Introduction

> And now let us go out on the terrace, where "droops the milk-white peacock like a ghost," while the evening star "washes the dusk with silver." At twilight nature becomes a wonderfully suggestive effect, and is not without loveliness, though perhaps its chief use is to illustrate quotations from the poets.
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> Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying" (1891)[1]

Oscar Wilde's aesthetic manifesto is famous for its assertion that painters taught us to see sunsets and fog; but it is no less notable for its parting remark that poets gave us the language of twilight. The evening hour – no longer day and not yet night – has been the preeminent time of lyric utterance since the Romantic era, the period invoked when Wilde's alter ego Vivian quotes from Blake's sonnet "To the Evening Star." An anthology of poems set at this threshold would include, to name only a few, Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*, Shelley's "Adonais," Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Stevens' "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," and Bishop's "At the Fishhouses." If, as Wilde says, evening is useful primarily for illustrating the words of poets, it is remarkable that so many poets have found uses for this time of day, above all other times.

This book proposes a variety of reasons for why this should be so. It defines the poetry of evening as a genre through which to articulate several properties of lyric, including the location of a self in an environment, the representation of temporal lapses, the dynamic between the continuous flux of the world and aesthetic closure of poems, and the intersection of private and public forms of time. I study these properties through readings of both canonical and lesser-known Romantic lyrics, as well as their eighteenth-century precursors; and I conclude by tracing new inflections of twilight in Victorian and early twentieth-century poetry. As a genre of temporal experience, evening is, like all genres, diffuse around the edges – descending from afternoon, deepening into night. As a literary

kind, however, the poetry of evening has a distinctly recognizable set of family resemblances: key-words, symbolic sites, presiding spirits and deities, moralizations, perceptual plots, and so forth. It will be the work of this book to identify these affinities and the poetic dialogue in which they participate: on the nature of the poet's work in relation to other forms of labor and recreation in the world, on the apprehension of time's passage and the temporal dimension of art, on historical change, on experiences of the beautiful and the ordinary, on pastoral nostalgia and urban realities.

The implication of Wilde's remark is that evening is not simply a given and immutable fact but rather a poetic *invention*; and I mean this word in both its common sense and its deeper etymology, both the deliberateness of formal creation and the serendipity of *coming upon* or *finding*. Evening, that is to say, is a natural phenomenon that had to be discovered, named, and valued – as occasion of beauty, as moment of pastoral calm, as time of religious observance, as end of a day's work. The conclusion of Wilde's essay nicely illustrates this point: the coming of twilight is represented as an interruption, a natural event that supervenes upon a conversation about artifice; but it is also a deliberate gesture with a literary history behind it. Indeed, Vivian ends the dialogue with his friend Cyril in the manner of Virgil's *Eclogues*, a *locus classicus* of evening poetry: he remarks that day has passed into dusk while the pair were deep in conversation. The innovation of the *Eclogues*, as Erwin Panofsky once observed, was to represent an ordinary diurnal event as both a pretext for ending and as a moment worth lingering over.[2] In essence, Wilde's dialogue represents an Edwardian version of the Virgilian colloquy: it begins in the *otium* of afternoon (when shepherds retreat from the heat and have conversations and singing-contests) and ends at twilight (when they must fold their flocks and head home).[3] Since Cyril begins by urging Vivian to stop reading and enjoy the afternoon *al fresco*, it is apt that when the latter finally agrees to go outside, he figuratively carries his poetry with him.[4]

Wilde refers, without historical specificity, to "the poets," but Virginia Woolf more specifically identifies evening as a recent invention. In a witty digression on Renaissance iconography, she notes in *Orlando* (1928) that this time of day was not sufficiently appreciated by the Elizabethan world in which her narrative begins:

> The brilliant amorous day was divided as sheerly from night as land from water. Sunsets were redder and more intense; dawns were whiter and more auroral. Of our crepuscular half-lights and lingering twilights they knew nothing. The rain fell vehemently, or not at all. The sun blazed or there was darkness. Translating

this to the spiritual regions as their wont is, the poets sang beautifully how roses fade and petals fall. The moment is brief, they sang; the moment is over; one long night is slept by all.[5]

This is a significant mimetic shift – a change that we can see in comparing two well-known sonnets, two centuries apart. In Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, twilight serves as a trope for the penultimate and transitory: "In me thou seest the twilight of such day, / As after sunset fadeth in the west, / Which by and by black night doth take away, / Death's second self, that seals up all in rest" (5–8).[6] In Wordsworth's sonnet, "It is a beauteous evening," on the other hand, this moment becomes an occasion of utterance – directly perceived rather than metaphorically invoked.[7] The present-tense experience of evening is virtually unheard of in Elizabethan lyric, with the notable exception of Spenser's "Epithalamion," in which the eager bridegroom marks the passage of time as he awaits the arrival of his beloved. While Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote sonnets *about* time and mutability, Wordsworth and his predecessors in the eighteenth-century sonnet revival often situated themselves *in* a particular time; and the impersonal construction of Wordsworth's opening declarative, "It is" – common to expressions of time and weather – reflects this change.[8] Under Northrop Frye's archetypal terms, Wordsworth's sonnet typifies the eighteenth-century era of "Sensibility" and its new emphasis on "process" rather than "product"; it takes part in a literature that represents its own fluid conditions of becoming, as in the epistolary mode of Richardson's novels, the digressive and self-referential frolics of *Tristram Shandy*, and the time- and space-specific tours of landscape poetry.[9]

In terms of cultural rather than specifically literary change, Wordsworth's solemnized setting can also be read as a nostalgic reaction against the secularization of time, in which the canonical hours of prayer gave way to the clock-reckoning of modernity. The de-sanctification of time long predates Wordsworth's poem, of course, but it was registered with particular acuity in the Romantic era. Two brief examples will illustrate this point. In his *Letters from England* (1807), Robert Southey, posing as a Spanish visitor by the name of Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella, remarked on the absence of holy markers in everyday English life. "Here are no vespers to unite a whole kingdom at one time in one feeling of devotion," the homesick Don reports, and "if bells are heard, it is because bell-ringing is the popular music."[10] Percy Shelley makes a similar observation in the guise of a visitor to Italy in his conversation poem "Julian and Maddalo." The two titular characters – thinly veiled alter egos of the poet and his friend Byron – have a conversation while a vesper-bell calls the

inmates of a Venetian madhouse to evening prayer. Their act of passive listening marks the two as outsiders (non-Catholics and non-believers), but in metaphorical terms, the bell also tolls for them. In Maddalo's improvised psychomachia, the knell of parting day becomes a mental vespers calling believers and skeptics alike: "the soul, / Hung in a heaven-illumined tower, must toll / Our thoughts and our desires to meet below / Round the rent heart and pray" (123–6).[11]

By situating a lyric at evening, the poet often self-consciously articulates the strangeness of his or her vocation in relation to other ways of being in the world: while other people's work is ending, the poet's has just begun. The writing of poetry is fundamentally an invisible, mental form of labor, and evening constitutes a temporal marker of that work – a crux between experience and reflection, and between the self and the world of ongoing events. Milton's Penseroso, who conceives of poetic apprenticeship as an inspired insomnia while the rest of the world sleeps, is the archetypal figure for this kind of temporal reckoning, and his descendants include Gray's churchyard elegist (who disregards the curfew-bell while weary villagers heed it), Cowper's sofa-bound philosopher, Smith's melancholy wanderer, and Wordsworth's alter ego William, who in "The Tables Turned" urges his studious friend to come outdoors to enjoy the "first sweet evening yellow."

Wordsworth's invitation is hardly the naïve escape from culture into nature that it purports to be. Eighteenth-century poets had long drawn on the descriptive and temporal vocabulary of *Paradise Lost*; and as Dustin Griffin has noted, Milton's twilight set-pieces were widely imitated.[12] Moreover, Wordsworth's evening walk had already been copiously mapped by the eighteenth-century discourse of the Picturesque in painting, amateur sketching, and locodescriptive poetry. In essence, the Picturesque promoted a way of viewing the natural world as site of connoisseurship, in which material things (hills, trees) and ephemeral phenomena (clouds, sunsets) became aesthetic experiences subject to rubrics and critiques. In the most practical terms, the end of the day, with its softened light and lengthened shadows, was considered the best time for drawing or painting landscapes.

Evening was also symbolically significant as a genre of time and human experience. As one of the four compass-points of the day, it has an iconographic history stretching back to classical Greece and Rome; and, as art historian Sean Shesgreen has noted, the allegorical representation of these times enjoyed a revival in Dutch and Flemish *points du jour* of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which depicted typical activities

and offered verse inscriptions on mortality, transience, and the cycle of labor and rest.[13] In these images, Evening is often represented by a pastoral scene and presided over by Hesperus, the grandfather of the Hesperides – quasi-deities who live in the perpetual twilight of the West, guarding the Isles of the Blessed and their inaccessible apples. Invoked in Virgil's *Eclogues* as a herald and arch-shepherd, Hesperus is traditionally represented as a herdsman. In the eighteenth century, however, the mythological apparatus of deities and the generic conventions of pastoral were targets of satire; and when Hogarth undertook a *points du jour* series in *The Four Times of the Day* (1738), he chose pointedly urban settings and represented the temporal divinities as ordinary Londoners. In his "Evening," home-bound shepherds are replaced by a bedraggled family (husband, wife, baby, and two quarrelsome children) returning from a hot summer day of grimly determined recreation at Sadler's Wells – a suburban pleasure-ground that falls decidedly short of an Arcadian idyll.[14] The prose equivalent of this scene can be found in the work of Hogarth's friend Henry Fielding, who frequently deflates a grandiose temporal description with a comic translation, as in this passage from *Joseph Andrews* (1742):

> Now the rake Hesperus had called for his breeches, and having well rubbed his drowsy eyes, prepared to dress himself for all night; by whose example his brother rakes on earth likewise leave those beds, in which they had slept away the day. Now Thetis the good housewife began to put on the pot in order to regale the good man Phoebus, after his daily labours were over. In vulgar language, it was evening when Joseph attended his lady's orders.[15]

Long before Wordsworth disavowed "poetic diction," Fielding was making fun of it in his novels. Even before the announced drop into the demotic, the "vulgar" has made its presence known, in the depiction of Hesperus as rake, a foil to the homebody Phoebus and the nuptial god Hymen, who lights the way to the marriage-chamber of newlyweds. Fielding's set-piece – mock-epic in its analogical prolixity and mock-pastoral in its replacement of the bucolic with the urbane – exemplifies a satirical or anti-idyllic strain in the evening tradition that I will be tracing in the following chapters, particularly in the last.

While evening has been represented in painting as a discrete time of day, it has been valued in the temporal art of poetry as a *process*, a participle as well as a noun: derived from the Old English verb *aefnian*, the word denotes the coming of *even*. ("Even," which survives in such words as "eventide" and "evensong," is cognate with the Modern German *Abend*.) The older, participial sense of the word has become obsolete in

common usage, but it has had a kind of twilight afterlife in lyric poetry. The etymology of "twilight" is itself instructive: the prefix "twi" denotes two-ness (the phenomenon of both dawn and evening skies), but as the *OED* suggests, it might also indicate the *tween*-ness of this intermediate period. The poetry of evening overlaps with the poetry of night, of course, but I mean to preserve a fundamental distinction between the two. A night-poem such as Donne's "Nocturnal upon St. Lucies Day" is set in the dark middle of things, a moment in which time seems to stand still; in contrast, its counterpart in the Romantic era, Coleridge's Dejection Ode, is set at the cusp between day and night, and the lapse of time is registered in significant ways.[16] Evening represents the transitional, and the frequent "now" of evening poetry is not so much a single moment as a passage, a flowing of past into present: Collins' "Now air is hushed," Cowper's "Now stir the fire"; Wordsworth's "And now . . . the picture of the mind revives again"; Keats's "And now with treble soft / The red-breast whistles"; Eliot's "And now the lighting of the lamps."[17]

By studying the temporal form of evening poems, I offer a corollary to M. H. Abrams' influential spatial model of the "greater Romantic lyric." In Abrams' narrative of poetic evolution, the potentially endless line of eighteenth-century topographical poetry was turned into a compact circle: the speaker of such poems as "Tintern Abbey" and "Frost at Midnight" begins in a specific place, "departs" through memory or imagination, and "returns" to the establishing scene with changed awareness of his place in the world.[18] Abrams' identification of this procedure helps us to see certain Romantic poems as solving the aesthetic problem of landscape poetry that Samuel Johnson called a "want of method" – that is, the failure to give coherent narrative and perceptual order to "appearances subsisting all at once."[19] As Abrams suggests, Wordsworth and Coleridge solved this problem by internalizing the locodescriptive idiom as a mental movement.

Such a virtual excursion frequently has a temporal dimension, and this has everything to do with how and why the speaker returns to the opening scene. In "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," for instance, Coleridge's vicarious walking-tour takes place in the lapse of afternoon into evening; and in "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth traverses an internally imagined span of time, from the afternoon of his opening salutation to the imaginary moonlight of his prayer for his sister. Through Abrams' helpful rubric, we can see that in "Fears in Solitude," for instance, Coleridge does "return" at the end, but this form of closure is motivated partly by the natural and symbolic fact that it is getting dark. The notion

of the greater Romantic lyric, as Abrams' honorific suggests, applies to only a handful of exemplary lyrics; and by articulating a poetics of evening, I wish to offer a way of understanding the affinities between poems that fit Abrams' rubric (such as Coleridge's conversation poems) and poems that do not (such as Keats's Autumn Ode), and between canonical Romantic lyrics and their predecessors.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotope" gives us a helpful way of thinking about evening as a temporal form and about the relation between lyric and narrative. In Bakhtin's definition, the chronotope is a hybrid form of "space-time," a place in a story (such as a road or a parlor) in which time is made palpable.[20] Though he applies this term primarily to novels, Bakhtin allows its relevance to lyric, particularly in reference to what he calls the "bucolic-pastoral-idyllic" chronotope – a feature common to both poems and novels of the eighteenth century, when "the problem of time in literature was posed with particular intensity."[21] Bakhtin pays more attention to *topos* than *chronos*; that is, he identifies certain characteristic sites of narrative action (the parlor, the roadway) but has little to say about the specific time in which action transpires. In the realm of lyric, however, I wish to focus on the other side of the equation – the time (and even duration) of poetic utterance more than the spot in which it takes place. I call evening a chronotope for several reasons: it is associated with typical spatial sites, including the bower, the hilltop, the field, the graveyard, and the shoreline; it is a literary topos originating in pastoral and epithalamium; and it is a liminal period in which a lapse of time becomes acutely perceptible.

In traditional ideas of genre, time is the medium of narrative, whether dramatic, epic, or novelistic; and timelessness – a suspension or pause – is the condition of lyric. I propose, however, to show how evening poetry registers increments and lapses of time; and in this way, I offer a set of qualifications to the general claims about lyric made by Sharon Cameron in *Lyric Time*. Cameron proposes that if plot is the soul of Aristotelian tragedy, the moment is the soul of lyric.[22] There is a fundamental truth to this statement, but it more accurately applies to the main subject of Cameron's study – the poems of Emily Dickinson, with their frequently expressed desire to escape or nullify earthly temporality – than to those of Dickinson's predecessors. I wish to show that the temporal features that Paul Ricoeur attributes to narrative – the Augustinian dialectic of expectation, memory, and attention, and the Heideggerian sense of being-in-time – can be equally ascribed to the Romantic lyric.[23] Indeed, in a revealing aside, Cameron acknowledges that "Romantics often frame

their lyrics in narrative settings," and thus demonstrate "a resistance to full temporal disembodiment" (217). This can be stated more forcefully: not only did the Romantics resist "full temporal disembodiment," they signally registered temporality – the movement of speech and thought, the Heraclitean flow of the world.

The exception noted by Cameron was addressed by Paul de Man in his famous commentary on Wordsworth's Lucy poem, "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." In de Man's reading, a timeless realization – the poet's knowledge of mortality – is formally extended "along the axis of an imaginary time."[24] A single moment is elaborated, as if in stop-action photography, as a grammatical shift from past ("A slumber did my spirit seal") to present ("No motion has she now"). Countering a perceived tendency among critics to value symbol (atemporal fusion of subject and object) over allegory (temporal sequence), de Man asserts that the poem is not so much a verbal icon as a formal construction of thought. The iconic brevity of Wordsworth's two-stanza poem makes de Man's claims about lyric time particularly striking; but I will argue that these claims can also be applied to Coleridge's conversation poems, whose dynamic evening settings reflect the temporality of thought and utterance, and to the poems of Shelley and Keats that follow in their wake.[25]

The subject of evening poetry has received fairly scant attention in Romantic criticism, with the notable exception of two essays by Geoffrey Hartman: one on the "fickle and minor genre" of the evening-star poem; and the other on the "Hesperian" mode of Collins' "Ode to Evening" and its successor, Keats's ode "To Autumn," which depart from the rhetoric and procedure of the sublime Pindaric ode or cultic hymn. In Hartman's reading, evening in these two odes represents a poetic "ideology" of the calmly descriptive over the feverishly epiphanic, the gradual over the sudden.[26] I wish to extend the reach of Hartman's findings by aligning this ideology with a popular nocturnal *sensibility* associated with the sonnet revival of the 1780s and 90s (what is understood, in terms of literary periodization, as Sensibility, *tout court*); and by tracing a poetic lineage that runs from Virgil's *Eclogues* to Wallace Stevens' "The Man on the Dump" and beyond – that is to say, from the time when evening is poetically discovered as formal principle and aesthetic experience to a historical moment when it is acknowledged as an outworn but still useful setting and trope.

Every poem, as T. S. Eliot argued in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," changes the tradition in which it participates; likewise, every new genre-name or formal description ought to effect a similar realignment.

This book seeks to accomplish that task in the first chapter by tracing a poetic genealogy from the closural moments of Virgilian pastoral, to the descriptive set-pieces of *Paradise Lost*, to lyrical elaborations of those scenes in the eighteenth-century works of such poets as Finch, Gray, Collins, Cowper, Smith, Bowles, and Blake. In the next four chapters, I show how a poetics of evening is elaborated in the work of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats; and in this way, I describe several important affinities among them. For the most part, my discussion follows the chronology of each poet's career, both to show how each begins by borrowing the nocturnal idiom of his predecessors, and to examine the ways in which each revisits archetypal twilight settings in their later work – Coleridge in the Dejection Ode, Wordsworth in the "Evening Voluntaries," Shelley in "Adonais," Keats in "To Autumn" and "The Day is Gone."

The question of why evening became the emblematic time of lyric can be answered, as I have suggested, with reference to large-scale historical and cultural changes: the secularization of canonical time and its metaphorical afterlife in poetry; the emergence of the poet as independent artist who defines his or her use of that time in relation to other, simultaneous activities in the world; the obsolescence of the curfew, and the attendant valuation of evening as a moment for tarrying rather than for seeking domestic safety; the aesthetic discourse and fashion of the Picturesque. These factors are important for establishing a background for this literary tradition, but I intend mainly to pursue the question of "Why evening?" by studying the deliberate uses that poets made of it, and the formal shapings that it enabled. The poetic uses of evening, in all their variety and complexity, will be explored in the chapters to follow, but they can be briefly summarized here. Evening serves as an occasion of perceptual adjustment, in which the faculty of vision yields to aural acuity and imaginative fancy or introspection; as an interval in which time – particularly the temporality of thought and utterance – is intensely felt and recorded; as a threshold of pastoral closure to be observed or exceeded; as a conventional site of beauty (the picturesque) and sensibility (the meditative or melancholy); as a time of both subtle change (in the phenomenal world) and stasis (in the poet's desire to linger); as a narrative crux between the day just passed and the "now" of lyric attention; and as a moment in which poetic reflection becomes a tertiary act between secular rest and sacred worship.

Studies of British Romanticism of the past two decades have typically posed their questions with reference to political, social, and intellectual

history. While this book makes reference to these currents, it is more fundamentally concerned with what might be called a small lyric quantum of history – the moment in which a poet registers his or her own temporality and historicity, thinks about the artistic representation of time, imagines the ongoing events of the world. In its early phase, the turn to History was often announced as a corrective to or replacement of strictly literary or formalist inquiry.[27] The ardor of that announcement has long since cooled, but it is nevertheless worth stating my book's implicit polemic: a claim that questions of form, genre, literary tradition, and aesthetic ambition continue to be worth asking; an assertion of the continuing vitality of (for lack of a better term) close reading; a demonstration of the premise that poems, as Wallace Stevens once said, are made out of other poems; a reminder that not all interpretive questions can be helpfully answered with reference to historical events or contexts – that poetry (and the dialogue among poems) itself constitutes a discourse that cannot always be adequately explained with reference to other discourses.

My approach to form in Romantic poetry responds, in complementary ways, to Stuart Curran's *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (1986) and Susan Wolfson's *Formal Charges* (1997).[28] Against the notion that Romantic poets were "anti-form," Curran shows how they adapted preexisting models (including the sonnet, the pastoral, and the romance). Following Curran's analysis of Romantic pastoral as representational topic (the life of shepherds or rustics) and as symbolic space (the idyllic retreat), I focus on the pastoral construction of time, specifically the interval from afternoon to evening, in which the duration of labor, thought, and utterance is manifested. Wolfson, meanwhile, has shown, in the wake of New Historicist challenges, how formalist inquiry continues to be an indispensable critical practice. In essence, she does so by offering models of how it can be done – illuminating the thematic and biographical significance of such formal matters as Coleridge's use of simile and Keats's vexed engagement with sonnet structure. As Wolfson's study reaffirms, studies of form and context ought peacefully to coexist and intersect.[29]

Indeed, to study the form of evening poems, particularly their capacity to represent time and perceptual flux, is to see how this form is implicated in biographical or historical narratives. Wordsworth's "Beauteous Evening" sonnet is a case in point. When we read this poem under the thematic and formal headings of "landscape" and "sonnet" we see the familiar Petrarchan *volta* animating a movement from the descriptive to