



PROJECT MUSE®

Narrative Means, Lyric Ends

Morgan, Monique R.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Morgan, Monique R.

Narrative Means, Lyric Ends: Temporality in the Nineteenth-Century British Long Poem.

The Ohio State University Press, 2009.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/27779.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27779>



LEGACIES AND LAPSES OF LYRIC NARRATIVE

The preceding four chapters have focused on mode in order to avoid the constraints of more narrow definitions of particular genres. Each chapter has tried to reach a better understanding of the unique structure of each poem, seeing its innovations and experiments as positive attributes, rather than as impediments to fitting the poem within a pre-existing genre. In the course of this study, I have also drawn out the implications of these four poems for current critical assumptions. Using Byron as an example, I have suggested that self-reflexivity can produce lyrical effects, as well as ironic playfulness. *Aurora Leigh* shows that lyric does not always have to be brief, nor does it have to be ahistorical. Narrative is not necessarily a retrospective experience for the reader, at least not for the reader of *The Prelude*. And although the two modes are often described as antithetical, Browning's dramatic monologues seamlessly blend lyric and narrative temporalities. Despite these varied experiments and effects, all four poems paradoxically employ temporal progression to imply the static and atemporal, and use narrative means

to achieve lyric ends. In closing this study, I want to make two final gestures. First, I reflect on the influences of these four poems on the literature that followed them. Second, I consider two nineteenth-century poems that suffer from an overabundance of lyricism, an inability to mix lyric and narrative with complete success. I will take as my examples a long poem indebted to epic and romance and a not-quite-sonnet sequence of a distinctly modern cast.



Karl Kroeber traces two strands of Romantic narrative poetry, with separate influences on subsequent literary history: Byron develops “the adventurous narrative: a story poem concerned with physical action and adventure,” while Wordsworth “developed narrative poetically” to become a “medium for the expression of personal, visionary experience.”¹ I agree that Wordsworth lyricizes narrative poetry, and that such lyricization has an important influence on nineteenth-century poetry. I also agree that specifically narrative forms of interest, centered on plot and action, are more important in Byron’s poetry than in other Romantic poems, and that Byron influences the novel tradition. But Byron’s fixation on adventure is not his only influence on the novel. Sections of *Don Juan* do fit the pattern of adventure narrative (namely, the first half of canto 2, and cantos 7–8), but as we’ve seen, many other narrative patterns are incorporated into the poem. Byron is almost encyclopedic in his invocation of different narrative genres, and each is ironically undermined, calling attention to its very conventionality. Byron’s encyclopedia of narrative conventions, and his satiric attitude toward them, may have had a belated descendant in the “Oxen of the Sun” chapter of Joyce’s *Ulysses*—a tour de force parody of prominent styles in English literary history. And the self-reflexivity which permeates *Don Juan*, although it certainly had prominent predecessors like Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, later became much more commonplace in the twentieth-century novel.

Wordsworth’s *Prelude* was also an important influence on some prominent twentieth-century novels, through its episodic nature and its focus on the development of character. In modern literature an “episodic pattern allows for free and full character development without interference from the requirements of a tightly-knit plot.”² More specifi-

1. Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), 84.

2. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 236.

cally, Wordsworth's poem on the growth of his own mind influenced later histories of an author's artistic development. A. D. Nuttall claims, "The greatest successor of *The Prelude* is not a poem but a novel, and so it begins, very quietly, in prose: 'Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure. . .'"³ Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* is not the poem's only successor, however. Herbert Lindenberger has aptly observed, "It seems no mere accident of literary history that *The Prelude's* greatness was first generally recognized by the age that produced introspective fiction—deriving as it does from the double stream of poetry and the novel—of Proust, Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf."⁴ Joyce should also be added to this list, since his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* shares *The Prelude's* introspection, lyrical association, and musing about an artist's development.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* reacts against the confidence about future developments and the isolation of the artist from society we see in *The Prelude*. Instead, she places the artist, and lyric poetry, in specific social contexts, and mixes the confidence of retrospective narration with the immediacy of epistolary forms. She juxtaposes fragments of multiple literary forms in order to expose the limitations of each genre in isolation, and she overcomes the limitations of one genre with the strengths of another. Since *Aurora Leigh* advocates the erosion of generic boundaries and the avoidance of slavish imitation, it was unlikely to produce any recognizable literary heirs. But the poem's aggressive juxtaposition of contradictory forms is an early precursor to modernist fragmentation. *Aurora Leigh's* earnestness and didacticism, however, occlude its formal connection to twentieth-century works that do not share its faith in literature's ability to communicate truth directly and sincerely.

In *The Ring and the Book*, Robert Browning unifies, rather than fragments, lyric and narrative time through his use of the dramatic monologue. Browning's techniques, especially the primacy of point of view, had a profound influence on subsequent novelists. As Lindenberger remarks of *The Ring and the Book*, "Its affinities are less with any other long poem, past or present, than with the modern experimental novel, as Henry James was perhaps the first to point out."⁵ James, in his focal-

3. A. D. Nuttall, *Openings: Narrative Beginnings from the Epic to the Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 150.

4. Herbert Lindenberger, "The Reception of *The Prelude*," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 64 (1960): 205.

5. Herbert Lindenberger, *On Wordsworth's Prelude* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), 125.

ization of stories through the consciousness of an imperfectly aware character, adopts Browning's use of narrative perspective as central to the text's meaning.⁶ But whereas Browning has faith that point of view is capable of reliably, if indirectly, communicating inner motivations, James uses point of view to emphasize problems of communication. In James's works, a particular narrative perspective is capable of not only making motives inscrutable, but also obscuring such basic information as whether or not an event actually happened. (In *The Turn of the Screw*, for example, there is significant tension about whether or not the ghosts exist outside the mind of the governess who narrates most of the tale.) Nineteenth-century long poems have had a profound and lasting influence on the novel, and we would do well to recognize that influence.



Not all experiments in mixing lyric and narrative are unqualified successes, though. Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* is surely a narrative poem, a blend of epic and romance. Yet *Idylls* employs narrative techniques in a manner that undermines their narrative interest. As we have seen, epics assume their audiences are already familiar with their basic plots, and the reader wonders "How did it happen?" rather than "What happened?" Tennyson's audience may be familiar with other versions of Arthurian legend, most notably Malory's. Even if they are not, Tennyson sometimes forces an epic reader response by giving away key plot events early in the text. The first book of *Idylls* describes Modred as "the same that afterward / Struck for the throne, and striking found his doom," giving away the revolt discussed in the penultimate book and a death discussed in the final idyll.⁷ The poem not only minimizes the narrative interest of suspense; it also renders unnecessary the typical rhetorical response to narrative: judgment. Many of the characters feel uncertain, misjudge, or fall prey to deception, but the reader does not, because Tennyson judges for us. When Vivien tells Balin that she heard an eyewitness account of Guinevere declaring her love to Lancelot, Balin believes the tale is true. The reader already knows of Guinevere's love

6. Ross Posnock also finds that Browning's focus on "the characters' thoughts and feelings" shows "the poem's affinities to James and modernism." Ross Posnock, "The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*": Henry James's Energetic 'Appropriation' of Browning," *The Centennial Review* 25.3 (Summer 1981): 287.

7. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, vol. 3, edited by Christopher Ricks (Harlow: Longman, 1987), "The Coming of Arthur" lines 323–34. Subsequent citations will provide the idyll name and line numbers in parentheses.

for Lancelot,⁸ but the narrator is careful to expose this specific story as false: he says of Vivien, "She lied with ease" ("Balin and Balan" 517). The narrator also imposes his judgment of characters on the reader through a stylistic defect that Christopher Ricks calls "overinsistencies." Ricks gives as an example the lines: "Eyes of *pure* women, *wholesome* stars of love; / And all about a *healthful* people stept / As in the presence of a *gracious* king."⁹ Here the narrator piles on one descriptive adjective after another, rather than allowing the reader to infer these characteristics from the characters' actions and speech. Villains also draw unambiguous epithets from the narrator: Vivien is described as "wily" at the beginning of her idyll, and at the end the narrator echoes Merlin in labeling her a "harlot" ("Merlin and Vivien" 5, 970).

In its large-scale temporal progression, *Idylls* moves roughly chronologically, opening with "The Coming of Arthur" and closing with "The Passing of Arthur." Many of the individual books, however, seem to adopt the epic convention of opening *in medias res*, then backtracking to earlier events. The technique is perhaps most obvious in "Lancelot and Elaine." The first 55 lines feature three separate movements backward in time, with the promise of a satisfactory explanation receding further into the past with each analepsis. John R. Reed makes a case for the narrative efficacy of this opening, suggesting that it arouses the reader's interest in clues, in order for the reader to see through the fantasies of the title characters.¹⁰ In other books, however, the opening *in medias res* fails to create narrative suspense or dramatic irony. "Merlin and Vivien" starts with five lines describing Vivien at Merlin's feet, then flashes back to a conversation which prompted Vivien to go to Arthur's court and undermine it through gossip. The opening time frame is not developed enough to create substantial resonance, foreshadowing, or dread; no clear purpose justifies the nonchronological narration of events. Similarly, "Pelleas and Ettarre" opens with fifteen lines on Arthur knighting Pelleas, then flashes back to his meeting Ettarre "a day or twain before"

8. In the earlier-placed idyll "The Marriage of Geraint" we learn that "Guinevere lay late into the morn, / Lost in sweet dreams, and dreaming of her love / For Lancelot" (157-59).

9. Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 269. The emphasis is Ricks's, and the quotation is "Gareth and Lynette," 307-9. Ricks claims overinsistencies are especially common "in those areas of the poem where Tennyson knew he had failed to create a sense of what the Round Table was in its living vigor." Ricks, 269.

10. John R. Reed, "Tennyson's Narrative on Narration," *Victorian Poetry* 24.2 (Summer 1986): 199. Reed also finds the anachrony that opens "The Holy Grail" fitting: "The poem begins at the very end of its action, requiring an extensive flashback, an appropriate technique for a poem in which there is no future." Reed, 200.

(19). The opening does not add much to the reader's investment in the tale. In addition, there is no clear motive for the narrator's inexactness about how much time elapsed between the two events. A different sort of temporal imprecision accompanies the analepsis in "The Marriage of Geraint." The book shifts from Geraint's suspicion that Enid is unfaithful, to an event at Arthur's court that spurred the quest that led to Geraint's meeting Enid. The narrator does not clearly mark the shift back in time, however. The only initial indication that we have entered a flashback is a reference to Arthur's "court" just after Enid thinks about her first "coming to the court" (146, 144). We only definitively learn eighty lines later that we have moved back to a period when Geraint is unmarried (227). Tennyson's opening anachronies, then, can push narrative explanation further and further into the past, can defy the reader's expectation that the anachronies create narrative interest, and can blur time even as they leap across it.

Idylls of the King further reduces its narrative interest by sometimes summarizing heroic action in so short a space that it seems trivialized. "Pelleas and Ettarre" summarizes a tournament in three lines (161–63),¹¹ and "The Coming of Arthur" concludes with this stunning narrative condensation:

And Arthur and his knighthood for a space
Were all one will, and through that strength the King
Drew in the petty princedoms under him,
Fought, and in twelve great battles overcame
The heathen hordes, and made a realm and reign'd.
(514–18)

By distilling twelve battles and the foundation of a kingdom into five lines, Tennyson indicates that action of a truly epic scope will not be the focus of the poem. Instead, many episodes feature the individual quests, digression, and repetition of romance, "a form which simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object."¹² Repetition is not limited, however, to the romance plots of Gareth fighting

11. "The Last Tournament" describes the title event in somewhat greater detail, but it focuses on Lancelot's mental state, his inattention to the foul words and foul deeds of the competitors, and his desire to shake off his foul mood by fighting Tristram (151–89).

12. Patricia A. Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 4. Christopher Ricks claims, "Tennyson's awed sense of time lent itself not to narrative, not to charting events and outcomes, but to waiting, to suspense." Ricks, 275. I claim it lent itself not to suspense but to suspension, to the dilation and repetition of romance and lyric.

each of four knights, or Sir Bedivere attempting to cast Excalibur into the lake three times. Rather, John R. Reed's comment on "Gareth and Lynette" is true for the *Idylls* generally: "Repeated lines, images, and phrases create a sense of continuity and stasis."¹³ On occasion, Tennyson takes repetition too far, to the point of belabored redundancy, even absurdity. Lancelot competes "For the great diamond in the diamond jousts, / Which Arthur had ordained, and by that name / Had named them, since a diamond was the prize" ("Lancelot and Elaine" 31–33). Surely the first line makes clear what the prize, and why the name. To this reader, at least, the repetition falls flat, and the phrase "by that name / Had named them" seems included only for metrical reasons. To my mind, the most absurd instance of repetition appears, appropriately enough, in "Balin and Balan": "And on the right of Balin Balin's horse / Was fast beside an alder, on the left / Of Balan Balan's near a poplartree" (26–28).

Tennyson's decisions to reduce the poem's narrative interest, blur some of its temporal shifts, and create a sense of stasis through repetition are in keeping with Arthur's (and Tennyson's) war against time. Nowhere is this allegorical battle against time clearer than in Gareth's quest to defeat four knights who insist on being called Morning-Star, Noon-Sun, Evening-Star, and Night or Death ("Gareth and Lynette" 619–23). When Gareth approaches Camelot he sees the city's gates depicting "... Arthur's wars in weird devices done, / New things and old co-twisted, as if Time / Were nothing" ("Gareth and Lynette" 221–23). Time is made nothing not only on the city gates, but also in the city's making. Merlin tells Gareth:

For an ye heard a music, like enow
They are building still, seeing the city is built
To music, therefore never built at all,
And therefore built for ever.
("Gareth and Lynette" 271–74)

It would seem Camelot, like *The Prelude*, is "something evermore about to be." It will never be complete, for it is an eternally dilated process. In this, and in its accompaniment by music, the city resembles lyric poetry. While the *Idylls* valorize Arthur's lyric agenda of overcoming time, they condemn other character's narrative projects. Mark is described as "craven—a man of plots, / Craft, poisonous counsels, wayside ambushings,"

13. Reed, 194.

suggesting the alignment of narrative “plots” with villainous schemes (“Gareth and Lynette” 423–24). And after Vivien slanders Lancelot and Guinevere, Balin then “cursed the tale, / The told-of, and the teller” (“Balin and Balan” 534–35).

Arthur eventually falls prey to plots and gossip (that is, to storytelling), and succumbs to time and death.¹⁴ Tennyson’s war against time also fails. Seven months before publishing the first group of *Idylls*, Tennyson wrote to his American publisher that he was not writing “an Epic of King Arthur. I should be crazed to attempt such a thing in the heart of the 19th Century.”¹⁵ Obviously, Tennyson did make the attempt, and tried to bridge the temporal gulf between Arthurian legend and the nineteenth century. The dedication to Prince Albert portrays him as a reincarnation of Arthurian virtues, drawing a contemporary resonance for the tale. Conversely, Tennyson depicts Arthurian society as suffering from the nostalgia and sense of belatedness that afflicted the Victorians. Bedivere’s lament, “For now I see the true old times are dead,” might also express Tennyson’s fear (“The Passing of Arthur” 397).¹⁶

In his attempts to recapture the true old times, Tennyson diminishes the poem’s narrative interest and creates an elegiac tone and lyric sense of stasis. In one respect, Tennyson may push the poem’s lyricism too far. Christopher Ricks complains that in the *Idylls*, Tennyson “has not creatively solved the problem of accommodating his style (what Arnold called his ‘curious elaborateness of expression’) to the simple exigencies of narrative, of the humble essential which would permit his story to move.”¹⁷ Certainly Tennyson’s heavy repetitions qualify as a curiously elaborate style. Tennyson’s most notable stylistic device is the epic simile. As we have seen, similes carefully divide the tenor and vehicle, and can allow for lyric elaboration that is distinct from yet tied to a narrative element. Tennyson is even more careful than Barrett Browning in dividing the literal from metaphoric, and the narrative from the lyric. He most often begins a simile with “as,” offers an elaborate vehicle, and

14. In Herbert Tucker’s reading of the *Idylls*, political authority depends upon public perception created through language, vows, stories, and even gossip. Herbert F. Tucker, *Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse 1790–1910* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 447–61.

15. Quoted in Ricks, 264.

16. My reading is decidedly less optimistic than John R. Reed’s. He claims, “Narrative itself becomes a genuine means of solving the problem of dissolution and decay” since past deeds are recorded in words that may inspire future deeds. Reed, 193.

17. Ricks, 270–71. In his analysis of “Morte d’Arthur” as vehicle of cultural transmission, Herbert Tucker sees similar dangers of “[n]arrative arrest” and “sensory overload” in Tennyson’s style. *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 329.

then uses “so” to announce the tenor. Yet Christopher Ricks is right to say the similes “seldom relate intimately to the poem’s real concerns.”¹⁸ Their lyric elaboration overpowers the narrative drive.

In another sense, however, Tennyson does not push the lyricism far enough, does not create sufficient lyrical interest to fill the void left by the diminishment of narrative interest. The poem sometimes focuses on lyrical subject matter by depicting the mental states of characters. But occasionally the narrator oddly externalizes these lyric musings by casting them as muttered dialogue partly overheard by another character. In “The Marriage of Geraint” this device creates irony and drives later events, but in “Merlin and Vivien” it seems mostly extraneous. The narrator does not focus at all on his own mental state, the subject that, in very different ways, proved so fruitful for Wordsworth and Byron. On several occasions, the narrator indirectly intrudes himself in the third person as “he that tells the tale.” Twice he intrudes to clarify that a choice about an idyll’s outcome was his. He notes his departure from Malory by saying, “And he that told the tale in older times / Says that Sir Gareth wedded Lyonors, / But he, that told it later, says Lynette” (“Gareth and Lynette” 1392–94). He later says of Ettarre, “he that tells the tale / Says that her ever-veering fancy turn’d / To Pelleas” though in vain (“Pelleas and Ettarre” 482–84). In both cases, he notes a deviation from or elaboration on earlier legend. Because the admissions are overt and infrequent, he builds trust in the reader that the rest of his story is faithful to earlier sources. While the changes reflect the narrator’s tastes about fit endings for love stories, they primarily focus attention on the reliability of the story, not on the personality of the narrator. In two other cases, “he that tells the tale” intrudes to claim he saw an event used as a simile’s vehicle, and to assert his agency in crafting a simile (“Geraint and Enid” 161–66, “The Last Tournament” 226–27). While this may draw attention to the level of discourse, it does so for no discernable purpose, and the narrator remains a hollow figure.



As a final example of the complex interactions of lyric and narrative in nineteenth-century poetry, I turn to George Meredith’s *Modern Love*. The poem clearly participates in the tradition of the sonnet sequence, yet its departures from that tradition are striking. The narrative content differs. Meredith’s speaker does not suffer the trials of courtly love and

18. Ricks, 274.

its unrequited adoration. Rather, his mistress “yields” to him (39.1), and he considers the possibility that the “familiar sight” of his wife may be “[m]ore keenly tempting than new loveliness” (5.8–9) even as his marriage disintegrates in suspicion, jealousy, and pain.¹⁹ Meredith also departs from traditional sonnet form, writing iambic pentameter poems of 16 lines, rather than 14. The greater length allows both more intricate narrative developments and a longer lyric dilation of time. The rhyme scheme (abbacddceffeghhg) itself can create a lyric sense of static repetition, constantly circling back rather than moving forward. In addition, the rhyme scheme gives no indication of where the volta would fall, and dulls the expectation of a clear narrative turn within an individual sonnet.²⁰ These further lyricizations of the sonnet structure aptly convey the speaker’s anguished obsession as he is unable fully to understand his situation or to break free of it. Of what use is narrative to the speaker when he claims his wife’s suspected infidelity has destroyed the future, flattened the present, and worst of all tarnished the past (12.1–16)? And yet *Modern Love* features a more strongly developed narrative line, and more fully realized narrative settings, than most sonnet sequences.

I have been referring to the husband as the “speaker” of the sonnets, but Meredith’s poem alternates between first person and third person reporting, sometimes within a single sonnet. It also alternates between the present tense and the past tense, and while the use of the present tense often correlates with the use of the first person, they do not always correspond. Sonnet 6 offers an especially complex example of these alternations:

It chanced his lips did meet her forehead cool.
 She had no blush, but slanted down her eye.
 Shamed nature, then, confesses love can die:
 And most she punishes the tender fool
 Who will believe what honours her the most!
 Dead! is it dead? She has a pulse, and flow
 Of tears, the price of blood-drops, as I know,
 For whom the midnight sobs around Love’s ghost,

19. George Meredith, *Modern Love*, in *The Poems of George Meredith*, vol. 1, edited by Phyllis B. Bartlett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978). Subsequent citations will provide the sonnet and line numbers in parentheses.

20. Arline Golden discusses at length the poem’s departure from courtly love, and mentions the stanza’s lack of a turn and more open-ended form. Arline Golden, “‘The Game of Sentiment’: Tradition and Innovation in Meredith’s *Modern Love*,” *ELH* 40.2 (Summer 1973): 265, 266.

Since then I heard her, and so will sob on.
 The love is here; it has but changed its aim.
 O bitter barren woman! what's the name?
 The name, the name, the new name thou hast won?
 Behold me striking the world's coward stroke!
 That will I not do, though the sting is dire.
 —Beneath the surface this, while by the fire
 They sat, she laughing at a quiet joke.
 (6.1–16)

This sonnet obviously begins in the third person and the past tense. But while the verb tense shifts to the present in line 3, the point of view changes later when the first person appears in line 7. The last two lines reintroduce the past tense and third person. Although they do not form a rhyming pair, the last two lines act as a closing couplet following a volta: they reframe the preceding lines, placing the present-tense emotional eruption in a sedate past-tense context. The closing frame reveals that the husband's demand to know her lover's name was thought but never spoken aloud, justifying Isobel Armstrong's description of *Modern Love's* sonnets as "internal monologues."²¹

Taken as a whole, the rapid shifts in tense and point of view both within and between sonnets generate productive tension and deep ambiguity. Armstrong claims that "bringing together the 'now' of immediate perception and analysis with the 'then' of retrospect . . . lead[s] to a form of narrative in which the speaker is ambiguously 'inside' experiences and events and yet *external* to them, never fully in possession of an analysis yet always seeking the detachment which would enable him to 'know that he knows.'"²² The reader likely shares this mixed sense of immersion and detachment, aligning *Modern Love* with the combined subjective expression and objective critique of Armstrong's double poems, and the combined sympathy and judgment of Langbaum's dramatic monologues or Phelan's lyric-narrative hybrids. If the husband is taken as the source of the sonnets, the narrator of events, then the frequent shifts in temporal perspective raise the question of when the husband writes the poems, before or after his wife's suicide. If his narration runs nearly concurrent with events and most of the sonnets are written before her death, then how does he know to drop hints of her

21. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 441.

22. *Ibid.*, 444.

suicide? If all the sonnets are written retrospectively after the last of the story events, then why does he invite his (now dead) wife to read one of the sonnets? In sonnet 33 after recording words he spoke to his mistress, the husband writes, "If the spy you play, / My wife, read this! Strange love talk, is it not?" (33.15–16) If he writes this after her death, the words are not only a moot invitation but also remarkably callous. Some readers may be tempted to treat *Modern Love* as an example of the nonmimetic technique of simultaneous present-tense narration. Two features interfere with this interpretation: the intermittent use of the past tense, and more importantly, the husband's explicit comments on composing the poems. Not only does he invite his wife to read one of his compositions, but he also labels another as a sonnet when he addresses his mistress: "Lady, this is my sonnet to your eyes" (30.16).

The ambiguous temporal relation between discourse and story in *Modern Love* may be better understood as a mixture of lyric and narrative conventions rather than as a purely narrative conundrum. In this respect, Meredith's poem bears some similarities to the last two books of *Aurora Leigh*. In sections written in the past tense the narrator may withhold key information to create a sense of immersion in the experience, and this sense of immersion is heightened in sections using the present tense. Sonnet 15 demonstrates this sense of present experience, as well as its tensions with the poem's narrative material:

I think she sleeps: it must be sleep, when low
 Hangs that abandoned arm toward the floor;
 The face turned with it. Now make fast the door.
 Sleep on: it is your husband, not your foe.
 The Poet's black stage-lion of wronged love,
 Frights not our modern dames:—well if he did!
 Now will I pour new light upon that lid,
 Full-sloping like the breasts beneath. 'Sweet dove,
 Your sleep is pure. Nay, pardon: I disturb.
 I do not? good!' Her waking infant-stare
 Grows woman to the burden my hands bear:
 Her own handwriting to me when no curb
 Was left on Passion's tongue. She trembles through;
 A woman's tremble—the whole instrument:—
 I show another letter lately sent.
 The words are very like: the name is new.
 (15.1–16)

The use of the first person and the present tense creates a lyric sense that the experience and the discourse are simultaneous. Yet this sonnet contains narrative material and clear changes over time: the husband wakes his wife to show her two love letters, and she both changes from sleeping to waking, and from incomprehension to understanding as she recognizes the import of the letters. The narrator has knowledge of the letters before the sonnet starts and deliberately, vindictively plans their use against her. The reader learns the letters' significance only at the end, however, and experiences a revelation similar to the wife's. The closer alignment of our knowledge with the wife's, combined with our likely condemnation of the husband's cruelty, may cause us to shift our sympathetic identification from the husband to the wife in this sonnet, going against the sequence's usual procedure of aligning us closely with the husband's perception.

The dominant alignment with the husband's perception has raised questions for some of Meredith's readers. George Stevenson asked Meredith to explain whether or not the husband's suspicions of his wife's infidelity were accurate, and Meredith replied, "As to the Lady in 'Modern Love,' her husband never accurately knew; therefore we ought not to inquire."²³ While some readers may inquire anyway, irritably reaching after the facts of the case, the indeterminacy of the answer does produce some positive aesthetic effects. The husband's uncertainty heightens the psychological realism of his portrait,²⁴ and the possibility that the wife was less guilty than she seemed heightens the pathos of her death. For this reader, however, the wife's suicide is less ably rendered. The event is not indeterminate, but it is partially occluded, and at the poem's close its lyricism interferes with the narrative's clarity and closure.

The suicide is revealed at the end of the penultimate sonnet: "Lethe had passed those lips, and he knew all" (49.16). Isobel Armstrong claims, "The shock of the wife's suicide after a seeming reconciliation is registered with tragic pathos."²⁵ For some readers the suicide does not register at all; when I have taught *Modern Love*, some students overlook or misinterpret this crucial event. The line's lyrical qualities—its mytho-

23. Phyllis Bartlett quotes Meredith's letter to Stevenson in her introductory note to *Modern Love* in *The Poems of George Meredith*.

24. For a psychological reading of the narrator, see Stephen Watt, "Neurotic Responses to a Failed Marriage: Meredith's *Modern Love*," *Mosaic* 17.1 (Winter 1984): 49–63. Cathy Comstock acknowledges the temptation to read the poem's fragmentariness through psychological realism, but claims the poem exposes character as an artificial construct. Cathy Comstock, "'Speak, and I see the side-lie of a truth': The Problematics of Truth in Meredith's *Modern Love*," *Victorian Poetry* 25.2 (Summer 1987): 135–39.

25. Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, 446.

logical allusion, lilting rhythm, and brevity of the disclosure—belie its staggering narrative content. The language sounds as if the wife has broken the opening interdiction of Keats's "Ode on Melancholy," rather than having died in Meredith's distinctly modern setting. Naomi Levine suggests the language is not only obscure but also ambiguous: "The elegiac quality of the last several sonnets suggests a parting, but the language is too ambiguous to make suicide the definitive cause."²⁶ Instead, she proposes the possibility that the death is a metaphoric repetition of the traumatic loss of love, a loss frequently figured in *Modern Love* through the language of death.

Even if we agree that the suicide is a literal event, not a metaphor, the event is curiously both too abrupt and too strongly foreshadowed. After the suicide is disclosed at the end of sonnet 49, readers have only one sonnet left to help them process its significance. Sonnet 50 gestures towards closure and objective distance, but the personified "Love" may feel too aloof (50.1). The contrast of "our life" with the reference to the spouses as "they" suddenly opens a gap between the third-person narrator and the husband, further confusing the already vexed issue of point of view, and dampening the emotional impact of the death on the husband (50.12, 6). Yet if we have too little time to process the death after it is revealed, we may also have too many hints of her death before its disclosure. The poem strongly foreshadows her death at least as early as sonnet 35. After describing his wife's secret suffering, the speaker warns, "O have a care of natures that are mute! / They punish you in acts: their steps are brief" (35.7–8). He even foreshadows an overdose as her cause of death: "She is not one / Long to endure this torpidly, and shun / The drugs that crowd about a woman's hand" (35.10–12). When sonnet 49 opens with, "He found her by the ocean's moaning verge, / Nor any wicked change in her discerned," the reader might assume he finds her corpse but does not immediately register her sinful death by suicide (49.1–2). This temptation is especially strong because the previous sonnet describes "honest speech" as a "fatal draught" (48.7,8), and the ocean's shore has been described as "a fitting spot to dig Love's grave; / Here where the ponderous breakers plunge and strike" (43.3–4). Yet the husband discovers her suicide not on the beach at the start of sonnet 49, but rather in her bed at the sonnet's end. This phantom death and the difficulty of reconstructing the chronology of events in the last ten sonnets blur the temporal location of her actual death. *Modern Love*

26. Naomi Levine, "Terrible Love': Amatory Trauma in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and *Modern Love*" (master's research paper, McGill University, 2006), 45.

is a powerful poem, and largely successful in its experiments with lyric and narrative. But in its handling of this crucial event it diminishes its narrative resonance, and the lyrical language and dislocation from time veil, rather than highlight, the event. In this case, lyrical means interfere with narrative ends.