



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT SPECIAL ISSUES

Number 64 October 2021

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

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To cite this article: Magee, P. (2021). Romantic notions of creativity now. In J. Wilkinson, C. Atherton & S. Holland-Batt (Eds.) *Poetry Now*. TEXT Special Issue 64.

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Romantic notions of creativity now

Abstract:

This article takes its point of departure from Paul de Man's observation that 'whenever romantic attitudes are implicitly or explicitly under discussion, a certain heightening of tone takes place, an increase of polemical tensions develops, as if something of immediate concern to all were at stake' (1993, p. 3). Note the way scholars feel repeatedly called upon to deflate the possibility that a given poem was the product of sudden transport, by pointing to textual and biographical evidence that it was 'extensively' revised. The frequency of this critical gesture suggests that there is something in ideas like 'spontaneous overflow' (Wordsworth, 1800/1957, para. 6) and poetry coming 'as naturally as leaves to a tree' (Keats, 1966, p. 46) that is refusing to go away. The article turns to *The Work of Revision* (2013), Hannah Sullivan's recent historicisation of the practice, to suggest that revision was not only less valued by the Romantics, but seems to have been less practised by them as well for a range of reasons, including technological ones to do with the general unavailability of proofs and the high cost of paper. On the other hand, contemporary poets' interview comments suggest that revision is often far more performative than our common equation between it and a controlling rationality would seem to indicate. 'Poetry now' may be much closer to 'poetry then' than we like to assume. A concluding discussion of Jacques Rancière's rejection of the concepts of modernism and postmodernism, in favour of a periodisation that locates present-day aesthetic judgements within the practices traced by Kant, Schiller and Coleridge, underlines this contention.

Biographical note:

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Keywords: Poetics, romantic compositional theory, revision, contemporary practice, periodisation

Leaves to a tree

Clarence Brown witnessed Keats write ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ in a few hours while the poet was sitting ‘in a grass-plot under a plum-tree’ (Stillinger, 2006, p. 311). Yet Keats was not just fast, he was accurate. As with all the draft manuscripts, there are occasional crossings-out and replacements in the text of the ode. But that first draft is still startlingly close to the poem as we now read it.

I am referring to epistolary and manuscript evidence provided by scholarly editor and textual theorist, Jack Stillinger. Stillinger’s evidence raises the possibility that a romantic poet might have written canonical lines at pace, revising only minimally prior to print. In Ve-Yin Tee’s recent *Coleridge, Revision and Romanticism*, Stillinger is referred to as ‘the major textual Romanticist of the 1990s’ (2009, p. 4). His status and proofs are indeed persuasive. But I have to admit I am wary of entering these waters. Paul de Man’s comments from 1967 ring just as true today:

It could be shown that whenever romantic attitudes are implicitly or explicitly under discussion, a certain heightening of tone takes place, an increase of polemical tensions develops, as if something of immediate concern to all were at stake. (1993, p. 3)

Robert Pinsky had the often-crude polemicism that can result in mind when voicing his dismay with those who make ‘facile reference to an “imaginative one-ness with nature”’ in Keats’ nightingale ode (1976, p. 55). The same problem inspired Zachary Leader’s bid that we adopt ‘romanticist’ as a more discriminating term than ‘romantic’ to denote ‘a bias against cognitive or controlling aspects of creation’ (1996, p. ix). It hasn’t happened. An author noted for expressing ‘romantic notions of creativity’ in the contemporary humanities is by that same phrasing disqualified. This is curious because, as Pinsky points out, the aesthetic and epistemological issues the nightingale ode raises are inescapably contemporary – the moment its treatment of nature is approached ‘not as a doctrine but a dilemma’ (1976, p. 49).

Could not a similarly recuperative operation be performed on the romantics’ descriptions of compositional practice? What would it cost us to approach these texts not as doctrines or rhetorics, but rather as attempts to make sense, in the various discourses of the day, of complex experience? Are they all that far removed from how poets discourse on their practices now? Consider, to stay with Keats, his statement in an 1818 letter to John Taylor that ‘if Poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all’ (Keats, 1966, p. 46). The quotation has become a peg for all manner of references to that familiar, now little-loved romantic equation between poetic creativity and organic growth. But Keats’s words around the topic are interesting. The account he offered to his friend, Richard Woodhouse, gives this same organic metaphor a more practical spin:

Keats has repeatedly said in conversation that he never sits down to write unless he is full of ideas – and then thoughts come about him in troops, as though soliciting to be accepted, and he selects. One of his maxims is that if Poetry does not come naturally, it had better not come at all. The moment he feels any dearth he discontinues writing and waits for a happier moment. (Woodhouse, as cited in Stillinger, 2006, p. 311)

Concepts such as discontinuation and waiting evoke something of the practices of in-the-moment composition and pause which I heard many poets describe in the 75 research interviews on questions of practice that I and my colleagues, Professor Jen Webb and Professor Kevin Brophy, recorded with poets over the years 2013 to 2015. Rae Armantrout, for instance, told me in San Diego in 2014:

Sometimes I write something and I know it is not finished, but I do not know what it needs. I know the sort of thing I want to go there, but the actual thing has not made itself manifest yet. I almost have to wait to see it or hear it. I have to just be open to it and when it arrives I will recognise it and think, ‘Oh, you go there.’

The reference to Keats’ selecting from a plethora of inputs while in the thick of composing finds echoes in other interviews I have conducted as well, particularly when paired with another Keats quotation from Woodhouse’s account: “‘My judgement’” (he says) “‘is as active while I am actually writing as my imagination. In fact, all my faculties are strongly excited and in their full play’” (Woodhouse, as cited in Stillinger, 2006, p. 311). Armantrout reports that she is judging as much as creating during composition. So does C.D. Wright. Brook Emery too. Many of the poets we interviewed do.

‘Manuscript after manuscript shows him getting *most* of the words right the first time’, Stillinger notes (2006, p. 309). In evidence, he provides a photographic reproduction of the first page of Keats’s ‘Nightingale’ draft. It contains 199 words. 188 of them are in the very form in which we read them today, landed. Stillinger also refers to Keats’s practice of stopping mid-flow in a letter to compose a poem, prior to resuming the thread of his message. ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ was one of these. ‘Ode to Psyche’ another. What is more:

There is practically no evidence that he wrote his longer or more ambitious poems in any other way. The extant drafts of documented spontaneity – the enthusiastic responses, the entries in sonnet competitions, the drafts in letters – are no different in appearance from the extant drafts of the best odes and narratives. (The long narratives were not, of course, written at single sittings, but they can easily be viewed as aggregations of shorter units...) (Stillinger, 2006, p. 311)

Keats wrote fast, and extraordinarily well. He – as Hannah Sullivan puts it in *The Work of Revision*, her recent historicisation of the practice – was a romantic poet ‘who, at least within certain bounds, practised what he preached’ (2013, p. 30).

Yet it has to be added at this point that only so many of the romantic poets do seem to have practised what they ‘preached’. Take Percy Bysshe Shelley. In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley describes the individual poem as the ‘perfect and consummate surface and bloom of all things’ (2002, p. 656). In that same text, he repudiates the idea that poetry proceeds from ‘labour and study’ (p. 656). Carl Fehrman, undermining this claim in turn, points to the ‘slow and gradual process’ of writing and rewriting that we can deduce from Shelley’s notebooks: “‘Labour and study’ show themselves, despite Shelley’s contention, to lie behind the most famous lines of his major poems’ (1980, p. 13). Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’ is a classic instance, but there are numerous other poems, Duncan Wu reminds us, that Coleridge ‘framed as the product of a single improvisational bout’, even though they were ‘overhauled across the decades’ (2015, n.p.). The citation is from Wu’s *30 Great Myths about the Romantics* (‘Myth 6: Romantic poems were produced by spontaneous inspiration’). William Wordsworth’s characterisation of composition as a form of ‘spontaneous overflow’ is, of course, one of the most famous literary-critical phrases of the era. Even so, *Peter Bell* was not published until 21 years after first completion; *The Prelude* did not go to press until 45 years after the (many think complete) 1805 version, with changes to nearly half of that earliest version’s lines; *Guilt and Sorrow* underwent a full 48 years of post-compositional changes before publication (Stillinger, 1991, pp. 72-74). Yet dissimulation is not really the right category in this case (or perhaps in Coleridge’s – can a paratext not be fictional?). For although ‘in literary historical terms the Wordsworth remembered is the Wordsworth of “spontaneous overflow”’, the author of *The Prelude* and the ‘Preface’ had, as Zachary Leader reminds us, ‘as much to say about “labour”, “judgement”, “finish”, “poetical pains”’ (1996, p. 24).

The case of George Gordon Noel Byron (Lord Byron), on the other hand, is much more redolent of Keats’s. Leader points to the extraordinary rapidity of Byron’s work. Byron’s claim that the 1272 lines of *Lara* were composed in just four weeks ‘while undressing after balls and masquerades’ sounds exemplary of poetic mythologising (Byron, as cited in Leader, 1996, p. 78). But he did write it in four weeks. We can also tell, on the basis of textual, epistolary and other evidence, that Canto I of *Don Juan*, the most revised Canto of the 17, took a mere four months. ‘With later cantos’, Leader comments, ‘time of composition is measured in weeks or days’ (1996, p. 104). The 111 eight-line stanzas of Canto XIII were, for instance, written in a week (p. 79). Byron’s comment in a letter to his publisher, John Murray, that ‘When I once take pen in hand – I *must* say what comes uppermost’, seems to have had grains of truth in it. As for revision,

Nobody ever succeeds in it great or small. – Tasso remade the whole of his Jerusalem but who ever reads that version? – All the world goes to the first. – Pope added to the ‘Rape of the Lock’ – but did not reduce it. – You must take my things as they happen to be – if they are not likely to suit – reduce their estimate *accordingly*. (Byron, as cited in Manning, 1992, p. 210)

The four volumes of the variorum edition of *Don Juan* indicate that Byron was not above revision, actually (1957). Both Keats and Byron do, all the same, provide examples of how now canonical poetry might be written at the sort of pace we have come to regard as mythic.

Hannah Sullivan on revision

But at this point it is worth pausing to ask why we have become so unwilling to believe that the sort of rapid composing Keats and Byron both mention in their letters could be a genuine possibility, why we have tended instead to relegate the whole issue to the categories of fabrication and romantic myth. Hannah Sullivan's *The Work of Revision* is gripping on the topic. Much of the reason for our prejudice, she argues, is that there have been such massive changes in attitudes towards revision in the two centuries since. Sullivan charts how a 'romantic creed of antirevisionism' persisted through the 19th century, with impetus from the Byronic topoi cited earlier (2013, p. 31). She mentions, as an instance, Robert Browning's 'fury on reading Tennyson's revised 1842 poems: "The alterations are insane. Whatever is touched is spoiled"' (Sullivan, 2013, p. 3, citing Browning). Sullivan proceeds to cite Algernon Charles Swinburne, who later in that same century wrote that to revise his works for each subsequent edition 'would be a dog's life to lead – worse than a galley slave's' (p. 37). But as the 20th century opened, the tables were decisively turned. Ezra Pound emerges as a key figure here, with immediate influence not just on T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein, but on Ernest Hemingway as well, and so, indirectly, upon the gamut of 20th century literatures from avant-garde to realist (pp. 101-145). Pointing to Vladimir Nabokov's quip that '[his] pencils outlast their erasers' and John Irving's claim that 'the value is in how many times you can redo something' (p. 7), Sullivan argues that romantic literary culture offers a 'mirror image of our own'. For while 'many of the romantics did more reworking than they or their publishers liked to pretend', it has in the present day become 'difficult for writers to claim they don't revise' (pp. 29-30). Since the modernists, 'literary value has become closely correlated with "revisedness"' (p. 12).

But the changes revision has undergone since the 19th century have not merely been in attitude. They have involved a whole new set of practices. By Sullivan's analysis, what happened was a shift from forms of revision contained at the level of phrasal substitution to those massive experiments in excessive and ampliative revision we respectively associate with Pound and, if a little less famously, with Joyce. To understand the largely substitutive nature of revision prior to then, take the fact that the 1805 and 1850 *Preludes* can be printed on facing pages, where:

And, on the shape of the unmoving man,
His fixèd face and sightless eyes, I look'd,
as if admonish'd from another world.

can jostle with:

And, on the shape of that unmoving man,
His steadfast face and sightless eyes, I gazed,
as if admonished from another world. (1971, pp. 288-289)

As an example of the new mode of ampliative revision, consider Joyce's 1939 work, *Finnegans Wake*. David Hayman (1963) describes how Joyce 'often doubled or tripled the length of passages' (p. 10) when revising the *Wake*. A manuscript page will bear evidence not just of additions 'but also additions to and changes in additions; there are not only changes but changes in and additions to changes' (p. 10). No one wrote works like the *Wake* in the 19th century ('those lashbetasselled lids on the verge of closing time, whiles ouze of his sidewiseopen mouth the breath of him, evenso languishing as the princeliest treble treacle or lichee chewchow purse could buy' [Joyce, 2012, p. 474]). The implication of Sullivan's argument is that this can to some extent be attributed to the fact that no one revised in Joyce's massively amplifying way either. Tripling the length – and verbal density – of a manuscript in the course of revision was new.

Nor do we find, in the 19th century or earlier, instances of the sort of radically excisive practice which Pound performed upon 'The Waste Land', reducing the 1,000-odd lines that Eliot brought him in Paris in January 1922 to a first edition count of 433. In what is 'widely recognised as one of the greatest acts of editorial intervention on record', Lawrence Rainey (2006) observes, Pound 'urged Eliot to remove the large tracts of narrative which furnished the beginning to parts I, III and IV of the poem', some 226 lines, as well as a further 60-odd lines scattered throughout, not to mention a further 260 lines of miscellaneous poems intended for insertion into the poem or for co-publication in the same volume (p. 23). Here are some of the 70 weakly Augustan lines that still opened Part III, at the point of Eliot's passing the materials to Pound. Eliot had already, tentatively, marked up some revisions, represented here in strike-out and bold:

Fresca was ~~baptised in~~ **borne upon** a soapy sea
Of Symonds – Walter Pater – Vernon Lea.
The Scandinavians bemused her wits,
The Russians thrilled her to hysteric fits.
~~For~~ **From** such chaotic misch-masch potpourri
What are we to expect but poetry? (Eliot & Eliot, 1994, p. 26)

Pound would have none of this: 'One of the gashes through the lines runs so deep that the ink has bled onto the other side of the paper' (Sullivan, 2013, p. 138).

Let me make an aside here, pertinent to our overall inquiry into the potential that 'romantic notions of creativity' might have a certain contemporary relevance. For Louis Martz (1993), Pound's 'critical slashing away of all those weak and in part offensive Popeian couplets' in Part III served to make way for 'the voice of one who is so reluctant to live that April becomes

the cruellest month ... the voice of a modern Ezekiel' (p. 141). Effectively, Pound changed 'the tone' of the poem 'from conversational to prophetic' by paring back lines redolent of the former (p. 141). It is an acute observation. But it is worth adding that the effect of Pound's editing was not just to bring out a prophetic voice in the lines Eliot had *already* written. It also spurred new lines. Looking at the manuscript facsimiles published in 1971, six years after Eliot's death, one discovers the mesmeric lines now opening Part III:

The river's tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf
clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers (Eliot, 1963, p. 70)

Those nine lines down to 'By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept...' were scrawled in pencil on the back of the first page of Fresca lines, in fact right over the top of Pound's bleed-through-the-page slash mark. The lines appear there almost exactly as we have them now. And the brief crossing-out of an infelicitous phrase at the start of one of them hints at the possibility that this pencilled page is where they first came to mind. The hand is otherwise unbroken. The recoil from Pound's terrific, accurate violence seems, in other words, to have been Eliot writing fast and stunningly.

But back to Sullivan's argument: no one, the record is clear, revised with this degree of excision in the 19th century, nor earlier. Some of the reasons for this were material: the high cost of paper alone meant that prior to the 20th century, authors 'were more likely to content themselves with one draft' (Sullivan, 2013, p. 23). A related issue concerns the cost of correcting printed copy: in the 19th century it was rare for authors to see proofs at all; in the UK case, it generally required a trip to London (p. 36). The invention of linotype in 1886 made it much easier to action changes on printed copy. It was only from then that the whole sequence of galley proofs, revised proofs and page proofs became potential sites for revision (p. 38). We simply would not have *Finnegans Wake*, with its relatively anodyne, much more story-telling first drafts (Crispi et al., 2007, p. 12), were it not for these material changes. In such ways, Sullivan attacks a key problem in contemporary evaluations of revision: 'Both those who advocate revision and those who denigrate it tend to assume that it works in the same way for all writers at all points of time, regardless of medium' (2013, p. 8). Her work, on the other hand, points to the fact that there have been times when the composition of verbal artworks in verse has been much more akin, not just in its image but also in its practice, to the registration on the page of a form of live performance. By the same token she, along with Stillinger, Leader and numerous other scholars, demonstrates that there have been great variations in these regards between individual authors, though they be in epochal terms each other's exact contemporaries. We see this when we compare Coleridge, Shelley and Wordsworth's compositional practices with those of Keats and Byron.

My first step towards reassessing the status and pertinence of romantic notions of creativity now has been to show some attested instances of rapid composition. Curiously, that material has come not just from the likely suspects, Keats and Byron, but from a handwritten section of 'The Waste Land' manuscripts, those lines which 'represent something much closer to first thoughts' than the ones that surround them in the version we now read (Sullivan, 2013, p. 128). The discussion has, all the same, indicated that poets have become even more likely to revise since the late 19th century, and that they now have even more means for doing so.

Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long. (Eliot, 1963, p. 70)

Calculation and frustration

The sources gathered above suggest that a rapid and relatively unrevised mode might – under certain, historically given conditions – generate extraordinary poetry. At least some celebrated poets, romantic and modernist, have written fast and well. But to gain a fuller sense of where things stand with topoi like 'spontaneous overflow' now, it will be worth homing in on something about revision that has started to emerge from the preceding sections. To do so will not answer all of our questions about the nature of past and contemporary compositional practices, but it may shift the terrain a little.

The idea of revision I have worked with to this point has been as follows: any changes to a work occurring after what genetic critic Pierre-Marc de Biasi refers to as 'basic compositional rough drafts' (1996, p. 35). I will continue with this definition over the pages to come. Carl Fehrman offers a representative way of figuring the phenomenon of revision, thus defined in his discussion of the 'labour and study' that went into Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind', for all the latter's representations to the contrary. Fehrman quotes a line from the ode:

Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams. (Shelley, as cited in Fehrman, 1980, p. 12)

Fehrman proceeds to observe that this line 'might well be thought to provide a good example of what Valéry called a *vers donné*' (1980, pp. 12-13). Valéry's idea was that a 'given' line might arrive as if from nowhere; but that the means by which it will develop into further such lines must be sought with time and care, if the sum of them is to amount – as the 'natural growth of an artificial flower' – to a full poem (as cited in Jarrety, 1998, p. 108). Yet in the case of Shelley's line, we only have to look into the notebooks to realise that this seemingly 'given line' had a predecessor. Shelley's first attempt was:

Lulled by the silence of his crystalline streams. (Shelley, as cited in Fehrman, 1980, p. 13)

The gorgeous ‘coil of his crystalline streams’ is so apt we almost cannot help but think of it as spontaneously generated. But we can see from the evidence of the relevant notebook, Fehrman observes, that it was really ‘a *vers calculé*’ (1980, p. 13).

This play on Valéry’s *vers donné* is, of course, somewhat humorous. But in the act of making this joke, Fehrman underlines our tendency to associate instances of revision with a controlling rationality. I wonder about that. Is revision necessarily *calculé*?

Our interviews can shed light here: Eilean Ni Chuilleanain offers an interesting analogy for the practice. Kevin Brophy, interviewing her in Dublin, asked whether she has to be ‘in the right mood’ to compose poetry. In her response, Ni Chuilleanain stressed the need for something to react to:

I think you need a stimulus and the stimulus produces the mood or else it produces the five minutes that it takes to write down the idea which you perhaps can’t return to. But I would say one has to be disciplined, one has to be professional. You don’t find Anne Sofie von Otter saying, ‘I’m not in the mood to play this concerto’, if the orchestra is out there waiting. You have to work at it. What I find with poetry is that if I put the work in, if I write and rewrite and rewrite and rewrite again, something does appear at the end of it. And it’s not usually a question of mood, but it is a question of time.

A notable feature of the interview archive I am citing from is the frequency with which metaphors from stage or other performance work figure in the poets’ discussions of composition (Magee, 2016; for the same feature in an earlier interview archive, see Magee, 2009). What is so curious here is the way a metaphor from live concert performance seems to do service not just for a first draft, but for revision as well. Anne Sofie von Otter’s singing in front of others night after night stands for the process whereby Ni Chuilleanain will ‘write and rewrite and rewrite and rewrite again’. Note too Ni Chuilleanain’s phrasing, when claiming that if she puts the time in, ‘something does appear at the end of it’. It is a curious way of speaking, not at all close to the decisive mood and active voice one might have attributed to the rewrite. Actually, it makes the products of revision sound more like *vers donnés*. But if this is so, it would be pertinent to rethink some basic assumptions. The fact that a poem has been ‘extensively’ revised should not necessarily be taken as evidence that it was produced calculatedly at all.

Other interviewees concur with Ni Chuilleanain in this regard. Scottish poet Don Paterson has a wonderful metaphor for getting the line you are trying to revise right. As is apparent from other parts of his interview, Paterson is very much a proponent of poetry as an in-the-moment phenomenon, one that provides its reader with an epiphanic experience by dint of its author having undergone one in real-time, composing. This puts him at a distance from Ni Chuilleanain, who relishes the fact that composing is *not* real-time. But for all his insistence on

finding the poem then and there, Paterson does indeed report a practice of revision. Here is how he put it, in his discussion with Kevin Brophy, back in 2014:

You are listening to the line, turning things very slowly to one degree here or there, left or right, and all of a sudden you hear a click and the whole line just goes clear, it opens up and you're into the safe.

Consider this picture of a poet working, in this safe-cracking fashion, to break back into the time of the poem. It is a picture of feeling for, much more than calculating. In fact, it involves ignoring the numbers on the lock! Say rather that the reviser's task is to listen attentively and feel their way into the give and take of the mechanism. It is something you do with your body, interfacing with the object. Which is surely why Paterson's analogy has such strong elements of *donné* about it as well.

It is not out of the question that this is what it was like for Shelley, each and every time he revised. You suddenly crack into the safe:

DA

Datta: we brother what have we given? (Eliot & Eliot, 1994, p. 77)

Could this have been what happened to Eliot?

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
After the frosty silence in the garden
After the agony in stony places
The shouting + the crying (Eliot & Eliot, 1994, p. 71)

Pound's comment above is 'OK' in green crayon. Then 'OK from here I think' just next to that, in ink (Pound, in Eliot & Eliot, 1994, p. 71). One scans down. Favourite lines appear verbatim through the six leaves of the pencilled first draft of Part V. Others have landed almost in the form we know them, but with occasional additions and crossings-out (additions indicated here in bold, crossings-out in strike-through):

Who is the third who walks **always** beside you
When I count, there is only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another **one** walking ~~there~~ beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or **a** woman
– But who is that on the other side of you? (Eliot & Eliot, 1994, p. 73)

Hugh Kenner refers to ‘the remarkable upwelling of language to which the holograph draft of Part V is testimony’ (1973, p. 43).

DA

Dayadhvam. ~~friend, my friend~~ I have heard the key
Turn in the door, once and once only. (Eliot & Eliot, 1994, p. 79)

It is Eliot’s very topic:

My friend, my ~~friend~~, **blood beating in shaking within** my heart,
The awful daring of a moment’s surrender
Which an age of prudence ~~cannot~~ **never** retract –
By this, and this only, we have existed (Eliot & Eliot, 1994, p. 77)

Whether in reaction to a month away from his torturous marriage, or through the effects of intensive psychotherapy in Lausanne with Dr Vittoz in late 1921, or in anticipation of his editorial meeting with Pound in Paris on his route back to England in the first month of the following year, it seems that Eliot wrote Part V in one long burst and was teeming:

DA

Damyata: ~~the wind was fair~~ the boat responded
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and ~~wheel~~ **rudder oar** (Eliot & Eliot, 1994, p. 79)

Consider again that *calculé* Shelleyan line to which Fehrman draws our attention. Why *calculé*? Who is to say Shelley did not find his final version of the line in as *donné* a manner as the first? Does its coming after the first version really prove anything about calculation?

Or rather, what is this model of calculation that has nothing to do with suddenness? Compare Martin Heidegger: ‘We never come to thoughts. They come to us’ (1971a, p. 6). See too, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, ridiculing the idea that rational thought works through cost-benefit analysis (2005, p. 171). Note, back before either, William James’s (1968) consideration on the fact that ‘thought goes on ... If we could say in English ‘it thinks’, as we say ‘it rains’ or ‘it blows’, we should be stating the fact most simply’ (p. 22). Why, in contrast, does Fehrman offer such a paltry understanding of what it is to calculate?

What I am taking issue with are the beliefs about poetry and rationality we seem surreptitiously to have packed into this word ‘revision’, to the extent that the mere fact of a poem’s having been revised is taken to myth-bust that poet’s claim to have written in any sort of performative state. The wealth of poetic manuscripts published in recent decades might, to the contrary, profit from an approach that looks in them for evidence of the sort of ‘upwelling’ Kenner (1973, p. 43) diagnoses here, or that Sullivan identifies at the start of ‘The Fire Sermon’ and characterises as the lines closest to ‘first thoughts’ (2013, p. 128). To do so would provide a

welcome corrective to the gaze that automatically equates revision with a phantasmatic rationality, and, at its worst, ignores the insight manuscripts can so richly provide: that most poems are a patchwork from different sittings. A poem so *donné* that its draft manuscript looks like a fair copy manuscript is ‘a rare specimen’, Fehrman writes, adding ‘but it would be unscientific to deny its existence’ (1980, p. 16). The case of ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ is there, but it is actually very rare, even though our writings, literary and non-literary alike, are almost always revised so as to appear like further cases of it.

On the other hand, Fehrman warns us against having an ‘exaggerated belief in what manuscripts can teach us’ (1980, p. 15). There will always be ‘intermediate links and underlying intermediate stages, about which we can know little’ (p. 15). This is as true for ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ as it is for ‘Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams’, or Parts III and V of ‘The Waste Land’. Other documentary sources can, of course, help. Kenner (1973) notes of Part V, for instance, that:

Eliot more than once testified that he wrote it almost at a sitting, apparently so late in his stay in Lausanne that he did not have time to make a fair copy ... the rapid writing of the holograph bears him out. (p. 41)

But even in that case, gaps and questions of evidence remain. Poems are ultimately mysterious in manuscript, if not quite as mysterious as on the printed page.

Let me conclude this section on a frustrated note. My last collection of poems was eight years in the writing: 62 pages. The frustration of words not being right, and having to return to them, so often fruitlessly – not even knowing most of the time whether those words or the corrections to them *are* right – puts me in a horror of voicing anything that might make poetic composition sound easy. I suspect that similar experiences explain why the 30 poets I have interviewed in Australia, Ireland, the UK and the USA during my career have so rarely associated their practices with the Romantics, and at times instanced outright hostility to the theme of spontaneity as well – even though they would at other times observe that poetry writing is like acting in a theatre, or jamming in a band on stage, or simply not knowing what you are going to say until you have said it (Magee, 2016). One does not want those 62 or however many pages to sound as available as speech itself. It does seem, all the same, that the *work* that goes into revising poems has little to do with ‘a controlling rationality’, as the phrase is typically understood, and much more to do with dwelling with repeated, frustrated action.

A case in point, among ‘The Waste Land’ drafts we have been considering one finds a sheet of 20 lines in pencil, marked for insertion towards the end of the 70 Fresca lines Eliot later deleted, an amplification of those 70 doomed lines. Here we read of ‘Venus Anadyomene’, of ‘Lady Katzeegg’, of Aeneas (‘To Aeneas, in an unfamiliar place, / Appeared his mother, with an altered face,’) (Eliot & Eliot, 1994, p. 29). The script is the same rapid scrawl Eliot used to inscribe the apparently *donnés* lines cited above (‘The awful daring of a moment’s surrender’). I suspect

all of these Venus Anadyomene lines were produced calculatedly as well, in the neologistic sense I am trying to hammer out here: that is, they were produced by paying close attention to the moment and riskily responding to whatever it offers. What else is there to go on? Midway through the passage one finds a swathe of even more numerous crossings-out and replacements and crossings-out of replacements. Sullivan describes the Venus Anadyomene lines as ‘the most heavily revised lines that survive in the entire facsimile’ (2013, p. 133). They were composed in Lausanne, during the same six-week *mirabilis* period from which Part V ‘What the Thunder Said’ emerged (for the chronology, see Rainey, 2006, pp. 17-24). And the lines are bad, as bad as any of the preceding 70 lines about Fresca. I’m referring to my judgement here, but also to Pound’s, and that of multiple critics succeeding him. It can seem so obvious in retrospect. But the pile of crossings-out on crossings-out inspires the speculation that Eliot himself had no idea whether he was onto something as good as ‘What the Thunder Said’ or not.

Underlining such difficulties, the vast majority of the poets we interviewed over 2013-2016 mentioned the essential role of a first reader – surprisingly often it was an intimate partner – to help them estimate the value of whatever it was they had in their hands. The question driving them in revision was not one of rationality, but judgement.

‘The denial of origins’ and the evacuation of substantive criteria: Romanticism at its broadest

The writing to this point has drawn on a small number of draft manuscripts, interviews and other materials to suggest that poems over the last two centuries have tended to be produced through a patchwork of compositional modes. This suggestion parallels the genetic critic de Biasi’s characterisation of the mixed compositional modes found in prose fiction archives over this time too (1996, p. 29). The obvious next step for this article would be to test whether similarly patchwork (part ‘romantic’, part ‘other’) patterns of compositional practice will manifest in the archival holdings of the various contemporary poets whose interviews have featured above. So we might explore Rae Armantrout’s drafts at UC San Diego, or the Don Paterson holdings in the National Library of Scotland. The Covid-19 pandemic precludes any such travel for an Australian researcher writing in July 2021. Nor are either of the holdings I have just referred to digitised. They should be.

Whether that would give those draft materials much more scholarly purchase is a different question. Writing in 1974 about the extensive holdings of modern poets’ working materials in the Poetry Collection at Buffalo, and the even larger collection at the University Library in Texas, Fehrman comments that the research ‘one might have expected’ over the decades since that material became available, ‘has – broadly speaking – failed to appear’ (1980, p. 11). Sullivan likewise comments on how the swathe of facsimile editions published from the 1970s on have more or less ‘languished on the shelves’ (2013, p. 56). To bring a third voice to the table, textual theorist Sally Bushell (2007) criticises the fact that – for all our now

‘unprecedented access to the draft materials of texts through facsimile editions and archives’, and in spite of the inroads French genetic criticism has made – textual study retains its erstwhile status within the Anglo-American academy as ‘a highly specialised activity rather than being recognised as having the potential to significantly redefine our understanding of a text’ (p. 101).

As this last quotation perhaps suggests, for Bushell, ‘the denial of origins’ inflecting our engagement with literature goes well beyond our relationship to facsimile editions and manuscript holdings. It is part and parcel of how we read and discuss written texts in general. She writes of the implicit ‘fetishisation’ in our habit of treating ‘language as held within the material object’ – i.e. a poem, a novel, a journal article, a work of philosophy – ‘as if possessed by the consciousness of the author and re-possessed by the reader’ (2007, p. 114). For an example of what Bushell means by this, and to raise one of the most broadly applicable romantic notions of creativity past and present, consider the case of contemporary critical reviewing. Here is an excerpt from Stephen Burt’s *New York Times* review of Rae Armantrout’s *Next Life*:

“Be untraceable,” Armantrout advises; “Be twice as far / and halfway back.” Her curt, sad, smart passages may seem hard to assemble, hard to make into poetic wholes: they can work like those 3-D “Magic Eye” images so popular a decade back – at first incomprehensible, then clear, once your eyes and brain find the right point of view. (2007, n.p.)

Is there a pointer towards the work of composing in Burt’s reference to the ‘3-D “Magic Eye”’ effect of Armantrout’s verse? Perhaps one can detect there an allusion to the multiple and temporally distinct instances of compositional activity any work will tend to hold accreted within it. But it seems more likely that Burt is following the critical convention of evoking – even though we all know the image bulks with fiction – a kind of superhero author, who can immediately see things in a way the rest of us cannot. Witness his casual reference to how ‘Armantrout advises’ at the head of the quotation, with its implicit equation between Armantrout the empirical individual and a putative speaker of the lines in question. ‘*Falling Awake* shows from its first poem that she knows what she needs to do’, Colin Burrow writes of a recent book of Alice Oswald’s (2016, n.p.). Again we find this figure of author as ‘command centre’ of a whole swathe of compositional decisions and histories that can hardly have been as unified in actual practice. A similar set of critical fudges in Helen Vendler’s well known *Poets Thinking: Pope, Dickinson, Whitman, Yeats* leads Nicolas de Warren to throw his arms up in the air: ‘What then is thinking? ... the thinking which is behind the poem, or which the poem represents?’ (2006, p. 103). The fact that I myself have ended up hypostatizing Burt, Burrow and de Warren as some sort of real-time disputants, when they themselves might well have put 10 different drafts into the sentences quoted in this very paragraph, underlines the extent of the ‘denial of origins’ Bushell is referring to, which is of course as endemic to scholarly discussion as it is to reviewing.

One might say that our interpretative and critical practices amount to a kind of romanticism in their own right. Which may well be the ‘something of immediate concern to all’ de Man had in mind, when mentioning the tensions which the invocation of romantic attitudes invariably arouses (1993, p. 3).

Coleridge – or if you like the ‘author function’ (Foucault, 1979) we call Coleridge – seems to have felt there was something inevitable to the act of conjuring up out of the texts we read authorial figures for praise and blame, as far as poetry goes. As he put it in the 1817 *Biographia Literaria, or Literary Sketch of my Life and Opinions*, ‘Our genuine admiration of a great poet is a continuous *undercurrent* of feeling; it is everywhere present, but seldom anywhere as a separate excitement’ (1962, p. 12). But the striving to locate that figure for judgement within whatever work we find ourselves before may be endemic to all forms of performative activity. Such is the implication of anthropologist Richard Bauman’s (1977) cross-cultural definition – he says it applies to every culture we know – of performance:

Performance involves on the part of the performer an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content. (p. 10)

That said, written texts clearly bear a much more paradoxical relationship to the ‘fetishisation’ of any one subject’s inputs as author (Bushell, 2007, p. 114), and have done so at least as far back as Homer – i.e. as far back as the Ancient Greek tradition of subsuming anonymous multitudes of prior oral poets into the one blind figure held up for praise in relation to the two written epics that resulted from their repeated improvisations (Parry, 1971).

Rather more specific to our era is Coleridge’s project of grounding his judgements of poetic excellence in principles that proceed from ‘the component faculties of the human mind itself’ (1962, p. 11). A few concluding words on this matter will serve to gloss the various references to being ‘accurate’, ‘getting a line right’, have a line ‘landed’, ‘cracking back into the safe’, ‘frustration’ and ‘good’ scattered through the writing above, and at the same time will reinforce my claims as to the plethora of literary practices and values we continue to share with the Romantics. It will be the final ‘romantic notion of creativity now’ to be discussed in this article.

Coleridge (1962, p. 11) articulates two ‘conditions and criteria of poetic style’ in the *Biographia Literaria*. The first is that it is ‘not the poem which we have *read*, but that to which we *return*, with the greatest pleasure’, that ‘possesses the genuine power and claims the name of *essential poetry*’ (p. 11). The second is that any words in a poem that can ‘be translated into other words of the same language, without diminution of their significance, either in sense or association, or in any worthy feeling, are so far vicious in their diction’ (p. 11). There are decidedly Heideggerian premonitions to these twin principles for judging a poet in any given case to have done well or poorly, for they effectively raise the best poem to the status of a thing,

with all the resistant materiality that concept implies in Heidegger's (1971b) thought (as opposed to a tool, composed of indifferent matter for some ulterior purpose, which would be a bad poem by those same criteria). But that is not their only contemporary pertinence. What really matters here is the related fact that Coleridge offers no substantive criteria for 'essential poetry' at all: it is all a matter of the work's impact upon a reader (their desire to return to it, their incapacity to translate it). Coleridge's 'conditions and criteria of poetic style' join with those of other contemporary artists and philosophers to inaugurate an epoch in which art is seen to have no necessary properties at all, other than impact. In this regard, too, we are all Romantics.

To see this, it will be pertinent to turn to Jacques Rancière's (2003) argument that European arts from the early Romantics through to the present (a period he refers to as 'The Aesthetic Revolution', and also as 'The Aesthetic Regime') are pervaded with the ethos that:

Everything is material for art, so that art is no longer governed by its subject, by what it speaks of: art can show and speak of everything in the same manner. In this sense, the aesthetic revolution is an extension to infinity of the realm of language, of poetry. It is the affirmation that poems are everywhere, that paintings are everywhere. (p. 205)

We find a striking illustration of this new mode of judging in the report of the revolutionary committee tasked with founding the new *Muséum central des arts de la République* (now known as the *Musée du Louvre*) in 1793. The report declares that the new institution will showcase an end to the 'ridiculous distinctions of *story*, or *genre*, or *landscapes* or *history*, nature having told no one that a village dance was out of place in the gallery of a people' (Comité d'Instruction publique, as cited in Rancière, 2013, p. 26). In other words, the report announces an end to the 'hierarchy of genres' prevailing over the preceding centuries and determining that 'history' paintings (i.e. those massive canvases focussed on either historical or mythic scenes) were innately superior to portraits, which were superior to 'genre' or everyday life paintings, while landscapes, animal art and still lives followed in descending scale of value, all on the grounds that 'a great painting required a great subject' (Rancière, 2013, p. 25). It is in this same revolutionary epoch that the category of 'art in the singular', the logical extension of such a repudiation, comes into being, and with it the 'exploding of genre' permeating 19th century arts, and the realist novel in particular (Rancière, 2013, p. 205; see, too, Bakhtin, 1986).

Rancière's claims are paralleled in Erich Auerbach's earlier demonstration that the late 18th century witnessed an end to the 'separation of styles' dominating European literature since Ancient Greece. Key to it was the unwritten stricture that everything 'commonly realistic, everything pertaining to everyday life, must not be treated on any level except the comic, which admits no problematic probing' (Auerbach, 2003, p. 31). Even in the case of the supposedly universal artist Shakespeare, the 'conception of the sublime and tragic is altogether aristocratic' (p. 315). Shakespeare's 'tragic heroes are kings, princes, commanders, noblemen and the great

figures of Roman history', Shylock being the rare exception to this kind of stylistic class rule, perhaps because Jewish (p. 314). A 'tragic situation revolving around the virginity of a middle-class girl', which is to say, the kind of plot we find in Friedrich Schiller's 1782-1783 play *Luise Millerin*, would be 'an absurdity within the frame of Elizabethan literature' (p. 329). It is only a short step from Schiller's elevation of a middle-class subject to the tragic stage to Eliot's treatment of 'the typist home at tea-time' in Part III of 'The Waste Land', the first known appearance of a female clerk in European letters outside light verse (Rainey, 2006, p. 22). But also, and even more to the point, it is only a short step from the abandonment of 'worthy' characters to the shattered, multiplicitous texture of 'The Waste Land', or even *Finnegans Wake*. Pertinently, what contemporary conservatives complained of in Flaubert's mid-19th century work was the seemingly indiscriminate (Rancière glosses it as 'democratic') plethora of descriptive detail, that threatened to undermine the dignity of story itself (Rancière, 2016, p. 10).

In other words, the idea of obligatory subject matter in art had been dethroned well before the 20th century. Hence Rancière's scorn for 'the completely simplistic image of a great anti-representational rupture' at that time (2003, p. 205). Rancière lacks Sullivan's understanding of the complex shifts in compositional practices giving rise to early 20th century literary texts. But there is all the same something compelling in his attack upon the term modernism for the way it inadequately collapses a periodising label for a set of artists with an uninterrogated acceptance of those same artists' belief in the difference they bear to their immediate predecessors (Rancière, 2000, p. 20). Postmodernism gets even shorter shrift (Rancière, 2003, p. 206). As for Rancière's term for our era, the one spanning from the Romantics to the present, 'The aesthetic regime is the true name for what is designated by the incoherent label, "modernity"' (2000, p. 24). That is as much as to say that for Rancière, as I put it above, we are all Romantics – not just Coleridge, Shelley, Wordsworth et al., but Armantrout, Ni Chuilleanain, and Paterson also; therefore, necessarily Eliot, Stein, Joyce and Pound too.

That the anti-representational rupture well precedes the 20th century is strikingly apparent in the two Coleridgean criteria for judgement noted above, which attribute to poems no actual categorical properties other than the responses they give rise to in their reader. Rancière's assertion that 'the autonomy staged by the aesthetic regime is not that of the work of art, but of a mode of experience' is perfectly consonant with them (2002, p. 135). The work Rancière sees as an indispensable reference in this regard is, however, not the *Biographia Literaria*, but rather Schiller's 1795 *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. 'Only as the form of something lives in our sensation, and its life takes form in our understanding, is it living shape', Schiller writes of the property that will necessarily accompany any work 'where we judge it to be beautiful' (2004, p. 76). For Schiller too, the aesthetic object has no categorical requirement other than that it serve to induce a play of emotions and ideas in the one enjoying it. Behind both Schiller and Coleridge one finds Immanuel Kant, who theorised the 'aesthetic idea' as that which 'occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e. concept, to be adequate to it' (2000, p. 193). Just like 'living shape', just like the poem to which

we repeatedly return, the only thing we can say about it is that it will serve to ‘animate the mind by opening up the prospect of an immeasurable field of related representations’ (p. 193). This is Kant’s famous ‘free play of the understanding and the imagination’, which for him comprises the effect of aesthetic phenomena upon onlookers, audiences, readers, listeners, and constitutes the only ultimate grounds for judging just what is art, and what not (p. 103). For the ‘anti-representational rupture’ is there too, way back in 1793, a point Thierry de Duve has made of the Third Critique as well (1996).

Consonantly, the individual speaker’s claim that any given work of art is ‘great’ emerges for Kant as an aspiration not to ‘objective’ but to ‘subjective’ universality. His point is that such an individual is not saying that, for example, this line of poetry has the determinate features that entitle it to fit into whatever prior category of great art, but rather that it induces, firstly, a ‘free play’ in one’s mind as one reads it, a reeling that confutes any easy categorisation and simultaneously sets the faculties in free fall trying to find one; and that, at the same time, it leads one to the sense that anyone with taste will necessarily experience a similar transport in relation to it (Kant, 2000, pp. 96-104). Kant observes that we make such ‘subjectively universal’ judgements in blithe disregard for any empirical evidence as to whether others are similarly affected by the work in question or not (p. 121). One’s sensibilities are, for all that, clearly informed by familiarity with an art and wider discussion. Otherwise put, and as is easily observed, judgement in our era is radically rendered the responsibility of the individual on the grounds of their experience of supposedly communal effects. No wonder it leaves artists in the difficult quandary recounted above, where one is not so much frustrated in attempting to reach a desired goal, but rather not even sure what that goal is, other than something that will somehow have untold effects on whoever comes to experience it.

Acknowledgements

This paper draws on *Understanding Creative Excellence: A Case Study in Poetry* (DP130100402), which was funded by the Australian Research Council over the years 2013-2016, as part of its Discovery Projects programme.

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