

Introduction

Romanticism's Composite Orders

I have bursts of local clarity, frequent access to new evidence, and these I coax to the page eagerly enough. But the backdrop, the larger point of it all, keeps slipping from me. I cannot easily hold the specific and the general in the right equilibrium.

– Sven Birkerts, “The Millennial Warp,” *Readings* (1999), p. 4

– all the knowledge, that can be acquired, child's play – the universe itself – what but an immense heap of *little* things? – I can contemplate nothing but parts, & parts are all *little* –! – My mind feels as if it ached to behold & know something *great* – something *one & indivisible* – and it is only in the faith of this that rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns give me the sense of sublimity or majesty! – But in this faith *all things* counterfeit infinity!

– Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Letter to John Thelwall,
14 Oct. 1797

I begin with two reflections on modernity. Ostensibly, Sven Birkerts is describing what it was like to write “The Millennial Warp,” an essay that attempts to isolate a change in our experience of time. In the passage I’ve excerpted, he is also introducing the intellectual problem of the essay: he *feels* that the abstract concept of time has shifted significantly in his lifetime because the rate of social interaction, of “life,” has gotten faster. For Birkerts in 1999, time was no longer what it had been fifty years before because the basic conditions of life (at least in the tech-obsessed West, if not globally) had been fundamentally altered by the digital revolution. We now live in a world hypersaturated with information, of “data ramified past all true comprehensibility.”¹ The reflection above thus serves double duty in his essay: it expresses the condition of living in a digital age, and it reflects the writer’s struggle as an analogue of that condition. The problem is how to extract an “incomprehensible totality” from the accumulated examples of lived experience, and how to write about it – the totality as

an idea, a condition of existence – in a way that evidences but also reveals it as something more than the accumulation of particular instances.

Birkerts's troubles sound familiar. Clifford Siskin and William Warner have pointed to the end of the eighteenth century as another moment of information saturation, a moment when mediation became overload.² Romanticism “happens,” as Andrew Piper has argued, when there are suddenly too many books to read.³ When William Wordsworth complained, in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, of the “frantic novels” and “deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” emanating from the press, he was worrying about new desires, attitudes, and behavior provoked by a “rapid communication of intelligence.”⁴ The problem was not so much the form of the communication, but the speed and ramification of it, which produced a “craving for extraordinary incident” that was “hourly gratified.”⁵ As Ann Blair has argued, this reaction wasn't born in the Romantic era: authors in the ancient and medieval world had complained just as bitterly about an overabundance of books and the paucity of resources for dealing with the information they contained.⁶ If the “what” continued to shift – manuscript, print, digital – the glut provoked much the same anxiety. In our moment, digital devices and platforms format and mediate our experience; the virtual structures social and object worlds. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment project of collecting – artifacts and specimens from across the globe were pouring into European storehouses and museums – seemed, as descriptions piled up in the *Philosophical Transactions*, another iteration of the proliferation of print. As Coleridge complains, rather than a whole integrated by God's plan, nature had begun to look like a heap of minutiae, the totality of which was ungraspable. Faith, the guarantor of oneness, only exposes things dissembling, deceiving by their irreducible particularity – a condition reproduced formally in the string of dashes that punctuate Coleridge's lament.

Conditions may have changed, but the question of how to deal with excess – and the desire to synthesize all the little things – has not. In this book, I'm particularly interested in the writerly conundrum articulated by Birkerts: How does one write in and about a moment of information saturation? What strategies do authors use to deal with and convey the troubling sense of too much, too fast, too many? Like Coleridge before him, Birkerts comes at this problem by quoting. People, he argues, have responded to hypersaturation by “editing,” by being selective about what and how much they absorb.⁷ Working off this insight, he routes his argument through two long quotations from Arthur Danto's *After the End of Art* and Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*. The problem of overload calls for

an editorial approach of careful selection, arrangement, and juxtaposition – not just of examples and observations, but of pieces of other texts. By stitching extracts together, the writer makes something new: he or she produces a composite that synthesizes various fields of knowledge – in Birkerts's case, art criticism and climate change – into the expression of a cultural condition. The composite order – a text made by splicing genres and kinds of knowledge, as well as bits of other texts – fills the gap between particular examples and a general sense of change.

The book you are about to read is not simply about information saturation in Britain around 1800, a moment that is eerily, pointedly analogous to our own. I am also concerned with the method authors used to turn a heap of particular instances into the expression of something larger, and the consequences of that method for books produced in the Romantic period. In writing this book I wanted to figure out how writers approached the problem of excess *formally*, and what kind of compositional strategies they adopted to navigate and capture a seemingly ungraspable totality. Other recent studies, most pertinently Blair's *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* and Chad Wellmon's *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University*, have focused on genres of information management such as the index, encyclopedia, anthology, and commonplace book. While I also discuss these genres, I'm particularly interested in how practices of extracting, quoting, and sourcing central to these genres changed cultural production in the Romantic period. (David Shield's aphoristic, reference-laden *Reality Hunger* exemplifies this preoccupation in our own moment of saturation.) The early nineteenth century codified specific formal approaches to sourcing and citation that we retain today: when Birkerts sets block quotes off from the rest of his text, he follows the citational methods emerging in the late eighteenth century. When he builds an argument about hypersaturation by collecting, selecting, arranging, comparing, contrasting, differentiating, and synthesizing pieces of other people's texts, he follows a tried (but not always true) procedure used by the Romantics to deal with this condition of Western modernity.

The backdrop for my argument is the history of a practice-*cum*-concept: I argue that the inductive method of seventeenth-century experimental philosophy became, over the course of the eighteenth century, a template for producing minds and texts across many fields of knowledge production. Part of this story is well known: propounded in Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* (1620) and codified in the experimental practice of the early Royal Society, inductive method became the hallmark of legitimate

science well into the nineteenth century, as well as – after John Locke’s *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690) – the defining procedure of the British empiricist tradition in moral philosophy.⁸ In this context, induction is most often understood as a new way – Bacon often uses path metaphors – to study nature by beginning with a “fresh examination of particulars.”⁹ Bacon wanted to build a databank of observations and experiments that could be arranged, compared, distinguished, and ultimately composed into universal principles. I’ve chosen the final term in this series carefully: for Bacon and those who took up his method in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, induction made experience *literate* – it was a technology for organizing information in writing, as text. Bacon argues that having a “store of natural history and experience” is a good beginning, but new knowledge doesn’t emerge from merely contemplating this mass of information: “hitherto more has been done in matter of invention by thinking than by writing; and experience has not yet learned her letters. Now no course of invention can be satisfactory unless it be carried on in writing” (*NO*, 96).¹⁰ What Bacon produced using induction – the example of heat in the *Novum Organum* itself, but also his wide-ranging natural history *Sylva Sylvarum* (1626) – took the form of a collection of aphorisms, signaling the conjunction of inductive method and older traditions of compilation and commonplacing. Induction repurposes Renaissance educational methods; its aim is to produce and manipulate a textual archive, and its product is a composite forged from many sources.

Induction was adopted across eighteenth-century writing about optics, astronomy, botany, chemistry, cognition, emotions, economy, grammar, history, aesthetics, the production of visual art, and literary criticism (and the list continues). Other methodological approaches existed, even flourished, but Baconian induction and the empiricist tradition spawned by Locke’s *Essay* underwrote much of the conceptual orientation, if not the practice, of later seventeenth- and eighteenth-century natural and moral philosophy.¹¹ As inductive method gained prominence and cultural sway, so too did its forms. Induction was not only a procedure for generating knowledge about any particular subject; it also prescribed a set of formal conditions for the presentation of that knowledge. As I detail at length in Chapter 1, these formal conventions were embedded in compositional practice: authors from Robert Boyle to Samuel Johnson to William Wordsworth follow the steps of induction to compile and organize raw materials, with the eventual goal of forging them into a less or more coherent expression of a truth – whether that truth pertained to air, language,

or “what is really important to men.”¹² What they produced – as Boyle’s *New Experiments Physico-Mechanicall, Touching the Spring of the Air*, Johnson’s *Dictionary*, and Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* differently attest – were composites. Their sources might include notebooks of first-hand observations or experimental results, stories overheard and noted in passing, records of conversations, commonplace books of textual excerpts, collections of letters or ballads, printed miscellanies, newspaper accounts, or books read and annotated. Whatever combination of sources the authors used, texts made by following inductive method are all products of splicing, grafting, and mixing bits of other written materials onto and into each other.

Some of my readers will be skeptical about this assertion. We feel that Boyle, Johnson, and Wordsworth must have been doing very different things because historical conditions were different when they wrote, they were working toward different ends in different genres, and the works they ultimately produced appear to be radically, even wildly, divergent from one another. Some historians of science might be particularly surprised by the conflation of compiling experimental results and collecting quotations from books, a merger that runs against the story we have told about seventeenth-century experimental philosophy and its break from classical, predominantly Aristotelian, forms of textual authority. While this established narrative remains salient, recent studies have demonstrated the centrality of the commonplace tradition to Enlightenment knowledge making.¹³ Aligning Boyle, Johnson, and Wordsworth also pushes against the conventional division in literary studies between Enlightenment empiricism and Romantic organicism. I am obviously not arguing that Boyle and Wordsworth were, in fact, doing exactly the same thing, or that Wordsworth believed he was doing the same thing as Boyle or Johnson. Rather, following recent studies that explore the centrality of Enlightenment science to Romantic literature, I am intent on drawing out the methodological thread that links their practices as writers, a historical continuum that can easily be blotted out by modern divisions of discipline, philosophical orientation, and time period.¹⁴

In giving attention to compositional practice and the procedures of making texts, I am engaging with various strands of textual criticism. From the description above, my approach seems most consonant with recent work such as Sally Bushell’s application of *critique génétique* to Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Dickinson in *Text as Process* (2009). While I share Bushell’s interest in authors’ compositional processes as they are captured in manuscript drafts and notes, I also focus on how procedures

of making texts are manifested in printed books.¹⁵ A number of editors and critics have begun to explore this conjunction. Summarizing criticism about Pierre Bayle, Ephraim Chambers, and other seventeenth-century encyclopedists, Richard Yeo argues that we can often see the ghostly traces of an author's methods of collecting and arranging materials in his or her published books; as Harriet Kirkley suggests of Johnson's "Life of Pope," we can also work in the other direction, unearthing the structure of the published work in the author's compilation and rearrangement of notes.¹⁶ These traces are particularly pressing for the Romantic-era texts I treat here, where the confluence of procedure and form is anything but ghostly: only consider what *Lyrical Ballads* announces in its title, and why the 1800 Preface adds not one but two statements describing compositional process. Through formal choices and paratextual commentary, the texts I examine here insistently draw attention to how they were made, and consequently to their status as composite orders.

My Introduction's title is doubly borrowed. The penultimate chapter of Stuart Curran's *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* is titled "Composite Orders," a phrase taken from Wordsworth's Preface to his *Poetical Works* (1827), first published as the preface to *Poems, by William Wordsworth* in 1815.¹⁷ In the 1827 Preface, Wordsworth defines the "composite order" as a combination of descriptive, didactic, and philosophical-satirical poetic modes, exemplified by Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* or William Cowper's *The Task* – two of the most popular loose, catch-all poems of the mid- to late eighteenth century.¹⁸ In 1815, Wordsworth had used the phrase "composite species," suggesting the botanical and typological roots of his thinking on poetic kinds (in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century botany, the family now designated *Asteraceae* was known as *Compositae*, its flowers being composites of smaller, distinct flowers). When Wordsworth changed the phrase to "composite order" in 1827, he shifted from a taxonomic to an architectural metaphor: *Composita* (later *Composite*) is the fifth classical order, being "composed of the Ionic grafted upon the Corinthian."¹⁹ Later technical uses of the term retain this sense of material difference and forced conjunction: composite ships are built of wood and iron, composite photographs superimpose images of two or more people on top of each other. In 1950s engineering, a composite designated "a material made from two or more physically different constituents each of which largely retains its original structure and identity."²⁰ The "composite order" is not defined by hybridity but by mixture, and an uneasy one at that: like oil and water, the constituent parts maintain a material separation rather than coalescing into a unified form.²¹

Beyond those baggy blank verse poems cited by Wordsworth, eighteenth-century Britain was rife with mixed forms: the novel, the newspaper, the miscellaneous collection, the anthology, the encyclopedia, and the periodical proliferated with abandon – indeed, their spread seemed void of human agency to contemporary critics.²² Collaboratively written and insistently polyvocal, periodicals announce their varied contents on their title pages; anthologies and miscellanies similarly claim variety as a selling point, whether they collect extracts from the “best” approved authors or compile ephemeral productions of the moment.²³ As these forms blossomed, conventional literary genres fractured and recombined. Pope subtitled *The Rape of the Lock* a “Heroi-Comical Poem”; Fielding called *Joseph Andrews* a “comic epic poem in prose” and cast *Tom Jones* as a “Heroic, Historical, Prosaic Poem.”²⁴ By the time Johnson was canonizing Shakespeare in 1765, “genre salad was fashionable dish,” as Barbara Benedict puts it in her discussion of the composite nature of eighteenth-century literary collections.²⁵ This cornucopia of mixed forms owes its existence to many forces, a number of which appear in Siskin and Warner’s account of print mediation as the defining feature of the Enlightenment: the emergence of new networks and spaces of print communication; the much expanded periodical press and the rise of advertising; new forms of association, from social clubs to the Royal Society; and new rules and regulations, including changes in copyright law.²⁶ Slightly preceding but continuing alongside these mediations, a conceptual revaluation of “mixture” was ongoing. Wolfram Schmidgen has convincingly argued that seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century writers claimed generic, chemical, and political mixture as an unequivocal good, a generative force that supported, indeed produced, England’s national genius.²⁷ Just as Siskin and Warner begin their account of Enlightenment by returning to Bacon, Schmidgen accounts for the eighteenth-century celebration of mixture in the linked scientific and political shifts of the seventeenth century. The seventeenth century’s conceptual recasting of mixture materialized in the eighteenth-century proliferation of mixed forms.

What I am designating a “composite order,” however, emerges in the Romantic period and is specifically and self-consciously concerned with mixing the oil of verse with the water of prose.²⁸ In my second chapter, I trace this particular concern back through eighteenth-century aesthetics to the mid-seventeenth-century debates over the constitution and purpose of the Royal Society. These debates centered on questions of style. The capacity to render and convey experimental knowledge was guaranteed by the linguistic precision of clear, transparent, unornamented prose – a kind

of prose defined against the figurative play of verse.²⁹ While this position, articulated most forcibly in Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society of London* (1667), was underwritten by political and religious controversies of the time, over the next century it effectively codified the opposition between poetic diction and the "plain style" of experimental science.³⁰ So powerful was this binary by the end of the eighteenth century that Erasmus Darwin claimed – in the middle of a poem about Linnaean botany – that "science is best delivered in Prose."³¹ Both Coleridge and Wordsworth took up the issue as a problem of definition: In a series of lectures on literature delivered in 1811–12, Coleridge suggested that "[p]oetry is not the proper antithesis to prose, but to science. Poetry is opposed to science, and prose to metre."³² Wordsworth had made a similar comment in a footnote to the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: "much confusion has been introduced into criticism by this contradistinction of Poetry and Prose, instead of the more philosophical one of Poetry and Matter of fact, or Science. The only strict antithesis to Prose is Metre."³³ These statements attest to the saliency of the distinction wrought in the seventeenth century: even as they attempt to contest the division between prose and poetry, they confirm its foundation. Science was different from poetry, just as prose was different from metrical verse; the difference between fact and figure is analogous to the difference in formal construction between prosaic and metrical language.

In this context, poetic extracts set off from the body of a prose narrative, and prose notes running across the bottom of a printed poem, are an ostentatious display of formal mixture. Like Ionic volutes grafted onto Corinthian acanthus leaves, verse and prose sit atop one another, insistently proclaiming their difference (Figs. 1–4). The space of the page, the way elements are composed and arranged on it, makes it impossible to ignore the composite nature of the text. David Duff has described this peculiarly Romantic proclivity as the "rough mixing" of genres, a "type of generic combination in which formal surfaces of constituent genres are left intact: heterogeneous elements are juxtaposed rather than integrated, thus creating the aesthetic effect of discontinuity."³⁴ These mixtures can be distinguished from the "seamless fusion of forms" characteristic of Duff's "smooth mixing" or the "blurring of generic lines" between poetry and prose that, Gabrielle Starr has argued, allowed the novel to incorporate conventions and patterns from various eighteenth-century poetic modes.³⁵ If the eighteenth-century novel could incorporate other genres, eating them up and subsuming them into itself (as J. Paul Hunter's *Before Novels* suggests), this is only one side of the story. Romantic composite orders,

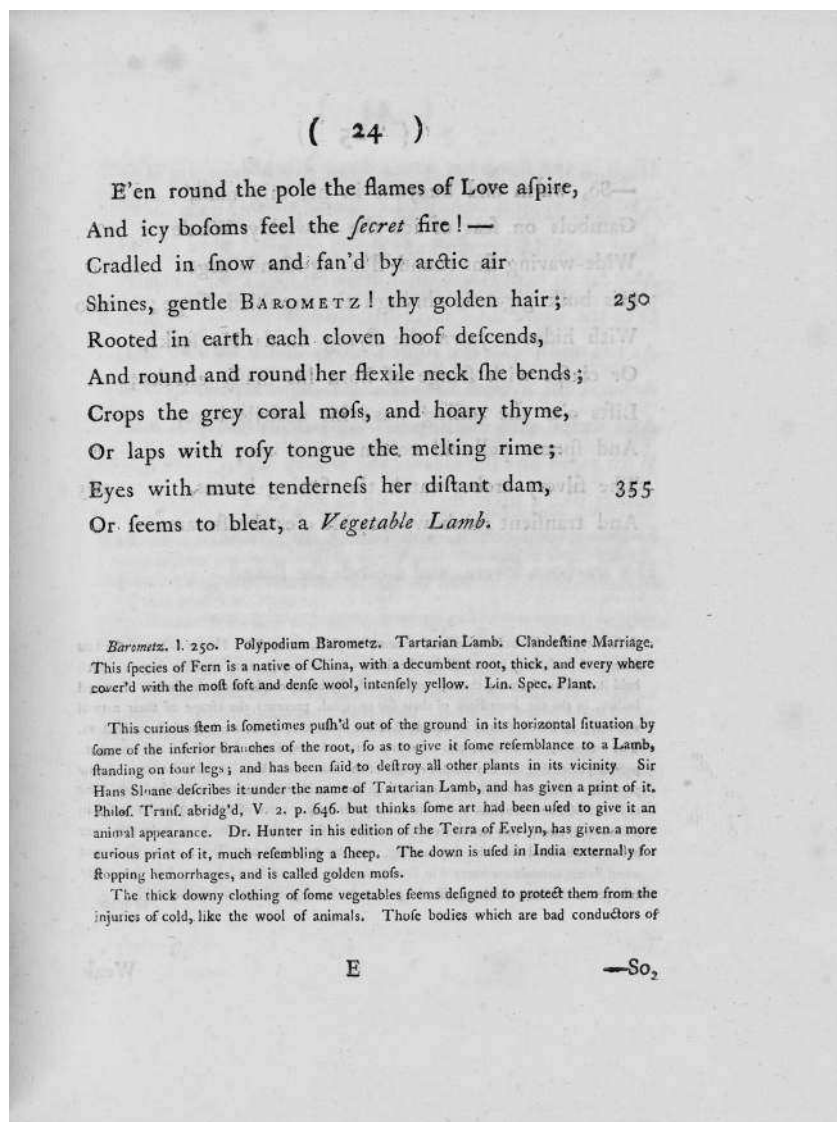


Fig. 1 Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden, Part II. Containing Loves of the Plants* (Litchfield, 1789), p. 24. Courtesy of Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

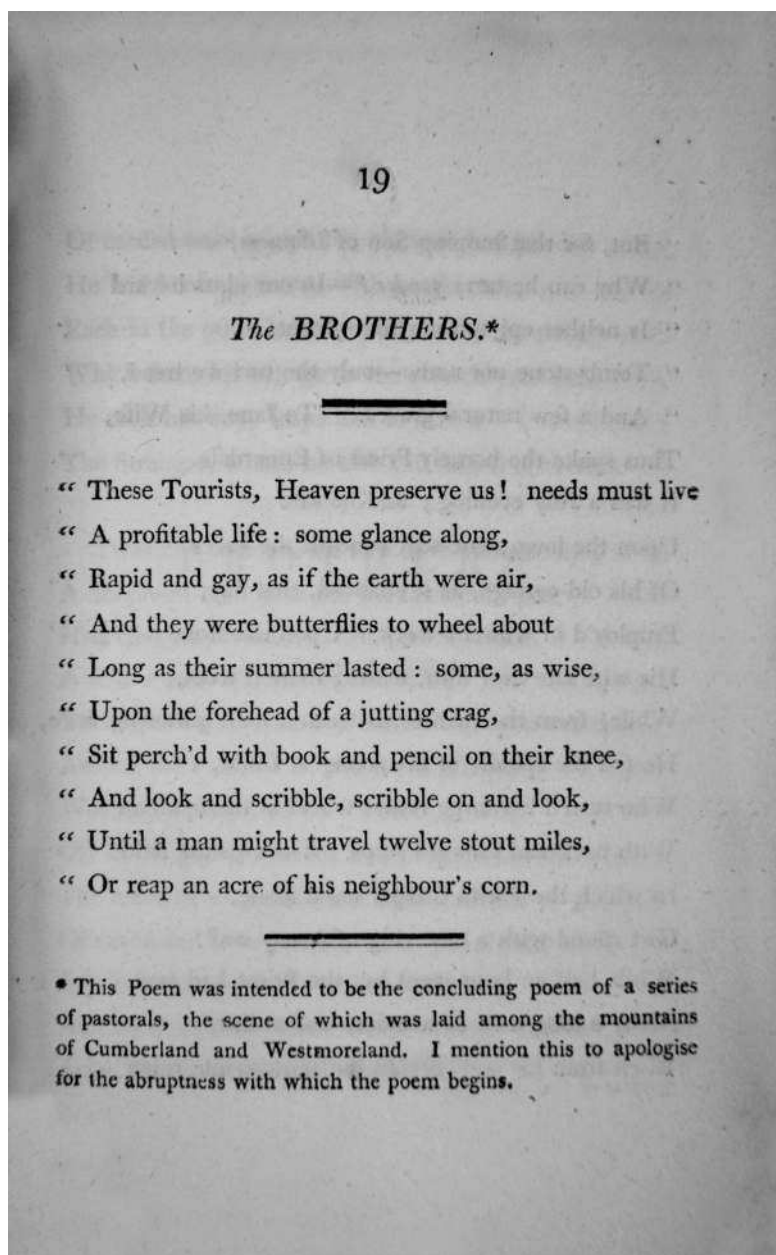


Fig. 2 Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and other poems* by W. Wordsworth, 2 vols. (London, 1800), 2: 37. Courtesy of University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library).