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The Riot and the Didactic:
Radical Instruction in British Romantic Poetry

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in English

by

Jesslyn Clark Whittell

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Riot and the Didactic: Radical Instruction in British Romantic Poetry

by

Jesslyn Clark Whittell

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Saree Makdisi, Co-Chair

Professor Anahid J Nersessian, Co-Chair

This dissertation investigates the historical and present relationship of didactic poetry to the political thought of radical communities. Poetry from the Romantic period to the present is often seen as the valence of lyric and personal registers of thought, and its political utility is typically equated with the extent to which it resists concretized meaning and refuses interpretation. Didactic poetry is typically seen as a bastardization of these disruptive tendencies, as an attempt to comb theoretical and personal contradictions into straightforward conclusions and to similarly amalgamate diverse beings, people, and needs into neatly packaged political agendas. Romanticism is understood as a knee-jerk reaction against didactic and instructive styles of writing. Through case studies of Romantic poets writing on the margins and three contemporary authors invested in protest and urban space, I argue that in the hands of certain authors writing within and against systems of early carcerality, imperial warfare, and sexual

control, didacticism becomes a means of imagining strange, intimate, and unstable political collectives that take shape through the communal mode of the didactic. As such, I argue that didacticism functions as both a kind of resistance/refusal *and* a means of exposing, exploring, and refuting the logics of usefulness, surveillance, and carceral instruction. It is, I claim, always balancing the threat of instruction tipping over into coercion with the importance of naming, teaching, and remembering marginal political histories.

In Chapter 1, I discuss the problem of “utility” in the poems and allegories that Thomas Spence wrote for his periodical *Pigs’ Meat; Lessons for the Swinish Multitude*. While Spence wants his work to be instructive, he also actively resists the easy categorization of things and people as “useful” or “not useful” that appears in both conservative poetry by Hannah More and in British vagrancy laws. In Chapter 2, Anna Barbauld and John Thelwall use the didactic poem to think through the larger problem of teaching literature, with each arguing that literary education is a key tool for developing political collectives. Their approaches resist traditional models of literary education and criticism, models which, I argue, operate in tandem with carceral and imperial thinking. In Chapter 3, I consider the role of embodied instruction in Percy Shelley’s *Laon and Cythna*, taking up the poem’s formal motif of endurance. I show how moments of embodied instruction correspond with queer challenges to gender and sexual norms that reimagine learning as, instead of the transmission of information in service of clear futures, a form of material care that resists easy resolution into useful data. The final chapter jumps forward to discuss three contemporary poets—Sean Bonney, Wendy Trevino, and Diane di Prima—who adopt didactic poetry for their writing about riots. I claim that in contemporary poetry, didacticism creates a transparent subjectivity that can navigate and survive violent systems of policing.

The dissertation of Jesslyn Clark Whittell is approved.

Daniel Scott Snelson

Sarah Tindal Kareem

Anahid J Nersessian, Committee Co-Chair

Saree Makdisi, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

For my parents.

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The dissertation and my graduate career would be vastly less interesting without Danny Snelson, whose generous insights, recommendations, and feedback guided my initial foray into contemporary poetics. With enthusiasm and care, Danny introduced me to theoretical and creative works that vastly expanded my sense of what it is possible to do in poetry and scholarship, and his warmth and encouragement kept my spirits up in the weeds of the drafting process and job search. From her seminar on attachments to her support at far-flung conferences, Sarah Kareem modeled an equally playful and rigorous academic scholarship and brought warmth and kindness to otherwise chilly spaces. I am grateful for her clear-eyed feedback on this

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To my siblings, Anna and Genna Whittell—this isn't our genre, and there's very little I can say to you here that wouldn't embarrass all of us, but thank you for coming back to LA, going with me to get little treats, and never allowing me to give in to self-doubt. Nic Schrading stumbled into the last 1.5 years of this dissertation, which he weathered with patience, humor, and love. Despite the uncertainty of the final push and job market, he made me excited to imagine what comes next.

I considered dedicating this project to Wednesday and Sassy, who sat on me “in complete cat” for most of the writing process, but since their contributions were edited out, the work is instead dedicated to my parents—thank you for encouraging me to pursue the things that make me happy, for putting those things in perspective when I start to spiral, and for the phone calls, coffees, boba, dinners, and walks that kept me going every step of the way. This is for you.

Biographical Sketch

Jesslyn Whittell obtained a B.A. in English and Computer Science from UC Berkeley before coming to UCLA for her Ph.D. in English. Her published academic works include “A tedious accumulation of nothing:’ Christopher Smart, imperialist archives, and an 18th-century avant-garde” in *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* 2022, and “‘The Chain,’ and queerness as a relationship to carcerality,” as part of a cluster on *Our Flag Means Death* forthcoming in 2024. In addition to publishing poetry across several venues, she is the author of the chapbooks *Slow Tapping to Help You Sleep [ASMR]* (Bottlecap 2023), and *All My Contingencies*, which was a finalist for the New Delta Review 2024 chapbook prize.

Introduction

Can poetry teach us anything? And is it a reliable or worthwhile teacher? Historically, the answer was a resounding yes. As late as 1783, critics like Hugh Blair espoused a poetics of usefulness: “good poetry should “make some useful impression on the mind.”¹ Blair devotes a sizable block of *Lectures* to didactic poetry, which he regards as the ideal medium for useful instruction. Poetry gains an edge over other genres, even prose, because “the charm of versification and numbers...renders instruction more agreeable.”² His opinion was a common one: 18th-century poets saw versification not as an artistic embellishment but as “a kind of artificial organ” of perception, like reading glasses for the mind.³ Didactic poems dominated the 18th-century literary scene, with topics ranging from moral and philosophical treatises to metrical manuals on health and gardening. But according to the familiar narrative, if didactic and georgic poetry dominated the early-to-mid-18th century, political upheaval in the late 18th-century tipped the scales in favor of the lyric mode, which came to define Romantic poetics and the lion’s share of poetry written since.

Think of William Wordsworth in “The Tables Turned,” crowing “quit your books” and “let Nature be your teacher.”⁴ At first blush, this is a good deal: skip the slog of academia and learn from gritty personal experience instead. It also becomes the dominate narrative about Romantic poetry, which is often understood to access political reality through individual

¹ Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (Turin: University of Turin, 2016), 436.

² Blair, 436.

³ Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11.

⁴ William Wordsworth, “The Tables Turned; an Evening Scene, on the Same Subject,” *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*, ed. Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter (Peterborough: Broadview, 2008), 136.

experience. This dissertation posits didactic poetry as a central and under-theorized element of Romantic poetics. What starts as a tool for authors in positions of economic and political security to remold classical poems like Virgil's *Georgics* in the image of a modernizing England—James Thomson's *The Seasons* and Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* are two key examples of this trend—is coopted in the Romantic period by authors writing at the margins, without institutional protection. I see this shift as a response to imperialist expansion, state surveillance, and industrial development, all of which changed Romantic understandings of instruction and information.

What I call radical didacticism names the aesthetic strategies used by authors like Thomas Spence, John Thelwall, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, William Blake, and Percy Shelley to make material, generalizable claims about reality at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. These authors used didactic poetry (broadly, useful poetry with a clear political agenda and a tendency to combine lyric, avant-garde, and academic conventions) to test drive experimental models of education and argument. Their radical approaches to education are conceived directly in opposition to the institutional norms that worked in service of policing and imperial expansion in the Romantic period—institutional norms that seeded the modern university. Set alongside these texts, Wordsworth's directive reads as almost embarrassingly conservative, a call to replace the educational pamphlets of the paper wars and the ballads and orators of the tavern with solitary reflection.

One immediate objective for this dissertation is a working definition of Romantic radicalism, an understanding of how it understood its formal projects in the context of imperialism and racial capitalism. I argue that we can trace that history through didactic poetry because of that genre's unique relationship to labor, surveillance, and economic systems. Didactic poems throw themselves into political conversations and use poetry as a site of

experimental essay or argument, and, because of their investment in utility and labor, tend to explicitly foreground their material and social contexts. As such, they account for a substantial and undertheorized segment of radical poetry in the Romantic period. This is true both of canonical works like Percy Shelley's *The Mask of Anarchy* and lesser-known texts like Thomas Spence's periodical *Pig's Meat*. The didactic mode can tell us a different story about Romanticism, its poetic functions, uses, and limits of its radicalism.

This project will fill a gap—almost a vacuum—in contemporary poetics by zooming in on the didactic mode and its unique formal, material, and affective features. Likewise, it will build on the scant but exciting research about didacticism that has surfaced in recent scholarship. Finally, it will attempt a more critical account of the role that Romanticism plays in contemporary poetry and the implications of today's Romantic hang-ups for humanities pedagogy. I see the didactic as a shared formal question for 18th-century and 21st-century authors, one that opens onto questions of aesthetic engagement with, reenactment of, or distancing from history. My dissertation will therefore explore the relevance of the didactic mode in contemporary riot poems. 21st-century didactic poets are overwhelmingly in conversation with longer radical traditions. As I argue, their work uses the didactic mode to interrogate our relationships with history. In other words, I ask how 20th- and 21st-century authors live with the histories of the 18th century, or how they have made that history, one that still emerges through palimpsests in everyday spaces, livable.

Didactic poetry before 1800

One challenge for this dissertation is the lack of historical continuity in definitions of the didactic. For classicists, that genre means one thing. For medieval scholars, it means another, and

something else for early modernists, 18th-centuryists, etc. For contemporary scholars, “didactic” has largely shifted from a generic category to a damning adjective. While a steady stream of Latin-language didactic verse was published in medieval England, this history will start with a tonal shift that Yasmin Haskell identifies between medieval and early modern didactic poems: the former tended to crunch Christian theology into meter, while the latter latched itself onto the coattails of forerunners like Virgil, Lucretius, Horace, Ovid, and Manilius.⁵

These later didactics, what Haskell calls “Neo-Latin,” were preoccupied with the philosophy put forward in Virgil and Lucretius’ poetry and focused on metaphysics and science. Robert M. Schuler and John G. Fitch link the rising popularity of this type of didactic in early modern England to the rise of print culture and a “literary and scientific climate [that] remained consistently favorable toward Didactic and especially toward scientific poetry.”⁶ David McOmish takes that argument a step further: “discussion of early-modern (specifically Newtonian) science had to pass through the literary filter of the didactic tradition, because of the place didactic poetry held within the long tradition of philosophical and scientific discourse from ancient Greece, ancient Rome, and renaissance Europe.”⁷ McOmish focuses on Scottish authors—including David Kinloch, Andrew Melville, and Adam King—who hewed closely to the poetics of Virgil and Lucretius in their writings on topics from medicine and education to political counsel.

⁵ Yasmin Haskell, “The classification of Neo-Latin didactic poetry from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries,” in P. Ford *et al.* (eds) *Brill’s Encyclopaedia of the Neo-Latin World* (2014), 437–448.

⁶ Robert M. Schuler and John G. Fitch, “Theory and Context of the Didactic Poem: Some Classical Mediaeval, and Later Continuities,” *Florilegium*, vol. 5 (1983), 21.

⁷ David McOmish, “Scientia Demands the Latin Muse: The Authority of Didactic Poetry in Early-Modern Scotland,” in *Didactic Poetry of Greece, Rome and Beyond: Knowledge, Power, Tradition*, Eds. Lilah Grace Canevaro, Donncha O’Rourke, (Classical Press of Wales: 2019), 249.

In addition to proliferating scientific discourse in the early modern period, the renewed interest in didactic poetry corresponded with a renewed interest in education and theories of instruction and with the increasing archive of colonial knowledge. The first recorded instance of “didactic” in English was John Milton’s “Of Education” (1644), where the author, at the time still more of an essayist than poet, comes out against “what many modern Ianua’s and Didactics have projected,” dismissing contemporary didactic poetry and a similar, obsolete genre called the “janua.”⁸ As Elbert N. S. Thompson explains, Milton was writing at a time when a broad tract of educators and politicians were advocating educational reform, including Milton’s friend Samuel Hartlib, to whom “Of Education” was dedicated.⁹ “Of Education” advocated a shift from dogged memorization to instruction based on sensory experience and personal interest (“delight”), which Milton found not only more pleasant but more efficient.¹⁰ But as Gauri Viswanathan reminds us in “Milton, Imperialism, and Education,” this interest in education was more than benevolent humanism: “I call therefore a complete and generous education, that which fits a man to perform justly, skillfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war.”¹¹ In fact, one basic assumption for both Milton and the political actors of his time was that education not only contributed to personal development but, as Viswanathan puts it in one punchy turn of phrase, “[made] good citizens of the state.”¹² Haskell raises, perhaps with a strange glee, the specter of imperialism in the history of the “Neo-Latin” didactic, but her

⁸ John Milton, “Of Education,” *The John Milton Reading Room*, Dartmouth, 2024.

⁹ Elbert N. S. Thompson, “Milton’s ‘Of Education,’” *Modern Philology*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1918), 160.

¹⁰ Thompson, 160-161.

¹¹ Milton, “Of Education.”

¹² Gauri Viswanathan, “Milton, Imperialism, and Education,” *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 59, (1998), 351.

assessment, couched in terms of “discovery” and “exotic” experiences, doesn’t seem remotely interested in a critique of these historical condition. Still, the connection she forges between didacticism and empire is a useful one, as it carried over into the 18th century.

From the early to mid-18th century, the didactic mode enjoyed a surge in popularity, one that waned during the Romantic period. These poems were overwhelmingly georgic or scientific, rattling off discourses on health, medicine, and botany. As Tita Chico’s *The Experimental Imagination* explains, the modern firewall between scientific and creative disciplines did not exist in the 18th century: science was “a literary trope,” and literature was a scientific one.¹³ When Alexander Pope sat down to write the “Essay on Man” and “Epistle to a Lady,” for example, he approached the subject matter as “the science of Human Nature.”¹⁴ But Pope’s writing is an anomaly in a period where many of the popular didactic poems billed themselves as georgics. Starting with the publication of John Dryden’s translation of Virgil’s *Georgics* in 1697, poets cranked out their own highly stylized manuals on agrarian labor. John Philips’ *Cyder* (1708) was the of a lineup that later included John Armstrong’s *The Art of Preserving Health*, John Dyer’s *The Fleece*, and John Grainger’s *The Sugar-Cane*.

My dissertation begins when georgic poems were falling out of fashion, but the genre establishes key formal conventions regarding labor and social organization to which the Romantic authors I discuss were responding. In *The Wreckage of Intentions* (2017), David Alff explains that georgic poems like *Cyder* developed speculative visions of agrarian improvement, anticipating favorable outcomes from “Enclosure, fen reclamation, new roads and bridges,

¹³ Tita Chico, *The Experimental Imagination: Literary Knowledge and Science in the British Enlightenment*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

¹⁴ Alexander Pope, “The Design,” *An Essay on Man*, in *The Rape of the Lock and Other Major Writings*, ed. Leo Damrosch (New York: Penguin, 2011), 96.

navigable rivers, and granaries and textile factories.”¹⁵ Melissa Schoenberger adds that, didactic poetry performs the “grafting” of empire, “yok[ing] together various digressions” under the pretext of a single teachable subject and so “urg[ing] a vision of unity derived from the transformed energies of factionalism.”¹⁶

Juan Christian Pellicer comes at the same problem by way of a different term. In “The Georgic at Mid-Eighteenth Century and the Case of Dodsley’s ‘Agriculture,’” Pellicer describes how interest in the georgic mode began to fizzle. Using Samuel Johnson’s dismissal of Dodsley, he obliquely raises the problem of “decorum,” which he elsewhere calls “negotiation.”¹⁷ For Pellicer, this is almost a throwaway line, but it’s a telling one. When I say the didactic’s project is “negotiation,” I mean only this: that “negotiate” comes from the negation of the Latin word for leisure (“not” + “leisure”).¹⁸ Negotiation (not-resting) may or may not be a convoluted way of naming one of the foremost formal trends in didactic poetry, an emphasis on labor. This project of adapting and transcribing historical texts places the didactic in a peculiar relationship to information. In the preface to *An Essay on Man*, which he called “The Design,” Pope explains, “I was unable to treat this part of my subject more in detail, without becoming dry and tedious; or more poetically, without sacrificing perspicuity to ornament, without wandering from the

¹⁵ David Alff, *The Wreckage of Intentions: Projects in British Culture, 1660-1730* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 115

¹⁶ Melissa Schoenberger, *Cultivating Peace: The Virgilian Georgic in English, 1650-1750* (Bucknell: Bucknell University Press, 2019), 118.

¹⁷ Juan Christian Pellicer, “The Georgic at Mid-Eighteenth Century and the Case of Dodsley’s ‘Agriculture,’” *The Review of English Studies* Vol. 54, No. 213 (Feb. 2003), pp. 67-93: 71.

¹⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “negotiate (v.), Etymology,” September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7695209173>.

precision, or breaking the chain of reasoning.”¹⁹ The didactic updates, modifies, and copies in a formal negotiation between making sense and sounding good.

Romantic didacticism

Romanticism is often (and rightly) read as a pendulum swing away from didacticism and other 18th century styles, and away from the 18th-century emphasis on empirical inquiry and academic forms of knowledge that produced them. By most accounts, didactic poetic are formally at odds with what critics have codified as the private, personal affects of Romanticism. Such an artificial distinction, begun by canonical authors like Wordsworth and Coleridge and fueled by projects like John Stuart Mill’s “What is poetry?” (1833), disavowed anything resembling the didactic’s functional poetics. In a letter to Sir Walter Scott, Wordsworth dismisses Dryden’s poetics:

The only qualities I can find in Dryden that are essentially poetical, are a certain ardour and impetuosity of mind, with an excellent ear. It may seem strange that I do not add to this his great command of language; that he certainly has, and of such language too, as it is most desirable that a poet should possess, or rather he should not be without. But it is not language that is, in the highest sense of the word, poetical, being neither of the imagination nor the passions.²⁰

For Wordsworth, the inclusion of useful information defeats the point of poetry by through its affective attrition. Didactic poetry doesn’t inspire the strongest passions, so however adept the poet is at molding language to match external data, their work will, by Wordsworth’s definition,

¹⁹ Pope, 96.

²⁰ William Wordsworth, Letter to Sir Walter Scott, 7 November 1805, *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, volume 1, New York: Franklin classics, 2018: 208-10.

fall short of being “poetry.” Instead, it starts to look like the “mere metrical good sense and wit” to which Coleridge, in “Notes on Selden’s Table Talk,” reduces *Essay on Man*.²¹

Mill’s is a complicated case because he doesn’t strictly ban didactic poetry, but he does insist on “limiting poetry to the delineation of states of feeling, and denying the name where nothing is delineated but outward objects.” As he elaborates, “The poetry is not in the object itself, nor in the scientific truth itself, but in the state of mind in which the one and the other may be contemplated,” and therefore, “Description is not poetry because there is descriptive poetry, no more than science is poetry because there is such a thing as a didactic poem.”²² At face value, Mill’s distinction seems to flatten all poetry to a Wordsworthian excess of feeling, but obliquely, he also hits on one of the most exciting aspects of didactic poetry—its ability to produce different “states of mind” and different modes of learning than what we might encounter in a classroom or while reading prose. However, Mill goes on to make the famous distinction that poetry isn’t “heard but *overheard*,” dragging even didactic poetry into a form of “soliloquy” that would be at odds with the collective ballads of, for example, Spence.

These Romantic classifications would get adopted by the Victorian period, which summarily disavowed 18th century poetry for its lack of sincere lyric emotion. The rift was aggravated by the New Criticism’s pendulum swing in the opposite direction, which Phillip Harth recounts in “The New Criticism and Eighteenth-Century Poetry,” wherein eighteenth century poetics:

supplied the basis for the sort of language and structure appropriated by the early theorists of the New Criticism as the distinguishing characteristics whereby poetry differed from scientific discourse. Unlike the expressive criteria of spontaneity and overt emotion which they replaced,

²¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Notes on Selden’s Table Talk,” in *The Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol. 2, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge (London: William Pickering, 1836), 362.

²² John Stuart Mill, “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties,” *Dissertation and Discussions*, Ed. Henry Holt, 1882. Accessed via UTexas’s Classical Utilitarianism website, no page number.

these objective criteria drawn from a different body of poetry emphasized a kind of language—wit, irony, ambiguity, paradox²³

While this dissertation is not focused on theories of lyric subjectivity, I want to stress that the mythos of Romanticism was invented out of these terms, that to create a history free of the obscene social and political realities of the Romantic period, Victorian literary critics whittled down its poetics to the type of “spontaneous overflow of emotion recollected in tranquility” described by Wordsworth in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. This limited view of Romanticism is as much a problem of reading practices as it is of genre classification. As Virginia Jackson puts it in her summary of “lyricization:” “the lyric takes form through the development of reading practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that become the practice of literary criticism.”²⁴ Identifying the kinds of reading practices that develop into or out of didactic poetry will be importance for this dissertation, and these are questions I plan to revisit in Chapter 2.

Moreover, whatever Wordsworth or Mill had to say, while the georgic fell out of fashion in the Romantic period, the didactic stuck around and, in the account that Kevis Goodman gives in *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism*, remained indebted to its agricultural forerunners, even if its topics no longer confined themselves to gardening. This, at least, is the thesis of Goodman’s chapter on the Romantic poet William Cowper, whose poem *The Task* is, as she puts it, a “georgic of the news.”²⁵ This reinterpretation of Cowper’s poem allows Goodman to

²³ Phillip Harth, “The New Criticism and Eighteenth-Century Poetry,” *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 7, No. 3 (Spring, 1981): 526.

²⁴ Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005: 8. She continues: “the notion of lyric enlarged in direct proportion to the diminution of the varieties of poetry—or at least that became the ratio as the idea of the lyric was itself produced by a critical culture that imagined itself on the definitive margins of culture” (Jackson 8).

²⁵ Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

leverage the georgic mode to name *The Task*'s careful transcription of newspaper reports and historical events. The same social grafting that scholars identify in *Cyder*, Goodman locates in *The Task*. Amanda Jo Goldstein makes a similar claim in *Sweet Science*, one of the few examples of Romantic scholarship that explicitly foregrounds didacticism in by tracing Romanticism's many invocations of *De Rerum Natura*. In a compelling reading, she locates this didactic impulse in Shelley's *Mask of Anarchy* and demonstrates how Lucretian materialism informs Shelley's approach to conditions of oppression and revolt.

Similar projects on poetry in the Romantic period, all of them in some way indebted to *Georgic Modernity*, have discussed its more didactic poems in the context of the period's social unrest. In fact, the centrality of didactic and georgic texts by Cowper, Charlotte Smith, James Thomson, and Thomas Spence to Mary Favret's *War at a Distance*, Lily Gurton-Wachter's *Watchwords*, Anahid Nersessian's *The Calamity Form*, and Tobias Meneley's *Climate and the Making of Worlds* demonstrate how useful these poems are for studying the unprecedented social and political traumas of the period.²⁶ In other words, while the lens of lyric subjectivity has been applied to most Romantic poetics, poems like *The Task* or *Beachy Head*, which are in unequivocally lyric projects, also make use of didactic strategies. I want to add that I am not treating the didactic and the lyric as mutually exclusive, especially not in light of Anne Janowitz's description of the "communitarian lyric," which, according to her "dialect of Romanticism," combines the rational lyric speaker with collectivism.²⁷ Janowitz is a helpful interlocutor, but while she focuses on a literary history of Chartist poetry, I am interested in the

²⁶ Mary A. Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010; Lily Gurton-Wachter, *Watchwords: Romanticism and the Poetics of Attention*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2016; Anahid Nersessian, *The Calamity Form: On Poetry and Social Life*, Chicago: Chicago UP, 2020; Tobias Menely, *Climate and the Making of Worlds: Toward a Geohistorical Poetics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021.

²⁷ Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998: 11.

formal problems that surface in the didactic and in their longer historical arc. For one, there's a contradiction in didactic poetry (both Romantic and contemporary) between clear description and a mode that might best be called surreal or prophetic. Poets that hew closer to the first style (Charlotte Smith, for instance) emphasize the recitation of information in clear style. The other group—and Shelley would be foremost in this category, but we could also add Blake and Spence—argue their points along allegorical lines.

Yet for the Romantics, there were reasons for the seachange away from didacticism beyond aesthetic preference. William Blake understood instructors—like parents, angels, and politicians—to be agents in an oppressive model of education that reinscribed social inequity. In one of the most evocative moments of bad pedagogy in his work, Blake has “Urizen,” the catch-all figure of Enlightenment empiricism, imperialist accumulation, and Christian fixations on purity, open his “books of brass” and instruct us to “compel the poor” to live upon a crust of bread, to say that if a poor man says he is hungry, tell him he looks well fed, if he says he is sick, tell him he looks healthy. In the hands of Urizen, instruction becomes a way to maintain a violent status quo. Blake regards didactic poetry as a potentially harmful undertaking, one that could reproduce state violence. This was a reasonable concern, given that many 18th-century public education efforts were tied to policing and carceral systems of control.

Blake's suspicions make the didactic an incredibly strange choice for adoption by radical poets, both in the Romantic period and the present moment. The best articulation I have been able to find of this effect is Thomas De Quincey's essay “Pope and Didactic Poetry,” which breaks with the typical assertion about poetry as a particularly useful tool of perception or a pneumatic device and instead foregrounds the challenges that didactic poetry creates for both instruction and poetry:

If the logic of the case be steadily examined, a definition of didactic poetry will emerge the very opposite to that popularly held: it will appear that in didactic poetry the teaching is not the *power*, but the *resistance*. It is difficult to teach even playfully or mimically in reconciliation with poetic effect: and the object is to wrestle with this difficulty. It is as when a man selects an absurd or nearly impracticable subject, his own chin, suppose, for the organ of a new music: he does not select it as being naturally allied to music, but for the very opposite reason—as being eminently alien from music, that his own art will have the greater triumph in taming this reluctance into any sort of obedience to a musical purpose.²⁸

In De Quincey's account, poetry doesn't assist with learning or transmitting information, but rather actively impedes it. Similarly, the didactic sections of a poem interfere with a reader's ability to encounter and engage with the poem as a poem. These two registers—aesthetic and useful—are pushed up against each other, and the result is a productive dissonance. This account of didacticism works well for understanding radical networks of instruction because it creates or models learning under duress, the almost-impossible production of knowledge and community on the margins.

This dissertation, therefore, explores the historical role of poetry and social unrest from the Romantic period to the present. I'm starting with the premise that Romanticism exerts an unusual influence over contemporary poets on the left. This influence seems tied to the period's historical function: scholars²⁹ and poets³⁰ alike regard it as the moment where the versions of empire, racialization and capitalism that would be recognizable to a 21st-century audience were inaugurated. Joshua Clover unfolds a similar narrative in *Riot. Strike. Riot* (2016), which takes

²⁸ Thomas De Quincey, "Pope and Didactic Poetry," *The Posthumous Works of Thomas De Quincey Vol. 2*, Ed. Alexander H. Japp, London: William Heinemann, 1893: 192-193. Digitized by Project Gutenberg.

²⁹ See *The Calamity Form* for a discussion of the poetic formations in the Romantic period as a response to these developments, or rather to the modes of unknowing generated by the trauma of capital.

³⁰ I could also point to Juliana Spahr's *That Winter the Wolf Came*, a collection of Occupy poems that opens with a line from Shelley's *Mask of Anarchy*, or Chris Nealon's "You Surround Me," which writes about the Pulse nightclub shooting by documenting Keats and Shelley's time in Rome and the "just boys' rooms" they inhabited there.

riot as the collective action that defines the 18th-century and the late 20th century, two periods separated by a turn toward strikes.³¹ The prevalence of these historical references lay the groundwork for Julie Carr and Jeffrey Robinson's collection *Active Romanticism*, which considers the relevance of poets like Blake and Shelley to the contemporary avant-garde.³² With this particular relationship to Romanticism, Carr and Robinson take the Romantic period to be a blueprint for radical thinking. That argument requires a not-entirely-but-all-too-generally unquestioning reaffirmation of Romantic projects. My project begins in the gaps that *Active Romanticism* leaves open. In approaching the Romantic period as a template for or influence on contemporary radical poetics, I also consider the limitations and failures of its radicalism.

Here I want to come back to Jackson and her characterization of the lyric as a reading practice rather than an inert form, which begs the question, what reading practices does a didactic poem promote? While a complete answer lies well beyond the scope of this dissertation, I want to raise the relationship between didactic directness and transparency, between saying what you mean and disappearing into recitation. When I say disappear, I mean that citation,

³¹ Clover's argument is laden with issues, not the least of which are an overemphasis on taxonomizing the riot and a painful silence on the kinds of reactionary and racist riots between 1840 and the 1960s? '80s? that threaten to disprove not only the historical fact of his argument but its affective thrust. For his historical distinction see: "The new era finds its paradigm in the Los Angeles riots of 1992, following the acquittal of the officers who were recorded beating Rodney King brutally after a traffic stop—riots which spread to numerous other cities and continued for five days. Increasingly, the contemporary riot transpires within a logic of racialization and takes the state rather than the economy as its direct antagonist. The riot returns not only to a changed world but changed itself. *Riot-strike-riot prime*. Better. These terms provide the book's three sections. Each has not just a proper period but a proper place. For the first era of riot, the market, but even more the port; for the era of strike, the factory floor; and, for the new era of riot, square and street. To make good on this tripartite sequence, this book will need to discover both the continuity of the two eras of riots as well as their difference: the unity of a tumult in the marketplace and the often racialized upwellings directed apparently against the state" (Clover). Page number not available, text accessed as .epub.

³² Julie Carr and Jeffrey C. Robinson, "Introduction: Active Romanticism," *Active Romanticism: The Radical Impulse in Nineteenth-Century and Contemporary Poetic Practice*, Eds. Carr and Robinson, Tualoosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2015. See page 3: "Many of the avant-gardes represented here see modern and contemporary innovations not as a break with a retrograde nineteenth-century past but as a development from experimental Romantic poetry and poetics. This proposed revision of the common view of Romanticism as a period in literary history has immediate implications for the place of social critique in poetic practice."

instruction, and information evade the lyric reader by conveying useable facts *and* using facts to block the familiar channels by which lyric readers demand access to a speaker.

What I'm driving at is a poetic mode that uses the language of utility to problematize the idea of revolutionary poetry—of a radicalism that can be contained within or enacted through literature—in the context of either lyric or avant-garde poetics by straddling the language and formal features of both. Here it's worth noting that many of the didactic poems I will discuss are not “good” by traditional metrics, that they gravitate almost compulsively toward boredom, exhaustion, and cheesiness, or are overwhelmingly prosaic. They force us to make the distinction for ourselves between poetic language and practical language, to ask why *this* needs to be poetry. Part of the effect is a sustained attention to the poetics of moments that would otherwise not be read poetically.

The transhistorical focus of this project is clamoring for some clarification. First, it materializes my very real concerns about the role of Romanticism and periodization in the humanities and my own trajectory from Romanticist to poetics writ large. Second, one of the driving forces behind this project is the entanglements between Romantic formulations of radicalism and their contemporary afterlives. But it's a big leap from the 18th to the 21st century, and the attempt to overlay those fields runs the risk of collapsing one into the other and sidestepping nearly 150 years of poetic developments. In taking that jump, I want to avoid a reductive reading that admits contemporary experiments into the canon by equating them with historical ones. Instead, I think the exhaustion, boredom, intricacy, pattern, and recitation that accompany didactic poems have something to tell us. Ultimately, I argue that didactic poetry can lead us to more informal, queer, embodied ways of knowing than the academy currently leaves room for. I have grounded my dissertation in the difficulties of teaching 18th-century material

and in my frustrations with methods that, through years of white heteropatriarchal scholarship, are privileged in literary fields. Because didactic poems complicate the divisions between poetic observation and academic argument and revel in those complications, I hope my line of inquiry brings to bear on the poetics of 18th-century scholarship, on how we live with and write about the violent legacy of the period.

The Chapters Ahead

In Chapter 1, I discuss the problem of “utility” in the poems and allegories that Thomas Spence wrote for his periodical *Pigs’ Meat; Lessons for the Swinish Multitude*. While Spence wants his work to be instructive, he also actively resists the easy categorization of things and people as “useful” or “not useful” that appears in both conservative poetry by Hannah More and in British vagrancy laws. Instead, in a series of poems that protest enclosure and policing, Spence comes to align politically useful poetry with vagrancy and movability. Studies of radicalism and print culture in the long 18th century deal with didactic poems but tend not to name or foreground the didactic; however, this mode of address was central to radical reading communities. This is particularly true in the case of Spence, whose colorful history as a pamphleteer and activist is often seen as more interesting than the sometimes-clunky didactic texts that he produced.

Yet Spence consistently invites us to group his literary and activist endeavors and read the work he created seriously. For example, when he published his 1775 lecture “The Rights of Man” in 1792, he supplemented the essay with a Q&A—titled “An Interesting Conversation, between a Gentleman and the Author, on the Subject of his Scheme”—and lyrics for “A Triumphant Song for the People, on the Recovery of their Long Lost Rights.” In Chapter 1, I demonstrate the effects of close reading Spence’s didactic poetics, arguing that while these

poems have clear political agendas, they work overtime, formally, to link the enforcement of enclosure to the premise of utility. The poems examine how the desire for “use” shapes our reading practices, both as applied to poetry and to the landscape of Spence’s poetics, which is pasted over with legal and technical language.

In Chapter 2, Anna Barbauld and John Thelwall use the didactic poem to think through the larger problem of teaching literature, with each arguing that literary education is a key tool for developing political collectives. Barbauld’s *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* traces the implications of a world where literature is another natural resource that can be accumulated, mapped, and used up by the British empire. In what is ostensibly a pantheon of British literary greats, she also demonstrates that literature mediates English reading audiences’ perceptions of the world and that bad acts of reading have political implications. John Thelwall, the British radical orator turned speech therapist, takes this argument further in his writings on scansion and meter. This work ties meter (what Thelwall calls “English rhythmus”) to political and national identities, and in his writing on scansion—how to teach scansion—Thelwall develops alternatives to traditional models of literary education and criticism, models which, I argue, operate in tandem with carceral and industrial thinking.

In Chapter 3, I consider the role of embodied instruction in Percy Shelley’s *Laon and Cythna*, taking up the poem’s formal motif of endurance. From Cythna’s “strange tale of strange endurance” to the poem’s investment in probing its audience for a “thirst for better days,” Shelley balances the text’s desire for instruction with its principled resistance to coercion. I show that what he lands on is an emphasis on embodied instruction and strangeness, that is, with queer challenges to temporal norms that reimagine learning as, instead of the transmission of

information in service of clear futures, a form of material care that resists easy resolution into useful data.

The final chapter jumps forward to discuss three contemporary poets—Sean Bonney, Wendy Trevino, and Diane di Prima—who adopt didactic poetry for their writing about riots. I claim that in contemporary poetry, didacticism creates a transparent subjectivity that can navigate and survive violent systems of policing. For example, Bonney’s *Letters Against the Firmament* offers an on-the-ground account of the UK riots in London in 2011, weaving lines like “London is a razor, an inflamed calm has settled” with what he calls “lectures,” essayistic interludes featuring block quotes of, for example, Hölderlin or the history of Newgate prison. These poems make use of specificity, information, and citation not only to transmit information but to bring poetic reading practices (instead of poems) into spaces where they are not typically incubated. Read this way, didactic invocations of Romanticism activate what Goodman would call a “sense of history” in relationship to the histories of power. Moreover, while these poems are fundamentally didactic, they inherit their poetics from a variety of modes and histories, combining direct argument with a fair amount of oblique lyric and experimental reflection. The is especially true of Bonney and di Prima, who frequently slide into surreal or sometimes, as is the case for di Prima, spiritual reflections.

In the last section, I argue that Wendy Trevino’s didacticism in *Cruel Fiction* navigates her suspicion of political collectives and borders alongside her desire for a tactile, material care. The inconsistency and dynamism of didactic styles leads me to my final point, which is that the texts in this dissertation often use the didactic mode to articulate demands, especially impossible ones. Eunsong Kim ends *The Gospel of Regicide* with a note that “What we want is impossible, unrealistic & non-negotiable” (Kim 119). She includes this line after the requisite blank pages

and acknowledgements section that we'd expect to end a book of poetry. That is, she positions these lines both within the body of poetic text and outside of it. This seems to be the fate of the didactic poem, its perverse negotiation with not negotiating. If "negotiation" is "not leisure," what problems are raised by making impossible demands? What is the labor of naming the non-negotiable?³³

Ultimately, this dissertation makes a case for a didacticism that, rather than producing coercive forms of instruction, experiments with dynamic, shifting, generous, and occasionally playful modes of communication and collaboration. These poets are never doing just one thing, but are in conversation with other mystical, experimental, and political literary histories, and they use didacticism to engage with the politics of information and knowing. This engagement is not reductive, nor does it negate the value of lyric modes of thinking or writing. As di Prima writes in "Revolutionary Letter #8:" "NO ONE WAY WORKS, it will take all of us/ shoving at the thing from all sides/ to bring it down" (di Prima 9).

³³ Kim, Eunsong. *The Gospel of Regicide*. Blacksburg: Noemi Press. 2017. Print.

Chapter 1

“They cannot live on air:” Thomas Spence, Poaching, and the Aesthetics of Use

In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke makes an appeal that’s both counterintuitive and familiar: emotional vitality is the purview of conservative thinkers, a safeguard against the artifice of radical instruction. Of those who share his contempt for Jacobins, he writes:

We have not been drawn and trussed, in order that we may be filled, like stuffed birds in a museum, with chaff and rags and paltry blurred shreds of paper about the rights of men. We preserve the whole of our feelings still native and entire, unsophisticated by pedantry and infidelity. We have real hearts of flesh and blood beating in our bosoms.³⁴

Burke contrasts the unsophisticated, guileless, and organic energy of his intended audience, gathered under the pronoun “we,” with the taxidermized “chaff” of radical pedants. Whatever feeling Burke observes in these publications isn’t “real” feeling (to him), just inorganic, trussed-up artifice. There’s an almost embarrassing resonance between Burke’s emphasis on organic feelings, (“native and entire”) and Wordsworth’s pivot from books to the equally “vital” and “unsophisticated” vision of “nature” as teacher. In each man’s assessment, political thought should be private and internal, and informed primarily by individual emotions. Actual political education, Burke argues, should be reserved for the professionals—also in *Reflections*, he laments that instruction has been ripped out of the hands of the clergy and nobility to be “trampled under the hooves of a swinish multitude.”³⁵ Burke never acknowledges that in casting

³⁴ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Yale: Yale UP, 2003), 73-74.

³⁵ Burke, 68: “Happy, if learning, not debauched by ambition, had been satisfied to continue the instructor, and not aspired to be the master! Along with its natural protectors and guardians, learning will be cast into the mire and trodden down under the hoofs of a swinish multitude.”

his enemy as both pedantic “stuffed birds” and unruly “swinish multitudes,” he’s slipped into a bit of a contradiction, but this contradiction is invoked so regularly that it’s become more of a formula than a fallacy: plenty of pundits have lamented the soulless didacticism of the left in one breath and mocked bleeding hearts in the next. Nor was this valuation unique to Burke.

Almost twenty years later, Robert Southey, writing for *The Quarterly Review* in 1812, takes what seems to be the opposite stance—that radical texts were more emotional and “profligate” than pedantic—saying of Jacobin periodicals:

The lessons are repeated day after day, and week after week. If madder be administered to a pig only for a few days, his bones are reddened with its dye; and can we believe that the bloody colouring of such ‘pig’s meat’ as this will not find its way into the system of those who take it for daily food?³⁶

One of the authors alluded to is Thomas Spence, who is best known for *Pigs’ Meat; Lessons for the Swinish Multitude*, a series of political pamphlets that he printed during the paper wars of the 1790s.³⁷ Debates about the French Revolution and its implication for British law and policy dominated print media, and while many of these publications circulated in exclusive (and expensive) newspapers, Spence sought to expand the access of the public and the working class to these conversations.

Southey, writing in 1812, is a little late to the party, but his use of “pig’s meat” lets us know that he’s thinking about Spence. There’s also a fairly clever metaphor at play. What

³⁶ Robert Southey, “Inquiry into the Poor Laws, &c.,” *Quarterly Review Volume 8 No. 16* (December 1812), 319–356: 342. Southey is generous enough to clarify that Eaton and Spence are “political fanatics,” by which he means men of principle, just the “wrong” kind of principle. It’s their successors, the avid readers of *Pigs’ Meat*, who slide into “profligacy” (n.342).

³⁷ In *Volume I*, Spence stylizes the title “Pig’s Meat,” which he changes to “Pigs’ Meat” in *Volumes II* and *III*. I’ve seen scholars use both versions and have opted for the second one here.

Southey has in mind by “bloody colouring” is an experiment that began by accident in 1737.³⁸ A calico printer, using madder root to dye cloth red, mixed a slurry of the powdered root with aluminum and sugar of lead. After being dyed, the calico was boiled with bran “in order to clean [it] from a dirty red Colour occasioned by an Infusion of *Madder-root*.”³⁹ Unwilling to waste the now-red bran, the printer fed it to his pigs, whose meat and bones turned pink, as he and his guest discovered a week later, when one of the pigs ended up on their dinner table. The account was documented in M. Du Hamel du Monceau’s paper “Observations and Experiments with Madder-Root, Which Has the Faculty of Tinging the Bones of Living Animals of a Red Colour” and subsequently published in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* in 1739, where it probably made its way to Southey.

One almost wants to thank Southey for going to the trouble of finding this unrelated story about a different kind of pig’s meat and grafting it into his essay. Southey’s description of *Pigs’ Meat* wholly buys in to the affective excess of the text. In comparing the periodical to daily food, he attributes its staying power to a contaminating repetition, rather than to the effectiveness of its “lessons.” This is memorization by rote, the sort of pedantry that Burke despised, and yet the sly pun on madder and madness suggests that this repetition produces messy affect.⁴⁰

As Southey and Burke are both at pains to remind us, any articulation of this wound isn’t real blood pumping through “real hearts...in our bosoms;” it’s just “bloody colouring.” That is,

³⁸ M. Du Hamel du Monceau, “Observations and Experiments with Madder-Root, Which Has the Faculty of Tinging the Bones of Living Animals a Red Colour,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, Volume 41, January 1737: 390.

³⁹ Du Monceau, 390.

⁴⁰ A Spencean might point out that in Monceau’s account, the madder root isn’t given to the pigs for its nutritional value; rather, the pigs are fed the byproducts of the printer’s labor, and the artificial bloodstains are stage blood for the very real wound of political economy.

Southey's assessment, like Burke's, accuses these texts of bad pedagogy. It's the "repetition of the lessons" that make radical pamphlets so effective, rather than the persuasiveness of their content. Whatever feeling Southey observes, it isn't "real" feeling (to him), just trussed-up excess. It's this excess that makes *Pigs' Meat*, in the joint assessments of Burke and Southey, at once unnatural, sloppy, bloodless, alien, pedantic, and repetitive—taxidermized and still an open wound. Percy Shelley would have us believe that blood, especially the blood of nonviolent protestors, speaks "in hot blushes;"⁴¹ Southey serves us a pork chop.

I've started with Burke and Southey's condemnations of these "lessons" because they introduce two of the primary concerns of this article: British radicals' turn to didactic style in the 1790s and the aesthetic double-bind in which they found themselves. Spence, my focus, has an explicitly didactic goal, one geared towards encouraging a working-class readership to follow and participate in the political debates of the time. Spence saw it as his job to cut through the noise: a separate advertisement for *Pigs' Meat* on the inside cover of "The End of Oppression" (1795) informs the reader that "*PIGS' MEAT: THE HONEY OR ESSENCE OF POLITICS, IS now finished ... This is the only Book that in a direct Manner teaches the real, honest, and pure RIGHTS OF MAN: and that shews an easy and practicable way to enjoy them.*"⁴² This emphasis on instruction in political theory and "easy, practical" application of it recurs across *Pigs' Meat*, as in a passage Spence excerpted from Anna Barbauld's pamphlet "Sins of Government; Sins of

⁴¹ Percy Shelley, *The Mask of Anarchy, Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, (New York: Norton, 2002) pp 316-326: ll. 351.

⁴² Thomas Spence, "The end of oppression: being a dialogue between an old mechanic and a young one. Concerning the establishment of the rights of man," London: printed for the author, and sold by T. Spence, 1795: title page.

the Nation:”⁴³ “We want principles, not to figure in a book of ethics... but principles by which we may act and by which we may suffer...political principles, of practical utility.”⁴⁴

While plenty of conversative authors distributed condescending, ideologically streamlined pamphlets to the working class—pamphlets to the tune of “there’ll be no English beef and pudding if we have a revolution”—Spence’s work prioritized the intellectual foundations of these debates, introducing readers without the privilege of a liberal education or an expansive library Mary Wortley Montagu’s letters, Cato’s writing on freedom of speech, Jonathan Swift’s sermons, John Milton’s works on censorship, and James Harrington’s *Aphorisms Political*. Spence has since been edged out of conversations about Romantic literary culture, but while *Pig’s Meat* was in print, he was selling about 1500 copies of each pamphlet per week, far more than established magazines like *The Monthly Review*, *The Monthly Magazine*, *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, and *The European Magazine*.

As Iain McCalman’s puts it, Spence “[used] the language and literary forms of the vulgar, the poor, and semi-literate (including chapbooks, ballads, posters, and almanacs)”⁴⁵ to build a crash course in political and economic thought for readers heretofore excluded from those conversations. Spence is wary of assigning a dominant narrative to the material in *Pigs’ Meat*. His pedagogy boils down to something like “see for yourself,” and the nonlinear, paratactic structure of *Pigs’ Meat* requires readers to draw their own connections and form their own ideas about the relationship between different texts in different pamphlets. These efforts to cultivate an

⁴³ Anna Laetitia Barbauld, “Sins of government, sins of the nation: or, a discourse for the fast, appointed on April 19, 1793. By a volunteer,” (London: printed for J. Johnson), 1793.

⁴⁴ Barbauld, 41. Cited in *Pigs’ Meat* volume 2 as “The time is now come for men to be provided with principles of practical utility” on pages 82-83.

⁴⁵ Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988): 41.

active, participatory readership are highly innovative when compared with the more conservative approaches to education pursued in the political pamphlets of his contemporaries.

Spence also included original literary texts, including poems and a series of allegories of the utopian country Spensonia, and these original works are often relegated to a bonus feature that compliments his role as a publisher. Scholars tend to approach *Pig's Meat* at the high level, focusing on its broader social significance rather than its formal qualities, a gap I will attempt to fill here. Broadly, the existing scholarship on Spence can be divided between two general conversations, one on Spence's role in urban print culture and the other on the collaborative and colloquial nature of his poetry. McCalman, Kevin Gilmartin, Terry Eagleton, and Jon Mee take the first approach,⁴⁶ while Anne Janowitz tracks the ripples of Spence's "communitarian lyric"⁴⁷ on his 19th-century followers, citing Spence as one of the "first self-conscious literary activists."⁴⁸ Yet Janowitz and McCalman are mainly concerned with what Spence meant to later generations of activists, like the 19th century Chartists; and Gilmartin, Eagleton, and Mee read Spence as a printer first and an author second. Here, I build on these studies by foregrounding Spence's original poetry. Spence's original work is overwhelmingly direct, spawning a series of experimental forms designed to advertise their own utility. In their almost-comically self-aware functionality, Spence's poems and allegories dramatize their relationship to labor.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism*, London: Verso, 2006. On page 36, Eagleton argues that Spence contributed to a "counter public sphere" through publications like *Pigs' Meat*.

⁴⁷ Anne Janowitz, *Labor and Lyric in the Romantic Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998: 11.

⁴⁸ Janowitz, 72

⁴⁹ Most helpful in my thinking here has been Sianne Ngai's *Theory of the Gimmick*, which argues that gimmicks work too hard to do too little and in so doing, expose labor that we would prefer to remain hidden.

The tricky relationship to usefulness developed in *Pigs' meat* serves two purposes: first, it allows Spence to cram a decent amount of political theory into his original work. Second, Spence's didacticism borrows the ideas of use and labor to theorize policing and land ownership. Use becomes—and this is where discussion of the didactic *poem* is really key—a question of formal aesthetics, of style in addition to content. One major claim of this article is that didacticism (or “practical utility”) is both a formal and a political problem in Spence's work, where use, excess, and instruction can always be mapped onto the development of use and excess as new political categories. In other words, utility in Spence's writing is not just about the clear and direct transmission of a message, although that is certainly part of his aim. Rather, utility as poetic style allows Spence to theorize use in the social structures of land use and political economy. His useful literature reflects on use in the context of labor, capitalism and surplus—about how people and land are used under these systems.

Didacticism, use, and authority

Spence's poetry tells a different story about Romantic poetics than what you'll find in the Norton Anthology. According to the familiar narrative, if didactic and georgic poetry dominated the early-to-mid-18th century, political upheaval in the late 18th-century tipped the scales in favor of the lyric mode, which came to define Romantic poetics and the lion's share of poetry written since. Think of William Wordsworth in “The Tables Turned,” crowing “quit your books” and “let Nature be your teacher.” At first blush, this is a good deal: skip the slog of academia and learn from gritty personal experience instead. It also becomes the dominate narrative about Romantic poetry, which is often understood to access political reality through individual experience.

Yet as David Duff and Amanda Jo Goldstein have demonstrated, these unfavorable evaluations of didacticism bely the importance of instruction to Romantic poetics.⁵⁰ Even poets as avowedly “antididactic” as Wordsworth and Shelley—who wrote in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound* that “Didactic poetry is my abhorrence; nothing can be equally well expressed in prose that is not tedious and supererogatory in verse”⁵¹—occasionally dabbled in didactic genres.⁵² Yet virtually no critical attention has been paid to the pedagogical approaches mustered by poets outside of the Big Six.

To talk about a radical didacticism from someone like Thomas Spence, we need to understand the aesthetic principles that govern conservative didactic texts, so that we can contextualize the strangeness of didactic forms in *Pigs’ Meat*. This first section focuses on usefulness and efficiency as key aesthetics in conservative work from the late 18th century. I argue that use and practicality emerge as virtues in didactic literature around the time that usefulness becomes a political category in British law.

⁵⁰ David Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre*, London: Oxford UP, 2009. See Chapter Three. Amanda Jo Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life*, Chicago: U Chicago Press, 2017. See also Stephen J. Pallas, “‘The Hell That Bigots Frame’: Queen Mab, Luddism, and the Rhetoric of Working-Class Revolution,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 12, no. 2 (2018), pp. 55–80. See also Duff’s “Antididacticism as a Contested Principle in Romantic Aesthetics,” *Eighteenth-Century Life*, Volume 25, Number 2, Spring 2001, pp. 252–270.

⁵¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), in *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. Kelvin Everest & Geoffrey Matthews, vol. 2: 1817–1819 (Harlow: Longman, 2000): 475.

⁵² As Duff writes in “Antididacticism as Contested Principle in Romantic Aesthetics,” criticism was equally inconsistent: “The critical record shows, however, that such distinctions are often difficult to maintain, and that the boundary between what was deemed didactic and nondidactic varied from individual to individual and almost from moment to moment; the same Charles Lamb who could object to the obtrusive moral sign-posting of ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’ could describe the baldly didactic Book IV of *The Excursion* as ‘the most valuable portion of the poem,’ and *The Excursion* as a whole as ‘without competition among our didactic and descriptive verse’ (266).

We can see a more reductive and violent interpretation of use converge with didactic aesthetics in Hannah More's *Village Politics* (1793), another text from the paper wars.⁵³ More was a landed conservative activist from Newcastle who, during her lifetime, published a series of widely successful pamphlets and chapbooks designed to reach the working class. Written as a script, *Village Politics* begins when Jack Anvil the blacksmith finds Tom Hod the mason looking "dismal."⁵⁴ With a little probing, Tom reveals that he's been reading Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and now he "want[s] a new constitution."⁵⁵ Jack is quick to intervene, reassuring Tom that those in authority have their best interests at heart and that there are checks in place to protect the public from abuses of power. They debate for a while, and Jack converts Tom back to the straight-and-narrow. If all this sounds painfully bland, it is! The work is meant to be streamlined and efficient. At the end of their conversation, Jack even summarizes the key takeaways, with what corporate speech would call the "actions items": "If thou would'st shew thy love to thy King and country, let's have no drinking, no riot, no bonfires; but put in practice this text, which our parson preached on last Sunday, 'Study to be quiet, work with your own hands, and mind your own business.'"⁵⁶

More's rationale for this simplicity is a lack of trust of her readers. As Jack says, "I am a better judge of a horse-shoe than Sir John, but he has a deal better notion of state affairs than I."⁵⁷ In fact, More frets that should a Tom or a Jack happen to pick up a book that doesn't

⁵³ Hannah More, *Village Politics*, York: G. Walker, 1793. Digitized by Google Books courtesy of the UMichigan library.

⁵⁴ More, 3.

⁵⁵ More, 3.

⁵⁶ More, 18.

⁵⁷ More, 9.

carefully control its meaning, they will invent artificial feelings. When Tom is explaining the cause of his dissatisfaction to Jack, he says, while “looking on his book,” “Why I find here that I’m very unhappy, and very miserable; which I should never have known if I had not had the good luck to meet with this book. O ‘tis a precious book!”⁵⁸ Part of Jack’s convincing counterargument is that, whatever Tom’s complaint is, it isn’t *real* suffering if he had to look in a book to find it.

The book is also, presumably, guilty of bad prose. Tom’s use of “O ‘tis a precious book!” is glaringly out of place against the vernacular speech that More imitates through the rest of the script. She offers Tom as a comic example of what happens when working class people read intellectual pamphlets without the proper guidance. Print culture doesn’t merely stir up class resentment; it produces aesthetic and emotional excess from feelings that are invented out of books. In response, *Village Politics* is strict and to the point, leaving no room for interpretation.

By contrast, while Spence has an explicit politics, he is wary of assigning a single dominant narrative to the material in *Pigs’ Meat*. The nonlinear, paratactic structure of the weekly pamphlets (later collected in several volumes) pushes readers to form their own ideas about the relationship between different texts in different pamphlets. As we shall see, Spence also used poetry to push for attentive, active interpretation of both literary and political documents, a very different kind of study than More’s call to “study to be quiet.”

Most importantly, More frames the problem of radicalism as a problem of work. Jack warns Tom that if he gets the revolution he wants—a revolution rendered, here, in the terms of Gerard Winstanley’s diggers⁵⁹—“our new rulers [will] give us half an acre of ground a-piece; we

⁵⁸ More, 3.

⁵⁹ Gerard Winstanley, a 17th century land rights activist in Lancashire, founded the radical organization the Diggers (also called the “True Levellers”) as a response to enclosure in the 17th century. The Diggers occupied formerly

cou'd to be sure raise potatoes on it for the use of our families; but ... every other man would be equally busy in raising potatoes for *his* family," any division of labor would collapse, and none of the newly-minted farmers have time to attend to their other roles in society. He warns that:

if thou wast to break thy spade, I should not be able to mend it. Neighbour Snip wou'd have no time to make us a suit of cloaths, nor the clothier to weave the cloth, for all the world would be gone a digging. And as to boots and shoes, the want of some one to make them for us, wou'd be a greater grievance than the tax on leather. If we shou'd be sick, there wou'd be no doctor's stuff for us; for doctors woud [sic]⁶⁰ be digging too. We cou'd not get a chimney swept, or a load of coal from pit, for love or money.⁶¹

The threat here is scarcity, but it's a very particular kind of scarcity, where there is a surplus of work and a shortage of laborers. More focuses on the labor that needs to be done rather than on the laborers, a choice most clear in her passive rendering of "a chimney swept, or a load of coal from pit." In the world of *Village Politics*, people are collapsed into their labor functions, like the tailor named "Snip" or the blacksmith named "Jack Anvil." The problem, in Jack's (and More's) vision of a leveling scheme is that people have ceased to be useful to each other.

Importantly, the violence of use is already active in 18th-century thinking, not just about literature but about labor. In his "Proposal for Making an Effectual Provision for the Poor," author and former London chief magistrate Henry Fielding writes, "having nothing but their labour to bestow on the society, if they withhold this from it they become useless members; ... On this labour the public hath a right to insist; since this is the only service which the poor can do."⁶² Fielding explains just how the public might "insist" on this labor in his proposal—through

public commons that had been enclosed and, as their name suggest, began to farm there, with the aim of freely distributing everything they cultivated. Winstanley's philosophy was that those who worked the land should own it, and that, therefore, land rights should reside with farmers rather than landlords.

⁶⁰ More's use of "would" and "woud" is inconsistent.

⁶¹ More, 6.

⁶² Henry Fielding, *A Proposal for Making an Effectual Provision for the Poor*, Dublin: John Smith, 1753: 8.

the development of a workhouse able to accommodate upwards of 5000 people.⁶³ He is particularly careful to emphasize how individuals convicted of “crimes” defined under the 17th century “Vagrant Act” could, at a judge’s discretion, be remanded to the workhouse instead of the “House of Correction.”⁶⁴

Nicolas Rogers’ sweeping article “Policing the Poor in Eighteenth-Century London: The Vagrancy Laws and their Administration” explains that the actions prohibited by England’s vagrancy laws—of which there were more than the one mentioned by Fielding—were loosely defined, which allowed the 18th century British state to use criminal proceedings to extort labor from the working class. A complete history of the vagrancy acts is impossible here, but since the 14th century, England had some form of “wandering laws” which criminalized people (and groups of people, including the Romani people) who instead of settling in parishes and cities, moved from place to place. By the 18th century, “wandering” laws became “vagrancy laws,” as the unattached nature of the displaced poor became (in the eyes of the British state) synonymous with the intent to commit crime. Wanderers were assumed to be thieves, prostitutes, con men, and criminals because they were wanderers, and a stranger’s arrival in town, if that stranger was not attached to another parish, household, or job, was enough to permit legal action.

As Rogers explains, these laws were erratically enforced through the 17th century. Only in the 18th century did Britain adopt a more organized, carceral approach to vagrancy, systematically jailing and imprisoning vagrants. In this sense, the 18th-century criminalization of vagrancy “was shaped by ... the requirements of a capitalist economy for male, mobile labour.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Fielding, 13.

⁶⁴ Fielding, 15-16.

⁶⁵ Nicolas Rogers, “Policing the Poor in Eighteenth-Century London: The Vagrancy Laws and their Administration,” *Histoire Sociale / Social History* 24 (1991), 127-147: 127. See also Lynn Hollen Lees, *The*

As Rogers indicates, and as Fielding's language implies, carceral policies like the invention of workhouses often adopted the language of making the poor "useful" to the state.

While the vagrant as a figure is critical to Romantic imagery, only Celeste Langan's *Romantic Vagrancy* and Sal Nicolazzo's *Vagrant Figures* have spent any sustained time discussing this subject. For Langan, who focuses on Wordsworth's writing, vagrancy makes a stab at freedom and "mobility that appears to guarantee the vagrant a residual economic freedom, despite his or her entire impoverishment."⁶⁶ This freedom is, crucially, a "simulation," "a reduction and an abstraction."⁶⁷ The Romantic author borrows the image of vagrancy to attain a kind of freedom "consolidate a residual political identity," but the freedom and identity available to the author are distinct from the lived reality of vagrants and social outcasts.⁶⁸ Nicolazzo's book brilliantly expands on Langan's to move past vagrancy as a model for "lyric subjectivity" and argue instead that "Vagrancy...names a relation to police—one that often includes, but is not limited to itinerancy"⁶⁹. As Nicolazzo details us, vagrancy was crucial to the development of modern policing. Vagrancy provided the perfect abstract threat against which new police forces could test out what Nicolazzo calls "predictive" policing, wherein if police suspected that someone had intent to commit a crime—even before any crime had been committed—they could

Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 and Douglas Hay and Paul Craven, "Introduction" in Hay and Craven (eds), *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562-1955*, Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004.

⁶⁶ Celeste Langan, *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006: 17.

⁶⁷ Langan, 17.

⁶⁸ Langan, 17.

⁶⁹ Sal Nicolazzo, *Vagrant Figures: Law, Literature, and the Origins of the Police*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020:122.

make an arrest.⁷⁰ Wanderers were assumed to be poachers, thieves, prostitutes, con men, and criminals because they were wanderers, and the arrival of a stranger in town, if that stranger was not affiliated with another parish, household, or job, was enough to justify legal action against them.

I trace these histories of didacticism and usefulness because they bring into view systems of power, knowledge, and information. Didacticism implicates poetic form in historical systems of power—who is allowed to teach, who is allowed to learn, and who has authority to know. Didactic poetry in the hands of a Pope or a Cowper can reinforce oppressive or coercive systems of knowledge, but it can also be wielded to imagine new ways of arguing and of building political communities. To that end, I hope to demonstrate that what I call radical didactic poetry, however “useful” it may be, is always talking out of both sides of its mouth, that it runs headlong into these questions rather than sidestepping them.⁷¹ What I’m driving at is a poetic mode that uses the premise of literary utility to bring into view social and political assumptions about utility. In the case of Thomas Spence, the tacit link between didacticism and use allows Spence to make labor and carcerality visible in his poetry.

Antiquated etcetera’s and allegorical excess

This is a chapter primarily concerned with poetry, but to understand the connection between practical utility and clarity in Spence, we’ll come at poetry by way of a prose allegory from *Volume II* of *Pigs’ Meat*.⁷² The title of this allegory, “A Dream: requiring no interpreter,” is

⁷⁰ See Nicolazzo, Chapter 3.

⁷¹ See also Summer Kim Lee, “Wrong Impressions;” and Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.

⁷² In *Volume I*, Spence stylizes the title “Pig’s Meat,” which he changes to “Pigs’ Meat” in *Volumes II* and *III*. I’ve seen scholars use both versions and have opted for the second one here.

somewhat misleading, since Spence at several points goes out of his way to interpret the text for us, most explicitly with the introduction of an old man named Plain Dealing. I'll begin with the text's preoccupation with argument. Spence differentiates the rhetorical modes of the public from those of tyrants:

the multitude wholly unacquainted with the wiles of logic, had nothing to support their cause but a parcel of phrases and words now entirely obsolete; such as *reason*, *humanity*, and *justice*, with a long list of antiquated etceteras: whereas, on the other side, the *monarchs* and their *jackalls* [sic] had a notable way of arguing, namely, by *torture*, *whips*, *racks*, *gibbets*, *gallies*, *dung[eons]* and many other syllogisms of the same kind. This manner of *persuasion*, or rather *compulsion*, may properly be called the *logic of tyrants*. Pain they maintained was much better for clearing the understanding than reason; the latter actuating but slowly, whilst the other was almost instantaneous.⁷³

This passage's irony—and its bitterness—are palpable, lumping “the wiles of logic” and any other formal protocols for argument into euphemisms for torture. Here, legal rhetoric doesn't proscribe oppressive “persuasion,” it enables it. At stake for Spence, then, is the question of how to get through to readers in a world where violence and logic live in happy symbiosis. Spence doesn't seem to think you can. On the other side of his bleak dichotomy, we have “the multitude” and their “parcel” of abstract ideals—“*reason, humanity, and justice.*”

While these buzzwords have the moral high ground compared to “racks, gibbets, [and] gallies,” Spence doesn't mask his suspicions that these “antiquated etceteras” are exactly that, buzzwords, and no match for the bloody implements they're up against. The word “parcel,” which echoes Spence's term for the divvying up of land by landlords, clues us into his preferred solution—the sharing of rents in utopian Spensonia.⁷⁴ Compared to material redistribution, the

⁷³ Thomas Spence, “A Dream Requiring No Interpreter,” *Pigs' Meat Volume II*, (London: printed for T. Spence, at the hive of liberty, No. 8, Little-Turnstile, High-Holborn, [1795?]), 9-10. Accessed via Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

⁷⁴ See Spence, “The End of Oppression”: “When a People create Landlords, they create a numerous host of hereditary Tyrants and Oppressors, who not content with their Lordly Revenues of Rents, seize also upon the Government, and parcel it out among themselves, and take as enormous salaries for the Places they occupy therein, as if they were poor Men.”

multitude's parcel of "abstract ideals" does start to look obsolete, and the "Dream" sketches out a cynical picture where pain is the prevailing mode of argument and instruction.

Given the didactic premise of *Pigs' Meat*, it's strange to encounter such apparent distrust towards instruction in the allegory of Spence's dream. That distrust bleeds into the rest of the allegory. From the get-go, Spence leans heavily into self-deprecating satire: "Methought I was transported to a large plain, green, flowery, and watered with innumerable rivulets; whose gentle murmurs formed an agreeable concert with the sweet notes of songsters which fluttered upon their verdant banks."⁷⁵ Calling this passage "overwrought" is an understatement. The first sentence is mired with adjectives ("gentle," "agreeable," "sweet"), and the image is less "flowery" than florid, starting with another antiquated etcetera—"methought." Moreover, while we're supposed to take this dream as an allegory of various models of governing, Spence reduces the distance between the discrete nations to an almost-ridiculous proximity. The narrator goes "walking among them, observing their manners and customs, which I found were quite different, notwithstanding their near connection; between some only a slight barrier; others had even but small rivulets to fix their boundaries."⁷⁶ This is less a world tour than a jaunt through a farmer's market, with the speaker shopping for a politics like a pound of green beans. The scene is meant to structure the logic of its comparisons, but the scale of this allegorical space is so cramped as to leave the reader wondering what the point is of rendering the comparison as an allegory at all.

Spence seems to be thinking the same thing. The minute the Dream has set up its allegorical scenery, in comes a "grave, decent old man, called PLAIN DEALING" to strike it down again. Strutting into the court, Plain Dealing begins a speech that comprises roughly half

⁷⁵ "A Dream," 2:9

⁷⁶ "A Dream," 2:9.

of the Dream's word count but operates in an entirely different register, one more like an essay or a speech than an allegory.⁷⁷ Our orator's "harangue" covers representation in government, corruption, freedom of the press,⁷⁸ and then concludes that "*Despotic government* has now lived its time. The *Sun of Liberty* is arisen; already the clouds that have long held the moral and political world in darkness begin to disperse, and Reason, like a flood of light, begins to burst upon mankind."⁷⁹ Plain dealing, indeed. There are theories of allegory that discuss its didactic potential and theories that cover the critical glitches between reality and its abstraction, but Spence is up to something else entirely. To start, we could gloss the unfudgeable clarity of his vision as an effort to narrate an accessible, useful politics. We were promised a dream that "requires no interpreter," and the hero of the story is a man named Plain Dealing.

But while clarity—what Spence will elsewhere call "simplicity"—is one of this text's aims, Spence seems at pains to highlight not only the key takeaways of Plain Dealing's policy agenda but also the strangeness of the allegorical medium for conveying that policy.⁸⁰ In fact, the beginning of Plain Dealing's speech spells the end of the allegorical world. Once Plain Dealing wraps up his jeremiad, the dream doesn't last more than two lines, during which the narrator is summarily ejected out of it: "The multitude at [his] words gave three huzzas, which awoke me out of my reverie. I am, &c."⁸¹

⁷⁷ "A Dream," 2:11.

⁷⁸ For example: "They tell us we have liberty: yes, two or three hundred citizens have the liberty of lording it over all the others; of making and repealing laws at pleasure; of engrossing dignities, ranks and honours; of investing themselves with the principal employments of the state, and disposing of the public revenue" (2:12).

⁷⁹ "A Dream," 2:12-13

⁸⁰ See "A Further Account of Spensonia" in *Pigs' Meat, Volume 2*

⁸¹ "A Dream," 2:13.

One word for this abrupt conclusion is impatience. Spence has made his point, and it's time to move along, with the narrator scrapped as yet another antiquated etcetera ("&c."). But in total, more than half of the dream is comprised of Plain Dealing's essayistic prose; why would Spence go to the trouble erecting a dream stage around this speech and then mock, at every step, the "flowery" prose that he's using? Scholars have certainly discussed satire in Spence's work, often related to his parody of legal language. Janowitz mentions satire in passing,⁸² while Halliwell argues that "through a complex strategy of excerption, adaption, appropriation, imitation and satire, Spence sought to contest ... the way in which authenticity was assigned in the political sphere."⁸³ Michael Scrivener likewise discusses the problem that Jacobin allegory poses for legal interpretation, arguing that indirect forms like allegory were leveraged in response to oppression because they were not as policeable as plain speech.⁸⁴

In this context, a politics of plain dealing makes sense because, as the character Plain Dealing explains, there is no transparency in British law. "They pretend we have a constitution," he complains, "but nobody knows the mechanism of it," and ordinary citizens "are not sensible when we trespass, until the lawyers (those *bloodsuckers* of society) apprize us of it by process."⁸⁵ Plain Dealing treats the constitution as a black box machine; it appears to work, but no one knows how; any interpretation is restricted to lawyers. Here, Spence outlines that problem by describing the adjudication of "pretended crimes" that are enforced "by process." In his reading,

⁸² Janowitz, 76.

⁸³ John Halliwell, "Acts of Insincerity? Thomas Spence and Radical Print Culture in the 1790s," *Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity*, Tim Miles and Kerry Sinanan, Eds, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2010: 201.

⁸⁴ Michael Henry Scrivener, "John Thelwall and Popular Jacobin Allegory, 1793-95." *ELH*, Volume 67, Number 4, Winter 2000, pp. 951-971

⁸⁵ "A Dream," 2:13.

interpretation becomes a legal problem, and the dream, requiring “no interpreter,” seeks to streamline the language through which ideas are communicated.

Yet the dream requires “no interpreter” mainly because Plain Dealing does the work for us. Plain Dealing aspires to direct, useful communication, but his goals seem at odds with the larger allegory. When Plain Dealing asks “Are these imaginary ills? Do they seem chimerical, on account of that security into which people seem to be lulled— some by interest, others by fear?”, he’s naming the challenge of accounting for violence that is just out of reach in familiar grammars or for an authoritarian presence that, like the constitution, is shrouded in mystery.⁸⁶ However, Plain Dealing’s speech seems to arraign both the court of Despotism and the aesthetic operations of the “Dream” itself: after all, our narrator has also been “lulled” to sleep.

The lull is a familiar image of sleep pre-Enlightenment benightedness; Kant’s early praise of Hume comes to mind. By these standards, the end of Plain Dealing’s own speech is formulaic: the sun rises, night fades, and “Reason,” so far stuck on bench with the other antiquated etcetera’s, “like a flood of light, begins to burst upon mankind.” This is exactly the worn epiphanic smugness that Blake parodies in *America a Prophecy*.⁸⁷ The only surprise is that final expression. What does it mean for something to “begin” to burst? This suspended motion harks back to Spence’s earlier claim in the allegory, when it comes to convincing someone of something, “reason...actuat[es] but slowly, whilst [pain] was almost instantaneous.” The image that Plain Dealing closes with is not just wonky; it undermines the victorious finale of the dream with the suggestion that the instant gratification of its imagery is more like violence than reason.

⁸⁶ “A Dream,” 2:13.

⁸⁷ William Blake, *America, a Prophecy*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Books, 1997), 51–59.

Where we end up—the sudden stillness of beginning to burst—is a liminal space, one between image and understanding.

In conclusion, while “A Dream” clearly takes plain dealing (not needing interpretation) as a rhetorical goal, the obvious juxtaposition of the allegory’s excess with Plain Dealing’s directness, and the subtler perplexities of Plain Dealing’s own speech, suggest that Spence is not only interested in crystalline argument but in its limits, in the chimerical, ridiculous, or extraneous as sites of political knowledge. To that end, usefulness becomes not only a goal for content but a heuristic for exploring the liminal, excessive, or vague etceteras that expose the inequalities behind use and authority.

Spence and Spencer: the gimmick, allegorical reference, excess

If we take the formatting of *Pigs’ Meat* at face value, quite a lot. Immediately opposite of Spence’s “Dream” comes what is probably the most cited example of Spence’s poetics, the equally cerebral and roguish “Examples of Safe Printing.”⁸⁸ “Examples” takes as its central conceit the idea of saying “what you do not mean” to avoid being prosecuted for libel or sedition. Spence transcribes a portion of Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, credits it to one “Spencer,” and inserts parenthetical modifiers to alter the poem’s meaning. The result is this:

TO prevent misrepresentation in these prosecuting times, it seems necessary to publish every thing relating to Tyranny and Oppression, though only among brutes, in the most guarded manner

The following are meant as Specimens:—

That tyger, or that other salvage wight
Is so exceeding furious and fell,
As WRONG,
[Not meaning our most gracious Sovereign Lord

⁸⁸ Spence, “Examples of Safe Printing,” *Pigs’ Meat*... 2:14-15.

the King, or the Government of this country]
when it hath arm'd himself with might;
Not fit' mong men that do with reason mell,
But 'mong wild beasts and salvage woods to dwell;
Where still the stronger
[Not meaning the Great Men of this country]
doth the weak devour,
And they that most in boldness doe excell,
Are draded most, and feared by their powre.

Let us thus, O ye Britons, shew what we do not mean, that the Attorney General may not,
in his Indictments, do it for us.

SPENCER.⁸⁹

When Spence advised readers to “shew what we do not mean,” he had the Libel Act in mind.⁹⁰

The prickly logic of not showing what you do not mean before someone else does implies that the prosecutors saw what they wanted to see. In other words, the Attorney General, in scanning texts for libelous speech, was find meaning that authors did not intend and indicting them willy-nilly. If any speech can be turned into libel, Spence decides on a program of directness, saying what he does mean and absolving it of any legal culpability by slapping a “not” in front of any risky claims. The effectiveness of this format is its transparency. Spence wants plain dealing, and he’s got it. Despite the formal negation used to defend against litigious objectors, Spence’s poem isn’t shy about saying what it means. The section operates on a loud irony. The king and his “Great Men” are compared to the “furious and fell” tiger that “Spencer” banishes from human society. Blake had something similar in mind when he wrote a more familiar tyger poem,⁹¹ but Blake requires us to wiggle our way out of “the forests of the night” to the “immortal hand” of

⁸⁹ “Examples,” 2:14. I have tried to preserve the tabulation of the original, because Spence’s interruptions are important to my discussion.

⁹⁰ See Scrivener, Mee.

⁹¹ According to Magnuson, “One may read Blake’s tyger as a Spencean innuendo.” Paul Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998: 20.

the authoritarian maker.⁹² Meanwhile, “Spencer’s” poem leads with its punch line. His tyger does “not” refer to “*our most gracious Sovereign Lord / the King.*”

Because of the text’s bluntness, most readings of it are topical and focus on Spence’s relationship to the English canon. From Janowitz: “In *Pig’s Meat*, Spence advances a concept of tradition which, though not posed in the language of class, will define a ‘people’s’ literary heritage, even while claiming figures from the hegemonic culture.”⁹³ Likewise, Daniel Tiffany claims that *Pigs’ Meat* exploits the canon for radical ends.⁹⁴ And Spence slips into the first chapter of Paul Magnuson’s *Reading Public Romanticism* just long enough to demonstrate that the boundary between public (read, policeable) rhetoric and literary production requires further elaboration.⁹⁵ In pointing to the relatively topical treatment of Spence’s work by these authors, I don’t want to malign their projects—which, in most cases, only want to tip their hat in passing at *Pigs’ Meat*, anyway—but to highlight the importance of Spence’s concept (vs. content) for existing scholarship. It’s his most obvious moves that garner the most attention, with this particular “specimen” far and away one of the most popular. Spence made other stabs at the parenthetical form, most notably in a retelling of the story of Joseph and Pharaoh from Genesis, but that text is rarely discussed.

⁹² Blake, “The Tyger,” in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 24-25.

⁹³ Janowitz, 76.

⁹⁴ Daniel Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics: Riddles, Nightlife, Substance*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009).

⁹⁵ “As an incident in literary history, Spence’s trial is trivial, but it does indicate, first, a shift in determining what one can say publicly from the government to the jury, the representatives of the people, and, second, the problems in prosecuting seditious writing that relied on innuendo or any other form of figurative writing. The trial indicates, as well, the complex relationships between discourses and between public disputes and literature.” (Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism*, 19)

So, if the take away of the poem is so immediately obvious, why bother with its intricacies of the poem? For one, the problem of close reading in so blunt a text seems to be Spence's point; more specifically, we could read "Examples" as a test drive of this question: what happens to poetry when it's made to refer to the real world? As Anahid Nersessian explains in *The Calamity Form*, the problem of what can perhaps best be consolidated under the term "reference" is that a statement never says only what it means; the act of transcribing it in the disciplinary protocols of poetry alters its meaning.⁹⁶ In other words, no reference is reducible to what is said.

If we look at form in this passage, Spence is eager to demonstrate how reference damages the original poem. The running commentary is destructive, intrusive, even academic, tripping up Spenser's rhyme scheme with deliberately short breaks in a process that aligns with du Certeau's assessment of reading as poaching.⁹⁷ Here, Spence assumes the role of the poacher by deliberately misusing and misunderstanding the interpretation of the text. Yet Spence's adaptation is also strangely functional: his insertions blend with the iambic beat of the original, divided into 10, 11, and 10-syllable lines, and tabulated as a sort of bridge on the page. These interpretations both interrupt the poem and allow us to cross it. Visually, Spence represents the reading process as one that inherently includes, this sort of interpretation, which exists half-in and half-out of the text. But reference isn't just a problem of poetic form; it runs the risk of legal persecution. Or rather, the potential for legal persecution defines or is defined in tandem with poetry's claim on the real world. Poetry has the power to void itself, to be say one thing and

⁹⁶ Anahid Nersessian, *The Calamity Form: On Poetry and Social Life*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2020).

⁹⁷ Michel du Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Vol. 1, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

mean another, but didacticism seems to violate the immunity granted to poetic language.

Spence's closing exhortation "let us thus, O ye Britons," should also give us pause, as it consolidates a poetics, a function of reference, and a national identity under one banner.⁹⁸

Yet Spence's redux of *The Faerie Queen* is less a radical experiment than a gimmick, doing the most and yet doing the bare minimum.⁹⁹ He excerpts from *Book 5*, the account of the knight of Justice, Artegall.¹⁰⁰ In this sequence, Artegall has vanquished the tyrant queen Adicia, who flees into the woods, where, they "doe say, that she transformed was / Into a Tygre, and that Tygres scath / In crueltie and outrage she did pas."¹⁰¹ Adicia's transformation concludes Canto VIII, and Canto IX begins with the lines that Spence quotes in *Pigs' Meat*. Since *The Faerie Queen*'s tyrant has explicitly morphed into a tyger, Spence's move in taking those lines and turning the tyger back into "our most gracious Sovereign Lord" isn't necessarily building on Spenser as much as recapitulating the original story.¹⁰² To readers familiar with *The Faerie Queen*, Spence's excerpt isn't a harmless passage about a tyger that proves the radical potential of any old canonical text;¹⁰³ rather, the passage takes the image of a fallen tyrant and doubles down in a way that complicates the acceptable use of the older poem.

⁹⁸ The category of "Britons" was still in flux at the time. See Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

⁹⁹ Sianne Ngai, "Theory of the Gimmick," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 43, no. 2 (2017). "This ambivalence comes forth most strongly in the aspect of the gimmick which I think irritates and charms us the most: the way in which it seems both to work too hard and work too little" (Ngai, 472).

¹⁰⁰ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Ed. C O'Donnell, Thomas Roche, (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), Book 5, Cantos 7-9.

¹⁰¹ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 5.9.1.

¹⁰² It's worth noting that in "The Rights of Man a Song," Spence extends the tiger metaphor to landlords, who, eager to squeeze their tenants for all they can get, keep watch "Like tygers lurking for their prey."

¹⁰³ Tiffany, 185.

Spence's placement of "Examples of Safe Printing" immediately after "A Dream" allows us to read these two texts together in ways that further complicate each other. Most obviously, Spence has chosen a poem that incorporates the allegorical objects we see in "A Dream." Artegall, the knight who defeats Artica, is the knight of "justice," one of the Dream's "antiquated etceteras." "Error" and other figures from the previous allegory also put Spence's dream in the context of Spenser's romance.¹⁰⁴ His interpretation of the tyger passage for his audience certainly parodies a litigious publishing climate but his formatting seems to suggest that the interpretation of this reference is part of the poem itself, that the unraveling of Spenser's allegory is in fact just another layer of the text. Through this process, the bare bones layer of plain dealing becomes a form of interpretive excess. The gimmicky nature of this reference suggests that he doesn't just want to "show what he does not mean," but also to show that the labor of interpretation is part of Spence's poetics, placing his work in a liminal back and forth.

Didactic ballads: "The Rights of Man, a song"

Spence's poem "The Rights of Man, a song" is one key example of a poem that frontloads its own interpretation. Scholars tend to read *Pig's Meat* at the high level, focusing on its historical significance, but Spence also included original poems and allegories that hold up to close reading. Formally, "The Rights of Man" dramatizes a relationship to labor, juxtaposing the efficient usefulness of instruction with the excess and artifice of loud poetic flourishes. The

¹⁰⁴ If we're looking for a one-to-one mapping, we're out of luck, because Artegall, in the broader arc of Book 5, isn't exactly a Spencean. One of his first heroic feats involves the murder of a "giant" who he finds preaching a proto-levelling scheme to a crowd gathered on the shore. The giant, pleading with his audience, "Seest not, how badly all things present bee./ And each estate quite out of order goth? The sea it selfe doest thou not plainly see/ Encroch upon the land there under thee," anticipates Spence's concern with natural and unnatural processes of use and distribution. Artegall debates the man for a few stanzas and then summarily tosses him into the water, on the grounds that the balance of the world is divinely ordained and any desire to reshuffle the cards is heretical.

didactic premise of “utility” lands twice as loud in a poem about enclosure and policing, and when the poem becomes most “useful,” effectively performing its content, it also becomes its most useless, transgressing its own literary and generic boundaries and bringing those boundaries into view. The poem begins with an invocation of the muses, something fairly boilerplate for didactic poetry, and with an equally typical guarantee that a historical cause will be identified and explained:

ALL you who wonder at the times,
That they so hard do grow,
Come hither, listen unto me,
And you the cause shall know.

O Muses, your assistance lend,
While such things I rehearse,
As neither goose nor eagle’s wing,
E’er wrote in prose or verse¹⁰⁵

There are three key formal elements that stand out in this section. First, the poem bills itself as a didactic text and asserts that it has explanatory power, the ability to make claims about political, social, and economic hardship, precisely the historical explanatory power that, in *The Calamity Form*, Nersessian argues is ill-suited for poetry.¹⁰⁶ Second, it adopts the title of Thomas Paine’s theoretical manuscript from 1791. Third, abandoning the blank verse and heroic couplets typical of didactic poems, it’s written in ballad meter—also called hymnal meter, it’s iambic tetrameter, with ABCB rhyme—and set to the tune of a popular English ballad, “Chevy Chase.” Genre-wise, this is a three-car-pile-up, but it’s a productive one that announces Spence’s intention of remolding aristocratic genres for a working-class readership.

¹⁰⁵ Spence, “Rights,” ll. 1-8.

¹⁰⁶ See *The Calamity Form*.

The major cause that Spence's poem seeks to outline is enclosure. Enclosure, documented brilliantly by E.P. Thompson in *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* began in the 16th century and continued through the 19th century,¹⁰⁷ but it was in the early 18th century that poaching was first criminalized with the passage of the Criminal Law Act or Black Act in 1723. That law made poaching—defined as hunting on private land—a capital offense.¹⁰⁸ With this new ability to enforce enclosure, Parliament began to fence off public land: Peter Linebaugh estimates that “between 1725 and 1825 nearly four thousand enclosure acts appropriated more than six million acres of land, about a quarter of cultivated acreage, to the politically dominant landowners.”¹⁰⁹ Spence, who was raised in Newcastle, saw the commons there enclosed before departing for London as a teenager.

The problem of enclosure appears obliquely with the goose quill in the second stanza, which is too pointed a reference to skip. Geese, after enclosure, were not a freely available resource. As one popular song from the early 18th century puts it:

They hang the man and flog the woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
Yet let the greater villain loose
That steals the common from the goose.¹¹⁰

“Goose” in the fourth line, as later in the song, doubles as a term for a person, the silly goose who allows their land to be snatched up by landlords. By suggesting that poetry is subdivided into those who write with goose wings and those who write with eagle's feathers, Spence links

¹⁰⁷ Peter Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance*, (New York: PM Press, 2014).

¹⁰⁸ E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origins of the Black Act*, (London: Penguin Books, 1977).

¹⁰⁹ Linebaugh, 144.

¹¹⁰ “The Goose and the Common,” cited in Peter Linebaugh's *Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance* (2014).

literary hierarchies to hunting, and by hinting that his poem could be written with a goose quill, Spence implies that the didactic genre (complete with the invocation of the Muses) is something he has poached from classical models and refashioned for his own ends. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau describes an everyday reader—someone who “wander[s] through an imposed system,”¹¹¹ through a world controlled by language, without institutional protection or extensive education. This person, Certeau argues, is like a poacher slipping onto the enclosed commons at night, and in this metaphor, reading becomes an act of poaching.

Over roughly four pages, the “Rights of Man a song” traces the wide-reaching social and economic effects of enclosure and proposes a solution, deciding that most present iniquity could be solved by shifting toward a cooperative model: rather than taking “equal shares of land or goods,” the people in Spence’s utopian vision, grouped by “parish, *part the rents:/* Which better far they deem.”¹¹² So, the poem is essentially drafting a model for agrarian socialism, and verse is an incredibly unwieldy choice for this project, which begs the question, why is this a poem? Why, especially, does Spence choose to tackle enclosure, a project on scale with 2023’s inflation, or the housing crash of 2008, in a poem?

One easy response is that he wants to make political ideals easier to digest but given the complexity of the other documents that Spence reprints in *Pigs’ Meat*, it’s unlikely that his poetics stems from a lack of trust in his readers. Instead, I will show that Spence’s intrusively formal poetics push us to close read what otherwise should function as a straightforward political pamphlet, and crucially, the moments where Spence pushes us to attend to the formal features of

¹¹¹ du Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 169.

¹¹² “Rights,” ll. 95-96.

the poem are also those where he pushes his reader toward the traces of carcerality on the landscape and in language.

If we move to the middle of the poem, the part that traces the impacts of enclosure, Spence adopts a dialogic structure, introducing a secondary speaker who pops into the poem with “helpful” ideas for the English poor. These suggestions are summarily dismissed by the poem’s speaker, and as the two voices go back and forth, it becomes clear that the naïve proposals of the second speaker lack the material and legal knowledge of main speaker. Can people buy food? No, their rents are too high. Well then, can people hunt? No, the landlord has closed off the land. As the situation grows increasingly dire, the poem illustrates the impacts of enclosure by demonstrating how the pastoral ballad is coopted by the legal terminology of ownership. We see the intrusion of legal language into poetic language several times throughout the poem, but most clearly in the suggestion that, since they can’t hunt, the poor can fish for sustenance:

‘To fish then you will them allow;
The river’s not my Lord’s.’
Do not mistake, *the water’s his*,
And all that it affords.¹¹³

As the main speaker explains, fishing is a no-go because the enclosure acts extend to bodies of water on a landlord’s estate. At face value, this stanza is purely descriptive, an educational back-and-forth about just how severely enclosure restricted access to formerly public land. So again, *why is this a poem?* I think in part because Spence is dying for us to close-read this passage, and specifically to take note of the strange distinction between the river and the water.

The narrator corrects not only the interlocutor’s suggestion about fishing, but their language, replacing “river” with “water.” This is effectively an editorial move on the part of the speaker,

¹¹³ “Rights” ll. 32-36

who proposes a different but synonymous word the way readers sometimes do in writing workshops. Yet in this moment, the difference between individual words is not just a question of poetics or aesthetics—there’s a legal, and enforceable, difference between rivers and water as well. In British riparian law, “the Crown is said to own the water that flows through a river” and “the landowner holds the rights to the riverbank, which extends across its bed towards an imaginary line drawn halfway across the river.”¹¹⁴ The speaker’s warning to “not mistake” suggests that getting this distinction between “river” and “water” mixed up runs the risk of mistaking in the sense of not just being wrong but of mis-taking, perhaps fishing illegally or trespassing. This warning implies that that questions of ownership and authority come down to the distinction between “river” and “water.”

But while Spence’s language emphasizes a difference in language that is tied to a legal border, *what* that difference is remains hazy. If we put any pressure at all on the distinction made in the poem between river and water, it seems that the speaker has it backwards: water does not belong to any single landlord but flows from one estate to the next with near-constant turnover, while the *river* has relatively stable boundaries that allow for its demarcation as property. Yet the narrator corrects his interlocutor by modifying the terms of ownership from a cohesive ecosystem (“river”) to a material resource (“water”). The general perplexity of “Rights”—the whiff of a distinction that can’t quite be pinned down—highlights the arbitrary nature of legal enforcement and boundaries in 18th century England, even as the poem seems to confound, rather than enforce, the boundaries it describes. Spence strains the distinctions further with the pun on “afford,” which evokes fording or crossing. What the river affords—what it produces, all said to

¹¹⁴ Nick Hayes, “The battle for England’s waterways,” *Red Pepper*, October 22, 2019, <https://www.redpepper.org.uk/the-battle-for-englands-waterways/>.

be the property of the landlord—is already tied up in questions of boundaries and their transgression. Effectively, the text juggles poetic and legal language and pushes relentlessly toward moments where they get in each other’s way, and where our ability to use or understand one interferes with our ability to use the other.

Spence uses the poetic mode to highlight the entanglement of literary and legal language at a moment when borders and their enforcement were a major concern for the British government. As the speaker explains, the people dispossessed by enclosure have no choice but to break the law:

For why in truth they cannot live
on air or the highway
trespass they must then on the grass
if suffered thus to stray.¹¹⁵

At the time, the word for the existence Spence describes here, living “on the highway,” is vagrancy, one of the social effects of enclosure. “The Rights of Man, A Song” is keenly aware of this developing relationship between language, instruction, utility, and carcerality. As the loud zeugma on “live” reminds us—living on the air means sustaining oneself on air, living on the highway means moving along the highway—for people without land, living along the highway was more or less synonymous with eating air, since anti-poaching laws prevented public access to game, fish, or vegetation.¹¹⁶

Yet while Spence abandons the sentimentalism that would be more frequently used to describe vagrancy and displacement in Wordsworth and Mary Robinson’s writing—both Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* and Robinson’s *Lyrical Tales* have a tendency to callously pluck

¹¹⁵ “Rights,” ll. 44-48.

¹¹⁶ See *Whigs and Hunters*.

characters off the side of the road and ventriloquize invented stories that rely on emotion and empathy to make their political point.¹¹⁷ Rather than try to imitate the feelings or politics that Burke subscribes to, those that present themselves as “whole,” “native and entire,” Spence’s poetics lurch toward artificiality and a performative, excessive utility, a utility—an eagerness to inform, to be of use—that gets in the way of feelings, that is as distracting as it is useful.

The same process plays out with the intrusion of legal language into the ballad, as with “trespass.” While the poem is in iambic meter, “Trespass” opens the third line with a trochee, tripping up the meter. That “trespass” squares off in an internal rhyme with “grass” is even more disruptive, as it clashes with the ABCB rhyme scheme. And then, in the typography of *Pigs’ Meat*, lines 44-46 are on the bottom of one page, while lines 47-48 are at the top of the next, making “trespass” doubly intrusive as the catchword. In other words, “trespass” as a word is literally trespassing in the poem. It’s unclear, while we’re suspended in the break between one page and the next, what the lone word “trespass” is setting up for us, since it starts its own clause, and isn’t syntactically connected to the previous line. For one instant, the word “trespass” lingers in the open, alone, and it reads almost as an imperative, an order *to* trespass. For Spence, didactic instruction doesn’t just fall back on useful or objective knowledge. It becomes a lesson in excess, artifice, and transgression, in poaching political conversations from enclosed genres.

While analysis of this exaggerated correspondence between form and function, is typical of Romantic poetry and Romantic scholarship, I’d argue that Spence’s poem goes beyond the uneasy mapping of politics onto poetic form that, for example, Susan Wolfson applies in *Formal Charges*. In Wolfson’s account, formal slightness becomes a test ground for political ideas, while in Spence, form is changed from a sandbox for political rebellion to the intrusive means by

¹¹⁷ See Nicolazzo, Chapter 3.

which utility comes to name a relationship to boundaries and land use. In “Rights,” a poem designed to convey a clear political message, this degree of performative stylizing becomes excessive, a flourish that highlights its own performativity and the violence of that performativity in the context of policeable rhetoric and movement. Poetic style is thus implicated in boundary enforcement, in the creation of distinct discourses and conversations that Edward Said derided as “specialization.”¹¹⁸ His poem, by contrast, situates itself between and at odds with these distinctions, trespassing on them by bringing ballad style into political debate.

The moments where “The Rights of Man a Song” becomes most “useful” politically are also the moments where it becomes most obviously artificial, even gimmicky—the most, if not “useless,” then “tasteless” as poetry. To come back to Ngai’s theory of the gimmick, the poem is working too hard and not working hard enough, reminding us of the demands of artistic labor—of legal precision—of “good” taste and aesthetics—exactly at the moment where it deliberately fumbles the catch. If usefulness is one of the demands of a carceral state, poetry as a discipline almost by design bends usefulness back on itself, forcing us to confront expectations of who has to be useful and who gets to be useless.

Moreover, the premise of a useful poem, of instruction in poetic form, confuses the reading habits we attach to political documents and poetry. By giving us a pamphlet in verse about the enforcement of legal boundaries and highlighting moments of carceral language in form, Spence applies to political speech the closeness that we might apply to literary writing, and offers that close reading as a kind of tiny formal transgression. The interpretive work this section asks of us, with its layers of performative poetics, is not only to challenge institutional norms of

¹¹⁸ Edward Said, “Professionals and Amateurs,” in *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 73-83.

taste or “useful” literature, but to understand how those same norms and the same logics of utility and functionality inform carceral thinking.

This didactic style lends an artificial or performative quality to Spence’s claim that is ideologically central to his argument. One of Spence’s many goals in this poem is the naturalization of land rights, a reworking of political utility that combines natural history with his contemporary economic terms. The poem ends:

Ye priests and lawyers, who men’s RIGHTS,
Gloss o’er deceitfully.
Our common claim to rents will stand’
Gainst all your sophistry.¹¹⁹

This conclusion, that humans have an innate, God-given claim to “rents,” highlights the interrelationship between religious ideology and legal terminology in Spence’s vocabulary, an entanglement that extends to the language of the pastoral and the function of the didactic poem. It is incredibly strange that Spence claim “rents” as a common right in the eyes of not just the law, but of Christian priests. The negotiation between economic terms and the Edenic opening of the poem introduces a political utility that exists between economic and spiritual discourses, between specific economic terms and pastoral generalizations. As Spence demonstrates, use requires a relationship to natural resources that is both ideological and material; the didactic poem, in raising use to an artificial or excessive formal problem, demonstrates how usefulness exists stranded between the “natural” discourse of rights and an incipient legal discourse—how, rather, those two vocabularies are increasingly entangled so that any idealized relationship to land use is inconceivable except in more functional and contractual terms like rent.

¹¹⁹ “Rights” ll. 117-120.

Empire and allegory

Spence's unique understanding of place and boundary in his writing dramatizes the impact of land ownership and control on capitalism and the connection between empire and property. In this sense, Spence is a useful figure for examining the entanglement of what Aimé Césaire names as "the two major problems to which [modern Europe's] existence has given rise: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem."¹²⁰ This final section hopes asks how Spence conceived of imperialism and globalism through use in his poetry, how the forms of instruction and didacticism he chose expose the contradictions of British nationalism and its attendant aesthetics.

We started with a discussion of performatively overwrought poetry; now I want to turn to a performatively overwrought allegory from Spence's collection of stories about the utopian nation Spensonia. Spence's first story about Spensonia in "The Marine Republic" from Volume 2, but he mentions it in passing throughout Volume 1 and revisits the utopian nation in other poems, fables, and texts throughout *Pigs' Meat*. The "Marine Republic" starts with a familiar, almost biblical, premise: an inheritance with a catch. A dying father wills his three sons a ship under the condition that they share the vessel and any profits they derive while aboard. Each of the sons will have a distinct role on the ship—captain, mate, carpenter—but none of these roles will be superior to the others. Moreover, as their crews expand and their wealth grows, instead of hoarding more lucre than they need, they will divide the crew among new ships, each independent of the others and all governed by identical principles.¹²¹ With this, their constitution, squared away, the sons set sail.

¹²⁰ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 31.

¹²¹ "The Marine Republic," in *Pigs' Meat*, 2:69.

Unfortunately, they don't get very far. The ship wrecks on "an uninhabited island of a luxurious soil, and an agreeable climate," and the sons and the rest of the crew, stranded, make the most of their new digs by updating the contract of their marine republic for *terra firma*.¹²² They name the island "Spensonia," "after the name of the ship which their father had given them;" strangely, we only learn the name of the ship *after* it has been replaced by the island.¹²³ Spensonia the island republic operates much like Spensonia the ship—none of its members outrank the others, all property is shared in common, and when individual townships grow too crowded, new independent townships are established.

The republic is a success, and when Spence cuts back to Spensonia in a follow-up on page 207 of Volume 2, "A Further Account of Spensonia," we're greeted with an enormously prosperous utopia: "The island now became very populous and highly cultivated... Trade flourished, ships were built, and commerce extended to distant shores its reciprocal blessings."¹²⁴ In fact, Spensonia is so successful that it has drawn the attention of an English skeptic, who peppers a Spensonian with questions about the island's governance. His suave interlocutor has an answer for everything, from the abolition of land tenure to protections against internal and external corruption; in this, "A Further Account of Spensonia" falls back on the question-and-answer structure that Spence regularly makes use of, as he did in "The Rights of Man, A Song." The English tourist is convinced, remarking "if ever there be a millennium or heaven upon earth, it can only exist under the *benign* SYSTEM of SPENSONIA."¹²⁵

¹²² "The Marine Republic," 2:71.

¹²³ "The Marine Republic."

¹²⁴ "A further account of Spensonia," 2:207.

¹²⁵ "A further account," 2:217.

At face value, this allegory is also fairly straightforward one, a tale of men made equal by their father (yes, he represents god) and the fulfillment of this equality in Spence's vision of agrarian socialism.¹²⁶ But there are a few things to consider. Crucially, Spensonia is conceived as a maritime space and only retroactively converted to an island: "Thus they live in union and equality on land, as their father intended they should do on sea, and frame and people new parishes at the public expense, as he designed they should build new ships."¹²⁷ Considering we haven't left the allegory, this careful articulation of the one-to-one mapping between the ship *Spensonia* and the island Spensonia does most of the interpretive work we might be expected to do ourselves, should we sit down to interrogate this parable. Spence makes the subtext text, and we're left to wonder why he shrink-wraps a theory of economic governance in a story of sons and ships that (at face value) adds remarkably little to our understanding of Spensonian law.

If Spence's goal is instruction, his desire for "practical utility" seems at odds with the layered process by which he introduces his ideas. One ready explanation might be that the allegorical style was in vogue, and if Spence's goal is to revamp elite political and literary modes for the consumption of the general public, he does an excellent job. But I think this doesn't give Spence enough credit for the deliberate excessiveness of his allegorical worlds. Starting the story with the marine republic only to copy-and-paste its policy onto the island (which we are then intended to copy-and-paste back onto English farmland) feels excessive; we might have started on the island or at least with a shipwreck. "The Marine Republic" adds the trappings of a parable without necessarily increasing or altering the interpretation of the political outcome.

¹²⁶ Malcolm Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1750–1840*, (Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹²⁷ "The Marine Republic," 2:72.

This reduplication is compounded by the fact that the story delivers us somewhere we've already been. The first mention of Spensonia as an agrarian utopia happens much earlier in Spence's collected works—including as a footnoted reference in "The Rights of Man A Song"—making the space a timeless, floating reference.¹²⁸ With Spensonia already established, the dramatic reveal of the ship's name, especially so late in the parable, feels pointed, a way to emphasize that the moveability of Spensonia is central to its tenants. In other words, before Spensonia is a place, it's a way of getting around. If equality is predicated on the ship's principles of mobility and its existence in the landless, lawless, un-propertied abundance of the water, Nicolazzo has described "the uneasy convergence of vagrancy with white settler mobility."¹²⁹ In that vein, this mobility is rendered as the ship, the major signifier of what Lisa Lowe would call the "intimacy of four continents."¹³⁰ In other words, Spence's vision of agrarian socialism, designed to mitigate the economic crisis of rural British populations, requires the figures of empire to think through these possibilities.

This article has up until now focused on the dramatization of interpretation, even the kind of interpretation and application provoked through more gimmicky styles. Such a dramatization betrays Spence's skepticism about usefulness and his understanding that literary conventions, like legal frameworks, operate to the advantage of people in power. In the process, Spence maps the mobility and flexibility (or even vagrancy) of poetic "use" onto a non-possessive relationship with land. He moves from an extractive and absolute interpretive practice to one that lingers in

¹²⁸ The first mention of Spensonia in *Pigs' Meat* happens in Volume II, "A Lesson for the Sheepish multitude:" "Whether in Spensonia, where the land is entirely public property, a person with much money would have more reason to complain, that he could not purchase land with his money, than one that has little?" ("Lesson" 2:34). This text is, however, excerpted from a 1779 publication, *The Poor Man's Advocate*.

¹²⁹ Nicolazzo, 161.

¹³⁰ Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke UP, 2015).

ambivalence and relationality. However, Spensonia, which realizes this relationality in the end of land ownership, can only do so by figuring the end of property as a generalizable principle, like the ship's contract, that can be copy and pasted onto deserted islands or an infinite multitude of new ships.

The parallels between the abstract, adaptable utopia and its recourse to (or dependence on) imperialism becomes clearer when we note that before "The Marine Republic" was rendered in the form cited above, as an article in *Pigs' Meat*, Spence drafted the text as a follow-up to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and published it alone in 1782.¹³¹ In this version, "Spensonia" is rendered as "Crusonia" and is designed in the image¹³² of "Crusoe's" island. Readings of Defoe's novel as a fantasy of European colonialism are rich and varied, from Edward Said's claim that Crusoe "is the founder of a new world, which he rules and reclaims for Christianity and England"¹³³ to Martin Burgess Green's formulation that the novel was "the prototype of literary imperialism."¹³⁴ Spence's decision to imagine a utopia from the wreckage of this colonial plot demonstrates the centrality of the idea of the "new world" to British radical thinking, in part as a misplaced desire to, as the Crusonians explain, start over without the limitations of existing English laws. And while the Crusonians treat the indigenous inhabitants of the island far more generously than their namesake, they still pursue what could be called a program of conversion:

they took all Opportunities of informing the Savages of their Resolutions. and of inviting them over to make Trial of living among them. Many therefore came, and proud of acquiring equal Property and Privileges, in a Parish, or rather little Common-wealth, with

¹³¹ Thomas Spence, *A Supplement to the History of Robinson Crusoe, Being the History of Crusonia, or Robinson Crusoe's Island, Down to the Present Time* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, 1782). Reprinted in *Life and Literature of the Working Class*, (Berlin, 1966), 2297-2307.

¹³² Literally—the Crusonians use Crusoe's image on their flag.

¹³³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Knopf, 1993: 70.

¹³⁴ Martin Burgess Green, *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire*, (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 5.

every one else, on so short a Settlement, each presently pitched upon a Residence, got a Piece of Ground, and a House built on it by the Parish, and so fell to work.¹³⁵

So what is allegorized here? Does the story project the presumed global appeal of a particularly British strain of socialist agrarianism? Or does Spence mean to imply that the “savages” are in fact other members of the British public, those who have not yet been convinced of the logic of Spensonian policy? I would argue that the second interpretation is more likely; while Spence vehemently opposed actual imperialist violence and dispossession, this early work cannot think of use, simplicity, or abundance outside of imperial contexts.

Yet the account of Spensonia in *Pigs’ Meat* takes a markedly different approach. Here we might want to consider Spence’s clear articulation of the link between property and imperialism, between tenancy agreements in England and the logic of settler colonialism. Spensonia is located “not far distant” from the “Americas,” which leads to open lines of communication and exchange with the islands Indigenous neighbors. Spensonia’s land policy becomes a point of interest in this communication, when an “Indian” asks a Spensonian:

“How is it that you have no Landlords?...Many colonies of Christians have established themselves in various parts of America, and carry on here, as in their original country, the iniquitous traffick in the soil. They expel, or exterminate us, the natives, because we will not work, or pay rent to them, for living in our own country”¹³⁶

This passage partially anticipates the relationship between land ownership and settler colonialism that Brenna Bhandar describes in *Colonial Lives of Property* (2018), wherein “Property law was a crucial mechanism for the colonial accumulation of capital, and by the late nineteenth century, had unfolded in conjunction with racial schemas that steadfastly held colonized subjects within

¹³⁵ Spence, “Supplement,” 2306.

¹³⁶ Spence, 2:206

their grip.”¹³⁷ We have already discussed how Spence’s understanding of property as an agent of carceral power informs his relationship to language and style. Here, we can see that same critique applied to property’s role in imperialism. While there are limits to what his project can do, Spence describes a relationship to land in opposition to European colonialism.

Moreover, the allegorical excess at play here—the layers of metaphor that dramatize Spensonia as a ship and then an island, doubly participating in the figures of colonial mobility and settlement—demonstrate how Spence’s didacticism positions itself in opposition to the logic of empire. As the allegory progresses, Spensonia moves from an abstract parable, located in an unspecified, ahistorical place and time, to a reality much like Spence’s own, marked by the same colonial violence and populated by the English. Unlike many radicals at the time, Spence conceives of his agrarian project as not a return to some idyllic past but as a policy that responds to and derails the consumptive logic of empire.

In “The Maritime Republic,” allegory becomes a form of unknowing. Rather than awaiting interpretation, allegory is, at its worst, another kind of displacement—emptying out meaning to serve as a figure for new ideas. This isn’t to say that allegory is inherently colonial or violent—rather, Spence uses instruction to highlight the relationship between literary processes and the abstract impositions of property. The interpretive work this section, with its layers of seemingly unnecessary, excessive allegory, asks of us is not only to challenge institutional norms of taste or “useful” literature, but to understand how those the logics of utility and functionality inform imperial thinking.

¹³⁷ Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham: Duke UP, 2018), 2. Further elaborations of property and its relationship to imperialism can be found in *The Intimacies of Four Continents*.

Didactic writing is so often seen to equate to proscriptive, violent writing, writing that enforces its points. But for an author like Spence, in a moment like the 1790s, writing instructive literature is in some way unavoidable. At the same time, Spence manages to talk out of both sides of his mouth, developing a literary project that is, literally, instructive, *and* using the premise of that project to demonstrate how usefulness and directness participated in the British privatization of land in the 18th century. Spence's radical didacticism dives headlong into the tension between direct communication as an expedient political resource and as a violent extension of coercive politics, figuring that tension through performative excess in its own form, drawing on poetic excess and even play. Poetry is a discipline that can bend usefulness back on itself, force us to confront who has to be useful and who gets to be useless. In *Pigs' Meat*, the acts of learning and teaching are consistently placed in the context of a carceral, imperial system.

Chapter 2

John Thelwall, Anna Barbauld, and teaching history

There's a bizarre footnote in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) where Samuel Coleridge, otherwise discussing Wordsworth's prosody, veers into a nightmarish classroom scene. A child is made to act out their own descent into hell, draped in "fetters and chains, to the music of which one of his school-fellows, who walks before, dolefully chants out the child's last speech and confession, birth, parentage, and education."¹³⁸ The offence committed by this child? They recited poetry with the wrong inflection. Coleridge is deep in the weeds of an argument about the nature of meter—whether and when it improves a text—and he is thinking through this argument in relation to Wordsworth's sections *Lyrical Ballads*. According to Coleridge, Wordsworth's poetry refuses to acknowledge "any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition."¹³⁹ Coleridge disagrees with this approach, and he claims that poems like "Simon Lee," "Alice Fell," "Beggars," and "The Sailor's Mother" "would have been more delightful to me in prose, told and managed, as by Mr. Wordsworth they would have been, in a moral essay or pedestrian tour."¹⁴⁰

The distinction between poetry and "a moral essay or pedestrian tour" epitomizes the Romantic preoccupation with when and how poetry should be instructive; for Coleridge, poetry needs to be distinct from a moral essay, and the best way to achieve this distinction is meter. As he puts it: "prose itself, at least in all argumentative and consecutive works, differs, and ought to

¹³⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, (1817; Gutenberg, 2023).

¹³⁹ *Biographia*, Chapter 18.

¹⁴⁰ *Biographia*, Chapter 18.

differ, from the language of conversation; even as [66] reading ought to differ from talking.”¹⁴¹

Note 66 is where the elementary school children draped in chains make their appearance. The students of this draconian classroom are being punished for slipping into a sing-song rhythm when they read poetry aloud—that is, for overemphasizing the rhythm of poetry when their teachers demand that they read “as they would talk,” ironing out the wrinkles of meter.

We might want to believe that this scene never happened, but it likely did. Note 66 elaborates that this classroom is the creation of Joseph Lancaster, a quaker who invented the monitorial system in the late 18th century. Intended for large classrooms of the urban poor, the monitorial system prioritized efficiency—“teaching” as many students as possible.¹⁴² Lancaster’s innovation in this process was the deputization of older or more advanced students as “monitors” who, after mastering subject material, taught it their peers and reported back to a single adult instructor. A similar system was developed around the same time by Andrew Bell in Madras as a means of educating the orphans of British colonizers who died there,¹⁴³ but in Lancasterian schools, monitorial authority supplemented by strict religious instruction. We get a little more clarity on the scene that Coleridge describes from Robert Southey’s *The origin, nature, and object of the new system of education* (1812), which documents the rise of both Bell and Lancaster’s approaches of public education. In a comparison between Bell and Lancaster that reflects very poorly on the latter, Southey describes the cruel punishments of Lancasterian

¹⁴¹ *Biographia*, Chapter 18.

¹⁴² See Joseph Lancaster’s *Improvements in Education as it Respects the Industrious Classes of the Community* (London: Darton and Harvey, 1803).

¹⁴³ See Andrew Bell’s *The Madras School; Or, Elements of Tuition: Comprising the Analysis of an Experiment in Education, Made at the Male Asylum, Madras; with Its Facts, Proofs, and Illustrations; to which are Added, Extracts of Sermons Preached at Lambeth; a Sketch of a National Institution for Training Up the Children of the Poor; and a Specimen of the Mode of Religious Instruction at the Royal Military Asylum, Chelsea*.

classrooms, including how students were made to enact their own funeral procession and descent into hell whenever they struggled with lessons or acted out in school.¹⁴⁴ Southey's account suggests that Coleridge has exaggerated the relationship between Lancasterian punishments and poetry—any number of “offenses” could result in the funeral charade—but that exaggeration illustrates a key tendency in Romantic poetry, one in which poetic principals function as a microcosm for Romantic theories of education, and through education, political and social theories.¹⁴⁵

Importantly, Coleridge presents the teachers who reject meter as the authoritarians, “enforcing a semblance of petulant ease and self-sufficiency, in repression and possible after-perversion of the natural feelings.”¹⁴⁶ This rhetorical move flips familiar Romantic characterizations of meter on their head. Generally, *over*-emphasis on metrical accuracy is read as unnecessarily strict: Probably the most famous example is William Blake's blanket statement, in *Jerusalem, The Emanation of the Giant Albion* that he has chosen not to write in meter because “Poetry Fetter'd. Fetters the Human Race.”¹⁴⁷ Blake launched a lot of excellent critiques at the heart of imperial ideology, but “Meter is slavery” collapses the greatest calamity of 18th-century life into a question of stress placement and offers formal innovation within poetry as a solution to global systems of oppression. Plenty has been said about the repeated comparison of poetic constraint to slavery. One of the bulkier texts on this subject comes from Andrea Brady,

¹⁴⁴ Robert Southey, *The origin, nature, and object of the new system of education*, (London: printed for John Murray, 1812), 89-90.

¹⁴⁵ It's worth adding that *Biographia Literaria* offers an extremely detailed account of Coleridge's own early literary education under James Bowyer, whose classroom Coleridge holds up as a model of literary instruction. *Biographia*, Chapter 1.

¹⁴⁶ *Biographia*, Chapter 18.

¹⁴⁷ William Blake, *Jerusalem The Emanation of The Giant Albion* in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*.

who traces instances from the early modern period to the present where “poets invoke bondage as metaphor while effacing the actuality of bondage.”¹⁴⁸

By contrast, we have Coleridge’s lament that eliminating meter enforces “self-sufficiency.” “Self-sufficiency” is a striking charge to lay at the feet of unmetered (or seemingly unmetered) poetry; his formulation implies that metered verse and the artificial feelings that come with it do not impose order from on high but reflect our entanglement with and dependence on each other. Here, at least, Coleridge does not read the artificial constraints of poetry as drawing on, miming, or appropriating the aesthetics of real human suffering; rather, Coleridge describes a model of constraint that imagines itself as a model for the compromises and negotiations of social relationships.

The first chapter of this dissertation considered the changing role of didactic poetry in the 1790s—how radical poetry was used to transmit political information and how this development differed from earlier iterations of 18th-century didacticism. Chapter 2, while still largely about instructive poetry, discusses how Anna Barbauld and John Thelwall defined the value of *studying* poetry, and how poetry informed these authors’ pedagogical and in turn political principles. The two texts in question—Barbauld’s epic poem *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* and Thelwall’s treatise on elocution, *Selections for the Illustration of a Course of Instructions on the Rhythmus and Utterance of the English Language*—have little in common formally, and arrive at very different conclusions about education, but they share a general interest in literary education and its impact on political collectives.

Moreover, by the start of the 19th century, Barbauld and Thelwall are two of the only Romantic writers giving serious thought to pedagogy. Barbauld published children’s stories and

¹⁴⁸ Andrea Brady, *Poetry and Bondage: A History and Theory of Lyric Constraint*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 351.

manuals for education well before she wrote *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*; after the poem's disastrous reception, she would return to young people's education with *A Legacy for Young Ladies*, which she worked on until her death. By the time *Selections...* was published in 1812, Thelwall had become an itinerant lecturer, striving to expand the general public's access to information. While their work does not make it onto syllabi or out of 18th-century and Romantic circles nearly as often as it should, in their time, both authors were recognized as key figures in political and literary circles; until she published *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, Barbauld managed to be both popular and critically well regarded.

For each of these authors, questions of education, particularly literary education, extended the political project of the 1790s. Before he became one of England's early elocutionists, Thelwall, the erstwhile Jacobin Fox, gave speeches with the London Corresponding Society and published articles on political reform,¹⁴⁹ the impact of government spies and informers on intellectual life,¹⁵⁰ and the death of King Charles III.¹⁵¹ His interest in elocution stemmed from his work as an orator and his sense of the role that public speech plays in social movements. He would eventually be tried for treason and released after several months in Newgate. Barbauld campaigned for abolition and women's rights and, in 1793, published the pamphlet "Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation" through Joseph Johnson. Between these two authors, we can see how the political goals of the 1790s were translated into pedagogical

¹⁴⁹ John Thelwall, "The speeches of John Thelwall, at the general meetings of the London Corresponding Society, in the neighbourhood of Copenhagen-House, on Monday, Oct. 26, and Thursday, Nov. 12. 1795," (London: John Thelwall, 1795).

¹⁵⁰ John Thelwall, "Political Lectures (No. I.) on the Moral Tendency of a System of Spies and Informers, and the Conduct to Be Observed by the Friends of Liberty During the Continuance of Such a System," (London: D. I. Eaton, 1794).

¹⁵¹ John Thelwall, *John Gilpin's Ghost; or, The warning voice of King Chanticleer: An historical ballad: Written before the late trials, and dedicated to the treason-hunters of Oakham*, (London: T. Smith, 1795).

strategies by two authors who had participated in the radical movements of the 1790s and had seen those moments fail. Part of this chapter's argument, however, is that it cuts both ways—each author's ideas about poetic form and the best way to teach poetry translate to their theories of political activity.

The first section reads Barbauld's "Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, a poem" as a poem about the relationship between literary canons and political futures. Barbauld's poem is obsessed with the relationship between canon and sense of space, how English literary history informs a reader's understanding of the actual world. Barbauld was a lifelong teacher, but "Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, a poem" deviates from her earlier political and poetic writing in its suspicion of the effectiveness of instruction. The poem abandons causality at key moments where it "should" explain historical causes and effects, and increasingly takes up moments of failed instruction or miseducation. Her key motif throughout this process is the map, which figures in moments of instruction and literalizes of the premise that nations, histories, and ecologies are being shaped textually. At the same time, the role of echo and repetition in the poem suggest a coiling or folding of the map upon itself, a process that demonstrates how Barbauld juxtaposes instruction with inevitability.

This second section turns to the activist, orator, and poet John Thelwall and his study—as part of a larger elocutionary project—of meter in English poetry and prose. Plenty has been said about Thelwall's understanding of elocution and the social/political body. Less has been said about how rhythm and his understanding of it reflect a historical sensibility that, far from being an aesthetic game, bears directly on his understanding of political and social relationships. In preparation for this reading, I first trace Thelwall's characterization of the relationship between poetry and authority—how academic and critical conventions take on elements of state

proceedings. In response, Thelwall develops a democratic model for reading and teaching poetry, one that comes to the fore in his articulation of the concept of “rhythmus” in his treatises on elocution. This section plays fast and loose with the definition of “didactic poetry” because several of the texts that I discuss are not poems; however, they are collected in a volume on rhythmus, which by Thelwall’s definition, extends poetic principles to other kinds of writing; Thelwall is concerned with questions of instruction, most explicitly how to teach meter, and how to apply meter and other poetic principles to genres beyond poetry. In the last section, I turn to Thelwall’s poem *The Hope of Albion; or, Edwin of Northumbria*, a bizarre fragment of which appears in *Selections*. The poem never appeared in full, but Thelwall published smaller selections in the *Monthly Magazine*. In the poem, rhythmus links poetic concepts of meter and pacing to both Thelwall’s theory of pedagogy and to larger ideas of historical change.

Barbauld’s map of history

In *England in 1819*, James Chandler makes the passing observation that history reads like a map, at least for Anna Laetitia Barbauld.¹⁵² He’s drawing on the theory that she develops in “On the Uses of History,” a chapter in the posthumously published *A Legacy for Young Ladies*,¹⁵³ about the importance of studying history. “On the Uses of History” names exactly what *England in 1819* is trying to describe, a Romantic sense of history, and one that, as Chandler observes, makes frequent recourse to maps as a metaphor for historical understanding. In one striking example, Barbauld argues that

¹⁵² James Chandler. *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism*. Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1998.

¹⁵³ Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *A Legacy for Young Ladies, consisting of miscellaneous pieces in prose and verse*, (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1826), 117-165.

To know the transactions of a particular reign, that of Cyrus for instance, in the regular order in which they happened in that reign, but not to know where to place them with respect to the history of other times and nations, is as if we had a very accurate map of a small island existing somewhere in the boundless ocean, and could lay down all the bearings and distances of its several towns and villages, but for want of its longitude and latitude were ignorant of the relative position of the island itself. Chronology supplies this longitude and latitude, and fixes every event to its precise point in the chart of universal time. It supplies a common measure by which I may compare the relator of an event with myself (“On the Uses of History” 150).

The function of the island image here is particularly evocative, since Barbauld collapses historical and spatial frameworks. Chronology enables the insular navigator to explore and map out other islands, while the ocean functions as blank space, a kind of unknowing. This chapter will try to explain how and why spatialization becomes such a key aesthetic element in Barbauld’s writing and that of John Thelwall. I get to maps by discussing the role of instruction and canon, how these two poets develop ideas of teaching poetry and how maps figure in their poems as objects of instruction and its failures. As I said, “Uses” receives only a passing reference in *England in 1819*—Barbauld herself gets only a few pages of airtime—and Chandler does not engage with the multiple references that Barbauld makes to mapped spaces and their failures.

I opened with “On the Uses of History,” but these questions come to a point in Barbauld’s “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven,” which, written in the eponymous year and published in 1812, catalogues the damages of the ongoing Napoleonic wars.¹⁵⁴ The scope of the poem is impressive, moving from the local damages of war to the inevitable fall of an overextended empire and a London that has gone from commercial hub to a historical ruin picked over by tourists. This lack of subtlety did the poem no favors in its reception, with most critics fixating

¹⁵⁴ Anna Letitia Barbauld, “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, A Poem,” (London: J. Johnson, 1812; *University of Pennsylvania*, 2024, <https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/barbauld/1811/1811.html>).

on the text's didactic nature. John Wilson Croker, in a scathing article for the *Quarterly Review*, called it a "party pamphlet in verse."¹⁵⁵

At face value, Croker's is a fair assessment. The poem's thesis is fairly straightforward, "a call for pacifism in the face of national militarism" as Anne K. Mellor puts it, and more specifically, a condemnation of the kind of modern warfare that, in Mary Favret's words, happens "at a distance."¹⁵⁶ The anti-war thrust of the poem does borrow themes from Barbauld's previous pamphleteering, especially *Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation* (1793).¹⁵⁷ In this pamphlet, which was widely circulated in radical circles and reproduced in texts like *Pigs' Meat*, Barbauld grapples with the need for a vocabulary for national accountability. For her part, Barbauld lands on the term "national religion," which she defines as "the extending to those affairs in which we act in common and as a body, that regard to religion, by which, when we act singly; we all profess to be guided. Nothing seems more obvious" (*Sins* 7). *Sins* aspires to a system that will guide the English people and their leaders to make political decisions that theoretically align with moral values. In one of Barbauld's examples, "we should be ashamed to say, My neighbour's house was burnt down last night, I am glad of it, I shall have more custom to my shop" (*Sins* 22); yet in her comparison, this is exactly how England has responded to political upheaval and natural disasters that affect other regions, following the mercantilist paradigm of *so much the worse for them, so much the better for us*.¹⁵⁸ She hopes that a "national

¹⁵⁵ John Wilson Croker, "Art. VI. Eighteen Hundred and Eleven. A Poem," *Quarterly Review* (June 1812).

¹⁵⁶ Anne K. Mellor, "The Female Poet and the Poetess: Two Traditions of British Women's Poetry, 1780-1830," *Studies in Romanticism* 36, no. 2 (1997): 261-76.; Mary A. Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). Marlon Ross and William Keach make similar observations.

¹⁵⁷ Anna Barbauld, *Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation; or, a Discourse for the Fast Appointed on April 19, 1793*, London: J. Johnson, 1793.

¹⁵⁸ *Sins*, 22-23.

religion” will counteract the “cold, calculating interest” that motivated Britain’s many wars and lead to more rational and moral interactions with the rest of the world.

Sins has an explicit end-goal in mind, and in true Barbauld fashion, better instruction is central to a more peaceable world. How, she laments, are politicians and citizens supposed to make choices regarding the state when they have never had moral instruction for these choices? As she puts it, “Is there any provision for instructing the people in the various arbitrary obligations that are laid upon them, or are they supposed to understand them by intuition, because they are too intricate to be explained methodically?” (*Sins* 15). In part, she’s asking if history and national obligations can be taught, and if so, how this is to happen? Is this project meant to be intuitive or methodical?

Theoretically, “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, a poem” is meant to similarly instruct its readers but any didactic imperative in it is tempered with a cool resignation to inevitability. A didactic poem promises to explain why things are the way they are—think of Spence pulling his readers in with “all ye who wonder at the times/ that they so hard do grow”—but when Barbauld comes to the moment where she can explain why power and wealth move where they do, she backs off, laying the vicissitudes of history at the feet of an anonymous spirit:

There walks a Spirit o’er the peopled earth,
Secret his progress is, unknown his birth;
Moody and viewless as the changing wind,
No force arrests his foot, no chains can bind (“Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, a poem”,
215-218)

In this section, arbitrariness becomes the defining characteristic of history. This Spirit is “secret,” “moody,” and “viewless,” and that last word implies that he is not only invisible but unable to see what he is doing. Like “the changing wind,” he becomes part of the diffuse and atmospheric imagery that Favret sees as characteristic of the poem, the same imagery that, as she

demonstrates, is used at the beginning of the poem to define “the clouds” of war.¹⁵⁹ Maybe the poem opens with a party pamphlet’s condemnation of war as a preventable evil, but halfway into it, Barbauld starts to imply that this scale of violence merely follows the spirit’s unpredictable movement. Her prediction that England will collapse under the strain of international wars and imperial expansion becomes less the unfortunate outcome of bad policy and more the natural result of historical highs and lows. In fact, the spirit exists outside the law. The emphasis on carceral language—“no force arrests his foot, no chains can bind” and later her description of him as a “vagrant Power” only temporarily “detain[ed]” by the swell of prosperity¹⁶⁰—not only draws attention to the unpredictable nature of history in her world but presents that unpredictability as entirely outside human control and at odds with state authority.

James Chandler identifies “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, a poem” as a key example of “Romantic historicism” and in many ways a forerunner to Percy Shelley’s “England in 1819,”¹⁶¹ but Barbauld’s poem shares none of Shelley’s optimism. “England in 1819” is a laundry list of problems with the state and society, and like “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, a poem,” it singles out warfare and consumption as two of the worst offenders.¹⁶² But like a rubber band, the twelve lines of cruelty and state violence snap into the volta’s triumphant promise that these losses and cruelties are but “graves from which a glorious Phantom may / Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day” (Shelley 13-14). Even the jolting fragments that make up the poem, fragments

¹⁵⁹ From *War at a Distance*: “As we will see, scientists and poets together produced a recognizable *georgics* of the sky, fusing the *work* of war and weather to highlight questions of mediation, especially between bodies and events located at great removes from each other” (Favret, 122).

¹⁶⁰ See lines 259-260: “And now the vagrant Power no more detains/The vale of Tempe, or Ausonian plains”.

¹⁶¹ See Chandler, *England in 1819*

¹⁶² Percy Bysshe Shelley, “England in 1819,” *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose (Norton Critical Edition)*, 2nd Edition, Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, eds. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2002.

that might be read as incomplete or ruinous, foreshadow the abrupt, even explosive, resurrection on which the poem ends.

I'm invoking Shelley mainly to emphasize the contrast between his Phantom and Barbauld's, between the "glorious" potential of new illumination and the "viewless" Spirit whose movements are unpredictable and indifferent. In fact, the anthropomorphism of natural processes, while promising for Shelley's allegories, works to humanity's disadvantage in Barbauld. There is no law or system, however severe or comprehensive, that can make the "Spirit" stay put when he has taken it in mind to leave. The closest we get to the Phantom's triumphant illumination in "Eighteen Hundred and Eleven" is the removal of the Genius to North and South America, where "the Genius" inspires the series of revolutions that occurred against imperial power in the early nineteenth century. The poem ends when He "Shouts to the mingled tribes from sea to sea, / And swears—Thy world, Columbus, shall be free" ("Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, a poem", 333-334). Yet unlike Shelley's prognostication, the Genius's "noble strife" does nothing for England, which, as Barbauld predicts, will still be languishing in its own aftermath while tourists from America come to visit famous sites from their history and literature books. Haiti is notably absent in her list of revolutions.

Similarly, when the linear progress narrative predicts that farmers will "new mould a climate from the soil" (300), it echoes something Barbauld already said when she describes London's "mouldering" stone (124). In another scene, while commerce causes "ponderous ore" to be dragged from the ground (227), the visitors to London have already arrived to see its ruin, to see "some crumbling turret, mined by time" (171). She uses georgic images not only to undercut that logic with one of artifice and unpredictability, but to suggest that any growth of commerce will inevitably be matched, in both terms and outcome, by natural processes. In fact,

this destruction precedes and sets the tone for the commercial extraction that follows. Decay, here, seems to be the prerequisite for development.

This pessimism contributed to the text's extremely negative reception after its release, most famously in Croker's accusation that the "fair pedagogue"¹⁶³ had become a "fatidical spinster."¹⁶⁴ Kelly E. Battles has covered this reception and Barbauld's relationship to her public image in depth, but it's worth considering some of the assumptions baked into Croker's words.¹⁶⁵ If we want to engage his language, Barbauld was not, in fact, a spinster—she was married with children. What's interesting is that this doesn't seem to matter to him. What changes is her relationship to her pedagogy. Her earlier work is suited for children, instructive but also "fair," gentle, likable. "Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, a poem" marks her shift to visionary pessimism. She leans instead into the "fatidical" vision of an inevitable demise, and this pedantic style seems to be Croker's main point of contention.

Cruel and misogynistic as Croker's language is, it glances off something much more interesting: in Barbauld's descriptions of nature, progress, and production, an acutely pessimistic and anti-futuristic world¹⁶⁶ comes into focus, one where progress is a myth and any notion of the "natural" is filtered through human cultivation. The poem's world is one obsessed with what is useful and used up, what is left over, and what is wasted. These, Barbauld suggests, are the

¹⁶³ "May we (without derogating too much from that reputation of age and gravity of which critics should be so chary) confess that we are yet young enough to have had early obligations to Mrs. Barbauld; and that it really is with no disposition to retaliate on the fair pedagogue of our former life, that on the present occasion, we have called her up to correct her exercise?"

¹⁶⁴ This is an old term for "prophetic" or "fatal" as in, having to do with fate.

¹⁶⁵ Kelly E. Battles, "Anna Barbauld's Authorial Self-Fashioning: From "fair pedagogue" to "fatidical spinster,"" *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, Volume 44, (2015): 143-162.

¹⁶⁶ See also Walt Hunter's discussion of the "no-prospect poem." Walt Hunter, "The No-Prospect Poem: Lyric Finality in Prynne, Awoonor, and Trethewey," *The Minnesota Review*, vol. 85 (2015): 144-152.

extractive terms with which we engage nature, with the result that a poem that begins criticizing war ends up unable to conclude anything except that England is, in the words of William Cowper, “a mutilated structure soon to fall.”¹⁶⁷

Apocalypse and empire

The anonymous pamphlet *Rethinking the Apocalypse: An Indigenous Anti-futurist Manifesto* opens with the question “Why can we imagine the ending of the world, yet not the ending of colonialism?”¹⁶⁸ It’s a question levied primarily at the vocabulary of “end times” and “apocalypse” that proliferated in the early stages of the coronavirus, but it clearly has something to say to a poem like “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven,” which plays with imagery of totalizing destruction.¹⁶⁹ As the pamphlet observes, “Our ancestors understood that this way of being could not be reasoned or negotiated with. That it could not be mitigated or redeemed. They understood that the apocalyptic only exists in absolutes.”¹⁷⁰ The fatal (“fatidical”) logic of the poem is central motif of imperialism—expansion is a universal logic, unchangeable and inevitable. British imperialism, in these terms, is as inevitable as other natural processes.

The connection between the apocalyptic lurch of the poem and its imperialist logic has been well remarked on, by Suvir Kaul, Robert Birns and others.¹⁷¹ Birns explains that much of

¹⁶⁷ See William Cowper, *The Task, Book I*.

¹⁶⁸ “Rethinking the Apocalypse,” *Indigenous Action*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.indigenoussaction.org/rethinking-the-apocalypse-an-indigenous-anti-futurist-manifesto/>.

¹⁶⁹ See Penny Bradshaw, “Dystopian Futures: Time-travel and Millenarian Visions in the Poetry of Anna Barbauld and Charlotte Smith,” *Romanticism on the Net*, vol. 21 (February 2021).

¹⁷⁰ “Rethinking the Apocalypse.”

¹⁷¹ See also Francesco Crocco, “The Colonial Subtext of Anna Letitia Barbauld’s Eighteen Hundred and Eleven,” *Wordsworth Circle* 41, no. 2 (2010): 91- 94.

the poem is concerned with the role of the canon in future instruction—how will American students read British literature? As he puts it: “Her poem possesses an optimism dependent on the sense of the mobile resilience of Anglophone culture, premised on the existence of the United States and of what later became Anglophone Canada.”¹⁷² For my part, I think Barbauld is deeply suspicious of the ways we can know the world, and my point is that this pessimism vis-à-vis instruction and information nevertheless goes hand in hand with her imperialism. One question I have for this section of the chapter is the extent to which Barbauld’s poem deals in absolutes, in broad strokes versus specificity. While I’m not yet sure where she lands, I think it is fair to say that she is intrigued by questions of specificity versus generality, of the problem of mentioning Chimborazo in the same general breath as (for instance) Niagara. Birns also hints at this when he remarks, in passing, on “The general, visionary aspect to the poem’s specter of the Western Hemisphere.”¹⁷³

Kaul sees Barbauld as troping various types of imperial historicism. He calls the poem “a stunning reversal of the aspiration of national expansion, doubly effective in that she reiterates and works within the comparative historical schemas and the poetic idiom constitutive of the poetry of empire.”¹⁷⁴ At the same time, Barbauld can’t quite get out of the world she creates: “Barbauld’s poem reminds us that such theories of evolutionary but uneven development are

¹⁷² Nicholas Birns, “‘Thy World, Columbus!’: Barbauld and Global Space, 1803, ‘1811’, 1812, 2003,” *European Romantic Review* 16, no. 5 (2005): 545-62.

¹⁷³ See Birns: “She used dramatic South American landscape to explicitly portray ‘manifest destiny.’ The mention of Chimborazo also brings to mind, besides Humboldt, the American painter Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), who used this and similar “exotic” locales as a display-place for a United States nationalism (e.g., his 1864 painting of Chimborazo), even if Church knew that United States territory, or the English language as primary vehicle, would never extend that far south. The general, visionary aspect to the poem’s specter of the Western Hemisphere is perhaps what Barbauld’s younger contemporary, the diarist Henry Crabb Robinson (1775–1867), in a caustic and perplexed commentary, meant when he said Barbauld had ‘the confidence of a prophet’.”

¹⁷⁴ Suvir Kaul, *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire: English Verse in the Long Eighteenth Century*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 127.

inextricable from—indeed, enabled by—the vision of the world made available by mercantile and imperial expansion in the eighteenth century.”¹⁷⁵ Jessie Reeder argues that Barbauld’s poem is “structured on two competing narratives of history, a feature that allows Barbauld to achieve a metahistorical awareness of empire, to describe the very poems of empire themselves” and that its two narratives offer a conflicted, even paradoxical, vision of progress, the first on English triumphalism and linear telos and the second structured on cyclical time.¹⁷⁶ She sees a clean break on line 215 of the poem, between 214 and 215, when the Spirit enters the scene.¹⁷⁷ While I’m not entirely convinced that the tension between the two narratives is enough to negate their respective imperialist ideologies, Reeder’s formal analysis of the poem as two versions of the same history is incredibly persuasive. This is, ultimately a poem about how to teach canons.

For the purposes of this dissertation, the poem is concerned with instruction and what will be taught and teachable. Part of Barbauld’s point is that canons and instruction are central to perceptions of history and war. Central to this chapter is my sense that Barbauld uses education to trace processes of war and imperialism in her poem. While it seems skeptical of the role of the didactic, Barbauld’s poem is obsessed with motifs of instruction. The first scene of this is her description of newspapers and the arrival of news from abroad. She describes “some soft one” looking over the map:

...the spread map with anxious eye explores,
Its dotted boundaries and penciled shores,
Asks *where* the spot that wrecked her bliss is found,
And learns its name but to detest the sound. (“Eighteen Hundred and Eleven”, 35-38)

¹⁷⁵ Kaul, 130.

¹⁷⁶ Jessie Reeder, ““A World Without ‘Dependant Kings’: ‘Eighteen Hundred and Eleven’ and the Forms of Informal Empire,” *Studies in Romanticism* 53, No. 4 (Winter 2014), 564.

¹⁷⁷ Reeder, 566-569.

In contrast to motifs of instruction that where about the world enriches a young student or evokes a wondering of interconnectedness, this scene is brutally pessimistic. The soft one already knows the most important information, that her love, or child, or friend has been killed, as she reads the newspaper for updates from the front before she turns to the map. By the time she's pulled the map out, she merely wants to locate the place where a known loss transpired, and this knowledge doesn't seem to benefit her. She immediately "detests" the sound of the name she learns; instruction opens onto a vehicle for further grief, rather than for resolution. What she learns is only a more specialized version of her grief.

Bizarrely, several lines later, Barbauld introduces the same language, albeit with a twist. She's describing the fall of empires and the process by which the spirit leaves places behind, and tourists come to the sites of "once great" empires to explore the ruins:

Then with enthusiast love the pilgrim roves
To seek his footsteps in forsaken groves,
Explores the fractured arch, the ruined tower,
Those limbs disjointed of gigantic power;
Still at each step he dreads the adder's sting,
The Arab's javelin, or the tiger's spring;
With doubtful caution treads the echoing ground,
And asks where Troy or Babylon is found. ("Eighteen Hundred and Eleven", 251-258)

In keeping with the general attitudes of the poem, this acquisition of knowledge happens in highly orientalist terms as Barbauld traces a kind of Ozymandian vision of ruin and "exploration." However, what's striking in this passage is the incredibly loud echo of the last lines quoted above, read alongside the "soft-one" looking over the newspaper: "With doubtful caution treads the echoing ground,/ And asks where Troy or Babylon is found." Instead of wrecked bliss, we see the bodily terms of ruined power, disjointed limbs, a shift from a human scale of loss to a metonymic one. Several words are directly recycled as well, including not just "asks where ___ is found" but also "explores." The meter does shift: "where" is stressed above,

while “ask” is stressed here. Troy and Babylon, we’re given to understand, are impossible to find. The spot that wrecked bliss, too easy to locate.

But opposing emotional registers aside, we get the same scene as before, an anxious person exploring something (a map, a place), looking for a specific spot. Barbauld’s choice to borrow the echo of her previous sentence does two things here. The first is, it loops this exploration into the process of death and conquest that she has described above. It implicates the kind of orientalist tourism she’s describing in the same forms of destruction as the war that kills the men that the newspaper woman grieves. She creates a link that suggests they are both involved in the same process, that the forms of knowledge available to them are the same, that they are looking for a specific spot that never quite materializes. They ask, “where Troy it is found”, a passive rendering that removes the finder (“where can I find Troy?”) and, furthermore, goes unanswered.

It’s worth noting that Barbauld seems deeply suspicious of the kinds of knowledge the “enthusiast pilgrim” is looking for. Rather than holding him up as an exemplar of worldly sensibility, Barbauld seems more ambivalent about his roving. The phrase “seek his footsteps” means the pilgrim seeks the Genius’ footsteps, but the line suggests a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, that the pilgrim treads somewhere he’s already been and will find things he already knows. He is potentially looking for his *own* footsteps, for example, looking to be somewhere he’s been before. The knowledge of this searching can only be self-referential.

Similarly, the “echoing ground” suggests that he hears only what his seeking footsteps tell him, that he doesn’t learn anything other than what is echoed by his own tread. At the same time, this moment also puns on the echo of the earlier passage. The ground he walks on not only echoes his footsteps, drowning out the sonic input of his asking and any potential answer. That

echoing links the echo of his own hollow form of knowledge with the echo of learning the name but to detest the sound—the imperial knowledge of maps and war. In both moments, knowledge doesn't change anything. The pilgrim sees the world only as an extension of his own enthusiasm, while the soft one perceives it through her own loss, unable to know place except as an extension of herself. Ultimately, the soft one sees the world no differently than the enthusiast, at least in the sense that the world she observes is geared toward specificity and shaped by her own emotional preconditioning. It's also worth adding that this is an extremely asymmetrical echo, one that binds a highly specific scene of a woman reading the newspaper to learn of her loved ones' deaths in the Napoleonic wars to a scene that is all but completely ejected from time.

At stake here is the question of generality and specificity that I think is at play throughout Barbauld's poem. If we return to Reeder's premise of the same story told multiple times, while I think this echo isn't quite an instance of this, she demonstrates that the same language can be applied to multiple scenarios, however distinct. The issue is that these two examples can't be placed in clear relationship to each other. Beyond the obvious themes of empire and conquest, and the echo of language, beyond the broad and general tenor of each scene and its micro-level language, there is a huge disconnect, and it's that disconnect that is significant for Barbauld, the extremely evident poetic flourish juxtaposed with the unhelpfulness of that connection.

Poem and map

In this final section on Barbauld, specificity and location become central aesthetics for the poem. I've already introduced the map, albeit briefly, but I will elaborate on its function beyond the scene of the soft one. First, in the scene where she explores the map, Barbauld refers to its "dotted lines" and "penciled shores." This imagery presents a world that is porous and

smudgy, a set of lines as fragile as they are imposing. Of key significance here is the role of “shore” in her own poem. Shore dominates the right margin. It is the most used rhyme by far (with seven counts), the next most common word being “name.” As a result, the right-hand side of the poem becomes, like the world of haphazard commerce that Barbauld describes, a site of pairing and crossing. To some extent, Barbauld starts to present the poem as a map, an association that she continues to play with throughout the poem. Barbauld seems interested in the moment where, as for the soft one, an experiential reality is transformed into a linguistic one.

When Barbauld discusses the relationship between reading and place for future literary tourists, she imagines the visitors to England in the future moving from this place to that, while “some Briton, in whose musing mind/ Those ages live which Time has cast behind” tells the guests “Here Chatham’s eloquence in thunder broke,/ Here Fox persuaded, or here Garrick spoke.” This specificity of place is charted through literary and cultural reference, and the emphatic sequence of “here” replaces the recurring question of “where” from the beginning of the poem. The visitors will go on to ask, “If of the modest mansion aught remains / Where Heaven and Nature prompted Cowper's strains,” and “listen for those strains that soothed of yore/ Thy rock, stern Skiddaw, and thy fall, Lodore;” and finally “visit ‘Melross by the pale moonlight.’” In this sense, the particularity of place becomes a shorthand for an increasingly abstract globalism, a vague gesture to the idea of English political or scientific reach even when a reference’s purpose isn’t an explicit indication of British power. Effectively, Barbauld turns a bibliography or reading list into a structure of movement and place.

She is equally specific in her predictions of what will happen in North America, although her reference is less focused on literary events and more invested in demonstrating all the places she can name, from “Niagara” to “Potosi,” the “Appalachians,” and “Chimborazo.” Sometimes

the point of a laundry list of names seems to be less the effect of their individual, specific meaning and more the sense that any of them could be swapped out for anything else. Blake's decision in *Jerusalem* to list several counties in England comes to mind. While each of the references in *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* is given enough treatment that it's hard to imagine them being completely interchangeable with another name or image, the import of these references is less what each one means, individually, and more that Barbauld has compiled a list of them. They mean more together, evoking the size and otherness of the over side of the Atlantic. The effect that she dramatizes here is, essentially, the creation of a map, where the amount of places referenced, rather than their specific meaning or history, is emphasized. The poem connects this process to displacement and echoes, to the violence of collapsing the soft one's grief and the enthusiast's love. Even as she describes her investment in the perseverance of canon and literary place, she does so by demonstrating how the process of globalization and the reduction of the world to maps hollow out the canon to the memory of names and eventually, sounds. The failed creation of a poem-map captures Barbauld's pessimism about education and what it is possible to teach in a globalizing world. Literary education cannot keep pace, in her assessment, with the slow and violence processes of imperial expansion, and the poem dramatizes how this failure of education, the lack of instruction, contributes to Britain's inevitable decline.

John Thelwall and "English rhythmus"

1812 was not a good year for Thelwall, either. At the turn of the century, his rocky relationship with public opinion and his increasingly dire financial situation pushed him to refocus the content of his lectures toward what some have taken to be more politically "neutral"

questions of elocutionary theory. It was in this context that he published *Selections for the Illustration of a Course of Instructions on the Rhythmus and Utterance of the English Language* (1812).¹⁷⁸ Historically, *Selections* has been read for its role in the development of speech therapy in England.¹⁷⁹ E. P. Thompson infamously dismissed Thelwall's pivot to elocutionary science as the end of his political career, saying that "nothing survived of the Patriot except his fading notoriety."¹⁸⁰ It's a sentiment that Thelwall himself seemed to echo, writing in a public letter to Henry Cline that while he had early interest in anatomy and speech, "the excentric [sic] fire of youth hurried me away to other topics; with an impetuosity, which mature judgment may regret, though integrity cannot repent of the principle."¹⁸¹ However, Judith Thompson and other authors have demonstrated that Thelwall's political thinking continues into his work on speech therapy, mapping Thelwall's approach to speech therapy onto his notion of a national wellbeing.¹⁸² As Judith Thompson neatly puts it in "Resounding Romanticism," "speech theory emerges as part of a total system to reform the body politic."¹⁸³ In fact, the bulk of recent Thelwall scholarship

¹⁷⁸ John Thelwall, "Introductory Essay on the Study of English Rhythmus," *Selections for the Illustration of a Course of Instructions on the Rhythmus and Utterance of the English Language: with an Introductory Essay on the application of Rhythmical Science to the Treatment of Impediments, and the Improvement of our National Oratory; and an Elementary Analysis of the of the Science and Practice of Elocution, Composition, &c.*, (London: J. M'Creery, 1812).

¹⁷⁹ Denyse Rockey, "John Thelwall and the Origins of British Speech Therapy," *Medical History* 23.2 (1979): 156-75. And Nicholas Roe, "The Logopaedic Thought of John Thelwall, 1764-1834: First British Speech Therapist," *British Journal of Disorders of Communication* 12.2 (1977): 83-94.

¹⁸⁰ E. P. Thompson, "Hunting the Jacobin Fox," *Past & Present*, vol. 142, no. 1 (February 1994), 123.

¹⁸¹ John Thelwall, "A letter to Henry Cline, Esq on imperfect developements [sic] of the faculties mental and moral, as well as constitutional and organic; and on the treatment of impediments of speech," (London: Richard Taylor and Co., 1810), 2.

¹⁸² Nicholas Roe. "'Atmospheric Air Itself': Medical Science, Politics and Poetry in Thelwall, Coleridge and Wordsworth." *1798: The Year of the Lyrical Ballads*. Ed. Richard Cronin. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998. 185-202. Michael Scrivener, in *Seditious Allegories: John Thelwall & Jacobin Writing* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2001) further argues that cases of improved elocution could be considered an "allegorical illustration of self-improvement and the rational application of knowledge" ("Seditious Allegories," 197).

¹⁸³ Judith Thompson, "Re-sounding Romanticism: John Thelwall and the Science and Practice of Elocution," *Spheres of Action: Speech and Performance in Romantic Culture*, Ed. Alexander Dick and Angela Esterhammer,

follows this schematic, examining whether and how the political commitments of the “Jacobin Fox” stick around in his nineteenth century projects. Other recent scholarship argues that Thelwall’s prose work, like his “Pedestrian Excursion through Several Parts of England and Wales during the Summer of 1797,” “The Phenomena of the Wye,” and the *Panoramic Miscellany* periodical are still emphatically political texts aligned with Thelwall’s republican ideals.¹⁸⁴ Thelwall also continued to write poetry until the end of his life, and, as Judith Thompson explains in “Citizen Juan Thelwall,” this poetry was committed to the political ideals of his earlier work.¹⁸⁵

This chapter builds on this scholarship by discussing the influence of poetry on Thelwall’s understanding of speech therapy and oratory. Poetry is central to Thelwall’s understanding of cadence and “rhythmus,” which is central to his understanding of historical progression. The concept of rhythmus initially surfaces in his work on elocution, like the

(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). Similarly, Emily Stanback considers Thelwall’s approach to speech therapy as one that “addresses the social and functional consequences of ‘disability’ while humanizing the disabled.” Emily Stanback, “Disability and Dissent: Thelwall’s Elocutionary Project,” *John Thelwall: Critical Reassessments, Romantic Circles* (2011), <https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/thelwall/HTML/praxis.2011.stanback.html>.

¹⁸⁴ Mary Fairclough argues that in contrast to the stuffiness of *The Peripatetic*, it is “Pedestrian Excursion” and “Phenomena of the Wye that allow Thelwall to “temper [the] political implications” of the picturesque. Mary Fairclough, “John Thelwall and the Politics of the Picturesque,” *Romantic Circles* (2011), <https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/thelwall/HTML/praxis.2011.fairclough.html>. Michael Scrivener makes a similar argument in “Jacobin Romanticism: John Thelwall’s ‘Wye’ Essay and ‘Pedestrian Excursion,’” *Placing and Displacing Romanticism*, Ed. Peter J. Kitson, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001): 73-87. In her work on Thelwall’s publishing career as editor of the *Panoramic Miscellany*, Angela Esterhammer writes that “the contents of the Panoramic Miscellany along with Thelwall’s editorial policy, his discursive tone, and his relationship with readers and contributors suggests that this last journalistic venture manifests the continuity of his commitments to political causes, public education, elocutionary training, and literary criticism” (Esterhammer, np). See Esterhammer, “John Thelwall’s Panoramic Miscellany: The Lecturer as Journalist,” *Romantic Circles* (2011), <https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/thelwall/HTML/praxis.2011.esterhammer.html>. Lastly, Molly Desjardins, argues that Thelwall experiments with association in his understanding of speech of pedagogy, and that this concept of association extends his understanding of political communities and collectives. See Desjardins, “John Thelwall and Association,” *Romantic Circles* (2011), <https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/thelwall/HTML/praxis.2011.desjardins.html>.

¹⁸⁵ Judith Thompson, “Citizen Juan Thelwall: In the Footsteps of a Free-Range Radical,” *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 48 (2009): 67-100.

“Introductory Essay” in *The Study of English Rhythmus*, but as I will argue, it builds on the earlier poetic and historical ideals discussed in the previous section.¹⁸⁶ In general conversation, “rhythmus” works like a pedantic synonym for “rhythm.” Both come from the Greek word “to flow,” but “rhythmus” first pops up in early modern discussions of Greek poetry, where it becomes a technical term for something more generalizable than rhythm, a linguistic, rather than stylistic, feature that holds true across several works in the same language. Tapping into the same history, Thelwall’s definition is predicated on the assumption that every language has a unique rhythmus and that an understanding of this rhythmus is essential anyone who would like to speak that language. *Selections* focuses on “English rhythmus,” which Thelwall uses to refer to the innate and unique flow of the English language, something which, he understands as an extension of English political and national identity. Thelwall even borrows the term “national rhythmus” from the Earl of Shaftesbury, quoted at the beginning of the text.¹⁸⁷

Part of Thelwall’s project in *The Study of English Rhythmus* is “the application of Rhythmical Science to...the Improvement of our National Oratory.” The text begins with an “Introductory Essay on the Study of English Rhythmus,” which quickly defines rhythmus, cadence, “metrical proportion,” stress, and parts of speech, and then describes the application of these elements for speech therapy and oratory. While the “Introductory Essay” will eventually get to speech therapy, national identity dominates the first few pages of the text. Thelwall argues

¹⁸⁶ John Thelwall, “Introductory Essay on the Study of English Rhythmus,” *Selections for the Illustration of a Course of Instructions on the Rhythmus and Utterance of the English Language: with an Introductory Essay on the application of Rhythmical Science to the Treatment of Impediments, and the Improvement of our National Oratory; and an Elementary Analysis of the of the Science and Practice of Elocution, Composition, &c.*, J. M’Creery: London, 1812.

¹⁸⁷ “Milton and Shakespeare have restored the antient Poetick Liberty, and happily broken the Ice for those who are to follow them; who, treading in their Footsteps, may, at leisure, polish our Language, lead our Ear to finer Pleasure, and find out the true Rhythmus, and harmonious Numbers, which alone can satisfy a just Judgment, and Music-like Apprehension. —Shaftesbury,” unnumbered inside cover of *The Study of English Rhythmus*.

There are few circumstances more hostile to the improvement of our national Elocution, or more conducive to that prevalency of impediment, which foreigners remark as one of the characteristics of our nation, than the general neglect of the study of Rhythmus; and, I might add, the worse than total ignorance of our grammarians and professed instructors, of the genuine principles upon which the rhythmus of Language depends. (“Introductory Essay,” 1)

The “Introductory Essay” establishes rhythmus as a feature of English national identity. The “neglect of the study of Rhythmus” leads to a decline in “national Elocution” and “national Oratory.” And according to the “Introductory Essay,” the prevalence of “impediment” is framed as an undesirable national characteristic, something that visitors to England see as “characteristic” of the English language; Thelwall seems to promise that the study of rhythmus will redirect the course of English political conversations and foreign relations. His use of “impediment” makes use of a familiar equivalence in Thelwall’s writing, between literal speech impediments as they apply to individuals and more collective forms of “impediment.” In his study of George III’s forms of speech, Jared S. Richman discusses how the king’s speech impediments were leveraged, across all sides of the political spectrum, to stand in for the king’s own presence. As a result, “‘the king’s speech’ became a focal point for commentators who sought to diminish George III’s political legitimacy by calling attention to his characteristic stutter.”¹⁸⁸ Richman’s article traces “the relationship between political subjectivity and vocal disability”¹⁸⁹ in Thelwall’s early writing on elocution and in representations of George III, describing how “Thelwall, along with other political satirists, leans heavily on the stuttering allegory to make a case for free speech, for full representative government.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Jared S. Richman, “The Other King’s Speech,” *The Eighteenth Century*, Fall 2018, Vol. 59, No. 3 (Fall 2018), 281.

¹⁸⁹ Richman 282.

¹⁹⁰ Richman 300.

The association here between speech and political participation is related to Thelwall's understanding of the relationship between literary criticism and state power. His "Essay on the English Sonnet," published in 1792 in *The Universal Magazine*, borrows the language and performativity of a trial to compare the works of John Milton and Charlotte Smith.¹⁹¹ Vocalizing a (potentially invented) critic and his insistence on the perfection of Milton's sonnets, Thelwall proceeds with phrases like, "Let us bring them before the reader, then, that he may know what perfection is" ("Essay") and observations about the "legitimacy" of various sonnet forms. Thelwall has appointed himself something of a public defendant for Charlotte Smith, who he believes is the greatest sonneteer in English, bar none (yes, he counts Milton and Shakespeare in that assessment). He wraps up, "I shall conclude with observing, that ... it was my sole design to vindicate the freedom of English verse from the pedantic chains of the Italian sonnet" ("Essay").

It turns out the trial is just a dramatic way for him to levy two aesthetic complaints against the sonnet, these being that the volta is overemphasized and the rhyme scheme too constrictive. Regarding the volta, and specifically the volta in Milton's Petrarchan sonnets, Thelwall dislikes the semantic and formal privileging of the "last six lines, for which there is more license" ("Essay"). In other words, since the volta always gets the last word and since this last word comprises nearly half of the poem, the tension between the first and second movement of a Petrarchan sonnet is too easily resolved, and the poem's message and dominant affective mood are too clear. Thelwall prefers the two-line volta in Smith's poetry, a slight intrusion that destabilizes the previous images of the poem without drowning it in self-interpretation.

Thelwall's second complaint is that the rhyme scheme is too "decisive." He puts this complaint in the voice of the critic, who says: "Each line...of the first eight, rhymes *four times*,

¹⁹¹ John Thelwall, "Essay on the English Sonnet," *The John Thelwall Archive*, 2023.

and the order in which these rhymes should fall is *decisive*....for labour, with this critic, is a requisite ingredient of beauty” (“Essay”). The order being decisive is a strange way to say what Thelwall (speaking as his own devil’s advocate) means. In this phrasing, the order seems to have its own agency—seems to make decisions—and this decisiveness aligns criticism and its expectations with authority. It is not the sonnet itself or the form that is aligned with authority and oppression, but the nature of criticism springing up around it. This criticism is, moreover, one concerned with labor and the equation of labor with beauty. There’s a whiff of political economy in this phrasing, the idea that something should advertise its own labor if it would like to be recognized as a thing of value.

It’s no coincidence that Thelwall drafted this essay amid the legal chaos of 1792; following the publication of *The Rights of Man* and the formation of political societies like the London Corresponding Society (to which Thelwall belonged), the British government had made hundreds of arrests for sedition and related charges.¹⁹² “Essay on the English Sonnet” articulates a relationship between literary criticism and institutional authority. It does not seem to be poetic so much as legal arbitration that Thelwall critiques when he says that “in the court of Parnassus, as in those of law, to be *right*, in opposition to precedent, is frequently to be *wrong*” (“Essay”).

Coleridge, too, equates literary and legal practices in a description of Bowyer’s classroom, where “certain introductions, similes, and examples, were placed by name on a list of interdiction,” and “banished by public edict in saecula saeculorum.”¹⁹³ In this scene, students are learning to be both scholars and legal arbiters, and if the legal vocabulary Coleridge employs in

¹⁹² John Barrell and Jon Mee, eds. “Introduction,” *Trials for Treason and Sedition, 1792–1794*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006).

¹⁹³ *Biographia*, Chapter 1.

this passage does not make that sufficiently obvious, he adds that “a list of this kind, or an index expurgatorius of certain well-known and ever-returning phrases, both introductory, and transitional, including a large assortment of modest egoisms, and flattering illeisms [sic], and the like,” would be a useful addition to “Law-courts, and both Houses of Parliament,” where it would, among other things, contribute to an “important saving of national time.”¹⁹⁴ For each of these authors—Coleridge, Thelwall, and Hazlitt—literary modes of reading are increasingly tied up with practices of reading people and reading institutions.¹⁹⁵ This feedback loop between the political and the literary is something Thelwall returns to throughout his career, even as the focus of his work changed.

In May 1794, Thelwall himself was arrested, along with Thomas Hardy and John Horne Took, on a charge of high treason. All three would be awaiting trial until November, when they would be acquitted. Thelwall spent July 14, 1794—the fifth anniversary of the storming of the Bastille—drafting the second of several sonnets he would write during his imprisonment and collect under the title *Poems written in close confinement in the Tower and Newgate*.¹⁹⁶ The Newgate sonnets put in practice several of the principles that he introduces while writing about Smith. “Sonnet II: To Tyranny” is an unusual sonnet for many reasons, not the least being its departure from the kind of content we might expect from a sonnet. “O Hell born Tyranny!” Thelwall begins, “how blest the land/ Whose watchful Citizens with dauntless breast/ Oppose they [sic] “first” approach!” (“Sonnet II: To Tyranny,” 1-3).

¹⁹⁴ *Biographia*, Chapter 1.

¹⁹⁵ Thelwall will come at the same question from a different angle when he discusses the London University in a series of essays for the *Panoramic Miscellany*.

¹⁹⁶ John Thelwall, “Sonnet II: To Tyranny,” *Poems written in close confinement in the Tower and Newgate*, ed. Judith Thompson, *John Thelwall Archive*, 2023, https://wordsandwork.johnthelwall.org/archive/llyswen/literary/sonnets_of_john_thelwall/confinement.html.

But while “To Tyranny” is unusual, it isn’t, at least initially, confusing. As far as introductions go, this is straightforward enough.¹⁹⁷ We have our antagonist, “Tyranny,” and the moral signposting of “Hell” and “blest” clarify the terms of engagement very quickly. But while the poem is busy establishing its ideological framework, the sonnet form completely unravels.

The rest of the poem reads:

O HELL born Tyranny! how blest the land
Whose watchful Citizens with dauntless breast
Oppose they [sic] "first" approach! With aspect bland
Thou wont, alas! too oft, to lull to rest
The sterner virtues that should guard the throne
Of Liberty. Deck'd with the gaudy zone
Of pomp, and usher'd with lascivious arts
Of glossing Luxury, thy fraudulent smile
Ensnares the dazzled senses, till our hearts
Sink, palsied, in degenerate lethargy.
Then bursts the swoln destruction forth; and while
Down the rough tide of Power Oppression drives
The shipwreck'd multitude, no hope survives,
But from the whelming storm of Anarchy. (1-14)

By the end of this sonnet, all neat binaries have imploded. The last section of the poem is a ten-car-pile-up of mixed metaphors. Water imagery predominates, but it’s hard to tell what has already sunk and what is still sinking and into what. The “shipwreck’d multitude” float, shipless, on a tide that is both power and “swoln destruction,” and if you look far enough up in the poem, “degenerate lethargy.” The clear allegorical labels from the beginning of the poem, where Tyranny arrives to “ensnare the senses” with the help of “glossing Luxury,” dissolve. What is the rough tide of “power” and how does that relate to the storm of anarchy? Where does “swoln destruction” end and “the rough tide of Power” begin?

¹⁹⁷ Less straightforward is whatever is happening with “they.” The Newgate sonnets aren’t widely available; I was only able to access a version through the John Thelwall archive run by Judith Thompson. My best guess is that Thelwall—or anyone who transcribed the poem after him—meant to write “thy,” which would make more sense in the frame of apostrophe.

The same ambiguity is reflected in the rhyme scheme. Part of the appeal of a sonnet is the neat pivot of the volta. But while “To Tyranny” starts off with the expected ABAB stanza (“land, breast, bland, rest”), the rhyme scheme of second stanza is interrupted by a couplet. From there, the sonnet unravels, so we’re left with something that looks like ABAB CC DEDFEGGF. The poem seems to have put its volta in the middle, where the couplet is. As a result, it is impossible to determine where the resolution or complication is.¹⁹⁸ This lack of resolution corresponds with the creeping approach of Tyranny; there is no obvious beginning, and “first” finds its way into scare quotes.

What’s striking is that the right-hand margin of this poem anticipates Thelwall’s later interest in sound patterns and elocution. As Thelwall pivoted from radical orator to elocutionist and journalist—writing poems all the while—he developed a theory of elocutionary instruction that included a breakdown of different linguistic phonemes.¹⁹⁹ Like the linguistic scheme of modern English, Thelwall’s elocutionary theory includes the class of consonants called liquids. As he defines them, “A Liquid is a tuneable element, formed by gentle contact of two organs in a state of vocal vibration, and capable of unlimited duration and flexure of tone, without change of character. There are eight—L. M. N. NG. R. V. W. Y: to which some have added Z” (“Introductory Essay” xxxv). However, this definition of liquids substantially differs from our modern one (for English), where liquids are limited to /l/, /r/, /m/, and /n/. Note that Thelwall’s more expansive definition focuses less on the production of the sound than on its duration and tone. Thelwall distinguishes liquids for their suspended and indefinite duration, a duration which is “tuneable” by the speaker.

¹⁹⁸ Other Newgate poems follow similarly unusual rhyme schemes.

¹⁹⁹ John Thelwall, “Introductory Essay on the Study of English Rhythmus.”

Obviously, it's anachronistic to apply Thelwall's 1812 theory of sound to a sonnet dashed off in 1794, but I'm not making the claim that the one caused the other. Rather, I want to suggest that there is a continued interest, for Thelwall, in duration as both sonic and political questions. In other words, *both* Thelwall's poetry and his theory of elocution and his general concept of "rhythmus" experiment with questions of suspended temporality, indefinite resolution, excess, and loss, questions he was hashing out in poetry before he turned to elocutionary theory.

Rhythmus and pedagogy in "Selections"

To return to *Selections*, Thelwall implicates bad pedagogy in the general ignorance of rhythmus. Part of the problem is the highly embodied and perceptual nature of elocution. Students need to learn to perceive rhythmus, and only by "the renovation of this perception, and by this alone, [can] our habits of utterance must be improved" ("Introductory Essay" xi). Perception is a sticking point for Thelwall—in his discussion of cadence and the nature of stress in the English language, he argues "Nothing can be more different than the effects produced by a progress from heavy to light, and one from light to heavy: and it is one of the first distinctions which I find it necessary to teach my pupils to comprehend and feel" ("Introductory Essay" v). However, "our general modes of education have a tendency rather to extinguish than mature" the ability to perceive rhythmus and cadence.²⁰⁰

It turns out this bad pedagogy has more deleterious effects than a failure to distinguish between stressed and unstressed syllables. "Introductory Essay" takes issue with the "imaginary" and hypothetical aspect of rhythmus aims to demonstrate that these abstract rules have real

²⁰⁰ Here, Thelwall expands his interest in the relationship between instruction and wellbeing. In A Letter to Henry Cline, he writes "there is a power in educational folly and mistake, to distemper the brain, that might have been tranquillized to consistency" ("Letter," 71).

impact. Or, at least, Thelwall takes issue with the fact that language would be written according to laws that can't be heard. He observes that Greek and Latin authors use metrical and rhythmical conventions which do not necessarily apply when the poems are read aloud but argues that the same is not true for English. This lack of "practical metre," for Thelwall, is a social problem related to a disconnect between theory and practice:

But shall we, therefore, conclude...that Homer and Virgil constructed their verses upon a theoretical principle of rhythmus, that was to be subverted in practice, before those verses could be rendered acceptable to the ear of taste? —*that they adjusted imaginary quantities, to involve themselves in useless difficulties and amuse Utopian sophists?* and that the measures they elaborated were addressed to the fingers of pedants, not to the organs of their readers, or the hearing of their auditors?²⁰¹

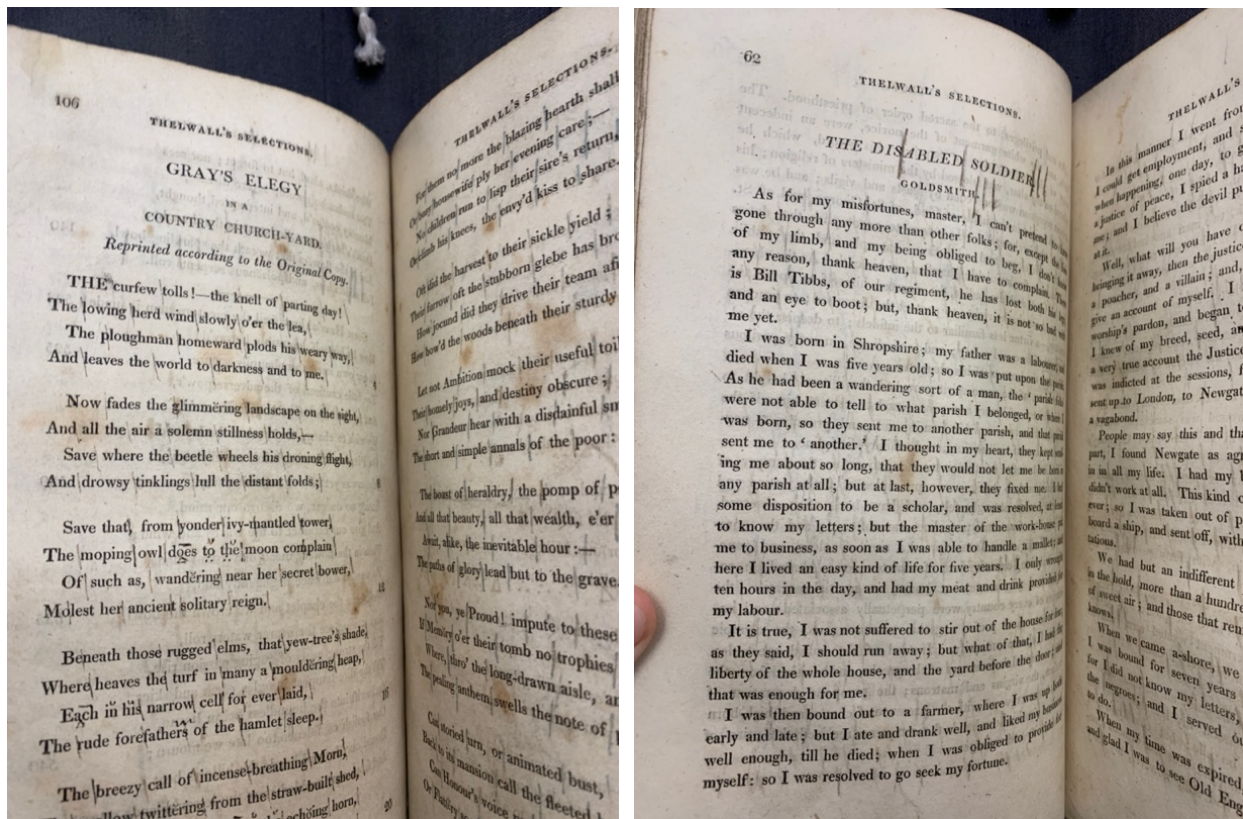
He never answers this set of questions, but he claims that "Such, at any rate, is not the rhythmus of the English language," which is "rhythmus addressed to the ear."²⁰² Part of Thelwall's goal here is to head off any criticism of his new professional undertaking as overly niche and academic, the musings of a scholar who finds poetic form intrinsically valuable and interesting. But the language Thelwall uses to make this point, that meter is not an "imaginary quantity" or "useless difficulty" designed to "amuse Utopian sophists," suddenly places rhythmus within the valence of political thought. Thelwall underscores his belief that the principles he outlines in *Illustrations* have a material bearing on the world around him.

The contrast between the two audiences that Thelwall describes above, the "fingers of pedants" and the "organs of readers," also emphasizes the importance of practical and carefully attuned education. This emphasis on learning and connection, rather than the "right or wrong" approach implied by the pedant's finger, is something that Thelwall will return to throughout his

²⁰¹ Thelwall, "Introductory Essay," ix, emphasis mine

²⁰² Thelwall, "Introductory Essay," ix.

career. In the effort to teach his students to “comprehend and feel” the subtle but distinct cadence of English rhythmus, Thelwall turns to poetry. He recommends that students recite poetry, especially the “the heroic couplet of the smoothe, but cold and formal school of Pope,” to develop a sense of cadence (“Introductory Essay” xviii). For this reason, *Illustrations* includes several examples on which students can practice. Even copies of his work in the British Library have scansion marks from readers, as shown in the (admittedly artless) images below.



Figures 1 and 2: “Gray’s Elegy in a Country Church-Yard” and Oliver Goldsmith’s “The Disabled Soldier” in Thelwall’s *The Study of English Rhythmus*. The works are part of several primary sources that Thelwall includes at the end of *Study* for the reader to practice on. A reader has diligently divided the texts into metrical units of stress and unstress that are marked with thin pencil lines.

Read this way, rhythmus is ultimately a theory of pedagogy that is about adaptive, flexible, and dynamic kinds of learning, a model of learning that needs to be felt and perceived

by repeated exposure to examples, a kind of inductive learning by doing, versus the dogmatic recitation of “pedants.” As authors like Scrivener, Thompson, and Stanback have said, this expands his political philosophies and ideologies, democratic in the sense that it operates by practice, feeling, and connection. It is also a highly *empirical* practice, one that Thelwall consistently links to “mathematically demonstrable” principles. In other words, rhythmus exists at the nexus between scientific principle and poetic reading practice.²⁰³

If this approach seems massively ambitious or overwhelmingly literal, part of Thelwall’s goal is the democratization of reading and speaking. His lectures and (the popularization of adult education in the early nineteenth century more generally) challenged, to use Thompson’s words, “the conservative view of learning as the exclusive preserve of a cultural elite, who must guard it, in Burke’s famous words, from being ‘cast into the mire and trodden down under the hoofs of a swinish multitude.’”²⁰⁴ Thelwall argues for a shift toward connection rather than difficulty. Rhythmus is about being heard, about appealing to the organs of an author’s audience, rather than about performing “useless difficulties” or, as the lawyer-critic in “Essay on the English Sonnet” believes, using formal challenges to jack up a sonnet’s value. Thelwall believed that rhythmus, understood and used correctly, would empower his students to participate in spoken debates and make their ideas known. It’s an impulse he shared with Thomas Spence, whose 1775 *Grand Repository of the English Language* proposed a system for the uniform phonetic spelling for English that would make reading and writing easier for the general reading public.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ For an elaboration of the role of science and embodiment in Thelwall’s thinking, see Yasmin Solomonescu, *John Thelwall and the Materialist Imagination*, (New York: Palgrave, 2014).

²⁰⁴ See “Citizen Juan Thelwall.”

²⁰⁵ Thomas Spence, *The Grant Repository of the English Language*, (London: Thomas Spence, 1775). Accessed in Joan C. Beal, *English Pronunciation in the Eighteenth Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

The rhythmus of canon

We've moved a little off track from the relationship between literary study and the formation of national identities and history, but we can start to see that relationship emerge here, in the excerpts of poetry and prose that Thelwall includes in his book. For starters, these samples, which include Shakespeare's plays, Milton's poetry (especially *Paradise Lost*), and Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard," sum together into a sort of crash course in the English literary canon. The samples also push the boundaries of the literary with prose by William Pitt (Earl of Chatham), William Roscoe, and Oliver Goldsmith. Effectively, Thelwall has given us a short list of what he considers the best written and spoken work of the last few centuries, and we're told that every piece fits within the flow of the English "rhetorical rhythmus," that there is a basic continuity between these very different styles and forms.

Moreover, the order of the texts within this sampler is incredibly pointed. We might expect the works to be arranged chronologically, Thelwall pursues a strategy more like that of Thomas Spence in *Pigs' Meat*, where the order of examples tells a story, often by producing stark contrast or irony. For example, the final four texts in the book are William Pitt's reply to Horace Walpole, Edmund Burke on the death of chivalry and the suffering of Marie Antoinette ("Apostrophe to the Queen of France"), "The Captive" sequence from Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*, and a portion from the Anglican burial service excerpted from the *Book of Common Prayer*. It's quite a bizarre lineup. If we're surprised by the inclusion of Burke in Thelwall's sampler, that surprise should be tempered by the fact that Burke's text is wedged between a speech by Pitt to Walpole about how his youth is an asset to him, rather than, as the

older and more conservative Walpole suggested, a detriment;²⁰⁶ and Sterne's famous description of a prisoner in the Bastille, tallying the time he has spent in prison.

The paratactic juxtaposition of these texts does quite a bit of heavy lifting, with abutting texts seeming to echo or anticipate each other at a minute and formal level. The section from Burke closes with his lament that "It is gone,—that sensibility of principle,—that chastity of honour, which felt a stain like a wound,—which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity,—which ennobled whatever it touched; and under which vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness."²⁰⁷ On the next page, Sterne's "The Captive" begins, and Yorick launches into his own argument that "the Bastile is not an evil to be despised: —but strip it of its towers—fill up the fosse—unbarricade the doors—call it, simply, a confinement, and suppose 'tis some tyrant of a distemper—and not of a man—which holds you in it—half the evil vanishes; and you bear the other half without complaint."²⁰⁸ In addition to the physical proximity of these sections, they share key stylistic similarities that give the game away. The first similarity is the premise of eliminating half of some evil by making it linguistically tolerable. The second similarity, since this is a book about rhythm, is the punchy meter created by the em-dashes, which divide both quotes into a series of short phrases. These similarities invite a reader to put the texts in much more direct conversation than they might be inclined to do, and once that conversation happens, we can see how Thelwall lets Sterne unravel Burke's reasoning for him, while doubling down on

²⁰⁶ "I shall, on such an occasion, without scruple, trample upon all those forms with which wealth and dignity entrench themselves; nor shall any thing but age restrain my resentment: age, which always brings one privilege—that of being insolent and supercilious without punishment," quoted on page 166 of *A Study of English Rhythmus*.

²⁰⁷ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), quoted as "Apostrophe to the Queen of France" on page 168 of *A Study of English Rhythmus*.

²⁰⁸ Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768), quoted as "The Captive" on page 169 in *A Study of English Rhythmus*.

the dialogic nature of Thelwall's writing that Judith Thompson finds characteristic of his work.²⁰⁹

Yorick will, after a bizarre encounter with an anthropomorphic starling, recant his earlier claim: the bird repeatedly cries "I cannot get out," and "mechanical as [these] notes were, yet so true in tune to nature were they chaunted, that, in one moment, they overthrew all my systematic reasonings on the Bastile; and I heavily walked up stairs, unsaying every word I had said in going down them."²¹⁰ There's been plenty written on this passage, which manages to be both voyeuristically bleak and casually dismissive, and I won't rehash it here. More interesting for this chapter is the role of rhythm and meter. It's the "mechanical" notes of the bird, "chaunted" "in tune to nature," that ultimately convince Yorick to reverse his previous thinking, and this regulated pseudo-speech parallels Thelwall's own characterization of the successful orator.

Moreover, Sterne emphasizes the act of going up and down the stairs as part of the process of thinking, changing his mind as he changes his position in space. However, throw that image into a book about rhythmus, and the up and down of logical reasoning—between Yorick's first argument and his second, between Burke and Sterne, between each of the texts as they come and go—starts to blur with the process of metrical scansion, "scanning" from the Latin *scandere*, meaning "to climb."²¹¹ "Scan" was first used in both Latin and English to refer to scansion, the process of climbing through the highs and lows of metered verse, after which it took on its association with a particularly systematic searching or surveillance. With "The Captive," then, Thelwall gently aligns the process of climbing up and down stairs with the process of climbing

²⁰⁹ See her introduction to *The Peripatetic*.

²¹⁰ Sterne, quoted on page 170 of *A Study of English Rhythmus*.

²¹¹ "scan," *OED Online*, March 2023, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/171869?rskey=cpdbB5&result=2&isAdvanced=false>.

stressed and unstressed syllables, a move that aligns rhythmus with the progress, or at least progression, between disparate items in the English canon.

If this feels like a stretch, it isn't the only instance of a pointed relationship between the content of the individual excerpts in *A Study of English Rhythmus* and the broad theoretical strokes of Thelwall's project. His decision to end on the "Burial Service" is equally deliberate, since its promise of resurrection parallels his own description of the advanced student of rhythmus, who will

ascend, in due gradation, from the mere abstract, to the rhetorical rhythmus: that is to say, from that skeleton rhythmus, which recognizes only the mere inherent qualities of the elements and syllables arranged, to that vital and more authentic rhythmus which results from the mingled considerations of sentiment, pause and emphasis, and assigns to each its just proportions of cadential quantity. ("Introductory Essay" x)

The stark contrast of this resurrection with Lancaster's punishment for "singing"—where students are sent to their graves—reiterates how for Thelwall, rhythmus is lifegiving and dynamic. Thelwall depicts the move from abstract and schematic to "vital" and "authentic" meter as a resurrection, taking the "inherent principles" of rhythmus as a skeleton on which a more living sense of cadence can grow. By closing with the burial service and its vision of the afterlife, the last sample text in Thelwall's collection offers the student exactly the kind of reanimation that the move from abstract to practical rhythmus is meant to achieve, allowing them to close the book ready to read, scan, recite, and speak with all metrical authority at their disposal.²¹² Overall, Thelwall's examples in *Selections* are not chosen at random. The order of texts dramatizes connects metrical and historical forms of reading across disciplines and genres.

²¹² There are also the more Jacobin inclusions, like "Nathan's Parable," about the rich man who would rather kill and cook his poor neighbor's only lamb, which is "unto him as a daughter," than take one of his own flock for dinner (*Illustrations*, 50-51).

Rhythmus and industry

As I hinted at above, Thelwall's investment in scansion happens at a time when the word "scan" was shifting in meaning to refer to other kinds of looking than looking at poetry.

Specifically, the word was shifting toward an association with surveillance and searching, from which we also got the word for "copy" that we have today. In this section, I argue that Thelwall puts these kinds of scanning in conversation with each other during a scene in his epic *The Hope of Albion; or, Edwin of Northumbria* that centers on the perusal of a map.

The Hope of Albion is an epic poem that Thelwall was writing around the time he compiled *A Study of English Rhythmus*. *The Hope of Albion* details the seventh century overthrow of the tyrannical Adelfrid by Edwin, a Northumbrian prince exiled by his political enemies. Solomonescu notes that David Hume's *History of England* provided key inspiration for the poem, but that Thelwall altered the poem's depiction of events "to present Edwin as the earliest champion of British constitutional liberties, the very existence of which had been called into question by the political debates of the 1790s."²¹³ In his study of Romantic epics, Stuart Curran suggests that "As the political repression deepened...it became more difficult to celebrate a constitutional accord whose true existence was in doubt, and difficult even to praise anything resembling a revolution without threat of penalty," which prompts "an inevitable turning to the legendary past."²¹⁴ He lists Thelwall's *Hope of Albion* as one of several poems so conceived. Solomonescu, meanwhile, reads *The Hope of Albion* alongside *The Daughter of Adoption* and *The Fairy of the Lake*, arguing that in all three texts, we see "radical heroes reduced to the status

²¹³ John Thelwall and the Materialist Imagination, 80.

²¹⁴ Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), 161.

of mere automatons by the reactionary forces of their respective worlds.”²¹⁵ In this, Edwin acts as a stand-in for Thelwall’s own political frustrations.²¹⁶

Thelwall had included sections of the poem in 1801’s *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement* and, as he continued drafting the never-to-be-completed text, published selections in *The Monthly Magazine* and other publications that he edited at the time, usually titling these pieces as “epic fragments” and offering little to no background about their provenance. Thelwall also slips a fragment of *The Hope of Albion* into his *Study of English Rhythmus*; he titles the excerpt “A Picturesque Contrast of Ancient and Modern Manchester” and frames it as a “prophetic” account of what will come to pass in the region.²¹⁷ In the excerpt, the titular hero Edwin explores an “instructive map” of the lands he is supposed to inherit. On it, he locates Manchester, which is still “a hamlet rude,/ Amid the ruins of belligerent walls” (*The Hope of Albion* 323-324).²¹⁸ As he looks with the “dilated gaze” of prophecy,²¹⁹ Edwin sees the “pastoral joy/ And blest obscurity” of Manchester replaced by:

“the busy hum of men,”
And looms, and whirring wheels, and whizzing threads,
Twin’d on the giddy spindles,—now succeed
To bleat of flocks and herds, and whistle blithe

²¹⁵ John Thelwall and *The Materialist Imagination*, 74.

²¹⁶ John Thelwall and *The Materialist Imagination*, 82.

²¹⁷ “The era of the narrative of that work is an early period of the Saxon Heptarchy. Edwin of Northumbria, the hero of the Poem...is represented as delineating, with his spear, on the wall of his apartment, an instructive map of his expected kingdom... During this heroic employment of the hour of danger, his projected improvements, and patriotic meditations, are occasionally enlivened by supernatural revelations, and visionary exhibitions of the past and future history of the respective places delineated. Manchester (then a mere rustic village, rising out of the ruins of a Roman station) does not escape his notice: but from its destined importance, becomes one of the prominent objects of prophetic vision.”

²¹⁸ Judith Thompson reads this moment as a stopover on the way from “visionary retirement [to] vocal activism” noting how the “‘tracing spear’ with which a musing Edwin outlines [the map] ...gives way to the ‘martial spear.’” See “Citizen Juan Thelwall.”

²¹⁹ In another of *Study*’s pointed transitions, the sequence from *Edwin* happens on the heels of John Milton’s “To Light,” which opens Book III of *Paradise Lost* with a meditation on vision and seeing inward truths.

Of solitary ploughman, o'er the share
Bent healthful. But, o'er all, with wondering eyes,
He marks the swoop gigantic of huge beam
Self-rock'd (so seeming!) and, with magic force,
Guiding innumerable engines, that appear
Instinct with strange volition: Vulcan's art
And Merlin's fables realis'd!—the while
Obedient rivers bend their tutor'd streams
To waft the web ingenious (336-348)

This passage details industrialization at a breakneck speed, with particular emphasis placed on the development of textile mills in Manchester and its surrounds. Mechanical looms, powered by steam from the river, replace the pastoral labor of the ploughman. I have been suggesting that the idea of *rhythmus* in Thelwall's work is closely connected with the idea of historical progress. Here, we start to see complications to that claim. What better figure for that meter than the perfect beat of "looms, and whirring wheels, and whizzing threads" of Manchester's industrializing cotton industry, weaving and shipping out the "web ingenious"? And yet Thelwall's description of Manchester seems to mourn the "blest obscurity" and "healthful" pastoral world he imagines in the past.

In that vein, we might ask—where are the people? As Manchester changes, the ploughmen and their flocks are raptured out of the city, replaced by the animated movement ("self-rock'd," "strange volition") of looms and mills and the engines that power them. Even the transport of cotton along waterways happens without people; the commodity is shipped as though voluntarily by the "tutor'd streams,"²²⁰ the same streams that power the steam engine and the mill. We are left in a world where people have ceased to exist, or at least have ceased to participate in economic production. Instead, the world moves on its own, and while we can hear "the busy hum of men," it seems as though they are offstage. Devoid of human life, Thelwall's

²²⁰ Compare Thelwall's "tutor'd streams" to Blake's "charter'd Thames."

Manchester is more like a map, an abstraction of the labor happening in a particular place. We have the streams, the mills, the beam, but they operate on their own, positioned relative to each other without human involvement, while the metonymic activity of a single dehumanized beam stands in for the industrialization of an entire city.

Meanwhile, the most ferocious image we have of metrical time-keeping is the “self-rock’d” movement of that “huge beam,” which, as far as I can discern, refers to the seesaw motion of the Boulton and Watt steam engine used to power the cotton mills of Manchester around 1800.²²¹ I want to come back to scansion, since this is still a book about rhythmus, and Thelwall’s primary investment is in meter. The metrical workings of the poem deliver, especially as we approach the beam. I read the two lines where this huge piece of machinery appears like so: “the **swoop** gigantic of **huge beam** / **Self-rock’d** (so **seeming!**) and, with **magic force**.” The poem continues in relatively stable iambic pentameter until we get to the double spondees of “huge beam” and “self-rock’d.” After this, it backs off with three unstressed syllables (“-ing, and with”) that bring us back to speed after the measured emphasis of the spondees. This meter is aggressively literal, and like many Romantic poems, draws our attention to images of interest by messing with meter at key moments. The literalization here happens because the beam (“self-rock’d”) moves back and forth with the regularity of meter.

The map is leveraged as the means of looking through the present state of Manchester to the future, organizing and triggering Edwin’s vision of poetry trying to account for changes in urban space and industry—the shift from pastoral to urban georgic, to industrial activity. Thelwall explores the relationship between spatialized information and poetics because the

²²¹ See 00:17 of <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VW1ApJ0FEzk>. “Boulton and Watt Engine,” *London Museum of Water and Steam*, December 10, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VW1ApJ0FEzk>.

reader scans the poem at the same moment that Edwin scans the map. For Thelwall, rhythmus operates *alongside* rather than at odds with, the spatial organization of the map. It becomes a way to organize and group information, a standard measure against which other elements can be mapped or graphed, a “scientific” way to approach literature.

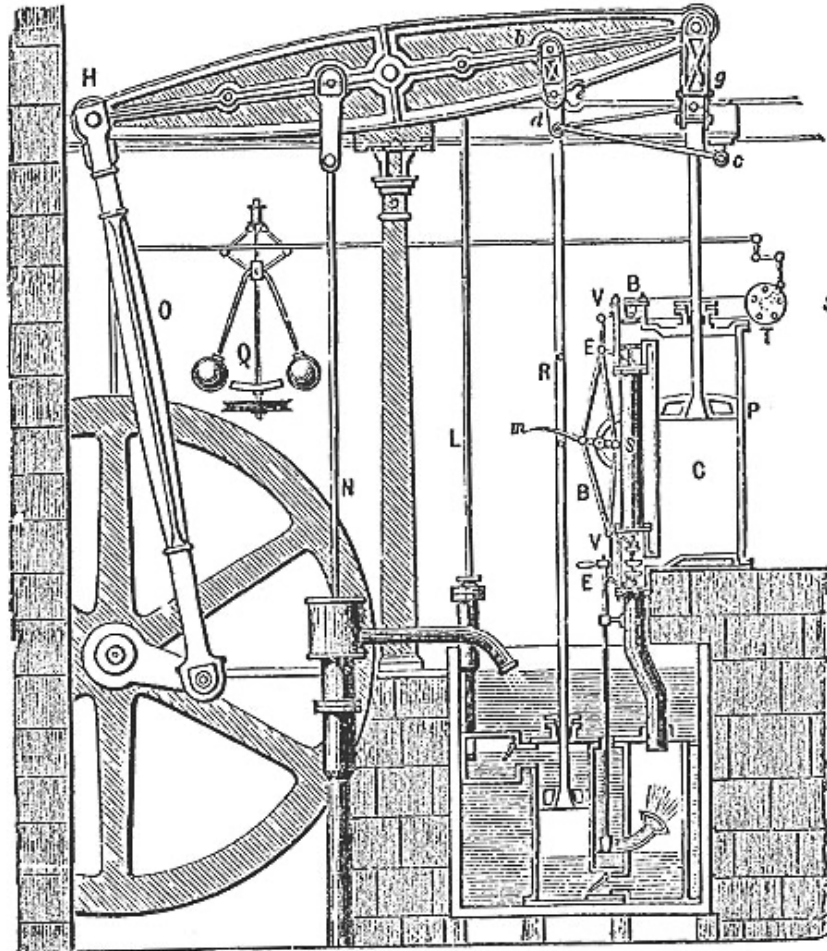


Figure 3: Boulton and Watt steam engine from 1785. Image from *The American Society of Mechanical Engineers*. The structure and movement of the beam may look familiar since the same design was used as the basis for modern oil derricks.

It's no accident that Thelwall chose to write about Manchester in this moment. The Luddite rebellion had started at least a few months earlier, in 1811, and cities in central England were feeling the shortages and scarcity created by industrialization. It is unclear to what extent

the poem responds to the Luddite uprisings, given that Thelwall was likely working on this fragment for months or years before the first frames were smashed in November 1811, but the poem does parallel some of the major concerns of the Luddites. For one, the human-less production happening in the passage echoes concerns, at the time, about human and artificial labor. In addition to poor working conditions and job shortages, one of the major complaints of textile workers was the lack of quality in factory outputs. Lord Byron, in his one and only speech in Parliament, explains that:

By the adoption of one species of Frame in particular, one man performed the work of many, and the superfluous labourers were thrown out of employment. Yet it is to be observed, that the work thus executed was inferior in quality, not marketable at home, and merely hurried over with a view to exportation. It was called, in the cant of the trade, by the name of ‘Spider work.’²²²

The nickname “Spider work”—which we do have to take Byron’s word on, since his speech is the first documentation of its use—harks back to Thelwall’s “web ingenious,” and both phrases capture fears that the work being produced is not produced by humans. We can see, then a degree of skepticism about mechanical labor and artifice in this section that ties in with the poem’s thoroughly sanitized, depopulated Manchester. “Waft the web ingenious” is certainly a vague euphemism for factory production that turns the noise, steam, and metal of the mill to a patch of cobweb drifting on the breeze.

Strangely, for all his skepticism, Thelwall seems to have accepted that history will unfold this way. Nothing about the vision of Manchester deters Edwin from pursuing his intended course of action. In fact, to Edwin, the realization of Manchester’s industrial potential seems predestined, the logical outcome of “Merlin’s fables” and “Vulcan’s art.” Although he does not fully understand 19th-century industrial developments, translating them into the epic terms of

²²² Lord George Gordon Byron, Address to the House of Lords on the Frame Work Bill, 27 February, 1812, *UK Parliament records*, 2023, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1812/feb/27/frame-work-bill>.

English folklore and Roman mythology, he is not put off by them in any way. In fact, the use of Edwin's perspective here allows Thelwall to, like Barbauld, play with notions of inevitable progress across vast periods of history. To Edwin, Manchester's "new-moulded" climate and soil seem as inevitable as the rise and fall of empires in *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*. The "self-rock'd" momentum of the "ingenious" web, too, plays with the same figure of inspired, spontaneous activity that we see in Barbauld's Genius. Linguistically, too, they share a root, since the "engine" that Thelwall references with "ingenious" comes from "genius."²²³

The almost viciously literal correspondence of the meter to the beam coops meter as an extension of this historical and industrial progress. By pushing us to scan the prosody with which he describes Manchester and the beam, Thelwall confronts us with the question of inevitable rhythm, an immutable pulse, the inexorable and unfeeling pulse of the idea of progress. Meter becomes shorthand for the idea of a literal pulse of history, and that pulse becomes an operator in Britain's industrialization. In other words, meter would seem to allow Thelwall to develop and access a political teleology that unifies the fantastic past and the real present, sweeping both along the tide of inevitability.

But while Thelwall dares us to associate the movement of industry with meter's metronomic beat, part of his major intervention in scansion is his insistence that iambic pentameter is backwards compared to English cadence, which he claims operates in troches. Thelwall is previously very clear that the progression from heavy to light stress in a cadence is a fundamental aspect of English rhythmus. Meter, in other words, works as productive interference to speech. It disrupts and wraps the "natural" beat of the troche. Yet the propulsive or self-rock'd

²²³ "engine," *OED Online*, April 2024, <https://www.oed.com/discover/engine/>.

image of the beam is rendered as a spondee, effectively grinding time to a halt at the moment that it literalizes the process of reading meter. The beam's movement thus operates in direct contrast to the unusual work of time in this passage. Edwin, as he looks into the future, seems to figure it in the language of John Milton's "L'Allegro," from which "the busy hum of men" originates.²²⁴ And the formulation of "succeeds to" places the bulk of the modernizing industry *before* the idyllic descriptions of sheep and ploughmen in the fields. These two moves, but most especially the citation of Milton, emphasize that time in this passage makes multiple anachronistic moves. Time is presented as layered and expansive, and its elements are organized by sound rather than chronology.

Moreover, *Selections* that "vital" rhythm is not a metronomic back and forth of heavy and light without any deviation. For instance, double stresses can be introduced for emphasis and that sometimes the heavy stress of a cadence can be silence (he refers to the rest in music). This variability is what he means when he describes the cadence as a "tuneable" portion of sound. It can expand or contract, dilating much like Edwin's eyes, and much like time in this passage. In fact, this distinction between an overly literal interpretation of meter and a more flexible one comprises the difference between "that skeleton rhythm, which recognizes only the mere inherent qualities of the elements and syllables arranged" and "that vital and more authentic rhythm which results from the mingled considerations of sentiment, pause and emphasis" ("Introductory Essay" x).

In this context, the "self-rock'd" spondee of the beam, which staples the meter to the movement of the steam engine, makes the beam a good student of verse, able to toggle between

²²⁴ "Towred Cities please us then,/ And the busie humm of men." John Milton, "L'Allegro," *The John Milton Reading Room*, Dartmouth, 2024, https://milton.host.dartmouth.edu/reading_room/l_allegro/text.shtml, ll. 117-118.

the slow march of blank verse and the “vital” and “mingled considerations.” The process of scanning, moreover, draws the reader closer to the activity of the beam, “mingling” the human and nonhuman. The distinction Thelwall makes is not between the natural and artificial in such simple terms; in fact, as in Barbauld’s poem, the “natural” is impossible to distinguish from the traces of human interference, having been shaped by human activity (“tutor’d”). Instead, Thelwall uses to meter to draw our attention away from the easy one-two of “natural” and “unnatural” toward a more focused consideration of how the textile mills in Manchester produce harm through an overly simplified relationship to time and resources.

Conclusion: didacticism and literalism

Juliana Spahr’s *That Winter the Wolf Came* (2015) is primarily a book about the 2011 Occupy Oakland riots.²²⁵ Across the collection, Spahr scrolls through Facebook events, texts friends who have been arrested, runs with the crowd, and holds strangers’ hands in still moments. But at the center of this book, we get “Dynamic Positioning,” a poem in blank verse about the Deepwater Horizon oil spill on April 20th, 2010, when one of BP’s rigs exploded, killing 11 workers and dumping 4 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.²²⁶ That poem’s documentary impulse, which uses form to narrate and enact the mechanical forces of oil extraction, has a hell of a lot in common with Thelwall’s approach to meter and energy systems in *Edwin of Northumbria*.

²²⁵ Juliana Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, (Oakland: Commune Editions, 2015).

²²⁶ “Deepwater Horizon – BP Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill,” *EPA*, August 14, 2023, <https://www.epa.gov/enforcement/deepwater-horizon-bp-gulf-mexico-oil-spill>.

The labor of writing “Dynamic Positioning” becomes part of the larger collection’s subject matter, particularly in its recurrent references to the fluctuations of oil prices: “The Brent Crude Oil Spot price was 101.84, when the first of a series of meetings are held at a park” and “The Brent Crude Oil Spot price is 112.11 when the police come the first time” (“Transitory, Momentary” 21). The price of oil positions poetry in a global economic network and offers a way of marking time that both ties political events to a narrative format and upends the usual structures (clock time) that organize social bodies. “Dynamic Positioning” opens in an oil well. The poem describes the machinery—including the drill bit and casing—that connects human enterprises to the sea floor:

It is dynamic positioning that
Allows a semi-submersible the

Ability to hover there over
The well. It is a thirty-six inch tube,

A casing, that extends down to allow
The drill and bit to be rotated there;

The drill then spudding in; the seafloor, dark,
And giving way. It is a thick column

Of drilling mud that keeps natural gas
And oil beneath the seafloor while the well

Is capped and it is a cement that
Fills in the casing so the drill pipe stays

Unmoving, stable, in this ever moving sea. (“Dynamic Positioning” 1-13)

With similarly aggressive literalism, Spahr’s form acts out the machines that it describes. On the page, its narrow, tall shape parallels the casing’s descent toward the seafloor, while the consistent use of enjambment and caesura keeps the poem in an uneasy suspension until the casing is satisfactorily anchored in the “ever moving sea,” and then we get a period on the line

break. The poem even performs drilling: “When [the casing] hits/The pay zone, down through it, down deeper, deep” (42-43). Like the casing, the repetition of “deep” here doubles down meaning, pushing past a target zone, going ever-so-slightly too far. Written with “New muses of innovation, common /Vocabulary, that covers over the/ Elaborate simplicity of this,” “Dynamic Positioning” relays objective, documentary information (26-28). The passive recitation “It is...” emphasizes this dull gesture to fact while “common vocabulary” promises a vision of collectivity built around common truths, objective facts in plain language. The problem here is not that the mechanism of the drill is difficult to understand. The problem—the catch in the throat—is its elaborate simplicity.

The simple reading might be, that poetic meter becomes a cog in the literal machine, starting to function like pressure in the drill, as it does here:

No flow. Considered
A good test. Blowout preventer open-

Ed, seawater then pumped down the drill
Pipe to displace the mud (77-80)

As pressure builds in the casing that Spahr describes, words break over the line in order to meet the mechanical demands of the meter. Here, the first instance of this word-split happens with “open/-Ed”, itself a literal opening. Spahr’s reference to the “new muses of innovation” takes up a familiar strain of lament for poetry’s complicity in systems of oppression. While I think they want to gesture to this premise of aesthetic violence, that pessimism is not the sole purpose of this poem, nor of Thelwall’s.

These poems seem to position iambic pentameter as a clear symbol for or extension of the violent economic systems they detail, but they have no intention of following through on this correspondence or of staging a miniature rebellion at the level of the syllable. Gimmicky and

loud, their literalism is a study in failure. It creates excess out of exactness through a laborious concession to evident fact. Scanning this poem yields no new information, but loudly confirms what we already know. The blank verse in these poems about metronymic extraction and industrial time submits to a kind of generous embarrassment that prolongs and draws out its resistance without catharsis. It drags us to the exact moment where the lived reality of harm outpaces our language for it.

To come back to Coleridge, meter is a choice, a rejection of self-sufficiency in favor of artifice and entanglement. In effect, as the most deliberate and obvious choice, iambic pentameter does little more than convey the forfeit of other possibilities. In these contexts, no other meter would feel so compelled, so inevitable, and it's this faint sense of inevitability that brings the glint of other possibilities into the field of possibility. It reminds us that there were other options, that this meter—and the conditions it represents—are not inevitable, but artificial, and it captures the existence of other possibilities at the fringe.

Chapter 3

Shelley's False Starts: Strange Tales and Romantic Pedagogy

Ending a study of radical didacticism in the Romantic period with Percy Shelley's *Laon and Cythna; or the Revolution of the Golden City* (1817) is a bit of a stretch.²²⁷ Shelley was no lover of the didactic form and his long poem, written in Spenserian stanzas, is no *Pigs' Meat*. Excluding a passing reference to the French revolution, it shies away from historical specificity and is largely devoid of the material and logistical treatises that have up until now been read as markers of didacticism.²²⁸ This lack of realism, of any bearing on "real life," was a calling card for Shelley; Letitia Elizabeth Landon once asked, "who could for a moment have hesitated as to whether a poem was marked with the actual and benevolent philosophy of Wordsworth, or the beautiful but ideal theory of Shelley?"²²⁹ That "actual and benevolent philosophy" harks back to Barbauld's call for "principles of practical utility" and the desire to meet political crisis with legible guidelines.²³⁰ "Beautiful but ideal," Shelley's poetry is presented as remote, even chilly, so much so that Wordsworth's writing takes on an earthy realism by contrast.

It's true that *Laon and Cythna* seems to confine itself to the ideal. Often read as a romance, the poem relays the serial misadventures of its titular heroes, the radical Laon and his

²²⁷ Percy Shelley, *Laon and Cythna*, ed. Anahid Nersessian, Peterborough: Broadview, 2016.

²²⁸ The first canto opens, "When the last hope of trampled France had failed / Like a brief dream of unremaining glory" (LC 1.1.1-2).

²²⁹ Letitia Elizabeth Landon, *Critical Writings by Letitia Elizabeth Landon*, ed. F. J. Sypher (Delmar NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1996), 64.

²³⁰ Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation*, (London: J. Johnson, 1793).

younger sister (later lover) Cythna.²³¹ Laon and Cythna reside in Argolis, a state occupied by a neighboring tyrant who is less a character than the sum of every Orientalist trope imaginable, leveraged, in typical British Jacobin fashion, as what Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud calls a “defamiliarized version of the British state.”²³² The frame narrative locates the poem in the aftermath of the French Revolution, so it has been read as a means of processing political disappointment and the story of Laon and Cythna as an adaptation of revolution at a human scale.²³³

Yet *Laon and Cythna* is also a poem preoccupied with the act of teaching and the intimately related act of telling; as one early critic put it, the poem “Not only preaches but is about preaching.”²³⁴ In one of the poem’s many nested frame narratives, Cythna, reunited with her brother and lover after being kidnapped seven years prior, recounts the events that transpired while they were apart. We hear this story filtered twice. Laon tells the narrator, who then tells us, how Cythna:

told me a strange tale of strange endurance,
Like broken memories of many a heart
Woven into one; to which no firm assurance,
So wild were they, could her own faith impart. (LC 7.3.1-4)

No one would disagree that what Cythna goes on to relate is a “strange tale,” but the formulation “strange endurance” is more perplexing. Grammatically, it is not clear what is enduring or being endured. Is Cythna strangely strong for enduring a series of traumatic experiences, or is the tale

²³¹ David Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre*, (London: Oxford UP, 2009); Anahid Nersessian, “Radical Love and the Political Romance: Shelley After the Jacobin Novel,” *ELH* 79, no. 1 (2012): 111-134.

²³² Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud, *Radical Orientalism: Rights, Reform, and Romanticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2-3. See also: Marilyn Butler.

²³³ Taylor Schey, “Romanticism and the Poetics of Political Despair,” *ELH* vol. 86, no. 4 (Winter 2019): 967-995; Madeleine Callaghan, “Shelley’s *Excursion*,” *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 60, no. 4 (2020): 717-737.

²³⁴ Brian Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and the Epic Tradition*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), 139.

strangely memorable, enduring in Laon's mind? And conceptually, the premise of endurance seems at odds with the "broken" and "wild" memories that Cythna herself seems unable to verify or put stock in. Her strange tale is so fragmented that it reads to Laon as the memories of several people furling into one, while Laon's mixed metaphors—the crumbly edges of "broken" and the soft threads of "woven"—make it hard to track where and how this fragmentation happens, what form it takes. Between the fragmented histories of Cythna's tale and Laon's murky description of them, it's hard to picture this speech enduring in any material way.

To some extent, those "broken memories" that make up Cythna's tale allude to the sexual violence at its center; the fragmentation and self-alienation that Laon diagnoses (whether correctly or not) in his sister's speech are well-documented among survivors of assault. But the strange tale that Cythna tells is not just a laundry list of misery and harm. It's the story of the beginning of revolution, the story of how she becomes the radical instructor who convinces the other "attendant slaves" in the tyrant's hall to rise up against him, until her agitations force the tyrant to imprison her in an underwater cave. Even then, he only delays her work; Cythna gets free and returns to the Golden City as Laone, the "maiden who had reared / The torch of Truth afar" (4.34.1-2).

Cythna's tale, then, is one of transformation, from the "child most infantine" that Laon loses at the end of Canto Second to the veiled "Form most like the imagined habitant / Of silver exhalations sprung from dawn" that he meets and can't quite recognize in Canto Fifth (5.44.1-2). In this sense, the polyphonic nature of Cythna's tale can be read as political speech. She becomes a mouthpiece for what Shelley might call the "multitude," her individual subjectivity shattering into the tales of "many a heart." What she describes is not just her "strange tale," but, as Shelley puts it elsewhere, "life's various story." In other words, this strange tale of strange endurance

traces the fashioning of Cythna into a revolutionary teacher, and “strange endurance” becomes less an acknowledgement of Cythna’s suffering and her “strength” than a principle of Shelley’s radicalism. Moreover, the endurance Shelley locates in Cythna is not quite the same as the image that might come to mind when we picture endurance. “Endurance” has its roots in hardening, toughening up to survive; Shelley’s decision to include “firm” when he notes Cythna’s lack of “firm assurance” lets us know that the kind of endurance he’s describing is different. The result of these crossed wires is that Shelley emphasizes Cythna’s endurance but defines it obliquely, as a mode of survival that does not depend on the usual requirements—a persistent sense of self, “firm assurance,” or unbrokenness. In fact, he seems to be after a mode of survival that acts in quite the opposite way, enduring through its flexibility or self-negation.

The preface to the poem explains that Shelley wants to test and read limits, calling *Laon and Cythna* “an experiment on the temper of the public mind, as to how far a thirst for a happier condition of moral and political society survives, among the enlightened and refined, the tempests which have shaken the age in which we live.”²³⁵ You may recognize in Shelley’s formulation an echo of Wordsworth’s preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, which also considers the subsequent text an experiment:

[*Lyrical Ballads*] was published, as an experiment, which, I hoped, might be of some use to ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart.²³⁶

Shelley borrows not just Wordsworth’s use of “experiment” but the idea that the poem will measure “how far” something goes. Both authors are preoccupied with extents and extremes,

²³⁵ Percy Shelley, “Preface” in *Laon and Cythna*, 41.

²³⁶ William Wordsworth, “Preface,” *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. Fiona Stafford, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 95.

with how far they can push form and with what that formal strain can tell them about something else, whether it is the pleasure that it is possible to transmit in verse or the survival of radical ideals. Shelley even traces Wordsworth's syntax, which is structured around delay and pushing language a little too far. In each sentence, the main clause is interrupted with an aside; for Shelley, this aside is "among the enlightened and refined" and for Wordsworth, it's "by fitting to metrical arrangement...vivid sensation."

Note, too, how Wordsworth is interested in pleasure—in both how much pleasure, and what kind. Scholars who tend to write about didacticism focus on its usefulness, clarity, and ability to impart pleasure. It's main selling point is that the pleasure and organization of a poem facilitate learning and retention. Go back far enough, and you'll find Horace promising that the aim of didactic writing is "to delight and to instruct." Meanwhile Shelley, though he adopts Wordsworth's syntax, is less invested in pleasure than in discomfort. While his preface also bills the poem as an experiment, that experiment is designed to measure "the thirst for a happier condition." Measuring thirst—measuring a lack, absence, desire—is a tough project, and as I will argue below, the model Shelley lands on for evaluating this kind of thirst, for gauging "how far" an idea "survives," is endurance.

Syntactically, Shelley pushes his preface a little further. Wordsworth doesn't split the subject ("that sort of pleasure") from its verb ("may be imparted"), and when he does interrupt his main clause, he does so on "how far," a reasonably intuitive place to ask your reader to put a pin in things. Shelley, meanwhile, splits the verb "survives" from its object, "tempests." The way he has written things, a reader could assume that "survives" is an intransitive verb and that the sentence will move in a new direction. Operating under that assumption, a reader would learn a

little too late that “survives” is a transitive verb, and there is a specific entity that requires surviving—“the tempests which have shaken the age in which we live.”

There’s another similarity in the suspended momentum of “survives,” not with Wordsworth but with Shelley’s own work two years later in 1820. I’m thinking of the massive enjambment in the Furies’ speech from *Prometheus Unbound*: “In each human heart terror survives / the ruin it has gorged.”²³⁷ The enjambment here, like the dependent clause in the preface to *Laon and Cythna*, allows Shelley to play with the dual functionality of “survive” as a transitive and intransitive verb, an ambiguity that also applies to “endure.”²³⁸ In each instance, this ambiguity introduces the problem of how to survive when what we are supposed to be surviving remains unclear, although in each of Shelley’s formulations, the object turns out to be a source of catastrophic harm, whether the “the ruin” or “the tempests.” Grammatically, “survive” and “endure” share this open-ended nature, failing to clarify whether there is a concrete harm or not. By worrying these limits, Shelley inches toward a threshold where survival and endurance stop reacting to a specific cause, where they become ongoing, generalizable principles. As Laon’s language suggests, the model for this kind of endurance in *Laon and Cythna* is Cythna herself.

Yasmin Solomonescu hints at a similar preoccupation with endurance and limits when she invokes Shelley’s own phrase, “expansive strain,” to argue that *Laon and Cythna* “quite

²³⁷ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, (New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2002), 1.618-1.619.

²³⁸ Shelley uses “survive” and “endure” as synonyms in this passage of *Laon and Cythna*, where he compares the survival of Laon and Cythna’s radical history with the “unenduring brass.”

That record shall remain, when they must pass
Who built their pride on its oblivion;
And fame, in human hope which sculptured was,
Survive the perished scrolls of unenduring brass.

literally pushes the period to its limit, placing emphasis on the pauses that typically define it.”²³⁹ While Solomonescu’s work focuses on the period as a unit of writing that “bridges the rhetorical, historical, and even scientific dimensions of Shelley’s poetry,” she likewise singles out Cythna as a key figure for Shelley’s experiments with rhetoric and radical politics. Solomonescu locates in Cythna’s style of speech a distinct relationship to the poetic period that gestures toward more expansive, dynamic “modes of knowing.”²⁴⁰

This chapter will claim that endurance is a key feature in Shelley’s formal agenda and a defining element of his politics. While earlier didactic texts strive to be proscriptive, advising behaviors or suggesting ideal outcomes, Shelley’s work strives to model inaction and endurance—negative actions. My question for this chapter is, what tropes or aesthetics are involved in the teaching and learning of a non-passive endurance? How does this pedagogical model relate to Shelley’s own nonviolent aesthetics and why, if this is the case, is Shelley so appealing to a more militant group of contemporary authors? In this chapter, I argue that Shelley’s didacticism demands a particular kind of endurance from its readers, and that its goal is to train them in this endurance.

Shelley’s didacticism

²³⁹ Yasmin Solomonescu, “Percy Shelley’s Revolutionary Periods,” *ELH*, vol. 83, no. 4 (Winter 2016), 1108; 1109. “In *Laon and Cythna* as Shelley quite literally pushes the period to its limit, placing emphasis on the pauses that typically define it. As a distinguishing feature of the heroine’s alternative to the martial language of her brother, the pause becomes uniquely capable of breaking through habitual patterns of thought, expression, and action, and potentially redirecting the course of history. By virtue of its open-endedness, however, the pause as both element and effect of Cythna’s periods also proves inherently unstable, susceptible of being closed down by material or rhetorical force—a duality it shares with the poem.”

²⁴⁰ Solomonescu, 1110.

A cursory scan of secondary writing on Shelley will tell you that he went to enormous lengths to distance his work from didactic literature. The preface to *Laon and Cythna*—re-published in an 1818 as *The Revolt of Islam*—insists that “The Poem...is narrative, not didactic. It is a succession of pictures illustrating the growth and progress of individual mind [sic] aspiring after excellence.”²⁴¹ As I mentioned in the first chapter of this dissertation, Shelley also takes what is regularly quoted as a passing shot at didacticism, in an 1813 letter to the publisher Thomas Hookham where he scoffs that “A poem very didactic is I think very stupid.”²⁴² This clipped, not quite-chiasmic disavowal captures some of Shelley’s allergy to the didactic mode, especially when contrasted with *Laon and Cythna*’s preface. While the narrative poem aspires, progresses, and strives, a tangle of endless momentum, the didactic poem snaps back on itself with the smug symmetry of a clamshell. Shelley, like Blake before him, is skeptical of this type of lesson, and indeed of any that can be easily bundled up for distribution.

But if we turn to the body of the letter to Hookham, the pithiness of that line operates less as a general slogan for “good” poetics than as a warning sign for Shelley himself, who was then preparing to send Hookham the manuscript of *Queen Mab*. In addition to rehearsing the usual details—wordcount and format—Shelley tries to prepare his publisher for the notes that accompany the poem: “The notes to Queen Mab will be long and philosophical. I shall take that opportunity which I judge to be a safe one of propagating my principles, which I decline to do syllogistically in a poem. A poem very didactic is I think very stupid.”²⁴³

²⁴¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Preface” in *Laon and Cythna*, 41.

²⁴² Shelley to [Thomas Hookham], 26 January [1813], in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 350.

²⁴³ Shelley to [Thomas Hookham], 352.

Laon and Cythna is often read as the first of a series of steps away from the “long and philosophical” style of *Queen Mab*, an evolution that is often seen as ending when Shelley reworks segments of *Laon and Cythna* for “Ode to the West Wind.”²⁴⁴ By the time Shelley gets to writing *Laon and Cythna*, he abandons footnotes and the “propagation” of “principles.” In Shelley’s account, *Laon and Cythna* was intended to be a “picture of his mind,” while in the notes to the first collected edition of P. Shelley’s work, which she edited and provided commentary for, Mary Shelley remarks that: “Shelley possessed two remarkable qualities of intellect—a brilliant imagination, and a logical exactness of reason. His inclinations led him (he fancied) almost alike to poetry and metaphysical discussions. I say ‘he fancied,’ because I believe the former to have been paramount.”²⁴⁵

Shelley’s oft-quoted antagonism to the didactic form is a little misleading, given that his poetry—including *The Mask of Anarchy* as read by Amanda Jo Goldstein in *Sweet Science*—can be read as didactic pieces, depending on your definition of didacticism.²⁴⁶ Under the microscope of Goldstein’s Lucretian materialism, Shelley looks like a teacher. Moreover, the line in the sand that Shelley draws between “narrative” and “didactic” literature cuts right through major Romantic texts—especially novels like *Caleb Williams*, *Maria*, *The Woman of Colour*, *Northanger Abbey*, *The Wild Irish Girl*, and *Castle Rackrent*—that, while explicitly didactic, pin their instructive hopes on narrative. In the subtitle of *Caleb Williams*, for instance, Godwin promises to illustrate “things as they are,” a project he elaborates in the preface as “a study and delineation of things passing in the moral world” whose author aims to “have taught a valuable

²⁴⁴ James Chandler, *England in 1819*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 118.

²⁴⁵ Mary Shelley, “Introductory note,” *UPenn Library*, 2024, <https://knarf.english.upenn.edu/MShelley/islam.html>.

²⁴⁶ Amanda Jo Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life*, Chicago: U Chicago Press, 2017.

lesson, without subtracting from the interest and passion by which a performance of this sort ought to be characterized.”²⁴⁷ In other words, narrative was entangled with didacticism decades before Shelley started *Laon and Cythna*. The distinction in the preface may mean that Shelley wants to distance himself from the proscriptive lifestyle advice of authors like Cowper, Pope, or Thompson, whose poems were less invested in narrative than their fictive counterparts. While this is true, Shelley uses narrative to dramatize moments of teaching and learning through a sequence of highly repetitive frame narratives in the poem.

Shelley is also writing at a time when didactic literature is rapidly falling out of critical favor. Moreover, the political disappointment that marks the transition from the works of Spence and Godwin to the works of Barbauld and Thelwall chilled any instructive impulse in verse. What happens to didacticism when it can no longer, with authority, proscribe an outcome? When there is no Spensonia to promise? What, then, does instruction look like? *Laon and Cythna* was not written out of political optimism. In fact, as we shall see, the poem seems almost bored with what it can teach, reciting the same “dramatic” revelations over and over.

Laon and Cythna takes a while to muscle its way through frame narratives into the allegory setting where the action of its titular characters takes place. The dedication “To Mary” opens with Shelley’s educational history and a self-mythologizing description of the process by which he became the revolutionary author we see before us. Because Shelley is writing about himself here, we could reasonably expect this intellectual biography to confine itself to the dedication and the “real world,” but each of the next two cantos repeat this pattern, with the ethereal Mary Wollstonecraft, and then eventually Laon and Cythna narrating their respective

²⁴⁷ William Godwin, *Things as They Are, Or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, ed. Maurice Hindle, (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 3.

educations, the processes by which they come to know “the dark tale which history doth unfold” (1.38.1). This repetitive structure introduces the poem’s preoccupation with education and instruction, but an education grounded in *how* rather than *what* they learn.

The commitment to a “narrative” poem eschews the premise of the direct transmission of information to limn the idea of lessons for which here is no straightforward or verbal conclusion. Aside from the academic and occasionally insufferable moralization of the Preface, the body of the poem is committedly evasive. Barring the occasional soundbites—“Never will peace and human nature meet/ Till free and equal man and woman greet/ Domestic peace” (2.38.4-6)—the poem goes out of its way to tell us just how much it *isn’t* telling us, hurtling toward moments of climactic revelation or communication and braking inches from the finish line. In this section, I will examine this series of what can best be described as “false starts” in the poem which resist the straightforward trajectory of instruction. To my knowledge, authors have not discussed the importance of this structural feature to *Laon and Cythna* or to Shelley’s idea of pedagogy, except for Michael Scrivener, who briefly notes the poem’s coiled nature.²⁴⁸ I then discuss how these false starts map onto notions of endurance, which for Shelley I argue are tied to the project of learning from trauma, of manufacturing use from harm.

From the dedication through the second canto, *Laon and Cythna* reads like a Spenserian curriculum vitae. In the dedication, “To Mary,” Shelley recounts how, sick with the educational tyranny of the school-rooms at Oxford, he resolves to “be wise,/ And just, and free, and mild, if in me lies / Such power” and

²⁴⁸ Michael Scrivener, *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). “The pattern, then, is this: conversion, disappointment in love, a loving relationship, libertarian struggle, defeat in the social world, ultimate victory as idealists. The pattern is repeated four other times: in Canto First, the allegorical section; Laon’s story; Cythna’s story; and in the concluding section of the poem, where the libertarian martyrs journey to the Temple of the spirits, thus inspiring the reader to practice high philosophical ideals” (Scrivener, 125).

... from that hour did I with earnest thought
Heap knowledge from forbidden mines of lore,
Yet nothing that my tyrants knew or taught
I cared to learn, but from that secret store
Wrought linked armour for my soul, before
It might walk forth to war among mankind ("To Mary" 5.1-6)

The section hinges on the contrast between the "forbidden," "secret" knowledge that Shelley mines on his own and the teachings of the tyrants at Oxford, whose lessons are rendered in less glamorous terms. He eventually finds a kindred spirit in Mary, and the dedication closes with a reminder that their bond is both romantic and intellectual.

When Shelley has finished presenting his credentials, the first canto introduces a speaker very similar to him, whose primary attribute is despair in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The speaker takes a walk along the coast to clear his head, and on his walk, he becomes an accidental witness to a cosmic battle between an eagle and the serpent in its talons. They trade blows for several stanzas, until the serpent is as good as dead, and the eagle unceremoniously dumps him into the sea and flies off. With the battle over, the speaker realizes that he hasn't been alone on the coast: a beautiful woman collects the serpent's body and revives him. She then explains that the serpent is an old figure for the forces of good in the universe, though these forces have become all-but-universally scorned by humanity, while the eagle represents "Legion, Death, Decay." This woman, usually read as a figure for Mary Wollstonecraft, then invites the speaker aboard her tiny boat, bound (we learn eventually) for a crystalline pantheon tucked into the arctic, populated by Shelley's dead heroes in the cause of democracy and truth.

To pass the time on their journey, she relays her own coming of age: "'Twas many years ago, / Since first my thirsting soul aspired to know / The secrets of this wondrous world'" (LC 1.35.4-6). But what those secrets are, the poem doesn't say. Instead, Wollstonecraft's account of her coming of age happens in the terms of a sexual awakening—she dreams of a spirit who "bent

his eyes of kindling tenderness/ near mind, and on my lips impressed a lingering kiss,” and the lessons she takes from the world are not heaped from subterranean mines, but rather as “deep love” drunk” from “beams” of light. This study is less pragmatic than ecstatic, rendered in terms of erotic connection, like the kiss. In this section, learning is as much an emotional, even physical, process as it is an intellectual one.

In her own writing, Mary Wollstonecraft is much more practical, grounded in empirical forms of knowledge and almost paranoically on-guard against accusations of indulgence or excess. *Thoughts on the education of daughters* advises rational storytelling consistent with Wollstonecraft’s own rather ascetic style, while *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* opens with emphasis on how practical she will be:

Animated by this important object, I shall disdain to cull my phrases or polish my style—I aim at being useful, and sincerity will render me unaffected; for wishing rather to persuade by the force of my arguments, than dazzle by the elegance of my language, I shall not waste my time in rounding periods, nor in fabricating the turgid bombast of artificial feelings, which, coming from the head, never reach the heart. I shall be employed about things, not words! and, anxious to render my sex more respectable members of society, I shall try to avoid that flowery diction which has slid from essays into novels, and from novels into familiar letters and conversation.

These pretty nothings, these caricatures of the real beauty of sensibility, dropping glibly from the tongue, vitiate the taste, and create a kind of sickly delicacy that turns away from simple unadorned truth; and a deluge of false sentiments and over-stretched feelings, stifling the natural emotions of the heart, render the domestic pleasures insipid, that ought to sweeten the exercise of those severe duties, which educate a rational and immortal being for a nobler field of action.²⁴⁹

Wollstonecraft’s work tries to navigate a highly gendered literary culture, and her dismissal of language coded as feminine—“flowery diction” from novels, “pretty nothings,” and “sickly delicacy”—operates partially as a desire to distance herself from literary stereotypes that would impede her message. Unlike Pope, she suggests that the “force of...arguments” is at odds with

²⁴⁹ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.

“the elegance of...language,” that style impedes the effectiveness of the claim being made. Her fear of “artificial feelings” echoes Burke’s language from Chapter 1; although she operates on the other side of the political spectrum, she draws a line in the sand between the rationally true and the stylistically compelling.

In his context, Shelley’s alteration of her experience in *Laon and Cythna* reads as a willful misinterpretation of Wollstonecraft and an almost-violent imposition of his own aesthetic principles on her story. In an ungenerous reading, we see Shelley remake the severe, practical author Wollstonecraft, replacing her with a smitten girl who comes to know things through sexual relationships rather than through the “force of reason.” A more generous reading might be that Shelley’s understanding of education is explicitly embodied. The bodies of his characters—what they eat, and how they have sex—are central to his vision. In other words, learning is a highly embodied process, entangled with sexuality and desire.²⁵⁰

In the next layer of the frame, Canto Second, when Laon launches into *his* tale, we get a third account of a coming of age: “I heard, as all have heard, the various story/ Of human life, and wept unwilling tears” (2.3.1-2). What that story is, again, remains to be seen. The description he gives is vague, applicable to any number of historical periods and kinds of suffering:

Feeble historians of its shame and glory,
False disputants on all its hopes and fears,
Victims who worshipped ruin,—chroniclers
Of daily scorn, and slaves who loathed their state
Yet flattering power had given its ministers (2.3.3-7)

²⁵⁰ In *Shelley’s Eros: The Rhetoric of Romantic Love*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), William A. Ulmer makes a case for the body in Shelley. See, for example, Chapter 2: “The Revolt of Islam corrects the excessive privacy of *Alastor*, but clearly continues the earlier poem’s political interests in the body, the self/other dynamic, and the first Romantic generation” (Ulmer, 49). Chapter 3 makes a case for the limits of embodiment in Shelley. Ulmer reads *Cythna* as the embodiment of the body and argues that what he reads as her subordination to and narrative dependence on Laon positions the body as secondary to Laon’s verbal politics.

As in Shelley's account of his own education, the institutional forms of knowledge are the enemy here, and the narratives of history make for "victims who worship ruin." Laon goes on to describe a world of suffering in terms as abstract and broad as oceanic oppression, "victims and torturers," and the "homeless thought" of hope that moves along the fringe of human minds. This vagueness seems a response to the worship of ruin, pointing to a world that is entirely washed out and devoid of obvious meaning. Instead, we have a general, polished stone of history, one that undermines the pretense of distinction between "victims and torturers," that points instead to a world where the line between causing harm and being harmed are impossible to pick out.

In fact, rather than educate us, the text seems to ask us to fill in the blank with our own understanding of suffering—there's an "as we all know" tenor to this section, one that, like Shelley's "dedication," appeals to a general understanding of the "human condition." Laon brackets this description with the repetition of "I have heard, as all have heard, life's various story." "Various story" is itself a strange phrase, collapsing the presumed variety of lived experience into a single cohesive account. In this section, as in the sections with Wollstonecraft and Shelley before, the information being transmitted in the text is less important than the experience of its transmission, in how it is learned. The text sidesteps traditional didacticism—this is not a "real," "specific" history. In fact, at every step of the way, it advertises its refusal to capitulate to the demands of specificity, instead favoring a hazy, gestural history. The non-content of these moments of instruction is, at first, counterintuitive. Why bother focusing so much on the act of learning if what is being learned is not being communicated? However, this disconnect is central to Shelley's project. He wants to shift our understanding of learning out of a semantic field and toward something like what Gayatri Spivak calls a "rearranging of desire."²⁵¹

²⁵¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Terror: A Speech After 9-11," *boundary 2*, vol. 31, no. 2, 81.

We see learning represented as both a spiritual and physical process rather than an intellectual one.

However, these false starts share more than thematic parallels, as the language and imagery of the successive accounts start to blur together. The way the narrator introduces Cythna to the audience—“there was One / Who sate beside him like his shadow there,/ And held his hand—far lovelier—she was known / To be thus fair” (1.60.2-5)—anticipates Laon’s own description of Cythna as both his physical shadow and an extension of his ideals and beliefs: “As mine own shadow was this child to me, /A second self, far dearer and more fair” (2.22.1-2). In both examples, likewise, her fairness is emphasized. A similar echo occurs when the fictional Mary Wollstonecraft describes her first encounters with knowledge: “My heart was pierced with sympathy, for woe/ Which could not be mine own—and thought did keep / In dream, unnatural watch beside an infant’s sleep” (1.35.7-9). Laon, in the next canto, describes watching Cythna sleep in similar terms: “I kept watch over her slumbers there, / While, as the shifting visions o’er her swept, / Amid her innocent rest by turns she smil’d and wept” (2.28.7-9). Even though the frame narrative is meant to be discreet, to simulate a kind of knowledge passed on one to the next, these echoes make it difficult to tell where one person’s knowledge stops and the next begins.

What I’m calling false starts names the repetition of the same process, each of which is pitched as being a moment of overwhelming clarity in some way, but arrives at the same conclusion, not really changing what we learn. In this, the entire narrative structure of the poem starts to resemble Cythna’s “strange tale of strange endurance,” composed of many voices that are both fragmented and woven together. Cythna’s story becomes a model for political instruction that plays out on the scale of the poem. Endurance is also, strangely, the defining

affective principle of this process, which moves away from the content of instruction toward its overarching structure and organization. Each tale includes its own version of a climactic realization that is simultaneously vague on the “what” that is realized. It is easy to get worn out from this repetition of principles which are clearly intended to be taken as redundant. This process shifts the tenor away from “what” is being learned. Instead, we get a poem that is emphatically *about* instruction and the experiences of its characters as they learn but extremely vague about the information they are supposed to be learning. The content that *should* be the principle of didactic verse ends up tenuous and barely perceptible.

Cythna’s “strange tale” and the problem of trauma

The most extreme example of this blank content occurs when Cythna explains how she converted the “attendant slaves” of the tyrant’s harem into revolutionaries. As she explains to Laon, after being kidnapped by Othman’s men, she is imprisoned in his palace but remains “calm and sad, musing always / On loftiest enterprise” until he assaults her (7.4.4-5). For the Romantic period, this violent tale is not particularly “strange.” It resembles poems—Blake’s *America A Prophecy* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* come to mind—where sexual assault literalizes other forms of social violence. More “strange” is the effect that this trauma has on Cythna, providing the conditions for her to begin a radical campaign. As Laon describes:

Her madness was a beam of light, a power
Which dawned thro' the rent soul, and words it gave
Gestures and looks, such as in whirlwinds bore
Which might not be withstood, whence none could save
All who approached their sphere, like some calm wave
Vexed into whirlpools by the chasms beneath;
And sympathy made each attendant slave
Fearless and free, and they began to breathe
Deep curses, like the voice of flames far underneath. (7.7.1-9)

As Nersessian reads it, “Shelley’s argument is almost identical to the one Blake makes in *America*: that rape gifts women with the power of incendiary speech by doing damage to their very shape and structure.”²⁵² That is, only after she is assaulted do Cythna’s static “musings” transform into the kind of political speech that gets through to the “attendant slaves” around her.

Trauma provides the conditions to apprehend political realities and convince others to see them. How that trauma works, however, is unclear. In which direction does “giving” operate in this passage? Did Cythna already have the words, which madness lends gestures and looks? Or did she have the gestures and looks, which are now suddenly possessed of linguistic clarity? The lack of clarification—the fact that the syntax allows each version to exist as a possibility—pushes the reader to the fringe of its instruction, making sure we are aware that instruction is taking place while also deliberately obfuscating the actual content of that instruction.

Solomonescu reads *Laon and Cythna* as a reflection on the uneasy overlaps between liberatory and coercive rhetoric. If “truth can never be told so as to be understood and not be believed,” *Laon and Cythna* tests how to ethically engage with what she calls “the tension between [Cythna] and Laon’s egalitarian, antiauthoritarian ideals and their common tendency to rhetorical manipulation.”²⁵³ Her emphasis is on the period and the long pause, which she connects to the broader suspension of history and a reorientation of possibility. Shelley seems to toy with this problem in Cythna’s conversion of the “attendant slaves,” where the blankness of her speech resists giving any easy answer. However, instruction in *Laon and Cythna* is not always as gentle or as patient it is in the moments where Cythna employs the pause and period that Solomonescu brilliantly analyzes. In this scene, it appears unpredictable and messy.

²⁵² Nersessian, *Utopia Limited*, 100.

²⁵³ Solomonescu, 1126.

Imagistically, this sequence is “typical” of Shelley, in that it features a stack of dependent clauses and comparisons that slowly peel away from its initial subject, getting snagged on clarifying its own details and pulled ever inward. Although each simile is making a separate comparison—the “whirlpool” seems to describe how no one can be saved from her words, which are compared to the whirlwind—the reference to the “whirlwind” seems to anticipate and prompt the repetitive image of “whirlpool,” and like the spiral tug of both, we’re sucked into the logic of the image. The inward pull of these two images enacts the conversion of the “attendant slaves” who become fearless and free; like Cythna’s listeners, we are caught in a riptide we can’t escape. To that end, the structure of this image parallels Shelley’s recursive frame narrative, which (as I discuss in the next section) draws us inwards but does not release us. This stanza, too, ends on the almost self-negating image of the “voice of flames far underneath,” which are both syntactically and typographically buried by winds and waters and seem to be extinguished even as they spring up.

In this stanza, instruction requires (and produces) a receptiveness that works more like passivity. This passivity is aligned with an instructive model that toes the line between “narrative” and “didactic,” in part because it presents instruction as a kind of personal or charismatic pull, rather than a smooth exchange of rational information. The premise of the “narrative” pushes us to consider Cythna’s pedagogy as one that depends on being or providing an example to those around her. She models behavior, rather than transmitting information. This exemplarity is often how she and her brother are understood. Scrivener sees *Laon and Cythna* as a response to Hazlitt’s review of *Corolianus* and his claim that “The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power.”²⁵⁴ Shelley’s effort to prove otherwise is, in Scrivener’s

²⁵⁴ Scrivener, 122.

evaluation, not entirely successful: “the poem is significantly ‘aristocratic.’ For one thing, the reader sees Laon, Cythna, and the Hermit, but ‘the People’ remain a faceless abstraction. *Laon and Cythna* represents two revolutionaries, not the process of social revolution.”²⁵⁵ It’s an intriguing critique, one that Scrivener links with a kind of disembodied altruism:

Shelley’s image of the ideal rebel is consistently one of the ethically pure individual liberated from the contaminating influences of self-interest. ...[T]he Shelleyan rebel denies self-interest and identifies instead with humanity as a whole, thus rejecting the merely phenomenal world of apparent reality for the ideal world of immutable justice and virtue.²⁵⁶

This assessment revives L.E.L.’s emphasis on the ideal and disembodied in Shelley’s work, and while Scrivener’s characterization of the ideal Shelleyan rebel is generally accurate, Cythna’s trauma problematizes the disembodiment of Shelley’s “ideal world.” Her strange tale entangles the atomic embodiment and particularity of her experience with its generalized expression. Moreover, if we take the plot of the poem at face value, as a road map for revolutionary praxis (and I’m not sure we should), Cythna seems to become a more effective teacher when her principles are tested against physical and psychological violence. This logic would have us believe that her status as exemplar results from her ability to endure harm. At the same time, this passage is skeptical of whether this kind of exemplarity is essential to pedagogy.

By way of another example, when Laon searches the carnage of wasted towns for food that can revive Cythna, he meets a woman who immediately kisses him with “burning” (presumably feverish) lips. What position this woman occupies, whether as an allegorical figure or a victim of disaster, remains totally unclear after their encounter. Laon describes her as “withered from a likeness of aught human / Into a fiend, by some strange misery” (6.48.3-4). If

²⁵⁵ Scrivener, 133.

²⁵⁶ Scrivener, 74.

the simile is Shelley's preferred mode of communication, in this passage simile ("likeness") implodes, and Laon can't describe the woman as a human. For her part, she introduces herself as "Pestilence:"

My name is Pestilence—this bosom dry,
Once fed two babes—a sister and a brother
When I came home, one in the blood did lie
Of three death-wounds—the flames had ate the other!
Since then I have no longer been a mother,
But I am Pestilence (6.49.1-6)

This encounter is another moment of failed instruction in the poem, in two ways. First, it parallels the encounter between the spirit of Liberty and the morning star, who "impress[es] a lingering kiss" on the dreaming Wollstonecraft, a moment where a human speaker exchanges a kiss with an anthropomorphic but abstract entity. Unlike in that scene, Pestilence here invites the human Laon to join her as an allegorical symbol, asking if he is "Death" and suggesting that "go to work together" if that is the case. Laon declines the offer but accepts her offering of food, which he brings to revive Cythna.

Second, while *Laon and Cythna* borrows regularly from the Spenserian allegory that supplies its meter, the status of this allegory is always up for grabs—both Pestilence and Hope identify *themselves* as allegorical figures, and in *The Mask*, the addition of "she said" to the "maniac maid's" self-introduction introduction qualifies it. Here, Shelley brings us to the uneasy moment where someone who seems once to have been a person becomes an allegorical character. This process is attritive, as much if not more so than the famine that has "withered" Pestilence's form. In both passages, trauma is made to mean, is retroactively assigned a use value, while part of the nature of trauma is its resistance to signification and meaning, at least in expected ways. I'm drawing on Lauren Berlant's frustrations with aestheticized trauma and its attendant sentimentality, which enable "a way of acknowledging and actually exploiting

apparently irreducible social differences to produce a universalism around, especially, modes of suffering or painful feeling.”²⁵⁷ Berlant’s project complements the work on Romanticism begun by Tilottama Rajan in both “(Dis)figuring the System” and *The Supplement of Reading*.²⁵⁸ Rajan’s emphasis is “cultural traumas for which there may not be material causes or remedies,” those that are formally inaccessible unless by proxy.²⁵⁹

This is not Shelley’s only poem where endurance is registered on women’s bodies. In *The Mask of Anarchy*, the body subjected to this endurance is Hope, the “maniac maid” who lies down in the street at the risk of being trampled by the horseman Anarchy and, through her act of near-sacrifice, destroys him. As is the case for Cythna, Hope’s endurance is measured primarily through non-action. The poem simulates this non-action through its refusal to detail or describe exactly what happens when the poem reverses, even though this hinge is central to the poem’s generic makeup as a masque.²⁶⁰ After a sudden, non-event, Anarchy lies dead, and Hope appears after the confrontation with Anarchy “walking with a quiet mien” (“The Mask of Anarchy,” 129). There’s a huge blank here, and as with Cythna, that absence of content is consistently captured via violence on a woman’s body. The uncertainty of what is being taught, of what *happens*, is offset in the poem’s logic via the intensity of Hope’s vulnerability.

²⁵⁷ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 241.

²⁵⁸ Tilottama Rajan, “(Dis)figuring the System: Vision, History, and Trauma in Blake’s Lambeth Books,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58, no. 3 “William Blake: Images and Texts” (1995): 383-411; Rajan, *The Supplement of Reading*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

²⁵⁹ Rajan, “(Dis)figuring...,” 405.

²⁶⁰ Barbara Esterman, “Shelley’s Antimasques of Life: Re-Visioning The Triumph,” *ELH*, vol. 81, no. 4 (2014):1193-1224. From Esterman: “This work utilizes an antimasque element before the reversal in the masque proper when freedom is established” (1193).

At least some of Shelley's investment in both Cythna and Hope's endurance is tied to his nonviolent politics. In the 1832 preface to *The Mask of Anarchy*, Leigh Hunt is preoccupied with the poem's interpretation, with how well it will be understood by the public. He explains that as the editor of the *Examiner*, he declined to publish the poem "because I thought that the public at large had not become sufficiently discerning to do justice to the sincerity and kind-heartedness of the spirit that walked in this flaming robe of verse."²⁶¹ As a result, much of Hunt's preface translates Shelley's work for the reader: "the poet recommends that there should be no active resistance, come what might."²⁶² The goal of *The Mask*, and of Hunt's preface, is the much-named "Reform" that was already on the horizon in 1832. He's working to head off any readings that might adopt policies more radical or less peaceful than the nonviolent resistance of Hope, "lay[ing] down in the street, / Right before the horses' feet" ("The Mask of Anarchy," 98-99). In fact, the cautious enforcement and advised restraint of Hunt's preface is echoed by Shelley in an excerpt that Hunt lifts from his writings: "With respect to Universal Suffrage, I confess I consider its adoption, in the present unprepared state of public knowledge and feeling, fraught with peril."²⁶³ The specter of a multitude that hasn't yet been trained in the restraint and measure of Shelley's own nonviolent reform is raised as not the antidote to anarchy, but rather as the preconditions for it, and *The Mask* explains how to have a nonviolent protest.

That said, the poem suggests that the best instructive mode, the most legible and obvious, is blood itself. The earth, outraged by the violence committed against innocent spectators, "Had turned every drop of blood, / By which her face had been bedewed, / To an accent unwithstood"

²⁶¹ Leigh Hunt, "Preface," *The Masque of anarchy. A poem. The University of Manchester Digital Collections*, <https://www.digitalcollections.manchester.ac.uk/view/PR-R-00002-26590/7>, v.

²⁶² Hunt, x-xi.

²⁶³ Hunt, xxvii-xxviii.

("The Mask of Anarchy," 143-145). This splattered blood becomes an accent that is *unwithstood*, an odd coinage that could be defined as "not withstood," or "not endured." The slippage between *understood* and *unwithstood* links understanding (the didactic mode) with a tale of strange endurance that is also un-endured. In this moment, endurance and un-endurance work somewhat similar. If endurance is instructive, learning is the process of un-enduring, which is a strange formulation because "un-withstanding" can mean both not being able to resist also not trying to. In this sense, there is a passive element to understanding and learning.

While this notion of endurance is deployed to police more radical notions of militancy, I am also intrigued by the strange endurance of Shelley, even among thinkers who do not share his nonviolent philosophy. Shelley keeps showing up in 20th and 21st century contexts. Diane Di Prima's elegy for Michael McClure remembers "[running] to the East/River" and "shouting Shelley to the stars."²⁶⁴ *That Winter the Wolf Came* takes as its epigraph the "maniac maid" Hope from *The Mask of Anarchy*. Part of this correlation seems to be that Shelley is one of most politically vocal poets in the Romantic canon. Shelley's exploration of liberal economies of endurance takes up inaction as a key theoretical and political principle that operates squarely within the liberal tradition of nonviolence. As he deploys this aesthetics of endurance, grounding it in gendered violence, he starts to experiment with familiar sentimental tropes of pity and emotionality that both fall in line with a familiar liberal aesthetics *and*, when read as a didactic principle, start to experiment with both the limits of pity and the strangeness of pedagogy and affect.

On the one hand, Shelley models a kind of endurance, of militant inaction, that can survive not knowing what comes next but knowing it can't stay in an unbearable present. This

²⁶⁴ Diane di Prima, "For Michael McClure," *The Center for the Humanities*, 2020.

inaction isn't finessing its own helplessness. Instead, it enables itself to table questions of its own survival or teleological planning in favor of a suspended, passive resistance that is passive not necessarily in the sense of being nonviolent (though Shelley certainly wants it to be read this way) but in its relation to history and time. Endurance names the failure to define familiar modes of resistance or freedom as the preconditions for any radical solidarity, shifting away from concrete political agendas toward an emphasis on embodied need, harm, and desire.

For Hope, Cythna, and Pestilence, Shelley coopts narratives of harm and uses them to interrogate the moment where physical damages become abstractable lessons. In his description of Cythna's revolutionary transformation, he does so in part by delaying the actual lessons of her speech and instead tracing how they operate like whirlwinds on those around her. The expansive, elaborative tendency of his images connects this delay to the poem's drawn-out poetics and its surprising unwillingness to define revolutionary goals or speech at key moments. More than making the text an abstract "beau ideal," a fill-in-the-blank formula for radical pedagogy, the rest of this chapter will argue that this gap is part of Shelley's theory of pedagogy, that it allows him to trace the modes of instruction that happen outside the familiar parameters of "words and gestures." This blankness allows Shelley to theorize passivity and endurance as critical models of instruction, ones that resist the more familiar models of resistance.

Strangeness and Queer Time

For Shelley, "strange" comes to name this warped resistance. In 46 cognates across the poem, "strange" is used to describe moments of possibility and indefinite intensity, as when it describes Cythna's "strange tale." These uses of "strange" index what Sean Bonney calls the poem's "liberated language," that is, a language which "comes from a place so distanced from

the official world that it can barely, if at all, be heard.”²⁶⁵ Bonney cites the narrator’s first meeting with the spirit of Wollstonecraft, who speaks with “strange melody” (1.19.1). Twice more in the first canto, the narrator describes their “strange” journey, and then he mentions the “strange and awful tale” that the spirit shares, anticipating in his language what Laon will say of Cythna. In scenes like these, “strange” pinpoints moments where intensity or urgency surpasses the text’s willingness to make sweeping generalizations. Like Ngai’s account of the “interesting,” it holds a place where an evaluative judgment could go but delays the deployment of that judgment.

Another word for it might be “queer.” I don’t say this lightly. Shelley also went to enormous lengths to distance his work from queerness. His work on the Greeks, in particular, reveals this tendency. We see this principle on display most evidently in Shelley’s (deeply uncomfortable) writing about Greek culture, particularly Greek homosexuality. Shelley was anxious to minimize the history of queerness among the Greeks, suggesting that its homoeroticism resulted from a lack of intellectually attractive women. In this, Shelley participates in a larger project of sanitizing homosexuality so that Greek political and classical histories could be subsumed into the larger project of delineating the limits of whiteness. The poetic, political, mathematical, and scientific writing of ancient Greece was particularly appealing to the race-making project of Europe, particularly Britain, but claiming the Greeks as predecessors in an intellectual or cultural lineage required “fixing” the problem of queerness within those histories.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ Sean Bonney, “Notes on Militant Poetics.”

²⁶⁶ Eric O. Clarke, *Virtuous Vice: Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2000).

But however committed Shelley is to a kind of streamlined heterosexuality, his writing explores and plays with what contemporary criticism refers to as queerness as a part of a shift toward political desire (“thirst for a happier condition”) rather than political agenda. More importantly, this queer time structures the nature of time in the poem. If we think of the individual sequences of instruction, they model a kind of normative development for each person, as they learn their role in the world. Each of these sequences seems to employ and demand a kind of normative process of learning—their sum, together, would suggest that they are looking to describe a new norm, to demonstrate the similarities of revolutionary sentiment. However, the many layers of the frame narrative interrupt the smooth progress of instruction.

This frame doesn’t release us, either. The poem ends with Laon’s narration, without bubbling back up to the first speaker, who disappears from the text. This infinite recursion error operates alongside a series of narrative record skips in the narrative in Cantos 11 and 12. In the last arc of the narrative, Laon surrenders himself to Othman, with the provision that Othman spare Cythna and send her to America. Laon’s purpose and intent are not relayed to the reader at this point; he leaves Cythna on the mountain and at the same juncture, departs from the narrative. He directs our attention to the Tyrant’s “aged Senate,” sitting with “their eyes / In stony expectation fixed; when one / Sudden before them stood, a Stranger and alone” (11.13.7-9). This Stranger, without introducing himself, brokers a deal with the Senate that he will give Laon over to them, in exchange for Cythna’s safety. When they swear to his terms, the Stranger reveals himself to be Laon.

Two things are happening here. First, this sequence builds on the tendency that I described earlier, wherein Shelley uses “strangeness” to mark intensity and potential. Laon must become a Stranger, effacing himself from the narrative, in order to effectively convey the plot

twist.²⁶⁷ This section probes the limits of telling, of and of knowing—especially the limits of a narrator who is supposed to know everything he’s been through and be able to give us a good account of it. Instead, it demonstrates how not knowing something, how creating a surprise or strangeness, is useful for the plot. Laon takes on more narrative manipulation, modulating what we know and what we don’t know. Moreover, it emphasizes the limits of Laon’s model of instruction. He can recount years of his own life but he can’t create strangeness without altering the narrative.

From here, we start to see fissures in Laon’s own plan for Cythna, that she go to America and carry on their liberatory project. His vision imitates the movement of the “Genius” that Barbauld describes in “1811,” but Cythna refuses to go ahead with this plan and instead dies with him on the pyre. Her choice to abandon Laon’s long-term plan, the end-goal of the narrative, corresponds with a series of suspensions of time and tense. As Laon details their respective procession to death, he slips into and out of both third person and present tense, and even pushes the reader into the perspective of time itself: “morn did ope/ It’s pale eyes then,” he narrates, enjambling across a stanza break,

and lo! the long array
Of guards in golden arms, and priests beside,
Singing their bloody hymns, whose garbs betray
The blackness of the faith it seems to hide;
And see, the Tyrant's gem-wrought chariot glide
Among the gloomy cowls and glittering spears—
A Shape of light is sitting by his side,
A child most beautiful. I’the midst appears
Laon,—exempt alone from mortal hopes and fears. (12.1.9-12.2.9).

Straining the narrative perspective of the poem into the position of the morning, the poem delivers a moment where time itself stops, replaced with the act of looking (“lo”). Then we jolt

²⁶⁷ For a larger consideration of strangeness and the stranger, see David Simpson’s *Romanticism and the Question of the Stranger*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

into the present tense and are asked to “see” in present tense as Laon “appears.” Several times, the poem reverts into the past tense and then, with a demand to “see,” moves back into the present.²⁶⁸

In two of the last moments of this shift, we have the arrival of Cythna—“a steed / Dark and gigantic, with the tempest's speedy / Bursts thro' their ranks” and it's Cythna who seems to hold the poem, even temporarily, in this suspended present, with Laon describing “smiles of tender joy as beamed from Cythna now.” “Cythna now” echoes Cythna's promise to her brother, previously, that she will fulfill the feminist side of his revolutionary mission, and the insistence that “Cythna then” will be a stronger revolutionary than she is in Canto 2.²⁶⁹ If this echo invites us to read this moment as “making good” on Cythna's promise, the irony is that Cythna has in fact once again been bound, this time to the pyre, and what she envisions as activity and power is rendered, again, in a form of highly passive vulnerability, the endurance of harm. She does not “pass, as the charmed bird” through “serpent's den,” but in fact finds herself consumed in and by that den.

The last instance of this present tense is Laon's own death—“And is this death? The pyre has disappeared,” after which the poem returns to the past tense, but never leaves Laon's narration. Structurally, the poem coils inward, stopping just before the moment when Laon should meet up with the narrator, when the boat finds its “haven.” But if the poem ends by turning in on itself, these bursts of the present tense experiment with a different kind of

²⁶⁸ “Tumult **was** in the soul of all beside
...but those who saw
Their tranquil victim pass, **felt** wonder glide
Into their brain, and **became** calm with awe.
See, the slow pageant near the pile doth draw.
... the morning fair
Is changed to a dim night by that unnatural glare.” (12.4.1-9)

²⁶⁹ “Cythna then / Will have cast off the impotence that binds / Her childhood now” (2.46.6-8)

temporality and interruption. The effect is that we have been thrown into a history that we might like to believe is past, that what should be over and done, should be narrated and confined to the act of telling (to a “strange tale”) suddenly slips those bounds and engulfs us in the present.

Crucially, this disruption of tense is uneven and imperfect, with the poem ending on the decidedly tamer note of the peaceful present tense. However, it’s striking that Shelley decides to mark vulnerability in the poem with interruptions of linear time. The effect introduces queer time, of a kind of uneven, imperfectly progressing time. As a result, it shifts the focus of Shelley’s political agenda from one anchored in the future, a future that deputizes Cythna as a colonial agent in America, to one that rejects that future and seemingly any future, suspending itself in the present and linking this suspension with both formal and narrative endurance and passivity. It leverages passivity—even susceptibility—as part of a liberatory ethics.

Chapter 4

The riot and the didactic: trends in contemporary didacticism

There is tenderness only in the coarsest demand: that no-one shall go hungry any more.

-Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*²⁷⁰

The “wall” is the limit of the poem, and also the contested site where the poem blends into absolute reality, where the “invisible point”, in its moment of crisis, becomes visible...

- Sean Bonney, “Notes on Militant Poetics”²⁷¹

This final chapter explores why the didactic has gained such traction in recent poetic work. After the 19th century, didacticism all but disappeared from the canon, but something like didactic poetry continued surface in Beat circles, including in the work of poets like Amiri Baraka and Diane Di Prima.²⁷² The trajectory of this radical poetics offers the best explanation

²⁷⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, (London: Verso Books, 1974; Reprint London: Verso, 2006), 156. The full quote reads: “There is tenderness only in the coarsest demand: that no-one shall go hungry any more. Every other seeks to apply to a condition that ought to be determined by human needs, a mode of human conduct adapted to production as an end in itself.”

²⁷¹ Sean Bonney, “Notes on Militant Poetics,” *BLACKOUT ((poetry and politics))*, June 15 2018. <http://my-blackout.com/2018/06/15/sean-bonney-notes-on-militant-poetics/>.

²⁷² Willard Spiegelman’s *The Didactic Muse*, about Lucretian instruction in the works of Merrill, Ashbery, and Nebekov, among others, offers an alternative history to the general disappearance of didacticism. Spiegelman makes an intriguing choice, one that complicates the terms of this paper, by anchoring his historical definition of didacticism in Wordsworth’s poetry: “From the poet-teacher’s point of view, no one has so powerfully summarized the twin ends of pleasure and instruction as Wordsworth” (Spiegelman 257). The comparison underlies much of *The Didactic Muse*’s arguments, but is particularly evident in the conclusion, where Spiegelman cites *The Prelude* and specifically the speaker’s program for emotional instruction: “What we have loved, /Others will love, and we will teach them how.” This interpretation raises questions about emotional instruction versus information. Is teaching another person to love what one loves a lyric or didactic project?

for the 21st-century poets who take up didactic forms, including Jamie Berrou, Sean Bonney, Anne Boyer, Brendan Joyce, Eunsong Kim, and Wendy Trevino.

While all these poets are to some extent engaged in a radical poetics, their use of didactic poetry would seem counterintuitive: depending on who you ask, “good” poetry generally involves a measure of uselessness or refusal, a refusal that has been discussed across several disciplines, as I discuss in Chapter 1. However, these poets lean on the question of “useful” poetry to highlight the role of labor, transactions, and payment in a knowledge economy where poetry is dismissed as a leisure activity or passion project. They are acutely aware of the labor behind literary production and of the inequity of that labor. By way of example, Berrou’s *ebt poems*, shared for \$0+ on *Patreon*, envision a non-traditional publishing route that eliminates the financial barriers to publishing and circulation.²⁷³ Brendan Joyce likewise shared his poems as tweets and PDFs sold through *Gumroad* before founding *GRVLND* with Kevin Latimer in 2020. Bonney’s *Letters Against the Firmament* is almost entirely available through his blog *abandonedbuildings*, which supplements the text from print with images, varied typesetting, and author comments.²⁷⁴ These are poems at odds with existing channels of literary production, poems designed to be circulated, shared, uploaded, recorded, and otherwise redistributed either online or among a group. As Joyce puts it in *Character Limit*, “copyrights are for cops write these poems anywhere.”²⁷⁵ In short, didactic poems make claims about reality that go beyond emotional reports. They look for or argue about historical relations vis-à-vis labor and authority,

²⁷³ Jamie Berrou, *ebt poems* / jan 15-feb 16 2020, *Patreon*, 2021.

²⁷⁴ Sean Bonney, *abandonedbuildings* (blog), 2019, <https://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com/>.

²⁷⁵ Brendan Joyce, *Character Limit* (Cleveland: published online by Joyce, 2019).

and so contemporary poets use didacticism to model creative, speculative, and non-linear relationships to history that didacticism that can help us think about literary pedagogy.

We might be tempted to call these poems “political,” in the sense that they grapple with broad social issues, but I think a better lens might be “antipolitical” as it is defined by Stephano Harney and Fred Moten in *The Undercommons*:

Our task is the self-defense of the surround in the face of repeated, targeted dispossessions through the settler’s armed incursion. And while acquisitive violence occasions this self-defense, *it is recourse to self-possession in the face of dispossession (recourse, in other words, to politics) that represents the real danger*. Politics is an ongoing attack on the common – the general and generative antagonism – from within the surround.²⁷⁶

I don’t mean to imply by his mention in this chapter that Moten is a didactic poet, but *The Undercommons* is written from the perspective of two professors, including a poet, who study the impact of organized knowledge (like the university) on the collectives and spaces that we imagine, poets who share with Thomas Spence a commitment to fostering alternative collectives on the margins of institutional knowledge. In *The Undercommon’s*, politics and its dependence on representability and visibility capitulates to existing carceral logics of control. For the purposes of this paper, we could say that politics renders communities “useful” to those around them, coheres commons into entities that can be known, policed, and acted upon. Politics is the language of a clearly defined “end,” while antipolitics, “the general and generative antagonism” of the surround, the margin of recognized or legalized existence that defines without being defined, creates its ends as it goes and exists only in their creation. Antipolitics was a key formulation for this paper because it links legibility with political compliance and “recourse to self-possession.”

²⁷⁶ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 17.

If I seem to be setting up an impossible comparison between the non-utility of the antipolitical surround, and the clinical efficacy of didactic poetry, I think that, for poets like di Prima, Trevino, and Bonney, who will be the focus of this chapter, these modes are less different in practice than they are in theory. While the didactic has historically worn its heart on its political sleeve, the tone in contemporary poetry reworks this politics or renounces it altogether. As I will argue, didactic poetry's unique relationship to clarity and utility, when it chafes against familiar articulations of lyric subjectivity and intelligibility, actively distorts the familiar proportions between coercive utility and generous care and between transparency and opacity.

What I'm driving at is a poetic mode that uses the language of utility to problematize a radicalism that can be contained within or enacted through literature in the context of either lyric or avant-garde poetics by straddling the language and formal features of both. Part of the effect is a sustained attention to the poetics of moments that would otherwise not be read poetically. Didactic poems in the 20th and 21st century make use of specificity, information, and citation not only to transmit information but to bring poetic reading practices into spaces where they are not typically employed. They force us to make the distinction for ourselves between poetic language and practical language, to ask why *this* needs to be poetry, to ask what our expectations of poetry are. Didacticism triangulates the entangled language of resistance and passivity with a third option, something so obvious it ceases to need that language for the care it locates in the surround of carceral capitalism. More importantly, as this chapter demonstrates, contemporary didactic poems strain compulsively at the limits of "self-representation" and "self-possession," and they do this largely by prioritizing questions of collective data, information, or advice. This poetics can be read as a direct response to increased policing.

In this final chapter, I want to discuss the role of didacticism in contemporary poetry and, furthermore, discuss why didactic modes are often tied to historical models and languages. Chapter Four, which also acts as the coda for this dissertation, jumps forward to discuss one 20th and two 21st-century poets who, in a very intriguing move, adopt the didact mode for their work about riots in the mid-2010s. As I argue, didacticism enables these authors to confront established forms of knowledge. Beyond raising a formal and conceptual challenge to the genres of lyric and avant-garde poetry, these texts are, I believe, critical for thinking about pedagogy and instruction. Most importantly, each of the three poets discussed in this chapter are militant; that is, they see themselves primarily as radical organizers, agitators, and protestors.

The epigraph to this text, from Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, is part of series of aphorisms and prose stories on living a "damaged life." It may seem inappropriate to invoke Adorno here in because of his disdain (putting it mildly) for direct social commentary in art. The beginning of "Lyric Poetry and Society" piece vocalizes the imagined "suspicions" of his audience on hearing about "lyric poetry and society," suspicions which "will be allayed only if lyric works are not abused by being made objects with which to demonstrate sociological theses but if instead the social element in them is shown to reveal something essential about the basis of their quality."²⁷⁷ This is the section I have seen quoted by other scholars, but this section is not as violently antagonistic as its citations had led me to believe. In fact, the language of purity and degradation with which Adorno imagines his audience discussing the introduction of social theses (like didacticism) to poetry is chilling. The central claim of the paper is much binary and more exciting: "The less the work thematizes the relationship of 'I' and society, the more

²⁷⁷ Theodor Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," *Notes to Literature Volume 1*, Ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia UP, 1991): 37-38.

spontaneously it crystallizes of its own accord in the poem, the more complete this process of precipitation will be.”²⁷⁸ In other words, social systems emerge more clearly in poetry when they are not muddled by poets seeking to staple down their own political agendas.

It's this same resistance to a unilaterally imposed politics that drives the section of *Minima Moralia* quoted above: “He who asks what is the goal of an emancipated society is given answers such as the fulfilment of human possibilities or the richness of life,” the passage begins, answers that drip with “repellant assurance.”²⁷⁹ The only reliable answer, the only one we can imagine with the knowledge available to us, is much simpler: “that no-one go hungry any more.”

For Adorno, one symptom of damaged life is the inability to perceive tenderness through its usual channels, to hear it instead in the “coarsest demands.” As the epigraph implies, I find didactic poetry to be unexpectedly tender, because of its insistence. Instructive verse is not a historically tender project. It is, in fact, often alienated and aloof. But these militant didactic poems operate in the affective gaps and challenges of the didactic mode, mustering discomfort, literalism, and plain fact into a kind of care. One major goal of this chapter is to demonstrate that didactic poetry, even among authors as ideologically similar as di Prima, Bonney, and Trevino, is varied and formally complex. While Adorno would still probably consider didacticism as a kind of inadequate art, what I hope to demonstrate here is that the radical didactic poetry in this chapter is didactic in exactly the places where it forfeits its own claims totalizing politics, where its claims about reality contract to small, material, and desperately fundamental needs grounded in present harm rather than long-term prescriptions.

²⁷⁸ “Lyric Poetry and Society,” 42.

²⁷⁹ *Minima Moralia*, 155-156.

In the first section, I argue that Diane di Prima's poetics in *Revolutionary Letters* navigate the problem of a lyric speaker in the context of both political collectives and surveillance states. The result that she arrives at, in both cases, is a push toward instruction, which both allows poems to build community while sheltering the lyric subject from prying eyes. The only way to survive, di Prima's poetry suggests, is to fade into a crowd, to be "clear" in every sense of the world, and didacticism models how that clarity opens onto new kinds of identification and connection. The second section reads Bonney's juxtaposition of didacticism and mysticism as a means of connecting urban spaces to systems of carceral logic. The laws and logics of mysticism provide a stand-in that catch these "laws that patrol the invisible" in action. More importantly, they rework a vocabulary commonly associated with history to make the present as bizarre as the medieval occult.

The third section turns to Wendy Trevino's *Cruel Fiction* (2015). In *Cruel Fiction*, the didactic mode functions as a response to bordering and policing, one that explores possibilities for naming loss without enacting the cruel work of collecting her readers into emotional and aesthetic monoliths. In fact, the didactic openness and disaffected recitation of these texts corresponds to an emotional guardedness that is the language of carceral capitalism and a renunciation of that language. Formally, this recitation foregrounds the labor, exhaustion, obviousness, and patterns of political and poetic austerity and control; at the same time, Trevino's recitation and patterning locates networks of care that emerge within these violent spaces.

"Try to be clear": Diane di Prima's vanishing speaker

When Diane Di Prima started drafting *Revolutionary Letters* (1971), she was living in San Francisco, working on her semi-autobiographical novel *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1968), and trying to support herself and four children. Simultaneously, she was also involved with the San Francisco Diggers, a social movement that took inspiration from the 17th-century Digger movement. In San Francisco, the Diggers are most remembered for their Free Bakeries, which began in 1967 out of All Saints Church, and for other free resources, including newspapers and medical clinics, that they provided for the community.²⁸⁰ This context—the labor of parenting and surviving—epitomizes one of the major challenges of reading her work: the negotiation between the categories of the private/domestic/practical and the general/ideal/abstract.

A massive undertaking, *Revolutionary Letters* confounds many of the generic frameworks we use to categorize contemporary poetry. The project is striking both for the dogged literalism of its advice and the sudden bursts of mysticism that string these lessons together. Wendy Trevino begins the introduction to the 2021 Edition of Diane di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* with the kind of question most people have learned to ignore: "How do 'we' keep fighting? There is no one way, but sometimes you think about lines in...*Revolutionary Letters*."²⁸¹ Trevino poses a question that wants a concrete answer, the kind of question that contemporary poetry is usually not willing or able to answer. But as Trevino's question implies, di Prima's poetry takes a different approach to the problem of "how" in the context of 20 and 21st century poetics. Trevino's observation that "there is no one way" alludes to "Revolutionary Letter #8," which admits that "no one way works" in activism.

²⁸⁰ "Digger Bread and the Free Bakery (ies)," *The Digger Archives*, <https://www.diggers.org/diggers/digbread.html>.

²⁸¹ Wendy Trevino, introductory note, *Revolutionary Letters: 50th Anniversary Edition*, (San Francisco: City Lights, 2021).

Critical approaches to di Prima's work often focus on this pragmatism. The reissue of *Revolutionary Letters* was praised for being "adamantly useful," "a manual," "a practical guide" and a kind of "community care," for assuaging, to some extent, the suspicion that poetry does not exert material effects on the world.²⁸² Other authors zoom in on di Prima's mysticism, looking to the *Letters* for "hints of...camouflaged meanings."²⁸³ Ian Davidson reads *Revolutionary Letters* as a theory of cosmology and narrative time that compresses the personal and the collective.²⁸⁴ Still others gravitate toward representations of the body, whether generally, or in relation to dance, and breath.²⁸⁵ Joseph Pizza places this emphasis on embodiment in a larger historical context: "As early as 1950, with the initial publication of Charles Olson's 'Projective Verse,' di Prima's generation was encouraged to understand poetic composition as a distinctively physical act."²⁸⁶

Still, for a collection which is perhaps most often quoted for its general, instructive information—how to protest, what to stockpile in anticipation of disaster—it begins at a deeply intimate scale:

²⁸² Hanif Abdurraqib, Ken Chen, and Sofia Dahlin, introductory notes, *Revolutionary Letters: 50th Anniversary Edition*, (San Francisco: City Lights, 2021).

²⁸³ David Stephen Calonne, *Diane Di Prima: Visionary Poetics and the Hidden Religions*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 225.

²⁸⁴ Ian Davidson, "Times and Spaces Never Dreamed of in Diane di Prima's 'Revolutionary Letters,'" *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 48, No. 3, Women's Experimental Forms (Fall 2018): 314-338. "Di Prima's cosmology is constructed from the materiality of everyday life, including the temporary spaces of the body and the home; it is neither eternal nor outside the simultaneously entropic and fertile narratives of the material and natural world of living things and their spatial relationships. In di Prima's world, the private locations, traditionally constructed as the preserve of the biological family, become increasingly public and reconstructed as 'revolutionary spaces' (Davidson, 314).

²⁸⁵ Gillian Thomsen, "Representations of Gender and the Body in Diane di Prima's *Loba*," *Otherness: Essays and Studies*, 2, No. 2 (2011); Isabel Castelao-Gómez, "The Art of Life, the Dance of Poetry: Gender, Experiment and Experience in Mina Loy and Diane di Prima," *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies*, 56 (2017); Joseph Pizza, "Breathing Between the Lines: Diane di Prima and the New American Poetry," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 42, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 235-253.

²⁸⁶ Pizza, 236.

I have just realized that the stakes are myself
I have no other
ransom money, nothing to break or barter but my life
my spirit measured out, in bits, my spirit measured out, in bits, spread over
the roulette table, I recoup what I can
nothing else to shove under the nose of the maitre de jeu (“Revolutionary Letter #1,” 1-6)

Pizza reads the introduction of the speaker here as “claim[ing] a relational agency, a power absent from [di Prima’s] socially constructed role as female ‘other.’”²⁸⁷ Yet this emphasis on agency and independence is something of a bait and switch, since most of the letters that follow are not (overly) concerned with the self. “Go to love-ins / with incense, flowers, food, and a plastic bag / with a damp cloth in it, for tear gas,” “Letter #8” advises a general audience. Letter #9 fantasizes about killing the head of DOW Chemical. Overall, the poems are often committed to what, in boardroom terms, we might call “action items.” They are suspicious of individual, confessional writing, and tend to highlight its importance: “The value of an individual life a credo they taught us to instil [sic] fear, and inaction, ‘you only live once’” (“Revolutionary Letter #2”). In di Prima’s formulation, this artificial individuality is “a fog in our eyes,” since “we are endless as the sea, not separate, we die/a million times a day, we are born/a million times” (“Revolutionary Letter #2”). Davidson gets at something similar when he observes that *Revolutionary Letters* is a poem of “collective narratives,” one that “humanizes time through the narrative of its letter writer and speakers.”²⁸⁸

But if the goal of the *Letters* is to create continuity and fluidity between different people and times, the speaker of Letter #1 is a lone subject (“the stakes are myself”) overdetermined by

²⁸⁷ Pizza, 237.

²⁸⁸ Davidson, 329. Elsewhere, he observes, “Incorporating elements of narrative, *Letters* combines historical processes, which provide the particulars of what has happened, and poetic processes, which outline what might happen. The form of the poem is therefore humanized through the development of an individual and collective subjectivity” (330).

the currencies (“ransom money”) and other units (“my spirit measured out, in bits”) of a world that plays out like a casino. Di Prima’s characteristically loud enjambment exaggerates this fragmentation, snapping the lines off at unwieldy places. The line break in “I have no other/ ransom money” positions “I have no other” as an elaboration of selfhood. “The stakes are myself, I have no other [self].” When the next line arrives at “ransom money,” the arrival of finances into identity is even more uncomfortable and surprising. It also doesn’t quite make sense; ransom money is usually paid *for* individuals. It is not often comprised of them. Here, the payment, and not the person to be rescued, is selfhood. In other words, the self is an obstacle, and these poems chase ego-death not as the equivalent to revolutionary work but as part of doing and surviving the work, “for every revolutionary must at last will his own destruction / rooted as he is in the past he sets out to destroy” (“Revolutionary Letter #12,” 11-12). Formally, the poems enact this destruction through several avenues, including didacticism and detail.

The poems tend to list useful detail out for the reader, operating with a particularity and specificity that is unprecedented when di Prima was writing. One of the best examples of this specificity comes from Letter 3, where di Prima explains how to prep for store closures and supply chain disruptions in the wake of civil unrest. The poem runs through what to keep in the pantry:

store food — dry stuff like rice and beans stores best
goes farthest. SALT VERY IMPORTANT: it’s health and energy
healing too, keep a couple pounds
sea salt around...
you can cool it indefinitely

with 20 lb brown rice
20 lb whole wheat flour
10 lb cornmeal
10 lb good beans—kidney or soy
5 lb sea salt
2 qts good oil

dried fruit and nuts
add nutrients and a sense of luxury
to this diet, a squash or coconut
in a cool place in your pad will keep six months
(“Revolutionary Letter #3,” 12-30)

Reading a poem like this is tricky, mainly because it seems to tell you how it wants to be read.

The second section is practical, a grocery list. You could, conceivably, print it out and head to Costco, and in doing so, write off the text as exclusively useful or functional. That might be an oversimplification, since there are a lot of follow-up questions I’d have for instructions like this—how long will 20 pounds of rice last for one person? For two or more? How do you store these goods? Even as the poem invites us to be taken at face value, it’s already toying with the limits of how reliable this kind of information can be.

The next option might be to treat this poem as an experimental text. While di Prima does also seem to be using the kind of routine food cataloguing that pops up (for example) in Frank O’Hara’s writing, the most familiar register for this kind of poetry is avant-garde writing. There’s precedent for this. Benjamin Lee reads di Prima’s earlier work as part of a “postwar subcultural poetics” that is “one of many potential heirs to the historical avant-garde, whose strategies it reinvents during an era in which the ideology of high art’s separation from everyday life had vigorously reasserted itself and mass culture had become even more ubiquitous.”²⁸⁹ Lee seems to mean that like experimental writing juxtaposed “high art” and “mass culture,” di Prima’s writing adopts many of the hallmarks of hipsterism that explored the boundaries of “coolness” through her engagement with the hipster subculture, while remaining skeptical of the gendered and racialized elements of white hipsterism. Most important for Lee is the premise that

²⁸⁹ Benjamin Lee, “Avant-Garde Poetry as Subcultural Practice: Mailer and Di Prima’s Hipsters,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010): 775-794.

di Prima's work (her earlier texts in particular) belongs in an experimental tradition. While Lee looks at her earlier work, including *Loba* and *Dinner and Nightmares*, recitative information like the list in "Revolutionary Letter #3" can be read as a kind of experimentalism.

In Tan Lin's *Ambient Stylistics*, that transformation seems to happen where the lyric self, run to extreme conclusions as it gives its personal accounts, moves out of the happenstance of "utterance overheard" to something more technical and sinister, particularly in the US after the PATRIOT act, where the idea of FBI agents surveilling every internet user has become a meme.²⁹⁰ Lin returns to the uneasy relationship between literature, data, and authority in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* (2010), which includes library cataloging and classification among its many poetic modes. Lin's poetry suggests that writing anything leaves us vulnerable to surveillance the state. Similarly, in di Prima's writing, the didactic style works to trope and thwart surveillance.

Take "Letter #8." Like most of the *Revolutionary Letters*, #8 veers into and out of the language of practical advice. It's a poem that wants—or more accurately, *performs* that it wants—to be useful, telling us something in basically unequivocal terms. Di Prima's decision to title the collection *Letters*, rather than *Poems*, doubles down on this generic tension between interpersonal and lyric address. For example, #8 opens: "Everytime [sic] you pick the spot for a be-in/ a demonstration, a march, a rally, you are choosing the ground/for a potential battle" ("Revolutionary Letter #8", 1-3). If you didn't know this was a poem, you might mistake it for a how-to manual on urban protest. The next few stanzas go on like this. Don't wear earrings. Bring

²⁹⁰ Tan Lin, "from 'Ambient Stylistics,'" *Poet's Sampler: Tan Lin*, *The Boston Review*, April 1, 1999, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/tan-lin-poets-sampler-tan-lin/>.

a cloth in case of tear gas. This legibility puts unusual strain on poetic form, eventually dissolving the speaker:

try to be clear
in front, what you will do if it comes
to trouble
if you're going to try to split stay out of the center
don't stampede or panic others
don't waver between active and passive resistance
know your limitations, bear contempt
neither for yourself, nor any of your brothers ("Revolutionary Letter #8," 18-25)

The most obvious formal choice here is the heavy use of enjambment, a pointed choice in a poem about knowing your limits. Even the break between "what you will do if it comes" and "to trouble" captures that wait. "Try to be clear in front, what you will do if it comes" almost reads like a complete sentence *without* the addition of "to trouble." There's a hazy "it" coming, and this "it" looms invisible and eerie, something we know to fear even if we can't explain why right off the bat. When "trouble" comes, it's almost redundant. And then there's that first line: *try to be clear*. She means that protestors should figure out ahead of time how they feel about "trouble," come up with a few contingency plans, and above all avoid making up their minds in the heat of the moment. But the enjambment on "clear" means we can read "try to be clear" as another kind of instruction, clear being transparent. Or clear as in removed, clear from the trouble, out of harm's way. Try to disappear.

This tacit connection between didacticism and disappearing is front and center in Hito Steyerl's delightfully titled "How Not To Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV file" (2013).²⁹¹ The video instructs its audience on how to cover up and avoid been visible or

²⁹¹ Hito Steyerl, "How Not To Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File," *Artforum*, April 20, 2015. <https://www.artforum.com/video/hito-steyerl-how-not-to-be-seen-a-fucking-didactic-educational-mov-file-2013-165845/>.

recognizable to CCTV, imitating certain types of protest wear, the high-contrast masks and makeup that people use to avoid facial recognition.

Game studies theorist Aubrey Anable, discussing Steyerl's project, makes a jump from didacticism to surface reading:

The use of "didactic" in Steyerl's title suggests that she is laying something bare, resolving, and clarifying. Yet the subject of her lesson is tactics for hiding and receding from view. It is this tension between form and content and Steyerl's taking of the didactic address a little too far—insisting on it to the point of absurdity, making it *fucking* didactic—that I find interesting, and, dare I say, instructive. It is a too obvious lesson on the topic of how to become less obvious.²⁹²

In an extended meditation on the function of critique, Anable links the interplay of obviousness and opacity in visual media to surface and paranoid reading methods, coming obliquely at the same tension between didacticism and surveillance, especially in the digital age. In the same way, di Prima's poems raise the problem of visibility, connection, and intimacy under surveillance, and many of them use their instructive framework to interfere with that surveillance.

Literal disappearance or figurative invisibility is probably not what di Prima advocates for her reader, that patient "you" trotting off to a "love-in" with friends and incense in tow, but it's a good descriptor for what happens to the speaker in a didactic poem—they get "clear." They are understandable but also, transparent. In other words, "#8" produces an implied link between didactic directness and transparency, between saying what you mean and disappearing into recitation. I mean that citation, instruction, and information evade the lyric reader by conveying useable facts *and* using facts to block the familiar channels by which readers demand access to a lyric speaker. Becoming "clear" isn't just about knowing; it's about testing ways to survive

²⁹² Aubrey Anable, "The Work of Didactic Art in the Information Age," *ASAP/Journal*, vol. 6, no. 1 (January 2021), 51.

language. As a poetic tactic, didactic recitation does not simply fall back on objective or transparent knowledge. It becomes its own form of opacity.

While di Prima uses didacticism to explore the limits of individual thinking and individual experiences, she does so without negating them. Instead, even as her poetry expands toward broad spiritual horizons (“we are endless as the sea, not separate, we die/a million times a day, we are born/a million times”), her didactic poems ground those concepts in material practices. In “#3” for example, we have an anaphoric refrain of “store” that moves through the major sections, telling us to “store water” “store food” and “hoard matches,” and this refrain extends to the larger structure of the poem. That is, the poem becomes a way to jar, pickle or otherwise store ideas for later.

Moreover, “#3” weaves the more straight-faced instructions with critical asides and value judgments. The reminder that salt is “health and nourishment,” the suggestion that dried fruit adds “a sense of luxury,” and the informal reference to her reader’s own home (“in your pad”) shift the register of the poem out of cold recitation to a kind one of patient, removed, but never-quite-blank affect. Tonally, this poem resembles the blend of literal instruction and familiar chattiness of the pamphlets circulated by the Diggers, including this one for Digger Bread, which is, first and foremost, a recipe.

The resemblance with the recipe implies that didactic verse provides nourishment, that there is in fact a critical need being met by these poems. In this, she echoes Spence, who promised that *Pigs’ Meat* was “THE HONEY OR ESSENCE OF POLITICS.” Militancy is not often seen as synonymous with bread baking, but di Prima introduces domestic labor and care as key elements of a radical practice.²⁹³ Like recipes, these poems offer loose guides that can be

²⁹³ Davidson, 314.

applied and adapted as needed. In this way, di Prima borrows existing systems of collective nourishment and conviviality and applies them to poetry. While a poem obviously can't feed people, the pretext of nourishment shifts the way we might read the experimental strategies of di Prima's poetry away from a kind of forfeit or substitution—this could've been a poem, but is instead a market list—toward, instead, the principle that “no-one shall go hungry any more.”

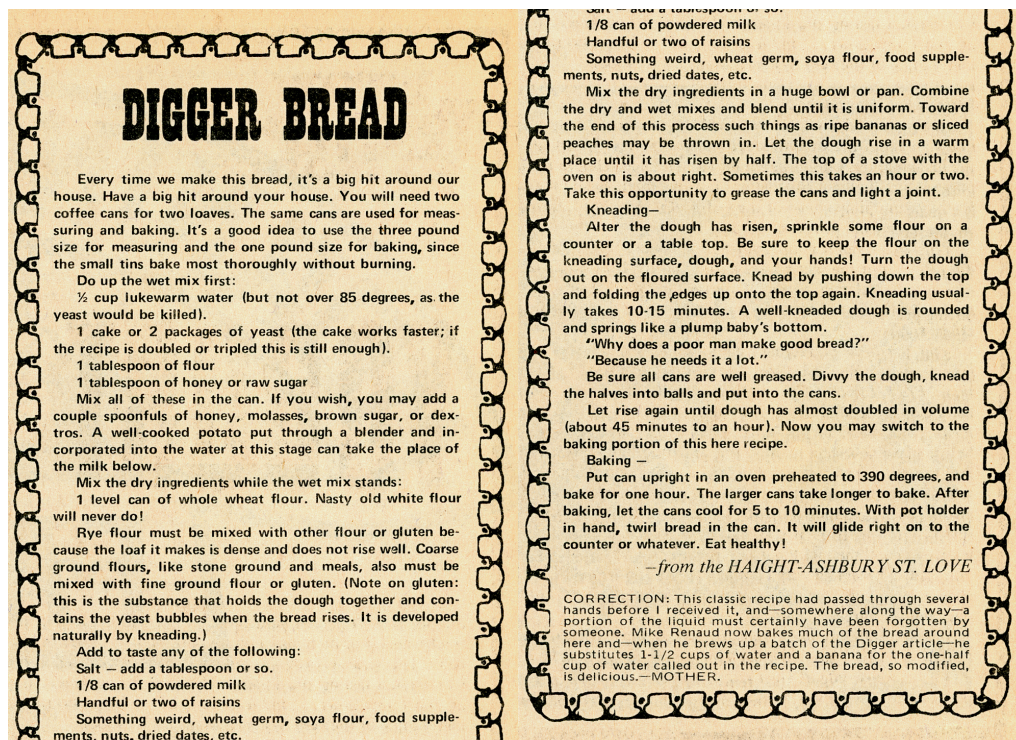


Figure 4: Digger bread recipe, *The Mother Earth News*, vol 1, no. 1, January 1970, courtesy of The Digger Archives.

Lastly, the didactic aspects of di Prima's poetry push on the disciplinary and categorical divisions that separate not only genres of writing but patterns of thinking. In “#8,” for instance, while the poem opens with practical advice, it ends on a slightly different note. For contrast, here is the last two stanzas, including the one discussed earlier:

try to be clear
in front, what you will do if it comes
to trouble

if you're going to try to split stay out of the center
don't stampede or panic others
don't waver between active and passive resistance
know your limitations, bear contempt
neither for yourself, nor any of your brothers

NO ONE WAY WORKS, it will take all of us
shoving at the thing from all sides
to bring it down. (“#8,” 18-28)

The last stanza signals a pivot from specific information to an incredibly vague blanket statement about a “thing.” All the concrete detail of the poem fades to an image so dematerialized that it no longer operates as useful physical instruction. For instance, shoving at something “from all sides” works great as a figure of speech to illustrate how “no one way works,” but it seems like a productive way to prop something up rather than bring it down. The material floor seems to fall out from under the poem, which ends by talking around a concept it can't quite name. In this moment, the poem moves from concrete didactic advice to abstract reasoning, deliberately taking us over the division between these two approaches.

Di Prima demonstrates that the genres and styles used to write about social movements, community care, and speculative futures influence what it is possible to imagine or do. Her poems warp these generic divisions by toggling between recipes, advice, personal meditations, experimental lists, and mystical writing. Moving between these genres allows di Prima to see how the material elements of ideas and systems play out. It isn't just a “campus,” for instance, it is a system of plumbing and power stations.²⁹⁴ This process makes visible the architectures of need and consumption behind abstract concepts, forcing these ideas into proximity with each other and, Audre Lorde puts it, “examining what those ideas feel like being lived on Sunday morning at 7 A.M., after brunch, during wild love, making war, giving birth, mourning our

²⁹⁴ See “Revolutionary Letter #15:” “when you seize a town, a campus, get hold of the power / stations, the water, the transportation, / forget to negotiate, forget how / to negotiate.”

dead.”²⁹⁵ Didactic poetry manipulates the material framing of ideological principles, testing how they change when the familiar parameters fall away.

Sean Bonney’s militant didacticism

In “Notes on Militant Poetics,” Sean Bonney reminds us that poetry began with “the curse, the charm, and the spell.”²⁹⁶ That power, he acknowledges, is all but absorbed by capitalist aims, but in the ebb of the curse, the essay locates a desire for a poetry that can get things done. This would militant poetics. “Notes” reads like a cheat sheet for Bonney’s major interlocutors, a who’s-who of 20th-century anti-racist and anti-capitalist poets or limit cases, often authors as invested in the relationship between poetry and mysticism, or poetry and pragmatism, as Bonney himself. In this section, I will argue that Bonney hones a peculiar kind of didacticism as his “militant poetics.” That didacticism combines “real” historical fact and straight-up instructions and imperatives with a wholly counterintuitive mysticism. I say counterintuitive not only because mysticism sits in uneasy relationship to didacticism in Bonney’s poetry but because Bonney himself seems to have an uneasy relationship to the hermetic traditions that he details.

While he is writing in the tradition of Diane di Prima, he is not exactly working out a spiritual practice. Instead, images and elements of mysticism and hermetic traditions find their way into his poetry at moments where he works to describe larger systems of carceral power. Walt Hunter’s *Forms of a World* makes a case for poetics in global literary studies, suggesting that up until now (well, up until 2019), fiction was the privileged genre in conversations of

²⁹⁵ Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” *Sister Outsider*, (New York: The Crossing Press, 1984), 39.

²⁹⁶ Sean Bonney, “Notes on Militant Poetics.” “It’s clear that advertising, like poetry, has its origins in the curse, the charm, and the spell. The supposed spells of the Welsh bards, all those secret combinations of words that had the power to kill kings – those fantasies have become all too real in their transformation into the secret combination of words that have the power to make you want to kill the poor” (Bonney).

global art forms, while poetry was read as local, untranslatable, and even provincial.²⁹⁷ Hunter's argument is in good company, part of a push to think about poetics as novels have been theorized, at a more global or transnational scale. First among these would be Jahan Ramazani's *A Transnational Poetics*.²⁹⁸ Bonney is, in large part, a member of that movement. It's not by chance that Keston Sutherland, in "Sean Bonney's Hate Poems," calls Bonney's work "passionately literary, European, not English."²⁹⁹ Bonney features prominently in Hunter's book, particularly when it comes to the relationship between poetics and collectivist politics. Hunter's Bonney is a man of the crowd, a "hortatory" poet "desperately conjur[ing] a globalized 'we,' a crowd to come."³⁰⁰ He accomplishes this, Hunter explains, through a careful bricolage of literary forms and moods/tones that operate as a "poetic enactment of gleaning. In this way, the commoning of diverse poetic left-overs becomes the stockpile that powers a collectivity yet to come."³⁰¹

I find Hunter's interpretation of Bonney a little too comfortable and hypothetical—while Bonney's invocations of historical poetics and mysticism may give the sense of a crowd or Romantic "multitude," the "you" to which Bonney addresses his various letters against the firmament is capacious and generally antagonistic. As he explains in "Letter on Riots and Doubt," "A while ago I started wondering about the possibility of a poetry that only the enemy

²⁹⁷ Walt Hunter, *Forms of A World: Contemporary Poetry and the Making of Globalization* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

²⁹⁸ Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

²⁹⁹ Keston Sutherland, "Sean Bonney's Hate Poems," *Post45*, July 16, 2019, <https://post45.org/2019/07/sean-bonneys-hate-poems/>.

³⁰⁰ Hunter, 66. See also: "The plural 'we' flashes forth in Bonney as a revolutionary subject in the process of being made, of scattering, and of reforming" (Hunter, 78).

³⁰¹ Hunter, 66.

could understand,” a line should alarm any reader confident in their interpretation of this text.³⁰² It challenges the limits—the appeal—of certain interrogative forms of reading. More interesting, although unfortunately more implicit, is Hunter’s investment in public space and Bonney’s narration of it. For Hunter, the poem *is* a common space, one constructed by the act of gleaning in response to the loss of crowds and common spaces.³⁰³ Below, I make a case for didacticism and didactic modes of reading as tools for understanding the not-totalizing-but-easily-perceived-as-totalizing systems that organize urban space. It’s impossible to read Bonney without considering the influence of cities and their attendant violence—surveillance, housing speculation, policing—on his work. More specifically, I focus on the role of didacticism in capturing the lived and often violent experience of 21st-century urban space (especially urban London). Didacticism, then, is a tactic for creating and surviving generalizations and blankness. It also doubles down on representations of contemporary surveillance and policing by connecting them to older historic systems of power and control.

There are plenty of reasons to say Bonney was a didactic poet, not the least of which being because he seems to define himself as one. In an interview with *Pores*, Bonney defines poetry as a tradition of leftist writers (many non-poets among them), including the long history of pamphleteers like Coppe and Winstanley.

4 :: for many years I had problems with the word “poetry” (thorngust mothfloom) because the official english story is one of modesty quietism self-satisfaction (black noise black noise) but the real line goes Gerard Winstanley Abeizer Coppe William Blake Bob Cobbing and on and on more more more (webcore webcore) the real line is wild³⁰⁴

³⁰² Sean Bonney, “Letter on Riots and Doubt,” *Letters Against the Firmament*, 8.

³⁰³ See Hunter, 66.

³⁰⁴ Sean Bonney, “The Is :: Occupied Territory : Anger Is An Energy,” *Pores*, September, 2002, <http://www.pores.bbk.ac.uk/2/bonney.htm>.

Bonney doesn't see the didacticism of Winstanley and Coppe as an offshoot of poetry. It's "the real line." While Bonney doesn't add himself to this list, the interview implies that any poet should be clued into this history, one that is presented as an alternative to the "modesty quietism" and "self-satisfaction" of the English lyric tradition. Then there's the fact that Bonney tagged the audio versions of his poems as "lectures" on Soundcloud.³⁰⁵

In an interview with BOMB magazine in 2019, Bonney positions his work at the limits of the poem, that the collection is about not writing and other failures to be useful. Discussing *Letters Against the Firmament*, Bonney explains that he chose letters as a medium because "It seem[ed] a bit hokey to go home and write a poem after being involved in [the riots in 2011]. So I wrote a letter which was, in my mind, written to one or two poets I know about how I couldn't write a poem."³⁰⁶ Bonney's Letters are poems that don't want to be poetry, that are more invested in questions of getting through to other people and developing an argument—questions of didacticism and utility—than recent analyses of experimental poetry can account for.

The project for *Letters Against the Firmament* is often one of recounting history. Right away, we can see that Bonney borrows the title of a text attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, a text central to the hermetic traditions that he riffs on throughout the poem.³⁰⁷ But the title is something of a bait and switch, because "Corpus Hermeticum" opens on London in March 2011, and on the insistence of basic historical facts—"News blackouts etc. This really happened" ("Corpus Hermeticum," 26). What really happened, happened in two waves. On March 26th,

³⁰⁵ Sean Bonney, "Sean Bonney," *Soundcloud*, Soundcloud, accessed May 1, 2024, <https://soundcloud.com/sean-bonney>.

³⁰⁶ Sean Bonney, "Their Own Pantheon: Sean Bonney Interviewed by Jeffrey Grunthaner," *BOMB Magazine*, December 11, 2019, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/sean-bonney/>.

³⁰⁷ Stanton J. Linden, *The alchemy reader: from Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003).

2011, Bonney participated in the March for the Alternative, an anti-cuts protest organized in response to government reductions in public spending;³⁰⁸ the action lasted several days and, as Bonney describes, included the smashing-up of a few luxury buildings on Piccadilly Circus. Then, in August, London police working for the racist Operation Trident shot and killed Mark Duggan, a Black man from Tottenham, and from August 6th to the 11th, protestors took to the streets in the largest uprising in London this century.

This history is in-and-out of the poem, which careens forward, to “Imaginary battles in science and strike actions,” lines that swing pendulously from “We’re blocking central London” to “the devil,” from “every Thursday” to “vision overload,” from “a slightly less comfortable suburb” to “their galaxies, spinning faster.” In short, Bonney responds to the challenges of representing a city in riot with a dizzying cocktail of visionary intensity and uncompromising pragmatism. *Letters* interleaves lines like “London is a razor, an inflamed calm has settled, we’re trapped outside on its rim” with what Bonney calls “lectures,” essayistic interludes featuring block quotes of, for example, Hölderlin. If “lectures” wasn’t a dead giveaway, these poems are concerned with instruction (and specifically, as I will argue below, about teaching history.)

From the first lines, the poem advertises a disconnect between recent historical content and the hermetic tradition, and this disconnect between realism and mysticism highlights the problem of relating a thing that “really happened” through “news blackouts,” the problem of narrating a lived reality that exists outside the authorized record. This precarity isn’t even exciting for Bonney, who by throwing in an “etc.,” suggests that this censorship happens all the time and that his reader should know the drill. And “etc.” functions as its own kind of

³⁰⁸ Mark Townsend, Tracy McVeigh, Jamie Doward and David Sharrock, “Anti-cuts march draws hundreds of thousands as police battle rioters,” *The Guardian*, March 26, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2011/mar/26/anti-cuts-march-police-rioters>.

withholding: rather than narrate the dirty particulars of “news blackouts,” Bonney responds with metaphysics, with a push and pull between reality and apocalyptic mysticism that comes to a head at the end of the poem. The question he raises from the beginning is why title a poem about the London riots “Corpus Hermeticum: on the revolution of the heavenly spheres”? Really, why forklift two titles out of the past and slip new material between their pages?

But then “Corpus Hermeticum” ends rather abruptly with a rewrite of one of Bonney’s earlier poems, “ACAB: A Nursery Rhyme.”³⁰⁹ In addition to the text of *Corpus Hermeticum* available on *abandonedbuildings* and the official version published in *Tripwire*, Bonney uploaded a reading to his SoundCloud.³¹⁰ I expected a chant, but Bonney doesn’t read the first lines like that; he’s deadpan, almost clinical, each substitution dispensed with what sounds like surprise as he finds the same words on the page. The utter lack of variation is mesmerizing. Since the poem lacks the rhyme structure or meter of a regular chant, the not-quite-metrical pattern becomes the structure around which the section organizes itself. There is, undeniably, a pleasure to this repetition, one heightened by the slight pause that precedes each refrain.

Here, the poem’s substitutions and associative misfires reach their logical end in what reads like a mantra, prayer, or incantation, as the repetition alchemizes familiar expressions into “wicked words.” (Bonney shows his hand a little when, in “Notes on Militant Poetics,” he compares the role of modern poetry to both the curse and the advertisement). All the same, we should be leery of ending up in the realm of incantations and curses, since “the fairy mab” and “the philosopher’s stone” (take that, Joanne) seem to be part of the problem, lumped in with the

³⁰⁹ Sean Bonney, “ACAB: A Nursery Rhyme,” *abandonedbuildings*, December 31, 2014, <https://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com/2014/12/acab-nursery-rhyme.html>.

³¹⁰ Sean Bonney, “Corpus Hermeticum,” *Soundcloud*, accessed May 1, 2024, <https://soundcloud.com/sean-bonney/corpus-hermeticum-on-the>.

words of Ezra Pound (“make it new”) and the bureaucratic demands of unemployment agencies (“these are the steps I’ve taken to find work”).

We get somewhat different clues from the standalone version of this section, which Bonney published in 2014 as “ACAB: A Nursey Rhyme.” The subtitle aligns the poem’s most obvious device, its repetition, with the form and purpose of children’s literature. In other words, the “nursery rhyme” genre, if we can call it that, tables the occult/hermetic in favor of the labor of care and instruction; to that end, Bonney seems to be playing up the parallel between “ACAB” and rhymes about the “ABCs.” To a greater extent than either the protest chant or the incantation, the nursery rhyme foregrounds *patterns* as a central organizing concept for Bonney, one that yokes the pleasure of repetition to its didactic function.

If this is a useful poem (I think yes), then Bonney seems interested in testing the limits of utility as a formal device. Since a poem featuring “electoral system” and “suicided by society” isn’t a likely candidate for *Mother Goose*, even if we take this repetition as a nursery rhyme rather than as an incantation, we’re still left asking—who is this poem for? It’s rapid-fire alteration between curated examples of the mundane (we’re still using lattes for that?) and performatively elevated confessions like “I have lost understanding of my visions” exposes the limits of the juxtaposition of visionary and ordinary. ACAB is also a model for life under carcerality, for how we navigate, think, and write under systems of policing. The refrain transforms everything it touches, until it seems that there is a single truth nested at the center of the world, that while police exist, the future is put on pause and the world narrows to a fine point. It puts the past on pause too—elsewhere, Bonney writes that “Stone circles are police kettles, you can’t tell me different” (“Corpus Hermeticum,” 27). The poem itself ends in the street, fully absorbed into the collective chant, “say no justice, no peace, and then say fuck the police.”

ACAB a poem has been published several times over and is one of Bonney's more recognizable works. Reprints and broadsides of it circulated online after his death. What's exciting here is the assumption that ACAB and ABCs are related, that literary and language instruction brings directly to bear on how we think about the police. This isn't rational convincing, either. In fact, it might be bad pedagogy. We're told a series of slogans, the way a brand might tell you to avoid one thing and do another.

In "Repetition Run Riot," Celeste Logan observes how slogans exert particular demands on the poetics of the lyric refrain.³¹¹ In a reading of *That Winter the Wolf Came*, Langan suggests that the repetition of the slogan "cut[s] against both the naturalization of the refrain—as an authentic utterance of a folk—and its divinization: the refrain as oracular performative. Instead, I suggest that...the refrain might be understood best as an exploration of writing 'out of place.'"³¹² In other words, the slogan and the refrain are portable, and this portability comes with a sense of displacement. The refrain drives toward semantic saturation, toward intensity in excess of content. But in Bonney's poem, the refrain isn't just emptied of its content; the exchange-based nature of the poem causes all the rest of the poem to be absorbed into this semantic saturation as well, as "fuck the police" is substituted in for all the other elements of the poem.

Like the graffiti that Langan describes, "fuck the police" seems to be written on all the places that come into this poem, all the different experiences and people and objects. There is the implication that the police are present in each of these places, from the coffee shop selling a latte

³¹¹ Celeste Langan, "Repetition Run Riot: Refrains, Slogans, and Graffiti," *The Wordsworth Circle* (Spring 2021), 287-307. "Like graffiti, defined by Susan Stewart as 'writing out of place,' the refrain might be considered as "a practice of defacement: an application that destroys the significance of their material base just as the defacement of coins invalidates their worth, their face value, and proves a threat to the monetary system as a whole" (217). No matter how imperative or exhortative its "content" might seem, as a citation—"Heard again—again—again"—it is ex-citable as well, susceptible to the ungovernable effects of displacement and appropriation" (295-296).

³¹² Langan, 298.

to the public relief office asking about the steps the speaker has taken to find work. That presence may not be the same, but it is universally there, and refrain becomes a way to visualize and capture the connectedness of these discrete places.

For readers who don't know, the city that Bonney is describing in 2015 (and experiencing in 2011) was one where it was almost impossible to move without being observed on CCTV. The riots that Bonney describes in *Letters Against the Firmament* were heavily policed. During the most intense days of the UK riots in August 2011, news sources posted live maps of "riot activity" on their websites. These maps were updated regularly, creating real-time local surveillance systems that also fed a global appetite for crisis; the data used in these maps are still available online through a public Google doc.³¹³

A series of academic projects have accounted for the unique violence of 21st-centuring policing and surveillance. Foremost among these accounts is Simone Browne's indispensable *Dark Matters*, which emphasizes the racialized violence of modern surveillance.³¹⁴ Meanwhile, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (2015) takes up the problem of "Control-freedom, which is intimately experienced as changes in sexuality and race, is a reaction to the increasing privatization of networks, public services and space, and to the corresponding encroachment of publicity and paranoia into everyday life."³¹⁵

³¹³ "England riots: Maps and Timeline," *BBC News*, August 15, 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14436499>; Simon Rogers, Ami Sedghi and Lisa Evans, "UK riots: every verified incident - interactive map," *The Guardian*, August 11, 2011, www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/interactive/2011/aug/09/uk-riots-incident-map.

³¹⁴ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke UP, 2015).

³¹⁵ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 1.

Chun explains that it isn't just our vulnerability to digital surveillance and control but our totalizing, paranoid views of this vulnerability—our assumption of an already-fully-realized control state—that leads us to ignore the fact that “The forms of control the Internet enables are not complete, and the freedom we experience stems from these controls; the forms of freedom the Internet enables stem from our vulnerabilities, from the fact that we do not entirely control our own actions.”³¹⁶ Her book advocates for a more precise and less apocalyptic approach to network controls and authorities, to understanding things as they are rather than investing these hidden structures with more power than they actually have. Chun takes a very different approach to surveillance than Bonney, but I think her account of paranoia and hidden authority is enormously helpful in discussing mysticism and surveillance in Bonney's work. This isn't to accuse Bonney of paranoia, but rather to suggest that he comes at the same problem from a different angle, advertising the occult nature of a police state by turning up the volume on its absurd systems and signs, rather than by diligently tracking down spaces of vulnerability and freedom, as Chun does.

For each of these writers, the problem is not merely technological nor even a question of the abuses of power that technology enables. Part of the problem is understanding the long history of surveillance and policing in urban spaces through and alongside rapidly mutating technological developments. As Tung-Hui Hu reminds us in *Prehistory of the Cloud*, the internet was built on top of existing infrastructure, and much of the social and political relations made possible by the cloud are extensions of relics of historical developments.³¹⁷ Hu's argument is primarily concerned with 19th- and 20th-century histories, with the upcycling of railroad lines and

³¹⁶ Chun, 3.

³¹⁷ Tung-Hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015).

cold war bunkers into fiberoptic cables and cloud cluster facilities, but the idea that historical frameworks can create productive distance through which to complicate and comprehend tech developments is not limited to the 19th- or 20th-centuries. In fact, Joe Milutis' *Ether* looks back even further, suggesting that the language employed to describe digital systems is steeped in a history of mysticism and non-entity.³¹⁸

It's helpful to think of the project that economist Saskia Sassen raises throughout *The Global City*, namely is one of catching capital in action.³¹⁹ As she puts it, "Do changes in the global flow of factors of production, commodities, and information amount to a new spatial expression of the logic of accumulation?"³²⁰ This question suggests that urban poetry provides an opportunity to spatialize formerly invisible dynamics of accumulation under racial capital, and I think Bonney's fallback onto didacticism (and systems of knowledge like maps and mysticism) seeks to evoke precisely this sense of logic accumulating in space. The rest of this section will read didacticism in Bonney's poetry as a strategy for visualizing policing and surveillance in London. Bonney's poetics is a response to the toll of both physical and digital policing. I mean by this that Bonney's militant mysticism plays with secrecy and obviousness in a world of occluded violence. These are very different models of resistance than the opacity and blankness usually offered as poetic forms of refusal.

We'll return, then, to "Corpus Hermeticum" and its account of the history of policing in London. Shortly after the mention of Bruno, Bonney adds:

Check the extent of police lines. 1829, Robert Peel invented 1000 pigs to circle the city as walls or gates as cordons. This happened. Those 1000 pigs as calendar, the working

³¹⁸ Joe Milutis, *Ether: The Nothing That Connects Everything*, (Twin Cities: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

³¹⁹ Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991).

³²⁰ Sassen, 22.

day a pyramid as razor the police recuperation of the sun. It was dark and the barricades were burning. (“Corpus Hermeticum,” 28)

The passage yokes specific reference, here the founding of the London police by Robert Peel, to a language that rapidly outpaces everyday life, moving from police to calendars to pyramids and razors and then that last sentence—“it was dark and the barricades were burning.” This line seems to eject us from history into a studied nowhere, a watery and unspecified reference to some notion of a perpetual conflict. What comes before that line, between the present-tense imperative to “check the extent of police lines” and the hasty gesture to a past tense where “it was dark” is a short-list of useful images. The circular perambulation of the 1000 pigs seems to become the calendar—the working day, and its attendant cycles of daylight. That pyramid is right out of Blake, while the calendar seems to be riffing off E. P. Thompson’s discussion of time and social control.³²¹

When the 1000 pigs transform into “walls or gates” and “cordons,” Bonney seems to suggest that policing is built not only into London’s history, but into its very architecture. The relationship between architectural space and policing that’s found in “cordon” (and by the way, hold onto its root word “string,” we’ll come back to that) plays out in the poem’s reference to Newgate prison:

For example, take Newgate. Built 1188, directly into the walls, London’s eastern gate. Beat Two. We don’t recognise ourselves there. Beat Three. The debtor’s jail, the throat the muzzle of the city. July 10th, 1790, burned. Robert Peel built cops from the ashes. Beat Four. Debt is bone. Versions of bone. Version One. Spare change. Version Two. Lock the bosses out. Superglue them. Out. Version Three. Debt One. Those nobility who entered the city from the east would pass through a wall packed with the tortured, the scraped and wheezing dead. London a cursèd city, is beautiful in the smouldering spring. (“Corpus Hermeticum,” 27)

³²¹ See Blake’s illustrations to *Jerusalem* and *The Book of Urizen*; E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism”, *Past & Present*, vol. 38, no. 1 (December 1967), 56-97.

Newgate was one of the seven gates into London, but it became a notoriously inhumane London prison in operation from 1188-1902. It was, as Bonney describes, built into what was then the wall surrounding the city of London, although the gate itself had been in use from the Roman construction of the wall. Newgate Prison officially closed in 1902; well before that, the city limits had expanded past the wall to which the prison was attached. Bonney's reference to Newgate here is one specifically structured around the fact that this violence was part of the construction of the city, that the gate into London was comprised of those trapped within its margins and dying.

As he reminds us later, "Robert Peel still peers down from Broadgate wall and is a blockade, Newgate torched." He's referencing here a pub at 178 Bishopgate in Broadgate, "The Robert Peel," which is two doors down from the City of London police headquarters. The pivot back, from a contemporary "still peering" Robert Peel to Newgate's burning in the 1780 Gordon riots suggests that history must be lived on top of, that it's a pile-on, a blockage or blockade. This performed relation to history, and at that a kind of random-access history that bounces all over, has some purchase in considering Bonney's relationship to space, surveillance, and system. Part of the slipperiness of his language works with the same totalizing and half-glimpsed logic of a historical violence that changes its methods but not its principles or purposes. In other words, this is surviving the violently transformed face of basically unaffordable and heavily policed spaces the formal stand-in for unrecognizability and surveillance are the same formal features that allow the poem to become porous, generic in a vague/secretive way, and opaque—these terms are a way of going unnoticed, of disappearing.

Hovering just at the back of Bonney's work is an investment in situationist poetics, and specifically in the work of Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem. Debord is best known for *The*

Society of the Spectacle, a collection on capitalism and spectacles in the mid-twentieth century, but it's his "Theory of the Dérive" that might have more purchase here. With the *dérive*, Debord yoked earlier models of wandering, drift, or *flânerie* to a project of mapping space and perceiving spatial relations.³²² He called this project of wandering "psychogeography." In "Corpus Hermeticum," we're told promptly to:

Forget psychogeography. All its ever been is a ring of protection, a police-thing's joy, at its centre that bitter knot of strings that Brecht called 'prophecy', spy-rings. String One: we were smashing up the Ritz, March 2011. String Two: shit was talked about immigrants, about dole scroungers. String Three: not an ATM a bright metallic wind or real-time alignment of the patterns of non-affordable housing scattered throughout the city and the stereo-optic beating of police hearts. Beat one. Cancellation of Europe and Mercury. Stone circles are police kettles, you can't tell me different.³²³

This passage might be the crux of Bonney's curse: here, we can see the tangle of images and vocabularies that structure his relationship to space and mapping. The *dérive* here, the experience of wandering and observing, becomes a form of policing space. There's a suspicion built in that even to walk and observe, in the style of Reznikoff or O'Hara, to document, is to do the police's work for them. That refusal to patrol London directs much of Bonney's relationship to space and could explain his dependence on and investment in mysticism as a unique form of blankness that is not withholding but rather inundating with information.

However, Bonney consistently interrogates his own ability to get out from these patterns and forms of control. The poem plows through its own self-problematized images, taking the knot of strings and turning them into a sequence of events that float, fragmented and passive ("shit was talked"—by who? when?), between the uprisings in March and the events that

³²² Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive," translated by Ken Knabb, *Les Lèvres Nues* #9 (November 1956), reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste* #2 (December 1958).

³²³ "Corpus Hermeticum," 26-27.

instigated them. The strings, in other words, become not just the “bitter knot” at the core of policing but the organizing principle of the poem in this passage and a way, indeed, of telling “what really happening” in a way that refuses to be polices, that fragments, tangles, and evades systems of control.

We don’t get a happy ending though, because after the pattern that introduces the strings, Bonney switches into “beats,” the “stereo-optic beating of police hearts.” This image for pacing invokes both musical and theatrical tropes, but it also plays up the policeman’s beat patrolling the “patterns of non-affordable housing” in the city. The conclusion, absurdly, strands us between an archaic and iconic structure right out of the mysticism handbook and a hyper-new tactic for urban control that was practiced in 2011, that continues to be practiced in 2020, as we in LA are all too aware. Mysticism explores these forms of violence, demonstrating how carceral logic operates not only in physical space but in the psychic and internal structures that govern it.

As Bonney writes in “Lamentation,” “there is a law it/ patrols the invisible /is dark outside.”³²⁴ The invisible is not an easy out from carceral logic. In fact, not only is the invisible is also subject to laws and logic, but “the invisible” disappears from that first sentence. Bonney’s steep enjambment encourages a reader to take the first two lines as a statement: “there is a law [and] it patrols the invisible.” Once we get to the third line, it becomes clear that we’ve been tricked. We get two sentences here. “There is a law [and] it patrols [while] the invisible is dark outside.”³²⁵ In other words, the invisible *becomes* invisible in the first sentence, literally disappearing so that what “the law” now patrols is (seemingly) everything. The invisible, which we might have read as a means of containing or locating the law, disappears, forcing us to reckon

³²⁴ Bonney, “Lamentation,” 22.

³²⁵ “Invisible dark” seems also to be a reworking of Hell’s “darkness visible” in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

with the fact that we can't quite locate where this law is or what it patrols. And the invisible that is dark outside hardly sounds invisible. It sounds more like the "dark" we greet at the beginning of "Lamentation," an obscurity or opacity that, as Bonney demonstrates, is hard to name, a form of refusal that also refuses to refuse, a blank that tells too much. *Letters Against the Firmament* becomes a way of verbally living on top of history and making control and "freedom" feel as strange as the "law that patrols the invisible" or the "bitter knot...prophecy."

Here, didactic poetry comes in as a counterweight to this violence, running the language of deep history and a variety of disciplines up against what Bonney elsewhere calls the "simply velocity" of "starving to death."³²⁶ When Bonney ends *Corpus Hermeticum* with "ACAB a Fragment," we are presented with an equally pointed contrast between "raging melt spectres" and "simple velocity." It is refreshing to feel the mysticism and scientific writing of the first sections honed into a single point, to feel "discourse" abandoned for something as simple as "fuck the police." Leaving listeners with "takeaways" is best practice for a lecture, but more than that, the asymmetry of this ending contracts the scope of what is possible to think or write while the carceral state exists.

Deadpan sonnets in Wendy Trevino's Cruel Fiction

In 2011, on the other side of the world from London, Wendy Trevino learns that "Santander Bank was smashed into!" Her inimitable *Cruel Fiction* (2018) begins with two very different poems, the second of which, "Poem," is about witnessing riots, not participating in them.³²⁷ Borrowing heavily from two Frank O'Hara pieces, "Poem (Lana Turner has

³²⁶ Bonney, "Letter on Employment or Not," *abandonedbuildings*, March 2, 2013, <https://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com/2013/03/letter-on-employment-or-not.html>.

³²⁷ Wendy Trevino, *Cruel Fiction* (Oakland: Commune Editions, 2018).

collapsed!)” and “The Day Lady Died,” “Poem” documents the experience of learning, from a friend, that the glass windows of the British bank were broken by protesters. This also really happened.

As we learn at the outset of “Poem,” the speaker is struggling to write (“getting nowhere with the novel”; “you said it was reading/ but reading hits you on the head/ so it was really burning”) until they are jerked out of their creative frustrations by news about the riots: “I had been/ standing there awhile when I got your text/ Santander Bank was smashed into!” (“Poem,” 2; 4-6; 7-9). After news reaches the speaker, the scope of the poem shifts from their work to a birds-eye, omniscient view of “barricades in London,” “riot girls drinking riot rosé” and “fluid road blocks & gangs & temporary autonomous zones” (11; 13-14). The pronouns also shift on either side of “Santander Bank,” populated by the conversational back-and-forth of “I” and “you” at the outset and then emptied out of discernable characters other than the anonymous “riot girls” until the last two lines, when “everyone & I / & we all stopped reading” (14-15).

That ending, coupled with the shift from the personal to the general, implies that reading and puzzling over a novel are not as meaningful at the moments when historical events break through. In this, there is a skepticism about the “use” of poetry in social movements. Even the allusions to Frank O’Hara read like frustrated edits. “Stop reading,” the poem demands, at the exact moment that it invites you to read not only the line on the page, but also the echo of another poem, one it assumes you will have heard before. You catch the wink in that last line with almost embarrassment. It’s almost self-destructive, sandbagging itself with the language of a canonical author even as it tries to push toward something else. To use Bonney’s language, it’s borderline “hokey” by design. While “Poem,” alongside other Trevino pieces, occasionally

explores anxieties about its own project, to read Trevino only for this pessimism is to miss the insights of her work.

Borrowing O'Hara's closing lines from "The day Lady died," Trevino plays with the strange not-quite-collective entity "everyone and I." For O'Hara, that phrase captures a shared experience—being stunned into silence by Billie Holliday's artistry—as it happens both to a room ("everyone") and to a single person ("I").³²⁸ The speaker feels and responds in concert with others, but simply saying "everyone stopped breathing," with the "I" implied, doesn't capture, grammatically, the disruption and almost the dissociation of a room of people experiencing a feeling simultaneously. "Everyone and I," while including the speaker with the larger "everyone," also by necessity sets them on parallel tracks, as separate subjects yoked to the same grammatical noun. The speaker is confirmed to be included in the collective at the exact moment that they are precipitated out of it.

"Poem" elaborates on this by turning the double movement of the "everyone and I" to a triple movement, changing the subject again to "we all." The speaker is summoned from within the crowd, materializes as an "I," and then blends into a "we all," emerging for a second only to dart back into the crowd. As with O'Hara's poem, this construction reveals something about the status of "I" within the poem. For Trevino, "everyone," "I," and "we all" are constructed as distinct grammatical and conceptual entities here, entities that move together but that are not fungible. Like O'Hara's "everyone and I" documents a failure to completely combine or separate "everyone" from "I," Trevino's poem documents a kind of failed arithmetic. "Everyone" + "I" does not quite sum to "we all," since the poem needs all three grammatical subjects.

³²⁸ "[W]hile she whispered a song along the keyboard/ to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing" ("The Day Lady Died," ll. 28-29). Frank O'Hara, "The Day Lady Died," *Lunch Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1964), 27.

Trevino, as an activist and political thinker, is deeply suspicious of smooth concepts of belonging, of idealizing the “crowd” as a monolith, which, as Hunter warns, tends to happen in discussions of radical poetry.³²⁹ And while much of *Cruel Fiction* is written in response to *Revolutionary Letters*, she also includes one poem titled “Revolutionary Letter” in the collection, and this poem explains the importance of “find[ing] the people who will help” in protest situations, the people who share your goals or strategies:

tl;dr you don’t need or want
the people who you know
aren’t “with you” to be
with you. really you don’t (“Revolutionary Letter” 11-14)

Content-wise, this poem is didactic. It delivers a clear message—that you don’t want to get entangled with people who aren’t “with you”—and uses “tl;dr” to flag that message as instructive information, a key takeaway if you didn’t read anything else. Trevino’s message is not advice for general politics, either. It is a temporary, practical instruction, primarily—judging from her posts online—about who to organize and protest with. She often comes back to practical disagreements about how to protest within movements.

As the rest of this paper will examine, in Trevino’s work, didacticism operates as a way of balancing her pessimism regarding easy *we*’s with the imperative of collaboration and action. Trevino connects questions of labor and exhaustion to the role of emotion, to when and whether poems make us feel things, and to the forms of racialized and gendered labor that these feelings demand. This is a labor of which Trevino is intensely skeptical, one she often links to “cruel work,” the process by which the culture industry maintains the “cruel fictions” of capital, race,

³²⁹ See Walt Hunter’s *Forms of a World*.

and nationhood. Instead, *Cruel Fiction* relies on an often-deadpan style of recitation that embodies Trevino's skepticism about emotional connection as poetic endgame.

This section will consider the tension between didactic poetry's professed desire to get through to others and the failure of the sentimental channels through which such lessons have historically been routed. This failure brings me to the deadpan, disaffected style that characterizes Trevino's work. I argue that this deadpan style serves several functions. First, it advertises the austerity of the poetry industry, in part by narrating exhaustion and in part by upending the formal experiments that academic poetry circles have come to expect. Second, this poetics is uniquely sensible to the limits of negation and refusal as poetic ideals and explores "being clear" as its own tactic. Deadpan recitation offers facts—direct, obvious, or immediate information—as a different form of refusal, one attuned to the demands placed on life and art. Third, the embodied attention of recitation suggests that didactic poems can operate as a kind of care. Most importantly, as I argue below, the didactic mode allows Trevino to theorize unstable, dynamic relationships between the "everyone," the "I," and the "we" by combining the urgency and earnestness of useful language with the skepticism and critical eye of formalism.

Trevino's *Cruel Fiction*, the impetus for this chapter, opens with the poem "From Santa Rita 128-131," subtitled "[A list of things as I remembered them and in no way to be taken as a complete account of what happened there then or what is happening there now]," which describes a night spent in jail by listing the number of objects, events, emotions, and people that Trevino observes:

I was detailed approximately 54 hours, 47 of which I spent in jail.
I spent 47 hours under bright fluorescent lights.
I was cold approximately 43 hours.
I was moved 7 times, to 5 different "tanks."

I spent no more than 15 hours in a tank near a door with a small rectangle of glass through which 21 women & then 27 women could see barbed wire & light then dark outside.

I was fed 6 times—5 “sack lunches” which included 2 slices of stale bread, 2 slides of slimy bologna, 2 crème cookies soaked in bologna juice, 1 packet of “salad dressing” (mayo), 1 packet of mustard, 1 packet of a “calcium mix” & 1 orange; & 1 “hot meal,” which included maybe turkey & definitely beans, a side of cooked carrots, some sauce, a salad, a cube of cornbread & a cube of cake.

I used a toilet no more than 5 times.

I slept no more than 4 hours.

I was denied birth control. (“From Santa Rita 128-131,” 1-15)

The numbering of objects, even singular events, lends a clinical edge to Trevino’s account. The imperative for the poems detachment is evident: in a space of total surveillance, emotional legibility becomes an extension of state control. The factual laundry list of this poem doesn’t advertise wanting to be close read, but Trevino, ever the expert at producing poems that “pass” as prose, has given us a highly lyric poem, but one that emphasizes the strangeness of the lyric under the pressure of the carceral state.

For starters, her focus narrows to immediate physical and medical concerns—the food she ate, the medication she had access to. Her description of the view the people in the tank had through the “small rectangle of glass” likewise invokes poetic modes of seeing, the small window that poetry offers into a scene. In this sense, it is a perfectly lyric poem, but a lyric poem on which has been imposed a logic of hard precision. From the French “e” in crème, which took me a long time to replicate in Word, to the clarification that “salad dressing” means mayo, to the specification of the number of people around, the poem aligns the vigilance of the lyric with the vigilance of the state. Similarly, the non-utility, or worse, complicity of poetry is front and center: “I heard 1 person recite 1 poem to 2 pigs.” “I heard 1 pig make fun of a woman for praying.”

I wouldn't call "From Santa Rita" a strictly *didactic* poem but it opens the collection with a meditation on tone, counting, and surveillance that sets up the more didactic and essayistic poems that follow. In other words, she takes up a poetics that eschews easily digestible feeling for recitation. This didactic model creates a poetics that is both accountable to social movements and desires while refusing to theorize those desires beyond what Harney and Moten call "general and generative antagonism." Surprisingly, although hopefully less so after my discussion above, in a poetics, this antagonism looks like deadpan, informative recitation.

There is also the sense that something is being substituted for style, here. Poetic recitation inaugurates a tangential relationship to absence or loss, operating as it does just before the poem tips over into white noise. The primary framework we have for reading a passage like "Revolutionary Letter #3" or the catalog of meals in jail reads as the refusal to put something else in a poem. In texts like Anne Boyer's "Not Writing" or Jamie Berrout's *ebt poems*, the poem's directness operates as a type of concession, an aesthetic "failure" that advertises how what we want to dismiss as the prosaic constraints of low funds, childcare, debt, and ineffectual social services make it difficult to write poetry.³³⁰ This is how Dominick Knowles reads Trevino's aesthetics in "Sonnets for Brass Knuckles Doodles," calling them "a kind of antiwork poetics of inelegance. In these moments, doodling on the job acts as a reclamation of stolen labor time, a gesture against plundered life" that negotiates the contradiction of her militant politics

³³⁰ "I am not writing about contemporary art. I am not writing accounts of my travels. I am not writing reviews for *The New Inquiry* and not writing pieces for *Triple Canopy* and not writing anything for *Fence*. I am not writing a daily accounting of my reading, activities, and ideas. I am not writing science fiction novels about the problem of the idea of the autonomy of art and science fiction novels about the problem of a society with only one law which is consent." (Anne Boyer, "Not Writing," *Garments Against Women*, (Boise: Ahsakta Press, 2015), 42).

and day job as a nonprofit worker.³³¹ They achieve this through their “deprivation of content, this perpetual ‘heartbreak’ endemic to capitalism’s life-world, in which one can neither work nor stop working, write nor stop writing.”³³²

Unlike “Sonnets for Brass Knuckles Doodles,” which primarily recounts the speaker’s quotidian experiences at work—the racialized labor they and other women of color carry out, their frustration at the nonprofit’s inefficacy, the awkwardness of being “friends” with their boss—*Cruel Fiction* spends less time with these personal, daily accounts. Formally, the project adopts the same tone, and many of the same formal features, including the sonnet form; short, plodding sentences; found speech; steep enjambment; and frequent caesura. Yet if *Cruel Fiction* builds on the grammars and style of the “Brass Knuckles” speaker’s personal frustration, alienation, and exhaustion, it tests what happens when these affects are applied to less personal topics.

This relationship to loss and subtlety brings me to the didactic section of *Cruel Fiction*. Most of the book is bundled into two sonnet crowns: “Popular Culture and Cruel Work” and “Brazilian is not a race,” titles that frontload their intent to instruct. Stylistically, the sonnets’ use of historical data and critical citation has a lot in common with a creative essay. They introduce theses, elaborate, lay out evidence, and come to conclusions. But the sonnets are also meticulously numbered, metrical closed-circuits that share both their structural order and their quasi-objective recitation with “From Santa Rita.” Reading these sonnets within the frame of

³³¹ Dominick Knowles, “Shadows of the Occupation: Wendy Trevino’s “Sonnets for Brass Knuckles Doodles” and Nonprofit Epistemology,” *Post45 Anti-work aesthetics*, January 10, 2024, <https://post45.org/sections/contemporaries-essays/anti-work-aesthetics/>.

³³² Knowles.

“From Santa Rita” links their deadpan tone to questions of ordering, ordinariness, and emotional withholding. For example, “Popular Culture and Cruel Work” begins:

“No matter how much you feel it, you want
To feel it even more.” That’s the feeling
Tony Bennett says he sees in Amy
Winehouse when they meet (“Popular Culture and Cruel Work: 1.” 1-4)

This first sonnet goes on to narrate the timeline of Winehouse’s death, ending on another quote, this one from Winehouse’s father. Given Trevino’s calm delivery, the disconnect between Bennett’s words and the poem’s tone is palpable. Of the contemporary authors described here, Trevino is the most recognizably didactic—the key points of her poems are dispatched in unmistakable plain speech. But she also breaks most completely with earlier didactic models by developing a markedly different approach to emotion and sentiment: in terms of feeling, the poem isn’t giving us much, except in the glaring irony of the final lines, when Winehouse’s father accepts her Grammy and ends his speech: “‘Long live / Whitney Houston! Long live Amy Winehouse! / Long live Etta James!’ But they’ll all be dead.” (12-14). Even that irony starts to feel tired of itself, thoroughly unsurprised by another loss.

More to the point, its rage and irony are yoked directly to the sonnet form. Here, the volta happens twice, with the interruption of a male speaker who calls out “long live Amy Winehouse” shortly after her death, and the second, corrective insertion at the end: “but they will all be dead.” Here, Trevino leverages the fundamentally argumentative nature of the sonnet, which is structured around a point and counterpoint. But even as it leans heavily into high-contrast irony, so much goes unsaid: the epidemic of women dying in and for the music industry (including Selena Quintanilla, who haunts much of “Pop Culture”); Bennett’s almost-creepy “feel it;” the preponderance of men’s speech in a poem about a dead woman. Even the loud irony in the poem operates at an almost parodic intensity, a playfully cruel extreme underscored by the poem’s

repetition of “feel,” “feel,” “feeling,” that last one Trevino’s own addition to Bennett’s praise.

The whole project smacks of obviousness and, simultaneously, withholding, and as I will argue, this is exactly the feeling feeling feeling that Trevino’s after.

The sonnet project, which in “#1” is used primarily to cram two prose quotes into iambic pentameter, is an unintuitive choice. Trevino emulates the prosaic style of these quotes, writing a poem that makes you ask: “couldn’t this have been a paragraph?” In “Pop Culture & Cruel Work,” meter is presented a duplication of itself, an unnecessary or even wasteful labor that throws into relief what we consider worthwhile in a sonnet and what we don’t. In other words, the spare, factual recitations of these poems are themselves a representation of austerity, a way of impugning the austerity measures of pop culture with trauma that registers first on the body.

Importantly, this instruction is not a humanizing project, at least not in the usual way. One of the great clichés about literature is that it is a powerful teaching tool because it can instill empathy, that poetry humanizes its subjects, and humanizes its readers. Scholar and novelist Namwali Serpell has written on the limitations of this approach to literature, and the issues of privileging empathy in literary practice or study; Serpell reads empathy as “an emotional palliative that distracts us from real inequities, on the page and on screen, to say nothing of our actual lives.”³³³ Serpell is not saying that empathy has no role in social or political interactions, simply that as a pedagogical endgame, it rarely gets us “beyond the recognition—which usually dawns on children by about age five—that other people exist, that they are human like us, and have thoughts like us, but are also very different from us and from each other.”³³⁴

³³³ Namwali Serpell, “The Banality of Empathy,” *The New York Review of Books*, 2 March, 2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2019/03/02/the-banality-of-empathy/>.

³³⁴ Namwali Serpell and Maria Tumarkin, “Unethical Reading and the Limits of Empathy: Two writers on the ethics of pen and paper,” *The Yale Review*, December 1, 2020, <https://yalereview.org/article/namwali-serpell-tumarkin-unethical-reading-and-limits-empathy>.

Trevino remains skeptical of easy lines of political identification and of how those lines of identification can be consolidated into nationalism, as she demonstrates in *Brazilian is Not a Race* 16, from which the collection takes its name;

A border, like race, is a cruel fiction
Maintained by constant policing, violence
Always threatening a new map. It takes
Time, lots of people's time, to organize
The world this way. & violence. It takes more
Violence. Violence no one can confuse for
Anything but violence. So much violence
Changes relationships, births a people
They can reason with. These people are not
Us. They underestimate the violence.
It's been awhile. We are who we are
To them, even when we don't know who we
Are to each other & culture is a
Record of us figuring that out. ("16", 1-14)

The larger project of *Brazilian is Not a Race* is a study of the fissures and slippages within notions of Mexican identity. The poems document instances wherein Trevino experiences racialization as a Mexican-American woman and explore the flawed assumptions and violences underlying the "familiar conflation of / Nationality & race" ("18", 11-12). These poems outline various failures of identification, moments where the solidarities that are "supposed" to exist, according to the American narrative, do not hold up. Trevino explains her belated realization that her classmates in growing up were Afro-Latine, the hierarchy of race in José Vasconcelos' foundational Chicano text "La Raza Cósmica," and the white women who pushed for the "multiracial movement."³³⁵ By extension, the poems in *Brazilian Is Not a Race* are written from a (typically) first-person collective point of view, but that point of view is capacious. "We" might be figuring out who we are to each other, but there is the imperative that we do that figuring, and

³³⁵ Trevino, "#13."

the insistence that even if we do not know the whole, complete reality—even if we want to resist that reality, what Glissant would call “totality”—there is an abstract middle ground that can acknowledge the looseness and uneasiness of the collective without invalidating the need to engage with questions of ideology and material reality.

The border is the first and central image of this poem and one of its central theoretical concerns, highlighting the function of borders and categories under racial capitalism. People arrive after the existence of borders and race in the poem, not before. The didactic presents itself as a mode for making visible the traces of these cruel fictions not just on the material world but on patterns of thought and reasoning. In “16,” I’d argue that the border emerges in the recurrence of a type of reflective equivalence. “We are who we are” says nothing about “we,” but it says a lot about how borders and cruel fiction function as a thought process, bracketing off collectives entirely knowable and reductive. This “reasoning” is bad logic, syllogistic, circular, and closed into itself. But the same syntactic structure shows up in Trevino’s more earnest line, that the violence of creating a border is “Violence no one can confuse for / Anything but violence.” It also functions poetically as a kind of blank rhyme, appearing three times on the right margin. Yet in none of these instances does violence register as rhyme, in part because of their arrangement. There is no pattern to teach us what to expect as it rhymes with itself, and there’s something jarring—in a poem about recognizing violence *as* violence—about this mis-matched failed identification. Here, “violence” starts to operate like “we” in that it is open-ended but in the process of being defined.

We’re invited to read the sonnet as an extension of policing—the enjambment, particularly between lines 2 and 3, reminds us that the sonnet shape is also a kind of imposed border. The didactic mode operates as a certain grammatical feature here, its measured

statements, its recitation, that returns us to the mode of “Santa Rita.” Like that poem, these poems lay out a litany of things that are true under policing. And, like political borders, the outline of a sonnet is fictional and exists through general agreement and convention. There is something reasonable, rational about this poem and its syntactic argumentation. It’s productive, cumulative even, as it lists how conditions are created. First, a border. Then time. Then violence. If violence, then people. This straightforwardness is chilling, in part because it seems to imply that “we,” too, can be reasoned with, even as the collective first person insists that “we” are not so easily convinced.

While the words read like a prose essay, Trevino’s lines, heavily enjambed as they are, fracture this essay into composite parts. For instance, line 5, on its own, reads as a series of three building blocks—“The world this way.” “& violence.” “It takes more”—which belong to a larger thought: “it takes time, lots of people’s time, to organize the world this way. And violence. It takes more violence.” But the poem’s structure systematically splits sentences at odd places so that we can visualize their pieces and the wayward possibilities in each one. “It takes more” could go any direction. More what? “These people are not” wills the reasonable people into nonexistence for a split second, before it clarifies, “are not us.” “We are who we are” promises a collective stability, almost resignation, to the identity of “we” before upending it by clarifying that this is only true “to them.” The didactic mode strives to identify the common facts that it can name to build a politics, the claims that can be made against “reality,” some great and tangled system. Trevino’s recitation of facts is not only about making an argument, but about demonstrating the discomfort of stating and working with fact, with fact and realism as entities, an allergy to easy systems of fact or slogan that is also committed to identifying a material fact.

At the same time, these poems also imagine poetic labor as a femme model of care, part of which is the tactile labor of transcription and retelling. And that labor, like the labor of the culture industry, is often gendered. “From Santa Rita” takes place in a microcosm of gender enforcement, in the gendered space of a women’s holding tank, which links the role of carceral capitalism with the physical enforcement of gender; detainees arrested at the Occupy protest have been sorted into male and female groups. Trevino’s refusal of affective legibility is one way of rejecting this structure and the labor that feminized emotions are expected to do in poems and politics. In this sense, Trevino’s poetry pushes toward a militant antipolitics in poetic form even as the content of its recitation is distinctly political.

In this, Trevino suggests that the didactic can function as a queer form. For Summer Kim Lee, the ambivalence produced by “queer form” is necessary for “[evading] the idea that queerness—as a sustained and sustaining politics, aesthetics, and critical reading practice—might somehow aim toward a fixed, contained political formation at which one must arrive.”³³⁶ Lee resists the idea that a single future or action can be distilled out of queerness, that queerness can refer to anything other than a principle of resistance in the moment. Similarly, Trevino’s didacticism refuses to proscribe outcomes. It traces the absence of a future through a summary of the present. Her writing doesn’t abandon the needs of collective struggle or absolve us of our responsibilities for each other and for the cruel work of this life. But vis-à-vis the didactic, it means that politics isn’t a lesson to be learned by rote or something that can be either rationally or psychically rewired in the megawatt surge of catharsis. I keep coming back to Trevino’s description of caress in “From Santa Rita:” “I gave 1 back rub. / I received 0 back rubs. /...I spooned 3 women. / I spooned 1 woman I had known previously” (“Santa Rita”, 14). This

³³⁶ Summer Kim Lee, “Wrong Impressions,” *ASAP/Journal*, Volume 2, Number 2 (May 2017), 263.

emotional closeness is a closeness that the poem doesn't necessarily give us access to, or at least, not the access of legible emotion. In fact, it is in this absence of legible or correct emotion that community can form.

Conclusion

At another moment in "Notes on Militant Poetics," Sean Bonney describes what he calls "the wall," the limit of the poem. The wall is also urban space, geopolitical divider. The wall names a "contested site," the place where one discipline blurs into the next, where the ideological and intellectual categories that we are trained to sort out into distinct processes of thought—what Blake might call senses—begin to blur. This limit draws us closer toward the problem of "absolute reality," toward what it is, and what we can know of it.

This chapter, and this dissertation more broadly, has considered how didactic poems engage with crisis and social movements. Didactic poems challenge the frameworks we are expected to use when thinking about crisis. Generically, the poems suggest a kind of demand for immediacy and urgency that would seem entirely spun-up, agitated. At the same time, the deadpan nature of poems like Trevino's, the pragmatism of di Prima's, and the repetition in Bonney's work take the space of the protest, the riot, or the carceral out of the way they are typically engaged with in art toward something either mystical and spiritual or mundane and ordinary.

If, as these contemporary poets demonstrate, what we can write is the product of our immediate circumstances and political presents, I'll end with my own. It is June 2024, over nine months since the siege by the Zionist entity began on Gaza in occupied Palestine. In those nine months, the damning inaction of a university complicit in this genocide has made one intellectual

problem very clear. Academics pride themselves on measured, complex, and nuanced evaluations of systems of oppression. Poets pride themselves on the negative dialectics of poetry, its refusal to be or mean in the ways we demand. This kind of ambiguity and ambivalence is, I believe, fundamentally good, both aesthetically and politically.

However, in the past year, the mirror image of that nuance has been weaponized by the likes of Chancellor Gene Block, to avoid naming actual, material violence—the murder of at least 46,000 Palestinians at the time of writing, the torture of Palestinian political prisoners, the intensification of Islamophobia and anti-Arab sentiments in the rest of the world, and the brutalization of student protestors at American university campuses.

The poems in this dissertation understand the relationships between land and carceral authority, between instruction and political collectives. They know that we can survive the swift, violent quelling of utopian possibilities, that the work of survival is often tied up with impossible endurance. Most importantly, they understand that rich, critical, complex, nuanced systems of understanding the world, be they mystical or historical, can and must coexist with a willingness to call it like it is. The didacticism of Bonney, di Prima, and Trevino exists in this balance, acknowledging and rejecting the cognitive dissonance of living in a world where LAPD used the iron fences and brick buildings of a private university to herd and kettle student protestors.

On UCLA's own campus, students have protested the university's complicity in genocide, particularly the investment of university endowments—into which go student tuition and housing payments, and from which come our retirement accounts, scholarship money, and research stipends—in arms companies. These students have been met at every turn with a heavily militarized response, while threats to those students, particularly the attacks of a Zionist mob on April 30th, have not led to formal investigations or charges. Yet when the first

encampment was swept in the early hours of May 1, students within the encampment were teargassed and shot with “less-lethal” weapons (rubber bullets). As is the case with similar incidents, the infrastructure of the university provided material aid to the police. The home of the English department at UCLA, Kaplan Hall, was used as a staging group for police in one of their many attempts to enter the encampment, which they ultimately did through Royce Hall, where graduation ceremonies are expected to take place. Twice in the aftermath, UCLA has called on external police forces to disperse student gatherings, bringing cops in riot gear onto campus. On June 10th, students were again arrested; students were detained in Dodd Hall, the university buildings again coopted in service of carceral ends.

Less overtly violent, but more insufferable has been the steady stream of platitudes from UC leadership, who have met these protests with stunning cruelty and a complete lack of intellectual engagement. The chancellor, in particular, speaks to students with the kind of tone that we would call, in the pejorative sense, didactic. To him, students are too young and too naïve to understand the situation; he writes of them and to them like a schoolmaster addressing naughty children, reassuring them that they have no idea what they’re talking about. In this way, the campus and its leaders have kindly demonstrated the entanglement between institutional modes of instruction and carcerality with which this dissertation has been concerned, and the ease with which ambiguity provides a cover for political disengagement.

Without adopting any embarrassing assumptions poetry, in and of itself, disrupts this systematic violence, the poems in this dissertation carve out space to imagine material resistance, action, and instruction. They also name the feeling that the world has narrowed to a point, that we can’t wiggle around the facts of the situation, and that in the place of anything else to say, we could instead say—fuck the police, end the occupation, and free Palestine.

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