

POINTING THE LIMITS OF ENDURANCE: PUNCTUATION, TIME, AND
NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH POETRY

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Owen Coury Boynton

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Owen Coury Boynton, Ph. D.

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This dissertation examines the relationship between punctuation and experiences of extreme endurance in nineteenth-century British poetry. In particular, the dissertation examines the poetry of William Wordsworth, Alfred Tennyson, and Christina G. Rossetti. All three poets were fascinated by how the limits of endurance also reveal the limits of the human. Because many marks of punctuation are inherently temporal, and because endurance is suffering experienced over time, punctuation provides these poets with a resource for presenting and imagining imperiled humanity as it sustains itself over time.

The dissertation consists of three chapters, an introduction, and a brief conclusion. The introduction provides a historical and theoretical account of punctuation in general and in the nineteenth century. Each subsequent chapter demonstrates how one poet deploys punctuation marks—chiefly commas, semi-colons, colons, and full-stops—in a regular fashion across a body of works in order to achieve particular creative effects. The first chapter argues that punctuation allows Wordsworth to register the gulf and discord between his experience of time and the experience of time of those solitaries, who are exemplars of human endurance. The second chapter is on Tennyson. It argues that he lightens or makes heavy the punctuation in his poetry to reflect and reveal how his speakers experience time's passage—which is, in itself, to be endured. The third chapter, on Rossetti, argues that Rossetti patterns punctuation

within poems, or in a poetic form (the sonnet), and then alters those patterns to reflect her shifting expectations, hopes, and anxieties about the imminence of God's judgment, and the dissolution and redemption of human time.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Owen Boynton graduated from Brown University in 2005.

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Introduction

It is very difficult to write on the minuter parts of literature without failing either to please or instruct. Too much nicety of detail disgusts the greater part of readers, and to throw a multitude of particulars under general heads, and lay down rules of extensive comprehension, is to common understandings of little use. They who undertake these subjects are therefore always in danger, as one or other inconvenience arises to their imagination of frightening us with rugged science, or amusing us with empty sound.

Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler* 90¹

The literature of the nineteenth century provides challenging, and rewarding, test-cases for critical work on punctuation. Punctuation of that century is often held to be less rhetorically expressive than the punctuation of earlier centuries, and less iconoclastic than the punctuation of the twentieth century. Nineteenth-century punctuation is largely conventional; looking back at it, after the experience of Modernism, we might be skeptical whether conventional punctuation can serve expressive or creative ends. Moreover, some might doubt whether nineteenth-century authors exercised sole control over the punctuation of their works, and thus as to whether punctuation in the works of these authors is susceptible to close and sustained critical analysis. My chief goal in this dissertation is to show that punctuation could and did serve creative ends

¹Samuel Johnson, 109-110.

for at least several major authors in the nineteenth century, and that close and sustained critical analysis of the punctuation in these works can lead to fresh insights about them.

Of course any mark of punctuation makes some difference to a work of literature, and often these differences matter. The difficult task for critics is in establishing whether they relate directly to a work's central concerns. I seek to show that punctuation marks often do, relating marks of punctuation to a concern of nineteenth-century literature, and poetry in particular, that has received little sustained critical attention: the limits of human endurance. Granted, critics have discussed many matters which touch upon and relate directly to human endurance. But Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Christina Rossetti were fascinated not simply by human endurance, but by the extremes of endurance, endurance so extreme as to challenge the humanness of those who endure. And this preoccupation with the limits of endurance remains largely uncharted in the critical literature.

Because of my dissertation's chief aim—the demonstration of punctuation's significance in nineteenth-century literature—I am limited in what I say about the topic of endurance. In a sense, the dissertation is braced on two sides: rather than choose any and all instances of punctuation which touch upon the many vital concerns in these various poets, I drive hard in analyzing those instances which illuminate the extremes of endurance in their works; and rather than ask broader conceptual, contextual and textual questions about their presentations of endurance, I limit myself to how punctuation registers and records the experience.

That punctuation does matter for three poets so interested in the limits of endurance is not surprising when we reflect that even when deployed for syntactical elucidation, as it is almost always in these poets' works, four of the central punctuation marks, the comma, semi-colon, colon, and full-stop, represent invitations to pause for relatively lesser or greater lengths of time.

As temporal icons, or sign-posts, which the reader may or may not heed, these marks of punctuation offer a unique resource for authors interested in human endurance—which is, roughly defined, duress over time. When we think of endurance as a feat, we might say that to endure is to persist in suffering or pain through time. We might also say, of course, that to endure, as a rock endures, is simply to persist over time—but for these poets, these two versions of endurance are not neatly separable. At any rate, the reason that punctuation serves as a creative tool for all three poets who write about endurance is that both punctuation and endurance are inherently temporal.

In a draft of an essay on punctuation, written in 1809, Samuel Taylor Coleridge looks “on the stops not as logical Symbols, but rather as dramatic *directions* representing the process of Thinking and Speaking conjointly.” He explains that a decision in matters of punctuation “is not made according to the actual weight & difference or equality of the logical connections, but to the view which the Speaker is supposed to have at the moment, in which he speaks the particular sentence.” For this reason, he calls marks of punctuation ‘dramatic directions’, ‘enabling the reader more easily to place himself in the state of the writer or original Speaker’.² Coleridge prompts us to see punctuation as a dramatization of a poet’s cognitive choreography. In my dissertation, I view punctuation as dramatization of a poet’s cognitive choreography as he or she apprehends time’s passage—punctuation allows all three poets writing in the first-person to present, by non-verbal marks on the page, their awareness and experiences of time.

² Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, iii. entry 3504.

There are several questions which I imagine a reader of this dissertation would like to have answered, before commencing on arguments about individual authors. I will structure the introduction around these questions, or areas of questioning : 1) What marks or spaces on the page count as punctuation? 2) What were the nineteenth-century theories of punctuation, and how did these relate to practice? 3) How did nineteenth-century authors punctuate (Was it conventional, rule-bound, and authorial? Does it matter for critics?)? 4) Why attend to poetry only? Is there a difference between punctuation in poetry and punctuation in prose?

1) What marks or spaces on the page count as punctuation?

This is an obvious, but necessary question. Punctuation consists not only of those non-verbal marks on the page, such as semi-colons, colons, dashes, quotation marks, or exclamation points; it refers also to the blank spaces between words, the spaces at the ends of the lines, the spaces between paragraphs, and indentations. John Lennard, one of the few literary critics who has written extensively on the theory and practice of punctuation, has proposed an axis of punctuation which includes also pagination, italics, and the book itself (punctuated by the space around it). The latter claim, that the limits of the book as a material object should be considered as a form of punctuation, might seem fanciful, but it should seem less far-fetched when we think of the three-volume novel, the narrative structure of which is influenced by the physical dimensions of each volume. We might likewise ask whether italics should be considered punctuation, since they are not non-verbal marks or spaces on the page, but are instead a feature of verbal marks. However, I would suggest that the pattern of italicized words may punctuate non-italicized, and I would note that italics may be used to indicate a stress, en lieu of a non-

verbal mark. There are border cases, undoubtedly; these would have to be judged marks of punctuation depending on their immediate surroundings and the culture in which they were produced. In an essay on the hyphen in Geoffrey Hill, Christopher Ricks observes that “All punctuation is at once a uniting and a separating. Like mortar, it holds bricks together and holds them apart.”³ With this principle of punctuation in hand, we might better appreciate the range of features which Lennard takes to be punctuation, while also better grasping what diverse functions these features might serve for the authors deploying them.

- 2) What were nineteenth-century theories of punctuation, and how did these relate to practice?

This dissertation stands on two basic, essential claims. One is that endurance may be characterized as pain suffered over time. The other is that four points of punctuation—comma, semi-colon, colon, and full-stop—invite readers to pause for ascending durations, with the comma inviting the shortest and the full-stop the longest pause. I believe that such an understanding of these marks of punctuation was common through the nineteenth-century and that, even today, such an understanding is widely accepted, excepting the current use of the colon, which is only rarely used nowadays as it was in the nineteenth century, as a pause of greater strength than a semi-colon and lesser strength than a full-stop. I write that these marks “invite” us to pause for greater or lesser durations, and the word “invite” is carefully chosen. Punctuation marks cannot obligate a reader, whether reading silently or aloud, to pause. But I believe that the implicit invitation for temporal pauses in these marks was sufficiently common

³ Ricks, *Force*, 326

the nineteenth century that authors or printers would have deployed them under the expectation that readers would have recognized the invitation, whether or not they acted on it.

However, even such a minimal claim as this may be challenged. It may be said that I have run afoul of the general narrative of nineteenth-century punctuation practices, outlined fifty years ago by Park Honan. Extensively studying nineteenth-century manuals and treatises of punctuation, Honan concluded that over the century, the function of punctuation shifted from being a rhetorical to a syntactical guide for readers, with John Wilson's 1844 *A Treatise on Grammatical Punctuation* being a decisive watermark and even catalyst in the shift. Honan finds that "treatments of pointing after 1845 display a lingering uncertainty as to how far rules should be applied, but few texts hold for the old elocutionary view."⁴ If, for the moment, we follow an extreme version of Honan's argument, full-stops, colons, and semi-colons deployed in the latter half of the nineteenth century would have been deployed, and understood, without regard to temporal characteristics; they would have been deployed depending only on the logical, semantic, and syntactic relationship between the phrases or clauses. I should say that I am not imputing such a view to Honan, but instead presenting it as the one conclusion (and not the only conclusion possible) from his research which would seriously threaten my arguments about punctuation in the poetry of Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Rossetti.

There are good reasons for denying such a conclusion. First, I would call into question Honan's conclusion on the grounds that, though John Wilson's manual was widely influential, it shared the marketplace of the mid-Victorian era with other, earlier, enormously popular guidebooks, including that of Lindley Murray, whose grammar was a synthesis of eighteenth-century authors (including the erudite Bishop Lowth), and which was reprinted well into the

⁴ Honan, 101.

century, with a sixty-fifth edition published in London in 1871, and numerous editions of the abridged version appearing concurrently through the century, also. We find Murray writing that: “The Comma represents the shortest pause; the Semicolon a pause double that of the Comma; the Colon, double that of the Semicolon; and the Period, double that of the Colon.”⁵ Murray’s words would have been read and absorbed well into the latter-portion of the century, either in new or second-hand copies of his work.

A still stronger reason for doubting the relevance of Honan’s claims for critical engagement with punctuation in literature is that the history of punctuation theories is not identical to the history of punctuation practices. John Lennard points out that

this history of theory is in no way a simple description of the history of practice, and the theoretical prescription or proscription of a given epoch is likely to be in conflict with its historical practice. Ben Jonson’s *English Grammar* of 1640, for example, which has quite a lot to say about punctuation, neither reflects nor adequately describes the practices of Jonson’s own first folio of 1616; the practices of Swift and Pope are not accounted for by the rules of Bishop Lowth (1762), nor those of Coleridge and Byron by Cobbett’s *Grammar of the English Language* (1824).⁶

Honan’s history of nineteenth-century punctuation is a history of nineteenth-century theories of punctuation. Do these have bearing on authors? Probably, but not necessarily. An author will use punctuation to achieve a variety of effects—some dramatic, some elucidatory—but is under

⁵ Murray, 1: 369.

⁶ Lennard, “Punctuation and Pragmatics,” 68.

no obligation to possess or follow a comprehensive system of rules about punctuation, under no obligation to theorize that all or most punctuation be syntactic or rhetorical; whether or not an author followed the precepts of John Wilson cannot be inferred from Wilson alone, but must be decided by an examination of the author, and Honan does not examine particular instances. If we accept that “rhetorical” and “syntactical” are helpful terms, we must decide based on individual instances whether a given mark is “rhetorical” or to what degree.

This leads me to my third point, more damaging to Honan’s conclusion than the last, which is that a strict distinction between rhetorical and syntactical punctuation may be less useful than it appears, both in theory and for those of us seeking to describe the particular practical deployments of marks. Linguist Paul Bruthiaux acknowledges the unease the blurring of the syntactical/rhetorical distinction may cause those seeking an elegant description of what punctuation does: “Perhaps modern analysts have been awed by the dual role demanded of the system and by the degrees of untidiness this creates. In effect, punctuation is assigned two simultaneous—and not always compatible—functions.”⁷ As critics, we need to bear in mind that both syntactical and rhetorical functions of punctuation may co-exist. Nor should we struggle to understand how either might be called upon in some degree: if a full-stop is chosen rather than a semi-colon to separate two independent clauses, it may be that the strength of the full-stop is felt to lie not only in some inherent logical property, but also in the sense that it represents a greater temporal break between the clauses, which may be acknowledged by the spoken or imagined voice.

In fact, even nineteenth-century punctuation manuals recognize as much, conflating the syntactical and rhetorical, as when Murray writes that “Punctuation is the art of dividing a

⁷ Bruthiaux, 1.

written composition into sentences, or parts of sentences, by points or stops, for the purpose of marking different pauses which the sense, and an accurate pronunciation require.” We can see a similar conflation of syntactical and rhetorical considerations in the instructively memorable illustrated guide, *Punctuation Personified*, which appeared in 1824, the author identified as “Mr. Stops.” The initial explanation of why punctuation matters seems entirely syntactical, but later explanations of particular marks insist upon their temporal character:

“Ev’ry lady in this land

“Has twenty nails upon each hand.

“Five & twenty on hands & feet

“And this is true without deceit.”

But when the stops were placed aright.

The real sense was brought to light.

(“Mr. Stops Reading to Robert and His Sister”)

See, how Semicolon is strutting with pride;

Into two or more parts he’ll a sentence divide.

As “John’s a good scholar; but George is a better:

“One wrote a fair copy; the other a letter.”

Without this gay ensign we little could do;

And when he appears we must pause & count TWO.

It is perhaps on account of common practices of reading aloud that the duration of a pause was held to be necessary to clarify sense—though the experience of reading aloud would quickly have proved that no such exactitude, relative or absolute, was necessary for clarifying relationships between phrases or clauses. In the later century, we find objections to the pedagogical style of “Mr. Stops.” A piece found in the 1860 collection *The Pupil-Teacher* (a series of articles for instructors of grammar school children) condemns as “absurd” “the old spelling-book method of teaching the use of stops...when the teacher counts aloud as the pupils read, the canonical pause-units attributed to each stop”; it objects to specifically to “canonical pause-units” like the “we must pause & count TWO” found in *Punctuation Personified*.⁹ An objection to “canonical pause-units” is not an objection to the temporal character of punctuation in general. Nor should we believe that the practice of counting aloud for strict times at various stops is a relic of the nineteenth century; an acquaintance of mine who attended a British grammar school in the 1980s has spoken to me of having to follow the same method, stopping to count off beats at marks of punctuation, while learning to read. Recent experiments by linguist Daniel O’Connell suggest that, even in the late twentieth century, readers had internalized the relative and increasing duration of pauses, pausing for longer at full-stops than commas when reading aloud—though his research shows also that readers do not only pause at marks of punctuation, so that the punctuation of their spoken performances do not match that of the

⁸ *Punctuation Personified, or Pointing Made Easy*, 2,4.

⁹ *The Pupil-Teacher*, 142.

written page.¹⁰ Even today, then, some marks of punctuation retain their temporal character, despite being sometimes ignored. To briefly restate my point, in theory and practice alike, we should be alive to both syntactical and rhetorical motives for punctuation, recognizing that these may co-exist, or even be indistinguishable from one another.

- 3) How did nineteenth-century authors punctuate (Was it conventional, rule-bound, and authorial? Does it matter for critics?) ?

John Lennard has urged readers and critics to think of punctuation as following conventions, rather than rules. But we should not pretend that there are not and have never been rules for punctuation. The nineteenth-century abounded with rules, fretted over by authors, decreed by grammarians, printers and educators, and revised with each passing generation. The rules, though, were non-binding (though the risk of not following rules—loosely construed—is incomprehensibility in the eyes of others), and they were at times in disagreement with one another. In short, we can say that rules do and have existed for punctuation, albeit without a supreme authority to adjudicate between them. In such an atmosphere of clashing and interfering rules, we find many nineteenth-century authors appealing to friends, to publishers, and to reasoned principles as they fretted over the punctuation of their work. Often, they fretted with the belief that there are right ways to go about punctuation, but also with a simultaneous fear that there is no way of knowing for sure what these are. Perhaps a chief difference between Modernist authors and their nineteenth-century predecessors lies in the willingness, even eagerness, of the former to buck authoritative opinion, and the relative eagerness of the latter to

¹⁰ O'Connell, 82-83.

appease it; it may be that there was no shift in strictness of or consensus upon punctuation conventions, rules, and habits between the cultures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but instead a shift in the attitude of authors towards whether they should attempt to accommodate themselves to the culturally dominant conventions, rules, and habits.

Across the nineteenth century, unsurprisingly, we find a variety of approaches and attitudes towards punctuation—also called “pointing” and “stopping.” Published in 1824, the printer John Johnson’s *Typographia*, a guide that would come have such standing that E.C. Bigmore and C.W.H Wyman in their encyclopedic 1880 *A Bibliography of Printing* would describe it as “a printer’s classic,” “too well known, and too readily accessible, to need a synopsis,” testifies to the dizzying eddies rules and opinions about punctuation that nineteenth-century authors and printers navigated:¹¹

Perhaps there never existed on any subject, among men of learning, a greater difference of opinion than on the true mode of punctuation, and scarcely can any two people agree in the same method; some making the pause of a semi-colon where the sense will only bear a comma; some contending for what is termed stiff pointing, and others altogether the reverse...

Scarcely nine works out of ten are sent properly prepared to the press; either the writing is illegible, the spelling incorrect, or the punctuation defective. The compositor has often to read sentences of his copy more than once before he can ascertain what he conceives the meaning of the author, that he may not deviate from his in the punctuation; this retards him considerably. But here it does not end—he, and the corrector of the press,

¹¹ Bigmore and Wyman, 1: 371.

though, perhaps, both intelligent and judicious men, differ in that in which few are found to agree, and the compositor has to follow either his whim or opinion. The proof goes to the author—he dissents from them both, and makes those alterations in print, which ought to have rendered his manuscript copy correct.¹²

Sympathizing with compositors, Johnson suggests the sheer (and, to his mind, bewildering) diversity of punctuation practices, among authors, among compositors, among publishers. It suggests also that, despite the influence of compositors in matters of punctuation, authors exercised control over the proofs, challenging the notion that nineteenth-century authors merely deferred to house-style in matters of punctuation. Admittedly, there is evidence that some—perhaps many—relied on printers for assistance in punctuation. Linda Mugglestone describes how

print culture fostered a set of norms which rationalized the variable realities of the underlying text. Correctors and printers' readers continued to act in markedly interventionist ways. 'Most authors expect the Printer to spell, point and digest their Copy, that it may be intelligible and significant to the Reader,' Caleb Stower noted in his *Printer's Grammar* (1808).¹³

¹² John Johnson, *Typographia*, 2:54-55.

¹³ Mugglestone, 279. Caleb Stower's *Printer's Grammar* was first published in 1778.

But even where authors deferred to printers for initial revisions or additions of punctuation, they often would revise these in turn. In *From Writer to Reader*, Phillip Gaskell presents facsimiles of the proofs of Dicken’s *David Copperfield*. The proofs are dense with Dickens’ revisions, not only to substantives, but to accidentals, and punctuation above all. Making the case for why an editor should take the first edition, rather than the proofs, as a copy-text, Gaskell writes that

it is clear that Dickens’s first intentions for the details of the text of *David Copperfield* are represented by those of the manuscript. But although he must have known from experience that his details would be altered by the compositors, he did not prevent these alterations from being carried out—as he surely could have done if he had made his wishes known in advance—but accepted and refined them, and passed them for publication.¹⁴

With some justice, the phonetician, spelling-reformer and exemplary Victorian eccentric Alexander John Ellis asserted in his 1869 *On Early English Pronunciation with special reference to Shakspeare and Chaucer* that “no printed book represents the orthography and punctuation of the man of education who writes, but only of the man of education who prints.”¹⁵ But we should not take Ellis’ statement as proof of a tension between printed and private punctuation. Instead, it points out that printed editions are the result of a process of exchange between printers, authors, editors and others involved in the preparation of manuscripts. Jerome McGann claims, in his *Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, following a discussion of Byron: “both author and copyist

¹⁴ Gaskell, 152.

¹⁵ Ellis, 591.

understand and operate within the accepted terms of the relationship... Sometimes these relationships operate smoothly, sometimes the author will struggle against every sort of intervention, and between these two extremes falls every sort of variation. Nevertheless, as soon as a person begins writing for publication, he or she becomes an author, and this means—by (historical) definition—to have entered the world of all those who belong to the literary institution.”¹⁶

The nature of these relationships varied from author to author. Wordsworth, for instance, often relied on close friends and family, including Dorothy his sister, Mary his wife, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and also acquaintances, such as Humphry Davy, for expertise and assistance in drafting fair copies for the printers. The Wordsworth circle provides a case-study in how punctuation may have been a matter of collaboration, contention, and theorizing among early nineteenth-century authors. In the spring of 1809, Wordsworth published his prose work, *The Convention of Cintra*, which Wordsworth had requested that De Quincey assist him in punctuating.¹⁷ In May of 1809, Wordsworth explained his decision to Thomas Poole, writing: “at the time the subject of punctuation in prose was one to which I had never attended, and had of course settled no scheme of it in my own mind.”¹⁸ It is worth briefly considering this remark for what it says beyond the punctuation of the *Convention*, for it suggests both that Wordsworth had attended to punctuation in poetry (as opposed to prose), and that he considered punctuation in poetry as something that might have “a scheme” of its own, distinct from prose. De Quincey offered Wordsworth what must have seemed like a deeply settled, if idiosyncratic “scheme.” De

¹⁶ McGann, 53.

¹⁷ John E. Jordan, 75-85.

¹⁸ Wordsworth, *Letters II: The Middle Years Part I*, 344.

Quincey adumbrates his thinking in a letter to Dorothy Wordsworth in March 28, 1809, as he calls out “the stupid compositor” for “having attended to my alterations, or not, *ad libitum*.” Of the “stupid compositor,” De Quincey objects that he

made the punctuation from what I designed it for (viz. a representation of the logical divisions—and a gamut of the proportions and symmetry of the different members—of each sentence) than if he had followed his ordinary guide—viz. his own blind feeling of propriety; which blind feeling (I told him, for his edification) was not, as he flattered himself a rude natural dictation from the demands of the case; but a dictation from the the [*sic*] artificial and conventional demands grounded at first on pure caprice arising out of a non-perception of the possibilities of a logical equilibration of sentences...¹⁹

Wordsworth probably did not request De Quincey’s assistance because of the clarity of De Quincey’s scheme; in fact, he wrote to Daniel Stuart that “my inducement for placing it in Mr De Quincey’s hands was to save time and expense.”²⁰ The former he certainly did not save, finding himself chagrined that De Quincey had been “so scrupulous with the Compositor, in having his own plan rigorously followed to an iota” that “whole weeks elapsed without the Book’s advancing a step”.²¹ a particularly worry for a topical political pamphlet. “Hinc illae lacrymae,” Wordsworth exclaims.²² Given that De Quincey was not uniquely able to save him time and expense, Wordsworth possibly asked for his assistance in particular as a gesture of affection, the

¹⁹ De Quincey, *De Quincey to Wordsworth*, 123-4.

²⁰ Wordsworth, *Letters II: The Middle Years Part I*, 344.

²¹ Wordsworth, *Letters II: The Middle Years Part I*, 344, 351.

²² Wordsworth, *Letters II: The Middle Years Part I*, 351.

established author attempting to give his younger, deeply admiring friend an opportunity to take part in the creative process. Wordsworth's other, older friends, Southey and Coleridge, were caustic about the results. Southey complained that the "unusual" "system of punctuation" had rendered Wordsworth's long sentences "obscure."²³ Coleridge cut deeper, writing to Daniel Stuart on June 13, 1809: "The Periods are often alarmingly long perforce of their construction; but De Quincey's Punctuation has made several of them immeasurable, & perplexed half the rest. Never was a stranger whim than the notion that , ; : and . could be made logical symbols expressing all the diversities of logical connection."²⁴ Reflecting on these words of Coleridge and Southey, John E. Jordan claims that "these complaints are somewhat difficult to understand" since "the punctuation does not seem peculiar; and where De Quincey's work can be gauged by comparison with the part of the pamphlet published in the *Courier*, it appears that he broke up some involved sentences and generally wrought improvement." Jordan speculates on another cause for Coleridge's acerbity: "Is it the friction of similar natures, the irritation at being indebted to and exposed to a younger and inferior counterpart? Or is it half-jealousy of De Quincey for aspiring to the kind of intimacy Coleridge had enjoyed with Wordsworth but was losing?"²⁵ Both are possible. Daniel Roberts describes De Quincey's explanation of his system of punctuation as "labyrinthine...almost a parody of Coleridge at his most heavy-handed."²⁶ Stephen Gill writes that by spring of 1808, a year before the *Convention*, "each [Wordsworth and Coleridge] was so privately critical of the other that any flow of feeling between them was

²³ Quoted in John E. Jordan, 84.

²⁴ Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, 767.

²⁵ John E. Jordan, 84.

²⁶ Roberts, 150.

readily distorted by tension.”²⁷ During these months of De Quincey’s carping at composers, putting forward knotty explanations of his system, and eventually seeing the pamphlet published, Coleridge was at work on his essay on punctuation (never completed, but preserved in draft form), at the heart of which is the statement: “In short, I look not on stops as logical symbols, but rather as dramatic *directions* representing the process of Thinking & Speaking conjointly.”²⁸ “Logical symbols” is also the phrase Coleridge used in his letter to Stuart complaining of De Quincey’s punctuation of the *Convention*. In light of the circumstances and evidence, Coleridge’s essay can be read as a rebuke of De Quincey’s scheme and a reassertion of Coleridge’s superiority as a writer and thinker, but it was also a reclaiming of the token, punctuation, that had come to symbolize De Quincey’s new intimacy with the living author that mattered most to both, Wordsworth. The flurry of interest in punctuation suggests its symbolic value for the Wordsworth circle as a whole, a creative matter open for dissent and debate.

There are a number of major nineteenth-century literary figures who considered themselves assured, sometimes even expert, in matters of punctuation. We have already seen evidence of Coleridge’s faith in his mastery of punctuation in the essay he drafted, an essay in which he invented a new vocabulary for describing punctuation’s effects; but some more evidence can be added to show the depth of his care. We find, for instance, in the notebooks Coleridge revising and correcting Donne’s punctuation, and we find him in raptures on account of a semi-colon in Defoe, remarking of a passage that “the simple semi-colon after it, the instant passing on without the least pause of reflex consciousness is more exquisite & masterlike than

²⁷ Gill, *William Wordsworth*, 263.

²⁸ Coleridge, *Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, iii. entry 3504.

the Touch itself.”²⁹ Malcom Parkes informs us that Coleridge’s raptures were ill-founded, and “only valid of nineteenth-century usage,” since the semi-colon was added by a nineteenth-century printer; in the original was a comma.³⁰ But Coleridge’s description of the “least pause of reflex consciousness” seems to me to be no less apt for a comma than a semi-colon. The evidence for Tennyson’s confidence lies in his consistent tinkering from manuscript to proof—behavior which may suggest also insecurity, but which suggests also the belief that he had within himself the resources to set matters right. The evidence of Macaulay’s faith in his powers of punctuation lies in contemporary report and reputation. *All The Year Round*, founded by Dickens and later “conducted” by his son Charles Dickens Jr., in a brief article on punctuation, tells its readers that “Macaulay was one of the most particular authors as to punctuation, and his works can be recommended as models to those who desire to gain a knowledge of the art.”³¹ Sir George Trevelyan in his *The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay* records how “in the case of a favorite writer, Macaulay frequently corrects the errors of the press, and even the punctuation, as

²⁹ Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Marginalia II*, 160-161 (Defoe), 226-228 (Donne). The passage in Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*: “I smiled to myself at the sight of this money: “O drug!” said I aloud, “what art thou good for?...e’en remain where thou art, and go to the bottom, as a creature whose life is not worth saving.” However, upon second thoughts, I took it away; and wrapping all this in a piece of canvass, I began to think of making another raft...” Coleridge writes (on 30 July 1830): “Worthy of Shakespear; and yet the simple semi-colon after it, the instant passing on without the least pause of reflex consciousness is more exquisite & masterlike than the Touch itself. A meaner writer, a Marmontel would have put n !—after “away”, and have commenced a fresh Paragraph.” His edition of Defoe was from 1812.

³⁰ Parkes, 5.

³¹ “Punctuation,” *All the Year Round*, 235.

minutely as if he were preparing the book for another edition.”³² Trevelyan later provides evidence for the claim, by way of a riddling anecdote:

Some of his old friends may remember how he prided himself on a correction of his own in the first page of *Persuasion*, which he maintained to be worthy of Bentley, and which undoubtedly fulfils all the conditions required to establish the credit of an emendation; for, without the alteration of a word, or even a letter, it turns into perfectly intelligible common-sense a passage which has puzzled, or which ought to have puzzled, two generations of Miss Austen’s readers.

In a footnote to the sentence, he lets the point out of the bag and explains that “a slight change in punctuation effects all that is required.”³³ Gerard Hopkins’ confidence in punctuation differed from his predecessors; rather than believing he had perfect control over and within the existing conventions, he used it in innovative ways, inventing a new series of marks to supplement it. His editor Norman MacKenzie has had to wrestle with the resulting obscurity in the manuscripts. Acknowledging Hopkins’ boast to Bridges that “he could give a reason for every punctuation mark he used,” Mackenzie responds that “he must then have varied his intentions from one draft to the next, since we could multiply examples such as No. 143, l. 33, ‘the hall rung’, where the same phrase is followed in different MSS by a colon, a semi-colon, and a full stop—and, we might add, three variants have exclamations instead.” Yet such revision is not evidence that Hopkins could not provide a reason for every punctuation mark he used; it may be instead that

³² Trevelyan, 322.

³³ Trevelyan, 678.

Hopkins' reasons for each revised mark differed. In his innovations, Hopkins presents special challenges to his editor. Mackenzie points out that in Hopkins' system of punctuation "between the comma and the full stop there is a hybrid of unguessable value which we might call the 'x stop' between the colon and the semi-colon, and almost as frequent as either, is a troublesome punctuation mark I call a 'three-quarters colon'."

Hopkins is an exception to the inclination, prevalent even among those nineteenth-century authors most confident in their aptitude for punctuation, to punctuate according to accepted and acceptable rules and conventions. But the desire to follow rules, and to do things as they ought to be done, should not be seen as depriving nineteenth-century authors, editors, and publishers of the prospect for punctuation to creative ends. Lennard recalls his advisor, the history of punctuation Malcom Parkes remarking that

there seems to be a kind of fashion (or perhaps topos) in early 19th-century letters of authors to publishers for saying that an author is 'careless' about punctuation, or 'ignorant' of its principles; but that instances known to him all involve either authors who were pernickety about their punctuation, or works in which the copy-editors altered punctuation very little, seeing to make the authorial punctuation consistent rather than to impose a system reflecting house-style. Such practices suggest a much greater sensitivity to the 'artistic' value of punctuation among practitioners than one would suspect from reading the theorists.³⁴

³⁴ Lennard, *But I Digress*, 286-87.

Parkes is careful to write “practitioners” rather than “authors.” In the examples I have given above, we find that the practice of punctuation is often carried out by more hands than the author’s. Punctuation is a reminder that, at least in matters of punctuation, the authority of authors is, as Jerome McGann writes, “a social nexus, not a personal possession.”³⁵ I accept this claim; it may be that the social nexus of authorship produces formal properties that are intrinsic to the intelligence of works or texts.

Additionally, we may accept that authors are not alone capable of contributing to the intelligence of a work of literature. Theodor Adorno writes of an author’s relationship to the conventions of punctuation that “one can sense the difference between a subject will that brutally demolishes the rules and tactful sensitivity that allows the rules to echo in the background even where it suspends them.”³⁶ We can accede to Adorno’s eloquence that such a difference exists without believing that the author is the only subject capable of displaying “tactful sensitivity.” We do not need to cease valuing intelligence and craft when we admit that authors do not possess monopolies on it. In his classic study of Shakespearean punctuation, Percy Simpson honors the craftsmen who punctuated Shakespeare’s Folio:

But the punctuation, which is usually regarded as the weakest point in the printing of the Folio, I believe to be on the whole sound and reasonable. It will help to a higher appreciation of the merits of this famous text if its claim to be regarded as correct in an elementary point of typography can be conclusively established... Was there, or was there not, a system of punctuation which old printers used? Can the differences of this system

³⁵ McGann, 48.

³⁶ Adorno, 305.

be classified, and proved step by step by an accumulation of instances? If so, we must do Isaac Jaggard and Edward Blount and their workmen the justice to believe that they knew how to print.³⁷

The intelligence of fine punctuators may not have been equivalent to the intelligence of major poets, and their intelligence was not often exercised in the same sphere of creative activity, but there is a reason that authors such as Byron, Wordsworth, Christina G. Rossetti, and Ruskin were careful in entrusting matters of punctuation to friends, acquaintances, and loved ones who they held in high esteem. These non-authorial individuals were likely chosen for their propensities to respond to works in ways that their authors respected.

- 4) Why attend to poetry only? Is there a difference between punctuation in poetry and punctuation in prose?

This dissertation concerns the relationship between punctuation and human endurance in nineteenth-century British poetry. Although prose might valuably be related to the discussion, there is nonetheless a distinction between punctuation in poetry and punctuation in prose, which justifies the attention paid to the former rather than to both together. We have seen from Lennard's axis that all spaces and breaks on the page can be considered punctuation—and in light of this, poetry often avails itself of one space and break that is not available to authors of prose: the space at the end of lines. For it is characteristic of prose that it does not make use of line-endings in the same way as poetry. Where Marjorie Perloff, in a review of Rita Dove's

³⁷ Simpson, 15.

Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century Poetry, vituperates the lack of craft in contemporary poetry, she suggests that it is marred by a failure to deploy this uniquely poetic form of punctuation to proper effect:

The attention to musical elements is absent in most contemporary poetry. Open the Dove anthology at random, and you find writing such as this:

My father once broke a man's hand
Over the exhaust pipe of a John Deere tractor. The man,
Rubén Vásquez, wanted to kill his own father
With a sharpened fruit knife

When I transpose this into prose—"My father once broke a man's hand over the exhaust pipe of a John Deere tractor. The man, Rubén Vásquez, wanted to kill his own father with a sharpened fruit knife."—I find it more interesting than the lineated version. Why lineate it at all?

Asking why the poet has bothered to lineate, Perloff is questioning whether the poet has attained mastery over one of the basic elements of the art: punctuation. Perloff draws attention to how a poem may be characterized by this form of punctuation, but may deploy it inertly.

In an essay on Wordsworth, Christopher Ricks writes of line-endings as poetic punctuation:

The punctuation of which poetry or verse further avails itself is the white space. In prose, line-endings are ordinarily the work of the compositor and not of the artist; they are compositorial, not compositional. Without entering into some traditional problems of distinction, and without claiming here that it is line-endings alone which important distinguish poetry (or at any rate such poetry as is not also verse) from prose, one may at least urge that the poet has at his command this further ‘system of punctuation.’³⁸

I would add two caveats to Ricks’ remarks: it is of course possible (as in Shakespeare’s plays, which are not always poetry, and which are occasionally in verse) that line-endings are added by compositors. Nor should Ricks’ “compositorial” be taken to mean that other matters of punctuation are in no way dependent upon compositors. The point is that line-endings of prose are characteristically decided solely by compositors, without thought of the author’s intentions, with thought given only to the avoidance of awkwardly split words and the available space on the page. In setting line-endings of poems, on the other hand, compositors will generally respect the poet’s wishes, or at least be aware that some such wishes might pertain. Ricks offers an elaboration of a principle articulated by T.S. Eliot, who considered himself an expert on matters of punctuation: “verse, whatever else it may or may not be, is itself a system of *punctuation*; the usual marks of punctuation themselves are differently employed.”³⁹ Because each mark of

³⁸ Ricks, *Force*, 89.

³⁹ Ricks quotes Eliot in *Force*, 89. Eliot wrote these words in the *TLS*, 27 September 1928. Eliot wrote to Paul Elmore More on 28 October 1930: “I am quite aware that I am a minor romantic poet of about the stature of Cyril Tourneur, that I have little knowledge and no gift for abstract thought; but if there is one thing I do know, it is how to punctuate poetry.” Quoted in Ricks, *Decisions and Revisions in T.S. Eliot*, 85.

punctuation gains significance relative to other marks of punctuation in a work, as well as the standard conventions of punctuation beyond a work, the presence of line-breaks in a work will throw into new light, lend new significance to all of the other marks; a comma at the end of a line of verse will sit differently from the comma occurring at the end of a line of prose, where the placement on the page is judged to be without significance.

In my dissertation, I follow Ricks in conflating poetry and verse (“poetry or verse” he writes), though we should note Eliot’s careful wording and consider the difference between the two. Later in his life, Eliot wrote that “the moment the intermediate term *verse* is suppressed, I do not believe that any distinction between poetry and prose is meaningful.”⁴⁰ Ricks sees a conflict between this statement and Eliot’s earlier remark in which he does distinguish verse and prose on account of line-endings; but in that earlier remark, Eliot was careful to use the word “verse.”⁴¹ Rather than see “verse” as an intermediate term, however, we might see it as existing on another axis altogether from “poetry.” I propose that we consider two axes as we think of the relation between poetry, prose, and verse. The axes are not exact measures, but allow us to roughly locate a work within one of four quadrants. One axis has prose at one end and poetry at the other, with poetry here as characterized by the density of organization of language—with poetry being more densely organized than prose (and this allowing, following Coleridge, that no poem is all poetry), where we might call a work densely organized where we imagine being able

⁴⁰ T.S. Eliot, “Introduction,” *The Art of Poetry*, by Paul Valery (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1958) xvi.

⁴¹ Ricks quotes Eliot saying that “the moment the intermediate term *verse* is suppressed, I do not believe that any distinction between poetry and prose is meaningful.” Then Ricks suggests that Eliot had, thirty years earlier, “come up with a very suggestive formulation.” But Eliot’s earlier formulation referred to “verse” rather than “poetry.” Ricks, *Force*, 89.

to posit plural, related reasons for the various formal elements and choices of words. Admittedly, there is no way of measuring or quantifying this, or of arriving at an absolute judgment, though a judgment on the matter should be justifiable in terms of reasons, which will depend upon description, analysis, and comparison. The other axis runs from verse to “prose that is not verse” (which I will here call “prose,” but which needs to be distinguished from the prose on the other axis) in terms of punctuation, the absence of presence of a conscious employment of line-endings. If we imagine these two axes intersecting, we are given four quadrants of language. First, there is verse-prose consisting of less-densely-organized language (prose in the first sense) employing line-endings as punctuation. Second, there is verse-poetry, densely-organized language employing line-endings as punctuation. Third, there is prose-poetry, densely-organized language not employing line-endings as punctuation. Finally, there is prose-prose, less-densely-organized language not employing line-endings as punctuation.

On this account, Baudelaire’s prose-poems are properly categorized. But Geoffrey Hill’s *Mercian Hymns* are not necessarily prose-poems but are instead verse-poems, as Hill has indicated that the placement of line-endings does matter, asking they remain consistent through reprintings. And one reason that they do matter is that Hill makes much of compound epithets in the poems, yoking together words by hyphens; when hyphens appear at the line-endings on the page, we are left to wonder whether these indicate that a normally unhyphenated word has been broken, or whether the hyphen would remain even if the word did not straddle two lines on the page. None of this should be taken as a judgment on the quality of these works. Prose-prose may achieve effects as great as verse-poetry or prose-poetry, despite less compressed organization. Moreover, it may be that a prose-prose author does make occasional use of a line-ending, perhaps as a joke. Take the anecdotal evidence of cultural critic, raconteur, and erotica

aficionado Gershon Legman put forward in his introduction to Patrick Kearney's *The Private Case: an annotated bibliography of the Private Case Erotica Collection in the British (Museum)*

Library:

On various pages M. Pia has the kindness to cover me with compliments on my books, and at col. 784, concerning the introduction to *My Secret Life*, he even goes so far as to call me “*un érudit américain, et peut-être le plus grand con-naisseur* [the line breaks at the syllable *con-*] *qu'il y ait aujourd'hui de la littérature érotique de tous les pays et de tous les temps.*” An assessment so sweeping certainly make me blush if I did not realize that it is only another of M. Pia's little jokes, as ‘*le plus grand con*’ makes very clear.⁴²

The “little joke” works only because it is a surprising and subtle deviation from norms of punctuation elsewhere expected and maintained. There is a flicker of doubt as to whether such an effect is compositional or compositorial, but in the flicker Legman sees the likelihood of intent and so can laugh at it.

It should also be noted that although the line-endings provide verse with a form of punctuation unavailable to prose, prose has in its own arsenal of punctuation a device to which verse cannot avail itself: the paragraph break. Although there is such a thing as a space between stanzas, and such a thing as a verse-paragraph, neither is equivalent to the paragraph in a work of prose—and the reason for this, to repeat an essential point, that the significance of all forms of punctuation are relative. And in the absence of line-endings, the relationship of period and sentence to paragraph in prose will differ from the relationship from period and sentence to

⁴² Legman, 38.

verse-paragraph in verse. There is no exact equivalent in poetry, for instance, to the following sequence of paragraphs from George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, one of the most profound engagements with endurance, if not with the extremes of endurance, in nineteenth-century British prose fiction:

Dorothea had been aware when Lydgate had ridden away, and she had stepped into the garden, with the impulse to go at once to her husband. But she hesitated, fearing to offend him by obtruding herself; for her ardour, continually repulsed, served, with her intense memory, to heighten her dread, as thwarted energy subsides into a shudder; and she wandered slowly round the nearer clumps of trees until she saw him advancing. Then she went towards him, and might have represented a heaven-sent angel coming with a promise that the short hours remaining should yet be filled with that faithful love which clings the closer to a comprehended grief. His glance in reply to hers was so chill that she felt her timidity increased; yet she turned and passed her hand through his arm.

Mr Casaubon kept his hands behind him and allowed her pliant arm to cling with difficulty against his rigid arm.

There was something horrible to Dorothea in the sensation which this unresponsive hardness inflicted on her. That is a strong word, but not too strong: it is in these acts called trivialities that the seeds of joy are forever wasted, until men and women look round with haggard faces at the devastation their own waste has made, and say, the earth bears no harvest of sweetness—calling their denial knowledge.⁴³

⁴³ George Eliot, 415-416.

Among the ways that Eliot gives unexpected weight to what may seem a trivial action in this passage is by availing herself of the punctuation uniquely available to prose, the paragraph. The sentence beginning “Mr Casaubon kept his hands behind him” makes up only a single sentence. By setting this single sentence in an isolated paragraph, Eliot asks us to see it as a decisive action, and also as an emblem of Dorothea’s estrangement. The action in the sentence follows continually from the words “passed her hand through his arm.” In the abrupt break of the paragraph, Eliot registers the disruption and violence done to Dorothea’s life by Casaubon’s seemingly small act, his rejection of her arm. Within the sentence, the inelegant and clanging repetition of “arm” is made necessary by the opposing adjectives “pliant” and “rigid,” such that their two arms are held apart by the sentence’s syntax despite Dorothea’s efforts to bring them together. The maintenance of Mr Casaubon (his coldly titled surname set always in proximity to the intimacy of her forename; but not in such proximity as she would be called Dorothea Casaubon by the narrator) as the subject of the entire sentence, such that Dorothea does not cling, but is “allowed,” by him, to cling. The sentence is charged also with Miltonic associations. On three occasions in *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve are described as moving “hand in hand”: “So hand in hand they passed, the loveliest fair” (IV, 321); “Thus talking hand in hand alone they passed” (IV, 689); “They hand in hand with wand’ring steps and slow” (XII, 648). And on one ominous occasion, they part hands: “Thus saying, from her husband’s hand her hand | Soft she withdrew, and like a wood-nymph light” (IX, 385-6). On three occasions in *Middlemarch*, the grasping of hands is associated with Dorothea. There is the passage quoted above; there is the “Prelude” where Eliot describes a youthful saint Theresa “walking forth one morning hand-in-hand with her still smaller brother”;⁴⁴ and there is the final sentence of the chapter LXII, which

⁴⁴ George Eliot, 3.

includes the passage above: “She put her hand into her husband’s, and they went along the broad corridor together.”⁴⁵ For Eve and Adam, expelled from Eden, the earth bore “no harvest of sweetness,” and they too were forced to endure their exile; but unlike Dorothea, exiled from a historical epoch more fertile for her gifts of zeal, each finds some soothing grace in marriage. Her experience of endurance—in exile, and in marriage—is brought into relief against theirs, in the paragraph that is but a single sentence in the epic sweep of the novel.

Having outlined the differences between prose-poetry, prose-prose, verse-poetry, and verse-prose, I will turn away from them for the rest of my dissertation; the categories are idiosyncratic, and unhelpful given that there is sufficient consensus on what is meant by ‘poetry.’ We do not need to elaborate or sharpen our conception of poetry any further for the task at hand.

I will end this section by anticipating and halting two trains of thought concerning the relationship between poetry and punctuation. First, on accepting that poetry employs line-endings as a form of punctuation, some might wonder whether these necessarily indicate a pause in spoken performance of verse. Recent empirical research by linguist Daniel O’Connell suggests that in the era of recorded verse at least, this is not the case:

A number of scholars (e.g., Dillon, 1976; Hartmann, 1980; Johnson, 1986; Lehiste, 1984; and Turner & Pöppel, 1983) have hypothesized that pauses are mandatory at the end of the poetic line in reading poetry aloud. O’Connell (1988, p. 151 f) has reviewed 14 studies in which 289 readings (aloud) by the poets themselves, by dramatic artists, or by ordinary people, were investigated. In this entire corpus, only one poem was read aloud with every poetic line terminated in a pause, and that one case happened to be

⁴⁵ George Eliot, 419.

a poem with only two lines (Nemerov's 1977 reading of his own *Power to the people*). In fact, across the board, pauses occurred at only 44% of unpunctuated line-end positions in poetic readings, and the mean duration of these pauses was also less than half the duration of punctuated line-end pauses ($0.57 < 1.12$ s). hence, one can hardly refer legitimately to the poetic line as the performance unit of poetry. As a literary genre, poetry is far too complex for such oversimplified generalizations regarding the relationship of the written structure of the poem to the oral performance.⁴⁶

Christopher Ricks calls the space at the end of a line of verse a “non-temporal pause,” and the paradoxical phrasing catches something apparently true: that we believe we have registered the visual equivalent of a pause, but not a pause itself.⁴⁷ Although it is possible for any reader of poetry to stop at a line-ending, and although it is possible that in the past more readers were instructed to do so than now are, we do not need to think that line-endings necessarily indicate a pause in delivery.

Second, some may wonder whether there is a relationship between punctuation and meter. An early editor of Wordsworth, Thomas Huxley, claims that Wordsworth used punctuation as a metrical device, and Wordsworth himself in an 1842 letter to John Peace suggests that there is some relation between meter and punctuation:⁴⁸

⁴⁶ O'Connell and Kowal, 83-4.

⁴⁷ Ricks, *Force*, 90.

⁴⁸ Wordsworth's editor Thomas Hutchinson quotes an earlier editors when he writes: “Wordsworth's system of punctuation was no mere logical or intellectual organ, but rather—in the words of the *Aldine* Editor—‘an elaborate and ingenious instrument, intended at once to guide the reader to the meaning and to serve a metrical purpose.’” Hutchinson, vii.

Your *Descant* amused me, but I must protest against your system, which would discard punctuation to the extent you propose. It would, I think, destroy the harmony of blank verse when skillfully written. What would become of the pauses at the third syllable, followed by an “and,” or any such word, without the rest—which a comma, when consistent with the sense, calls upon the reader to make—and which being made, he starts with the weak syllable that follows, as from the beginning of a verse? I am sure Milton would have supported me in this opinion.⁴⁹

But what Wordsworth claims is not that punctuation alters the meter of the verse. Meter depends upon the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables alone; punctuation does not alter this pattern. However, Wordsworth suggests is that punctuation guides the spoken voice as it reads a poem, and therefore affects how the natural music of a spoken voice comes into contact with the metrical scheme of the words on the page. Poetry, when metrical, is never simply a matter of the rhythm of the spoken voice, nor of the metrical scheme of the poem—but of the meeting of the two. By influencing the former, punctuation can influence this meeting.

One explanation of how punctuation might direct the voice as it encounters a poem’s meter is provided Samuel Johnson, who may have been in Wordsworth’s mind when he wrote his letter, for it echoes Johnson in referring to Milton and to weak syllables. In *The Rambler* 90, Johnson praises Milton for the “the variety and choice of the pauses with which he has diversified his numbers.” Among the principles he arrives at: “It may be, I think, established as a rule, that a pause which concludes a period should be made for the most part upon a strong

⁴⁹ Wordsworth, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years: Part IV*, 292.

syllable, as the fourth and sixth; but those pauses which only suspend the sense may be placed upon the weaker.”⁵⁰ What Johnson means by “those pauses which only suspend the sense” is evident from a passage he quotes:

He, with his horrid crew,
Lay vanquish'd, rolling in the fiery gulph,
Confounded though *immortal*. But his doom
Reserv'd him to more wrath; for now the thought
Both of lost happiness and lasting pain
Torments *him*. (vii. 33-8)

His italics mark the syllables in question. The first, the weak “tal” of “immortal” is followed by a pause which, though a full-stop, does not conclude what Johnson understands as the period, which ends with “Torments him.” The following pause, concluding the period on the third syllable of “him,” Johnson censures. Johnson’s discussion assumes that punctuation should answer to the meter that already exists, as well as the sense of a poem; the placement of pauses will be successful, for Johnson, depending on their place in the metrical order of the poem. In conclusion, punctuation might resolve, clarify or remove metrical ambiguity, without altering or influencing meter. It serves only, but not merely, to guide the movement of the voice as it encounters the meter of the poem.

⁵⁰ Samuel Johnson, 113.

Chapter One: Wordsworth's Perplexed Punctuation

Critics since A.C. Bradley have noted that Wordsworth's poems about solitaries are taut with, and strain under, perplexity.⁵¹ Wordsworth, in "Resolution and Independence," provides the term, when he recollects being "perplex'd by what the old man had said." One of the motives of that poem is Wordsworth's determination to represent and recover the conditions of his perplexity during the encounter, which, he felt at the time, was a symptom of some profound truth possessed by, expressed in, the old man's being. The sources of Wordsworth's perplexity, not only in "Resolution and Independence" but in other poems about solitaries, have been the object of a host of critical works on Wordsworth; critics have long been perplexed by Wordsworth's own perplexity, because they are uncertain in part what in fact perplexes Wordsworth in the encounters. Oddly, since the topic receives such generous and attentive care in criticism of Wordsworth's poetry in general, the matter of time is not much scrutinized as a source of Wordsworth's consternation. But in many of the poems about solitaries, Wordsworth is held at abeyance from apprehending the lives of solitaries by virtue of the divorce in their experiences of time.

The solitaries are, in Wordsworth's eyes, emblematic of human endurance at its extreme limits; they exist not only on the borders of civilization and nature, but on the borders of humanity and something else. Their endurance often risks becoming animal survival, or even mineral perdurance. They harden to the world, and to Wordsworth's efforts at sympathetic understanding; the poems about them are efforts at recuperating their humanness. But in

⁵¹ Bradley, 136; Hartman, 268.

enduring as they have, the humanness of the solitaries is compromised not only in respect to their appearances, their emotional lives, their possession of a common language, or the potential for communication against a shared horizon of the world, but in respect to the temporal structures of their pasts, presents, and futures. Often, the solitaries seem removed from history; at times, they seem deprived of the past narratives which would invest them with identity; at times, they live by rhythms that do not converge or correspond with those of the social worlds they skirt; they stumble, and seem to do so obliviously, in the dance of interactions such as bind together individuals in the commerce of daily life; they gaze on the future with indifference, as if it is inconceivable to them, or as if they have fatalistically abandoned their agency to shape the middle- and long-term events of their lives. Wordsworth encounters the solitaries as a man of civilization and society, and in the encounters, as he represents them, the distance of his experience of time from theirs is painfully present. One way that the poems about the solitaries register the discord between Wordsworth's and their experiences of time is by punctuation, especially by abrupt, harsh or unexpectedly long pauses, which can make the poems falter, skip, and unexpectedly start. The result dramatizes Wordsworth's inability to fit his poetry's rhythms to the rhythms of the solitaries; the poems cannot master the time and timing of their lives, though they observe them vigilantly.⁵²

⁵² The recent completion of the Cornell Wordsworth allows us to entertain seriously the possibility that Wordsworth used punctuation to so significant an end. With its abundance of textual evidence and exhaustive and meticulously presented editorial work, the Cornell edition allows critics to attend carefully to Wordsworth's punctuation with confidence that he attended to it with care himself. Mark Reed, editor of the Cornell *Thirteen-Book Prelude*, states that "Wordsworth's concern with the punctuation of his works was lifelong." In a similar vein, Jared Curtis, editor of the Cornell *Poems, in Two Volumes*, writes: "The weight of this evidence, and its consistency with holograph and printed alterations made after 1807,

For most of the poem bearing his name, Michael, with strong bonds to wife and son, cannot properly be called a solitary. But a sudden change of fortune, a loss not only of his son but of future hopes attached to his son, drives him to an isolation which the poem's final verse-paragraphs recount. At the heart of those verse-paragraphs are the lines presenting Michael's faltering work on the sheepfold that, before his misfortune, he had intended to complete as a covenant between father and son. Those lines as they appeared in Cornell Wordsworth *Lyrical Ballads*:⁵³

And to that hollow Dell from time to time
Did he repair, to build the Fold of which
His flock had need. 'Tis not forgotten yet
The pity which was then in every heart
For the Old Man—and 'tis believ'd by all
That many and many a day he thither went,
And never lifted up a single stone.
There, by the Sheep-fold, sometimes was he seen
Sitting alone, with that his faithful Dog,
Then old, beside him, lying at his feet.
The length of full seven years from time to time

suggest that Wordsworth reviewed with care and extensively altered punctuation and capitals in proof.”
Reed, 102; Curtis, 54.

⁵³ Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems 1798-1800*, eds. Butler and Green, 252-68.

He at the building of this Sheep-fold wrought,
And left the work unfinished when he died.

Three years, or more, did Isabel
Survive her Husband: at her death the estate
Was sold, and went into a Stranger's hand. (1800, 469-484)

Michael's life has been defined by habit and routine, and now that he has lost his son, habit and routine remain to him still. But his habit and routine are not entirely what they were. Michael no longer goes to the sheepfold daily to work; on some days, he retires there to sit alone with his dog. The passage is strewn with phrases of frequency—'from time to time,' 'many and many a day,' 'from time to time.' Over these, 'never' looms, casting a shadow; for 'never,' though it does not, in the context of poem, mean 'never again, *tout court*,' admits into the poem the possibility of Michael's absolute surrender to idleness. Perhaps because a frisson of this possibility, the line 'And never lifted up a single stone' has stood out to many readers, among them Matthew Arnold, who plucked the line from the poem as a touchstone of Wordsworth's characteristic genius.

At this juncture of the poem, the editors of the *Cornell Lyrical Ballads*, Karen Green and James Butler, were faced with a difficulty involving its punctuation—namely, the punctuation that is the space between verse-paragraphs. In the original edition of the poem, 'And never lifted up a single stone' comes at the end of a page. In the editions of 1802, it comes in the middle of a page and is followed by a break in the verse-paragraph. In their 'notes on non-verbal variants,'

Green and Butler observe ‘para intent obscured by page break’ (*Lyrical Ballads*, 450).⁵⁴ They recognized that Wordsworth might have intended a paragraph break at this point in the poem, but that the contingency of typesetting might have obscured it, and they were left to decide whether to end the verse-paragraph after ‘stone’ or not. Based on the evidence they present, their decision not to do so was justified. In the note, they document the great care devoted to the spacing between verse-paragraphs in the first edition of ‘Michael.’ On the manuscript of the poem sent to the printer, Coleridge included the instruction: ‘(N.B. This poem with a separate title page & be so good as [illegible word del] to put a very large Capital letter where there is one in the M.S., with more than ordinary interspace between the Paragraphs.)’ Elsewhere on the MS (above l. 217), Dorothy Wordsworth wrote: ‘N.B. This must begin a new page but with new words between such as Part Second or anything of that sort.’ Also, the printers were attentive to the layout as indicated by Coleridge: at l. 61, Green and Butler explain, ‘the printer of LB 1800 here understandably but mistakenly inserted a paragraph break; in MS. 1800, STC left a two-line space for an insertion that WW eventually filled with one line of text’ (*Lyrical Ballads*, eds. Green 252, 260, 254). Had Wordsworth wished, he (or another member of the circle of family and friends) could have asked for enough spacing earlier in the poem to ensure that ‘And he

⁵⁴ See further John Lennard theorization that page-breaks are to be viewed along a gradient or axis of punctuation. Were Lennard’s theory followed out in practice, all editorial editions should note original page breaks, whether intended by an author, or not. But it is difficult to imagine that readers of most editions attribute authorial intent to a break in page in the same way that they do to the break in a paragraph. Even if a break in pagination is a form of punctuation that affects the reading of a work, it does not affect it in the same way as a break in a verse-paragraph. The helpful electronic scholarly edition of *Lyrical Ballads* does indicate pagination: *Lyrical Ballads: An Electronic Scholarly Edition*, eds. Bruce Graver and Ron Tetreault.

never lifted up a single stone' did not arrive at the end of a page. Or he might have asked for additional space at the top of the subsequent page.

In the edition of 1802, Wordsworth clearly ended the verse-paragraph following the word 'stone,' and in 1815, he removed the break in the verse-paragraph after 'died,' so text appeared in that (1815) collection as follows:

And to that hollow Dell from time to time
Did he repair, to build the Fold of which
His flock had need. 'Tis not forgotten yet
The pity which was then in every heart
For the Old Man—and 'tis believed by all
That many and many a day he thither went,
And never lifted up a single stone.

There, by the Sheep-fold, sometimes was he seen
Sitting alone, with that his faithful Dog,
Then old, beside him, lying at his feet.
The length of full seven years from time to time
He at the building of this Sheep-fold wrought,
And left the work unfinished when he died.
Three years, or more, did Isabel
Survive her Husband: at her death the estate

Was sold, and went into a stranger's hand. (1815, 460-475)⁵⁵

The break of the verse-paragraph in 1815 registers where the most meaningful break in Michael's life occurred: not with his death, which does away with life and all of its conflicts, but on the occasions when he did not lift a single stone, when he was conflicted between surrendering to idleness and continuing his labor. The interruption of Michael's routine is made to coincide with the routine progress of the language on the page, and in so doing we may feel that Wordsworth has been dislodged from the timing of his narrative as Michael has been dislodged from his life. But rather than read this as Wordsworth's formal mirroring of Michael's break, I would read the cleavage of the blank space between the two verse-paragraphs as corresponding with a cleaving of Wordsworth's poetic understanding and Michael's existence—an understanding that, in a poem where Wordsworth reflects on Michael with detached circumspection (see above the phrase “ ’tis believed by all”), has never been indulgent, presumptuous or profound, and which is nonetheless entirely closed to Wordsworth on this occasion. The cause for the severing of Wordsworth and Michael is not only Michael's evident pain, a pain to which Wordsworth excludes himself and us, perhaps out of conscientious respect, perhaps out of the awareness that his art cannot do it justice, and perhaps out of bafflement; the cause is also Michael's sharp forsaking of habit, his deviation from the time and timing of his life, both in that he abandons his steady, predictably pursued work, and that in his abandonment he implicitly concedes that his future is no longer what it was. Wordsworth is perplexed at what

⁵⁵ The punctuation of the 1815 edition was verified by the six first edition copies of the 1815 *Poems* in the Wordsworth Collection at Cornell University. William Wordsworth, *Poems, Including Lyrical Ballads*, 1: 203-24.

he cannot imagine, or cannot articulate: how Michael experiences his present, past, and future in this instant when he temporarily releases himself from the routine of labor that had been tethering him to all three, to his love for the son he has lost, to the means of passing his days, and to the work that would consecrate his future. At the moment of the break in the poem, the narrative of time that had been Michael's is dissolved by the corrosive force of the loss he has suffered, and Wordsworth is cut off from whatever experience of time replaces it for Michael in those hours of idleness.

Whereas Michael's endurance is presented in relation to his history and his hopes for the future, "Animal Tranquillity and Decay, a sketch" is without narrative arc, nearly without an awareness of history, absorbed instead by only the present and immediate sight of the man walking along the road. The first fourteen lines of the poem, as they appeared in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*:⁵⁶

The little hedge-row birds
That peck along the road, regard him not.
He travels on, and in his face, his step,
His gait, is one expression; every limb,
His look and bending figure, all bespeak
A man who does not move with pain, but moves
With thought—He is insensibly subdued
To settled quiet: he is one by whom

⁵⁶ Text from *Lyrical Ballads*, eds. Green and Butler. 110, 371. They provide a reading text of the 1798 poem, "Old Man Travelling," only. Their record of variants, verbal and non-verbal, was used to cross-check other 1800 editions, original and scholarly.

All effort seems forgotten, one to whom
Long patience has such mild composure given,
That patience now doth seem a thing, of which
He hath no need. He is by nature led
To peace so perfect, that the young behold
With envy, what the old man hardly feels.

The only look to the past comes in the tenth line: “Long patience has such mild composure given,” where the verb is present perfect. “Patience” is a key-word of the poem, as it is a key-word of all literature about endurance; in the old man’s patience, his having endured and his continuing to endure is visible to Wordsworth. For this quality, Wordsworth esteems him.

Jonathan Wordsworth writes of the old man: “Pain has gone, effort has gone, patience—the most passive of virtues—is no longer needed.”⁵⁷ But this is to misread the poem: it is not that patience is no longer needed, but that it *seems* to be no longer needed. The man’s patience has become so deeply engrained within his “mild” composure, as to become inseparable from his life; a man with a functioning kidney does in fact need a kidney, but he does not “seem” to need it.

And yet the poem also contains the suggestion that Wordsworth can admire the old man’s steady movement, without achieving a corresponding steadiness in the movement of words on the page. The poem is in iambic pentameter, and it can be scanned in this meter with regularity until the line “Long patience has such mild composure given,” where “Long pat-” is a spondee and “given” a feminine ending. Another spondaic substitution occurs in the final line of the poem, at “Man hard-.” What matters is where these substitutions occur: the two spondees are on

⁵⁷ Jonathan Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision*, 9.

phrases of endurance in the poem, “long patience” and “man hardly,” “hard” chiming with the “dur” of endurance. They land on Wordsworth’s moments of most intense speculation, when he strains to understand the old man’s inner life, and where he appreciates how the old man lives seemingly unperturbed by time. As he strains, his own steady rhythm falters; he cannot attain in verse what the old man does in walking on the road. The second sort of irregularity in the poem’s movement comes by virtue of its punctuation. The marks that divide the poem’s independent clauses are as follows: full-stop, semicolon, full-stop followed by a dash, semicolon, full-stop.⁵⁸ In the early nineteenth century, as I remarked in the introduction, each of these marks could be used to separate independent clauses, differing only in their relative weights. I have already quoted Murray’s grammar, but here I will quote a well-known grammar that Murray incorporated into his own, and which, first appearing in 1762, was roughly contemporary with Wordsworth’s youth, and which remained in print well into the century following. Robert Lowth, later Bishop Lowth, writes that:

The proportional quantity, or time of the points, with respect to one another, is determined by the following general rule: The Period is a pause in quantity or duration double of the Colon; the Colon is double of the Semicolon; and the Semicolon is double of the comma. So that they are in the same proportion to one another as the Semibref, the

⁵⁸ In editions of 1832 onwards, the semicolon after “expression” (l.4) became a colon. From 1805 onwards, the comma after “forgotten” (l. 9) became a semicolon, though it does not divide independent clauses.

Minim, the Crotchet, and the Quaver, in Music. The precise quantity, or duration or pause of each cannot be defined.⁵⁹

For Lowth, the choice of points depends, as it does for Murray, on the relation between the parts in a “compound sentence,” with a lighter or heavier point being chosen depending on the extent to which those parts are “closely connected” or not. Lowth provides some strict guidelines describing when to use a comma as opposed to a semi-colon and so forth, but in Wordsworth’s poetry we find colons and semi-colons, and even semi-colons and commas, used interchangeably—yet not randomly—to separate the same sorts of clauses (independent, independent with conjunction, dependent, dependent with conjunction, and so forth). He works within convention, rather than following rules; and conventions afforded him the scope for judgment that is evident in Murray’s discussion of the semicolon: “The Semicolon is used for dividing a compound sentence into two or more parts, not so closely connected as those which are separated by a comma, nor yet so little dependent on each other, as those which are distinguished by a colon.”⁶⁰ Conventions granted Wordsworth, and his circle, the space to exercise creative judgment in matters of punctuation.

One can hazard plausible syntactic reasons for each of the specific marks in “Animal Tranquillity and Decay.” The full-stop separates the first sentence from the second because the perspective changes from birds to the man, inviting a strong division. A semicolon separates “one expression” from “every limb” because the latter is the subject of a clause which gives a further account of that “one expression,” bringing the two sides of the semicolon into a close

⁵⁹ Lowth, 158-159.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 166. For a survey of eighteenth-century punctuation, see Salmon, 13-55.

relationship. Similarly close is the relationship between “settled quiet” and the clause containing “all effort seems forgotten,” though it is not so close to warrant a semicolon rather than a colon. The final full-stop might have been selected because of the distance between the previous clause’s “Patience” and “nature,” which leads the man to “perfect peace.” Or perhaps it is there for rhetorical effect, since the final stop after “need” marks a dramatic calm in the poem. Though the basic syntactical clarity of the poem could have been maintained equally well if it were punctuated entirely by semicolons or colons or full-stops, an alteration of any of the existing marks would have suggested a different set of relations between the phrases on either side of it. But the variety of marks, the relation of each mark to all of the others, makes a distinct contribution to the poem in itself, making irregular Wordsworth’s pattern of pausing, making irregular the rhythm by which he moves from clause to clause, such that the poem is not modulated with an evenness commensurate to the old man’s. He strains to understand—and embody—the old man’s rhythm of movement, and of life, in his poem, and the variety of pauses make it quiver, like muscles twitching from strain at holding still for too long. The final surprise of the poem, at least in the versions published between 1799 and 1815, when it was revised, comes in the final six lines, following the initial fourteen:⁶¹

—I asked him whither he was bound, and what

The object of his journey; he replied

That he was going many miles to take

⁶¹ *Lyrical Ballads*, eds. Butler and Green, 110, 371-2. As before, they present a reading edition of 1798’s “Old Man Travelling.” Their record of variants, verbal and non-verbal, was used to cross-check other 1800 editions, original and scholarly.

A last leave of his son, a mariner,
Who from a sea-fight had been brought to Falmouth,
And there was lying in an hospital. (ll. 15-20)

With this, the Old Man is thrust into historical time. Wordsworth had originally, in 1799, had the Old Man answer in direct speech, but the shift to indirect speech maintains a unity of past-tense verbs in these final lines, juxtaposing the historical creature that the man has become with the predominant present-tense of the first fourteen lines. The punctuation does not fluctuate here; instead, the final four lines are marked only by light commas. But perhaps we should not expect Wordsworth to register a rhythmic variation with the revelation of these lines: in them, the Old Man's relationship to time is no longer alien to Wordsworth's own. At poem's end, both men occupy the same contemporary world.

Whereas the Old Man's experience of the war seems to make him more human to Wordsworth, an encounter with the discharged soldier in Book IV of *The Prelude* disconcerts him on account of the consequences of war, and the consequences of the life and after-life of the soldiery, which are apparent both in the soldier's haggard and distorted appearance, and in the discrepancy between Wordsworth's words and his reactions and responses. His initial curiosity in the soldier is shot through by a mixture of "fear and sorrow," until, subduing his heart's "specious cowardice," he approaches, hoping to speak to him⁶²:

⁶² *The Prelude* is not only the poem that preoccupied Wordsworth throughout his career, but, as a result of his long preoccupation with it, it is the poem whose stages of punctuation were most often revised by Wordsworth and his household. It is difficult to know whether Wordsworth dictated and how carefully he oversaw punctuation, but the various members of the household responsible for transcribing are as follows: Dorothy and Mary transcribing MS A and MS B of 1805, with revisions by William, his

I wish'd to see him move; but he remain'd
Fix'd to his place, and still from time to time
Sent forth a murmuring voice of dead complaint,
Groans scarcely audible. Without self-blame
I had not thus prolong'd my watch; and now,
Subduing my heart's specious cowardise,
I left the shady nook where I had stood,
And hail'd him. Slowly from his resting-place
He rose, and, with a lean and wasted arm
In measur'd gesture lifted to his head,
Return'd my salutation; then resum'd
His station as before: and when, ere long,
I ask'd his history, he in reply
Was neither slow nor eager; but unmov'd,
And with a quiet, uncomplaining voice,
A stately air of mild indifference

secretary John Carter transcribed MS C in 1818-1819, Mary transcribed MS D, commenced in 1832, and Wordsworth's daughter Dora and a friend of the family, Elizabeth Cookson, transcribed MS E, sometime after 1838-9, with William and Mary revising in places. Before publication in 1850, the poem was revised, and punctuation altered, once more by the poet's executors. The passage here is taken from the Cornell Wordsworth MS AB, the punctuation of which is usually taken from MS A. Notes indicate whether the punctuation in MS AB was revised for MS D.

He told, in simple words, a Soldier's Tale,
That in the Tropic Islands he had serv'd,
Whence he had landed, scarcely ten days past,
That on his landing he had been dismiss'd,
And now was travelling to his native home.

(MS AB, Book IV, ll. 429-453; underlined punctuation will be discussed)

On each occasion that the soldier's immobility runs athwart of Wordsworth's expectations that he will move or act in a certain way, a semi-colon registers Wordsworth's baffled disappointment. Consider if the pertinent moments had been marked by commas, as convention and Wordsworth's practice permitted, and note how much smaller the disturbances to the verse:

I wish'd to see him move, but he remain'd

Return'd my salutation, then resum'd

Was neither slow nor eager, but unmov'd,

The semi-colons are not only a measure of Wordsworth's surprise, but of the distance that exists between the two men, embodying the barriers of communication between them. The sudden pauses represent syncopation in the rhythm of the interaction between the two men, and the rhythm of the poetry. The rhythms of interactions underlie the bonds of sympathy and society,

and Wordsworth had approached the soldier hoping that some interaction, an exchange of gestures as well as words, would reveal their shared humanity; instead, the soldier's humanity remains distant, recognizable only, and only barely, in the desolate appearance to which he has been worn down . Yet such distance of between Wordsworth and the discharged soldier is characteristic of Wordsworthian sympathy, which, rather than demand on shared understanding and fellow-feeling, involves the recognition of insurmountable distances between people, in light of which duty and moral aid are required.

Nowhere is the distance between Wordsworth and a solitary felt more than in “Resolution and Independence.” In the poem, Wordsworth is driven to what Geoffrey Hartman calls a “distraught perplexity” at his inability to understand how the leech-gatherer lives a human life. Similarly, A.C. Bradley remarked on the “perplexed persistence” with which Wordsworth presses forward in his effort at understanding the leech-gatherer, and in his attempt at describing him in the poem he writes, such that Wordsworth’s perplexity is both a fact of the encounter and a fact of how he recollects and records it. The problem of the man’s relation to time is inseparable from Wordsworth’s fascination with his “being,” to which he drew attention when he wrote to Sara Wordsworth that:

A person reading this Poem with feelings like mine will have been awed and controuled, expecting almost something spiritual or supernatural—What is brought forward? “A lonely place, a Pond,” “by which an old man *was*, far from all house or home”—not stood, not sat, but “*was*”—the figure presented in the most naked simplicity possible. ⁶³

⁶³Wordsworth, *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years: 1787-1805*, 366-7.

As John Jones remarks: “Wordsworth’s use of the verb “to be” in the poetry of this period is directly related, as he says, to the simplicity of his solitaries, which is as large as it is naked.” Leaning on the existential verb, Jones observes further: “This is no substitute for the Leech-Gatherer, who is what he is; and the question, ‘what is he?’ can only be answered by the poem.”⁶⁴ But alongside Wordsworth’s claim that at the heart of the poem stands an assertion of what the leech-gatherer *was*, it is necessary to set those occasions when Wordsworth stresses instead what he *seems* to be:⁶⁵

So that it seems a thing endued with sense:

like a Sea-beast crawled forth, which on a shelf (68-69)

such seemed this man, not all alive nor dead, (71)

As if some dire constraint of pain, or rage

Of sickness felt by him in times long past

A more than human weight upon his frame had cast. (75-77)

And the whole Body of the man did seem

Like one whom I had met with a dream; (116-117)

The old man’s shape, and speech, all troubled me:

⁶⁴ Jones, 64-65.

⁶⁵ The text is from ‘*Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. Jared Curtis, 123-129.

The poem repeatedly displays what Hartman describes as “precarious intermingling of vision and matter-of-fact,” though the word “intermingling” does not do justice to the violence of the poem.⁶⁶ Wordsworth is torn between the hunger of the imagination, urging him to see the leech-gatherer as things he is not, and what John Jones calls his ‘vigilant devotion to the actual,’ or his ‘literalness,’ demanding that he see the leech-gatherer for what he is; something that, though it shares much with these other things, is distinct from them.⁶⁷ His enduring as he does makes him seem other than human; but his endurance is impressive and strange because Wordsworth knows him to be, despite what he seems, human. The leech-gatherer’s “being” is a present reality before Wordsworth, but his “seeming,” Wordsworth’s “visions,” often imply or involve a narrative of the past, which Wordsworth cannot imagine in human terms. The man’s physical appearance is such that to imagine his having endured is to imagine his having endured a past as something other than human: he seems to have grown (evolved in his life) from a sea-beast, suggesting a tremendous span of time and an inhuman course of development; to have undergone a mysterious trauma which has endowed him with alien significance; and he seems to have had been encountered once already in a dream, a phantasm already known to Wordsworth and because of this less knowable as a man in the present. A chasm opens between Wordsworth and the leech-gatherer because the latter’s appearance resists assimilation into a narrative of human temporality. Reinhart Koselleck has written that “When one seeks to form an intuition of time as such, one is referred to spatial indications, to the hand of the clock or the leaves of a calendar

⁶⁶ Hartman, 268.

⁶⁷ Jones, 15-16.

that one pulls off every day. And when one tries to guide one's intuition in a historical direction, one perhaps pays attention to the wrinkles of an aged human being or the scars in which a life's past fate is present."⁶⁸ The leech-gatherer's appearance stymies Wordsworth's intuitions of human historical time; his appearance leads him instead in the direction of other, inhuman histories.

The heavy and abrupt pointing of the poem can be read as registering Wordsworth's struggle to reconcile the appearance of the leech-gatherer with a human experience of time, from which he stands removed. In the course of 'Resolution and Independence,' Wordsworth's pointing frequently interrupts the movement of the verse and often does so abruptly and for unexpectedly long durations; where we might expect fluidity or steadiness, it often denies us either. One explanation of this would be that he dramatizes his inability to place or focus the leech-gatherer's temporal existence by the erratic point of his verse. The presence of a semi-colon or colon where a comma would have sufficed, and the slight tremor or disturbance it creates on the surface of the poem, can be seen as an inky and inarticulate intimation of turbulence as Wordsworth comes into contact with the leech-gatherer's alien temporality. Some fairly extensive quotation is necessary in order to grasp the effects of the punctuation in the poem because, once Wordsworth has met the leech-gatherer, what matters is not only the significance of a few particular marks, but the number of marks which are unexpectedly and heavily placed. Because the presence of punctuation is more easily taken for granted than the words of a poem, it can be difficult to gain a sense of what its presence is contributing to the poem. In order to bring a mark's contribution into focus, it helps to imagine how the poem might have been punctuated otherwise. Fortunately, with 'Resolution and Independence,' as with most of Wordsworth's

⁶⁸ Koselleck, 102.

poems, we do not need to imagine this on our own. On several occasions, the poem, with punctuation from the seven volume collected works of 1849-50, will be set below passages as they appeared in 1807.⁶⁹ More helpful, there is another version of the poem with more, and more interesting, variants. Written in 1802, ‘The Leechgatherer’ circulated in manuscript through the Wordsworth circle. Although ‘The Leechgatherer’ was substantially revised before publication as ‘Resolution and Independence,’ it was not entirely re-written, and in a letter written on August 13 1803, Coleridge transcribes ‘The Leechgatherer,’ with many lines the same or nearly the same as the 1807 version. Coleridge’s transcription is helpful because he punctuates it, and with punctuation that differs from the poem as it appears in the version published in 1807.⁷⁰ Where Coleridge transcribes passages that are also present in the 1807, with whatever minor revisions to wording and punctuation, his transcription will appear below.

In all transcriptions, the punctuation relevant to the discussion has been underlined by me:

As a huge Stone is sometimes seen to lie

⁶⁹ The quotations from the 1849 edition are from the volume in the Wordsworth Collection at Cornell University. William Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, 2: 117-23.

⁷⁰ To George and Lady Beaumont, August 13, 1803, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: 1826-1834*, 966-73. Whether the punctuation is the same as that of the original Coleridge had before him, or whether he altered it when transcribing, the fact that it is punctuated is important in two respects. This suggests that Coleridge (unlike Sara Hutchinson, whose fair copy transcription has no punctuation) felt that the punctuation was sufficiently important to the poem to warrant transcription or alteration. Yet for Coleridge all punctuation was significant, as is demonstrated by his marginalia, which includes the re-punctuation of Donne’s poetry and an ecstatic outburst about a semi-colon in Defoe. The marginalia can be found in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Marginalia II*, ed. George Whalley (Princeton, 1985), 226-8 (Donne), 160-1 (Defoe).

Couch'd on the bald top of an eminence;
Wonder to all who do the same espy
By what means it could thither come, and whence;
So that it seems a thing endued with sense:
Like a Sea-beast crawl'd forth, which on a shelf
Of rock or sand reposeth, there to sun itself. (1807, 64-70)

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie
Couch'd on the bald time of an eminence,
Wonder to all that do the same espy,
By what means it could thither come & whence;
So that it seems a thing endued with sense,
Like a Sea-beast crawl'd forth, which on a Shelf
Of rock or sand reposeth, there to sun itself. (Coleridge, 64-70)

The only place in the passage where Coleridge's punctuation is heavier than the 1807 version is with the comma following 'espy', and this could be said to muddy the sense of the passage by separating it from the following phrase, and Wordsworth may have wished to avoid doing so. Elsewhere, however, 1807 is heavier. We may think that the challenge of the syntax demanded the semi-colon of 1807 rather than the comma of Coleridge's transcription. The nub of the difficulty is the word 'wonder'. 'Wonder' might be taken as a noun in apposition with 'huge stone' and 'the same', so that the huge stone is a wonder to all who could spy by what means it could thither come and whence—implying that anyone who saw the route available to it would

be surprised that it ended up where it was. Alternatively, ‘wonder’ might be taken as an attribute of those who ‘do the same [stone] espy’, along the lines of: ‘there was wonder in all of those who espied that same stone, that wonder occasioned by thinking of how and whence it got to the eminence’. But heavier punctuation does not resolve or elucidate the matter: whether there is a semi-colon or comma before the word, either reading is possible.

Such seem'd this Man, not all alive nor dead,
Nor all asleep; in his extreme old age:
His body was bent double, feet and head
Coming together in their pilgrimage;
As if some dire constraint of pain, or rage
Of sickness felt by him in times long past,
A more than human weight upon his frame had cast. (1807, 71-77)

Such seemed this Man, not all alive nor dead,
Nor all asleep—in his extreme old age: (1849, 64-65)

Such seem'd this Man, not all alive nor dead,
Nor all asleep; in his extreme old age
His body was bent double, feet and head
Coming together in their pilgrimage;
As if some dire constraint of pain, or rage
Of sickness felt by him in times long past

A more than human weight upon his age had cast. (Coleridge, 71-77)

We might understand 'in his extreme old age' in relation either to what comes before, as an item in a list, or to what comes after, as providing the reason that his body is 'bent double.' But the semi-colon that precedes the phrase and the colon that follows it distance it from both what comes before and what comes after, so that it somewhat uncertainly hangs attached to either. In 1849, Wordsworth replaces the semi-colon with a dash, and in his transcription, Coleridge had replaced the colon with the absence of a mark. We might have expected either of these, or a comma in place of either the colon or the semi-colon so as to establish clearer continuity with either the phrase that precedes or the phrase that follows. As Wordsworth punctuates it in 1807, the phrase floats, a partially severed observation about the old man:

Himself he propp'd, his body, limbs, and face,
Upon a long grey Staff of shaven wood:
And, still as I drew near with gentle pace,
Beside the little pond or Moorish flood
Motionless as a Cloud the Old Man stood;
That heareth not the loud winds when they call;
And moveth altogether, if it move at all. (1807, 78-84)

Motionless as a cloud the old Man stood,
That heareth not the loud winds when they call; (1849,74-76)

Himself he propp'd, both body, [limb, and face,]
Upon a long grey staff of shaven wood[d],
And still as I drew near with gentle pace
Beside the little pond or Moorish flood
Motionless as a cloud the Old Man stood,
That heareth not the loud winds when they call,
And moveth altogether if it moves at all. (Coleridge, 78-84)

The punctuation of the Coleridge transcription is not surprising in the nineteenth century: commas dividing the dependent clauses from one another. Yet, even in revising the poem, Wordsworth did not alter the second of the semicolons preceding the dependent clause beginning 'And moveth'. With the semi-colon in 1807, the verse itself ceases moving for a greater duration than it does with Coleridge's comma.

His words came feebly, from a feeble chest,
Yet each in solemn order follow'd each,
With something of a lofty utterance drest:
Choice word, and measured phrase; above the reach
Of ordinary men; a stately speech!
Such as grave Livers do In Scotland use,
Religious men, who give to God and Man their dues. (1807, 99-105)

With something of a lofty utterance drest—

Choice word and measured phrase, above the reach

Of ordinary men; a stately speech; (1849, 94-96)

His words came feebly from a feeble chest,

Yet each in solemn order follow'd each

With something of a pompous utterance drest,

Choice word & measur'd phrase, beyond the reach

Of ordinary men, a stately speech,

Such as grave livers do in Scotland use,

Religious Men who give to God & Man their dues. (Coleridge, 106-112)

Both Wordsworth's revision and the Coleridge transcription agree in following 'measured phrase' with a comma, rather than a semicolon, as it appears in the 1807 version. Coleridge's transcription sets off the appositive phrase ('stately speech') with a comma, rather than a semicolon, and follows it with the expected comma, which the exclamation mark in the 1807 version might have been thought to replace, had it not been for Wordsworth's revision. For in nineteenth-century usage, an exclamation mark indicates intonation and might be substituted for any of the various pauses, from comma to full-stop. Hence the alteration of the exclamation point after 'speech' to a semicolon is an alteration in the direction of a more unambiguously divisive mark, and it is the only instance in revision of this poem where Wordsworth alters a lighter for a heavier mark where it is not for the purpose of syntactical elucidation. Without taking the revision into account, the exclamation point may have been read as the equivalent of a comma,

or as simply a guide for intonation, with no bearing on the nearness of the words to one another in time or syntax.

The Old Man still stood talking by my side;
But now his voice to me was like a stream
Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;
And the whole Body of the man did seem
Like one who I had met with in a dream;
Or like a Man from some far region sent;
To give me human strength, and strong admonishment. (1807, 113-119)

The Old Man still stood talking by my side,
But soon his voice to me was like a stream
Scarce heard, nor word from word could I divide,
And the whole body of the Man did seem
Like [one w]hom I had met with in a dream;
Or like a Man from some far region sent
To give me human strength, & strong admonishment. (Coleridge, 120-126)

The semicolon following ‘sent’ is not included in the Cornell Wordsworth edition, though it was present as the poem was published in 1807. The Cornell editor, Jared Curtis, remarks in a note that ‘sense and phrasing require a comma, which was supplied by WW in 1815’, but it is not evident that the semicolon obfuscates the sense at all, and the phrasing, though altered by the

comma, is not in need of one.⁷¹ In fact, the semicolon following ‘sent’ leaves open the possibility that the final phrase, ‘to give me human strength, and strong admonishment’ applies not only to the man ‘from some far region sent’, but the man Wordsworth had met with in a dream. The effect of the semicolon after ‘sent’ is jarring, but then so is the man’s purpose. Also startling, though less obtrusive, is the semicolon after ‘dream’. As in many of the cases underlined, the semicolon might have been replaced with a comma, since it introduces a dependent clause governed by the verb ‘seem’, though the Coleridge transcription likewise includes the strong semicolon to cap off the line.

He with a smile did then his words repeat;
And said that, gathering Leeches, far and wide
He travelled; stirring thus about his feet
The waters of the Ponds where they abide.
‘Once I could meet with them on every side;
But they have dwindled long by slow decay;
Yet still I persevere, and find them where I may’. (1807, 127-133)

He with a smile did then his words repeat
And said, that whereso’er they might be spied
He gather’d Leeches, stirring at his feet
The waters in the Ponds where they abide.
Once he could meet with them on every side;

⁷¹ *Poems, in Two Volumes*, ed. Curtis, 128.

But fewer they became from day to day,

And so his means of life before him died away. (Coleridge, 134-40)

The semicolon following ‘side’ shows that the Coleridge transcription is not always bereft of semicolons—but his transcription of the passage elsewhere shows how much lighter the punctuation of 1807 might have been much of the time, as when it has a comma rather than a semicolon between ‘Leeches’ and ‘stirring’. In 1807, even when reporting the leech-gatherer’s speech, the heavy punctuation interrupts, dividing the leech-gatherer from his daily labour of ‘stirring’. It could be that a difference of meaning is suggested by the semi-colon. With the comma, we might be inclined to hear the leech-gatherer as saying that he stirs the water with his feet as he travels. But we might take the semi-colon as indicating that he has concluded his speech, and that he stirs the water with his feet as he speaks to Wordsworth.

The unexpectedly heavy pointing of the poem does not usually coincide with those occasions when Wordsworth imagines the leech-gatherer’s history; but they disrupt the poem’s rhythm such that we are aware of Wordsworth presenting himself as out of joint with time during the meeting. I have already described the poem as a collision between the present state of the man and the inhuman history Wordsworth posits for him. But this is not a complete description of Wordsworth’s alienation from the leech-gatherer’s experience of time. Not only can Wordsworth not see the leech-gatherer in relation to a human past, but he cannot understand how he continues to exist in the present, in the short-term, from moment to moment. In asking the famous question, “How is it that you live, and what is it you do?,” Wordsworth is asking both a profound and mundane question. He marvels at the existence of the leech-gatherer, and so seeks what the leech-gatherer cannot give: an explanation of his “being.” But he also wants to

know how, practically, the leech-gatherer goes about living; and this because, I think, Wordsworth does not understand how the being before him exists in time, how he passes the time so as to endure as he does. In wondering “being,” Wordsworth is tempted to see the gatherer as a timeless creature; one who simply is, without awareness of time, or with an existence somehow (impossibly) independent of it. The question tries to get behind the veil of the fantasy, and understand what how he orders and orients himself towards diurnal time. Wordsworth’s difficulty in placing the leech-gatherer as a creature within the currents of time provides another reason for the poem’s erratic pointing: the abrupt and long pauses suggest that, in standing before the timeless being, Wordsworth’s own sense of the passing of time during the encounter, and recalling the encounter, is disrupted, as a stream might be by a rock that is in it, but not carried by it. The uneven pointing dramatizes the perplexing effect of the leech-gatherer on Wordsworth’s awareness of time.

One solitary is an exception to the trend I have described so far: Toussaint L’Ouverture, though he is not usually thought of among this group of characters. Although he is unlike them in that he is a historical figure, and a figure of strength even in defeat, as a result of that defeat he has been made isolated, vulnerable, and cast out of society:

Toussaint, the most unhappy Man of Men!
Whether the rural Milk-maid by her Cow
Sing in thy hearing, or thou liest now
Alone in some deep dungeon’s earless den,
O miserable Chieftain! where and when
Wilt thou find patience? Yet die not; do thou

Wear rather in thy bonds a cheerful brow:
Though fallen Thyself, never to rise again,
Live, and take comfort. Thou hast left behind
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
There's not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and Man's unconquerable mind. (“To Toussaint L'Ouverture”)

Lines 5-6 of the poem turn to a question that resembles, on first glance, the questions that we have found elsewhere in Wordsworth's poems about enduring solitaries: “Where and when wilt thou find patience?” In the version of the poem in the collected edition at the end of Wordsworth's life, the question mark has been replaced by an exclamation mark, and something of value is lost as a result. For although the interrogative syntax remains the same, the exclamation mark resolves the question into an affirmation before it has been properly asked, and so prematurely closes the wound of uncertainty that the question-mark opens in the poem: for an instant, in the space before “Yet,” there is genuine puzzlement over when and where he will find patience. As it appeared in 1807, the final eight lines of the poem are a salve applied to the wound, affirming the sustenance that the world promises to L'Ouverture, and which will allow his name and his life's actions to endure in history. Without the presence of the question, the efficacy and potency of the salve is less dramatically present before us. The poem's subsequent punctuation modulates the poise and optimism of the affirmation. The full-stop after “comfort” is not a blank of doubt, but a breath of confidence and calm. The semi-colons between

the phrases in the eight lines of the poem following the question mark are the lightest conventional pauses for separating independent clauses, allowing them a hearty and hopeful stride towards the final lines: “Thy friends are exultations, agonies, and love, and Man’s unconquerable mind.” The last clause “and Man’s unconquerable mind” is made to seem superabundant, because there was already a conjunction before “love.” The expected phrasing: “Thy friends are exultations, agonies, love, and Man’s unconquerable mind.” Tacked on by a second “and,” “Man’s unconquerable mind” seems an afterthought, albeit an afterthought of great importance—for the other effect of the second “and” is to suggest that “Man’s unconquerable mind” is not so much an item in the list but a separate list unto itself, a group set apart from “exultations, agonies, and love,” all of which are feelings, and all of which might be considered as distinct from the “mind.” But what is strange then is that this separate category, introduced by “and,” is set apart by a comma, rather than a semi-colon, which would have given the apparent distinction clarity on the page: “Thy friends are exultations, agonies, and love; and Man’s unconquerable mind.” Yet what Wordsworth affirms with the comma before “and” is that although the two groups are distinguishable, they are not distinct. The comma establishes continuity between them, encouraging a commerce between feelings and the mind on the words of the page. The intercourse between “exultations, agonies, and love” and “Man’s unconquerable mind” is not, for Wordsworth, an occasion for doubt, or pause; it to be acknowledged in the poem, without hesitation, as the strength that will allow L’Overture to endure. Coinciding with the optimism is Wordsworth’s confidence, absent from the other poems about solitaries, in his grasp on the course of L’Overture’s life and in his faith in his powers of prognostication; his affirmation is lightly punctuated, and so moves unhindered, because Wordsworth is at ease with

his own understanding of time's course. Wordsworth presumes here, and the punctuation suggests that his presumptions do not meet with the resistance of doubt.

The volume of 1807, where the sonnet to L'Ouverture appeared, saw also two of Wordsworth's most personal statements about endurance—albeit an experience of endurance quite different from that of the solitaries, in that his experience is not characterized by physical hardship, or exile from the borders of civilization and society. These poems are also different from the poems about solitaries, though, in that their punctuation illuminates the experience and consciousness of time, rather than registering Wordsworth's distance from it. "Elegiac Stanzas" was occasioned by the death of Wordsworth's brother John in 1805 and by the sight of a painting of Peele Castle by George Beaumont, but it is ultimately about the loss of Wordsworth's faith in the natural world, the consequences of time and age upon his youthful imagination, optimism, and beliefs. In mourning what he has lost, Wordsworth writes lines that might have been found in the Ode that followed it in the volume of 1807: "A power is gone, which nothing can restore"... "So once it would have been—'tis so no more." The poems have in common Wordsworth's realization that his former powers have diminished with the experiences of age. Yet there is also a great deal in the poems that sets them at odds. "Elegiac Stanzas" is without the nostalgia for the past found in the Ode. As Geoffrey Hartman says of the poem: "Wordsworth's new strength is not in dallying with the hope that his soul may revive once more toward the past. He faces only to future in the assured consciousness that, if he cannot bear the divine glimpses which the past offers, he can sustain the human sorrows to come."⁷² "Elegiac Stanzas" represents a sharp rejection of Wordsworth's former vision of nature and is founded on self-recrimination and self-accusation that is largely absent from the Ode. Hartman again: "It is quite

⁷² Hartman, 286.

true that nature led him on, to a conception that proved false; but it is clearly his own soul which betrayed him through the “fond delusion” that nature is more than it can be.”⁷³ The word “betray’d” sits heavy in Wordsworth’s “Elegiac Stanzas”:

Such, in the fond delusion of my heart,
Such Picture would I at that time have made:
And seen the soul of truth in every part;
A faith, a trust, that could not be betray’d. (ll. 29-32)

And, jumping ahead a stanza:

Not for a moment could I now behold
A smiling sea and be what I have been:
The feeling of my loss will ne’er be old;
This, which I know, I speak with mind serene. (ll. 37-40)

It is tempting to read these lines as a wholesale rejection of Wordsworth’s earlier attitude towards nature, what Hartman describes as a “capacity for generous error and noble illusion, which made life correspond to the heart’s desire.”⁷⁴ The poem is an effort at affirming a new attitude towards life. He yearns to stand now, like Peele Castle, “Cased in the unfeeling armor of old time.” The phrase is rich in possibilities of meaning: that time is old, that “old time” is itself

⁷³ Hartman, 284.

⁷⁴ Hartman, 285.

the “unfeeling armor,” that “old time” is the time of old age, as the castle is old, and that “old time” is an ancient species of time, in which the castle, being old, is cased. Perhaps this latter possibility refers to Wordsworth rejecting vogueish, eighteenth-century sensibility and sentimentality, admittedly not associated with Peele Castle in particular, in favor of stoicism, which might be justly called “the unfeeling armor of old time” or which, being ancient, might represent “old time.” Wordsworth’s new relationship to, and understanding of, time, is crucial to his new view of the world, and of his own past.

The shock to Wordsworth’s system is not only a shock in his understanding of time, but a shock of time, a break in the time of his life, which he registers by a mark of punctuation:

So once it would have been,—’tis so no more;
I have submitted to a new control:
A power is gone, which nothing can restore;
A deep distress hath humanised my Soul. (ll. 33-36)

The first line of the stanza is an account of Wordsworth’s shift from his old view of nature to his new, but also registers, in its punctuation, the pressure time has exerted upon him in the process of the change. The comma-dash after “been” is might have been otherwise: a semi-colon or colon before an independent clause without a conjunction: “So once it would have been; ’tis so no more.” Setting aside the dash for a moment, it is difficult to understand how a comma alone could have been placed here; it would have been excessively rapid, an extremely light pause considering it comes between two independent clauses. We might see the comma-dash sequence on this occasion as dramatizing a sequence of thoughts or intuitions. I do not pretend that these

sequences are what actually occurred as Wordsworth was writing the poem, but I think the punctuation invites us to imagine them, as if they did. In the first imagined sequence, we might imagine that Wordsworth felt that a comma would suffice, because he had anticipated placing a conjunction (“and” probably) after it, but then, having set the comma, did not wish to provide as clear and close a connection as “and” would have done, and felt instead that a greater quantity of time, albeit one he could not define, was truer to the change he had undergone, and so deployed a dash. Since the duration of a dash, even relative to other marks, is undefined, it implies a mysterious quantity of time through which Wordsworth passed. In the second imagined sequence, which I prefer, Wordsworth, looking back at the change he has undergone, feels the comma to adequately modulate the rhythm of his verse; the change seems to him to have occurred so quickly, or so easily. But, having placed the comma, he recognizes the fallacy of his perspective, sees that the length of time required for the change, or the perceived length of time for the change, requires an additional mark, even if one without a set relative duration. We are to see that he did not want to revise the line outright, because it matters that the transition from comma to dash, the mental drama it indicates, be recorded on the page. Whether what happened to Wordsworth took a long time or not, the shock that he received with the loss of his brother would have given that span of time a proportionately greater significance; it was a shock which he endured, and whose consequences, as he reevaluated his life, he endured.

The punctuation of the poem registers Wordsworth’s new attitude to time. It apprehends time as a promise of tragedy to come. In the penultimate stanza, Wordsworth bids eager farewell to his former feelings and beliefs:

Farewell, farewell the Heart that lives alone,

Hous'd in a dream, at distance from the Kind!
Such happiness, wherever it be known,
Is to be pitied; for 'tis surely blind. (ll. 53-56)

So much for the vale of Grasmere and a restorative nature; the poem braces for the prospect of years without “such happiness.” Having endured the death of his brother, and having suffered the loss of his former beliefs, Wordsworth looks ahead in the final stanza to a future which he must endure without the comforting visions of his youth:

But welcome fortitude, and patient cheer,
And frequent sights of what is to be borne!
Such sights, or worse, as are before me here.—
Not without hope we suffer and we mourn. (ll. 53-60)

The penultimate stanza is not “about” time, but the passage of time is as much about this stanza as any other in the poem. Curiously, Wordsworth’s newfound attitude in these stanzas is not so different from that expressed years before in “Expostulation and Reply,” which shares the rhyme scheme of “Elegiac Stanzas,” though the differences in meter between the two compound with the rhymes for opposing effects, the tetrameter chiming with jaunty youth compared to the more wearied stretch of the pentameter. In “Expostulation and Reply,” Wordsworth replies to Matthew:

“Think you, ’mid all this mighty sum

“Of things for ever speaking,

“That nothing of itself will come,

“But we must still be seeking?

“—Then ask not wherefore, here, alone

“Conversing as I may,

“I sit upon this old grey stone,

“And dream my time away. (ll. 25-32)

In “Elegiac Stanzas” too, Wordsworth submits to the progress of time: what will come will come of its own accord, in its own time. Unlike in “Elegiac Stanzas,” in “Expostulation and Reply” he can dream his time away because his time is not his own, but the time of the world which speaks and moves of its own accord; he patiently, subserviently and gratefully receives its gifts, which are given by a time of its own. The chief difference in the attitudes towards time found in “Elegiac Stanzas” and “Expostulation and Reply,” is that when he wrote the former, Wordsworth had received from the world tragedy as well as consolation and pleasure, and a tragedy that made him wary of ever believing again that the time of the world would bring sufficient recompense with it to counter its painful wastefulness. That wastefulness can be accepted, says the Wordsworth of “Elegiac Stanzas,” only as a consequence of standing in a different relation to the world and time than Wordsworth earlier had.

The self-accusation of “Elegiac Stanzas” is itself peculiarly blind to Wordsworth’s earlier career, where poems such as “The Female Vagrant” or “The Ruined Cottage” do not flinch away from tragic waste. But there is also in earlier Wordsworth the inclination to distance himself

from such losses—of which the conclusion of “The Ruined Cottage” is an example—and, however justified such an impulse may be, it is likely this impulse that he censures in “Elegiac Stanzas.” The self-accusation had been anticipated in the earlier poetry, as where Wordsworth’s removal from the “Kind” is one strand of Matthew’s hectoring in “Expostulation and Reply”:

“You look round on your mother earth,
“As if she for no purpose bore you;
“As if you were her first-born birth,
“And none had lived before you!” (ll. 9-12)

Matthew refers to books and the wisdom of the ages, but the implication of the final line extends further: to live as if “none had lived before” is also to live as if none had died before, to ignore the experience that others have gained through time, at the peril of trusting too much in time as a consequence of ignorance or, taking up the word of “Elegiac Stanzas,” blindness. Another difference between the two poems is in the nature of their “wise passivity.” In both poems, “wise passivity” implies an acceptance of the temporal order of the natural world, and, perhaps, of a divinity. But in “Expostulation and Reply,” this acceptance is not a source of grief, whereas in “Elegiac Stanzas” it is an acknowledgement of, and resignation to, the inevitability of irredeemable tragic losses. Wordsworth is not, in “Elegiac Stanzas,” more attuned to time than he had been in earlier verse, but he is sensitive to time differently than he had been, pessimistically withstanding it rather than optimistically in attendance upon it. In the context of the new attitude, the semi-colon after “pitied” in the penultimate stanza reminds us of the

passage of time as it halts the line with a pause, but in this poem, such a reminder is charged with a negative valence; a reminder of what is to be endured.

The final stanza of “Elegiac Stanzas” proclaims virtues of endurance: “fortitude, and patient cheer.” And yet before the stanza’s and poem’s final line, the final affirmation of hope despite a pessimistic anticipation of sorrows to come, the verse is jostled by a dash. The chief reason for the dash is that the line of thought has swerved aside from the “sights” of the picture, or “worse” sights of the imagination, that Wordsworth has summoned. There is also a change from first-person singular to plural; Wordsworth ends the poem speaking for the common human heart. Later in his life, in a letter of 1844, Wordsworth looked to the poem as a source of consolation for his friend William Lisle Bowles, and he misquotes himself: “ ‘But not without hope we sorrow and we mourn.’ So I wrote when I lost that dear brother. So have I ever felt since, and so I am sure in my heart, you do now.”⁷⁵ Wordsworth misquotes himself. “Sorrow” for “suffer” is wrong, and so is the word “but.” The substitution of “but” for the dash responds to Wordsworth’s memory of the change of direction the poem takes, but it does not alter the movement of the verse. The dash, on the other hand, perturbs and propels the verse, registering Wordsworth’s spontaneous leap away from the contemplation of the “worse” that will “frequently” befall in the years to come; even though he has resolved to stand in stoic acceptance of what time will bring, he is not sufficiently reconciled with time to willingly sustain himself in imagining what its passage may bring.

The final poem of the 1807 volume, the Ode, represents a steeling of Wordsworth’s nerves, and a reconciliation also of the present with the “fond delusions” of his past. Christopher Salveson wrote over fifty years ago that “the philosophical ‘control’ of the poem is now less the

⁷⁵ Wordsworth, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years: Part IV*, 551.

action of memory than an awareness, and acceptance, of Time, of the ever-increasing distance between the present and the earliest rememberable past.”⁷⁶ The Ode doesn’t achieve such control immediately, but only at line 132, with the turn “O joy! that in our embers | Is something that doth live.” Geoffrey Hill calls this line a “fresh time-signature” in the poem . Responding to Saintsbury’s charge that the Ode is “broken-backed” in its rhythm, Hill goes on:

The Ode is indeed broken, but the break, far from being an injury sustained, is a resistance proclaimed. If language is more than a vehicle for the transmission of axioms and concepts, rhythm is correspondingly more than a physiological motor. It is capable of registering, mimetically, deep shocks of recognition.⁷⁷

As scrupulous and inventive a punctuator as Hill might agree that rhythm in the case of these lines is more than a matter of meter. The pause that precedes the lines is not merely the pause of the full-stop concluding the prior stanza; it is also the visual pause, the blank of the page that punctuates the Ode, separating the stanzas from one another. The altered time-signature registers the shock of Wordsworth’s recognition “that nature yet remembers,” that an essential power within himself has endured time, and that time itself is not only to be accounted a force of attrition. The blank of the page prior to the altered time-signature is akin to a shock of recognition at the shock that follows; and the space on the page is a blank of time, an unaccountable, unaccounted for time, in which Wordsworth discovers his new, mature “joy”.

And so we read in the poem:

⁷⁶ Salvesen, 115.

⁷⁷ Hill, 91.

Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

O joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive! (ll.129-135)

The rhythm of the lines prior to the break is affected also by the presence of commas where none would be expected: following “weight” and “frost.” Nowhere else in the poem does Wordsworth place a comma between two adjectival phrases as he does in the final line of the stanza; nor does there seem any reason that “heavy” should not follow from “weight” without interruption, since it modifies it directly. We might expect “Heavy as frost” to be set aside in commas were “weight” to be a subject with a verb: “a weight, heavy as frost and deep almost as life, pressed down on him,” for example. Observe how differently the lines would move and feel if they were punctuated as follows:

Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight
Heavy as frost and deep almost as life.

I do not think that the intrusion of heavy punctuation, or the relief of light punctuation, in the Ode can be said to represent “shocks of recognition” in the same way as the change that begins at “O joy!” To say they do would be to devalue the strength of the word; but the pressure of such marks, light or heavy, on the rhythm of the verse nonetheless registers Wordsworth’s recognition of time through the poem. In these lines, the commas are themselves a “weight” and “freight” of the time of custom. They are not only mimetic of the experience of time Wordsworth describes, but also reflect his experience of time as he recalls the weight, the oppressed mental state he is in as he composes the poem, and which the composition of the poem will help in remedying. The shock of the new time-signature erupts not only from the iambic pentameter of these lines, but from those pauses.

Although heavy pauses register a recognition of time’s erosive force, the attitude Wordsworth takes towards that force is modified over the poem’s course. The strains of joy in the first stanzas—perhaps an overly emphatic joy, a willful and self-deluded joy—are accompanied by lightening of punctuation at several moments:

The winds come to me from the fields of sleep,

And all the earth is gay,

Land and sea

Give themselves up to jollity,

And with the heart of May

Dost every Beast keep holiday. (ll. 28-33)

The comma after “gay” separates two independent clauses, unusually for Wordsworth; but in the state of mind that Wordsworth has worked himself towards in this stanza, the time of age, of custom, and the losses of time, are not much felt. There is similarly light pointing between independent clauses earlier in the poem:

My heart is at your festival,

My head hath its coronal,

The fullness of your bliss, I feel—I feel it all. (ll.39-41)

There are not sufficient instances to form a pattern, but these marks can nonetheless be felt as symptoms of Wordsworth’s consciousness of time—or his insensitivity to it in the early, joyful stanzas. When he begins to recollect the deprivations that accompany aging, we find the heavier pointing following “weight” and “frost.” Yet in the renewed happiness of the stanza that begins “O joy! that in our embers,” where we might expect for Wordsworth to once more evince symptoms of a lightened sensitivity to time, we find something else. At a critical moment of reflection upon the endurance of “those shadowy recollections” through time, which in turn provide power for Wordsworth to endure whatever he has lost, the punctuation presses heavily:

Uphold us, cherish us, and make

Our noisy years seem moments in the being

Of the eternal silence: truths that wake,

To perish never;

Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,

Nor Man nor Boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy. (ll. 156-163)

The two unusually heavy marks are the comma following “wake” and the semi-colon following “never.” I think it is fairly evident that the comma following “wake” is heavy; the semi-colon may not seem to be so, and it may have been syntactically necessary if Wordsworth wished to establish that “which” refers not to “truths” but, further behind it in the stanza, to “those shadowy recollections.” But even if this is the intention for the semi-colon, it is not sufficient to prevent us from attaching “which” to “truths,” in which case we feel the semi-colon to be a greater pause than a comma in the equivalent place. He acknowledges once more the pressure and force of the years that have passed, rather than turning away and ignoring them, as he may be said to have done earlier in the poem. In meeting that force, Wordsworth may be thought to consider himself, in his new state of mind, strong enough to reckon with, and resist it; and we may also feel that, in the revelation that something essential to his creative and emotional life has endured time, he is able to reconcile himself to it.

Chapter Two: Tennyson and the Weight of a Pause

“Poetry looks better, more convincing, in print.”—Tennyson, recorded by Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir*⁷⁸

From his early to his late years, Alfred Tennyson was acutely sensitive to time’s passage. Hallam Tennyson records in his memoir of his father an incident that occurred in 1873, when the poet was 64 years old:

During the evening we consoled ourselves by reading *Lélia* by George Sand: whose *Consuelo* and *Petite Fadette* were favourites of his. Nothing was to be heard at night thro’ the mist but the shrill ticking of a church-clock, which sounded, he said, ‘in the thick darkness like the cry of a dying man.’ He says he once lived near a stable clock which he never *heard* but which he *felt*, most ghostly wise, through the boards.⁷⁹

As time passed in the ticking of a church-clock, it passed also along Tennyson’s nerves; that a clock can have an exquisitely visceral presence was intuited by Tennyson in some of his earliest surviving verse, too:⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Hallam Tennyson, 1:190.

⁷⁹ Hallam Tennyson, 2: 504.

⁸⁰ All quotations of Tennyson’s poems, except for *In Memoriam*, are from the Ricks edition, unless I indicate otherwise. *In Memoriam* is quoted from Shatto and Shaw. At times, I will note revisions Tennyson made to his punctuation, especially between 1832 and 1842. In these cases, my text is still from the Ricks edition, even though it takes as a copy-text the Eversley Edition of 1904—with punctuation at

There is a clock in Pandemonium,
Hard by the burning throne of my Great Grandsire,
The slow vibrations of whose pendulum,
With click-clack alternation to and fro,
Sound ‘*Ever, Never!*’ through the courts of Hell,
Piercing the wrung ears of the damned that writhe
Upon their beds of flame... (*The Devil and the Lady*, I.v. 233-239)

The nightmare of Hell, in addition to the agony of the beds of flame, is that it is both eternal and subject still to the tangibly “piercing” vibrations of a clock. In both old age and youth, time takes on a tangible presence in Tennyson’s imagination, something that does violence to men and women—not only as a corrosive medium of life, but as a metallic tool of torture.

Endurance is suffering, duress, toil, or hardship experienced over time. We might consider two experiences as experiences of endurance if in one case a person endures a great pain for a short duration, and in the other case a person endures a lesser pain for a longer duration. To be more aware of time’s passage is to be more intensely conscious of one’s

times supplied from Tennyson’s 1894 edition. Ricks does not include variants in punctuation, so when discussing 1842 or 1832 punctuation, I have cross-checked Ricks with 1842 and 1832 editions. With great consistency, the punctuation in Ricks accords with that of 1842 versions of poems. However, I have returned to Tennyson’s preference, which runs counter to the editorial policy of the series for which Ricks edited his edition, of making use of an apostrophe to elide letters in certain words. For instance, Tennyson writes “tho’” for “though” and “calendar’d” instead of “calendared.” Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Poems of Tennyson*, Second Edition, ed. Christopher Ricks, 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1897).

experience enduring; and to experience severe pain is often also to experience a heightened awareness of time's passing. Therefore in Tennyson's poems about human endurance—"Ulysses," "Mariana," "Tithonus," "The Lotos-Eaters," "St. Simeon Stylites"—punctuation's temporal character takes on a special significance. Whether or not he subscribed to quantitative notions of meter, whereby meter might be measured by long and short syllables, we do know that Tennyson at least occasionally thought of his lines as temporal as well as metrical units, in one case remarking that a revised line in "A Dream of Fair Women" was "almost synchronous with the old reading."⁸¹ The original line read "Which yet to name my spirit loathes and fears:" and the revised, altered in 1883, "Which men called Aulis in those iron years:". That both lines have identical punctuation may be one reason Tennyson can speak of them as "synchronous." For punctuation can extend or shorten the time of a line of poetry, depending on whether a mark is heavy or light. And where a mark of punctuation is unusually heavy or unusually light, we will be aware that there is extra time in a line, or that there is unusually little time.

This chapter advances a simple argument: that in Tennyson's poetry, heavy or light marks of punctuation, extending or shortening the time of a line, can reveal something about how a speaker registers time's passage at a particular moment. Unusually heavy punctuation will often record moments when time weighs more heavily on the speakers, when their awareness of time's passing is heightened, when the difficulty of enduring is greatest; conversely, lighter punctuation will often record moments when the opposite is true, when they experience

⁸¹ John Hollander argues that quantity has no place in discussions of English verse and posits that Tennyson must have known so and have been coyly suggesting that he knew the quantity of every word in English except for scissors. The classicist Donald Carne-Ross has argued that the knowledge of quantitative meter might alter how poets hear English verse, writing it with a Latin or Greek accent. John Hollander, 49-70. Carne-Ross, 19-48. Tennyson's remark is recorded in *Poems*, ed. Ricks 1:485, n. 106.

something akin to relief, even if temporary, and when the weight of time is lifted from their consciousnesses. We can sharpen our understanding of the relationship between punctuation and endurance in Tennyson's poetry if we compare it to Wordsworth's. Wordsworth's poems about the solitaries reveal his distance from those who endure, his punctuation registering the distance of his experience of time from theirs; Tennyson's poems, often dramatic monologues, inhabit the experience from within, and deploy punctuation so that the reader is likewise invited to share in a crucial part of the experience. As we arrive at a pause of greater or lesser duration, we are invited to feel for ourselves, on a miniature scale, the passage of time which imposes on the speaker of the poem. I grant that, in theory, there are poems in which light punctuation, the rapidity of pauses, might quicken the time of the poem, even as a speaker is acutely sensitive to time's passage; and that there are poems in which heavy punctuation might extend the time of a poem where a speaker fades into a reverie, oblivious of time. However, I do not think that Tennyson wrote many such poems (I will discuss one such poem by Tennyson at the chapter's close). Instead, in Tennyson's poems of endurance, it is usually the case that, to reduce my argument to a single phrase, 'heavier punctuation registers more intense awareness of time.'

We might think that the differences of duration between, say, a semi-colon and colon, or even semi-colon and full-stop, are so small as to be nugatory; but I believe that though the absolute difference between the marks might be small, the relative differences might matter a great deal, possessing significance disproportionate to their absolute values. Herbert Tucker has written: "Even when Tennyson registers the eternal process as a stream or tide, he takes care to break the flow into rhythmic units that creep or beat with a fundamentally musical organization. This is so whether those units are pulses or eons; indeed, one of the most disturbing features of the poet's imagination is its way of implying how little difference it makes what the time scale

may happen to be.”⁸² The same poet whose imagination could imply how little difference the time-scale happened to make could also seize for great imaginative effect on the relatively miniscule time-scale that measures the duration of the pause represented by a comma, or the difference in the duration between a comma and a semi-colon.

Tennyson attended diligently to the punctuation of his poems. In their edition of *In Memoriam*, Elaine Shatto and Marion Shaw note in passing that “he was also, of course, always tinkering with punctuation” through various editions, and they thoroughly document the results of the tinkering in an appendix to the volume.⁸³ Following the progress of “Oenone” from initial drafts, through publication in 1833, through further drafts, to publication in revised form in 1842, Philip Gaskell remarks that “Tennyson took care with its spelling and punctuation,” and the facsimiles of manuscripts and proofs collected in *The Tennyson Archive* contain similar evidence that he took conscious care with his punctuation.⁸⁴ Critics have taken care with his punctuation, too—Christopher Ricks, Eric Griffiths, Herbert Tucker, and a more recent generation including Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and Kirstie Blair have all turned their attention towards it; but they have turned their attention towards it when looking away from the other matters with which they are chiefly concerned, glancing briefly and occasionally at marks, rather than granting Tennyson’s punctuation the sustained scrutiny it deserves.⁸⁵ Sustained scrutiny can take more than one form. It may, for instance, enumerate the many ways in which the marks contribute different effects to particular lines in particular poems. It may also attempt to identify a persistent

⁸² Tucker, 21.

⁸³ Susan Shatto and Marion Shaw, “Introduction,” 23.

⁸⁴ Gaskell, 137.

⁸⁵ See Ricks, *Tennyson*, passim; Griffiths, *Printed Voice*, 102-3, 119, 129, 132, 160, ; Tucker, 420-21; Douglas-Fairhurst, 184, 215, 220; Blair, 44, 188.

end for which punctuation is deployed, for various effects. This chapter proceeds along the latter route.

Why might the awareness of time's passage be felt as a burden or threat in Tennyson's poetry? An answer: because consciousness of time is consciousness of change, in the world, in oneself in the world. Sociologist Norbert Elias argues that time is a technique—not a metaphysical substance or category—by which humans orient and coordinate themselves in a world of constant, though not total, flux; time is the relation an observer posits between two continua of change, one of which is somewhat regular (sun-rise, the seasons, a clock's hands). Numerous changes set against constants allow time to permeate the human vista. Time is, in Elias' anti-metaphysical view, a conceptual apparatus for coping with a world is always changing, though not always changing at the same rate, or changing entirely.⁸⁶ Tennyson's excruciating awareness of time is also an excruciating awareness of change—and of the stasis by which change is known. Matthew Campbell has written that the speakers of Tennyson's poems are often “in thrall to what has gone before, in decisions made by others, or accidents of fate,” such that “those poems would appear at best to be merely ambivalent about the possibility of change.”⁸⁷ Campbell's remark is incisive, and his having made it spurs me to consider that it would be more accurate to say that the poems are ambivalent about the possibility of the right sort of change; stasis is only evident against a larger field in which changes occur. For Tennyson and his speakers, the nightmare is not that nothing changes, but that change is inevitable and that

⁸⁶ See Elias, *An Essay on Time*

⁸⁷ Campbell, 126.

the wrong things will change and change in the wrong ways, while the wrong things will remain static.

We do not immediately perceive the threat of change in a poem such as “Ulysses” because Ulysses’ complaint is that nothing does change for him; the poem is most often read as a lament of the tedium and monotony in a life that consists of repetition, a life that goes nowhere, with the poem being a rallying final rallying cry for change. But Ulysses’ call for a departure from the routine of Ithaca must be heard also as a last ditch attempt at out-scheming and resisting the one change that he cannot escape or defeat: aging. The change that threatens Ulysses—the change that permeates his existence on Ithaca—is the impoverishment of strength that comes with age, and he speaks as a final show of resistance against such weakening, even as the poem is scarred (not marred) by it. One way—not, of course, the only way—that Tennyson grants time what is due to it in the poem, an unavoidable and insidiously subtle presence, is in punctuation of the words of Ulysses’ complaint. Ulysses draws attention to how the pauses that are marks of punctuation may stifle life’s potential for willful action; the passage of time in such a pause may represent a deadening waste of life when it is harvested for nothing but a paradoxically life-sustaining breath of air:

Yet all experience is an arch wherethro’
Gleams that untravell’d world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish’d, not to shine in use!
As tho’ to breathe were life. (ll. 19-24)

“How dull it is to pause” looks reflexively backwards to the full-stop following “move.” And the revised line, “As though to breathe were life” recalls the rhetorical grounding of punctuation, whereby a stop is a place for breathing. A life of nothing more than the idle breaths spent in a mark of punctuation is hardly deserving to be called life at all; it is an animal existence, tranquilized rather than tranquil.

In the Heath Manuscript of the poem, “as though to breathe were life” is otherwise: “As if to live were the end of life.” In so revising, Tennyson removes the teasing paradox, perhaps finding Ulysses’ grim comedy to sit ill-at-ease in the poem. But the sense of the original line strikes with directness at Ulysses’ situation and resolution the poem, and does so with irony. For Ulysses here speaks contemptuously of living as the “end of life,” meaning by “live” primarily “bare survival”; however by the poem’s end, Ulysses has resolved that indeed “to live” is the best possible end to his life, but meaning by “live” “live life to the fullest, seize hold of life’s opportunities.” When Tennyson revises the line, rather than play on the capacious meanings of “live” and “life,” he has Ulysses argue against the conception of life as mere breathing, mere survival over time. “Ulysses” is an imagining of what it would be like to refuse to endure a life that consists of endurance alone. In this, it is typical of Tennyson’s poems about endurance, all of which are built upon a conflict: whether it is better to continue living, or whether it is better to surrender to death. For to endure is to live a life that tests, sours, and thwarts the desire to go on living. Where Tennyson differs from Wordsworth and Christina Rossetti is in explicitly granting that it may not only be desirable, but justifiable, to cease living. Empson remarked that “Tithonus” is a poem “in favour of the common human practice of dying,” and in writing such a

poem Tennyson stands apart from Beckett's "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."⁸⁸ For Tennyson, there is no ethical "must," though for a figure like "Tithonus," there is no actual alternative to living.

"Ulysses" takes as its starting point the resolution not to go on with life as it is, and, in so far as Ulysses' final adventure is a glorified suicide, with life at all; its hero is burdened by the sense that his life is life reduced to time, and a life reduced by time. Although we might sense the passing of time in any of the poem's marks of punctuation, one mark, at a crucial moment in the poem, is decidedly heavy, and embodies the painfully sharpened consciousness of time which Ulysses carries through the poem, and through his life. The culmination of the poem, its final passage, is the appeal that Ulysses makes to his mariners, calling on the strength that remains to them and to him, and urging them forward on the final burst of adventure that will lead to death:

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. (ll. 65-70)

"That which we are, we are" is set off, on both sides, by semi-colons⁸⁹. The semi-colon following the phrase is not unusual; our current conventions of punctuation would have us

⁸⁸ Empson, 108.

deploy a colon in the same place, but a semi-colon clarifies apposition between “we are” and “one equal temper...not to yield” also. However the semi-colon before the phrase is abrupt.

Consider how the lines might have appeared:

Tho’ much is taken, much abides; and tho’
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Here the strength which in old days “moved heaven and earth” propels the verse forward. The distance between what they were in “old days” and what they are is as slight as a comma and no cause of perturbation. As Tennyson published the lines, the semi-colon after “heaven” halts the line momentarily, so that the separation between the “old days” and the present is unignorable and, though surmountable, requires greater effort to surmount than the expected comma would have—and not only greater effort, but greater time, as Ulysses, in his speech, is pausing before delivering this line of acceptance that may be heard either as acquiescing to circumstances or as defying them. But whether “that which we are, we are” be heard as defiant or acquiescent, or both at once, his pausing before saying it makes even the note of defiance more deliberate,

⁸⁹ This passage of the poem in the Harvard Manuscript, though the words are different, has the same punctuation as the published version, reading “We are not now that strength that in one night|Swathed Troy with flame; that which we are, we are;”. See Pearsall, 200.

perhaps, more willed and more in need of willing than it might have been had he rushed to it through the brief space of a comma. For in a pause at this crucial moment of his speech, hesitation, doubt, or weariness may be heard, all of which deprive the defiance of its full glory. Robert Langbaum writes that the poem's "music bears the enervated cadence of "Tithonus" and "the Lotos Eaters.""⁹⁰ Even in the final lines of the poem, where the poem is most strident in its wish to go on living, the cadences are nonetheless "enervated," and this in part by a mark of punctuation.⁹¹

But the passage of time that intrudes into the verse with the semi-colon does more than modulate the cadences of Ulysses' voice as we imagine him speaking. At the crucial moment of this line, the unexpected pause of the semi-colon is a reminder of what Ulysses yearns to escape from: time as it stretches through a monotony of days, a present in which there are no new experiences to be had. Linda K. Hughes has drawn attention to Ulysses' being caught in a trap of monotonously cyclical time. Ulysses endures not only the eroding wash of indistinguishable days, but life in a present that is defined only by former deeds and struggles; for Ulysses, the burden of time is the burden of times past, and each passing second is a second in which he has failed to add to those former deeds and struggles, another second wasted, another second decaying his potential for heroism and greatness. Christopher Ricks remarks that "Ulysses yearns to believe that his life is not just a past, that it still has a future" and noting the scarcity of future-tense verbs in the poem, shows how the future is absent from the poem itself, or present only in strained and qualified forms which suggest that Ulysses himself cannot convincingly imagine

⁹⁰ Langbaum, 90.

⁹¹ The final line is also 'enervated' rhythmically; although "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" is an instance of iambic pentameter, it is difficult, when reading the line, to stress "not" with the force as "strive," "seek," "find," and "yield."

it.⁹² The ponderous semi-colon at the poem's end embodies time's passage, more seconds in which nothing is done, and so is a reminder of the source of Ulysses' thwarted urgency—but also a foreboding reminder of the idle time to which he has already lost so much of his life, and which remains an unignorable presence in his mind.

There has been debate among Tennyson critics over whether the speakers of Tennyson's dramatic monologues can or do accomplish anything; whether they are agents, or whether, if so, they are in situations in which their being agents makes a difference. Ulysses is exceptional in comparison to many of Tennyson's speakers in that, although he is weakened, he retains the capacity for a final surge of action. More often, Tennyson's speakers plead, and plead from positions of near-paralysis. Herbert Tucker offers eloquent variations on the subject of one of Tennyson's favored subject-positions:

When there is everything to be endured and nothing to be done, endurance will be a leading virtue; the index of a speaker's strength will be the deepening stasis of a mood; and action will take the strictly subordinate place it takes in Tennyson's poetry...some external power, in the guise of providence or inertia, blanks independent initiative...Tennysonian experience, it appears, is not a mode of self-expression but a pressure exerted on the self from without...Tennyson put so little stock in action, and in the capacity of human character to conceive a plot and bring it to fulfillment, because his interest lay instead in *passion*, a term whose etymological connection to *passivity* his poetry consistently reinforces.⁹³

⁹² Ricks, *Tennyson*, 116.

⁹³ Tucker, 16-18.

Tucker echoes Arnold's Preface of 1853, in which Arnold justified the exclusion of "Empedocles Upon Etna" from the collection. But Tucker is led, as is Arnold, to an extreme that denies those who endure the capacity to act in any way, as if endurance involved no resistance against or struggle with the forces of the world. Granting that Tennyson's major poems are usually records of pressure exerted from without, it is simply not the case that they "put little stock in action," even if the scope of action is painfully circumscribed within them. The speakers of these poems bewail their diminished capacity to act and to shape their destinies; they do not denigrate or dismiss the opportunity to do so. Other critics have resisted the extremes of Tucker's position, but have been led to concordant conclusions nonetheless. Matthew Campbell writes that "Tennyson's best monologues occupy a poetry which exploits all of its author's seemingly boundless technical mastery to suggest the ways in which mastery and power can be cruelly inhibited."⁹⁴ Cornelia Pearsall has recently argued against this line of critics, writing of the speakers of Tennyson's dramatic monologues:

My tendency, it might be well to state here, is to assume that they do attain their goals in some measure. Dramatic speakers achieve in particular various kinds of transformation and transportation, as witnessed by the internal evidence of the monologues themselves. Although certain specified ambitions often provided the precondition of a monologue, the reason for the speech itself, we must also track other, less tangible or visible goals that a speaker might attain by way of the monologue.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Campbell, 126.

⁹⁵ Pearsall, 23.

Among the “less tangible or visible goals” might be included, though Pearsall does not include it in her own study, a speaker’s relaxing their awareness of the time’s passage. By means of speaking a dramatic monologue, some of Tennyson’s most impotent creations are able to achieve a moment of rapturous release from their painful awareness of the hours, and because of the punctuation on the page, the release is “visible.”

No speaker despairs over the continuing tyranny of time more than does Tithonus, and no speaker is as impotent beneath it. In “Tithonus,” time is relentless, wasting the speaker’s body and hopes, but refusing him the one change that he most desires, an end to life, so that his endurance is without conflict: he would die if he could, but he cannot. Ricks writes that “To Tithonus, death was the mercy of eternity,” and eternity for Tithonus is relentlessly temporal, since his life is measured in the same way as the life of a mortal, by the incessant return of Aurora, the dawn. Hence his cry of involuntary submission: “Thy strong Hours indignant worked their wills | And beat me down and marred and wasted me.” The poem is about a man’s relationship with a divine timepiece; Tithonus does nothing, and has nothing to do, except to measure his rate of decay according to Aurora’s regular departures and returns. Tennyson affixed a note to the poem explaining the outcome of the myth that inspired it by noting that Tithonus “grew old and infirm, and as he could not die, according to the legend, was turned into a grasshopper.” But none of this makes a difference to the speaker of the poem, because it does not change his beliefs that his future offers only more of the same. There is a gap not only between what Tithonus believes, but between the legend and the speech he makes. Ricks writes of the poem “we can neither happily bring in this merciful translation into a grasshopper, nor happily

leave it out.”⁹⁶ Eventually, it may be, Tithonus’ complaints will make a difference, but there is no evidence in this poem that they do; Aurora is already weeping, and she has not yet come up with the grasshopper escape clause.⁹⁷ This may be the first time Tithonus has made this sort of speech, or the hundredth; it may be the final, or he may repeat the same sort of speech one hundred times more. At any rate, he does not believe that it will have the desired effect of bringing about his death. Even though the poem is “Tennyson’s subtlest and most beautiful exploration of the impulse to suicide,” it is a safe exploration because there is no possibility, in Tithonus’ mind, of going through with the act successfully.

The culmination of Tithonus’ hopeless and helpless outcry is in the final verse paragraph:

Yet hold me not for ever in thine East:
How can my nature longer mix with thine?
Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold
Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet
Upon thy glimmering thresholds, when the steam
Floats up from those dim fields about the homes
Of happy men that have the power to die,

⁹⁶ Ricks, *Tennyson*, 124.

⁹⁷ Christopher Ricks writes that, in his transformation into a grasshopper, “neither the tragedy of immortal age nor the tragedy of death will be available to Tithonus, but something much smaller, verging on the kindly ludicrous” (Ricks, *Tennyson*, 125). Derek Mahon’s poem “Tithonus” imagines how “reduced| To this absurdity...” of a grasshopper, Tithonus—and Mahon’s is the Tithonus of Tennyson’s poem—remains a witness to the tragedy of time’s passage, to the destruction of humanity, a lonely survivor on the planet’s crust. Mahon’s Tithonus is a comic-tragic figure, with the tragic receiving a greater proportion of weight. Mahon, 168-172.

And grassy barrows of the happier dead.
Release me, and restore me to the ground;
Thou seest all things, thou wilt see my grave:
Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn;
I earth in earth forget these empty courts,
And thee returning on thy silver wheels. (ll. 64-76)

Herbert Tucker writes of these lines, and of the common reading of the poem: “If we read this paragraph as a renewal, necessarily futile, of Tithonus’ petition for cancellation of his life sentence, then the poem becomes a tape loop doomed to pointless reenactment, on argumentative and emotional pains, of the silver whirling of Aurora’s natural cycle” (Tucker 259). Tucker’s summary account of a critical reading he would reject requires modification in one small particular. Tithonus’ complaint, even if futile in bringing about what he desires, is not “pointless,” because it does bring about something that is nonetheless desirable, and that something is discernible in the pointing of the penultimate line.

The significant punctuation is between the subject of the final two lines, “I,” and the appositive phrase, “earth in earth.” On this occasion it is the absence of punctuation, rather than punctuation itself, that matters—in particular, the absence of commas which might have been expected to set off the apposition of “earth in earth” and “I.” The elided verbs and absent commas are small features in the passage, but their magnitude is appropriate given Tithonus’ limited capacity for action. Tithonus can effect little change, even in his state of mind; and yet pressed down, as he is, by the weight of circumstance and fate, the smallest space in which to move, even if not to escape, is a significant opportunity for relief. Without the commas, “earth in

earth” is made into an essential appositive, a subject that cannot be removed from the clause if it is to retain its proper sense. But it would have been possible—more likely, even—to set the phrase off in commas, as we would with appositions in grammar today, and in Tennyson’s day.⁹⁸ Tennyson is using punctuation to elucidate a surprising syntactical relation that others might not believe existed in the first place: “I” and “earth in earth” are placed on equal footing, as if the former were no more essentially the subject of the sentence than the latter. His punctuation shows how Tithonus is already, in his own mind, losing himself in the earth, becoming indistinguishable from it; he is fulfilling his wish in his consciousness as he speaks. But another effect of the lightened punctuation is a lightened sense of time’s presence in the poem at this crucial moment: the seconds, measured in the pause of a comma, are no longer admitted into Tithonus’ mind where they would normally be. As his fantasy of merging with the earth is fulfilled, he is released from his awareness of time’s passing. If this is a speech that he has had to make one hundred times, and that he may make one hundred times more, it may be useful to him in granting this taste of desired end—freedom from time, or freedom from awareness of time—even if does not bring about that end. As Pearsall suggests, the act of speaking has achieved something; but in line with Campbell’s understanding of the speaker’s limited capacity for action, what it is has brought about is only a temporary salve.

The relief in Tithonus’ mind does not arrive arbitrarily. The progress of the verbs of the final verse paragraph shows how Tithonus pitches himself towards it, talking himself to the succor of delusion. There is first the series of present-tense verbs, the condition of Tithonus juxtaposed, ironically, to the condition of mortal humans, since his present tense is perpetual and

⁹⁸ For instance, Murray’s *Grammar* (Murray, 321), provides as an instance of apposition: “The emperor, Marcus Aurelius, was a wise and virtuous prince.”

that of mortals, like that of the trees in the woods at the start of the poem, referring to a group rather than an individual; this vision yields to the imploring imperatives of “release” and “restore,” and then returns to a present tense statement of fact about Aurora, who sees all things (except, unfortunately, the future). But this present tense statement of fact is a springboard for prophesy: “since you do see all things, you will see my grave, and you will renew thy beauty morn by morn.” At this point, the process of self-deception has begun. Tithonus has started to talk himself to a short-lived liberation from time. Of the three statements in the lines, the first and last are true, and the middle, that Aurora will see his grave, is false, given what Tithonus knows at the time. Christopher Ricks exempts these lines when stating that “ ‘Tithonus’—which yearns to have no future—can find no room for the future tense of hope,” but he need not have done so on these grounds, for strictly speaking, the lines do not hope; they believe.⁹⁹ Had the order of the statements been altered, so that “thou wilt see my grave” came as a climactic finale, the effect would be diminished; the phrase would have been a clear leap away from the truth of the other two statements, and so would have been left to linger in the mind, an assertion to which there could be no response but denial. But nestled among statements of fact, it is suggested that, in Tithonus’ mind at least, the prediction that Aurora will see his grave is no different from the true statements which surround it. Then comes the penultimate line with the absent commas. The line has the sense, “I earth in earth will forget thee returning on thy silver wheels,” but the words compel the reader in a different direction also, to a statement of present-tense identity (“I am earth in earth”) heard as a wish-fulfilling utterance. Herbert Tucker writes that “the line asks to be read on its own as a present-tense formation,” as a “performative valediction,” as if by saying “I...forget,” Tithonus makes it true that he forgets his circumstances, and, in really believing

⁹⁹ Ricks, *Tennyson*, 125.

himself to do so, is relieved of the misery they have brought to him.¹⁰⁰ Three false claims are suggested in the line: that Tithonus has lost his identity in the earth, that the burden of time's passage has been suspended, and that he forgets. The reader is not supposed to be taken in by any of these claims; Tithonus is, if not entirely severed from the actual state of his affairs, granting his delusions brief sway over his mind's weariness. He has talked himself to this inverse of an epiphany; rather than the revelation of a fundamental truth, he summons a fantasy necessary for his survival, and which he allows to overcome his reason. The relief is borne out of falsehood but is relief nonetheless. Its being only temporary relief, however, is apparent from the final line of the poem, which sours the sweetness of hope: "And thee returning on thy silver wheels." "Thee returning" is an object of "forget," but "returning" is also the first progressive verb form of the verse paragraph (albeit an adjective here). The word is a reminder of what is continual as well as continuing: the return of Aurora. With the word, we might hear the re-entry of reality into the poem, a reminder that Tithonus has not forgotten, and that there will be another day in which he will grow older, decay, and not die. But we might also believe that Tithonus, ensconced in the bliss of his delusion, can at last to see Aurora's return, the dawn, as many mortals see it, some of the time: a source of hope and renewal.

Ulysses is a paragon of compromised but enduring masculinity. Despite governing an island, since his return he has been afforded no opportunity to perform the deeds of strength and cunning by which he defines his character. His character requires also that he has a home and wife to return to, but not that he remain fixed at home, with his wife. Tithonus' situation is an inversion of Ulysses': he is a man cast into the domestically bound role of a Victorian woman. (Tiresias, because he lived as both a man and a woman, makes for a suitable subject for the third

¹⁰⁰ Tucker, 263.

poem in the cluster, though his sexual transformations are not its focus). In writing “Tithonus,” Tennyson returns to a subject that he had first imagined prior to Hallam’s death, in a poem his friend had praised: “Mariana” was Tennyson’s first sustained exploration of the experience of endurance that characterized the lives of abandoned, trapped, and solitary women. The poem differs from “Tithonus” in one crucial formal respect: it is not a dramatic monologue. Instead, it is a portrait of Mariana’s state of mind that holds in tension two-viewpoints: that of a sympathetic observer and that of Mariana herself. Elaine Jordan makes the point that “everything in “Mariana” is a product of her inconsolable will; how she experiences her environment is the only thing, apparently, over which she has any control, and she holds on to her view of it relentlessly.”¹⁰¹ But we are not given Mariana’s view of her environment directly, as we would be had the poem been a dramatic monologue. Although we hear Mariana’s voice in the poem’s refrains, a third-person perspective is required in the poem because Mariana’s “sense is confounded, so that some other observer is needed to say what her state of mind is.”¹⁰² Overwhelmingly conscious of the one fact about her life that has not come to pass, possessed by what is painfully absent from her days, she has become deadened to the world, and even to time’s passage, which she can no longer bear to attentively reckon, having been disappointed for so long in the promise of relief and fulfillment it never brings. Ricks writes of the poem: “The sudden sketch which shows us that time has passed, the chronographia which in a poet like Milton hearteningly shows us that time has concluded one episode and is about to inaugurate another, has become a disheartening, a mere intensification of vacancy, and not a pause between

¹⁰¹ Elaine Jordan, 61.

¹⁰² Elaine Jordan, 61.

living moments.”¹⁰³ Elaine Jordan seizes on the word “confounds” in the poem’s final stanza and observes that “indications of time confuse” Mariana, and Ricks points out that “though the clock may tick slow, it is Mariana’s spirit which turns such a movement into a ‘slow clock.’” It is slow because the seconds count away what she believes will never arrive; it confounds her because the ticking is a reminder of the clock-time that governs the actions, meetings, departures and arrivals of the public world from which she has been cut off and excluded, and from which she, in her hopeless disappointment, has excluded herself.

The majority of the poem’s pointing is not unusually heavy, and this although, in the context of Mariana’s ordeal, it is possible to hear in any of the stops of the poem the clock’s ticking, during which the only change is the “change which clenches into dismay and outcry—heartening as change at all, disheartening as this change.”¹⁰⁴ In fact, we might say it is unusually light, if we expected that Mariana, like Tennyson’s other enduring figures, was excruciatingly sensitive to time’s passage. But we should not be surprised that none of the punctuation is unusually heavy as a reflection of Mariana’s experience. For although Mariana is burdened by time’s passage, having been worn down to her reduced state by the days and years, she is not acutely conscious of it. As Ricks and Jordan remark, her sense of time is itself confounded, and this fact of her existence enduring in her moated grange is registered by the poem’s punctuation, in the refrain of the poem, where Mariana speaks in her own voice, and where one mark is lighter than would be expected. The refrains, Ricks writes, “tell of the passing of time” and “kill time,” “like a ritual to numb pain,” but like a ritual which in turn numbs the poem’s heroine to the world. The refrains repeat, or “toll,” six times, the changes in the wording of the first line

¹⁰³ Ricks, *Tennyson*, 43.

¹⁰⁴ Ricks, *Tennyson*, 42.

reflecting the progress of hours: “My life is dreary,” “The night is dreary,” “The day is dreary,” “My life is dreary,” “The night is dreary,” “My life is dreary,” “I am very dreary.” Aside from those differences to the first line, each refrain except the last is an exact parallel to the first, as regards the other lines and punctuation:

She only said, ‘My life is dreary,
He cometh not,’ she said;
She said, ‘I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!’ (ll. 9-12)

The final stanza differs slightly:

Then, said she, ‘I am very dreary,
He will not come,’ she said;
She wept, ‘I am aweary, aweary,
Oh God, that I were dead!’ (ll. 81-84)

The punctuation at issue is the comma following “dreary,” which is rare in Tennyson for separating two independent clauses, with no conjunction connecting them. A semi-colon, colon, or full-stop might have been expected, even though it is Mariana’s speech within quotation marks. Compounding the effect are the speech-tags book-ending her words: “she only said” and “she said.” It is as if there were two speeches, made at two times, collapsing into one, and the ease of transition between them, the brevity of the comma, suggests that Mariana, in her

excruciating stupor, does not fully register the time that has elapsed between them. In Ricks' words, the poem presents "time as vacancy," but the vacancy is in Mariana's consciousness, which lacks a purchase on time's passing, overwhelmed as she is by all in her situation that does not change—her desolated loneliness and her hope for death.

Mariana finds an antidote life's pains not in a surrender to death, but in fits of waking oblivion. Succumbing entirely to such a state, she would endure as brute animal, touched by time, but unconscious of it. It is to such a fate, and such a state, that the mariners of "The Lotos-Eaters" are tempted. They are weary from the labors of travel, and wary of returning to their old lives, where they will once more "reap the harvest with enduring toil," and the lotos-fruit offers an escape in its promise of senselessness, to responsibilities, care, and the lapse of years (as monotonous as the lapse of waves). In "The Choric Song" of the poem, they swoon towards it. But their swoon is not an unbroken fall; instead, as Ricks observes: "The 'Choric Song' ebbs and flows, its stanzas alternately evoking deep languor and sharply questioning... Relaxation never obliterates indignation."¹⁰⁵ Nor does the prospect of relaxation ever obliterate world-weariness from all the mariners have encountered and undergone. They lean towards promised oblivion only to pull back with the recollection of past, present, and future aches, fatigue, and fear. As they move to and fro, nearer and further from the anticipated taste of the fruit, they move in and out of awareness of time, their varying intensities of temporal consciousness registered in the alternations heavier and lighter punctuation through the poem. Because Tennyson revised the poem heavily between its first publication in 1832 and its subsequent publication in 1842, some of the variants will be noted in square brackets alongside the text, which is from Ricks' edition. The first stanza of the 'Song,' where I have underlined the punctuation that I will discuss:

¹⁰⁵ Ricks, *Tennyson*, 1984.

There is sweet music here that softer falls [falls, 1832]
Than petals from blown roses on the grass,
 Or night-dews on still waters between walls
 Of shadowy granite, in a gleaming pass; [pass. 1832]
 Music that gentlier on the spirit lies,
Than tir'd eyelids upon tir'd eyes;
 Music that brings sweet sleep down from the blissful skies.
 Here are cool mosses deep,
 And thro' the moss the ivies creep,
 And in the stream the long-leave flowers weep,
 And from the craggy ledge the poppy hangs in sleep. (ll. 46-56)

In 1832, there was a comma after both “falls” and “lies.” In 1842, Tennyson revised the lines so that there was no comma to insist on a pause in the music softly falling, while retaining the comma to pause after the music lies gently on the spirit, and this despite the two clauses being syntactically parallel. As the time at the line-ending of “falls” is lifted, the time between rhymes distends too: the chime of “walls” is found two lines later, rather than in a line immediately following, where “eyes” answers “lies.” The timing of the verse, like the time experienced in the verse, waxes and wanes, before falling into the even procession of commas that punctuate the four final rhyme-words: “deep,” “creep,” “weep,” “sleep.” In these lines, with their regular rhymes and regular, light punctuation (a semi-colon might have separated one or more of the phrases), the mariners have found tranquility. But no calm is allowed to remain unperturbed in

“The Lotos-Eaters”; even when they have determined to remain on the island and enjoy its fruit, we know that Ulysses will rouse them to a life of toil once more. And well before the poem’s end, the mariners are roused by their questions and memories:

Why are we weighed upon with heaviness,
And utterly consumed with sharp distress,
While all things else have rest from weariness?
All things have rest: why should we toil alone,
We only toil, who are first of things,
And make perpetual moan,
Still from one sorrow to another thrown: [thrown ; 1832]
Nor ever fold our wings,
And cease from wanderings, [wanderings; 1832, 1842]
Nor steep our brows in slumber’s holy balm;
Nor harken what the inner spirit sings,
‘There is no joy but calm!’
Why should we only toil, the roof and crown of things? (ll. 57-69)

The 1832 semi-colon after “thrown” became a comma in 1842, and a semi-colon remained after “wanderings” through both 1832 and 1842, though it has been amended in Ricks’ edition, which is based on a later version of the text. The consecutive revisions trended towards more irregular pointing, since the comma, semi-colon and colon precede syntactically identical phrases. As the

mariners unsettle themselves with questions, they unsettle their apprehension of time—it afflicts them now more, now less, even in imagining the island’s promise of “slumber’s holy balm.”

Hateful is the dark-blue sky,
Vaulted o’er the dark-blue sea.
Death is the end of life; ah, why [ah! 1832]
Should life all labour be?
Let us alone. Time driveth onward fast,
And in a little while our lips are dumb.
Let us alone. What is it that will last?
All things are taken from us, and become
Portions and parcels of the dreadful Past.
Let us alone. What pleasure can we have
To war with evil? Is there any peace
In ever climbing up the climbing wave?
All things have rest, and ripen toward the grave
In silence; ripen, fall and cease: [silence, 1832; cease. 1832]
Give us long rest or death, dark death, or dreamful ease. (ll. 84-98)

The mariners squirm interrogatively, wondering why they should endure any longer the time that “driveth onward fast.” But they cannot simply shed the past. The prospect of escape stirs up in the mariners’ minds the memory of a life of “all labor,” so that they experience it again with intense immediacy, and the punctuation, the weight of time, is heavy in the frequent full-stops in

this section. The exception to the heavy punctuation is the colon after cease, which before 1842 had been a full-stop (in 1842, Tennyson added weight earlier in the line, converting the comma following “silence” to a semi-colon). The lightening responds to their renewed response to the Island’s promise, to the escape it offers from endurance, be it by “long rest” or “death” or “dreamful ease.” They are not particular as to which alternative, so long as they need not go on as before.

In the seventh stanza of the “choric song,” the scents and savors of the island and fruit most successfully hold time at abeyance:

But, propt on beds of amaranth and moly,
How sweet (while warm airs lull us, blowing lowly)
With half-dropt eyelid still,
Beneath a heaven dark and holy,
To watch the long bright river drawing slowly
His waters from the purple hill—
To hear the dewy echoes calling
From cave to cave thro’ the thick-twinèd vine—
To watch the emerald-coloured water falling
Thro’ many a wov’n acanthus-wreath divine!
Only to hear and see the far off sparkling brine,
Only to hear were sweet, stretch’d out beneath the pine. (ll. 133-144)

The alternative to the parentheses in the second line would have been commas or dashes. In respect to their relation to the time of other marks in the poems, dashes and parentheses are similar, suspending a phrase from the plane which the poem's other words occupy, without temporal relation to commas, semi-colons, colons, or full-stops. In the second line, the dashes ask that we recognize a discontinuity in the poem's syntax, but refuse to specify the time of the discontinuity, and this refusal to account for time precisely corresponds with the mariners' unwillingness or inability (depending on how hypnotized they are) to do the same. Then there are the dashes. They are not irregular here, but they are an evasion once more of a mark, the semi-colon, that elsewhere in the poem Tennyson used to separate a series of phrases beginning with infinitive verb forms (see ll. 102-110). It is not that dashes are untimed, but, like parentheses, they do not have a defined temporal relation to other marks of punctuation in the same way as commas, semi-colons, colons and full-stops do to one another. Both the dashes and the parentheses are an alternative to the normal time of punctuation, and the island an escape from time as the mariners experience it in their laboring lives. The poem does not end with an easy forgetfulness, but in its last section recalls the struggles of the past, yielding to the perpetual present of the island only in the closing line:

Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore
Than labour in the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar;
Oh rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more. (ll. 171-173)

The semi-colon following “oar” is the lightest mark Tennyson could have chosen given the syntax. It was inserted in 1842. Although the wording is different, the syntax of the 1832 poem paralleled this, and Tennyson had punctuated “oar” with a full-stop:

Surely, surely slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore
Than labour in the ocean, and rowing with the oar.
Oh! Islanders of Ithaca, we will return no more.

In the 1832 passage, the full-stop after “oar” is a reckoning of time’s passage which the last line of the poem promises to forget. In the revised passage, the semi-colon suggests, in comparison with the full-stop, that the lightened consciousness of time has already begun, the memories of past toil and the weariness from the days of journeying lifting from the mariners’ minds. The revisions in the wording give further reason to believe that they are less weary in 1842 than in 1832, the initial “Oh! Islanders of Ithaca” turning to “Oh rest ye, brother mariners,” which anticipates the fruit’s relief, and which suggests also the mariners’ exhaustion, as if they could not muster the strength that the mark of exclamation implies.

The 1842 *Poems* saw both a revised “The Lotos-Eaters” and the first public appearance of another poem composed nearly ten years before, “St. Simeon Stylites.” To read the latter for satire alone is to miss out on the way that it was also a vehicle for Tennyson to enter into the experience of endurance that explores also his non-satirical monologues of the time. Simeon Stylites, not yet sainted as he speaks the poem, resists any opportunity to do more than endure life, endurance being the end, rather than the means of his being. His endurance is a showpiece,

the crowning fruit of his pride, as he stands before God challenging Him to deny how much he has endured:

And I, in truth (thou wilt bear witness here)
Have all in all endured as much, and more
Than many just and holy men, whose names
Are register'd and calendar'd for saints. (ll. 127-130)

He revels in his accomplishment, and revels in displaying it before his Lord, and the reader, in the parenthetical plea that touches on the comma, forgetting all the while that the heart as well as the hand is subject to God's judgment. But whatever the motive, there is no denying that he has suffered much, even "as much, and more" than most saints. The poem works, as all good ironies and satires work, because much of what Simeon says is true; if it were not, he would not have a leg (let alone a pillar) to stand on. And because he has endured, Simeon, from his pillar top, offers Tennyson not only an opportunity for satire, but a non-satirical vantage from which to contemplate the experience of endurance.

Simeon is an object of ridicule because his ambitions and pride have led him to spend his life in self-imposed suffering atop a pillar. But he is also to be pitied, because his endurance has been genuine and because those former ambitions and pride have made it impossible for him to climb down. Though not bound by social convention or the will of the gods, like the other speakers of Tennyson's monologues, he is, as Matthew Campbell writes, "in thrall to what has

gone before.”¹⁰⁶ The poem is occasioned by a moment of genuine fatigue, when the yearning for death is greatest:

Let this avail, just, dreadful, mighty God,
This not be all in vain, that thrice ten years,
Thrice multiplied by superhuman pangs,
In hungers and in thirsts, fevers and cold,
In coughs, aches, stitches, ulcerous throes and cramps,
A sign betwixt the meadow and the cloud,
Patient on this tall pillar I have borne
Rain, wind, frost, heat, hail, damp, and sleet, and snow;
And I had hoped that ere this period closed
Thou wouldst have caught me up into thy rest,
Denying not these weather-beaten limbs
The meed of saints, the white robe and the palm. (ll. 9-20)

“Period” is not only the span of years he has spent atop the pillar, but is also the span of words in classical oratory, marked in rhetorical punctuation by a full-stop. Simeon had hoped that by the time “this period,” concluded by the point after “palm” had closed, he would have already been taken up into heaven. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst writes of “Simeon’s relentless search for a full-

¹⁰⁶ Campbell, 126.

stop,” referring to one ten-line stretch of the poem.¹⁰⁷ But elsewhere the poem bristles with full-stops, as when Simeon recalls his past agonies:

On the coals I lay,
A vessel full of sin: all hell beneath
Made me boil over. Devils pluck'd at my sleeve,
Abbadon and Asmodeus caught at me.
I smote them with the cross; they swarm'd again.
In bed like the monstrous apes they crush'd my chest:
They flapp'd my light out as I read: I saw
Their faces grow between me and my book;
With cold-like whinny and with hoggish whine
They burst my prayer. Yet this way was left,
And by this way I 'scaped them. Mortify
Your flesh, like me, with scourges and with thorns;
Smite, shrink not, spare not. If it may be, fast
Whole Lents, and pray. I hardly, with slow steps,
With slow, faint, steps, and much exceeding pain,
Have scrambled past those pits of fire, that still
Sing in mine ears. (ll. 166-182)

¹⁰⁷ Douglas-Fairhurst, 220.

That many of the full-stops might have been colons or otherwise is evident from the period between “I smote” and “my prayer.” They are not because Simeon does not want them to be anything but full-stops. Rather than say that Simeon relentlessly searches for a full-stop, we should say that he searches for a final full-stop, the one that announces: it is finished. In the passage just quoted, none of the full-stops marks the ending; they represent only more time atop the pillar. Yet Simeon cannot be entirely disappointed that they are not the final endings. For even as he wishes to be taken into heaven, he wishes also to prove that he can endure whatever he must, for however long he must. A part of Simeon takes pleasure in the time that weighs in each of these full-stops; he would that they were the end, but if they are not, he will further drown his unquenchable pride for having gone on that much longer. Simeon craves full-stops on two grounds: because they hold both the possibility of a final ending (which he cherishes) and also because they hold forth the possibility of a subsequent period such that the full-stop, rather than bring the poem to a close, extends its time, thereby further proving his capacity to persevere, if only for a few seconds more, until his death.

Like all of the speakers I’ve considered, Simeon is highly attentive—he also being attentive from on high—to the passage of time, though this is exploited, as is unusual in Tennyson, for comic effect. In the final lines, he prophecies, with the fussy precision of a nation increasingly dependent on mail-coaches and trains, that he shall die that night, “A quarter before twelve.” And a playful conceit of the poem is that he measures time by the pillar on which he stands, and which he crowns, as if it were a giant sundial. By the shadow his instrument of penance casts, he knows the duration of his suffering and is able to say that he could have found none more “slowly-painful” (l. 56). Whereas most of Tennyson’s speakers seek to escape reminders of time, Simeon delightfully attends to it by tracking the shadow of his own torture:

I think that I have borne as much as this—
Or else I dream—and for so long a time,
If I may measure time by yon slow light,
And this high dial, which my sorrow crowns—
So much—even so. (ll. 91-95)

The humility of “If I may measure” is characteristically misplaced, an empty badge of a virtue nowhere properly evinced, since he knows full well that he can and has measured time by the high dial which his sorrow crowns. His sorrow is nurtured by a consciousness proud of its own duration, and that duration is known by the shadow which his sorrow casts; his pain is parasitic on itself. Yet at this moment of the poem, and only here, Tennyson shifts away from the regular pointing found elsewhere and punctuates predominantly by dashes. These work to several ends, suggesting Simeon’s flight of fancy as his mind wanders, his fatigue at having remained for so long on the pillar (and implored God for so long to let him die), and his attempt at ingratiatingly hesitating speech; but they also have the effect of dashes elsewhere in Tennyson, breaking clauses and phrases with pauses of durations that are not defined relative to the four main points (commas, semi-colons, colons, and full-stops). They are pauses of uncertain duration, and so disrupt time in the poem, not by halting it but by making it indeterminate. The effect is to make Simeon seem as if he were stripped of his awareness of time’s passage as he rhapsodizes on how much time has passed; he is able to better endure both his past and his present on the pillar as he savors the reward those years promise to bring, and the contemplation of time alleviates from Simeon’s mind time’s burden. Although it is strange that Simeon finds relief from time by

contemplating time, his being able to talk himself into a moment of relief is not unique in Tennyson's poems; as we have seen, it occurs in "Tithonus" too, albeit for tragic rather than comic effect.

"St. Simeon Stylites" was written in the year following Arthur Hallam's death; an early version of "Tithonus," "Tithon," in the month following, along with "Ulysses." We might expect that the major long-poem emerging from that crisis would likewise have something to say about endurance. There is no moment of epiphany about endurance in the poem, and so when punctuation bears on the poem's concern for it, it is less dramatic than in "Tithonus," or even "Ulysses"—and this compounded by the absence in *In Memoriam* of a sustained dramatic arc. Some signs of Tennyson's occupation with endurance are found possibly in the sections about the destruction of the human race, or in stanzas about the continuity of the soul beyond the grave. But these sections are concerned chiefly with these matters as they might be with the endurance of inanimate objects, as remaining or not remaining over time, with no effort or strain required on their part, no question of whether to go on or give up. Tennyson's concern with endurance in the poem emerges often without announcement, without systemic arrangement. Moreover, making matters more complex, Tennyson is conflicted about the conflict underlying endurance itself—he is both conflicted about the rival claims of endurance and surrender and about being conflicted at all. Depending on the circumstances of the poem, an abruptly heavy stop may be taken as sign that Tennyson has succeeded in preserving his grief and love over time, a sign that Tennyson fears for the change time might bring, a sign that he apprehends the past as a burden he would move beyond if he could, or a sign that he cherishes the weight of the past that Tennyson that he carries into the future, in honor of his lost friend.

All time brings with it the threat of change and the fulfillment of that threat in unpredictable ways. In the first two sections of the poem, Tennyson's fear is that his grieving self—which he sometimes associated with his loving self—will be unable to endure the course of time; he fears what might be lost in the changes of time. It will be easier to speak of “grief” and “love” than “grieving self,” but there is from the first stanza of the poem encouragement to think of “dead selves,” former selves which one leaves behind. The idea of plural selves is also glanced at in Hallam's essay “On Sympathy,” where Hallam writes that “the soul, we have seen, exists as one subject In various successive states” and that “as far back as memory can carry us, or far forward as anticipation can travel unrestrained, the remembered state in the one case, and the imagined one in the other, are forms of self.”¹⁰⁸ For Tennyson to invoke the notion is, as well as being a crux of the poem's thought, an act of homage to his friend. Although Tennyson does want to get on with his life, he does not want to do so if it will mean losing his grief and the love of which the grief is sure witness. And one reason that *In Memoriam* goes on for so long without going very far in any direction—lacking not only narrative but even a sustained development of thought, at least until its hundredth section when Tennyson departs from the old familiar landscape—is because a part of Tennyson does not want to go anywhere, does not want to move on from mourning, and because a part of Tennyson feels that in grief there is nowhere to go:

Let Love clasp Grief lest both be drown'd,

Let darkness keep her raven gloss:

Ah, sweeter to be drunk with loss,

To dance with death, to beat the ground,

¹⁰⁸ Hallam, 137.

Than that the victor Hours should scorn
The long result of love, and boast,
‘Behold the man that loved and lost,
But all he was is overworn.’ (I, ll. 9-16)

The “victor Hours” are his foe in the ordeal of mourning. But there are two ways to prove victorious over them. He might either persevere, preserving grief and love through time, or else he might, like the mariners of “The Lotos-Eaters,” achieve a state of insensibility, immune to time’s passage:

Old Yew, which graspest at the stones
That name the under-lying dead,
Thy fibres net the dreamless head,
Thy roots are wrapt about the bones.

The seasons bring the flower again,
And bring the firstling to the flock;
And in the dusk of thee, the clock
Beats out the little lives of men.

O not for thee the glow, the bloom,
Who changest not in any gale,

Nor branding summer suns avail
 To touch thy thousand years of gloom:

And gazing on thee, sullen tree,
 Sick for thy stubborn hardihood,
 I seem to fail from out my blood [blood, Trial-1851A]
 And grow incorporate into thee. (II)

Timothy Peltason writes that in this section Tennyson moves away from the intense passion of the first section, finding here instead “another way of mastering time.”¹⁰⁹ But lives in many forms, and having abandoned the frenzied dance of the prior section does not mean he has abandoned that feeling, only turned away from its exhausting expression. In this section, he finds in the Yew Tree an emblem for a love and grief that can be sustained, unaltered by the clocks that “beat out the little lives of men.” No season can touch the “thousand years of gloom,” which stand vigil over the “dreamless head.” As Tennyson seems to “fail from out” his blood, and grow incorporate into the tree, the punctuation of the poem is lightened. One would expect, after “blood” and before “and,” a comma; Tennyson often places one before “and” when it is followed by a verb, and he had done so in editions of the poem from the Trial version to the first edition of 1851, 1851A. Its absence, though, suggests that as Tennyson seems to feel himself grow into the tree, he seems also to feel the pressure of time, the threat of its change and wear, lift from off of him. Oblivious to the passage of time, he is immune to the changes it will bring. And it need not

¹⁰⁹ Peltason, 24.

be oblivion that alleviates the weight of time. The thought that a part of himself has already reached eternity, and lives with Hallam, beyond earthly time's attrition, provides some comfort:

Since we deserved the name of friends,
And thine effect so lives in me,
A part of mine may live in thee
And move thee on to noble ends. (LXV, ll. 9-12)

There is no comma following "thee" and preceding "and," despite the verb "move" following the conjunction. He moves with Hallam in his imagination, and the poem moves forward in time, without the drag of a pause of punctuation.

Yet Tennyson is not of one mind about the prospect of escape from, or evasion of, clock-time. "Sick for," Eric Griffiths observes, may mean both "sick with yearning to become" and "sick on account of."¹¹⁰ One of the conflicts in the poem is whether it is better to preserve grief by transcending time, or whether it is better to prove one's grief by weathering time. There is a shade of Simeon's pride in Tennyson, who wants to prove how much and how long his mourning self has endured and can continue enduring, as if a longer grief would receive greater reward in the afterlife:

O days and hours, your work is this
To hold me from my proper place,
A little while from his embrace,

¹¹⁰ Griffiths, *Printed Voice*, 116-117.

For fuller gain of after bliss:

That out of distance might ensue

Desire of nearness doubly sweet;

And unto meeting when we meet,

Delight a hundredfold accrue,

For every grain of sand that runs,

And every span of shade that steals,

And every kiss of toothed wheels,

And all the courses of the suns. (CXXVII)

The final stanza of the poem organizes a massive range of temporal experience. For Tennyson, there is an intimation of both infinity and divinity in every grain of sand that runs—of the inevitability and eternity of time and of the hope in there being some plan directing it. The smallest is susceptible to change; the smallest is a record of change, as is the largest, and “runs” joins the particular motion of sand to “the courses of the suns” at the other end of the scale. “Runs” concedes the haste, but also allows the purpose, of time’s passage; it admits that the entire world, even sand, may participate in the race of life. The second line is joined to the first by the chiasmus of internal assonance, and so suggests that the scales of time are intimately bound up with one another: the long “a” of “grain” intertwines with that of “shade,” the “an” of “span” echoing, and nearly rhyming, the “an” of “sand.” “Runs” is used intransitively, as we would expect, but “steals,” though intransitive, permits us to consider its transitive sense: so

rather than “the shade steals across the lawn,” we are invited to consider “every span of shade” stealing youth or memories or something else from us. “Every kiss of toothed wheels” is acoustically and syntactically continuous with the prior to lines by the repetition of “And every,” the “and” carrying also the reminder of “sand,” as if it runs through the time of the stanza, and of course by the rhyme of “steals” and “wheels.” But “kiss” encompasses the poem’s ambivalence to time, as, say, “beats” in “beats out the little lives of men” does not. The kisses of toothed wheels are the kisses of the gears of clocks; they are metallic, cold and even violent, but they are kisses worth enduring, promises of a greater love that will meet Tennyson in the afterlife. He desires to feel love even if only by the torture of time, and like Simeon seeking out full-stops, can feel its weight as a pleasant reminder of the worth of his continued love for Hallam. For this reason, the pressure of time is not necessarily good or bad in the poem; heavy pointing may on occasion be a reminder of the changes that time brings, and on other occasions may be signs of the trial through which Tennyson feels he must pass:

Still onward winds the dreary way;

I with it; for I long to prove [it, Trial & LMS]

No lapse of moons can canker Love,

Whatever fickle tongues may say. (XXVI, ll. 1-4)

What had been a comma following “it” in the Trial edition and the Lincoln Manuscript was revised, upon the poem’s publication, to a semi-colon, which is abrupt after the brevity of the phrase that it follows. In that semicolon, the “lapse of moons” passes. In Section CXXIII, two-full-stops contain within them the weight of eons, but against such a weight, Tennyson sets

himself defiant in the final stanza:

There rolls the deep where grew the tree.

O earth, what changes hast thou seen!

There where the long street roars, hath been

The stillness of the central sea.

The hills are shadows, and they flow

From form to form, and nothing stands;

They melt like mist, the solid lands,

Like clouds they shape themselves and go.

But in my spirit will I dwell,

And dream my dream, and hold it true;

For tho' my lips may breathe adieu,

I cannot think the thing farewell. (CXIII)

The slow geological transformation of the massy earth is sublimated into an airy sky-scape, the work of eons as ephemeral as the passing of an evening's clouds; but change is not effected seamlessly in Tennyson's verse, which is less fluent than the scene he describes. In the syntax of "They melt like mist, the solid lands," "the solid lands" reasserting themselves between "mist" and "clouds," not so easily imagined away; and "like clouds they shape themselves and go" ends on the monosyllable "go," which should be taken to mean—but which by no means says—"go

away” or “disappear” or “depart,” and which reduces the passing of time to a vague and worn stepping stone of common speech. Perhaps the reduction is appropriate because the Tennyson seeks to deny that the spectacle has any more grandeur or significance than an everyday occurrence of clouds forming and dissipating. In the stanza that follows he denies what he has asserted: time does not conquer the forms of the nature so easily—nor, and Tennyson reveals himself to have been thinking all the while also of forms of human feeling, does time so easily conquer his love for his friend, or their friendship. In the center of these stanzas is the full-stop following “go” and preceding “But.” Tennyson might have substituted a comma, semi-colon, or colon in its place. As a full-stop, however, the mark does at least two things. First, it establishes an occasion for an ending, which Tennyson spurns as he continues on with the final stanza. Second, and in line with my argument, it is a reminder of the force of time which is able, he has just claimed, to do away so quickly with nature’s most lasting features, and against which, in the final stanza he asserts himself. In that full-stop, the reader can apprehend the rush of time that Tennyson fears, and which, in the final stanza, he denies the power he had earlier imagined it to possess, insisting to himself, even at the risk of a self-delusion akin to Tithonus’ (“dream my dream, and hold it true”) that some things are beyond the harmful reach of time.

But there are occasions in the poem when Tennyson denies altogether the need to either endure or escape time. These provide some of its most settled and certain moments of relief:

I woo your love: I count it crime
To mourn for any overmuch;
I, the divided half of such
A friendship as had master’d Time;

Which masters Time indeed, and is

Eternal, separate from fears:

The all-assuming months and years

Can take no part away from this: (LXXXV, ll. 61-68)

In such a state of mind, time's passage is irrelevant, neither to be shunned or embraced; their friendship has already mastered it. It is met with elsewhere—and it is a characteristic of *In Memoriam* that its feelings towards time, and experiences of time, while not developing or progressing, are interspersed with one another, arrived at unexpectedly, then lost, only to be arrived at later, under different circumstances, spurred on by a different occasion of thought:

I envy not the beast that takes

His license in the field of time,

Unfetter'd by the sense of crime,

To whom a conscience never wakes;

Nor, what may count itself as blest,

The heart that never plighted troth

But stagnates in the weeds of sloth;

Nor any want-begotten rest.

I hold it true, whate'er befall;

I feel it, when I sorrow most;
'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all. (XXVII, ll. 5-16)

Tennyson takes pride at having braved “the fields of time,” and I find in these lines an absence of resentment, fatigue, or fear. He can find relief through an acceptance of the changes of time—an acceptance also that something is to be valued for having happened, even if it will fade, or change. The absence of the comma after “lost” is not the absence of time in the poem, but the absence of worries about it.

Tennyson is not consistent in placing a comma before “than” in the poem. Later, in section LXXXV, the closing lines of section XXVII are repeated:

This truth came borne with bier and pall,
I felt it, when I sorrow'd most,
'Tis better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all —— (LXXXV, ll. 1-4)

On this occasion, the lines are not felt, they are recalled, their freshness faded, time heavy on them. The dash following “all” is longer than Tennyson’s usual m-dash, found for instance in XCV l. 42 or XCVII l. 9, and, wistfully reaching elsewhere, beyond the poem, marks as incomplete or insufficient the sentiment that it is better never to have loved at all. What follows in LXVIII is Tennyson’s effort, and success, at girding himself to affirm that his friendship had mastered time.

Where time rests easy on Tennyson in *In Memoriam*, he is capable of swallow-flights of song that soar free from the anxiety, and free also from the particular circumstances of the elegy, but these are not culminations of the poem's progress; instead, they occur as unexpected gifts of grace. Some of these sections seem airily aloof from the larger poem of which they are a part:

Sweet after showers, ambrosial air,
That rollest from the gorgeous gloom
Of evening over brake and bloom
And meadow, slowly breathing bare

The round of space, and rapt below
Thro' all the dewy-tassell'd wood,
And shadowing down the horned flood
In ripples, fan my brows and blow

The fever from my cheek, and sigh
The full new life that feeds thy breath
Throughout my frame, till Doubt and Death,
Ill brethren, let the fancy fly

From belt to belt of crimson seas
On leagues of odour streaming far,
To where in yonder orient star

A hundred spirits whisper 'Peace.'

(LXXXVI)

The movement of the passage is interrupted by commas alone, though Tennyson might have deployed semi-colons to modulate the roll of clauses. To have done so, however, would have been to retard the speed of the passage, to temporally freight the poem at a moment when Tennyson's conscious no longer carries such freight. Anxieties about endurance have vanished from the poem, as Tennyson seems to have escaped not time but the compulsion to extend his mourning through time, or to prove it against time. He arrives at such a state of mind more than once in the poem, but the sense of finality is proven false on all but one of these instances, his almost always having more to say. The exception is the final section of the poem, which is followed only by an epilogue that is not subject to the Roman-numeral titles that keep count of the poem's duration. In that final section, CXXXI, confident in the endurance of what is alive and true in his love and friendship with Hallam, there are no points but commas. Time has not been evaded by the insensibility of the inanimate; instead, it has been accepted, but without morbid sensitivity:

O living will that shalt endure

When all that seems shall suffer shock,

Rise in the spiritual rock,

Flow thro' our deeds and make them pure,

That we may lift from out of dust

A voice as unto him that hears,

A cry above the conquer'd years

To one that with us works, and trust,

With faith that comes of self-control,

 The truths that never can be proved

 Until we close with all we loved,

And all we flow from, soul in soul. (CXXXI)

This is not the poem's conclusion, for the Epilogue is still to follow. What allows Tennyson to depart from this section into the Epilogue, and the imminent close of the poem, is not that the relief he feels here, the feel of faith, is permanent, but that with this momentary possession of faith, he allows himself to bring to an end the potentially interminable mourning, doubting and reminiscing of the poem. With these words, that is, the conflict that underlay *In Memoriam* from the last line of its final section, whether it would be better to continue or cease the poem, has been decided. The possession of faith, even if temporary, reconciles Tennyson with the losses and changes of time, and the reconciliation is registered by the lightness of the commas; they ease the continuity between clauses and phrases, suggesting that the living meets with few shocks of it as it endures in it.

Coda: Reversing the Hypothesis

As I mentioned in my introductory paragraphs to this chapter, there are poems with unexpectedly light punctuation, and where this lightness responds to the speaker's acute

sensitivity to time's passage, rather than suggesting relief from it. *Maud* provides a good example, from near the end of Part II, when the speaker's madness is reaching a peak, and where he contemplates time's passage with more directness than hitherto in the poem:

Dead, long dead,
Long dead!
And my heart is a handful of dust,
And the wheels go over my head,
And my bones are shaken with pain,
For into a shallow grave they are thrust,
Only a yard beneath the street,
And the hoofs of the horses, beat, beat,
The hoofs of the horses beat,
Beat into my scalp and my brain,
With never an end to the stream of passing feet,
Driving, hurrying, marrying, burying,
Clamour and rumble, and ringing and clatter,
And here beneath it is all as bad,
For I thought the dead had peace, but it is not so;
To have no peace in the grave, is that not sad?
But up and down and to and fro,
Ever about me the dead men go;
And then to hear a dead man chatter

Is enough to drive one mad. (Maud, II.V.I)

Although they are numerous, the commas are conspicuously light and in their lightness they quicken the movement of the verse. We may appreciate this as registering the speaker's consciousness of time, which is not dulled or lessened; instead he apprehends with terror and anguish its ceaseless rapidity. Tennyson called this speaker "a morbid poetic soul," and one of his flaws (not flaws in his construction as a fiction) is that he exaggerates his endurance to himself, which we may see as a symptom of his morbid temperament. We know that the poem was written with the Spasmodics somewhere in mind—he was making use of some of their devices—and this Spasmodic element in it might lead us to consider how it presents—and represents—the less-heroic version of human endurance which Arnold had described in his Preface of 1853, which was written, Trilling tells us, as a reaction against "the confusion of the Spasmodics" that Arnold had detected in his "Empedocles Upon Etna":¹¹¹

What then are the situations, from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived? They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continual state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous. When they occur in actual life, they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Trilling, 149-150.

¹¹² Arnold, 2-3.

Tennyson's earlier poems about endurance strive to resist the notion that the resistance that inevitably accompanies endurance is itself doing nothing, but *Maud* is written later, and its speaker stands in contrast to Tennyson's earlier speakers by wrongly imagining himself to be at the extremes of endurance, especially by the end of the poem's second part, where the passage I have quoted arrives. It is in part a poem about the morbid temperament's desire to coddle its own fantasies of endurance. Eric Griffiths points out that in their poems about endurance and madness, *Julian and Maddalo* and *Empedocles Upon Etna*, "Shelley and Arnold contrast the deranged pulses of madness or morbidity to the measured pulsations of music; they count on the belief that music hath charms to soothe the ravaged mind." Following from this, Griffiths treats the music of the lyrical forms of *Maud* as "a possible symptom of the morbidity as the poem dramatizes the roots of lyricism in the pathological."¹¹³ In the madness of morbidity, the speaker's excruciating awareness of time manifests in the lightened pauses of punctuation. I speculate that Tennyson abandons his earlier mode of punctuating endurance for a speaker who is without the nobility or heroism of his earlier speakers.

¹¹³ Griffiths, *Printed Voice*, 154.

Chapter Three: Christina G. Rossetti and the Points of Patience

In the last major work of her life, a prose commentary on the Book of Revelation entitled *The Face of the Deep*, Christina G. Rossetti glosses Revelation 2:13. In the passage, Saint John records what he has been told to write to the church in Pergamos: “I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan’s seat is, and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied by faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.” Rossetti responds:

‘In those days’—No momentary trial: saintly impulse not enough, saintly endurance equally essential. Here then once more patience is in requisition: patience, a tedious, indomitable grace.¹¹⁴

“Once more”—despite this being only the second chapter of the book, Rossetti has met with patience in it before. We might be surprised to see her finding a comment on the need for patience in these three words in particular, let alone in this passage at all, but Rossetti undertook to write her commentary prompted by a remark from her sister that patience was the lesson of Revelation: “A dear saint—I speak under correction of the Judgment of the Great Day, yet think then not to have my word corrected—this dear person once pointed out to me Patience as our lesson in the Book of Revelations.”¹¹⁵ In her comments on Revelation 2:13, she aspires to better understand this lesson, assuming that, though not overt in John’s words, it is present nonetheless.

¹¹⁴ Rossetti, *Face*, 68.

¹¹⁵ Rossetti, *Face*, 7. Rossetti writes “Revelations” with the “s” at the end.

She notes that “in those days” refers to a span of time, “no momentary trial” and the duration of the trial is what demands “saintly endurance” rather than “saintly impulse” and from “saintly endurance,” Rossetti turns, once more, to patience.¹¹⁶

Both Tennyson and Wordsworth write of patience as an ideal of endurance; for Rossetti, it is more. Patience is, she writes elsewhere in her commentary, “a crown to her fellow virtues.”¹¹⁷ She prays: “Grant us patience for a crown, patience for a shield, patience and perseverance in our vocation, patience in suffering.”¹¹⁸ The virtue not only rests upon, but diffuses through the Christian life. It is a virtue exemplified by Christ:

So far as I am aware the word *patience* is exclusively a New Testament word, although *patient* and *patiently* occur in both Testaments. Not that the virtue so named waited for these last days for illustration: on the contrary, St. James cites the Prophets and Job as examples of patience. Yet because patience in perfection was not found on earth until Christ trod our weary ways, it wakes a harmonious chord in our hearts to observe that till His blessed human lips spake the word, that word was not (unless I mistake) recorded in the Scriptures of Truth.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Two works that stand out for placing “endurance” and “patience” in positions of prominence, Dolores Rosenblum’s *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance* and Constance Hassett’s *Christina Rossetti and the Patience of Style*. However, in each critic the key-words themselves receive little sustained scrutiny; they serve as grounds for an exploration of many other facets of her poetry.

¹¹⁷ Rossetti, *Face*, 285.

¹¹⁸ Rossetti, *Face*, 274.

¹¹⁹ Rossetti, *Face*, 115.

She does not mistake. The word appears in The New Testament thirty-four times, in The Old Testament not once. Rossetti sees Christ as having made patience not only possible, but perfect; an injunction that she must follow through on in her life and work. Answering her question whether patience “is at all a privilege,” as well as being “a great grace,” Rossetti responds “yes, surely” and explains that “Tribulation cannot but be a privilege, inasmuch as it makes us so far like Christ.”¹²⁰ But Rossetti does not mean to say that to undergo tribulation is necessarily to be patient, for in the sentence following, she offers a prayer: “O Tender Lord Jesus, Who layest not upon us more than we can bear, give us patience in tribulation; a courageous, sweet patience; a patient, indomitable hope.”¹²¹ This goes some way to explaining how for Rossetti patience is both a crowning virtue and a “tedious, indomitable grace.” As a virtue, patience is that which humans must aspire towards on their own efforts; as a grace, patience is received from above, the aid of God. Perhaps we can, in light of this, understand her where, elsewhere, she calls patience an “advanced grace,” one which we do not expect to be associated with children: “Of course nothing contrary to patience can we desire for them at any period; but we remember that ‘tribulation worketh patience,’ and if we can we shelter our harmless little ones a while from tribulation.”¹²² In the “for” of “desire for them,” she intimates that patience is something bestowed. And yet her calling such grace “tedious” as well as “indomitable” is a recognition that the divine grace of patience does not efface or erase the human experience of endurance: the duration of tribulation and the heightened, excruciating, sense of time’s passing.

¹²⁰ Rossetti, *Face*, 26.

¹²¹ Rossetti, *Face*, 26.

¹²² Rossetti, *Face*, 360.

As a grace, patience does not arrive *sui generis*, or out of the strength of an individual alone; it is something given from above. As a virtue, an individual's capacity to endure—their strength—is nonetheless requisite for patience—as is their capacity to seek it from God. The virtue of patience is requisite if the grace of patience is to be attained. Repeatedly in her poetry, Rossetti recognizes, and does justice to, patience as both virtue and grace, depending both on another (the Other: God) and herself; it demands an activity of her own will and a proper orientation towards God. Nor is patience attained permanently, having met these demands; in being “indomitable,” patience not only conquers toil, but resists easy conquest by whoever seeks it. What Eric Griffiths writes of “Twice” is true of her work in general: “what calm the poem achieves about its own pain is not something possessed once and for all, but will have to be worked towards again, patience being an incessant rehearsal of itself.”¹²³ Rossetti's poems are the principal stage of her incessant rehearsal, though the word “rehearsal” is perhaps too theatrical a description of what for Rossetti is a private and necessary requirement of life. Griffiths' wording nonetheless suggests how it is that patience can be a tedious grace; “incessant” suggests that the rehearsal of patience wears on Rossetti. One reason for the continuing demand for patience to be renewed and repeated is that it is a virtue called upon in so many of life's activities and elements. Rossetti writes in *The Face of the Deep*: “All I have read, then, is to lead me up to patience: patience under ignorance, patience under fear, patience under hope deferred, patience so long as free-will entails the terrific possibility of self-destruction; patience until (please God) my will freely, finally, indefectibly, becomes one with the Divine

¹²³ Eric Griffiths, “The Disappointment of Christina G. Rossetti,” *Essays in Criticism* XLVII (2) 1997, 126 [107-142]

Will.”¹²⁴ “Under ignorance...under fear...under hope deferred...so long as free-will entails the terrific possibility of self-destruction:” these are the abiding conditions that pervade Rossetti’s life as it is imagined and presented in the poetry.¹²⁵

Though Rossetti most thoroughly describes and analyzes the virtue of patience in her later theological poems and prose works, it is not a virtue only in her religious work, but is a virtue also in (and of) those poems about her human loves. The phrase “hope deferred” from *Face of the Deep* is an echo of the Biblical proverb, “hope deferred maketh the heart sick,” and also a return to an earlier echo of the same proverb, in Rossetti’s youthful poem of lost love: “A Pause of Thought”:¹²⁶

I looked for that which is not, nor can be,
And hope deferred made my heart sick in truth:
But years must pass before a hope of youth
Is resigned utterly. (ll. 1-4)

¹²⁴ Rossetti, *Face*, 360.

¹²⁵ We should bear in mind too that patience is not only, for Rossetti, a condition of life: in her youth, and the years of her conversion, Rossetti frequently attended the sermons of Reverend William Dodsworth, a proponent of the doctrine of soul-sleep, which holds that the soul, upon death, sleeps until the day of judgment and resurrection. The sleep is not an utter oblivion necessarily; it is a season of life, often figured in her poems as winter, which demands patience no less than—if differently than—other seasons.

¹²⁶ The text of all poems by Rossetti is taken from the Crump edition. Christina G. Rossetti, *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti: A Variorum Edition*, Ed. R.W. Crump, 3 vols (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

Here too then the need for patience; the need to wait until the hope of youth can be “resigned utterly,” rather than uttered repeatedly. Arcing through, and undergirding, Rossetti’s work from that which admits itself most openly to worldly concerns to that which most intently looks beyond the world, patience is inseparable from trust, whether it is, as in “A Pause of Thought,” a trust that time will mend, or as in other lyrics addressed to man or God, a trust in the time of another, a trust that in time another will fulfill or meet a promise. But trust likewise requires patience, since there is no knowing whether trust has been broken until it is too late; it is only proven by time, and so the uncertainties of trust may need, with time’s passage, to be endured.

The poem that prompted Griffiths’ remark on patience in Rossetti, “Twice,” traces the path between Rossetti’s love for man and her love for God; the patience required in each relationship is the same, but the conditions of patience in a relationship with God are to be preferred, and this in part because she can trust in what God asks of her, trust His standards, as she cannot trust man’s. First addressing the man, she writes

You took my heart in your hand

With a friendly smile,

With a critical eye you scanned,

Then set it down,

And said: It is still unripe,

Better wait awhile;

Wait while the skylarks pipe,

Till the corn grows brown. (“Twice,” ll. 9-16)

Then, abandoning man's love, she turns to God:

I take my heart in my hand,
O my God, O my God,
My broke heart in my hand:
Thou hast seen, judge Thou.
My hope was written on sand,
O my God, O my God;
Now let Thy judgment stand—
Yea, judge me now. (“Twice,” ll. 25-32)

The poem concludes:

I take my heart in my hand—
I shall not die, but live—
Before Thy face I stand;
I, for Thou callest such:
All that I have I bring,
All that I am I give,
Smile Thou and I shall sing,
But shall not question much. (“Twice” ll. 41-48)

She must be patient not until the man loves her—but until the man judges that her heart is ripe enough to sufficiently love him. We are meant to see that the judgment of the man is inappropriate, cruel, unjust—and untrustworthy, because it is fallible, without his recognizing its fallibility—whereas the judgment of God is the opposite, and, what is more, promises a reward which is of greater value than a human relationship. There is nothing explicit in the poem about how God responds to her offer, but He returns her heart to her, and we may interpret this in two ways, which the poem probably wishes to hold simultaneously in mind. On the one hand, she had asked, rather impatiently, for God to judge her heart “now.” This He will not do; she must wait for the day of Judgment. The man had said “wait till the corn grows brown,” and this was meant to be measure of earthly time; silly because she already felt her love for him to be ripe, and because he was making a fatuous claim to greater knowledge, as if he knew what difference a few seasons would bring to the state of her feelings. But in the allegorical language of the Bible, she must indeed wait for God’s judgment to occur when “the corn grows brown,” for this indicates the final harvest of souls, and Judgment Day; since the time of the seasons is God’s time, a part of His plan, established according to His will, it is fair for Him to evoke it as a measure of when He will judge, or to invoke them as a figural time-piece for measuring the life of the world. He does not invoke the seasons in the poem, but they are already mentioned and we can see how much more fittingly they serve as a measure of God’s time than of man’s. Perhaps Rossetti does not have Him mention the seasons because she wishes to keep open another possibility: although she must wait for the day of Judgment, wait for God’s final assessment of the ripeness of her heart, in returning her heart to her, God does not return it broken, as did the man. The poem allows that something secret has passed between Rossetti and God—that she withholds what He communicated to her. On this other reading, we may think that God has

already returned her love, that He deems, as the man did not, her faith and her willingness to love Him, as a sufficient condition for His loving her in return. We can reconcile the two readings by saying that God's love for her is expressed not in immediate salvation but in the promise that, if she remains faithful, and lives a life of Christian renunciation (we would expect that, for Rossetti, this would be a condition), He will redeem her on the Day of Judgment. His love is expressed through and manifest in His promise, which demands patience from her. But her patience for God is not the same as her patience for the man because God has already revealed His love for her; she is patient knowing His love. She ends the poem by saying that she will not question much, but this is a dream of patience with God which cannot easily be obtained or guaranteed elsewhere in her work. She questions frequently through her poems, wondering at why the God who says He loves her has made her toil for so long, at when His promise will be fulfilled, at whether she will be saved. But she also questions herself, asking whether she loves Him sufficiently, whether she has sufficient faith, whether she has lived well enough to deserve His love. Much of the questioning is part and parcel in the attempt at trusting in the timing of His promise and plan—because faith is always set against doubt, and so is a repeated answering of doubts questions, rather than an obviation of them—and in finding patience in the toil and time as she abides.

The effort to find patience in, and with, time is not an effort to forget it. In her poetry, she rarely lapses into forgetfulness—either happy forgetfulness or sinful forgetfulness—of time: the time she has spent, the time which remains to her, or the time which He has decreed must be passed until He judges and redeems the world with a new order of time. Instead, to achieve patience, she must strive to adjust, and readjust, her attitudes towards His time. The punctuation of her poetry cannot of course tell us whether she is more or less at ease with, more or less

trusting of time; but it can move the poem—alter its movement—as she moves towards, or away from, patience.¹²⁷ We know from her letters to her brother, Dante Gabriel, that Christina Rossetti concerned herself with the details of punctuation in her poetry; at times she asked for his assistance.¹²⁸ Rossetti frequently relies on a particular technique of punctuation which is different from the other poets I have examined, establishing of a pattern of punctuation in a particular poetic form (the sonnet) or across the regular stanzas of a particular poem, which she then disrupts or varies; the variation often corresponds with a shift in her consciousness of time, registering that shift in the poem’s rhythm. The nature of the shift in her consciousness will depend on the forces and concerns at work in that particular poem—though in general, these forces and concerns will involve her relationship to that virtuous grace, patience. This is not Rossetti’s only way of using punctuation to reflect her experience in poems, but it happens consistently enough so as to become a motif in this chapter. Changes in the patterns of her punctuation often coincide with Rossetti’s successes and failures at achieving patience, registering shifts in her attitudes towards God’s time, and her own.

Many of Rossetti’s poems depend upon the establishment of regular stanza shapes, and in achieving balance between stanzas, she considered punctuation as a quantity to be weighed alongside meter and stanza shape. As a brief example, let us turn to “The Lowest Place”:

¹²⁷ Tennyson’s punctuation cannot, in itself, tell us that he is more or less at ease with time, either; I begin with the belief, grounded in the words of the poetry, that Tennyson often imagines time as a burdensome pressure, or a corrosive force, and that punctuation provides a way of registering or representing this force in the poetry. His attitude, however, is not in the punctuation itself, but in the poetry where punctuation plays a role.

¹²⁸ Crump, “Introduction,” 6.

Give me the lowest place: not that I dare
Ask for that lowest place, but Thou hast died
That I might live and share
Thy glory by thy side.

Give me the lowest place: or if for me
That lowest place too high, make one more low
Where I may sit and see
My God and love Thee so. (“The Lowest Place”)

Rossetti is of two minds regarding her worthiness for the seat: the opening imperative quickly softened as she makes the case against herself, before cautiously pleading her cause in the final two and half lines. She would not deserve the seat had Christ not died to make her deserving, and except that she loves him and feels the seat to be the best vantage for her adoration. Within each stanza, the unpunctuated line endings and enjambments cause the movement of the lines to falter with hesitation and trepidation. But set against this, there is the perfect symmetry between the two stanzas, a symmetry of punctuation as well as meter and shape, suggesting that the hesitation and trepidation are less than spontaneous, that they are part of a necessary ritual, which she has mastered. The punctuation, however, is not only an additional item in the balanced scales: it is the evidence of her mastery over time in the ritual, as she pauses for equivalent durations, at equivalent instants in both stanzas. Such control over time in this poem suggests that she has achieved some patience of hope, that she has accepted that the timing of the ritual prayer will yield, eventually, the fulfillment of her wish.

We find the same balance in “The Patience of Hope,” but to different effect. The poem offers an example of Rossetti’s establishing and then deviating from a pattern of punctuation. The balance between the first two stanzas is metrical and syntactical, but also an effect of punctuation, with a comma appearing in the second, fifth, eighth and eleventh lines of the poem, and a full-stop in the third, sixth, ninth and twelfth lines.

The flowers that bloom in sun and shade

And glitter in the dew,

The flowers must fade.

The birds that build their nest and sing

When lovely Spring is new,

Must soon take wing.

The sun that rises in his strength

To wake and warm the world,

Must set at length.

The sea that overflows the shore

With billows frothed and curled,

Must ebb once more.

All come and go, all wax and wane,

O Lord, save only Thou

Who dost remain

The Same to all eternity.

All things which fail us now

We trust to Thee.

(“Patience of Hope”)

“Patience of Hope” is motivated by the hope for patience of a particular kind—for the patience that comes with a restful hope of God’s promise being fulfilled. The first two stanzas, which are written without perturbation at the claims they make, belie the strangeness of what Rossetti is actually saying. For she misses the fundamental and widely agreed upon truism about nature: that the death of the natural world is temporary, to be inevitably renewed by spring. Rossetti seems, in the first two stanzas, to mourn the passing of the seasons as if they were irrevocably lost; but the poem does not represent the pathetic fallacy taken to an extreme, fears of the permanence of human death being projected onto the natural world. Rossetti would not want to imagine that human life is permanently lost with death. But she does want to make the point that the return of the seasons depends upon a God who stands outside of earthly time entirely, impermeable to its changes, “The Same to all eternity.” She does not worship nature; after all, it depends on the greater power and nourishment of God. And so she waits until the final line of the poem to write “which fail us now” and “Trust to Thee.” “Now” because these failure are not permanent, but “Trust to Thee” because the returns of nature depend upon God’s will. We are to take the natural world’s seasons as emblematic of human life—a device common in Rossetti—and see that just as the nature would not return in spring without the will of God, so humans, having died, will not be reborn without the will of God. He transcends time, but also dictates its rhythms of return. Hence the title of the poem: we have hope and patience that we will return just as these will all return, but only because of His guarantee, and our faith in Him.

As we have seen, the first three stanzas are timed with regularity, full-stops and commas arriving predictably, and we might take this as corresponding to the regular, unceasing cycle of natural fading away, which they describe. We might find also in the regularity a symptom of Rossetti's reconciliation, or resignation, to the state of affairs. But the hope in "The Patience of Hope" arrives in the final stanza where the pattern is broken, as Rossetti turns her attention from nature's recurrent losses to God's eternal sameness, the pattern of the timing is destroyed; Rossetti's hope is that God ensures that the losses of death will be redeemed in resurrection and that the time of (fallen) nature be abolished, and in the final stanza as she imagines God undoing or reversing nature's losses, she abolishes the pattern of the poem's earlier punctuation. The altered rhythm of the new syntax in the final stanza, as it is embodied by the pointing of the lines, then, coincides with Rossetti's sudden, renewed consciousness—not a discovery, but a rediscovery—of the eventual renovation to life and the world promised by God. Because of God's presence in the poem, its pattern of punctuation is altered such that it is no longer the same as when it was solely concerned with the losses of nature. With the promise of God in mind, her experience of time is shaken free from what it was, and it is this new sense of time's promise which makes her patiently enduring its passage possible.

Even unworried about the fulfillment of God's plans, Rossetti may nonetheless be frustrated by the clash between acting on her own time and acting in time with His wishes. "Weary in Well-Doing" is about the asymmetry between the timing of God's plans and her own, which the poem presents in symmetrical stanzas, the first two of which mirror each other not only in their rhyme scheme and metrical form, but in their punctuation and syntactical shape. The third stanza retains the rhyme scheme and metrical form, but the syntactical shape differs and, with it, so does the pattern of punctuation, and the rhythm of pauses. But before I discuss

the altered pattern of the third stanza, I would like to talk about a few marks in the first two stanzas:

I would have gone; God bade me stay:

I would have worked; God bade me rest.

He broke my will from day to day,

He read my yearnings unexpressed

And said them nay.

Now I would stay; God bids me go:

Now I would rest; God bids me work.

He breaks my heart tossed to and fro,

My soul is wrung with doubts that lurk

And vex it so.

I go, Lord, where Thou sendest me;

Day after day I plod and moil:

But, Christ my God, when will it be

That I may let alone my toil

And rest with Thee? (“Weary in Well-Doing”)

Despite the clash of desires, Rossetti goes and does where God bids her, when He bids her. The conflict of timing is apparent in the semi-colons and colons of the first two lines of the first and

second stanzas. They are deployed to distinguish independent clauses, but each stanza ends also with two independent clauses divided only by a comma. From the first stanza, we might think that these final independent clauses are divided only by a comma because each has the same subject, but in the second stanza, the two independent clauses have different subjects. So we should not take it for granted that it is only on account of this syntactical feature (there being two independent clauses) that the first two lines of the stanza do not read:

I would have gone, God bid me stay:

I would have worked, God bid me rest.

Now I would stay, God bids me go:

Now I would rest, God bids me work.

What matters is not only the fact that they are two independent clauses, but that the comma would invite speculation on their being a degree of dependence between them, which I think that the semi-colon precludes. In either case, we might have understood something along the lines of “Now that I would stay, God bids me go” or “When I would have gone, God bid me stay.” In one sense, the commas still function as the semi-colons: these two events coincided. But with the comma in place, we might think that God’s bidding her to stay or go was occasioned by—motivated by—her will to go or stay. With a semi-colon dividing the clauses, Rossetti maintains that the two clauses coincided, without depending on one another. There is a secondary effect of the semi-colon; it maintains the independent coincidence of the two wills, but also sets a heavy (relative to a comma) quantity of time in each line, as if a measure of the turbulent discord

between them. The effect is similar to that achieved by the semi-colons in Wordsworth's encounter with the discharged soldier.

And yet the clash is contained with two stanzas of symmetrical syntax and punctuation, such that it is dramatized with great poise and control. Although the conflict with God disrupts Rossetti's timing, she has accommodated the conflict and disruption into her life and expectations; the conflict of timing is made, over the two stanzas, to feel well-timed. But the pattern alters in the third stanza; the tedium of the recurring clash, even if predicted, boils over as Rossetti implores God for her final rest, a rest in which the timing of her will and His will no longer be at odds. She is no longer, as she was in the first two stanzas, patiently resigned to the routine of conflict. I do not think that the difference between any of the specific pauses in first/second and third stanzas matters as much as the general nature of the difference, and the fact of there being a difference at all. There are fewer pauses in the final stanza; the pointing has quickened the poem's rhythm; rather than weaken beneath routine, Rossetti has kicked against it, breaking it by her questioning. The poem is unusual in that it ends on a note of impatience; characteristically, Rossetti's poems move towards a place of rest, or an reaffirmation of eventual rest, for which Rossetti pleads here.

A sustained lightening of punctuation in a stanza, is not, in itself, a symptom of impatience, any more than heavy pointing is always a symptom of weariness. Take the final poem of Rossetti's first volume, "Amen":

It is over. What is over?

Nay, how much is over truly:

Harvest days we toiled to sow for;

Now the sheaves are gathered newly,
Now the wheat is garnered duly.

It is finished. What is finished?

Much is finished known or unknown:
Lives are finished; time diminished;
Was the fallow field left unsown?
Will these buds be always unblown?

It suffices. What suffices?

All suffices reckoned rightly:
Spring shall bloom where now the ice is,
Roses make the bramble sightly,
And the quickening sun shine brightly,
And the latter wind blow lightly,
And my garden teem with spices. (“Amen”)

In “Amen,” Rossetti finds the place of rest she seeks elsewhere; it is present first of all in the full-stop which make of each stanza’s short opening phrase a declaration of a settled truth, the full-stop insisting as it were on the sufficiency of what has been said. The time that passes in the pause is time for relief and contemplation, as in another poem earlier in the same volume, “Sweet Death”:

quarry further, in the questions that follow. Although her voice is alone in the poem, it turns against itself, as she seeks to rationally understand the truth that she has already intuitively grasped. The tranquility of the poem is a result of the ease, confidence and, perhaps, certainty with which she can answer her own questions. In the second stanza, she asks more questions than she can answer, but she has already accepted that there is much that is “unknown” in God’s plan, and it may be a part of that plan that these fields will be left fallow, that some buds will be left unblown. We might also take the third stanza as a response to these questions asked in the second.

There is a progress in the sentences that open the stanzas: “it is over” to “it is finished” to “it suffices.” The first two are nearly redundant; what is the difference between something being “over” and something being “finished,” aside from the fact that Jesus said “it is finished” rather than “it is over”? There is obviously a difference in the verbs themselves, such that a person may say “I have finished” or “I am finished” or “I am finished eating” or “I am finished with dinner.” We might conclude that in saying “it is finished,” Rossetti refers to an agent, rather than to a state of affairs, but here seems to be no relevant agent in this case. I think, however, that because “finished” attaches to an agent, it may be that saying “it is finished” suggests that something has reached its intended end, whereas saying “it is over” means simply that something has ceased. Jesus is quoted as saying “it is finished” rather than “it is over,” because God’s plan has reached its goal; “finished” is used because such a goal exists. There is a progression therefore from “over” to “finished” to “suffices” in that the first verb does not speak of an individual’s judgment of requirements being met, whereas the last verb, “suffices” does so; “to suffice” implies that one has decided on a measure by which one can decide when there is enough. In saying “it suffices,” Rossetti may be both affirming a third intuited truth and in

looking back at the questions of the third stanzas, so as to say “what you know suffices” and “even with these things left in such a state, the world has lasted for a sufficient time.” The width of possibilities depends upon the vague generality of “it,” which potentially encompasses all of life, the world, and God’s plans, as well as potentially referring to anything else already mentioned in the poem. We might wonder also at the grounds for all of the poem’s talk of finality. “It is over,” she says, and she means that her days of toil have ended, that there is little left to endure. The poem could be a premonition of death-bed peace, but there are no mentions of death, and death, for Rossetti, does not mark the fulfillment of God’s plan; even the dead must lie dormant for a long time before the springtime rejuvenation of the Day of Judgment. I prefer to think that in the short sentences Rossetti is temporarily, in the space of the poem, granted an alternative perspective on, and in, time, whereby her promised final rest is made to seem imminent; she imaginatively projects forward and allows herself to taste the relief that her faith tells her will be hers. In so far as it transcends time, the poem is motivated by a profound impatience; but in so far as she accepts the intuition with equanimity, that impatience is mollified.

As I have already noted, the poem progresses; it is not simply three stanzas, three truths, sitting side by side. The progress follows the change in the three verbs: there is an increasing focus on the design and intention governing the world. “All suffices reckoned rightly” acknowledges that it may not be in our power to accomplish the reckoning, but that there is a way in which the losses and gains in the world through time can be said to be “enough” for an end, and not just for any end, but for the final end, the ultimate good of God. The progress of Rossetti’s imagination in the poem is most apparent in the altered stanza form of the final stanza, which has two lines more than the two first, as she turns from what is over and finished to look

ahead to the final end, for which it has all sufficed: because God's plan is perfect, everything suffices to bring about the Day of Judgment and the rejuvenation of the world in a perfect form, represented here as elsewhere by spring. The final stanza swells with happy expectation of this future; the previous stanza form, the stanza form associated with the world and time that have passed, is inadequate to contain its glories. Or, better still, we might say that the earlier stanza form was itself the bud that has bloomed into the final stanza: for the final stanza is an expansion of the earlier two, a ripening into fruition and perfection, which is represented in its final word "spices," which completes a circuit with the first line, "suffices," so that the rhyme scheme is circular, as it is not in the first two (and we see the indentation of the final line in the third stanza matching that of the first line, also). Finally, there is the punctuation. The syntax of the final stanza permits, but does not demand, the successive commas of the final five lines. The shift to a lighter pattern of punctuation in this stanza does not, on this occasion, dramatize impatience; instead, it registers the quickening of time that we are to associate with the quickening of life. The finished world has yielded a new beginning not only to life, but to the time that had been "diminished," and that is now recommenced. The commas are light and regular, time buoyant in Rossetti's imagination. But the recommencement of time in God's kingdom is not apprehended as a disruption of or imposition on the movement on the verse, or on Rossetti's consciousness; it offers ease and fulfillment.

Most often in Rossetti's poetry, the future that Rossetti envisions and presents with such confidence and gratitude in "Amen" is distant, a test of patience and a source of doubt and trepidation as in "Dost Thou Not Care":

I love and love not: Lord, it breaks my heart

To love and not to love.

Thou veiled within Thy glory, gone apart

Into Thy shrine, which is above,

Dost Thou not love me, Lord, or care

For this mine ill?

I love thee here or there,

I will accept thy broken heart, lie still

Lord, it was well with me in time gone by

That cometh not again,

When I was fresh and cheerful, who but I?

I fresh, I cheerful: worn with pain

Now, out of sight and out of heart;

Oh Lord, how long?

I watch thee as thou art,

I will accept thy fainting heart, be strong.

“Lie still,” “be strong,” today; but, Lord, tomorrow,

What of tomorrow, Lord?

Shall there be rest from toil, be truce from sorrow,

Be living green upon the sward

Now but a barren grave to me,

Be joy for sorrow?—

Did I not die for thee?

Do I not live for thee? leave Me tomorrow. (“Dost Thou Not Care?”)

The poem dramatizes a conflict that underlies all efforts of patience: the conflict between trust and mistrust in the future. It may be often the case that it is best to give time a chance to either dispel or fulfill desires; but there may be some needs so immediate and pressing that the possibility of leaving them unsatisfied is too great to bear without special pleading, and there may be some pains that one endures only at the risk of regretting that one did nothing to dispel them, if there should be no final relief or reward for having abided them. So it is for Rossetti who, in this poem, fears that her life of devotional suffering will yield nothing but a barren grave. She refuses to be assuaged by God’s telling her to “be strong,” because he evades her doubt and questions when he does so. But she loses her poise only in the poem’s second stanza, after asking “who but I?”:

I fresh, I cheerful: worn with pain

Now, out of sight and out of heart;

Oh Lord, how long? (ll. 12-14)

The lines are turbulent due to their compression and the rapidity with which Rossetti switches from past to present to interrogation, eliding verbs and relying instead upon heavy and abrupt pointing (the colon after “cheerful,” the semi-colon after “heart”) to maintain order and clarity; it is a style more often found in Hopkins. Even as they allow Rossetti to compress her phrasing, the pauses have the additional effect, no less real because a consequence of the compression, of

disrupting the movement of the lines. And the abrupt line-break after “pain,” which defers our understanding “worn with pain” to refer to her present state, rather than to belong paradoxically with “fresh” and “cheerful,” is not required for clarity at all, but serves both to disrupt the rhythm and inspire momentary perplexity. The disrupted movement is an expression of her agony, but her agony is itself founded on her doubts as to whether she can endure for much longer, and the strange and unpredictable movements of her verse, the sudden pauses and turns, register and reflect her confusion as to the timing of God’s plan for her; not knowing his time, she struggles with her own timing. The lines present a failure to maintain the patient style with which the poem had begun; its undoing is the third line of the stanza, where she reminisces “when I was fresh and cheerful.” In looking backwards, she becomes aware not only of what she was as opposed to what she is, but to how long it has been since she was such; her consciousness of the length of her tribulation, and of time’s effects on her, provokes the fit of despondency that follows.

This is one of several poems in which Rossetti attains patience only by means of God’s voice checking and soothing hers; God’s voice in these poems is variously punctuated, sometimes lacking quotation marks, at other times with them. Here, uniquely for Rossetti, it is set in italics. As I discussed in the introduction, John Lennard suggests that we consider italics as a form of punctuation; I do not think it is helpful to think of them in this way on all occasions, but here it is perhaps helpful, since Rossetti’s complaint in each stanza is broken by God’s words, as she reaches out to him, and because those words are distinguished typographically from Rossetti’s own, as if they belonged to another plane or order of existence. Perhaps Rossetti did not wish to set God’s voice in quotation marks after each stanza because she wished to set his voice in quotation marks within her own words: the quotation marks would indicate that she

clutches and setting herself aloof from his words, picking them up and examining them, but taking hold of them nonetheless, whereas the italics indicate that the words are in no way in the same voice as her own. The italics, that is, are intended to dissuade us from believing that she merely ventriloquizes God, as she does in the final stanza, where her patience, or lack thereof, becomes the poem's focus; her impatience propels her final question in the poem, tumbling forward to the future, guessing at what might await her. There are only commas in the lines, and they quicken along with her expectations. But God's time is not accelerated as a result of her hope; His final words chasten her seizing on what is His alone: "*leave Me tomorrow.*" In the italics that those final words are spoken, we might feel that her words are being interrupted not only by another, but by another order of time, which remains alien, and, for the present, incommensurable with hers.

In "Why?", another dialogue poem in which God urges Rossetti to have patience, there is only a dash setting apart His voice from hers:

Lord, if I love Thee and Thou lovest me,
 Why need I any more these toilsome days;
 Why should I not run singing up Thy ways
Straight into heaven, to rest myself with Thee?
What need remains of death-pang yet to be,
 If all my soul is quickened in Thy praise;
 If all my heart loves Thee, what need the amaze,
Struggle and dimness of an agony?—
Bride whom I love, if thou too lovest Me,

Thou needs must choose My Likeness for thy dower:

So wilt thou toil in patience, and abide
Hungering and thirsting for that blessed hour
When I My Likeness shall behold in thee,

And thou therein shalt waken satisfied. (“Why?”)

We might hear Rossetti genuinely questioning, out of despair, or we might hear her playfully cajoling, trying to beguile God into seeing things her way; in the latter case, her questions are in some degree rhetorical. His answer undercuts her questioning entirely; she has missed the crucial point that love entails her patience and the ‘imitatio Christi’, and in so asking, she has shown herself to be lacking in it. I think, however, that Rossetti’s willingness to accommodate both voices within a single sonnet, and her decision to present God’s voice without quotation marks, indicates that in this poem, unlike in “Dost Thou Not Care?,” Rossetti has already accepted for herself, on her own terms, the need for patience. Because it is not set within quotation marks, we might understand God’s voice here as sounding within herself, and in a voice that is not foreign to her own; He might already behold His Likeness in her, in so far as she already has that within her which makes her conscious of the necessity for patience.

Although a result of their contrasting syntaxes, the difference in the styles of punctuation in the first eight lines, which she speaks, and the final six, which God speaks, contrasts the two attitudes towards time’s passing which she finds within herself. Her series of independent questions requires heavy pauses to separate one from another, but even within this series of questions we see that Rossetti could have deployed as many as four question marks, and instead uses only two. An obvious reason presents itself: as the indentation of the lines suggests, she

wished each quatrain to be bound as a single unit (though not always bound thus by full-stops); but she is then made to place semi-colons in the positions where question-marks might have been. It is not unheard of for Rossetti to decide against deploying question marks; they signaled an interrogative movement of the voice, but were not necessary to ensure that a particular sentence would, in fact, be understood as a question. In “What Would I Give?”, each stanza consists of a question, but the only question mark is in the poem’s title:

What would I give for a heart of flesh to warm me thro’,
Instead of this heart of stone ice-cold whatever I do;
Hard and cold and small, of all hearts the worst of all.

What would I give for words, if only words would come;
But now in its misery my spirit has fallen dumb:
O merry friends, go your way, I have never a word to say.

What would I give for tears, not smiles but scalding tears,
To wash the black mark clean, and to thaw the frost of years,
To wash the stain ingrain and to make me clean again.

(“What Would I Give?”)

What she gains without question marks is the determinate pause of the full-stops (in the first and third stanzas) and semi-colon (at the end of the first line of the second, where a question mark

could have been). A question-mark might have been used, in the nineteenth-century, in place of any of the stops; hence we find at the end of “Dost Thou Not Care” the lower-case “I” in “leave Me Tomorrow,” which follows a question mark that presumably is intended to stand-in for a semi-colon or colon. But question marks do not carry any certain temporal length, or any certain duration relative to the other stops. In “What Would I Give?” the absence of question-marks has two effects, as a consequence. First, by the end of the first and third stanzas, where a question-mark might have appeared, the absence of a question mark opens the possibility that the interrogative thrust of the sentence has been abandoned, and that, though she commenced by asking a question, her real interest lay in describing her heart, or her stained, chilled state. We are left to wonder whether she has abandoned the questions herself; perhaps she expects no reply. Second, Rossetti gains the known quantity of a pause associated with full-stops and the semi-colon. The poem is about all that Rossetti has weathered through time; “the frost of years” lies thick on her (recalling Wordsworth’s Ode), and perhaps she wanted time to encrust the poem as evidently as possible, and so chose these marks of punctuation which would indicate a measurable depth of “frost.”

The determinate length of the semi-colons in the first two quatrains of “Why?” similarly impinges temporally upon the lines, albeit with a touch of irony, with “Why need I any more these toilsome days” coming to a halt both at the line’s ending and at the pause. This first semi-colon might have, without altering the sense, been a comma instead:

Lord, if I love Thee and Thou lovest me,
Why need I any more these toilsome days,
Why should I not run singing up Thy ways

Straight into heaven, to rest myself with Thee?

Elsewhere, Rossetti separates two independent clauses by a comma rather than a semi-colon, so we should not think it to have been impossible to do the same here, especially when the thought in the second clause follows so closely from that in the first. But with the semi-colon instead of a comma, the poem slows, stuttering, as she reaches “toilsome days,” as she is not yet free from them, but still must reckon with their inertia. In the second instance, the irony is greater, since “If all my soul is quickened in Thy praise” does not move with any quickening life into the line that follows, but is hindered by the mark at line’s end. The point is not just that she is aware of time as she says these lines, but that temporal obstructions to their movement, in the punctuation marks, represent the passage of time against which she must accommodate her patience. However, when God’s voice preaches patience, the obstructions fade; time is not a hindrance for the patient soul. Once again, although the syntax of the final four lines does not invite heavy punctuation, it does not preclude it, and the comma at the end of the penultimate line might be imagined as a semi-colon. The re-punctuated lines:

So wilt thou toil in patience, and abide
Hungering and thirsting for that blessed hour
When I My Likeness shall behold in thee;
And thou therein shalt waken satisfied.

Had the line been punctuated thus, with the semi-colon in the place of the comma, we might have felt it justified by the lapse of time between the present and that hour in which she shall

“waken satisfied.” Since the mark of punctuation in the published poem is not a semi-colon, we might ask what the comma contributes: one answer is that it suggests that, in His perfect patience, and in the certainty of His divine plan, God does not feel Himself to be hindered by time’s passage, does not resist it, and so it intrudes only lightly into the movement of His verse. God, in preaching patience, is also the perfection of it.

Rossetti’s sonnets characteristically pause with a full-stop before the final sestet, rather than with a question mark as in “Why?” (though we can take that mark to act as a full-stop, syntactically). The break does not necessarily coincide with a turn in the direction of thought in her poems; Rossetti often places the full-stop at the point in order to divide the sonnet into two periods corresponding with octet and sestet. The full-stop arriving at the junction of sestet and octet is not only an indication of the sonnet’s organization, but a feature of the sonnet’s rhythm. We might compare the consistent shape of her sonnets to the patterned stanzas in other verses, in that she must reckon with, or noticeably deviate from, the pattern that she accepts for herself.¹²⁹ In “If Only,” the pattern of punctuation is more rigid than usual, with full-stops following each quatrain, as well as dividing the quatrains from the final sestet:

If I might only love my God and die!

But now He bids me love Him and live on,

¹²⁹ Of the 67 sonnets, all Petrarchan, in Rossetti’s first three collections (not including the sonnet-less collection of nursery rhymes, *Sing-Song*), 25 sonnets have full-stops after the first quatrain. We can say that although each quatrain is, by rhyme and indentation, a unit, punctuation is not usually used to bound that unit; though it does, about a third of the time, conspire with these other organization features. The full-stop before the final sestet, however, is very common. Of these sonnets, 60 have full-stops before the final sestets. Only three have full-stops within the final sestets.

Now when the bloom of all my life is gone,
The pleasant half of life has quite gone by.
My tree of hope is lopped that spread so high;
And I forget how Summer glowed and shone,
While Autumn grips me with its fingers wan,
And frets me with its fitful windy sigh.
When Autumn passes then must Winter numb,
And Winter may not pass a weary while.
But when it passes Spring shall flower again:
And in that Spring who weepeth now shall smile,
Yea, they shall wax who now are on the wane,
Yea, they shall sing for love when Christ shall come. (“If Only”)

The long beats of the full-stops keep the time of the poem’s rhyme scheme with a formal predictability commensurate to the passing of the seasons, which Rossetti describes with resigned dread until the final four lines. Between the full-stops, within the periods, there are other heavy marks, such as the semi-colon following “high” and colon after “again.” But the mark that takes the chief significance is the fourth full-stop, following “while,” two lines into the final sestet. The rhyme scheme maintains the final sestet as a group, but the full-stop after “while” denies the sestet the unity that it finds in most other Rossetti sonnets, where it is a single period. Altering the full-stop to a colon would have made it a single period. As it is punctuated, though, the commencement of the final movement of the poem, its final period, is delayed: it normally would have begun two lines earlier, where Rossetti set her full-stop after “windy sigh,”

as if she were prepared to commence her final period. Here, though, the final six-line period is broken because Rossetti wants a full-stop before the final four lines, and this because the final four lines moves to a new season, Spring, i.e., Resurrection, and a new attitude towards time, one of hope and affirmation; the long duration of the full-stop registers the shift of seasons. But this is not really an explanation because we might then wonder why Rossetti did not instead take all of the final six lines for singing the glories of Spring. The reason, I suspect, is that we are to feel that the seasons (and stages of God's plan, to which they correspond) cannot be neatly reconciled with the time-keeping of the sonnet's conventional pauses, that although Spring does arrive, and is celebrated, Winter has already extended its stay beyond the order established by the normal, or ideal, pattern of punctuation. That normal—and, for Rossetti, desired—pattern of full-stops represents her way of ordering time, which does not fit with the sonnet's subject matter: the timing of God's plan. Spring might not arrive too late, but it arrives later than Rossetti would have it arrive, discordant with her anticipation of time's progress, testing her patience beyond its natural limits.

In "Where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt," the full-stop that demarcates the final sestet divides a dependent clause from its subject, and follows no syntactical demand:

Nerve us with patience, Lord, to toil or rest,
 Toiling at rest on our allotted level;
 Unsnared, unscared by world or flesh or devil,
Fulfilling the good Will of Thy behest:
 Not careful here to hoard, not here to revel;
But waiting for our treasure and our zest

Beyond the fading splendour of the west,
Beyond this deathstruck life and deathlier evil.
Not with the sparrow building here a house:
But with the swallow tabernacling so
As still to poise alert to rise and go
On eager wings with wing-outspeeding wills
Beyond earth's gourds and past her almond boughs,
Past utmost bound of the everlasting hills.

(“Where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt”)

“Nerve us with patience” corrects those who would confuse patience with passivity. Patience here is the capacity or conditioning for a particular sort of action: “toil or rest,” both of which, in this poem, come to the same thing. “Toiling at rest on our allotted level” might mean either nerve us to toil, as we are at rest on our allotted level, which we should toil to accept for now, or it might mean, nerve us to toil in order to achieve rest, since rest is itself a form of toil, requiring exertions. The various alternatives should be held in mind at once: we are to toil to accept ourselves as being at rest on this level, at least for now, and also toil in order to achieve a patient rest, because we know that there is a better place to be, which is denied us for now. “Rest” because we are to be at peace with God’s plan, while we wait. The poem itself both toils and remains at rest. The verbs, mostly in present continuous, are gerundives, verbal adjectives, describing the subjects as active creatures, but not functioning as proper verbs of action. They “poise alert to rise and go,” without actually going. Despite all of the activity of the verbal

adjectives, despite all of the toiling of human life, neither the poem nor humans can move to where we most would want to move: to God's Kingdom. We toil to stay at rest because no matter the amount of human toil, or earthly activity, brings us there. The poem does not come to the potentially definitive rest of a full-stop until its eighth line. The full-stop is conventional for Rossetti but what follows is syntactically continuous with what proceeds. The full-stop is a convention that Rossetti overleaps in the sonnet; the first octet carries on as if no disruption were felt, another boundary which she imagines herself moving beyond. But the nature of that disruption is temporal as well as syntactical: one reason that it surprises us in light of the syntax, which is continuous across the full-stop, is that we would have expected a mark of lesser duration. The long beat of the full-stop responds to the solemn finality of "this deathstruck life and deathlier evil"; life, being "deathstruck," does come to a close, its time is broken, and the full-stop acknowledges this. By persevering in the forward progress of the sentence through the full-stop, Rossetti dramatizes her will to look past "deathstruck life and deathlier evil," a will that has been nerved by patience that will not be defeated or deterred by the sense of an ending or foreboding accompanying them. The sonnet implores God for the strength to wait and look beyond the false end of death, and as imploring him demonstrates that the strength (of patience) she seeks.

To be patient waiting for God is to be at rest knowing that one is not permanently put to rest—knowing that there is more, and better to come—and this knowledge braces Rossetti in her patience. But her present patience for the future is dependent also upon a reconciliation with the past. To be at rest waiting also means not writhing in regret. Yet regret, like impatience, cannot be simply excluded or ignored from life or art but must, to echo Eric Griffiths, be overcome through repeated rehearsals; she does not write off the errors, failures and deficiencies of her

past, but acknowledges them. “They Desire A Better Country,” a three part sonnet-series, follows the arc of Rossetti’s gaze from past to future, subduing both regret and impatience, in turn. The poem’s three parts come to terms with, respectively, the speaker’s past, present and future. The title is taken from Hebrews 11:16: “But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly, wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.” Rossetti illuminates the significance of the passage in her prose work, *Seek and Find*:

Watching, waiting, looking forward and upward, in such an attitude did the saints of the elder dispensation serve God. Prophets and kings desired to see things they saw not, and to hear things they heard not (St. Luke x. 24): their eye was not satisfied with seeing, nor their ear filled with hearing (Eccles. i. 8). Those who were persuaded of the promises received them not then and there (Heb. xi. 13), but received only some representation of them or at the utmost some foretaste of them (see St. John viii. 56): many entered the Holy Land and feasted on its milk and honey, who hungering and thirsting with a hunger and thirst which no earthly dainties could appease, still desired a better country, that is, a heavenly (Heb. xi. 16), still craved for the wine and milk which are priceless (Is. lv. I). If no trumpet from without, yet ever and anon an alarm from within, renewed the summons, “Arise ye, and depart; for this is not your rest” (Mic. ii. 10).¹³⁰

For Rossetti, then, the passage from Hebrews speaks to what it means to not feel at rest, as Saints, prophets, kings and the chosen people did not feel at rest: not rushing towards the future, but conscious that it will bring due rewards which the present lacks, and so conscious also that

¹³⁰ Rossetti, *Seek and Find*, 144-145.

the present is not their time. Rossetti had written of “saintly endurance,” and this passage allows us to see that she may have had in mind not only a saintly capacity to endure, but a capacity to endure as a saint—in so far as saints endure the deprivations and barrenness of the present in the belief, even if not absolutely certain, of future reward, which those who are not saints do not necessarily know will be theirs to receive. The poem, however, does not recount the lives of the saints, kings, prophets or Jews. Instead, it is founded, as we shall see, on a reticently presented personal affair, either Rossetti’s own, or else one that may have been her own.

I would not if I could undo my past,
 Tho’ for its sake my future is a blank;
 My past for which I have myself to thank,
For all its faults and follies first and last.
I would not cast anew the lot once cast,
 Or launch a second ship for one that sank,
 Or drug with sweets the bitterness I drank,
Or break by feasting my perpetual fast.
I would not if I could: for much more dear
 Is one remembrance than a hundred joys,
 More than a thousand hopes in jubilee;
Dearer the music of one tearful voice
 That unforgotten calls and calls to me,
“Follow me here, rise up, and follow here.”

(“They Desire a Better Country,” I)

The chief mystery of the poem is who speaks the final line, which is repeated also in the third sonnet. The language echoes both Christ’s call to the disciples and an angel’s call to Peter, but the typography casts doubt on whether it is Christ. Generally, where He speaks in Rossetti’s poetry, the personal pronouns are capitalized; that “me” is not here makes it highly unlikely that Christ speaks. Although Rossetti uses the typology of the Jews wandering in the desert, and alludes to Christ’s call to his disciples, the poem is about her own past (or the past of whatever human voice we posit), about a loss of a particular loved one, and about the promise that they will be reunited. We might be tempted to say that the poem is secular, but this would be too narrow a view, not only because the allusions to the Bible are there, but because for Rossetti such a distinction would be meaningless. Rossetti does not draw on the Bible in order to invest the secular with an aura of the sacred, or to drape it in a sacred cloak, but because her faith gives her a means for understanding her personal suffering, losses, and errors, and the promise of a future happiness which redeems what has mattered to her in her own life. It is unlike Rossetti to look towards the future, its afterlife and redemption, in the hopes of finding there an earthly creature, rather than the Lord, and it shows that she does not deny worldly interests, but only denies us their value in this world; the value of what we cherish in this life will be realized and attained in the next.

The story behind the poem must run something like: someone with whom Rossetti was deeply attached was lost from her once, likely through some error of her own, and died soon after; she had failed to recognize at the time the happiness this person promised her, but such a recognition would have made for less happiness than the future happiness this person offers

when calling out. She first heard the voice calling out in the midst of her barren past—it is “one remembrance”—and, because she feels that the person would not have called to her had it not been for the barrenness, she refuses to regret it; because she lives only for the person alone, she no longer wants to break her fast; to do so would perhaps be unfaithful to this person, perhaps cause her to cease hearing the voice. She does not specify the gender, as she is not in the poems about Christ where she is Bride, He groom, and where her feminine virtues and tone of supplication are appreciated as the proper for addressing the Lord; in this poem, because it is not about Christ, she does not want the promise of future happiness to be in the least sexual or carnal, but rather a platonic meeting of two bodiless souls.

Rossetti would have been sufficiently wary of the sin of pride to guard against suggesting that she was as deserving of future reward as saints, kings, prophets, or the chosen; but the alignment of the poem with the passage from Hebrews, and Christ’s words to his disciple, cannot help but to suggest that the speaker of the poem elevates herself to some sort of special status. We should ask on what grounds she might do so. It may be that she feels justified in making the implicit comparison on account of the intensity and purity of her faith, but I think that there is a specific form of behavior which she has in mind, too. In one respect the speaker has proven herself saintly: that is in her patience in enduring her earthly loss, and in trusting that her God will reward her with recompense in heaven. It is not only that patience is exemplified by the saints, but that exhibiting and exemplifying patience may allow one to attain a status that, while not saintly, is nonetheless holy. One aim of this first sonnet in the series, as she looks backward at her past, is for Rossetti to embody in her writing the virtue which sanctifies her life. And one way that she does so is by the pattern of punctuation in it. The pattern of full-stops, in particular, is exemplary of Rossetti sonnets; it is her ideal pattern from which she deviates on various

occasions, as we have seen elsewhere and as we will see in the latter two sonnets in the series. Full-stops mark both quatrains and the second of these separates the initial octet from the final sestet, which in turn moves without interruption by a full-stop, but which is divided evenly in two by a semi-colon. We can feel in the conventional rhythm, in the full-stops coinciding with the organization of the poem's rhyme scheme (and of its typographical layout on the page, in the indentation of its lines), Rossetti's steady mastery of the burden of past time: she has accepted her losses, and sets herself in accord with the years that have brought her the pain of loneliness.

The effect of the punctuation is a matter not only of comparison with Rossetti's sonnets elsewhere, but with the other sonnets in the series. The second sonnet is as reticent as the first in its allusions to the personal, shrouding them in allegory:

What seekest thou, far in the unknown land?

In hope I follow joy gone on before;

In hope and fear persistent more and more,

As the dry desert lengthens out its sand.

Whilst day and night I carry in my hand

The golden key to ope the golden door

Of golden home; yet mine eye weepeth sore,

For long the journey is that makes no stand.

And who is this that veiled doth walk with thee?

Lo, this is Love that walketh at my right;

One exile holds us both, and we are bound

To selfsame home-joys in the land of light.

Weeping thou walkest with him; weepeth he?

Some sobbing weep, some weep and make no sound.

(“They Desire a Better Country,” II)

The allegorical puzzle turns on Love, which is exiled with Rossetti—and so she is not without Love, but neither Love nor she dwell in their proper homes. Love is in exile with her, because she is in exile from her beloved; neither she nor love can be said to be at home without that person. The poem is punctuated by questions—which are themselves set apart by full-stops. There is one additional full-stop in the poem, after the first quatrain, so that it is punctuated with regularity at the expected breaks of quatrains and sestet. However, it is punctuated also with a full-stop before the question in the penultimate line, such that the final question and response form a sort of couplet. We can therefore see the poem as being tied tightly together by various forms of organization: the rhyme scheme of quatrains and sestet, the questions marking of an octet from a quatrain and a final couplet, and full-stops setting apart three quatrains and a final couplet. These do not clash with one another, but interweave to fortify and tighten the organization of the poem; so taut an organization is brought about by her alert self-scrutiny, as the rhyme scheme is cross-girded by her questions. The questions are not in quotation marks, unlike the voice in the final line of the first sonnet (and third); instead they are indistinguishable from her voice, and so represent her ventriloquizing a third-person interrogation of herself. The questions, and her responses, are focused intently on the present: where she wanders, who she is with, whether he weeps. It is in stark contrast with the reverie of the sonnet that follows, but before discussing that poem, I want to draw attention to the single mark of punctuation in the

second sonnet that seems to me to have a bearing on how she experiences time in the present that she describes. The semi-colon in the seventh line following “golden home” prefaces the word “yet.” Because we are accustomed to find a semi-colon before a conjunction introducing an independent or dependent clause, we might be tempted to understand “yet” as a conjunction. The trouble is that, if we do so, the sentence becomes incomprehensible as a grammatical whole. We would have to take “whilst...golden home” to belong with “as the dry desert lengthens out its sand,” with a full-stop strangely coming between the clauses. I do not deny that the poem pulls us to read in this way, and in doing so we might take the full-stop as registering the time in which the desert lengthens its sand. We can make sense of the second sentence (beginning “Whilst day...”) as an independent grammatical entity only if we take “yet” to mean “still,” so that she is saying “whilst day and night I carry in my hand...still mine eyes weepeth.” The semi-colon seems so long a pause because we are used to no pause greater than a comma intruding in a sentence prior to the introduction of its main subject and verb, in this case are “mine eyes” and “weepeth.” In other words, we might expect the lines to be punctuated as follows:

Whilst day and night I carry in my hand
The golden key to ope the golden door
Of golden home, yet mine eye weepeth sore,
For long the journey is that makes no stand.

The sense of “yet” is clarified by this punctuation, but Rossetti here sacrifices clarity for the jolt that the semi-colon provides. She had been ensnared by the seductive powers of her vision of “The golden key to ope the golden door| Of golden home,” the word “golden” hypnotically

repeated; and the unexpectedly strong, and disorienting, semi-colon punctures her trance, reminding her the “long” time separating her from that home.

In the final sonnet, she is granted a vision of her future happiness; that she has such a vision is perhaps sufficient incentive or her continuing patience, and it is also a consequence—a reward—of the patience she has already shown. There is a chance that the “golden walls of home” that she sees, fleetingly, in the sonnet, are a mirage; but such is the nature of faith that the signs or glimpses of the promised end can never be trusted entirely. After the tensed poise of the first two sonnets, in this third, where the promise of the future seems to spring up immediately before her, Rossetti springs forward with impatience. Having, in the first two sonnets, established a pattern of full-stops following the first two quatrains, and an additional full-stop separating these quatrains from the sestet, in the third sonnet, she deploys a full-stop only at the end of the last line:

A dimness of a glory glimmers here
Thro' veils and distance from the space remote,
A faintest far vibration of a note
Reaches to us and seems to bring us near;
Causing our face to glow with braver cheer,
Making the serried mist to stand afloat,
Subduing languor with an antidote,
And strengthening love almost to cast out fear:
Till for one moment golden city walls
Rise looming on us, golden walls of home,

Light of our eyes until the darkness falls;
Then thro' the outer darkness burdensome
I hear again the tender voice that calls,
"Follow me hither, follow, rise, and come."

("They Desire a Better Country," III)

The full-stop at the end of the first quatrain has been mitigated to a semi-colon; that at the end of the second quatrain a colon, so that the sestet is not divided from what precedes. In the case of the first semi-colon, at the end of the first quatrain, the syntax is such that a full-stop would have been unusual. In the case of the colon at the end of the eighth line, we can notice both that Rossetti has, in a highly unusual choice, decided not to separate the initial octet from the final sestet with a full-stop—a full-stop here could not have been justified by syntax—but also that the colon might have been a still lighter mark; a comma or semi-colon might have been in its place. It is conceivable, and I think probable, that Rossetti set a colon here because she wanted to break the pattern established in the earlier sonnets, and in sonnets elsewhere, while nonetheless providing the most sustained pause in this poem, so as to acknowledge the division between octet and sestet, and also to register that at this point of the poem, the awareness of time is heightened. We have, therefore, two considerations: the colon in relation to the punctuation pattern of other sonnets, and the colon in relation to the other stops that might have been used in its place. On the one hand, this third sonnet moves more rapidly, its rhythm less disturbed by long pauses in comparison with the other sonnets; her expectations move with fewer hindrances through its fourteen lines to the voice of her beloved calling her, the jubilation gaining momentum from the

first far off note is heard. After the layered organization of the second, the release is all the greater, corresponding with the relief of happiness at an intuited sign of the final rest that has been promised. But on the other hand, we are to feel the strong delay of the colon before “till” is reached. The sound of the note that has heralded the vision has not cast out fear entirely. There remains room for fear that this is not real, that it will never come to pass, and in the duration of the colon before the vision fully materializes in the sight of the golden home, her fear is registered, a fear of time’s failure to realize its promise. Yet despite the weight of this one colon, in general the punctuation of this poem is lighter than the earlier sonnets: the pattern has been disrupted, not because Rossetti is uneasy with time, but because she barely registers time’s passage, feeling no need, with the promise of the future imminent before her, to reconcile herself to years of waiting.

Her ecstasy is evident also in the diction and imagery of the poem. These are, by Rossetti’s standards, abstract, even eddying. “A dimness of a glory glimmers” resembles Tennysonian myopia by “dimness”, though the word “glimmers” recalls one of Wordsworth’s favorites, the promissory “gleam”; it is in the Romantic tradition of indefinable, otherworldly mystical power. The image works in several directions: “dimness” and “glimmers” are opposed semantically, but joined phonetically by the humming m’s, “glory” is an abstraction that cannot be obviously either dim or glimmering, and it too is joined to “glimmers” alliteratively. “Veils” and “distance” denote two types of separation, one that of material barriers, the other of distance and time, and yet they are joined in the line, as if equated. “The space remote” has a peculiar article, “the,” suggesting it is a particular, identifiable and identifiably vacant space, not space in general; she can identify the space because it is where God lives, or else because it is the space they will both occupy by His side. “Our face” is singular and plural at once; but their eventual

consummation anticipated, though not realized, since the note only “seems to bring” them near. The “faintest far off vibration of a note” works on them mysteriously: it may be that its vibrations touch their nerves, and stirs them to move towards one another; it may be that the note induces the reverie in which they share in the same dream. She might be saying that the note reaches her alone and brings on the fantasy of their being joined, or it may be that she believes that the note reaches both of them at once, in which case she makes a leap of faith; she has no way of knowing, but treats it as a certainty in opposition to “seems,” such that she admits their togetherness to be illusory, but their shared experience of the note to be genuine, so that they participate in the illusion of togetherness simultaneously. “Serried” to describe the mist, introduces, without development, a military association; the word is in Milton, but the application so far afield from the field of battle is nonetheless disorienting momentarily. Mist is already floating, so it is surprising to see it being caused to “stand afloat,” though perhaps the oddity of “stand” should be taken as a clue that Rossetti means to emphasize that word, suggesting that the mist comes to a standstill while afloat, like a regiment of airy soldiers standing at attention at the sounding of a bugle before a battle. “Antidote” has a precedent use in Rossetti’s ancestor in the plain devotional style, Herbert, but here its chemical connotations clash with the military sense of “subdued,” as if the note has both caused the mist to stand at attention and defeated her languor; “antidote” shifts perspective suddenly such that “languor” is instead a poison. “Light of our eyes” is ambiguous, meaning both that the “golden walls” lend light to their eyes, an outer light by which they can finally see one another, and also that they are to be identified with a light emanating from their eyes, such that they are the source of the vision. “Until the darkness falls” is likewise ambiguous: it might mean the golden walls will be lit up until a final, spiritual darkness falls (perhaps this bliss they imagine will last only until God’s

final judgment), or that they will last only until her death (since it is a vision that depends upon her living in hope), or that they will last only until their love goes dim (never, presumably, and so the phrase is defiant against time). The next line, however, resolves the sense: she sees the golden home only momentarily, after which she is left in the “burdensome outer dark” of her ordinary life. The word “outer” suggests that, although the vision no longer exists before her, there is an inner light which she still possesses. Recall *Seek and Find* where Rossetti had written that “no trumpet from without, yet ever and anon an alarm from within, renewed the summons, ‘Arise ye, and depart; for this is not your rest’ (Mic. ii. 10).” In the third sonnet, she had heard a “trumpet from without,” but in its absence there is still this “alarm from within,” the “tender” voice, with gratitude in the word “tender” for the defense it offers against the burdensome dark. Rossetti might have set a full-stop in the place of the semi-colon “falls,” or a colon, since what follows is an independent clause, and since, as the vision fades, she finds herself once more in the desert of years, plodding forward. A full-stop here would have disrupted the ideal punctuation pattern of the sonnet (since it would come in the middle of the final sestet) as her reverie fails and falls; a colon would at least have registered a consciousness of time commensurate with the final moments of anticipation preceding “till,” such that the vision would fade away with the same rhythmic ripple with which it arrived. Her decision to deploy a semi-colon instead can be understood as a subtle statement: that although the vision has been lost, she is guarded against the shock of this reinstatement of earthly time either by what she has seen, or else by the voice that remains within her.

The body of Rossetti’s poetic work is extensive, and, in comparison with many of her most esteemed contemporaries, surprisingly consistent; and across the work, beyond even the first few volumes from which I have drawn most of my examples, we find Rossetti returning

again and again to the struggle with, and struggle for, patience. Her “incessant rehearsals” continued almost until her death, testifying to her capacity to remain patient at the very least with the struggle itself, as it is repeatedly recast, as she repeatedly reconciles the timing of her words—their rhythms, meters, and pauses—to God’s time, only to find that she and it are, once more, irreconcilable except for the short stays that her poetry records and attains. Likely they were sufficient for her to go on seeking yet more, in hopes of a pause of permanent patience, or a permanent rest which would ask no patience of her.

Conclusion

I have pursued the implications of punctuation's temporal character in the work of three poets who imagine human endurance at the extreme limits. I would like to end by considering two areas of critical work which could follow from my dissertation.

In one area, critics of nineteenth-century literature can and should continue to investigate punctuation as a resource of poetic expression, and also as a resource available to prose authors. Some authors in the nineteenth century might be better served by a sustained analysis of punctuation than others. From my reading, I would point to Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Carlyle, Dickens, Eliot, Tennyson, Robert Browning, William Barnes, Christina G. Rossetti, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Hopkins. But there is no reason not to look with an open mind upon all marks, in any work; considering punctuation as a worthy feature of critical analysis can serve to broaden and enrich the conversations that we have as critics. The temporal aspect of punctuation need not figure centrally in a discussion of punctuation; nor, obviously, need further critical investigation occur at the expense of investigation into broader conceptual or further formal concerns. But punctuation deserves critical engagement that asks what it, uniquely among other formal properties, affords authors as they seek to marshal and choreograph their words on the page, such that, even if punctuation is a feature of a poem or novel noted in passing, it should be given due consideration as more than a dramatic pause serving to emphasize a more significant aspect of sense or sound found elsewhere—though admittedly, it might do this also.

Where are critics to begin as they investigate punctuation as a creative resource? I would point them to a principle I have already noted in my introduction, one articulated by Christopher

Ricks: “All punctuation,” Ricks observes, “is at once a uniting and a separating. Like mortar, it holds bricks together and holds them apart.”¹³¹ Discontinuity and continuity; unity and division; the one and the many: punctuation has a purchase on such lofty and abstract concerns as these. Not that a great many poets will address these exact concerns, at a level of such generality, but in their particular preoccupations, it is not difficult to imagine how these concerns might manifest themselves. For instance, in Wordsworth’s presentation of the French Revolution in Books IX and X of *The Prelude*, the continuities and divisions between past and present, public life and personal life, history and mythology, and recorded and suppressed history press upon his imagination and consciousness. One way that he registers these continuities and discontinuities is by way of organizing clauses into periodic units, divided by full-stops, or else by denying clauses periodic unity, or else by adjusting the marks dividing clauses and phrases within periods. As he revised the poem over time, some of these marks were altered. As twentieth-century editors re-punctuated the poem, the marks were altered still further. These alterations are not cosmetic or superficial; they affect the intelligence of the work itself, differently organizing and relating the temporal frames that jostle alongside and are stacked atop one another in the poem.

Because I have, through the dissertation, offered readings of punctuation in poetry, I will turn away from Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and examine instead the punctuation in a passage of nineteenth-century prose, in order to demonstrate how punctuation might be analyzed without emphasizing its temporal character. I offer a reading of a passage that I have already quoted in the introduction, from George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. Although punctuation of Eliot’s manuscripts was altered by her publishers, in her study of Eliot’s syntax examined, Melissa Raines concludes, after examination of the manuscripts, that “quite often, George Eliot herself had a hand in

¹³¹ Ricks, *Force*, 326.

creating the more formal punctuation in later stages of revision, and that such changes were not always mandates based on the publishing house style.”¹³² But whether or not a particular punctuation mark is authorial or not, we can accept its contribution to the intelligence of a work, whether in verse or prose. The following passage arrives after Lydgate has been to tell Casaubon that he is uncertain how much longer he has to live; on his departure, Dorothea approaches Casaubon in the garden, eager to comfort him should he wish it. He does not:

Dorothea had been aware when Lydgate had ridden away, and she had stepped into the garden, with the impulse to go at once to her husband. But she hesitated, fearing to offend him by obtruding herself; for her ardour, continually repulsed, served, with her intense memory, to heighten her dread, as thwarted energy subsides into a shudder; and she wandered slowly round the nearer clumps of trees until she saw him advancing. Then she went towards him, and might have represented a heaven-sent angel coming with a promise that the short hours remaining should yet be filled with that faithful love which clings the closer to a comprehended grief. His glance in reply to hers was so chill that she felt her timidity increased; yet she turned and passed her hand through his arm.¹³³

The paragraph exemplifies Eliot’s capacity to expose the dynamic inner action accompanying hesitation, doubt and immobility; Dorothea strains against her outward passivity and stasis, and so proves the inertia which she must overcome, the forces to which she is subjected. The single sentence from “But she hesitated” to “she saw him advancing” is an achievement of punctuation

¹³² Raines, viii.

¹³³ George Eliot, 415.

as well as prose style. First, there is the full-stop separating her initial “impulse,” perhaps less conscious than an intention, living more along the pulses, from her hesitation; it represents on the page the barrier, an inexplicable barrier too subtle even for Eliot’s microscopic chronicle of the life of the nerves, between impulse and action. Then there is the structure of the sentence that follows the full-stop, divided into three parts, three cola, each a movement of mind, heart, and body. To feel the effect of the sentence as it is written we need to imagine had it been otherwise both in its punctuated organization and in its content. First, consider the punctuation, and note how differently the clauses and phrases would move if they were not organized as a single sentence:

But she hesitated, fearing to offend him by obtruding herself; for her ardour, continually repulsed, served, with her intense memory, to heighten her dread, as thwarted energy subsides into a shudder. And she wandered slowly round the nearer clumps of trees until she saw him advancing.

Or:

But she hesitated, fearing to offend him by obtruding herself, for her ardour, continually repulsed, served, with her intense memory, to heighten her dread, as thwarted energy subsides into a shudder; and she wandered slowly round the nearer clumps of trees until she saw him advancing.

As it is actually punctuated, and as the former of these examples is not, Eliot insists on the continuity between Dorothea's hesitation, her inner ardor, memory and dread, and her action of wandering. We are to see "and she wandered" as issuing from her "shudder." In the latter example, I have removed the semi-colon between "herself" and "for her ardour." Admittedly, this makes the first part of the sentence somewhat knotty, but it also deprives the sentence of its three distinct and equally weighted subjects: her conscious, mental attitude of fear, her abstract inner energies, and the waiting, the reference to the "clumps of trees" placing her once more in the outward environment she shares with Causabon, the word "nearer" a physical emblem of the emotional distance between them. Even with a semi-colon preceding "for her ardour," the middle portion of the sentence is skein of abstraction and verbs, which makes a powerful contrast with the simplicity of the adjacent clauses. There is, the sentence's structure seems to be saying, hesitation and fear on the one hand, and wandering slowly and waiting on the other—and there is also much between. We might imagine many twentieth-century realists writing a sentence as follows: "But she hesitated, fearing to offend him by obtruding herself; and she wandered slowly round the nearer clumps of trees until she saw him advancing." Such a sentence is not without power, but it is without the daring quality of Eliot's prose, daring because it is nourished by psychological abstractions which it presents as agents and objects as concrete as those against which Dorothea might stub a toe: "for her ardour, continually repulsed, served, with her intense memory, to heighten her dread, as thwarted energy subsides into a shudder." For Eliot, striving to understand and present Dorothea's experience means understanding and presenting the struggles of psychic energies that accompany fear, hesitation and wandering. This central portion of the sentence embodies the action in stasis in its syntactic structure: the subject "ardor" is divided from the passive verb "served" by a verbal clause which immediately deprives the

passage of forward motion just as the verb “repulsed” deprives “ardour” of success. “Heighten her dread” is perversely equated with “subsides into a shudder,” the normally opposing motions of “heighten” and “subsides” carrying no fixed, meaningful orientations in the space of her inner chaos. The force of the punctuation in the passage does not depend upon the temporal quality of the punctuation, but derives from its capacity to unite clauses into a period, and to divide them from one another within that period. Early in the novel, Mrs. Cadwallader quips that “somebody put a drop” of Mr. Causabon’s blood “under a magnifying-glass, and it was all semi-colons and parentheses.”¹³⁴ While punctuation marks may be poor stuff for sustaining human life, they are not to be disparaged as poor stuff for helping to sustain a work of fiction; Mrs. Cadwallader’s quip, sharpened on the dull whetstone of her mind, should not discourage, but should incite, critics to see how punctuation may serve to animate prose, not only in Eliot’s novel, but in the novels of her contemporaries.

In another direction, my work points towards a preoccupation of nineteenth-century literature that, though contiguous with many others, should not be confused with them: the extremes of human endurance. As a matter for imaginative engagement, the limits of human endurance is taken up by not only Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Christina G. Rossetti, but by Byron, in the ship-wreck stanzas of *Don Juan*, and perhaps the war cantos, by Clare in his late poetry of mental duress and dissolution, and by Hopkins. I imagine several lines of inquiry which might lead us to better understand how and why these authors struggle to make something of the limits of human endurance. First, there is a line of inquiry into the “states of endurance.” This turns on the question of what states of being those at the limits of human endurance abut

¹³⁴ George Eliot, 69.

against. The extremes of endurance in the works of these poets threaten to subsume individuals to categories of the natural world (whether animal or mineral), the divine, or the savage. How these poets gesture towards and play between these categories in their language, and how do they locate individuals in relation to them. What, given the context of the authors, were the significances of these categories? How does human life at the limits of endurance demarcate them? How do those individuals at the extreme of endurance prove themselves both excepted from, and included within, these categories? Second, there is a line of inquiry into the “verbs of endurance.” Here, there is the question of whether the extreme of endurance means living, or persisting, or thriving, or surviving? What verbs are used to describe the activities of those for whom to do everything is near to doing nothing? How is this language deployed in contemporary discourse? Must these authors redeem the language in order to describe and imagine their test-cases? In a theoretically inflected tone, we might ask, “what are the activities of the bare life?” Third, there is a line of inquiry into the “economy of endurance.” Just how much is needed for human life to persist, be it a quantity of food, love, energy? Scarcity, frugality, and thrift become sources and occasions for anxiety and conflict in public discourse in the century, with the rise of political economy, with fears of the national debt, with new means of measurement that arose simultaneous to industrial production, and with a new awareness of a massive population that might not have “enough” to survive. And the question is also a perpetual one, a question prompted by Lear’s cry of “reason not the need.” How does one reason the needs of human life? Should one reason the barest needs? For these authors words relating to sufficiency, excess, necessity, scarcity become actors in the dramas of reason within poetry. Fourth, there is a line of inquiry into “Aging and Endurance.” How do the extremes of human endurance differ for the very young and very old? How does extreme endurance upset the

categories of age that existed in the nineteenth-century? How does it help to demarcate those categories? Does extreme endurance displace an individual from these accepted categories, or admit an individual into more than one category? In answering these questions, punctuation would not fall by the wayside, but it would be only one in a bundle of formal properties by which the drama of reason would be choreographed, as works engage with these questions, and with their underlying concerns.

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