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STORY

1

These days everybody knows a couple of verse narratives, maybe by heart; but such acquaintance has little effect on our default assumption, inherited as we shall see from the last Victorians, that real storytelling gets done in prose while real poetry does something else. And yet once upon a time – indeed, for nearly the entire cultural history we have means of reconstructing – narrative and poetry were made for each other. Within the oral culture of archaic society, verse served both as a preservative technology and as an ornament dignifying those records whose importance justified elaborate safekeeping. Equipped to survive the memory of a single individual or generation by especially marked verbal practices (a prosody), such records moreover tended to assume a narrative form. Elder societies tallied the knowledge they prized by telling it over; to account for a momentous phenomenon in natural or tribal history was to recount it in the designedly memorable, stepwise shape of myth, ritual, recipe. Thus in primary epics, whether orally or scribally recorded, a practical knowledge-how (to slay, to

plant, to worship) consorts with a commemorative knowledge-that (Odysseus prevailed, Prometheus transgressed, Moses persisted), the ensemble being delivered in a narrative package distinctively clothed in measured language.

By the time of classical Rome and Alexandria, literacy had taught sophisticated poets to regard continuous major narrative as not an obligation but an option; and the same went for the stories they opted to retail. Nevertheless, the story poems Virgil and Ovid wrote formed a binding tradition within the scribal culture of medieval Latinity. In emergent vernaculars too the predominant poetic kinds remained firmly narrative – ballad, lay, romance – and the crowning genius of Dante and Chaucer was devoted to making narrative new. It was at the waning of the Middle Ages that major narrative began its epochal secession from verse into prose, a medium that asserted new bragging rights as the Renaissance ripened across Boccaccio and Rabelais towards Cervantes. The brisk arrival of the new fictional prose on one hand sent poets elsewhere, notably to cultivate subjectivities of unprecedented complexity in lyric forms like the sonnet. On the other hand, prose's new inroads on the realms of fiction let poets from Ariosto to Spenser lay afresh the classical poets' millennial wager on artfully learned verse as the vehicle of choice for a plot keyed to a *translatio imperii* that was now coursing west by northwest.

It was poems, not novels, that played for these high cultural stakes; novels had in hand the different game of subverting generic decorum, breaking the rules of genre in the name of a lower but truer mimesis of the world and the human condition than the venerable rules permitted. Arguably one such rule was the monopoly on epistemological authority that narrative had traditionally enjoyed as the eldest and surest way of knowing. In lieu of that ancient accountancy, prose fiction with its burly inventories and farcical overturnings breathed a curiosity about the things of this life, and an accompanying empiricist skepticism as to ideas about things, that in alliance with science's new inductive method bid fair to sweep the seventeenth century before it. In the face of these winds of change, Milton's breathtaking reclamation of poetry for the universal human story was the daring last stand of a forfeit dispensation. Within a couple of generations Dryden and Pope, although they cherished that dispensation dearly, were devoting their talents to verse polemics and essays: satiric and didactic modes of dazzling brilliance, which sharpened story to a burin's point for the scoring of a caricature or illustration of an aphorism. The best eighteenth-century verse being dedicated to Augustan controversy or Sensibility discursiveness, properly narrative energy flowed through prose channels into fiction and historiography. The cultural place once enjoyed by *Paradise Lost* was occupied a century later by the magisterial prose of

Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, with its sardonic supersession of all Milton had stood for: Christ's religion as the culture-summing expression of human potential, and verse's grandeur as the right medium in which to sing so lofty a theme.

2

With the Romantic poets it was another story, a story to which Victorian verse narrative forms a long and eventful sequel. We should remember that 'Romanticism' denotes, as an -ism, not just a revival of 'romance' (extended narrative) but a revival undertaken with conscious deliberation. For the revival of romance took place on what Schiller hailed as *sentimental* rather than *naïve* terms. Romantic poetry was more often than not narrative, and on the whole it was consistent with a largely shared cultural theory. This theory revalorized narrative as a privileged category of knowledge. At the turn of the nineteenth century what most urgently needed knowing was not a thing at all but a process, not a noun but a verb: not a fixed order, nor even a series of changes; but the law of change itself. In valorizing time over space, this theory broke decisively with eighteenth-century assumptions, by taking up the Enlightenment key of skeptical inquiry and using it to unlock the Enlightenment postulate of

unconditioned, invariant rationality. The rock of vantage to which Descartes and Locke had pointed, and on which Pope and Gibbon had based their panoramic certitudes, was in Romantic hindsight a philosopher's mirage flitting across the slope of an active volcano.

Two powerfully efficient causes sustained this Romantic critique of Enlightenment, in ways that, having affected primarily intellectuals during the Romantic era, soon spread their influence to touch every Victorian common reader: the spectacular failure of the French Revolution, and the irresistible advance of the Industrial one. The former revolution showed that the price paid for repressing history, as Parisian ideologues had lately done on the best Enlightenment principles, was having to repeat it traumatically once the historically repressed came back. The latter revolution transvalued time itself, which emerged in the nineteenth century as the dimension along which to gauge the vast interlocking changes in production and consumption, transportation and residence, labor and leisure, that were refiguring human relations across the board. The political and economic consequences of these twinned developments gave denizens of the nineteenth century every reason to reckon on change as the paradoxically salient constant within modern experience; and their calculus for coping with change took preponderantly the shape of story. So influential was the new *modus vivendi* that it surged into the

intellectual currents from which educated Victorians took their bearings.

Ascendant disciplines near the turn of the century included chemistry and geology, philology and the analytic editing of classic and scriptural texts: each in its way was a science of change that characteristically asked, not what and why, but whence and whither; and its findings were in effect narratives. Once understanding a thing became coterminous with knowing how it had come to pass, the epochal appearance of a book called *The Origin of Species* was just a matter of time; and the difference between Darwin's dynamical plots and Newton's mechanical equations discloses what amounts to a tale of two cultures.

In the discipline of literature, accordingly, narrative swiftly recouped the ground it had recently lost to the discursive space of reason, whose synoptic array now looked quaint beside story's limber mutabilities; and it was in the medium of verse that Romantic sophistication about narrative was most clearly pronounced. True, Austen and Scott wove in supple prose their studies of a maturing protagonist's psychological development into the fabric of a society that was itself in throes of change; but by their time the commodity form of the novel was enforcing consistencies of marketplace presentation from which avant-garde poetry could depart more freely. The best poets' enthusiastic resumption of narrative's age-old duties was tempered by a more exigently

critical spirit than had motivated even those elders like Ovid and Spenser who were most inspired by visions of change and becoming. Inquisitors of change, the Romantics broke story open in order to show how it worked, at once exalting and exposing the technique of narrative as just that – a human and instrumental creation, answerable to the devising imagination whose revolutionary interventions, for good and ill, were the most conspicuous phenomena of the new century.

Thus the prosodic reinforcement and tale-binding structure that in past centuries had conservatively stabilized cultural heirlooms were turned under Romanticism into diagnostic expedients. *Lyrical Ballads* revolutionized the folk poetry that antiquarian scholarship had recently revived by (the title says it) customizing the ballad form through systematic interruption. ‘Simon Lee’ sabotages its ostensible storytelling, challenging the reader to ‘make a tale’ of what’s left; ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ fouls a putatively redemptive storyline with uncanny incongruities, then wraps the result in faux-scholarly apparatus that leaves readers wondering just what company they are keeping. ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ follows ballad-mutant suit by puncturing the tale of Keats’s knight-at-arms (a memoir tendered, like the Mariner’s, by way of *explanation*) with a cautionary dream that is then punctured in its turn, and to no better issue than a cold hillside. For each of these poems the way to

understanding lies through story, as it ever did of old. But now nothing stands in greater need of wary analysis than story as such: its givenness, its conventional and ideological presuppositions. The unfinished form of ‘Christabel’, mounted for good measure on a versification spectacularly experimental, solicits awareness of how narrative expectation gets aroused and frustrated. There – as in the sorely scrambled Bard’s Song that Blake ladles into *Milton* and Byron’s self-perforating raconteurship in *Don Juan* – the truly engrossing story is that of the telling itself, a meta-fiction whereby the poet labors to promote into critical awareness the conscripted readerly involvement that he simultaneously elicits. This Romantic vanguard heralded what we find in Victorian poetry: a narrative regime that took the force of early-century experimentalism, even as without remission it listened, and danced, to the tempo of modern living.

3

That the nineteenth-century poetic approach to narrative was self-consciously *sentimental* does not mean there wasn’t plenty of residual *naïveté* to go around. In decade after decade, poet after poet produced straight-up narratives of epic scope and ambition, typically sporting the look, the tone, and

the generic accessories that had been installed into the British tradition via Milton from Virgil and Homer. About stolid verse narratives of this kind – the pious sort exemplified by Jean Ingelow’s *A Story of Doom* (1867), based on the Biblical patriarchs; the patriotic sort whose Victorian flood tide, after much Romantic-era inundation, was John Fitchett’s 1841 *King Arthur*, water-logged in at some 130,000 lines – this chapter will have nothing more to say, because the subject is one the present author has treated at length elsewhere. These white mastodons deserve a decent pen within the literary-historical menagerie, if only to countervail triumphalist accounts of the rise of the novel; but they stood so stubbornly apart from the defining energies of their time that literary history can do little more than gesture at them.

It’s also the case that, in pure mint condition, the mastodon epic was almost as rare as were the handful of brilliantly successful adaptations of the genre that the most innovative Victorian poets produced: Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1857), Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9), Morris’s *Sigurd* (1876) and Swinburne’s *Tristram* (1882), Hardy’s *Dynasts* (1903-10). More commonly met than either kind of epic outlier is a hybrid creature that superficially resembles epic but makes a point of winking or shrugging off its generic ambition; and the way such a work apologizes for its modern irrelevance could not be more modern. Southey pioneered such arts of generic

disownment early in the century by the condescending prose in which he annotated his own deadpan epic verses; Scott did him one better when he built the disclaimer right into the poetry, by means of proem, epilogue, or more pervasively still the odd nudge confiding to readers that they were at an entertainment and not a sermon – a device Byron exploited to the hilt by inverting its proportions of earnest and game. It was Scott's lightly worn dubiety about heroic narrative that made verse romances on the model of *Marmion* the most imitated of nineteenth-century modes. The forgiving adaptability of the form made it the *sentimental* choice par excellence among narrative poets wishing to appear, however late in the day, in *naïf's* clothing.

So did the nineteenth-century identification of Scott with history. For heroism was a quality that by modern lights belonged to the past, which remained an inexhaustible resource for the poet who sought to indulge heroic imaginings at safe distance, in that mix of admiration with patronage which typifies our first order of verse narrative. Victorian minds believed in the rising curve of progress – or believed they should so believe, which is what ideology means in practice – and therefore to look back on a prior stage of development, whether social or personal, was inevitably to look down on it too. Much of the appeal of early times was that they were simpler: primal in one aspect (innocent, authentic), primitive in another (barbarous, backward). Such was the

ambivalence that drew narrative poets, not only to historical themes, but to settings remote in place: rural outlands within a national purview, colonial and imperial outposts within a global one. Such geographic dislocation made it possible to restage, in the historical present but a far-flung place, the same essential contrast that was afforded by the epic of distant retrospect. Neither William Allingham's *Laurence Bloomfield in Ireland* (1864) nor Alfred Domett's New Zealand epic *Ranolf and Amohia* (1872) was as hamfistedly jingoistic as other titles that will go unmentioned here, yet they all held a share in the metanarrative that melded progressivist modernity with the diffusion of civilization. In the associated campaign for minds and hearts, the heart went out to beautiful aboriginal losers; but that cordial impulse was trumped every time, as in Scott's poems and novels it had been, by the intellect's recognition that modernity depended on the cutting of just such losses. Being of two minds about simplicity was a part of outgrowing it, a rite of modern passage in which poetic narratives like these afforded practice.

Modernity's self-representation as cultural maturity fed directly into stories in verse for children, a subset of straight-ahead narrative in which the Victorian period excelled. Here childhood innocence served much the same function as did archaic or outlandish simplicity in the epics just considered, within a calculus that suited juvenile literature ideally for consumption by

adults as well. As if to acknowledge this split audience, poets seized on plots involving a threshold experience, often set within something like a colonial contact zone, that brought the child protagonist up towards adulthood, and inducted the implied child reader likewise by proxy. Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' (1862) is the locus classicus for this narrative dynamic, where through respectively transgressive and recuperative ordeals the two sisters have their fruit and eat it too; the dynamic may be even more drastically present in Browning's 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin' (1842), where the swindled Piper's seduction of an entire generation becomes narratable at all only by a crippled boy whom sole survivorship may now have lamed imaginatively into the bargain. A test case for this subgenre greets us in Macaulay's bestseller of 1842, *Lays of Ancient Rome*: a three-layered confection of tales in verse that are ostensibly englished from a classical Latin feint at celebrating Rome's Latian antecedents. Macaulay probably wrote them with grownup readers in mind, but they were recruited into the juvenile section for the rest of the century, as if to prove how versatile the patronizing stance of Victorian condescension into indulged byways of make-believe could be.

Further along the continuum from brazen to pinchbeck narrative lie varieties of comic verse that retail some funny thing that happened on the way somewhere. 'Funny' can of course mean 'humorous' or 'bizarre', and it is

remarkable how the funny stories Victorian poets found to tell are clustered near the bizarre end of the spectrum: take, for instance (please), Thomas Hood's 'Miss Kilmansegg and Her Precious Leg' (1840). The donnée of a golden limb tilts this kind of production so heavily in the direction of broad humor that subtlety of wit must assert its comic rights elsewhere – and precisely this is what the choice of a verse medium let Hood and others do, at the level of formal execution. Thus while Browning's 'Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis' (1845) tells a cute story about lobbing a boring tome into a hollow stump, this would be merely the 'garden fancy' he calls it were it not for a robust dividend of vigorously clever rhyming. The best known of Victorian comic rhymesters is W. S. Gilbert, and the principle of incongruity that comic rhyming localizes is writ large in the attitude his *Bab Ballads* (1868) take towards the ballad tradition his title alludes to. Of mock-epic on the Augustan scale, which had flared up again in Regency polemics and rocketed to greatness in Byron's last phase, the Victorian period produced nothing to speak of. But tongue-in-cheek balladry did much to supply the deficit, and it did so by contriving disparities between form and content that bear comparison with what lay at stake in mock-epic: namely, modern civilization and its discontents.

Even the strictly sober ballads that Elizabeth Barrett among other poetesses contributed to early Victorian gift-books were stiffened with gender

resentments that now seem halfway down the road to the incisive ironies of *Aurora Leigh*. Their suppressed energies caught the ear of the young Tennyson, whose ‘Ballad of Oriana’ and ballad-based ‘Mariana’ (both 1830) stoked passion by inhibiting action, within poetic forms that ought to have made narrative progress but didn’t; this is famously the case with ‘The Lady of Shalott’ (1832), whose balladic elaboration of confining rhymes underscores the protagonist’s meager budget of options for living out a love story that has been blighted in advance by a curse. The nightmarish quest of Browning’s *Childe Roland* (1855) only takes him to a place where something at last might happen but nothing, in the poem, actually does. The endurance of forbidden or balked desire forms as well the unprogressive plot typical of Pre-Raphaelite balladry. The terms ‘refrain’ and ‘burden’ seem cruel puns descriptive of a frustration that turns D. G. Rossetti’s ‘Sister Helen’ (1854) back on itself in verbal as well as narrative terms; an opening like ‘The blessed damozel leaned out / From the gold bar of Heaven’ forecasts a story but proves, in Rossetti’s dislocated portrayal, to be mere description of an inalterable state.¹ In “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” (1898) Wilde tenders no grimmer irony than his choice of a genre that underscores its rendition of a dreary inferno without forward motion, life without parole.

By generic affiliation these ballads formed part of the era's ambivalent medievalism, which in turn participated in that Victorian historicism which on all sides bespoke the wholesale nineteenth-century revival of narrative itself. Where the Augustans had set classical epic grandeur in inconclusive standoff against the tawdry triviality of contemporary life, for the Victorians it was balladry's medieval provenance and folk affinity that implied an ideal contrast to bourgeois manners, which triumphant capitalism was industriously spooling off into the separate spheres of the commercial and the domestic, the banal and the genteel. Gilbert's ballads, like the *Ingoldsby Legends* (1840) of R. H. Barham and the *Bon Gaultier Ballads* (1845) of W. E. Aytoun and Theodore Martin, played each side of this contest off the other. Incident parodied form in ways that were impossible to miss, and that were highlighted yet further by the habitual infusion of grotesquerie. All the while, however, the durable if tattered ballad forms spoke for a cultural heritage, conducted in accordance with rhythms and values contrary to those of industrial life, that the poets would not willingly let die. The result was not great poetry but it made for good comedy, and like all good comedy it sprang more or less gaily painted from pervasive sources of malaise.

Before Edward Lear taught it to the world, the limerick form had been around for a couple of decades, but it was *A Book of Nonsense* (1846) that put it on everybody's mind and earns it a place in this chapter. For in Lear's hands the limerick is a relentlessly narrative device, albeit a perversely unproductive one. The standard 'There was a . . .' introduction could not look more like the opening of a story. But then the stories Lear starts go nowhere:

There was an old man who screamed out
 Whenever they knocked him about;
 So they took off his boots, And fed him with fruits,
 And continued to knock him about.ⁱⁱ

The sterile recycled rhyme of 'about' with itself enacts this limerick's failure to progress, in spite of the pains so consequentially taken ('So. . . And') with the old man's boots and fruits. Here is a kind of comic story – better take it that way, from the author of *Laughable Lyrics* (1877), than take the bait and chase after the red herring of sadistic violence, which also goes nowhere – but then what kind of comic story? A Bergsonian foregrounding of machinery over life, structure over sense, one that takes up the tendency that was already evident in mock-balladry from the 1840s and runs with it, around form's charmed circle, right back to where it started, in both the *a-a-b(-b)-a* rhyme and loose anapestic

3-3-2(-2)-3 meter. It's not just that the story a limerick tells is trifling, but that Lear's entire practice is to trifle with story as such – and to trifle, thereby, with his century's deep investment in narrative understanding. The limerick is narrative, all right, but at the same time so ostentatiously nonprogressive that it has its laugh, lastly, at the expense of progressivism itself.

Poetry like this crosses a line that separates its game plan from the directness with which even Gilbert played at narrative. At bottom the reader of a *Bon Gaultier* or *Bab* or even *Barrack-Room Ballad* (Kipling, 1892) is enjoined to believe in the story it tells; there is a twinkle in the narrator's eye, but the eye stays on the ball. The show must go on, and the plot must fulfill itself conventionally in order for the parodic contrast to take effect. Not so Lear, whose purpose is to bankrupt the narrative system, and to show that in the end it is only form that abides. His great counterpart in the high arts of Victorian nonsense had a similarly subversive point to make:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:

All mimsy were the borogoves,

And the mome raths outgrabe.ⁱⁱⁱ

Lewis Carroll's strategic objective in 'Jabberwocky' (1855) is one with Lear's: to expose the sense-making mechanism of narrative as the apparatus it is. The difference between Carroll's poetical "'Twas. . .'" and Lear's flatfooted 'There was a. . .'" corresponds, however, to a difference in tactics. In diction and syntax the limerick is by design plain, nay prosaic, so as to throw the burden of proof onto the abstract narrative formula of expectation and (non)fulfillment that bears the throwaway words along. Carroll too will end where he began: the quatrain quoted here is both the poem's first stanza and its last, so that the completion of the young swordsman's Jabberwock quest seems to have made no more difference than the old man's bootless diet of fruit in Lear. But to this Lear-like subversion of narrative's progressive destination Carroll adds subversion of the linguistic vehicle that gets narrative to its noplacé special. The arch locutions 'Did gyre' and 'All mimsy were. . .'" express texturally a loftiness of aim that the rhetorically stilted lexicon of the poem as a whole sustains, and that it is Carroll's purpose to send up as all attitude, no substance.

Knock-down proof in support of Carroll's charge against narrative's vacant posturing lies in the semantic emptiness of the main words in his trademark stanza. After the initial postulate of "'Twas'", the only words a candid reader of the lines can so much as recognize are connective prepositions, articles, conjunctions, plus that resonant adverbial intensifier of zero, 'All'. The

verbs, nouns, and adjectives have nothing to tell except that those are the parts of speech they are. That a reader untutored by Humpty Dumpty may know this much with assurance from the syntax alone – may know even that ‘outgrabe’ is a strong past-tense form, probably of the inferred nonsense verb ‘to outgribe’ – is the focal point of Carroll’s experiment. ‘Jabberwocky’ is an exposé, an investigative report on how, and how far, the vehicle of narrative can run on auto-pilot without real-world fuel. The execution of the Jabberwock illustrates the execution of a sheer program, a story pattern that, because it is about next to nothing, might as well be about almost anything. What the framing stanza exposes about the mechanics of language, the whole poem exposes about the mechanics of narrative.

This is the job Lear does, just a little less deftly, in his verses about the Jumblies and the Dong, whose tales we follow in spite of gross semantic roadblocks, and follow not only in the plot but in the plot’s associated affects. Narratives groom the expectation they fulfill, a principle we may find obliquely acknowledged in a notorious choral syllepsis from ‘The Hunting of the Snark’: ‘They pursued it with forks and hope.’^{iv} Carroll’s demented pursuivants have both the right gear and the right stuff; for the attitudinal orientation that is reinforced by habituation to story-types is itself mightily formative, and adhesive, equipment for living. This is why stories should be both told and

interrogated, and why for the latter service in Victorian times it was radical questioners of the status quo who volunteered most often. Witness the widely attested obscurity of Browning's *Sordello* (1840) or Morris's 'The Tune of Seven Towers' (1858): each is manifestly a narrative, both have long baffled readers, yet neither is classed – why not? – with nonsense verse.

5

Carroll's stunning coup against common sense – his exposure of the robotic circuitry, and mindless stamina, of the unexamined mythic archetypes that underlie common sense – could not, by its nature, be repeated very often. Once you've gotten the point, a refresher course may be advisable now and then, but that is available through a fresh reading of 'Jabberwocky'. Full-monty exposure to yet another gutted plot peppered with yet another budget of nonsensical words seems beside the point: the 'Snark' and the 'Dong' soon take us to the limit of the rightly rare and wonderful sort of poem they are. And a dozen limericks go a long way. Much richer terrain for the poetic proving of narrative lay open to poets who cultivated different elements of the storyteller's art, such as narratorial perspective. Here was available a spectrum of possibilities as various as human psychology, which was compounded, during a

century that established the modern social sciences, by the myriad fractions of economic, political, ethnic, and credal difference whose impingement on character ordinary Victorians stood ready to concede in their own lives and to recognize in each others'. This dangerous edge of impingement was the breeding ground for that signal poetic innovation the dramatic monologue, as we now call it, though the poets did not; and indeed for our purposes we may as well put the term to one side and think of their great verse impersonations, for a change, as constituting a subset of narrative.

For the monologue emerges in hindsight as Victorian Britain's answer to the concurrent development of the short story in America and on the Continent. In each genre, as more broadly in the novel, the variable balance between character and conditioning is where the action is. The plot ordinarily consists of the mutual determination of subjective selves and objective circumstances (including other selves). Where a first-person standpoint is used, and in monologues by definition it always is, an additional wrinkle enters the picture with the soupçon, if not the wild-eyed reality, of narratorial unreliability. The device of the unreliable narrator is one which nineteenth-century verse monologues did much to establish, and which in the genre's more sophisticated instances remains legible as an artifact or deposit created within the psyche as a result, yet again, of specifically imagined outward conditions

against which the narrator's symptomatic distortions attempt a defense. The heavy narratorial foregrounding that obscured *Sordello* and Tennyson's experiment in introversion 'The Lover's Tale' (1832? published 1879) suggests that narrative unreliability was the problem for which both poets went on to write monologues as the solution.

Admittedly, verse monologues do sometimes traffic in plot mysteries, and mystifications, of a more elementary kind; and these can upstage narratorial matters. It takes quite a while, when meeting Browning's 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb' (1845), to sort out even the big simple questions – who is speaking to whom, where and when – before proceeding to the hermeneutic challenges of why. It was to obviate such trouble that Tennyson furnished introductory framing narratives in the third person for his early impersonations 'The Hesperides' (1830), 'Oenone', and 'The Lotos-Eaters' (both 1832); as late as 'Lucretius' (1868) he invoked it again lest the mental instability of his monologist induce too great a disorientation. Stories of social protest like Hood's 'Song of the Shirt' (1843) and EBB's 'Cry of the Children' (1844) likewise gave voice to the voiceless by ushering monologue in under the opening stanzas' chaperonage. Browning preferred implication to explication in this as in all matters, gambling on the reader's capacity to infer the elements of story from the horse's mouth, the first-person discourse of the speaker. The

insatiable curiosity felt by readers of ‘My Last Duchess’, or ‘Count Gismond’ (both 1842), as to what the Duke ultimately did to his late wife, or who had access when to the Countess’ bed, demonstrates that about those poems these are not the best questions to ask. Yet pressing hard for an answer to these questions can be a way of posing better ones that lead closer to the perspectival nerve of the monologue genre. Why do the Duke and the Countess see themselves, and their world, as they do? What does a woman like Augusta Webster’s ‘Circe’, or ‘The Castaway’, or ‘The Happiest Girl in the World’ (all 1870) want, and what has led her to frame her desire that way?

Considering Victorian monologues as narrative rather than dramatic texts should prompt us to answer questions like these in terms of the personal stories, and behind them the collective histories, that the texts imply. Suffice it here to note how a discrepancy opens between the story a speaker thinks s/he’s in, and the story in which what the speaker discloses along the way, while telling that story, shows us s/he is more deeply entangled. With ‘Circe’, as with Webster’s model Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’ (1842), the fuller story is intertextual: see the *Odyssey* and *Inferno* if you want to know what’s really in the works. With the Italian Duke and the English Happiest Girl we encounter a more intricately elegant inside story. Each speaker is in possession of a cogent narrative dictating the place of man, woman, and desire within the institution of

marriage – narratives distinct not just from each other, and from a reader's today probably, but also from what the poet shows each speaker dimly suspecting may be a truer narrative, one that arises from the unarticulated experience of the heart. Neither Browning's monologist nor Webster's can steer clear around the ideological story that is composed by the defining cultural and historical moment; but their intuition of an emergent alternative story, just beyond their capacity to think it in words, is both their most humanizing feature and their poems' most modernizing contribution to an understanding of history that is rooted, with the best nineteenth-century understandings, in processual change.

Not all strong Victorian monologues work this kind of interior narrative overlap. Amy Levy's 'Xantippe' (1881) stalks the masculine chauvinism of the Victorian academy so hard, under cover of the all-male monolithic Platonic academy it swore by, that there is nothing for us to know about her speaker's bitter intellectual frustration that straitened Xantippe doesn't know all too well already. History offers the cornered pagan speaker of Swinburne's 'Hymn to Prosperine' (1866) an exit from its oppressions, when on the occasion of Christianity's ascendancy in Rome he predicts its eventual doom by the same supersessive law that has swept it into power; but here as in 'Xantippe' the speaker's knowledge coincides with the reader's. These monologues and others

imagined in a like rhetorical vein exemplify essentially testimonial narrative: etched in the spirit, and the service, of contemporary controversy, their portraiture is rather propagandistic than heuristic.

At the opposite extreme lies a species of monologue so deeply invested in the violation of norms as to be, like much in the study of abnormal psychology, actually norm-enforcing. Browning's homicidal narrator in 'Porphyria's Lover' (1836) is roughly reliable as to the circumstances of his tale – the whole poem evaporates on any other supposition – and yet the sympathetic reliance his opening lines have elicited blows up in our face the moment he improvises the sex-crime strangulation that his poem is really all about. The abhorrent recoil that Browning contrived with this strictly narrative prototype monologue detonates as sensationally as a bomb, but the chasm that thereafter sunders reader from speaker yawns too wide to permit the squirm or wiggle room on which the genre's more impressive narrative effects depend. The grim assessment of Romantic desire that Browning may have had in mind with this poem seems more successfully pursued through the unhurried gradualism of a diseased necrophiliac's self-accounting in 'The Leper' (1866) by Swinburne. Still, this story like Browning's resembles as much as anything a confession taken down in police custody, an effect that discourages the deputized reader from pursuing the study of perversion very far into the

sponsoring medieval culture by which Swinburne's incident is framed. And yet, when police custody again provides the venue for EBB's infanticidal culprit in 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' (1848) and also for her husband's womanizing monk 'Fra Lippo Lippi' (1855), the opportunity for an enlarged and liberal understanding proves in each case ample. This is due, in the latter poem, to the way police arrest becomes a figure for less palpable mind-forged entrapments, all of which Lippo feels but only some of which he can grasp. In the former, it is due to the very extremity of the speaker's literal enslavement, within bonds of race and gender that this speaker, for once in the history of the genre, understands better than the reader, who is left with the stunned posse to ponder whether 'curse-free', at the bottom line, possesses greater moral shock value as a malediction climactically hurled or as one mercifully withheld.

6

Victorian poets, to resume our argument, kept time with a turbulent century by putting poetry and story back in each other's keeping. They deployed the consciousness-raising resources of verse as means of evaluating the pervasive cultural power that was wielded by narrative as a cognitive instrument. Unreconstructed epoists simply exploited that power (or died

trying); so did parodists and writers for children, even though in doing so they also belittled and to that extent disowned it. This serious play reached an extreme when nonsense verse stripped plot down to the bare bones, showed it could live on nothing, and proposed that nothing might be all it was good for anyhow. With impersonative monologues poets shifted attention from the narrative to the narratorial, there to patrol the thronged crossroads where the self met history. This was a junction ideologically fraught, since liberal individualism and transpersonal progressivism were as likely to thwart as abet one another; and Victorians' diligence to keep the traffic smoothly flowing emerges in the pains they took over yet another of story's primary dimensions: narrative continuity. One striking result was the sheer fluency of the poetic monologue, especially within the blank-verse format that, in Browning's hands, ballooned out into hundreds and even thousands of lines at a narrative stretch: 'Mr. Sludge' (1864) and the Balaustion poems (1871, 1875) are such prodigies of unstinting articulation that we marvel to think what phobic compulsion must be driving them on.

The cardinal manifestation, however, of the nineteenth century's anxiety over continuity was its proliferation of serial forms. Seriality is everywhere in Victorian literature, from the phenomenal explosion of the periodical press, through the part-issue of novels subdivided into time-released installments,

down to the period's fondness for stanza-staggered verse. It is among the poets that this proclivity for the express segmentation of narrative intake appears with utmost sharpness. Not only do the number-ticketed quanta comprised by *In Memoriam* (1850) and *The House of Life* (1870) regularly obtrude on a reader's notice, but they serve to focus the distinctive sort of plottedness to which an ordinal poetic sequence lays claim. Lyrically atomized in themselves, the constituent portions engross attention within an interlude which the work's larger design treats as momentary, and from whose tranceful suspense the narrative thrust of the sequence must be again and again reactivated. This iterated pattern of interruption and resumption, which is integral to the design of these and many other instances of serial narrative poetry, in effect trained readers to collaborate in the production of continuity: a survival skill seemingly indispensable to nineteenth-century bourgeois sanity. The cultural importance of this practice explains why, although Victorian poets did not invent the idea of stringing lyrics along a narrative thread, they seized on Renaissance sequence poetry so eagerly as a model and permuted it so inventively.

Sonnet sequences were the most patent of such derivatives. EBB's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) pioneered a Victorian mode with its slow but sure plot of erotic acceptance and spiritual uplift. Two decades later love's Victorian climax was regained, then excruciatingly relinquished, by D. G.

Rossetti in *The House of Life*; and from this devastation his sister Christina went on, with the desperate serenity of ‘Monna Innominata’ (1881), to mount an a priori argument for love’s human unsustainability. All three sequences are cardiogram printouts of the heart’s events, which George Eliot’s sonnets in ‘Brother and Sister’ (1874), and Webster’s in ‘Mother and Daughter’ (1895), show beating for Victorians as poignantly with familial as with sexual affection. That George Meredith expanded the tale-bearing platform for *Modern Love* (1862) from fourteen lines to a quatrain-accommodating sixteen has kept no one from regarding that poem of marital disaster as a sonnet sequence squarely true to type.

But that type is only the most conspicuous within a category of serialized lyrics much larger than can be enumerated here. Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* and *Maud* (1855) occupy a class by themselves for sheer visibility, and also perhaps for the subtlety with which they worry the question of their own continuity. But their congeners are legion, among them Arnold’s ‘Switzerland’ (1852), Clough’s *Amours de Voyage* (1858), Patmore’s *The Angel in the House* (1862), and Browning’s ‘James Lee’s Wife’ (1864). All these works use forms other than the sonnet; nearly all incorporate a variety of metrical and stanzaic modes; and every one of them, like every sonnet sequence just mentioned, directly concerns the making and breaking of contact between

lovers. This remarkable consistency of topic tempts one to claim that the Victorian lyric sequence embraced interpersonal connectedness as its theme because structural connectedness was its prescribed principle; and that the structural challenge was the more exigent of the two. Lovers might win or lose, and more often than not they lost. Yet even where a tale came to catastrophic grief, it paid a formal bonus: the question of continuity that impended over Victorian life was favorably resolved by a tale's being brought to term, despite the gaps and obstacles that serial form placed in the way.

Discontinuity overcome: such was the watchword of sequential verse narrative, and it obtained all the way from the sonneteer's scanty plot of love into the higher order of magnitude where Victorians designed new prototypes of the epic. Tennyson starts *The Princess* (1847), as Browning does *The Ring and the Book*, by discussing explicitly what sort of continuity the poem aspires to and how the author has compassed it. *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70), for all its casual languor of presentation, stakes Morris's bet that an artful arrangement of many tales by many tellers will give structural support to a togetherness radically broader than Chaucer's had been, embracing now all Europe and not just England. Where Morris's epic and Browning's both appeared serially over months, *Idylls of the King* was published in installments over as many years: the gradual emergence of Tennyson's epic across half a century (1833-1885

from first manuscript to twelfth idyll) gives unbeatable evidence of the era's patient craving for the fruits of slow-ripening time.

In this magnum opus, as in shorter poetic sequences, theme followed format. The rise and decline of Camelot hangs, like the poem's gestation over decades, on the question of unity: in epic statecraft as in sonnet courtship, getting it all together is a value that outlives the dashing of King Arthur's dreams as man of state and married man alike. The sovereign's task and the laureate's ultimately addressed the same Victorian problematic, which was how to rescue order from change under the sign of progressive continuity. The governing melancholy shared by poet and hero is symptomatic of the same ambivalence we have seen quickening the best narrative verse of the century. It was only poetic mediocrities, at the end of the day, who could endure to surf progressivism's rising tide without a grimace. One such was Tennyson's friend F. T. Palgrave, whose anthology *The Golden Treasury* (1861) had so effectually boosted the English lyrical tradition, and who went on to publish in *The Visions of England* (1881) a lyrical sequence of his own composition whose unifying through-line inhered in the foregone conclusion of his nation's ascent to world dominion. The complacency of Palgrave's facile chauvinist exercise shows how effortlessly full-blown imperial progressivism lent itself to a kind of ideological

automatic writing, a slumbrous crooning at the narrative switch of cultural power.

7

A longer account of how the field of poetry lay open at the fin de siècle to Palgrave's brand of lyric sequencing would lead back to the dissociation of poetry from narrative with which this chapter began. Victorian serial poetry had harbored from the first a possibility that its thread of continuity might be slit, its constituents spilled from the envelope of major narrative into the free-floating suggestiveness of vignette. Verse anecdotes about what just happened to happen had been attracting Victorian poets at least since Tennyson wrote 'Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere' (1842) and 'The Eagle' (1851). Each was subtitled 'A Fragment', and their intensity of appeal arises, as in Browning's zestful 1845 'Meeting at Night' and 'How They Brought the Good News', from their comparative narrative disconnection, their status as episodes un beholden to epic. Abandoned or absorbed into the moment, these vagrant lyrics, like their obsessed speakers, deem the world well lost for that moment's passionate sake. Where the poems just mentioned were truants from their authors' still traditionally narrative regime, in the next generation Victorian poetry crested a

lyric watershed when Morris filled his remarkable debut volume *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858) with poems typically taken not *from* history but clean *out of* it: incidents rough at the edges, which bristle with verisimilitude yet are extravagantly unrelated to each other or to any master narrative.

‘The Haystack in the Floods’ and ‘Concerning Geffray Teste Noire’ look from a distance like an epyllion and a ballad, respectively. But the closer we get, the less either poem has to do with narration as usual: the former’s splendid tactical violence stands out the more shockingly for its disconnection from strategic motives and results; the latter’s free-association transitivity throws into stronger relief an old man’s memories that emerge the more vividly for their being inconsequential. These poems draw on none of the generalizing power that made of William Barnes’ ‘The Turnstile’ (also 1858) a lucid, archetypal parable of familial grief at a child’s death; nor are they didactic fables, of a kind whose potential for sophistication would appear in EBB’s ‘A Musical Instrument’ (1862) and Meredith’s ‘Lucifer in Starlight’ (1883), each of which carves from a classic narrative a modern parable of creative anomie. What Morris was up to is more nearly matched, indeed all but explicated, in D. G. Rossetti’s ‘The Woodspurge’ (1870), which wears the shape of narrative but tells the story of, precisely, meaning’s failure to emerge from events:

From perfect grief there need not be

Wisdom or even memory:

One thing then learnt remains to me,--

The woodspurge has a cup of three.^v

Declining his own flirtatious gambit with the Trinitarian symbolism of ‘three cups in one’, Rossetti’s speaker declines not only narrative’s offer of meaning but even memory’s offer of continuity. Here is neither antecedence nor succession, beyond the graven print of unaccommodated fact on life’s tabula rasa. Narrative stringency on this Pre-Raphaelite order meets its apotheosis, if not its redemption, in Hopkins, whose sonnets remain fiercely unsequenced and who aspired to convert chance happening to radiant epiphany. The wreck of the *Deutschland* (1876) and flight of the windhover (1877) were narratable events; but all the effort of this poet’s inspired reportage was to make events declare themselves not historically but sacramentally: to redeem the very significations Morris and Rossetti regarded as lost, yet still like them to situate phenomena in an order of meaning perpendicular to that of secular continuity.

An understated example drawn from a poet less dazzling than Hopkins will suggest, in closing, how the new ascendancy of lyrical anecdote slackened the sinews of nineteenth-century narrative in verse:

The lake lay blue below the hill.

O'er it, as I looked, there flew
 Across the waters, cold and still,
 A bird whose wings were palest blue.

The sky above was blue at last,
 The sky beneath me blue in blue.
 A moment, ere the bird had passed,
 It caught his image as he flew.^{vi}

In 'L'Oiseau Bleu' (pub. 1908) nineties poet Mary E. Coleridge was practicing the minimalist narrative of imagism *avant la lettre*, bending story back on itself in anticipation of the modernist spatial form towards which her painterly French title gestures. There's a plot here, just enough to let the poem glance before and after its one agent's one act. The cool wisp of a narratorial 'I' seems superfluous until we notice that the situation s/he occupies – the potentially limiting vantage that might define a persona, and so introduce some High-Victorian irony – is as free and airy as the bird's, with blue sky not only above but beneath. The sky's reflection in the lake water, mimed aurally by the echoic 'blue in blue', feels foretold from the outset by the inlaid repetition of sounds,

‘lake’ clipping ‘lay’ and ‘blue below’ in line 1, the two word pairs converging in line 2 on the key word ‘looked’. Redundancy is in the air, the speaker’s place doubling the bird’s, the ‘image’ the bird makes in the lake tallying with the one left in the poem.

As the last line hovers between snapshot and filmclip, between the bird ‘caught’ in a phrase and the bird let fly in a passage, we confront poetry that has ingested its ostensibly narrative occasion. ‘L’Oiseau Bleu’ no longer tells a story, because it has become one. An act discovered in the world is embedded within the story of its discovery, what Wallace Stevens would call half a century later ‘The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice’.^{vii} That ‘act of finding’ is already for Coleridge a nineteenth-century deed sufficient unto itself, its narrative *heuristic* is rooted etymologically, with *history* and thus with this chapter’s category of *story*, in the Greek verb *heuriskein* (‘to find’). The past tense of that verb – *eureka* – epitomizes the story of modern poetry to which Victorian story poems belong.

ⁱ ‘The Blessed Damozel’ (1850), in Christopher Ricks, ed., *The New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 269.

ⁱⁱ Ricks, ed., *Victorian Verse*, 217.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ricks, ed., *Victorian Verse*, 190.

^{iv} Ricks, ed., *Victorian Verse*, 204.

^v Ricks, ed., *Victorian Verse*, 275.

^{vi} Daniel Karlin, ed., *The Penguin Book of Victorian Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), 731.

^{vii} 'Of Modern Poetry' (1940), in *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954), 239.