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COVENTRY PATMORE'S CORPUS

BY EWAN JONES

In the pure theater that is Robert Buchanan's *Fleshly School*, Coventry Patmore does not merit so much as a walk-on part. Matthew Arnold plays Horatio to Alfred Tennyson's Hamlet; A. C. Swinburne and William Morris are Rosencranz and Guildenstern; even Robert Bulwer-Lytton gets to be "a Gentleman."¹ That Patmore is nowhere to be seen hardly counts as a great surprise, given that his general reputation, by the time of Buchanan's review of 1871, was about as far from fleshliness as it was possible to get. For the representative mid-Victorian reader, Patmore was above all the Patmore of *The Angel of the House* (1854–62), his extended verse apotheosis of sober matrimonial bliss. The association has, more or less, stuck: with the caveats that where the Victorian public reveled in Patmore's epithalamion, more contemporary readers tend to find it disconcertingly patriarchal; and that where the Victorian public devoured it in drones, today's audience rarely give it the time of day.

Those areas of the academy that have recently reconsidered Patmore's work generally confirm the sense that here stands before us the most unfleshly of poets. In the past years, Patmore has become an avatar of abstract, idealizing or immaterial conceptions of verse (and of life). Meredith Martin's *The Rise and Fall of Meter* asserts that "his metrical grid was abstract"; Yopie Prins similarly holds that Patmore's "Essay on Metrical Law" "led to an abstraction of meter . . . theorized as a principle of spacing that could formalize temporal relations between abstract quantities, mentally perceived in the act of counting and not necessarily audible"; Joshua King goes yet further, arguing that such a prosody was fated to be "never realized in a human voice"; a section-heading from Jason Rudy's recent *Electric Meters*, meanwhile, tells its own story, reading simply "BODILESS PATMORE."²

Yet none of these accounts—to which several more could readily be appended—consider the fact that Patmore not only did treat of the body, but did so with an obsessiveness and excessiveness that shocked many of his contemporaries.³ The now-dominant view of Patmore as poet of disembodiment establishes itself through five willed oversights: 1) the separation of *The Angel in the House* from his other, highly

various, poetic output; 2) the exclusion of aphoristic and epigrammatic writings, such as *The Rod, the Root, and the Flower*; 3) the deracination of Patmore's writing from European currents of thought, which it both borrowed from (G. W. F. Hegel, for instance), and itself influenced (for example, Paul Claudel); 4) the overemphasis upon one element within the *Essay on English Metrical Law* ("abstraction") to the detriment of others; 5) the sustained aversion to consider the experimental qualities of Patmore's verse, in particular the great ode sequence gathered as *The Unknown Eros* (1877). The upshot of these exclusions is that Patmore appears to us today as the most English of authors, reactionary, provincial and fastidious—when in reality he vied with Swinburne as the most cosmopolitan of Victorian poets, being a radically conservative Hegelian and a heterodox Catholic and producing some of the most technically experimental verse in the English vernacular. Even John Maynard, who for several years has been waging a lonely and impassioned defense of Patmore's "eroticism" (an effort that has clearly fallen on deaf ears), glosses over all bar 1).⁴

It is in order to counter such an *idée reçue* that the pun in the title of this article needs to be as blatant as it is. By it, I propose to restore the dynamic vitality that has always existed within Patmore's corpus, in both senses of the term. This essay seeks to do so by reading in succession his aphoristic writings, his bilateral relation with contemporary mainland European culture, and—finally and most significantly—his verse technique within *The Unknown Eros*. But the aim of this critical reconsideration is not belatedly to return Patmore to the stage of the Fleshly School, as if all this time he had been anxiously awaiting his cue from the wings. It is rather to suggest that the recognition of Patmore's corporeality necessarily forces us to reconsider also what fleshliness might truly mean, both for the Victorian age and for our own, and to rethink the casual oppositions (between abstract and concrete, material and immaterial) that continue to stipulate what counts as a body.

Patmore's alleged immateriality is frequently established through the significant contrast with some putatively more embodied thinker. In several of the critical accounts above, Gerard Manley Hopkins is the self-evident antitype: where Patmore's metrical isochronism (in which each line holds the same duration, regardless of whether or not it is filled or voiced with verbal matter) leads naturally to abstraction, Hopkins's vocal articulation (through the phenomenon that he calls

instress) generates a theologico-poetics of incarnation. As King summarizes, “unlike Patmore, Hopkins identifies poetry’s affective meaning with the spoken sound of lines, rather than with the abstract pattern a reader might perceive governing the spaces and silences between lines.”⁵ The female poet Alice Meynell permits Yopie Prins a similar dichotomy, yet with an additional gendered dimension: “Without altogether rejecting his principle of ‘catalexis,’ Meynell resists an artificial imposition of isochrony that tries to prescribe pauses: she prefers a more natural variation according to a more natural measure of time,” a natural measure that includes, among other things, the “rhythmic pangs of maternity.”⁶

Prins’s account of Meynell—who in Patmore’s later years represented both a poetic apostle and an unattainable love-object—is characteristically astute. Yet the implicit judgment that arises (that where Meynell “projects the metricality of verse into the universe, as a universal rhythmic experience that cannot be precisely measured but is felt inside and outside the body,” Patmore mandates artificial, decorporealized “law”) raises several questions.⁷ Not least of them concerns the curious fact that, in the lengthy correspondence between Hopkins and Patmore, the former proves far more disquieted by the latter’s conception of the body than he is by the respective merits of temporal or accentual prosodies. In his letter dated 24 September 1883, Hopkins takes umbrage at a passage from *The Angel in the House* (“Because, although in act and word / As lowly as a wife can be, / Her manners when they call me lord / Remind me ’tis by courtesy”), but not in the way that a contemporary reader might expect.⁸ Hopkins writes,

Naturally a lurking error appears in more places than one and a false principle gives rise to false consequences. An ideal becomes an idol and false worship sets in. So I call it at p. 251, where it is said that a wife calls her husband lord by courtesy, meaning, as I understand, only by courtesy and ‘not with her least consent of will’ to his being so. But he is her lord. If it is courtesy only and no consent than a wife’s lowliness is hypocrisy and Christian marriage a comedy, a piece of pretence.⁹

It is somewhat surprising and dispiriting to find Hopkins—whose own sensuous verse can hardly be reduced to simple doctrinal statement—criticize *The Angel in the House* not because its view of marital relations is hierarchical but because it is not hierarchical enough. That this idolatry or “false worship” is overwhelmingly a matter of bodily desire is shown by the preceding context of the same letter, in which Hopkins expounds at length on what he takes to be Patmore’s

problematic conception of female “vanity.” Noting *The Angel in the House*’s statement that “Women *should* be vain” he embarks upon a tirade of mounting pitch (*P*, 174):

In particular how can anyone admire or (except in charity, as the greatest of sins, but in judgment and approval) tolerate vanity in women? Is it not the beginning of their saddest and most characteristic fall? What but vanity makes them first publish, then prostitute their charms? In Leonardo’s famous picture, ‘Modesty and *Vanity*’ is it not almost taken for granted that the one figure is that of a virgin, the other that of a courtesan? If modesty in women means two things at once, purity and humility, must not the pair of opposites be no great way apart, vanity from impurity? Who can think of the Blessed Virgin and of vanity?¹⁰

Such passages threaten to slip loose from the gentlemanly restraint that otherwise characterizes the pair’s correspondence. Patmore replies amicably yet firmly: “I did not mean ‘vanity’ however in the sense in which you read it. I meant Honoria’s pleasure in her lover’s delight in her beauty—a sense in which some great Doctor, a Saint—I think St. Augustine—says that there was a little vanity in the Blessed Virgin. (‘Sweet to myself that am so sweet to thee.’)”¹¹

What are we to make of such a brief yet intense contention, which quickly dissipates in Patmore’s responses to Hopkins’s more humdrum textual emendations? Certainly, we would not want to say that because Hopkins entertains a drastically austere view of the (female) devotional body, this precludes him from writing verse that is embodied in an unprecedented manner. Historical examples abound in which a doctrinal reserve communicates itself through paradoxically sensuous means; and in any case, Hopkins clearly intends a distinction between those bodies that bear divine grace, and those that do not. We could, hypothetically, say the obverse of Patmore: that what appears to be an extremely heterodox conception of female beauty (it is difficult to imagine what dictum from St. Augustine he had in mind, although the following citation is readily traceable, being the concluding lines to Patmore’s own “The Azalea,” from book 1 of the *Unknown Eros*) would not prevent him from writing verse of an austere, plain, or mechanical kind.

But Patmore’s “vanity” cuts far deeper than such a hypothesis suggests. Within his later writings, the question of erotic comportment moves beyond normative statement (“Women *should* be vain”) to become perhaps his single dominating concern; a concern, moreover, that is present not merely as theme, but also, and appropriately,

as formal embodiment. The comparative self-restraint that Patmore exercised in his rejoinder to Hopkins would become a fully-fledged eroticism in a passage from "Homo," one of the several collections of aphorisms and epigrams collected as *The Rod the Root, and the Flower*:

The Angels gain credibility and human sympathy from the doctrine of their defect of absolute purity; and nothing has made the idea of the Blessed Virgin so amiable in my sight as the saying of St. Augustine that the only sin she is chargeable with is a little vanity in the consciousness of being the Bride and Mother of God. O felix culpa, without which she would not have been a woman! If we must think of the Infinite, the most profitable way is to think of God as having made Himself infinitely small, a mere babe sucking a woman's breast, to suit Himself to the smallness of our capacities.¹²

Given Hopkins's reaction to the submerged eroticism of *The Angel in the House*, it is not difficult to imagine the force of his reaction to such untrammelled passages. Indeed, we do not even have to imagine it: for it is well known that when Patmore presented him with his unfinished prose manuscript "Sponsa Dei"—whose contents, we can be sure, developed the parallel of erotic and divine love—Hopkins's reaction was vehement enough to encourage Patmore to commit the work (which he considered the summation of his mature thought) to the flames.

Early twentieth-century editors of the two poets have, with varying degrees of partisanship, disputed the directness between Hopkins's criticism and Patmore's immolation.¹³ But I am not principally concerned with such a debate here. It is difficult to believe that whatever *Sponsa Dei* contained, it was anything more inflammatory (for somebody of Hopkins's persuasion) than much of what is contained within *The Rod, The Root, and The Flower*. There, the strikingly heterodox image of God made over into a suckling infant hardly counts as an excitable lapse. For the body is the single dominant theme in Patmore's aphoristic writing, worked over with an energy that is monomaniacal yet also dynamic, as it shuttles between erotic and divine poles. The following complete aphorism (from "Aurea Dicta") demonstrates just how much charged space spans those two extremes:

"Under the Tree where thy mother was debauched, I have redeemed thee." "We are healed by the serpent by which we were slain." It is by the natural desires that we were slain, and it is by the natural desires, made truly natural by inoculation with the Body of Christ, that we are ultimately saved. Religion has no real power until it becomes natural. (R, 42)

Patmore here makes characteristically deft use of the unattributed quotation (whose biblical provenance we assume) so as to manage the highly sensitive material. Yet lingering doubts remain: precisely which sacred text is here being translated into the profane language of debauchery? The two interposed quotations that commence the aphorism derive their force less from being renderings of a spiritual authority, than from the chiasmic motion that they set up, both individually and cumulatively: from “debauched” to “redeemed,” from “healed” back again to “slain.”

Of the innumerable passages that develop this corporeal worship, a couple more should suffice to make the point. Firstly: “‘The human form divine.’ It is actually divine; for the Body is the house of God, and an image of Him, though the Devil may be its present tenant”—a whole entry that hardly stands in need of extrinsic comment (*R*, 41). The clipped aphorism, “Those who know God know that it is quite a mistake to suppose that there are only five senses,” further suggests that what exceeds bodily finitude is not abstraction, but sensuousness of a different order (*R*, 53). “Abstract” is, indeed (contrary to the reception of the *Essay on English Metrical Law*), always a pejorative term for Patmore: worship is “not an article of abstract faith, but a fact discerned in our own bodies or souls” (*R*, 71). The real question accordingly becomes not whether the body counts for Patmore (for it manifestly does), but under what conditions and modalities it presents itself.

Most obviously: Patmore’s body is a feminized body. It is through the emblematic images of Eve’s “debauch,” St Agnes’s pious fervor, the “vanity” of the female lover that corporeal existence most fully discloses its divine role: “The woman is the man’s ‘glory,’” states Patmore, in a similar vein to above, “and she naturally delights in the praises which are assurances that she is fulfilling her function; and she gives herself to him who succeeds in convincing her that she, of all others, is best able to discharge it *for him*. A woman without this kind of ‘vanity’ is a monster” (*R*, 51). This hardly clears Patmore of the charge of misogyny, although it does change the nature of the charges. Hopkins may well have entertained a more unforgiving view of marital relations based on literal submission; yet however much room Patmore by contrast allocates to female “delight,” such delight nonetheless remains bound to “fulfilling her function.”

But Patmore’s feminized body is also a more elusive (and perhaps still more disturbing) presence. For all that it stands as a subject and object of male desire, so too does it collapse the very distinction

between female and male. After all, one of the principal reasons for Hopkins's intense discomfort was his sense that Patmore had pushed too far the established analogy of the relation between husband and wife and between Jesus and the Church. As several aphorisms make plain, the ties that bind both parties together are erotic and matrimonial in each case; so the feminized body is at once also the body of any worshipper who awaits God's presence:

"The soul of the Lover lives in the body of his Mistress", says Plutarch. "Ye are two in one flesh", says St. Paul. "My body is already joined to God", says St. Agnes. "She who loves God is chaste, she who touches him is clean, she who embraces him is a virgin indeed", says another great Saint. (*R*, 53)

Once again we note the manner in which non- or half-attribution emerges as a strategy ("says another great Saint") precisely where doctrine risks itself: here, at the point where Patmore suggests that to love God is to touch Him. The pronoun "She" that endures now appears in a far more figurative guise than the specific "Mistress" that opened the aphorism. Elsewhere, indeed, Patmore is at pains to show that this devotional touch is a matter for the worshipper in general:

The "touch" of God is not a figure of speech. "Touch", says Aquinas, "applies to spiritual as well as to material things." The same authority says, "Touch is the sense of alimentation, taste that of saviour." A perfect life ends, as it begins, in the simplicity of infancy: it knows nothing of God on whom it feeds other than by touch and taste. The fullness of intelligence is the obliteration of intelligence. (*R*, 81)

I said above that in certain respects, Patmore's conception of the female body can be considered more disturbing than the conventional misogyny with which he is associated. The reason for this is that the conception of an asymmetric erotic relation (between the lover and his mistress, between God and His worshipper), in addition to risking religious heterodoxy, intuits a complex dialectic of desire. Sex and faith equally proceed through a constant alternation between fulfillment and anticipation, recollection, postponement, denial, and even disgust; desire itself is not a simple property that arises from a subject but rather the product of an intersubjective field of recognition or misrecognition, the shuttling of gazes, the phantasmal identification with an Other who in turn desires. Embodied worship, moreover, itself feminizes the devout male: "The divine manhood, indeed, may

be discerned in man through the cloud of that womanhood of which he is a participator" (R, 111). (Even the apparently restrained *Angel in the House* had made the arresting claim that "Female and male God made the man; / His image is the whole, not half" [P, 107]).

The significance of Patmore's intuition I take to be twofold. On the one hand, his pushing of erotic "worship" into the realm of the Absolute curiously results in an often unsurpassed account of the intricacy and perversity of actual ("profane") human sexuality. On the other, this account emerges through, and produces, an equally unprecedented version of a particular kind of formal embodiment—here the aphorism. Put simply, Patmore's aphoristic writing, despite its neglect, deserves to be considered as some of the finest specimens of the mode in English, alongside anything to be found in Oscar Wilde, or William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, or Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*. (The surprising lack of critical interest in the aphorism in English, while it might help to explain this lack of consideration of Patmore in particular, is an issue beyond the purview of this present essay.)

Where Wilde's epigrammatic pithiness derives much of its force from the sudden inversion of moral codes that nonetheless need to be kept in play for the *détournement* to have its effect ("A man can't be too careful in the choice of his enemies," "Divorces are made in Heaven"), Patmore's aphorisms prove true instances of dialectical thinking, in that they show the dynamic process by which antinomies emerge, implicate one another, and are sublated into a third term irreducible to its constituents.¹⁴ The very concision of the aphoristic form is used in this respect negatively to indicate and touch a more boundless world of meaning or feeling, in a manner that recalls Patmore's definition of the deity (making use once again of vague attribution): "'God', says a great Philosopher—Proclus, If I remember rightly—'is not infinite, but the synthesis of Infinite and Boundary'" (R, 21). I will consider below the means by which Patmore's verse conducts a comparable synthesis, but for now it is interesting to note his distinction that "[t]he most ardent love is rather epigrammatic than lyrical. The Saints, above all St. Augustine, abound in epigrams" (R, 54).

It is a fitting indication of Patmore's idiosyncrasy that this so often reserved or austere author would indeed often be most ardent through the typically clipped or urbane form of the epigram. At times such feeling emerges in the form of strikingly direct statement ("The ardour chills us which we do not share" [R, 37]), or in a preternatural awareness of the way in which—call it perversity, call it dialectics—temptation

and self-denial frequently amount to the same thing (“The sweetness even of self-denial wears with time, and becomes tediously easy” [R, 33]). But Patmore’s finest aphorisms do not merely describe such a process; they also enact it. The remarkable epigram, “The more wild and incredible your desire the more willing and prompt God is in fulfilling it, if you will have it so” (R, 37), extends the prospect of a fulfillment that would be both infinite and entirely harmonious with God’s own, before checking back abruptly; “if you will have it so” might feel at first like a simple extension of unlimited desire, only to reveal itself suddenly also as the conditionality of self-realized responsibility. Elsewhere, Patmore daringly gives a further turn of the screw to Plato’s parable of the Cave, to suggest that we go back to the shadows, having grasped their epiphenomenal nature: for those images, “being attributed by us to their true origin, are immeasurably more satisfying than they were before, and may be delighted in without blame”; the shadow “has now obtained a core of substance” (R, 76).

Countless other examples could be appended; yet the more the quality of Patmore’s writing is attested, the more pressing becomes the question of its marginalization. Patmore’s quixotic attempt to obtain a core of substance even for the shadow might well have found an appreciative audience in the Cambridge Platonists of the seventeenth century; by the mid-Victorian moment, however (where even sympathizers such as Aubrey de Vere counseled Patmore against a too candid exposition of his views), such tarrying with the immaterial was always bound to seem suspect.¹⁵ The reasons for such a shift are too large and contentious fully to explore here, though it would clearly be reductive to explain them away simply through an appeal to Victorian positivism and/or prurience. We might speculate that when Joseph Priestley and other eighteenth-century materialists reacted against Henry More’s notion of the extended yet immaterial soul, they established a working notion of the physical world defined, above all, by its manifest properties. Hopkins, while in many respects hardly an orthodox philosopher in the English tradition, nevertheless similarly cleaved to an understanding of matter as *haecceitas*: as what Duns Scotus considered the tangible particularity, or *thisness*, of a thing.

Patmore’s corporeality is by contrast dynamic, in the sense that divine essence does not merely infuse bounded entities, but rather emerges through the relation of plural bodies. A treatment of desire

that takes into account its mediation through the other (whether divine or profane) and its temporal articulation in the form of anticipation and recollection is bound to seem diffuse or “abstract” judged by the standards of a crude materialism; yet it remains a genuine account of embodied experience for all that. It is for this reason that Patmore’s views are frequently better explained (in both the causal and hermeneutic sense) when placed in the context of continental European philosophical and theological thought of the nineteenth century. In this respect, I consider his example both as a consolidation and extension of Anne Jamison’s recent claim in *Poetics en Passant* that the relationship between Victorian and European verse culture is a more dynamic and bilateral one than is commonly supposed.¹⁶

The Catholic vocabulary of incarnation and transubstantiation more readily available in Continental Europe naturally helps facilitate this greater openness to Patmore’s heterodox body. When the French poet Claudel wrote his “Lettre sur Coventry Patmore” in the second volume of his *Positions et Propositions* he was able not only to countenance but to celebrate the analogy between human and divine love that so troubled even Patmore’s fellow English converts to Catholicism. “Two ideas,” states Claudel, “have dominated the life and work of Coventry Patmore: the first being that of conjugal Love, the other that of a finite world” [Coventry Patmore a eu deux idées qui dominant son œuvre et sa vie: l’une est celle de l’Amour conjugal, l’autre est celle d’un monde fini].¹⁷ (Claudel first heard of Patmore’s work during his retreat at the monastery of Solesmes in 1900, where he became acquainted with the Bishop of Rochester’s son, who had selections of the *Unknown Eros* to hand; his letter is addressed to Father Ubald, the editor of *Études franciscaines*.)

Given such compositional circumstances, we might therefore be tempted to conclude that Patmore appealed principally by virtue of being that fairly exotic breed, the Anglo-Catholic poet. Yet Claudel treats Patmore’s “finitude” with a sensitivity that transcends doctrinal affiliation. “The whole nineteenth century,” he asserts, “was persuaded that creation was infinite, that beyond this world lay others, innumerable others, all populated with intelligent souls and creatures perhaps superior to us. There is no conception more foolishly vertiginous, more deleterious for the imagination, and more thoroughly demeaning for our dignity” [Tout le dix-neuvième siècle a vécu dans la persuasion que la création était infini, qu’au delà de ce monde, il y en avait encore d’autres, et d’autres indéfiniment, tous peuplés d’âmes intelligentes et de créatures peut-être supérieures à nous. Il n’y a pas de conception

plus niaisement vertigineuse, plus délétère pur l'imagination et plus parfaitement avilissante pour notre dignité].¹⁸ The circle is at once symbol of infinity and finitude, Claudel continues, in a formulation that recalls Patmore's definition of God as "synthesis of boundary and Infinite" (though he was unacquainted with the latter's aphoristic writing). The question accordingly becomes: if God is not intuited as infinite, how is the worshipper to experience His palpability?

Claudel allots Patmore two responses. The first, as suggested above, is marital union: not in the form of *The Angel in the House* (of which he was again ignorant), but rather through the erotic candor of the *Psyche Odes*, which Claudel calls "smiling paraphrases of the Song of Solomon" [une paraphrase souriante de l'hymne de Salomon].¹⁹ The second is the very form of poetry, as distinct from its subject matter: the "Lettre sur Coventry Patmore" concludes with Claudel's passable if inexact translation of the opening of another of the *Odes*, "Legum Tuam Dilexi," which begins, appositely, with the lines "The 'Infinite.' Word horrible! at feud / with life" (*P*, 405). While Claudel's lexical selections are occasionally sloppy or over-literal (he had no firm command of the English language), he dutifully preserves the highly irregular line-lengths of Patmore's ode form, which we will later examine in more depth. Accordingly, when he renders the final line as a full alexandrine ("Pour remplir l'affreuse immensité de l'espace"; Patmore gives the decasyllabic "And fill the ghastly boundlessness of space") following several severely truncated lines ("Linconnu," "Dit oui"), he gives a nicely French twist to the manner in which verse form itself can render empty space tangible.²⁰

Claudel's translation of Patmore (he published several further adaptations as "Poèmes de Coventry Patmore," which appeared in the September and October 1911 issues of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*) therefore poses a number of tantalizing questions. It is tempting to conclude that, if Patmore's experiments with the irregular ode did not directly influence Claudel's own *Cinq Grandes Odes* (1907), they at the least represented a substantive counterpart to the latter's own verse, which pushed the traditional resources of French meter to their limit. We might also speculate that a fundamental affinity exists between Patmore's conception of the isochronous line (which endures even without verbal matter) and Claudel's conception of the line-as-breath, which he developed in "Reflexions sur le vers français," once more in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, in November 1925.

It is therefore possible to reprise the argument that I stated above in a philosophical register, so as to apply it to prosody: just as there

are other means of considering the body distinct from a crudely leveling materialism, so too does the embodied voice inhere not only in the articulated syllable or heavy stress, but also through the vocal suspension or breath that endures palpably in the allegedly “abstract” space of Patmore’s line. For this reason, Prins’s suggestion of a choice between “turning to the example of French poetry in order to break the regular beat of verse” and “the English metrical law exemplified in Patmore’s odes” amounts to a bad choice.²¹ While he may perhaps be a less fashionable example than Arthur Rimbaud or Stéphane Mallarmé, Claudel disrupted “the regular beat” in no less significant or distinctive a manner; and in such a way that had much in common with Patmore himself. Why Claudel’s poetic innovation is downplayed in comparison to other proponents of freer verse, despite his significant anticipation of Charles Olson’s own “breath-poetics,” is a moot point; doctrinal views must have much to do with it.²² Rather than reproduce the lazy conservative-devout/radical-atheist divide, however, I would prefer to see both Claudel and Patmore as radical conservatives: as conservatives moved to formal radicalism precisely through the increasing coolness with which society received their belief.

Be this as it may, Patmore’s conception of the body pertains far beyond a strictly theological context. For in addition to being a figure of interest for French Catholics such as Claudel and Gide, he also proved one of the earliest and most sensitive English readers of Hegel; no small achievement, given the interest in that philosopher’s “mysteries” that was beginning to percolate through English society by the 1850s.²³ (The mainstream aversion to “German metaphysics” contributed to the subsequent forgetting of this episode, which W. J. Mander’s excellent *British Idealism: A History* has however recently recovered.)²⁴ One of the more extended aphorisms from *The Rod, The Root, and the Flower* shows the extent to which the dialectically mediated, erotic relationship between lover/worshipper and mistress/God owes a debt to Hegel:

Who, except perhaps, Hegel, has ever noted, except by way of poetical metaphor, the surprising fact, simply natural and of general experience, of the double and reciprocal consciousness of love; that marvellous state in which each of two persons in distinct bodies perceives sensibly all that the other feels in regard to him or herself, although their feelings are of the most opposite characters; and this so completely, each discerning and enjoying the distinct desire and felicity of the other, that you might say that in each was the fullness of both sexes. To note one such human fact as this is to exalt life to fuller consciousness, and to do more for true science than to discover a thousand new suns. (R, 108)

Patmore's specific and sustained elaboration of Hegel helps us to re-evaluate not only the former's achievement, but also the means by which the latter influenced Victorian thought in general, and its "new prosody" more particularly. The fullest overview of this somewhat counterintuitive history remains Dennis Taylor's *Hardy's Metres and Victorian Prosody*, which uncovers the direct link between Hegel's aesthetics and the isochronic theories of Patmore and T. S. Omond, where verse operates according to the "musical bar analogy."²⁵ Taylor explains such influence through an "abstraction" that he takes to be common to both approaches: Hegel's account of music, he summarizes, establishes a "dialectic between the abstract bar-like rhythm and the melody"; such a pattern emerges similarly in classical poetry, where the opposition is between "the 'feet' and the phrases."²⁶ While modern prosody is characterized by its lack of "any precise abstract structure," Taylor nonetheless understands Hegel to inspire a similarly oppositional conception of meter, namely, the opposition between "abstract metrical form and . . . individual speech rhythms."²⁷ From here it is a short step to Pinch's claim "that meter is important as an abstract idea in your mind against which you measure how the line would actually be spoken if it were spoken"; and thereafter, to the decision to dispense with vocal performance altogether.²⁸ The logical terminus is the received notion of Patmore's meter as pure disembodiment with which this essay commenced.

Taylor is quite right to insist on Hegel's pre-eminence for a generation of English prosody; yet his summary heading of "abstraction" fatally impoverishes the complexity of that theory and its afterlives. As a preliminary, we should note that *abstrakt* always is a complex (and frequently pejorative) term for Hegel (for proof see his 1807 essay, "Who Thinks Abstractly?").²⁹ Not only is "abstract" the first stage in the *Phenomenology's* abstract-negative-concrete dialectical triad; so too does the very analysis of "rhythm" on which Taylor draws offer a conception very remote from musical disembodiment. Hegel does, it is true, on occasion refer to "the rhythm of the bar" to indicate an unvarying and ideal entity. Yet this abstract property does not simply mark itself off from an animating, performative force, against which it is inoculated, and with which it holds nothing in common. Rather, that animating force is itself "rhythm," just as much as the abstract beat that it displaces: "the counter-thrust between the rhythm of the bar and *that of the melody* comes out at its sharpest in what are called syncopations."³⁰

Rhythm, in other words, is at once abstract law and the animating force that disrupts that law: a form that asserts itself, paradoxically, by departing from its own example. (A reductive account of Hegel's prosody may well represent both a symptom of, and a contributing factor to, readings of the Hegelian system as "closed," or "totalizing"; the notion of rhythm as self-departing phenomenon, for which I am attempting to argue, has something in common with what Catherine Malabou calls "plasticity"; indeed, Hegel expressly links that concept to rhythm.)³¹

Throughout its treatment of music, the *Lectures on Fine Art* presses home this notion of rhythm as internal variation: "If . . . the melody keeps strictly in its rhythm and parts to the rhythm of the beat," writes Hegel immediately following the above citation, "then it really sounds humdrum, bare and lacking in invention. What may be demanded in this connection is, in brief, freedom from the pedantry of metre and the barbarism of a uniform rhythm" (L, 918). Hegel even goes so far as to make the interplay between time and rhythm central to the dialectical emergence of the subject. In order to recognize the self as self, the subject must break up "undifferentiated duration" into a series of intervals: "its self-concentration interrupts the indefinite series of points of time and makes gaps in their abstract continuity" (L, 914).

Measure, then, is the means by which the self unfolds, negatively; far from essentially "abstract," it transfigures the temporal material upon which it operates. Hence Hegel goes on to insist that "the satisfaction which the self acquires, owing to the bar, in the rediscovery of itself is all the more complete because the unity and uniformity does not pertain either to time or to the notes in themselves; it is by the self for its own self-satisfaction. For in nature this abstract identity does not exist" (L, 915).³² Unlike the fixed proportions of architecture (whose identical quantities do exist in space), the negative work of measure proceeds truly "from the spirit." As such, meter can hardly be seen to share the unchanging and immaterial essence that we customarily ascribe to pure mathematics: it is rather a specific act, constituted by (and constitutive of) the subject, at a particular historical situation. And this determinative act itself invariably produces variation, which proceeds not from some allegedly external sphere ("performance"), but is rather fully intrinsic: "however strictly the specific beat has to govern the *variety* of duration . . . nevertheless its domination is not to extend so far that it dominates the variety quite abstractly" (L, 916). Far from rhythm being identical with the bar, as Taylor claims, this unfolding dialectic of law and variation "is brought about by means

of *rhythm* which alone brings proper animation to the time and the bar" (L, 917).

All of the above examples derive from Hegel's consideration of music. Yet just as "music begins in recitative to liberate itself from the motionless sameness of the beat," so poetic meter operates according to a still more dynamic principle (L, 1018). Hegel gives short shrift to modern attempts to emulate the putatively unvarying norms of quantitative, classical verse: "When Voss wants to read even alcaic and Sapphic stanzas in these abstractedly uniform time-intervals, this is only a capricious fancy and means doing violence to the verse" (L, 1018). While Hegel is acutely aware of the differences pertaining to classical and vernacular prosody (of which more in a moment), both systems of organization have this self-variation in common: "the classical iambic trimeter acquires its beauty especially from its not consisting of six similarly timed iambic feet . . . and in this way the continual repetition of the same time-measure and anything like the beat is avoided" (L, 918); similarly, "[i]n modern times Reichardt and others seem to me to have brought a new rhythmic life into song-composition precisely by abandoning . . . iambic sing-song" (L, 919).

Given all the above, it is hard to see how Hegel's prosody could be entertained for any length of time as uncomplicatedly "abstract." Isobel Armstrong's "Metre and Meaning" offers a welcome corrective, saluting Patmore for "recognizing that Hegel's idealism did not abnegate the 'body' of corporeal language, as has often been thought."³³ (Armstrong is here courteous enough not to name names.) The salutary effect of this essay extends beyond its specific treatment of Patmore and Hegel (although Armstrong wavers somewhat over how well the former really did read the latter) to a more general consideration of the position of nineteenth-century poetry within a broader historical dialectic of versification.³⁴ That position is not unproblematic: while the transition from what Hegel calls "classical" to "romantic" art is a process of increasing interiorization, such development (as Armstrong rightly stresses) nonetheless embodies itself in new forms. On the other hand, however, Hegel's account of the transition from classical to modern prosody is suffused with a sense of irremediable loss: once, writes Armstrong, "the poet availed himself of the complex of sound signs whose *relation* both to one another and to lexical elements, is meaning making." Yet "Patmore, like Hegel, recognized that age was gone."³⁵

Hegel resolves this apparent contradiction through the modern emergence of rhyme, whose historical situation and cognitive purchase

Simon Jarvis has explored with acuity.³⁶ Armstrong's own analysis, by contrast, chooses to underplay the sonorous element, where the expressive variations of which modern verse remains capable instead signal the intercession of print culture: "I believe that the interest in variation and its equivalents (for example, counterpoint and syncopation) could arise only when readers began to see the text rather than hear it."³⁷ Yet I feel that this purchase of modern rhythmical variation at the cost of sonority pays too dear a price.³⁸ In what follows, I want to suggest that Patmore proved an astute reader of Hegel precisely by refusing either to renounce the acoustic force of "classical" meter, or to preserve it only by converting it to "romantic" rhyme. Rather, he demonstrates precisely that sonorous variations remain available to modern practitioners, in however transfigured a form; in so doing, he demonstrates that the Hegelian account of prosodic development is far more complex than might at first appear.

To be sure, Hegel does sometimes describe truly rhythmical verse as Armstrong suggests: "an age [that] was gone." Having demonstrated so compellingly that classical meters permit self-variation precisely through their lawfulness, it is rather dispiriting to find Hegel conclude the section on "Rhythmical Variation" with the summary verdict that in

[Modern] languages there is little room for rhythm, or the soul has little freedom any longer to spread itself in it, because time, and the sound of syllables outpoured uniformly with the movement of time, is surpassed by something more ideal, i.e. by the sense and meaning of words, and in this way the power of a more independent rhythmical configuration is damped down. (*L*, 1022)

Yet to move from this to Armstrong's claim that "for classical prosody the caesura's break is integral to the pattern of the verse and organic to its flow," whereas in our present age "Walter Benjamin's empty, meaningless time and the 'modern' caesura are alike," involves no little distortion. For one thing, so far from the caesura being mere "empty time," Benjamin himself specifically developed the former term—which he found Friedrich Hölderlin to enunciate most forcefully—as a means of comprehending the productively interruptive forces proper to *modernity*: "dialectics at a standstill" is one of his better-known terms for such a phenomenon.³⁹

On a deeper level, however, Armstrong's tale about the modern demise of the caesura simplifies Hegel's own account: while her sense of the general movements of Hegel's *Lectures* is generally sure, she does not often engage directly with the text itself. And that text here treats

caesura in a productively ambiguous manner, which not infrequently contradicts Hegel's headline view that "rhythm" is no longer possible for us moderns. As even the above quote shows, such a rhythmical demise would in any case have to do not with the caesura, so much as a more general linguistic shift: as Hegel explores in detail, it is the move from an inflected language such as Latin, to an accentual prosody such as German, which effects the modern tendency to stress sense rather than sound (see *L*, 1020–22). But this hardly annuls the possibility for pause, or caesurae. Syllabic languages such as French and Italian may, according to Hegel, "lack metre and rhythm in the classical sense altogether," yet the caesura figures as prominently in the *alexandrin* as in any other metrical form (*L*, 1027). Indeed, Hegel himself sometimes explicitly suggests that the caesura (so far from having vanished or been eclipsed by rhyme) endures for modernity, in however altered a guise. Classical versification, we recall, staged a conflict between law and invariable variation; yet something similar appears to govern German rhymed iambics, which "we are accustomed to scan more in accordance with a beat than is the case with the rhymeless iambics of classical antiquity. Nevertheless, halting at caesuras, the emphasis on single words to be markedly pronounced according to their sense, and stopping on them, may produce once more a counter-thrust to abstract sameness and therefore an enlivening variety" (*L*, 1033). Moreover, when Hegel leaves off his account of versification to consider poetic genre, the lyric (that most emblematically "romantic" of genres) is seen precisely to permit "(i) a rather variegated ranging of longs and shorts in a broken inequality of rhythmic feet, (ii) the varied kinds of caesura, and (iii) the rounding-off of into strophes which in themselves and their succession may have a wealth of variation both in the length and shortness of single lines and in their rhythmical variation" (*L*, 1136). The cognitive potential that Jarvis accords to rhyme, in short, would appear no less available for even the modern caesura.

I have treated Hegel's conception of prosody and rhythm in such detail so as to show that Patmore's *Essay on English Metrical Law*, which has long served as *the* indictment of his "mentalization" of meter, in reality proves nothing of the sort. Rather, it develops both Hegel's general conception of measure as self-variation, and, more specifically, of the pause or caesura as a specific instance of how such self-variation might unfold within a modern horizon. Patmore once again wears his influences on his sleeve:

The nature of the relation between the poet's peculiar mode of expression and the matter expressed has engaged the curiosity of many philosophic minds. Hegel, whose chapters on music and metre contain by far the most satisfactory piece of writing I know of on the subject, admirably observes, that versification affords a necessary counterpoise to the great spiritualisation of language in poetry. 'It is false', he adds, 'that versification offers any obstacle to the free outpouring of poetic thought. True genius disposes with ease of sensible materials, and moves therein as in a native element, which, instead of depressing or hindering, exalts and supports its flight.' Art, indeed, must have a body as well as a soul; and the higher and purer the spiritual, the more powerful and unmistakable should be the corporeal element;—in other words, the more vigorous and various the life, the more stringent and elaborate must be the law by obedience to which life expresses it.⁴⁰

Jason Rudy cites precisely this emphatic declaration as proof that Patmore's *Essay* "relegates to the sidelines 'the corporeal element,'" thereby showcasing his "utter disdain for rhythm": "Patmore's overall project throughout the 1850s," he concludes, "is to abstract poetry from corporeal experience."⁴¹ But even if there is indeed something rather stentorian in Patmore's above specification of a "stringent" and "elaborate" (yet specifically corporeal!) law, the *Essay* as a whole could not be less "disdainful" of rhythm. Far from the body being simply subsumed to an unvarying higher order, law and life interrelate just as dynamically as for Hegel. "In the finest specimens of versification," Patmore continues, "there seems to be a perpetual conflict between the law of the verse and the freedom of the language, and each is incessantly, though insignificantly, violated for the purpose of giving effect to the other" (*E*, 9). A "cultivated ear . . . rather delights in, than objects to [rhythmical variation] when there is an emotional motive, as indicating an additional degree of that artistic consciousness, to the expression of which, Hegel traces the very life of meter" (*E*, 22).

Even when Patmore makes his central claim, that the ictus, "for the most part...*has no material and external existence at all*" (*E*, 11)—a claim that is often extracted from its context to serve alone as a convenient summary of the *Essay*—things are not as simple as they appear. As Joseph Phelan notes, Patmore is specifically arguing against a physiological account of prosody that would be so reductively material as to identify accent with a particular region of the tongue or palate.⁴² You don't have to be a card-carrying Hegelian (though it certainly helps) to believe that this kind of "material" cannot ever amount to the actuality of experience. And indeed, for all that Patmore's prosody does involve a necessary operation of mind, this mental process is shown to

be irreducibly affective and corporeal throughout. “[T]he musical and metrical expression of emotion is an instinct, and not an artifice,” he states: “Were the vulgar and infantine delight in rhythm insufficient to justify that conviction, history itself would prove it” (E, 9).

Vulgar and infantine are not meant here as pejorative terms. For childish instinct already engages in a complex, embodied play with law and periodicity, where as in Hegel the imposition of an apparently “abstract” pattern testifies to a subject’s concrete, formative activity. “If Grétry,” writes Patmore, referring to the eighteenth-century French composer, “when a child, danced to the pulsations of a waterfall, it was because his fancy abolished their monotony. The ticking of a clock is truly monotonous; but when we listen to it, we hear, or rather seem to hear, two, or even four, distinct tones, upon the imaginary distinction of which, and the equally imaginary emphasis of one or two, depends what we call its rhythm” (E, 16). The individual appropriation of meter here could not be less like Rudy’s equation of “in one’s own head” and “internal metronome”: so far from abstraction amounting to objective, supra-personal quantity, it secures for the subject phenomenological variety!⁴³ Even when Patmore does seem to approach what Eric Griffiths called the printed voice of Victorian poetry, arguing that the “*ideal*” reader of Shakespeare will render the text in a more complex manner than most contemporary real persons are able (E, 19), his argument is grounded less upon an absolute distinction than upon the historical shift to “an age of unnatural divorce of sound and sense” (E, 18). “Verse itself,” despite Armstrong’s claim for the displacement of aurality by visibility, is still “only verse on the condition of right reading” (E, 11). Even rhyme, the distinctively “romantic” phenomenon that was supposed to have superseded rhythmical prosody, in fact only deepens the expressive possibilities for the caesura, which as we have seen even Hegel could not fully deny: “[R]hyme . . . is the great means, in modern languages, of marking essential metrical pauses” (E, 31). When even the *Essay on English Metrical Law* reveals that abstraction and law are involved in a complex dialectic with vocal performance and corporeal experience, we have to begin to wonder what proof of Patmore’s disembodiment is left standing. How far his great ode sequence *The Unknown Eros* extends and complicates this pattern of body-thinking, we shall now see.

Hitherto I have argued that the breadth of Patmore's mature thinking—from his aphoristic writing, to his Hegelianized prosody—reveals a consistent preoccupation with embodiment, which nonetheless refuses to reduce itself to a leveling materialism. The ode sequence gathered as the two-book *Unknown Eros* provides the most significant treatment of this complex embodiment. Yet for it to do so, that verse represents not only a continuation of Patmore's prose theorization of corporeality; so too does it exceed and challenge even what I have attempted to argue are the more dynamic and fluid specifications of Patmore's *Essay*. For all that Patmore's prosodic theory would indeed sometimes like to preserve a "high and stately lyrical feeling" linked to the uniform pause, *The Unknown Eros* in fact achieves something far more interesting (*E*, 28). Its actualization or non-actualization of the long pause comprises at once the intuited need for deferral, the desire for more immediate consummation and the deflation or frustration of desire, in a simultaneous movement that constitutes the subject's relation both to a divine transcendental realm, and to the bathetic order of human erotic love. As such, Patmore's odes think further what remains a stubborn conundrum for Hegel's aesthetics: the rhythmical potential of the caesura for a modern verse that no longer operated according to quantitative principles. The poet's late output does not simply "refute" the regularity that the *Essay* would at times wish to impose. Rather, the ghost of regulated order endures even in silence, where it comes into tension with the vocal impulse to speak, and hence to abolish law. I take this general truth to apply to all nominally "free verse," but it operates particularly acutely in Patmore's verse, given his competing devotional, political and prosodic conceptions of order.

The Unknown Eros does not achieve all this right from the start. The first of the sequence's two books is comparatively conventional, both in the manner in which it manipulates the resources of the irregular English ode (however much Patmore would resist that designation), and in the extent to which it strives to procure those formal devices for a stable and recognizable poetic persona. Yet even here it stands in a dynamic relation to Patmore's prosodic theory—not least in the way in which it manipulates sustained catalexis so as to render even the silent or paused voice palpable. An early poem entitled "The Day After Tomorrow" utilizes a lexicon of pauses and beats so frequently that we are hard pressed not to read it in direct conversation with the *Essay* itself:

But shall I not, with ne'er a sign, perceive,
 Whilst her sweet hands I hold,
 The myriad threads and meshes manifold
 Which Love shall round her weave:
 The pulse in that vein making alien pause
 And varying beats from this;
 Down each long finger felt, a differing strand
 Of silvery welcome bland;
 And in her breezy palm
 And silken wrist,
 Beneath the touch of my like numerous bliss
 Complexly kiss'd,
 A diverse and distinguishable calm?
(P, 357)

If ever proof were needed that internal variation constituted the life of meter, it is here, in a passage that first reveals the frank eroticism of Patmore's handling of the line. The alternation between extended lines of triple measure (lines 29, 31) and pronounced catalexis (lines 28, 30) produces a chain of "varying beats," whose actuated or non-actuated status is less a matter of "real" or "imagined" stress, than a realization of the desire that comes from the subject, and that is mediated by the other. Patmore fights to unify these "beats" or "pulses," without destroying their radical singularity; to make the "alien pause," which bears such an interesting relation to his *Essay*, part of "[a] diverse and distinguishable calm." We might well be tempted to desecrate that pause or calm, by hurrying through the increasingly breathless elaboration of the lover's body ("And silken wrist"), were it not for Patmore having already deployed extreme end-stopped catalexis as a declarative statement of certainty, to enforce pause: "Tell her I come;" and "We know." (P, 357).

Other early poems in the sequence similarly all seek to turn negation into a positive quality, through a virtuosic handling of the verse line that further evoke the natural patterns that constitute the recurring addressee (titles such as "Saint Valentines Day," "Winter," and "Wind and Wave" already suggest periodic returns). "The Day After Tomorrow" is like all these things, insofar as it suggests a temporality subject to absence; yet it pushes this absence further than anything that the more proximate tomorrow could ever hope to possess. The pleasure in waiting battles against the pleasure from making the awaited one come. As such, Patmore's vocal address comes increasingly to suggest not only those conventional phenomena that generically indicate the passage of time, but also a more singular (if still vague)

real erotic presence, a “she” who stands behind the “heaving Sea” (*P*, 356), “blazing photosphere of central night” (*P*, 358), and various other scattered figures. The poem therefore struggles between a mastery of absence through a stated law of eternal return (“It all has been before” [*P*, 357]), and a present-tense longing that would disrupt all such ordered procession, as the speaker beseeches “Life” to “[p]erturb my golden patience not with joy” (*P*, 358).

Perhaps it is for this reason that “The Day after Tomorrow” ends by taking refuge in a host of personifications (“O Life, Death, Terror, Love!” [*P*, 358]); and that the following series of odes, while redirecting Patmore’s invocations to a consistent female subject, also redirects them into a prior temporality of controlled regret. “Tristitia,” “The Azalea,” “Departure,” “Eurydice,” “The Toys,” and “Tired Memory” are all, as several of the titles directly or indirectly suggest, poems of backward turning, to a lover or other since departed. “The Azalea”—the poem from which we had seen Patmore quote, in his defense to Hopkins of womanly “vanity”—recounts a dream in which the subject’s beloved was dead; the subject awakens to his relief, “[p]erfectly bless’d in the delicious sphere / By which I knew that she was near” (*P*, 362); yet then awakens again from what he had only taken to be waking reality, “and she *was* dead!” (*P*, 362). There is an overbearing pathos to this tale, given that the speaker had gone to bed clutching a letter bearing the now-familiar claim, “Sweet to myself that am so sweet to you!” (*P*, 362). Yet so too does this letter insinuate a perhaps more disturbing state of affairs: that even in absence (the absence of mediated desire, the absence intrinsic to the act of letter-writing, the absence even of death), the beloved can be recalled or called up in a manner more tangible than what passes for immediate presence.

The very title of “Eurydice” might well represent an acknowledgment of this predicament. But it is “Tired Memory” that provides book I’s most sustained treatment of desire in abeyance. Once again, Patmore’s mega-catalexis serves at first to underscore a temporal order, the finality of death:

At last, then, thou wast dead.
Yet would I not despair,
But wrought my daily task, and daily said
Many and many a fond, unfeeling prayer,
To keep my vows of faith to thee from harm.
In vain.

(*P*, 366)

There is a perversity of feeling here that underlies what might pass for somewhat mawkish simplicity ("Yet would I not despair"). For the subject counters bereavement not through cathartic mourning, but rather with prayers that somehow manage to be at once "fond" yet "unfeeling"; the following line then suggests that it is not the departed beloved, so much as the "vows of faith," that constitute the speaker's principal concern. The catalectic "In vain." brutally unmasks such an endeavor, abruptly disappointing the rhyme-pattern that had appeared to win hope from suffering ("dead" becoming "said," "despair" finding "prayer"), its subsequent, extended silence both representing and enforcing the time that cannot be undone. (It is worth remarking here, that where Patmore's *Essay* considers rhyme as a privileged means of enforcing pause, this brutally enforced silence comes about precisely through sonorous disjunction.) The "vanity" that Patmore's poetic and aphoristic writing had celebrated in woman, much to Hopkins's unease, here resounds in altered form, transformed by the vulgar pun into futility.

Yet there is a world of difference between this definitive, end-stopped pause and Patmore's ensuing use of his signature device. The bereaved speaker, having come to see that the merely dutiful act of remembrance holds no succor ("The wilful faith, which has no joy or pain" [*P*, 367]), undergoes a remarkable change in his patterns of worship. Kneeling in a church at Easter,

It came to me to say:
 'Though there is no intelligible rest,
 In Earth or Heaven,
 For me, but on her breast,
 I yield her up, again to have her given,
 Or not, as, Lord, Thou wilt, and that for aye.'
 And the same night, in slumber lying,
 I, who had dream'd of thee as sad and sick and dying,
 And only so, nightly for all one year,
 Did thee, my own most Dear,
 Possess,
 In gay celestial beauty nothing coy,
 And felt thy soft caress
 With heretofore unknown reality of joy.

(*P*, 367)

It is surely a contentious bargain, to agree to "yield" a wife already departed, in the hope that the Lord who receives her might in turn return her—however much the enjambed "Or not, as, Lord, Thou

wilt" confesses His utter authority. Once again Patmore's spiritual and erotic dynamics intersect in a manner whose degree of contentiousness depends upon the doctrinal affiliation of whoever is judging: this act of relinquishment, which might just about conceivably be a self-abasement before God's domain, also has at least a tint of the erotic yielding that is either pleasurable in itself, or which hopes for deferred and thus still greater gratification. Just as Patmore's remodeling of Plato's cave myth moves from shadow to ideality back to shadow, so this dialectic of abandonment moves from the tangible ("on her breast"), to the immaterial ("I yield her up"), back to the tangible ("soft caress"). Precisely how much this possession suggests a profane eroticism all the stranger for the beloved being irredeemable in any real sense, or a retrieval of feeling memory made possible by the grace of God, will again depend on the reader's persuasion. But in either case, where the previous catalexis ("In vain") enforced definitive finality, "Possess," makes the vocal space that follows it vibrate with palpability, in much the same way as the departed lover's absent body. Taking it as a complete unit (the unitary line that forms so essential a component of Patmore's prosody), we forget the past tense of the qualifying clause, bestowing upon it the priority of the present.

It is perhaps the disturbing charge of such visions that causes Patmore abruptly to change course for the remainder of book 1, and seek refuge in a series of more public odes whose reactionary politics—whether inveighing against the 1867 reform act, Benjamin Disraeli's marriage of "false English Nobles and their Jew" (*P*, 370) or the settlement of the Alabama claims—remains, frankly, shocking. It could well be that in these poems Patmore continues to manipulate the varied verse line in a virtuosic fashion, though for my part I confess that I am unable to see beyond the abruptly rabid tone. Yet the eroticism that book 1 attempted to get out of its system only returns in still bolder form, in the first ode of the second volume, the eponymous "To the Unknown Eros."

Such a shift arises through Patmore's verse technique, which pushes an established repertoire further and harder than anything yet seen:

What rumour'd heavens are these
Which not a poet sings,
O, Unknown Eros? What this breeze
Of sudden wings
Speeding at far returns of time from interstellar space
To fan my very face,
And gone as fleet,

Through delicatest ether feathering soft their solitary beat,
With ne'er a light plume dropp'd, nor any trace
To speak of whence they came or whither they depart?
(*P*, 392)

There is a newfound plenitude to Patmore's non-catalectic lines here, which resembles Hopkins in its alternation of polysyllables and monosyllables to create a sense of easeful propulsion ("Through delicatest ether feathering soft their solitary beat"). The extension of lines 5, 8 and 10 runs up against an element that is, however, seldom to be found in Hopkins's output, the catalexis that has become familiar, but which now communicates an unprecedented tension and release. The complete lines "Of sudden wings," "And gone as fleet" burst suddenly into being, before rendering the voice mute as they depart: the fact that both "wings" and "fleet" form answering rhymes chains us to the fullness of the line, while depriving us of the elusive force that briefly flew into view.

The speaker of book 1 continually shied away from an investment of the departed past so charged as to render it anew. Here, the recollected and the prospective are brought unashamedly and intimately together, through a daring rescripting of William Wordsworth's "Ode ('Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood')":

And why this palpitating heart,
This blind and unrelated joy,
This meaningless desire,
That moves me like the Child
Who in the flushing darkness troubled lies,
Inventing lonely prophecies,
Which even to his Mother mild
He dares not tell:
To which himself is infidel;
His heart not less on fire
With dreams impossible as wildest Arab Tale,
(So thinks the boy,)
With dreams that turn him red and pale,
Yet less impossible and wild
Than those which bashful Love, in his own way and hour,
Shall duly bring to flower?
(*P*, 392)

If Love is indeed "bashful," it has a funny way of showing it, in this most vocally and declaratively sensuous of passages. That sensuousness exists not only at the level of imagery and the varied pauses that

have formed so great a part of my readings to date, but also through a series of rhymes with which Patmore takes far greater liberties than anything on offer in book 1. Those prior poems naturally varied acoustic patterns, in a manner perfectly permissible for the irregular ode; but here, “unrelated joy” stands as an appropriately unanswered singular. We might think a similar fate has befallen the apparently equivalent state of “meaningless desire,” where once again no immediate rhyme is forthcoming; the trace of the word has almost faded by the stage we get to “less on fire,” a full seven lines later, in another proof through a different medium of the strength of delayed gratification. “To the Unknown Eros” continues to push rhyme’s natural capacity for (erotic) invitation and completion still further: tempting us to draw “wild” away from its true-rhyme (“Mother mild”) into the verbal ambit of the more proximate “fire”; and later fusing together the “fire” rhyme that had been staggered (“Thou art not Amor; or if so, yon pyre, / That waits the willing victim flames with vestal fire” [*P*, 393]), in a quickening cycle of amorous conflagration.

Where Wordsworth can appeal implicitly to a broader Neo-Platonism, so as to justify his belief that the newborn child knows more of the soul than the adult self that succeeds it, Patmore therefore makes that knowledge both frankly erotic and, with striking candor, grounded in singular experience. This child’s intimation similarly turns out to be the aptest “prophes[y]” of all, not because it anticipates the erotic life to come in an accurate manner, but rather because its total incapacity to seize the excessiveness of desire tells us more about desire than those later versions of ourselves (those versions that “know better”) ever can. But if book 2 can finally bring itself to admit the desire that constituted those prior poems all along, so does it raise the disconcerting question of how such erotic impulse can possibly accommodate itself not only to correct devotional practice, but also to any even half-orderly prosody. It is not hard to perceive how such energy might threaten even the more embodied and dynamic account of meter that I have attempted to claim Patmore’s prosodic theory provided. Just how could the heart on fire accommodate itself to law of any kind?

The question as to how we should read the odes in light of Patmore’s *Essay* has, despite its obviousness, seldom been satisfactorily or thoroughly answered. Despite spending nearly 130 pages on the ode sequence in *Victorian Discourses in Sexuality and Religion* (by far the most comprehensive critical treatment to date), John Maynard says nothing about how the erotic content whose pervasiveness he correctly identifies relates to the metrical novelty of Patmore’s verse.

Joseph Phelan, by contrast, does attend to the metrical character of the sequence, which he reads in perfect conformity with (what he takes to be) Patmore's prosodic theory. "Perhaps because of its metrical idiosyncrasy," Phelan contends, "*The Unknown Eros* has not achieved the recognition it deserves, as one of the most majestic poetic collections issued during the second half of the nineteenth century. Read in line with Patmore's theories, the poems are often excruciatingly slow to read, but do unquestioningly possess what Patmore calls 'high and stately lyrical feeling.'"⁴⁴ It is difficult to know on what evidence this claim rests, and how, more generally, the platitude of "stately lyrical feeling" (whatever that really means) can ever be protected from excruciating declamation. We might here recall Patmore's own admission in the *Essay* that the excessive pause renders both vocal expedients (ignoring it, or realizing it) equally "absurd" (*E*, 26–27). I myself have tried the experiment that Phelan recommends on more than one occasion, with a group of students: the embarrassment that proceeded was in my opinion fatal to conventional lyric propriety. (That embarrassment was certainly not restricted to my students.)

By calling the excessive pause fatal to propriety, I do not mean that it simply dissolves lyric aspiration into bathos. Indeed, it does something far more interesting and novel than that. But to witness that novelty, we have to look more closely at the range of Patmore's verse technique. Phelan clinches his claim that the catalexis, while "excruciating," is appropriate both to lyric register and to the *Essay* more broadly, by reading a single poem from book 1 that I mentioned only in passing, "Departure." Here again we find the familiar mega-catalexis:

It was not like your great and gracious ways!
Do you that have nought other to lament,
Never, my love, repent
Of how, that July afternoon,
You went,
With sudden unintelligible phrase,
And frightened eye[.]

(*P*, 363)

"In the case of the momentous line 'You went,'" Phelan continues, "there is a pause of the full fourteen syllables allowed for in Patmore's theory; the mimetic appropriateness of this painfully distended pause for the speaker's speechless and disbelieving guilt is self-evident."⁴⁵ Now, I am in full agreement that we can indeed read the catalectic line as Phelan suggests, with a protracted pause, and that this protracted pause is appropriate to the domestic drama of the poem more generally.

(I do not much care whether we can make the strong claim of adherence to “Patmore’s theory,” whether we need to specify the duration of this pause as 14 syllables—it is enough that we can speak in the approximate language of the short, the long and the very long.)

The crucial fault within Phelan’s argument, however, is that it uses a singular instance (“You went”) to advance a general thesis (that *The Unknown Eros* can be read in perfect conformity with the *Essay*). Yet as that ode sequence progresses, it is increasingly clear that the catalexis produces a more complex and wider range of effects, not (it is important to repeat) to “refute” that theory, but to apply a productive pressure that reveals its possibilities. The justification for reading “You went” is, as Phelan says, mimetic: the pause equates to and enforces the departure of the beloved. I have highlighted other such uses of similar mimetic pauses above (for example, “In vain.”). Even the truncated “Possess” can be seen to perform similar work, albeit that its palpability functions in a slightly different manner, threatening to possess and thereby to disarm the pause that succeeds it.

But “To the Unknown Eros” (to return to the matter in hand) muddies the issue yet further. It is one thing to read the early catelectic pauses (“Of sudden wings,” “And gone as fleet”), which communicate sheer speed yet also a sense of abandonment comparable to “You went.” It is quite another to encounter the later, fuller catalexis of the poem’s middle section:

What in its ruddy orbit lifts the blood,
Like a perturbed moon of Uranus,
Reaching to some great world in ungauged darkness hid;
And whence
This rapture of the sense
Which, by thy whisper bid,
Reveres with obscure rite and sacramental sign
A bond I know not of nor dimly can divine;

(P, 393)

Phelan’s mimetic justification can hardly be wheeled out in support of “And whence,” which is no less momentous than “You went,” despite (or because of) its lack of decisive narrative content. Where the latter example enforces separation, “And whence” no less forcefully seeks continuance, through a whole host of properties: through featuring a directional preposition (“whence”), through being one of the countless rhetorical questions whose answer is no sooner sought than a similar variant is posed, through not being end-stopped by any punctuation at all, through being the invitation and not the response to rhyme, where

even Patmore's *Essay* acknowledges that the latter most effectively marks the pause (*E*, 31). For all these accumulated reasons, it is simply ludicrous to think that any reader of whatever level of erudition can simply effect an extended pause, without a force tugging them (as Eros tugs the speaker) to the following line.

But this does not simply mean that we simply have to realize different catalexis differently, to pause at some while breathlessly enjambling others. The significance of "And whence" is not that we need quickly to dispose of it, but that the reader's voice is caught between the internalized need to pause appropriately, as if in obedience to some external law, and to rush forward into the gratification of continuance; and this dilemma constitutes the crux of Patmore's erotic and devotional body. It might be objected at this point that by retaining even this intimation of a disobeyed law, I am preserving too much of the normative force of Patmore's *Essay*; that most readers are fortunate enough not to come to a poem with the whole weight of the nineteenth century prosodic debates hanging on their shoulders. This is indeed true: but even in that bliss of ignorance, a countervailing force to the free discharge of vocal energy is, I think, demonstrably present. We cannot get to the unenforceable pause of "And whence" without first having read the more performable pauses of the same poem's opening. The disruptive force of the former therefore exists only through some form of intuited "law," however inexact; a law that covers not only the singular poem but also (for those more diligent readers who still read whole sequences in order) *The Unknown Eros* to this point. And this truth extends yet further: in reality, even the most immediate or naïve reader does not approach the single poem or sequence in isolation. Even in an unmetrical age such as our own, poetry as a conventional form of social expression sets up numerous expectations: chief among them is (still, just about) the expectation that the line itself has a particular if indefinable valence, that the marked curtailment of that line does not amount to nothing. In the discovery that even the self-asserting liberty of free verse can exist only under condition of violating a deep-seated law that paradoxically needs to remain in place (to be violated ever anew), we approach the language of Patmore's own *Essay*, and glimpse once again the counter-intuitively radical potential that it has always held.

Several other odes from book 2 develop Patmore's theologico-corporeal thinking in distinct manners, as their titles ("Sponsa Dei," "To the Body," "Eros and Psyche" already suggest). Yet I wish to conclude this essay in a more eccentric fashion, by focusing upon a small document

that is unknown in a rather different manner to *The Unknown Eros*. It takes the form of a 1933 letter from Richard de Bary, a prolific Catholic author and acquaintance of Patmore, to Julian Huxley, the evolutionary biologist and brother of Aldous Huxley. Having recently attended the latter's talk on "Tissue Culture and Human Habits," de Bary writes on 5 June with news of a past "discovery" made by Coventry Patmore, who is strikingly described as "a pioneer student of sex," who "was worried with nerve trouble."⁴⁶ De Bary elaborates upon the theme in a further letter on 13 June, in a handwriting that is at times difficult to decipher:

He discovered that if there were an absolutely perfect closure (by silk-thread if you will) of the sex-organ, and coitus attempted; the entire output of spermatozoa ["broke"?] into the nerve system of the emitter and effect *entire* "nerve-regeneration." The reason why this has not otherwise been discovered is because it requires one particular rather vehement act to bring it about; and what C. P. described as the act of a "severing sword."⁴⁷

Given de Bary's rather euphemistic locution (although it is quite a surprise that he could bring himself to be this frank), it is difficult to know precisely what this mysterious "severing sword" comprised. But it seems fairly clear—from de Bary's subsequent reference to "'injaculation' instead of 'ejaculation'," and the claim that such an act could be considered typically Victorian only insofar as it shunned "waste"—that it formed something like the common Taoist practice, where ejaculation is deferred or denied entirely, so as to introduce semen into the blood supply.⁴⁸ (Curious readers should know that modern science refutes such a hypothesis.)

De Bary claims to have learned of this "discovery" from "one who knew Coventry Patmore perfectly," a claim whose reliability cannot be proven, but which would seem a little far-fetched to fabricate.⁴⁹ He attributes Patmore's reticence on the subject to a Victorian culture whose unforgiving tendencies were already clearer in retrospect. Interestingly, however, de Bary states that "he buried his discovery"; the unnamed friend assures him that Patmore's "meanings were not 'mystical' but 'physiological'," and de Bary himself states, in his second letter on 13 June, that "[a]fter the discovery referred to he wrote To the *Unknown Eros* & 5 or 6 Odes including *The Open Secret*."⁵⁰ While Patmore is alleged to refer directly to "coitus," de Bary freely admits to have attempted the same "act" in masturbation, and to have achieved "*entire . . . nerve regeneration*"!⁵¹

While I intend this curious set of letters to clinch the argument that I have been attempting throughout, so too do I intend it to clarify precisely what that argument does and does not entail. For it might well be tempting to reduce Patmore's verse body to the pleasurable or controlled real body, to collapse his devotional language into a codified discourse of erotic desire, as de Bary's emphases of "*Unknown*" and "*Open Secret*" encourage us to do. Yet this is a temptation that—if the reader will forgive the loaded phrasing—we would do well to resist, for it would merely reproduce what I have earlier described as the crass identification of bodily experience with the immediately manifest. Patmore's writing strives throughout to resist the parceling-out of experience into the profane and the devotional spheres, because both proceed through the complex interplay of abstraction and palpability, gratification and deferral. The more Patmore's body approaches the real, human, profane embarrassed body, the more it paradoxically intuits man's relationship to an unknowable yet sensuous beyond. Such a form of worship may not, needless to say, be to everyone's devotional taste. It nevertheless distinguishes Patmore as one of the most idiosyncratic, perverse, profound, and unrecognized poets of the body to which the English language can lay claim. He was no member of the Fleshly School, not because he was unfleshly but because it is difficult to imagine any school ever forming around *this* body.

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NOTES

¹ Thomas Maitland [Robert Buchanan], "The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr. D. G. Rossetti," *Contemporary Review* 18 (1871): 335.

² Meredith Martin, *The Rise and Fall of Meter* (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 2012), 69; Yopie Prins, "Patmore's Law, Meynell's Rhythm," in *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 2005), 262; Joshua King, "Patmore, Hopkins, and the Problem of the English Metrical Law," *Victorian Poetry* 49.2 (2011): 31; Jason Rudy, *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 2007), 112. Rudy's wavering on the issue of just how abstract Patmore's prosody really was, however, is shown by the reprinting of the section on Patmore under the revised title, "Material Patmore," in *Meter Matters*, ed. Jason David Hall (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 2011), 135–53. As I discuss below, Rudy acutely perceives the embodied nature of Patmore's later verse, but in contrast to my analysis wants to see practice as a direct contradiction of his stated prosodic theory.

³ See Adela Pinch, "Love Thinking," *Victorian Studies* 50.3 (2008): 379–97, which extrapolates a mechanical regularity to Patmore's verse from one passage in *The Angel in the House*; and Jason David Hall, "Materializing Meter: Physiology, Psychology, Prosody," *Victorian Poetry* 49.2 (2011): 179–97.

⁴ Maynard has written on Patmore, and *The Unknown Eros* in particular, in several contexts; his fullest treatment comes in *Victorian Discourses in Sexuality and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 141–270.

⁵ King, 39.

⁶ Prins, 269.

⁷ Prins, 269.

⁸ Coventry Patmore, *The Poems of Coventry Patmore*, ed. Frederick Page (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1949), 202. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *P*.

⁹ Gerard Manley Hopkins to Patmore, 24 September 1883, in *The Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins: Including his Correspondence with Coventry Patmore*, ed. C. C. Abbott (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956), 310.

¹⁰ Hopkins to Patmore, 24 September 1883, in *The Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 308.

¹¹ Patmore to Hopkins, 27 September 1883, in *The Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 311.

¹² Patmore, *The Rod, the Root and the Flower* (London: Grey Walls Press, 1950), 103. Hereafter abbreviated *R* and cited parenthetically by page number.

¹³ See Abbott's introduction to the correspondence between Hopkins and Patmore, xxxiii–xli; and Derek Patmore's introduction to *The Rod, the Root, and the Flower*.

¹⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 2000), 11; *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 255.

¹⁵ As Basil Chapuys diplomatically observes, “[i]t is evident that to some of the poet's friends a few of the later odes had appeared to carry to excess this analogy between human and Divine love. Mr de Vere had, in a letter which is printed in vol ii, strongly urged the suppression of the group of odes, ‘Eros and Psyche,’ ‘Psyche's Discontent’ and ‘De Natural Deorum’” (Patmore, *Memoirs and Correspondence of Coventry Patmore*, 2 vol., ed. Chapuys [London: George Bell and Sons, 1900], 1:317).

¹⁶ See Anne Jamison, *Poetics en Passant* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). The influence of Christina Rossetti on Charles Baudelaire stands for Jamison as a case in point.

¹⁷ Paul Claudel, *Positions and Prepositions*, 2 vol. (Paris: Gallimard, 1928–34), 2:29. Translation mine.

¹⁸ Claudel, 2:33.

¹⁹ Claudel, 2:32.

²⁰ Claudel, 2:35.

²¹ Prins, 278. Again, Prins describes this choice as it applies to Alice Meynell.

²² See Charles Olson, “Projective Verse,” in *Collected Prose of Charles Olson*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997), 239–249.

²³ J. H. Stirling's *The Secret of Hegel* (1865) did much to establish this sense of Hegel's work as a rite of initiation for the dedicated few.

²⁴ See W. J. Mander, *British Idealism: A History* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011). For an account of the British resistance to Hegel, see Kirk Willis, “The Introduction and Critical Reception of Hegelian Thought in Britain, 1830–1900,” *Victorian Studies* 32.1 (1988): 85–111.

²⁵ See Dennis Taylor, *Hardy's Metres and Victorian Prosody* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 7–48, esp. 18–29.

²⁶ Taylor, 28.

²⁷ Taylor, 16.

²⁸ Pinch, 391.

²⁹ See G. W. F. Hegel, "Who Thinks Abstractly?" in *Hegel: Texts and Commentary*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 117–18.

³⁰ Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, 3 vol., trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 918, emphasis added. Hereafter abbreviated *L* and cited parenthetically by page number.

³¹ Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth During (New York: Routledge, 2004). Hegel writes, "In this respect we may compare the principle of rhythmical versification with plasticity" (*L*, 1022).

³² This account of spirit's leaving and returning itself through the self-cancellation of the beat resembles his later account of the origin of rhyme so closely as to cast doubt upon the privilege of the latter as an index of romantic "interiority" (rhythm being a recognizably "classical" phenomenon).

³³ Armstrong, "Meter and Meaning," in *Meter Matters*, 32.

³⁴ Armstrong identifies four forms of prosodic theory common to the nineteenth century: 1) meter as "empty container"; 2) meter as "correspondence" of sound and sense; 3) meter as productive "noncorrespondence" of the same; and, most sophisticated of all, 4) meter as complex "polyrhythm." While Hegel evidently makes category 4 on Armstrong's reading, Patmore rather slides between categories 3 and 4.

³⁵ Armstrong, "Meter and Meaning," 33.

³⁶ See Simon Jarvis, "Musical Thinking: Hegel and the Phenomenology of Prosody," *Paragraph* 28.2 (2005): 57–71.

³⁷ Armstrong, "Meter and Meaning," 31.

³⁸ Armstrong presses home this claim, arguing that, even in Hopkins's prosody, "forms of aurality are born from the act of sight" ("Meter and Meaning," 34).

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," in *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913–1926* (Harvard: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996), 340–41; Benjamin develops the notion of "dialectics at a standstill" in convolute N of the *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999). This is one of several moments where Benjamin develops Friedrich Hölderlin's riddling sense of caesura as "counter-rhythmic interruption" ("Remarks on *Oedipus*," in *Classical and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J. M. Bernstein [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003], 194).

⁴⁰ Patmore, *Coventry Patmore's "Essay on Metrical Law": A Critical Edition with Commentary*, ed. Sister Mary Augustine Roth (PhD Diss., Catholic University of America, 1961), 7. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *E*.

⁴¹ Rudy, 115, 121.

⁴² See Joseph Phelan, *The Music of Verse: Metrical Experiment in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 28–29.

⁴³ Rudy, 115.

⁴⁴ Phelan, 33–34.

⁴⁵ Phelan, 35.

⁴⁶ Richard de Bary to Julian Huxley, 5 June 1933, in Julian Sorell Huxley - Papers, 1899–1980, Fondren Library, Rice University, Box 11, Folder 3, MS 50. My thanks to Lesley Hall at the Wellcome Library for informing me of this correspondence and to the librarians at the Fondren Library.

⁴⁷ De Bary to Huxley, 13 June 1933, in Julian Sorell Huxley - Papers, 1899–1980, Box 11, Folder 3, MS 50.

⁴⁸ De Bary to Huxley, 16 June 1933, in Julian Sorell Huxley - Papers, 1899–1980, Box 11, Folder 3, MS 50; De Bary to Huxley, 13 June 1933, 1.

⁴⁹ De Bary to Huxley, 5 June, 2.

⁵⁰ De Bary to Huxley, 13 June, 1.

⁵¹ De Bary to Huxley, 5 June, 1.