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The Poetics of Complexity and the Modern Long Poem

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The Poetics of Complexity and the Modern Long Poem

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This study examines several long poems from 1850 to the present to demonstrate why they are properly long poems as opposed to verse narratives or lyric sequences, the two most common characterizations of texts composed of many lines of verse. This study redirects attention to the form of the long poem as well as to several under-read examples of it, which are widely regarded as their authors’ masterpieces despite their apparent obscurity. The primary texts are: Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*, T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, James Merrill’s *The Changing Light at Sandover*, Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*, and Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*. One of the hallmarks of the form is its incompleteness in excerpt; as a result, modern long poems are seldom included in discussions of poetry, which instead focus on lyric sequences or collections as the primary examples of long forms since they can be
addressed in small pieces. At the same time, a prevailing interest in narrative effectively places any attention given to extensive poetry on their plots and characters; and since many modern long poems do not succeed as literature solely because of their narrative content, they are not well understood when they are read at all. To assist readers in making sense of these texts, this study describes a poetics based on the insights offered by complexity theory. Among the strengths of complexity theory is its focus on the paradoxes of form as they appear in communicating systems, which for the purposes of this study means: readers. Through a critical analysis of the recursive paradoxes inherent in the study’s primary texts, this study shows how readers can and do make sense of them as poetic.
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Chapter 1
Overture: Complexity and Poetics

The title of this study indicates in brief my two-fold purpose: to describe an approach to literature that takes into account the insights of recent complexity theory, and to apply that approach to a persistent problem of genre in literary studies—specifically, the problem of the long poem from 1850 on—in order to deepen our understanding of that genre as well as to illuminate the potential usefulness of the approach itself in literary studies more broadly. My discussions of this approach and of the genre must unfold to a great extent together; yet the unfolding must begin somewhere, and for clarity’s sake, with only one of the primary goals in mind at a time. For this reason I have called this chapter an overture, since here I intend merely to mark the ground of the discussion to come in the succeeding chapters, in each of which poems and methodology will illustrate each other by turns.

To begin the groundwork, then: what is the problem surrounding the modern long poem? For one thing, its very existence is in dispute—at least, it has been disputed, and by critics as famous as Edgar Allan Poe, as in his 1850 essay “The Poetic Principle”:

And here, in the beginning, permit me to say a few words in regard to a somewhat peculiar principle, which, whether rightfully or wrongfully, has always had its influence in my own critical estimate of the poem. I hold that a long poem does not exist. I
maintain that the phrase, “a long poem,” is simply a flat contradiction in terms. (Poe 71)

Poe argues that once the poetic “elevation of soul” has passed, as it must after a sitting of half an hour or so, the text is no longer truly a poem; therefore, any poetic work requiring more than a single sitting to read is by default not a poem. Obviously, this is an extreme view; but it reflects a widely held belief about poetry, then and now, which is that poetry’s power lies in lyric or, more specifically, in the moments of intense concentrated vision of which many great lyrics are made. One of the few studies of the last 20 years devoted to long poetry, Rosenthal and Gall’s The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry, effectively reduces all modern long poetry to lyric sequences: that is, to lengthy collections of shorter lyrics or fragments ranging from Whitman’s Song of Myself and Dickinson’s fascicles to just about any 20th-century collection of poems with a shared theme or style. Rosenthal and Gall identify a modern “direction of sensibility” which they claim excludes anything but fragmentary or sequential works from being poetic:

Of course it is sheer dogmatism to rule out any form or genre as obsolete (“the novel is dead”), and it is always possible that some genius will find a way of writing a long, continuous narrative poem or logically or thematically developed one that will satisfy the most knowledgeable and sensitized of contemporary readers. But a fatal ennu with such efforts does seem to have set in . . . (Rosenthal and Gall 6)
Their implication is that such a text has not been written in modern times, and that modern readers, savvy and sophisticated as we are, would not find it satisfactory even if it had been. Poetry employing continuous narrative or well-developed themes or logic seems to them to be merely nostalgic or passé, and they offer Poe as a justification for their position, claiming that “he was dead right in what is after all his essential position: that the traditional ways to structure the long poem no longer satisfy the modern poet” (Rosenthal and Gall 6). They claim, therefore, that modern poets do not write long poems, only long poetic (lyric) sequences.

If Rosenthal and Gall mean that modern poets are mostly uninterested in writing verse novels, then they are right. Such works as Longfellow’s *The Song of Hiawatha* and Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* seem no more than poetic museum pieces today (as worthwhile as it might be to look at them for literary history’s sake), and any attempt to follow their lead today is likely to be dismissed. But what is remarkable about these works—and many others like them, especially from the late 19th century—is that they are read and studied today (if at all) primarily as narratives that happen to be in verse, not as poems, long or otherwise. In other words, their form is incidental to their content. Rosenthal and Gall imply that the only structure of these works is their narrative (“the traditional ways of structuring the long poem”), but they overlook the possibility that there could be poems with themes and even narratives satisfactory to

1 Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate: A Novel in Verse* (1986) is a notable exception.
modern poets and readers that also structure their form in meaningful ways without necessarily being fragmented. Collage is certainly one way to generate large-scale structure, but it is not the only way.

The main concern for long poetry is how it negotiates its own magnitude so that it can be effectively read as a single poem as opposed to a series of smaller, more or less related poems which may or may not cohere into a greater whole. In the simplest terms, readers need to realize as they read that they are in fact reading a single whole text. To facilitate this realization—since, of course, readers could choose to read the text any way they like—long poems tend periodically to point to themselves, and by doing so they reinforce the impression that they should be treated as single wholes, not merely as groups of smaller wholes. Such self-reference appears in different ways: it may be semantically explicit, as in “As I write this poem, I see that . . .”; or it may be formally implicit, as indicated by such devices as rhyme schemes or metrical patterns that rely for their effect on reference to other parts of the same text. Lyric poems for the most part employ formal self-reference to establish themselves as unified works, but on occasion they also employ semantic self-reference, and when they do the effect can be remarkable.

Consider Shakespeare’s Sonnet #18:

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer’s lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometimes declines,
By chance or nature’s changing course untrimmed;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander’st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st:
       So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
       So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Much has been written about this poem, and rightfully so. Here I wish only to point out that the poem’s tension or argument builds from the beginning of the poem to the fourth word of the last line, “this,” and then resolves by returning the topic (while figuratively giving life) to the addressee of the poem. Not only is this word “this” the culmination of the strongest rising-stress pattern in the poem (each of the four syllables is more strongly stressed than the one preceding: “So long | lives this”) and the location of the poem’s only strong medial caesura—which together make it the most striking metrical moment in the poem—it is the rhetorical climax (more even than “thee”) of the sonnet’s closing couplet, which is itself the rhetorical climax of the entire sonnet. Everything in the poem points to “this.” And what is “this”? The most apparent answer is “the text you are reading,” and that’s the way the poem is usually taken. But it is worth noting that despite the potential reference to lines of poetry in line 12, it is possible that “this” could be something else, since grammatically and even logically the unstated antecedent could be something involving visual lines in the speaker’s possession that we do not happen to know about explicitly: a portrait, perhaps, or a sculpted bust. Most readers, however, assume that the “lines” of line 12 are lines of poetry (since they have evidence of them within the poem—indeed, they have the evidence of the poem itself), and that “this” refers
to them. This reading certainly gives the climactic moment in the poem a crystallizing effect the alternative readings lack entirely.

To repeat: everything in the poem points to “this,” which is the poem itself; or, put more compactly, everything in the poem points to the poem itself. This particular kind of explicit self-reference, also known as recursion, in which part of a thing indicates the thing itself—or, alternatively, the thing contains itself in smaller versions—lies at the heart of a great many phenomena, both natural and artificial. A common form that illustrates recursion well is fractal patterning, such as that found in clouds, shorelines, or snow crystals. A fractal is a geometric pattern that repeats itself on ever-smaller scales, and it is often used as a graphic depiction of infinity because it does not require ever-expanding space to achieve the effect. A famous example of this concept is Benoit Mandelbrot’s description of the coastline of Britain, i.e. the length of the physical borderline on the island’s shores between land and water. Imagine this border as momentarily unchanging for measurement purposes: how long is it? The answer you get depends on your measuring stick. Since the shoreline twists and turns, any instrument you use to measure length (a straight-line unit) must approximate the answer to some degree. What is fascinating about a fractal curve like this one is that it has variation and twists at every level of scale, so you have to keep finding shorter and shorter rulers to measure more and more lengths of curve, and you will ultimately find the length to be infinite.

Mandelbrot’s more famous fractal, the Mandelbrot set, is not natural but purely mathematical, and it illustrates even more powerfully the illusion of
infinity that fractals can produce. The Mandelbrot set is usually pictured as a
two-dimensional cardioid (heart-shaped) pattern generated by a recursive
geometric formula (of fractional dimension, hence the name “fractal”).² A more
simple description:

The Mandelbrot set is a collection of points. Every point in the complex plane—that is, every complex number—is either in the set or outside it. One way to define the set is in terms of a test for every point, involving some simple iterated arithmetic. To test a point, take the complex number; square it; add the original number; square the result; add the original number; square the result—and so on, over and over again. If the total runs away to infinity, then the point is not in the Mandelbrot set. If the total remains finite (it could be trapped in some repeating loop, or it could wander chaotically), then the point is in the Mandelbrot set. (Gleick 223)

The only limit to the level of detail is the number of recursive iterations needed to determine whether a point is in the set. Close to the origin of the plane, all the points are in it; farther out, most of them run to infinity and are out of it. In between, it is difficult to determine whether they are in or out without the aid of a computer, which is a fortunate need: computers can enhance the image of the set by using gradated color schemes to illustrate the rapidity with which a given outlying iteration runs to infinity, while using black for points inside the set.

² For a succinct illustration and discussion of Julia and Mandelbrot sets, and of complex numbers, please see David E. Joyce’s web site, with extensive links, at <http://aleph0.clarku.edu/~djoyce/julia/>.
(Joyce). With this feature, viewers can detect little black cardioids emerging out of the colored spaces on the edges of bigger cardioids, magnify them or simply look more closely, and see still more cardioids emerging in threads in the shifting colors, for as long as the computer can iterate the formula. The pattern replicates itself (or very nearly so) ad infinitum, and the only thing preventing us from actually seeing the infinite regress is the resolution both of our eyesight and of the graphical display, both of which have limitations at the small end of the scale as well as at the large.Remarkably, however, and despite these limitations, the recursiveness of the Mandelbrot set effectively produces a visual impression of infinity.

Of course, the recursive patterning only gives that impression if the viewer makes the appropriate connections between elements of the pattern. That is: unless a viewer sees that the smaller cardioids resemble the larger ones, the image might simply be perceived as complicated but nothing more—no pictures-within-pictures, no apparent system of recursive generation, no illusion of infinity. And this perspective is quite reasonable, since perception of the self-similarity and recursive patterning demands that the viewer look at the image in fairly specific ways: for instance, all the interesting recursive patterning appears most vividly at the borders between the included and excluded points, and you have to focus on those borders at varying scales to see what’s going on; yet there is more to the image than that, and there’s no absolute requirement that viewers

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3 See Figures 1-6 on pp. 216-18 for examples of such images of the Mandelbrot set.
focus on the borders or view them at more than one scale. In a quite literal sense, what you see is what you get.4

This discussion of the Mandelbrot set illustrates a more general paradigm of perception, especially of art objects. This view is laid out in the abstract by another mathematician, George Spencer-Brown,5 in his major work, Laws of Form, a central text in the emerging field of complexity theory.6 Spencer-Brown refers to his book as “the calculus of indications” (viii) because it takes as its subject not numerical values or Boolean truth-values but all indications, of which numerical and Boolean values are but specific examples. Language, of course, is also a

4 It is fortunate that here, as in so many analogues from other disciplines, the technical terminology resonates with the item’s connotations. In the case of the Mandelbrot set, this difference between seeing the recursion and not seeing it might be described in terms of the plane in which the figure is drawn. If it is seen as (being drawn in the) real (plane), the image might simply be what it appears to be. However, if it is seen as (being drawn in the) complex (plane)—that is, with one real axis and one imaginary axis—then there might be more at work than meets the eye, and seeing it requires encountering the world of the imaginary, while simultaneously maintaining a sense of the real. See also Spencer-Brown 90-91.

5 There is some confusion over the spelling of this name. His last name used to be “Spencer Brown,” a good British double name. But as the editor of an essay collection devoted to discussions of Laws of Form points out, “Only since the 1979 reprint paperback edition has Spencer-Brown added the hyphen to his name, presumably in order to tell librarians not to hide his book under ‘Brown, G. Spencer’” (in Problems of Form, ed. Dirk Baecker [Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999], 201). Jerome McGann, among others, has fallen prey to this confusion, as he consistently cites Spencer-Brown as “Brown” in his book Radiant Textuality. For clarity, I will use the hyphenated spelling in this study.

6 The field takes on different names depending on the context from which it is approached. In the social sciences, it is often called “systems theory” because of its importance in understanding social systems. In cognitive science and the various fields of information and computer sciences, it is named “complex systems theory” to distinguish it from social systems by emphasizing the “complex” over the “social.” In this dissertation I will use the term “complexity theory” with the understanding that the term “systems” lurks in the background and has some relevance.
system of indications and thus is subject to Spencer-Brown’s calculus. But what makes the laws of form so useful in the context of language and literature is not only their generality but their use of recursion and self-reference, which (as was discussed above in the context of the Shakespeare sonnet) are important components of poetry, even the essential components of it.7 Before turning back to poetry, then, I will describe in brief the laws of form, some of their implications in complexity theory, and their significance to the study of literature and in particular the modern long poem. In this way I hope to make more apparent what is for the moment only a postulated link between complexity and poetics.

Spencer-Brown begins his calculus by laying out his assumptions and basic definitions, the first of which are these:

We take as given the idea of distinction and the idea of indication, and that we cannot make an indication without drawing a distinction. We take, therefore, the form of distinction for the form. (1)

He goes on to describe what it is to indicate, or mark, something: first a distinction must be drawn between that thing and everything else, and then the thing is marked or indicated, to the exclusion of the non-indicated or unmarked world on the other side of the distinction. The situation thus described is also called “the two-sided form.” There is a third element involved here, however: the distinction itself that serves as the boundary between the marked indication and the unmarked world. While in operation, this distinction is invisible, meaning

7 See Jerome McGann, Radiant Textuality 172-73.
that it too is unmarked: but it surely does exist because it operates. Now: where is the one who distinguishes—the observer—in this picture of things? The observer also is invisible while observing, and can be observed only by a second observer (about which more in a bit).

Now for the recursion:

An observer, since he [sic] distinguishes the space he occupies, is also a mark. . . .

In this conception a distinction drawn in any space is a mark distinguishing the space. Equally and conversely, any mark in a space draws a distinction.

We see now that the first distinction, the mark, and the observer are not only interchangeable, but, in the form, identical.

(76)

By this argument, drawing a distinction—observing—makes things both observable and unobservable simultaneously. Observers are invisible to themselves while observing; yet since in the form they are identical with the distinctions they draw, they are somehow visible too. Spencer-Brown calls this phenomenon “re-entry into the form,” which is another way of saying that the whole issue of form is paradoxical from the beginning. Look back at the assumptions/definitions Spencer-Brown employs: in order to distinguish distinction and indication, we already have to know what distinction itself is. In other words, it is a self-referential distinction which, when put into operation, has already assumed that which it seeks to indicate. Yet at the same time, the
distinction between distinction and indication is shown to be an identity: the distinction, the mark (indication), and the observer are the same. Form is both tautological and paradoxical; and while this state of things may seem paradoxical, it turns out to be inescapable and therefore tautological.

Spencer-Brown himself offers a less abstract but more lengthy description of this state of things that will illustrate it better:

Let us consider, for a moment, the world as described by the physicist. It consists of a number of fundamental particles which, if shot through their own space, appear as waves, and are thus . . . of the same laminated structure as pearls or onions, and other wave forms called electromagnetic which it is convenient, by Occam’s razor, to consider as travelling through space with a standard velocity. All these appear bound by certain natural laws which indicate the form of their relationship.

Now the physicist himself, who describes all this, is, in his own account, himself constructed of it. He is, in short, made of a conglomeration of the very particulars he describes, no more, no less, bound together by and obeying such general laws as he himself has managed to find and to record.

Thus we cannot escape the fact that the world we know is constructed in order (and thus in such a way as to be able) to see itself.

This is indeed amazing.
Not so much in view of what it sees, although this may appear fantastic enough, but in respect of the fact that it can see at all.

But in order to do so, evidently it must first cut itself up into at least one state which sees, and at least one other state which is seen. In this severed and mutilated condition, whatever it sees is only partially itself. We may take it that the world undoubtedly is itself (i.e. is indistinct from itself), but, in any attempt to see itself as an object, it must, equally undoubtedly, act so as to make itself distinct from, and therefore false to, itself. In this condition it will always partially elude itself.⁸ (104-05)

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⁸ Spencer-Brown continues this note (interestingly, much of the significant discussion of the calculus takes place in his lengthy Notes section) in a more metaphysical, even religious tone: “It seems hard to find an acceptable answer to the question of how or why the world conceives a desire, and discovers an ability, to see itself, and appears to suffer the process. That it does so is sometimes called the original mystery. Perhaps, in view of the form in which we presently take ourselves to exist, the mystery arises from our insistence on framing a question where there is, in reality, nothing to question” (106). In case the purpose of his italics is unclear, here are the italicized words together: “The form we take to exist arises from framing nothing.” This statement resonates with what he writes in his preface to the book’s 1994 limited edition: “The universe is simply what would appear if it could. Its laws are the laws of the possible, called by Sakyamuni the links of conditioned coproduction, called by me the calculus of indications. Each teaches exactly the same teaching, how what cannot possibly be anything comes to appear as if it were something. . . . All I teach is the consequences of there being nothing. The perennial mistake of western philosophers has been to suppose, with no justification whatever, that nothing cannot have any consequences. On the contrary: not only it can: it must. And one of the consequences of there being nothing is the inevitable appearance of ‘all this.’ No problem!” (viii-ix).
To sum up, then: *Laws of Form* demonstrates that in making indications, observers draw distinctions and thus bring form into existence. At the same time, through the re-entry of form into the form, observation indicates both the marked object and the observer simultaneously, since in order to draw distinctions in the first place, observers have to identify themselves as such—even if only tacitly—and therefore have already drawn a distinction: between themselves (self-reference) and everything else (hetero-reference).

Indication, or observation, or distinction (or even “marking” in the Elizabethan sense of the word, as in “Mark ye this: . . .”) of an object, thus making it visible, entails the concurrent indication (observation, distinguishing) of an observer, making it invisible to itself. In other words: form is distinction (“we take the form of distinction for the form”), which is also indication, which means in the simplest terms that form is content, and content is form. The world observed is the world in form; without form, there can be no observation. And finally, to observe something is to observe oneself, even though by observation one becomes for the moment invisible to self-observation.

These conclusions resonate profoundly with many other discoveries of the modern period, from the scientific and mathematical—Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem (no closed system can be both complete and consistent), Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle (we can know either the position or the velocity of an object with certainty, but not both)—to the social and humanistic—McLuhan’s dictum “the medium is the message,” information theory’s signal-to-noise ratio (redundancy is necessary for information not to be lost in transmission, but too
much redundancy reduces the quantity of information). The emerging cross-disciplinary field of complexity studies is the direct descendant of these and other insights, comprising work in biology, sociology, philosophy, and linguistics. However, relatively little work in complexity theory has as yet been done in literary studies, although recent scholars in the humanities such as William Paulson, N. Katharine Hayles, David Roberts, William Rasch, Bruce Clarke, and Mark C. Taylor have begun to explore its various branches. Part of the purpose of this study is to build on this work and open up the field for further scholarship. To start that process, then, let me turn from Spencer-Brown to a short overview of the field of complexity theory and some of its more influential proponents, and then discuss how this work resonates with and revises theoretical approaches already well known in literary studies, particularly structural linguistics and philosophical hermeneutics. As with so many disciplines and modes of thinking, there is no clear chronology to follow in the development of complexity studies, especially because so many of its diverse branches have only recently become aware of each other, despite their having been around for a good while. Instead of presenting a timeline, then, I will simply catalogue several of these major strands of thought that pertain to what I see as a poetics of complexity.⁹

Such a catalogue must begin with the work of Douglas R. Hofstadter, whose seminal book Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid (1979) appears on almost every bibliography in texts concerning complexity, communication, and cognition. Hofstadter shows in this book and in his collection of Scientific American essays, Metamagical Themas, that recursion and self-reference—whether in mathematical systems, pictorial art, Baroque music, or children’s literature—mark moments of extreme interest to those concerned with systems of meaning. Hofstadter’s interests range widely, but chief among them is the search for artificial intelligence (AI). While he does not present clear solutions to the problems facing AI studies except to suggest that they are insoluble, he does explain why the field faces such huge problems, and in the process describes more clearly than any other critic what the consequences are of what he calls Strange Loops (recursive paradoxes) within cognitive systems. One important concept he explores is the phenomenon of “popping” and “pushing,” which are the terms he uses to describe how we keep our place within nested systems, such as stories within stories or pictures within pictures (Hofstadter 127-29). For instance, when a narrative begins, the audience pushes down one level from their daily life into the world of the narrative. Should the narrative contain within it a narrative told by one of its characters, the audience then pushes down another level into that narrative. When that narrative ends, the audience pops back up a level to the main narrative, and when the narrative ends entirely they pop back up to their primary level of perception (“the real world”). Hofstadter claims that any element-within-an-element structure is recursive, and that the
pushing and popping is essential in perceiving that structure. I will have occasion to use the terms “pushing” and “popping” in my discussion of poems, and so I highlight them here. But I also note that the general concept signifies in a variety of fields in which recursion plays an important role.

Although a possibly unexpected source, biology provides a key concept to the study of complex systems: the phenomenon of autopoiesis. As its derivation suggests, the term has to do with self-making. An autopoietic system, according to Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, is a living system that is organizationally closed yet interactively open, and that perpetuates itself through its own (internal) operations. That is, autopoietic systems are structurally determined, since their structures at any given moment determine the changes they might undergo at that moment. Since the terms “structure” and “organization” are often used loosely, it is worthwhile to clarify their meanings in the context of systems:

By *organization* Maturana refers to the relations between components that give a system its identity, that make it a member of a particular type. Thus, if the organization of a system changes, so does its identity. By *structure* Maturana means the actual components and relations between components that constitute a particular example of a type of system. The organization is realized through the structure, but it is the structure that can interact and change. So long as the structural changes maintain the organization, the system’s identity remains. (Mingers 29)
Thus, human beings are able to change their physical composition (through respiration, digestion, perspiration, etc.) yet maintain their identities as human beings because their organization stays intact. Likewise, language (a non-autopoietic system) may incorporate or develop new words and lose others yet remain a language, since the organization that makes it language remains in place (the Saussurean difference between *langue* and *parole*, or the Wittgensteinian difference between language and language-games).

In order for an autopoietic system to operate so as to maintain itself as a system, it has to be able to distinguish (with or without consciousness) between itself and its environment. As we saw above, this distinction is recursive and leads to interesting problems of form. Other scholars have seen the similarity between Spencer-Brown’s laws of form and Maturana and Varela’s autopoiesis and posited that autopoietic systems need not be living systems; all that autopoiesis requires is self-perpetuation along with organizational closure and interactive openness. The most influential proponent of this view is sociologist Niklas Luhmann, who has adopted the concept of autopoiesis in his general theory of social systems. Luhmann utilizes another concept introduced by Maturana and Varela called *structural coupling*: through structural coupling, a system is linked to its environment while remaining separate from it. Humans, for example, are structurally coupled to the environment of the Earth, since without its atmosphere, gravitational field, and other physical elements humans could not continue to live (that is, operate autopoietically). It is possible for systems to be structurally coupled to one another, both in the way that
subsystems within a system are interrelated (e.g., the nervous system and the circulatory system within humans) and in the sense of symbiosis (i.e., two systems that depend on each other for their mutual survival). Luhmann argues that systems in the medium of meaning are structurally coupled in this latter sense. The two systems that use meaning as a medium of autopoiesis are psychic systems (consciousnesses) and social systems (communication networks). Further, Luhmann defines social systems as being in the environment of psychic systems, and vice versa. Because of this structural coupling, social systems are the communications themselves and use psychic systems as their environment, while psychic systems are the consciousnesses themselves and have social systems as their environment. This is not how these things are usually understood, so let me reiterate: social systems are not made up of people. They are made up of communications, and only communications. (Consider: if people persisted but their communications were to cease, there would be no social systems.) Luhmann takes great pains to establish this perspective, since so much of his discussion of social systems and their paradoxical consequences (vide the laws of form) depends on clarity in these matters.

For purposes of this study, however, I am more interested in the implications of this state of affairs on psychic systems, because only psychic systems can be readers. The corollary of Luhmann’s theory from the perspective

Footnote 10: For a discussion of meaning as the medium of both communication and consciousness, see Luhmann, “Meaning as Sociology’s Basic Concept” in Essays on Self-Reference 21-79; see also the third chapter of Luhmann’s Art as a Social System, “Medium and Form” 102-32, and the second chapter of his Social Systems, “Meaning” 59-102.
of the reader is: psychic systems are closed to each other but open to the social system of communications. They perceive communications (in the various perceptual fields, but primarily visual, aural, or tactile) and—purely internally—derive understandings from them. Psychic systems then produce communications of their own which are not part of themselves but instead are part of the social system (which is structurally coupled to their communication-producing embodiments). Instead of focusing on how communications generate further communications and thus engage in autopoiesis in the social system, here I would like to consider the implications of readers’ closure to other psychic systems and interactive openness to communications. This difference from the shorthand way we usually think of our interactions with others does make a difference, because it removes a bunch of thorny issues from the realm of consideration. For instance: it is not possible to know the mind of another person directly, though it is possible to perceive communications generated by that person; perception and communication are structurally coupled. Since the only way we can ascertain whether those communications accurately reflect the other’s mind is through further communications, subject to the same restriction as the first set of communications, we can never know for certain whether our understanding matches the other person’s—indeed, since we are different consciousnesses, our understandings could never exactly match. Now, obviously, we do communicate accurately about a wide variety of topics, and in terms of information, we can be confident in our ability to verify whether we have understood particular facts and data. This confidence stems from our sharing a
great deal of context with our interlocutors, so to the degree that we share common ground with them, we can understand them. But as a general rule, this understanding is only more or less accurate, not absolute. In everyday situations, an approximate understanding may be sufficient; in complex situations, in which language may or may not mean what it appears to (e.g., while traveling in a foreign land where the language is unfamiliar; in diplomatic relations; in the interpretation of literature; in love and courtship), a misunderstood gesture or phrase may lead to a breakdown of communications. And just as social systems cease when people stop communicating, so too do psychic systems fail when they no longer have communications to engage with.\footnote{In the absence of communications from other people, people will begin talking to themselves unless there is a more immediate survival need for silence, so strong is our need to be in the environment of a social system of some kind, even if it is self-generated.} In the specific case of reading (perceiving a written communication), then, knowing whether readers have understood “what the author meant” or “what the text really means” are matters about which there can be no certainty. All readers can know is what the text means to them, and while they may share a large part of this understanding with others, their own understandings are in a literal sense their own, since they exist only within themselves.

These points have been made in different terms by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. He writes in the \textit{Philosophical Investigations}:

\begin{quote}
If I see someone writhing in pain with evident cause I do not think: all the same, his feelings are hidden from me.
\end{quote}
We also say of some people that they are transparent to us. It is, however, important as regards this observation that one human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even given a mastery of the country’s language. We do not understand the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We cannot find our feet with them.

“I cannot know what is going on in him” is above all a picture. It is the convincing expression of a conviction. It does not give the reasons for the conviction. They are not readily accessible.

If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.

(Wittgenstein 212-13)

Without saying so explicitly, Wittgenstein draws a distinction between communication and understanding: to elaborate on his example, we perceive another’s pain through communication without truly understanding that pain experience for ourselves. In this way Wittgenstein too is grappling with the paradox of form, as becomes clear in other places in his writings where the paradox is rephrased for other situations, for instance: “A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt” (Wittgenstein in Grayling 108) or “At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded” (Wittgenstein 257). Because these insights appear in just this fragmentary way, their underpinnings and implications are not sufficiently rigorous to convince most
philosophers (Grayling 126-27); however, they have served to inspire a great number of writers and scholars in the humanities, possibly because of just this ambiguousness and suggestiveness (Perloff, Wittgenstein’s Ladder 3-8) but also because of their deep, unstated resonance with complexity theory. Wittgenstein claims:

> When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.) (Wittgenstein 250)

He also claims in a kind of corollary: “(My) doubts form a system” (Wittgenstein 249). In these later writings especially, but also in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, there are glimpses of the terminology that Luhmann and others will eventually put to use in their elucidation of complex systems. But since Wittgenstein worked within the constraints of philosophy—in order to end philosophy per se, paradoxically—his insights remain more enigmatic than elucidating. Viewed as proto-complexity studies, however, his work is helpful not only for its particular expressions of formal paradoxes but also for its connection with traditional philosophy, which is of course not immune to problems of form.

The complexity-theory description of reading—what Wittgenstein might call the private understanding of public language—has obvious resonances with, as well as strong differences from, better-known views of reading and interpretation in literary studies, specifically philosophical and phenomenological hermeneutics. In the view of these more traditional
approaches, the central difficulty to be overcome in the interpretation of any text, particularly a written text, is the difference between the context of the text’s creation and the context of its reception or reading. In order for the text’s intention or original meaning to be properly understood, the reader must gain a sense of the work as a whole in its original historical context. The problem is that this sense can be gained only from looking at the parts of the work in the reader’s present context, and thus the “proper” meaning is purely an ideal that can never be fully realized by any reader (or, more famously, readers can never escape from the self-implicating “hermeneutic circle” of endless regression).

This problem has been addressed in various ways: for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer posits a “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer in Newton 45-46) where these two contexts meet. In Gadamer’s view, a historical consciousness of the text—the historical horizon—must be postulated by readers who are limited by their own horizons of the present, resulting in a fusion of horizons which is always in flux as the horizon of the present changes (Gadamer 304-07). In this way, true understanding (that is, with a consciousness of the text’s “traditional” meaning) may be achieved, or at least approached. This point of view adapts Edmund Husserl’s concept of the horizons of the present and of the past by combining them into the single fusion of horizons that defines understanding:

If, however, there is no such thing as these distinct horizons, why do we speak of the fusion of horizons and not simply of the formation of the one horizon, whose bounds are set in the depths of tradition? To ask the question means that we are recognizing that
understanding becomes a scholarly task only under special circumstances and that it is necessary to work out these circumstances as a hermeneutical situation. Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of a tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutic task consists not in covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out. This is why it is part of the hermeneutic approach to project a historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present. Historical consciousness is aware of its own otherness and hence foregrounds the horizon of the past from its own. On the other hand, it is itself, as we are trying to show, only something superimposed upon continuing tradition, and hence it immediately recombines with what it has foregrounded itself from in order to become one with itself again in the unity of the historical horizon that it thus acquires. (Gadamer 306)

Gadamer is grappling with a paradox here: the past can be known only through the present, which is itself a product of history. In this way, the hermeneutic circle resembles the paradoxes of form we have encountered already, phrased in terms of temporal system-states. The hermeneutic paradox troubles him because he seeks to recover an understanding of a text from the past, assuming that the original understanding of a text has a kind of priority over any understandings of it at the present moment. As we have seen already, one problem with this
approach is that it is inherently impossible to arrive at a unified understanding of a text, whether from another era or not. If our goal is to achieve consensus on what a text used to mean to a lot of people, we are not talking about literary interpretation so much as literary history.\(^{12}\)

The hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur moves away from interpretation as recovery toward interpretation as appropriation, and thus toward a less historical view of the matter:

To interpret, we said, is to appropriate here and now the intention of the text. . . . [T]he intended meaning of the text is not essentially the presumed intention of the author, the lived experience of the writer, but rather what the text means for whoever complies with its injunction. The text seeks to place us in its meaning, that is—according to another acceptance of the word sens—in the same direction. (Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* 161)

Ricoeur thus replaces the Gadamerian dynamic tension between historical perspectives with the dialectic between distanciation (the act of alienation when texts are committed to writing) and appropriation (the act of making one’s own what is alien). His definition of appropriation entails a corresponding view of distanciation, as he points out in his essay “Appropriation”:

\(^{12}\) Reception aesthetics, such as that of Hans Robert Jauss, advocates just this kind of literary history as its primary method of interpreting texts in order to arrive at a “literary series” (Jauss in Newton 193) of all past reading horizons, the multiple “horizons of expectations” (Jauss in Newton 191) in the history of a text’s reception.
What is “made our own” is not something mental, not the intention of another subject, nor some design supposedly hidden behind the text; rather, it is the projection of a world, the proposal of a mode of being-in-the-world, which the text discloses in front of itself by means of its non-ostensive references. Far from saying that a subject, who already masters his [sic] own being-in-the-world, projects the a priori of his own understanding and interpolates this a priori in the text, I shall say that appropriation is the process by which the revelation of new modes of being—or, if you prefer Wittgenstein to Heidegger, new “forms of life”—gives the subject new capacities for knowing himself. The reader is rather broadened in his capacity to project himself by receiving a new mode of being from the text itself.

Thus appropriation ceases to appear as a kind of possession, as a way of taking hold of ... It implies instead a moment of dispossession. (Ricoeur, Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences 192)

Ricoeur here runs up against the self-referential paradox, which he unfolds through the notion of world-projection. While retaining the centrality of the reader in creating or projecting the world of the text, he describes that creative process as stepping out of the self into another world, based on a distinction between ego and self, the latter being that which is given to readers by texts (Ricoeur, "Rhetoric-Poetics-Hermeneutics" 192-93).
Both Gadamer’s and Ricoeur’s hermeneutics suggest that within texts there is an “out there” that needs to be brought “in here” to be understood (or perhaps, in Ricoeur’s case, an “out there” to which one must surrender oneself). But as we have seen, understanding takes place entirely within the reader; nothing is brought in, nor does the reader go anywhere else. These discrepancies appear as a result of a fundamental assumption of hermeneutics that complexity theory does not share: the distinction between the past and present.

Hermeneutics treats the present as a “horizon” or context from which all texts can be interpreted, and the past as a similar horizon or context that no longer functions except through the evidence of memory and documentation. Complexity theory does not recognize the past/present distinction as valid, seeing the present as instantaneously becoming the past the moment its operations are over. A simpler way to frame this is: the present is the boundary (the distinction) between the past and the future. In this view, what hermeneutics calls “the present” is actually the very recent past. Here is how complexity theory would describe things: while a text is being read, the reader’s context or horizon affects the distinctions the reader draws. While in operation, those distinctions cannot be observed as distinctions. They can merely operate. Only at the second order can these observations be themselves observed, whether by a second observer or by the same reader (at some even slightly later time—observing in memory). Thus there can never be an observed difference between the present and the past, only between two discrete pasts. Since for practical purposes we can get pretty close to the present horizon but will have more and more difficulty
in reconstructing it the farther back we go, the matter is really one of degree rather than kind. And just as we can never exactly reconstruct the “present” horizon, neither can we exactly reconstruct past horizons, since they will always be constructed in terms of (the horizon of) the present.

Complexity theory thus fundamentally questions what a text is in the first place. If a piece of writing does not have a fixed essential meaning waiting inside it to be discovered/recovered but instead produces understandings in readers that differ from reader to reader and from context to context, then what we mean by text is something more than the physical object (in writing, in sounds, in whatever medium). Texts incorporate elements suggested by the etymology of the very word “text”—“weavings,” in both the noun and verb senses of the word (the artifact vs. the act of making). To adapt Yeats’s famous question in “Among School Children” to textuality: how can we know the weaver from the weaving? or, how can we know the reader from the text? Complexity theory supports the implied answer to the rhetorical question: that the two are inextricably intertwined; an emergent phenomenon; or, as expressed by Francisco Varela, an instance of codependent arising (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 110). However, the most prominent current theorist of literary textuality, Jerome McGann, has recently come to similar conclusions, but arriving from a more traditional background of poetics and aesthetics. His insights will bring us full circle from complexity back to poetics again, and then, taking McGann’s cue, we will be ready to look closely at some textual examples.
McGann’s prize-winning *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web* describes the author’s development of an online archive of the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the practical and theoretical problems he encountered in the process. Late in the project, he realized that the difficulties he and his colleagues were facing in the markup of writings and paintings for electronic storage and retrieval stemmed from their failure to consider some basic questions about their material:

First, what is a literary work, what are its parts, how do they function? We assumed we knew how to answer such questions, but our attempts to translate our bibliographic materials into coded instructions showed that we didn’t. (The principle here is simple and known to every teacher: If you can’t explain what you know to someone else so that they also understand, you don’t really know what you think you know.) Second, what constitutes a critical representation of a literary work, and how does such a representation function? With one notable exception, every critical method and theory known to me assumes that the measure of critical adequacy is the degree of equivalence that can be produced between the object of attention and the critical representation of that object. As we kept building *The Rossetti Archive* the flaw in that traditional understanding became more and more clear. (McGann 172)
In other words, it is futile to try to recreate a literary text accurately in another
form. As we saw earlier, form is content, and changing the form necessarily
changes the content, rendering the task of re-creation hopeless from the start.\(^\text{13}\)
Nor is McGann unaware of the inherent paradoxes of form in his discussion, in
which he takes poetry as his primary example of an artistic form:

> The problem is that poetical works, insofar as they are
> poetical, are not expository or informational. Because works of
> imagination are built as complex nets of repetition and variation,
> they are rich in what informational models of textuality label
> “noise.” No poem can exist without systems of “overlapping
> structure,” and the more developed the poetical text, the more
> complex are those systems of recursion. So it is that in a poetic field
> no unit can be assumed to be self-identical. The logic of a poem is
> only frameable in some kind of paradoxical articulation such as: “a
> equals a if and only if a does not equal a.” (McGann 175)

Or, as Spencer-Brown might put it: in the form, a poem both is and is not itself.

Using terminology that appears to dissolve this paradoxical formulation, I
rephrase it thus: *a poem is a text that simultaneously indicates itself and something

\(^{13}\) The most famous parodies of such attempts appear in the 18\(^{\text{th}}\) century: for example, Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, in which the narrator attempts (and fails) to tell his own life story by recounting all of its details, in essence attempting to make his life story equivalent to his life (a recursive task!); and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, in the Academy of Lagado section, in which the learned men have eschewed language and instead show actual objects to each other to carry on conversations, necessitating their carrying larger and larger packs for all the objects they want to communicate about (since all things are reducible to nouns, being things).
else. McGann calls this “radiant textuality” or “quantum poetics”; drawing on the insights of complexity theory, I call this a “poetics of complexity.”

Despite the apparent overuse of the term “poetics” today, I prefer it to “textuality” because the latter carries with it too much of its noun-sense and not enough of its verb-sense. The word “poetics,” however, connotes more of its origin in “making,” and thus suggests more readily the function of readers in creating the poems they read. I do not mean this in the sense of reader-response theory such as Wolfgang Iser’s: readers are not filling in the parts of a text that remain implicit in order to create a plausible textual world. I mean this in a strong constructivist sense, in that poems do not exist anywhere except within readers. Consider that an author is in part simply another reader, since authors must read the literature they write in order to identify it as such. The difference between authors and other readers is that authors create and/or modify (i.e., operate on) the written or aural (i.e., real-world) objects that others merely read (i.e., observe), and authors decide for themselves when their texts satisfy the criteria for being literary art. Other readers may disagree, and their judgments are no less valid than the author’s: there is no way to distinguish between right and wrong judgments except by reaching consensus, which is a function of communication, in the social system of literature (and even then the minority viewpoint is no less valid than the consensus view—“correctness” in these matters is a purely social value). In this way, literariness does not reside in the real-world objects but only in readers; and by poetics, I mean the ways that
readers (including authors, of course) make literary meaning out of textual objects.

McGann once again:

What is this kind of text, really? First of all, it is both—and simultaneously—a perceptual and conceptual event. Informational texts seek to minimize their perceptual features in the belief that texts calling attention to their vehicular forms interfere with the transmission of their ideas. . . . Are there such things as pure, nonlanguaged “ideas”? Perhaps. However that may be, when ideas function textually, they commit themselves to fields of perception as well as to systems of conception. (McGann 178)

For this reason—that texts are both perceptual and conceptual—we must also be concerned with readers’ contexts, since what language means to readers is a function not only of readers’ own perceptions but also of the possibilities for those perceptions, which have to do with the medium in which they occur. A poetics of complexity replaces the old distinction between form and content with the distinction between form and medium. In the medium of meaning (of concepts), the understanding readers get from texts depends on what the possibilities of understanding are: it is always a selection from among potential alternatives. For this reason, Luhmann defines meaning as the unity of the distinction between actuality and potentiality in language. Both of these distinctions, form/medium and actuality/potentiality, are recursive, since they each re-enter themselves on one side of the distinction:
The meaning-producing distinction between actuality and potentiality reenters itself on the side of actuality, because for something to be actual it must also be possible. It follows that the distinction between medium and form is itself a form. Or, considered in terms of meaning: as medium, meaning is a form that creates forms in order to assume form. (Luhmann, *Art* 107-08)

What readers allow as possible meanings—what exists in the medium of language—are contextually derived. Anything affecting the way readers might perceive texts—education, culture, memory, history, disability, gender, dialect, and so on—matters in literary studies to the extent that it demonstrates the range of the possibilities of meaning in those texts. But the study of context or medium should not—in fact, cannot—exclude the study of text or form. We assume we already know what text is; but as McGann reminds us, we typically do not. And so there is still a need for scholarship that focuses primarily on the text, which is to say: on the formal side of the form/medium distinction. McGann points out:

Traditional criticism will engage this kind of radiant textuality more as a problem of context than a problem of text, and we have no reason to fault that way of seeing the matter. But as the word itself suggests, “context” is a cognate of text, and not in any abstract Barthesian sense. We construct the poem’s context, for example, by searching out the meanings marked in the physical witnesses that bring the poem to us. We read those witnesses with scrupulous attention, that is to say, we make our detailed way
through the looking glass of the book and thence to the endless reaches of the Library of Babel [in Borges’ eponymous story], where every text is catalogued and multiply cross-referenced. In making this journey we are driven far out into the deep space, as we say these days, occupied by our orbiting texts. There objects pivot about many different points and poles. The objects themselves shapeshift continually and the pivots move, drift, shiver, and even dissolve away. Those transformations occur because “the text” is always a negotiated text, half perceived and half created by those who engage with it. (McGann 181)

In terms of a poetics of complexity, the text has form in the sense of what readers read into it (what distinctions they draw) and what their contexts would have them read into it (what distinctions they are capable of drawing).

In the concluding chapter of Radiant Textuality, McGann describes these features of text in terms of the laws of form and elaborates them for the specific textual form of poetry:

The conceptual structure—the demonstration—of Laws of Form explains, demonstrates, why this dysfunction [between textual markup and imaginative works] must occur in any case where laws of form operate—for instance, in language or any of its instances. Unbeknownst to itself until the moment when it turns reflexively back on itself—and then it is too late—every form of thought is
incommensurate with itself. Certain texts—and certain kinds of
text—make that contradiction a primary focus of attention. . . .

Works of imagination, however—let us say henceforth
“poetry”—make the discourse of paradox and contradiction the
ground of their semiosis. In terms of [Spencer-]Brown’s Laws of
Form, this means that distinctions in poetic texts are elaborated in a
space that (so to speak) has no intention of maintaining original
integrity. As textual boundaries are defined and crossed, the marks
of distinction constituting the boundaries are canceled or
threatened with erasure, because new marks of distinction turn out
to be phenomenal illusions, closely akin to mathematical
transformations. New distinctions conceal algorithms—hidden
injunctions—to cancel the same distinctions by recrossing the
boundary initiated when the distinction first appeared to view.

Whereas everyone knows this about poetical texts, we are
less clear about how and why this network of recursions unfolds.
(McGann 204)

While I am not certain that everyone in fact knows this about poetical texts—
although I hope they do—McGann’s identification of injunction as foundational
in texts resonates both with the poetics of complexity and with another area of
traditional scholarship in language and literature: rhetoric. Spencer-Brown
begins his calculus of indications with a mathematical construction, “Draw a
distinction” (Spencer-Brown 3). But this is also an injunction in the rhetorical sense, as he points out in his note to the construction:

> It may be helpful at this stage to realize that the primary form of mathematical communication is not description, but injunction. In this respect it is comparable with practical art forms like cookery [or] [m]usic . . . . (Spencer-Brown 77)

McGann expands upon these specific insights:

> Although [Spencer-]Brown does not include text production among these practical art forms, he might and indeed should have done so, as his own book admirably demonstrates. Clearly Dante [in the Vita Nuova] regards writing, including poetical writing, as injunctive. Dante’s word would not be injunction, however, it would be—it was—rhetoric. (McGann 203)

In this way, then, we see that a poetics of complexity has resonances not only with hermeneutics (the study of interpretation) but also rhetoric (the study of persuasion).

In a lengthy passage, McGann explains why the rhetorical character of poetics (as he puts it, of textuality) has been to this point poorly understood in literary studies:

> Modern linguistic analysis from Saussure to Hjelmslev to Segré develops a four-part analysis of the sign. The signifier and the signified—the elemental dismantling and reconstruction of the ancient distinction of form from content—are each shown to
replicate in themselves the form/content distinction because in any case both signifier and signified, in order to be recognized as such, have to be separately marked. The marking transaction creates, by the law of form, a new distinction—signifier versus signified—that dissolves a mistaken implication drawn from the earlier distinction of form/content. In the reconstructed sign both signifier and signified are not only “content constitutive,” they are so precisely because of their “form function,” because they have been marked.

What this otherwise useful analysis does not indicate—what it positively obscures, in fact—is the injunctive or rhetorical character of textuality. The structure of any text overgoes its own internal (signifier/signified) coherencies and/or contradictions. In Jakobsonian terms, this overplus is comprehended under the concept of “reference.” The concept functions reasonably well in analyses focused on informational and nonpoetic texts, but its analytic force dissipates when directed toward poetry. This happens because a modern aesthetic understanding shapes our thought about “the literary text.” Since poetical works are conceived as “communication sui generis” . . ., neither affirming or denying anything beyond their internal relations, “reference” in the literary text turns (virtually) virtual. (McGann 204-05)

Here McGann echoes Ricoeur in his recognition of textuality as injunction, as rhetorical (Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences 161). He too argues that the
insights revealed by linguistic semiotics and eventually deconstruction theory have not taken into consideration the “both . . . and” possibilities of textuality and poetics, focusing instead on the obstructive aspects of the paradoxes inherent in a difference-based system such as language. But as complexity theory shows, the existence of a paradox does not mean the end of a system. The real paradox is that systems cannot function without paradox; as we saw earlier, autopoiesis is inherently paradoxical, but without autopoiesis, a system would cease to exist. Therefore, McGann asserts, literary criticism needs to be rethought so as to incorporate the paradox without letting it obstruct understanding:

The signifier/signified/referent structure implicitly poses two (related) questions to a text: “What is it saying? and “What is it doing in saying what it says?” This second question points toward the injunctive feature that is open in every text and in every part of every text. Ultimately one would want to be able to describe and analyze what literary texts are doing, sui generis, in saying what they say—how they function in society and culture at large as they are literary works. To construct that kind of comprehensive analysis, however, we will have to undertake a thorough re-examination of their rhetorical and injunctive character at micro levels. The history of any text’s emergence is both a record and an index of how it has been used, what it “meant.” Those records should be recovered for a programmatic analysis of their injunctive features, which is to say
for their Dantesque “divisions” and their [Spencer-]Brownian “laws of form.” (McGann 205)

This program recalls Wittgenstein’s “language in use” and Ricoeur’s “discourse stylistics” (Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* 136-38); however, McGann goes on to show why those aren’t what he means:

But the historical record can only be “recovered” through acts that cover it yet again, by agencies of markup. Every text descending to us is not only marked text, it is multiply and ambiguously marked. The analytic usefulness of aesthetic texts lies exactly in their generic inertia to pursue and exploit multiple and overlapping formalities and divisions in explicit ways.

In such circumstances what is needed is a dynamic engagement with text and not a program aimed at discovering the objectively constitutive features of what a text “is.” That dynamic requirement follows from the laws of form themselves, as [Spencer-]Brown’s work shows. But what equally follows is that the analysis must be applied to the text as it is performative. We begin with an understanding that text is always the marked or materially distinguished text—the text as image and/or audition—and that the textual analysis is itself part of the marking processes that governs [sic] the object of study. (McGann 206)

This programmatic proposal resonates with the description of art laid out by Niklas Luhmann. Anticipating McGann’s observation that both the materially
distinguished text and the textual analysis itself are part of the object of study, Luhmann borrows from cybernetic theory (particularly of Heinz von Foerster) to describe the situation as second-order observing, or the observation of observation. Both first-order and second-order observation pertain in the observation of a system, since only at the second order can a system be observed in operation. In his discussion of art as a system, Luhmann shows how the art object itself functions:

What distinguishes the art system from other functional systems is that second-order observation occurs in the realm of perception. Objects or quasi objects are always at stake in art, whether we are dealing with real or imagined objects or with sequences of events. To cover all of these distinctions, we shall speak of forms in terms of their object-like determination. The formal decisions embedded in objects permit us to observe observations by observing the same object.

This proposition has considerable consequences. It liberates art, to a large extent, from the demands of consensus. The sameness of the object substitutes for the conformity of opinion. Without losing contact with the artist’s formal decisions, the beholder can arrive at judgments, valuations, or experiences that radically diverge from the artist’s. One stays with the forms created by the artist while perceiving things other than what he [sic] intended to express. . . . This is worth emphasizing because it flies in the face of widely held
notions concerning the conditions of social communication.

(Luhmann, *Art* 74-75)

So it is less important, for example, that readers agree on what a poem means or whether it is good than on whether it is a poem in the first place. Once the sameness of the object has been established, then the play of forms can take place and subsequently be observed.

Luhmann devotes some time to poetry specifically, since poetry takes place not just in the medium of perception but in the medium of language as well and thus is a special case of art (as are all the verbal arts; poetry is the extreme case). Poetry must enable readers to perceive language *per se*, to observe the perceptual qualities of language, not just the conceptual, in McGann’s terms; or as Roman Jakobson describes the same characteristic: “The set toward the message as such, focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language” (Jakobson 69). Luhmann puts it thus:

To convince, poetry appeals to perception, not to thinking. And the function of the ornament, in poetry as elsewhere, is to intensify redundancy and variety in ways that would hardly otherwise be possible.

Poetry, then, is not just rhymed prose. If one reads poetry as a sequence of propositions about the world and considers the poetic only as beautification, adornment, or decoration, one does not observe it as a work of art. Nor can one apprehend in this way the formal combination the poet uses to compose his [*sic*] work.
Only at the level where symbols, sounds, meanings, and rhythms conspire—a level that is difficult to “read”—do poems refer to themselves in the process of creating forms. They generate contextual dependencies, ironic references, and paradoxes, all of which refer back to the text that produces these effects. Supported by the text, poetic self-reference may eventually articulate itself explicitly—not as a flat, abrupt statement, but as a form within the nexus of forms that constitute the text. (Luhmann, Art 125)

So we return at last to where this long discussion of complexity began: poetic self-reference. And now we are better able to address the problem with which this overture began—how to understand the modern long poem. As Luhmann suggests, formal criticism of poetry has long relied on the analysis of ornament (whether metrical, alliterative, figurative, imagistic, visual, or other) in the service of interpretation or meaning. In other words, formalist criticism has sought to find links between perceptual elements and conceptual elements in poetry. In many poems, especially lyric, these links abound, making formalist critique productive. But in these cases, as for instance with the Shakespeare sonnet discussed earlier, no one disagrees that the text is a poem to begin with. Therefore, traditional formal criticism is a sufficiently powerful lens through which to view the text. But in cases where there is potential disagreement among readers about whether the text is a poem at all—for instance, a book-length blank-verse text—traditional formalist criticism does not suffice. For this reason perspectives such as Poe’s or Rosenthal and Gall’s continue to flourish: they do
not take into consideration the more general perspective of which traditional formalism is a narrow version. In that more general perspective—the poetics of complexity—self-reference and recursion are the key elements. And they are the primary features of modern long poems that distinguish them from lyric sequences and verse novels.

Modern long poems will serve as a useful test case for the poetics of complexity because no other critical approach seems to be able to describe them adequately. Of course, as a general theory of literary reading, the poetics of complexity could be applied to any other literary genre with good effect. The only significant difference between genres is the fundamental distinction the texts ask readers to draw. In drama, for instance, the recursive distinction is the distinction between what is visible (perceived) and what is invisible (unperceived), and it gets played out through such devices as dramatic irony, stage whispers and asides, and plays within plays; or as David Roberts explains, “Drama foregrounds the blindness of observation and the observation of blindness” (39). In the novel, the re-entering distinction is that between the narrated and the not narrated (between what is told and untold). Similar distinctions can be identified in all the arts, verbal or other. In poetry, the key distinction is that between what can be marked in language and what cannot. I use the phrase “marked in language” because it emphasizes language’s textual aspect: poetry concerns itself with not only what words mean, but also what words sound like, or look like, or even feel like (in Braille, or in American Sign Language, for instance). For this reason I claim (again) that poetry is text that
simultaneously indicates itself and something else. Poetry concerns both perceptual events (self-reference) and conceptual events (hetero-reference), and cannot do without either. And since these events are necessarily internal to readers, to read a poem is to experience hetero-reference (semantic meaning) and self-reference (oneself as a poetic reader) simultaneously. In order to be a long poem, then, a text must in essence make an argument for itself as a long poem. It must cause readers to believe they are in fact reading a long poem. Since over such scales micro-level recursive techniques (such as rhyme or stanzaic form) do not typically suffice in sustaining this belief, long poems must also employ macro-level recursive techniques that resonate with their micro-level recursive structures to persuade readers that they are experiencing not just an assembly of short poems or a long narrative in verse (if it be in verse, which is not necessary) but a single long poem.

My discussion focuses on modern long poems because before roughly 1850, it was not necessary for long poems to make the case for themselves in such a complex way. Much has been made, for example, of the disappearance of the epic (and mock-epic) in the 19th century. Pre-Romantic readers had no need to be convinced of the purpose of epic, which in brief is to reinforce a sense of communal identity among a group of people, united by nation, religion, or class (among other possibilities), through an artistic retelling of history or mythology. Milton needed only to write, “Sing, Heavenly Muse” to draw upon a wide host of assumptions in his audience (not necessarily including theological ones, by the way), which effectively guaranteed that Paradise Lost would be understood in a
certain way if it were understood at all: anyone capable of reading the poem would know both the epic tradition and the Bible. Similarly, other pre-Romantic long poems called upon familiar traditions that rendered their use of strong recursion unnecessary to establish themselves as long poems per se. Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, for example, employs elements of allegory, romance, and epic in addition to a regular stanzaic form (what has come to be known as the Spenserian stanza) and great length. Audiences could readily identify one or more of these larger formal structures presented in conventional verse poetry, and this identification would suffice to establish the object and connect it with other well-known texts with the same structure. The poem’s innovations—its versification and skillful blending of allegory, romance, and epic—have helped it to survive to the present as an exemplar of the time, but its conventionalities were what made it work in its own time, as evidenced by the poem’s self-consciously archaic diction, intended to play up those conventionalities. None of these elements are recursive in the explicit sense; they call attention to the language in the strictly ornamental sense, which is recursive in the merely implicit way that all language is recursive—but this was sufficient. In the same way, the verse epistles and essays of Dryden and Pope make wonderful use of their verse forms and rhetorical figures to make it clear that they are poems, and

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14 It is ironic that today it is more likely that readers coming to the poem for the first time will be familiar with elements originating in *Paradise Lost* (e.g., Pandemonium, the fall of Lucifer, the burning lake of fire) instead of the classical epic tradition or the Bible, so editors are obliged to provide extensive footnotes and commentaries providing this background to help readers become “capable” of reading a poem that in one sense they already know more about than did first-time readers in late 17th-century England.
their basis in classical verse genres was enough for their audiences to understand them as self-consciously thus.\textsuperscript{15} Today we have difficulty reading such works as the \textit{Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot} as poetic at all (instead we tend to read them primarily for their informational content) because we lack the same sense of the formal tradition of which they are a part: we miss the self-reference that is implicit in the form. But for the knowledgeable audience, these texts are poetic in the same way that Spenser’s and Milton’s are, if less imaginative in the fictive sense. These authors knew their audiences and made use of the contexts that they knew they held in common while writing their poems, which they knew would be regarded as poems, without further argument needed.\textsuperscript{16}

But post-Romantic poets in English could no longer make such broad assumptions. They could assume a basic understanding of the language and some knowledge of historical events, but not a shared set of religious, political, economic, or cultural values. Therefore, long poems after 1850 could not draw upon the same sets of devices (such as epic machinery, or religious allegory) to establish themselves as fresh works of art; if they did draw upon them, they would achieve only nostalgia or archaism (whether deliberately or not). Instead,

\textsuperscript{15} Certainly the mock-epics of Dryden and Pope, such as \textit{MacFlecknoe}, \textit{The Dunciad}, and \textit{The Rape of the Lock}, played upon the established formal conventions of epic for their effect, and can be treated the same way as Milton or Spenser in terms of recursion.

\textsuperscript{16} I leave as outside the scope of this study the long prophetic works of William Blake, the discussion of which is complicated by their medium: they might best be treated as pictorial art including text rather than as text embellished by pictorial art. However, in either case a complex-poetical criticism might well be, in Blake’s terminology, “illuminating,” and I hope that future scholarship will take up this project.
they had to employ a poetics of complexity, which means they had to play with multiple levels of recursion in order to establish themselves successfully as long poems. The examples of modern long poems I will examine in the remainder of this study (from the 19th century: Tennyson’s *In Memoriam A. H. H.* and Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*; from the high Modernist period: Eliot’s *Four Quartets*; and from the last quarter-century: Merrill’s *The Changing Light at Sandover*, Walcott’s *Omeros*, and Hejinian’s *My Life*) all exhibit different uses of a poetics of complexity in the service of establishing themselves as poems, specifically as modern long poems. It is worthwhile to note from the beginning that each poem has as a primary goal the presentation of a topic or idea that in a strictly logical sense is unprovable, ineffable, or nonlogical. In each case the poem succeeds poetically in generating belief in its central idea. This paradoxical result is an inevitable consequence of the poetics of complexity, which takes paradoxes in stride and shows how they can be unfolded and made productive. As Paul Ricoeur writes:

Conversion of the *imaginary* is the central aim of poetics.

With it, poetics stirs up the sedimented universe of conventional ideas which are the premises of rhetorical argumentation. At the same time, this same breakthrough of the imaginary shakes up the order of persuasion, from the moment it becomes less a matter of settling a controversy than of generating a new conviction.

(Ricoeur, "Rhetoric-Poetics-Hermeneutics" 66)

Or, as mathematician Louis H. Kauffman puts it:
I believe that it is this resonance [between self-reference and imaginary numbers] that accounts for the unreasonable effectiveness of the complex numbers in mathematics and in physics.

Only the imaginary is real. (Kauffman 70)

Just as a mathematics of the complex depicts infinity in fractal patterns, a poetics of complexity explains the persuasive power of the imaginary.

As a result of their length, the poems under examination here—famous and well-regarded works all, most noted as their poet’s masterwork—are, paradoxically, read and studied far less than their reputations would suggest, particularly in settings where time is a scarce resource (such as college courses). However, they are seldom read in excerpt either, since to do so is to miss the macro-level structuring that makes them persuasive as poems. Through the examples in the succeeding chapters, I hope to show that these poems, and others like them, are not only accessible but worth the while, and that with a better understanding of the intersection of poetics and complexity they may be read and studied with confidence and, indeed, with pleasure.
Chapter 2

*In Memoriam:* The Use of Measured Language and the Hope for Modern Rhyme

Throughout this study, I mark the “modern” period as beginning around 1850. While I acknowledge this choice as somewhat arbitrary, it is no less convenient for that fact. Besides its derivation from the work of both social and literary historians who make similar claims (Luhmann *Observations* 57-62, also 66-67; Langbaum 9-37; Armstrong 1-21), and the numerical nicety of its being exactly at the midpoint of the 19th century, the year 1850 saw the appearance of not one but two great long poems: Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* and Tennyson’s *In Memoriam A. H. H.* While the majority of this chapter will be devoted to Tennyson, it is necessary to say something about Wordsworth and why his major long poem does not fit the model described in this study. At first glance, it would appear that *The Prelude* employs self-reference, since the poem is about the poet’s own life story, and it ends with a kind of description of how the poem itself came to be written as part of that life story. The poem is certainly long, and it is surely not merely a sequence of lyrics, since a clear narrative connects them all together. Many scholars agree that it is poetic in the best sense. Why is it not a good example of a modern long poem? I recognize the difficulty in arguing for the absence of a thing in a text, especially since the significance of its presence or absence depends so much upon the observer. However, there are some characteristics of Wordsworth’s poem that do not fit with those described in my
overview of the poetics of complexity, and exploring those characteristics will
contrast usefully with those that Tennyson’s poem exhibits.

Regarding self-reference: The Prelude tells the story of the poet’s life, not the
poem’s, even at the end when describing the poet writing the poem itself:

Having now
Told what best merits mention, further pains
Our present purpose seems not to require,
And I have other tasks. Recall to mind
The mood in which this labour was begun.
O Friend! the termination of my course
Is nearer now, much nearer; yet even then,
In that distraction, and intense desire,
I said unto the life which I had lived,
Where art thou? Hear I not a voice from thee
Which ’tis reproach to hear? Anon I rose
As if on wings, and saw beneath me stretched
Vast prospect of the world which I had been
And was; and hence this Song, which like a Lark
I have protracted, in the unwearied heavens
Singing, and often with more plaintive voice
To Earth attempered and her deep-drawn sighs,
Yet centering all in love, and in the end
All gratulant, if rightly understood. (The Fourteen-Book Prelude
14.371-89)

The brief reference to the poem likens it to a lark’s song, but the emphasis is
more on the poet as a lark than on the poem as a song. The final sentence in
keyword form is, “I rose as if on wings, and saw the world I had been and was,
hence this song, which I have protracted and attempered.” Throughout the
sentence, the reader’s attention rests on the actions of the author—evidenced by
the poem itself, to be sure, but not on the poem in a way conducive to calling
attention to the reader, which, as we saw in the previous chapter, is the function
of self-reference in a poetics of complexity. Instead, the poet and his narrative
command attention here, reinforced by the injunction, “Recall to mind / The
mood in which this labour was begun.” Whose mood? Not the reader’s, but the poet-speaker’s, of course, since “this labour” refers not to the reader’s process of reading the poem, but to the poet’s process of writing it: the lines clearly point back to the first 250 lines or so of the poem in which the speaker describes his mood and its suitability for writing poetry. In Paul Ricoeur’s terms, Wordsworth is more concerned with ego than with self (Ricoeur, Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences 193).

This passage also indicates the main form of the poem: extended lyric, or as Wordsworth puts it above, a protracted song. The production history of The Prelude suggests a similar nature, since the poem began as a two-part lyric which over the years was expanded and expanded until it reached its final fourteen-book form. But while the poem became longer, it did not modify its essentially lyric sensibility, and for this reason it can be described as a long autobiographical narrative in verse form. It contains lovely lyric moments, certainly, but on the whole it falls prey to Poe’s objection to the long poem as a form, since it does little to adapt its form to its enormous scale. It simply continues its blank verse in episode after episode, which appear together solely by virtue of their narrative. Such poems, particularly common in the 18th century and earlier, tend to be arbitrarily long (or arbitrarily in verse, as with verse epistles and essays): their form (length, organization, etc.) does not play a role in their overall poetic signification. For these reasons The Prelude is a long poem in the older, pre-
modern sense, in which ornament (e.g., versification, rhyme, figure) could suffice to make any text a poem.¹

But just as *The Prelude* signals the end of the Romantic sensibility, *In Memoriam* ushers in the modern one. Where the former reflects upon the self in order to draw conclusions that apply universally, the latter turns toward the universe in order to illustrate the workings of the self. As has been well documented, the Victorian universe was undergoing deep transformations, particularly as a result of developments in the sciences, and the ramifications of those changes were still the subject of much concern. Chief among these concerns was the growing suspicion that on many subjects, there was no longer a single point of view that would find anything like general consensus. Debates raged in religion, biology, economics, politics, and just about any sphere in which groups of people found themselves coping with the increasing complexity of the events and information with which they were faced. In complexity-theory terms, the mid-19th century marked the functional differentiation of society into various overlapping social subsystems, which is the primary characteristic of modernity (Luhmann, *Art* 158-84). Therefore, a poem of the mid-19th century that turns outward finds a different universe in which the self is reflected. In his insightful survey of literary history from Romanticism through Modernism, Robert Langbaum describes the Romantic movement as an attempt to salvage the validity of subjective perceptions in terms of the objectivity of Enlightenment

¹ See the discussion of pre-Romantic poetry on pages 45-47 above.
empiricism. Paradoxically, this is why Wordsworth appears overly subjective in 
*The Prelude*:

For subjectivity was not the program but the inescapable condition of romanticism. No sooner had the eighteenth century left the individual isolated within himself [*sic*]—without an objective counterpart for the values he sensed in his own will and feelings—than romanticism began as a movement toward objectivity, toward a new principle of connection with society and nature through the imposition of values on the external world. Wordsworth wrote *The Prelude*, the model in English of the subjective or autobiographical poem, not because he believed in autobiographical poetry but in order to prepare himself for a long philosophical poem treating “the mind of man.” He wrote it because he felt as yet inadequate to the objective undertaking, out of “real humility”: “Here, at least, I hoped that to a certain degree I should be sure of succeeding, as I had nothing to do but describe what I felt and thought.” (Langbaum 28-29)

But where the Romantics looked inward and felt themselves in control of their environment as a result, the Victorians understood themselves as not fully in control of the complex changes they saw around them, whether in control of themselves or not. As Isobel Armstrong points out:

“Modern,” in spite of its long history, has a resurgence as a Victorian term—the “modern” element in literature (Arnold),
“modern” love (Meredith), a “modern” landlord (William Allingham). To see yourself as modern is actually to define the contemporary self-consciously and this is simultaneously an act which historicises the modern. Victorian modernism sees itself as new but it does not, like twentieth-century modernism, conceive itself in terms of a radical break with the past. Victorian modernism, as it emerges in its poetics, describes itself as belonging to a condition of crisis which has emerged directly from economic and cultural change. In fact, Victorian poetics begins to conceptualise the idea of culture as a category and includes itself within the definition. . . . The Victorian poets were post-Romantic but to understand the political and aesthetic consequences of this it is necessary to see what being post-Romantic entailed. For to be “new,” or “modern” or “post-Romantic” was to confront and self-consciously to conceptualise as new elements that are still perceived as the constitutive forms of our own condition. Whether a poet was a subversive reactionary, as Tennyson was, or attempting to write a radical poetry, as Browning was, such a poet was “modern” or secondary in a number of ways, all of which involved the reformation of the categories of knowledge. . . . [Victorian modernism] was post-teleological and scientific, conceiving systems, including those of Christianity, anthropologically in terms of belief systems and representations
through myth. Simply because of its awareness of teleological insecurity, Victorian poetry is arguably the last theological poetry to be written. (Armstrong 3)

So instead of the monolithic self-assuredness of *The Prelude* (which, after all, had been mostly written almost two decades before its posthumous 1850 publication), *In Memoriam* famously doubts everything yet maintains faith just the same. That it does so in a convincing manner is a function of its modern, complex poetics.

Tennyson explicitly takes up the themes of doubt and faith in the poem’s prologue, and in so doing he also implicitly describes a complexity-infused worldview and acknowledges its difference from earlier ones:

Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.

We have but faith: we cannot know;
For knowledge comes of things we see;
And yet we trust it comes from thee,
A beam in darkness: let it grow.

Let knowledge grow from more to more,
But more of reverence in us dwell;
That mind and soul, according well,
May make one music as before,

But vaster. (Prologue.17-29)²

While the poet here invokes a traditional difference between the human and divine, he does so in terms of “systems” and uses several figurative distinctions

in the process: broken/whole, darkness/light, knowledge/reverence, dissonance/harmony. In each case, the comparison less/more operates, with the human always on the side of “less” and the divine on the side of “more.” Since the distinction knowledge/reverence pertains more than the others to complex-systems theory, I want to look a little more closely at that distinction to show how the poem incorporates it from its beginning section and uses it—and by implication a poetics of complexity—to make its case for faith. Following the model of the other figures in these stanzas, the argument seems to be that more knowledge is better, with the ultimate goal being reverence, saying that if we simply knew more we would be more reverent. However, the poet also says that “We have but faith: we cannot know; / For knowledge comes of things we see.” Since what is beyond the world cannot be observed in the world, and since we can know only what we can observe, we can never have knowledge of the divine. We can have belief or faith, but never knowledge. So the distinction between knowledge and reverence does not work in the apparent way described earlier; instead it involves a paradox. Knowledge is observation; but reverence is the knowing observation of something that you know cannot be observed. As Paul Woodruff writes in *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*:

> Reverence must stand in awe of something—something I will call the object of reverence. What could it be? Something that reminds us of human limitations . . . . Therefore you must believe that there is one Something that satisfies at least one of the following conditions: it cannot be changed or controlled by human
means, is not fully understood by human experts, was not created by human beings, and is transcendent. (117)

These more specific conditions are equally paradoxical, and all are consistent with the complexity-theory formulation above. So reverence is a kind of knowledge after all, since it involves observation. It is simply paradoxical, since it is the knowledge that complete knowledge is impossible. The knowledge/reverence distinction, then, might be described as less/more in terms of “awareness of the limitations of observation,” which is a different way of saying “adhering to a poetics of complexity.”

The faith that Tennyson describes in *In Memoriam*, then, is less dogmatic or theological than it is poetical. He is less concerned with what is—either in this world or beyond it—than with what can be made of it, with how it affects us in our own doings. This focus stems from the immediate cause of the poem, the death of his good friend, and from the natural thoughts and feelings that arise in such times: concerns for the friend’s soul, sorrow for one’s own loss, bewilderment about the seeming injustice in dying young with such promise, desires for eventual reunion beyond this world. None of these matters can be resolved through worldly knowledge; for Tennyson, the answers are “behind the veil” (*IM* 56.28). Instead, he yearns for a “vaster music,” a metaphysical harmony between mind and soul that must come from knowledge, scientific or otherwise, and reverence together. This harmony takes place in the world, among its people, and serves a variety of purposes, mostly solace and inspiration. What it
requires is imagination, which is the realm of art and above all, for Tennyson, of poetry.

Tennyson’s challenge, then, is to write a poem that does not simply describe grief and renewal but also demonstrates it, in its many changing guises. Without this kind of vivid demonstration, the poem would become just another lament of a grief-stricken man and would not further his goal of creating a vaster music, as he indicates in section 77:

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What hope is here for modern rhyme
   To him who turns a musing eye
   On songs, on deeds, and lives, that lie
Foreshorten’d in the tract of time?

These mortal lullabies of pain
   May bind a book, may line a box,
   May serve to curl a maiden’s locks;
Or when a thousand moons shall wane

A man upon a stall may find,
   And, passing, turn the page that tells
   A grief, then changed to something else,
Sung by a long-forgotten mind.

But what of that? My darken’d ways
   Shall ring with music all the same;
   To breathe my loss is more than fame,
   To utter love more sweet than praise.
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Taken by itself, this section continues the tradition of poets consigning their own verse to the scrap heap, never to be truly understood because no later readers can know the origins of the poet’s text, which is but a poor representation of those origins. But here, in the middle of a long poem that begins with a yearning for deep spiritual music, these lines take on a different meaning. The rhetorical question “What hope is here” does not despair of an answer. Instead, the poet
dismisses as irrelevant the possibility that his text may never find a wide reception in the future; he does not seek fame or praise for his work. The hope for modern rhyme is that the poem’s “darken’d ways / Shall ring with music all the same.” How? By being read at all. When the poet says, “What hope is here,” he means, in effect, “Here in this poem lies the hope”: the poem is its own hope. And by being read (as it must have been to make this discussion possible in the first place), the poem ensures that its readers have breathed its loss and uttered love and, in short, have seen its hope. The infinitive verb forms in the final two lines facilitate this reference to the reader, suggested by the explicit reference to a reader and to poetry in the first stanza. By taking advantage of recursive paradoxes of form, the self-reference of the poem becomes self-reference for the reader, and thus it instantiates the hope for modern rhyme: it must employ a self-referential poetics of complexity to create the vast music it seeks to (re)create in the modern world, without which it might as well serve as hair-curling paper, as mere ornamentation.

Vast music requires scale and extent, and Tennyson rightly understood that he needed to use a long form to achieve his goals. But a long form such as that of *The Prelude* or even *Paradise Lost* would not serve: he needed to come up with a different way to structure his poem, and through the arrangement of carefully crafted lyric sections, he created a work whose whole is more than just an accretion of its parts. As T. S. Eliot commented:

> And the poem has to be comprehended as a whole. We may not memorize a few passages, we cannot find a “fair sample”; we have
to comprehend the whole of a poem which is essentially the length that it is. (Eliot, "In Memoriam" 175)

The poem is poorly understood in excerpt because the relationships between parts are themselves parts of the poem. For instance, students are usually surprised when they learn that the most famous lines in the poem, "’Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all” (27.15-16), are about a dead man by a living one and are not the consolations of a failed romance. In the context of the full poem, this popular interpretation of the lines is unlikely at best. Although it’s always possible to take an excerpt from a poem out of context and “misread” it, the fact that it happens with Tennyson’s poem so often indicates that the lyric mode does not dominate the work. In the rest of this chapter, I will describe how In Memoriam sets up these relationships to establish itself as a long poem. I will first examine connections between and within sections of the poem in order to show how the text creates resonant relationships—harmonies—among several levels of perception at the same time, and then look closely at the explicitly self-referential sections of the poem to show how

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3 I am aware of the complications that readings of homoeroticism in the poem have raised on this point, such as in Jeff Nunokawa’s “In Memoriam and the Extinction of the Homosexual” (ELH 58.2 [1991]: 427-38). As useful as these readings can be in identifying Victorian attitudes about homosexuality—despite their tendency to identify such attitudes through contemporary readings of the poem and then ascribe those attitudes in the poem to its original context—they typically do not consider the larger context of the rest of the poem and thus fail to take into account essential connections that would refine those readings differently. While they contribute to our understanding of the poem at specific points, they do not show how those points affect our understanding at the level of the entire work and thus de facto treat the poem as a set of disconnected lyric sections and therefore, in my view, misread it rather significantly.
they direct our attention to the entirety of the work. In other words, I will show how the poem uses both implicit and explicit self-reference to convince readers of its identity and coherence as a long poem. In the process, I will necessarily rely on excerpts from the poem (how could I not?); but I will be as concerned with the connections these excerpts facilitate as with their decontextualized interpretations (as if such a thing were truly possible).

In order for a poem consisting of more than a hundred sections of verse whose topics, themes, lengths, moods, techniques, and quality vary widely to be considered a single text as opposed to a group of lyrics, there must be significant relationships between the sections that connect them in a more than accidental way. How a given section or group of sections coheres with the rest of the poem depends on the scale of perception through which it is distinguished; or, in the more traditional terminology of Alan Sinfield (from his masterful 1971 study *The Language of In Memoriam*):

> The elements of poetic language are so presented as to invite us to perceive further relationships between them such that the whole poem becomes a complex web of inter-connecting meanings working almost simultaneously.

> . . . The ultimate structure is the entire poem in all its manifold complexity, but within it may be distinguished, for critical convenience, smaller, contributory structures of all kinds and sizes. (5-6)
Sinfield perceives that understanding the poem on its smaller scales requires understanding the relationships in which its small-scale elements are enmeshed. His study is the definitive treatment of the poem at the smaller scales—diction, syntax, sound, and rhythm—and there is no need to repeat that treatment here. Instead, what matters is seeing the connections of the micro-level elements in the poem with the macro-level ones. In any long text, patterns will emerge among textual elements at various levels of perception. But in order for the text to function poetically, the relationships between elements at various levels must resonate with each other to contribute to the whole text.

Or, as Tennyson puts it in *In Memoriam*:

I see in part
That all, as in some piece of art,
Is toil coöperant to an end. (128.22-24)

Tennyson’s great achievement in the poem is to adapt the same basic poetic devices to various scales of perception and thus to create powerful linkages across those scales that are reinforced in the recursive passages in the text discussed above. This is not simply a New Critical technique of seeing that the form is suited to the content; as we have seen already, form is content, so what matters in a poem is simultaneous self-reference and hetero-reference: the re-entry of form into the form. Over large scales, this re-entry can—must—take place not only at the line level but at larger levels up to and including that of the whole text, and at these larger levels the New Critical apparatus for understanding form breaks down. In a long poem, patterns appear in different ways depending on what scale of perception is operative at the time. Tennyson
weaves those patterns together in what George Landow calls “the multilinear organization of the poem” (Landow 55) to convince readers that it is what it is and it does what it does, which despite the circularity of this (implicit) argument is nonetheless remarkable.

The most obvious of these patterns is the stanzaic form that bears the poem’s name, the *In Memoriam* stanza, or what is more technically known as an envelope quatrain of iambic tetrameter (Turco 205). Because of the enveloping *abba* rhyme scheme, the first and last lines of each stanza are connected, each one ending with a variation on its beginning. Between them, a second rhyme is varied before leading back to the initial sound. At the same time, the four-beat meter lends itself to similar kinds of binary divisions, whether within each line (two beats, two beats), between the first two lines and last two lines of each stanza, or even separating each line in a stanza. Four lines of four beats: the form affords many opportunities for symmetry and balance, which Tennyson uses to good effect. As Sinfield points out in detail, the poem is remarkably regular in its meter and rhythm (176), like the “dull narcotics” Tennyson imagines his verse to be, which has the advantages of both establishing a characteristic cadence (evidenced by the stanzaic form that despite earlier origins has taken the name of this poem) as well as highlighting more strongly the places where that cadence is changed (e.g., “And came on that which is, and caught . . . ,” where the third beat of the third line marks the pivot of the stanza). So the general characteristics that appear in this form at the stanzaic level are parallel regularity and cyclical return, the structure of chiasmus.
The basic chiasmus pattern recurs throughout the poem in “contributory structures of all kinds and sizes.” However, it seldom occurs within lines or couplets in the syntactic manner made famous by Dryden, Pope, and other 18th-century poets (e.g., as in Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*, “Where wigs with wigs, with sword-knots sword-knots strive, / Beaux banish beaux, and coaches coaches drive” (1.101-02)). Combined with the metrical and linear symmetry of the stanza, such uses would be too mannered or forced to serve Tennyson’s purpose, which is in part to lull and soothe, not to coerce or convince in a logical way. It does appear, however, in aural devices throughout the poem on the microlevel, including in the name of the poem itself: in “memoriam,” whose first and last syllables are dominated by the voiced “m” sound, much like the mantra syllable “om.” Sinfield discusses these intra-sectional instances at length; here, I will focus on the envelope pattern on the inter-sectional level, since the larger scale’s adaptation of this basic smaller-scale patterning establishes the text as a long poem and not simply an aggregation of lyrics.

As many commentators have noted, the sections of *In Memoriam* fall into groups of varying sizes. Several of these groups share common topics or episodes: in addition to the four-section group (45-48) discussed earlier, there is the speaker’s virtual journey with the ship bearing Hallam’s body in sections 9-19, for instance; or the first Christmas after Hallam’s death in sections 28-30 (although since the succeeding sections continue with images of Christ, it is difficult to say where the “Christmas” group ends precisely); and there are several others. A. C. Bradley in his famous *Commentary* on the poem points out:
But perhaps few readers are aware of the large part played by these groups. The fact is that, taken together, they account for considerably more than one-half of the poem; and in this estimate no notice has been taken of mere pairs of connected sections . . . or of parts of the poem where the sections, though not so closely connected as to form a distinct group, are yet manifestly united in a looser way. If these additions are made to our estimate, it will be found to include nearly 100 poems out of the total of 131. (Bradley 195)

He goes on to point out the recurrence of similar *topoi* in noncontiguous groups (e.g., the three Christmases, the visits to Hallam’s house, the yew-tree sections) and has this to say about the rest: “a small number may properly be called occasional poems, though the positions which they occupy in the whole are always more or less significant” (195). This last claim is striking, both because it seems to state a truism (how could a thing not be either more or less significant?) and because it assumes that the relationship of any section to the rest is a part/whole relationship. In this he agrees with T. S. Eliot; but where Bradley focuses on the sections’ subject matter, Eliot recognizes their technical mastery and discerns the absence of “monotony or repetition” (Eliot, ”In Memoriam” 175) despite the regularity of their stanzaic form. Where the one finds sameness in difference, the other finds difference in sameness. Considering these together, we see that the poem is a unity based on differences based in similarities. The poem is of a piece, not for the “obvious” reason that every stanza looks generally the
same, but because the relationships among the sections are (more or less) significant.

Taking our cue from Eliot’s discernment of technical matters, we can account for all the sections without resorting to the label “occasional poem” (which implies “accidental” or “superfluous”) if we consider thematic linkages such as the ones Bradley enumerates as only one kind of relationship, and not an especially poetic one (that is, not one uniquely associated with poetry). While it is true that the thematic links of, say, the recurring “milestone” sections (Christmases, springs, visits to the house, seeing the yew tree, etc.) do involve self-reference—since they refer to each other and thus, by the laws of form, indicate the observer who perceives the sameness in different things—such links represent a relatively weak version of self-reference, especially compared with the explicitly recursive sections (to be discussed below). Readers tend to focus on the hetero-reference in these passages at the expense of the self-reference. In addition to these thematic links, though, the poem employs not only a series of explicitly recursive sections—which themselves form a recurring pattern—but also recurring prosodic techniques that promote self-reference in a more traditionally poetic way.

For example, section 11 employs a loose anaphora by beginning each of its stanzas with the word “Calm” and repeating it in various places elsewhere in the section:

Calm is the morn without a sound,
Calm as to suit a calmer grief,
And only thro’ the faded leaf
The chestnut pattering to the ground:
Calm and deep peace on this high wold,
And on these dews that drench the furze,
And all the silvery gossamers
That twinkle into green and gold:

Calm and still light on yon great plain
That sweeps with all its autumn bowers,
And crowded farms and lessening towers,
To mingle with the bounding main:

Calm and deep peace in this wide air,
These leaves that redden to the fall;
And in my heart, if calm at all,
If any calm, a calm despair:

Calm on the seas, and silver sleep.
And waves that sway themselves in rest,
And dead calm in that noble breast
Which heaves but with the heaving deep.  (boldface added)

The effect is as of tolling bells and their echoes, and not surprisingly the force of
the final repetition in line 19 comes from the deviation of the word from the
rhythmic pattern established so strongly in the rest of the section. In every
instance but the last, the word “calm” follows either a line break (by starting a
line) or an unstressed syllable; but in the last one, it follows the stressed word
“dead,” quite literally arresting the reader through its rhythmic juxtaposition.
Prosodically, section 11 is among the most memorable in the early part of the
poem.

This kind of repetition appears in several later sections in the poem, most
notably in sections 50 and 106 (section 14 also contains anaphora, but of the
relatively unimportant—and unstressed—word “and” in an extended compound
conditional clause, so it is less relevant here). Section 50 employs “Be near me
when . . .” in a prayer-like supplication at the beginning of each stanza; section
106 (the “wild bells” section) plays changes on “Ring out” and “Ring in” in the first line of each stanza and in all but one of the last lines of each (and in one of the other seven stanzas, the syntax is changed so the anaphora is not strictly preserved, but the preceding line doubles the repetition as if to compensate for the change—an especially good choice for the subject matter, which is self-referential: “Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes, / / But ring the fuller minstrel in” (106.19-20)). By themselves, each of these three notable anaphoric sections evinces the same kind of development that the envelope pattern typifies: by the end of each section, what appears the same has become something different, by virtue of its being at the end and therefore connected with and differentiated from what has come before it. This same phenomenon occurs between sections so similarly constructed. In section 11 there is no mention of church bells: it only feels as if they are ringing because of the somber topic and the prosodic skill of the poet. But in section 106 they are explicitly ringing, and through the use of a rhetorical technique similar to the prior section’s, a connection is made between the two sections that does not depend entirely on narrative. Similarly, section 50 invokes supplication, which suggests prayer and religion, and discusses capitalized abstractions such as Time, Life, and Being in addition to the non-personified concepts of faith and eternity. Its anaphora evokes the subject matter of its predecessor section 11, and anticipates the ecstatic injunctions of section 106 (and in case we didn’t realize this was an important phrase from its multiple appearances in section 50 alone, the same repetend appears at the end of section 51).
While these connections are not strictly narrative, they do have narrative consequences, and the convergence of these two types of connections—prosodic and narrative, or self-referential and hetero-referential—holds the text together on a large scale as a poem. In section 11, the speaker experiences despair, since his grief is so fresh. The repetition there seems both to express the numbness of the “use of measured language” and to hammer home the reality of the speaker’s loss. By section 50, the speaker is more philosophical about his grief, and while he has not eliminated his doubts about the afterlife, he is at least willing to hold out some hope of it and has moved forward from where he was earlier. By section 106, the speaker quite resolutely and triumphantly announces his trust in the second coming and the eradication of “the darkness of the land” (106.31-32), recalling the “twilight” of section 50. Over the course of the anaphoric sections, the poem has moved from inertness and despair to energy and optimism. A similar sectional form suffices for all of these changes, just as the regular stanzaic form underneath it does; and importantly, the two forms rely on the same kind of figurative movement from one position through others and returning to the original position which is somehow not the same position any more.

The moments in the poem where the self-reference and hetero-reference are compressed within the same section operate even more strongly to link the sections together, paradoxically, by expanding the reader’s perspective in those moments to include the entire poem. Their appearance throughout the poem not only links them as another kind of recurring device, like the ones discussed above, but also deliberately and consistently reminds readers that the text is a
long poem. These explicitly recursive sections merit an extensive examination.

From the beginning of the poem, Tennyson wastes little time in bringing up the subject of his own writing process. Section 5 concerns specifically his use of poetry as a vehicle of assuaging grief:

I sometimes hold it half a sin
To put in words the grief I feel;
For words, like Nature, half reveal
And half conceal the Soul within.

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,
A use in measured language lies;
The sad mechanic exercise,
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.

In words, like weeds, I’ll wrap me o’er,
Like coarsest clothes against the cold;
But that large grief which these enfold
Is given in outline and no more.

Although the first two lines suggest that the poet is talking about the process by which he wrote the very poem we are reading, the explicit self-reference appears only in the eleventh line, in the word “these.” While earlier the poet describes poetry generally, and his grief generally, which refer to the poem itself only generally, the explicit self-reference of “these” has the immediate effect typical in such cases: in order to make sense out of the line, readers observe themselves from the second-order position as readers of the poem. And so the moment is poetic in the strongest sense: it calls attention to itself and something else at the same moment, and by the laws of form readers observe themselves and something else simultaneously as well, which is the very definition of poetry in terms of the poetics of complexity.
In what is also a fairly conventional move, the self-referential moment has resonance with the rest of the section in its use of standard poetic devices. Simile is the most obvious one here, appearing in each of the three stanzas of this section. Each simile compares *words* with something else: “Nature,” “dull narcotics,” and “weeds” or “clothes.” The comparisons progress from general to specific, focusing the reader’s attention more narrowly while at the same time setting up the second-order “pushing” moment of line 11. In the first stanza, words are like Nature in their ability to simultaneously “half reveal / And half conceal the Soul within.” Since the passage involves observation, complexity’s perspective on observation should be of use in interpreting the passage. If we take the Soul to be the unchangeable and unutterable essence of a person, then words/Nature are mere outward manifestations of that essence, and while they may give a glimpse of that essence, their perspective must necessarily be incomplete. Why necessarily so? Because a distinction has already been drawn between the Soul and its manifestation: the Soul is *within*, begging the question, “Within what?” Whatever it is, it must be something distinct from “the Soul.” So no matter how representative Nature (read: the body) or words are, they can never be read exactly as the Soul is, or else they would be identical with it. The “half a sin” that the poet feels when he tells his grief, then, is his half revealing his soul in language, when such a task is from the outset impossible and indeed false to his soul in a real sense.

In the second stanza, Tennyson focuses his attention not just on communicating his grief in language but on his use of poetry (“measured
language”) to do so. In this case, words are like “dull narcotics, numbing pain.” Again, language is external to the “unquiet heart and brain,” and serves to soothe them as a drug would. What is interesting here are the implications about how that soothing takes place. The use lies in “measured language,” that use being “sad mechanic exercise.” The question is how one finds exercise in measured language (interestingly, not in measuring language). There seem to be only two possibilities: writing such language, or reading it. From the poet’s perspective, the first option appears plausible, since he is writing to assuage his grief. But at the same time, he is also reading what he writes, since reading is an indispensable part of the writing process (there are few if any who could rattle off stanza after stanza of iambic tetrameter quatrains rhymed *abba* without stopping to read and revise passages here and there; and even in that case one could argue that the poet is making observations on the fly about the poetry being written, observations which constitute “reading”). The phrase “mechanic exercise” reinforces this notion of how language is being used: the language is experienced, machine-like, in order to dull an inward pain, and that experience is the use of measured language. Presumably, it is the measure of the language—its metrical and stanzaic regularity—that constitutes the dulling mechanism. And here Tennyson begins to bring the reader’s attention closer to the self. For in the first stanza, language is discussed abstractly, and the self-reference of the

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4 I use “reading” here as a conventional shorthand for “observing a text.” Hearing the text aloud is of course possible, as is feeling it when written in Braille, but since all of these are analogous modes of observation in different perceptual fields, I will use the term “reading” with the understanding that other modes of observation could be substituted for it.
stanza—words whose subject is words—might be overlooked. But in a stanza of measured language in which language’s measure is the subject, the self-reference is more apparent. One could at this point look at any number of fine analyses of Tennyson’s meter and form to see how this pairing of sound and sense have been traditionally understood. For our purposes, the most important thing is simply the fact that the text suggests the second-order perspective along with a first-order perspective, in whatever way the two are related. The general perception that the particular measurement Tennyson gives his language is inherently soothing, thus illustrating itself, is one of the main reasons readers have persisted in wanting to view the poem as a single long poem, despite its “problematic” features.

Then, in the final stanza of the section, words are likened to clothing, or “weeds” as they are first labeled. The choice of word here is deliberate: “weeds” may mean both “clothes” metaphorically and “Nature” metonymically, and possibly even “dull narcotics” appositively, thereby bringing together the three similes in one culminating comparison. Certainly the sense of the simile is clear: words resemble clothes (and the other things) in being simultaneously external—and thus nonessential, even undesirable, as weeds in a lawn are—yet useful in times of grief. While in the first two stanzas the poet’s grief is first exposed and then calmed, in the last stanza the poet’s grief is “enfolded” by words. In this way, the poet locates his grief deep within himself, akin to his very soul, in that words act as coverings for grief and “enfold” it, revealing it only “in outline and no more.” The words themselves suggest the paradox of language’s use in this
way: words *enfold* (inwardly hide) grief, yet they also *outline* (outwardly distinguish) it. In complexity terms, what they do is *unfold* it: since what is internal can never be observed directly, it can only be displaced to another point of observation which may prove more or less effective in conveying the general sense of what is internal and unobservable. This displacement of the observational blind spot is called “unfolding.”

Tennyson’s section is an example of such an unfolding: no argument is presented here justifying the distinction between Soul and Nature, for instance, but through its unfolding via a succession of comparisons that both match the reader’s perceptions of the world (i.e., words appear to work the way the similes imply that they do) and appear internally consistent (i.e., the words of the poem indeed have the effect the poem says they do), the basic distinction is said to be unfolded—it has been involved in a system of relationships the reader finds plausible, and thus the initial distinction is more likely to be accepted as well. Jerome McGann describes the act of critical unfolding as “deformance” and posits it as the means by which we experience and identify a kind of grammar of assent within literary works: “Aesthetic forms recreate—they ‘stage’ or simulate—a world of primary human intercourse and conversation. As with their reciprocating critical reflections, they manipulate their perceptual fields to generate certain dominant rhetorics or surface patterns that will organize and complicate our understandings. An important critical maneuver, then, involves dislocating or ‘deforming’ those dominant patterns so as to open doors of perception toward new opportunities and points of view” (McGann 173). In
other words, the function of criticism is to indicate the relationships and patterns in a text, by taking a text apart and looking at it differently (deforming it), so that its readers may perceive its relationships vis-à-vis those differences and thus become better able to interpret (perform) the text. McGann writes:

Poems, after all, aren’t transmitters of information, and if we usually read them in a linear mode, we know that they also (and simultaneously) move in complex recursive ways. Tennyson wrote of their strange diagonals. (108)

With this idea of deformance in mind, then, what makes section 5 especially powerful is the final explicit self-reference, itself an unfolding of the paradox of using language to communicate that which is incommunicable. The poet states that language is insufficient for depicting his grief completely, yet it does have uses for him. By implication, language has uses for the reader as well, since the reader may be in the position of the poet as described in the second stanza of the section—with an unquiet heart and brain—or may simply wish to observe the nature of grief as it is expressed through language. In any event, the grief of the poet is “enfolded” and “given” to someone, presumably not just the poet, and so the poet’s grief becomes, via reading, the reader’s concern. Only the self-reference of the closing lines of the stanza, which refers both to the words of this section and to the words of the entire poem, makes the reader’s involvement with the poet’s grief more than just witnessing at a distance. By building from the general problem of language to the specific instance of it in this poem, the text facilitates the reader’s poetic experience that crystallizes in the explicit self-
reference. Once the reader experiences the text unmistakably as both self-referential and hetero-referential simultaneously—and both occur in this section, at the final moment in line 11—and as part of a larger text in which the self- and hetero-references are consistent—as they are in this section and in the rest of the poem—the reader has accepted the initial distinction, “This is a poem, an entire long poem.” Another way to put this is: “I am reading this as a poem, as an entire long poem.” Through recognizing the self-reference and significant patterning in this early section, readers interpret everything else in the text from that perspective.

In sections 45 through 48, four sections of four stanzas each, the poem discusses personal identity (the distinguishing of self and other) and the question of its cancellation after death. Here the poem employs self-reference by indicating the sections themselves as well as the other sections of the long poem:

45
The baby new to earth and sky
   What time his tender palm is prest
   Against the circle of the breast,
Has never thought that ‘this is I:’

But as he grows he gathers much,
   And learns the use of ‘I,’ and ‘me,’
   And finds ‘I am not what I see,
And other than the things I touch.’

So rounds he to a separate mind
   From whence clear memory may begin,
   As thro’ the frame that binds him in
His isolation grows defined.

This use may lie in blood and breath,
   Which else were fruitless of their due,
   Had man to learn himself anew
Beyond the second birth of Death.
46
We ranging down this lower track,
   The path we came by, thorn and flower,
Is shadow’d by the growing hour
Lest life should fail in looking back.

So be it: there no shade can last
   In that deep dawn behind the tomb,
   But clear from marge to marge shall bloom
The eternal landscape of the past;

A lifelong tract of time reveal’d;
   The fruitful hours of still increase;
   Days order’d in a wealthy peace,
And those five years its richest field.

O Love, thy province were not large,
   A bounded field, nor stretching far;
   Look also, Love, a brooding star,
A rosy warmth from marge to marge.

47
That each, who seems a separate whole,
   Should move his rounds, and fusing all
The skirts of self again, should fall
Remerging in the general Soul,

Is faith as vague as all unsweet:
   Eternal form shall still divide
   The eternal soul from all beside;
And I shall know him when we meet:

And we shall sit at endless feast,
   Enjoying each the other’s good:
Of Love on earth? He seeks at least
Upon the last and sharpest height,
Before the spirits fade away,
Some landing-place, to clasp and say,
‘Farewell! We lose ourselves in light.’

48
If these brief lays, of Sorrow born,
   Were taken to be such as closed
Grave doubts and answers here proposed,
Then these were such as men might scorn:

Her care is not to part and prove;
   She takes, when harsher moods remit,
   What slender shade of doubt may flit,
And makes it vassal unto love:

And hence, indeed, she sports with words,
   But better serves a wholesome law,
   And holds it sin and shame to draw
The deepest measure from the chords:

Nor dare she trust a larger lay,
   But rather loosens from the lip
   Short swallow-flights of song, that dip
Their wings in tears, and skim away.

Starting at the end: in section 48 Tennyson describes his purpose not simply in using poetic language, as in section 5, but in using the particular poetic forms he does (the tetrameter lines, the quatrains, the relatively short sections). The explicit self-reference appears in the first line: “these brief lays.” Here the poet widens his scope of reference not just to the immediate text but at least to the preceding three sections and at most to the entire poem. The sense of the section concerns the topic of the group of sections, which in summary is: “The question of the soul’s identity after death is indeed serious, and although the establishment of our identity in this world would appear to be meaningless if it did not persist after death, in the end we cannot know whether it will or not; we can only hope it does.” This section claims that answers to such lines of inquiry will not be found in this poem, since the poem is really more about love than about metaphysics. For that reason, the poem is described through the metaphor of the swallow-flight, in which each section is one such flight. The entirety of the
poem, then, is a succession of flights—or, better, a flock of swallows which together in flight have a tendency and pattern of their own that emerges from the individual members’ paths. For this reason Tennyson says that Sorrow, the figurative progenitor of the poetry, merely “sports with words” in order to “better [serve] a wholesome law”: to attempt to convey ”the deepest measure” would be “sin and shame.”

In this description, the poet draws a distinction between this text and other possible models. By implication, a “larger lay” would attempt to draw more deeply from language, in an attempt to answer the questions this poem explicitly does not and cannot answer. In what sense would this happen? I take “deepest measure” to mean language’s “meaning,” traditionally understood: the deeper, the more profound, thus the more insightful or explanatory. If this poem were to try to have deep insight when such insight is expressly denied (as in the poem’s prologue), it would be not only a failure but wrong, irreverent, a “sin”: it would disobey the laws of observation, here figured as divine law. So paradoxically, the poem merely “dip[s]” and “skim[s]” and ”sports with words” to convey a sense of its meaning. These terms all connote surface features and playfulness, both of which when applied to language and reading indicate the self-referential approach. Double meaning in language is the essence of wordplay; and as opposed to the “deep” hetero-reference of words, a

5 Interestingly, the term of venery for a group of swallows is a flight. Not only is this a term of the hunt or of sport (see line 9 of the section), then, it also indicates a historical tendency to see swallows in flight in their collective sense as well as multiple.
“superficial” reading would indicate the self-reference of words: language always refers to itself, in a manner that has become invisible through being trivial in most instances. The final stanza in fact claims that the only trustworthy vehicle for communicating the poet’s sorrow and love is this looser, more playful structure in which the relationships between the parts are themselves parts that contribute to the whole: the “wholesome law” that is better served by this approach than by one which depends on linear proof and analysis.

This reading of the passage works in conjunction with its self-referential reading to push the reader once again to the perspective through which the poem is coherently a “long poem.” The section encompasses the rest of the “brief lays” in its focus, and it self-evidently does everything the section itself says it does: it refers to itself, thereby playing with language; it uses sound devices to reinforce the stronger recursive elements in the passage (e.g., using short words and closed vowels when “skimming,” open vowels when discussing weighty things, etc.); and it clearly does not answer the large questions raised elsewhere in the poem, as it says it doesn’t. As before, according to the poetics of complexity, once the self-referential and hetero-referential readings are observed simultaneously, the text is effectively poetic.

Explicit recursion appears again in section 75, a section whose themes of expressing the inexpressible and knowing the unknowable are themselves recursive:

I leave thy praises unexpress’d
In verse that brings myself relief,
And by the fullness of my grief
I leave thy greatness to be guess’d;

81
What practice howso’er expert
   In fitting aptest words to things,
   Or voice the richest-toned that sings,
Hath power to give thee as thou wert?

I care not in these fading days
   To raise a cry that lasts not long,
   And round thee with the breeze of song
To stir a little dust of praise.

Thy leaf has perish’d in the green,
   And, while we breathe beneath the sun,
   The world which credits what is done
Is cold to all that might have been.

So here shall silence guard thy fame;
   But somewhere, out of human view,
   Whate’er thy hands are set to do
Is wrought with tumult of acclaim.

The poet uses irony in a time-honored manner here: by asserting the impossibility of adequate description and praise of the departed friend, the poet still praises him. So he praises him by not praising him, which is both praise and not-praise. In this instance, the recursive move works differently than in earlier parts of the poem: instead of indicating what the poem says, it indicates what it does not say—which paradoxically results in saying it anyway. Were the poet describing what he does not do in any other situation than in the poem itself, there would be no problem. Consider this poor imitation of Tennyson: “I leave thy letters unreviewed; / I cannot bear to look them o’er; / My thoughts of thee refuse to soar; / I do not find my strength renewed.” In these lines, there is no ostensible reason to question their meaning: they do not indicate that the speaker is actually reading his friend’s letters by saying that he is not reading them. But when recursion is involved, the situation is different. The indication of a negative
is itself a positive indication. In section 75, since the negative is contradicted by its own utterance, we have irony. But more importantly, we have the pushing of the reader to the second-order stance, since the only way to recognize that the section contradicts itself is to see oneself making the distinctions the section calls for—to observe oneself reading. From that stance, the poem clearly undercuts itself several times: the poet’s “cry” has lasted long, despite his indifference to fame; “here silence” does not guard Hallam’s fame, since the poem is noisy evidence to the contrary; the concession that his “expert practice” and “rich-toned voice” are inadequate as praise yet implies a comparison, which is a form of praise; and so on. All of these instances make reference not only to the section under scrutiny, but to the entire poem, which stands as evidence contradicting the explicit claims of the section.

Thus the poet manages to express the inexpressible. At the same time, he manages to persuade us that he knows the unknowable, and that we do too. Again, the poem’s very existence is the evidence, and Tennyson even tells us so: “And by the measure of my grief / I leave thy greatness to be guess’d.” The “measure” of the poet’s grief is not simply its “extent” or “size” (or “limitedness”) but its “measured form,” the verse we are reading (a reading reinforced by the explicit reference to “verse” in the preceding line). And although we must “guess” it by reading, which as a form of communication is necessarily imperfect in conveying information, Hallam apparently possesses “greatness” as opposed to some other quality. In short, the poem will give Hallam’s praises, despite the fact that it really cannot do it perfectly. Of course,
this point goes without saying, and in many elegies it is not said at all. But precisely by saying it here, Tennyson not only attempts to reinforce his main claims, he also provides a point at which readers can observe themselves reading, triggering the widening of their perspective to encompass as much of the poem as is consistent with the content of the section—which is all of it.

At the end of the section, Tennyson even sets the challenge of believing the unprovable before his readers: “The world which credits what is done / Is cold to all that might have been.” In the primary sense, the poet refers to Hallam’s unlived life (the leaf that “perish’d in the green”) and indirectly asks us to credit the potential, not the actual. But in another quite active sense, the poet is asking us to consider the worth of what remains in potentio in the poem itself: what is inexpressible in language. Since we have already considered the matter and found that it is indeed possible to say something while simultaneously not saying it, as explained above, we comprehend the irony here as well. All of these set up the final three lines, which open by asserting knowledge of something “somewhere, out of human view.” Of course such things are unknowable; but since we have already accepted the possibility of understanding things that cannot be properly expressed, it is a small and subtle step to knowledge of things that cannot be known. In this case, since the grammatical subject remains rather vague (“Whate’er thy hands are set to do . . .”) we gloss over the actual claim, which is not as vague (“. . . Is wrought with tumult of acclaim”). We cannot know whether the claim is true; neither can Tennyson. But at this moment in the poem, in a section whose claims of poetry’s inefficacy in achieving its goals are
consistently undermined, a claim that has nothing to do with poetry is more likely to be taken at face value—that is, unironically. To be fair, the “tumult of acclaim” may in fact refer to the poem’s praises, not a chorus of angels or another otherworldly source of praise. But however we want to take it, we do not take it as irony, a result of the shift from indications of negatives to indication of a positive, regardless of how beyond perception that positive might in fact be. If there is any irony here, it resides at the second order, where we notice that the concluding positive, unlike the preceding negatives, does not undercut itself; and because it is not explicitly self-contradictory, we are willing at this point to accept it at face value despite its unprovability. Ironically, the only unprovable claim is the one we accept; all the others we reject, since we paradoxically see their self-contradiction as proof—of their own falsehood, which is proof nonetheless.

The generally acknowledged climax of the poem occurs in section 95, in the famous moment of spiritual communion between the poet and Hallam. It should come as no surprise that the section owes its effects to a poetics of complexity, centering on recursion and self-reference:

A hunger seized my heart; I read
   Of that glad year which once had been,
   In those fallen leaves which kept their green,
   The noble letters of the dead.

   And strangely on the silence broke
   The silent-speaking words, and strange
   Was love’s dumb cry defying change
   To test his worth; and strangely spoke

   The faith, the vigor, bold to dwell
   On doubts that drive the coward back,
   And keen thro’ wordy snares to track
   Suggestion to her inmost cell.
So word by word, and line by line,
The dead man touch’d me from the past,
And all at once it seem’d at last
The living soul was flash’d on mine,

And mine in this was wound, and whirl’d
About empyreal heights of thought,
And came on that which is, and caught
The deep pulsations of the world,

Æonian music measuring out
The steps of Time—the shocks of Chance—
The blows of Death. At length my trance
Was cancell’d, stricken thro’ with doubt.

Vague words! but ah, how hard to frame
In matter-moulded forms of speech,
Or even for intellect to reach
Thro’ memory that which I became: . . . (95.21-45)

In this passage, the self-references mostly do not resemble the ones in sections 5, 48, or 75 (or even 77) in referring to the text, the object, itself. Here the poem refers to the act of reading: specifically, to the poet’s reading of Hallam’s letters. This too is a strong form of recursion, since the means by which readers learn of Tennyson’s reading is . . . reading. To understand the hetero-reference of the passage is to recognize it as self-referential also, and as we have seen, this is the quintessential complex-poetic moment. So here at the poem’s climax, the poem describes itself in brief and thus attempts to enact its own meaning. In concert with the other sections of the poem, with which this particular section resonates, section 95 shows both the transcendental moment of contact the poet so desperately craves in order to overcome his many doubts, as well as the moment of crystallization that pulls the “short swallow-flights of song” into a coherent whole that adds up to more than the sum of the parts. In other words, this
section establishes the relationships necessary to sustain belief, however
tentative, within both the world of the poet’s searchings and musings, and the
world of the poem’s credibility or lack thereof.

Let us examine how the poem builds up to this pivotal moment. In lines
21ff., the references remain sufficiently vague to allow readers to recognize the
recursion in them. For instance, “I read / Of that glad year which once had been,
/ In those fallen leaves which kept their green” might well refer to the poet’s
reading his own lyrics as he accumulates them for what was to become In
Memoriam. The next line clarifies the reference, “The noble letters of the dead,”
but we have already detected the self-referential potential of the lines, which
remains at work as we continue reading. That potential does not diminish in the
next stanzas: “And strangely on the silence broke / The silent-speaking words,
and strange / Was love’s dumb cry defying change / To test his worth; and
strangely spoke // The faith, the vigor, bold to dwell / On doubts that drive the
coward back, / And keen thro’ wordy snares to track / Suggestion to her inmost
cell.” Not only does this passage indicate the poet’s reaction to Hallam’s letters, it
might just as well be a description of the rest of the poem up until this point. The
poet has indeed declared his love in the face of doubt, doing his best to use
language to plumb the depths of the mysteries of the soul.

The emphasis on variations of the word “strange” here intensifies the
poem’s indication of its own method. In each instance, strangeness applies to
some manifestation of language: words, a cry, and speech (in order). And in each
instance, the strangeness derives from paradox: words are “silent-speaking”;
love’s cry is “dumb”; “faith” finds its grounding in “doubts.” The sequence here deliberately moves from the medium (poetry, or language) to the subject (love, constancy, and finally faith and the soul), implying that the content does not precede the form (conventionally conceived) but rather emerges from it. The final two lines back this up: faith is “keen thro’ wordy snares to track / Suggestion to her inmost cell.” The words generate what they will; faithful, or simply reverent, readers will let the words point to the deepest meaning, finding its power through the paradoxes inherent to language (e.g., that content codependently arises with form; that language refers to itself and cannot have external reference without internal closure; that meaning is dependent upon the reader making the distinctions, so that it comes from difference, not from identity). As should be clear, the poem is about nothing if not about the power of poetry to help the poet overcome the doubts and fears of modernity and find comfort in their face, a process which however irrational is the only way to achieve the goal. Furthermore, it is not only inevitable but desirable: as other parts of the poem remind us, “‘Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all” (27.15-16) and “There lives more faith in honest doubt, / Believe me, than in half the creeds” (96.11-12). Language’s best and possibly only means of demonstrating these claims is poetry.

Going on in section 95: “So word by word, and line by line, / The dead man touch’d me from the past . . . .” Again, the dual meaning of the poem here allows readers to keep following the ramifications of seeing it as self-descriptive. And in the next lines, the poem strives for nothing less than transcendence: “And
all at once it seem’d at last / The living soul was flash’d on mine, / / And mine in this was wound, and whirl’d / About empyreal heights of thought, / / And came on that which is, and caught / The deep pulsations of the world, / / Æonian music measuring out / The steps of Time—the shocks of Chance— / / The blows of Death.” These nine lines are the heart of In Memoriam, both as the spiritual contact between Tennyson and Hallam and as the poetic focus of the whole work. The preceding stanzas arguing poetry’s power to overcome doubt have now led to the exercise of that power, appearing here as grand, abstract, majestic descriptions of the poet’s, or of the poetic, experience. The revisions Tennyson famously made in this stanza are apt: by using the ambiguous “this” in line 37, the poet employs a self-referential element and thus further sustains simultaneous hetero- and self-reference in the passage. The poem grinds to a huge pause in the most unexpected of ways here, by coming to a short word in the middle of a line: “And came on that which is.” Everything in the section leads up to this comma, which might at first glance seem to indicate a missing word (that which is what?) were it not for the meter and the rising-stress pattern of “on that which is,” in which each successive syllable is stressed more strongly than the one before it. Without any further explanation (that is, without a what at the end), the phrase indicates a metaphysical reality of some kind, the thing that is beyond our world and is unknowable in it. This sense indicates a paradox—seeing an unseeable thing—which is supported by the abstract personifications of the next stanza. Yet the poem has managed to indicate that indescribable thing, which is itself a form of description. And so at this moment the poem
embodies the paradox, which resonates with similar recursive paradoxes elsewhere in the poem (such as those discussed earlier), connecting and relating them through this moment of supreme resolution.

The passage closes with the exclamation “Vague words!” as a reflection on the description of the transcendent moment just before it. It is a lament on the inadequacy of language to express precisely what the poet experiences in that moment (“but ah, how hard to frame / In matter-moulded forms of speech, / Or even for intellect to reach / Thro’ memory that which I became”) but also an indication of the proper method: the deliberate use of vague words, since words’ inherent vagueness is unavoidable in any event. Since neither forms of speech (communications, or perceptual distinctions) nor memories (delayed repetitions of system-internal distinctions)\(^6\) can suffice to recreate transcendence (distinguishing oneself—a part of the world—as outside the world), the best alternative is to use the form of speech (the re-entry of form into the form) and memory (second-order positions of self-observation) to facilitate the experience of the imaginary (a poetics of complexity). Properly chosen vague words such as Tennyson’s thus take advantage of their vagueness—which is itself a kind of specificity—to make the poetic experience convincing and satisfying to readers. As one of the more acute readers of *In Memoriam*, Timothy Peltason, points out:

> Our assent to section XCV is not an assent to mysticism, but to the vividness with which this experience of satisfaction is rendered.

\(^6\) For a more complete discussion of memory in complexity theory, see Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, especially pp. 104-05.
The indissoluble connections of the moment to other moments and of the self to an enclosing order are radically and successfully confirmed. (Peltason 119)

In other words, the poem does not necessarily succeed in presenting a theological argument or in reproducing a singular event in the poet’s life but in unfolding the paradox of form in such a way that for the moment we postulate assent to the argument or the experience. Within the poem, which is to say via our poetic reading, the poet unproblematically achieves momentary contact with Hallam and with “that which is.”

Thus does Tennyson grapple with the isolation and groundlessness he feels, both as a result of Hallam’s death and a growing Victorian sense of modernity. As many readers have sensed (often disparagingly, claiming that In Memoriam is a long poem in which nothing happens), the poem ends where it begins, but with a difference for having been somewhere else in the middle: the form of chiasmus. And this is clearly the movement of the overall arc of the text: the speaker acknowledges his faith despite his growing doubts and lessening capacities; his faith is tested through loss; he finds no external reason for faith; he looks within and finds a reason (section 95); and he contents himself with the faith he has and persists as he has always done. In one sense nothing has changed; but in another sense everything has. As T. S. Eliot was to explore later in Murder in the Cathedral, as well as Robert Browning in The Ring and the Book, one can hold the right belief for the wrong reasons, in which case it is not really the right belief after all: the process of arriving at belief is what matters. This is
what Tennyson means when he describes art as “toil coöperant to an end”: art is not the object so much as the toil, the experience, the process. And this is why the close of the epilogue of In Memoriam is so powerful (despite some of the weaker poetry in that section), at the end of the long sentence moving the readers’ focus from the newlyweds (“them” in line 136) to the bigger cosmic picture:

For all we thought and loved and did,
And hoped, and suffer’d, is but seed
Of what in them is flower and fruit;

Whereof the man, that with me trod
This planet, was a noble type
Appearing ere the times were ripe,
That friend of mine who lives in God,

That God, which ever lives and loves,
One God, one law, one element,
And one far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves. (Epilogue.134-44)

The final line, coming here at the end of the poem after all the explicitly recursive sections, and after all the grief and doubt and recovery and faith, and after all the connections such as those in the anaphoric sections, has quite a different resonance than the invocation stanzas of the Prologue. Its allusion to the Day of Judgment clearly indicates that “creation” refers to the world, as created by God; but the use of the word simultaneously puts a different, more process-oriented reading in play. The sentence has slipped further and further from its original subject, with subordinate clause modifying subordinate clause through the last line, which modifies “divine event.” In a poem which has as its clear purpose the justification of faith, or the proper preparation for such an event (recalling an early subtitle of the poem, “The Way of the Soul”), the “whole
creation” that moves toward the event is the poem—the “made” or created thing—itself. It not only “moves” in the sense of following a path (or even of “moving to the divine event,” as dancing to music), but it “moves” in the transitive, emotive sense: it moves readers to believe in the poetic, if not religious, experience it offers. Simply saying what the poem says in the Prologue, Epilogue, or any of the individual sections, is not enough. The process of movement through all these points, in the form in which they appear, is essential to the poetic experience that allows readers to understand that although the ending point seems to be the same as the beginning, it is not. The reader who arrives at the end having been through the rest of the sections is not the same as the one who started, either. That is the paradox of form, and the power of poetry in unfolding that paradox and, as in the Hesper-Phosphor metaphor Tennyson uses near the start and finish of the poem (sections 9 and 121), in making the same thing appear different and making different things appear the same.\(^7\)

Tennyson’s brilliance in *In Memoriam*, then, is that he is simply marking time. The changes he describes and relives all require the process of time’s passage, and at a fundamental level he is merely illustrating that process.

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\(^7\) Interestingly, Tennyson here follows the precept described by Wordsworth in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: “Among the chief of these causes [of pleasure received from metrical language] is to be reckoned a principle which must be well known to those who have made any of the Arts the object of accurate reflection; I mean the pleasure which the mind derives from the perception of similitude in dissimilitude. This principle is the great spring of the activity of our minds and their chief feeder” (Wordsworth, “Preface” 173). For a more contemporary discussion of how this principle functions, see Mark Turner, *Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991).
However, he shows that how one goes about marking time makes all the difference in the world, and that in this case, in the increasingly complex modern world, by allowing the cycles to unfold and persisting in the face of seemingly insurmountable difficulty, pain, and hopelessness, one can end up with something extraordinary. In that sense, *In Memoriam* truly does provide consolation and encouragement, and it is no wonder the book was on countless bookshelves during Tennyson’s time. Its form both describes and enacts its purpose.

The form of chiasmus serves Tennyson well; but not all poets shared his same goals. In contrast to Tennyson, Robert Browning looked not to the present as his point of departure, but to the past. In the next chapter, we’ll look at how his poem attempting to bring the past to life in the present does things a bit differently.
Whereas Tennyson marks the passage of time in *In Memoriam*, exploring the consequences of a single event on a single observer who changes over time, Robert Browning in *The Ring and the Book* marks a moment in time long past and explores how several observers perceive and participate in that moment. That is: Tennyson holds the observing perspective constant while its context changes (and thus it too must change as a result), while Browning holds the context constant and shifts observers. Clearly, each approach results in a quite different poetic text; but both texts arise from the same impulse to convey transcendence through poetic experience, which in the modern period often means: through a poetics of complexity.

The poetic form most obviously suited to Browning’s needs is the dramatic monologue, the form he almost single-handedly perfected in his earlier volumes of poetry. Not only does the form foreground speaker and setting to allow the kinds of contrasts and comparisons necessary to sustain interest in the basic story of *The Ring and the Book* over more than 21,000 lines of verse, but it embodies from the outset the basic principles of a poetics of complexity I have argued for here. Before showing how Browning uses the dramatic monologue for the purposes of a modern long poem, then, I will discuss it as a complex-poetic form in its own right.
Many of Browning’s dramatic monologues are quite lengthy. “Mr. Sludge, ‘The Medium,’” for instance, consists of 1525 lines of verse; “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” has 1014. Neither of these, however, is long in the same way that *In Memoriam* is, for example, or even Browning’s own *Sordello*, a long episodic narrative poem. “Sludge” and “Bishop Blougram” each take place in a single extended scene, as do the majority of Browning’s dramatic monologues. This observance of the unities of time, place, and action makes the poems cohere in the same way many other lengthy poetic forms do: e.g., ballads, elegies, verse epistles, which all imply unity in the text. In other words, when there is no potential for fragmentation, the poem is not a long poem in the sense relevant to this study. Browning’s dramatic monologues by themselves, then, are actually modern poems that might or might not be long, rather than modern long poems.

The modernity of the dramatic monologue as a form has been extensively discussed, usually by differentiating the form’s principles from those of Romantic poetics (Tucker, *Browning’s Beginnings* 3; Armstrong 3-4; Martin 23-26). The primary differences appear to be the ways in which Victorian and later writers imagined themselves as modern, stemming from cultural feelings of alienation and groundlessness beginning in the Romantic period. Niklas Luhmann describes this growth of the modern sensibility as it arises in Romanticism:

The romantic critique of Idealism focused on the unresolved problem of communication. One preferred “hovering” in a state of undecidability, because communication no longer found stability in
the old categories of an ontological metaphysics and because even successful communication could not compensate for this lack. . . .

One cultivated humor and irony as forms of communication, as the presentation [Darstellung] of a “hovering” self-relation. Since information (hetero-reference) lacked certainty, one relied all the more on utterance [Mitteilung] (self-reference). It is possible to understand the romantics’ longing for unity and wholeness as a cipher for a problem of communication . . . . (Luhmann, Art 284)

This destabilization of communication is the origin of Romantic irony, which found its most clear expression in aesthetic critiques of the period, particularly those of Friedrich Schlegel (Slinn 38-41; Ryals 4-13). As Luhmann puts it: “Resolute awareness of the chasm between art and the ‘real world’ was called irony; irony was dead serious, so to speak, about the fact that it did not take the world seriously; it was a consistently maintained self-assertion” (Luhmann, Art 286-87). The signal difference between conventional understandings of Romantic irony and complexity theory’s interpretation of the same phenomenon is that complexity theory focuses less on the two sides of the distinction between art object and real world and more on the fact of the distinction itself. By doing so, it shows that the distinction re-enters itself: that is, any distinction between an object in the world and the world itself must be self-referential, for the distinction cannot be made without the object’s having already been indicated. As Luhmann puts it:
The difference between the universal and the particular is replicated within the particular, and the difference between the intellect and the senses recurs within the sensuous realm. The artwork, so to speak, takes on the burden of paradox and dissolves it in its own formal arrangements; one then sees quite concretely: it works!

One can treat a number of distinctions in this manner. When the distinction between system and environment is reintroduced into the system in the form of the distinction between self-reference and hetero-reference, then used within the system to determine the self (for example, as effort and beauty), this, too, is an operation of reentry, whose function is to provide the observer with a workable distinction. And reentries are always forms, that is to say, distinctions, on whose other side paradox is not to be seen.

(Luhmann, *Art* 301)

The re-entry of form into the form unfolds the paradox of the difference of the gap between art object and world by focusing on the distinction and, therefore, on the observer who makes it (Spencer-Brown 76).

The dramatic monologue foregrounds exactly this re-entry of form into the form, which results in the second-order reading central to the poetics of complexity. Other descriptions of the dramatic monologue do not adequately account for the re-entry. For example, in perhaps the best-known study of the dramatic monologue, *The Poetry of Experience*, Robert Langbaum describes the
doubleness of the reader’s perspective in terms of sympathy versus judgment (Langbaum 75-108), a choice between only first-order approaches to the text. That is: in both the sympathetic and judgmental approaches to the dramatic monologue, readers do not observe themselves as readers; they merely sympathize with or judge the poem’s speaker from their perspective as observers. Loy Martin argues for a different kind of doubleness:

Dramatic monologues call attention to the fact that language within their domain seems to operate both at a level that is consciously “poetic” in some traditional sense and at a separate syntactic, semantic, or merely “message” level. And these two levels give at least the initial impression that one is independently variable with respect to the other. This implies, for one thing, an ontological division between what language is as an artificial and malleable aesthetic medium and what it says as a constant medium of human communication. The self-conscious doubleness of the dramatic monologue points out, in other words, an alienation between poetry and discourse . . . . (Martin 112-13)

While this description comes nearer the mark, it still fails to take into account the re-entry of form that would relate the two views of language not simply as two sides of a distinction but as recursive as well (i.e., the distinction between language as constant and language as malleable re-enters itself on the side of constancy, since in order for it to be malleable in form it must be a constant medium). A description of the dramatic monologue according to the poetics of
complexity does not contradict existing scholarship on the form so much as refine it; the description resonates with these previous insights while presenting a difference that makes a difference.

The difference is that the recursive (i.e., simultaneous second-order) reading takes place in the medium of written language, which explains precisely why a dramatic monologue is poetic rather than merely dramatic. The distinction between what can be marked in language and what cannot is the fundamental distinction of poetry as a genre; the fundamental distinction of drama is between that which can be observed and that which cannot.¹ While dramatic monologues present scenes in which speakers are on some level oblivious to the meanings of their own words—involving the observed/unobserved distinction—those scenes are mediated by language that is (for Browning, at least) conventionally artificial. To extend Luhmann’s definition of Romantic irony presented above: the difference between the art object and the real world mirrors the difference between the reader as invisible auditor of the speaker’s words and the reader as audience of the poet’s text, what James Phelan describes as a difference between the narrative audience and the authorial audience (Phelan 5). Both of these mutually implicated distinctions are re-entering: the first one as previously described, and the second one through the sameness of the text, since the poet’s

¹ Poetic dramas may of course be both dramatic and poetic as well, whether observed in performance or read on the page. What makes plays such as Shakespeare’s or Marlowe’s poetic is the use of language that calls attention to itself as well as to the scene being played out. The poetic aspect of such dramas, however, is generally not their primary concern, which is why they are generally regarded as plays and not poems.
text is the speaker’s words. This is not the same thing as “double-voicing,” as it is sometimes called, since the re-entry of the reader’s distinction does not take place merely in voice. It takes place in language, and thus can avail itself of any recursive device inherent in that medium, which includes visual and aural devices. The dramatic monologue differentiates itself from both drama and other forms of lyric poetry by its simultaneous mimesis of voice and recursion in language.

Browning’s best-known poem, “My Last Duchess,” serves as an excellent example of how the poetics of complexity works in the dramatic monologue. In the first two lines, the poem calls attention to the gap between an art object and the real world:

That’s my last duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. (1-2)\(^2\)

As speech, these lines ask us to imagine the scene: a man calls attention to a visual representation of a person who is now dead. At the same time, as text-art, the lines call our attention to a linguistic representation of the Duke as if he were alive. This simultaneous indication-within-indication prepares us for a recursive reading of the rest of the poem. It continues:

I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf’s hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will’t please you sit and look at her? I said
“Frà Pandolf” by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,

The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. (2-13)

The basic ideas of this passage are authorship and reading, with emphasis on who has control of those processes. In addition to the obvious reference to the painter Frà Pandolf, the passage also directly indicates the Duke’s own speech-production: “I said / ‘Frà Pandolf’ by design.” This self-indication simultaneously calls our attention to the design of the text itself, since of course the duke says everything he says only through the higher-order design of the poet. The rhyme scheme here is crucial to the poet’s purpose, since it makes sure that when readers notice the text’s design, it is recursive in the medium of language (i.e., language’s visual or aural self-reference), not merely thematically or semantically. It might be sufficient for readers to notice the lineation, and possibly the meter; it usually takes a much more careful reading to discern that the entire poem is in rhymed pentameter couplets. The juxtaposition of the speech-like cadences with the absolutely regular verse form is not less remarkable for its being subtle; the fact that the poem requires a deliberate second-order reading to notice it fits well with the poem’s first-order point that the portrait of the duchess is indeed a wonder precisely because of its subtleties and nuances.

The Duke himself is an extraordinarily subtle speaker, which makes the moments when he draws our attention to his own speech instead of its ostensible subject all the more noticeable. The two major instances:
She had
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed . . . (21-23)

Even had you skill
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one . . . (35-37)

The first of these shows the Duke’s awareness and control over his language; the second shows his ironic disclaimer of that very control. Herbert Tucker discusses these passages, however, not merely as evidence of the Duke’s rhetorical skill but also of his struggle with the basic problem of communication:

[T]he Duke is drawn back to the portrait, in order once again to undertake the task of figuring his last Duchess out. The Duke in his monologue and other source-hunting speakers in theirs track this power [of untamed meaning] to its dwelling in a gap between signs and meanings—a gap indicated by the Duke in referring to the Duchess’s inexplicably joyful “speech, / Or blush, at least.” It is with that eloquent blush, when the sign she makes is irreducibly “least,” that the mysterious power of the Duchess is greatest; for then it hints most strongly at the potential energy of a meaning that persistently eludes formulation. Her “earnest glance” gives an earnest of her escape from any interpretive confines. (Tucker, *Browning’s Beginnings* 180-81)

What frightens the Duke, in other words, is the fact that meaning is the unity of the distinction between actuality and potentiality in language (Luhmann, *Art* 107-08), and that in order for him to grasp it he will have to “stoop,” by making
distinctions that run the risk of being unpersuasive to others or unflattering to himself. The Duchess’s smiles appear in different contexts, yet he claims that “’twas all one” (25): he cannot distinguish how that text appears to him from how it appears to others, since any acknowledgment of the comparison would imply diminishment of his lofty status. Tucker characterizes his behavior as focusing on the gap between form and content; in the light of complexity theory, this focus indicates the Duke’s real problem. As complexity theory shows, the distinction between form and content is false—there is no gap between them—so by dwelling in such a distinction, one misses the opportunity to avail oneself of the power of meaning and thus transcend limitations. Tucker describes a first-order interpretation of the poem that suggests a second-order analogy:

“My Last Duchess” may be considered a study in the reductive study of poetry, with the face of a Duchess as a highly figured text and the Duke as a “reader” of “that pictured countenance,” a student impatient of uncertainties who would fix the meaning of a text beyond doubt, regardless of the cost to its vitality. By giving commands to obliterate the spot of joy, the Duke’s reductive reading would reduce what all reductive reading reduces: the difference, where poetry grows, between intention and execution; or, in temporal terms, the difference between “meaning” conceived as a beginning and as an end. (Tucker, Browning’s Beginnings 182)
The poetics of complexity recasts these insights with an understanding of meaning as a medium in which both actuality and potentiality are at play simultaneously. A poem means anything at all only because it could mean something else, yet it means exactly (and only) what readers take it to mean. So at the first order, the Duke appears both powerful through his ability to make the text of his last Duchess come to a fixed meaning, and powerless because he does not recognize that the only possibility for doing so is to cancel all the marks, to remove all the distinctions of the woman/text and reduce her to nothing. Seen this way, the poem illustrates the Duke’s utter failure, since the text of the Duchess has simply been replaced by the text of the Duchess’s portrait, over which the Duke’s control is limited to drawing back the curtain in front of it. Now the second-order recursive reading comes into play: by seeing the Duke’s ability to make meaning along with his inability to see how that meaning limits his power, readers of the poem see that they too have the power to find meaning in the text, but only if they also recognize that the meaning is contingent and ultimately says as much about their meaning-making power as it does about the poem. Phelan’s “authorial audience” takes on added significance in this light: readers are not merely paying attention to the synthetic elements of the text provided by the author; they are in a sense authoring the meanings they derive from their poetic experience. As a form, the dramatic monologue makes this simultaneous awareness of the mimetic and synthetic elements in the text, of oneself as part of both the narrative and authorial audiences, of both first- and second-order readings, an inevitable part of reading the text as a poem.
In a famous letter to John Ruskin in 1855, Browning himself describes the process by which readers make their own meanings out of a poetic text. Responding to Ruskin’s criticism of *Men and Women* that it is too difficult and obscure, Browning replies:

> For your bewilderment more especially noted—how shall I help *that*? We don’t read poetry the same way, by the same law; it is too clear. I cannot begin writing poetry till my imaginary reader has conceded licences to me which you demur at altogether. I *know* that I don’t make out my conception by my language; all poetry being a putting the infinite within the finite. You would have me paint it all plain out, which can’t be; but by various artifices I try to make shift with touches and bits of outlines which *succeed* if they bear the conception from me to you. You ought, I think, to keep pace with the thought tripping from ledge to ledge of my “glaciers,” as you call them; not stand poking your alpenstock into the holes, and demonstrating that no foot could have stood there;—suppose it sprang over there? In *prose* you may criticize so—because that is the absolute representation of portions of truth, what chronicling is to history—but in asking for more *ultimates* you must accept less *mediates*, nor expect that a Druid stone-circle will be traced for you with as few breaks to the eye as the North Crescent and South Crescent that go together so cleverly in many a suburb. (Browning, *Poetry and Prose* 751)
Looking back at this passage with the benefit of the terminology of complexity theory, we recognize that Browning is talking about the same basic problem of emergence that the dramatic monologue as a form so neatly solves. Rephrasing Browning’s response in complexity-theory terms: in order for readers to understand transcendent truths through the mediation of language (the infinite within the finite), they paradoxically must expect less from the language itself and more from their own recognition of the artifice at work in the language (more ultimates through fewer mediates). In other words, they must see themselves as poetic, not merely information-seeking, readers—that is, they must employ second-order self-observation—and thus spring over—or, in Hofstadter’s terms, “push” through—potential pitfalls that catch those who observe only at the first order. Especially noteworthy is Browning’s admission that readers alone have the ability to do this, and that some readers will not find his poetry meaningful, because of either their lack of skill in poetic reading or their differing tastes.

Interestingly, the same keynotes of the letter to Ruskin are struck at the close of *The Ring and the Book*:

> How look a brother in the face and say
> “Thy right is wrong, eyes hast thou yet art blind,
> Thine ears are stuffed and stopped, despite their length,
> And, oh, the foolishness thou countest faith!”
> Say this as silverly as tongue can troll—
> The anger of the man may be endured,
> The shrug, the disappointed eyes of him
> Are not so bad to bear—but here’s the plague
> That all this trouble comes of telling truth,
> Which truth, by when it reaches him, looks false,
> Seems to be just the thing it would supplant,
> Nor recognizable by whom it left—
While falsehood would have done the work of truth.
But Art,—wherein man nowise speaks to man,
Only to mankind,—Art may tell a truth
Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,
Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word.
So may you paint your picture, twice show truth,
Beyond mere imagery on the wall,—
So, note by note, bring music from your mind,
Deeper than ever the Andante dived,—
So write a book shall mean, beyond the facts,
Suffice the eye and save the soul beside. (12.841-63)³

Browning again indicates—this time through the narrator-persona of the poem, who closely resembles him—that the only way for truth to be communicated reliably is through second-order observation: to “twice show truth” and “mean beyond the facts.” Of course this claim could be refuted by pointing out the *mise en abyme* that results from taking any observation as a first-order perspective of its own, for which there is always a higher order from which to observe it. But its appearance following the story of a murder trial—in which the primary concerns have been the accessibility of truth, the reliability of witnesses and evidence, the proper use of language and writing, and the relationship between means and ends—signals recursion, and thus the infinite regress comes paradoxically (how else?) to a stop. Not only does the passage refer to poetry in general, it refers back to this very poem in particular, and so the resonance between the two references is central in convincing readers of the accuracy of both of them.

Just as “My Last Duchess” uses reading as the primary self-referential element connecting the first- and second-order perspectives on the poem to

generate an emergent sense of the truth “beyond the facts” the Duke offers, The
Ring and the Book uses writing for the same purpose. Many of Browning’s other
dramatic monologues employ artistic creation self-referentially: “Andrea del
Sarto” and “Fra Lippo Lippi,” for instance, use painting as a way of making their
statements about both the speaking character and the poem in which they
appear. Over the course of a dozen monologues, however, the self-reference
must be even more explicit else it appear to be really only hetero-reference after
all. In order for the entire work to cohere as a poem, the recursive element must
involve writing, not a more general art form. For this reason, instances of writing
are the primary locations at which the individual monologues establish what is
true according to their speakers and at which the monologues refer to each other
in order to generate a larger-scale recursive structure across monologues. Thus it
is that writing, not truth, serves as the pivot for the poem’s central analogy of the
ring and the book (in which gold : ring :: book : poem). For obvious reasons, the
ring analogy (usually described as the ring metaphor, which more accurately is
ring = poem) has been the subject of numerous studies, and a full discussion of
them is beyond the scope of this project. For now, I would like to point out that
contrary to the observations of most critics, who refer to only one metaphor (the
ring), there are actually two metaphors, since the book in the ring analogy stands
in for what has come to be known as the Old Yellow Book (OYB), the actual
collection of legal proceedings and correspondence that Browning drew from for
his source material. The narrator claims that the material in the book is shaped
by the artist’s fancy or skill to make the poem, and readers often understand the
claim metaphorically (and with biographical evidence) to mean that Browning the poet took the material in the OYB to write *The Ring and the Book*, but without seeing that this understanding is fundamentally metaphorical. As a result, readers have become fascinated with the discrepancies between the facts as described in the OYB and in the poem, and with the issues of judgment and authorial bias. Such fascinations fail to take into account how the book metaphor works, which in analogy form is book : poem :: OYB : poem. Note that the two instances of “poem” here are not identical: the first is the poem as conceptual event; the second is the poem as textual artifact. From the first-order perspective of the reader, the term “poem” in the book metaphor, then, is both self-referential (it refers to itself within the poem) and hetero-referential (it refers to the physical object created by the poet, which is not within the text because it is the text). To observe both senses, readers must assume a second-order perspective from which they can observe themselves reading the poem; and as we have seen, this is the necessary complex-poetic moment.

Much of the confusion about truth and judgment in the poem stems from readers’ simply combining the book and ring analogies to derive gold : ring :: OYB : poem. By locating the second-order objects (the OYB and the poem as written artifact) within the frame of the first-order analogy, flattening them to a single perspectival level, readers lose the simultaneity of the two perspectives and focus on the text more as information and less as poetry. This analysis explains why Browning scholars have devoted so much attention to the text’s consistency (or lack thereof) with the “facts” as laid out in the Old Yellow Book:
if the OYB figures so prominently in Browning’s central ring metaphor, the argument goes, readers need to know what was in it and how it appears within the poem. As it happens, though, the OYB does not appear in the ring metaphor, only in the book metaphor—and in that instance only as the implied tenor of the metaphor. The book metaphor’s purpose in the poem is to connect the poem as conceptual event and the poem as physical artifact more explicitly within the reading experience, so that the ring metaphor may contain within it both self- and hetero-reference (i.e., so that “poem” more clearly refers to itself both as object and as artwork simultaneously). Having established that poetic connection, the book metaphor has no other purpose within the first-order perspective of the poem’s readers; any other significance it and the OYB now have is extra-literary, in the realm of historical or biographical studies. The poem’s narrator even says as much, in reply to a supposed skeptic of the worth of his tale:

"Thanks meantime for the story, long and strong,
A pretty piece of narrative enough,
Which scarce ought so to drop out, one would think,
From the more curious annals of our kind.
Do you tell the story, now, in off-hand style,
Straight from the book? Or simply here and there,
(The while you vault it through the loose and large)
Hang to a hint? Or is there book at all,
And don’t you deal in poetry, make-believe,
And the white lies it sounds like?"

Yes and no!
From the book, yes; thence bit by bit I dug
The lingot truth, that memorable day,
Assayed and knew my piecemeal gain was gold,—
Yes; but from something else surpassing that,
Something of mine which, mixed up with the mass,
Made it bear hammer and be firm to file. (1.447-63)
The poem derives “from the book,” but the “something else” that he later calls poetic fancy is the key element that makes the text a work of art, just as a goldsmith’s alloy enables gold to become a ring. The truth of *The Ring and the Book* (its ring-ness, the success of its artifice) does not necessarily depend on the truth as described in the OYB, but instead on the truth of—that is, readers’ assent to—the metaphor that connects the two. For this reason, writing (the process by which texts are generated) is more essential to the text’s poetics than truth is.

Truth still plays a key role in the poem, and not just as one of its main themes. Browning understands that truth is one of his “infinities” that really cannot be expressed in language. Nor does he conceive of truth as purely rhetorical, as becomes clear over the course of the poem as succeeding personae give their opinions on the murder case, some of whom agree in their verdicts yet somehow still seem wrong. Instead he describes truth as poetic, as existing only in the process of coming to understand it:

Well, now; there’s nothing in nor out o’ the world
Good except truth: yet this, the something else,
What’s this then, which proves good yet seems untrue?
This that I mixed with truth, motions of mine
That quickened, made the inertness malleolable
O’ the gold was not mine,—what’s your name for this?
Are means to the end, themselves in part the end?
Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?
The somehow may be thishow. (1.698-706)

The narrator here only asserts the “good”-ness of the text (but calls it “proven”), so in one sense he is arguing circularly about its truth. But since, by the laws of form, tautology is unavoidable, only more or less functional in any given instance, this circularity presents no insurmountable problems. To overcome
them, the narrator employs self-reference which carries poetic potency, as described by the poetics of complexity. Thus he may claim confidently that “Fancy with fact is just one fact the more” (1.464), that the means to the end are an end in themselves, that the somehow may be thishow—a coinage that self-referentially illustrates the basic point about means and ends. As long as readers comprehend the self-reference, they are conceding that which is to be concluded: that the text is in fact a poetic text and needs to be understood as such in order to be appreciated fully. Furthermore, this self-referential understanding—this reading of the text as poetic—suffices to make it a “live fact,” which means simply a fact that is persuasive and memorable for its audience and consequently is “true,” even if only from a second-order perspective (a “fiction” or artifice that is at the same time a “fact” or truth).

The advantage of the dramatic monologue as a vehicle is that it accommodates speakers who are not wholly truthful without undermining the effectiveness of the text in presenting true pictures of those speakers and their subjects. Since the whole truth can never be fully represented in language, the speakers of The Ring and the Book deliberately—unavoidably—present partial, biased, and often quite deceptive testimony or discussion of the “facts” under consideration. Elsewhere in the opening monologue, the narrator hints that the several versions of the story in the rest of the poem are suspect yet indispensable for formulating our own judgments. Of the poem’s own program, he says:

Let this old woe step on the stage again!
Act itself o’er anew for men to judge,
Not by the very sense and sight indeed—
(Which take at best imperfect cognizance,
Since, how heart moves brain, and how both move hand,
What mortal ever in entirety saw?)
—No dose of purer truth than man digests,
But truth with falsehood, milk that feeds him now,
Not strong meat he may get to bear some day—
To-wit, by voices we call evidence,
Uproar in the echo, live fact deadened down,
Talked over, bruited abroad, whispered away,
Yet helping us to all we seem to hear:
For how else know we save by worth of word? (1.824-37)

Readers of the poem may observe all the perspectives it presents and come to an understanding of the truth that resembles that of the Pope before he delivers his judgment in the case:

Truth, nowhere, lies yet everywhere in these—
Not absolutely in a portion, yet
Evolvable from the whole: evolved at last
Painfully, held tenaciously by me. (10.228-31)

In other words, the poem’s truth is emergent rather than immanent, and emergence is possible only through second-order operations such as the recursive operations of poetic reading.

This process is not the same thing as simply “triangulating” the truth from several standpoints—the method of the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India, completed two years before the publication of *The Ring and the Book*—since such a process will show truth only at the first order, e.g., whether the verdict in the Guido case was justified or whether it checks against the OYB. Following the triangulation model, the poem has often been held up as an example of a “relativist” poem, most notably by Langbaum, who writes:

The first sign of the poem’s relativism is in Browning’s use of dramatic monologues to tell his story. For though he does not
entirely succeed, his aim at least in telling the same story eleven times over through ten dramatic monologues and his own account in Book I was to replace the objective view of events of traditional drama and narrative with points of view. Such a method can be justified only on the relativist assumption that truth cannot be apprehended in itself but must be “induced” from particular points of view . . . . (Langbaum 109)

And addressing the narrator’s discussion of Art in Book 12, he says:

[Art] shows the truth twice in that it shows the physical facts and the metaphysical meaning behind them—opening out an extra dimension “beyond . . . the wall” because it brings to the business of understanding the mind’s deepest resource, imagination, what Wordsworth called “Reason in her most exalted mood.” Above all, art is more convincing than philosophical discourse because, confronting false formulations with facts, it causes us to start again with the facts and construct the truth for ourselves. (Langbaum 110)

While he is right about the reader’s agency in the process, Langbaum limits the “facts” in question to those of the various witnesses and documents in the case, which is only part of the story. As Browning reminds us, “fancy with fact is just one fact the more,” and that additional fact must be taken into account in order for truth to be understood in a non-relative way. That is: what is at issue is not whether Guido is guilty, since his guilt is revealed only a few hundred lines into
the poem. What is at issue is whether the reader sees that the means to the end are themselves in part the end, that the process of seeing the various perspectives and their idiosyncrasies vis-à-vis the predetermined verdict is also an integral part of the poem. Therefore, the poem needs to convince readers not only of the aptness of the verdict according to their weighing of the testimonial evidence, but also of the appropriateness of the means of their arriving at it: the poetic process. For as the narrator says in Book 12:

Why take the artistic way to prove so much?
Because, it is the glory and good of Art,
That Art remains the one way possible
Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine, at least. (12.837-40)

In other words, readers must appreciate the process at the same time that they evaluate the facts: they must read self-referentially (as an authorial audience) while they read hetero-referentially (as a narrative audience). From this poetic reading process, the truth will emerge—not about the outcome of the murder case, for that is already given, but about the “worth of word” in retelling the tale and thus about the text as a poem as well as a kind of evidentiary argument.

The individual monologues of The Ring and the Book present this truth in diverse ways, in keeping with the variety of the speakers. A detailed analysis of each of these monologues is beyond the scope of this study; here it will suffice to claim that the inherent recursiveness of the dramatic monologue form functions in each one to generate a sense of the truth “shall mean beyond the facts.” The rest of this discussion will examine the inter-monologue recursion that is made possible by the poem’s overall program. That is: each speaker is, for purposes of their respective dramatic monologues, a specialized language producer; and the
real genius of the governing fiction that connects the twelve monologues together is that it puts them equally in that position in front of the reader. Each speaker tells a story, formally or informally, publicly or privately, for various purposes—but in order to achieve those purposes they must become storytellers, language-users, authors (and authorities), and they know it. In this way, their narratives are not simply recursively framed—since they successively present the same events from different perspectives—but also recursively composed, since their narratives all concern the way in which the principals’ narratives (i.e., those of the Count, his wife, and the priest) are composed by the various pieces of evidence at hand. By examining the most explicitly recursive element in these narratives, pieces of writing, I will show not only how the monologues cohere as a modern long poem and generate an emergent sense of the truth, but also how those two outcomes codependently arise, which is the main contribution of a poetics of complexity to the study of the poem.

The monologues between the narrator’s preview and summary in Books 1 and 12 fall into three main sets: the Roman bystanders (Books 2, 3, and 4), the principals in the murder trial (Books 5, 6, and 7), and the agents of the judiciary (Books 8, 9, and 10). Book 11, Guido Franceschini’s second speech, falls outside any convenient grouping, fittingly enough: since the trial is over and he has been found guilty and condemned to death, he no longer participates in any of those communities. Each triad of monologues contains recursive patterning that invokes second-order reading strategies, and the triads themselves exhibit such patterning as well. Since the order of the monologues signifies both in the
temporal narrative of the poem and in the building of the recursive structures, I will address these nine monologues in order from Book 2 to Book 10, showing on the way how they refer back to previous monologues productively.

The first two of these monologues show the simple division among the Roman populace between Guido’s advocates and detractors: Half-Rome sides with Guido as a cuckolded husband who was entitled to avenge the deceptions played upon him for so many years; The Other Half-Rome holds Pompilia up as a pure and innocent martyr, even a saint. While the two differ in their interpretations of several details of the case, the most telling differences involve the love-letters alleged to have been exchanged between the wife and the priest. In his defense of Guido’s actions, Half-Rome relies heavily upon the evidence of the love-letters as proof of Pompilia’s infidelity. However, he is aware of Pompilia’s avowal of illiteracy and suggestion that the letters were forgeries (2.1126-47), as well as the fact that such arguments were presented well before the murders—in the trial that relegated Caponsacchi to seclusion in Civita, Pompilia to a Convertite convent outside Rome, and Guido back to Arezzo—and thus in a sense had already been taken into account by the judicial authorities. Therefore, he consciously suppresses his opinion on the authenticity of the letters while he discusses them, and only discloses his beliefs in a more subtle fashion—he suggests that the wife’s protestation of illiteracy and innocence is “a tale” invented in collaboration with the priest, since she “chimes in” with him in so protesting (2.1130-32)—or in a different context altogether, in referring to the letters Pompilia supposedly wrote to Guido’s brother Abate Paolo in Rome:
Her first deliberate measure was, she wrote,
Pricked by some loyal impulse, straight to Rome
And her husband’s brother the Abate there,
Who, having managed to effect the match,
Might take men’s measure for its ill success.

Fact this, and not a dream o’ the Devil, Sir!
And more than this, a fact none dare dispute,
Word for word, such a letter did she write. (2.684-721)

Half-Rome puts a great deal of emphasis on “facts”; yet in this particular
instance, he demonstrates via self-reference that even though his claims may be
ture, they are certainly not indisputable “facts.” First, it is clear from elsewhere in
his own monologue as well as in the rest of the poem that some do dispute that
Pompilia wrote such a letter. But further, it is obvious that any letter she sent to
Paolo was not reproduced verbatim in the lines preceding Half-Rome’s claim
that it was. That is: even if she wrote letters, Pompilia did not write the blank
verse “word for word” (or in English, either) that the monologue gives us.
Readers at this moment recognize the synthetic elements of the text—its prosody,
its diction—and therefore read it recursively. As often happens in Browning’s
dramatic monologues, the self-reference of the claim undercuts the claim itself
while simultaneously establishing at the second order that we are reading an
artificial construction, an intentionally poetic text.

The Other Half-Rome, of course, takes the opposite stance, being not a
brutal pragmatist like Half-Rome but a hopeless romantic. When it comes to the
love-letters, then, The Other Half-Rome does not care about whether Pompilia
actually traced the pen-strokes of the letters; he cares about whether the content
of the letters coheres with the characters of the senders. As appealing a view of
the case as this is, its unfolding in the monologue indicates that it is no more objective or provable than Half-Rome’s surface truth. In a telling passage, The Other Half-Rome describes the essential problem of legal proceedings as a matter of whose word to trust:

So should the heaped-up shames go shuddering back
O’ the head o’ the heapers, Pietro and his wife,
And bury in the breakage three at once:
While Guido, left free, no one right renounced,
Gain present, gain prospective, all the gain,
None of the wife except her rights absorbed,
Should ask law what it was law paused about—
If law were dubious still whose word to take,
The husband’s—dignified and derelict,
Or the wife’s—the . . . what I tell you. It should be. (3.728-37)

In other words, The Other Half-Rome’s decision against Guido is based on an arbitrary belief that the unsavory character is necessarily guilty of the crimes alleged, and that his own views are what should be the case, regardless of whether they are the case. In this instance, his beliefs accord with the facts as found in the rest of the poem, and so in a sense he arrives at the correct conclusion; but, in what Langbaum calls “the poem’s boldest stroke” (Langbaum 117), he does so for the wrong reason. While Pompilia and Caponsacchi appear to be innocent of adultery, they seem to The Other Half-Rome to be the ideal characters of courtly love: innocent, yes, but involved in a purer kind of romance than the business-like marriage transaction of Pompilia and Guido. He bases this perception on his belief in Pompilia’s illiteracy and Caponsacchi’s courtesy:

Men are men: why then need I say one word
More than this, that our man the Canon here
Saw, pitied, loved Pompilia?

This is why;
This startling why: that Caponsacchi’s self—
Whom foes and friends alike avouch, for good
Or ill, a man of truth whate’er betide,

—‘Tis strange then that this else abashless mouth
Should yet maintain, for truth’s sake which is God’s,
That it was not he made the first advance,
That, even ere word had passed between the two,
Pompilia penned him letters, passionate prayers,
If not love, then so simulating love
That he, no novice to the taste of thyme,
Turned from such over-luscious honey-clot
At end o’ the flower, and would not lend his lip
Till . . . but the tale here frankly outsoars faith:
There must be falsehood somewhere. For her part,
Pompilia quietly constantly avers
She never penned a letter in her life
Nor to the Canon nor any other man,
Being incompetent to write and read . . . (3.880-911)

Because Caponsacchi knew enough not to besmirch a lady’s reputation by
revealing that she made the first advances to him, and because Pompilia could
not possibly have done so, and because both are clearly telling the truth (!), The
Other Half-Rome concludes that there must be some other explanation that
reconciles their two accounts: that Guido forged Pompilia’s letters and that
Pompilia burned Caponsacchi’s (dismissive) replies unread (3.949-63). His
conclusion is unabashedly tautological: “there must be falsehood” indicates that
he simply has “faith” in his version of the events. Only a second-order reading,
one that observes the circular reasoning as circular, enables readers to see its
arbitrariness. The Other Half-Rome bases his entire interpretation of the case on
the belief that Guido created all the letters that, intentionally or not, set the
events in motion, and that he is therefore essentially at fault. This belief in the
inauthenticity of the letters is no less arbitrary than Half-Rome’s belief in their
authenticity, yet because we know already that Guido is found guilty of murder, the arbitrariness does not stand out. Only when The Other Half-Rome’s version of the story is read recursively—not merely as contradictory to Half-Rome’s, but as indicative of the self-referential elements found in both monologues—can it take its place in the larger scheme of the total poem.

A third bystander, Tertium Quid, gives his version of the case next, and in doing so completes the triad that many erroneously believe represents the relativist method of the poem. Whereas Half-Rome and The Other Half-Rome offer two sides of the case in the most basic terms (the righteous vengeance of a cheated husband vs. the murder of an innocent abused wife), Tertium Quid offers what he thinks is a more subtle version that turns out simply to be more confusing. Tertium Quid speaks in his monologue to a pair of nobles with whom he wishes to ingratiate himself; he attempts to show the complexities of the case, both to flatter their higher capacity for understanding and to differentiate himself from “this rabble’s-brabble of dolts and fools / Who make up reasonless unreasoning Rome” (4.10-11). Therefore he presents as well as he can both sides of the case, so that his wise addressees can make up their own minds on the guilt of the accused. He offers no decisive opinion on the authenticity of the love-letters at the heart of the case, since to do so would be to offer the verdict ex cathedra that he desperately wants to avoid. He believes that anyone who comprehends the entirety of the case, as the mechanisms of law and the misinformed masses cannot, will come to the correct conclusion, so he tries to give as complete a view of the facts as he can. He is blind to the flaw in this
belief, however, and fails to realize he is subject to the same error he ascribes to
Guido and Pompilia’s parents during their marriage negotiations:

    Mind knew its own mind: but when mind must speak,
    The bargain have expression in plain terms,
    There was the blunder incident to words,
    And in the clumsy process, fair turned foul. (4.510-13)

Instead of making the case more clear, he leaves his narrative audience
bewildered and unable to decide which side is right, and thus he fails to achieve
either of his objectives: neither the discovery of the truth nor his advancement
with that audience (4.1632-40). At the same time, the authorial audience—who
reads recursively—observes his dual objectives and his failure to achieve them.
While the narrative audience (the first-order reader) fails to be convinced
because of the speaker’s confusion of the facts of the case, the authorial audience
becomes convinced only of the speaker’s inability to argue a case, which results
in his method’s being discounted as a first-order approach to truth.

    In microcosm, this first triad plays out the way The Ring and the Book has
been traditionally understood: a text in which different perspectives on the truth
are presented, and the juxtaposition of the several perspectives results in a richer,
more complete account of the truth that makes us understand the genius of the
poet in offering the perspectives. However, Tertium Quid’s monologue belies
this view of things. While Half-Rome and The Other Half-Rome merely give
away their own biases in their monologues, thus undercutting their own
conclusions, Tertium Quid’s refusal to show a bias one way or the other is even
worse, since it renders his conclusion inconclusive and shows only that he really
does not know how to make a case at all. Browning includes Tertium Quid, an
outlier character in many ways, to make just this point: that merely presenting
the various sides of a given story does not necessarily make a text poetic or even
coherent. The means by which the sides are presented and arranged makes all
the difference in arriving at the desired end; by including a monologue on the
ineffectiveness of certain kinds of arrangement, Browning implicitly—or, at the
second order, explicitly—asks readers to contrast it with his own method in the
overall scheme of things. Since mere juxtaposition is not his method, readers
must pay attention to what the method is: through recursive reading, they notice
the poem’s own recursion. Having thus been prepared by a closer look at “facts,”
readers are now in a position to pay poetic attention (simultaneously self- and
other-directed) to some of the central concerns of the second triad of monologues
—those of Guido Franceschini, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, and Pompilia—the
relationship between means and ends, process and product, poiesis and poetry.

The Count offers his testimony to the court in order to refute the charge of
murder, and on the face of it, he presents a reasonably good case—because for
the most part he defeats expectations about what his defense ought to be, such as
those of Half-Rome and Tertium Quid. In the matter of several points of fact,
particularly concerning the forged letters, Guido surprisingly admits everything,
and thus turns the case not upon whether such acts occurred but whether those
acts were justified. His primary defense is that “all means to the lawful end / Are
lawful likewise” (5.1189-90). He first employs it while addressing the fact that he
is actually not as wealthy as the Comparini believed him to be when he
contracted for their supposed daughter’s hand:
I am charged, I know, with gilding fact by fraud;
I falsified and fabricated, wrote
Myself down roughly richer than I prove,
Rendered a wrong revenue,—grant it all!
Mere grace, mere coquetry such fraud, I say:
A flourish round the figures of a sum
For fashion’s sake, that deceives nobody. (5.493-99)

This particular instance recalls the narrator from Book I, who feels himself accused of having simply made up the story and embellished its language to make it into poetry. The narrator claims in his defense that such artistry is not mere “gilding,” which implies that the essence is unchanged; he offers instead the ring metaphor which indicates the bringing into existence of an entirely new thing in which any “fraud”—or “fancy,” as he calls it—plays a role more than simply as ornamentation. In contrast, Guido tries to show that the details are insignificant to the main point, which was to conclude the negotiations beneficial to both parties (Pompilia notably absent from these). Through the contrast that the text’s recursion enables, the authorial audience sees the disparity between Guido’s argument and the frame-narrator’s, and is in a position to understand Guido the accused at the first order and Guido the speaker at the second order.

In this instance, the recursive reference back to Book I is accompanied by a metaphor employing the poem’s basic self-referential element of writing (Guido figuratively wrote himself down for a sum), just as in the earlier example of “My Last Duchess” the speaker’s desire for, and lack of, control over the duchess is mirrored in the text by his discussion and display of the duchess’s portrait. Neither figure is accidental. In “My Last Duchess,” the physical artifact is a visual representation of the person, so that the effects of looking (the Duchess’s
looks that went everywhere; the Duke’s jealous looking at her; the power of controlling who looks at what and when, with the lack of control over how) are foregrounded in the poem and generate the second-order reading of the poem as a study of observation. In *The Ring and the Book*, in order to connect the semantic content (the valence of lying) more strongly with the explicit form (the written artifact of the poem), Browning uses a figure that refers to itself and to the elements of the narrative simultaneously. At the first order, its use by Guido in the narrative indicates his belief that readers determine the meaning of a text: they observe textual forms and derive content from them (i.e., become informed) according to their awareness of various contexts. If they misread the context, well . . . *caveat lector*.

But when Guido discusses his forgery of Pompilia’s letters, his defense relies on the reverse claim—that from the observation of forms one should be able to *derive* the proper context in which to interpret them, or that forms should be universally comprehensible regardless of context. Such an argument attempts to justify any claim whatsoever, since (as Borges’s “The Library of Babel” illustrates so well) a coherent context can be imagined for any text. In hopes of this premise’s acceptance, then, he argues that he was justified in forcing Pompilia to trace the characters of letters he wrote so that she could in a technical sense be called their writer:

Mine and not hers the letter,—conceded, lords!  
Impute to me that practice!—take as proved  
I taught my wife her duty, made her see  
What it behoved her see and say and do,  
Feel in her heart and with her tongue declare,  
And, whether sluggish or recalcitrant,
Forced her to take the right step, I myself
Marching in mere marital rectitude! (5.852-59)

Guido cannot have it both ways, of course, at least not as he imagines he can. Although form and content are codependently arising phenomena, what counts for both depends on the observer; and one observer cannot impose forms on another observer. Thus the illiterate Pompilia cannot be said to have written the letter, even if she traced the characters, because she is incapable of drawing the same distinctions as a literate person. In this case, Guido wishes to adhere to a simple “form yields content” formula, when the reality of interpretation and authorship are more complex than that, as he acknowledges in the previous example. His about-face shows that even when he gets things right, he does so for the wrong reasons or entirely by chance. He will stake his claim on anything that will save his life, and since he does not know what that is, he tries everything, at the risk of inconsistency if not outright fallacy. He even attempts to brush aside the flaws attendant on such waffling by suggesting that the forms are merely forms, incidental to the content behind them, in a strongly recursive passage discussing his forgery of the love-letters:

The letters,—do they so incriminate?
But what if the whole prove a prank o’ the pen,
Flight of the fancy, none of theirs at all,
Bred of the vapours of my brain belike,
Or at worst mere exercise of scholar’s-wit
In the courtly Caponsacchi: verse, convict? (5.1203-08)

Guido means his rhetorical question to have a negative answer for his narrative audience, but to the reader at the second order the answer is clearly affirmative. The second-order reading also recalls that Guido is presented here in verse—the
basic prosodic recursion of the dramatic monologue—which in this instance signals an ironic use of the verse form. Guido imagines he is simply speaking, not speaking verse, yet he interrogates the efficacy of verse in presenting a true description of a speaker when all we have is a verse depiction of him. Once again, the recursive reading indicates the problems with his argument and supports the overall argument that he is guilty while at the same time calling readerly attention to the mechanism by which this support is provided, to the means to the end as well as to the end itself.

The next speaker, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, the priest who escorts Pompilia in her flight to Rome, calls direct attention to the question of means and ends in his discussion of the love-letters. In his account, he consistently rebuffs Pompilia’s apparent advances, which he interprets (correctly) as coming from her jealous husband to entrap him. Yet in the end, they serve their purpose of bringing him to Pompilia’s window on a fateful evening, as one day a letter comes beseeching him not to come to her window on account of Guido’s return to Arezzo:

I wrote—“You raise my courage, or call up My curiosity, who am but man. Tell him he owns the palace, not the street Under—that’s his and yours and mine alike.” (6.651-54)

The reverse psychology works (although whose work it was, Guido’s or the go-between’s, is not made clear); but this time Pompilia has indeed authorized the summons, as she herself states in her own monologue (7.1358) as well as in Caponsacchi’s account (6.865-68). Thus, despite its form, the summons is made and answered, which raises an important question of interpretation:
Here is another point
I bid you pause at. When I told thus far,
Someone said, subtly, “Here at least was found
Your confidence in error,—you perceived
The spirit of the letters, in a sort,
Had been the lady’s, if the body should be
Supplied by Guido: say, he forged them all!
Here was the unforged fact—she sent for you,
Spontaneously elected you to help,
—What men call, loved you: Guido read her mind,
Gave it expression to assure the world
The case was just as he foresaw: he wrote,
She spoke.” (6.896-908)

The Canon’s detractors would have us believe that all means to the end are
equivalent: because Pompilia wanted Caponsacchi to come, Guido’s forging the
letters is immaterial to the case. In other words, they argue, Caponsacchi is only a
first-order reader of the letters, and since the first-order reading “Pompilia wants
Caponsacchi to come” is the same whether she wrote them or not, the
communication of the essential information is complete despite the flaws in the
transmission. And those flaws result in other errors on his part: on the basis of
the letters, he mistakenly believes Guido is lying in wait for him with Pompilia as
bait, for which reason Caponsacchi comes across as a knight-errant more than a
holy man. He seems to be doing the right thing for the wrong reason, which
recalls The Other Half-Rome and foreshadows the second speaker in the third
triad (Bottini) as well. And just as in The Other Half-Rome’s monologue, only a
second-order reading which takes into account the difference between medium
and form can explain why it matters whether Guido forged the letters and why
Caponsacchi’s behavior is ultimately vindicated, despite his behavior’s seeming
contradiction with his priestly role. If we read recursively (that is, poetically), we will understand correctly his explanation for his actions:

Pompilia spoke, and I at once received,
Accepted my own fact, my miracle
Self-authorised and self-explained,—she chose
To summon me and signify her choice.
Afterward,—oh! I gave a passing glance
To a certain ugly cloud-shape, goblin-shred
Of hell-smoke hurrying past the splendid moon
Out now to tolerate no darkness more,
And saw right through the thing that tried to pass
For truth and solid, not an empty lie:
“So, he not only forged the words for her
But words for me, made letters he called mine:
What I sent, he retained, gave these in place,
All by the mistress-messenger! As I
Recognized her, at potency of truth,
So she, by the crystalline soul, knew me,
Never mistook the signs.”  (6.918-34)

On one level Caponsacchi is merely admitting that he finds Pompilia persuasive as well as innocent; but he significantly describes the persuasion as self-authorization and self-explanation. Unlike The Other Half-Rome, Caponsacchi understands that his beliefs are circular, even though they are grounded in his direct communications with Pompilia. What he fails to understand is the paradox that he can know the soul behind the signs only through the mediation afforded by her speech and her person, which are merely non-written signs. As recursive readers ourselves, we can see this paradox and understand why his reasons are ultimately wrong at the authorial level, even while appreciating that at the narrative level he has done well. And when we read his monologue recursively, we see that we perceive his acceptance of Pompilia as innocent and true only through his own mediation of that experience, which we read both as his
narrative in the monologue and as the simultaneous creation of the poet. What is true for Caponsacchi is also true for us: we must be aware that if we accept his narrative as “true,” we do so as a self-authorizing choice that results in our acceptance of the authorial/authorizing text that brings the tale to us. Since the authorization depends on the re-entry of the written form, the text operates according to the poetics of complexity, and presents an effective unfolding of the paradoxes of form in the service of discovering the truth at the authorial level, even if the truth is not exactly as the monologue’s speaker would have us believe at the narrative level.

If Caponsacchi is right for the wrong (or at least misguided) reasons, and Guido is simply wrong, Pompilia represents a third possibility: simply being right. However, as is demonstrated by the first triad of speakers, such rectitude cannot be so simple, since it must be persuasive as well, which means it must be communicable—which in a poem means: in language. Yet of all the speakers in the poem, Pompilia is the least able to use language for her own good, since she cannot read or write. Despite this limitation, however, her monologue makes the convincing case that she is truly innocent, even though such arguments only unfold the self-referential paradoxes facing all the monologists and do not truly “prove” anything. Picking up on the persistent underlying point of the earlier monologues that the means to the end are themselves part of the end, Pompilia appears to be innocent by speaking innocently yet insightfully about herself and her history. Her insightfulness is confirmed recursively at the narrative level by its consistence with Caponsacchi’s account of the same events (made stronger by
the fact of Caponsacchi’s separation from Pompilia from the moment of their apprehension outside of Rome, making any collusion impossible); her innocence is confirmed recursively at the authorial level by her attitude toward writing, made more salient because of her illiteracy. She mentions the letters only briefly and only dismissively (or dis-missive-ly), since they signify nothing to her. When she does allude to them, she downplays their material written form, calling them only “foolish words . . . borne from you to me” (7.1418), while at the same time recalling her own words to the priest merely “In some such sense as this, whatever the phrase” (7.1417). This attitude paradoxically reminds us that we are reading her words in written form, and in a form different from another account of the same speech. Pompilia distrusts forms because of their dependence on observers, as she explains in her defense of Caponsacchi’s innocence in rescuing her:

I did think, do think, in the thought shall die,  
That to have Caponsacchi for my guide,  
Ever the face upturned to mine, the hand  
Holding my hand across the world,—a sense  
That reads, as only such can read, the mark  
God sets on woman, signifying so  
She should—shall peradventure—be divine;  
Yet ’ware, the while, how weakness mars the print  
And makes confusion, leaves the thing men see,  
—Not this man,—who from his own soul, re-writes  
The obliterated charter,—love and strength  
Mending what’s marred: . . . (7.1495-1506)

Pompilia describes Caponsacchi as an antithesis to the Duke of Ferrara, whose poor reading of the Duchess’s smiles results not in rewriting the “obliterated charter” of divinity but in turning his hatred and weakness into the obliteration of the human “text” of that charter and replacing it with a material artifact that
somehow also eludes his complete control. Pompilia claims that the divine mark itself is made mundane in the act of marking, both in the sense of being given form which is necessarily limited and “weakened” through being human, and in the sense of being observed, “marked,” and consequently confused, since the divine is by definition inaccessible to human perception.

The only way to access the divine, Pompilia argues, is through an act of figurative rewriting, of transcending the marring incidental to life through the ideal love—marrying—innate to angels:

He is a priest;
He cannot marry therefore, which is right:
I think he would not marry if he could.
Marriage on earth seems such a counterfeit,
Mere imitation of the inimitable:
In heaven we have the real and true and sure.
’T is there they neither marry nor are given
In marriage but are as the angels: . . . (7.1821-28)

Pompilia reverses the usual perspective and calls the supernatural “real” and the world “counterfeit.” This shift fits with her near-supernatural position, since she is about to die as she speaks here; but it also indicates the basic method by which the divine is accessible in the world, which is by mere faith. Such a faith can never be logically argued; but it can be made persuasive nonetheless, and in Pompilia’s monologue her insistence on observing that which is beyond form (a paradox) helps make it so. Since the recursive elements in the monologue are consistent both with other monologues and with the poetics of complexity, in short, they serve to convince us that Pompilia is both innocent and truthful—an ironic result to be drawn from the treatment of writing by an illiterate observer, especially since that observer is shown to be innocent and truthful through the
necessarily slanted written record of her own fictionally spoken words. This is a corollary to the dramatic monologue’s ability to present falsehoods truly: the form’s instantiation of the poetics of complexity entails the emergence of truths (both narrative and authorial) from even partial, biased, or incomplete accounts such as Pompilia’s. The further knowledge that Browning the poet appears to have emended the historical record to make this point makes it even more salient: from the OYB as well as other source documents, it seems clear that the historical Pompilia was quite able to read and write and was probably lying in her various testimonies.4 This fact does not diminish the poetic accomplishment of the monologue; indeed, it shows how important writing as a recursive element is in the poem, since the introduction of illiteracy raises unavoidably the question of how to arrive at truth when the means of arriving at it are inherently flawed.

As if to emphasize this very point, Browning next offers the monologues of three of the facilitators of the law: the two opposing lawyers and the final arbiter, the Pope. In the first two triads of monologues, the poem narrowed its focus from hearsay and rumor to the actual participants in the events, from second-hand fact to first-hand motive, seemingly drawing us closer to the

4 Richard D. Altick devotes a page of the General Notes in his edition of the poem to a discussion of Pompilia’s illiteracy and the letters. He writes, “In her deposition of May 1697, in connection with the processus fugae, Pompilia denied that she could read or write. Seizing upon this avowal, the earlier commentators on the poem were inclined to follow Browning’s own clear prejudice in her favour and conclude that the love letters were forgeries. But the evidence in the Old Yellow Book makes it quite plain that in this respect, as in some others, she was lying” (Altick 635). Here Altick evinces many readers’ confusion of the historical case and the poem by suggesting that comment on the poem should be primarily concerned with judgment on the Guido/Pompilia case in light of the OYB.
essence of the matter. And while we may feel confident in our narrative assessment of Guido’s guilt and Pompilia’s innocence, we are now reminded that those questions were never in doubt from the beginning. Instead, we are supposed to feel confident that the poem has made those beliefs convincing, and that the means to that end are supremely important. So now that the poem appears to be moving away from the heart of the case, it is actually bringing us even closer, since its focus on means and ends becomes even more insistent.

Certainly the lawyers provide some comic relief from the seriousness and pathos of the three principals, paving the way for the elevated sobriety of the Pope; but they also reinforce the central poetic device of recursion and thus speak to the central concern of the entire poem, which is how to take such rude materials and form an artistic text from them. The lawyer for the defense—Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis, or Arcangeli—makes this his central concern as well, with ironic consequences in several senses. Unlike the spirit-like Pompilia whose final thoughts include the archangels, their namesake Arcangeli could not be more of the world: he is a workaday lawyer whose true passion is epicurianism, as he reminds himself (and us) throughout his monologue with his preoccupation with his son’s birthday celebration that evening. He also fancies himself a master prose stylist in Latin, an important trait because all the case’s legal proceedings take place in writing, not in speech. Arcangeli’s monologue, then, is more accurately a soliloquy, with occasional monologic parts: the read-aloud snippets of the pleading he is drafting. Thus the monologue/soliloquy is ironically recursive on several levels: Arcangeli speaks about the draft he is
writing, and occasionally quotes from that draft, but such speech is transmitted
to the poem’s readers only in writing; Arcangeli laments having to write
everything in prose (8.146-51, among others), yet the entire monologue is in
blank verse, including the Latin bits; and Arcangeli believes that the superior
styling of the argument will win him his judges’ favor, while his egregious errors
of substance outweigh any niceties of phrasing that he employs. As he himself
says, comparing his Latin style to that of the prosecutor, Bottini the Fisc:

Bottini is a beast, one barbarous:
Look out for him when he attempts to say
“Armed with a pistol, Guido followed her!”
Will I not be beforehand with my Fisc,
Cut away phrase by phrase from underfoot!
Guido Pompiliam—Guido thus his wife
Following with igneous engine, shall I have?
Arms munitus ignis persequens—
Arma sulphurea gestans, sulphury arms,
Or, one might style a pistol—popping-piece?
Armatus breviori sceluto?
We’ll let him have been armed so, though it make
Somewhat against us: I had thought to own—
Provided with a simple travelling-sword,
Instructus: but we’ll grant the pistol here:
Better we lost the cause than lacked the gird
At the Fisc’s Latin, lost the Judge’s laugh!
It’s Venturini that decides for style.
Tommati rather goes upon the law. (8.200-19)

Arcangeli has the disadvantage of having to argue the defense first, and
therefore he must anticipate the Fisc’s attacks before they are made. Nonetheless,
this passage indicates his recurring tactic of backing himself into a corner merely
to show his rhetorical ability to get out of it.

Near the end of the pleading, this tactic is pushed to its absurd extreme,
having admitted to the triple homicide and attempting to justify it through an
appeal to Guido’s wounded honor (the defense The Other Half-Rome refuted in Book 3):

Is the end lawful? It allows the means:
What we may do we may with safety do,
And what means “safety” we ourselves must judge.

Aside from its obvious problems as a legal argument, this line of reasoning—expressed in one form or another by almost every speaker to this point in the poem—becomes the rubric through which the reader can interpret Arcangeli’s entire monologue at the second order. The lawyer says after “writing” his pleading:

Done! I’ the rough, i’ the rough! But done! And, lo,
Landed and stranded lies my very own,
My miracle, my monster of defence—

I’ the rough,—to-morrow I review my piece,
Tame here and there undue floridity,—
It’s hard: you have to plead before these priests
And poke at them with Scripture, or you pass
For heathen and, what’s worse, for ignorant
O’ the quality o’ the Court and what it likes
By way of illustration of the law:
To-morrow stick in this, and throw out that,
And, having first ecclesiasticized,
Regularize the whole, next emphasize,
Then latinize and lastly Cicero-ize,
Giving my Fisc his finish. There’s my speech—
And where’s my fry, my family and friends? (8.1728-46)

Here Arcangeli recognizes that the means to the end do matter to his narrative audience and that not all means are equally “lawful” or effective in achieving the desired end of persuading them. But his transition from work to home in the last line of the passage above is followed by two more pages of rhapsodic waxing about the feast, his son, his wife, and the other pleasures awaiting him in the
evening, indicating what his true ends are. Taken this way—that the legal work is merely a means of supporting his personal indulgences—we see readily, and recursively, that the all-means-to-lawful-ends precept rings false: no one would deny that public servants are entitled to personal comforts, but means of obtaining them such as Arcangeli’s are inept at best and immoral at worst, and likelier fall somewhere between those extremes. The resonance between this second-order reading of the entire monologue and the first-order sense of Arcangeli’s argument in the monologue echoes Browning’s basic point from the beginning, that the means to the end do matter, and that the poem’s specific means are appropriate in bringing about the desired end—of making readers see that the means to the end matter. Tautological? Certainly; but the unfolding of the tautology through the irony of Arcangeli’s monologue makes it both convincing and poetic in the way Browning’s dramatic monologues so often are: by allowing the reader to take a different perspective from the speaker and comprehend not just the two different perspectives simultaneously (i.e., as an instance of Romantic irony) but also the difference between the two as a re-entering distinction that indicates the reader who makes it (i.e., as an instance of the poetics of complexity).

For the second lawyer, Bottini the Fisc, Browning reverses the irony of Arcangeli’s monologue in order to effect this poetic unfolding. In Bottini’s case, however, the irony becomes apparent primarily through its contrast with earlier parts of the poem and only in a few places within the monologue itself, unlike Arcangeli’s monologue in which the lawyer undercuts himself by showing us the
“backstage” workings of his rhetorical process. Bottini imagines all but 24 lines of his monologue as the speech he wishes he could give before the Court in lieu of the written pleading he must present; therefore, what the reader gets is almost entirely “finished product” with no inner workings showing. The first irony, then, is that Bottini’s speech is precisely not what the Court will hear, although we presume he will attempt to make similar arguments—as he suggests at the close when he says of his ancient predecessor Isocrates, “He put in just what rushed into his head, / While I shall have to prune and pare and print” (9.1574-75). He is aware of the limitations of writing, but instead of trying to overcome them in front of us (at the narrative, or first-order, level), he sidesteps them—yet we know of it only through its being written, a second (and second-order) irony. The greatest irony, though, involves the case he puts forward in his imagined speech as Guido’s prosecutor on the charge of murder, since he almost entirely neglects to incriminate Guido, choosing instead to focus on Pompilia. As he discloses near the end of his oration, defending his deliberate avoidance of Guido as a subject:

His fate is sealed, his life as good as gone,
On him I am not tempted to waste word.
Yet though my purpose holds,—which was and is
And solely shall be to the very end,
To draw the true effigiem of a saint,
Do justice to perfection in the sex,—
Yet, let not some gross pamperer o’ the flesh
And niggard in the spirit’s nourishment,
Whose feeding hath offuscated his wit
Rather than law,—he never had, to lose—
Let not such advocate object to me
I leave my proper function of attack!

By painting saintship I depicture sin,
Beside the pearl, I prove how black the jet,
And through Pompilia’s virtue, Guido’s crime. (9.1393-1411)

In the abstract, this line of reasoning has some merit. Unfortunately, Bottini’s idea of “saintship” appears to be anything but saintly, since Pompilia in his account appears to be coquettish, deceitful, lusty, and manipulative—and, significantly, literate (9.443-74). Furthermore, his depiction does not match any of the preceding descriptions of her, including Guido’s, nor does it fit with Pompilia’s own *apologia*. Thus even though the Fisc is championing the right party, he does it so dishonestly (unlike The Other Half-Rome, for instance, who is sincere though overly sentimental) that the reader calls into question his recurring precept of “permit the end—permit therewith / Means to the end” (9.516-17). Had Pompilia in fact done what he suggests she might have done, and done blamelessly, she would certainly not appear innocent. Bottini argues that it would be justified to commit adultery to save her own life; but of course in that case Guido would have been legally justified to seek retribution, despite Bottini’s argument. Knowing this, the authorial (second-order) reader understands that Bottini’s own observance of his precept is likewise wrong if in fact he wishes to acquit Pompilia of wrongdoing and convict Guido. As it happens, Bottini has other motives that explain his actions. For one thing, he seeks not just to win the case but to win fame for himself, as he indicates throughout his speech in his use of high style but in particular in his acknowledgement that Pompilia herself claimed that she was innocent in all her dealings:

As this were found at variance with my tale,
Falsified all I have adduced for truth,
Admitted not one peccadillo here,
Pretended to perfection, first and last,
O’ the whole procedure—perfect in the end,
Perfect i’ the means, perfect in everything,
Leaving a lawyer nothing to excuse,
Reason away and show his skill about!  (9.1433-40)

Additionally, he has in mind a second lawsuit with which he is involved, in which he represents the Convertite nunnery where Pompilia was relegated after the processus fugae trial, which is suing for the inheritance of the now-deceased Pompilia and her parents (12.668-731). This about-face both explains why Bottini argues as he does and why the all-means-to-the-end philosophy remains unsatisfactory, both legally and poetically. Not just any presentation of the case Browning found in the OYB will be a poem; and while other possibilities exist, this one’s use of recursion in form and in subject (which is, at crucial times, form) makes it persuasively poetic, even (especially) in monologues such as Bottini’s, in which the supposed goal of the poem, truth, seems very far away.

Following the lawyers in the poem is the Pope, whose sole purpose is to decide and pronounce the truth as he sees it. The issue of papal infallibility is raised early on in the monologue so that it will not be a simple deus ex machina to “decide” the case for the reader. As we have seen already, the verdict was never in doubt, nor is it for the Pope:

The case is over, judgment at an end,
And all things done now and irrevocable:
A mere dead man is Franceschini here,
Even as Formosus centuries ago.  (10.207-10)

The Pope’s first 161 lines are devoted to a discussion of the strange case of his predecessor Formosus, and the ongoing posthumous debate over whether he was a holy man and rightful Pope or not. His point is that since these
contradictory decisions were each made by Popes, some of them must have been wrong; in short, there cannot be absolute infallibility. Yet such a shortcoming does not absolve him of the responsibility to judge as well as he can:

If some acuter wit, fresh probing, sound
This multifarious mass of words and deeds
Deeper, and reach through guilt to innocence,
I shall face Guido’s ghost nor blench a jot.
“God who set me to judge thee, meted out
So much of judging faculty, no more:
Ask Him if I was slack in use thereof!”
I hold a heavier fault imputable
Inasmuch as I changed a chaplain once,
For no cause,—no, if I must bare my heart,—
Save that he snuffled somewhat saying mass.
For I am ware it is the seed of act,
God holds appraising in His hollow palm,
Not act grown great thence on the world below,
Leafage and branchage, vulgar eyes admire.
Therefore I stand on my integrity,
Not fear at all: and if I hesitate,
It is because I need to breathe awhile,
Rest, as the human right allows, review
Intent the little seeds of act, the tree,—
The thought, to clothe in deed, and give the world
At chink of bell and push of arrased door. (10.260-81)

The Pope’s seed metaphor indicates that at last we have a speaker who values the means as well as the ends, and not accidentally, this speaker gets to pronounce the (narrative) truth. Based on all the evidence in the poem up to this point, we are prepared to believe that his judgment, while not infallible, will be more conscientious and less self-motivated than the others we have seen (Pompilia’s monologue may evince less self-interest, but neither does she offer judgment: her relative lack of self-reflection makes her claims more straightforwardly acceptable).
Part of the reason the Pope’s judgment seems more impartial is that it is, in effect, a meta-judgment, since he has at his disposal all the evidence and testimony of the case, as well as knowledge of the rumors and opinions that have filtered their way up to him. In short, he too knows everything in the poem preceding his monologue, and more. His reliance on written materials is emphasized by his use of the Formosus story at the opening, which he finds in a Papal reference source:

Like to Ahasuerus, that shrewd prince,  
I will begin,—as is, these seven years now,  
My daily wont,—and read a History  
(Written by one whose deft right hand was dust  
To the last digit, ages ere my birth)  
Of all my predecessors, Popes of Rome:  
For though mine ancient early dropped the pen,  
Yet others picked it up and wrote it dry,  
Since of the making books there is no end.  
And so I have the Papacy complete  
From Peter first to Alexander last;  
Can question each and take instruction so.  (10.1-12)

With this cue to pay attention to the book’s making—its poiesis—we are prepared to notice the recursive moments in Browning’s text so we can observe it as poetry and not merely as narrative. Unlike many of the earlier monologists who focus on the love letters as a primary recursive element, the Pope dismisses them outright, saying:

These letters false beyond all forgery—  
Not just handwriting and mere authorship,  
But false to body and soul they figure forth—  (10.649-51)

Instead he relies on writing more aligned with truth, by which he means in accordance with divine instruction. Surprisingly, however, he cites the Bible only a little, and usually through allusion and not quotation. He seems equally at ease
alluding to ancient pagan writers: Virgil, Horace, Seneca. However, his longest “quotation,” aside from the history of Formosus, comes from his imagination of a conversation with Euripides (10.1669-1789), who asks why he should be condemned as a pagan despite the worth of his words that yet survive:

“Pope, dost thou dare pretend to punish me,
For not descrying sunshine at midnight,
Me who crept all-fours, found my way so far—
While thou rewardest teachers of the truth,
Who miss the plain way in the blaze of noon,—
Though just a word from that strong style of mine,
Grasped honestly in hand as guiding-staff,
Had pricked them a sure path across the bog,
That mire of cowardice and slush of lies
Wherein I find them wallow in wide day?” (10.1780-89)

The Pope’s response gets to the heart of the problem, and in doing so actually shows sympathy to the one group of people otherwise universally decried in the poem, the heretic Molinists:

As we broke up that old faith of the world,
Have we, next age, to break up this the new—
Faith, in the thing, grown faith in the report—
Whence need to bravely disbelieve report
Through increased faith in thing reports belie?
Must we deny,—do they, these Molinists,
At peril of their body and their soul,—
Recognized truths, obedient to some truth
Unrecognized yet, but perceptible?—
Correct the portrait by the living face,
Man’s God, by God’s God in the mind of man? (10.1863-73)

In other words, in order to arrive at truth, one must sometimes reject received forms and instead perceive new ones (or as Browning puts it, one must accept fewer mediates to arrive at more ultimates), since the forms of truth constantly shift as the world—i.e., the context for truth—itself changes. The Pope acknowledges that the truth he speaks of is beyond human limitations, yet
somehow can be arrived at anyway: this is the paradox of faith within the sphere of religion, of love within the sphere of society, and of poetry within the sphere of literary art. He says:

\[
\ldots \text{this may be surmised,} \\
\text{The other is revealed,} \quad \text{— whether a fact,} \\
\text{Absolute, abstract, independent truth,} \\
\text{Historic, not reduced to suit man’s mind,} \quad \text{—} \\
\text{Or only truth reverberate, changed, made pass} \\
\text{A spectrum into mind, the narrow eye,} \quad \text{—} \\
\text{The same and not the same, else unconceived—} \\
\text{Though quite conceivable to the next grade} \\
\text{Above it in intelligence,} \quad \text{— as truth} \\
\text{Easy to man were blindness to the beast} \\
\text{By parity of procedure,} \quad \text{— the same truth} \\
\text{In a new form, but changed in either case:} \\
\text{What matter so the intelligence be filled? (10.1386-98)}
\]

The corollary notions that the truth must be both the same and not the same, and that different observers will perceive the same truth differently yet the same, resonate fully with the poetics of complexity. And by this point in *The Ring and the Book*, readers will identify the same principles at work in this poem. Each monologue represents one persona’s perspective on the truth, and despite their differences—of fact and of opinion—they each independently and all collectively indicate a larger truth. From the narrative perspective of the Pope, that truth involves the verdict he must render and the reasons why he must render it. From our authorial perspective as readers, the truth involves perceiving the perspectives of all the monologues simultaneously with perceiving our own process of perception. This self-reflexive simultaneity is what makes the experience of reading *The Ring and the Book* poetic, in addition to its being a fascinating tale and an intricate, ingeniously structured narrative.
In the foregoing discussion, I have focused primarily on the explicitly self-referential parts of the poem, since they more clearly serve the purpose of triggering recursion in readers. The formal devices of the blank-verse paragraphs and the overlaid shifts in rhythm and diction certainly serve recursive purposes as well, and to the end of explicating those features, a study of *The Ring and the Book* similar to Alan Sinfield’s *The Language of In Memoriam* would be a welcome addition to the critical literature on the poem. Here, such microlevel structures will be assumed as part of the essentially poetic dramatic monologue form, sufficiently self-referential as described in the earlier discussion of “My Last Duchess”; what concerns us in a long poem made up of many such monologues is how the text’s constructions work together to create an emergent sense of the whole work. For instance, the love letters appear as touchstone moments in most of the monologues, serving to signal recursion both within any given monologue, since they are instances of writing about writing, as well as between monologues, through the second-order comparison of the various accounts. Thus the recurring instances of the love letters, or of other forms of writing such as Caponsacchi’s courtly verses or the Pope’s manuals, serve to link the monologues at a level higher than that of the verse paragraph. At an even higher level, the monologues themselves are arranged in a twice-tripled structure. Within each triad, a similar pattern emerges: the first is pro-Guido; the second is anti-Guido; and the third is somehow neither. The recurrence of these general stances creates links between noncontiguous sections of the poem over and above those involving the explicitly recursive elements mentioned above, which appear in each monologue.
Such links remind readers that each dramatic monologue section is part of a whole that involves not just the section preceding but also, and at the same time, several other parts of the poem extending all the way back to the first frame monologue, which previews all the later ones, and forward to the closing frame monologue, which catches us up with events in the story taking place after Guido’s execution. And taking our cue from McGann’s notion of deformance, we could also see the triads working longitudinally as well as sequentially. For instance, the first monologues in each set (Books 2, 5, and 8) show three pro-Guido speakers who are respectively more pro-Guido, less pro-Guido, and finally ambivalently pro-Guido: Half-Rome makes a reasonably good case since the evidence is still in doubt; Guido himself undermines his own case; and Arcangeli tries to defend him but does it poorly. Their common thread is that the speakers are all intimately concerned with themselves, and such self-concern ultimately weakens their cases. The second monologues (Books 3, 6, and 9) show similar patterning: The Other Half-Rome is only moderately effective in his defense of Pompilia, not comprehending the evidence; Caponsacchi vehemently defends Pompilia and succeeds because of his direct insight; and Bottini makes an effective case but wholly mischaracterizes Pompilia and thus hurts her. All three speakers appear to be less self-concerned than their predecessors, although all three have ulterior motives of some kind, Bottini’s less benign than the other two. The third monologues (Books 4, 7, and 10) change this pattern: Tertium Quid tries to be objective and instead merely confuses matters, through his desire for self-promotion; Pompilia is so selfless that she is both unbiased and
completely subjective in her monologue; and the Pope is both concerned with himself and his imminent call to account for his actions in Heaven, and with the good of those involved in the murder trial, including Guido, whose condemnation is an act of mercy. These interweaving patterns work in conjunction with the already recursive patterning on the individual monologue level to set up resonances that keep us reading poetically (as described by a poetics of complexity) when the tremendous length of the work would have us stop doing so in favor of a solely narrative reading.

Out of all this recursion emerges a sense of the entire work as a long poem, not merely a series of related but different dramatic monologues (like Browning’s own *Dramatis Personae* or *Men and Women*, for instance). By this I do not mean that it contains memorable lyric passages, because it generally does not. It does, however, make readers consistently and frequently aware of the subject of the narrative at hand and the linguistic medium through which that narrative is being communicated. This simultaneous awareness is what makes *The Ring and the Book* a modern long poem. As the narrator Browning concludes in Book 12:

So, British Public, who may like me yet,
(Marry and amen!) learn one lesson hence
Of many which whatever lives should teach:
This lesson, that our human speech is naught,
Our human testimony false, our fame
And human estimation words and wind.
Why take the artistic way to prove so much?
Because, it is the glory and good of Art,
That Art remains the one way possible
Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine, at least. (12.831-40)
Why indeed take not just the artistic way but such a long way to say that words are empty? Henry David Thoreau says, “Truth is always paradoxical”; and George Spencer-Brown says, “The form we take to exist arises from framing nothing.” Browning creates a meditation on truth by resuscitating a forgotten, unimportant history, and because of the unimportance of the history, paradoxically, the more needs to be said about it. Only by going through such length can readers perceive the simultaneous fullness and emptiness of the matter. Only poetry could make this interesting, and even lasting, and only modernity could be ready for this kind of poetic text.
Chapter 4
Form and the Observation of Time in *Four Quartets*

In the first part of the twentieth century, modernity identified itself as Modernism, and in the process gave rise to a number of poetic texts differing greatly from those of the Victorian period through well-known literary movements such as Imagism, Symbolism, and Futurism. These movements resulted in new possibilities for lyric poetry, but they also affected long forms as well through their general avoidance of traditional narrative (McHale 2). While such longer, sectioned poems have their predecessors in earlier poems (Shelley’s closet dramas and Tennyson’s monodramas, to name two notable examples), their simultaneous fragmentation and unification suggest a specifically Modernist way for long poems to cohere. T. S. Eliot’s late masterpiece *Four Quartets* will serve as our major example of this coherence.

Including *Four Quartets* in this study may seem odd, since it is at once significantly shorter than the other poems under consideration, as well as more widely acknowledged to be both poetic and modern. A more obvious test case from the high Modernist period is Pound’s *Cantos*, because it is both much longer than *Four Quartets* (on the same scale as *The Ring and the Book*) as well as a more borderline example. I will leave it aside, however, because I concur with Rosenthal and Gall in their assessment of the *Cantos* as an excellent instance not of a modern long poem but of a modern poetic sequence (or more precisely, of several such sequences, since “the *Cantos* as a whole may have interconnections
without themselves making a self-contained sequence” (Rosenthal and Gall 214))
in which the entire work fails to cohere as a single poetic text. Rosenthal and Gall
describe why it thus fails:

. . . [T]heir very richness and proliferation, the loading every rift
with ore thrice over and then loading new rifts with more ore as the
poem grows, militate against structural progression and
completion. Clearly it is this overloading that constitutes the most
serious problem of the very long would-be sequence; and with the
overloading comes increasing reliance on the arbitrary, ultimately
personal sensibility of the poet, no longer at the necessary remove
from the poem’s surface. Hence Pound’s rhetorical self-indulgence,
and the problems of clarity of reference at certain points, and the
picking up of tonal currents at such great distances from one
another that only the truly attentive and sensitized reader can
respond—and then, sometimes, only at the risk of bringing external
associations and sources of the kind we have to some degree just
introduced (Pound’s prose, Vidal’s poetry) to support a reading
that the poem itself may not sustain or simply to suggest an
intellectual coherence rather than an affective one. (Rosenthal and
Gall 229)

Paradoxically, the text’s attempts at comprehensiveness result in its becoming
disjointed, and as a result readers cannot see it as a single poetic work in the
experience of reading it. Of course, many other poems of the early-to-mid-
twentieth century fall under the same general rubric as the Cantos, such as William Carlos Williams’s Paterson or Louis Zukovsky’s A, and for that reason are similarly omitted. The aim of this study is not comprehensiveness but exemplariness, and Eliot’s poem (for reasons to be elaborated below) is a better exemplar of the modern long poem than these other possibilities.

Four Quartets nevertheless has its own barriers to being read as a long poem. Each of its four constituent parts was published separately, and so each can legitimately be taken as a self-sufficient poem of its own. The last three quartets (the “wartime quartets,” as they are sometimes called) were conceived after the publication of “Burnt Norton,” which was the final poem of Eliot’s Collected Poems 1909-1935, published in 1936 (Gardner 16). In order to anticipate the difficulties readers might have in seeing the four poems as the parts of a single poem, the English publishers of Four Quartets in 1944 tried to provide guidance on the poem’s dust jacket; as Helen Gardner describes it in her exhaustive textual history The Composition of Four Quartets:

The four poems which make up this volume have all appeared separately. . . . The author, however, has always intended them to be published as one volume, and to be judged as a single work.

As the story of the writing of the poem [shows], no such scheme was in Eliot’s mind when he wrote Burnt Norton, nor, the war having made the writing of another play seem futile, when he “picked up his tablets again” and wrote East Coker. (Gardner 28)

Yet the poem does seem to be the “single work” it is advertised to be, and not merely four more-or-less related poems such as one might find in a typical
single-author poetry volume. As Gardner puts it, “It became in the writing the unified poem which the four separate poems finally came together to create” (Gardner 14); or as Keith Alldritt says in his extended close reading of the poem, “Four Quartets as a whole signifies more than the sum of its individual lines and sentences and is very plainly a denial of some of them” (Alldritt 22). These two reflections identify the cohesive element of the poem as emergent; or, as the critic Denis Donoghue points out in different terms:

We have four poems, each in five parts; clearly an elaborate structure, indicating that the character of the work is likely to be disclosed not in any culminating moment but in the organization of the whole, the relations among the parts, the correspondence of one part to its counterpart in the whole. (Donoghue 229)

For this emergence to be poetic, according to the poetics of complexity, the poem needs to call attention to its large-scale organization as well as to its smaller-scale devices and its semantic content to sustain readers’ belief that the work is an entire poetic text that is actually about something other than itself. That is: it must be simultaneously self-referential and hetero-referential in the medium of language.

Eliot’s poem compresses this process significantly more than Tennyson or Browning does, as we have seen earlier. In those cases, the poems require a greater degree of narrative, since they each attempt to show the effects of time and perspective on observers, either on a single observer over time (which requires length, as in In Memoriam) or on multiple observers at a given time
(which requires extensive variety, as in *The Ring and the Book*). Eliot, however, chooses to focus less on the effects of time and perspective but on time and perspective themselves, allowing their effects to be felt rather than represented. This approach to poetry derives from the Imagism and Symbolism influencing so much poetry of the high Modernist period, especially Eliot’s, and it typically supports brief, intense lyrics, not long poems. *The Waste Land*, for instance, despite its reputation as a “long” poem, is only 434 lines long. Even *Four Quartets* contains only 887 lines, which is fewer than several of Browning’s dramatic monologues (including poems such as “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” and “Mr. Sludge, ‘the Medium’”), not to mention most of the individual monologues in *The Ring and the Book* (all but Book 12, at 870 lines). Eliot relies on quintessentially Modernist techniques in *Four Quartets* in his avoidance of sustained narrative and in the lack of attendant transitions. In this way he does not require great length in his poem; he requires only enough length to establish recursion at multiple scales.

The poem’s primary recursive element is its focus on form—that is, on its attention to our experience of time and space—as mediated by language. Given this emphasis, it does not need to include explicitly recursive elements such as pieces of writing since its focus is on a more general sense of form in language, of which writing is only a subset. Instead it discusses, for example, time, in words which require time to read, making those words recursive through their deliberate focus on the reading experience, what Tennyson refers to as “measured language” in *In Memoriam*. It is for this reason that Eliot names the
poems “quartets,” in an oft-explored analogy to musical string quartets. In another essay, I explore that analogy specifically with reference to the late string quartets of Beethoven, in part to illustrate the usefulness and the limitations of any kind of musical analogy. At the conclusion of that essay, I write:

Experiencing the works [both Eliot’s and Beethoven’s] in this way—understanding them in time and over repeated times—is still the most rewarding way to approach either of them. This heightened awareness of time and its effects may be the most useful contribution to a reading of Four Quartets that a musical analogy from Beethoven has to offer. (Barndollar 192)

For my purposes here, I will take my (present) beginning in my (prior) end and explore what readers of the poem might do with the musical analogy in light of the formal considerations at the heart of the poetics of complexity.

Eliot suggests one possibility near the end of “Burnt Norton”:

Words move, music moves  
Only in time; but that which is only living  
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach  
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness. (BN 5.1-7)

Several keynotes of the quartet are struck together in this brief passage, in words on which many changes have been or will be rung in the poem: “time,” “movement,” and “still.” The confluence of them here suggests a consideration

1 All quotations from Four Quartets are taken from Eliot’s Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950 and are cited parenthetically by quartet (BN, EC, DS, or LG), section, and lines (according to my own numbering).
of the distinction between time and space, since movement and stillness both require space-time for their existence. Niklas Luhmann discusses this distinction in terms of medium and form:

They [space and time] are both generated in the same way, namely, through the distinction between medium and form, or, more accurately, between place and object. They do, however, differ considerably, which makes it impossible to impoverish the world by reducing one to the other. One essential difference between the two concerns the way in which space and time manage variety, the alternation of forms . . . . Space makes it possible for objects to leave their places. Time makes it necessary for places to leave their objects. In this way, contingency is furnished with necessity and necessity with contingency. (Luhmann, Art 112)

Note that in this conception, place is not merely spatial but temporal as well, which is why time provides necessity to the distinction:

Time articulates its necessity in terms of a simultaneity of all conditions and events—a kind of self-negation. Whatever is actualized at a given moment occupies only one position in time. All other positions momentarily withdraw and hence cannot be accessed; in this sense, they suggest a stable world. Instability correlates with actuality, stability with nonactuality—which is a manner of unfolding temporal necessity. (Luhmann, Art 113)
And these considerations pertain to artworks since in order to be perceived, they must involve space and time:

In the imaginary world of art, just as in the real world, a spatial position defines itself by providing access to other places. Architecture determines how the context of the edifice is to be seen. A sculpture defines its surrounding space. Temporal positions in art, above all in music, are determined by their own vanishing, and the artwork must define what remains significant and what can follow—a momentarily fixated and vanishing where and whence. It is always the difference, the boundary, that makes a difference and is turned into information by the work of art. (Luhmann, Art 114)

The poem calls attention to the temporal side of the distinction not only in the second line of the passage above but in the first word of the poem, “Time.” And the poem illustrates Luhmann’s insights by claiming that “Words, after speech, reach / Into the silence,” a phenomenon possible only when time has passed and the sound of the words has vanished and thus marked its own boundary. By linking language and music together in their reliance on form in lines 5.4-7 above, Eliot makes more clear the basic point that Wallace Stevens makes in “Anecdote of the Jar,” using a similar image: that observation of any object defines not just the object but also its context, the non-indicated side of the distinction.

“Burnt Norton” continues:

Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,
Not that only, but the co-existence,
Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
And the end and the beginning were always there
Before the beginning and after the end.
And all is always now.  (BN 5.8-13)

Here Eliot champions a view of time that accords with complexity theory:
observation takes place only, and always, in the present. He uses the words
“beginning” and “end” here to refer to unconventional ways of thinking about
temporal objects, and in ways that shift through the passage. At first, by
suggesting that in the example of the violin “the end precedes the beginning,”
the poem shows that music must define itself paradoxically through its own
evanescence. That is, before the note of the violin can be defined, it must come to
an end, at which point it exists only in memory (or “pattern,” as the poem calls it
earlier). But then the poem offers a deliberate paradox: “the end and the
beginning were always there / Before the beginning and after the end.” The
unfolding of this paradox is hinted at by the final line of the passage: “And all is
always now.” This line does not mean that all things happen simultaneously:
such a reading confuses medium (place in time) and form (event in time). The
line refers to the medium, not the events; thus the paradox of ever-present
beginnings and ends can be unfolded by seeing that beginnings and endings are
the formal events that constitute the medium of time itself; or, as Luhmann puts
it, “media can be recognized only by the contingency of the formations that make
them possible” (Luhmann, Art 104). Being contingent, such events could always
be otherwise; therefore, they are in a sense always there, latent both in time and
in their perceptual media (e.g., sound, sight, touch, etc.). By forwarding this
point through a paradox, the poem requires readers to make sense of the self-
referential paradoxes of form and medium in artworks through an exposition of those same paradoxes in an actual artwork. Such a technique is recursive, and through this recursion the text signals itself as poetic, over and above its more ornamental features (e.g., meter, lineation, figures of speech).

In this way, the titular analogy with musical quartets simply calls attention to the self-referential paradoxes of temporal distinctions in art. Since such paradoxes appear more obviously in music than in poetry, the analogy is useful. As Luhmann claims of artworks:

[A]ny observing participation in artistic activity is a temporal process, a systematically ordered succession of events. . . .

These observations apply to art in general, not only to the obvious cases of music, dance, and stage productions, in which the artwork exists only as a pure sequence of events. On the contrary, such cases are special in that they synchronize the sequence of performance and experience, thus creating a heightened sense of simultaneity, as has often been described. Reading texts is also a process that takes time—whether in narrative one reads the sequence that unfolds in a succession of sentences, or whether, as in poetry, one misses what matters if one thinks reading must begin at the beginning and end at the ending, and one will have understood it all. (Luhmann, Art 20-21)

Music’s more purely temporal nature makes it an apt analogy in Four Quartets for poetry; the fact that poetry is also temporal (as is all art) makes the analogy work.
Other resemblances certainly pertain as well: the particular musical form of the quartet with its more intimate character, tightly controlled range, and flexibility of style (Barndollar 182); the quartet’s high-art appeal to an intellectual or artistic mandarinate (Cooper 54); even the possibility of four distinct voices or threads woven contrapuntally in the poem (Alldritt 32-33). But these are convenient resemblances, not essential ones. Given the poem’s explicit concern with time, the primary function of the quartet analogy is to ask readers to focus on their temporal experience of the poem as they would in a piece of music, since their doing so is a form of self-reference. Coupled with the hetero-reference of the poem—its concern with time—a reading of the quartet analogy is but one of the poem’s recursive elements that help connect the four sections together as a single long poem.

The other keywords in the first passage above indicate some of these less specifically musical elements, and not accidentally, both have to do with the other side of the time/space distinction: “movement” and “stillness.” While the word “movement” appearing in a “quartet” suggests its meaning as a musical term, such a reading does not appear to have much significance in the poem, especially since the term is defined in the closing stanza of “Burnt Norton” through several abstract analogies that make its connection to musical form incidental at best:

The detail of the pattern is movement,
As in the figure of the ten stairs.
Desire itself is movement
Not in itself desirable;
Love is itself unmoving,
Only the cause and end of movement,
Timeless, and undesiring
Except in the aspect of time
Caught in the form of limitation
Between un-being and being. (BN 5.23-32)

As in the earlier line “Words move, music moves,” the forms of the verb “to move” here combine two senses of the word: the transitive one in which motion is imparted to an object, and the intransitive one in which the subject is itself in motion. In the poem’s conception, movement is desire, caused by and oriented toward love. The unfolding of the passage’s paradoxes depends on recognizing a distinction between medium and form signaled by the two senses of “movement.” If desire is movement, then it takes place in space and time, and thus is a form. If love is unmoving, then it exists outside of time and space (it is “Timeless, and undesiring”) and thus is a medium, since within it is the potential for movement. The forms themselves are undesirable for their own sake (“desire is not in itself desirable”), only for their capacity to direct desire beyond form—to discover love, to understand being, to “reach into the silence.” The paradoxical attempt to transcend form through form—or as Eliot puts it earlier in the poem, “Only through time time is conquered” (BN 2.44)—indicates the poetics of complexity at work.

If movement indicates both goal and method in Four Quartets, “stillness” would seem to indicate the opposite. But the poem treats stillness as a correlative to movement, not an antithesis. Again, the double valence of the word “still” highlights its function in the poem. It is both adjective (“motionless”) and adverb (“yet” or “persistently”), and the two senses appear in close succession in the closing section of “Burnt Norton”: “as a Chinese jar still / Moves perpetually in
its stillness” (BN 5.6-7). The first instance in these lines, through its position at the line ending, hovers ambiguously between both senses: the jar is still, and still moving (in the transitive sense, although that too is ambiguous). Eliot then returns to language’s role in lines that now have a self-referential quality to them:

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still. (BN 5.13-17)

Words are forms, which means they do not “stay still” in either sense: they are both moving and impermanent. Earlier in the section, Eliot says that “Only by the form . . . / Can words or music reach / The stillness.” These instances suggest that “stillness” is what is beyond form, as love is in the last part of the poem.

The word appears several times earlier in “Burnt Norton,” as well as in the next quartet, “East Coker,” each time reinforcing the recursive paradoxes that call attention to the reading process itself as well as the subjects of art and time the poem is concerned with. In the second section of “Burnt Norton,” after the introduction of the axle-tree image, the poem says:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. (BN 2.16-21)
Again the poem grapples with the paradox of form: form requires a medium, which is stable because it is a medium, but unrealizable except in form. Thus the “still point” is in both space and time a medium; the “dance”—an apt choice of art forms—requires both space and time, and so the paradox of simultaneous movement and stillness is unfolded. As happens elsewhere in the poem, this close attention to fundamental questions of form triggers a recursive reading. Since the “dance” at the “still point” might just as well be the act of reading in which the poem’s audience is engaged, those words include explicitly self-referential meanings among their possible interpretations; and since they appear in contexts that play up these kinds of self-referential readings elsewhere in the poem, those meanings become actualized. The examples in the fifth section of “Burnt Norton” discussed above pertain here. But the general structure of “East Coker” reinforces the pattern as well. The first section of that quartet recalls the poet’s ancestor Sir Thomas Elyot and his description of rustic dance. The second section opens with a stanza of 17 tetrameter lines employing obvious end-rhymes in varying patterns, followed by this reflection on those lines:

That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:  
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,  
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle  
With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.  

(EC 2.18-21)

The old-fashioned forms leave one unmoved; nor do they matter—make, or stimulate poiesis. They leave one with the “wrestle” but not the substance: they are too formal, which means they emphasize self-reference at the expense of hetero-reference. Or so Eliot says, as a kind of posturing; the poetry seems good
enough, but its subsequent reworking in the rest of the section reveals
differences that make a difference. Not only is the passage more conversational,
both in tone and in prosody, it explains why the “still” quality of the first
versification prevents the poetry from mattering:

There is, it seems to us,

At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been. (EC 2.31-37)

Certainly there are suggestions of Pound’s dictum “Make it new” here; but for
our purposes, the passage anticipates Luhmann’s description of art in
information-theoretical terms: “The artwork must provide its own configuration
of redundancy and surprise; it must deliberately create and resolve the paradox
that information is at once necessary and superfluous” (Luhmann, Art 154). Eliot
succinctly describes the workings of consciousness, of psychic systems, in these
lines, as he acknowledges the necessity of experience in creating knowledge
while recognizing that experience takes place only and always in the present,
rendering rigid patterns deadening. Hence he focuses on the “still point of the
turning world,” at which there is paradoxically both motion and stillness, or life.

The third section of “East Coker” builds up to the stanza alluding to St.
John of the Cross’s mystical philosophy by revisiting these matters:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.  
(EC 3.23-28)

The basic paradox resides in the phrase “be still,” since being implies motion and impermanence, the opposite of what “still” signifies. To unfold this paradox, Eliot directs attention to the total suspension of thought, which of course is impossible for psychic systems whose autopoiesis depends on the perpetuation of thought. Thinking about not-thinking is recursion at the second order, and Eliot raises the issue here to suggest that within the recursive method, here called the poetics of complexity, is the key to the unfolding of all such paradoxes. The succeeding lines bear this out:

You say I am repeating
Something I have said before. I shall say it again.  
Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there,  
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.  
In order to arrive at what you do not know  
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
In order to possess what you do not possess  
You must go by the way of dispossession.  
In order to arrive at what you are not  
You must go through the way in which you are not.  
And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
And what you own is what you do not own  
And where you are is where you are not.  (EC 3.34-47)

These last three lines are striking because of their difference from the rest of the passage. The earlier lines might easily be a more prosaic, “informational” argument, since they attempt to show how what seems paradoxical is actually strictly logical. But the closing lines do not do so, presenting instead simple oppositions with the force of a conclusion. Although an analysis of their meaning leaves us slightly bewildered, in this context they do have such a conclusive
effect, because our attention has been so consistently directed to the reconciliation of the two sides of a distinction. This is the complex-poetic method, which enables readers to make meaning even out of sentences of the form “X is not X.” As Luhmann puts it:

Words carry and “signify” their ordinary meanings, and this is why they refer to something other, not just themselves. At the same time, however, they also carry and “signify” a special textual meaning, within which they execute and propel the text’s recursions. Text-art organizes itself by means of self-referential references that combine elements of sound, rhythm, and meaning. The unity of self-reference and hetero-reference lies in the sensuous perceptibility of words. The difference between these two types of reference can be pushed to the point of utter discrepancy—for example, when words in a poem come to mean the exact opposite of what they mean in ordinary language. (Luhmann, Art 26)

The most striking example of this unity of a distinction, this re-entry of form into the form, appears in “East Coker” in the recurring combinations of “beginning” and “end.” This particular distinction shows nicely Eliot’s recursive method of tying the whole poem together.

“East Coker” contains the most overt exploration of the beginning/end unity/distinction, which is not surprising in light of its emphasis on the paradoxes of form in the third section (neither its beginning nor its end). The quartet opens, “In my beginning is my end,” which is both paradoxical (as we
saw earlier) and self-evident, since one could add quotation marks to indicate the words’ self-referential meaning:

In my beginning is “my end.”

Since this line is the beginning of the quartet, this claim is literally true. It calls attention to beginnings and endings more generally as a result, which is fitting in its immediate context (a reworking of the biblical passage, “To every thing there is a season, and a time for every purpose under Heaven”). Then the line appears again, this time referring to something other than itself—since it is not at the beginning now—and although the reference would seem to be to the first line of the quartet, it could refer equally to the end of the first section:

Dawn points, and another day
Prepares for heat and silence. Out at sea the dawn wind
Wrinkles and slides. I am here
Or there, or elsewhere. In my beginning. (EC 1.48-51)

The last three words are the end of the section, just as the first line promised they would be (“‘In my beginning’ is my end”). At the same time, they indicate the speaker who has just considered the beginning of the new day, and so they serve to connect disparate parts of the poem to each other in recursive ways as well as to illuminate local meanings in context.

The fifth section of the quartet picks these ideas up explicitly, after they have appeared in various guises in the intervening sections—for instance, when the speaker rephrases the verses in section two, he says, “It was not (to start again) what one had expected” (EC 2.22), calling attention within the parenthesis to the act of beginning. Section five opens:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of l’entre deux guerres—
Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning . . . (EC 5.1-8)

In a sectioned poem like *Four Quartets*, such language indicates that sections,
stanzas, and “quartets” are always both ends (actualized meanings) and
beginnings (choosing among potential meanings), just as words themselves are.
And as is typical in the *Quartets*, the section does not end with this kind of self-
referential consideration, instead going back to the more general topic of which
the recursive reading is only one possibility. “East Coker” is concerned with
starting and ending, movement and stillness, love and darkness; and with those
topics it comes to an end, but not without a small acknowledgment of the formal
wordplay the quartet also includes:

Love is most nearly itself
When here and now cease to matter.
Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.
(ÉC 5.29-38)

The last half-line serves as a bookend to the quartet’s first line, with the context-
specific reversal. But not only does it refer back to the quartet’s opening, it now
asks readers to consider the larger distinctions of beginnings and ends, of forms.
Here at the end of the quartet is a beginning, according to the poem. Like the
violin note in “Burnt Norton” that cannot be understood until it has ended, this part of the poem now has form and can be interpreted as a unit only when it has come to an end, when it is bounded. This same idea is raised again in both “The Dry Salvages” and “Little Gidding,” both in their corresponding closing sections and in others, always in the context both of the immediate quartet and section surrounding them and of the larger poem incorporating them. This simultaneity of connection across scales is what makes the poem cohere as a modern long poem.

To begin with the end, then:

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning,
The end is where we start from. And every phrase
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together)
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem an epitaph. (LG 5.1-12)

This closing section of “Little Gidding” recalls several of the main elements from the earlier parts of the Quartets: the dance from “Burnt Norton” and “East Coker,” and starting and the sense of home from “East Coker” (e.g., “Home is where one starts from” (EC 5.19)). And the passage segues neatly into a discussion of life and death—what the poem terms imagistically, “The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree” (LG 5.19), recalling images from “Burnt Norton” sections 1 and 2 (the rose-garden) and section 4 (“Chill / Fingers of yew” (6-7)), “The Dry Salvages” section 3 (“the future is a faded song, a Royal
Rose or a lavender spray” (3)) and section 5 (the yew-tree in the penultimate line), and earlier in “Little Gidding” in section 2 (the ash of burnt roses) and section 3 (“the spectre of a Rose” (35)). The last verse paragraph of the poem continues to pull images and ideas from earlier in the poem. “We shall not cease from exploration” (26) recalls the explorers of “East Coker” section 5 and “The Dry Salvages” section 3; the “unknown, remembered gate” (30) alludes to the gate of the rose-garden in “Burnt Norton” section 1. Exact quotations link the ending even more strongly with earlier passages: “Quick now, here, now, always—” (both BN 5.37 and LG 5.39) and “And all shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well” (LG 5.42-43, closely resembling LG 3.18-19). Such resonances are not merely echoes in the manner of a recapitulation, reminding readers of the fact that they have seen these ideas before. They are also recursive in their meanings, since their subject is the experience of time in human existence. This dual function—to call attention to form both self-referentially and hetero-referentially—indicates a poetics of complexity at the heart of the text.

With this in mind, we return to the recursion in the explicit references to time with which we began our discussion of the poem. In “Burnt Norton” and “East Coker,” time appears as the medium of music, the measure of dance, and the movement of poetry—as central to the experience of artistic forms. In “The Dry Salvages,” however, Eliot focuses attention not on artistic experience but on lived experience, through his central image of water and its marking of time. The close of section 1 connects the water discussion of the first part of the section with time specifically:
And under the oppression of the silent fog
The tolling bell
Measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried
Ground swell, a time
Older than the time of chronometers, older
Than time counted by anxious worried women
Lying awake, calculating the future,
Trying to unweave, unwind, unravel
And piece together the past and the future,
Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception,
The future futureless, before the morning watch
When time stops and time is never ending;
And the ground swell, that is and was from the beginning,
Clangs
The bell. (DS 1.36-50)

Time is measured through the sound of a buoy’s bell, but what is moving here is
the water itself, and that movement marks “time not our time,” in whatever way
that movement is translated for human perception. Since the movement of the
ocean swells is not generated by people, unlike the mechanisms of chronometers
or the processing of thoughts, it reinforces the view that time depends on the
observer (as the theory of relativity demonstrates) and on the object
determinations that observer makes. To emphasize the point, the meter of this
passage is more fluid, with shorter lines presenting the bell, the swell, and the
clanging resulting from both working in concert. This prosodic self-reference
mirrors the semantic reference to time, in an unusual (for Eliot) example of
metrical (not musical) mimesis.

Whereas the sea in section 1 acts as a medium because of its endless and
unpredictable translation of energy into form, in section 3 it acts as a medium
because of its role in the translation of conscious systems (i.e., people) from one
side of the water to the other. In the middle—while riding through the
medium—the constructed “past” and “future” on either side of the journey are suspended, and all that can be observed is the present. In the passage adapted from the Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna says:

“Fare forward, you who think that you are voyaging;
You are not those who saw the harbour
Receding, or those who will disembark.
Here between the hither and the farther shore
While time is withdrawn, consider the future
And the past with an equal mind.
At the moment which is not of action or inaction
You can receive this: ‘on whatever sphere of being
The mind of a man may be intent
At the time of death’—that is the one action
(And the time of death is every moment)
Which shall fructify in the lives of others:
And do not think of the fruit of action.
Fare forward.

O voyagers, O seamen,
You who come to port, and you whose bodies
Will suffer the trial and judgment of the sea,
Or whatever event, this is your real destination.” (DS 3.26-43)

The sea voyage acts as a metaphor here, of course, for any kind of journey, which is to say: for any movement from a beginning to an end. The duration of a sea voyage calls additional attention to the middle, however, while linking the quartet’s central image of water to temporal perception. The description of this water-borne voyage as an opportunity to observe observation (since the moment is neither of action nor inaction, and it is also every moment: a meta-moment) makes it self-referential while simultaneously hetero-referential. And in the end, the voyage is the destination: the means to the end are themselves the end, to recall Browning’s phrase from *The Ring and the Book*. While at this point in the quartet, the connection to poetry is only implicit, by the end of section 5 it is made explicit through a recurrence of the journey parable, this time expressed as
a musical journey: “you are the music / While the music lasts” (DS 5.28-29).

Taking into consideration the other recursive elements of the poem involving music, this line may easily be understood, “You are the poem while the poem lasts.” In other words, the poem advocates a claim utterly in keeping with the poetics of complexity, which now—since “the way forward is the way back” (DS 3.6)—resonates throughout the work, as its considerations of form, music, movement, words, and time all culminate in the description of human perception at the close of “The Dry Salvages”:

Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual,
Here the past and future
Are conquered, and reconciled,
Where action were otherwise movement
Of that which is only moved
And has in it no source of movement—
Driven by daemonic, chthonic
Powers. And right action is freedom
From past and future also.
For most of us, this is the aim
Never here to be realized;
Who are only undefeated
Because we have gone on trying;
We, content at the last
If our temporal reversion nourish
(Not too far from the yew-tree)
The life of significant soil. (DS 5.33-50)

The image of the sea as medium has developed into a focus on form as an operation in the present (“our temporal reversion”).

The third quartet’s focus on this durationless version of time leads organically to “the intersection of the timeless moment” of “Little Gidding” (1.54) just as it arises from the “eternally present” time of “Burnt Norton.” The
first section of “Little Gidding” describes a time that, like poetic language, both is and is not itself:

Midwinter spring is its own season
Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,
Suspended in time, between pole and tropic.

... This is the spring time
But not in time’s covenant. Now the hedgerow
Is blanched for an hour with transitory blossom
Of snow, a bloom more sudden
Than that of summer, neither budding nor fading,
Not in the scheme of generation.
Where is the summer, the unimaginable
Zero summer? (LG 1.1-20)

This paradoxical unity of the time/not-time distinction dominates the quartet, appearing most clearly in the description of Little Gidding itself—“England and nowhere. Never and always” (LG 1.55)—and in the quasi-terza rima passage of section 2 in which the speaker converses with the “familiar compound ghost” (LG 2.42) of his poetic predecessors during the Blitz—“Near the ending of interminable night / At the recurrent end of the unending” (LG 2.26-27). The unfolding of these paradoxes through language such as this is the work of poetry, as “Little Gidding” shows in the first part of section 5, discussed above. And the unfolding that takes place in this way indicates the modern poetics of complexity at work, here and throughout the poem. The final lines of the poem embody such a poetics in an image that demonstrates it metaphorically:

Quick now, here, now, always—
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one. (LG 5.39-46)

The crowned knot is made of fire and conjures a rose; in the metaphor they are one, through the unity of a distinction between self-reference (fire) and hetero-reference (rose). Here at the end, the poem wishes to “in-fold” its images, as it has done in the preceding lines, finally coming to a stop with reference to the paradoxical indication (distinction) of unity (non-distinction), “one.” This in-folding takes place through poetic reading, which is an unfolding of the paradoxes of form. The fact that both take place at the same time, and in the same words, makes the text poetic in the complex-poetic sense.

Such unfoldings and in-foldings require consistent recursions in the text in order for the work to cohere as a poem. The poem contains plenty of other formal clues to bind the sections together, which are not inconsistent with those already discussed. The stanzaic structure, for instance, provides parallels among the individual quartets and sections within them; the titles indicate specific places which carry both local significance and abstract signification; the central images of each quartet follow the classic tetralogy of the elements (earth, air, water, and fire respectively), making the quartets a unified set in a culturally recognizable, not simply an “aesthetic,” way. One clue that would have further unified the quartets and spoken to their central concern is a contemplated epigraph to the whole poem from The Pickwick Papers: “What a rum thing time is, ain’t it, Neddy?” (Gardner 28). As in the other instance of Eliot’s leaving out a Dickens reference at the start of one of his poems (that being The Waste Land with its original subtitle/epigraph, “He Do the Police in Different Voices”), the
omission is a happy one overall. Furthermore, it more easily permits the four quartets to stand alone and be part of the unified whole, which makes this poem remarkable. Just as in *In Memoriam* or *The Ring and the Book*, each section works on its own yet requires the surrounding text to be understood fully. The individual sections participate in the poiesis of the entire text, not simply by proximity (i.e., in narrative terms) but through recursion (i.e., in poetic terms).

The three examples of the modern long poem discussed in this study so far show how the form accommodates vastly different materials in ways that are consistent with the poetics of complexity. Certainly other examples from this 100-year span might also be identified and discussed to good effect, and I anticipate this work being taken up by future scholarship. I have selected these works, however, because I wish to point out that the form includes some of the most famous poems by the most highly regarded poets of the period in question. It is a major form, with a solid history and tradition, even if it has not been identified as such to date. The last quarter-century saw a proliferation of poems that fit into this rubric, expanding its possibilities through experiments and innovations of various kinds. Three of these poems will be the subject of the final chapter.
Chapter 5
The Present Horizon of the Modern Long Poem

Much of the critical attention directed toward contemporary poetry focuses on its distinctly contemporary qualities, which are variously described as “postmodern” or “avant-garde” in order to separate the works from the merely “modern” (or even “pre-modern,” however defined) or “mainstream.” A proliferation of distinct poetic movements in the last half of the 20th century attests to this kind of critical differentiation: the Black Mountain school, Beat poetry, Oulipo (from Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, or the Workshop of Potential Literature), Language poetry (or L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, from the journal of that name), e-poetry (employing electronic hypertext or hypermedia). Contemporary long poems, however, do not figure as much into these discussions. Since their length restricts the ways in which they can sustain their identity as poetry, long poems fall outside many of these more radical or experimental categories and are discussed relatively little in their capacity as poems.

They are often discussed, however, in other terms: e.g., in terms of culture, or gender, or sexuality. In other words, they are treated as equivalent to any number of other literary texts in other genres that use narrative as a primary mode of communication. And as we have seen, it is rare for a text to sustain itself as a long poem without narrative. Even Four Quartets contains narrative sections (monologues, dialogues, parables), although the overall arc of the poem is not a
straightforward narrative. As Brian McHale observes in a recent study of “postmodern long poems,” one of the traits of post-Modernist poetry is the lifting of restrictions on the use of narrative. Poetry is then able to draw upon traditions older than Modernism (McHale identifies the novel and Menippean satire as primary among them (McHale 3-6)) for its material.

As this study has shown in the preceding chapters, narrative has been a part of long poems for many years, and not always in ways incompatible with poetry or modernity. Indeed, one premise of the study is that the modern long poem as a genre has been around for 150 years or so, and that the genre has relied on the use of self-reference in different ways over that time. Such self-reference does not require narrative, but it does not exclude it. The more essential issue is the form which that self-reference takes. In the remainder of this chapter, I will examine three examples of long poems of the last quarter-century that employ self-reference in their narratives and also in their poetics, in keeping with the insights of the poetics of complexity. Each of these poems describes, at least in part, the life of a first-person speaker closely identified with the poet. Personal details enter the poem in crucial ways: events in a life are related, relationships explored, backgrounds uncovered. Each poem at heart is a translation of these elements into language, and at the same time is an exploration of how language makes possible the representation of those elements. The poetics of complexity serves a key role in explaining this reciprocal operation of translating experience into poetic language and language into poetic experience: it helps us handle the distinction between form and medium in useful ways.
The distinction between medium and form takes on special meaning in James Merrill’s *The Changing Light at Sandover*, since the poem’s basic premise is its derivation from transcripts of sessions at the Ouija board with the poet and his partner, David Jackson. The two figure into the poem as the characters JM and DJ, who are explicitly referred to as “the mediums” (*CLS* 281),¹ in case their role was at all unclear. Through their use of the Ouija board, they bring into form what Timothy Materer refers to as an apocalypse, in the sense of an unveiling of that which lies (in Tennyson’s words) behind the veil (Materer 16). The spirits from beyond this world—the dead, the angels, even deities—communicate with JM and DJ through the board, and the mediums speak directly with them. In the process, they learn about the history of the universe, the hierarchy of the afterlife, the makeup of souls, and a number of other quasi-religious matters, guided by a series of instructors with increasing power and knowledge. The sole purpose of these lessons, it appears, is to give rise to the very poem that communicates the lessons and everything else in the poem to a wider audience. Early in the second part, *Mirabell’s Books of Number*, the bat-angels who intervene in JM and DJ’s otherworldly conversations in “The Book of Ephraim,” section U, reveal why the mediums have been called by the spirits:

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UNHEEDFULL ONE  3 OF YOUR YEARES MORE WE WANT  WE MUST HAVE 
POEMS OF SCIENCE  THE WERK FINISHT IS BUT A PROLOGUE 
ABSOLUTES ARE NOW NEEDED  YOU MUST MAKE GOD OF SCIENCE 
TELL OF POWER  MANS IGNORANCE FEARES THE POWER WE ARE 
THAT FEAR STOPS PARADISE  WE SPEAK FROM WITHIN THE ATOM  (113)
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1 All references to *The Changing Light at Sandover* are by page number.
The poem gradually reveals that the two were chosen for being especially compatible with the work, and that their familiar spirit Ephraim, who first introduces them to the workings of the Ouija board and of communication with the dead, is actually a persona of the archangel Michael, the angel of light and lesson-master in *Scripts for the Pageant* (although his identity is revealed only in the “Coda: The Higher Keys”). The central question all these oddities beg is: what exactly are the mediums in touch with, and in a work of literary art, what does that matter anyway? Many reviewers of *The Changing Light* have rejected the poem because they cannot swallow the outrageous depictions of God, the angels, Nature, and the rest, dismissing them and the poem together. Merrill is not unaware of these potential responses; in “Ephraim” section I, the mediums themselves consider these matters:

The question
Of who or what we took Ephraim to be,
And of what truths (if any) we considered
Him spokesman, had arisen from the start.

We, all we knew, dreamed, felt and had forgotten,
Flesh made word, became through him a set of
Quasi-grammatical constructions which
Could utter some things clearly, forcibly,
Others not. Like Tosca hadn’t we
Lived for art and love? We were not tough-
Or literal-minded, or unduly patient
With those who were. Hadn’t—from books, from living—
The profusion dawned on us, of “languages”
Any one of which, to who could read it,
Lit up the system it conceived?—bird-flight,
Hallucinogen, chorale and horoscope:
Each its own world, hypnotic, many-sided
Facet of the universal gem.
Ephraim’s revelations—we had them
For comfort, thrills and chills, “material.”
He didn’t cavil. *He* was the revelation.
(Or if we had created him, then we were).
The point—one twinkling point by now of thousands—
Was never to forego, in favor of
Plain dull proof, the marvelous nightly pudding. (31-32)

The speaker JM brushes aside the question of the origin of the messages on the board to focus instead on their sheer delight in the “revelations” of the personae speaking to them, whether those personae be from the world beyond or from their own imaginations.

As Tennyson says, “We have but faith; we cannot know.” And as in *In Memoriam*, verification is less important for the poem’s purposes than poetic emergence. In the course of *The Changing Light*, this emergence takes place in the “revelation” or unfolding of the text’s central paradoxical problem: that the text must both describe and enact itself persuasively as poetic art. As with Browning’s Old Yellow Book and *The Ring and the Book*, the existence of Merrill’s actual transcripts of the Ouija board sessions is irrelevant to the poem, no matter how interesting to literary history and poetic praxis. What pertains is that the poem presents itself as an arrangement of “received” materials that describes their reception while embodying the arrangement, which is an inherently recursive process. The implicit claim that the poem’s materials derive authenticity from the afterlife and thus present an accurate depiction of that world does not fundamentally differ from the tautological claim to authenticity of any other fiction. Nor does the tautology diminish the literary success of the work, regardless of one’s beliefs about the metaphysics it describes. The form it takes, however, makes all the difference to whether readers will see it as poetic.

And in order to be seen as a long poem, the text makes good use of the poetics of
complexity, with the figure of the Ouija board itself as the central recursive element that holds the entire poem together at different structural scales. Its presence in the poem eliminates the need for external “verification” or “proof”; or, rather, by accepting the board as the basic recursive element in the text, we have already given whatever external verification or proof was needed to our reading.

The Ouija board’s aptness for its role in the poem lies in its alphanumeric components. As Helen Vendler writes:

The Ouija board is a symbol system that offers potentially unlimited combinations of letters and numbers, affirmations and denials; it can stand, we might say, for language itself. (Vendler 162)

Vendler calls attention here to the difference between langue and parole, between medium and form: the Ouija board is a medium, as language is, but its presence as a medium can be known only through the contingent forms it permits. Thus Vendler’s insights might be modified by the poetics of complexity to say: if the board stands for language as a medium, it is also a form since it is not language but merely a stand-in for it, necessitating a distinction from which form arises. In his recent study of contemporary long poems, Brian McHale describes this standing-in in terms of a prosthetic device:

The key terms here are device, contrivance, artifice. For what is in the end perhaps most scandalous about the Ouija-board premise of The Changing Light is not its occult implications (those we are free
to take or leave), but rather its status as a *device*. The presence of the Ouija board lays bare the *artificiality* of this poetry, its basis in mechanical procedures—precisely in the operation of a text-generating machine—rather than in the poet’s “heart” or “psyche” or “subconscious,” or whatever other term we might prefer for the site of authentic feeling. No doubt the Ouija board only mediates a stream of language that proceeds from some such site (if it does not proceed from the other world); but it *does* mediate that language, introducing a device—admittedly a strange device—into the circuit joining poet and audience. Prostheses ought not to be noticeable, and if one does happen to notice one, it is bad manners to draw attention to it; but that is what the Ouija board does in *The Changing Light*, outraging the still-prevalent Romantic ideology of poetic creation, and forcing us to acknowledge the artifice, the prosthetic character, of poetry itself—indeed, of language itself. (McHale 48)

As we have seen consistently in this study, calling attention to themselves is precisely what enables texts to function as modern long poems at all; *The Changing Light* is no different on that account. But it does differ from most lyrics, which McHale associates with a prevailing Romantic ideology of poetry. The question of the accuracy of his claim is beyond my scope here; for now I wish only to point out that in this regard *The Changing Light* follows in the post-Romantic tradition of the modern long poem by calling attention to itself in ostentatious ways, made all the more ostentatious by its subject matter.
For even though the poem is, as McHale says, fundamentally concerned with death (McHale 49), it is also and at the same time concerned with Life. That is, its subject is the very survival of the planet and of humanity—the autopoiesis of all terrestrial living systems—which turns out, not surprisingly, to be inextricably intertwined with the spirit world in complicated ways. The poem itself is JM’s “V work,” a term signifying a complex of meanings. Mirabell, the bat-angel turned peacock who introduces JM and DJ to the hierarchies of the Research Lab (where souls labor and learn in the other world with their immortal superiors), first describes the term to JM:

IN DEFFERENCE
TO ALL VITAL GROUPINGS OF 5 WE MAY NOW INSERT V
WHEN NAMING WORK GUIDED BY HIGHER COLLABORATION (162)

Not only is “V” short for “vital” (or the French “vie” (Yenser 256), recalling Merrill’s fondness for Proust), it is the Roman numeral for “five,” significant for its reference to the immortal five souls of the Research Lab which lend their powers to mortals doing their work on Earth (the Greenhouse). Numbers matter a great deal in the poem: the bat-angels’ anchor points of Atlantis (their first world) number 14; tetralogies abound, in the four archangels, the four mortals at the Sandover lessons, and the four major sections of the poem; and the term “the 12%” comes to signify the non-chemical part of human beings as well as the number associated with the angels (each of the four angelic brothers has three aspects, as does God B’s twin, Nature/Chaos/Psyche). In accordance with the one great principle of the Greenhouse that JM and DJ learn—“No Accident” (196)—the vestigial meaning of “numbers” as “verse” applies as well. Each kind
of being in the poem has its own characteristic meter: the humans, both dead and living, use pentameter; the angels and their mother, Nature, speak in the free verse of the Psalms; the unicorn Unice, “a lonely / Quadruped” (320), speaks in tetrameter; God Biology (or God B) in his two appearances speaks in ten lines of ten syllables each, a less inflected variation of the mortals’ pentameter. JM and one of the primary mortal shades, the spirit of W. H. Auden, even discuss how to present the bat-angels in verse:

So fourteeners might
Do for the bats? NOT SKITTERY ENOUGH
WHY NOT MY BOY SYLLABICS? LET THE CASE
REPRESENT A FALL FROM METRICAL GRACE (240)

And so they appear in 14-syllable lines, to match the number of bat-angels surrounding Mirabell and the others during their initial lessons. Speakers of different kinds keep time to the beat of their own meters, even when they speak in short phrases to each other, as in this snippet from Mirabell’s Books of Number:

QUESTIONS?
Peacock, what’s wrong?
I AM HERE I AM MORE CAREFUL
Poor darling, were you punished?
WE MUST GO ON (233)

The deliberateness of the meters calls attention to the prosody, which is a self-referential move. JM’s part works just like the speaker’s in a dramatic monologue—the speech is both ordinary and versified—but since Mirabell’s speech is generated from a board transcription, in which spacing and lineation are not generated by the board but imposed by the scribe/poet, the artifice is not to be ignored. Even with the addition early in Mirabell of ten punctuation marks (129), the text must be translated from the activity or motion of the cup indicating
symbols on the board, to a sequence or string of written symbols, to an edition of
them in poetic form. The poem manages to represent not just the indicated
symbols but also their delivery, through apt use of white space that represents
pauses or shifts in the pace of the cup:

\begin{verbatim}
WE USE WORDS WHEN WE SPEAK WORDS CANNOT EXPRESS SUCH
POWER SUCH GODLY PRODUCTION WE TOO WERE OBLITERATED
WE TRIFLED & FALL NEGATIVE ENERGY THE BLACK HOLE
WAS BORNE WE BURN YET THERE IS MERCY & HAVING SUFFERED
IT IS OUR DUTY TO WARN MAN AGAINST THE CHAOS ONCE
WORSHIP BY US OUR IMAGE IS LITERALLY BLACKEND
ON THE RUINED ALTARS WHERE OUR FEELINGS WENT UP IN FLAME
“Fell” and “flame” emerging ritardando
As from the lips of a speller still in shock. (113-14)
\end{verbatim}

To assure us there is no accident with the spacing, the speaker JM instructs us on
how to read the text. Such innovative coding will eventually become transparent
to the reader over the course of the poem’s 560 pages, but at these initial
moments it emphasizes its opaque quality, the self-referential element inherent
in all language. Through this self-reference, the small-caps text consistently
indicates not only the substance of some otherworldly entity’s communications
(granting that “otherworldly” may well include the world of the poet’s
imagination), but also the device from which it comes—not simply language,
but language mediated by the Ouija board.

\footnote{It has been suggested by several commentators as well as by the poet
himself that David Jackson ought to receive at least partial credit for the
authorship of the poem, since he was “the hand” and participated in the
generation of the Ouija board transcripts, if not in the working of them into
poetic form. Thus the poem’s imaginative world may well have been Jackson’s
also. See McHale 40-41 and Lurie 97-108.}
The Ouija board thus appears implicitly on almost every page of the poem. And its presence is discernible in the structure of the poem’s sections, with the 26 sections in “The Book of Ephraim” beginning with each letter of the alphabet; the ten major sections of Mirabell’s Books of Number beginning with not only a number (and proceeding with numerically-outlined subsections throughout) but a word signifying that number in some language (e.g., section 2 begins “Bethinking,” using the Hebrew beth; section 5 begins with “Go,” the Japanese word for five); and the three parts of Scripts for the Pageant organized by the three final symbols on the board, “Yes,” “&,” and “No.” But near the end of Scripts, the Ouija board makes an explicit appearance, during the final lesson, delivered by God B himself:

MY SON MICHAEL LIT UP YOUR MINDS  MY SON
GABRIEL TURNED THEM TO THE DARK FORCE WE
CONTAIN  POET FROM THIS MAKE A V WORK
GIVING BOTH PAUSE AND HOPE TO THIS FIGURE
I SEE EMBLAZONED HERE  (493)

At this point a diagram of the board is inserted on the page, with the letters forming a semicircle from bottom left to center top to bottom right, the numbers in a line across the bottom, the words “YES” and “NO” in the top corners, and the ampersand in the center. The next lines indicate something the cup does that is not translated into text, as sometimes happens in the poem (when the cup is swept off the board by some force, or when it dances or pauses during its turning):

YES to NO to A to Z to YES
(Quincunx where ghosts of Five and Twelve perambulate)
The cup . . . crosses itself? Inscribes a stark
Twinbladed axe
Upon the block, sideways? Is it the mark
That cancels, or the letter-writer’s kiss?
The X
Of the illiterate?
Fulcrum and consort to our willowy &?
The space of a slow breath indrawn,
Simplicity itself, it waits and then goes on,
Taking us like children by the hand:

MY UPRIGHT MAN
FULL OF TIME HE STRUGGLES TO HOLD IT BACK
AND CREATE FOR ME A PARADISE I
IN MY OWN UPSTRETCHED ARMS WILL SHOW CRYING
SEE BROTHERS WE HAVE HELD IT BACK SEE SEE
I AND MINE BROTHERS IN OUR DAY SURVIVE

Drifting to the outer limit. Gone. (493-94)

The figure of the X the cup draws represents humanity, standing with legs apart
and arms outstretched, referring back to another diagram JM draws at Gabriel’s
direction two lessons earlier (475). But the poet’s questions indicate alternative
readings with darker consequences—without pointing out an obvious one
obliterated by his use of the board solely as a medium. God B is marking the Ouija
board itself, indicating it as a form and equating it with the human struggle to
mark time, to survive. As we have seen earlier, social and psychic systems
require continued operations in language for their autopoiesis, which is both
survival (looking forward) and experience (looking back). The marking of the
board as a self-indicating language device is poetically consistent with its use for
marking figures, even when the symbols are used not for their linguistic content
but for their physical layout in space. The poem as a V work must give both
pause and hope to the figure God B thus indicates, which is now both self-
referential (the marked Ouija board as language’s prosthesis) and hetero-referential (the readers “marked” on the board’s surface).

The marking of the Ouija board within the poem makes the text deeply recursive. Its very name suggests that the recursion merely unfolds the tautology on which the poem is based, that it describes the other world accurately because we accept its pronouncements as accurate:

In 1899 a small businessman called William Fuld improved on [the planchette], creating what he called “OUIJA, the MYSTIFYING ORACLE.” At this period the Near East was considered the source of everything magical and exotic, and the name “Ouija” sounded vaguely Arabic. But in fact it was merely a combination of the words for “yes” in French (oui) and German (ja). Fuld’s invention was, literally, a YesYes board—appropriately so, since what it promised what essentially affirmation of the operator’s hopes and fears. (Lurie 53)

What seems circular (YesYes) undergoes changes that make it seem not exactly circular (Ouija), if looked at from the proper perspective. The consistency of the changes, signaled by the recursion of the Ouija board in the poem, make it persuasive from a poetic standpoint. By the circular end of the poem, when JM ends by reading the poem from the beginning to a group of 26 assembled spirits and friends, we can finally appreciate the full irony of the beginning:

Admittedly I err by undertaking
This in its present form. The baldest prose
Reportage was called for, that would reach
Not only does the poet call attention to the fact that the text is in verse, and is intended as a poem, he begins with an enlargement of the bottom half of the figure indicated by God B, or by Gabriel before him: the downward-facing half in which time is slipping away, out of reach. Such a reading of the text, in which the letters themselves come to signify not just pieces of language but physical symbols and even abstract figures, must be poetic, not prosaic; and this reading is consistent with the use of the Ouija board throughout the poem. Seeing the recursion makes the text plausible as a poem, and the only apocalyptic vision required is the complex-poetic vision of belief in poetic worlds, radically constructed out of language used recursively. As in all poetic texts, there is no accident; and if there is error here, it becomes part of the text and, as with Dante (whose Divine Comedy echoes throughout The Changing Light) or Milton’s Adam and Eve, leads to greater knowledge in and of the long poem.

Another recent long poem drawing upon famous antecedent works such as Dante’s is Derek Walcott’s Omeros. It is frequently characterized as an epic, since it of course engages Homeric epic poems in its characters and plot lines. Much criticism of the poem attempts to describe what kind of epic it is. Reed Way Dasenbrock identifies Omeros as a postcolonial counterpart to Pound’s Cantos in its attempt to rework Homer and Dante into a Modernist epic (Dasenbrock 117-18); Robert Hamner focuses instead on the non-heroic elements in the poem, calling it an “epic of the dispossessed” (Hamner 15) that represents
its age in the same way that classical heroic epics and their 20th-century successors took advantage of contemporary subjects (166). Others have denied the poem the status of epic, such as Paul Breslin:

The Homeric epic is a genre devoted to cultural memory . . . . Walcott’s way of dealing with the past, however, encourages a necessary forgetting. In Omeros, this forgetting extends to the Homeric texts themselves. Encountering the spirit of Homer, the Walcott persona says of The Odyssey: “I never read it, / . . . not all the way through” (O, 283) And yet, he claims, “I was the freshest of all your readers”—impudently fresh, perhaps, but Adamically fresh as well. (Breslin 241-42)

Walcott himself has denied that Omeros is an epic, in part because of his own presence in it in the form of the narrator character (Hamner 33). The consensus on the poem’s identity as epic, if there is any consensus, is that Walcott appropriates epic conventions for his own purposes, whether the resulting text is itself an epic or not.

More interesting is the question of what is gained by appropriating elements of the epic genre and of specific epics, a question which recalls Eliot’s allusion to musical form in Four Quartets. As in Four Quartets, Omeros’s reworking of epic form uses the similarities to call attention ultimately to the differences. Indeed, “difference” is one of the consistent themes of the poem, with its focus on the differences (among others) between white and black, land and sea, colonizer and colonized, and ancient and modern, and on how all those
differences can coexist in a single place (St. Lucia), in a single person (Derek Walcott), and in a single text (Omeros). To understand the paradoxical unity of distinctions such as these, the poetics of complexity is of great assistance, as it shows both how Walcott’s text handles the epic/not-epic distinction as well as how it establishes itself as a modern long poem and not merely a narrative in verse employing epic machinery. The complex-poetic approach resonates with the insights of other scholars of the poem who have tended to focus primarily on the political, cultural, historical, and narrative elements in the poem—and even on its status as “epic” in the sense of scale or sweep—at the expense of its poetic elements.

Most critics of the poem have noticed this complexity in terms of postcolonial approaches, either specifically as a local Caribbean poetics or more generally as a creole aesthetic. David Farrier identifies these characteristics with the figure of chiasmus (Farrier 26-28); Adam Roberts focuses instead on the figure of paronomasia:

One feature of Omeros that strikes a curiously unsettled quality of tone is Walcott’s fascination with puns. There are a great many puns in this poem, and most of them are bad puns; this in turn raises questions of reading. The punning has a certain appropriateness, in one obvious way, of course, because the whole of Omeros is a sort of meta-pun, a perceived double significance in the actions of its protagonists—Achille and Hector fight both as St. Lucian fishermen and as Homeric heroes. Taking this organising
principle of the poem down to the local level, we find over and over again words telegraph their doubleness. (A. Roberts 57)

The unease Roberts feels about the poem’s tone indicates a way of reading that goes beyond merely noticing the wordplay. As he indicates, the Achille-Hector tale at the center of the poem has a kind of double significance, but it is not intended as an allegory. The characters are aware of their differences from their namesakes, to the extent they are aware of them at all. And the text’s own turn against itself, as Walcott describes it, suggests that the attempt to see it as allegorical is misguided:

In a remarkable impromptu lecture, transcribed for *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Walcott claimed that “the last third” of *Omeros* “is a total refutation of the efforts made by two characters.” The first is the English expatriate Dennis Plunkett’s attempt to ennoble “the maid, Helen, who has worked for him” by comparing her to Helen of Troy; this obsession leads him to pursue every possible verbal coincidence linking St. Lucia to the Homeric narrative. But “the second effort is made by the writer, or narrator (presumably me, if you like), who composes a long poem in which he compares this island woman to Helen of Troy. The answer to both the historian [Plunkett] and the poet/narrator—the answer in terms of history, the answer in terms of literature—is that the woman doesn’t need it.” (Breslin 242)
The character of Helen in *Omeros* both is and is not a type of Homer’s Helen, whereas in allegory the difference (her not being Homer’s Helen) would be rendered largely insignificant. Roberts is correct, then, to reduce the significance of the Homeric echoes of the poem’s characters to mere doubleness, which need not be allegorical. Taking a cue from a general identification of the text’s poetics as double/creole/chiastic, the poetics of complexity reframes that identification as a kind of *marking* or *crossing*.

The term “cross” appears in Spencer-Brown’s *Laws of Form* as a synonym for “indication” and as the name of the mark he uses to represent such an operation in his calculus. It derives its significance from the basic idea of distinction, since “if the content [on one side of a distinction] is of value, a motive or intention or instruction to cross this boundary into the content can be taken to indicate this value. Thus, also, the crossing of the boundary can be identified with the value of the content” (Spencer-Brown 2). *Omeros* is filled with the crossing of boundaries, which in turn make up the bulk of its content. Roberts notes the telegraphing of words’ doubleness; I take this further to say that words in the poem function poetically precisely because of this telegraphing. Instead of seeing the puns/chiasmus/creolizations as the poem getting its lines crossed, a poetics of complexity sees such crossings as what makes the poem a poem. The central image in the poem supporting this reading is that of the sea-swift, who appears regularly throughout the text in a number of variations turning on the swift’s shape or form.

In the second section of Chapter I, the form of the swift is introduced:
Achille looked up at the hole the laurel had left. He saw the hole silently healing with the foam of a cloud like a breaker. Then he saw the swift crossing the cloud-surf, a small thing, far from its home confused by the waves of blue hills. A thorn vine gripped his heel. He tugged it free. Around him, other ships were shaping from the saw. With his cutlass he made a swift sign of the cross, his thumb touching his lips while the height rang with axes. (2)

The swift both crosses over things in flight and appears to be a cross, as the “swift sign of the cross” is both rapid and swift-shaped; Achille hears God tell him during his ocean-crossing odyssey-vision, “Is I send the sea-swift as a pilot, / the swift whose wings is the sign of my crucifixion” (134). In the context of the tree-felling, the ringing of axes might well be the ringing of X’s, the sign of the cross and a textual marker of crossing within the poem. During Achille’s vision of his African ancestors, he hears the axes in a different context, with different resonances:

He could hear the same echoes made by their stone axes in the heights over the tied sticks of the settlement, and the echoes were prediction and memory, the crossing X’s of the sidewise strokes, but here in their element the trees and the spirits that they uttered were rooted, and Achille looked at the map in his hand rivered as numerously as this, his coast. (144)

Achille recalls the suffering the descendants of these people—himself included—will endure, and the crossing of perspectives (“prediction and memory”) associated with the shape and sound of axe/X appears here as

3 All reference to Omeros are by page number.

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fundamentally poetic, in that it indicates itself through aural and visual form as well as something not-itself in its semantic meanings of chopping-stroke and chiastic figure. The X as both forward and backward glance surfaces again at the beginning of Book Five, with narrator’s trip to Europe as a parallel to Achille’s trip to Africa:

I crossed my meridian. Rust terraces, olive trees, the grey horns of a port. Then, from a cobbled corner of this mud-caked settlement founded by Ulysses—

swifts, launched from the nesting sails of Ulissibona, their cries modulated to “Lisbon” as the Mediterranean aged into the white Atlantic, their flight, in reverse,

repeating the X of an hourglass, every twitter and aeon from which a horizon climbed in the upturned vase. A church clock spun back its helm. (189)

Resembling the time-filled X of Merrill’s Changing Light, the swifts’ upward flight is both marked in time and a marker of time, just as the narrator’s odyssey and Achille’s are journeys into the past that take the poem forward into the future. If to “verse” is a way of marking time in language, to “reverse” is to do the same thing. Recalling Spencer-Brown’s first axiom, to make an indication followed by the same indication is the same as making the indication only once. Thus to “cross” and to “reverse” in the text are both ways of marking; and as with so many markers in the poem, they undergo numerous transformations that unfold a multiplicity of meanings together in the single text. Early in the poem, the narrator encounters the ghost of his father, who presents him with a written artifact from their past:

In his transparent hand was a book I had read.
“In this pale blue notebook where you found my verses”—
my father smiled—“I appeared to make your life’s choice,
and the calling that you practise both reverses
and honours mine from the moment it blent with yours.
Now that you are twice my age, which is the boy’s,
which the father’s?”

“Sir”—I swallowed—“they are one voice.”

The encounter cuts across generations (via the trans-parent hand), and affirms
the unification within the narrator of the father’s influence through both reversal
and blending, and the play on “swallow,” as with “swift” and with the
numerous other birds in the text, deliberately brings the text’s central figure of
crossing into play.

Other letters come to represent marks of crossing in the poem. “V” is both
Plunkett’s notation for “the errors in either fleet” in his account of the maritime
Battle of St. Lucia (91) and the outline of “the velvet back” of the lemon dress that
Helen has taken from Maud Plunkett (29). On occasions, “I” is singled out as a
marker, as in this narrative aside describing Dennis Plunkett’s head-wound:

This wound I have stitched into Plunkett’s character.
He has to be wounded, affliction is one theme
of this work, this fiction, since every “I” is a
fiction finally. (28)

This passage is doubly self-referential, since it refers not just to the poem but to
the speaker as one of the fictional I’s. The mark of the I parallels the scar of
Philoctete, the cure of whose wounded shin makes up a major sub-plot of the
poem (even the names “Philoctete” and “Plunkett” are parallel, both being
reductions of “Philoctetes” in Antillean patois and British English respectively).
And the letter “O” is both interjection—“O open this day with the conch’s moan, Omeros” (12)—and representative of sounds and shapes:

I said, “Omeros,”

and O was the conch-shell’s invocation, mer was both mother and sea in our Antillean patois, os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore. (14)

This explicit association of meanings and signs asks us to pay attention to the components of the text in a particularly poetic way, by seeing them as at least partially self-referential. Ultimately that is why all the different letters with their divergent figurative and literal forms work toward the same poetic goal: of promoting the simultaneous first- and second-order reading that takes advantage of the text’s inherent complexity to unfold the text’s apparent confusions and inconsistencies. That is why both X’s and O’s, I’s and V’s work to “re-verse” the various wounds or marks in the poem.

In terms of narrative, the swift figures in this reversal of time’s wounds in several of the poem’s threads—at times, quite literally—through acts of making or poiesis. Maud Plunkett’s Penelope-like quilting of the birds of St. Lucia into what will be her funeral shroud is her way of reconciling herself to her childless life far from Ireland. Her husband admired her hands in the half-dark out of the lamplit ring in the deep floral divan, diving like a swift to the drum’s hoop, as quick as a curlew drinking salt, with its hover, skim, dip, then vertical lift. (89)
Flight and stitching are linked several times in the poem, as when Ma Kilman imagines bats in the forest canopy “when their wings with crisscrossing stitches / blurred in the leaf-breaks, building a web overhead, / a net that entered her nerves” (243), or when the narrator enters for his final appearance in the poem:

I followed a sea-swift to both sides of this text; her hyphen stitched its seam, like the interlocking basins of globe in which one half fits the next into an equator, both shores neatly clicking into a globe; except that its meridian was not North and South but East and West. . . .

Her wing-beat carries these islands to Africa, she sewed the Atlantic rift with a needle’s line, the rift in the soul. (319)

These sections, along with the name-association of Maud Plunkett with Maud Gonne, recall Yeats’s “Adam’s Curse,” a poem that surely lies underneath Omeros along with Homeric epic: “I said, ‘A line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been nought’” (Yeats 80). Stich-ing as stitching; poetry as poiesis: the figure of the swift comes to stand for both. Walcott builds up this image through the poem in pieces that must be stitched together, in what becomes the text’s most explicitly recursive gesture. Above, Maud’s work resembles the movement of the swift “dipping” into the fabric of the quilt; later, Omeros himself (a double of the blind local man St. Omere, or Seven Seas) describes the origins and poetics of the text on behalf of the narrator, who cannot seem to reconcile the contradictions he encounters in his quest to write an epic of St. Lucia:

“You ain’t been nowhere,” Seven Seas said, “you have seen nothing no matter how far you may have travelled,
cities with shadowy spires stitched on a screen

which the beak of a swift has ravelled and unravelled;
you have learnt no more than if you stood on that beach
watching the unthreading foam you watched as a youth,

except your skill with one oar; you hear the salt speech
that your father once heard; one island, and one truth.
Your wanderer is a phantom from the boy’s shore.

Mark you, he does not go; he sends his narrator;
he plays tricks with time because there are two journeys
in every odyssey, one on worried water,

the other crouched and motionless, without noise.
For both, the ‘I’ is a mast; a desk is a raft
for one, foaming with paper, and dipping the beak

of a pen in its foam, while an actual craft
carries the other to cities where people speak
a different language, or look at him differently,

while the sun rises from the other direction
with its unsettling shadows, but the right journey
is motionless; as the sea moves round an island

that appears to be moving, love moves round the heart—
with encircling salt, and the slowly travelling hand
knows it returns to the port from which it must start.

Therefore, this is what this island has meant to you,
why my bust spoke, why the sea-swift was sent to you:
to circle yourself and your island with this art.” (291)

Thus when the narrator says in his envoi, “So much left unspoken // by my
chirping nib!” (321), the pen’s association with the swift is complete.

The poem’s motive is to join, but the materials resist the joining and retain
marks of their severance. Rather than despair, the poem recognizes this state as
unavoidable, as the poetics of complexity shows. Indication is distinction; the
perception of unity comes only from the paradoxical unity of a distinction, from
a crossing that is seen at the second order as a unity. This reading of the poem is represented within the poem in the character of Philoctete, whose shin wound is healed only after Ma Kilman locates the flower of the seed brought from Africa in the stomach of the swift (238-39). Philoctete is “without roots in this world” (21), not simply because his injury prevents him from working the sea as he once did, but because he no sense of his own identity, as a descendent of slaves in a former British and French colony that was long ago home to native Aruac tribes long since vanished. While these historical facts cannot be changed, his perspective on them can be, which the healing of his shin metaphorically, poetically demonstrates. The stinking white flower—rooted in the island, born in Africa, tinted with the color of the colonizer and the smell of the colonized—becomes the salve that facilitates his cure. The narrator describes Achille “thinking of the stitched, sutured wound that Philoctete / was given by the sea, but how the sea could heal / the wound also” (242). Without both the wound and its cure, there would be no poem.

In no way is Walcott justifying the horrors of the Middle Passage or of the brutality of Caribbean colonization (or of the Trail of Tears, in his vision of Catherine Weldon and the Sioux); he is, however, providing a means by which he can come to grips with his conflicting allegiances (as evidenced in his early lyric poem “A Far Cry from Africa”: “Where shall I turn, divided to the vein? / . . . how choose / Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?” (Collected Poems 18)) and thus model a way for others’ wounds to be healed. The wounds are real, and they cannot be erased. The crossing of the Atlantic—Africa to St.
Lucia, St. Lucia to Europe—cannot be re-crossed, or “cancelled” in Spencer-Brown’s terms (Spencer-Brown 2, 5). But the wounds can be healed, and the crossing can be marked. Such marking is the work of poetry, and readers guided by the poetics of complexity can likewise find the paradoxical unity of the text’s distinctions in its stitching/stich-ing of the wounds. As the narrator says in the penultimate section of the poem:

Like Philoctete’s wound, this language carries its cure,
itself radiant affliction; reluctantly now,
like Achille’s, my craft slips the chain of its anchor,
moored to its cross as I leave it; its nodding prow
lettered as simply, ribbed in our native timber,
riding these last worried lines; its rhythm agrees
that all it forgot a swift made it remember
since that green sunrise of axes and laurel-trees,
till the sunset chars it, slowly, to an ember. (323)

The rhythm of the lines—the loose adaptation of epic hexameters with the loose terza rima rhyme in the poem’s tercets—becomes as natural to the poem as Browning’s blank verse or Tennyon’s In Memoriam stanza are to theirs. Yet its debts to Homer and Dante are easily forgotten, as the form itself seems to mimic the movement of the ocean that figures so prominently in the poem as the medium of travel and the division between peoples. The loose rhythm, both regular and variable—variable even to the point of being abandoned entirely in a section of tetrameter couplets (173-74)—echoes the motion of waves, as do the larger-scale structures of the text. The poem is divided into seven books, a number that resonates nicely with the “Seven Seas” persona of Omeros; these are divided into an irregular number of chapters, which in turn are divided into
three sections each, which in turn are divided into a widely varying number of
stanzas, which in turn have exactly three lines each. The form is both patterned
and variable, both deliberate and arbitrary. The work coheres as poetry, though,
because this form resonates self-referentially with the central motif of crossing.
Structural boundaries are set up only to be crossed—not negated, but shown to
be at once integral and unimportant. The boundaries mean what they mean only
because observers see them that way. By coming to terms with the boundaries
through the poetics of complexity, readers can see that language in the poem
does carry its own cure and its own affliction, despite the circular paradoxes that
configuration entails.

In contrast, Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life* addresses the problem of circular
paradoxes more directly, beginning with its title. It explicitly invokes self-
reference and recursion to establish the text as poetic, while ostensibly presenting
itself as an autobiography, a written representation of the poet’s life. The
expectation of a straightforward autobiography is consistently defeated, as the
poem refuses to narrate the basic biographical data we expect in a life story.
While such “facts” do appear in the text, they appear as incidental details rather
than significant foci of the story, such as when her children’s names suddenly
appear in the text, even though the events of their births have not been marked
in any conspicuous way. Yet impressions of a life emerge from the text, which is
all any life story can provide, being merely a translation of a life into language
and thus limited by media in fundamental ways. It is this point that *Tristram
Shandy* famously illustrates by way of negative example: by attempting to narrate
everything in the life, the autobiography breaks down and cannot fulfill its own purpose. *My Life*, on the other hand, has learned the lesson: “But many facts about a life should be left out, they are easily replaced” (29: 105).

Or easily appended: the poem exists in two versions, one written when Hejinian was 37 years old, and an expanded version published when she was 45. The structure of each version of the poem corresponds with the poet’s age: the first contains 37 sections of 37 sentences each, and the second has 45 sections of 45 sentences each. As Marjorie Perloff notes:

> Not only don’t they [the eight added sentences in each section] stand out; once inserted into the text, they are wholly absorbed into its momentum so that it is impossible to tell where the seams are. . . . [A] given “fact of life” will be “replaced” or at least recontextualized so as to take on somewhat different meanings by being inserted between a new X and Y. And yet, as in a jigsaw puzzle or mosaic, the replacement strategies don’t alter the fact that the “pieces” are very similar—cut, as it were, from the same cloth. (Perloff, *Radical Artifice* 164)

Perloff sees this similarity of poetic materials as an attempt by the poet to question the mode of “‘informational’ autobiography” and defeat the

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4 All references to *My Life* are to the Green Integer edition of 2002, and the citations include both section number and page number. The Green Integer printing reproduces the 1987 Sun & Moon edition of the poem with different page formatting and thus different pagination; therefore, the section number is cited for convenience, since the earlier edition remains in common use. Neither should be confused with the considerably shorter 1980 Burning Deck edition.
construction of self in writing (164). In contrast, however, Craig Douglas
Dworkin picks up on the patchwork pattern of My Life in his discussion of the
text vis-à-vis textiles—specifically, quilting:

As incongruous as it might at first appear, the analogue of the quilt
accentuates certain of the book’s thematic and structural elements,
which in turn can help both to tease out the threads of clear and
recoverable narrative woven into the text and to suggest the
theoretical framework in which they might be read to the best
advantage. (Dworkin 59)

In his essay Dworkin shows that this patching together of textual elements
ultimately resists coherence, and that this resistance is in keeping with Hejinian’s
own desire to reject closure in her work (78). Both Dworkin and Perloff point out
the text’s emphasis on its own artificiality, and that this emphasis serves various
poetic or political purposes (of the Language poets, of women’s writing, of
critiques of power hierarchies), which are useful insights. In light of the poetics
of complexity, however, the text’s deliberate artificiality might instead be read as
an example of self-reference that unfolds the autobiographical self-reference that
is defeated by more traditional narrative or structural approaches (such as the
autobiographical example from earlier in this study, Wordsworth’s The Prelude).
In this way, the text can in fact be read as a coherent representation of a “self,”
and as a poem as well.

Returning to the title: whose life does it indicate, and what kind of life is
that? Certainly the text is at least in part autobiographical, as deduced from the
personal details that are clearly taken from the events in her life story. But the correspondence between sections of the poem and the years of Hejinian’s life suggested by the numerical coincidence does not entirely work out: many events are foreshadowed or recalled at times other than when they might have happened. As the poem reminds us, “It was only a coincidence” (17: 64), and the movement of the text accommodates these kinds of inexactitudes that in an “ordinary” autobiography would be unacceptable. It is also clear that much of the text consists of vague generalities, aphorisms, and observations that might pertain to any life. Their appearance in the poem does not negate the possibility that they apply to Hejinian’s life specifically; but they allow for multiple possibilities that suggest that the “my” in My Life might be, during the reading experience, the reader. Juliana Spahr explains how this works through an examination of grammatical number and gender:

In several other places, [Hejinian] emphasizes the gender neutral pronoun “one”: “In the sentence, ‘one climbs five worn wood stairs and turns left to the scarred open door, then crosses a hall and two feet of linoleum to the four foot formica counter with two sacks of groceries in seven steps,’ I am the one” [38: 132]. In Hejinian’s use of “one,” the autobiographical “I” becomes representative exactly when it encounters the geographical, located discourse of directions. The “one” in these phrases is not identical with the narrator. It is instead a pronoun that anyone can inhabit. Like “one,” the “I” fluctuates and no longer claims autobiography’s
clear separation between self and other. Hejinian’s despecification of the pronoun also subverts the location-centered, individualist discourse of autobiographies in which the subject claims an absolute position from which to speak. (Spahr 145-46)

The decentering of the narrating subject is specifically acknowledged in the text as well: “There were more storytellers than there were stories, so that everyone in the family had a version of history and it was impossible to get close to the original, or to know ‘what really happened’” (7: 27). The use of quotation marks here indicates that knowledge of the “real” is suspect. Elsewhere, the poem links this suspicion not just with history but with biography: “The lives of which I read seemed more real than my own, but I still seemed more real than the persons who had led them” (18: 69). Here the poem draws an essential distinction between a life as a constructed narrative and a person as a conscious system. Since the one is mediated solely by language, and the other by autopoietic operations in several media, a life can never be commensurate with a person. But by calling attention to the distinction between life and person within the written “life,” the text enacts recursion, since such a distinction must already be operating for it to be understood in this context. That is, the distinction between text and person re-enters itself here on the side of the text. Taking into account the ambiguity of the pronoun “I,” the poem triggers a self-referential reading at this moment of recursion. The reader is in the process of reading a life—whose is still an open question—and that life is for that moment more real than his or her own.
The text regularly includes such self-referential moments, at which time the text operates most clearly under a poetics of complexity. In the second section, for example, the poem asks (without a question mark, as is usual within the poem): “Are your fingers in the margin” (2: 12). Certainly this sentence might suggest something that happened to the narrator/author in her childhood, possibly even her growing awareness of her own body and its ability to manipulate and indicate objects. But the more likely reading is as a question to readers at that moment, asking whether their fingers are in the margin of the book while they read it. And except for readers with hands-free bookstands, the answer is likely to be “yes.” This response, an acceptance of the responsibility of seeing oneself implicated in the text, carries over to other situations in which the direct address is less clear. The most notable of these appear in several of the italicized phrases that appear at the beginning of each of the poem’s carefully structured sections and recur from that point forward, generally several times each. The initial phrase of section 6 is “The obvious analogy is with music,” and frequently when it recurs its effect is to offer a meta-commentary on the poem, as in section 25:

We are “on a trip” as if that were the form of conveyance. Then I wanted to visit Giverny and the gardens of Monet. I can still make the sound of galloping on my thighs. To the degree that seeing and hearing are activities rather than receptivities. The obvious analogy is with music. The concert of Gregorian chants was held in the medieval wing of the museum, where the music shook the walls. (25: 91)

Verb tense changes from present to past to present to past again, yet the passage appears to have coherence through its subtle shifting of topic from travel to
France to Monet to visual perception to aural perception to music to a concert.

While the narrative of the passage is disconnected, the logic of it is not, and one might make the case that the logic is musical. At another time, the phrase appears to be purely ironic:

> My outer ear looks like a shell, and if you put your ear to it you will hear the Gulf. The obvious analogy is with music...I do love to compare apples with oranges. Many versions of aspiration...like Russia. (43: 152)

The irony is that the comparison is not that the sound of placing your ear close to a hollow enclosure is like music, but that making that comparison is very much like comparing apples and oranges—the cliché example of comparing dissimilar things—in that the two are actually comparable in a similar way as the ear-noise and music are. However, the irony is complicated when an earlier instance of the phrase is recalled:

> Even the children remember that as a year in the slums, threatened with change, where the speakers in the van invited theft. Sticky finger licking chicken. Cliches and lamentation. We were floating the logic in a rushing medium. I want to be free of you, in order to do things, things of importance which will impress you, attract you, so that you can be mine and I can be yours, forever. The clock picked up, their thoughts to their tasks. And the gaps began to stick. The obvious analogy is with music. (31: 110)

Now the Gulf that is heard in section 43 has an antecedent in the sticking “gaps” of section 31. The gaps may refer to silences, or to logical fallacies, or to interpersonal distances, or to the floating and rushing of whatever medium—a fluid, like water or air, the fluids that come together in the Gulf image of the later section.
A major function of the recurrence of the phrase, though, is to trigger second-order reading and recursion. This phrase in particular serves the purpose well, since its multiple appearances remind readers both of its previous instances in the text, which facilitates seeing the text as a unified work, and of the nature of those instances. Since the context changes so much from instance to instance, the primary effect of the recurrence is like the effect of music. A musical phrase has no “meaning” per se; its function is to mark aural experience in time, and only through its relationship to other such parts of the work does the phrase have emotional or aesthetic effect. The recurring initial phrases work similarly, as at least one of them says they do. Elsewhere in the poem, sentences reinforce this understanding of the text: “The new cannot be melodic, for melody requires repetition” (23: 86); “Because of their recurrence, what had originally seemed merely details of atmosphere became, in time, thematic” (3: 15-16); “And could it be musical if I hate it” (6: 26); and, combining two initial phrases, “Such is the rhythm of cognition, and the obvious analogy is with music” (41: 147). Without using meter, the poem establishes this “rhythm of cognition” precisely in order to be understood as text-art, what the poetics of complexity calls poetry.

Through the basic unit of the phrase, the text sets up patterns that suggest resonances of various kinds. Some come into being through exact or near-exact repetition, as with the 45 initial phrases; others follow the example of Tennyson in *In Memoriam* and appear as repeated syntactical structures. The most common syntactic unit is the set of three, which appears in the first section’s initial phrase, “A pause, a rose, something on paper” (1: 7). This exact phrase appears many times
throughout the poem with multiple significances in its various contexts. But similar patterns appear almost as frequently: “The egg of Columbus, landscape and grammar” (2: 10); “But, already, words” (4:18); “The day will twinkle, sparkle, shoot forth its single bits” (8:31); “Meanwhile, I was growing up as a cowgirl, a child doctor, a great reader” (11: 45); “Number, stutter, and curvature” (38: 131). This last example comes from section 38, “Now such is the rhythm of cognition,” and to emphasize the importance of this triple pattern, two more instances appear in the same section, one of which is a rearrangement of the initial phrase of section 22, “Reason looks for two, then arranges it from there” (22: 81):

Reason looks for two, then arranges it from three: number, stutter, and curvature. The pith, restlessness, and the severe sanity of inquiry. (38: 132-33)

The search for twos is another way of saying “drawing distinctions.” Once a distinction has been drawn in language, the two objects thus distinguished may be examined, compared, contrasted, reordered, analyzed, combined, and arranged to make meaning. The structure of threes is such a distinction: once it is identified, it appears in unexpected places, as in the third example above where the three elements, “But, already, words,” are not parallel in the grammatical sense but parallel in the rhythm the poem sets up. In the last section, “Altruism in poetry” (with the play on the idea of selflessness in an autobiographical text emphasized by the quotation marks), the speaker ends an unusually long sentence with a meditation on the effect of repetition in art:

I had heard this piece of music (it was Shoot Pop) in several cities, and now hearing it again a shaft of stairs and a narrow
doorway opened into the revolving, lateral, humid light of Mechnikov Prospekt and its dazzling translucent dust, and I felt again the complex happiness of my own fulfilled arrogance and bemused femininity as it was aroused by the differently infinite cathedral at Amiens (my mother’s mother had married her cousin, thus keeping her maiden name, and she asserted that “Ruskin” was a corruption of her “Erskine,” and that he was one of the relatives), but though I could say the music brought these places “home” to me, the composition itself grew increasingly strange as I listened again, less recognizable, in the dark, as when one repeats a word or phrase over and over in order to disintegrate its associations, to defamiliarize it, and the man playing it amazed me with his assertion. (45: 161-62)

This hearing of Shoot Pop, a repeated exposure, instigates exactly the kind of rumination and free association that is described in that rumination, before ending with a completion of the original thought about the music itself. The poem elsewhere provides less self-descriptive versions of this phenomenon. But since these other versions appear within the text as well as the descriptions of them noted above, they are self-descriptive also. and stimulate the recursive reading across sections, across the scale of the entire text, establishing it a single work made up of fragments that cohere in a fundamentally poetic—not narrative, not musical, certainly not informational—way.

The poem does manage to represent a life, then, and not just the poet’s or even the reader’s, although it certainly does represent those in its way. It is a poem about its own coming into existence, as the title so plainly says: it is a poem about its own life. The life of the poem is in the reading of it, in the complex interaction that takes place in the gaps between language and meaning. As the poem puts it, “If words matched their things we’d be imprisoned within walls of symmetry” (27: 98). The way such imprisonment is avoided in poetry is by
words not matching their things but instead indicating them while indicating themselves. Since those indications are contingent upon the observer, the life of the poem really does depend on the reader who makes the distinctions in the text. Or, as Hejinian puts it:

The language of poetry is a language of inquiry, not the language of a genre. It is that language in which a writer (or a reader) both perceives and is conscious of the perception. Poetry, therefore, takes as its premise that language is a medium for experiencing experience. (The Language of Inquiry 3)

Just as a piece of sound-art can be musical even if one hates it, My Life can still work as autobiography and as poetry even if it leaves one inquiring about whether it is actually either of those things. By asking the question, we are approaching the text the right way, the way that complexity theory describes as poetic.

Throughout this study, the term “poetic” is used in a rather precise way, signifying “in accordance with the poetics of complexity,” as described in the overture. This usage does not, however, negate more familiar senses of the word associated with aesthetic or affective experience. This study is premised on the belief that the experience of reading a modern long poem can be every bit as moving and powerful as reading other forms of literature. Indeed, one purpose of reexamining form through the lens of complexity theory is to explain the power of text-art not simply as it appears in long poetic texts but also in other
poetic or literary forms. The set of texts to be considered in this way is therefore a purposeful selection: all six are canonical long poems, and are generally regarded as exemplary poems. I have taken it as given that they have poetic merit, then, and have made it my task to explain why in terms of complexity theory. One difficulty of the study, however, is justifying why it matters that these texts be regarded as poetic (or as unified long poems) at all. By way of a recapitulation, I would like to look back over the preceding discussion of these texts to make this justification, and then to show what we as scholars and general readers might do with the insights thus afforded. This study covers a variety of poetic texts, the variety based not simply on the historical periods they span but also on the ways in which they use structures such as narrative, character, prosody and so forth. Beyond their different identities as Victorian, Modernist, or contemporary, they range from the more novelistic (Browning, Merrill, Walcott) to the more lyric (Tennyson, Eliot) to what Kurt Heinzelman calls the postlyric (Hejinian). Most of my discussion of these works, however, has focused on the ways they fit into a similar mold, that of the modern long poem, in which recursive structures over scale serve the purpose of making the works cohere as single texts as well as function poetically in a more or less traditional sense of that term. For a moment, I would like to consider how their differences make a difference to how we understand them as poetic, and what implications that has on what we mean by “poetic.”

Certainly readers place an exceptional value (either good or bad) on texts they perceive to be poetic. For many people, especially less experienced readers,
“poetic” means “hard to read.” For them, a text in the form of a sonnet, for example, is automatically valued a certain way: abstract, artificial, difficult, pointless. A text covering many pages, be it a novel or a long poem, also carries valences of difficulty and pointlessness, although narrative texts may be perceived as less abstract or artificial, since narrative is familiar to us all. Other readers—including most students, teachers, and writers of literature—find other values in the term “poetic,” among which are transcendent, artful, beautiful, and insightful, and which stem from traditional kinds of poetic devices. In either case, identifying a text as poetry significantly affects the reading experience. The lingering difficulty with long poetry, then, is that most readers resist approaching long poems as poems, either because they prefer not to read poems at all or because the scale of the text makes it easier to focus on the text’s narrative qualities to the exclusion of its poetic qualities, even in less narrative poems such as *Four Quartets* or *My Life*. As complexity theory shows, the distinction between narrative and poetic re-enters itself on the side of the poetic, since for a text to be narrative (hetero-referential) it must also be poetic (both self- and hetero-referential). However, it is not necessary to mark the re-entry of the distinction to appreciate the narrative side. What is at stake, then, in reading modern long poems—or any texts—as poetic according to a poetics of complexity is the identification of self-reference with the qualities more traditionally associated with poetry.

These values have, of course, changed over time. The historical differences among the six long poems of this study have been described earlier in the
discussion, ranging from the Victorians’ emphasis on transcendence and
evidence in the face of crises of faith and knowledge, to the Modernists’ concern
with intensity and fragmentation accompanied by what they saw as a radical
break from the past, to the recent past in which postmodern understandings of
constructedness and contextualization result in the wide variety of forms
described in the earlier part of this chapter. But the six texts also differ in the way
they handle narrative, since in any coherent text of great length narrative is
unavoidable; and their differences do not necessarily correspond to historical
concerns. The Ring and the Book and Omeros, for instance, employ personae and
story-telling, and these forms merit notice and commentary. Four Quartets, on the
other hand, uses them much less, and so its elements of prosody and imagery
occupy a greater place in the body of criticism on that work. In Memoriam uses
narrative within individual sections and occasionally across sections, but the
poem is not primarily a narrative in the sense of having a definable plot. The
same can be said of The Changing Light at Sandover, whose narrative interlaces
with expressly lyric sections that unfold sequentially but not strictly for the
purpose of a plot. My Life explodes the distinction between narrative and poetic
elements by simulating a narrative but defeating typical narrative expectations,
such as identifying the speaker or providing details of important plot events.

Despite these intra-period differences, there appears to be a clear
progression from the Victorian handling of narrative in long poetry to the
Modernist and contemporary treatments. Tennyson and Browning had to
differentiate their texts from novels, and so they each rely on recursion across
divisions in addition to versification to make clear that their works fall into the realm of poetry and not prose fiction. However, each employed narrative elements in their texts to satisfy the lingering need for progression and conclusion associated with Victorian England (when even texts despairing of an answer make clear that they despair, which is a narrative conclusion nonetheless, such as in Arnold’s “Dover Beach”). The Modernists dispensed with those requirements, which is in part why it is so difficult to identify Modernist long poems that are not better described as lyric sequences. *Four Quartets*, the Modernist example of the modern long poem in this study, contains a narrative, as it were, accidentally. Modernist poetics downplay plot and speaker, seeking instead to present more impersonal and abstract texts to stimulate emotions in the reader (as Eliot famously describes in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”). And contemporary, “postmodern” texts use narrative as only one possibility among many for generating meaningful structure, as evidenced by the amalgam of narrative and non-narrative elements in varying degrees in the study’s three recent examples of the form. Our more recent awareness of the constructed nature of texts and their necessary historical and cultural situation—the product of deconstructionist, historicist, post-colonial, and cultural-studies approaches to literature—makes us distrustful of narrative, more than simply the distrust of narrators extant before the Victorian novel.

All the poems in this study, then, grapple with narrative as a constituent element. The poetics of complexity does not negate these differences; instead, it assumes the differences yet accommodates them under a more general rubric
which is fundamentally difference-based. Rather than reduce poetry to a
cognitive enterprise only, in which readers identify textual objects in certain
specific ways to line them up with a pre-set template, the poetics of complexity
shows how poetry is both a cognitive experience (how could it not be?) and an
affective one. I have insisted on the textual perspective as the intrinsically literary
concern; but as Jerome McGann points out, what “textual” means is more
complicated that has been traditionally understood. The poetics of complexity
makes textuality a phenomenon both of written objects and of literary readers.
Narrative elements in texts emphasize hetero-reference; but poetic elements
emphasize self-reference. Thus it happens that poetic texts employ narrative to
differing degrees; their main concern (as poetic texts) is to generate affective
responses in readers, which necessitates readerly self-awareness, identified here
in this study with textual recursion and the paradoxical re-entry of form into the
form.

The poetics of complexity illustrates how poems can have the
extraordinary power they have in making meaning and generating emotional
responses in readers. Through simultaneous self- and hetero-reference, poetic
texts overcome their own contingency to become self-sufficient statements on
subjects beyond the scope of ordinary discourse. All six poems in this study
demonstrate this effect, since all of them provide the powerful affective
responses we typically associate with poetry. But since they are long poems, the
way this effect is generated is not as simple to explain as in shorter forms such as
lyric. Psychoanalytic criticism or reception theory may have more specific things
to say about these affective responses, and complexity theory will not deny them.
But the fact that poetry can generate such responses at all is its remarkable
feature, and the poetics of complexity, with its attention to the paradoxes of
form, explains how it is possible to do so. As noted in the overture, the potential
usefulness of complexity theory is not limited to poetry. Other genres, and even
other art forms, may be examined using a poetics of complexity with good effect;
the main differences lie in the genre- or medium-defining distinctions the texts
ask readers or observers to draw. As long as observers have opportunities for
simultaneous self- and other-indication in their aesthetic experiences, they will
feel the power of the artwork under observation. Rather than being a limited
claim for art and for poetry specifically, this is a grand claim with far-reaching
consequences that have only begun to be explored in this study. I sincerely hope
that future scholarship will address some of the issues and problems only
gestured at here, including: the development of a historical narrative extending
both before and after Romanticism that accounts for the changing poetics of
period and genre; the connection between aesthetics, rhetoric, and poetics that
addresses well-established theories in those fields along with the insights of
complexity studies; and the contribution of complexity theory to narrative
studies more generally.

Most importantly, I hope that teachers of literature will take a closer look
at modern long poetry as a form to be studied and taught, and I believe that the
poetics of complexity will prove an effective way to begin to understand these
works better. The modern long poem as a genre exists because of its calling
attention to itself as a form whose very existence is somewhat of a surprise. As Niklas Luhmann points out:

\[ . . . [T]he artwork directs the beholder’s awareness toward the improbability of its emergence. If attention is drawn to poetic constructions, then it is only because they do not seem very likely, whereas the likelihood of using other constructions is, on the contrary, very high. “Poetic is that which has not become law,” writes Julia Kristeva. Especially for poetic texts, one might add that their improbability must not be based on their informational value, which always implies a certain quality of surprise, but consists in their renunciation of information in the sense of mundane utility. \]

(Luhmann, \textit{Art} 126)

By showing how attention may be directed at the self-referential and recursive aspects of these texts, the poetics of complexity in effect simplifies the difficulty associated with the enormous length of the poetry without discounting the text’s less-surprising narrative elements. In fact, it complicates those elements by showing how they are embedded in a text whose purpose is not primarily narrative and what effects that embedding has. By unfolding the paradox of form, readers may discover for themselves the power of poetic language in unlikely places, with the added benefit of beginning to see that power in places where it is already recognized but not well understood. For this reason, the modern long poem is well worth our consideration, as an unlikely but increasingly present form that illustrates as no other form can the power of
poetic language—indeed, of language—in meaning-making and self-discovery. The poetics of complexity most clearly illustrates how those two things necessarily co-exist within poetic texts and (which is to say) within poetic readers.
Figure 1. The Mandelbrot set.

Figure 2. A magnification (9x) of the top of the pattern in Figure 1.
Figure 3. One of the cardioid nodes in the arms of the Mandelbrot set image.

Figure 4. Magnification (3x) of the center of the image in Figure 3.
Figure 5. Magnification (3×) of the center of the image in Figure 4.

Figure 6. Continued magnification reveals more nodes like the one in Figure 3.
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