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WHAT IS THE LANGUAGE OF POETRY?

DICTION, DIALECT, AND SPEECH IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LYRIC

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To the memory of my father, Scott Calahan, whose folksy Nebraska idioms still resound in my ears and who always used to read the copyright date of books to me as a child

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Abstract

“What Is the Language of Poetry? Diction, Dialect, and Speech in Nineteenth-Century Lyric”

In this dissertation, I propose a reconsideration of the idea of speech that animates the writing and reading of lyric poetry. The project revisits competing linguistic and literary definitions of speech that emerged from nineteenth-century debates in the European academy over the nature of language, and reads the transformation of the lyric poem and its diction as a reaction to the Romantic ideal of language—a diction taken from “real language of men,” as Wordsworth famously formulates it in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. I argue that poetry critics can revisit the definition of poetic language by turning to the principles of dialectology (or *glottologia*), a branch of historical linguistics pursued primarily by Italian scholars in the latter half of the nineteenth century, especially its resistance to the widely held idea that speech is inferior to the written word. Through readings of neglected archival sources in dialect lexicography and grammar alongside both canonical and non-canonical lyric poems by Leopardi, Coleridge, Barnes, Hopkins, and Manzoni, I offer a general theoretical claim about the nature of the lyric: that poetic language ought to be read as the speech of geographically-bounded communities of speakers over the *longue durée*, not merely, as many critics propose, from an immediate historical context nor from an idealized timeless present tense. The work of these poets confronts us with the idea that the specific figurative or rhetorical uses of words and phrases in individual poems may draw discriminately from deep reservoirs of historical meaning as a consequence of the social, geographical world that the poem establishes. By extension, these poets show through their art that everyday speech contains deep roots in social communities.

In each of four chapters, my project reevaluates a different common assumption of literary criticism on how speech influences poetic language. The introductory chapter argues that Locke's influential rationalist conception of language, which continues to dominate our thinking about the spoken language, saw crucial revisions toward a socio-historical plane (primarily in Condillac, Cesarotti, and Ascoli). Based on new analysis of the internal anachronism of spoken language, these critics redefined language function not in terms of its immediate contextual usage but in terms of its deep history. In the main critical chapters, I then focus on two canonical poets of the early nineteenth-century lyric, Leopardi and Coleridge, each of whom presents a different model of poetic language based on figures found embedded in the linguistic strata of individual words. For Coleridge, the lyric speaker demonstrates the limits of individual speech capacities by using an artificially hybridized diction that illuminates the German and French roots of English; by contrast, Leopardi's use of archaisms reveals the deep resemblance of spoken Italian to Vulgar Latin—a demonstration of the permanence of speech against the dramatic linguistic changes of written Italian. My final chapter considers the linguistic turn to dialectology through the experimental philology and poetry of William Barnes. By creating an artificially standardized language with no real-world equivalent speech community, Barnes's experiments with dialect poetry and a universal Standard English make visible the inherent anachronism of speech. This project ultimately aims to be prospective: I affirm the need for literary scholars to reconsider their implicit allegiance to a simple, transparent concept of speech by ignoring the historical and material dimension of poetic language—important precisely for a hybrid genre like the lyric, dependent as it is on the deep history and evolution of speech as its touchstone.

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Introduction:

How We Hear Speech When We Read Poetry

“All poetic languages are versions of social language, that is to say, versions of socially identifiable dialects. When I speak of them as ‘versions’ I mean that we encounter them as disguises.”

—Allen Grossman, “*Summa Lyrica*, 4.1”

When William Wordsworth wrote in his celebrated Preface to the collaborative volume *Lyrical Ballads* (1798; 1805) that he intended the poetics of the volume to be an experiment in the “selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation,” the obvious question, unanswered by the poems contained within it, was to what extent his poetic diction depended on the “ballad” part of the title (a pastiche of the folk tradition of rural England through using language exemplary of it) or the “lyrical” part—a fashioning of language to represent the “state of vivid sensation” that literary effects might produce, outside the bounds of normal, everyday speech. The later response of his own collaborator, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, has become a signal dissent from the project of renewing poetic diction that Wordsworth proposed. Coleridge begins with an attack on Wordsworth’s own qualifications of the phrase by noting that this “real language of men” ought also to be “purified from all provincialism and grossness, and so far re-constructed as to be made consistent with the rules of grammar”—a fact that, he concludes, means that it “will not differ from the language of any other man of common-sense.”¹ In this manner, Coleridge gleefully concludes, his friend ought to have substituted “*ordinary*, or *lingua communis*” for the phrase “real language.” Coleridge hears in Wordsworth’s aspiration to speech a philosophical concern for universality that belies the actual choice of his language.

¹ *Biographia Literaria*, vol. 2, ed. James Engel and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 52.

In an equally significant but critically underappreciated treatise on speech in lyric poetry, the Roman poet Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli claims in the introduction to his collection of sonnets in Roman dialect, *I sonetti romaneschi* (written 1830–1848, unpublished but circulated widely), that his aim in the volume, resonant with Wordsworth’s, is to accurately represent the spoken tongue of the Roman people:

Esporre le frasi del romano quali dalla bocca del romano escono tuttora, senza ornamento, senza alterazione veruna, senza pure inversioni di sintassi o troncamenti di licenza, eccetto quelli che il parlator romanesco usi egli stesso: insomma cavare una regola dal caso e una grammatica dall’uso, ecco il mio scopo.²

[Exhibiting Roman expressions as they come from the mouth of the Roman citizen every day without ornament or alteration, without syntactic inversion or poetic license, except those that the Roman speaker uses himself: in short, to obtain a general rule from the individual case and a grammar from common usage—this is my aim.]

Though he echoes Wordsworth’s call for the legitimacy of the spoken language as a source for poetry, Belli directs his focus not on the process of fashioning the dialect into a literary register, but rather on linguistic accuracy. He writes that he does not wish “proporre un modello ma sí per dare una imagine fedele di cosa già esistente e, piú, abbandonata senza miglioramento” [“propose a model but indeed to offer a faithful image of something already in existence and, further, something left behind without improvement”].³ Belli’s desire to write in “le frasi del romano quali dalla bocca del romano escono tuttora” [“Roman expressions as they come from the mouth of the Roman citizen every day”] is anthropological as well as poetic: his original and reprinted editions contained pronunciation guides as well as lexical concordances to the Romanesco terms unknown to a speaker of Italian.

² *I sonetti romaneschi*, ed. Giorgio Vigolo and Pietro Gibellini (Milan: Mondadori, 1978), 2.

³ Belli, 2–3.

I highlight these two nineteenth-century statements of a poetics of speech to demonstrate the textual features critics often take for granted in describing the kind of speech they hear in poetry. Reading speech in poetry can refer to a method attuned to various elements: subject matter of the everyday world; use of everyday metaphors or common idiomatic phrases; syntax common to speech (in English, i.e., Subject-Verb-Object); a reliance on the emphatic, in the form of vague meaning or inarticulate cries at moments of particular intensity. But such features by and large describe speech as a style, following the direction of Wordsworth. The flourishing of dialect verse in the vein of Belli during the period directly associated with Romanticism as well as throughout the nineteenth century shows a treatment of language far different from the aesthetic aspirations of Wordsworth, and thereby challenges us to revisit our assumptions of what we hear when we read speech in poetry.

In this dissertation, I propose a reconsideration of our basic understanding of how speech—its nature, its function, and its consequences—defines the language of lyric poetry. In order to do so, my project revisits competing definitions of speech that emerged from nineteenth-century debates over the nature of language, from poets and literary critics on one hand and from linguists and philosophers of language on the other hand. Historians of linguistics have noted the crucial shift in the focus of language studies in the period 1780–1880, from historical philology (analysis of the history and origins of language) to dialectology (analysis of spoken language, or dialect). Throughout this disciplinary shift, we notice a hallmark of Romanticism: a fascination with oral and folk culture, not simply for its own sake, but as the foundation for exploring the conditions of language at their origin. The problem shared across the shift from philology to dialectology was the importance given to the origin and history of

language for understanding its function and use in the here and now: could modern spoken language, which continues to evolve and adapt itself across towns and regions as local dialects, provide insight into texts written centuries before?

In this schematic description of the period, I acknowledge the striking similarities between the way that thinking about language and its evolution mirrored a transformation in the style of the poetic language in nineteenth-century letters. In my view, the shift in poetic language played an integral role in defining the idea of the spoken language in that period. However, despite longstanding and obvious affinities of period theories of language with theories of lyric poetry—particularly in two cornerstone documents of European Romanticism, Johann Gottfried Herder’s *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* [Treatise on the origin of language] and William Wordsworth’s preface to *Lyrical Ballads*—literary scholars have only recently begun to argue for a reconsideration of how scientific and artistic views of language might present complementary or competing views on the intellectual history of the nineteenth century. As it stands, however, most critical attention has been focused almost exclusively on the German context, without considering how the reception and spread of what is known as the New Philology (especially *resistance* to its underlying principles) in different literary traditions and languages might transform our understanding of the social claims of literature after European Romanticism.

In focusing on the convergence (through mutual influence) of an intellectual history with a literary history, my work stakes its argument within recent scholarly debates in the discipline of historical poetics. Scholars in a range of disciplines in Victorian, Slavic, and Classical studies circles in the American academy have, independently, reinvested themselves in interpreting the

formal features of poetry as historical phenomenon. The methodological approaches and argumentative stakes of these approaches differ as widely as the sources of influence that have led to this critical discussion.⁴ My approach to the question of language history does not follow exactly the formalist methods of historical reading championed by both camps of scholars, in the sense that it does not prioritize the traditional prosodic features of lyric poetry. Instead, this project focuses on the historicization of spoken language itself as the subject for formalist analysis. In my view, a central question for the study of historical poetics turns out to be: can an alternative history of spoken language change our sense of what features count to the analysis of poetic form? And, following from this, can our sense of what language form means revise our understanding of the achievements of the Romantic lyric?

Taking the philological analysis still standard in classics departments as a guiding principle, this reading method treats language as a formal rather than merely as a thematic feature of lyric poetry. Therefore, my analysis reads the expressive language typical of poetry as conceptual in equal measure, reflective of the nature and function of language to instantiate individual and social thought as part of a tradition. In individual chapters, I make use of a method of interpreting poetic language influenced by the German scholarly discipline of *Begriffsgeschichte* (“history of concepts”; also known as “historical semantics”), in which I consider the deep histories of individual words found in lyric poems to demonstrate the relevance of social values and concepts at key moments in their historical evolution to their immediate meaning in specific poems. The history of concepts, though primarily a method of the

⁴ For a summary of the debate over the provenance and methodology of the term, see V. Joshua Adams, Joel Calahan, and Michael Hansen, “Reading Historical Poetics,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 77:1 (March 2016).

social sciences, extends the inquiries of social and philosophical history into the realm of the linguistic by, as Viktor Zhivov summarizes, “attention to the word as such [*k slovu kak takovomu*], that is, to the historical-philological component in the analysis of intellectual processes.”⁵ As Reinhart Koselleck proposes, historical semantics refocuses our attention to facts of social history by reading their linguistic embodiment as the primary evidence of historical change.⁶ In the history of concepts, language presumes to embody larger historical forces than individual authors and texts could express.

Because my project seeks to refocus the idea of language by which lyric poetry is read from the written to the spoken, the history of concepts remains only a starting place for my analysis. Indeed, my readings of individual poems refocus the scope of the history of concepts to a neglected register for the social sciences: everyday speech. This shift has potentially significant consequences for poetic texts. As Leo Spitzer writes on the method of one of his masterpieces of historical semantics, “Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony,” the critic and historian of poetry must analyze not only “the concept and the words expressing it” but also “in the words, in turn, the semantic kernel and the emotional connotations with their variations and fluctuations in time.”⁷ The outmoded but still attractive promise of the idealist linguistics pursued by Spitzer (a stylistic reading method based on a holistic, philosophical concept of

⁵ “Conceptual History, Cultural History, Social History,” trans. Boris Maslov, *ВИБЛИОТКА: E-Journal of Eighteenth-Century Russian Studies* 2 (2014): 1.

⁶ Koselleck makes the crucial observation that the relation of a social fact to its linguistic embodiment is never identical or total, but rather that “social history (*Sozialgeschichte oder Gesellschaftsgeschichte*) and conceptual history stand in a reciprocal, historically necessitated tension that can never be cancelled out.” “Social History and Conceptual History,” in *The Practice of Conceptual History*, trans. Kerstin Behnke (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 23.

⁷ “Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony: Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word ‘Stimmung. Part 1,’” *Traditio* 2 (1944), 409.

language from Romanticism) might therefore turn to the old formalist notion of *diction* (“a selection of the language of men,” as Donald Davie puts it, revising Wordsworth’s definition of speech in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*).⁸ The *topoi* found in the post-Romantic lyric often overlap with the big concepts of modern social and political history (“progress,” “imagination,” “nature”), but they also bring the personal, private, and emotional elements of experience into the realm of social discourse. We might say that lyric poetry conceptualizes the personal.

By reading lyric poetry through a history of poetic concepts in which large-scale social concepts converge with the personal content of plain speech, this argument makes certain assumptions about the genre of lyric that I feel compelled to state explicitly and defend: the hybrid conceptual/emotional language of the lyric poem reflects the hybrid nature of the lyric genre. Modern lyric, I believe, is an inherently hybrid genre based on the anachronism of its use of a modern idiom in an ancient form. Lyric crystallizes the relation of speaker to an implied community of its audience through both the immediacy of address and utterance as well as the authority of its heritage in a literary tradition. This premise stands between the traditional viewpoint that song (or music) is the ground of lyric poetry, and the more recent theoretical position that lyric is a critical fiction conflating a variety of short poetic forms under one banner. By advocating for a philological approach to the spoken roots of the lyric, I advocate moving beyond two commonsense but ultimately flawed ideas: that speech is an ephemeral, transparent, and unmediated cousin of written language; and that lyric speech is a special category of language that works unlike other kinds. Instead, I begin from the premise that lyric speech uses the evolution of the spoken language (invisible to the individual, arising from complex

⁸ *The Purity of English Diction* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952), 5.

geographical and social encounters over centuries) to present the complex emotions and thoughts of an individual utterance. While admitting the analytical claim that, in the real world, individual intentions by speakers shape their utterances to specific, communicative purposes, I argue that the lyric poem exposes the roots of everyday language function in a past shaped outside of individual design or intention through collective and largely unconscious means.

Dialectology: The Forgotten Study of Speech

Up to now, my focus has been on the relationship of the spoken language to the lyric poem. But the major critical claim of my readings requires, as I remarked above, not simply a different emphasis in language source for poetry (from written to spoken elements of language) but an entirely different conception of the nature of the spoken language. Studying the formal means by which the spoken language changes over time is the scope of dialectology, the long neglected study of regional dialect and speech that grew out of the positivist approaches of historical linguistics beginning in the 1860s. The critical neglect of dialectology both within and outside of linguistics is due to the singular influence made on cultural studies and philosophy by Ferdinand de Saussure, whose work in theoretical linguistics eclipsed the dialect linguistics of French, British, and Italian scholars and its focus on ethnographic, sociological, and geographical elements in the evolution of speech. Saussure instead turned linguistics away from the diachronic and sociohistorical aspect of language. I will have more to say about Italian *glottologia* and criticism in Chapter 1, and the relevance of British dialectology to the reading of dialect verse in Chapter 4. However, I will briefly sketch the contours of the field of dialectology by noting three main arguments that scholars of dialect brought to the study of language, all three serving as a

vital counterweight to the ordinary language philosophy that came to dominate the twentieth century after Saussure.

Firstly, the dialectologists argued that speech should be studied not merely as an individual competency or performance but as a shared, communal tradition. From this perspective, speech has formal elements that endure over a long span of time, long beyond any single conversational encounter between speakers as well as beyond the memory of an individual speaker over a human life span. Despite the fact that these qualities were uncontroversially attributed to the written language for centuries, few scholars had come to see the historical nature of the spoken dialect in the same manner. If the historical properties of speech were recognized, as they were by Samuel Johnson and Jonathan Swift as well as many of their successors into the late nineteenth century, they were identified as corruptions of a written standard, or as local variations of a national tongue. For dialectologists, instead, the formal elements of speech do not arise from or belong to the written language, but must be studied within the spoken language alone. Further, what might be thought of as variations only appear so if one considers the common, shared cross-section of national language a standard by which to judge all individual utterances as well as community-based dialects (whether based on region, class, or vocation). However, as the Italian *glottologi* and the Swiss linguist Jules Gilliéron argued in different contexts, phonological and morphological irregularities in dialect possess distinct patterns only visible when studied independently of analogous features of written language. Further, as Antoine Meillet and Hugo Schuchardt would each come to argue, such means are not always unconscious adoptions of spoken characteristics through habits of speech, but may also consciously respond to social needs (“se conformer les uns aux autres en tout ce qui

est utile à l'exercice de leurs fonctions communes" ["comply with each other for all that is useful to performing their common functions"]⁹ or simply be "matters of conscious or half-conscious imitation."¹⁰ Rather than considering dialect forms through the subjective experience of the speaker, as a question of individual competency, the dialectologists studied speech as a tradition with its own internal history that interacts with—by influencing and being influenced by—the histories of other cultural institutions and phenomena.

Building from this idea that speech belongs to a community and not to individual speakers, dialectologists posited that the vocabulary of speech possesses its own history independent of the learned, formal vocabulary of writing. The emergence in print of regional dialect glossaries in the early nineteenth century across Europe, earliest in Italy and England, suggests that word form and meaning itself became the first recognizable quality distinguishing speech originating in bounded geographical speech communities. Such glossaries reflected the importance of lexicography in the high culture of these traditions (the 1612 *Vocabolario degli accademici della Crusca* and Dr. Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language* were lode stars for traditional lexicography) through the convergence of classical philology and practical criticism. While the Romance philologists François Just Marie Raynouard and Friedrich Diez reconstructed elements of Proto-Romance and the Vulgar Latin tongue based on genetic comparison and reconstruction from classical sources, the Italian school of *glottologia* (associated with the journal *Archivio glottologico italiano*) applied these techniques to the panoply of regional

⁹ Antoine Meillet, "Comment les mots changent de sens," in *Linguistique historique et linguistique générale* (Paris: Champion, 1982), 233.

¹⁰ Hugo Schuchardt, "On Sound Laws: Against the Neogrammarians," in *Schuchardt, the Neogrammarians, and the Transformational Theory of Phonological Change: Four Essays*, trans. Theo Vennemann and Terence H. Wilbur (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1972), 50.

speech communities on the Italian peninsula, covering both contemporary peninsular dialects as well as Italic, pre-Roman dialects. The upshot of these related historical-linguistic endeavours was to reconceive of how words carry cultural meaning and evolve in their embodiment of that meaning over time (especially through interaction with other cultures). Dialect words, contrary to their reputation as corrupted or unrefined variants of common words, could be recognized as more precise, more conceptually rich, and more poetic than their cognates in the national language. The analytical qualities held by dialect words could not only match learned, philosophical terms (so-called “hard” words) in their precision, but could in fact establish this precision through the explicit authority of social interaction in a geographically bounded community rather than the implicit norms binding a distant scholarly community together. For many rural dialects, labor and local commerce provided the social foundation for meaning and the source of the dialect’s traditional authority. Additionally, the artistic potential available to poets thinking across dialect and register made speech an appealing object of study. William Barnes, the eccentric philologist and poet of the Dorset dialect, wrote in his first glossary that dialect is “more distinctive than our bookspeech” for its doubled variations of English words and its novel pronunciation, which, he jokes, “withholds from the punster most of his changes of word-play.”¹¹ Dialectologists saw the variation of local words as a feature adding to the richness of the national vocabulary, rather than as a detriment to it. As the English expatriate lexicographer Jonathan Boucher argued, “the prevalence of dialects...is a proof of cultivation” inasmuch as it is “an attempt to improve” the common tongue.¹²

¹¹ *A Grammar and Glossary of the Dorset Dialect* (Berlin: A. Asher & Co., 1863), 31.

¹² “Introduction,” *A Glossary of Archaic and Provincial Words*, ed. Joseph Hunter and Joseph Stevenson (London: Black, Young, and Young, 1832), vi.

Finally, dialectologists argued that the interaction of speech communities through migration, commerce, war, and other large-scale as well as small-scale sociological events accounts for language change. Graziadio Isaia Ascoli, the rigorous *glottologo* and founder of *AGI* who held a longstanding polemic with the neo-grammarians school, argued that claims for purely linguistic or psychological causes for changes in speech could not stand up to chorographic and sociological explanations—the “*motivo etnologico*” [“ethnological cause”], as Ascoli referred to this idea.¹³ Because ethnological causes of language change were not simply exceptions to broader historical linguistic rules but could themselves be generalized into patterns, the dialectologists offered a new paradigm for understanding how linguistic change spread over space and time. In the same way that historical linguists studied language as the property of a community over a long tradition, dialectologists shifted the conventional description of language change from the genetic *Stammbaum*, or tree model, of language change popularized by August Schleicher to the concept of the *wellentheorie*, or wave theory, first posited by Johannes Schmidt and later developed by Hugo Schuchardt into a theory of *Kreolization* [creolization]. Where traditionally linguists understood language change by the tree model as occurring once and for all, with the diverging branches of language losing contact with more distantly related branches, the wave theory accommodates a more sophisticated distribution of change and innovation through intersected patterns.¹⁴ As Schuchardt suggests, the continuum of sound changes seen over a broad geographical region as “a series of contiguous dialects” shows evidence that these changes

¹³ “Due recenti lettere glottologiche e una poscritta nuova,” *Archivio glottologico italiano* 10 (1886–1888), 31.

¹⁴ Ferdinand de Saussure cites the wave theory model in the *Cours de linguistique générale*, an often overlooked promotion of an antagonist’s point of view. See “Part Four: Chapter IV: Propagation of Linguistic Waves,” *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986), 207.

“spread out from one point in the form of radiation.”¹⁵

All of these claims made by dialectologists, and particularly the ethnological, interactive conception of language change, lead to a basic principle of scientific neutrality with respect to the nature and function of the spoken dialect. Because speech held a peculiarly low esteem in the cultural criticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the divorce of cultural criticism from linguistics had dramatic consequences. Dialectologists protested against the use of dialect and its features to make value judgments or moral claims about the communities to which these features belong. The polemic between Graziadio Isaia Ascoli and Alessandro Manzoni (covered in Chapter 1) over the government’s role in promoting social cohesiveness in the newly unified Italian state contains the longer debate between prescriptive grammar and descriptive linguistics *in nuce*: where Manzoni proposed a refined, fixed standard of the spoken Florentine dialect as the tool that might unify isolated, dispersed dialect communities across the Italian peninsula, Ascoli saw the hopelessness of such prescriptive measures because language, seen through its chorographic and sociological dimensions, resists imposed boundaries and rules.

Critical Approaches to Speech in Lyric

By using the historical, geographically-bound conception of speech that comes from dialectology to read the historical nature of poetic diction, my argument offers an alternative position to the theoretical claims and reading methods of two major (and conflicting) approaches to the study of lyric that have been pursued in recent years. The first is the argument put forward

¹⁵ “On Sound Laws,” 49. See also, for its use in a classic dialect study, *Der Vokalismus des Vulgärlateins*, Vol. 1 (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1866), 94.

by Virginia Jackson (and the Victorian studies circle of historical poetics) that a categorical or generic definition of lyric poetry is a scholarly fiction that has arisen from a misunderstanding of the consequences of historical acts of reading. Jackson argues that the idea we have of modern lyric poetry, beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century, came about “through the development of reading practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that become the practice of literary criticism”; in fact, that, as she continues, “lyric is the creation of print and critical mediation.”¹⁶ Against the “lyricization” of poetry by critics, as she refers to it, Jackson and likeminded scholars deconstruct the reading methods inherited from the New Criticism that, in their removal of poetry from the world to consider it only as an aesthetic form, have papered over the crucial historical particularities of influence, production, and reception that produced these very same aesthetic features. This method calls itself “historical poetics” for returning the historical contingencies of reception to the category of poetics.

However, in staking the reading of lyric not to features within the poem but to a history of reading, Jackson’s work demonstrates that, like Derrida before her, she values the textual over the oral aspect of poetics—and in fact that the method of historical poetics draws its account of the function and nature of poetic language exclusively from what is contained in the written historical record. This is not merely a matter of emphasis on archival studies, which might uncover neglected or lost resources for reading the language and style of poems. Rather, shifting from reading poems to reading critics-reading-poems is a method of evaluation as much as it is critique. In her article on Longfellow and the institution of an “American” lyric, Jackson distinguishes between the public perception of Longfellow’s project as “the spontaneous overflow

¹⁶ *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 8.

of popular feeling” and the “representation” of “*people’s feelings*” (as Longfellow himself puts it).¹⁷ This argument contains an underlying judgment of expression and representation as poetic techniques. The preference for the expressive over the representational prizes the textual over the oral by making key assumptions about the nature of language to express and represent: that speech always comes before writing; because of its primacy; that the spoken contains a more authentic version of emotion than the written; and that the spoken is ephemeral and incapable of being translated, again authentically, into a written poem. These assumptions inform Jackson’s critical evaluation of Longfellow and also the methods of periodization that the Victorian Studies scholars of historical poetics use to make their claims of historical specificity. Jackson and her fellow scholars critique the presumption of locating any shift from an oral to a written tradition within a particular historical moment by condemning *all* non-textual evidence as mere guesswork. And yet even as she seals off this particular moment in the history of civilization (just as she seals off the same moment writ small during the composition process of poems) from the bounds of critical study, Jackson proposes in her extensive critique of “lyricization” that the manner in which poems are collected, edited, and published shapes them into something they are not. The question for historical poetics, as practiced by Jackson and her colleagues, is: if we can only speak of lyric as a series of mediations, then what is being mediated? Is there an original (speech, poem) behind the critic’s fiction? If not, what is the point of criticism?

If Jackson’s position begs the question of whether lyric is a spoken or written form, then the argument of Jonathan Culler, the American academy’s most established advocate of

¹⁷ “Longfellow’s Tradition; or, Picture-Writing a Nation,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (December 1998): 473.

structuralist poetry criticism, raises a set of related issues: namely, the role of language's contextual and relational features in establishing a social framework for lyric. Culler's claims about the underlying stability of lyric features provide a formalist defense against those, like Jackson, who would dispute that formal features of poems cannot be generalized to either absolute or transhistorical claims. For Culler, general claims about lyric are possible because of the persistent resemblances of brief, non-narrative poems through evolving generic and formal models. In an early work on structuralist poetics, Culler identifies three related modes of lyric: the fact of distance and impersonality; the expectation of totality or coherence; and the claim of significance.¹⁸ In a recent essay on the language of lyric, Culler argues that the distinctive present tense of lyric functions as a ritualistic feature to present a timeless, unutterable aspect, and thereby resisting the representational or fictional aspect of literary language *tout court*.¹⁹ In both of these discussions, Culler brings a commonsense notion of genre ("conventional expectations") to a specific reading method that brings formal analysis into conversation with the patterns structuring other institutions of human life: natural life cycles, social etiquette, experiences of time, religious iconography.

However, Culler's focus on the uses and aspect of language comes with its own limitations. The premise under which he operates is one common to structuralism's inheritance from Saussure: that in order to characterize the nature of an individual utterance its function must be explained as part of the broader framework of its language system. Culler pursues this structural inquiry with the idea that at base it possesses a basic theoretical truth: a feature such as

¹⁸ See *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1975), 188–220.

¹⁹ "The Language of Lyric," *Thinking Verse* 4:1 (2014), 160–176.

tense, for example, could be discussed both in terms of its synchronic nature (as a function of language) and its diachronic nature (as a history of evolving functions). Culler's reading method interprets the formal features of lyric through the same structural elements that define communication and tradition in the larger social world of language. When considering an individual poem, Culler focuses on the organization of the poem's language as a system of its own composed of the attitude of poet to addressee, the relation of present utterance to deep time, and the movement from specific allusion to general reference. But for Culler, as for Saussure, the historical promise of the *langue/parole* system is never quite fulfilled. As Roy Harris argues in *The Language Myth*, Saussure's focus on *la langue* instead of *le langage* allows him to "free language studies from the tyranny of the historian" and place it within the individual mind, as "systems of cognitive structures."²⁰ Harris identifies two aspects of the diachronic that Saussure substitutes for historical depth: "cotemporality" and "succession," which are two aspects of "the individual's everyday experience of language," provide "unique contextualization" oriented toward the speaker of a language, instead of the macro-scale perspective that a historian of language would study.²¹ Therefore, Saussure avoids history by having it both ways: language could not be properly historical because of the importance of mental concepts for the theory of the sign, but could also not be properly psychological-cognitive because of the mind's reliance on a *passé* nomenclature theory of language (i.e., words are names of things, not names of ideas).

Structuralism's narrow sense of history (history as succession) means that it cannot accommodate the expressive content of deep history—only its forms. Therefore, despite the

²⁰ *The Language Myth* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 46.

²¹ *Language Myth*, 154–155.

ability to identify persistent patterns of lyric form from the ancient to the modern, structuralist categories remain unable to account for the expressive or connotative elements of language as anything other than attitudes to or relations surrounding expression. Paul de Man, Culler's contemporary and fellow advocate of the "linguistic turn" in literary criticism, suggests that the divorce of history from structure was a paradigmatic shift in modern thought. De Man argues that, for the modern writer, the very act of writing engenders a distance that forces modernity to recede from the text: "If history is not to become sheer regression or paralysis, it depends on modernity for its duration and renewal; but modernity cannot assert itself without being at once swallowed up and reintegrated into a regressive historical process."²² The modern writer, De Man further claims, sees his very craft as the mediating experience of modernity, in which the "ambivalence" of composition ought to be seen as "both an act and an interpretative process that follows after an act with which it cannot coincide"—or, that is, an act of expression and the framing act of composition.²³ Echoing Saussure's impoverished notion of diachrony, De Man concludes that literature exists "as a plurality of moments" that the writer may represent "as a succession of moments or a duration."²⁴ For De Man as well as Culler, therefore, formal analysis can only describe systems of meaning by identifying attitudes to them—something like Romantic irony, in De Man's view; something like pragmatic intention, in Culler's—without admitting an underlying historical continuity, an essential core, to meaning as it changes over time.

Though neither of the approaches to lyric I have mentioned takes up an explicit position on the philosophies of language or speech, the work of Ferdinand de Saussure remains an

²² "Literary History and Literary Modernity," *Daedalus* 99, no. 2 (1970): 391.

²³ "Literary History and Literary Modernity," 392.

²⁴ "Literary History and Literary Modernity," 398.

implicit source for defining the place of language in culture. The limitations of Saussure's version of speech (*parole*) for literary criticism can be seen in the relatively thin conceptions of cultural and literary tradition that arise from the basic principles of his *Cours*. Perhaps the most basic premise of the *Cours* (a fact that "no one contests," Saussure admits) is the claim that the linguistic sign is arbitrary, meaning that "there is no natural link between the signifier and the signified."²⁵ Not only has a generation of critics come to emphasize the central place that Saussure himself gives to this simple fact (citing Rudolf Engler's notes on the lectures: "the hierarchical place of this truth is at the very summit"²⁶), but they have elaborated Saussure's remarks to suggest that "since there are no fixed universal concepts or fixed universal signifiers, the signified itself is arbitrary, and so is the signifier."²⁷ But the quality of this claim, while it may have been important for theoretical reasons in the history of philosophy and language, remains dubious as a foundation for literary critical judgments. As Roy Harris explains in his commentary on the *Cours*, Saussure insists that language features are arbitrary in a way that does not resemble the arbitrariness of other kinds of social institutions, which cannot be changed or removed without material consequences in social life.²⁸

And yet through the work of dialectologists we can raise the main objection to Saussure's synchronic philosophy of language, one that is still relevant for thinking about speech and poetic language in the work of critics such as Jackson and Culler: that historical continuity motivates the survival of linguistic elements and meaning in language. While the arbitrary nature of the

²⁵ *Ferdinand de Saussure*, rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 28.

²⁶ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, vol. 2, ed. Rudolf Engler (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1974), 153.

²⁷ *Ferdinand de Saussure*, 33.

²⁸ Harris, *Reading Saussure* (London: Duckworth, 1987), 68.

sign may be simply true in terms of the ordinary word usage in communication, the ability for words to carry meaning that changes over time cannot be simply arbitrary. In order for meaning to be preserved for future use, communities are motivated to attach words to their references. The relationship between signifier and signified is in fact natural and inevitable and not at all arbitrary, particularly in the sense that matters for literary interpretation: communities preserve words for the values they create between individuals and collectives through the traditions that outlive them.

Method and Chapter Descriptions

Though I have remarked on the theoretical stakes of my position against the approaches of American historical poetics and structuralism, I feel it necessary to offer a précis of my reading method with a brief example, in order to show firsthand the comparative dimensions of the lexical, historical approach pursued in the chapters that follow. An exemplary case can be found in one of the great nineteenth-century lyric poems in Italian, Giacomo Leopardi's "L'Infinito" (1819).²⁹ Many critics have sought to read the themes of philosophical pessimism and poetic nostalgia as the poet's individual expression of the general human emotion of loss, where self-negation seems a fitting action in world full of "sovrumani / Silenzi, e profondissima quiete" ["superhuman silences, and the deepest quiet"]. In these themes of general and specific loss, Leopardi testifies to the power of the imagination, a common Romantic trope. However, such a canonical reading neglects several of the poem's central linguistic features, most important

²⁹ Jonathan Culler provides an extended close reading of this poem in his recent book, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

among these its striking, speechlike diction. Indeed, focus on diction provides the ground for reading a rich depth of semantic history that the poem tantalizingly suggests right at the surface of its word choices. To begin with, the poem's language belongs to a refined poetic register in the tradition of Petrarch and the *stilnovo* lyric but distinctly different from the elevation of Petrarch's own word choices. The poem's plainspoken diction might equally strike readers as surprising because it does not closely resemble the speech of Leopardi's own historical era. Nor is it precisely the *vulgare illustre* described by Dante in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, a *lingua communis* based on words selected from a range of spoken dialects. Instead the poem's diction evokes the historical vernacular of Vulgar Latin, the closest ancestral spoken tongue to the Italian.³⁰ The relative stability of this lexicon for ten centuries provides a key for understanding the thematic meaning of local word and phrasing choices as an outcome of deep semantic history.

In my reading, the literal, surface presence of the stable historical vernacular in Leopardi's diction heightens the two key semantic fields within the poem's small lexicon: the curious use of a common vernacular word for drowning ("s'annega") as the metaphorical suggestion of a later specialized word for an act of religious penitence ("abnegazione"); and the climactic metaphor of shipwreck ("il naufragar") as the ironic experience of loss through the effacement of self. These thematically related words appear in the poem's final lines:

Così tra questa
immensità s'annega il pensier mio:
e il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare.

³⁰ One of Leopardi's lifelong intellectual fascinations was the nascent field of Romance philology, and in particular the reconstruction of Vulgar Latin from textual sources. His Vulgar Latin etymologies in the *Zibaldone* were unpublished during his lifetime, but have come to be recognized as prescient descriptions of now-standard claims of Romance philology, as well as insights into the early adoptions of classical philology for the study of the vernacular. See Chapter 2, Section 1 for more on this topic.

And so amidst this
Immensity my thought is drowned:
And the shipwreck is sweet to me in this sea.

The poem's crux in these lines is contained in the deep figuration of the feeling of drowning (the nothingness of the sea, the nothingness of death) as a shipwreck. As Hans Blumenberg has written, in Western cultural metaphorology the *topos* of the sea serves to describe the "naturally given boundary of the realm of human activities"; given this fact, shipwreck, therefore, is the "legitimate' result" of all seafaring.³¹ Leopardi's word choices here, then, raise the deep metaphor of shipwreck into a question of semantic meaning. And, like so many of Leopardi's words, *s'annega* comes from the historical vernacular. Etymologists attribute a Vulgar Latin origin to *annegare* (speculatively *adnecare*³²), a contrast to its homograph *annegare*, cognate with the English "abnegate," from classical Latin sources meaning "deny." In Late Latin and in early Italian sources alike, these meanings bend toward one another: the classical Latin sense of "denial" (*abnegare*) is preserved in the ecclesiastical Latin notion of spiritual "abnegation," and the vulgar Latin meaning of "drown" (*adnecare*) is extended by early Italian vernacular writers to figurative senses of "being undone" or "being lost."³³ In that transitional period between the decline of the classical Latin belonging to state institutions and elite culture, and the rise of the vernacular, the word meaning finds its crucial conceptual core. Leopardi's figurative poetic usage

³¹ Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. Steven Rendall (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 8; 10.

³² See Silvio Pieri, "Gli omeótrofi italiani," *Archivio glottologico italiano* 15 (1901), 138. Pieri cites Gustav Körting, *Lateinisch-romanisches Wörterbuch* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1891), entry 5575. All subsequent citations to language reference sources in the dissertation will be made in shorthand by last name, with entry title or number.

³³ See *Tesoro della lingua italiana degli origini*, "annegare (1), v."

evokes the historical convergence of *annegare* by his use of the reflexive form that makes ambiguous the poet's agency: is it the intentional, conscious *abnegation* of his thoughts, or is it the overwhelming *drowning* of that thought in an immense sea of other cares? Leopardi's word selection makes the poem's crux hinge on a figurative usage between registers of the word's deep past. The philosophical concept of self-denial, so crucial to Leopardi's body of work, gains its richness in the poem from this nexus of meaning. A philological reading sensitive to these elements of word history therefore might supplement the work of a close reading that attends to the structural features of utterance and dialogue, as well as a close reading that brings into its analysis the historical particulars of textual production and reception.

As this analysis shows, my reading method has much in common with the fine-grained analysis of "close reading" that has dominated the American academy since the New Criticism. The understanding of individual words as part of the poem's artistic whole suggests indeed the kind of exhaustive, ahistorical modes of attention that belong to that school of criticism, in contrast to the cultural studies methods of New Historicism, New Formalism, and the American working group in Historical Poetics led by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, which continue to recycle the methods of close reading with a self-conscious distance from their extreme conclusions. However, my focus on individual words goes beyond the boundaries of the poem, as the Leopardi example proves, and in this sense outstrips the narrow focus on the aesthetic whole. I substitute narrow focus on the word as an integral whole of conceptual meaning that creates poetic meaning when used by poets in poems. This shift in focus from poem to word changes the role of intention in my understanding of poetic language. My reading method draws from seemingly conflicting critical models: both the early critical influences on the New Criticism,

including T. S. Eliot and William Empson, who saw fit to include communicative intention as part of the poetic or aesthetic design of the poem, and also the infamous New Critical dogma of W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley known as the “intentional fallacy,” which holds authorial intention in suspicious as a source of interpretive value for the critic. My method takes into account the poet’s intention of using words with traditional meaning for communicative value, and also takes into account the poet’s designs in using diction and formal features to create and artistic whole. But I treat individual intentions merely as part of a long history of meaning, such that poets use language as a means to their specific, local intentions, while the changing value of and the self-conscious reuse of poetic motifs and specialized lexical meanings plays as important a role in poetic meaning.

Such a perspective on language and intention requires me to face contemporary debates over poetic language and the lyric genre head on. Thus, in the individual chapters of this dissertation, I challenge many of the assumptions of modern literary criticism inherited from the dominant philosophy of language in the European tradition, beginning with Locke and continuing with Saussure:

1. Speech is inherently less stable, less permanent than the written word
2. Poetic meaning should be interpreted by its immediate context of usage
3. Poetic “speakers” use language as an individual person does
4. Poetic diction is a purified, idealized version of speech in the world

As I have suggested in the preceding remarks, by erecting artificial barriers between poetry, language, and history, critics can find themselves operating under a set of limited and often dubious assumptions about language—a major problem given that the spoken language is the very medium of the art. In each of four chapters on lyric and speech, then, I directly address one

or more of the above truisms, and then propose instead an alternative claim for how a historical conception of speech might offer the poetry critic a new set of tools for reading the lyric.

The introductory theoretical chapter, “Vulgar Philology: Lyric, Speech, and History,” provides a general overview of the shift I have described above from philology to dialectology during the period 1780–1890. There I draw from the commonsense idea suggested by Samuel Johnson in the preface to his *Dictionary of the English Language* that speech is chaotic and ephemeral compared to the order and precision of writing. As this chapter makes clear, the Johnsonian idea of speech has its roots in John Locke’s “translation” theory of communication, a theory that held sway in England through the period of Romanticism. Abroad the influence of Locke’s idealism had drastically different effects. The chapter discusses how the Italian critic Melchiorre Cesarotti and the dialectologist Graziadio Isaia Ascoli received Locke’s idealist conception (through Condillac) that language is fundamentally a representation of thought, and that it therefore possess a mixed nature, as a theoretical warrant for describing Italian’s inherent “*plurilinguismo*” (multidialectalism) in the centuries-long debates over the Italian “*questione della lingua*” (the status of Italian as the heir to classical Latin amidst the continuum of related dialects on the Italian peninsula). Because of its ancient and modern sediment of words and grammar from its linguistic inheritance in Classical and Vulgar Latin, Italian allows us to see the hybridity of language as fundamentally a mixture of geographical anachronisms—not as a systematic language that is imperfect or inadequate to thought. This speech-focused theory of language becomes the occasion for a comparison between historical poetic methods in the criticism of Francesco De Sanctis and Alexander Veselovsky. By contrasting their analyses of language and genre, the chapter shows how the lyric poem, as the nexus of social and personal

forms of speech, proves to be the genre most capable of depicting speech.

In the subsequent two chapters, I focus on two canonical poets of the early nineteenth century, Giacomo Leopardi and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in whose work I find a model of lyric speech based on the figuration found in the linguistic strata of individual words. In the chapter titled “Absolute Metaphor and Historical Vernacular in Leopardi’s *Canti*,” I address the commonplace idea that the ambiguity of meaning inherent in speech arises from the arbitrary relation of the signifier to of the sign—a systematic and synchronic argument. Rather, for Leopardi and for many poets of the period, the relation of individual signs to the larger system, even if arbitrary, should be seen as the product of ongoing historical change that works to intentionalize immediate meaning by appeal to related meanings that are no longer current or are fully obsolete. The fact that Leopardi studiously avoids an erudite diction by embracing a vulgar register suggests an important revision to our understanding of his deeply learned poems. Leopardi’s experimentation with an anachronistic vernacular and late Latin style in his middle-period idylls presages the turn in his poetics to the late style, or *nuova poetica leopardiana*: a metaphorical system of words from everyday, spoken Italian that evoke deep, cultural concepts. Leopardi’s poetic language thus achieves its figurative power by its ability to layer personal emotion within deep cultural images through the vernacular.

In the chapter on Coleridge, I focus on the commonplace concept of the poet as a speaker of the poem, and argue that Coleridge’s own reputation as a talker *par excellence* allows us to see the lyric speaker itself as a necessary fiction to perform the hybrid language of Coleridge’s most esteemed lyric poems. Coleridge’s diction betrays a mode of speech moving intentionally between the French and Latinate register of the English scientific/philosophical tradition, and the

Germanic register of English speech. To show the experimental extremes of this superhuman speaker, I begin with readings of Coleridge's pastiche of medieval German *Minnesinger* song and its later prose/poetry hybrid version, "The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree." Through reading Coleridge's poetics in the practical criticism of I. A. Richards and William Empson, I argue for the importance of "complex words" as a manifestation of speaker capacity. I conclude this discussion by turning to the Conversation Poems "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement" and "Frost at Midnight." In these famous lyric meditations, Coleridge evokes the philosophical source for his idea of in the German Romantic concepts of *die Stille*, for which he coins the complex word "silence." For Coleridge, hybridity—senses and sounds belonging to different language families—enriches the imaginative and spiritual values of language.

The fourth and final chapter of the dissertation considers the rise of dialect poetry in England as an ongoing interrogation of the old idea that poetic diction is an artificially pure version of the spoken language. Instead, the chapter demonstrates the natural consequences of writing, as Donald Davie describes, in "pure diction": to expose the hybrid mix of all artificial selections of language, and then "to purify the language by enlivening dead metaphor."³⁴ To describe the impact of dialect on thinking about language, I consider the genre of the dialect dictionary as it is set forth in the introductions to many early examples of these, especially by the important and neglected introduction by Jonathan Boucher in his unfinished dialect dictionary of 1832. As Boucher suggests, an alternative reading of the history of language, in which dialects hold equal social preeminence with national languages, is to recover the potential for speech to exert a pervasive influence on the culture at large. Through reading several early verse eclogues

³⁴ *Purity of English Diction*, 32.

and two experimental purist prose works by the Dorset dialect poet William Barnes [*An Outline of Rede-Craft (Logic)* (1880) and *A Dictionary of Animal Names* (1886)] I argue that the very work of limiting language by diction works to create deep, conceptual connections across general and particular, national and local, institutional and vernacular registers. By using an artificially standardized language with no real-world equivalent speech community, these works demonstrate a basic function of all poetry: to make visible for readers the gap between pure language and the mixture of terms, registers, and styles that constitute our everyday speech.

The major guiding metaphor of the project, which recurs in key places throughout these chapters, is Bakhtin's notion of the "possible chorus"—the implied aesthetic whole of a speaker that the poet designs to capture the individual and collective hybridity of lyric utterance. The lyric speaker is a "voice that feels a possible choral support outside itself," Bakhtin writes, based on his modest solidarity within the choral song: "In a lyrical work," Bakhtin writes, "I have not yet stepped forward out of the chorus in the capacity of its hero-protagonist.... I am still wholly within a chorus and I speak from within a chorus."³⁵ The persistence of a chorus as the implied performative background of the lyric poem has many explanations, but I believe that the hybrid nature of individual and collective, modern and ancient, underwrites the survival of lyric and its renewed interest among critics in the contemporary field. In the epilogue to the dissertation, I will return to the notion of "possible chorus" in a brief reading of the Chorus to Alessandro Manzoni's tragedy *Il Conte di Carmagnola*, the first major Italian lyric poem of the nineteenth century, as an archetype of speech in lyric as the individual and collective voice in the lyric poem.

³⁵ "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," in *Art and Answerability*, trans. Vadim Liapunov, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 170–171.

Ultimately, I hope to be prospective through the critical methodology of my readings: I believe there is a need for literary scholars to reconsider their implicit allegiance to a simple concept of speech that ignores the historical dimensions of poetic language. For a hybrid genre like the lyric, dependent as it is on the deep history and evolution of speech as a touchstone, the historical and lexical reading approach remains challenging but vital to the ongoing critical debates over the nature and function of lyric.

Chapter 1:
Vulgar Philology: Speech, History, and Lyric

“I am not yet so lost in lexicography, as to forget that *words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven.*”
—Samuel Johnson, Preface to the *Dictionary*

In the Preface to his landmark 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*, Samuel Johnson articulates a well-known paradox in the lexicographer’s efforts to “secure [language] from corruption and decay” in light of the ultimate futility of this work:

Academies have been instituted, to guard the avenues of their languages, to retain fugitives, and repulse intruders; but their vigilance and activity have hitherto been vain; sounds are too volatile and subtile for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength.¹

Dr. Johnson’s lament, through its insightful comparison to the French and Italian academies, bases itself on a now-familiar statement of the hierarchy of written and spoken language: while the cultural academies of nations might attempt to “guard the avenues of their language” by establishing standards of vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and pronunciation, the “volatile and subtile” sounds of everyday speech prove uncheckable by “legal restraints.”

Despite its colorful phrasing, Johnson’s position on the degeneracy of speech was far from innovative for his time. The eighteenth-century commonplace that Johnson reinforces in his Preface and in the larger project of the *Dictionary* has a familiar ring to it: that because speech constantly changes, by its nature it is idiosyncratic, impermanent, and irrational. Though more judicious in his application of prescriptive rules, Johnson held tight to the position of Jonathan

¹ *Johnson on the English Language*, ed. Gwin J. Kolb and Robert DeMaria, Jr. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 105 (hereafter cited as *EL*).

Swift, who wrote in the 1712 *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* that it is “better a Language should not be wholly perfect, than it should be perpetually changing.”² Where Swift saw the degeneracy of language as vicious corruption from a range of evil influences, however, Johnson’s view maintained its nuance and generosity. As Johnson suggests in his 1747 *Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*, the nature of language reflects the frail nature of humankind: “Changes will be almost always informing us, that language is the work of man, of a being from whom permanence and stability cannot be derived.”³ Leo Braudy, taking the idea that such a problem must be personal, writes that Johnson “saw in language a medium as fallible and weak as his own body, but one that might, through the mediation of his mind and will, be capable of permanence and power.”⁴ The lexicographer maintains the speech paradox by his natural human desire to work against the decay of the human species, as well as against his own mortality.

Johnson’s commonplace on speech seems so well-known and patently true that it may not be readily apparent where the idea comes from, and why it matters to put it into question. In fact, the chestnut on speech’s instability and inferiority was there from the beginning. In the first treatise in Europe on the vernacular language, Dante Alighieri’s 1305 *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante distinguishes between two species of spoken language: the familiar idea of the domestic vernacular, a universal and natural tongue that “we learn without any formal instruction, by

² *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (London: Benjamin Tooke, 1712), 31.

³ *EL*, 44.

⁴ *Native Informant: Essays on Film, Fiction, and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 110.

imitating our nurses”⁵; and the *vulgare illustre* (“illustrious vernacular”), an artificial, curated diction modeled by the *stilnovo* lyric of Dante and his circle. The domestic vernacular, in its variety across the world, demonstrates the *confusione linguarum*, or confusion of languages, after the fall of the Tower at Babel (*DVE* I.VIII.1–5). The *vulgare illustre* will then work to refine the domestic speech through its nobility as an example of professional, elite use of a natural, universal language, as Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo describes, based on the prior model of Latin: “La possibilita di una sua fissazione normativa a livello letterario non e neppure concepibile senza il modello di lingua colta *regulata* e non corrutibile rappresentato dal latino” [“The possibility that [the *vulgar illustre*] might be established as a literary norm is not even conceivable without the model of a learned language that is *rule-bound* and not corruptible, represented by Latin”].⁶ From this early vantage point, we can readily see the fundamental principle of humanistic prescriptivism at work, an attitude that squares with the later English critics: that refining the spoken language by the elite standard of distinguished instructors (*doctores illustres*, in the words of Dante) improves culture.

For the British intellectuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the source of the dogmatic belief in the degeneracy of speech arose closer to home. As many scholars have noted, Johnson’s own view of language reflects the consensus held by the British intellectual elite after the 1689 publication of John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.⁷ In the second book of the *Essay*, Locke proposes a new description of the relation of ideas to words that

⁵ *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. and trans. Steven Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Book I, Section I, paragraphs 2–3. Hereafter cited as *DVE* with book, section, and paragraph number.

⁶ Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, *Linguistica e retorica di Dante* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1978), 31.

⁷ James McLaverty, “From Definition to Explanation: Locke’s Influence on Johnson’s Dictionary,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47, no. 3 (July–September 1986): 377–94; and Robert DeMaria, Jr., *Johnson’s Dictionary and the Language of Learning* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

directly takes on the medieval philosophy of language that Dante shared, which is based on a presumption by humans that “the abstract Ideas that they have in their Minds, are such, as agree to the Things existing without them, to which they are referred; and are the same also, to which the Names they give them, do by the Use and Propriety of that Language belong.”⁸ Hans Aarsleff refers to this theory (what Locke calls the “double conformity” of ideas) as the “Adamic” doctrine, since it argues that “languages even now, in spite of their multiplicity and seeming chaos, contain elements of the original perfect language created by Adam when he named the animals in his prelapsarian state.”⁹ Locke proposes to upend this doctrine with an elegant but monumental innovation in the history of philosophy: he claims that words have no “natural connexion” to ideas, even though it seems so based on their “long and familiar use.” Instead Locke claims that they actually possess the same “perfectly arbitrary” relationship that ideas also have in relationship to things:

That [words] *signify* only Men’s peculiar *Ideas*, and that *by a perfectly arbitrary Imposition* is evident in that they often fail to excite in others (even that use the same Language) the same *Ideas*, we take them to be the Signs of.¹⁰

For Locke, the arbitrary nature of words to ideas is the only plausible basis for understanding both how individual intention works from the individual’s point of view (intention shapes our ideas) and how communication works from the point of view of the whole system of exchange (communication fails because of the contingencies that arise in the asymmetrical things-words-ideas circuit). G. H. R. Parkinson refers to Locke’s principle as the “translation theory of

⁸ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 386 (hereafter cited as *Essay*).

⁹ Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 25.

¹⁰ *Essay*, 408.

understanding”: “The speaker as it were translates his ideas into language; the man who hears and understands him translates the language into his own ideas.”¹¹ The analogy of translation helpfully captures the idea of loss as the basis of communication. Thus, even in Locke’s rejection of Dante’s original philosophy of language, we find speech once again tarred with the same reputation for inaccuracy, instability, and inferiority.

The enduring influence of Locke’s essay on the history of European linguistics and cultural criticism can hardly be overstated.¹² Writing in the Preface to the *Dictionary* that “language is only the instrument of science, and words are but the signs of ideas,” Johnson has fully assimilated Locke’s concluding remark in the *Essay* that ideas and words are “the great instruments of knowledge.”¹³ In that concluding statement, Locke synthesizes a grand argument that the distinct relation of words to things in the world and ideas in the mind defines all human understanding. Following Locke, a generation of thinkers saw the central task of the philosophy of language as the study of meaning (communication of ideas through words) rather than the study of reference (identity of words to the things to which they refer). Furthermore, by directing language study toward the philosophy of mind, Hans Aarsleff argues, Locke inoculated the British academy against the spread of historical and comparative linguistics from Germany.¹⁴

¹¹ “The Translation Theory of Understanding,” in *Communication and Understanding*, ed. Godfrey Vesey (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1977), 3.

¹² The critic and judge James Fitzjames Stephen, in the neglected but important 1866 article “Locke’s Essay,” makes the plausible claim that the *Essay* was “so thoroughly assimilated...that large numbers of people naturally suppose themselves to have read it, when in point of fact they never have.” *Horae Sabbaticae*, vol. 2 (London and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1892), 108.

¹³ *Essay*, 721.

¹⁴ See “Locke’s Influence,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 252–89. In “Eighteenth-Century Doctrines Concerning Language and Mind,” the first chapter of *The Study of Language in England, 1780–1860*, Aarsleff focuses on Condillac’s extension of Locke’s notion that ideas remain rooted in sensation. See below for more on this influence.

Through its disciplinary influence, indeed, Locke's theory of language promoted two major claims that, as I see it, held sway in the dominant criticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: firstly, that any descriptions of language's cultural and historical function take as granted, implicitly or explicitly, the origin of language in reason and thought (rationalism); and, following from this, that because words, with careful use, may ultimately realize the order and accuracy of rational ideas, communication can be improved by human intervention (prescriptivism).¹⁵ Ultimately, I believe, many early historicist thinkers based their innovations on (and often perpetuated) the underlying rationalism set out in Locke's philosophy.

The fact that Johnson's claim about the volatility of speech filtered down from Dante, distantly, and then from Locke, more directly, matters greatly because literary criticism since the time of Johnson has tended to rely on an assumption, implicitly or explicitly, of speech's inferiority to thought. Though the rationalist and prescriptivist elements of Locke's theory underwrite much of the practical criticism of the eighteenth century, as well as the philosophical criticism of Romanticism, Locke's legacy in the theoretical linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure means that his influence has lasted well through the twentieth century and into the present.¹⁶ The

¹⁵ I acknowledge the similar division made by Nicholas Hudson of the interpretations made of the Lockean theory of language: the arbitrariness of the "sign" and the further claim that "words were much more than outward signs, but had a fundamental role in the formation of ideas and their organization into rational thought." But I maintain the additional significance of Locke's prescriptions for stabilizing language, precisely because Johnson leans so heavily on the idea in his Preface. "Theories of Language," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. IV: The Eighteenth Century*, ed. H. B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 335.

¹⁶ Hans Aarsleff has made the most consistent, cogent defense of the Locke-Saussure lineage, which ultimately holds up against more recent scholarship objecting to the connection in philosophy (Roy Harris) and intellectual history (Boris Gasparov). See *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); Roy Harris, *Reading Saussure* (London: Duckworth, 1987); and Boris Gasparov, *Beyond Pure Reason: Ferdinand de*

(slight) revision of Locke’s claim by Saussure—from the arbitrary nature of word to idea, to the arbitrary nature of *signifié* to *signifiant*—reinforces the underlying principle of rationalism, even as it moves to reject the notion that prescriptive means of any kind can improve the fundamental mismatch between ideas and words.

In critical disciplines devoted to the recovery of historical and social context, including historicism and cultural studies, the implicit rejection of a historical concept of speech demonstrates the fundamental reliance on Locke’s belief in the rational origins of language. Some scholars associated with a working group in transatlantic historical poetics, led by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, demonstrate their allegiance to Johnson and Locke’s implicit assumptions through their focus on the contextual cues of aesthetic and cultural history surrounding their texts, as well as the literary standards and norms recorded in non-literary documents. Meredith Martin, as an example of this method, argues that “metrical communities” formed in Victorian England by the peculiarly urgent methods of teaching English poetic meter in primary and secondary schools, resulting in a “proliferation of prosodic theories” in order to “reflect the greatness of English poetry and adequately measure the English language.”¹⁷ Thus, by reading school books and treatises on meter, Martin illustrates the general desire to “stabilize and define English national identity.”¹⁸ Though not affiliated with this group, Andrew Elfenbein writes in *Romanticism and The Rise of English* of the similarly conceived problem of the “effects of English’s standardization on literature” through the lens of philology, which shows how

Saussure’s Philosophy of Language and Its Early Romantic Antecedents (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ *The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture, 1860–1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 5.

¹⁸ Martin, 9.

literary works represent questions of “bad and good usage.”¹⁹ Ultimately, Elfenbein, like Martin, focuses on characterizing historically contingent modes of writing; “less a history of literature,” as Elfenbein puts it, “than an account of new forms of literariness possible only after the standardization of English in the eighteenth century.”²⁰ Though in such studies these scholars recognize the important relationship of prescription to practice, this method of period characterization rehashes the old Johnsonian view of language even as it historicizes that view: language change is taken to be uniform rather than idiosyncratic and partial; standardization is considered to be progressive, and therefore accomplished in incremental stages; and, most tellingly, the narrative history of standardization of prosody or of grammar conveniently reflects moral, spiritual, patriotic, or other kinds of beliefs that we recognize as pervasive in the period (Victorian or Romanticism). Instead of gaining a new identity, speech—the putative focus of these studies—becomes the inferior member of another hierarchy: the grammar or prosody manual, advertisements for elocutionary services, memoirs of famous orators, and so on.

My larger dissertation project aims to call into question the persistence of the intellectual tradition treating speech as the handmaiden of thought, and equally as a barometer of cultural standards or status rather than as an integral, descriptive part of the spatial and temporal dimensions of literary history. In order to discuss in later chapters how the poets and poet-critics of the nineteenth century reconceived of the “volatile and subtile sounds” of speech as a historical thing, with a continuous, material tradition and a capacity for deep, cultural meaning, this chapter begins with a basic question raised by Johnson’s claims in the Preface: ought literary

¹⁹ *Romanticism and the Rise of English* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 7.

²⁰ Elfenbein, 13.

historians read texts according to the prescriptions of taste and usage that lexicographers and literary critics make when they attempt to “enchain syllables”? Or, ought they to identify and interpret the historical and sociological factors that comprise the “volatile and subtile” sounds of the spoken tongue itself, too ephemeral it would seem for prescriptive standards? In fact, which is the real version of speech? To the extent that grammars and dictionaries impose rules (and prohibitions) concerning the spoken language, studying them to learn something about the language they guide seems like trying to learn about cows from studying the fences that pen them in. Furthermore, even if we can agree that such texts reflect consensus views about usage, what can they tell us ultimately about literary uses of words, which seek to break convention as much as they adhere to it?

I argue in this chapter that Johnson’s reluctant and realistic prescriptivism, however its defining influence in England and abroad, should not be understood as the final word in cultural criticism on the question of speech. As a counter to the schema I outlined above, I propose an alternative history of language scholarship as it unfolded in Italy in the period from Johnson to Saussure (roughly 1750–1915). The opening sections of the chapter trace the departure from Locke through Condillac and Cesarotti to the Italian dialectologists of the nineteenth-century, based on the gradual move away from the cognitive, rationalist theory of speech toward a rationalist but simultaneously expressive and sociohistorical conception of speech. Based on their knowledge of a longstanding vernacular literary tradition as well as a discipline of comparative linguistics sensitive to the complex sociological influences of its history, Italian linguists and philosophers held more responsive attitudes toward speech than those that took root in the British tradition. With this intellectual history as a narrative backdrop, I believe it is possible to

describe the aims of the historical criticism of nineteenth-century comparatists that emerged contemporaneous to the rise of dialectology. In the final sections of the chapter, I argue that the historicism of Alexander Veselovsky and Francesco De Sanctis relies implicitly on a shift in the view of the hierarchy of written and spoken language. Though both critics discuss the history of ideas through a history of style or language, De Sanctis's view of the anachronistic evolution of language (when compared to other cultural institutions) allows him to describe the lyric as a history of spoken forms that fold individual expression into the large-scale evolutionary shifts that unfold over the *longue durée* of a culture's history. Veselovsky, conversely, reads the history of language instrumentally to arrive at what he sees as the more consequential history of ideas. Read as an antidote to the universalism of Dr. Johnson, the analytical approach of Veselovsky's historical poetics and De Sanctis's *critica storica* might provide modern readers with a neglected but vital strain of thinking about the spoken roots constantly renewing the writing of lyric poetry.

Locke's Legacy: Condillac, Cesarotti, and the *Questione della lingua*

If we consider Locke the *paterfamilias* of the theory of rational origins of language, then in order to discuss the gradual break from this tradition we must begin with the prodigal son. In the final book of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke concludes with the claim that, despite its limitations, our knowledge of a complex, multidimensional philosophical issue like morality, because it is based on modes (the rational understanding of the relation of ideas) rather than on substances (meaning, on our understanding of truth), is sufficient for the needs of human life. The same is true for his conception of language, for which the use and efficiency of communication outweighs its inherent flaws. Therefore Locke's initial skepticism leads to

suggestions for the improvement of the efficacy and accuracy of words. These may be summarized as follows: that one ought to “use no word without a signification”; use words for simple ideas that are “clear and distinct” and for complex ideas that are “determinate”; use words conforming to “the common measure of Commerce and Communication” (i.e., according to common usage); and, finally, to “declare their Meaning” where meaning is uncertain or unusual.²¹ As Talbot J. Taylor characterizes this conclusion, Locke proposes a “rhetorical strategy in working towards prescriptive conclusions”²²—one that certainly resembles Dr. Johnson’s attempts at “lashing the wind” of speech. Despite the flaws in the instruments of translation, Locke concludes, conscious strategy can make communication possible. If problems in the broader communicational system can be traced to imperfections in the medium (even inherent ones), then improvements or adaptations can be made to improve the mode and medium of communication. In making recourse to commonplaces of the rhetorical tradition as a prescription for accuracy and clarity in language use, Locke sets the stage for the practical steps taken by the grammarians and lexicographers of the following century in English.

The logical conclusions of Locke’s rationalism were most significantly challenged by Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, arguably Locke’s greatest interpreter and inarguably the most influential disciple of his empiricism in Europe. In his seminal *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines* [*Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*]*—*subtitled in its 1756 English translation, “a supplement to Mr. Locke’s *Essay*”—Condillac works from Locke’s absolute claims of the primary of ideas in words (that “ideas connect with signs”) to argue that, as he writes in his

²¹ *Essay*, 512–515.

²² “Which Is To Be Master? The Institutionalization of Authority in the Science of Language,” in *Ideologies of Language*, ed. John E. Joseph and Talbot J. Taylor, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 16.

introduction, the origin of signs comes from a “language of action.”²³ For Condillac the words we use and the ideas we think “mutually assist each other”: just as “signs gradually extended the exercise of the operations of the soul,” thoughts “in turn, as they gained more exercise, improved the signs and made them more familiar.”²⁴ The pivot on Locke’s system is transformational. Instead of seeing rhetorical prescriptions for clarity and accuracy as the restoration of meaning to an ideal, as Locke would, Condillac argues that cultural improvement arises from the refinement of thought by language and language by thought—in equal measure. In his suggestion of the interplay of a philosophy of mind with a philosophy of speech, Condillac gently shakes the foundations of Locke’s empiricism through emphasizing not the manifestation of senses in ideas but the experience of the senses through words.

With this modification of Locke’s concept of knowledge, Condillac proposes to change the stakes of Locke’s use of reason. Condillac identifies the creative capacity of speech in two related aspects: as a difference in the theory of the mind’s creative mechanism (associative versus rational), and as recognition of the inherently social (rather than purely mental) nature of speech. To explain the first point, it is fitting to remark, first of all, that Locke’s resistance to figurative language is well established. Even while promoting prescriptions for clarity and accuracy in language, Locke condemns rhetoric for its “abuse of words,” as he titles a chapter in the *Essay*: “All the Art of Rhetorick, besides Order and Clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of Words Eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong *Ideas*, move the

²³ Condillac, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, tr. and ed. Hans Aarsleff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 6 (hereafter cited as Condillac).

²⁴ Condillac, 115.

Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheat.”²⁵ Locke’s argument seeks to draw a bright line between intentional and contingent (and therefore natural and artificial) relations of ideas in the world. Locke distinguishes between the “natural Correspondence and Connection” of certain ideas, held together by “the Office and Excellency of our Reason,” and the “Connexion of *Ideas* wholly owing to Chance or Custom.”²⁶ For Locke, the consequences of confusing these connections between ideas couldn’t be graver: “This wrong Connexion in our Minds of Ideas in themselves, loose and independent of another, has such an influence, and is of so great force to set us awry in our actions, as well Moral as Natural.”²⁷ In such passages, Locke’s underlying rationalism argument has moral implications precisely because it assumes that intentional action of language can restore the natural relations of ideas that communication has muddied or confused.

Condillac, by contrast, understands the combination of ideas as the productive capacity of the individual mind’s mechanical activity, neither in opposition to reason nor immoral for its reliance on the vagaries of “chance” or “custom.” Condillac’s basic notion of the “langage d’action” describes the essential role that chance plays at the origin of language as the catalyst for the imagination:

The perception of a need, for instance, was connected with the object which had served to relieve it. But having been formed by chance and lacking the steady support of reflection, these connections did not last long.... Thus the exercise of the imagination...was merely the effect of the circumstances in which they found themselves.²⁸

²⁵ *Essay*, 493.

²⁶ *Essay*, 395.

²⁷ *Essay*, 397.

²⁸ Condillac, 114.

Because, for Locke, “association” is not based on reason, it has no place in the discussion of the origin of knowledge. Therefore, Hans Aarsleff argues, Condillac’s use of the association of ideas expands rather than contradicts Locke’s use, insofar as “Condillac observed that poetry is governed by association in the expression of emotion and passion, whereas prose, being the rational discourse of the philosopher, relies on the ‘connection of ideas.’”²⁹ By relying on more than just the rational principles of communication, Condillac establishes more capacious and generous room for figurative and constructive uses of language than does Locke in the *Essay*.

Perhaps more importantly, Condillac’s idea of speech recognizes the underlying social nature of creativity. Locke’s description of the communication circuit relies on an analogy to memory. Words hold ideas together in order to create stability, as he writes in the *Essay*, firstly “for the recording of our own Thoughts,” and, secondly, “for the communicating of our Thoughts to others.”³⁰ These functions are related, as Locke articulates, because the conventions of both memory and communication require consistency of terms. Thus, communication serves as the necessary empirical proof of the basis of reason in thought, as “the common measure of Commerce and Communication.”³¹ Again, Locke returns to reason as the mark of certainty in knowledge as well as the mark of order in communication.

The limitation with this theory, to Condillac, is that the idea of words as a “measure” cannot account for their full range of uses or effects. Indeed, the most powerful effects of words are emotional. Condillac’s *Essai* shows that Locke’s theory of communication requires a theory of

²⁹ “Locke’s Influence,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 270.

³⁰ *Essay*, 476.

³¹ *Essay*, 514.

expression to account for the robust “sociability” of language.³² For Condillac, as Hans Aarsleff shows, “the origin of knowledge begins with...the mutual benefit of affective responses that arises in social interaction”—in short, the social nature of emotion.³³ For Paul de Man, Condillac’s *Essai* is a seminal moment in the intellectual history of figuration:

Being and identity are the result of a resemblance which is not in things but posited by an act of the mind which, as such, can only be verbal. And since to be verbal, in this context, means to allow substitutions based on illusory resemblances...then mind, or subject, is the central metaphor, the metaphor of metaphors.³⁴

De Man’s argument prioritizes Condillac’s theory of language over Locke to explain the pervasiveness of figurative language in literary and non-literary contexts. But despite his polemical angle against Locke here, De Man captures something basic about the importance of Locke and his influence that remains consistent in the reception of Locke from thinkers from Condillac to Dr. Johnson and beyond. The presumption that words organize thoughts according to rational principles lies behind the practical methods taken by all prescriptive linguists, inasmuch as they place their faith in the permanence of ideas underlying language and the universality of reason for organizing and communicating those ideas through speech. Ultimately, a range of methods of literary criticism, as I explore below, appeal to the notion that style and diction reflect a mental, rational language, and therefore serve as a transparent window into human behavior. Condillac’s revision of Locke signals the leap beyond reason, acknowledging the socially contingent and emotional elements of words as they inhabit individual thought

³² “Locke’s Influence,” 276. Aarsleff argues that Condillac’s theory is more inclusive than Locke’s claim to rational, scientific knowledge: “Starting from Locke, Condillac offered a global theory of human expression that embraced both aesthetics and epistemology, both art and science, poetry and prose.”

³³ Aarsleff, introduction to Condillac, xvi.

³⁴ De Man, “The Epistemology of Metaphor,” in “On Metaphor,” ed. Sheldon Sacks, special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 1 (August 1978): 25.

through everyday speech. In this way, Condillac's pressure against linguistic rationalism itself suggests that establishing a "common measure of Commerce and Communication" in prescriptive grammars and dictionaries ought to be reconceived.

The influence of Condillac in the so-called *questione della lingua* ("language debate") has been neglected by Italian historians of linguistics, and yet the ideas contained within the *Essai* on the social, creative essence of the spoken language injected new life into the Italian debate at the end of the eighteenth century. In the centuries after Dante, the turn toward historical principles, rather than aesthetic principles, in the study of the vernacular was gradual but inevitable. Dante's historical commentary in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* served to model an empirical method that encouraged later critics to study the lineage of spoken Italian, in all its dialect forms, to the spoken and written languages of the Roman Empire. In fact, the main question for Italian letters in the centuries after Dante proved to be historical: is spoken Italian a corruption of the high, refined language of ancient culture and state (classical Latin), or is it the descendent of the vernacular tongues spoken familiarly in the Roman Empire (vulgar Latin) but having a grammar, morphology, and lexicon distinct from classical Latin? The Dantean philosophical position continued in the work of theorists like Pietro Bembo, whose 1525 treatise on style, *Prose della volgar lingua* [Prose of the vernacular tongue], argued that the *trecento* Tuscan dialect (particularly of Petrarch and Boccaccio) should serve as the model for literary writing. However, many scholars of Italian Humanism began to turn to newly available historical vernacular sources to explain their stylistic and evaluative claims. Indeed, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italians broached the concept of the primacy of the vernacular as the basis for Italian and the Romance languages long before the outline of Vulgar Latin posited by nineteenth-century

comparative philologists Raynouard and Diez. As Claudio Marazzini summarizes, the early eighteenth-century scholars Scipione Maffei and Ludovico Muratori, writing from the perspective of philologists rather than philosophers, attempted not to establish Italian as a fixed language but “spiegare il divenire, scoprendo le cause ed i meccanismi della trasformazione” [“to explain the growth, uncovering the causes and mechanisms of change”].³⁵ Whether or not scholars held the *a priori* theory of language corruption that Locke rejected in his *Essay*, the robust tradition of classical philology in medieval and Renaissance Italian letters led to a wider acceptance of the study of spoken language as a deep historical tradition of its own.

Condillac’s revision of Locke arrived in Italy through the Italian critic and translator Melchiorre Cesarotti, whose neglected but vital positivist treatise, *Sulla filosofia delle lingue* (1785), revisits the universalist positions of Bembo (and Dante) through a distinctly historical lens. Cesarotti’s enormous debt to the *Nuova Scienza* of Giambattista Vico has been well documented. Indeed, as Isaiah Berlin and others have argued, the extensive footnotes to Cesarotti’s Homer and Ossian translations demonstrate that Vico’s stadial conception of history permeates Cesarotti’s thinking, to the extent that these popular translations were themselves responsible for spreading Vico to a widespread audience throughout Europe (including, debatably, Herder).³⁶ Yet, despite Vico’s undeniable presence in his work, Cesarotti’s use of Condillac’s sensationism arguably had more influence on the trajectory of the *questione della*

³⁵ “Linguistica italiana del settecento,” in *History and Historiography of Linguistics*, vol. 1, *Antiquity–17th Century*, ed. Hans-Josef Niederehe, E. F. K. Koerner (Amsterdam: Johns Benjamin Publishing, 1990), 324.

³⁶ Berlin argues that Herder conceived of his stadial theory of history at least twenty years before reading *La Nuova Scienza*, though he would have been familiar with Vico through Cesarotti’s Ossian. Robert Clark argues for a more direct influence through Cesarotti. See *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1980), 75fn2, 90–92; and Robert T. Clark, Jr., “Herder, Cesarotti and Vico,” *Studies in Philology* 44, no. 4 (1947): 645–71.

lingua in the following century, inasmuch as the fieldwork and vernacular philology done by dialectologists and historical linguists confirmed in large part the unconscious and mechanical origins of language change. In Cesarotti's treatise, therefore, Vico's cyclical notion of historical stages joins the sensation theory of language in Condillac. Cesarotti's view of language therefore demonstrates its flexibility as the synthesis of different strains of materialism.

In the opening to the essay *Sulla filosofia delle lingue*, Cesarotti rejects the Golden Age thinking that dominates the *questione della lingua* after Bembo, which "si fissa la perfezione d'ogni lingua ad un'epoca particolare per lo piú remota, dalla quale quanto piú si scosta, tanto piú si degrada" ["fixes the perfection of every language to a specific era that is usually long past, which the degrades the more it moves away that era"].³⁷ In response to this static way of thinking about language, Cesarotti presents a series of counter claims that articulate the strongest defense of the historical-linguistic position in the *questione* that had been made up to the time. Cesarotti offers a series of maxims that argue for leaving behind stylistic evaluation for a scientific approach to language: that no language is essentially superior to another, no language is pure, no language can be designed by a preexisting blueprint, no language can be established by institutional authority, no language is perfect, no language is rich enough that it cannot be added to, and—perhaps most strikingly—no language is spoken uniformly by the nation. Crucially, Cesarotti's maxims discuss the *lingua parlata* as a collective phenomenon, rather than one based on the notion of individual sensation, as in Condillac.

³⁷ *Saggio sulla filosofia delle lingue*, ed. Mario Puppo (Milan: Marzorati, 1969), 19 (hereafter cited as *Saggio*).

From these cultural-historical principles that he considers truisms, Cesarotti works inductively to present the basic principles of his philosophy of languages (note the plural!), based on what he refers to as the *genio* of the language. He begins with a simple suggestion: the written language and spoken language both exert significant influence on culture at large, but through different means. While not disputing the traditional Dantean idea of the written as the “piú armoniosa e piú nobile” [“more harmonious and noble”] version of the national language, Cesarotti argues that the spoken language possess certain advantages: that it is richer than the written language, since “i parlanti sono infinitamente in piú numero che gli scriventi” [“speakers are infinitely more numerous than writers”]; it is more lively, since its users are “mosso da un senso vivo e presente” [“moved by a living, present sense”]; it is more disinterested and less affected, since it does not display the “solennità e compostezza dell’arte” [“solemnity and restraint of art”]; and it is freer and more fertile since it is not “inceptata da regole” [“hindered by rules”].³⁸ Cesarotti remains committed to the idea that the spoken language, due to its flexibility and variety, precisely the qualities that Dante and Bembo disparaged, exerts as much creative influence on our experience of the world as the reason, art, and taste exhibited in the finest examples of the written language. Furthermore, the spoken language captures more fully the non-rational or emotional aspects of language than does the written.

Based on these descriptions of language, Cesarotti posits a concept of language origins not through an absolute, rational framework—by making an analogy between the individual and the collective mind in culture, as Locke does—but through the historical and material influences that contribute to the state of a language through various distinct means. In the second part of

³⁸ *Saggio*, 24.

the *Saggio*, Cesarotti develops his claim of the mutual influence of the written and spoken languages into a theory of the material basis of languages, which he refers as the *genio*. Though this notion of *genio* coincides in great part with Herder's notion of the *Volksgeist*, Cesarotti's notion has two consequences that differentiate his work from that of Herder and the German Romantics. Firstly, Cesarotti defines the *genio* not as a unified concept, but as the expression of a variety. From this, the *genio della lingua* consists of two interrelated and mutually influential features, the *genio grammaticale* ("grammatical genius"), which Cesarotti describes as depending on the "struttura meccanica degli elementi della lingua e dalla loro sintassi" ["mechanical structure of the language's elements and their syntax"] and the *genio rettorico* ("rhetorical genius"), which is the "sistema generale dell'idee e dei sentimenti che predomina nelle diverse nazioni" ["general system of ideas and emotions that predominate in various nations"].³⁹ Secondly, because the *genio* of a language consists in the interplay between related grammatical and rhetorical functions, the foundation for his theory rests on historical particulars. While Vico's philosophy offers Cesarotti (and likewise Herder) the basis for understanding history's origin as the expression *in nuce* of its progressive culmination, Cesarotti leaves behind Vico in just this point: the *genio grammaticale* expresses not an originary meaning to which we must always judge its state and development, but rather a framework of trace elements that persist from its original state to its present state. In his theory of the double nature of language, Cesarotti thus argues for the equal contribution of underlying, essential qualities of language (*genio grammaticale*) and contingent, contextual features (*genio rettorico*). The continuity of speech resembles the philological notion of textual influence: Cesarotti argues that *change* is an essential

³⁹ *Saggio*, 61.

component of the nature of language, change that reveals the persistent elements that bind together a speech community through time.

The relationship of written and spoken language in the *Saggio* describes for Cesarotti how the language serves as the barometer of cultural development, and of what use the work of philosophers and philologists might be for cultural improvement. In general, Cesarotti argues that because languages can't be said to improve or decline in absolute terms, attempts at improving culture through language are misguided. Where for Locke (and indeed for Condillac), the standardizing efforts of grammarians and lexicographers to set the pronunciation, grammar, and lexicon of the national language might offer "remedies" of the "imperfections" and the "abuse of words" (as Locke proposes in the *Essay*), for Cesarotti the inherent variety of both national culture and national language resist improvements based on refining or limiting measures. As Paola Garambota argues, Cesarotti resists the "autarchic monolingualism," or unity of language, proposed by Condillac as well as the "nascent nationalistic ideology that posited the cultural uniformity of the polity."⁴⁰ Instead, Cesarotti proposes that the proper work of the philologist might provide the historical and rhetorical knowledge available to make the intellectual elite more aware of the diversity and complexity of the national language. In the final chapter of the *Saggio*, in which he offers practical solutions for the lexicographer and grammarian, he proposes that two dictionaries be constructed, one that would include the most exhaustive and comprehensive list of Italian words available, organized not alphabetically but by root, so that it would present "le diramazioni delle lingue e dei dialetti, le mescolanze dei popoli"

⁴⁰ *Irresistible Signs: The Genius of Language and Italian National Identity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 187.

[“the circulation of languages and dialects, the mixing of peoples”] along with the “qualche anello opportuno alla catena general delle lingue, tessuta sulle prime fila d’una lingua naturale” [“any convenient link in the general chain of languages, a fabric over the first threads of a natural language”]; and a second one that would be organized alphabetically, a streamlined, up-to-date version of the *Vocabolario della Crusca* based on new equanimous, descriptive principles of organization and example. These dual dictionaries would serve to highlight the synthetic nature of language in its individual and collective form, through its traditional and innovative elements.

The stakes of Cesarotti’s position in the *question della lingua* demonstrate therefore the idea that language exists as a repository of culture rather than an instrument of culture, as the English (and Italian) prescriptivist tradition would claim. Instead of purging the language of foreign terms and terms of art, Cesarotti’s proposed dictionaries would acknowledge the significance of specialized and niche terms for revealing the sociological and geographical history of the people who speak the language. In this sense, Cesarotti offers the founding ideal of a history of language as a history of speech, not as a textual tradition. In Cesarotti’s concept of history, drawing from Condillac and Vico, the relationship of a textual present to past and future depends on constantly renegotiating one’s position from the origins of language through careful tracing of the registers, dialects, and jargons of spoken language in their origin and history. Cesarotti’s experience translating Ossian and Homer gave him insight into the Romantic ideal of returning to the naïve and primitive origin of language; however, unlike Herder and Condillac, Cesarotti uses the present and origin as end points, delimiting a trajectory of change over which the linguist might trace the elements of language to assess properly the scope and variety of culture. In this sense, the *Saggio* would presage the progressive sociolinguistic position in the

nineteenth-century debate in European linguistics over dialect as the sediment and mark of culture. For Cesarotti, speech must be studied just as any other human institution: according to its collective history.

Glottologia: The New Study of Speech

The nineteenth-century debate over cultural and political unification during Italy's Risorgimento period (1815–1860) marked the return of the *questione della lingua* to the forefront of Italian culture, not solely as a philosophical or literary debate but instead for political reasons. Where Cesarotti left the state of the discussion over what to do with Italy's bevy of mutually incomprehensible dialects with a proposal in theory only, the leading intellectuals of the founding Italian state, including Giuseppe Mazzini and Alessandro Manzoni, found themselves faced with the practical political problem of forming the committees and compiling the dictionaries that Cesarotti only dreamed of. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the conservative, prescriptive position proved to be the more popular. The 1868 proposal submitted by the Minister of Education for the nascent Italian state, Alessandro Manzoni himself, appealed in its very title to the ideal of the unitary national language that could, through strategic government interventions, bind together a fragmented state and culture: *Dell'Unità della lingua e dei mezzi di diffonderla* [On the unity of language and the means for its dissemination]. In the document, Manzoni advocated for selecting the spoken dialect of Florence as the new, national standard based predominantly on its historical prestige as the language representing high culture. Manzoni saw that a living, spoken language (“uso vivo”) might have a role to play as a unitary and unifying medium of culture (“mezzo unico”), consolidating a dispersed and geographically

isolated set of regional cultures.⁴¹ He proposed that Italy take the French case as its model, substituting Florence for Paris as the cultural center from which a unified, prestigious spoken language would find its way to the entire peninsula. The recommendations contained in the proposal include Florentine textbooks and instruction for primary schools throughout Italy, as well as the exclusive use of Florentine in official government records and communications. The culmination of these efforts would be a language standard to eclipse the outdated *Vocabolario della Crusca*: a new dictionary of Italian for domestic use with comparative entries of words in a range of Italian dialects, printed in an affordable, abridged version containing words common to everyday use.⁴² The important work of such a dictionary would be to highlight the basic underlying similarities between the various regional dialects of Italy, fostering a sense of a shared linguistic past and a practical means to bring Italians of all native dialects to speaking the same tongue. In this proposal, Manzoni drew from the claims made by scholars participating in the *questione della lingua* over the relative value of the Tuscan language. Bembo's preference for the *trecento* Florentine dialect would finally be realized, with a new state authority behind it; likewise, the new dictionary would appeal to dissenting descriptivist scholars in that it would realize Cesarotti's proposal for a mass-market dictionary of common usage.

However, a group of scholars in the field of *glottologia*, the Italian branch of historical linguistics established by dialect scholar Graziadio Isaia Ascoli, offered a severe critique of the Manzonian proposal, and in particular the brute tactics of prescriptivism aimed at solving a

⁴¹ Manzoni, *Scritti linguistici*, ed. Ferruccio Monterosso (Milan: Edizioni paoline, 1972), 187; 179.

⁴² This recommendation was realized by Broglio and Georgini's *Novo Vocabolario della lingua italiana*, printed in 4 volumes, 1870–1897.

political problem.⁴³ Their scholarship, published primarily in the flagship journal *Archivio glottologico italiano*, reacted both to the statement of Italian cultural consolidation through linguistic means as well as to the theoretical turn from historical philology to dialectology in linguistics after the influence of the *Junggrammatiker Richtung*, the so-called “neogrammarian” group of scholars at the University of Leipzig.⁴⁴ Though both of these reactions were based on the same series of objections to the consequences of the Romantic philosophy of language espoused by von Humboldt and Schlegel, the political aspect of Ascoli’s *glottologia* has perhaps been more visible. It is important to see their dissent in both cases as built on the same objections. Against Manzoni, Ascoli sought to explain through empirical analysis the varied nature and historical past of language as a necessary description of its function. In doing so, his work would demonstrate that Manzoni’s solution to the *questione della lingua* was, as Sebastiano Timpanaro has argued, “di troppo romantico e, nello stesso tempo, di astrattamente razionalistico” [“too Romantic and at the same time too abstractly rationalistic”].⁴⁵ Ascoli’s concept of the linguistic substrate of spoken language occupies a middle ground between Manzoni’s appeal to the “giuridico-codificante (dogmatico) natura di fatti linguistici” [“juridical-

⁴³ The scholars associated with *glottologia* were not simply dialect linguists; they also continued the vulgar philological tradition of Maffei and Muratori. The name *glottologia* itself, as its etymology suggests, emphasizes the textual interpretation of medieval philology (Late Latin *glossa*) as well as the spoken features of language (Attic Gr. *glôttá*), the latter root analogous to that of the English word “linguist.”

⁴⁴ The neogrammarian position was based, as Anna Morpurgo-Davies summarizes, on several founding principles: that sound laws in language occur with absolute regularity and uniformity; that language production, both in terms of individual creation and historical change, can be explained by processes of analogy; and that sound changes are based on unconscious psychological factors, meaning that widespread changes always begin with the individual. See Chapter 9, “The neogrammarians and the new beginnings,” Anna Morpurgo-Davies, *Nineteenth-Century Linguistics*, vol. 4 of *History of Linguistics*, ed. Giulio Lepschy (New York: Longman, 1992).

⁴⁵ “Graziadio Ascoli,” *Belfagor* 27 (1972), 157.

codifying (dogmatic) nature of linguistic facts”]⁴⁶ in the words of Giacomo Devoto, and the aesthetic idealism of Croce that rejected the scientificity of art and creative expression on humanistic grounds. Ascoli sought to split the difference between, as he saw it, misguided pragmatism and impractical aestheticism.

The premise to Ascoli’s research program of *glottologia* is summarized in his editorial statement, or *Proemio*, to the first issue of *AGI*, written as a direct rebuttal of the proposals contained in the Manzoni treatise:

Il problema verte sul modo in cui si possa estrinsecare, con uniforme parola, il pensiero di una nazione moderna, multistirpe e centrifuga, il quale deve laboriosamente nutrirsi di un sapere infinito e per molta parte non indigeno.⁴⁷

[The problem centers on how we can express with a uniform speech the thought of a modern nation, multiracial and centrifugal, which must industriously feed itself from an infinite and mostly non-indigenous knowledge.]

“Centrifuga” [centrifugal, center-fleeing] is a key theoretical term for Ascoli: it describes the unique Italian situation, in which multiple cultural centers of historical importance (Florence, Rome, Milan, Venice, Palermo) vie for cultural predominance and influence, rather than a single metropolitan center (e.g., Paris in the French case). The concept also implies the constant motion of a city’s population and institutions, as the common traditions and language of one group of people encounter those of other groups, transforming all of them in the process. In the final part of the passage, Ascoli raises the sociological claim to the level of philosophy: knowledge itself is in

⁴⁶ *Nuovi studi di stilistica*, 169.

⁴⁷ *Il proemio all'Archivio glottologico italiano e una lettera su lo stile* (Città di Castello: Lapi, 1914), 35. It is worth noting on the question of language and race that Ascoli’s theory follows the lead of Carlo Cattaneo to counter the racist claims of Von Humboldt by asserting the independence of language mixture from ethnic mixture. In an amusing aside right before the quotation above, Ascoli notes: “Qual mente si può pensare più aliena da ogni affettazione di quello che fosse la mente to Guglielmo di Humboldt?” [“What mind could be conceived of as more alien from any affectation than that of Wilhelm von Humboldt?”].

constant circulation in a newly cosmopolitan modern world, and therefore any inquiry into its nature should reflect a concern with its multinational and multiregional origins. Rather than seeing the *sapienza volgare*—the “wisdom of the crowd”—as a unitary form, or as the property of the intellectual elite of Florence (or any other Italian city), Ascoli sees it as varied and mixed.

To accurately account for the nature of language change in a “centrifugal” culture, therefore, Ascoli changes focus from language as an integral whole to the linguistic elements distinct to particular communities of speakers—be they specific to a particular village or city, or widespread across a region or an entire nation. The main theoretical concept he popularized through his many contributions to the pages of the *AGI* (both scholarly and editorial) is known as the *sostrato linguistico*—the linguistic substrate. Based on the philosophical figure “substratum” (“underlying principle” or “essence”⁴⁸), the term *sostrato* came to refer to the layered elements of geological strata in nineteenth-century physical sciences before it was adopted by linguists and sociologists to the social sciences.⁴⁹ For Ascoli, a text or conversation is

come una sezione accidentale d’una corrente di trasformazioni perpetue, nella qual sezione si possano insieme riconoscere, dall’una parte, i resti d’un diverso tipo che tramonta, e, dall’altra, i fenomeni precursori d’un diverso tipo che verrà maturando.⁵⁰

[like an arbitrary cross-section of a current of neverending transformations, a cross-section in which can be recognized both, on the one hand, the surviving elements of one

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Locke, *Essay*, I, IV, 33: “Something...which we take to be the substratum, or support, of those Ideas we do know.”

⁴⁹ Sebastiano Timpanaro argues that the concepts of *sostrato* (substrate) and *soprastrato* (superstrate) were fairly widely circulated in Italian and European linguistics in the period, citing Scipione Maffei, Ludovico Antonio Muratori, Carlo Cattaneo, and others, though he acknowledges that Ascoli developed the most sophisticated methodology of identifying the substrate of pre-Roman, Italic languages. See *Classicismo e illuminismo nell’Ottocento* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1965), 229–252.

⁵⁰ “Squarci d’una lettera concernente le ricostruzioni paleotologiche della parola,” in *Studi critici* II (Milan: Loescher, 1877), 5.

type of speech that are diminishing, and on the other, the precursor phenomena of a different type that are maturing.]

Following Cesarotti's basic maxims on language, Ascoli refuses to accede to the idea that languages develop or refine themselves to a higher or purer state. Instead, they are indexes of the rise and fall of different social and cultural factors. A properly historical approach to speech would allow a linguist or critic make fine-grained analyses of its various elements (whether mutually supporting or conflicting, ascendant or descendant) and then draw conclusions about interaction of these elements for much broader cultural features. A universal conception of a "living speech"—the shorthand used by both Manzoni and Dr. Johnson—is tempered by Ascoli's skepticism about characterizing speech according to any kind of capacious category of present: some spoken features are declining, while others are rising.

Likewise, speech of any kind is not an *instrument or standard* of culture, as Manzoni thought it could be; rather, its variety and mixture shows "the sediment of civil and literary activity"—as Ascoli writes in the *Proemio*. Ascoli proposes the idea that to know language as a system is to study its origins as well as the historical emergence and submergence of its various elements—to see these functional peculiarities not as defects of an idealized prior state but as the remainder, or the sediment, of various historical forces. Ascoli writes in an oft-cited footnote in the first of three articles discussing *Morphologische Untersuchungen*, by Karl Brugmann and Hermann Osthoff, a founding neogrammarian text, that the dialectologist ought not to consider variations of speech "exceptions" to a rule or standard. Instead, he argues, the task of linguistics ought to be to show that "un dato suono, o di una data combinazione di suoni, si possano anche avere esiti diversi in una lingua medesima o in un medesimo dialetto," and by doing so to

describe “le regioni delle diversità.” [“a given sound or a given combination of sounds can also have different effects in the same language or dialect”; “the causes of this variety”].⁵¹ Ascoli’s view, as Sebastiano Timpanaro explains, continues the new philology of the German tradition (found in Grimm and Bopp) as well as the comparative folklore methods of Italian scholars such as Nigra, Comparetti, Nerucci, D’Ancona, and Pitre, who saw “lingua come depositaria di tradizioni popolari antichissime e come documento di storia collettiva” [language as a depository of ancient popular traditions and as a document of collective history].⁵² Against Manzoni, therefore, Ascoli offers the counterargument that the sediment of language cannot change the culture from which the sediment has settled; prescriptivism therefore asks of language a task impossible to its nature as a “centrifugal” cultural force.

Ultimately, Ascoli rejects Manzoni’s central premise for using a spoken language instead of a written language as a standard by which to foster cultural unity: that speech expresses a unified and common spirit of the people. This argument relies on the premise that the universality of language for communication is based in human reason, the Lockean notion of rationalism in language. In his government report, Manzoni’s view of language is holistic; a set of common words reflects society as a coherent mirror image: “Ciò che costituisce una lingua, non è l’appartenere a un’estensione maggiore o minore di paese, ma l’essere una quantità di vocaboli adequate agli usi d’una società effettiva e intera” [“What constitutes a language is not belonging more or less closely to a town but the existence of a quantity of words suitable for the uses of a

⁵¹ “Lettere glottologiche,” in *Rivista di filologia e d’istruzione classica* 10 (1882): 7–8, n1.

⁵² “Graziadio Ascoli,” *Belfagor* 27 (1972), 161.

real, whole society”].⁵³ And, Manzoni argues, this integrity of society might reflect an integral whole of language use, since “una totalità e continuità di relazioni tra gli uomini produce necessariamente un uso uniforme di lingua” [“A totality and continuity of relations between men necessarily produces a uniform use of language”].⁵⁴ In Manzoni’s proposal, the comparative dictionary of dialects would show non-Florentine speakers its underlying similarities with their own *parlar natio*, and the relative ease of substituting Florentine words for their own based on a shared worldview, behavior, and custom. In this respect, Manzoni’s position was the practical extension of the German-Romanticist philosophy into Italy.

By contrast, Ascoli presents the idea that language mixtures (called *Sprachmischung* by the German Romantics, and later what Hugo Schuchardt would refine by proposing the notion of *Kreolization*) display collective change through the mixing of peoples from different language communities, each with their own distinct speaking habits. As always, Ascoli only makes general claims drawn from specific cases:

The case [of Gallo-Italic dialects in the Alpine region] is one of the new ethnic individualities arising from the fusion of two national entities, one of which, numerically more or less weak, is so far victorious that its speech is adopted, while the other succeeds in adapting that speech to its own habits of utterance.⁵⁵

Crucially, for Ascoli the concept of a “disposizioni orali” [“habits of utterance”] is not on an individual tendency, but rather a collective one that depends on the ethnographic history of the language community, the distance of that community from others with whom it has contact, and

⁵³ “Lettera al signor Cavaliere Consigliere Giacino Carena,” in *Sulla lingua italiana* (Milan: Stabilimento Redaelli della Società Chiusi e Rechidei, 1868), 15.

⁵⁴ “Dell’Unità della lingua e dei mezzi di diffonderla,” in *Sulla lingua italiana*, 61.

⁵⁵ Ascoli, “Italy, Part III, Language,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th ed., vol. 13 (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1881), 497.

the various economic, social, and political factors that create any form of contact with other language communities. As Ascoli explains about the historical narrative of Vulgar Latin:

Where popular Latin has been adopted by peoples of foreign speech, the elaboration which it has undergone along the lines of their oral tendencies becomes always greater the farther we get away from the point at which the Latin reached them,—in proportion, that is, to the time and space through which it [i.e., “the imported speech,” as in the original, “parola importata”] has been transmitted in these foreign mouths.⁵⁶

In Ascoli’s terms, the variety of cultural and linguistic encounters that a community experiences in its history, from colonial subjugation to commercial trade, constitutes the hybrid structural features that any spoken language possesses.

Historical language change, for Ascoli, works thus as a kind of diachronic translation: one community of speakers, studied within a given period or era, gains linguistic material from that of a previous period or era and adopts it to their own patterns of speech, transforming the materials merely through reusing them. Roberto Gusmani’s characterization of Ascoli is helpful in seeing the social role of translation as one between registers, or forms of speech. In Gusmani’s view, Ascoli presents “l’evoluzione come una sorta di compromesso nella trasmissione del linguaggio in ambienti bilingui, vale a dire quale effetto dell’adozione di un idioma da parte di popolazioni che, nel processo d’apprendimento, adeguano le forme espressive acquisite alle loro abitudini e alle strutture della lingua materna” [“[change] as a kind of compromise in the transmission of language in bilingual environments, which is to say as an effect of the adoption of one idiom by populations that, in the process of learning it, shape the expressive forms acquired

⁵⁶ Ibid.

to their customs and their native language structures”].⁵⁷ Ascoli’s methodology—philological analysis of *parola* (“speech”) rather than *testo* (“text”)—shows that historical interaction between the linguistic elements of speech creates changes of the kind textual philologists would call influence. In the archeology of speech, Ascoli finds a way to reconcile the division between the history of such linguistic elements and their function in common usage.

Ascoli’s description of the historical lineage of speech in communities has major ramifications for the question of how culture and language interact—and not only in questioning Manzoni’s claim that a unified language can lead to cultural unity. Ascoli’s historical approach to dialect offers scholars of history an important insight: the variety of social phenomena (both collective and individual, institutional and non-institutional) that influence language do so by different means that lead to distinct results. The most apparently minor elements of regional variation in morphology, grammar, and lexicon might be the outcome of a variety of different traceable historical influences. In these simple but powerful principles, the dialectologist represents the culmination of the materialist strands found in Locke’s philosophy of language, though nearly unrecognizably transformed through the passage of these ideas through Condillac and Cesarotti. In their descriptive approach we find a new relation of speaker to speech: speech not as individual competency or performance, nor as the abstract cultural norms bounding individual usage, but rather as the cultural institution belonging to a community of speakers. Thus, we have a speech that outlives individual speakers.

⁵⁷ Roberto Gusmani, “Graziadio Isaia Ascoli. Impegno civile e questione linguistica nell’Italia unita,” in “Studi in memoria di Eugenio Coseriu,” ed. Vincenzo Orioles, special issue of *Plurilinguismo* 10 (2004): 202.

Historical Poetics and Speech: Veselovsky and De Sanctis

“Pensando alle parole perdeva l’idea.... Pensando al concetto, perdono il sentimento.”
[Focusing on words, he lost the idea.... Focusing on the concept, they lost the emotion.]
—Francesco De Sanctis, “‘Cours familier de littérature’ par M. de Lamartine”⁵⁸

As I have outlined, the gradual development of the historical-linguistic approach to dialect over the period 1780–1880 describes significant shifts in thinking about the nature of language: speech belongs not merely to individuals but to a shared, communal tradition; the vocabulary and grammar of dialects possess a history independent of written, learned texts; and sociological phenomena (group migration, opening or closing of trade routes, commerce, political coup or military conquest) leave lasting marks on the linguistic features of the spoken language. These points advanced by dialectologists, and especially the work of the Italian *glottologi* under the banner of Ascoli and the flagship journal of *glottologia*, the *Archivio glottologico italiano*, mark not merely a change in the emphasis of study from a history of written texts to a history of speech, but more broadly a changed view of the interaction of culture and language. The Italian *glottologi* argued from their empirical study of speech that culture cannot be unified and refined by shaping spoken language, since the spoken language contains the sediment of ideas; rather, they demonstrated that interactions and encounters of different cultural forces shape language, leaving traces of one way of speaking within the very sounds and structures of another.

Despite these signal innovations in the field of linguistics in the last decades of the nineteenth-century, other fields of cultural history were, in the main, still beholden to the idealist

⁵⁸ *Saggi critici*, 2nd ed. (Naples: Antonio Morano, 1869), 356.

narrative of history derived from German Romanticism. Comparative literary historians including Hippolyte Taine and Ferdinand Brunetière (as well as art historian Jakob Burckhardt) brought to this version of history an emphasis on style, a dynamic tension between the individual and his cultural setting. The historicism of German Romanticism, found particularly in Herder and Hegel, proposed that the ongoing process of change of all cultural institutions (including and beginning with language) can only be understood against the horizon of its origins; and, likewise, that the individual or organism is the “prototype of all dynamic wholes,” meaning that individuals and institutions share a unified, organic nature with a “cyclical development.”⁵⁹ Building on these idealist models, Taine would propose to analyze literary history through the elements of race, milieu, and moment demonstrated in authors and texts. Taine proposed a version of history that did not lead through progressive stages of becoming (à la Hegel) or the “cyclical development” of Vico and Herder, but rather through the “spontaneity of active energies generated by individuals,” as Marshall Brown summarizes.⁶⁰ Taine characterized *le moment* as the “vitesse acquise” [“acquired speed”] in relative tension to the internal factors of the individual (*la race*) and the external factors of the cultural scene (*le milieu*); his descriptions of style, writes Brown, are not “moments of classical perfection,” but “moments of passage.”⁶¹

Outside the long shadow of German Romanticism, however, two major European literary historians, Alexander Veselovsky and Francesco De Sanctis, each pursued a rigorous empirical framework that reflected a view of history more closely sympathetic to Ascoli’s notion of the linguistic as “una sezione accidentale d’una corrente di trasformazioni perpetue” [“an arbitrary

⁵⁹ Anna Morpurgo-Davies, 84.

⁶⁰ “Why Style Matters: The Lessons of Taine’s *History of English Literature*,” in *Turning Points: Essays in the History of Cultural Expressions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 56.

⁶¹ Brown, 58.

cross-section of a current of neverending transformations”]. Through their work, we can retrospectively see the shared method of a theory of cultural history that synthesizes idealism with a scientific, empirical approach meant to challenge the received notion of all cultural artifacts as organic, unified expressions of a spirit or whole. In this section, I sketch an outline of their critical methodologies for two reasons. Firstly, both Veselovsky and De Sanctis complete the alternative history of the philosophy of speech beginning in Locke. Their use of empiricism owes a debt to Locke, and the reception of his *Essay* in European letters, for its emphasis on the relationship of the psychological to the social. Yet in these two figures we notice a significant interpretive shift: Veselovsky and De Sanctis use scientific and philosophical analysis of language elements in order to make conclusive generalizations about the large-scale historical narrative of literature. Their work, I argue, testifies to the linguistic nature of literary history, just as the work of *glottologia* testifies to the linguistic nature of cultural history. The dialectologists and their predecessors saw that the evolution of dialect could tell an accurate and powerful story of the history of a culture, even more powerful than that told by the written language. However, in their telling, the evanescence of speech means that those narrating the story must look not at the surface of texts but at minor linguistic details found within them. Just so, Veselovsky and De Sanctis, practitioners of *istoričeskaia poëtika* (“historical poetics”) and *critica storica* (“historical criticism”), show that the grand, synthetic narrative of literary history begins from the material traces of the spoken as they impress themselves on literary language.

Though I pair these two literary scholars for my claim about the linguistic nature of literary history, the methods and conclusions of their major works exhibit key differences that define how they treat the role of style and literary form in historical analysis. While literary form

for Veselovsky contains in it the “sedimentation” (or “substrate,” to use Ascoli’s analogous term) of elements like motif and plot drawn from ritual social practices, literary form for De Sanctis, I would argue, contains the “substrate” of distinct *language forms*. In this distinction, I am not separating the linguistic from the social per se; I am acknowledging, as did Ascoli and his contemporaries, the idea that the sediment of speech contains both *external and internal* (rather than exclusively external) factors. De Sanctis takes local exchanges of language and culture as what constitutes a grand, synthetic narrative of history. Veselovsky focuses on the *longue durée* history of culture, attuned to the trace elements of pre-literary, oral features within the techniques and forms of the literary. De Sanctis therefore adds geographical and social dimension, essential to reading the culture of communities, to literature’s deep past. Likewise, as the term “critica” in the method of *critica storica* suggests, De Sanctis’s method goes beyond the task of literary history in order to express evaluative judgments about the major authors and works comprising the *Storia della letteratura italiana*. The dimension of practical criticism in De Sanctis’s literary history reflects, I believe, not only its social aspect, but also the choice of his objects of study. For De Sanctis, the lyric poem stands as the archetypal cultural expression of subjectivity through emotion. Therefore, the culmination of a poem’s chorographic and ethnological concerns comes in its ability to enfold the individual into these collective ideas.

In order to illustrate the importance of a spoken language to these genetically similar methods of reading language and history, it is worth while considering the components of Veselovsky’s historical poetics. The introduction to Veselovsky’s defining theoretical work, *Istoričeskaia poëtika* [Historical poetics] (1894), begins with a simple proposition that has broad application and consequence: “Literary history is the history of social thought in its imagistic-

poetic survival and in the forms that express this sedimentation.”⁶² The term “imagistic-poetic survival” (*perezhivanie*) implies a synthetic approach to history, as Boris Maslov explains, because it encapsulates the ethnographic concept of “survival” (as popularized by William Tylor in the 1871 work *Primitive Cultures*) and the common meaning of “experience” contained in the Russian verb *perezhivat*: “This terminological nexus suggests a particular mode of historically-anchored experience, understood as recycling—and perpetuation—of inherited cultural forms.”⁶³ The process of “sedimentation” explains, in other words, the concept of “survival”: past cultural expressions inhere in present ones through the materials of social practice; likewise these social practices persist because of the powerful figurative appeal of the poetic element. This argument echoes that of the historians of style: that the history of literature is a history of ideas manifested through its material medium. And yet, for Veselovsky, the primary elements of literature narrow both the scope and method of historical analysis. While neither Taine nor Brunetière would dispute the fact that the poetic device crystallizes social thought (though the latter would focus on an author’s style as “an image or expression of themselves” rather than as “social” thought⁶⁴), Veselovsky’s ethnographic and philological reading method emphasizes the individual literary motif, a trace element of received, preexisting cultural forms, over the author or his integral literary work. Thus, instead of reading literary style thematically, Veselovsky reads the poetic element or device as a form adaptable across genre, register, and medium.

⁶² “From the Introduction to Historical Poetics: Questions and Answers,” in *Persistent Forms: Explorations in Historical Poetics*, trans. Boris Maslov, ed. Ilya Kliger and Boris Maslov (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 40.

⁶³ Veselovsky, n4.

⁶⁴ Brunetière, “French Mastery of Style,” trans. Irving Babbitt, in *Theories of Style*, ed. Lane Cooper (New York: MacMillan Company, 1907), 423.

The reading method of Veselovsky's historical poetics likewise reflects the change in emphasis on the scope of a literary history. Veselovsky focuses throughout individual studies primarily on the transformation and innovation of genre through folkloric elements, plot motifs, thematic clusters, and conceptual categories. In a paradigmatic example of his reading method, Veselovsky analyzes the emergence of artistic drama out of the pageants of medieval church ritual and even earlier festivals of Dionysian cults. The new literary form of artistic drama should not be considered an innovation *tout court* by its earliest practitioners; rather, the new drama only took its modern form "as it preserved, and at the same time refashioned, both its own cult forms and the subject matter of myth."⁶⁵ The author of artistic drama, thus, did not create a "mechanical fusion of epic and lyric elements"; instead the new drama was "the evolutionary product of an ancient syncretic structure, solidified by cult and successively incorporating the results of social and poetic evolution."⁶⁶ As this description of a change from oral to literary tradition demonstrates, Veselovsky reads the phenomena of ritual and poetry as different manifestations of a continuously evolving cultural expression—the former belonging to oral culture, the latter to literary culture—that may emerge, decline, and rise again at different points in a national cultural tradition. A common pattern emerges across Veselovsky's various studies: he continually describes the interaction between popular or oral traditions and literary or "high" traditions. For Veselovsky, the transformation of folkloric elements to artistic imagery, of social practice to literary composition, define the deep history of literature.

⁶⁵ "Istoricheskaia Poetika (*A Historical Poetics*), Chapter 1, Section 8," trans. Ian Helfant, *New Literary History* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 425.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

The methodology of Veselovskyian historical poetics—locating elements of the pre-literary in the literary—ultimately has a defining influence on the choice of texts that historical poetics prefers. Indeed, the focus of Veselovsky’s method entails a tendency to choose those texts that exhibit generic hybridity so that the anachronisms of their compositional elements remain legible. One of Veselovsky’s underappreciated contributions to medieval philology is also one of his earliest critical works, the first edition of *Il Paradiso degli Alberti* (1389), by Giovanni di Gherardo da Prato (called Gherardi), a text that illustrates the strictures of text choice made by scholars of historical poetics. I will consider several passages of Veselovsky’s introductory essay to this hybrid, multi-generic work of late medieval narrative prose, mythology, landscape description, and fictional dialogue, which I believe was attractive to Veselovsky precisely for the lingering question of its authorship and the instability of its textual composition and history.

In establishing the cultural-historical setting of the novel, Veselovsky analyzes the copresence of Latin and vernacular elements in different registers as a cross-section of the social world within which the novella was composed. Veselovsky describes the cultural milieu of Gherardi’s Florence as a volatile world of conflicting social and religious views, in which the “letteratura latina della Chiesa continuare nelle sue aggressioni contro la volgare della scuola poetica fiorentina” [“literature of the Church continue in its aggressions toward the vernacular of the Florentine school of poetry”], leading to the development of a synthetic style “che tende al classico purismo, lasciando l’italiano appena costituito per un latino che inutilmente si sforza ad esser ciceroniano” [“which tends toward classical purism, leaving behind a barely established

Italian language for a Latin that uselessly struggles to be like Cicero”].⁶⁷ Veselovsky concludes that these linguistic interactions served as proxy battles for a larger war over the supremacy of Christian ideas against steadfast resistance from pagan undercurrents:

La lotta tra questa tre forme non esser più una quistione di lingua come ai tempi di Dante, dappoichè gli scrittori della Chiesa adoperano qualche volta un volgare più puro e più schietto di quello della scuola dantesca, ma una quistione di principii, tra le idee cristiane che informarono la civiltà del medio evo e le pagane che già cominciano a sorgere.⁶⁸

[And the conflict between these three forms is no longer a debate over language [*quistione della lingua*] as in the times of Dante, since the Church authors sometimes used a purer and more straightforward vernacular than the vernacular of Dante’s school, but a debate over principles [*quistione di principii*], among which are the Christian ideas that inform medieval civilization and the pagan ideas that have already begun to emerge.]

In this passage, the overlapping rise and fall of different social values attached to belief systems—and especially their *interaction* at this key juncture of cultural conflict—brings the world of the novella into the context of a larger social world of the period. A crucial feature of Veselovsky’s analysis here is its use of a neutral stance toward the relation of genre and style to institutional belief. The convergence of church Latin, Florentine vernacular, and a Latinate hybrid demonstrate the effects of both literary and class struggle as a polemical tool for language change. And yet the literary and linguistic innovations of these authors prove to be consequential only for the ideas that the texts embodied. The *quistione della lingua* established by Dante has been resolved, Veselovsky claims, by the reaction of prose writers, not to Dante’s example of the *stilnovo* lyric, but rather to the more influential struggle for *principii* (principles, or ideas).

⁶⁷ “Società del Paradiso,” in *Il Paradiso degli Alberti e gli ultimi trecentisti: Saggio di storia letteraria italiana*, vol. 1, part 1 of *Il Paradiso degli Alberti*, by Giovanni da Prato, ed. Alessandro Wesselofsky (Bologna: Romagnoli, 1867), 54. Hereafter cited as *Paradiso*.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Considering the non-integral, fragmented structure of Gherardi's text, then, Veselovsky claims that the work spans a major "trasizione letteraria e sociale" ["literary and social transition"] in which the fourteenth-century "concreto novellare" ["concrete prose narrative"] develops into the Renaissance-period "astratte filosofiche tenzoni" ["abstract philosophical *tenzoni*"], the latter referring to the collaborative troubadour lyric song known as the *tenso*, in which two poets compose a single text as two voices engaged in a debate over love or ethics. The social provenance of the *tenso* becomes all-important for Veselovsky's analysis: "Qui si novella ancora e si chiacchera, ma più ancora si ragiona e si sottilizza e si fa mostra della scienza dell'antichità nuovamente acquistata" ["Here the poet still narrates and converses, but more and more frequently he reasons and analyzes and makes a display of the newly established science of antiquities"].⁶⁹ This particular innovation in literary form arises from self-conscious emulation of a historical precedent. Further, Veselovsky claims, the field of antiquities itself, which allowed the reconstruction of the text to be possible, begins to influence the style of the imitation. Based on the poet's intentions in recuperating a poetic text through academic means, Veselovsky reads historical influence itself into the style of the text.

Ultimately, the historical horizon of the text's reception and afterlife becomes the focus of Veselovsky's methodological conclusions about the text as well as his explicit claim for its historical importance. Comparing the Gherardi text to its vastly more famous predecessor, Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, Veselovsky describes the inherent capabilities of the language as its relevance to understanding the period as well as the discipline of historiography:

⁶⁹ *Paradiso*, 64.

Il novellare era facile ed il ragionare riesciva difficile in una lingua, la quale, avendo da qualche secolo formato lo stile poetico e di recente il narrativo, nel ragionamento filosofico si moveva ancora fra gli intoppi della lingua latina che pareva essersi nel medio evo usurpato il dominio esclusivo del pensiero astratto..⁷⁰

[Here the narrative was easy and the reasoning made difficult in a language, which, having formed its poetic style for more than a century but its narrative prose style more recently, in its philosophical reasoning shifted still between the minor obstacles of the Latin tongue that seemed in the Middle Ages to have usurped the exclusive dominion of abstract thought.]

Characterizing the style as “facile” [“easy”] for narrative but “difficile” [“difficult”] for philosophical prose, Veselovsky uses the distance from the period in which these styles were settled to make his historical claim. Here he verges on an evaluative statement of the *Paradiso* when he describes the ill match of medieval Latin for the content of the philosophical sections, especially in contrast to the “abbastanza lucido e disinvolto” [“rather lucid and casual”] sections of the fictional tale.⁷¹ However, the major interest of the passage—and the introduction—can be found in the notion that the “narrative prose style” of the work captured Veselovsky’s eye for its inherent hybridity. The uniform poetic style acts as a backdrop for Veselovsky; the variable, unsettled prose style is where his attention runs.

For Veselovsky’s contemporary, Francesco De Sanctis, the methodology of literary history begins from a different understanding of the relationship of culture and literature. In his masterpiece of literary history, *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1870–1871), De Sanctis acknowledges his debt to Hegel’s familiar concept of historical progress. The final chapter of the *Storia*, “The New Literature,” summarizes his own understanding of history, following Hegel, as

⁷⁰ *Paradiso*, 72.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

one based on logic, in which history “non sia una successione empirica e arbitraria di fatti, ma la manifestazione progressiva e razionale dell’idea, una dialettica vivente” [“is not an empirical and arbitrary succession of facts, but the progressive and rational manifestation of the idea, a living dialectic”].⁷² While basing his concept of history on two foundations of Hegelian philosophy, “il divenire, base dell’evoluzione (*Entwicklung*), e l’esistere, base del realismo” [“the principle of becoming, the basis of evolution (*Entwicklung*), and the principle of *being*, the basis of realism”],⁷³ the *Storia* makes a crucial distinction between Hegel’s stadial or evolutionary history of ideas and a history of artistic forms. For De Sanctis, the history of concepts values content at the expense of form: “La forma non è *a priori*, non è qualcosa che stia da sè e diversa dal contenuto, quasi ornamento o veste, o apparenza or aggiunto di esso; anzi è essa generata dal contenuto, attivo nella mente dell’artista: tal contenuto, tal forma” [“Form is not *a priori*, not something apart and different from the content, a sort of ornament, or vest, or appearance, or an adjunct to it. On the contrary form is generated by content active in the mind of the artist. Like content, like form”].⁷⁴ De Sanctis therefore proposes a version of literary history founded on both idealist and materialist pillars: literary works manifest the unfolding history of ideas as the relations of human society to their material forms. As Renate Holub writes, De Sanctis’s concept of *forma* understands form as both the “fixed idea of reality” and as “representing the fluidity of

⁷² *Storia della letteratura italiana*, vol. 2 (Naples: Antonio Morano, 1870), 472 (hereafter cited as *Storia* with volume number indicated).

⁷³ “Zola e l’ ‘Assomoir,’” in *Saggi varii, inediti o rari*, vol. 2, ed. Benedetto Croce (Naples: Antonio Morano, 1898), 83.

⁷⁴ “Settembrini e suoi critici,” in *Nuovi saggi critici* (Naples: Antonio Morano, 1872), 241n1.

reality (content).”⁷⁵ For De Sanctis as for Vico, this means that stages of history show progress precisely because they are also recursive—modern ideas and thoughts and customs may indeed be older ones appearing anew because of their evolving forms. In its method, the *Storia* stands as a fundamentally Romantic work of historiography, and, in complex relation to its German predecessors, establishes an Italian canon based on a view of literature as the evolution and transformation of *forms*, the concrete materials of culture that organize our personal and collective experiences of the world.

Veselovsky’s reading of hybrid elements of style overlaps greatly with De Sanctis’s analysis on the distinctions of speech genres in early Italian literature. Yet there are minor distinctions even in their characterizations of how form manifests in texts. Where Veselovsky reads in the Gherardi novel the rise of an intellectual history against the decline of a linguistic history—an interaction of broadly social forces, in which language reflects the more dominant intellectual currents of Christianity and scientific rationalism—De Sanctis reads the periodization of language’s own internal history through the evidence of style. Therefore acknowledging an inverted hierarchy of the spoken and written language has significant consequences for understanding De Sanctis’s defining role in the historical criticism of the nineteenth century. Language is indeed central to the work’s nationalist aims as well as its literary critical judgments. Though the status of his masterpiece, *Storia della letteratura italiana*, as a nationalist work highlighting the unifying work of the Risorgimento movement has perhaps been overargued—Croce called the work both “an intimate history of the Italian people” and “an

⁷⁵ Renate Holub, “Francesco De Sanctis (1817–1883),” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. VI: The Nineteenth Century, c. 1830–1914*, ed. M. A. R. Habib (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 412.

examination of the national conscience”⁷⁶—De Sanctis’s critical perspective on individual poems and authors holds no purchase apart from this larger nationalist aim. In fact, by focusing on the *Storia*’s status as an exemplary national-historical project we can gain new insight into the work’s judgments of the linguistic elements of individual works of literature. In De Sanctis, the progressive, stadial history of *becoming* in the model of Hegel works by the Vichian “patient analysis *a posteriori*” of these progressive historical forms of language. The historical readings of the *critica desanctiana* come part and parcel with the big-picture themes of independence, sovereignty, and liberalism that pervade the broad narrative of the *Storia*.

De Sanctis’s emphasis on the primacy of language over ideas runs parallel to the major concerns of *glottologia*, especially in its understanding of the material instantiations of forces in the minor, linguistic details of texts. In the first chapter of the *Storia*, De Sanctis demonstrates a (surprisingly) microscopic view of one of the earliest poems recorded in the dialect of Sicily, the *cantilena* of Ciullo d’Alcamo. He begins with the assertion that the language of the poem is “ancor rozza e incerta nelle forme grammaticali e nelle desinenze, mescolata di voci siciliane, napoletane, provenzali, francesi, latine....” [“still rough and uncertain in its grammatical forms and endings, mixed as it is with Sicilian, Neapolitan, Provencal, French, and Latin terms....”].⁷⁷ In this analysis, he avoids broad stylistic claims, even in his evaluative characterization of the state of the language. And yet the fineness of the analysis penetrates even more closely to the individual style as the manifestation of period style:

⁷⁶ Preface to the English translation of *Storia della letteratura italiana* by Joan Redfern (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1931), vi.

⁷⁷ *Storia*, vol. 1, 2–3.

La canzone è tirata giù tutta d'un fiato, piena di naturalezza e di brio e di movimenti drammatici, rapida, tutta case, senza ombra di artificio e di retorica. Ci è una finezza e gentilezza di concetti in forma ancor greggia, ineducata. E perciò il documento è più prezioso, perchè se l'ingegno del poeta apparisce nei concetti e ne' sentimenti e nell'andamento vivo e rapido del dialogo, la forma è quasi impersonale, ritratto immediato e genuino del tempo.

E studiando in quella forma, è facile indurre che c'era allora già la nuova lingua, non ancora formata e fissata, ma tale che non solo si parlava, ma si scriveva; e c'era pure una scuola poetica col suo repertorio di frasi e di concetti, e con le sue forme tecniche e metriche già fissate.⁷⁸

[The canzone is drawn down all in one breath, full of naturalness and bio and dramatic movements, rapid, spontaneous, without a shadow of artifice and of rhetoric. There's a fineness and gentility of concepts in a form that is still crude, raw. And for this reason the document is even more valuable, because if the poet's genius appears in the concepts and in the emotions and in the lively, rapid movement of the dialogue, the form is almost impersonal, an immediate and genuine portrait of the time.

And, by examining the poem's form, it is easy to infer that the new language [*lingua*] was already in existence at the time, and was spoken as well as written, though it had not yet been formed and fixed; and that there was a school of poetry with its own repertory of phrases and concepts, and with its own literary forms of technique and meter already fixed.]

Much of what we find here resonates with the method of Veselovsky: the generalization of period style through individual style, the separation of the elements of literary form and linguistic detail, the claim of anachronism based on the relative settling of styles. The warrant De Sanctis gives for his characterization of the form as a "ritratto immediato e genuino del tempo" ["immediate and genuine portrait of the time"] is particularly striking. The liveliness of the language overshadows the fixed nature of the form, evidence of "una scuola poetica col suo repertorio di frasi e di concetti" ["a school of poetry with its own repertory of phrases and concepts"]. The impersonality of the form becomes visible by the personal tone of the language.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

We can compare these comments on the Sicilian canzone to his observations on the Tuscan dialect from the same time, which he takes up in the following chapter:

Gittando uno sguardo su quelle antichissime rime, non ritrovi la vivacità e la tenerezza meridionale, ma uno stile sano e semplice, lontano da ogni gonfiezza e pretensione, e un volgare già assai più fino, per la proprietà de' vocaboli ed una grazia non scevra di eleganza.... Nella cantilena di [Ciullo] hai più varietà e più impeto, e concetti ingegnosi in forma rozza. Nella tenzone di Ciacco tutto è su uno stampo, in andamento piano, uguale e tranquillo, e in una lingua così propria e sicura, che non ne hai esempio ne' più tersi e puliti siciliani.⁷⁹

[Taking a look over those earliest [Tuscan] verses, you will find the vivacity and tenderness of the Sicilian verses, but a sane and simple style, far from any kind of self-importance or pretension, and a vernacular already much more complete [*fino*] from the propriety of terms and a grace resembling elegance.... In Ciullo's *cantilena* you have more variety and more passion, and ingenious concepts in a crude form. In Ciacco's *tenzone* all is of one imprint, in even, equal, and calm movement, and therefore in a proper and certain language, that has no similar examples in the terse, polished Sicilians.] Again, De Sanctis observes that the form of the poems reveals the anachronism of different historical stages of the spoken register and literary form: the vernacular in Sicily has not yet been formed or fixed, but the literary tropes and meter of the Sicilian repertory have been; in Tuscan, the "proprietà" ["propriety"] of diction shows a more settled spoken language, matching the settled nature of the form. De Sanctis calls the uniformity of the Tuscan verse a molded form: "tutto è su uno stampo" ["all is of one imprint"].

Beyond the simple description of style, De Sanctis offers his literary judgments through an evaluation of the sources of the disparities in form and diction. The sociological situation of the two centers of writing lead to their different cultural influences. For example, De Sanctis speaks of the layered influences of Arabic and Norman culture visible in Sicilian, a contrast to the

⁷⁹ *Storia*, vol. 1, 19–20.

static, more isolated geography of Tuscan. Where then De Sanctis uses traditional rhetorical concepts, he describes not the *effects* of variety but the *origins* of variety—a mixture of spoken and written forms, official and vernacular registers. In the Sicilian *cantilena*, the modulation between these words from different sources creates a naturalness, a liveliness, a dramatic movement akin to that of speech, contrasted by the static, “impersonal” nature of the Provençal love poem conventions, which originate from a single source. In both judgments, the word “fixed”—*fissata*—is a negative value—not because of the poorer literary or rhetorical qualities associated with a fixed form (it is indeed *more* literary because it belongs to the high tradition of courtly love poetry) but because it does not reflect the reality of the form of language to which it belongs. In these moments, De Sanctis considers the concept of form at different levels, seeing the poem’s *content* of words and grammatical formulae as another kind of *form*—just like images, literary tropes, and allegorical figures.

Turning to the analysis of literary works contemporary to the period, we can see the centrality of lyric to De Sanctis’s concept of *critica storica*. The lyric poem, far from being one among many genres that participate in the transformation of social practice into literary form, retains a unique place in the pantheon of genres due to its ability to make visible the forms of inner life that have no social existence in ritual practice, only a concrete existence in individual physical action and behavior. De Sanctis turns the historical and sociological concept of *forma* into one of psychology or personality in his analysis of Leopardi’s *pathos*:

La logica nel senso comune è la coerenza delle idee, la corrispondenza dei mezzi col fine;
la logica dell’arte è la coerenza di linguaggio e di condotta nel giuoco combinato di tutte le

forze vitali, quando e come operano in un dato momento dell'esistenza, idee, immaginazioni, sentimenti, passioni; stato fisico, morale, intellettuale.⁸⁰

[Logic commonly understood is the coherence of ideas, the correspondence of the means with the end; the logic of art is the coherence of language and of behavior in the combined play of all of their vital forces, when and how they operate in a given moment of existence, ideas, imaginations, emotions, passions; a physical, moral, and intellectual state.]

This is a typical instance of De Sanctis's suspicion of the focus of a Romantic philosophy of art on the ideal or logical at the expense of the real or concrete. For De Sanctis, ideas of mind and spirit within the individual take form in language and behavior—those physical actions that give a concrete reality to the emotions. Likewise, form organizes thought itself as the material in language and in behavior of these larger cultural forces. Following this schema, De Sanctis reads individual lyric poems by attention to the forms of inner life (thought and emotion) that characterize the outer forms of sociological and cultural exchange.

In Leopardi's portrayal of "la vita interiore sviluppatissima" ["the interior life at its most advanced level of development"], De Sanctis finds the culmination of the method of *critica*. Leopardi's writing puts into practice a skepticism that rejects both the ideal perfection of the classical poetic form as well as the stylistic qualities of "rapidity, naturalness, and brio" associated with the Romantic dogma:

Ciò che ha importanza, è l'esplorazione del proprio petto, il mondo interno, virtù, libertà, amore, tutti gl'ideali della religione, della scienza e della poesia, ombre e illusioni innanzi alla sua ragione e che pur gli scaldano il cuore, e non vogliono morire.

[What is important to him is the exploration of his own breast, the inner world with its virtue, liberty, love, and all the ideals of religion, of science, and of poetry, which are

⁸⁰ *Studio su Giacomo Leopardi* (Naples: Morano, 1894), 163.

shades and illusions when confronted with reason, despite the fact that they kindle the heart and do not wish to die.]

Questa vita tenace di un mondo interno, malgrado la caduta di ogni mondo teologico e metafisico, è l'originalità di Leopardi, e dà al suo scetticismo una impronta religiosa. Anzi è lo scetticismo di un quarto d'ora in cui vibra un così energico sentimento del mondo morale. Ciascuno sente lì dentro una nuova formazione.

[This tenacious life of the inner world, despite the downfall of each theological and metaphysical world, is Leopardi's originality, and gives his skepticism the imprint of religion. Or, rather, it is a fleeting skepticism that vibrates with the energetic emotion of the moral world. Every person feels within themselves a new formation.]⁸¹

De Sanctis posits here that the lyric poems of Leopardi inhabit a position linking interior and exterior forms, those touching the individual as well as the collective experience. The ideas and institutions active in the world that motivate individuals are both inadequate to logic—an ironic condemnation of Hegelian idealism—and yet stubborn survivals of time: they “non vogliono morire” [“do not wish to die”]. In this poetic turn of phrase, De Sanctis personifies the form of ideas inside and outside the mind as autonomous entities to describes its persistence. In the second part of the quotation, the word *formazione*, playing on the philosophical notion of *forma*, suggests the everyday meaning “education” or “instruction”—and in this play on words there is the echo of the idea of our individual mental development as the *forming* of the mind. De Sanctis seems to anticipate Leo Spitzer's analysis of the Leopardi poem “Aspasia,” when he writes that, in the unfolding poetic narrative, “è come le fasi del pensiero e emozione poetica sono realizzati di fronte di nostri occhi” [“it is as if the stages of the poet's thought and emotion materialized right before our eyes”]⁸² For De Sanctis, when the lyric poem individuates the larger concepts of “il

⁸¹ *Storia*, vol. 2, 462.

⁸² *Studi italiani* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1976), 285–286.

mondo morale” [“the moral world”] it does not exit history—it reenters history and renews the cycle of historical change.

If the concept of the historical, as these passages suggest, gains a personal dimension in De Sanctis, then likewise the scope of cultural history expands to include the linguistic dimensions of dialect’s social nature. As the analysis of Leopardi shows, the lyric poem’s hybrid nature displays a modern individual voice set within an ancient collective chorus. Yet for a geographical form that conditions the lyric voice, De Sanctis turns to Alessandro Manzoni, whose work directly engages the political and historical forces of his own native land. In one of the first major Italian lyric pieces of the nineteenth century, the chorus at the conclusion of Act II of Manzoni’s 1820 tragedy *Il Conte di Carmagnola* (The count of Carmagnola), De Sanctis finds an expression of deep cultural solidarity that functions as a hybrid personal and collective expression. Here is the ending of Manzoni’s chorus:

In qual ora, in qual parte del suolo,
Trascorriamo quest’aura vital
Siam fratelli; siam stretti ad un patto:
Maledetto colui che l’infrange,
Che s’innalza sul fiacco che piange,
Che contrista uno spirto immortal!

Whatever hour, whatever part of the soil
We pass over this vital aura
We are brothers; we are joined in a pact:
Cursed is he who breaks it,
Who is raised over the weak man who weeps,
Who saddens an immortal spirit!

Here it might be said merely that the poet’s moral judgment dissolves the poetic tension between the horizon of history and the expression of individual emotion. In these final lines, however, the

reader identifies something that goes beyond the individual moral choice. Here the chorus utters a specific curse to those who fail to recognize or keep the pact of “lignaggio” (the bloodline shared by the inhabitants of the plain) by a dismissal of the importance of historical succession (“in qual ora”) or soil (“in qual parte del suolo”; *suolo* as the prehistorical notion of land, not divided into property but natural and related to the human itinerary on earth).

In his own reading of the chorus, De Sanctis considers the cogent expression of emotion a rhetorical construction to comment on the historical:

Il Coro greco è legato strettamente con l'azione, è la spiegazione e l'impressione di quella; qui il Coro è la reazione del poeta, è l'impressione sua e dei contemporanei, la maledizione della storia in nome dell'idea; ma la storia continua la sua via e non l'ode. Il Coro rimane un «a parte», lo sfogo del poeta innanzi ad una rappresentazione che fa sanguinare il suo cuore di cristiano e di patriotta. A poco a poco quel Coro si è sciolto dal tutto, al quale apparteneva, ed è rimasto un bel pezzo lirico, gl'*Inni* in continuazione, con quell'accento e con quella intonazione un po' rettorica, che si purifica per via e si alza alla semplicità e verità del sentimento.⁸³

[The Greek chorus is strictly linked with the action, is the explanation and impression of it; here the Chorus is the poet's reaction, is the impression of himself and his contemporaries, the curse of history in the name of the idea; but history continues on its path and does not listen. The Chorus remains “outside,” the poet's effusion before a representation that makes his Christian and patriotic heart ache. Slowly that Chorus is dissolved by everything to which it belongs, and only a lovely lyrical piece remains, an extension of the *Sacred Hymns*, with the emphasis and rhetorical intonation that is made purer by and through the simplicity and truth of emotion.]

L'azione storica è di tanta importanza, che non patisce compagnia di elementi estranei e vuoi regnare sola. Pure l'ideale investe così il poeta che ivi si manifesta tutta la sua genialità, sì che lungamente risuonano nell'immaginazione commossa dei lettori.... [i Cori] rimangono i pezzi staccati, si sperde l'insieme, si sperde quanto di profondo ha

⁸³ “La poetica di Manzoni,” in *La letteratura italiana del secolo XIX*, Vol. 1: Alessandro Manzoni, ed. Luigi Blasucci (Bari: Laterza & Figli, 1963), 30.

messo l'Autore ne' suoi pensieri storici: quei due mondi, messi dirimpetto, in luogo di formare un tutto omogeneo e concorde si sciolgono, e l'uno muore, l'altro sopravvive.⁸⁴

[The historical action is so important that it does not welcome the company of extraneous elements and wants to reign alone. The ideal alone invests the poet in this way, who manifests all of his geniality, so that the eventually they resound in the disturbed imagination of the readers.... [The Choruses] remain detached pieces, the whole is scattered, along with whatever profound meaning the Author has placed into his historical thoughts: those two worlds, put in juxtaposition in order to form a homogenous and harmonious whole, dissolve, and one dies and the other survives.]

In both of these formulations, the Chorus raises the problem of representing two worlds—the historical, real world, and the ideal, imagined world. In lyric, the two problems are not equal: before the lyric chorus, “la storia continua la sua via e non l’ode” [“history continues on its path and does not listen”]. In judging the significance of the Chorus as a lyric poem, De Sanctis therefore stresses the importance of noticing what “sopravvive” [“lasts”] in the poem: not the objective “azione” [“action”] but the subjective “reazione” [“reaction”]; not the “storia” [“history”] but the “sfogo del poeta” [“poet’s effusion”]; not merely the “pensi storici” [“historical thoughts”] but rather the “quanto di profondo ha messo l’Autore” [“what profound thing the Author has put into them”]. For De Sanctis, the poet must make individual and particular the active forces of history in the world (which in the historical world of the poem includes the religious values of Christianity and nationalist values of patriotism). The poem’s defining achievement is its ability to express the lasting qualities of individual emotion with language that links him to others from that very place.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 31.

Conclusion: Lyric and the Need for Criticism

In the introductory section to this chapter (as well as the general introduction to the dissertation), I acknowledged the need for scholars of literary history and poetics to consider language with more fine-grained, historically sensitive distinctions between its spoken, communicative and written, artistic aspects; between its historical evolution over the *longue durée* and its systematic and successive functions at key moments within that longer narrative; and the influence of mass, collective influences (i.e., geographical, sociological, demographic changes or events) on the cultural institutions that hold preferential authority within the annals of cultural history. Contemporary scholars may do well to consider the fact that the assumptions (or dogmas) of twentieth-century criticism that I detailed in the introduction, especially those drawn from Saussure, have drowned out the voices of influential, major scholars sensitive to these issues, as they certainly have with Veselovsky and De Sanctis.

In these concluding remarks, I want to acknowledge a separate issue related to that linguistic blind spot of historical critics, and that is the continued energy among scholars of different allegiances and approaches—perhaps surprising to some—for definitional disputes over the genre of lyric. In fact, I believe that renewed engagement with the lyric in a range of past critical approaches—among them structuralism, deconstructionism, practical criticism, and historical poetics—reflect the fact that lyric, by its very function, intends to renew both self-reflexive critical thought and expressive immediacy whenever it is used by poets. I believe that lyric's hybrid formal and pragmatic features explain its survival into the modern era as well as its survival as a keen object of scholarly interest. Furthermore, this hybrid nature explains the need to constantly renegotiate the genre's relation to lay readers responding to its expressive and

emotional content, to critics interested in offering either philosophical or historical insight into these responses, and to poets self-conscious of the different pragmatic and formal modes available to them as poetic technique. Poetics is, as Boris Maslov writes, a “true homonym”: “the art of ‘making’ literary artifacts and the science that reveals their constructedness to the eyes of a different epoch.”⁸⁵ No matter its reader or its author, lyric poetics requires a rich conception of social meaning in order to understand its hybrid, anachronistic form, made from variously felt and constructed elements of an archaic, pre-literary past within those elements of a perpetual and constantly developing present.

The intention of lyric to announce its own vitality, part of the long history of defenses of poetry, has been described by the poet and critic Allen Grossman as the eidetic or “presence-making” function of the lyric, which comes from its ability to manifest the immediacy of the human voice through its repetition and repeatability throughout history: “The association of poetry and immortality can be constructed by observing the eidetic utility inherent in the exact repeatability of sentences.”⁸⁶ Grossman further writes that the language of the lyric poem, crucial to this pragmatic function, enters the poem as “social language, that is to say, versions of socially identifiable dialects” that are distinguished from “natural versions” of social language by “archaism,” or the “authority of prior life.”⁸⁷ The social connections implied between reader and author (as well as between author and the tradition) in this account of lyric resonates with

⁸⁵ *Pindar and the Emergence of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 320.

⁸⁶ “Summa Lyrica: A Primer of the Commonplaces in Speculative Poetics,” in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, ed. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 427. Grossman refers to the Homeric rather than the Platonic use of the term *eidos*.

⁸⁷ Grossman, 426.

Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of the "possible chorus" present in all lyric utterance.⁸⁸ These theories of lyric solicit social as well as historical thinking. For Grossman and for Bakhtin alike, the authority of the lyric chorus persists not simply as an archaic or ancient historical feature that presages the present, but as ongoing investments of the poetic tradition to which they belong.

What a contemporary version of historical poetics would do to respond to the eidetic function of lyric is not immediately clear. Though I discussed the critical theories and reading methods of two major scholars of historical poetics at great length in the previous section, my intentions were not to propose that the Veselovsky or De Sanctis should be examples for contemporary scholars, beyond simply in the fact that their respective theories of literary history, long considered outdated, still manage to accommodate the capacious version of language change innovated by the dialectologists that were their contemporaries. And yet the revival of historical poetics by two specific schools of thought in recent years, one a working group of Victorian studies scholars headed by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, the other a working group of Slavic and Classics scholars led by Ilya Kliger and Boris Maslov, have brought that very question into the critical conversation.⁸⁹

In my estimation, the most valuable consequence of reintroducing Veselovsky's historical poetics into the contemporary field of literary studies has been reasserting the crucial yet ever-diminishing distinction between the methods of literary criticism and literary history. It is

⁸⁸ For more consideration of Bakhtin and lyric, see Chapter 3, Section 1, "Lyric Speech, Lyric Speakers."

⁸⁹ The warring titles of two contributions to the debate over historical poetics illustrate the polemical angles of the debate, though neither scholar is affiliated with the Chicago working group: Simon Jarvis, "What Is Historical Poetics?" in *Theory Aside*, ed. Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 97–116; and Yopie Prins, "What Is Historical Poetics?," *Modern Language Quarterly* 77:1 (March 2016): 13–40. For an account of Veselovsky's relevance to contemporary debates, written by a member of the working group, see Boris Maslov, "Comparative Literature and Revolution; or, The Many Arts of (Mis)reading Alexander Veselovsky," *Compar(a)ison*, no. 2 of 2008 vol.: 101–129.

perhaps fitting that a group of scholars based primarily in Chicago should do so. In his seminal essay “History Versus Criticism in the Study of Literature,” renowned Chicago School critic R. S. Crane calls for a hard line to be drawn between the “analytical and evaluative” functions of criticism—a reiteration of concern for Aristotelian unity in a literary work—and the narrative task of history, “indifferent to questions of value.”⁹⁰ By revisiting Veselovsky’s scientific approach of historiography, younger scholars have positioned themselves to identify and reveal the implicit assumptions of value that many historicist approaches make.

A potential pitfall of holding onto the objective claims of historicism is that the historical horizon provides cover for subtle but consequential critical evaluations implicit in the construction of a historiography. Thus, in many critical works engaged in ideology critique, the implicit promise endures that historical self-awareness, an acknowledgement of how the ideology of the past “establishes the limits, conceptual and practical, of our present and our future” has allowed criticism to shed its “uncritical absorption” of the ideologies present in its artifacts and texts.⁹¹ And yet literary historiography of this kind continues to justify itself in just the same ways as it always has. As W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks remind us, the earliest literary histories of English literature, those of Warton and Taine, “were primarily evaluative—that is, they had to do with a re-assessment of neo-classic norms and a turning back to look at primitive literatures with what was considered a greater fairness.”⁹² Prior to these proper literary histories, Dr. Johnson himself finds a schematic notion of historical progress useful as a standard for evaluating poems from different eras. In his commentary on Pope’s translation of Homer, for example, Johnson

⁹⁰ “History versus Criticism in the Study of Literature,” *English Journal* 24 (1935): 645.

⁹¹ Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 5.

⁹² *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 532.

defends Pope's overlay of an "artificial diction" over Homer's "awful simplicity, his artless grandeur, his unaffected majesty" by appeal to the "change which two thousand years have made in the modes of life and the habits of thought."⁹³ In both its earliest and most recent forms, literary history in English has often smuggled in critical evaluations by holding (and continuing to hold) the narrative of change or progress as a measuring stick for the present.

And yet the importance of distinguishing literary history from literary criticism should not simply be to banish criticism from scholarship once and for all. More than forty years ago, in the essay "The Fall of Literary History," Rene Wellek performed a belated eulogy for the macroscopic literary historiographical work that came of age in the nineteenth century (including those by Warton, Taine, and De Sanctis) by calling both its theoretical premises and practical aims an "illusion." "There is no progress, no development, no history of art," Wellek writes, "except a history of writers, institutions, and techniques."⁹⁴ Wellek's lament aims to describe poststructuralism as the more responsible, more self-conscious ("less atomistically conceived" and "with greater awareness of the difficulties...of influence and periods") version of the old literary history, and his assessment could also apply to the claims made for New Historicism in the decades that followed.⁹⁵ Following Wellek's diagnosis (but not his evaluation of their success), it seems unproductive simply to reprise methodologies and questions raised by the old literary history of Veselovsky and De Sanctis; but it seems equally unproductive to historicize those methods by appeal to any "greater awareness" of ours. The old historicism of De

⁹³ *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, vol. 4., ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 74.

⁹⁴ "The Fall of Literary History," in *The Attack on Literature and Other Essays* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 77.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

Sanctis (more so than Veselovsky) wears its commitments to critical evaluation more obviously than the New Historicism and its contemporaries, and therefore offers the straightforward appeal of sincerity to counteract objections to its outdatedness. If De Sanctis was a historian and a critic, he was an honest one.

In the following chapters, this project will propose related but distinct answers to the central question raised by revisiting the scholarly field of dialectology through the lens of historical poetics: what role does a particular history of the spoken language, continuous in a time and space belonging to a specific community, play in the language of the lyric poem? Beyond the peculiar solicitations that lyric makes on our values, there is something in the hybrid nature of speech itself that brings out the contours of lyric's hybrid nature as archaic and modern, as individual and collective. Where speech forms our values, lyric organizes these values and crystallizes them for further scrutiny. This fact suggests to me that the local, evaluative judgments of the literary critic may not need to be so carefully concealed in the objective rigor of the historian.

Chapter 2:

Absolute Metaphor and Historical Vernacular in Leopardi's *Canti*

Despite his obscurity during his lifetime and the relatively meager size of his body of work, Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837) undoubtedly staked his claim as the modern heir of the Dantean and Petrarchan lyric tradition by his self-conscious appropriation of the refined cultural tropes that have characterized the high Italian literary tradition from its origins. Following this reputation, critics in the twentieth century have focused a great deal of effort on reading the vast catalog of literary allusions to the classical and *stilnovo* traditions laced into the diction of his thirty-six lyric poems and fragments. Yet, as recent scholarship has shown, the Italian high literary tradition serves as only one well from which Leopardi draws his poetic diction. Salvatore Battaglia identifies three distinct fields of vocabulary that Leopardi synthesizes in his poetry: words from everyday speech, scientific language, and literary language.¹ The range of these layered registers—from low to high, from common to specialized—should come as no surprise to those readers familiar with Leopardi's apprenticeship as a classical philologist or the extensive linguistic notes scattered throughout the pages of his *Zibaldone dei pensieri* ("Notebook of thoughts").² As Donatella Martinelli remarks, the linguistic notes in the *Zibaldone* as well as the marginal notes to the *Canti* in the autograph edition demonstrate "il carattere così spesso squisitamente linguistico delle fonti: non umanistico modello da emulare, ma *auctoritas* utile

¹ "La dottrina linguistica di Leopardi," in *Leopardi e il Settecento* (Florence: L. S. Olschki, 1964), 11–47.

² Leopardi's works of classical philology include editions of Porphyry's life of Plotinus (*Porphyri de vita Plotini et ordine librorum ejus*, 1814); a collection of writings on rhetoric (*Commentarii de vita et scriptis rhetorum quorundam qui secundo post Christum saeculo vel primo declinante vixerunt*, 1814); and an edition of the works of Sextus Julius Africanus (1815). Leopardi gave up philology before he began writing poetry because of poor health. See Sebastiano Timpanaro, *La filologia di Giacomo Leopardi* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1955), chapter 7.

all'esatta decifrazione semantica" ["the often exquisitely linguistic character of the sources: not a humanistic model to emulate, but an *auctoritas* [authority, prestige] useful for semantic decipherment"].³ Leopardi perhaps more than any poet of his generation embraced linguistic expertise as his poetic vocation.

Despite the significant reevaluations of his legacy as a thinker about language, little progress has been made in assessing the influence of Leopardi's singular linguistic expertise on his poetics. In recent decades, Leopardi has been granted the status of a serious linguist who made real (and finally recognized) interventions in the history of linguistics.⁴ The majority of his contributions remain in the realm of comparative linguistics, based on recurring entries in the *Zibaldone* on the history and grammar of vulgar Latin, a nascent field in the early nineteenth century.⁵ These notes use archaic Latin sources as well as late Latin (and early Romance) sources to make sometimes speculative and incorrect, sometimes prescient claims about the morphology, grammar, and lexicon of Vulgar Latin. The lexicographer Giovanni Nencioni notes that Leopardi

³ "Il 'Lexicon' del Forcellini nell'officina linguistica leopardiana," in *Strumenti di Giacomo Leopardi: repertori, dizionari, periodici*, ed. Maria Maddalena Lombardi (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2000), 114.

⁴ Maurizio Dardano notes that Leopardi was among the heirs of the French *idéologues* in Italy but interpreted their focus on interdisciplinarity "con maggiore ampiezza di orizzonti" ["with broader horizons"]. "Le concezioni linguistiche del Leopardi," in *Lingua e stile di Giacomo Leopardi* (Firenze: Olschki, 1994), 30. For a discussion of Rousseau's influence, see Claudia Stancati, "The French Sources of Leopardi's Linguistics," in *Historical Roots of Linguistic Theories*, ed. Lia Formigari and Daniele Gambarara (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1995), 129–40.

⁵ See Angela Bianchi, *Pensieri sull'etimo. Riflessioni linguistiche nello Zibaldone di Giacomo Leopardi* (Rome: Carocci, 2012); Mirko Tavoni, "Sulla linguistica comparata di Leopardi," in *Studi per Umberto Carpi. Un saluto da allievi e colleghi pisani*, ed. Marco Santagata and Alfredo Stussi (Pisa: ETS, 2000), 674–81; and Alberto Grilli, "Leopardi e la lingua latina," and Mario Verducci, "Lingua e stile: presenze e apporti dialettali negli scritti leopardiani," both included in *Lingua e stile di Giacomo Leopardi* (Florence: L. S. Olschki, 1994). Luca Barbieri also notes that many of Leopardi's notes on possible links from vulgar Latin to modern Italian come by way of comments on the vocabulary of classical Latin authors, including Vergil, Horace, and Cicero. See Barbieri, "Leopardi linguista e filologo. Lo 'Zibaldone di pensieri' e un'idea di latino volgare," *Aevum* 68:3 (September–December 1994): 684–687. See also Barbieri's appendix including examples of Leopardian etymology, 692–698.

proudly embraced his amateur status, exploring speculatively through the pages of the *Zibaldone* unprovable hypotheses that could not be published the annals of conventional classical philology. Nencioni admires his outsider status as a linguist and critic: “Leopardi si rifiuta piú volte, sia nello *Zibaldone* che fuori di esso, di riconoscere autorità normativa al vocabolario” [“Leopardi often refuses both in the *Zibaldone* and elsewhere, to recognize a standard authority for vocabulary”].⁶ By seeing speculative yet rigorous engagements with ancient speech as part of the classical scholarship that forms the basis for Leopardi’s thought, we can make a significant step toward understanding how thinking etymologically and historically might form an important basis for his poetics. By his interest in the elements of speech legible within the concepts of high classical learning, we can see how Leopardi’s work directs us to the ancient roots shared by the *volgare* (the spoken vernacular, the plain speech of the people) and the *lingua* (the formal technical concept of language). Leopardi’s poetics reimagines lyric as the synthesis of ancient spoken and written features embedded in the texture of modern language.

Because of the relative recency of the scholarship on his Vulgar Latin philology, Leopardi’s attitude toward spoken language has been obscured by a misreading of his position on the centuries-old *questione della lingua* in Italian letters, a debate that Leopardi engaged with in print briefly between the careers of Cesarotti and Manzoni. Because of his formal training in classical philology, Leopardi has often been positioned with the conservative purists who advocated a literary style that took classical Latin as its model.⁷ Indeed, his response to the

⁶ “Leopardi lessicologo e lessicografo,” in *Tra grammatica e retorica. Da Dante a Pirandello* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983), 262.

⁷ A typical view is that of Claudio Marazzini, who calls Leopardi “rigorosamente classicista” and pointedly links him to colleague Pietro Giordani’s polemics against dialect. See *Da Dante alla lingua selvaggia* (Rome: Carocci, 1999), 148–159.

famous essay on translation by Madame De Staël, published in the journal of his mentor Pietro Giordani called *Biblioteca Italiana*, expressed caution against overvaluing the exotic *per se* in translation. However, in distinction to the other letters of dissent to Madame De Staël's position, Leopardi's letter avoids chauvinistic claims for the superiority of his native language based on its classical Latin ancestry. Instead, he advocates for linguistic and literary-critical analysis of how a translator might allow one language to be *innestato* ("grafted") from one culture to another.⁸ Indeed, as we find more elaborately in his linguistic writings in the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi professed profound skepticism toward using classical Latin as a touchstone for any modern literature precisely because of its lack of resemblance to living speech:

La letteratura antica per grande ch'ella sia, non basta alla lingua moderna. La lingua (massime dove non è società) è sempre formata e determinata dalla letteratura: dico sempre, cioè successivamente e in ciascun tempo: onde la lingua presente essendo moderna dev'essere determinata non dalla letteratura antica, cioè da quella che la determinò, ma da una che attualmente la determini, cioè da una letteratura moderna.⁹

[Ancient literature, however grand it might be, is not enough for modern language. Language (especially where there is no society) is always formed and determined by literature, and by always I mean successively and in each time period. Hence the present language, being modern, must be determined not by ancient literature, meaning by the language that determined it, but by what currently determines it, i.e., modern literature.]

Here, Leopardi's expertise in classical Latin allows him the authority to pronounce the historical gap between ancient and modern an inadvisable leap for any author to make. Taking a strictly presentist view of language's influence on literature that would not be out of place among the

⁸ *Scritti vari inediti* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1906), 162. The botanical metaphor is directly echoed in *Zibaldone*, 3407–3408. The definitive study on Leopardi's exchange with De Staël can be found in Sofia Ravasi, *Leopardi et Mme de Staël* (Milano: Tipografia Sociale, 1910).

⁹ *Zibaldone*, ed. Rolando Damiani (Milan: Mondadori, 1997), 2125 (hereafter cited as *Zibaldone*, with Leopardi's original page numbers, since they are preserved in all editions). See also 838–863.

French historians of style, Taine and Brunetière, Leopardi strongly denounces the idea of finding the proper diction outside of one's own time period.

This rigorous conception of poetic diction converges, in my own reading, with Leopardi's fixation on the nuances of spoken language in the verbal matter of ancient Latin sources. In Leopardi's poetics, the poet makes use of inherent capabilities in his native tongue that have resulted from the accidents of history: whether it was formed early or late relative to the present; what institutions or events have shaped it by gradual or cataclysmic change; and, ultimately, what kind of change is evident from foregrounding the past meanings of modern words. For Leopardi, the poet ought to have, as Leopardi did, in Stefano Gensini's words, a "coscienza affinata dei vari livelli diacronici compresenti nell'italiano, e delle tare stesse della sua condizione sociolinguistica" ["refined awareness of the various diachronic levels copresent in Italian, and of the flaws of its sociolinguistic condition"].¹⁰ Based on his intuitions about the relation of ancient and modern dialect, Leopardi bases his major poetic tropes—voice, metonym, metaphor—on the change of word meanings over centuries of language development from ancient to modern usages. His use of these tropes develop over the course of his writing in the *Canti*, from contrasts of voice and diction to more sophisticated figurative devices—both metonymic and metaphorical—in his late poems.

The argument of this chapter will unfold in three parts. Firstly, it will describe in detail the philosophy of style that provides a necessary link between Leopardi's observations on comparative linguistics in the *Zibaldone* and his poetic practice. Leopardi's poetics, I will argue, synthesizes the traditional disciplines of philology and rhetoric, using the careful historical and

¹⁰ *Linguistica leopardiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1984), 70.

linguistic description of individual words and tropes as the basis of the poetic value of *pellegrinità* (a *seicento* rhetorical concept that revises Aristotle's rhetorical concept of ξένικον, foreignness or strangeness). The lyric poem for Leopardi activates the speech of ages past that lies dormant in the history of individual words, revealed by showing the natural *pellegrinaggio*, or "wandering," from its normal situation in the language.

Then, in the second section, I will turn to analysis of two poems from Leopardi's middle-period *Canti*, "La vita solitaria" and "l'Ultimo canto di Saffo," both poems that draw out specific, historically locatable concepts of cultural value found in the usage of key words drawn from classical as well as vulgar Latin. These poems rhetorically allegorize the downfall of language kept artificially static over time by its standardization through religious and political institutions; and, on the other hand, they stage the rhetorical victory of the vernacular register that genetically links vulgar Latin with modern Italian. They confirm, in other words, the preeminence of the spoken language for Leopardi's poetics. My reading of these poems highlights the minute shifts—primarily morphological and syntactic—of the language of the earlier Latinate languages foregrounded in his poems drawing most explicitly from classical sources.

The final section of this chapter turns to Leopardi's late, long-form lyrics, particularly "Il canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia" and "La ginestra." By using Hans Blumenberg's notion of "absolute metaphor," I argue that the turn away from the historical allegory of the middle period toward a Leopardian lexical *metaphorology* is built from the idea of a foundational metaphor of thought and culture, not as the artifact of the poet's creative invention but rather as the evidence of the evolution of words across spoken and written dimensions over the *longue durée*. These poems draw attitudes of resilience toward fate from the cultural authority

established by metaphors of organic procreation and genealogy—metaphors that bring philosophical depth and poetic resonance into words belonging to plain speech.

Philological Style and *Pellegrinità*

To begin with, Leopardi's theory of poetic language should be understood against the backdrop of a general theory of culture that has since his own time been considered closely aligned with the philosophical pessimism of Arthur Schopenhauer.¹¹ Tobias Dahlkvist distinguishes Leopardi's version of pessimism from Schopenhauer's, however, based on its inclusion of historical principles. Schopenhauer's absolute conception of pessimism—that existence itself cannot be justified, and that it is indeed worth the same as non-existence—was modified by his follower Eduard von Hartmann into a historical version that describes the cultural decline of the modern world—its social, moral, etc., stagnancy—as one not motivated by particular individual states or actions, but instead as the natural and inevitable occurrence of history.¹² This is close in approach to the cultural critique of Leopardi's major interventions in *Discorso di un italiano sulla poesia romantica* ("Discourse of an Italian on Romantic poetry"; 1818) and *Discorso sopra lo stato presente dei costumi degl'Italiani* ("Discourse on the present state of the customs of the Italians"; 1824). In anticipating Schopenhauer and his followers,

¹¹ Schopenhauer speaks of Leopardi in a private letter to David Asher as his "spiritual relative." See Tobias Dahlkvist, *Nietzsche and the Philosophy of Pessimism* (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala Universitet, 2007), 99.

¹² For a thorough discussion of Hartmann's reception of Schopenhauerian pessimism, see Chapter 2 of Dahlkvist. This model of decline, Reinhart Koselleck reminds us, runs counter to the dominant narrative of historical progress of the time: "During the eighteenth century and in the time since then it had become a widespread belief that progress is general and constant while every regression, decline, or decay occurs only partially or temporarily." "'Progress' and 'Decline': An Appendix to the History of Two Concepts," *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Presner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 227.

Leopardi prizes both the historical aspect of cultural decline as well as its primary transhistorical quality—namely, the experience of melancholy by the individual.

The relationship of the historical change of culture to its individual manifestations in people is based on a fundamental analogy between the growth and decline of a culture and the growth and aging of the human person. Leopardi, like many of his European contemporaries, describes the unfolding of cultural history unfolds by the stages of human growth, with the pre-rational moment of ancient civilization analogous to childhood and the post-Enlightenment epoch analogous to adulthood and old age. In the essay on romantic poetry, Leopardi offers the clearest discussion of this metaphor: “Quello che furono gli antichi, siamo stati noi tutti, e quello che fu il mondo per qualche secolo, siamo stati noi per qualche anno, dico fanciulli e partecipi di quella ignoranza e di quei timori e di quei dilette e di quelle credenze e di quella sterminata operazione della fantasia” [“What the ancients were, we all were, and what the world was for a number of centuries we all were for a number of years: children, and participants in that ignorance and those fears and delights and beliefs and that nearly endless activity of imagination”].¹³ Reason transforms civilization by replacing the imagination as the primary mode of engagement with the natural world—the crossing of a cultural Rubicon for Leopardi—because it shrinks the world to something graspable by the human mind, rather than opening human nature into the vastness of nature. While in many instances Leopardi seems to make this narrative chronological, Elio Gioanola makes a distinction between historical and chronological decline: “Non è possibile indicare, per Leopardi, il luogo dell’antico e quello del moderno.... Il

¹³ *Discorso di un italiano interno alla poesia romantica*, ed. Ottavio Besomi, et al (Bellinzona: Casagrande, 1988), 18–19. Leopardi’s notion that civilization develops stadially reflects Vico’s concept of the three ages (“the age of gods, the age of heroes, and the age of men”) as well as his notion of the primacy of *fantasia*—imagination—over reason as the basis for art.

moderno si insinua fin nel cuore dell'antico e l'antico vive ancora...nei fanciulli e negli indotti” [“It is not possible to indicate, for Leopardi, the place of the ancient and of the modern.... The modern insinuates itself in the heart of the ancient and the ancient still lives...in the child and in the primitive”].¹⁴ Thus, while we cannot identify a single, objective historical moment as the shift from a so-called Golden Age of imagination to the modern era of rationality, we identify the unfolding process of decline as always *present*, and the age of imagination as always *prior*. The mixture of ancient and modern that Gioanola suggests may be present in either time period is largely analogical: we have our very conception of history based on the subjective sense of loss we carry from our pre-rational experience.

This conflation of the objective and subjective experiences of our place in a civilization are suggestive, in Leopardi's philosophy, of the features of language that poetry might use. Poetic language for Leopardi has the special capacity to allow us to contemplate a word's meaning and force by showing us its situation *across* the gap between the prehistorical (imaginative) aspect and the historical (rational) aspect. Language has properties that arise from usage that influence its ability to function poetically: all words do not possess the capacity to make great poetry, just as not all raw materials have the same physical properties required to build a house. Leopardi makes a crucial distinction between different types of words—*termini* (“terms”) and *parole* (“words”) and their peculiar effects in the *Zibaldone* entry dated April 30, 1820:

Le parole...non presentano la sola idea dell'oggetto significato, ma quando più quando meno immagini accessorie.... Le voci scientifiche presentano la nuda e circoscritta idea di quel tale oggetto, e perciò si chiamano termini perchè determinano e definiscono la cosa

¹⁴ “Sentimentale romantico e sentimentale leopardiano,” in *Leopardi e l'età Romantica*, ed. Mario Andrea Rigoni (Venice: Marsilio, 1999), 39.

da tutte le parti. Quanto più una lingua abbonda di parole, tanto più è adattata alla letteratura e alla bellezza ec. ec.¹⁵

[Words [*parole*]...do not present only the idea of the object, but also more or less accessory images.... Scientific terms present the bare, circumscribed idea of the object, and so they are called “terms” [*termini*] because they determine and define the thing from all parts. The more a language abounds in words [*parole*], the more it is suitable for literature and beauty.]

From this description, we can see that words have no intrinsic properties—because of their structure, their sonorous qualities, their conventional use in poetic diction—that make them poetic.¹⁶ Rather, words (*parole*) are poetic because of their ability to present ideas, *immagini accesorie*, that expand and extend their meaning for the individual imagination. The scientific term (*termine*) is “bare” and “circumscribed”—it has no evocative quality because it must have precision and transparency for clarity and communicability. The defining trait of the *parola* is indeterminacy, a concept associated in Leopardi’s thought with the idea of *vago*, the aesthetic quality of loveliness possessed by something because it is obscure, hazy, indeterminate, or multiple. In such words, one has access to the aesthetic sensations of the ancients, as Costanza Geddes da Filicaia notes: “Antichità, un’età non condizionata dal determinismo freddo di ragione, era l’età privilegiata in cui si espandeva l’animo umano nel vago” [“Antiquity, an age not conditioned by the cold determinism of reason, was the privileged age in which the human soul expanded into the *vago*”].¹⁷ Thus the imaginative capacity of the word is based on its role as an

¹⁵ *Zibaldone*, 109–110.

¹⁶ Contrast Dante from *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Book II, Chapter VII: “Some words can be seen as infantile, some as womanish, some as virile; and of the virile some are thought rustic and some urbane; and of those we call urbane some are combed and glossy, some shaggy and unkempt.” *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, ed. and tr. Stephen Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 67.

¹⁷ *Con atti e con parole: saggi sul pensiero linguistico di Leopardi* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2011), 76.

index of the various overlapping and evolving usages that humans have put it into over the centuries.

The objective value of certain words because of their suggestiveness, however, has a necessarily subjective component. Leopardi suggests that the *immagini accesorie* of words arise by “uso giornaliero” [“daily use”] and due to the “alle diversissime circostanze in cui quella parola si è udita o usata” [“various circumstances in which the word is heard or used”].¹⁸ The use of words demonstrates a concrete instance of a conventional meaning, and the images that arise from *parole* come out of these concrete instances. The images that accompany words are common to every speaker, but they are private: “non c’è forse un uomo a cui una parola medesima...produca una concezione precisamente identica a quella di un altro” [“There is perhaps no man to whom the same word...produces an idea precisely identical to the idea produced for someone else”].¹⁹ This is due to the role that memory plays in the poetic imagination. For Leopardi, the images that accompany *parole* arise from an association of objects within the memory:

La massima parte delle immagini e sensazioni indefinite che noi proviamo pure dopo la fanciullezza e nel resto della vita, non sono altro che una rimembranza della fanciullezza.... Così che la sensazione presente non deriva immediatamente dalle cose, non è un’immagine degli oggetti, ma della immagine fanciullesca; una ricordanza, una ripetizione, una ripercussione o riflesso della immagine antica.²⁰

The majority of the indefinite images and sensations that we experience after childhood and over the rest of our lives are nothing but a memory of childhood.... Thus immediate sensation does not arise directly from things, is not an image of objects, but is an image of the childhood image; a memory, a repetition, an effect, or a reflection of the older image.

¹⁸ Zibaldone, 1702.

¹⁹ Zibaldone, 1705–1706.

²⁰ Zibaldone, 515.

Leopardi emphasizes the mediation of our immediate sensations by the memory: immediate sensation only produces the sensation of the *vago* when it occurs in childhood, and our memory of that occurrence is our closest link to the poetic experience of the object. It is significant that Leopardi uses the term *antico* (“ancient”) to describe the image we remember from childhood experience: it is a statement of individual as well as cultural ancientness, a visual and sensory experience prior to thought. Stefano Gensini identifies this notion of a pre-cognitive thought as the essential *mitografico-conoscitivo* [mythographic-cognitive] binary between Nature and Reason: “L’utilizzazione dell’opposizione, latamente russoiana, fra lo schema archetipico dello stato di natura e la ‘dannazione’ di un progresso razionale che conduce alla infelicità, si trasferisce ben presto sul piano *conoscitivo*” [“The use of the Rousseauian contrast between the archetypal framework of the state of nature and the ‘damnation’ of a rational progress that leads to unhappiness, transfers readily enough to a *cognitive* level”].²¹ In Gensini’s terms, the cultural primitive stands as a figure for the psychological primitive part of the human psyche, where variety, freedom, imagination, and the immediacy of sensory perception dominate. Leopardi therefore establishes *word as image* in the memory as the link between the individual mind and the culture as a whole.

Comparing this to Leopardi’s comments in the *Zibaldone*, we can see that the position of the modern poet is to make use of the power of the archaic to arouse our *immagini fanciullesche* in our adult mind—“influisce su quasi tutta la propria lingua, anche la più ricca, e la meno capace di esser ben conosciuta da’ fanciulli,” Leopardi concludes [“it influences almost the whole of one’s own language, even that which is most rich, and least capable of being understood well by

²¹ Gensini, 31.

children”].²² In *Discorso di un italiano intorno alla poesia romantica* (Discourse of an Italian on romantic poetry), Leopardi presents a clear synopsis of his notion of the relationship between individual memory and cultural memory as a product of the encounter with literature:

Le immagini fanciullesche e la fantasia...sono appunto le immagini e la fantasia degli antichi, e le ricordanze della prima età e le idee prime nostre che noi siamo così gagliardamente tratti ad amare e desiderare, sono appunto quelle che ci ridesta l'imitazione della natura schietta e inviolata, quelle che ci può e secondo noi ci deve ridestare il poeta, quelle che ci ridestano divinamente gli antichi, quelle che i romantici bestemmiano e rigettano e sbandiscono dalla poesia, gridando che non siamo più fanciulli: e pur troppo non siamo.²³

[Childhood images and imagination...are precisely the images and imagination of the ancients, and our earliest memories and the first ideas that we are so strongly drawn to love and desire are precisely those the direct, pure imitation of nature awakens in us, those that the poet can and, we think, must awaken in us, those that the ancients divinely awaken in us, those that the Romantics curse and reject and banish from poetry, crying that we are no longer children: and too bad we aren't.]

Commenting on this passage, Antonio Prete remarks on the importance of myth as a founding concept for the childlike mind as Leopardi describes it: “Il *mito*, per la lingua della poesia, è questo balzo, sempre possibile, sempre inadempito, nell'origine, nell'origine della lingua stessa, nella perdita e inattuabile comunanza dei nomi con l'essenza delle cose” [“Myth, for the language of poetry, is this always possible but always unfulfilled into the origin, into the origin of language itself, into the lost and unattainable communing of names with the essence of things”].²⁴ Here the unattainable ideal of the ancient world finds its conceptual breakthrough in Leopardi's description of the “imitazione della natura schietta e inviolata”—the poet's special capacity through direct, pure imitation to draw us outside of historical time to that idea of vastness we

²² *Zibaldone*, 1706.

²³ *Scritti vari inediti*, 198–199.

²⁴ “Leopardi e il mito,” *Aut aut* 243/244 (1991), 94.

associate with the ancients. Myth, as Prete suggests, is a touchstone that may reawaken what is “nearly extinct” (as we see elsewhere in the *Discorso*) of the ancient world; our language contains within it the poetic capacities to evoke the sensations of earlier generations and civilizations.

From this philosophy of language, focused on the imaginative power of the individual word to recall our deepest memories of the world, Leopardi sets forth a theory of literary style. He draws two major rhetorical terms from the Seicento rhetorical tradition: *proprietà* and *pellegrinità*. In Emanuele Tesauro’s landmark 1670 treatise, *Il Cannocchiale aristotelico* (The Aristotelian spyglass), *proprietà* refers to the standard usage and standard form of words “nella età migliore da’ migliori compositori” [“in the finest writers of the finest age”].²⁵ This idea refines the Aristotelian term *κῶμια* (“established,” “vernacular”) to accommodate the Italian tradition of the *vulgare illustre* set forth by Dante—that is, a model for speech set by a refined poetic diction and not by common usage. *Proprietà* thus refers to the standard poetic lexicon by which we understand a literary text’s position with respect to its literary antecedents and peers.

What is elegant in literature, however, is what sets it apart from this established texture of language. As Leopardi writes, “L’eleganza delle scritture, l’eleganza di una parola, di un modo ec.,...sempre consiste in un piccolo irregolare, o in un piccolo straordinario o nuovo, che...gli dà risalto, e risalta esso stesso” [“Elegance in writing, elegance of a word, of a style, etc.,... always consists of a small irregularity, a small something extraordinary or new, that...gives it emphasis, and emphasizes itself as well”].²⁶ *Risalto*—emphasis—is literally something that “jumps out.” This literary device is *pellegrinità*, or *peregrinità*, a concept that refers to the felt strangeness of a word

²⁵ *Il Cannocchiale aristotelico*, ed. Giuseppe Manfredi (1670; repr., Savigliano: Editrice Artistica Piemontese, 2000), 153.

²⁶ *Zibaldone*, 1323.

or trope that sets it apart from the *proprietà*.²⁷ Leopardi writes of it as a commonplace, drawn from Aristotle:

Non è ella cosa conosciutissima che alla poesia non solo giova, ma è necessario il pellegrino delle parole delle frasi delle forme (niente meno che delle idee), per fare il suo stile elegante e distinto dalla prosa? Non lo dà per precetto Aristotele? (Caro, *Apolog.* p.25.). Il poetico della lingua non è quasi il medesimo che il pellegrino?²⁸

Isn't it well known that for poetry the *pellegrino* of words, phrases, and forms (not to mention ideas) not only benefits but is necessary for making style elegant and distinct from prose? Doesn't Aristotle give this as a precept? (Caro., *Apologia*, p. 25) Isn't what is poetic in language almost the same thing as the *pellegrino*?

Tesauro's term for this, *pellegrino*, which Leopardi borrows, is a calque of the Aristotelian term ξένικον (strange, foreign), a feature peculiarly apt for poetry as he describes in the *Rhetoric*: "Wherefore we should give our language a 'foreign [ξένην] air'; for men admire what is remote, and that which excites admiration is pleasant."²⁹ The idea of "foreign" persists into Italian as well, suggesting an "out of the way" or "unusual" trope—*pellegrino* literally means "peregrine" or "in pilgrimage" (without religious connotations). As Tesauro explains,

Tanto più pellegrino sarà la metafora, quanto più virtù pellegrine accoglierà in un vocabolo; hor'aggiungo, che tanto più sarà acuta e ingegnosa; quanto men superficiali son le notioni, che in quella si rappresentano.³⁰

The more singular the metaphor is, the more singular will be the virtues gathered into a word; and I also add that the more clever and ingenious it will be, and the less superficial the concepts it represents.

²⁷ Leopardi's choice to use *pellegrino*, the rarer, vernacular version of the term, is a departure from Tesauro and Pallavicino, who use the learned form *peregrino*. See Canello, 361; Sălișteanu Cristia, 131.

²⁸ *Zibaldone*, 2518.

²⁹ "Art" of *Rhetoric*, trans. J. H. Freese, Loeb Classical Library 193 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 351.

³⁰ Tesauro, 166.

This is a modification of Aristotle, who notes that pleasure is the main effect of the “foreign” trope. Leopardi’s notion of *pellegrino* gathers together these ideas of emotional and intellectual arrest at the linguistic singularities in a poem’s verbal texture. The “wandering” trope or word has intellectual, imaginative depth aroused by its surface strangeness.

Leopardi makes a crucial break from Tesauro’s conception of *pellegrinità*, however. Yves Hersant notes that Tesauro’s reinterpretation accounts for the singularity of metaphor in the rhetorical schema as a trope of difference: “De cet insolite (qu’il opposait le *xenikon* a l’*idiotikon*), Tesauro fait le trait distinctif de la métaphore: alors que les autres figures doivent leur force a l’harmonie ou au pathos, la métaphore tire sa vitalité inventive de son caractere étrange et étranger” [“From this unusualness (which contrasts *xenikon* a l’*idiotikon*), Tesauro posits the distinctive characteristic of metaphor: while other figures owe their force to harmony or to pathos, metaphor draws its inventive vitality from its strange and stranger nature”].³¹ For Leopardi, not just *any* strange word or phrase will create the effect of literary elegance, but only those that seem to be deeply related or felt within one’s native language. In his formulation of this point, Leopardi echoes Schleiermacher’s seminal translation metaphor of the plant:

La novità in una lingua, o la rarità ec., insomma il pellegrino, da qualunque luogo sia tolto (o da’ forestieri, o dagli antichi classici nazionali ec.), deve sempre parere una pianta, bensì nuova nel paese o rara, ma nata nel terreno medesimo della lingua nazionale, e non pur della nazionale, ma della lingua di quel secolo, della lingua conveniente a quel genere a quello stile a quel luogo della scrittura.³²

Novelty in a language, or rarity, etc.—that is, the *pellegrino*—from wherever it is taken (from foreign languages, from ancient national classics, etc.), must always be like a plant, which, though it is new or rare in the country, sprang up in the same earth as the national

³¹ *La métaphore baroque: d’Aristote a Tesauro* (Editions de Seuil, 2001), 191.

³² *Zibaldone*, 3407–3408.

language, or not just the national language, but also a language of that epoch, of a language proper to the text's genre, style, and place.

Leopardi's description of stylistic elegance takes into account related levels of discourse: the *pellegrino* must stand out from common speech but must also belong to the deeper linguistic awareness of all speakers of the language. Leopardi prompts us to consider the broader historical contingencies that determine our sense of *pellegrinità* at a given moment in time. In doing so, Leopardi seeks to correct "quelli che pretendono che v'abbia principii fissi ed eterni dell'eleganza" ["Those who pretend that there are fixed and eternal principles of elegance"].³³ This method combines a traditional conception of rhetoric—with the immediate *ethos* of an audience based on their common experience of the native language—and the traditional conception of philology—the *ethos* established between a text or source and its history across the ages. Leopardi's method of linguistic analysis, as Stefano Gensini notes, synthesizes the aesthetic and conceptual powers of language by expressing "la duplice valenza dello strumento linguistico, ora poeticamente indeterminate, ora convezionalmente [sic] chiamato a isolare precisi nuclei concettuali" ["The double valence of the linguistic tool, in one sense poetically indeterminate but in the other sense conventionally called to isolating precise conceptual clusters"].³⁴ The analytical tool that Gensini describes shows us the superimposition, once again, of the cultural fact of language with the mental or psychological effect, as Leopardi himself emphasizes:

Voci e modi che una volta perchè familiari alla nazione non erano eleganti...divengono già elegantissime e graziosissime perchè da una parte si riconoscono ancora facilmente per nazionali, e quindi sono intese subito da tutti...dall'altra parte non sono più correnti nell'uso quotidiano.³⁵

³³ Zibaldone, 2512.

³⁴ Gensini, 123.

³⁵ Zibaldone, 2511–2512.

Words and modes that were once not considered elegant by a nation because they were familiar...now become highly elegant and refined because, on the one hand, they are still easily recognized by native speakers and so understood by all...and on the other hand they are no longer currently in daily use.

This passage summarizes the function of a philological style, as I have attempted to describe it. Leopardi's poetics fuses an aesthetic pleasure based in novelty with a critical function that recognizes the cultural value of language related in some way etymologically to the poet's text. The pleasurable novelty is always based in some way on our recognition of the word's core relation to the meaning of a word we already know—a lexical poetics that is based on intuition as well as reason.

Word, Register, and Allegory in *Gli idilli*

“The words of ‘La Vita Solitaria’ by Leopardi seemed to come out
of the trunk of a tree—hopeless, uncrushable sentiments.”

—Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One*

The group of six poems Leopardi composed in the years 1819–1821, explicitly titled “*Gli idilli*” (“The Idylls”), present the pastoral lyric as an archetypal genre for a historical poetic conception of language. In these poems, the mythological scenes and figures deployed in early Leopardian lyrics such as “*Alla primavera*” (“To Spring”) and “*Inno ai patriarchi*” (“Hymn to the Patriarchs”) recede to the background, bringing to the fore the rhetorical structure of the Petrarchan *canzone*, with its world-weary speaker and its address to a higher order beyond the social, earthly setting to which the speaker belongs. The explicit models for Leopardi's lyrics of the period are Petrarch's *Bucolicum carmen*, imitations of Vergil's *Eclogues*. For Petrarch, the pastoral imitation is meant to provide the literary armature of Vergilian allegory for subversive

critique of contemporary society; where in Vergil this critique is more or less explicit, Annabel Patterson argues, for Petrarch “the result was a text substantially more enigmatic than its model.”³⁶ Developing this contrast, the Leopardian idylls exhibit a self-conscious, even ironic, version of the Petrarchan pastoral. This is at bottom a formal trait of the poems. David Woolf broadly describes the poetic form as “an image of pictorial description and a comment relating to the content of the image,”³⁷ a structure that foregrounds the mental and vocal capabilities of the lyric speaker as a critical agent in the poem. The structure emphasizes the speaker’s increased desire for the natural world as an emblem freedom apart from the social world of the metropolis, as well as his knowledge of the inability to return there as one with nature. In other words, Leopardi’s poems stage the rational speaker’s vision of the natural world from outside it, and in doing so embrace the pre-rational or primitive mentality to which it can no longer return because of this development of reason.

This position of ironic distance created by the modern use of an archaic genre such as pastoral raises a key question about the function of Leopardi’s philological style within the context of genre: from what linguistic context does the *parola pellegrina* appear to be strange? Should the *stilo aulico*—learned, formal, based on classical Latin—of Petrarch and Vergil be read as the linguistic backdrop of the poem, based on the pastoral lyric genre associated with it? Or is the *plurilinguismo* of modern Italian—vernacular, plainspoken, based on Late Latin and Romance, and the immediate context for the poem’s reading—the setting for the poem’s rhetorical force? In the first case, the *pellegrino* would be drawn from the vulgar tongue; in the

³⁶ *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valéry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 44.

³⁷ “Leopardi: The Nature and Development of the Idyll,” *Italica* 54, no. 1 (Spring, 1977), 75.

second case, the learned, classical form would add the necessary *risalto* from plain speech. Luigi Blasucci argues that the classical tropes and form of these mid-period poems embody a telling preference toward the cultural values of an earlier age:

In realtà l'impiego del 'pellegrino' nelle canzoni risulta surdeterminato: la scelta estetica di Leopardi si pone infatti anche come una scelta storica. Il poeta che si affida a un linguaggio dotto e arcaizzante e' anche un poeta che rifiuta deliberatamente il suo secolo prosaico e privo d'illusioni.³⁸

[In reality, the use of the *pellegrino* in the *canzoni* is overdetermined: Leopardi's aesthetic choice is in fact established as a historical choice as well. The poet who commits himself to a learned, archaic diction is also the poet who consciously rejects his own prosaic, illusion-free century.]

In this reading, which I believe to be quite correct for the Leopardian pastoral of the middle period, the use of an ancient genre marks an escape from the present. The poet's sense of detachment expresses itself in a language that feels ill fit to the values embodied in the poem. As readers, we feel our language pulled out of our own idiom.

"La vita solitaria" ("The solitary life"), a poem alluding in its title to Petrarch's prose work *De vita solitaria*, stages a common internal conflict of Leopardi's speakers: the struggle over accepting a misfortunate lot in life. In the reading that follows, I will track the poem's dramatic movement as a psychological despair played out at the level of language register—in which learned words with classical Latin resonances take on a distinctly negative cast as an artificial force of imposed order on the natural world, while words from the vernacular register challenge this cosmic order. The poem ultimately, I believe, seeks to collapse the distinction in these language registers into a synthetic concept of the *antico*—the ancient, or *prehistorical* moment sought in the imagination. The poem's final lines change diction to a vernacular Italian, the

³⁸ "Lingua e stile delle canzoni," in *Lingua e stile di Giacomo Leopardi* (Florence: L. S. Olschki, 1994), 147.

spoken language of Leopardi's own time; they return public speech to private speech. These shifts in diction suggest a social parable about the rise and ultimate triumph of the spoken vernacular as the language of lyric speech—as a poetic synthesis of the written and spoken historical registers present in modern Italian.

Before I discuss the poem, I must outline a key feature of Italian, brought to light in several key articles in early issues of the *Archivio glottologico italiano*, that allows us to see how its words are separated into different registers. Modern Italian contains many examples of word pairs that scholars of dialect refer to as *allotropi* (“allotropes”)—a pair of words from the same Latin source that belong to different registers in Italian.³⁹ For example: *fragile* versus *frale* [weak, frail] from Latin *fragilis*; *medio* versus *mezzo* [mean, median] from Latin *medium*; and so on. Allotropes arose, as the lexicographer Ugo Canello shows, from different historical phenomena: borrowed Latinisms appear closer to classical Latin than those words with Vulgar Latin roots in everyday speech that followed standard phonetic shifts and morphological changes over the centuries.⁴⁰ This distinction has an influence on their register meaning in Italian. Borrowings from classical Latin remain learned words in Italian; those words that evolved organically remain in the register of everyday speech (often called *ereditario*, or hereditary, words). Furthermore, Canello argues, who first borrowed the term *allotropo* from chemistry for comparative linguistics in an influential 1878 article, notes, “the words may be synonyms, but more often they differ

³⁹ *Allotropo*, both the concept and the word, is a term borrowed from chemistry, where it refers to each of two or more physical states in which an element can exist.

⁴⁰ See “Gli allotropi italiani,” *Archivio glottologico italiano* 3 (1878): 285–419; and, for a contrasting term, *omeotropi*, meaning two or more homographs that converged into the same word from different origins, see Silvio Pieri, “Gli omeótrapi italiani,” *Archivio glottologico italiano* 15 (1901): 131–213.

slightly in sense.”⁴¹ That is, a specialized meaning may be preserved by the word’s specific associations with classical Latin, especially if the Latin form belonged to an institutional or scholarly use. The preservation of specialized meaning is common, for example, in liturgical or legal language in which the preservation of continuity of meaning over time is important.

In the opening stanza of “La vita solitaria,” the various elements of the scene—persons, animals, weather conditions, location, atmosphere—are indicated by a range of both learned and common words, a hybridized diction:

La mattutina pioggia, allor che l’ale
Battendo esulta nella chiusa stanza
La gallinella, ed al balcon s’affaccia
L’abitator de’ campi, e il Sol che nasce
I suoi tremuli rai fra le cadenti
Stille saetta, alla capanna mia
Dolcemente picchiando, mi risveglia;
E sorgo, e i lievi nugoletti, e il primo
Degli augelli susurro, e l’aura fresca,
E le ridenti piagge benedico:
Poiché voi, cittadine infauste mura,
Vidi e conobbi assai, là dove segue
Odio al dolor compagno; e doloroso
Io vivo, e tal morrò, deh tosto! Alcuna
Benché scarsa pietà pur mi dimostra
Natura in questi lochi, un giorno oh quanto
Verso me più cortese! E tu pur volgi
Dai miseri lo sguardo; e tu, sdegnando
Le sciagure e gli affanni, alla reina
Felicità servi, o natura. In cielo,
In terra amico agl’infelici alcuno
E rifugio non resta altro che il ferro.⁴²

⁴¹ Canello, 285.

⁴² *Poesie e prose*, vol. 1, ed. Mario Andrea Rigoni (Milan: Mondadori, 1988) (hereafter cited as Rigoni; other editions cited by editor name).

[The morning rain, now that with wings
 Beating the hen exults in her confined
 Room, and the field-dweller looks out
 over his balcony, and the dawning Sun
 Fires his trembling rays amidst the
 Falling drops, on my cabin
 Sweetly pecking, wakens me;
 And I rise, and the light clouds, and the first
 Of the birds' murmurs, and the fresh air,
 And the laughing slopes I bless:
 Because you, unfortunate city walls,
 I saw and knew you all too well, where
 Hate follows his companion grief; and full of
 Grief I live, and so I will die, may it be soon!
 Some pity, though scarce, Nature still shows
 Me in these places, who was once so kind
 To me! And you still turn your gaze
 From the miserable; and you, disdainful
 Disasters and anxieties, serve your queen
 Felicitas, Oh Nature. In heaven,
 On earth no refuge or friend remains for the
 Unfortunate except iron.]

Unlike a spoken vernacular, however, in which ancient and modern words and high and low words may comingle indiscriminately, in this diction there is a distinct association of register with kinds of words. Concrete objects and descriptions are primarily indicated by Latinisms drawn from the vernacular register;⁴³ abstract or figurative descriptions are indicated by

⁴³ *Pioggia*, "rain"; *gallinella*, "hen"; *ale*, "wings"; *capanna*, "cabin"; *picchiare*, "peck" (the rain's motion that evokes the hen); *nugoleto*, "little clouds"; *saetta*, "arrow" (but with a poetic usage meaning "ray of sun"); *chiusa*, "confined" or "cramped"; *risveglia*, "wakens"; *fresca*, "fresh"; *piagge*, "slopes." The diminutive suffixes *-ella* and *-etto* indicate Vulgar Latin. *Gallinella* and *picchiare* are also imitative words. *Nugoleto* is a term from Leopardi's own dialect, Recanatese (mentioned by Verducci, 573; see also *Zibaldone* 2986 for Leopardi's own note). *Capanna* is a Late Latin term from Welsh or Celtic. *Fresco* is Germanic. *Chiuso* is a learned word coming from *cludere*, but turned vernacular later by its opposition the church Latin *clostrum*/It. *chiostro*. The prefix in *risvegliare* indicates Vulgar Latin. Vernacular *pioggia* is chosen over the learned *pluvia*; *piaggia* is chosen over the learned *plaga* (see Leopardi's comments in *Zibaldone*, 4173 and

Latinisms drawn from more formal registers—primarily literary.⁴⁴ In a striking reversal, the poem’s frame is the vernacular; modern Italian terms feel unmarked in the poem, just as they would be in speech. Words from the learned register are marked in this stanza: *abitator de’ campi* (“dweller of fields”), for example, renders the peasant laborer with a kind of mythical epithet.

The stanza gives rhetorical emphasis to two Latinisms—*infauste* and *infelice*—used to describe the urban surroundings of the *locus amoenus*. These terms stand out from the texture of the poem because of their strangeness in the poetic context, neither learned words belonging to the pastoral literary tradition nor vernacular words belonging to common speech. The first is addressed to the city walls, *infauste mure*, from the Latin source *infaustus* (“unfortunate; ill-omened, ill-starred”), an epithet used to describe the ill ends that are fated to persons, places, or things unfavored by the gods.⁴⁵ In this context, the walls become personified by comparison to the speaker’s own fate. The effect of being unfavored or unfortunate is *infelicità*—being snubbed by *Felicitas*, the Latin deity who bestows happiness or unhappiness. Our speaker is indeed *infelice*, as we see in the stanza’s second-to-last line. His condition is therefore analogous to *infausto*, but the relative rarity of *infausto* against the commonness of *infelice* suggests a difference in senses here. *Felicitas*, the presiding deity over this scene, governs not just happiness

4505). *Saetta* is the hereditary form whose double is *sagitta*; in this case, the hereditary form came to have a specialized poetic meaning by its usage in Petrarch (see sonnets 2 and 209). See sources in Ernout, 139–140; Körting, entry 1683; Canello, 315; and Diez, 109.

⁴⁴ *Matutina*, “morning,” is chosen instead of the unmarked term *mattino*; *abitator*, “dweller” instead of *abitante*; *tremuli*, “trembling” instead of *tremoli*; *stille*, “raindrops” instead of *gocce*; *susurro*, “murmur”; *augelli*, “birds” instead of *uccelli*; *aura*, “air” instead of *aria*. See Sălișteanu Cristia and Pianigiani for references. The literary sources are easily traceable: e.g., *susurro* from Virgil’s Eclogue 1, l. 56 (“saepe levi somnum suadebit inire susurro”) or Tasso’s *Aminta*, Act 1 (“con soave / Susurro mormorò non so che versi”). *Aura* is a common Petrarchan *topos*. See Contini, “Préhistoire de l’aura de Pétrarque,” in *Varianti e altra linguistica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1970), 193–199.

⁴⁵ Its use for cities is rare but extant, e.g., in Tacitus, who describes of the city of Bedriacum, the site of two Roman battles that took place in 69 CE, as “notus infaustusque.” *Historiae*, 2.23.

or luck, but fruitfulness as well. The distinction of the speaker's unhappiness is his unfruitfulness, a dimension suggested by its semantic overlap with the other Latinism. This sense offers a glimpse of true despair: surely you are ill-fated if you are not only unhappy but if you also have no chance to improve your fate by progeny.⁴⁶

The classical backdrop of the opening scene has been set up as a foil to the rural scene to which the speaker and the dialect elements both belong. In the poem's final stanza, this binary of country/city has been overturned. The poem's landscape as well as its linguistic texture has shifted to a new frame. The speaker praises the moon as the benign master of the heavens, but defines the moon's light on the earth as an *infesto* ("hostile") force to those who depend on the darkness of light to hide their nefarious deeds: the moon illuminates the highwayman's knife, and exposes the cowardly lover slinking through decent neighborhoods. *Infesto* is a key term that embodies a crucial historical change from the learned register of Italian to its spoken register. Initially a learned term initially cognate with classical Latin *infestus* (lit. the participle "infested," or "made unsafe" or "disturbed"⁴⁷ as well as, by extension, the active adjective "hostile," i.e., "that which makes unsafe"⁴⁸), Italian *infesto* shed the original sense of a verb participle to remain solely an attributive adjective meaning "hostile." In this stanza, despite the rhetorical parallel to the classical Latin term *infausto* of the first stanza, *infesto* has a distinctly modern Italian sense that mirrors the Late Latin reduction of *infesto* to the meaning "hostile." The linguistic change of

⁴⁶ The prehistory of Latin *felix*, of which Leopardi and his contemporaries would not yet be aware, confirms the link to progeny, by a common Indo-European root, as De Vaan summarizes: "Lat. *felix* developed from 'suckling' or 'with young' to 'fruitful' and 'fortunate.'" *Felix* shares a common root with *fecundus*, *felare*, *femina*, *fenus*, *fetus*, and *filius*. De Vaan, "felix, -icis."

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Livy 3.68.1 ("ubi hic curiam circumsederitis et forum infestum feceritis et carcerem impleveritis principibus").

⁴⁸ Its English equivalent is the archaic "infestuous" or "infestious." Florio indicates two senses of "infesto," "infested" and "infestuous," which mirrors the Latin passive/active double.

passive becoming active (“made unsafe” to “makes unsafe”) transforms the traditional idea of the moon as the nurturing mother figure to the moon as a violent actor controlling the world.⁴⁹ But the speaker’s position has changed in this scene; he aligns with the moon. Her violent actions are for those who do not understand, those “wicked minds.” The classical Latin roots that earlier showed us the ill effects of the goddess of fortune, *Felicitas*, have dropped out of these Latinisms.

The shift toward modern Italian continues to the poem’s end:

Me spesso rivedrai solingo e muto
Errar pe’ boschi e per le verdi rive,
O seder sopra l’erbe, assai contento
Se core e lena a sospirar m’avanza.

[You will often see me solitary and silent
Wandering through forests and green banks,
Or sitting on the grass, very content
If heart and breath draw me to sigh.]

All linguistic features here, from syntax to morphology to semantics, move distinctly away from the classical Latin register and instead toward the vernacular register shared by Late Latin and early Italian. While this is most obvious in sentence structure and word form—the elision of vowels in *pe’* and *m’avanza*, as well as in the final syllables of verbs, for example—the diction itself demonstrates the modern, hybrid provenance that distinguishes Italian from other Romance languages because of its historical position as the heir of Late Latin.⁵⁰ The semantic senses here are restricted to Italian senses that have dropped earlier senses of classical Latin: *mute* (“silent”) refers exclusively to persons, unlike the Latin *mutus*; *contento* (“content”) refers to

⁴⁹ A military sense becomes widespread in Romance and the Romance languages as the sole meaning for the cognate verbs *infestare* (Sp.), *infester* (Fr.), and *infestare* (It.). See de Echeagaray y Eizaguirre, “infestar”; Littré, “infester”; Pianigani, “infesto”; and Grassi, “infestare.” Again, the adjective forms are no longer verb participles in the Romance languages, but have solely become attributive adjectives.

⁵⁰ *Solingo* (“solitary”), a frequent Leopardi term, has a Germanic ending that arose after the fourteenth century. See Finzi, vol. 1, 10. *Rivedrai* (“you will see”) has a Romance ending shared with French; *sovra* (“on”) and *rive* (“banks”) are variants (of *sopra*, *ripa*) drawn from Italian dialects.

satisfaction or contentment as an attribute adjective, losing the participle of Latin *contineo*; *lena* (“breath”) that is a shorting of *alenare*, a transposition of vulgar Latin *anhelare*, “to breathe”;⁵¹ and *avanza* from vulgar Latin *abantiare*, “to go forward.”⁵² The lack of learned terms in this ending suggests that, within the context of the poem, the poem has arrived at a different place than it started. The speaker’s contentment and ease in the place of timelessness suggests that a thematic reading of the poem relies on an intuitive sense of these historical strata of spoken Latin in modern Italian. Against the poem’s classical backdrop, the poem’s imaginative resonance comes via the lexical strangeness introduced by vulgar Latin terms.

The strata of language contained in the speaker’s voice is therefore made visible by the allegorical conventions of the pastoral genre in Italy, and primarily the necessity of justifying by ironic distance the speaker’s position of cultural difference from the naiveté of the early pastoral tradition. In this diction the poem suggests a thematic emphasis on the closeness of speech to the imagination. This idea emerges first in the poem’s second stanza, in a famous passage on the experience of *antichità* that one achieves by solitude in the natural world:

Talor m’assido in solitaria parte,
 sovra un rialto, al margine d’un lago
 di taciturne piante incoronato.
 Ivi, quando il meriggio in ciel si volve,
 la sua tranquilla imago il sol dipinge,
 ed erba o foglia non si crolla al vento;
 e non onda incresparsi, e non cicala
 strider, né batter penna augello in ramo,
 né farfalla ronzar, né voce o moto
 da presso né da lunge odi né vedi.
 Tien quelle rive altissima quiete;
 ond’io quasi me stesso e il mondo obbligo

⁵¹ Diez, 12.

⁵² Pianigiani, “avanzare.”

sedendo immoto; e già mi par che sciolte
giaccian le membra mie, né spirto o senso
piú le commova, e lor quiete antica
co' silenzi del loco si confonda.

[Sometimes I seat myself in a solitary place,
On a slope, at the edge of a lake
Crowned with silent plants.
There, when midday turns in the sky,
The sun paints its peaceful image,
And grass and leaf do not bend in the wind;
And no wave breaks, and no cicada
Buzzes, no bird flaps a feather on a branch,
No butterfly flits, no voice or motion
Is heard or seen near or far.
The highest quiet holds those banks;
So that I almost forget the world and myself
Sitting motionless; and it seems like my
Limbs have dissolved, neither spirit or sense
Can move them, and their ancient quiet
Mixes with the silences of the place.]

The liminal location of this scene—on a slope overlooking the surrounding fields, on the edge of the transition from earth to water—reflects the liminal state of the speaker's body, where the outside silence and stillness render his limbs incapable of control. The *quiete antica* arises from the local stillness of the scene, and together these environmental conditions pervade the speaker's inner spirit and outer senses. The word *antico* is one of Leopardi's most known and philosophically rich key terms, embodying both conceptions of intellectual and aesthetic wonder:

L'antico non è eterno, e quindi non è infinito, ma il concepire che fa l'anima uno spazio di molti secoli, produce una sensazione indefinita, l'idea di un tempo indeterminato, dove l'anima si perde, e sebben sa che vi sono confini, non li discerne, e non sa quali sieno.⁵³

[The *antico* is not eternal, and therefore is not infinite, but the conception that a space of many centuries gives the soul, produces an undefined feeling, the idea of an

⁵³ Zibaldone, 1429.

indeterminate time, where the soul is lost, and even if it knows that there are boundaries, it does not discern them, and does not know what they could be.] Part of this can be seen in the suggestiveness of the word itself: *antico* by etymology (L *anticus*, *antiquus*) simply means “before” in both temporal and spatial senses.⁵⁴ But it is not a specific term; it has a sense of the *vago* about it, an experience of pleasure at the idea of suggestiveness or vastness (neither concrete nor specific). The moment of pleasure “where the soul is lost” is captured in “La vita solitaria” with the verb *si confonda* (“mix,” “pour together”) which suggests by its compound construction the physical idea of “being poured together” that we also see in the phrase *sciolte / Giaccian le membre mie* (“my limbs lie dissolved”) The speaker revels in the ultimate satisfaction of being lost outside of any order at all, be it social, physical, or temporal. This is a common Romantic trope here figured not by the speaker’s expression but embodied in the poem’s diction. The final lines describe the speaker’s flight not just from the city, or even from the surrounding countryside, but into non-space and non-language—not speaking but *sospirar*, “sighing.” The poem circles back from Latinate formality to a private moment of the speaker’s native Italian idiom that then recedes further again into indeterminate language—to pure sound.⁵⁵ This experience of timelessness is ultimately an expression of the desire for an escape from not just the social world of the city (*infauste mure*) but from the confines of time itself. Yet the final lines also acknowledge a contentment to experience this freedom only in part, or only with the limitations of time that human life experiences. The speaker seems to hear his own life penetrating the silence of the *quiete antica*, a reminder of his mortality but also a

⁵⁴ Forcellini, second entry for “anticus.”

⁵⁵ Gianfranco Contini reads the final *avanza* as the culmination and closure also of the short “a” sound recurring throughout the poem in prominent positions. *Letteratura italiana del Risorgimento*, Vol. 1 (Florence: Sansoni Editore, 1986), 308. Note that the word is a Petrarchan word as well.

pleasure at the experience of just breathing and sharing the wordless moment of life with the natural world.

The lyric features of voice and language in “La vita solitaria” develop the philological style into a feature of character in the theatrical lyrics often referred to as the *Canzoni* (1820–1823), composed at the same time as the *Idilli*. The use of classical personae in particular—“Bruto minore” and “L’ultimo canto di Saffo”—expands the idea of allegory into the spiritual realm. Just as in “La vita solitaria,” Leopardi’s language draws from the restricted meanings of speech in these poems as a mimesis of voice, but also as a method of figuration: the word takes on the function of metonymy proximate to the register of the spoken vernacular, rather than the metaphor characteristic of *stilnovismo*. In other words, Leopardi distances the figuration of the poem from the literary tradition from which it draws: the Dantean and Petrarchan lexical metaphor that uses classical Latin as a source of imaginative complexity is self-consciously narrowed in Leopardi’s *Canzoni*. As Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo demonstrates, the classical poems revise allegory for a modern age, offering an “allegoria reciproca” [“reciprocal allegory”] in which “figurante e figurato sembrano scambiarsi di funzione” [“figuring and figured seem to switch functions”].⁵⁶ Such poems display an underlying and unified allegorical design that tends to abstract and veil the allegorical figure even as it makes it concrete and clarifies it.

In “L’ultimo canto di Saffo,” Leopardi resists the temptation to allegorize character in the poem; again, we are drawn to place significance in the speech register displayed in the character’s voice. A passage of singular importance occurs at the opening of the third stanza, at a moment of poignant self-questioning:

⁵⁶ *Leopardi antiromantico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012), 39.

Qual fallo mai, qual sì nefando eccesso
Macchiommi anzi il natale, onde sì torvo
Il ciel mi fosse e di fortuna il volto?
In che peccai bambina, allor che ignara
Di misfatto è la vita, onde poi scemo
Di giovanezza, e disfiolato, al fuso
Dell'indomita Parca si volvesse
Il ferrigno mio stame?

[What fault of mine, what heinous excess
Marked me before birth, where grim
Was heaven to me and the face of fortune?
How did I sin as a child, when life's ignorant
Of wrongdoing, from which devoid
Of youthfulness, uprooted, on the spindle
Of indomitable Lachesis runs
My iron thread?]

Up to this point in the poem, Sappho is looking out over the cliff into the ocean and contemplating the misery of her life. The diction is particularly poetic and traditional; the mode of address is equally traditional, with the poetic persona engaging in the ancient lyric role. Here, then, the emotional tenor of the poem reaches its climax. This passage expresses a sense of emotional confusion through a series of extended questions that we might characterize as inappropriate. If the speaker of "La vita solitaria" sought to seek a method of coping with his misfortune at the hands of the gods, then this speaker seems to want to take responsibility for her own misfortune. She does not want to believe that the Fates would have assigned her lot without motivation. I say they are inappropriate because even by questioning them, she is imagining an alternative, and then taking illegitimate responsibility for her lot in life.

Just as in the opening stanza of "La vita solitaria," the diction of this passage is striking for its hybrid composition. Yet unlike that passage, the vernacular terms here are primarily historical, belonging to Late Latin rather than modern Italian. They furthermore have a moral (or

more properly, religious) facet to their meaning—which the speaker seems to occlude by her emphasis on the restricted meanings that belong to speech. *Fallo* comes from It. *fallire* and Vulg. Lat. *fallio*: “to lack.”⁵⁷ This sense rejects the classical Latin sense of *fallere* (“to trip, cause to fall” and fig. “to lead into error, cheat”), which has a distinctly moral valence. Likewise, *nefando eccesso* is a marked Latinate diction that rejects its classical senses: *nefandus* (from *ne* and *fari*, “not to speak of” meaning “unspeakable”) meant “heinous” or “abominable”; *excessus* (“departure”) had a figurative meaning of “leaving one’s senses.”⁵⁸ In each case, the moral sense would be a metaphorical extension of a more physical, concrete meaning. These nouns are simply meant to describe the physical sensation without the figurative.

They instead are meant to direct us to the complex sense of the verb, *macchiomi*. This verb would commonly mean “stained me” or “defiled me.” *Macchiare*, like its allotrop *maculare*, comes from classical Latin *macula*, or “spot, mark, stain.” But, like most synonyms, the two Italian words have slightly different historical senses that arise with modern Italian: *macula*, the written form from classical Latin, referred to a “very small stain, especially moral”; while *macchia*, the vernacular form that arose in the Florentine dialect, referred to either a “notch” or a “patch of forest” (i.e., which appeared to be a small stain from afar).⁵⁹ Leopardi’s usage here indicates the non-religious sense—*macchiare*, from vernacular, rather than *maculare*. The sense should be more directly invasive than a superficial idea of a “stain”: more like, “What utter lack, or what unspeakable excess *notched its mark* on me?” In the Christian worldview, a stain may be washed; in Sappho’s lament, the notch cuts into the material of the soul, making it permanent.

⁵⁷ See Körting, “fallio, fallire,” and Diez, “fallire.”

⁵⁸ Lewis and Short cites the Vulgate usages of “excessus” as a translation of the Greek *ἔκστασις* in Acts 11:5, Psalms 30:22, and Psalms 115:2.

⁵⁹ Canello, 352; Sălișteanu Cristia, 121.

The physical brutality becomes more predominant in the second question:

How did I sin as a child, when life is ignorant
Of wrongdoing, from which disabled
Of youthfulness, and uprooted, on the spindle
Of indomitable Lachesis runs
My iron thread?

In contrast to the first question, the second begins with an explicitly and directly religious term: *peccai*, meaning “sinned” in a religious sense. Its historical change was opposite to *macchiare*. The classical Latin term *peccare* was more general, as in “to miss or mistake any thing; to do amiss, to transgress, to commit a fault, to offend, sin.”⁶⁰ *Peccare* then took on its specific religious sense in ecclesiastical Latin, and hence in Romance and in Italian *peccare*.⁶¹ The speaker seems to entertain the idea that religious sin might be the cause of her misfortune.

Its nouns, though, draw us in the opposite direction from this abstract speculation—toward her physical body. *Misfatto* and *disfiorato* display Late Latin features; the prefixes modifying classical Latin roots. *Misfatto* (“wrongdoing”) comes from the vulgar Latin *misfacere*, “to do wrong.”⁶² *Disfiorato* has a very specific sense in Italian from its own vulgar Latin cognate, and means something beyond the sense of “out of flower” or “faded” that we get from the related word *sfiarato*: it suggests a brutally violent act of plucking or pulling out one’s flowers—“uprooting,” perhaps.⁶³ In the same manner, *scemo* commonly means “diminishing” in Italian,

⁶⁰ Lewis and Short, “peccare.”

⁶¹ See Papias, “peccatum” and “peccare”; and Souter, “peccatum.”

⁶² See Maigne d’Arnis, “misfacere.”

⁶³ “*Sfiarare* differisce da *disfiorare*, *deflorare*, *sfiarare*. *Sfiarare* e *disfiorare* accennano ambedue ad atto violento, ma il primo é meno brutale, e poi *sfiarare* ha pure il senso di Cogliere la parte più bella di chechessia. *Deflorare* é togliere il fiore della verginità. *Sfiarare* è Cessare di fiorire, e quindi dicesi di fiore che comincia ad appassire, e di altra cosa che sia troppo brancicata si da perdere la natural freschezza” [“*Sfiarare* differs from *disfiorare*, *deflorare*, *sfiarare*. *Sfiarare* and *disfiorare* both imply a violent act, but the former is less brutal, and *sfiarare* indeed has the meaning of Collecting someone’s best part. *Deflorare* is

but here it seems to be a calque of the vulgar Latin word *semus*, therefore evoking the more violent sense of “crippled” or “disabled.”⁶⁴ If we were to read the poem’s critical rhetorical question by its lineage in the classical tradition, the polysemy of the terms would be evident: the sense would be of the faded or diminished vitality that the speaker feels by the subtle figurative language of the body “fading” or “wilting” as a plant does, or by the natural process of entropy causing the body to “wane” or “diminish.” But the emphasis of these questions isn’t on the comparison of old age to youth, as we might expect with such poetic tropes. Nor are these tropes being ironically used to describe a premature aging, as Leopardi does elsewhere in the *Canti*. Rather, the poetic adjectives are limited especially to the physical dimension of ugliness and debilitation that the speaker has been granted by the Fates. The speaker’s self-description seems explicitly to avoid the metaphysical. The poetic terms are restricted in meaning; they are metonyms characterizing physical debilitation, not metaphors figuring physical debilitation as spiritual debilitation.

These readings of “La vita solitaria” and “L’ultimo canto di Saffo” demonstrate the concern for style as an instrument of culture: I have shown that the poems ought to be read thematically and allegorically through key words and rhetorical emphases that carry social and, ultimately, moral values. In “La vita solitaria,” the desire for freedom from the impositions of Fate depicts the moral value of the imagination to hold an idea of freedom within the impossibly

plucking the flower of virginity. *Sfiorire* means To cease flowering, and is thus said of a flower that begins to wilt, and of anything else that is handled and loses its natural freshness”] (Pianigiani, “sfiorare”).

⁶⁴ See Maigne d’Arnis, “semus” and “semare.” Ficara notes that Leopardi’s manuscript contains the following marginal note: “non vuol dir *diminuito*, ma assolutamente *mancante*.... In somma non vale *scemato*, ma *privo*; bensì *privo d’una cosa che gli conveniva d’aver*” [“it doesn’t mean *diminished*, but absolutely *lacking*.... In short it doesn’t mean *reduced to less*, but *devoid*; but *devoid of something that it really ought to have*”].

confined space of time. The ironic distance created by the lack of fit between the poem's diction and its use of the pastoral genre suggest an ultimate tale of the triumph of allegory—not in a naïve or naturalized sense, as we find in Petrarch, but in a distinctly modern sense, as the allegorization of language register in the change from ancient to modern. In “L'ultimo canto di Saffo” this allegorization plays out at the level of the speaker's voice and body: the triumph of the physical over the metaphysical is a development of the earlier poem's insistence on the physicality of poetic speech against the abstraction of the literary tradition. The technique of philological style that I have been describing develops from the allegorical tradition of the *stilnovo* and the Petrarchan lyric, and in doing so offers a peculiarly rich concept of poetic language as the embodiment of values that have evolved over centuries within a cultural tradition.

Absolute Metaphor and *Begriffsgeschichte* in the Late *Canti*

If it were possible to convey what one feels when night falls and the stars come out and one is alone in the vastness, and life's truths (night truths) begin to march past one by one, somehow swooning or as if the person out in the open were swooning or as if a strange sickness were circulating in the blood unnoticed.⁶⁵

—Roberto Bolaño, 2666

The allegorization of spoken language in the classical *canzone* tends to change in Leopardi's late lyric, revealing the inherent limitations associated with allegory for the modern lyric. The poetic mode of the late *Canti*, I will argue in this section, is an attempt to move beyond the allegorical

⁶⁵ This passage precedes a recitation by the character Florita Almada, a television psychic, of Leopardi's poem “Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia” [“Nocturnal Song of an Asian Nomadic Shepherd”].

mode in search of a conception of poetic language that is more capacious than the allegorization of a particular feature of historical language. In Leopardi's late poems, the grandness of scale and theme shifts our focus to language itself as it mediates our access to the external world through thought. The individual fate of the *uomo infelice* (*the unfortunate man*) becomes assimilated into the larger scope of *il gener nostro*—"this species of ours," as the speaker discovers in the poem "A se stesso" ("To himself"). The poetic shift reflects a larger historical split that Leopardi's work straddles, between, as Giuseppe Prestipino claims, the "concetto tradizionale dell'arte come *imitazione della natura*" ["traditional concept of art as an *imitation* of nature"] and the late Renaissance concept of "una scienza come, invece, *trasformazione della natura*" ["a science as a *transformation* of nature"].⁶⁶ Words become more than mere symbols: they show a universal figuration at the bottom of all of humankind's conceptions of itself.

In this section, instead of tracking the linguistic strata contained in the diction of individual poems, I will focus on the presence of specific keywords used frequently in the later *Canti*. These key words betray a rich, resonant range of meanings that develop into a Leopardian metaphorology, to use the term of Hans Blumenberg. The trope of metaphor is, Blumenberg suggests, a "foundational element of philosophical language"⁶⁷—his term for such a concept is "absolute metaphor," in opposition to the rational notion of "conceptual metaphor." While absolute metaphor has a deep relation to the phenomenon of myth, Blumenberg suggests their difference is "genetic":

⁶⁶ *Tre voci nel deserto. Vico, Leopardi, Gramsci per una nuova logica storica* (Rome: Carocci, 2006), 110.

⁶⁷ *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, trans. Robert Savage (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 3.

Myth bears the sanction of its primordial, unfathomable origin, its divine or inspirative ordination, whereas metaphor can present itself as a figment of the imagination, needing only to disclose a possibility of understanding in order for it to establish its credentials.⁶⁸ The point for a Leopardian absolute metaphor is precisely the emphasis on the ambiguity of origin: whether it arises inside the mind or outside the mind is of no consequence. For Leopardi, in fact there is no difference.

Blumenberg's theory of metaphorology has proved influential on recent Leopardian critics Antonella del Gatto, who focuses her work on the Leopardian metaphor of the moon as psychological and civilizational "other," and Tommaso Tarani, who reads the metaphor of the veil in Leopardi as the individuation of a cultural symbol common to modernity. For Del Gatto, Leopardi's lyric is the culmination of an idea in which the content of metaphor goes beyond communication, gaining a certain autonomy:

La metafora, una volta inserita nel circuito comunicativo ed esposta alla ricezione del lettore, non si può dominare: le immagini diventano autonome, incontrollabili nella loro inesauribile forza evocativa. E ciò non comporta affatto una minaccia per la dignità stilistica e testuale; è semmai un modo per consentire al testo di sprigionare la sua carica comunicativa e di sfruttare appieno il suo ruolo mediatico.⁶⁹

[Metaphor, once introduced into the communicative circuit and exhibited for the reader's reception, cannot be dominated: images become autonomous, uncontrollable in their inexhaustible evocative force. And this does not in fact entail a threat for stylistic and textual status; it is if anything a way to allow the text to release its task of communication and to enjoy fully its role as mediator.]

Rather than being intended to communicate a rational proposition under the veil of aesthetic suggestion, the Leopardian metaphors "sono piuttosto sistemi di distrazione, di velatura del messaggio di superficie del componimento" ["are rather systems of distraction, of a veiling of the

⁶⁸ *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 78.

⁶⁹ *Quel punto acerbo. Temporalità e conoscenza metaforica in Leopardi* (Florence: L. S. Olschki, 2012), 4.

message of the element's surface"], which leave the subject of the metaphor “intatto da un lato, mentre dall'altro lo rivela come copertura del senso” [“intact on the one hand, and on the other a covering over of meaning”].⁷⁰ For Tarani, the veiling of meaning is the inheritance to modernity of original sin. Tarani draws our attention to a passage of the *Zibaldone* (171) in which Leopardi suggests that the poet's function is to consider the *rimanente*, the “remnant” existing in language that stands for an original, Edenic state:

Di qua [i.e., dopo il peccato originale] il soggetto, al centro il dispositivo di copertura che impedisce la “vista,” e di là da esso il reale e le cose che l'immaginazione, nell'impossibilità di vedere, è costretta a “figurare.” Con particolare attenzione al fatto che “il rimanente,” ciò che viene escluso, nei passi leopardiani non è da intendersi come l'aggiunta immaginifica apportata dal tutto oltre la parte, ma piuttosto come la “cosa” materiale stessa.⁷¹

[From this moment (i.e., after original sin) we have the subject, at its core the veiling device that hinders “sight,” and beyond it the real and the things that the imagination, due to the impossibility of seeing, is constrained to “figure.” Particular attention should be given to the fact that the “remnant,” what comes to be excluded, is not in Leopardi's thought to be understood as the addition of the image wholly generated beyond the part, but rather as a material ‘thing’ itself.]

Tarani distinguishes between types of metaphors that make this “material thing itself” visible: *metafora antica*⁷² stands in contrast to the *metafora barocca* of Dante and Petrarch:

La tendenza generale della metafora antica consiste nel collegare al referente oggettuale un'eccedenza corrispondente a una parte del corpo umano...laddove la metafora secentista [i.e., *metafora barocca*] tende a moltiplicare la catena di *rappports* accostando due o più elementi empirici.⁷³

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ *Il velo e la morte. Saggio su Leopardi* (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2011), 50.

⁷² Tarani identifies this kind of metaphor based on examples from Melchiorre Cesarotti, drawing from Pindar. For more on Cesarotti's theory of language, see Chapter 1, “Locke's Legacy: Condillac, Cesarotti, and the *questione della lingua*.”

⁷³ Tarani, 88.

[The general tendency of *metafora antica* (ancient metaphor) consists in linking to the object referent an excess corresponding to a part of the human body...where Renaissance metaphor (i.e., Baroque metaphor) tends to multiply the chain of *rappports* by combining two or more empirical elements.]

Metafora antica is simpler than *metafora barocca* because it seeks to return us to an originary, real relation between the word and the world—by recourse, as Tarani argues, to an “eccedenza” (“excess”) in the form of our own body as the point of reference.

If we follow del Gatto’s and Tarani’s conceptions, we see that our most basic (and, in a sense, largest) ideas about ourselves contain an inherent figurative quality. In Leopardi’s work, we might say, we have a literary picture of this philosophical problem of metaphorology. A Leopardian metaphor has effects emanating beyond rhetorical delight or absorption (as the *pellegrino* of Tesauro does), and instead reveals something fundamental about our knowledge of the world: it reveals our need for a figurative conception that both allows the individual mind access to a truth about itself that it could not otherwise grasp, and which remains in our culture as the resource for other minds to grasp as well. It has gained, as both Blumenberg and del Gatto suggest, a certain life of its own—a *possibility* rather than a meaning.

Some of Leopardi’s chief critics have been hesitant to describe Leopardi’s verse as metaphorical at all because of its reliance on propositional statement and description rather than resemblance or explicit figuration. Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo titles an influential article “Leopardi non è un poeta metaforico” [“Leopardi is not a metaphorical poet”] by which he means that the predominant figurative language in the *Canti* is *catathresis*, i.e., an intentional misuse or recontextualization of a word, or recycled metaphor, often a single allusion to Petrarch, Dante,

Vergil, or Horace.⁷⁴ Instead, Mengaldo calls Leopardi a “syntactical” poet: the poems don’t found their poetry in comparison of unlike things—a relation between abstract and concrete levels of the world, or between exterior and interior—but in direct statement. Leo Spitzer anticipates Mengaldo’s characterization in his reading of the late poem “Aspasia,” when he refers to Leopardi as a poet of thought (“l’impressione diretta che ricaviamo dalla lettura come se le tappe del pensiero e del sentimento del poeta si realizzassero davanti a noi” [“we get the direct impression from reading that the stages of the poet’s thought and emotion had materialized before us”]) and of the “immediatamente vissuto” [“immediately lived”]—and not of imagination.⁷⁵ Both critics indicate—rightly—that the traditional figuration associated with the Romantic lyric is lacking in Leopardi’s poetics, despite the fact that Leopardi’s theory of imagination—both conceptual as well as empirical, abstract as well as immediate, with an emphasis on the etymological sense of the imaginative as having to do primarily with the *image*—can be associated with major Romantic poets in other traditions (primarily Coleridge).

The claim of the history of concepts, however, is that human thought often has no recourse outside of metaphor to describe aspects of deep historical time because of its natural temporal limitations. Reinhart Koselleck, for example, suggests that all of our ideas about history work by analogy:

Numerous borrowings come from the spheres of experience prevailing during a given time—from mythology, from the political life of constitutional states, from the church and theology, from technology and the natural sciences—in order to describe historical

⁷⁴ “Leopardi non è un poeta metaforico,” *Strumenti critici* 20:1 (January 2005), 1–2.

⁷⁵ *Studi italiani* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1976), 285–286.

phenomena. At first, genuinely historical concepts, ones which have to do with historical time, do not exist. It is always a question of metaphors.⁷⁶

It is in a distinct sense that Leopardian and all literary metaphor seems indeed the correct idea of the trope Koselleck describes: not as the product of *poiesis*, but as an effect of the gradual accrual of different senses to a deep concept by usage over centuries of history. In many cases, Leopardi himself claims, such instances of incremental evolution register immediately in the character of the word's sound and appearance:

Ora sin tanto che l'etimologie di queste originariamente metafore, ma oggi, o anche da principio, parole effettivamente proprie, si ravvisano e sentono, il accade almeno nella maggior parte delle parole proprie di una lingua, l'idea ch'elle destano, è quasi doppia, benchè la parola sia proprissima, e di più esse producono nella mente, non la sola concezione ma l'immagine della cosa, ancorchè la più astratta, essendo anche queste in qualsivoglia lingua, sempre in ultima analisi espresse con metafore prese dal materiale e sensibile.⁷⁷

[Since the etymologies of these words—that were originally metaphors but today or even from the beginning were effectively words—are recognized or felt, what happens at least in the majority of a language's words, the idea that they arouse is almost double, though the word be a very established word, and further they produce in the mind not only the conception but the image of the thing—albeit the most abstract—since they are such in any language, always ultimately expressed with metaphors taken from the material and sensible.]

The “doubled” word that evokes both a mental concept and a physical image—that we saw earlier as the province of the individual mind—activates our deep intuition about the relation of its etymology to its current usage in context. The *parola propria* retains something of its original concrete, specific, real-world reference in its present abstraction, even as it requires for its resonance on the plane of culture the abstraction that comes from its use over centuries and

⁷⁶ “‘Progress’ and ‘Decline’: An Appendix to the History of Two Concepts,” *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Presner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 220–21.

⁷⁷ *Zibaldone*, 1702–1703.

across languages. The absolute metaphor is not brought into play by bringing different images together; they are discovered by noticing the layers of images buried in a word's past. To take up the old terms of the New Criticism, we might say that the tenor and vehicle of the metaphor are no longer separate images or senses brought into a state of interaction in the poem, but the images or senses belonging to the same word from its pre-linguistic, material origin to its abstracted, figural properties in the modern world.⁷⁸ The fact that the content of absolute metaphors have no actual, real-world aspect suggests that we need to establish this immediate context: the mind forges a metaphor to bring it into the province of thought.

In two of Leopardi's late canzoni, "Il canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia" ("Nocturnal song of an Asian nomadic shepherd") and "La ginestra" ("The broom plant"), the metaphors of time and of progeny in particular—two themes expressing the endurance of human civilization—demonstrate the harmony of different meanings inflected by institutions or traditions over the *longue durée*. Their prevalence in the late poems suggests a feature of Blumenberg's "absolute metaphor": the terms we use to describe the continuance of the human race aren't analogous or parallel to our concepts of what offspring is, nor are they embodiments of abstract ideas of race, civilization, or genealogy: the words *are* our concepts of offspring.

"Il canto notturno" and "La ginestra" both offer a point of particularly crucial departure from the earlier classical lyrics and canzone. "Il canto notturno" draws from the formal features of "La vita solitaria"—a speaker isolated from humankind, a structure that presents itself as an

⁷⁸ Recent work in historical semantics largely confirms the scientific basis for these literary intuitions first made by Locke. Eve Sweetser summarizes the available evidence: "The link-up between our vocabularies of mind and body may have some psychosomatic roots, but it is essentially metaphorical in nature, and his equation of the physical self and the inner self is pervasive in English and in the Indo-European family at large (if indeed it is not a universal)." *From Etymology to Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 31.

ode without a subject other than the isolated self—as well as its central focus on the paradoxical identification with and inscrutability of the moon in the sky, the speaker’s silent auditor. “La ginestra” also centers on apostrophe to a silent interlocutor (the desert flower of the title) and is structured as a self-conscious meditation making thematic comparison of the interlocutor in its historical and geographical situation with its previous states. The key concept that pervades the speaker’s lyric reflection in these poems is humanity’s constitutive state, or *stato*: what is the essential and inescapable condition of the human being, the thing that endures despite our relative situation in the world? The word *stato* has a certain linguistic peculiarity suggested by its prominence in Leopardi’s diction. It is a word belonging to common speech as well as literary language, and is distinct for this universality as well as its stable meaning from classical Latin to modern Italian—as both the noun *status* (“condition, place, circumstance”) and the participle *status* of *sto, stare* (“stand, remain, persist”—and by poetic extension, “to be”).⁷⁹ We might refer to the extended, non-juridical meaning of *status* given by Forcellini: “Frequentissime per metaphorum ponitur pro modo, quo quaeque res stat, conditione, qualitate fortunae, loco, ordine.”⁸⁰ It is also the root of many derived terms in both vulgar and classical Latin that connote endurance or immobility.⁸¹ Leopardi’s own notes on *stare* in the *Zibaldone* suggest that he considered the word conceptually rich as a description of continuous or enduring states of being:

Il verbo *stare*, e per sua natura in tutte le lingue (giacchè egli è propriamente ed essenzialmente un continuativo di *essere*), e per proprietà della nostra, è il più adattato, o

⁷⁹ Meillet and Ernout, “*stō, stās, stētī, stātum;*” De Vaan, “*stō, stāre.*”

⁸⁰ “Quite often used as a metaphor for how a thing stands, its condition, qualities of fortune, place, order.” Forcellini, “*status.*”

⁸¹ De Vaan highlights *superstes, -stitis*, “standing by, surviving”; *stabilis*, “steady, firm”; *dēstināre*, “determine, settle”; *stāmen, -inis*, “thread, loom, warp” (Cf. my earlier reading of “*stamo*” in “l’Ultimo canto di Saffo”).

piuttosto è precisamente quello ch'esprime la continuità o durata di qualsivoglia azione.... Propriamente e perpetuamente adoperiamo in questa forma il verbo *stare* in luogo di universale continuativo.⁸²

[The verb *stare*, by its nature in all languages (since it is properly and fundamentally a continuative of *essere*) and as a quality of our language, is best suited for expressing, or rather is precisely what expresses continuation or duration of any action.... We typically and consistently use this form of the verb *stare* [i.e., as an auxiliary] in place of a universal continuative.]

In the poems, I would suggest, *stato* is given a special kind of significance as the condition of being into which humankind is born, the position or circumstance into which it is born—and, crucially, persists.⁸³ Both the moon of “Il canto notturno” and the flower of “La ginestra” are praised for their permanence, but their endurance is much different than that of humankind. Against the backdrop of a Nature prone to constant, dramatic change, the human race as a whole has a constitutive permanence. The concept of the *stato mortale* we find in the third stanza of “Il canto notturno” is that humanity is defined by its inability to escape its physical frailty, related intimately to its certain mortality. In “La ginestra,” the lowness of humanity is made explicit: “basso stato e frale” (“low, frail state”). Despite moral improvement (“che sia dell’alma generoso ed alto”; “someone of generous, high soul”), humans cannot leave behind the “povero stato e

⁸² *Zibaldone*, 2328. Leopardi confirms this by citing Forcellini, who, “avvertendo che il verbo *stare* si trova adoperato più volte in luogo di *esse*, soggiunge, *cum aliqua significatione diuturnitatis* (v. *sto*), (e ne reca gli esempi), cioè, dico io, secondo la primitiva proprietà di esso verbo che è continuativo di *esse*” [“observing that the verb *stare* is used often in place of *esse*, adds, *cum aliqua significatione diuturnitatis* [with some sense of duration] (cf. *sto*), (and offers examples), meaning, in my view, according to the original properties of the verb that is the continuative of *esse*”] *Zibaldone*, 1120–1121. Alberto Grilli notes that Leopardi is wrong about this. See Grilli, “Leopardi e la lingua latina,” in *Lingua e stile di Giacomo Leopardi* (Florence: L. S. Olschki, 1994), 139.

⁸³ Note, however, that it does not take on the Machiavellian sense of the *stato politico*. For more on this concept, see Barbara Cassin, *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Paris: Editions Seuil, 2004), entry for “stato”; and Quentin Skinner, “The state,” in *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, ed. Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 90–131.

membra inferme” (“poor state and weak limbs”). The counterpart of *stato* in that poem is the *mortal grado* (“mortal rank”): the spatial notion of a level or rank figured as the human situation below the heavens emphasizes the absolute distance between humankind’s actual state and the ideal state of any form of transcendence. In these two terms we have the idea of *stasis* as well as *lowness*, both spatial and temporal immobility. And, finally, we can speak of *stato* as belonging individually to a person or collectively to a people.

A complementary facet of the human condition comes through the word *sorte* (L *sors*, *sortis*: “lot,” “tablet to throw lots with”), the lot or fate of one’s life determined by chance—what determines the *stato mortale*. This is a recurrent term throughout the *Canti*, and evokes the ancient notion of fate as the province of *Felicitas* that we saw earlier in “La vita solitaria.”⁸⁴ However, in the late poems we have a distinctly new version of this term’s sense: *sorte* takes on the figurative idea of a manner or behavior arising by fortune (typical of Petrarch’s use of the term; e.g., *dura sorte*, “harsh lot”). The Latin *sors* is closely related to the verb *sero*, *serere*, meaning “link together”—*sors* thus suggesting a conceptual cognate with *series*, “series” or “chain.”⁸⁵ The etymology carries a deep metaphorical sense of the individual’s fate being cast for by a game being brought together into a lineage—both the individual person folded into the family lineage, as well as the individual action patterning into a general behavior or character type. The central expression of this idea is in the third stanza of “La ginestra,” where we note the description of *il vero / Dell’aspra sorte e depresso loco* [“the truth / of your bitter lot and low station”]. Here the spatial idea of binding compounds the sense of immobility and futility with

⁸⁴ The *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* defines “sorte” as a synonym of fortune: “Ventura, Fortuna, Destino.”

⁸⁵ *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, “sorte”; Pianigiani, “sorte”; Meillet and Ernout, “sors, -tis,” “serō.”

the temporal idea of the future being taken away. The word is echoed in a poem contemporaneous to “La ginestra,” “Il tramonto della luna” (“The Setting of the Moon”):

Troppo felice e lieta
nostra misera sorte
parve lassú, se il giovanile stato,
dove ogni ben di mille pene è frutto
durasse tutto della vita il corso.

[Too fortunate and light
our miserable lot
seems up there, if our youthful state,
where each good produced by a thousand ills
might last all of our life.]

The view from above that the moon has of earthbound humans suggests we don’t recognize our *misera sorte*, our miserable lot, ignoring that each good we experience is produced by an exponentially greater number of ills (*ogni ben di mille pene è frutto*: “each good is fruit of a thousand ills”). The *stato giovanile* is seen as the temporary, fading state of early life, a stage; the underlying *nostra misera sorte* tells in the end. The comparative dimension of these lines—one good to a thousand ills—conflates individual action with that of the species: our miserable lot is produced by our inability to avoid suffering, both by individual experience and by birth.

The notion of human birth as the common trait of humanity brings us to the complex of terms surrounding the Latin word *gens*, a race of common descent. This is a term that arises again in “La ginestra”:

A queste piagge
Venga colui che d’esaltar con lode
Il nostro stato ha in uso, e vegga quanto
È il gener nostro in cura
All’amante natura.

[On these slopes

Comes he who exalts with praise
Our state has in use, and comes since
It is our kind in care
Of loving nature.]

Genere gives us the same idea as *stato*, a core of the human condition: the *genus* of a living organism is its classification based on common traits. It also anticipates the stanza's end: "Son dell'umana gente / *Le magnifiche sorti e progressive*." Here the idea of *gente* is the classical Roman schema of describing human relations by *familia* and *gentum*, the latter comprising a larger branch of families all descended from the same progenitor.⁸⁶ We can even see the address to the plant itself—"o fior gentile" ["o gentle flower"]—suggesting the class-based connotations of civil propriety from its linguistic relation to the idea of the Roman *gentum*. In each case, the birth relation adds a common tenor to the different concepts. It also prefigures the final lines of the fifth stanza, which provide something like a summary of the poem's argument:

Caggiono i regni intanto,
Passan genti e linguaggi: ella nol vede:
E l'uom d'eternità s'arroga il vanto.

[Empires fall meanwhile,
Peoples and languages pass: it does not see:
And man boasts that he merits eternity.]

The inner relationship between the human conception of history and language is figured here. Note that Leopardi uses the narrower terms *genti* and *linguaggi* rather than the general terms *genere* and *lingua*. Both restrict the idea of a people and a language to that which is related to the individual human, rather than to the race as a whole. It demonstrates the vast foolishness of the boast described in the final line, in which a single individual sets himself outside of historical time, thinking he can transcend his own lifespan in the *æon*.

⁸⁶ Pianigiani, "gente."

To read Leopardi's philosophy of language—and style—as primarily focused on the *status* or *sorte* of the individual outside of historical time, without being focused on the conceptually social qualities of these ideas is to only consider one aspect of Leopardi's conception of the human condition. As I suggested in introducing these poems, the historical *status* of humankind is not total in Leopardian poetics. Leopardi seems to partition off the realm of aesthetic pleasure from the underlying pessimism with which he views civilization; metaphor, after all, offers a peculiar pleasure that looks like it is private because it is based on memory. And yet, it is at this juncture that we can see the personal and social function as indivisible features of Leopardi's philosophy of language. The lyric poem activates the “riflesso della immagine antica”—the reflection of the ancient image that is at the root of our memory and our culture at once. This is a topic Paul Hamilton takes up in his recent study of the politics of Romantic thought across Europe, when he writes that Leopardi “was focused exactly on the project of redescribing the ‘typical,’ or what we should take to be the human condition, the universal within whose jurisdiction variants like his own were played out.”⁸⁷ Hamilton's point is that Leopardi excepts himself from being the sole subject of the pessimism while still maintaining his belonging to the *stato mortale*. Hamilton emphasizes the essential social project of “voicing of an overriding political concern to conjure up a sense of collective unity however unpromising the circumstances.”⁸⁸ Hamilton's corrective is important insofar as he demonstrates both the ground-clearing aspect of Leopardi's project (not its hope but its implicit conception of an alternative) as well as the immediacy of its social concerns.

⁸⁷ *Realpoetik: European Romanticism and Literary Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 193.

⁸⁸ Hamilton, 197.

Italian social philosopher Antonio Negri, in his work on Leopardi's political and social philosophy titled *Lenta Ginestra*, makes the extraordinary claim that the version of utopia for which the Leopardi of the late *Canti* reaches—called simply “l'altro” [“the other place”] in the satirical canzone “Palinodia al Marchese Gino Capponi”—is not a utopia at all, but rather an “ontologia”: an “esperienza dell'essere alternativo” [“an experience of alternative being”]. “L'alterità” is, in Negri's vivid turn of phrase, “qualche cosa che sta sui piedi e non sulla testa” [“Alterity is something that stands on its feet and not on its head”].⁸⁹ The importance of the *altro* as a social notion returns us to the final lines of the “Canto notturno,” and the notion of otherness as a form of thought:

Forse s'avess'io l'ale
Da volar su le nubi,
E noverar le stelle ad una ad una,
O come il tuono errar di giogo in giogo,
Più felice sarei, dolce mia greggia,
Più felice sarei, candida luna.
O forse erra dal vero,
Mirando all'altrui sorte, il mio pensiero:
Forse in qual forma, in quale
Stato che sia, dentro covile o cuna,
E' funesto a chi nasce il dì natale.

[Perhaps if I had wings
To fly above the clouds,
And number the stars one by one,
Or like thunder stray from pass to pass,
I would be happier, gentle flock,
I would be happier, pale moon.
Or perhaps my thoughts stray,
Seeking others' fates:
Perhaps in whatever form, whatever
State there is, in cradle or den,
The day of birth, whoever's born, is sorrow.]

⁸⁹ *Lenta Ginestra* (Milan: SugarCo Edizioni, 1987), 247.

The hypothetical statements here offer a vision of alternatives that suggest a potential happiness for the shepherd in leaving the restrictions of an earthbound body. The rhetorical syllepsis in the final sentence of the poem (*O forse erra dal vero*) continues the idea of the hypothetical celestial wandering of the mind back on the ground, suggesting that the shepherd has not only entered that alternative space but has managed to bring it with him by language. Here, we encounter qualification of the absolute metaphors in the words *sorte* and *state* by the entertaining of alternatives: *altrui sorte*, the fates of others, *quale stato*, any state. The final lines are no mere dismissal of the idea of hoping there is another fate out there for the shepherd. The deep meanings of humankind's *status* as well as its destiny, are held in tension with the speechlike qualifications they're given—they suggest that language might allow us hope by its very structure. This is an attitude toward the world made possible by the word's capacity to hold deep meaning in its form.

“La ginestra” also captures something of Negri's idea of an alternative mode of being, and is, in Negri's words, a “capolavoro etico”—a masterpiece of ethics. The address to the broom plant in the final stanza holds up the plant as a model for an appropriate attitude toward the world. The foolish boast of the man who arrogates himself to eternity (“l'uom d'eternità s'arrogava il vanto” [“man presumes to boast eternity”]) is the consensus belief Leopardi attributes to human civilization. It is this attitude that must be challenged. The epithet given to the plant is *lenta*, meaning “pliant” or “flexible” in its classical Latin sense, and by extension suggesting durability and longevity—a contrast to the development of the term across the Romance

languages, which shrunk back into “slow” or “lazy.”⁹⁰ Here the plant is the embodiment of permanence from the high classical style. Conceptually, the plant’s flexibility accounts for its survival but also its downfall, because it doesn’t (indeed, won’t) resist the element destroying it. This is a simple enough comparison. The genetic traits of humans and plants are similarly frail: “tanto / Meno inferma dell’uom, quanto le frali / Tue stirpi non credesti / O dal fato o da te fatte immortali” [“[You are] less diseased than man, since you do not believe your frail roots / have been fated or made by you immortal”]. The frailty of the natural world makes its permanence improbable but not impossible.

The description of what the broom plant does *not* do in response to its destruction comment on the tendencies of humans. The broom is described in three senses: *non renitente*, *non piegato*, and *non eretto*. All three terms are Latinisms but hereditary doubles, rather than borrowings. The permanent duality of each term has remained from classical Latin: a spiritual or metaphysical analog to a concrete, physical trait in its distant root. *Renitente* (L *renitentem*, from *renitor*, “to strive against”) means “resistant, reluctant”; the term has roots in a sense of physical resistance, while its more common, primary usage became the figurative resistance of spirit. Likewise, *piegare* (L *plico*, *plicare*, “to fold, bend”) means the sense of physical folding, but also by extension a spiritual or moral bending.⁹¹ This double sense is emphasized by the word *supplicare* in the next line, which is a term of religious behavior (“supplicating”) but also depicts a kind of

⁹⁰ Rigoni glosses it “flessuosa” [“lithe”]; Dotti, “flessibile” [“flexible”]; Ficara, “cedevole” [“yielding”]. All three source the epithet from Virgil’s *Georgics*, 2.12, which reads: “ut molle siler lentaeque genestae.” See Lewis and Short, “lentus”: “pliant, flexible, tough, tenacious, sticky, viscous,” and then by extension “lasting or continuing long” or “slow, lingering, lazy.”

⁹¹ The most common usage in vernacular is reversed with the two, however: *renitente* most often means a spiritual resistance, but *piegato* most often means a physical bending.

literal bending, as if the plant were on its knees.⁹² And, finally, *eretto* (L *erectus*, “elevated, lofty”) suggests the state of a lofty spirit, which with its “lunatic pride” would be considered haughty—that is, elevated in a negative sense. But there is a play on a more literal meaning here, too—“upright”—inasmuch as it’s clear that the plant is not literally raised above the soil, but rather aspiring toward the heavens. The stability of the plant is underscored too by its position in the ground, described in terms of human life. It takes its *natali* and *sede* in the volcanic soil: its birthplace and its place of residence. Therefore, taken together these three terms of motion with physical and counterpart spiritual senses make a critical claim on the virtues of the plant: its physical stability is worthy of praise, and by contrast the particular weakness of instability is to be condemned in humans. The epithet attributed to humans comes near the end: *infermo*, literally “not stable.” (The plant is also *infermo*, just not to the extent that humans are.)

The plant is not only endowed with physical virtues; there are ethical virtues as well. The lot granted by *Fortuna* (“E la sede e i natali / Non per voler ma per fortuna avesti”) is not the end of the story here. The concept of behavior and its consequences comes in the verb *non credesti*: “you did not believe.” That is, the broom is praised for not *believing* that it is immortal. The plant perceives the real limitations of both Fate and its own actions to influence its survival and longevity: as we note in the poem’s final line, Fate cannot overrule the plant’s genetically coded mortality, and neither can its own actions. This perception is much different than the simple acquiescence to Fate found in many other Leopardi poems, as well as the limited suggestion of *stato* and *sorte* in the absolute metaphors of the earlier stanzas. Fate is not the predominant force in the cosmos of the *Canti*, but a shift to place human failure as its equal in assigning the blame

⁹² “Che prega colle ginocchia piegate” [“praying on bent knees”]. Pianigiani, “supplice.”

for misfortune. Recognizing the limitations of its metaphysical and physical aspects is the plant's virtue. The idea of merit or improvement—making *use* of one's genetic situation in the world and in time—enters into the final lines, making this ending much less despairing than the endings of other (especially earlier) poems.

In Negri's reading, the ending of the poem advocates for a "comportamento etico di resistenza e di quotidiana costruzione" ["Ethical behavior of resistance and daily construction"].⁹³ This notion of the "daily"—perhaps mundane, meager—labor involved in ethical behavior suggests an important trait to Leopardian metaphorology that sets his poetics apart from both Blumenberg's notion of absolute metaphor as well as the practitioners of *Begriffsgeschichte* as a broader method. Leopardi's key metaphors focus primarily on *plain, everyday* meaning; they lower abstract, philosophical concepts to *common* speech. A key insight in the final lines of "La ginestra" comes in the simple contrast of two words differing by only a letter. The final line shows a family resemblance between the words *fato* and *fatto*, near homonyms separated by distinct etymologies: *Fato* is what has been decreed by the gods; *fatto* is what the broom plant has done on its own.⁹⁴ In these words, we have both passive and active: what has been *fated*, and *doing*, the general idea of action. Neither function, the poem concludes, could be the source of the broom plant's immortality. No one or thing can change it. In this single subtraction of a letter, we have proof that Leopardi's deep engagement with the history of words is no less important in the slips of everyday language than it is in the profound philosophical concepts of lineage and genealogy.

⁹³ Negri, 285. Negri's reading contradicts the reading of Paul Hamilton, who suggests, too dismissively, that the plant's final plea is "cowardly and hopeless" because it is only a flower. See Hamilton, 214.

⁹⁴ *Fatum* from *fari*, "to say" or "to decree"; *facere* from *facio*, *-ere*, "to make."

Chapter 3: Coleridge's Talk and the Idea of a Lyric Speaker

Of his many notable and notorious behaviors, the talent of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's mercurial personality most often remarked upon by friends, colleagues, and rivals was his gift of gab—he was a “master of monologue,” as Madame de Staël famously remarked to her nephew.¹ William Hazlitt, whose early hagiographical essay “My First Acquaintance with Poets” depicts an adolescent awe at the older poet's powers of speech, takes a more measured tone in *The Spirit of the Age* by referring to Coleridge's skill with some prudent misgivings:

If Mr. Coleridge had not been the most impressive talker of his age, he would probably have been the finest writer; but he lays down his pen to make sure of an auditor, and mortgages the admiration of posterity for the stare of an idler.... [He] is too rich in intellectual wealth, to need to task himself to any drudgery: he has only to draw the sliders of his imagination, and a thousand subjects expand before him, startling him with their brilliancy, or losing themselves in endless obscurity.²

Hazlitt depicts the talk performance as a machine-like mechanism—“the sliders of the imagination”—regulating the natural flow of ideas from the mouth, not subject to the talker's conscious control.³ Other observers commented likewise on the “automotive” nature of Coleridge's talk: “He went on like a steam engine—I keeping the engine oiled with my looks of pleasure, while he supplied the fuel.”⁴ Antiquarian analogies stood alongside the language of gleaming new technology: “Mr. Coleridge has ‘a mind reflecting ages past’.... Hardly a speculation has been left on record from the earliest time,” Hazlitt writes in a later passage, “but

¹ *Specimens of the Table Talk of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol. 2, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1835), 216–17, fn.

² *The Spirit of the Age, or Contemporary Portraits*, 2nd ed. (London: Colburn, 1825), 59–60.

³ This sentence is the example used for the OED's fourth definition of the term “slider.”

⁴ Charles Cowden Clarke, as cited in *Coleridge the Talker: A Series of Contemporary Descriptions and Comments*, ed. Richard W. Armour and Raymond F. Howes (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1940).

it is loosely folded up in Mr. Coleridge's memory, like a rich, but somewhat tattered piece of tapestry."⁵ As these comments suggest, Coleridge's reputation was (and still remains) that his genius overruns his control—that he cannot handle the gift of talk he possesses.

It is striking that the awe-struck descriptions of Coleridge's biographical persona as a talker repeat many of the tropes that came to characterize the long-suffering term "lyric speaker" in twentieth-century criticism: his cosmopolitan universality, his solipsism, his transparent voice. Despite their criticism, indeed, the hyperbole by Coleridge's contemporaries reaffirms the poet's reputation as a poetic genius by its very critique of his failure at mastering the materials of talk. While condemning Coleridge's inability to argue coherently or clarify his ideas, Hazlitt, for example, depicts the mind's storehouse of materials (its "intellectual wealth") as superhuman—a reprisal of the trope of Romantic genius through describing the seer or visionary. This notion is echoed in Thomas De Quincey's description of his own encounter with Coleridge, when he figures Coleridge's speech, in an allusion to Horace's ode on Pindar, as "some great river, the Orellana, or the St. Lawrence," and then, recalling Goethe's *topos* of the genius as wanderer (in, e.g., "Wanderers Sturmlied" [Wanderer's Storm Song]), as a "wanderer" whose "compass and huge circuit...travelled farthest into remote regions before they began to revolve."⁶ The various metaphors these critics used, Andrew Bennett notes, reinterpret talk in literary terms, referring obliquely to the ancient prophetic role of the *vates* as the vessel for a divine communication, and especially its potential danger, in which "it appears to be out of control, literally to take over the

⁵ Hazlitt, 58–59.

⁶ *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets* (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1862), 54–55.

body of the speaker.”⁷ Contemporary critics have echoed this mystification of talk according to their own concerns. Coleridge’s ephemeral style—seen in the fragmentary or unfinished poems “Kubla Khan” and “Christabel,” in his discursive and digressive notebooks, or in the asystematic (even anti-systematic) philosophical treatises—is often read as a written version of talk. Seamus Perry, in a typical version of this idea, writes that the “nonce-writings” of Coleridge’s prose “emulate the passing, one-off language uttered at the table or improvised at the lecture-podium.”⁸ Likewise, Donald Davie argues that Coleridge’s speaker is, as the titles of one of his minor poems puts it, “The Improvisatore”—“a professional entertainer” who “makes it up as he goes along, and ‘it,’ therefore, the thing he makes, is not a poem, a statement, having shape and finality, but a piece of poetry, the record of a visitation, the section of a flow of talk.”⁹ In comments like these, the disorganization or fragmentary nature of Coleridge’s writing is said to reveal the raw materials of his mind. Coleridge’s larger-than-life persona overshadows the conventional lyric speaker of the poem.

Treating Coleridge’s poetic voice as the aesthetic or philosophical triumph of his role as talker *par excellence* raises a unique set of problems for reading his poetry, which, I would argue, in turn challenges the reception of the poetic language of the Romantic lyric in contemporary criticism. (These critical questions are overshadowed by the remarkable presumption that poetry belongs to failures of coherency more readily than other modes of writing.) The two are related, in my view, in the simple sense that Coleridge’s personal reputation as a talker has set the terms

⁷ Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 120.

⁸ “The Talker,” in the *Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 113.

⁹ *The Purity of Diction in English Verse* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952), 125.

for canonical readings of his poems. The evidence of this reception can be found ranging the gamut of approaches, from the antihistorical, aestheticist approach of the New Criticism on the Greater Romantic Lyric, as M. H. Abrams referred to Coleridge's long lyric poems, to the discussions of Coleridge's appropriation of period philosophical and political ideas that characterizes many historicist readings. As I see it, the shorthand analysis of style takes a premise from Coleridge's own philosophy of language, whether explicitly or not: for Coleridge and these Coleridgean critics, the medium of language should be understood as "not only the *Vehicle* of thought but the *Wheels*," as Coleridge would put it in *Aids of Reflection*.¹⁰ In this way, as I discussed in chapter 1, the Lockean notion of the origin of language in thought takes the form of a poetic claim: language is not only a way of transporting thoughts from the mind, but also the peculiar construction of the vehicle itself as a material object. Therefore, Coleridge's poetic speaker, like his reputation as a monologist, lies at the nexus of the biographical persona and the linguistic fiction of a speaker. Indeed, the speaker of Coleridge's lyric poems fits uncomfortably in the model of lyric speaker suggested by later critics because of their complex relationship of speaker and biography. On the one hand, Coleridge's poems resist the depersonalization process we might expect of the traditional *vates*, inasmuch as they make his own personal life the subject matter and frame of his readers. On the other hand, the fictionalized anecdotes framing many poems, including "Kubla Khan" and "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," seem to deflect biographical inquiry as much as they invite it.

In this chapter, I focus the question of biography and speech in a direction that critics have often neglected in favor of more pressing historical or philosophical concerns: on the

¹⁰ *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 7.

linguistic effects of fabricating a master speaker. In my view, Coleridge the Poet uses the speaking persona of Coleridge the Monologist in the meditative lyrics to present an impossible, superhuman ambition: to evoke in words the full of span of English's evolution over its long, vast history. However, in Coleridge's voice, a radical scale shift in shrinking millennia of language evolution to the human lifespan does not engender irony toward the individual life, of the kind we find in the sentimental archaisms of Keats or the later scientific realism of Hardy's fiction and poetry. Rather, for Coleridge, the poet's speech presents a nearly boundless capacity for expression of emotions and thoughts, far beyond the capabilities of ordinary conversation. Sensitivity to the nuanced distinctions of semantic meaning *in* language allows him to uncover emotional matter that has accrued *within* language—emotion that is not internal to the individual mind or spirit but is present within the vast storehouse of language. The “intellectual wealth” that Hazlitt identified, I could argue, is not Coleridge's own, but belongs to the language itself. Coleridge's speakers therefore expose their fascination with and vulnerability to (as well as their vain ambition to control) the deep history of language that lies behind everyday plain speech.

Though this chapter will discuss in detail several of Coleridge's canonical poems of talk, the Conversation Poems, I begin instead with the foundations of lyric speech: beginning with the figure of the speaker, I discuss how Coleridge pitches his work as a method for discovering universality in the spoken language. Then I turn to a creative anomaly that illustrates the thematic and stylistic issues at work in superimposing Coleridge the Monologist with Coleridge the Poet: the biographical prose poem-hybrid “The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree,” began around the end of the poet's first major period of work, around 1802. I will present a genetic

analysis of the poem's revisions over twenty-five years, beginning in erudition (an imitation medieval German minnesinger lyric that he produced for a lecture in 1818) and ending in artful yet garrulous prose discourse. By foregrounding the biographical difficulty of writing the poem (no flash of poetic inspiration, as in "Kubla Khan") Coleridge aims to make the poem's prehistory in German and its composition in a hybrid, sedimented English an expression of individual development and growth. And by staking the meaning of the poem on the lost horizon of the child's entry into language, Coleridge aims to reveal that poetic authority lies deep in the material history of language.

The use of a varied literary style to express the emotional resonance accrued in the individual over a lifetime, however, does not address the question of where the private, subjective aspect of individual speech resides: the expression of internal emotion. To discuss this difficult question, it is necessary to consider Coleridge's ambitious yet incoherent philosophical views on language, and the philosophical tool of "desynonymy." Coleridge's influence on practical criticism depends on the use of desynonymy through its reception in the thought of the two major British hermeneutic critics, I. A. Richards and William Empson. For these Coleridgean thinkers, the underlying rational, communicative nature of language that inheres in words explains their emotional power. Taking Empson as a guide to Coleridge that explains the circuit of speaker and spoken word, I then read Coleridge's transformation (perhaps "Anglicization") of the German aesthetic trope of *die Stille* ("quietness" or "silentness," as he renders it) in two of Coleridge's famous poetic scenes of quiet, "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement" and "Frost at Midnight." In these poems, a single concept with a long, complex history expresses a

poetic search for emotional depth—and provides a template for reading Coleridge’s style throughout the longer political odes and meditative lyrics.

Lyric Speakers, Lyric Speech

In recent years, a consensus has formed among critics decrying the persistence in scholarship of the idea of a lyric speaker, that fictional character or persona standing in for the author as one who speaks the lyric poem into existence.¹¹ The complaint seems to contain both dismissiveness about the convenience for teaching students more familiar with fiction about speakers as “characters,” as well as embarrassment of the suspicion that the “lyric I” betrays a “thirst for intersubjective confirmation of self”¹² that the poststructuralist critique of the subject dispensed with long ago. The speaker’s seductive quality, as Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins claim, comes simply from its presumed universality: “A fictional person of all times and places, the first-person speaker of the lyric could speak to no one in particular and thus to all of us.”¹³ Jackson furthermore argues in her monograph on Emily Dickinson that the speaker’s undue persistence is merely one aspect of the larger process of “lyricization,” a critical construct of the Romantic lyric as a genre in which “a broad idea of the lyric became exemplary for the reading of all poetry.”¹⁴ The lyric speaker is thus for a range of critics—Jackson, Prins, Herbert Tucker, and

¹¹ See, for a seminal article on the issue, Herbert Tucker, “Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric,” in *Lyric Poetry beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985.), 226–243.

¹² Tucker, 242.

¹³ From the general introduction to *The Lyric Theory Reader*, ed. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 4.

¹⁴ “Lyric,” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed., ed. Roland Greene et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

even Jonathan Culler (“the speaker is inferred from a voice, which is itself a figure”¹⁵)—a bevy of things: a critical abstraction, a rhetorical figure for human voice, a replacement of the liberal subject, a dramatically objective pose, a New Critical dogma, a leftover “mask” from the scrapheap of Modernism—anything but the simple idea of the poet writing the poem.

An earlier and more suggestive version of this argument can be found in the work of the Cambridge critic Veronica Forrest-Thomson. Though she explicitly affiliates herself with the British New Critical tradition (in her acknowledged debt to T. S. Eliot and William Empson), Forrest-Thomson’s work seeks to reevaluate the relevance of external (historical, biographical, philosophical) materials to a poem’s internal organization for our understanding of poetic meaning. The central interpretive question for Forrest-Thomson turns out to be: what warrants our use of any information outside of a poem in interpreting it? In her classic *Poetic Artifice*, Forrest-Thomson challenges reading methods that aim to “naturalise” the formal, artificial features of poetic language by “extend[ing] meaning” into the “external world”; “bad Naturalisation,” as she calls it, is “an attempt to reduce the strangeness of poetic language and poetic organisation by making it intelligible, by translating it into a statement about the non-verbal external world, by making the Artifice appear natural.”¹⁶ A reader of poetry errs when he attempts to make sense of poetic language “by inserting it in some non-poetic area: his own mind, the poet’s mind, or any non-fictional situation.”¹⁷

¹⁵ “The Modern Lyric: Generic Continuity and Critical Practice,” in *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice*, ed. Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 298.

¹⁶ *Poetic Artifice* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978), xi.

¹⁷ Forrest-Thomson, 16.

Though Forrest-Thomson's own readings of poems largely treat the importance of syntax and prosody as the hallmarks of poetic artifice, this theory of artifice presents a peculiar challenge for the specter of the lyric speaker. If the language of poetry can't be considered the same basic kind of language as that existing in the "external world," then likewise the speaker of that language cannot be conceived of as a human behaving as humans would. The expression of emotion, for example, is one such feature of a speaker's fictional presentation that must be separated from the poem's artifice, since, with the responsible critic, we "cannot locate the emotion in either our minds or the poet's mind as situations outside the poem."¹⁸ Forrest-Thomson's view has much in common with the classic position of New Criticism presented by Barbara Herrnstein Smith in her book *Poetic Closure*: "When a poem occurs, it is...isolated from the circumstances and motives that might have occasioned it."¹⁹ But Forrest-Thomson's claim about the fictional nature of the poetic utterance takes the New Critical position further: she insists that because of its unique fictional nature (different from the fiction of a novel or narrative prose) based on meter, prosody, figure, and the poetic tradition to which it alludes and in which it must be read, there exists a barrier between the real world and the world of the poem that a reader must be prohibited from crossing. Therefore the poem's depictions of our mental states, emotions, fears—indeed, any kind of behavior that we grant to be property of the human mind—should be understood as part of a poetic system designed without reference to our received, default assumptions of how mental and expressive behaviors work in the real world.

¹⁸ Forrest-Thomson, 19.

¹⁹ *Poetic Closure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 15.

Both the contemporary critics as well as the earlier New Criticism, I would argue, resist what they see as the error of literary criticism in making something other of the poem's speaker than its role simply as the voice of the poet speaking the poem's language. Virginia Jackson sees in the lyric speaker an abstraction of an external reality that does violence to the particulars of historical fact and social reality (as in, for example, editors did who transformed the hand-bound fascicles of Emily Dickinson's poems into the familiar poetry volume). In the attempt to make general claims about individual poems as examples of a system of genre, their abstractions reduce the particularities of composition and reception to mere categories, Jackson argues. Forrest-Thomson on the other hand sees in the concept of lyric speaker an equally violent perversion of the fictional abstractions of poetic artifice by the arbitrary appeal to the non-verbal external world as the warrant for any interpretation of the poem's presentation of word and image, and then ultimately as the final arbiter of the poem's meaning. For these critics, the lyric speaker is either a fiction too mediated by critical visions for the historical particularity it would need to be a human person; or an artistic fiction too readily dependent on our commonsense idea of what a person is to be helpful for reading poems.

In moving beyond the acknowledged limitations of the New Criticism, both Jackson and Forrest-Thomson perhaps tend to caricature the relationship of real-world speech to lyric speaker. Reading their objections together indeed raises an important question: does the speaker's fictional nature tell us anything about the nature of his speech? In a seminal essay that influenced the New Critical school's discussions of the lyric speaker, the 1953 lecture "Three Voices of Poetry," T. S. Eliot offers a nuanced position on the relationship of fictional speaker to poet, as well as the relationship of lyric speech to real-world dialect. Eliot distinguishes among

the “three voices” identifiable in all poems—“the voice of the poet talking to himself”; “the poet addressing an audience”; and “one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character”²⁰—to focus on the complex formal nature entailed in the first voice, “the voice of the poet talking to himself,” the one commonly associated with lyric:

In the poem in which the first voice, that of the poet talking to himself, dominates, the ‘psychic material’ tends to create its own form—the eventual form will be to a greater or less degree the form for that one poem and for no other.... What happens is the simultaneous development of form and material.²¹

Here Eliot describes the form of the poem as a function of the poet’s reveal of his mental nature:

“psychic material,” which tends to “create its own form” through the unique voice designed for the poem’s narrow formal framework. Though this concept of form arises from the organicist strain of Romanticism (as famously defined for British Romanticism in Coleridge’s criticism on Shakespeare²²), Eliot brings to it a distinctly classical echo: he insists that poetic form is shaped not according to any and all living forces (*wo sich lebendige Krafte regen* [“throughout the whole range of living powers”] in the words of Schlegel, which Coleridge copies) but to the particular motive force of the individual mind.²³ The lyric poem, therefore, as Eliot describes it, presents a distinct reading challenge: to hear language operating as both the transparent voice of the poet and the imagined voice of a character. By this method, the poem may be read by the poet’s intentional design as well as by his biographical person. Because of its conventional first-person

²⁰ *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1957), 96.

²¹ Eliot, 110.

²² “The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such as the life is, such is the form.” *The Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol. 2, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge (London: William Pickering, 1836), 67–68.

²³ A. W. Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, trans. John Black (London: Henry Bohn, 1846), 340. For further discussion, see John Neubauer, “Organicist Poetics as Romantic Heritage?” in *Romantic Poetry*, vol. 17 of *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages*, ed. Angela Esterhammer (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002), 491–508.

reflective mode, lyric establishes a world of speech “where creator is everywhere present and everywhere hidden.”²⁴ Eliot’s view, which influenced the New Criticism primarily in terms of its discussion of artifice, readily admits that the poem’s artifice often collapses the two voices together into one, but demands that that critic distinguish them in order to interpret properly the poem’s voice.

The critic’s task of distinguishing the voices of the lyric has its warrant in a function of lyric that has remained present throughout its long tradition, what poet-critic Allen Grossman calls the *eidetic* function of lyric, or its world- and value-making capacity. Though Eliot does not focus on this function in the “Three Voices” essay, the argument on “organicism” does indeed propose a foundational, underlying fashioning (simply put, *poesis*) that the lyric voice belongs to in both the poet’s act of composition and in the critic’s recognition of technique. Mikhail Bakhtin and Susan Stewart, in far different approaches, develop a more robust account of the poet’s biographical relationship to the poetic voice. For these critics, historical reading means neither a transparent biographical reading nor an elaborately indirect cultural/contextual reading, but rather than acknowledgement of the material and social presence of many voices within the poem’s speaker.

Bakhtin’s theory of lyric speech and speaker has been underappreciated, since his most definitive statement on poetry, the early philosophical essay “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” remains almost totally ignored in English criticism. Indeed, Bakhtin’s critique of lyric is more familiar than his defense of its aesthetic potential. In the famous essay “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin condemns poetry, a monologic genre, as the “unitary and singular Ptolemaic

²⁴ Eliot, 112.

world” out of which the novel arises toward the dialogism of complex modern life.²⁵ Because of its being sealed off intentionally from the heteroglossia of secondary speech genres (a concept he would develop in the late classic, “The Problem of Speech Genres”), lyric poetry stands aside, archaic and unresponsive as “language enters life through concrete utterances (which manifest language) and life enters language through concrete utterances as well.”²⁶ In the familiar Bakhtin, then, the lyric has a relationship to speech separate from history.

However, the early Bakhtin of “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” suggests a deeper significance of the lyric through the way it fashions its speaker. The interest he raises in the opening section of the essay is precisely the problem a reader encounters with the Romantic lyric: how to take the relationship of an author to the hero of his work. In Bakhtin’s view, the poet’s separation of art from life through the frame of aesthetic and creative effects (primarily image and rhythm) illustrates the underlying (and undying) appeal of the fiction of wholeness with which we wish to treat our own lives: “The author experiences the hero’s life in value-categories that are completely different from those in which he experiences his own life and the life of other people living together with him.”²⁷ The complex dissimilarity between author and hero lies in the artistic and aesthetic whole that comprises the hero; their relationship is “complicated and

²⁵ *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 287.

²⁶ *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), 63. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins strain to include a Bakhtin essay in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, choosing this one. To justify its inclusion, they argue that Bakhtin brought the language of lyric utterance out of the “individual circuit of communication idealized by the New Critics” but also back into the historical realm, “back into the heterogenous diversity of ordinary communication and mass culture from which the Practical and New Critics wanted to protect the poem and its reader.” “Structuralist Reading,” in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, 221.

²⁷ *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. Vadim Liapunov, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 15.

diversified by those cognitive-ethical determinations of the whole of the hero which...are indissolubly fused with the purely artistic form given him.”²⁸ The key therefore to understanding the author-hero circuit is this: the aesthetic creation secures an interconnection between an author and another based on this wholeness outside of the author that he has created; there is no art, no hero, no “aesthetic event” when there is “only one unitary and unique participant.”²⁹

In lyric poetry, then, the relation of poet to speaker reflects the idea of the hero’s wholeness as the basis for aesthetic evaluation. Yet the specific kind of hero created for lyric, its monologic speaker, differs greatly from that of other genres, including its closest relative, biography. In lyric, the author “permeates” the hero, “leaving only a potential possibility of self-dependence in him, in his very depths”; and, unlike other works, where the wholeness of the hero stands outside the author, in lyric “everything interior in the hero is, as it were, turned totally outward, toward the author, and is shaped by the author.”³⁰ For Bakhtin, the lyric hero’s significance comes from two crucial, constitutive features: its partiality as a person and its authority as a chorus. Firstly, the intentional partiality or lack of wholeness of this figure comes from the fact that the poet “does not draw a clear-cut boundary around the entire whole of the hero’s soul and all of his inner life” and therefore means that the lyric hero “provides no clear-cut impression of a human being’s finiteness in the world.”³¹ The author remains constrained by the brevity of the lyric, Bakhtin argues; unlike the autobiographical narrative, which uses a “clear-cut *fabula*” to delimit the soul and therefore the boundaries of the human life, the lyric consists of

²⁸ “Author and Hero,” 21.

²⁹ “Author and Hero,” 22.

³⁰ “Author and Hero,” 167.

³¹ “Author and Hero,” 168.

only “an *episode* from his inner life.”³² Therefore, in lieu of a finite fictional representation of an inner soul, the lyric poem’s presentation of the lyric hero’s inner life relies on the illusion of its coherency and wholeness, which is actually the coherency and wholeness of the poet’s inner life.

Following from this, Bakhtin claims that the authority by which the poet expresses his inner life is through the speaker’s embodiment and evocation of song’s constitutive mode of expression and address: the chorus. Again, Bakhtin relies on the suggestiveness of the lyric form: “Lyrical self-objectification is a seeing and hearing of myself from within the emotional eyes of the other and in the emotional *voice* of the other.” Rather than relying on the self-sufficiency of the poet’s biographical self outside of the poem for its claim to speaking the inner life of a person, the poem therefore does so by the suggestion of its social nature. Bakhtin calls the other voices called forth by the lyric hero a “possible chorus,” or a “voice that feels a possible choral support outside itself.”³³ The evocation of a “possible chorus” suggests the solidarity of the hero with fellow singers through the hero’s passivity or modesty: “In a lyrical work,” Bakhtin writes, “I have not yet stepped forward out of the chorus in the capacity of its hero-protagonist.... I am still wholly within a chorus and I speak from within a chorus.”³⁴ Rather than the speaker in isolation being “overheard,” or even “feeling confessing itself in moments of solitude” (John Stuart Mill’s famous dicta on the British Romantic lyric), Bakhtin’s conception of the lyric hero emphasizes the implied society of any lyric poem. Further, by drawing on the ancient performative origins of the lyric in choral song, Bakhtin restores the value of the “possible chorus” in both aesthetic as well as historical dimensions. Despite being banished from the dialogism of modern speech

³² “Author and Hero,” 168.

³³ “Author and Hero,” 170.

³⁴ “Author and Hero,” 171.

genres, the lyric shapes a crucial relation of author to hero through its very anachronism in the modern world.

Susan Stewart echoes Bakhtin's reevaluation of lyric when she describes the task of reading poetry as reading voice through sensitivity to its "historically constructed...concepts of language and poetic convention."³⁵ For Stewart, the contingencies of meaning and usage in texts create limitations on intention in authorship. Stewart embraces in her reading method "exactly the phenomenon of which Plato warns us—that a subject possessed by an unfathomable and external agency will place words into the social realm where they will continue their profoundly 'irresponsible' effects of consequences."³⁶ Focusing instead on the "irresponsible effects" of the voice's agency in lyric, Stewart's reading of lyric offers a way of revisiting the concept of speaker as subject, not beholden to facile ideas of personhood or, equally, elaborate fictional constructions. Stewart recognizes, like Bakhtin, that a commonsense notion of intention in the composition of lyric accommodates a quite sophisticated definition of a speaker (a "lyric voice," in her words). Furthermore, also like Bakhtin, Stewart recognizes that the presence of a community is not only implied but also constructed by lyric utterance. She writes in opposition to the Platonic position that "all poetic utterance comes from elsewhere" (i.e., from divine sources), arguing instead that "*poiesis* involves a dynamic between propositional will on the one hand and somatic meaning on the other."³⁷ The presence of bodies implies other bodies; outside of Bakhtin's mystical notions of "warmth" and "love" as the medium by which the poet evokes a possible chorus in lyric, Stewart offers a material authority for the co-presence of others in the

³⁵ Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 115.

³⁶ Stewart, 115.

³⁷ Stewart, 116.

expression of voice. Stewart, quoting Walt Whitman's 1881 poem "Vocalism," draws from the ancient tradition of lyric possession to support the "somatic" approach to lyric through speech. Whitman writes that the performance of voice remains unwilled, "until that comes which has the quality to bring forth what lies slumbering forever ready in all words."³⁸ Stewart reads this last phrase—"what lies slumbering forever ready in all words"—not as the divine voice but as "the long history of the use of words, the legacy of generations of the dead and the somatic memory of living speakers."³⁹ Words themselves show, in Stewart's view, how "our voices are spoken through": in them the sedimented usages of past speakers contribute to active meaning and intention in the poet's voice.

An approach to reading a lyric speaker as possible chorus or embodied voice provides some resolution to the recent critical frustrations about the persistence of the lyric speaker. For both these complementary approaches, larger questions of the speaker's relation to personhood are put aside in favor of a more incisive revision of how we ought to read a speaker's fictional coherency. Acknowledging that the ideological consequences of questions of subjectivity may be important, Bakhtin and Stewart (along with Eliot) provide a more substantial critical question: how does the illusion of the speaker's infinite capacity work as a poetic technique? For a poet like Coleridge, a poet who, with Wordsworth, attempted to change the terms of collective authorship to individual poetic mastery in *Lyrical Ballads*, this question remains central. The superhuman description of his abilities as a talker *par excellence* shades our reading of the superhuman fiction of himself as a speaker, but this connection may only be helpful if we consider its stylistic effects.

³⁸ As quoted in Stewart, 143.

³⁹ Stewart, 143.

As I suggested above, Coleridge's insistence on using biographical facts as a frame for reading specific lyric poems—"Kubla Khan" and "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison"—demonstrates a limited gesture toward modesty that the wide range and depth of register in Coleridge's diction flattens over like a truck. The biography illuminates the poetry by limiting the poetry; the pretense of modesty on the other hand finds itself overcome by the social solidarity the poet gains from an immense, thick poetic voice. In reading Coleridge's poems, therefore, readers ought to follow Coleridge's rhetorical intentions in the architectural construction of self that "permeates," to use Bakhtin's term, the speaker's expression of feeling. And yet, the real insight might be to see that following intention does not oversimplify the complexity of the speaker's nature or function, as we will see.

"Science and Song": Semantic Form in "The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree"

The hybrid prose-verse piece "The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree: A Lament" serves as an exercise in reading the complex overlay of poet and speaker in Coleridge's work. But it is far more than an exercise, in the sense that illuminates a compositional method that would find its greatest achievement elsewhere, in the Conversation Poems. "Date-Tree" is strange and remarkable but ultimately not Coleridge's finest work. The poem, which critics have surmised Coleridge worked on beginning in 1802, was published in part in 1818 as part of lecture series on the history and philosophy of European literature, then revised and expanded for his collection *Poetical Works* in 1828.⁴⁰ These revisions dramatically altered the length and structure of the

⁴⁰ The early draft (accompanied by the bulky title: "Imitation of One of the Minnesinger of the Thirteenth Century. Introduced by Mr. Coleridge in His Lecture on the Literature of the Middle Ages") was

poem. Treating one of Coleridge's most sustained themes, unrequited love, with the common Romantic-era *topos* of the eternal divine nature of children, the final poem changes its style in each numbered stanza (and includes a prose introduction), ranging through various prosaic and poetic modes: myth, personal biography, lay sermon, philosophical prose, unrhymed tetrameter verse, and an imitation of a German Minnesinger piece in the seven-line *canzone* form. Its unusual structure makes it a comprehensively difficult poem to write about, as critics have noted in apology and demonstrated in futility.⁴¹ However, I believe that this range of language styles captures the analytical and cognitive nature of speech through its attempt to foreground the variety of English's language structure. In its final version, the hybrid prose-poem reveals a cross-section of speech as the evidence of language evolution in English.

In its early, more traditional form, the poem comprises five stanzas in the traditional *canzone* form of the troubadour lyric (an *abab* quatrain plus a rhymed *ccc* tercet) that begins with an emphatic disquisition on love and its disappointments:

Hard is my Lot, a Life of stifled Pain!
And oft to thee do I bewail my Doom
Yet think not thou that loving to complain
I nurse sick fancies and distemper'd Gloom,
A man diseas'd in nature! O no! no!
It is Joy's greatness and it's overflow

published as an advertisement for the lecture series in the *New Times* of January 31, 1818, under the section heading "Fashionable Mirror." The 1828 revision, with its finalized title, was dated 1805.

⁴¹ Nikki Santilli discusses only the introductory prose note in *Such Rare Citings: The Prose Poem in English Literature* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), 45–49. Timothy Fulford's stanza-by-stanza reading of the poem is carefully comprehensive, but only values a method of surface reading by showing the futility of close reading: "The *Date-Tree* seems to me to dramatize...acts of revision" as a work that "struggles to make its own flawed incompleteness articulate the limitations of the self as sexualized by language." "Paradise Rewritten? Coleridge's *The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree*" in *Imprints & Re-Visions: The Making of the Literary Text, 1759–1818*, ed. Peter Hughes and Robert Rehder (Tübingen: Narr, 1996), 180.

Which, being incomplete, disquieteth me so!

I am not a God, that I should stand alone,
And having all, but Love, I want the Whole;
The Organ, that makes outward Bliss our own,
The Door, that lets it in upon the Soul!
Sweet Babes make beautiful my Parlour Hearth,
My Bookroom Windows shew a Heaven on Earth;
And I have a Heart attun'd alike to Joy or Mirth!

Coleridge's performance here dramatizes his own suffering in the first stanza, and in the second turns to a lament for human society: unlike gods, who through perfection need no complement or company, our very human speaker needs the social warmth that "makes outward Bliss our own." "Bliss" seems to provide a synonym for "Joy" (in the last line) and, later, "Gladness" (in the third stanza) but Coleridge distinguishes these terms in a notebook entry by suggesting that "Gladness" is a "Status intellectualis" while "Joy" is "Blessedness," or "that state, in which all the individuuous nature, the distinction without Division, of a vivid Thought is united with the sense and substance of intensest Reality."⁴² Bliss, then, culminates all as the "union of the [Joy] and [Gladness]."⁴³

In the revised version, the style of the poem changes—the opening verse stanzas are replaced by two prose sections and a blank verse stanza—such that the stakes of the experience of love reflect a cross-section of different levels of literary register, beginning with modern philosophical prose and then turning back to the medieval German Minnesanger lyric. Here are the opening stanzas of prose:

⁴² *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol. 3, 1808–1819, ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), entry 3708.

⁴³ *Notebooks*, Vol. 3, entry 3565.

I.

Beneath the blaze of a tropical sun the mountain peaks are the Thrones of Frost, through the absence of objects to reflect the rays. 'What no one with us shares, seems scarce our own.' The presence of a ONE,

The best below'd, who loveth me the best,
is for the heart, what the supporting air from within is for the hollow globe with its suspended car. Deprive it of this, and all without, that would have buoyed it aloft even to the seat of the gods, becomes a burthen and crushes it into flatness.

II.

The finer the sense for the beautiful and the lovely, and the fairer and lovelier the object presented to the sense; the more exquisite the individual's capacity of joy, and the more ample his means and opportunities of enjoyment, the more heavily will he feel the ache of solitariness, the more unsubstantial becomes the feast spread around him. What matters it, whether in fact the viands and the ministering graces are shadowy or real, to him who has not hand to grasp nor arms to embrace them?

The stanzas apparently depict an obsessive mind trying to find more precise ways to describe the feeling of the "ache of solitariness." Both stanzas therefore turn a central poetic metaphor (hot air balloon, feast) into a philosophical syllogism—they, as it were, philosophize the concrete world. In the first stanza, the visual illustration and invented citation might be read as what Daniel White refers to as the "religious oratory" of the Conversation Poems, drawing parallels with Coleridge's published lay sermons.⁴⁴ The technical description of ballooning made in a non-specialist vocabulary (e.g., "buoyed," "crushes it into flatness") is meant to communicate a general moral principle (*man is made for love*) by visual analogy. In the second stanza, Coleridge shifts to an elevated register of English traditionally called "hard" words, meaning specialized terms of art or philosophy that require precise definition. Through the diction of hard words, as Murray Evans writes, Coleridge explores a "rhetoric of speculation" keyed to suggestion rather

⁴⁴ Daniel White, *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 140.

than logical claim.⁴⁵ In these stanzas, the marked styles of didactic oratory and philosophy supplants traditionally figurative or symbolic imagery.

Though the poem's revision from emphatic lyric verse stanzas to detached prose paragraph stages a dramatic shift in poetic style, "solitariness" remains the poem's unwavering theme in both early and later versions. However, the middle verse stanza (printed as the first stanza in the 1828 *Poetical Works* version) contains the glimpse of a lyric voice that aspires to its placement in a chorus of other voices, both in social and historical terms:

Imagination; honourable aims;
Free commune with the choir that cannot die;
Science and song; delight in little things,
The buoyant child surviving in the man;
Fields, forests, ancient mountains, ocean, sky,
With all their voices – O dare I accuse
My earthly lot as guilty of my spleen,
Or call my destiny niggard! O no! no!
It is her largeness, and her overflow,
Which being incomplete, disquieteth me so!

The immediate reading of the "choir that cannot die" is the pleasure described in lines five and six: "Fields, forests, ancient mountains, ocean, sky, / With all their voices." And yet the thought of the natural pair that Coleridge brings together, "science and song," suggests that the community of voices maintains its lineage not simply by commune with the natural world, but by commune with the language used to describe and order our experience of the natural world. The "joy" of the original lines moves to the philosophical speculation ("the more exquisite the individual's capacity of joy, and the more ample his means and opportunities of enjoyment"), and the "largeness" and "overflow" in the revision refer instead to the human's destiny on earth.

⁴⁵ *Sublime Coleridge: The Opus Maximum* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 86.

The stanza serves as a poetic transition from the “science” of the prose stanzas to the “song” of the medieval lyric pastiche in the poem’s final sections; thus it celebrates the imaginative and the real functions of the human voice.

In the poem’s final lines, those inspired by the medieval German Minnesinger poem, Coleridge turns away from the social promise of the “chorus that cannot die.” In doing so, he seems to reverse the evolution of language. The figures in the poem’s final stanzas stage scenes of unrequited love not merely as the physical removal from the world in “solitariness” but as the more comprehensively lonely state of speechlessness. All access to others is cut off. The two major figures of these stanzas—the “blind Arab” and the mother with child—possess special access to the inner life that cannot redeem them. Where the blind man might be traditionally granted access to the divine by virtue of the refinement of his visionary powers, this “blind Arab” is characterized as particularly human and earthly:

For never touch of gladness stirs my heart,
But tim’rously beginning to rejoice
Like a blind Arab, that from sleep doth start
In lonesome tent, I listen for thy voice.
Belovéd ! ‘tis not thine ; thou art not there !
Then melts the bubble into idle air,
And wishing without hope I restlessly despair.⁴⁶

Coleridge’s diction evokes the later poem with the image of the “blind Arab,” “Love’s Apparition and Evanishment: An Allegoric Romance,” a poem which also seems to lament the unrequited love he enjoyed with Sara Hutchinson. In that poem, the visionary speaker similarly “listens for a human sound—in vain!”; yet his “idle brain” is deadened by a “sickly calm” that presages the final disappointment: the “chilling breath” of Love “woke just enough of life in death / To make

⁴⁶ Robert Bridges excerpts this stanza as a standalone poem in the 1916 anthology *The Spirit of Man*.

Hope die anew.” Here instead the direct language of the triplet (“’tis not thine; thou are not there”) makes an urgent statement of denial that the beloved is there, despite the speaker’s emotion that seems to make her presence felt. The language of these lines is dramatic: the change of syntax to short lines and the change of tone to the emphatic register—a somatic overwhelm of the rational mind—reflects the change to the Germanic register of English.

In both stages of composition, the complex of balloon and air images underscores a major shift in concepts from the abstract to the concrete—a change made evident by Coleridge’s shift in selecting words deriving from the scholarly tradition of medieval Latin to the English vernacular associated with its Germanic history. Thus, the “hollow globe” of the poem’s first prose stanza returns in the verse stanza as the *bubble*, and in this return lowers the speculative, philosophical language of the opening image to the concrete, physical world. “Globe” is primarily a scientific term (from the Latin *globus*) describing a solid spherical shape (often thought of as the perfect, unified body due to its perfect symmetry). “Bubble” began likewise in scientific usage but has, over centuries, been established across Germanic languages as a vernacular word referring to any object growing or swelling.⁴⁷

The language of the air likewise betrays a subtle but distinct shift from specialized scientific to generalized vernacular lexicon. The first stanza focuses on the complementary relationship of the globe to the “supporting air,” which, if deprived, would end the balloon’s flight. In this sense, the forces of air within the globe (outer force to inner force) float only if balanced equally. For Coleridge, the air therefore has the inverse nature of bubble: it is “idle,” an

⁴⁷ Swedish *bubbla*, Danish *boble*, Dutch *bobbel*, German dialect *bobbel*, *bubbel*. The conceptual homology of “bubble” is based on sound symbolism. See Liberman, “beacon,” for citations and summaries of the earliest commentators, who include John Whitaker, Walter Whiter, and Karl F. Johansson. See also Gyselling and Wood.

archaic sense meaning “empty” (resonant of its modern German cognate *eitel*). This archaism captures the “nothingness” or “futility” of an irretrievable loss of the beloved, but it does so by using a literal description of its physical properties.⁴⁸ In the phrase “melts the bubble into idle air,” Coleridge explicitly rejects a metaphorical usage of “bubble” and “air” as figurative descriptions of an interior life and its heartfelt emotions, instead taking a literal, physical use as a restricted meaning of that relation of inner to outer. By this vernacular sense, the poem presents the physical world (felt to be closer to a German semantic substratum) as a non-poetic feature invisible in word’s present meaning that becomes an active component of the line’s poetic meaning. It is the restoration of an old, vernacular sense that presents, by analogy rather than by poetic figure, the poem’s theme.

The scene of language acquisition in the poem’s final stanzas—written first, and therefore the genetic seed of the poem—frames the abstract thematic concepts of unrequited love as a human drama countering the natural course of biological growth. By placing the child’s entry to language last, Coleridge thematically reverses the historical development of the English language from its Germanic past in Old English to the influx of Romance language elements through Norman French. The poem’s formal juxtaposition of the stock medieval lyric *canzone* stanza to the free, oratorical style of the prose stanzas brings the formal problem of the speaker to the fore. Rather than simply using the lexicon of old speech as the source of poetic meaning, Coleridge uses the anachronism of literary form to present the dramatic moment of the child’s entry into language as a prefiguration of the speaker’s ultimate expression of lost love. The Minnesinger

⁴⁸ There is an early formulaic use of the term in the revision of the Wycliffite Bible, Genesis 1:2, “Forsythe the erthe was idel and voide [L. *inanis et vacua*]. The earlier version contained the phrase “veyn with ynne,” a spiritually-loaded gloss of “idle”: i.e., an *interior* emptiness.

form serves as a pastiche of the antiquated courtly love ideal, modernized by its ultimately sad ending in the lover's rejection. Inasmuch as the disjunction between modern and medieval forms rises to the level of theme, the diction serves as the link between a kind of language that expresses personal anguish and that of a stock scenario between ill-fated lovers. The poem's thematic development runs counter to its compositional process: beginning in journalistic prose, moving to a free, oratorical style, and then to antiquated verse.

The poem's final tercet warrants intensive scrutiny precisely because it blends the three formal levels—stanzaic, thematic, and semantic—into a profound statement of loss. Here the poet expresses his disconsolate state by compressing the philosophical style of the prose sections into the prosodic intensity of the rhymed verse line:

Dear maid! No prattler at a mother's knee
Was e'er so dearly prized as I prize thee.
Why was I made for Love and Love denied to me?

Aside from the extra end rhyme at the stanza's end, the internal rhyme and assonance of the tercet (*maid/made, prattler/prized/prize, mother/Love/Love, I/denied*) produce a tight structure of enclosed references that forge new connections at the thematic and semantic levels. Thematically, these lines conclude the extended, complex metaphor comparing a mother's delight at hearing her child imitate the sound of her voice to the speaker's delight at his beloved. The poet conclusively casts aside the value of articulating desire by admitting that a mother values her child's quite imperfect attempts at language; instead, introducing the concept of the rational component involved in adult love, the rejection of mutual care by the beloved strikes the speaker at a more profound level than it could have otherwise. Comparing these relationships, the speaker posits a rational component to the primeval, emotional component in love: love's

capacity is greater in the meeting of exquisite taste and exquisite beauty. Thus, the “prizing”—and the exquisite taste such a judgment suggests—is an expression not just of the worth of the beloved but also the worth of the lover. The historical trajectories of these words registers on several conceptual levels in the poem: the dumb physical versus rational mental activity—and thus the animal versus the human; the imitative use of language versus the instrumental; language of the mouth versus language of the mind; the private, domestic scene versus the public marketplace, where goods are evaluated, bought, and sold.

The final line of the poem intensifies these conceptual contrasts of inner and outer: the poet reverses the condemnation of the child’s inarticulacy by placing himself in the infant’s abject, prelinguistic condition. Theme-wise, the line’s meaning is straightforward: the speaker expresses sorrow that he has been refused or rejected from the shared emotion of love that is the height of human experience—a condition for which humans are “made.” The despair he feels in the gap between his desire and his fate strikes the *coup de grace*. But there is a harsher, more profound idea than simply that the speaker cannot reach a potential capacity of his fellow humans, and this is an idea that comes again from the generative contrast between the deep histories of the key words in the final line. “Made” or “make” is a common Germanic verb that has deep etymological associations with the word “mate.” Wright’s English Dialect Dictionary cites a common term of northern dialects, “make,” which means a “match” or “make” from its history in Scandinavian languages. Coleridge’s use of the term here carries these resonances of the regional dialect through an allusion to the age of that idea in the language’s Germanic past. Not only is the speaker created with Love as his highest human purpose but he is “matched” to Love itself, condemned to keeping company with the emotion rather than experiencing the fulfillment

of the emotion by a relationship with another person. The love is directed inwardly to a mental image rather than outwardly to a human person—the Romantic ideal turned on its head.

The inwardness of “made” makes a conceptual contrast with the outwardness of “deny”—a word with a visible late Latin pedigree in *denegare*.⁴⁹ In English as well as its historical antecedents in French and late Latin, “deny” has meant first and foremost a verbal act—a refusal by *saying*. “Deny” therefore carries the idea of a lover’s verbal jilt as well as the denial of institutional authority (the mother saying “no” to the child). Further, the poem’s existential speculations present the problem of a traditionally granted gift of life being taken from one by God himself, à la Job (“should disease or chance the darling take”; “to him who has not hand to grasp nor arms to embrace them”). The helpless poet is pitted against authority with the power to keep him unfulfilled—just by saying no. In the contrast of “made” and “deny,” poem’s final verse line expresses ultimate despair by accepting the inherent fact that an exterior authority always directs inner life. The verbal capacity of humans—what in fact makes them human over the lispng prattlers of the world—also forces them into submission by their entrance into a language community.

While, as I have shown, the diction of the poem’s opening prose stanzas—associated with the scholarly tradition of medieval Latin—frames the concept of romantic love by philosophical analogy, the vernacular style of the final three stanzas—drawn from Germanic key words—describes the promise and ultimate frustration of the child’s entry into language. These levels of structural and semantic variety create the poem’s thematic drama: the profound spiritual loss

⁴⁹ The word is built from compounds (*de* “very much, thoroughly” + *ne* “not” + *ago* “I do, act”) that reinforce the status of the word as a speech act with legal connotations. See Valpy, entries for “de-” and “nego, -are.”

expressed in vernacular English achieves emotive depth by its contrast with the airy, philosophical speculations of the philosophized register of English. Coleridge's turn away from the "chorus that cannot die" in the middle stanza, with its union of love and intellectual activity, to the final, agonizing question "Why was I made for Love and Love denied to me?" is an embrace of solitude (or "solitariness") as the utmost private act. The speaker's capacity for variety comes to the fore in the final, hybrid version of the poem, even as he experiences rejection from the chorus that would unite his voice with other voices. The organization of the poem's diction by register therefore exposes the illusion of progress in language by the reversal of a biographical narrative of maturation (the child develops abstract thought from the entry into language; so too the English language develops abstract registers from cultural refinement). Instead, Coleridge's unrequited love makes him feel like a child at his mother's knee, where he is, as he writes in the middle stanza, vaguely aware of the "largeness" and "overflow" of his "earthly lot," which "disquieteth" him by being "incomplete." In one sense, "Date-Tree" is a singular poem: the fault lines of the biographical and fictional run along its formal (prose/poetry) and historical-semantic (French/Germanic) shift. The lyric section, however, prompts us to think beyond the edges of the hybrid poem, to the way that the Conversation Poems as a whole present a hybrid style of discursive, elaborative talk fit into the blank verse of the English poetic tradition. The nested structure of "Date-Tree" implies the precedence, by biography, of poetry to prose, but the historical-semantic depth of individual words to capture the biological growth of language in both person and culture. Here semantics is biography.

Coleridge's Complex Words

None can *fluency* deny
To Tears, the Language of the Eye.
—“Lines on Tears, as the Language of the Eye”

The haunting rhetorical question at the end of “Date-Tree” raises a question germane to the broader topic of the lyric speaker and its speech: where does the emotion, that “restless despair” of his unrequited love, come from? Is it part of the speaker’s capacity to reveal an unmediated inner life? Or does the lyric utterance within the possible chorus present emotion in a different dimension? Coleridge’s own complex thinking on this matter, captured succinctly in the 1807 ode to Wordsworth, as a response to Wordsworth’s out-loud reading of drafts of *The Prelude*, suggests the dual nature of the answer:

Of the foundations and the building up
Of a Human Spirit thou hast dared to tell
What may be told, to the understanding mind
Revealable; and what within the mind
By vital breathings secret as the soul
Of vernal growth, oft quickens in the Heart
Thoughts all too deep for words!—⁵⁰

In these lines, Coleridge makes a sharp distinction between the activity of the mind accessible to others—what is “to the understanding mind / Revealable”—and the activity sealed off from others: “Thoughts all too deep for words!” (Or, as he has it in the original version of the poem, sent in a January, 1807 letter to Sir George Beaumont: “Thoughts that obey no mastery of words,

⁵⁰ All Coleridge poems cited from *Poetical Works I: Poems (Reading Text)*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, 2 vols., vol. 16, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

/ Pure self-beholdings!”)⁵¹ Words therefore capture something about what “quickens in the heart,” but are limited in depth when compared to thought.

The philosophical claim about speech contained in these lines revises the idealistic strain of writing on language and linguistics that I have evoked in earlier chapters of this dissertation. For Coleridge, following in the main line of Lockean thought, the partial relationship of thought to articulated word creates the basic need for—and insurmountable problem of—communication between persons. In a well-known passage of the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge conceives of the active interior as a language of its own, to which the common conception of communicative language is subordinate: “Besides the language of words, there is a language of spirits—(*sermo interior*)—and...the former is only the vehicle of the latter.”⁵² With the term *sermo interior*, Coleridge is drawing from his readings of a longstanding Western philosophical debate over the relationship of thought to language. In the formulation of John of Damascus, drawing on the terminology of Philo,

The speaking (or rational) part of the soul is again divided into mental and spoken speech. Mental speech [*logos endiathetos; sermone internus*] is a movement of the soul made in its reasoning faculty without any vocal expression.... Spoken speech [*logos prophorikos; sermone prolatitio*] acts through the voice and language.... It is, moreover, the messenger of thought.⁵³

The concept of *sermo interior* serves as a crucial touchstone for Coleridge in religious intellectual history as shorthand for the importance of the communicative function of language. As the “messenger of thought” (“vehicle” in Coleridge’s phrasing) its significance, I believe, arises from

⁵¹ As quoted in the appendix to *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, vol. 3, ed. William Knight (Edinburgh: William Paterson, 1883), 420.

⁵² *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. 1, ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 191.

⁵³ An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, Book II, Chapter 21, in *Writings*, trans. Frederic H. Chase (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 246.

two complementary ideas: that both outer and inner forms of language (speech and thought) must be conceived of as forms of the intellectual imagination; and that emotion belongs essentially to the communicative function of speech—not only to inner life, the world of thought and imagination, but also to the outer world of language, its public and social life. Coleridge’s allusion to the *sermo interior* raises the problem of mental activity or interior experience of human life consisting in communicative language only to resolve the problem: the “language of the spirits” is interpretable as the “language of words.”

The idea that emotion belongs not merely to the private domain of an individual speaker but to the social domain of the “language of words” is a concept that Coleridge alludes to obliquely in the *Biographia* and in the Notebooks. As many critics have shown, the formal features of poetry serve, in Coleridge’s poetics, to evoke emotional effects beyond the capacity of everyday communication.⁵⁴ Meter in particular provides “balance” to the deeply felt experience of emotion—a “spontaneous effort which strives to hold in check the workings of passion,” such that “Passion itself imitates Order, and the *order* resulting produces a pleasurable *Passion* (whence *Metre*).”⁵⁵ More importantly for my purposes, poetry might through its diction—that is, its choice of words—stimulate new logical connections in the mind by reorganizing our experience of the world. This is the idea that prompts Coleridge’s most well-known aphorisms about words from a 1800 letter to William Godwin:

⁵⁴ See Ewan James Jones, *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), chapters 1 and 2; Gregory Leadbetter, *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 135–140; and Susan J. Wolfson, “Romantic Measures: Stressing the Sound of Sound,” in *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Jason David Hall (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011).

⁵⁵ *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. 2, 64; *Notebooks*, Vol. 3, entry 4397.

I wish you to write a book on the power of words, and the processes by which human feelings form affinities with them.... In something of this order I would endeavor to destroy the old antithesis of *Words & Things*, elevating, as it were, words into Things, & living Things too.⁵⁶

The idea of the word as a “living Thing” is not simply its autonomy in the world beyond the speaker’s ability to master it—words that obey no mastery of thought, perhaps?—but the idea that words have a distinctive power because of the capacity of “human feelings” to “form affinities with them.” In his lectures on philosophy, Coleridge makes this idea even plainer: “Words are things. They are the great mighty instruments by which thoughts are excited and by which alone they can be expressed in a rememberable form.”⁵⁷ A word returns us, as Coleridge elaborates in his unpublished treatise on *Logic*, a “co-presence”—the feeling that arises from the mental concept and the word that makes the concept present. The active sense that Coleridge proposes as part of the mental function—again, as the *sermo interior*—is made exterior to the mind and therefore the speaker’s conscious control, enabling the particular force of poetry: “The power of Poetry is by a single word to produce that energy in the mind as compels the imagination to produce the picture.”⁵⁸ This theory of speech requires a complex description of both the psychological mechanisms of human language revealed by speech communication as well as an account of speech’s living autonomy outside of human utterance. In positing this imaginative theory of communication, Coleridge uses poetics to counteract a theory of speech received from eighteenth-century British criticism. To Johnson and Locke, Coleridge adds the imaginative element of the mind to a word’s capacity.

⁵⁶ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol. 1, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), 625–626.

⁵⁷ *Philosophical Lectures*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 368 (hereafter cited as *Philosophical Lectures*).

⁵⁸ From the collected lectures, as cited in *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. 2, 128n2.

Coleridge's linguistic idealism in using imagination to describe the capacity of language has often been read according to his philosophical idealism, and therefore as a product of Kant's notion of the primacy of mental action in language's function. But, as several critics have noted, the historical dimension of language forms an integral part of Coleridge's philosophy, adding a sociohistorical dimension to the philosophy of language he inherited from Locke. As Angela Esterhammer argues, Coleridge follows Humboldt in proposing that "language negotiates between individual minds and the history of a nation, so that history both shapes and is shaped by both individual and collective speech acts."⁵⁹ For Jamie McKusick, the function of diction in both poetic and philosophical works is as a clarification to the natural confusion of language that was once clear—a restoration not of an originary meaning (a conventionally Romantic view), but rather a technique of linguistic precision that seeks to create distinctions in meaning that show the evidence of the "constant interplay between nature and culture, between somatic and psychological forces."⁶⁰ These critics confirm A. C. Goodson's blunt assessment that stripping away Coleridge's "deep historical awarenesses" results in "verbal imagination of a straitened kind."⁶¹ For Coleridge, "verbal imagination" would not merely be a description of the instantiation of thoughts in words, but a description of how words gain an imaginative element outside of the mind through the tradition to which they belong, and the emotional effects they arouse through figurative dimensions.

⁵⁹ Angela Esterhammer, *The Romantic Performative: Language and Action in British and German Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 164.

⁶⁰ *Coleridge's Philosophy of Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 94.

⁶¹ *Verbal Imagination: Coleridge and the Language of Modern Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 18. Goodson is talking specifically about Richards's discussion of Coleridge's concept of imagination.

Coleridge's thought tool of "desynonymy," which he develops in his philosophical lectures, captures a deeper intuition about the poetic nature of ideas and their development over history. For Coleridge, adding to past knowledge involves one of two operations: the additive act of coining new words, or the reevaluative act of differentiating synonyms to establish distinct, related meanings. *Desynonymy* is the latter. As a research exercise that describes the extant process of historical evolution through culture, the philosopher's agency is limited, Coleridge claims; he may only "aid and complete this process as his subject demands"⁶²—or, as he says elsewhere, that he works by "following and impelling the natural progress of language in civilized societies."⁶³ The major "desynonymized" word familiar to readers of Coleridge is "imagination," out of which he distinguishes "fancy"—though there are many others made in passing in the notebooks and in asides in his journal prose and in the *Biographia*.⁶⁴ Coleridge's intention in proposing a discipline devoted to calibrating word meaning seems to have been to exploit not only his own synthetic creative tendencies, but to underwrite a larger warrant for the philosophical claims of poetry. As Paul Hamilton suggests, desynonymy might be the missing link connecting practical criticism with philosophical knowledge. Hamilton argues that the basic aim to calibrate the mental concepts we share with others by using precise language suggests granting poetry "a theoretical importance already implied in the writings of many theorists concerned with sympathy, and the problem of explaining how we come by our knowledge of

⁶² *Philosophical Lectures*, 368.

⁶³ *Philosophical Lectures*, 152.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., the discussion of "pleasure/gladness/happiness/bliss" in *Notebooks*, Vol. 3, entry 4422. "Bliss" is a term that appears prominently in "Reflections on Leaving a Place of Retirement," a poem discussed in the following section.

other minds.”⁶⁵ In this reading, following from his abstruse philosophy as well as his breezy etymological word play, Coleridge proposes to bring together two linguistic fields: deductive philosophy as well as ordinary language use (or common sense). Desynonymy is therefore a philosophical tool for making fine-grained distinctions, but Coleridge sees its potential as not simply scholarly. Plain speech shows an equal capacity for precision and imagination.

Though the idea of desynonymy has been largely neglected by critics in Coleridge’s own body of work, its legacy continues through the influence of the two major British critics who carried on Coleridge’s legacy in style and philosophy, I. A. Richards and William Empson. Both key practitioners of the practical criticism we associate with Coleridge, it is perhaps only Richards that we continue to associate as a Coleridgean (largely because of his still-relevant early work, *Coleridge on Imagination*). Empson’s writing on “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” betrays a critical obsession that many scholars have dismissed, especially given the pride of place that single work has in his idiosyncratic *Selected Poetry* volume. Nonetheless, there is something to the idea that Empson’s Coleridge endures (even beyond Empson) for the predominantly social vision he maintains that he receives through Coleridge. As A. C. Goodson writes, Romantic criticism is the “halfway house” of the deconstructionist critique of language, making the social claims of critical theory attempt to expand the narrower concerns of literary criticism.⁶⁶ In the work of the Cambridge critics, especially Empson, these social claims for literature boil down to complementary revisions of our understanding of what constitutes the speaker and his speech: words as things.

⁶⁵ *Coleridge’s Poetics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983), 33.

⁶⁶ “Romantic Theory and the Critique of Language,” in *Questioning Romanticism*, ed. John Beer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 9.

For Richards, the speaker's role in the use and formation of individual word meaning should be understood as a question of hermeneutics. Understanding a text means an act of intellectual empathy, much as for Locke the act of communication means a "translation" of ideas from one mind to another. In his treatise *Mencius on the Mind*, Richards establishes a schematic plan for textual interpretation, called Multiple Definition, in which he calls for "a systematic survey of the language we are forced to use in translation, of the ranges of possible meanings which may be carried both by our chief pivotal terms...and of our chief syntactic instruments, 'is,' 'has,' 'can,' 'of,' and the like."⁶⁷ As the idea of "definition" suggests, Richards's method focuses on single words and the concepts attached to them through their semantic range as well as their various connotations and resonances. (The latter of these Richards discusses as "intention," "feeling," and "tone" and groups under the idea of a word's "gesture"). Richards's method of Multiple Definition, like his method of Practical Criticism, derives from a neo-romantic position inasmuch as it involves "imagining other purposes than our own and other structures for the thought that serves them"—that is, reading a text by an imaginative act.⁶⁸ Richards's model of reading philosophical words emphasizes the hermeneutic aspect of all reading: like the translator who makes an interpretation in the act of translation, the reader in his own act of interpretation must take into account the cultural context as well as the relationship of world-word and world-mind that the language of the original represents.

In Empson's criticism, interpretation is not directed toward a reconciliation of minds through language, but a reconciliation of rational effects—both poetic and communicative.

⁶⁷ *Mencius on the Mind* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, and Trubner, 1932), 89.

⁶⁸ *Mencius*, 92.

Where Richards focuses on the essential communicability of meaning, Empson takes his task instead to be the essential communicability of the aesthetic features of language as nuanced versions of meaning: connotation, resonance, and suggestion. Poetry exposes the given ambiguities of language, and Empson sees this not as a problem of minds—as in everyday speech—but as a problem of words. Empson’s critical interest in the idea of ambiguity demonstrates the tension between the capacities of language with which the poet works and the technique of verse—the materials versus the craft. As Paul Fry clarifies, Empsonian ambiguity is “the dialectic of signification and force, the conflict between the available paraphrases of a word and the atmosphere of tone and feeling that leaves paraphrase in disarray.”⁶⁹ This is where Empson departs from the idealism of both Richards and the New Criticism he was often associated with by proxy: for Empson, the meaning of a poem is shaded by moods and atmospheres dependent largely on their incremental shifts in meaning through various usages and adaptations. Words arouse and *contain* attitudes toward meaning, and this is not simply a conceptual fact but a fact of history. Or to put it in terms that I have used previously in other chapters: the concept that the word contains is not an absolute meaning but a *Begriffsgeschichte*, an evolving semantic history that describes and reflects intellectual and cultural history.

Empson’s most significant exploration of the stakes of words as “living things” can be found in his rather difficult and arcane treatise that expands Richard’s practice of semasiology, *The Structure of Complex Words* (1948). A complex word in Empson’s sense is a “compact doctrine,” focusing into a single phonemic cluster a cultural or philosophical concept through its range of potential connotations based on the various usages, past and present, specialized and

⁶⁹ *William Empson: Prophet against Sacrifice* (London: Routledge, 1991), 41.

general, of a word in a tradition. These connotations cling to a word as a residue even when eclipsed by another primary meaning in a given utterance. To explain the structure and nature of the word as “compacted doctrine,” Empson distinguishes between various types of equation that the word makes between related meanings: equations in which primary or secondary meanings predominate. Therefore where most thinkers, following Saussure, read the social aspect of language in its function or use, Empson (following Coleridge and Richards) reads the social within the word.

Empson’s major dispute with Richards lies in the different relationship they posit for the location of language’s emotion as a feature of its meaning. Do words arouse emotion in their speaker because of an ineffable quality they carry with them, or because of the interplay of its given meanings? In other words, does emotion lie outside of words or within them? For Empson, it is the latter:

Professor Richards conceives the Sense of a word in a given use as something single, however “elaborate,” and therefore thinks that anything beyond that Sense has got to be explained in terms of feelings, and feelings of course are Emotions, or Tones. But much of what appears to us as a “feeling”...will in fact be quite an elaborate structure of related meanings.⁷⁰

Empson’s distinction between considering emotion outside of a word’s meaning or at the nexus of a set of related meanings makes clear that he understands meaning as a product of literary intention as well as tradition. Indeed, Empson wonders in a footnote to this section whether or not Coleridge, a believer in the “absorption of the living water of thought,” would concede with Richards to the idea of an equation theory of complex words if it were understood that an equation theory merely means to explain the rational basis for the “deeper experience by which

⁷⁰ *The Structure of Complex Words* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1951), 56–57 (hereafter cited as *Complex Words*).

the work of a writer is absorbed and made part of [one's] own *corpus* of half-conscious feeling and instinctive choice."⁷¹

The further consequence between choosing the Richards or Empson versions of Coleridge's poetics comes from their respective treatments of common speech in a theory of poetics. Speech clarifies speech for Coleridge, since it shows us the functions and aims of philosophical precision as repeated by habitual use over time:

And delightful it is to listen to the common people, hear them in the streets, overhear them when they are conversing with each other, and particularly at any moment when they are interested or animated, and you may count on your fingers word after word the history of which you can trace and find. How familiar words are with them and how appropriately used which but a century ago were placed as pedantic and fit only for the schools!⁷²

This Coleridge falls outside the philosophical frame set forth by Richards. For Richards, who distinguishes between the emotive and cognitive elements of meaning, habitual uses of words tend to obscure rather than clarify meaning. Empson, on the other hand, attends to the common meanings of words formed by habitual usage primarily because the various shades of meaning ("Senses, Implications, Emotions and Moods") that a word carries demonstrate an underlying rational arrangement.⁷³ As Empson explains, the rationality of a complex word's emotion and tone works analogously to the underlying grammar of speech: "The mere fact that we can talk straight ahead and get the grammar in order shows that we must be doing a lot more rational planning about the process of talk than we have to notice in detail."⁷⁴ As A. C. Goodson remarks, Empson claims that emotive kinds of language do in fact share an underlying nature with

⁷¹ *Complex Words*, 57n.

⁷² *Philosophical Lectures*, 199.

⁷³ *Complex Words*, 39.

⁷⁴ *Complex Words*, 57.

scientific, or “cognitive,” kinds, a correction of Richards based on an emphasis on the historical, social nature of all language:

The language of verse is fundamentally similar to that of the drawing room or of diplomacy: it functions in a social context which is indicated in material ways in the forms and formulae of speech, and which modifies the sense of individual words.⁷⁵ Therefore the formula or habit, with its own implications, becomes a linchpin for their disagreement: habit as unoriginality versus habit as authority.⁷⁶ A word’s feeling, which we can understand by Empson’s theory of rational equation, is an integral part of the basic meaning that we use in speech.

The initial problem presented by the lyric speaker in Coleridge, which we left behind for the somewhat less feverishly debated but no less complex idea of the word as “living thing,” returns us to a major question of poetry: from where does its emotional power arise? Empson’s method of reading complex words, inspired by Coleridge’s synthetic poetics, seems to capture the peculiar experience of finding emotions within words. Such emotions are those we recognize as belonging to ourselves—indeed they *move* us; no small thing—but they seem to exist outside of the speaker-audience circuit of the ancient concepts of rhetoric. Richard shuffles emotion to the side by focusing on the so-called “hard words” that Samuel Johnson resisted in his dictionary and Coleridge seemed to absorb, only to be able to resist in his own prose. Empson proposes that the capacious emotional qualities of words come from their usage over time, not their provenance.

⁷⁵ Goodson, *Verbal Imagination*, 51–52.

⁷⁶ Jamie McKusick argues that the distinction in the value of habitual use can already be found in the disagreement between Wordsworth and Coleridge over what defined “natural language.” He would disagree with Empson’s (and my) description of Coleridge as interested in the influence of ordinary language on poetic diction; as he remarks, Coleridge “believes that language is worn and defaced, rather than enhanced, by its use in everyday situations.” *Coleridge’s Philosophy of Language*, 117.

Independently of the poet's (or any particular speaker's) rhetorical claims on us, words bear the evidence of thought and emotion imprinted on them.

Die Stille: Two Readings of the Poetic Trope as Talk

The convergence of a capacious speaker (as one within a possible chorus) with a capacious idea of a word (as a compacted doctrine) goes hand in hand for the reader of Coleridge. If the words found in poems contain an accumulated thickness of emotion then the result, in Susan Stewart's phrase, is "irresponsible effects"—the feeling of strangeness when language seems to take on a life of its own. De Quincey's unmitigated awe and Hazlitt's backhanded compliments directed to Coleridge might instead have been more appropriately bestowed on the language itself, whose properties elude mastery. And nowhere are Coleridge's ambitions and claims for the autonomous life of words more evident than in the way that Coleridge makes use of received Western poetic tropes, drawn especially from German literature.

In this section, I will discuss the conventional German Romantic literary trope, *die Stille*, that Coleridge transforms by its placement in two distinct registers in the Conversation Poems "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement" and "Frost at Midnight." The two poems make rhetorical gestures toward the native English vernacular as it descends from its the Germanic cousins, but the poet's choice of a Latinate diction for the key words describing *die Stille* makes them newly resonant as the philosophically rich of English sociality. Coleridge's poetic voice uses its performed mastery over English to hold in tension the high and low registers of English through French- and German-styled diction; indeed, the Latinate transforms the Germanic *topoi* and diction by elevating the key words from the vernacular to a formal religious

or philosophical language. Coleridge therefore Anglicizes the German *topos* by drawing his language to the interplay of public speech and domestic speech that defines the English lexicon.

Die Stille describes a quality of atmosphere, usually depicted at nighttime, in which the absence of motion and noise makes a speaker feel at one with the natural world.⁷⁷ Common in the German Romantic lyric, the longer conceptual history of *Stille* contains many specialized religious and literary uses that add freight to the prized aesthetic of inner and outer peaceful calm.⁷⁸ Its culmination in the Western cultural imagination occurred during Coleridge's lifetime, with the composition of the German carol "Stille nacht" (1818) from a poem written by Joseph Mohr in 1816, based in part on the nativity scene described in Otfrid's *Evangelienbuch*.⁷⁹ From this sketch, we can characterize the following: *die Stille* offers in one word the semantic range of inner and outer stillness or quietness—thus a quietness of action and appearance as well as a quietness of spirit. Similar to the English word "calm," the word suggests a weather phenomenon as well as a human mood—thus a general environmental description that might influence the human attitude within it. And, it has the option of meaning "secrecy" or "concealment," that is, the barrier to communication erected by silence, or withholding communication.⁸⁰

The *topos* of *die Stille* appears often in Coleridge's verse in the period of the 1790s, appearing most succinctly in "The Nightingale," where Coleridge poaches a phrase ("All is still")

⁷⁷ The Grimms describe this succinctly: "*Still* as a descriptor for time and space, both large and small as the venue of human nature; often of the nocturnal world.... Purely atmospherically as an expression of an inner nature and the relation of humans to nature. Beginning in the Baroque period (*stille nacht*); widespread in the 18th century; especially popular in in Romantic and related poetry." Grimm, 2259.

⁷⁸ Significantly, *Still* or *stille* is Martin Luther's preferred rendering of the Vulgate term *quiētus*. See below for more on this term.

⁷⁹ The nativity is found in *Das Evangelienbuch*, Ludwig 11, headed "Exiit Edictum A Caesare Augusto." Coleridge translated the passage in a footnote of the *Biographia Letteraria*, vol. 1, 208. The connection is pointed out in Willoughby, "Coleridge as Philologist," *Modern Language Review* 31:2 (1936), 181.

⁸⁰ See Grimm, 2939–2987; 2989–3005.

directly from Klopstock's "Die Frühlingsfeier."⁸¹ Though the use in "The Nightingale" (and a reprise of the term "silence") refers thematically and descriptively to the German *topos*, a direct link can be made through the 1800 publication of his translation of Schiller's drama *Wallensteins Tod*, where Coleridge translates *stille* with the neologism "silentness":

Wallenstein (stepping to the window). What now, then?
Tertsky. There are strange movements among all the troops,
And no one knows the cause. Mysteriously,
With gloomy silentness, the several corps
Marshal themselves, each under its own banners.

This is the opening exchange between Wallenstein and Tertsky in Act I, Scene VII, in which Tertsky offers the first foreshadowing of the mutiny abetted by Octavio Piccolomini. The German phrase that Coleridge renders "gloomy silentness" is *finstern Stille*, a description of the mood of the troops that suggests both dejection and secrecy. Coleridge's translation thematically emphasizes the trade in political secrets that is the undoing of Wallenstein; as Wallenstein has played both ends against the middle in his dealings with Ferdinand II, so the troops gain their "mysterious" and "gloomy silentness" from their leader. By using "silentness," Coleridge seems to suggest the interior mood of *Stille* that produces the brooding secrecy.

Why "silentness," though, a marked variation of the more common "silence"? In this translation Coleridge employs the word (for the first time in English) in reference to a pervasive condition of silence rather than an action of keeping from speaking.⁸² "Silentness" is strange—marked for its rhythmic qualities (alternating stresses, which Coleridge uses to keep an iambic pattern) and marked also within the diction by its rarity in the common language. With this

⁸¹ "*Alles ist still*" reads the original, which runs, in English: "All is still before thee, approaching Power! round about all is still."

⁸² The *OED* cites only Bailey's dictionary and Henry Ainsworth's annotated Psalms as prior uses of the word, and only for "avoidance of speech or utterance."

word, Coleridge make a hybrid: though it has an etymology in classical Latin, “silent” gains the native English suffix “-ness” to change the structure according to a new historical lineage. Coleridge diverts the idea of being “silent” to a Germanic history rather than a Latin history. Capturing Schiller’s language then becomes the occasion for an exercise in poetic desynonymy.

When the word “silentness” appears in Coleridge’s own verse, the word evokes the commerce of inner and outer from its origins as a translation of *die Stille*. In the world of the Conversation Poems, “silentness” serves as counterpoint to the speaker’s discursive, expressive meditations on the natural and social worlds. In the Empsonian model of the word as “compacted doctrine,” silentness contains a proposition (“reticence to speech entails atmospheric calm”) with emotional properties from its ability to inspire wonder and imagination: nostalgia or hope, depending on one’s orientation to the past or future; inner restlessness belying outer calm, or inner calm in consort with the outer; and a host of localized traces of ecstasy, joy, and gratitude. Those lines of the ode to Wordsworth cited earlier suggest a theme of wondrous secrecy in the osmotic influence of “silentness”: “what within the mind / By vital breathings secret as the soul / Of vernal growth, oft quickens in the heart.” In silentness, Nature, the Romantic touchstone *ne plus ultra*, finds its most permeating effects.

In the “Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” (a poem composed during the same months Coleridge was completing his draft of the Schiller play) the word appears in Part VI, after the mariner awakes from his trance to arrive at his native country, with its familiar landmarks, but its shore supernaturally still and quiet:

The harbour-bay was clear as glass,
So smoothly it was strewn!
And on the bay the moonlight lay,

And the shadow of the moon.

The rock shone bright, the kirk no less,
That stands above the rock:
The moonlight steeped in silentness
The steady weathercock.

There are no humans in this community: the “harbour-bay” (thus a commercial port) is “clear as glass”; the kirk has no sound of worship (in contrast to the bustling church of the wedding that frames this story). And so the unearthly quality of this scene comes through in its ascription of agency to natural actors, through active verbs: “strewn,” “lay,” “shone,” “stands,” “steeped.” Following these agential references, “silentness” personifies the moon and its light because of its implication of withholding speech. The strange qualities of this scene arise by our understanding of them as naturally human qualities or actions, unleashed on the world by the Mariner’s unnatural action of killing the albatross. The interior becomes the exterior in this alternate world; the landscape itself withholds a secret.

The most dramatic and significant use of “silentness,” however, occurs in “Frost at Midnight,” another poem written during the first months of 1798. Coleridge establishes the sensation of inner and outer stillness through a stanza marked by its perfectly regular blank verse pattern, and its insistent and repetitive description of the absolute “calm” and “silentness” of the scene:

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings : save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.

'Tis calm indeed ! so calm, that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with its strange
And extreme silentness.

The scene is Coleridge's cottage at midnight, when all of the home's inhabitants are sound asleep, and the speaker is left alone with his sleeping infant and his thoughts, working out the "secret Ministry" of the natural phenomena on the windowpanes. The poem's atmosphere of peaceful quiet has a strange effect: it "disturbs and vexes medication" with its intensity, invading Coleridge's thinking. The emotion contained in these opening lines is unsettled, between the calm of the outside and the agitation of the inside.

But this scene of silentness begins only the occasion for the poem. Its meditative movement in the subsequent stanzas demonstrates the poetic effect of Coleridge's linguistic play with different registers of English converging in the themes of stillness and movement. Indeed, immediately as he feels disturbed by the silentness, the poet's mind wanders to the "sole unquiet thing" in the room—what will in the next stanza be referred to as the "fluttering stranger," described here only as the "film that lies upon the grate." As many critics have noted, the word "stranger" forms the central poetic image of the poem.⁸³ The fluttering piece of soot conjures up memories of his mind idling through school days, and the dramatic significance of that tiny film as an emblem of home and the familiar faces of absent friends. This thematic activation of the symbol of the "stranger" offers us a rich depiction of the qualities of memory associated with familiar objects. Each of those components—"fluttering" and "stranger"—extends the poem associatively in the way of memory. Yet that phrase also offers more. By attending to its

⁸³ See, among others, Kelvin Everest, *Coleridge's Secret Ministry* (New York; Sussex: Harvester Press; Barnes & Noble, 1979); and David Simpson, *Romanticism and the Question of the Stranger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

historical-semantic range as a Germanic *leitwort* in English, we are meant to contemplate a larger, deeper theme: how the individual is positioned in the world as one person among a historical lineage of family members, as well as one human genus among the cosmos of the animal and plant kingdom. “Frost at Midnight” is traditionally read as a poem of fatherly affection and hope, an interpretation that Coleridge explores through deeper, structural themes in his choice of complex words.

The word “stranger” has a rich history by its place within an English reception of diverging cultural customs. In national English, “stranger” comes through French and shares cognates meaning “foreigner” in all the Romance languages. English modified these senses through centuries of usage, making its primary meaning “an unknown person” rather than a person from another nation. However, Coleridge uses it here, as a conspicuous footnote to the poem’s first publication explains, in a specific popular, dialect usage: “In all parts of the kingdom these films are called *strangers*, and supposed to portend the arrival of some absent friend.” As Tim Fulford suggests in a brilliant reading of Coleridge’s spiritual language, the stranger figures the future expectations of his relationship with his son: “The spiritual union which Coleridge feels with his son finds its analogy in a commonly held popular tradition.”⁸⁴ The folk meaning has been recorded in several places as part of a group of related signs portending the imminent arrival of a friend, including a piece of tea leaf floating in tea and others.⁸⁵ The folk meaning, together with the optimism the poet shares later in the poem (“still I hoped to see the *stranger’s*

⁸⁴ Coleridge’s *Figurative Language* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), 48.

⁸⁵ See Elizabeth Mary Wright, *Rustic Speech and Folk-Lore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1913), 224; and *The English Dialect Dictionary*, “stranger.”

face”), suggests that “guest” is a more likely sense for the word than its lineage as a word for “foreigner.”

This set of semantic connotations is a turn in the long history of words describing the cultural practice of entertaining visitors. The early concepts of hospitality in the West (Latin *hostis*, Greek *xénos*) show a remarkable similarity in meaning, often referring interchangeably to each member of the guest-host relation. As Benveniste shows in his study of Indo-European concepts, the basic interchangeability of these terms comes from the emphasis on the gift-giving relation between the two.⁸⁶ Based on this principle, American philologist Carl Darling Buck describes the shift from unfamiliarity to intimacy (“‘stranger’ > ‘guest’ > ‘host’”) as the general evolution in the Western tradition.⁸⁷ However, the English word “stranger,” as Buck shows, follows the influence of the post-Augustan Latin *extraneus* through French *étranger*, in which it takes on the legal meaning of “non-native” or “foreign.” In Coleridge’s usage, however, the history of the concept does not participate in this later change. Within dialectal English, the meaning of friendliness (in Coleridge’s phrasing, the “absent friend”) in “guest” survives in “stranger” from the heritage of *hostis* and *gast*, even as the word in common period usage came to be associated with the French *étranger*.⁸⁸ Coleridge therefore uses a survival in the spoken dialect for the poetic suggestiveness of its figurative quality.

How do these senses, then, of “fluttering stranger” bear on the larger reading of the poem? To gather these semantic strands together, we can think about the poem’s stanzaic

⁸⁶ See Book 1, Chapter 7 of Emile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society*, trans. Elizabeth Palmer (London: Faber, 1973).

⁸⁷ Buck, 19.55. See related comments on “guest,” 19.56, and “host,” 19.57.

⁸⁸ For David Simpson’s synopsis of the period concept of the “stranger” as state enemy, see Chapter 1, “Theorizing Strangers: A Very Long Romanticism,” in *Romanticism and the Question of the Stranger*.

structure as an extension by thought of the totemic image of the “fluttering stranger,” and the image’s movement made possible by the “silentness” of the scene. First noticing the physical movement on the grate, the speaker develops this image by associating it with the memory of idleness at school, and then into personification with the line, “For still I hoped to see the *stranger’s* face, / Townsman, or aunt, or sister more beloved.” The stranger’s appeal in the first stanza is that it is only form, and betokens many thoughts and ideas by its very movement; then, in the second stanza, the stranger’s general form is given specific content, as the stranger becomes a relative. But the image pattern does not end there; the poem’s pervading emotion of hope attaches itself to these words “stranger” and “silentness” as well. The concept of the stranger continues in the third stanza, with its famous turn from an inner flight of memory to the sleeping babe in the cradle at the speaker’s foot. The invocation for the child’s future offers wishes that he “wander like a breeze” through the variety of nature—the very idea of “fluttering” movement through the world described by the idea of the stranger outside the domestic world. This tourism, however, will not destroy his roots at home. The speaker’s wish is that the son be an absent friend, with the familiarity to return at any time. It is a turn outward to the world with the promise of a return inward again.

The movement outward suggested by the atmosphere as well as by the movement of thought finds deeper exploration in the early, largely neglected Conversation Poem “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement.” In this poem, Coleridge meditates on the relation of a secluded life of privacy in nature to an active life of social engagement. In this poem, the content of the *topos* of *die Stille* rises to the level of theme in his treatment of public and private versions of speech. As its original, discursive title in the October 1796 issue of *Monthly Magazine* suggests

(“Reflections on entering into active life. A poem, which affects not to be Poetry”), the poem presents itself as raw, unmediated thought. However, the moments of emphatic address that punctuate the poem’s key episodes suggest that its emphasis on public performance overwrites any pretensions to a realism of thinking. In this poem, the *topos* of *die Stille* has not yet found the preferred translation “silence”; instead, Coleridge turns to the more common idea of “quietness.”

These rhetorical emphases guide us through an argument. The opening stanza of the poem establishes the *locus amoenus* of the area around the speaker’s “pretty Cot,” set within a lush dell that he calls the “Valley of Seclusion.” An outsider momentarily breaks the experience of peace, a man of the world drawn to the cottage’s peaceful atmosphere, who is rejuvenated just by encounter with the scene. Coleridge breaks from this place of solitude and peace in the second stanza by traveling to the height of the overlooking mountain, where he takes in the “goodly scene” of the entire valley before him and its thrill—“It seemed like omnipresence,” he proclaims, as he describes what it must feel like to be a god. The poem’s main argument is revealed in the third stanza. The speaker reflects on his position in the world, and feels guilty of enjoying a life of ease in his cottage, while his fellow citizens “toiled and bled.” He resolves to leave his solitude and “bliss,” and “join head, heart and hand / Active and firm, to fight the bloodless fight / Of Science, Freedom, and the truth in Christ.” The decision rests on a crucial value judgment: the dreamer has no social value, whatever productive mental activity he might have. And yet, in the final, brief stanza, the speaker offers an important qualification to this decision as he longs for the return to his life of ease. He suggests that mental ease, the luxury “to be,” *is* in fact the height of man; but it must be deferred until such a time when all can experience it.

Though the poem's rhetorical argument is not difficult to track, its underlying motivation seems conflicted, or perhaps unsatisfying. How does the poet shift from reveling in the bliss of mental ease of his Valley of Seclusion, to the inevitable realization that such ease lacks the value of social work? The poem's explicit rationale is guilt: "Was it right, / While my unnumber'd brethren toil'd and bled, / That I should dream away the entrusted hours...?" But explaining the turn in attitude by guilt seems unable to account for the richness of the speaker's satisfaction in Dell and Cottage, nor the final conclusion that our ultimate end is to indulge in quiet, solitary reflection rather than in continued active life. In my view, the more satisfying reading of Coleridge's change reads the moment of personal epiphany as a description of linguistic evolution. By using the complex word "quietness" to describe the private spiritual world of reflection as inherently social, Coleridge hopes to create a sense of passage between—inner and outer, private and public, home and abroad.

The word "quiet" first appears when the "wealthy son of commerce" wanders into the scene; his religious observance of "quietness" on the Sunday draws him to this quiet place. The day of the week is pivotal, since it introduces occasion of the rite, as well as method for performing it: "quietness" here is instrumental for the "hallowing" of the ritual observance. The businessman is outside his normal weekday walking commute, and performs the duties of religious observance by his ritual silence and his benediction: "sighed, and said, it was a Blesséd Place / And we were blessed." At the end of the stanza, the speaker returns the businessman's generosity by including the speaker and his beloved into his "inobtrusive song of Happiness." Spiritual peace, in the poem's system, has two components: it is "only heard / When the Soul seeks to hear" (individual agency) and "when all is hush'd, / And the Heart listens" (the *locus*

quietus). The prescription for spiritual peace: the soul must seek to hear and the heart must listen (actions for the individual); and all must be hushed (the place must be quiet).

In the poem's crucial third stanza, the poet turns from place to person, and from the outer component of quietness to the inner, by a simple statement of his need to leave: "Ah! quiet Dell! dear Cot, and Mount sublime! / I was constrain'd to quit you." "Quit" is perhaps at first glance an unremarkable description of the speaker's departure from the Valley of Seclusion out into the wider world. And yet the shift is significant precisely because Coleridge exposes to our view the breakage (the etymological pun "quit") from the "quiet"—and therefore brings to a thematic level the aura surrounding the "quietness" for the poem's argument. The primary meaning of "quiet" in English was influenced greatly by its use as a Biblical term, meaning the optimal spiritual state in which to commune with the Divine.⁸⁹ Following the religious sense, the general meaning of "quiet" in English referred more often to character than to places—that is, meaning "gentle and reserved," or *causing no* disturbance, rather than meaning the absence of bustle and activity, or *free from* disturbance. To be fully "quiet" as a spiritual state means not simply retreat into a quiet location; it means allowing "quietness" to permeate one inside and outside. To be "quiet" means to be "quit" of all obligations.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ "Quiet" was the preferred translation of the Latin *quiētus* in the early version of the Wycliffite Bible. See, for example, 1 Timothy 2:1–2: "I biseche...that we lede quyet and pesyble lyf" (KJV: "I exhort...that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life"). The Wycliffite usage meant that many other early Biblical translations took "quiet" as the preferred translation for this term, including the 1535 Coverdale version and the 1610 Douay version. (The later Wycliffite version, however, turned to "restful" and its various forms for *quiētus*.) Note also that Martin Luther chooses *stille* to render *quiētus* in his German translation.

⁹⁰ Coleridge surely intends the pun to signify here. We can trace a brief etymology to play his game: "quit," an early legal term from Norman French, first meant to "exempt" or "release from obligation." The meaning "to leave or separate from a person or place" is the arrival at a gradual shift through the emotion of freedom and release from debt obligations through fulfilling them. As Robert explains, "Comme celui qui a payé ses dettes peut être tranquille, on comprend *quitte* est venu à signifier cet état de tranquillité...."

The complex of moral and spiritual values around the idea of “quietness” suggests how readers ought to understand the poem’s psychological transformation. The transference of “quietness” as a quality of place to a quality of a persons is an expression of individual faith as a microcosm of the historical movement from Latin to English, from *quiētus* to “quiet.” This is how the poem concludes in its final stanza that the end of human existence is to rest in quietness, with an active mind rather than an active body:

Yet oft when after honorable toil
Rests the tired mind, and waking loves to dream,
My spirit shall revisit thee, dear Cot!

The speaker seems to find a silver lining in his recourse to a mental retreat back to his physical place of quietness—a mental substitute of quietness, as it were. Richard Haven reads the return from public language as a theme common to this poem and “The Eolian Harp,” though for Haven the limitations of “Reflections” are its affectation toward the ethical (“Coleridge writing...what he felt he should”): “For Coleridge here, the remembered moment has no such ethical content to carry over and enrich the public and the practical.”⁹¹ Haven’s claim seems unobjectionable: the ending indeed seems to be a Romantic cliché of the triumph of the imagination such as we find often in Coleridge—similar, perhaps, to the triumph in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison (“and sometimes / ’Tis well to be bereft of promise good, / That we may lift the Soul, and contemplate / With lively joys the joys we cannot share”), or even the fragmentary conclusion to “Kubla Khan” (“I would build that dome in air!”). Empson and Donald Pirie, in their *Selected Poetry*, only reproduce the poem’s first two stanzas for this

Puis...one ne tardera à concevoir comment *quitter* est devenu synonyme de *laisser, abandonner*.” “Les Doublets,” *Taalstudie* 2 (1880): 220.

⁹¹ *Patterns of Consciousness: An Essay on Coleridge* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1969), 56.

reason.⁹² Despite these objections to the poem's achievement and authenticity, the terms of Coleridge's ending seem worthwhile remembering as an expression of an emotional rather than cognitive exploration. The guiding *topos* of *die Stille*, the harmony of inner and outer stillness, finds its completion in the speaker's efforts to place himself between these influences. His ambivalence between stillness and action, between solitude and society, forces the concepts to be held in suspension in his experience. Taking the philosophical dimension of "quietness" as the grounds for which the spiritual life begins, the ending serves not as the culmination of the imaginative impulse alone but as a triumph of faith through imagination. The historical depth of this faith, expressed in the doctrine of "quietness," diverges from the claims of individual imagination or poetic invention. The poet recedes into the collective voice of his chorus.

If this return of the capacious speaker to the scene of his blissful memory has significance in Coleridge's epistemology of language (in which memory serves as the evidence of growth), then we might also think of returning to the expressive moment of admiration for Wordsworth. As part of Coleridge's fervent praise, he chooses to describe the language of his friend's recital as the synesthesia of a moment of sublime transport:

In silence listening, like a devout child,
My soul lay passive, by thy various strain
Driven as in surges now beneath the stars.

Here the transport comes through music that cannot allow the atmosphere to remain calm, even though the "soul lay passive." Yet the active mind with its new force ("blended in one thought / (Thought was it? or aspiration? or resolve?)" again finds a touchstone that presents itself again and again as inspiration, now pictured by "that happy vision of beloved faces." Just so, in "Frost

⁹² Donald Pirie's notes to the poem read, "The two concluding paragraphs of this poem have been omitted since they add nothing to its chief interest which is in lines 24–40."

at Midnight” and “Reflections” the wish for future peace comes through attendance to the community—the “chorus that cannot die,” as he puts it in “The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree”—evoked in language. It is not only the speaker’s wish for a childhood for his son that he never had; nor is it a firmly held belief in religious or spiritual principles. The speaker’s understanding of the Divine “eternal language” of Nature in “Frost at Midnight” has its roots in understanding human language as an evolving set of words always aspiring to more universal inclusiveness, both of other languages and other times. The authority to speak, Coleridge would claim, is based on the genetic lineage of the poet to the chorus of speakers that make up English.

Chapter 4: Dialect Verse and the Purity of Speech

Critics who read Wordsworth's famous line in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* about turning poetic diction to "the real language of men" to argue that Wordsworth's "experiment" in poetics was a success presume that its artistic intentions outweigh its linguistic accuracy. Derek Attridge, in a characteristic explanation of this claim, points out that Wordsworth's insistent appeal to "real" language in the Preface is bound to fail linguistically not only because of the hollowness of the aim of a "real" language—isn't all literary language fictional, even if it aims not to be?—but because it would exclude "virtually all the poets from the canon, including Wordsworth himself."¹ Attridge echoes a long line of critics, captured aptly by George Saintsbury in the early twentieth century: "We can only save Wordsworth the poet...at the expense of Wordsworth the critic."² Critics concur that the literary merit of the *Lyrical Ballads* rests on grounds other than that of faithful imitation: it has perhaps become commonplace to agree with Coleridge's aesthetic objection to the notion that, insofar as the use of actual speech in poetry can even be done, "as a *rule* it is useless, if not injurious."³ But in considering poetry fashioned to be a particular kind of speech—whether it is intended to be any kind of language, "real" or fictional—it is not easy to differentiate the aesthetic from the linguistic grounds on which we judge its merits. Heather Glen defines this as "the problem of living experience versus literary text," or the problem of using aesthetic criteria to judge the merits of a literature that proposes to change the

¹ *Peculiar Language : Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 61.

² *A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1917), 217.

³ *Biographia Literaria*, vol. 2, ed. James Engel and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 52.

world.⁴ If we don't consider speech to be intrinsically artful, then Wordsworth's project would only be successful as art by failing to achieve its aspiration to "real" language.

The literary problem of dialect and the linguistic problem of dialect raised by Wordsworth's claim share, in my view, the same basic problem of genre: how do the imagined audiences and circulation of texts recording and portraying spoken language shape the form it takes on the page? In the century that followed Wordsworth's statement in the Preface, poets would interpret the aspiration to speech according to different poetic preoccupations, though rarely would these be focused on linguistic precision. Poets after Wordsworth took the dictum as the challenge to reinvent the poetic voice—the medium or delivery of that "real" language. The energy of transcendental speech forms (through classical rhetoric, or the prophetic mode) in Keats and Shelley—perhaps the most vital and enduring legacy of Romantic lyric—derives from Wordsworth's idealism in, as Ian Balfour argues, speaking "both of nature and on behalf of it."⁵ In Wordsworth's model of the "philosophic song," as Simon Jarvis succinctly characterizes this mode, the poet explores the excesses of verse form, its "hypermetricality," a sensual and cognitive expression of "the living event of truth."⁶

On the other hand, Wordsworth's dictum equally sanctioned a poetics of the common (the *lingua communis*, as Coleridge saw fit to describe this), in which a dialect voice brings the authenticity of experience to its description. John Clare is perhaps the writer whose poetic voice most closely matches the desire to experiment with the "language of conversation in the middle

⁴ *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's Songs and Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 74. In Glen's account, a visionary poet like Blake saw that Wordsworth's linguistic failure was de facto an aesthetic as well.

⁵ *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 22.

⁶ *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 21.

and lower classes,” as Wordsworth humbly phrases it in the advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads*.⁷ Using for the most part a common, everyday register of English, Clare’s poems draw discriminately from the lexicon of northern British dialect, but less for its aesthetic qualities than for its readiness and suitability to the scenes and descriptions of his native Northamptonshire countryside. Clare’s diction reflects an ordinary, simple experience of nature that has emotional resonance without needing to rise to the transcendent mode of the High Romantics. Within these alternative interpretations of Wordsworth, each poet’s mode of address determines the form of his language; rustic life plays a different role as the occasion for the bard’s vatic announcements than it does for the speaker of plain speech.

However, the scholarly impact of Britain’s amateur dialectology in the period following the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* challenges the categories that I have described just above. The premise of this chapter is the curious phenomenon that one can observe when British dialect comes to prominence as both a scholarly interest and as a literary language in the nineteenth century: when dialect is studied as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon, as in the dictionary or in a treatise on language, it is often acknowledged as exemplary of language’s inherently mixed nature (even if this mixed nature must be overcome for polite company or for the learned registers of the arts and sciences). When, however, dialect is used as literary language, especially in direct representations of speech, it is represented as unitary: a pure, regional variant of a standard language. This phenomenon may not seem strange, given that the very act of writing tends to encourage a more purified diction—and also because many early representations of regional speech involved caricature for comic purposes. However, this conflicting tendency between linguistic and literary representations of dialect suggests that when dialect went from

⁷ Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).

being considered the curiosity of rural culture (the “barbarous speech of your countrie people,” Edmund Coote chides⁸) to a universal linguistic phenomenon (“assume language mixture even within the most homogenous speech community,” Hugo Schuchardt cautions⁹), its relation to literary language changed.

Contemporary literary scholars tend not to have followed the turn away from dialect as a sociological marker of identity to dialect as a geographical and historical fact of language that linguists made in the nineteenth century. Such studies range in focus and method. Scholarly works of a poststructuralist persuasion, such as Christine Ferguson’s *Language, Science, and Popular Fiction in the Victorian Fin-de-Siecle: The Brutal Tongue* (2006), hinge their arguments on the premise that the inextricable relationship of language and power described by Foucault suggest the inherent instability of claims toward language norms. In a typical analysis, Ferguson reads popular texts that deal in the “brutal tongues” of the working class as resistances by representation of the “late-century language purism...and the reactionary concern with social homogeneity.”¹⁰ A productive approach to understanding these linguistic norms and their alternatives is Taryn Hakala’s recent writing on working-class dialect and sociolinguistics, which argues for a “reevaluation of nonstandard varieties of nineteenth-century English in Victorian literature and a reassessment of some of the terms literary critics use to talk about language in the nineteenth century.”¹¹ In Hakala’s reading of the Victorian novel, alternative values of “vulgarity,

⁸ *The English School-Master* (1596), <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/ret/coote/coote.html>.

⁹ “On Sound Laws: Against the Neogrammarians,” in *Schuchardt, the Neogrammarians, and the Transformational Theory of Phonological Change: Four Essays*, trans. Theo Vennemann and Terence H. Wilbur (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1972), 51.

¹⁰ *Language, Science, and Popular Fiction in the Victorian Fin-de-Siecle: The Brutal Tongue* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 10.

¹¹ “Working Dialect: Nonstandard Voices in Victorian Literature” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2010), 14.

authenticity, knowingness, and theatricality” drawn from the interpretation of social norms by sociolinguistics suggests new ways to view the representation and performance of speech in fiction. Hakala’s study has the advantage of its questioning the assumptions that critics make about the history of English while at the same time concurring with the kind of commonsense notions of language usage that modern sociolinguistics describes in great detail: she acknowledges that our reading of literary texts is similar to our reading of people in everyday life, based on interpreting from speech patterns, word usages, and pronunciation a range of facts about identity.

Even those accounts of dialect and diction that treat immediate political and social context responsibly expose serious limitations by failing to acknowledge vital historical factors that contribute to the relation and organization of word meaning in speech. A recent *Boston Review* article on class and dialect by Daniel Tiffany offers a series of claims for the role of diction in exposing the boundaries of class struggle within contemporary *poésie engagée*. In his discussion of diction, Tiffany describes the intentional flexibility of performance as one of its defining uses as a poetic device: “Even if diction is viewed as a performative aspect of a poet’s identity, it is generally understood to speak through the poet as an impersonal expression of social identity in its various registers (race, gender, geography—and class).”¹² In this reading, diction is *not* like speech in that it is impersonal while intends to display personal attributes. And yet Tiffany’s methodology goes beyond mere ideology critique when he argues that diction does not simply exhibit class affiliation, any more than accent betrays birthplace; diction may be “faked,” and in fact this capability distinguishes diction from other kinds of ideology critique.

¹² “Cheap Signaling: Class Conflict and Diction in Avant-Garde Poet,” *Boston Review*, July 15, 2014, <http://bostonreview.net/poetry/daniel-tiffany-cheap-signaling-class-conflict-and-diction-avant-garde-poetry/>. The online article is unpaginated.

Fake or fraudulent diction, the pretension to use a diction that does not naturally belong to one, in fact offers as much of the evidence of class conflict as authentic diction: “Form cannot be fabricated, diction can—a condition essential to its potency as a means of social expression.” By focusing on performativity, Tiffany’s description of diction emphasizes speech as a capacity of selection and curation. Tiffany’s understanding of language as a mirror of social identity, even if fabricated, ultimately fails to recognize the importance of the distinct and various origins of these linguistic elements as an “expression of emergent class formations.” As I acknowledged in my general introduction, in the comments on dialectology, if as Meillet and Schuchardt suggest the social prestige of words matters to its survival over time, then the deep historical roots of words and collections of words in diction also matter. Tiffany instead treats the words affiliated with class formation as universal, static concepts of a dynamic, evolving class—getting the relationship of word to world one-sided in favor of ideas about class instead of ideas about words.

In contrast to these studies that read language as primarily a feature of identity, this chapter proposes a literary critical claim. By representing dialect, lyric poems reveal the historical resonances of everyday speech that remain hidden when used as communicative medium or when read as a marker of identity or cultural affiliation. I begin by considering the historical phenomenon of the dialect dictionary as a special, non-literary genre of dialect text that demonstrates attitudes toward language that influence our readings of poetic genres. I will discuss in these terms the claims made by dialect lexicographers Thomas Nodal, Samuel Bamford, William Barnes, and Jonathan Boucher on behalf of their projects that went against, by and large, the intentions of the major monolingual dictionary projects of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (such as, naturally, Dr. Johnson). Where monolingual dictionaries presume the inherent unity of a national language—even if their purpose is to establish that unity by their

role in the standardization of vocabulary—dialect dictionaries presume the speech’s variability. Rather than seeing local users as interested in refining their language, dialect glossaries are written for the non-native speaker of the dialect, as a way to foreground the particularities of a local speech community within the broader framework of a universal idea of speech.

This discussion of how dialect dictionaries demonstrate a pluralistic stance to language leads to the transformative shift marked by all dialect writing: the move from the pre-literary oral tradition to the written, literary tradition. I will examine this shift in two stages, from prose written in a hyper-purified diction; and then in verse written according to the formal features available with specialized diction. I read the purified prose treatises of William Barnes alongside the journals of Gerard Manley Hopkins in order to show the poetic effects of purified prose. In these works, the constraint of a purified lexicon reveals historical depth in individual words, depth invisible in the wide-ranging registers of ordinary speech. The radical philological project of Barnes seems to draw us toward what is always true of dialect in literary form: its poetic ability to confront us with a speech that is like and unlike our own, to raise for our scrutiny the speech we unselfconsciously use as a tool to communicate. Then I move on to considering what happens when the constraint becomes a traditional genre associated with dialect, the pastoral. Genre experiments with diction in a regional dialect changes our perspective on the quality of spoken language expected in lyric. Within two types of pastoral verse—eclogue and brief lyric poem—Barnes refashions the generic conventions of the high literary forms through new lexical features unavailable to a standard English. In this sense, then, Barnes remakes the dialect through its constraint in a received lyric form. The conventional expectations of form purifies the dialect according to a different standard—by lexical and morphological innovations that do not belong to speech or to the literary tradition, but instead to a deep past long obsolete. Wordsworth’s

claim vanishes, in a sense, within the contours of the hybrid dialect verse: where a free, organic literary form allows for the monolithic purification of the dialect into an artificial diction, it is no longer felt to be “real”; equally, where speech exposes its variability through a conventional, artificial poetic form, it is no longer felt to be real.

Dialect Glossaries as New Histories of Language

Dialect scholarship in the British tradition made the explicit claim for the linguistic value of various regional speech forms through their unifying social function—one interpretation of the claim at the heart of Wordsworth’s Preface. What is perhaps remarkable is how little this scholarship—mostly amateur and poorly circulated in its time—remains known even now. The sheer number of dialect glossaries and grammars of the early Victorian period is impressive: between 1823 and 1854 alone, at least twenty-six glossaries covering different regional and provincial dialects were published in England.¹³ While many of these volumes took their cue from naturalist John Ray’s *Collection of English words not generally used* (1674), the first English dialect glossary, whose explicit rationale for publication was offering a practical guide for travelers to the northern counties (to provide “some diversion to the curious, and give them occasion of making many considerable remarks”¹⁴), an equal number proposed linguistic and historical claims for the crucial role that dialect plays in broadening the horizon of the national language. Robert Penhallurick notes an accomplishment of the dialect dictionary even as early as

¹³ The bibliography of sources in Joseph Wright’s *English Dialect Dictionary* (1905) lists fourteen glossaries from this period from Cheshire, Devonshire, Dorsetshire, Durham, Herefordshire, Northamptonshire, North Country, Shropshire, Suffolk, Sussex, Westmoreland and Cumberland, Wiltshire, and Yorkshire. The Bonaparte Collection at the Newberry Library contains twelve additional examples from Bedfordshire, Cumberland, Derbyshire, Dorsetshire, Essex, Gloucestershire, South Lancashire, Leicestershire, London, Lowland Scotch, and Somersetshire.

¹⁴ “To the reader,” Ray.

Ray's glossary to shift the language standard from propriety to geography: where the scholarly dictionaries of Robert Cawdrey and Henry Cockeram, among others, only considered the "provincial (and 'barbarous') evaluated against a polite standard," the dialect dictionary emphasized the "local compared with the general."¹⁵ Thus, while scholarly lexicographers largely ignored or condescended to dialect for its limited, geographical focus, dialect dictionary-makers emphasized the usefulness of knowing a range of regional vocabularies, grammars, and pronunciations for understanding Standard English in its historical context.

Religious and progressive social ideals often justified the collection of linguistic folklore in dialect glossaries. The dialect glossaries that proposed themselves as monuments of regional custom and history, such as Thomas Sternberg's *Dialect and Folk-Lore of Northamptonshire*, described their contents as collections of "lingual localisms; popular superstitions, fairy-lore, and other traces of Teutonic heathenism."¹⁶ Harold Whitehall notes "under clerical support dialect study and dialect literature flourished" because members of the Lancashire clergy often sponsored or collected dialect glossaries in order to understand the cultural norms of their parish and to be able to communicate more fluently with their parishioners.¹⁷ Graham Shorrocks links religious motivation to broader social ideals concerning improvement of the economic conditions of working people, citing the example of the Reverend William Gaskell's lectures on

¹⁵ "Dialect Dictionaries," in *The Oxford History of English Lexicography, Vol. II: Specialized Dictionaries*, ed. A. P. Cowie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 295.

¹⁶ "Preface," *The Dialect and Folk-Lore of Northamptonshire* (London; Northampton: John Russell Smith; Abel and Sons, 1851), iii.

¹⁷ Harold Whitehall, "Thomas Shadwell and the Lancashire Dialect," *Michigan University Publications, Language and Literature, Studies in English and Comparative Literature* 10 (1933): 262.

the Lancashire dialect, included as an appendix to Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1854), as "evidence of linguistic, literary, social and religious motivations combined."¹⁸

The predominant rationale shared by the majority of dialect glossarists of the early to mid nineteenth century, however, was linguistic. While scholarly dictionary-makers largely ignored or condescended to dialect, dialect dictionary-makers emphasized the usefulness of knowing regional vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation for understanding Standard English in its historical context. The preface to Roger Wilbraham's *Attempt at a Glossary of Words Used in Chesire* (1826) challenges Dr. Johnson's ability to write a true "General Dictionary" without paying attention to dialect:

There is still a more important benefit [than pleasure] to be derived from this custom [of recording provincial words and proverbs], were it practised to its full extent in a publication comprising all the provincial Dialects of England, as they would, when united all together, form the only true and solid foundation for a work much wanted, a General Dictionary of the English Language.¹⁹

While, for Wilbraham, dialect is an important part of the overall picture of the English language, for other dialectologists, the value of dialect for historical and comparative linguistics is key. An unsigned preface to a glossary of the Westmorland and Cumberland dialects acknowledges the general reader's interest in the "graphic sketches...of popular manners, or the simple expression of natural feelings and sentiments," but equally dedicates the volume to philologist, due to "the numerous examples they afford of words and modes of expression, which are either obsolete in the general language of England, or which appear to have been peculiar to those two counties

¹⁸ "Purpose, Theory and Method in English Dialectology: Towards a More Objective History of the Discipline," in *Debating Dialect: Essays on the Philosophy of Dialect Study*, ed. Robert Penallurick (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 86.

¹⁹ "Preliminary Observations," in *Attempt at a Glossary of Words Used in Chesire* (1826), 3.

from time immemorial.”²⁰ Similarly, in the early archeological survey and glossary *Salopia antiqua*, Charles Hartshorne writes, “One use of a Provincial Glossary was to shew to what distance words had been carried from the North of Europe, and under what modifications they still existed. For we should bear in mind that these etymological affinities are something like Erratic Blocks in geology, they serve to shew how far the tide of northern languages has flowed.”²¹ In Hartshorne we see also the suggestion that the past of language is not of interest only for antiquarians and dictionary-makers, but also for those interested in the broader context of the living language.

The most definitive and perhaps earliest statement of the inherent aesthetic value of a dialect comes from Jonathan Boucher’s introduction to his unfinished general dialect dictionary, *A Glossary of Archaic and Provincial Words*, with the humbly polemical subtitle “a supplement to the dictionaries of the English language, particularly those of Dr. Johnson and Dr. Webster.” Boucher was an Anglican minister, and close friend of George Washington, who lived most of his life in the American colonies before returning to England in 1775 in protest of the American Revolution. Boucher’s long-neglected treatise on language advocates for a rigorously empirical approach as the basis for understanding the potential of dialect for a range of literary and cultural expressions. In making this claim, Boucher sets forth in kernel form a theory of dialect that brings variety as an empirical fact to the interest in aesthetic and poetic evaluation.

²⁰ *Dialogues, Poems, Songs, and Ballads, by Various Writers, in the Westmoreland and Cumberland Dialects, Now First Collected: with a Copious Glossary of Words Peculiar to those Counties* (London: John Russell Smith, 1839), iii.

²¹ *Salopia Antiqua, or An Enquiry from Personal Survey into the ‘Druidical,’ Military, and other Eraly Remains in Shropshire and the North Welsh Borders, with Observations upon the Names of Places, and a Glossary of Words Used in the County of Salop*, rev. ed. (1841), xix.

Boucher's advocacy for the value of "provincial words" in the title of his dictionary is based, as it was for many dialectologists, on its relation to the literary and social past of English. But unlike many of his peers, Boucher takes the role of historical philology not as an archeological expedition into a native past, but as a comparative task by nature. For Boucher, tracing word origin through etymology allows the scholar "an acquaintance with the imperfections and perfections of language," which in itself is a strikingly evenhanded position for a man of letters in the age of British imperialism.²² We might compare it in passing to the views of colonial educator Thomas Macaulay, who spoke in his infamous "Indian Minute on Education" of 1835, of the inferiority of Indian dialect, which "contains neither literary nor scientific information."²³ Boucher flatly makes the case for both the literary and scientific values of speech. The scientific aspect, more fundamental, relies on Boucher's understanding of the need for an exhaustive range of language features to be analyzed by empirical study:

Each [language] has, perhaps not fundamentally, but from its structure, some perfections and imperfections which would hardly be visible, were they not peculiar. It is therefore only by attending to, studying, and comparing several different languages, that we can hope to attain any clear information and knowledge, either of their common nature, or their individual peculiarities.²⁴

The power of Boucher's theory is its reliance on comparative analysis: it presumes the inherent relevance of a dialect in seeing language as a whole, and therefore that any comparative analysis the lexicographer or grammarian might make should properly take into account its distinct features. The phrase "peculiarities" describes the outcome of empirical analysis that might form the basis for any further social or cultural interpretation. As he plainly states in a latter passage,

²² "Introduction," *A Glossary of Archaic and Provincial Words*, ed. Joseph Hunter and Joseph Stevenson (London: Black, Young, and Young, 1832), iii (hereafter cited as Boucher).

²³ "Minute by the Hon'ble T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835," <http://www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/history/primarydocs/education/Macaulay001.htm>.

²⁴ Boucher, ii.

“There neither is any merit in speaking [dialect], nor demerit in not speaking it.”²⁵ As Boucher suggests in another place, the dialect stands alongside any national forms of language as equally illustrative of cultural history: “Both the one and the other are always formed of the corruptions, the ruins, or the alterations and mixtures of the old; that is to say, of some government, or some language, that either has been already in existence, or still is.”²⁶ Boucher’s proposal is both empiricist as well as robustly historicist: it counters the polemical angle of many national language lexicographers, which presupposes the superiority of a national language for the cultural influence it wields.

Based therefore on the foundation of a rigorously comparative analysis of language over a long etymological history, Boucher makes the radical claim that dialects ought to be considered not as corruptions or substandard forms of speech but rather as evolutionary adaptations for the progressive improvement of spoken language over time:

The prevalence of dialects, therefore, in any language is a proof of cultivation: for, a dialect or deviation from the established standard of speech, is an attempt to improve, and not always an unsuccessful one, either by introducing new modes and idioms of speech, as being either really, or being supposed to be, preferable to the old, or by retaining old terms and idioms, when abandoned by others, from the like opinion of their being better.²⁷

This assertion takes the idea that dialect has value in assessing the cultural history of language one step farther. Boucher takes the philosophical conception of evolutionary history (not Darwinian, in that it precedes Darwin by decades) in its application to linguistic history. Boucher’s claim reflects knowledge of German Romantic philosophy of language and its idea of historical change, which proposes that both literature and language conform to an evolutionary

²⁵ Boucher, vii.

²⁶ Boucher, xlii.

²⁷ Boucher, vi.

or stadial theory of history, in which culture and its various manifestations progress through certain fixed stages, from primitive to civilized.

The last stage of Boucher's argument then advances the idea that the scientific and historical claims of dialect give rise to the widespread cultural influence that literature written in dialect might have on the language of a given society. He makes this claim by comparison of the attitudes of the Greeks and Romans to the regional dialects of their empires. In Rome, Boucher writes, the "uniformity of language" was of paramount concern; only in religion did the Roman government offer tolerance.²⁸ By contrast, the Greek attitude advocated judicious consideration of dialect as part of cultural variety and particularity: "It was peculiar to the Greeks to bestow as much attention and regard on their dialects, even whilst they remained dialects, as they did on the standard language."²⁹ Indeed, the literary and rhetorical value was based on this ideal: "No one of these dialects was ever sacrificed, or gave way, to another; they were all held in equal esteem and respect: it was incumbent on every orator to be acquainted with, and, occasionally, to speak, in them all."³⁰ Boucher's ultimate claim is this: dialect may serve as the crystallization of a cultural equality by merit as well as the materials for the expression of this value.

²⁸ Boucher, vi.

²⁹ Boucher, vii.

³⁰ Boucher, xvii–xviii.

William Barnes and the Pure English Style

The futility of dialect scholarship by amateurs like Jonathan Boucher to influence the British intellectual debates of the Victorian period is captured aptly by the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, in an 1882 letter to Robert Bridges, when he describes the eccentric but fascinating style of *An Outline of English Speech-Craft*, by the Dorset dialect poet William Barnes:

[Barnes] has published a ‘Speech craft of English Speech’=English Grammar, written in an unknown tongue, a sort of modern Anglosaxon, beyond all that Furnival in his wildest Forewords ever dreamed. He does not see the utter hopelessness of the thing. It makes one weep to think what English might have been; for in spite of all that Shakspeare and Milton have done with the compound I cannot doubt that no beauty in a language can make up for want of purity. In fact I am learning Anglosaxon and it is a vastly superior thing to what we have now. But the madness of an almost unknown man trying to do what the three estates of the realm together could never accomplish! He calls degrees of comparison pitches of suchness: we ought to call them so, but alas!³¹

Here Hopkins shows pessimism from the “utter hopelessness” of Barnes’s project, despite praising its merits in the theory. This commentary on the form of language in England goes one step past Jonathan Swift’s call for stopping language change (“it is better a Language should not be wholly perfect, that it should be perpetually changing”)³² by praising the “superior” “purity” of Old English, in effect calling for the reversal of language evolution. Hopkins gives us a glimpse of Barnes’s idiosyncrasies in his effusive praise: he quotes the odd phrase “pitches of suchness,” a combination of catachresis and neologism in which Barnes flattens the everyday English idiom into a token of pure, yet artificial, speech.

The commentaries accompanying and justifying the eccentric (and often dubiously sourced) philological scholarship of Barnes are troubling, as many critics have noted, for the

³¹ *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, ed. Claude Colleer Abott, rev. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 162–163.

³² *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (London: Benjamin Tooke, 1712), 31.

intellectual support they gave to the Pure English movement, advocated most vocally by Richard Chenevix Trench.³³ In his historical treatise on the history of Ancient Britain, *Early England and the Saxon-English*, Barnes claims that English has become “mongrel” by the “needless inbringing” of foreign words, especially classical language; writers and educators find it acceptable to import words without so much as turning to a native word or phrase “found in its older form, formed from its own roots and stems.”³⁴ Many scholars cite this passage (and others similarly worded) as evidence of Barnes’s nativism, which is a charge that Barnes answers to in many respects. However, Barnes’s emphasis, visible as this passage continues, focuses instead on the practical values of removing the class barrier to elite education:

Thence English has become so much harder to learn, that, in its foreign-worded fullness, it is a speech only for the more learned, and foreign to unschooled men, so that the sermon and book are half lost to their minds: whereas in Tuscany and in the west of Ireland, or in Wales, the speech of the upper ranks is that of the cottage, and the well-worded book of the higher mind needs no list of hard words to open its meaning to the lower.³⁵

Here, Barnes holds a position not merely (or easily) reactionary against the encroachment the non-native into a pure language, any more than he is resisting an encroachment of polite society into folk or rural culture. For Barnes, the linguistic stratification of English determines class station. Standard English, as he claims, already seems “foreign to unschooled men”; moral and intellectual improvement is made more difficult by an unnecessary artificial barrier. His stance is reminiscent of those taken by other pedagogues and clergymen of the day, including William Cobbett, whose English grammar of 1818 proposes “to give practical effect to the natural genius

³³ See Richard Chenevix Trench, *English, Past and Present* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1873).

³⁴ *Early England and the Saxon-English* (London: John Russell Smith, 1869), 101.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

found in the soldier, the sailor, the apprentice, and the plough-boy.”³⁶ Barnes however goes beyond Cobbett to note the intrinsic viability of dialect for intellectual work; its cultivation requires adjusting the language, not changing the schoolboy’s way of speaking.

The hallmark Anglicized style that Barnes employed in his writing makes the terms of this project extend beyond the simple nativism of the grammarian or lexicographer. Toward the end of his life, Barnes published two entire books written in an artificially purified English, *An Outline of English Speech-Craft* (1878) (i.e., rhetoric) and *An Outline of Rede-Craft (Logic) with English Wording* (1880). These experiments are as fascinating as they are absurd, as this sample from a section on “disputation” in the rhetoric treatise demonstrates:

There is a vast deal of wrangling which is idle for the finding of truth, and kindles anger for want of clear definitions which cannot be sought too carefully; for when one man upholds against another a so-taken truth under a name by which the other understands something else, their reasonings do not run on the same line, and cannot reach the same upshot. There are things of great weight in the world, and yet, while their names are very rife in speech and writing, it is not easy to formark them, and I am sometimes already ready to say that I do not understand the meaning of a single word.³⁷

The character of the lexicon does resemble a monolith: the words are, by and large, Barnes’s “pure, homely, strong Saxon-English of English stems.” But who is the audience for this kind of writing? It seems hardly likely that an uneducated speaker of a rural dialect could understand such a distorted, artificial idiom. The meanings of Barnes’s neologisms (“formark”) may be puzzling even if they are discernable, and require a certain mental leap to understand. Further, the native words required to explain abstract concepts require a specialized emphasis that the common usage does not carry in its primary meaning: “idle,” “kindle,” “upholds,” “upshot.”

³⁶ “Dedication,” *A Grammar of the English Language, in a Series of Letters, Intended for the Use of Schools and of Young Persons in General, But More Especially for the Use of Soldiers, Sailors, Apprentices and Plough-boys* (New York: Clayton and Kingsland, 1818).

³⁷ *An Outline of Rede-Craft* (London: Kegan and Paul, 1880), 45.

Likewise, certain terms with Anglo-Saxon roots—“wrangling” for disputation—are little better than the Greek terms, because they already belong to a specialized philosophical register.³⁸ The passage also demonstrates that word knowledge is only one barrier to understanding; the grammar of the passage, with its frequent hypotaxis, is more difficult to untangle than the parataxis more frequently found in speech. It too would be foreign to a native speaker of most English dialects. This is not a record of any spoken language, learned, rural, or in-between; it is a pure fiction.

The strain it takes Barnes to concoct this specimen of pure English demonstrates, I would suggest, the language’s natural resistance to being made a single register as well as to being limited to a narrow vocabulary. The passage is full of Old English words (truth, weight, reach, speech, understand, word); words with obsolete meanings except in dialect (uphold); newer words (upshot, already); and straight-up inventions from English stems (formark, the compound so-taken). But some words are not even English in origin, including those of newer vintage from Norman French (very, reasoning), Old French (clear), and directly from Latin—vast, definition, single. The closer we inspect this strange, monoglot text the more we can see that it gains *more depth* rather than less with the reverse standardization that Barnes is attempting.

The rhetorical effects of both Barnes’s purified prose as well as his remarkably inventive word lists are worth remarking upon: both are undeniably strange and fascinating. There is a poetic quality to the play between old and new: the new combinations of words in slightly shifted contexts and with slightly altered senses that a native speaker would certainly be able to understand with some consideration. One of the experiences of reading the manual in full is to

³⁸ See, e.g., Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which uses the term “wrangling” several times to refer to the internecine arguments among philosophers.

gain a certain fluency in a historically stratified English—it feels like reading a centuries-old text and being forced to become aware of the changes in word meaning and sound between the time when the text was written and the present. Indeed, by its poetic facet alone, Barnes’s claim about the social usefulness of a pure English seems a bit less farfetched. Using Greek or Latin terms for a logic treatise provides an English speaker with no intuitions about the metaphorical play in combining terms for names; as Barnes suggests in his “Dissertation on the Dorset Dialect,” the learned terms are often literal translations of the vernacular terms (“we use in what we consider the better expression, the very same words as in the worse; or we take, instead of two English words, a Latin compound, which...is made of the very simples which we reject”³⁹). In this sense, Barnes’s work redefines the social value of dialect through its poetic qualities.

Barnes’s Saxonized writing style in the rhetoric and logic treatises shares the Germanic diction of more well-known contemporaries William Morris and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Morris’s translations of Old Norse in *The Völsunga Saga* (1876) work, like Barnes, to avoid an implied Latinate register; indeed, both writers share the aim to make Latin words faintly visible as a “translation” into a Saxon-derived word. In the opening lines of *Sigurd*, Morris uses this technique to establish an exotic world that is also familiar:

There was a dwelling of Kings ere the world was waxen old;
Dukes were the door-wards there, and the roofs were thatched with gold;
Earls were the wrights that wrought it, and silver nailed its doors;
Earls' wives were the weaving-women, queens' daughters strewed its floors,
And the masters of its song-craft were the mightiest men that cast
The sails of the storm of battle adown the bickering blast.⁴⁰

³⁹ “A Dissertation on the Dorset Dialect,” in *The Complete Poems of William Barnes, Vol. 1: Poems in the Broad Form of the Dorset Dialect*, ed. T. L. Burton and K. K. Ruthven (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7.

⁴⁰ *Völsunga Saga: The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs, with certain Songs from the Elder Edda*, tr. Eiríkir Magnússon and William Morris (London: Ellis, 1870).

Morris's word choices for naming and description offer a pastiche of Saxon terms: "waxen" for "grow"; "door-ward" for "guard" or "doorkeeper"; "thatched" for "covered"; "wrought" for "made"; "strewed" for "laid"; "adown" for "down"; and "bicker" for "battle." These terms appear prominently as essential features of the physical and social world of the poem. The Saxonized language does not change the figurative force of Morris's descriptions (there are, for example, the same personifications of the aging world and the disputatious climate). Instead, the artificial dialect works as an ornament to capture a feeling of the distant past.

The style of Gerard Manley Hopkins, however, takes the technique of constraining English to its Germanic register into the same poetic territory that Barnes reaches in his purified prose. Like Barnes, Hopkins's poetry and prose alike highlights the linguistic anachronisms of a purified register, as seen in the poem "Inversnaid" and an excerpt from his journal:

THIS darksome burn, horseback brown,
His rollrock highroad roaring down,
In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam
Flutes and low to the lake falls home.

A windpuff-bonnet of fawn-fróth
Turns and twindles over the broth
Of a pool so pitchblack, féll-frówning,
It rounds and rounds Despair to drowning.

Degged with dew, dappled with dew
Are the groins of the braes that the brook treads through,
Wiry heathpacks, flitches of fern,
And the beadbonny ash that sits over the burn.

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;

Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.⁴¹

A beautiful instance of inscape sided on the slide, that is a successive sidings of one inscape is seen in the behaviour of the flag flower from the shut bud to the full blowing: each term you can distinguish is beautiful in itself and of course if the whole behavior were gathered up and so staled it would have a beauty of all the higher degree.⁴²

In these far different texts, Hopkins's technique of drawing together words by their sound relations (especially through alliteration and internal rhyme) exposes a hidden continuity between terms with the same sound shapes. The pairing of a rare and a familiar term ("burn"/"brown"; "darksome"/"horseback"; "degged"/"dappled"; "turns"/"twindles") uses a reader's familiar vocabulary to teach them that they already know the meaning of unfamiliar words based on "phonoaesthetic" qualities. A neologism like "twindles" becomes alive in Hopkins's technique because of how his Germanic diction directs us to the felt past of the Anglo-Saxon remnants in modern English.

The prose passage does the same work by using repeated sounds and deep figuration of key terms: "instance" introduces "inscape," Hopkins's special term for the essential material shape defining an object's nature.⁴³ Here the inner scenery of the flag flower arises not through dissection or analysis but through a description of its dynamic growth over time. The flower's maturation from "the shut bud to the full blowing [i.e., blooming]" makes an analogy between botanical and linguistic evolution.

⁴¹ From *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Garner and N. H. MacKenzie, 4th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

⁴² Entry dated "June 13, 1871," *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Humphry House and Graham Storey (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 211.

⁴³ Hopkins never defines "inscape" in his writing, even though it is one of the keys to his aesthetic vision. Yet the lack of a definition is instructive: even though the meaning of "inscape" is obscure, Hopkins allows us to see its meaning as the constructed meaning of "inner" with the combinatory suffix "-scape" as in "landscape."

Yet the difference between the poem and the poetic prose demonstrates a key to seeing Hopkins's poetic technique as historical play of word roots and relationships. Hopkins notes Barnes's "chronologically impossible and long words" as the key to his appeal: "In spite of all that Shakspeare and Milton have done with the compound I cannot doubt that no beauty in a language can make up for want of purity."⁴⁴ Though many critics have understood this statement as explicit advocacy for Barnes's project of purism, Hopkins's reservations about Barnes's attempts ("the madness of an almost unknown man trying to do what the three estates of the realm together could never accomplish!"⁴⁵) lead me to believe that he intends a more precise statement of poetic technique rather than philosophy here. The key is in Hopkins's use of the word "compound" as the technique appropriate to the national English, demonstrated fully in Shakespeare and Milton. As James Milroy argues, Hopkins's poetics bases itself on the tension between "*repetition*, as in spoken language" and "*compression*, which is not so characteristic of speech."⁴⁶ As Milroy demonstrates, Hopkins uses both techniques in equal measure in a poem like "Inversnaid." However, I believe it is a mistake to suggest that compression does not belong to speech, or remains a separate technique from the associative links forged by repetition. Hopkins's repetition draws from the more familiar performative dimension of speech, while his compression reveals the vast historical continuity of speech in a linguistic tradition. Following Barnes, Hopkins focuses on the "epithets, images, and so on" of a regional dialect community, "which seem to have been tested and digested for a long age in their native air and circumstances and to have a keeping which nothing else could give."⁴⁷ The "keeping" of a word seems to be

⁴⁴ Hopkins, *Letters*, 162–163.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *The Language of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: André Deutsch, 1977), 200.

⁴⁷ *Letters*, 370–371.

related to *inscape*: an inner, essential continuity in usage over time, especially when the word finds itself in a new context. In this sense, Hopkins coordinates the associative power of sound with the associative power of historical relation. Word history underwrites the more visible techniques of repetition in his verse and prose.

Barnes's Word-Stems and British Philology

In their use of textual history, Barnes's lexicographical projects differ greatly from the philologist with whom his work bears the most obvious resemblance, John Horne Tooke, the British clergyman and author of the infamous philological work *ἔπεα πτερόεντα*, or *the Diversions of Purley* (vol. 1, 1786; vol. 2, 1805). Horne Tooke begins with Locke's basic premise that "the purpose of Language is to communicate our thoughts"⁴⁸ and argues that focusing on this one fact led philosophers and grammarians to avoid the complementary fact that we must communicate "with *dispatch*"—a fact that, as Horne Tooke argues through etymological analysis of the various parts of speech in English, "has a much greater share in accounting for the different sorts of words."⁴⁹ Therefore, as Horne Tooke argues, words function as "abbreviations" of names of ideas derived from sensation. Horne Tooke's idea is based on Locke's statement that "Notions quite removed from sense, *have their rise from thence, and from obvious sensible Ideas are transferred to more abstruse significations*, and made to stand for *Ideas* that come not under the cognizance of our senses."⁵⁰ Horne Tooke's insistence on the primacy of "sensible Ideas" as the single, originary meaning at the core of words demonstrates an attempt at correcting the

⁴⁸ *Diversions of Purley*, vol. 1, rev. ed., ed. Richard Taylor (London: Thomas Tegg, 1829), 17.

⁴⁹ *Diversions of Purley*, 26, 27. In a footnote to this sentence, Tooke cites De Brosse's treatise *De la formation mécanique des Langues*, and its claim of the human need to communicate "*promptement*."

⁵⁰ Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (3.1.5).

philosophical use of language by bringing out of abstraction and returning it its original function. In this model, meaning arises from word function.

Rather than focus on the relation of word to world, Barnes instead focuses on the networks of connections between words. In Barnes's theory of roots, word origin can be traced through ascertaining a common reference, but his focus lies on identifying the networks of word particles that share meaning from language convention. In his most speculative work *Tiw; or, a View of the Roots and Stems of the English as a Teutonic Tongue* (1862), Barnes identifies "about fifty primary roots" at the origin of the English language based on etymological study that, like Horne Tooke, stretches speculation for the purpose of his nativist polemic. However, in that work the underlying principle of historical change begins from firmer ground than Horne Tooke's philosophical etymology. His principle of analysis relies not on the *a priori* idea that sensation precedes naming, but rather on a textual basis for their recurrence in words: "I deem them the primary ones, inasmuch as, by the known course of Teutonic word-building and word-wear, our sundry forms of stem-words might have come from them, but could not have yielded them."⁵¹ Unlike Horne Tooke, Barnes saw the concept of continuity and evolution over time as the basic principle of word change, rather than discontinuity and devolution between past and present. And so, for example, in his first word stem, "B*NG," Barnes finds associations with firstly, to "set up, bear up, or make up together"; the "to bend up all round, to inclose"; then "to beat with something bunch-like"; and then "to make sounds the type of which was that of a hollow body."⁵² A diverse range of national English, French, German, and regional dialect words share this basic principle, from "bing-house" to "bank" to "boodge" [to mend a shard with a

⁵¹ *Tiw; or, a View of the Roots and Stems of the English as a Teutonic Tongue* (London: John Russell Smith, 1862), v.

⁵² *TIW*, 2.

bunch of thorns] to “bubble” to “bilge.” Where Horne Tooke insists on the *single* sensible object of the word, Barnes begins with a more inchoate concept that underlies a vast collection of only vaguely related words.

Likewise, in the *History of Early England and Anglo-Saxon*, Barnes uses creative neologism to push against the simple idea that dialect words, in their closer relationship to the older forms of native English, also form a closer relationship to the natural world and rural lifestyle. There he presents a list of invented words based, as he puts it, on the “resources of pure English for the outbuilding of our speech from the word-stores of the land-folk.”⁵³ A sampling of the words suggests the focus on precision in this exercise:

Auction—Bode sale, bidding sale.
Asterisk—Starkin.
Accumulate—Upheap, upgather.
Abject—Downcast.
Anticipate—Foreween, foretake.
Appendix—Onhenge.
Attentive—Heedsome.
Retire—Withdraw.
Recalcitrant—Withspurring.
Austere—Tart.
Criticism—Deemstery.
Culmination—Uptippening.
Inveterate—Onoldened.
Invective—Inwaging.
Invalid—Unhale.
Interpolate—Infoist.
Instinct—Ongoadng.

While at first glance, this list seems to demonstrate Horne Tooke’s etymological method put to Barnes’s simple social critique, upon closer inspection the difference between the Horne Tooke account of language change and Barnes’s becomes evident. This list of neologisms can be read as

⁵³ *Early England*, 124.

a peculiar figurative language: translating a recognizable term in the Latinate register of English into the Germanic register through approximation of their complexity built from simpler ideas and morphemes. For his creative word coinages, Barnes relies on analogy of word forms as much as he does on an account of an “originary” moment to which these word forms refer. Therefore, despite its lack of sophistication compared to the historical research of the “Unregistered Words Committee” working on the *NED*, Barnes’s lexicon takes more seriously the comparative dimension of historical philology that Horne Tooke dismisses for philosophical principles.

The end result is that Barnes’s work demonstrates a greater philosophical dimension through its constructive shaping of the history of specific words. The condensed network of linguistic association in Barnes’s Saxonized word calques, indeed, recalls the philosophical discourse on the distinction of metaphor and catachresis in the history of concepts: metaphor is a transfer of meaning from one proper term for a concept to another, while catachresis is the transfer of one term associated with a concept to another for which there is no proper term. In the original discussion of the distinction between *translatio* (metaphor) and *abusio* (catachresis), in the *Institutio oratoria* of Quintilian, the distinction relies on their innovation in the context of the whole language: “Catachresis is found where there was previously no word, Metaphor where there was a different word.”⁵⁴ In Barnes’s artificial pure English, readers can see metaphorical relation of different registers of the language, since as the creative act of positing new relations relies on the established range of word shape in each register. Apart from Barnes’s prose polemic, his lexicography with word-stems leads readers to see the words of plain speech as complex and

⁵⁴ *The Orator’s Education*, trans. Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3.444–5. See for a history of the reception of this idea, Patricia Parker, “Metaphor and Catachresis,” in *The Ends of Rhetoric: History, Theory, Practice*, ed. John Bender and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990): 60–76.

beautiful organisms in their own right, by reimagining their role as the content of speech. Speakers ought not to see dialect as the regional translation of a universal object or idea, but particularized concepts that can be understood only if one encounters the underlying networks of etymology and word history that dialect offers.

A later, unpublished Barnes manuscript, titled “An Alphabetical and Etymological Dictionary of our Common Names of Animals” and dated 1886, demonstrates the poetic effects created by comparative analysis of word shapes. Barnes dictated this manuscript, kept now in two notebooks among his papers, to his son Miles during the last years of his life, when the ailments of his advanced age prevented his handwriting from being legible. The work is a comparative lexicon of common names for animals that draws from nearly 70 different languages for its etymological glosses. These are primarily descriptive terms that come from dialects from around the world local to the animal’s native habitat. Therefore, the work is not another monoglot specimen of English like his other later works, but rather a polyglot work. In keeping with this fact, Barnes’s advocacy takes a different tone than his nativist polemics of the 1860s:

Men have given names to animals on manifold grounds; as, on that of shape, or hue, of body or limbs, on the sound which they utter, or their speed or slowness, or gait, or on their behaviour, or work, for safety, or [force?], or on a likeness to some other animals of another kind.... Since the name bestowed in a folk speech, on folk-known animals is in the main, well chosen on a good knowledge of its shape, or behaviour, it might have been well to have taken for its name in science a Latin or Greek version of its folk-speech name, and it seems to be worthwhile to learn the meaning of the folk’s name of an animal, as it holds up to the mind, a mark of the animal as clear, as that given by its special or general name in the Latin or Greek and may be likely to lead to a fuller knowledge of it in books on the order or species to which it belongs.

In some cases again since the unfolded meaning of a name of an animal may mark some point of its shape, hue, or behaviour, so two or three sundry names in as many

tongues may show as many points of an animal and so may be a help to a greater knowledge of it.⁵⁵

Here Barnes values not only the objective classification of a scientific name, but also the subjective, familiar knowledge of an animal—its habits, its qualities, and so on—that belongs to the group of people who live near it. In the final paragraph, he notes the purpose of a comparative dictionary: it allows us to see a multifaceted view of an animal’s traits from different language communities.

If Barnes’s introduction suggests not a social aim but rather a scientific one (“fuller knowledge” of the animal), the lexical entries reveal the poetic effects of this scientific aim as distinctly as do his purified English treatises. Here he explores the variety rather than the uniformity of word links. Just as the Saxon-derived neologisms like “upheap” and “infoist” may be read as metaphors translating between registers of English, the multilingual entries of the “Animals” dictionary ought to be understood as lexical metaphors exposing the phenomenological and philological roots of English by comparison with those roots of words for the same animal in other languages. This work makes explicit by comparison the condensed work done in his purified writing and glossary-making. His entry for “bull” demonstrates the comparative technique:

BULL The Bull may be so called from a
stem word which means ‘what bellows’ as
BELL.O to bellow, bleat, as a deer
BELLAN.O
BEEL.N.
BELVE.W. } to bellow
BELLOCK.W.
BULLOCK.E.

⁵⁵ “An Alphabetical and Etymological Dictionary of our Common Names of Animals,” 1886, William Barnes Papers, Dorset County Museum, Dorchester, England. All citations are my own transcriptions.

Then again Bull, Bo-el is found in two-stemmed words, as a stem meaning big or coarse or bulky or bunchy, boel-ok-ig, as in
 Bull-finch
 Bull-frog
 Bull-head - The Miller's thumb
 Wel- Pen -but - Bunchhead
 Bull-stang - The dragon fly
 Bull-rush
 Bull-trout
 Bull-weed, Knapweed
 In Latin and Welsh, the names of the Bull - Taurus and Tarw, are from a stem as Taro in Welsh, meaning to strike against, to butt, impinge, and so the Bull is the Butting beast
 So in Arab - Tsaoor, a Bull, from Tsara, to strike
 - Cheremiss - Yskys, a Bull, from Ys', what strikes, a hammer
 —Pers. Margaw, Male-cow

Here, after listing a range of related words, Barnes traces English “bull” to a root meaning “strike” or “butt” that is parallel to the etymology in Welsh, Latin, Arabic, Persian, and Cheremissian (now known as the Mari language of the Ural mountains). On the surface, the “Animal” dictionary offers a counterpart to the Pure English works of the same period: its comparative model shows dissimilarities as well as similarities in how different regional cultures name the animals with which they share geography. Barnes shows in the “bull” entry, for example, that certain cultures focus on its vocal behavior (Anglo dialects) while others on its physical behavior (Latin, Welsh, Arab, Cheremissian); in Persian, the name simply refers to gender.

And yet its claims to universal knowledge through particularity seem to shed light on the project of Saxonizing English as a polemic for local, regional culture—less against foreignizing influences on the national language and more to exposing the variety of language by acknowledging the influence of local customs and behaviors that make up word meaning. What

is equally striking about the “bull” entry is the number of British regional dialect names linguistically related to “bull” that Barnes adduces: “bell,” “belve,” “bellock,” and “bullock” are all dialect verbs, meaning “to bellow,” attested in the *English Dialect Dictionary* (1898–1905) of Joseph Wright, alongside the many common dialect compounds drawn from “bull”: bull-finch, bull-frog, bull-head, bull-stang, and so on. Barnes’s entry ranges from learned to colloquial with indifference: it is a synthesis of local, scientific, and classical knowledge that seems to treat a universalist claim like Boucher’s, that dialects ought to be “held in equal esteem and respect,” at face value.⁵⁶

Pure Dialect in Pastoral

Though it may be unusual to make the claim, the dialect glossary itself proves to be one of the most important genres for understanding the poetic value distinct to dialect and spoken language in the Victorian period. Indeed, the genre of dialect glossary, I would argue, allows us to reconsider the traditional literary forms to which dialect poets sought to adapt their representations of regional speech. If then we turn to a fundamental literary genre for dialect, the pastoral genre of eclogue, we find that the relationship between dialect speech and literary form changes terms.

Traditional pastoral has a peculiar nature: it depicts low, rustic characters in a high, literary language that is not their own. For Empson, this “clash of style and theme” is a feature of the genre: “The essential trick of the old pastoral, which was felt to imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor, was to make simple people express strong feelings (felt as the most universal subject, something fundamentally true about everybody) in learned and fashionable

⁵⁶ See the appendix for several more examples.

language (so that you wrote about the best subject in the best way).⁵⁷ Despite this judicious claim, and Jonathan Boucher's optimism that "in pastorals...dialect may certainly be introduced with great advantage," Pope describes the inherent bias of the genre against realistic speech when he chastises Spenser's diction in the *Shepherd's Calendar*: "The old English and country phrases of Spenser were either entirely obsolete, or spoken only by people of the lowest condition. As there is a difference betwixt simplicity and rusticity, so the expression of simple thoughts should be plain, but not clownish."⁵⁸ Yet despite—or because of—Pope's expression of the rule, the eclogue became one of the most popular forms of eighteenth-century British verse, spawning dozens of adaptations and parodies. Not by coincidence, its distinguishing dramatic device of the dialogic exchange between characters has much in common with the earliest dialect pieces published in eighteenth-century popular newspapers, including the Tim Bobbin's "Tummus and Meery," *The Exmoor Scolding and Courtship*, and *The Obliging Husband and Imperious Wife...in Witty and Ingenious Dialogues*, as well as George Meriton's *A Yorkshire Dialogue* (1614) and G. Stuart's *Joco-Serious discourse, in Two Dialogues* (1686).⁵⁹ These pieces took the satirical edge of social criticism found in Pope's eclogues and turned its flexible gaze to the common social rituals of marriage, work, and crime and punishment.

William Barnes's work in pastoral makes the strongest claims for the marriage of social and aesthetic values that the use of dialect promises. His earliest poems in fact, were a series of anonymous eclogues published, beginning in 1834, in the local newspaper, the *Dorset County Chronicle*, all written in his own version of the Dorset dialect—locatable precisely to the

⁵⁷ *Some Versions of Pastoral*, repr. ed. (New York: New Directions, 1974), 11.

⁵⁸ "A Discourse on Pastoral Poetry," *The Works of Alexander Pope* (London: Jacob Tonson and Bernard Lintot, 1717).

⁵⁹ A more comprehensive list can be found in Wakelin, *English Dialects: An Introduction* (London: Athlone Press, 1972), 45.

“secluded and beautiful Vale of Blackmore,” as he indicates in the introduction to his first collection of these poems with other Dorset lyrics, *Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect* (1844). Barnes’s titles to these early eclogues—indicating different rural peasant types for each poem, as in *Rusticus Dolens*, *Rusticus Gaudens*—as well as the classical allusions scattered throughout his folklore writing and commentary in the *DCC* suggests that he was well aware of the longer literary tradition to which his pastoral pieces belonged.⁶⁰ T. L. Burton and K. K. Ruthven indeed suggest that Barnes deliberately excludes the explicit references to classical sources in Vergil and Theocritus (by character name, setting, and allusion) that had become de rigueur in early eighteenth-century adaptations of the eclogue, including Pope’s and Phillips’s famous pastoral sequences, as well as parodies of these by the likes of John Gay.⁶¹

Under Barnes’s pen, the eclogue becomes the forum for social critique of the kind that would later be missed entirely by the general audience unable to comprehend his experiments in purified English. The social issue of land inclosure is made the backdrop for Barnes’s first published eclogue, titled *Rusticus Dolens; or, Inclosures of Common*, and later collected as “Eclogue: The Common a-Took in”:

JOHN.

No; they do mēan to teäke the moor in, I do hear,
An’ ’twill be soon begun upon;

⁶⁰ An unpublished notebook titled “Thoughts,” located among Barnes’s papers and manuscripts at the Dorset County Museum, contains the following note on Vergil’s pastoral works:

While his Georgicon and Bucolics are shaped from the patterns of Hesiod, and Theocritus, as a proof, take the burthen in the 8th Eclogue

“incipie Maenalios mecum, mea tibia, versus”

a parody on that of the 1st Idyll of Theocritus.

“Ἀρχετε βουκολικᾶς Μοῖσαι φίλαι ἄρχετ’ ἀοιδᾶς.”

⁶¹ “General Introduction,” *The Complete Poems of William Barnes*, vol. 1, xcvi.

Zoo I must zell my bit o' stock to-year,
Because they woon't have any groun' to run upon.

THOMAS.

Why, what d'ye tell o'? I be very zorry
To hear what they be gwain about;
But yet I s'pose there'll be a 'lotment vor ye,
When they do come to mark it out.

JOHN.

No; not vor me, I fear. An' if there should,
Why 'twoulden be so handy as 'tis now;
Vor 'tis the common that do do me good,
The run for my vew geese, or vor my cow.⁶²

This, to begin with, is a strange kind of eclogue. Its political references would have been legible: the topic of “teäke[ing] the moor in” and the “lotments” indicate a recent proposal for an Inclosure Act that would remove the open access to Bagber Common, north of Dorchester near Barnes’s birthplace in the Blackmore Vale.⁶³ Beyond the locals who knew about the proposal (the poem was printed in the agricultural section of the newspaper), it would have been a common topic to many rural communities of the time. However, its setting might seem strange. The characters meet on the roadway, traveling between the fields where we would recognize the traditional setting of pastoral.

In the conversation, John sides against the proposal, firstly based on his skepticism that he could gain a part of the allotment (“not vor me, I fear”) because of his lack of political

⁶² All citations of Barnes poems from *The Complete Poems of William Barnes, Vol.1: Poems in the Broad Form of the Dorset Dialect*, ed. T. L. Burton and K. K. Ruthven (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶³ See Bernard Jones ed., *Poems of William Barnes*, Vol. 1 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press), x.

connection, and secondly based on his general belief that the practical advantages of the common would be destroyed by its inclosure. This pragmatic argument persuades Thomas by the poem's end, despite his recurrent optimism and John's pessimism:

THOMAS.

'Tis handy to live near a common;
But I've a-zeed, an' I've a-zaid,
That if a poor man got a bit o' bread,
They'll try to teäke it vrom en.
But I wer twold back tother day,
That they be got into a way
O' lettèn bits o' groun' out to the poor.

JOHN.

Well, I do hope 'tis true, I'm sure;
An' I do hope that they will do it here,
Or I must goo to workhouse, I do fear.

The two commiserate here over the idea that the working poor are often prey to the whims of the government. As Sue Edney points out, the dialogue, in its polite tone and its avoidance of direct political invective, stands in contrast to a similar dialogue on social justice from the period, Alexander Rodger's "The Twa Weavers" (1819). The two primarily differ on their use of dialect, Edney argues: where Rodger turns the substandard reputation of selected dialect words to express the working man's anger at his lot in life, Barnes's dialect words "were covert symbols of an equalizing poetry, one that sought no distinction between poor and wealthy but attempted to express the right of all humanity to social justice through continuity of communal value and

respect.”⁶⁴ By raising dialect’s reputation and seeking equality among idioms, in other words, Barnes was making social justice happen by proxy.

The social topic of the common inclosure is one that Barnes returns to in a pastoral lyric included in the 1844 collection, originally published in the *Dorset County Chronicle* in 1840, six years after the original pastoral dialogue appeared. It describes the aftermath of the inclosure of Bagber Common:

The Common A-Took in.

Oh! no, Poll, no! Since they’ve a-took
The common in, our lew wold nook
Don’t seem a-bit as used to look
When we had runnèn room;
Girt banks do shut up ev’ry drong,
An’ stratch wi’ thorny backs along
Where we did use to run among
The vuzzen an’ the broom.

Ees; while the ragged colts did crop
The nibbled grass, I used to hop
The emmet-butts, vrom top to top,
So proud o’ my spry jumps:
Wi’ thee behind or at my zide,
A-skippèn on so light an’ wide
’S thy little frock would let thee stride,
Among the vuzzy humps.

Ah while the lark up over head
Did twitter, I did search the red
Thick bunch o’ broom, or yollow bed
O’ vuzzen vor a nest;
An’ thou di’st hunt about, to meet
Wi’ strawberries so red an’ sweet,

⁶⁴ “‘Times be Badish Vor the Poor’: William Barnes and his Dialect of Disturbance in the Dorset ‘Eclogues,’” *English* 58:222 (January 2009), 218.

Or clogs or shoes off hosses veet,
Or wild thyme vor thy breast;

Or when the cows did run about
A-stung, in zummer, by the stout,
Or when they play'd, or when they föught,
Di'st stand a-lookèn on:
An' where white geese, wi' long red bills,
Did veed among the emmet-hills,
There we did goo to vind their quills
Alongzide o' the pon'.

What fun there wer among us, when
The hayward come, wi' all his men,
To drève the common, an' to pen
Strange cattle in the pound;
The cows did bleäre, the men did shout
An' toss their eärms an' sticks about,
An' vo'ks, to own their stock, come out
Vrom all the housen round.

Instead of wondering through discursive dialogue about the fate of the future, this poem looks back to appreciate the “lew wold nook” (“flat, green land sheltered from the wind”) with plenty of “runnèn room” that has been destroyed by the “girt banks” (“great banks”). The poem that takes up the common theme of nostalgia for a simpler time that is common to Barnes’s dialect poems, though here the simpler time refers directly back to the world of the earlier poem. Its meditation on the lost *locus amoenus* suggests an affinity with contemporary pastoral pieces, such as Southey’s “The Ruined Cottage,” the last of his six *English Eclogues*.

Taking into consideration the period conventions of the eclogue, we can identify a crucial difference in the formal effects of the two Barnes poems. Robert F. Jones suggests that in the eighteenth-century eclogue the regularity of the dramatic form takes precedence over the pastoral content of the scene, which requires “a clearly suggested scene in which soliloquoy or

dialogue is carried on—a kind of static dramatic scene.” This stasis is created by a recurrence of definite setting description “either at the beginning or end, and frequently in both place,” and kept in mind by “frequent allusions to the surroundings.”⁶⁵ Paul Alpers focuses on the modal rather than formal features of pastoral in his book *What Is Pastoral?*, and suggests that its distinguishing mode is experienced when “the figure of the shepherd is felt to be representative precisely in figuring every or any man’s strength relative to the world.”⁶⁶ For Alpers as well as Jones, the question of how pastoral functions turns on the poem ending: is the world described in the poem appropriate to the character whose strength is tried, contested, or celebrated?

For Barnes’s pastoral variations, the question is answered differently for each poem. In the eclogue, John’s cautious optimism at the ending is deflated by the suggestion that he fears that he “must goo to workhouse.” It is an acknowledgement of what Thomas has said earlier, that “if a poor man got a bit o’ bread, / They’ll try to teäke it vrom en.” The power structure of the poem’s world is unbalanced because neither man has control over his share in the common; it is the official “they” that hold the power. This wresting of power from the poor is reversed in the dramatic form of the second poem, the lyric, which restores the pleasure of the common through memory:

What fun there wer among us, when
 The hayward come, wi’ all his men,
 To drève the common, an’ to pen
 Strange cattle in the pound;
 The cows did bleäre, the men did shout
 An’ toss their eärms an’ sticks about,
 An’ vo’ks, to own their stock, come out
 Vrom all the housen round.

⁶⁵ Richard F. Jones, “Eclogue Types in English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 24, No. 1 (Jan., 1925): 35.

⁶⁶ *What Is Pastoral?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 50.

In the final lines, there is a restoration not only of the common land but also the right relationship of animal to human that the use of the common allows. The abundance of flora and fauna that was almost overwhelming our speaker in the previous stanzas is matched suddenly in the ending by the crowding together of “strange cattle” and “vo’ks... / Vrom all the housen round.” The variety and familiarity of the common is its particular charm. This poem has a pastoral ending; it represents the speaker’s strength relative to his world, as Alpers suggests.

The effect of dialect in these poems follows this division by form and genre. Barnes’s eclogue draws from a deep historical well in order to suggest its non-belonging to a place in the modern world. The linguistic focus of Barnes’s poem is contained in the title, “The Common a-Took in,” chosen as a dialect version of his original eclogue title, *Rusticus Dolens; or, Inclosures of Common*. The eighteenth-century trend of classical literary allusion in the eclogue gives way in Barnes in favor of the dialect detail. Barnes explains the idiom in the “Dissertation on the Dorset Dialect” included as a preface to his 1844 *Poems of Rural Life*:

‘The common is a-took in.’

‘The common is inclosed.’ *Inclosed* being from the compound *in-cludo*, to shut in. By the examples in the list, Barnes demonstrates what he considers to be a primary fact of modern English: it has let fall out of use of many of its original, native Anglo-Saxon words for replacements from French, Latin, and Greek. The peculiar value of the Dorset speech arises by its very difference from this facet of modern English:

[The Dorset dialect] is not only a separate offspring from the Anglo-Saxon tongue, but purer and more regular than the dialect which is chosen as the national speech; purer, inasmuch as it uses many words of Saxon origin for which the English substitutes others of Latin, Greek, or French derivation; and more regular, inasmuch as it inflects regularly many words which in the national language are irregular.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ “A Dissertation of the Dorset Dialect,” *Complete Poems*, vol. 1, 6.

If we consider the poetic language in the eclogue version of “The Common a-Took in,” we can see that the poet makes into poetic devices both aspects of the linguistic claim for dialect: purity and regularity. Thomas’s concise description of how the rural poor are treated includes several such moments:

Tis handy to live near a common;
But I’ve a-zeed, an’ I’ve a-zaid,
That if a poor man got a bit o’ bread,
They’ll try to teäke it vrom en.

The *a* rhyme of this quatrain relies on a grammatical inflection particular to Dorset, the declension of the masculine personal pronoun as “en” rather than “him” when serving as an object in the sentence, as well as the proper stress of the first syllable of the phrase “vrom en” because “en” is treated in pronunciation differently than “him” (often stressed to indicate its importance as object) in standard English.⁶⁸ Likewise, the symmetrical line “But I’ve a-zeed, an’ I’ve a-zaid” takes advantage of the dialectal prefix “a-“ in perfect participles of verbs, as well as the regular inflection of “to see” as “seed” rather than “seen” to create a rhythmically perfect iambic tetrameter line.⁶⁹ For all of these features, Barnes foregrounds a dialect usage of words that exist even in standard English; he then connects their form in Dorset to older, Anglo-Saxon grammatical forms.

These moments of grammatical anachronism provide, however, only a limited idea of poetic value: they do not fully suggest the figurative capabilities of dialect that Barnes and Boucher, among others, would identify as its main aesthetic function. Rather, the poem hints at

⁶⁸ “The accusative case of *he* is *en* not *him*, the Anglo-Saxon *hine*. ‘He araerde hine up,’ ‘He raised him up’; and the accusative case of *they* is *em*, the Anglo-Saxon *hym* or *him*. ‘Faeder forgyf *him*.’ ‘Father, forgive them’ Luke 23.34.” “A Dissertation of the Dorset Dialect,” *Complete Poems*, vol.1, 13.

⁶⁹ “The Dorset dialect is remarkable as retaining in the perfect participle of verbs a *syllabic augment* which is found in Anglo-Saxon and German, though the English language has lost it. In German this augment is *ge*...in A. Saxon it is *ge* or *a*, the latter of which is retained in Dorsetshire.” “A Dissertation of the Dorset Dialect,” *Complete Poems*, vol. 1, 15.

the metaphorical nature of word change as it forges new associations between abstract and concrete meanings. This discovery arises primarily in the later poem about the loss of the common. The phrase the poet uses to describe the green is “lew wold nook,” a tightly condensed metonym for the entire common and its nostalgic appeal to freedom and play. The chain of words that make up the association is both dialectal and old: Barnes glosses “lew” in his 1863 *Grammar and Glossary of the Dorset Dialect* as “Shelter from the wind. ‘In the lew zide o’ the hedge.” Barnes derives it directly from the Anglo-Saxon *hleow*, “shelter, shade, covering.”⁷⁰ “Wold” is a common Germanic term from Anglo-Saxon, which originally meant a forested or wilderness area, and came to signify “an elevated tract of open country or moorland.”⁷¹ (“Nook” is of uncertain origin—here it provides the key rhyme with “took” in Barnes’s Anglicization of the legal term “inclosure.”) This verbal picture—sheltered from wind, elevated, green, open, out of the way—presents the essential qualities of the entire idyllic pastoral scene prevalent in the rest of the poem. The local flora and fauna (colts, ant hills, furze bushes, larks, broom plants, strawberries, thyme, cows, gadflies (“stout”)) belong to that pleasance, figured by the hill, reminiscent of Coleridge’s “Valley of Seclusion” in “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement”—except for Barnes, there is no conflict between social obligation and idyllic repose as there is for Coleridge. The common is social and restful at once.

If we consider Barnes’s late experiments in purified English and in animal etymology against the early experiments in pastoral dialect verse, then we see a partial resolution of the problem of linguistic versus literary merits found in Wordsworth’s test of the “real language of men.” But it is neither on Wordsworth’s terms, as a true embodiment of the real language of men

⁷⁰ *A Grammar and Glossary of the Dorset Dialect* (Berlin: A. Asher, 1863), 68. It is also, he notes, where the modern English word “lee” comes from.

⁷¹ *OED*, “wold, 3a.”

by poetic structure, nor on the terms of later European dialectologists, such as Jules Gillieron and Hugo Schuchardt, who turned from theory to empirical study in the project of linguistic atlases. Of course, maps, like poems, are simply another way of representing the community of speakers that use a particular variety of speech. In Barnes's works, we have an unlikely fulfillment of Wordsworth's aspiration through the historical anomaly of writing a poetic language outside of poetic history: Barnes uses the histories of words rather than the history of literary forms to suggest imaginative resonance and deep connection to a community of speakers. *An Outline of Rede-Craft* and the *Alphabetical and Etymological Dictionary of Animals* work in opposite ways to achieve a poetic texture not unlike that of Barnes's lyric poems by embracing the contingent features that language carries with it into new contexts. Language makes resistance to being shaped by literary form, not because of the irreducibility of historical or social context but because of the deep conceptual connections that poetry makes across contexts to sort and arrange particulars. Barnes's artificially-shaped collections of speech with no real-world equivalent speech community make visible for readers the distance between the idea of pure language as such—whether local, national, standard, or global—and the mixture of terms, registers, and styles that actually constitute speech.

Appendix

Selections from the “Alphabetical and Etymological Dictionary of our Common Names of Animals,” by William Barnes

ARMADILLO . *Dasyus sexanctus* (Wood)
Spain – Armad-illo, diminutive of Armado
armed – The Little Armed-beast. A shell-shielded
beast of the foreteethless kind in South America.

BENTEOT
CHEKITUT Java
Phrenotrix Temia
Crypsirkina Temia Horsfield
Mus.
A crow-kind, bird of Java

QUEBEC MARMOT
Wood Badger Siffleur, Fr. Canadian
Cree, Weenusk

DORMOUSE
Dormeuse Frn. The sleeping beast
L Glis Fr. Loir Flm croque-noix Fr [Ratid'or]
Ger Rothe, wald-mans
Hasel Schäfer
Hasel mause
Swed Skogs mus
Wood mouse
Wel Pathew

Epilogue: Reading Modern Lyric in the “Possible Chorus”

“...la storia continua la sua via e non l’ode.”
[“...history continues on its way and does not hear.”]
—Francesco De Sanctis, “La poetica di Manzoni”

One of the first important Italian lyric poems of the nineteenth century, the chorus at the conclusion of Act II of Manzoni’s 1820 tragedy *Il Conte di Carmagnola* (The count of Carmagnola), has been acclaimed by critics as a prime example of the classical iteration of Romanticism that took root in Italy in the first decades of that century. The chorus’s opening lines—the first twenty-four of a 128-line poem—show the peculiar hybrid of its descriptive historical narration and lyric voice:

S’ode a destra uno squillo di tromba;
a sinistra risponde uno squillo:
d’ambo i lati calpesto rimbomba
da cavalli e da fanti il terren.
Quinci spunta per l’aria un vessillo;
quindi un altro s’avanza spiegato:
ecco appare un drappello schierato;
ecco un altro che incontro gli vien.
Già di mezzo sparito è il terreno;
già le spade rispington le spade;
l’un dell’altro le immerge nel seno;
gronda il sangue; raddoppia il ferir.
– Chi son essi? Alle belle contrade
qual ne venne straniero a far guerra?
Qual è quei che ha giurato la terra
dove nacque far salva, o morir?
– D’una terra son tutti: un linguaggio
parlan tutti: fratelli li dice
lo straniero: il comune lignaggio
a ognun d’essi dal volto traspar.
Questa terra fu a tutti nudrice,
questa terra di sangue ora intrisa,
che natura dall’altre ha divisa,

e ricinta con l'alpe e col mar.¹

[A burst of trumpet is heard on the right;
on the left another burst replies:
on both sides the pavement resounds
with horses and the ground with soldiers.
From here a standard juts into the air;
there another advances unfurled:
Here a troop in formation appears;
there another that comes to meet them.
Already the ground has half disappeared;
already sword clashes against sword;
one of the others' plunges into the breast;
blood pours forth; the wounding multiplies.
– Who are they? Who is the distant stranger
who came to this beautiful land to wage war?
Who is he that has sworn to save
the land where he was born, or to die?
– All come from one land: all speak
one language: the foreigner calls
them brothers: a common lineage
appears on each of their faces.
This land was nurse to them all,
this land that their blood seeps into,
that nature has separated from others,
and encircles with the Alps and with the sea.]

In these lines, the historical military conflict at the heart of the play—the fifteenth-century battle between the Ducate of Milan and the Republic of Venice, led by renowned military leader Francesco da Bussone, the titular Conte di Carmagnola—comes to be described in exacting detail through a distant, omniscient narration. Suddenly, mid-battle, the chorus abruptly averts its gaze from the carnage, shifting instead to a tender lyric voice (“Chi son essi?”) that presents, as Francesco De Sanctis describes, “le impressioni nuovi, personali, e contemporanee nel poeta”

¹ Cited from *Tragedie*, ed. Fausto Ghisalberti (Milan: Rizzoli, 1954).

[“novel, personal, and simultaneous impressions within the poet”].² The suspension of narrative time in the lyric chorus, De Sanctis argues, suggests that the different thoughts occur simultaneously. Therefore the affirmative response by the chorus to these questions (set off by the dash as though it were a different voice) confirms their rhetorical potency as an expression of personal doubt underlying troubling political and military events with grand historical significance.

Manzoni acknowledges the modern chorus’s flexibility through the split of rhetorical modes in this opening: historical narration, speculative questioning, and finally patriotic and political affirmation. In his compositional frame, Manzoni self-consciously echoes August Wilhelm Schlegel’s commentary on Greek chorus from the *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1809), in which he famously refers to the chorus as the “ideal spectator,” a figure that “conveys to the actual spectator a lyrical and musical expression of his own emotions.”³ Manzoni cites Schlegel directly in the preface to the play, when he cites the chorus’s role as “la personificazione de’ pensieri morali che l’azione ispira, come l’organo de’ sentimenti del poeta anche parla in nome dell’intera umanità” [“the personification of moral thoughts inspired by the action, as the organ of the poet’s emotions that speak on behalf of the whole of humankind”]) but with a crucial difference: where Schlegel describes in the highest terms the poet’s role to speak *als Sprechers der gesamten Menschheit* (“in nome dell’intera umanità” in Manzoni’s translation: “on behalf of the whole of humankind”), Manzoni places emphasis on the poet’s role speaking “in

² *Scritti varii, inediti o rari*, Vol. 1, ed. Benedetto Croce (Naples: Morano, 1898), 144.

³ *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, trans. John Black (London: Henry Bohn, 1846), 70.

persona propria.”⁴ Thus, the chorus voices the poet’s own subjective view of the objective, historical action:

Se l’essere questi [i.e., Cori moderni] indipendenti dall’azione e non applicati a personaggi li priva d’una gran parte dell’effetto che producevano quelli [i.e., Cori greci], può però, a mio credere, renderli suscettibili d’uno slancio più lirico, più variato e più fantastico.⁵

[If being independent from the action and not belonging to characters within the play deprives [modern choruses] the majority of the effect that [Greek choruses] produced, it can nevertheless, in my view, make them sensitive to a more lyrical, more varied, and more imaginative impulse.]

Manzoni chooses to emphasize the stylistic gains the chorus makes in its adaptation from ancient to modern, losing the authority for speaking on behalf of the community while gaining the expressive qualities of the modern lyric poem. The main dramatic forces of the play’s historical narration—the nature of political authority in the modern world, the class struggle of the professional soldier against the urban elite, and, most fundamentally, the newly realized anachronism of the ancient Roman values of allegiance to military ritual and virtue—are realized primarily through the nostalgic emotions expressed in the lyric interludes.

As this dissertation has argued along various fronts over its chapters, the pragmatic uncertainty of the lyric utterance defines the genre as intrinsically hybrid: the lyric’s anachronism as both ancient and modern can be read through its diction, which poetically reveals a vernacular register with the historical depth of an entire tradition of language change informing its meaning. As this dissertation set out to investigate, the language of the lyric consists neither of a mimetic representation of speech by poetic style nor of an index of personal or social identity through a rhetoric fictionalizing individual subjectivity. Instead, the language of lyric ought to be read as

⁴ *Tragedie*, 28.

⁵ *Ibid.*

the poet's individuation (the making personal) of the collective speech of a community defined by and recognizable according to specific geographical boundaries and a complex of cultural customs, beliefs, and practices that have persisted over time. This hybrid personal-historical nature may be thought of, as the evocative image of Bakhtin that I cited in Chapter 3 describes, as the "possible chorus": "a voice that feels a possible choral support outside itself."⁶ The Manzoni example therefore serves as the culminating illustration of the stylistic and formal method of this dissertation precisely because it reveals in the visible congruence of formal and thematic registers the geographical and sociological conception of speech as a historical phenomenon. Manzoni's revived ancient chorus thus contains a microcosm of the modern lyric poem, a genre that is not quite individual speech and not quite chorus: a choral speaker fictionalized as an individual, who crystallizes in artful, universalized language the social ideals of a specific language community. The hybrid nature of the ancient choral voice performed in the modern idiom defines the nature of language in the lyric.

The title of this dissertation raises a question: what is the language of poetry? The commonplace answer to this question that many contemporary poetry critics resort to, to a greater or lesser extent, goes all the way back to Wittgenstein, who negatively defines poetic language in the caveat, "Do not forget that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information." The straightforward correctness of this sentiment should not mask its complex consequences: poetic language is the same as ordinary language, but its intentions and effects are different. In making the distinction, Wittgenstein seems to echo the divorce of meaning from function that Saussure postulates with the complementary ideas of *langue* and *parole* (language-system and utterance); but in

⁶ "Author and Hero," 170.

Wittgenstein's version of this, that pairing ought more properly to be classified as language-system ("the language-game of giving information") and the lexicon and grammar ("the language of information"). Perhaps the correct distinction would be between *langue* and *langage*. "The language of poetry" (like "the language of bees" or "the language of carpenters") is not the same as "language" (the broad, non-quantifiable noun referring to the communication system of humans) but it is "a language"—a communication system with a history and a tradition that makes it possible to describe the evolution of its constituent elements.

As the individual chapters demonstrate, the way that readers and poets think about speech, dialect, and diction all condition what kind of language "poetic language" is. Speech has often been considered too plural, ephemeral, and unpredictable to be the measure of lyric poetry; because of its association with high literary culture and with learned diction, readers have presumed that poetic language, a *written* language, is more stable, immediate, unified, and pure than the speech they use for communication in everyday life. But as the history of poetry shows, this is not the case for either side of the comparison: the language of the lyric poem is both more transitory, heterogenous, and geographically specific than commonly acknowledged; and speech is more stable, traditional, and universal than commonly acknowledged. The chapter presenting the intellectual history of dialectology, "Vulgar Philology: Speech, History, and Lyric," proposes this convergence as the major premise of my reading method: by locating the language of the lyric poem within the dialect tradition to which it belongs, scholars might read diagnostically, focusing on the poem's complex, stratified, and anachronistic elements as the proof of personal and cultural elements sedimented into language. As the condition for reading, or the ground against which the poem is read, speech changes its role as a response to the social tradition to

which it belongs; likewise, the elements of speech become redefined according to the cultural milieu as well as the long tradition to which the dialect belongs.

Reading the poem through the voice of the “possible chorus” means something more specific than a historical-poetic method for other kinds of texts: it means an encounter with the poet’s personal emotions bound up into the larger cultural forces with which the text is shot through. For Bakhtin, the lyric’s emphasis on the “organizing power of love” (either consummated or unrequited) suggests that the emotions permeate the voice of the poem through all of its constitutive features: “The voice can *sing* only in a *warm* atmosphere, only in the atmosphere of possible choral support, where *solitariness* of sound is in principle excluded.”⁷ This claim does not mean to suggest that a simple biographical reading of the poet suffices for an understanding of the poem’s emotion; nor does it entail that a description of individual technique or style captures the complex cultural weight of words, which Coleridge calls the “great mighty instruments by which thoughts are excited and by which alone they can be expressed in a rememberable form.”⁸ Through readings of individual words as portals to a longer speech tradition, I attempted to illustrate in each chapter that the poem’s emotional content can be read not simply through an author’s poetic technique but through the expressive capabilities of a language’s lexicon and word history. The lyric poem may work through a system of metaphors that raise simple, concrete, personalized words to broad cultural concepts with complex histories, as it does for Giacomo Leopardi; the poem may establish emotional power through the figurative interaction of words from different registers or with different etymologies, as it does for Samuel Taylor Coleridge; or the poem may use an artificially pure diction to emphasize the personal

⁷ “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” in *Art and Answerability*, trans. Vadim Liapunov, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 170.

⁸ *Philosophical Lectures*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 368.

attachment to regionally specific words, as it does for William Barnes. For each of these poets, a word's semantic and connotational depth causes a moment of intellectual and emotional suspension; meanwhile, as Francesco De Sanctis writes, "la storia continua la sua via e non l'ode" ["history continues on its way and does not hear"].

The concept of chorus has tremendous staying power in the cultural imagination, long past the immediate context of its place with the choral lyric. Though Schlegel's characterization has been superseded by classics scholars in the subsequent decades, the appeal of the collective individual modeling the role of the "ideal spectator" persists in various forms, with striking similarity to Schlegel's description. In his recent *Boston Review* essay on poetic diction and class struggle, Daniel Tiffany uses the figure to discuss a "communal experience" that might serve as an artistic alternative to Marx's idea of the proletariat: "Poetry can play an important role in the exploration of choral identity—as the medium of 'the class that is the dissolution of all classes.'"⁹ In Tiffany's telling, the promise of "choral identity" lies in its ability to form a coherent figure (like to but not identical with the liberal subject) that expresses the solidarity of a class through the intentional, performative speech belonging to the individual. But there are other potential usages, other "possible choruses" to which lyric might appeal, to be written by other poets who have "not yet stepped forward out of the chorus." The appeal of lyric and its speech is the modesty with which it captures and evokes the biggest concepts humans can think of.

⁹ "Cheap Signaling: Class Conflict and Diction in Avant-Garde Poet," *Boston Review*, July 15, 2014, <https://bostonreview.net/poetry/daniel-tiffany-cheap-signaling-class-conflict-and-diction-avant-garde-poetry>. Online article is unpaginated.

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Joel Calahan was born in 1982 in Omaha, Nebraska, and was raised in Minneapolis, Minnesota and Phoenix, Arizona. He graduated from Tempe Preparatory Academy (2000) as the valedictorian of the school's first graduating class. He later earned a B. A. in English language and literature with a minor in linguistics at Pomona College in Claremont, California (2004), and a M. A. in Humanities at the University of Chicago (2005). He completed his Ph.D. in comparative literature at the University of Chicago in 2016 with the support of the University of Chicago graduate fellowship and a final year Mellon Humanities Division Fellowship. His areas of specialization include the history of literary criticism, the history and theory of lyric poetry, linguistics and literature, dialect studies and dialectology, and translation studies. His literary translations from Italian have been published by University of Toronto Press, TransEuropa Edizioni, Zona Editrice, and in the journals *Circumference*, *Lana Turner*, *Aufgabe*, and *Cambridge Literary Review*. With V. Joshua Adams and Michael Hansen, he recently coedited a special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* (77:1), titled "Reading Historical Poetics." He was editor of *Chicago Review* from 2010 to 2014, where he edited special issues on Elliott Carter, A. R. Ammons, and new Italian writing.