

Poetry

The form and culture of poetic creation in English poetry manuscripts, 1600–2000

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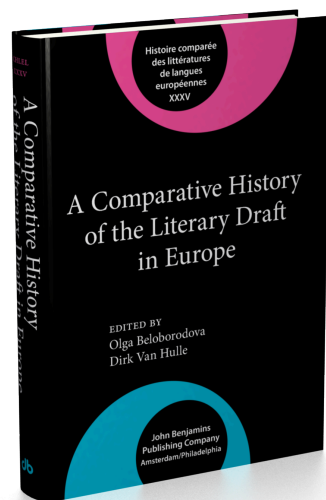
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1.4.1 Poetry

The form and culture of poetic creation in English poetry manuscripts, 1600–2000

Wim Van Mierlo

Surveying the form and cultural significance of English poetry manuscripts in the period since 1600, this chapter looks at the unique features of the poetry manuscript. The first section discusses the authenticity value of poetry manuscripts as objects that were collected and exchanged. As gifts within domestic and literary networks, poetry manuscripts often held special value, representing the physical embodiment of friendship. The material proximity to the hand that created the poem forms the subject of the second section on creativity. Bringing to the fore conflicting attitudes towards the poet's workshop, this section offers a reflection on the working of the imagination as manifested on the page. This finally leads to an investigation of the creative traces recorded on the manuscript, which analyses modes of composition as well as the poet's own special relationship with their manuscript and how, as physical object, the manuscript impacts on the creative process.

Keywords: manuscript, draft, creativity, inspiration, composition, collecting, history of writing, romantic poetry, victorian poetry, modernist poetry, post-war poetry

This chapter considers the form and cultural significance of the poetry manuscript as it evolved in English literature from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. The premise is that the poetry manuscript has properties that are different from those of other genres, and that these differences have to do with how poetry is conceived in the double sense of the word. In traditional poetics, from muse-inspired poems to the rules of composition, the very nature of poetry is connected with the way poems are engendered. The chapter will have three sections: one on the value of poetry manuscripts; one on the nature of composition and the imagination; and one on the cross-cultural practices of writing poetry.

Poetry is often regarded as an elevated genre. Aristotle put poetry above history, because poets speak of the universal, not the particular; the Romantics saw poetry as the pre-eminent form for the expression of the imagination. As a result, the cultural capital of the poetry manuscript has been historically high. It is no coincidence that among the earliest surviving manuscripts written in the author's own hand are those of poets: Sir Philip Sidney and John Donne. As is well known, Donne shunned what he thought of as the vulgarity of print; only a handful of his poems ever appeared in book form during his lifetime.¹ But rather remarkable perhaps, given that more of Donne's manuscripts were in circulation than those of any other poet of the

1. See also Chapter 2.1.3 in this volume.

time, is the fact that only one poem survives in his own hand: the “Verse Epistle to Lettice, Lady Carey, and Mrs Essex Riche, from Amyens” (CELM 2013:#DnJ 1858).

Often carefully produced at significant cost, the poetry manuscripts that circulated among an elite network of readers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were, so to speak, the limited edition of their time. Moreover, even as a scribal copy, the manuscript expressed a personal association between author and reader. Their value guaranteed their survival, but also lent them a certain cachet and iconic value not always seen with prose manuscripts. Many of these readers were also often in fact collectors or compilers of their own miscellanies. The taste for copying out poems in private manuscript books lasted throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, after which the fashion peters out but does not disappear entirely. Many Regency figures from the gentry and middle classes compiled their own albums, Charles Lamb and the Wordsworth Circle among them (see Matthews 2020). We even find a notable example in the twentieth century in the form of Eric Walter White’s “Personal Anthology”, an *album amicorum* bound in red morocco containing about 60 autograph poems, some composed impromptu, inscribed between 1962 and 1975. The volume includes poems by, among others, W.H. Auden, John Betjeman, T.S. Eliot, Thom Gunn, Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, Cecil Day-Lewis, and Kathleen Raine.² The album is not just a token of White’s literary connections. As Literature Director of the Arts Council, he had set up in 1963, along with Jenny Stratford, the Modern Literary Manuscripts Fund, which enabled the British Museum to acquire papers of contemporary writers.³

Producing miscellanies with the work of contemporary poets and writers was, in a sense, the collecting of *texts*. Not until the nineteenth century, however, does a market for contemporary autographs emerge. Reiman ascribes this phenomenon to a new cult of the personal (1993: 18–27), but it is safe to say that the collecting of autograph manuscripts was the continuation of an earlier practice. Moreover, as antiquarianism becomes increasingly scientific and professionalised, a cultural shift takes place that puts new emphasis on preserving for posterity what is valuable in the present. This shift increases the number of manuscripts that are collected among both private and institutional collectors. Private collectors, though, led the way, especially in the United States, amalgamating the treasures that later formed the basis of important repositories. Among the first autograph manuscripts to be preserved in a public institution are the Milton manuscripts in Trinity College Cambridge. How they arrived there is somewhat of a mystery. Certain is that they were found among the papers of Sir Henry Puckering, a Warwickshire politician, who was for some time a Trinity resident. In 1691 Puckering left his extensive collection of books to the Wren library, which may have included the Milton manuscripts; however, the collection catalogue (compiled in 1697) did not specify the presence of the 30 or so folios that were later found among Puckering’s papers (ODNB; Milton 1899: 1). Another pos-

2. The manuscript was sold at auction by Bonham’s in 2013, see <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/20923/lot/331/>.

3. The Fund had started under the name of National Manuscript Collection of Contemporary Poets and was expanded in 1969 to include prose (Stratford 1974: xiii and xvi).

sibility is that the manuscripts were left behind by Daniel Skinner, a young friend of Milton's and later Fellow of the College, who had allegedly taken "what he thought fit" from the elderly poets' papers (Kelley 1977: 206–207).

By the nineteenth century, literary manuscripts had become valuable objects. The trade in manuscripts in sales rooms and dealerships was no doubt responsible for stimulating the cult of the personal in the period for its commodification of authenticity. In the final decades of the nineteenth and the first of the twentieth century, wealthy American industrialists began investing in European literary culture, amassing important manuscript collections of British authors (Reiman 1993: 28–29). Especially manuscripts of the Romantic poets were highly sought after. On the whole, these collectors built up eclectic collections, but some specialised in poetry. The railroad magnate Henry E. Huntington (1850–1927), who began collecting in the 1870s, acquired manuscripts and letters from Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and their family (see Hart 1970). The centre piece of John Pierpont Morgan's (1837–1913) collection was the manuscript of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which he acquired in 1904, complementing the manuscripts of, among others, Lord Byron's *Don Juan* and John Keats's *Endymion* already in his possession (*Morgan Library* 2000: 17, 93, 106). The most extensive poetry manuscripts collection, however, is no doubt that of investment banker and stockbroker Carl H. Pforzheimer (1879–1957), who focused on the manuscripts of Shelley and his circle (see Wagner and Fischer 1996). Unlike many other collectors, he avoided "autographism", the acquisition of treasures that leads to materials being broken up and scattered; instead, he built up an archive that could represent "the story inherent in the lives and works" of their subjects (Cameron 1961: 2). Amy Lowell's Keats collection, now at the Houghton in Harvard, was also the result of focalisation. Her achievements stand out, however, because of her gender and interest. Independently wealthy, home schooled and outspoken, she built her collection mainly out of love for reading and a devotion to Keats, whose writings inspired her to become a poet herself; she also saw it as her destiny to change critical attitudes about Keats (Rollyson 2013: 152). Her first major purchase was the archive of John Taylor, Keats's publisher, in 1903 (Hebron 2009: 31), which furnished her with information that was not in the public domain for her biography of the poet published in 1925. Notwithstanding the extent of their spoils, these American collectors were, in more ways than one, outdone by the British arch-collector Thomas J. Wise. Wise started collecting the manuscripts of his contemporaries with whom he was personally acquainted, particularly those of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Algernon Swinburne, in many cases not without pressurising them into selling their papers to him (Barker and Collins 1983: 56). Not only that, Wise later put his spoils back on the market, making considerable profit. He also benefited financially from publishing pamphlets drawing on unpublished materials from his collections. Even then he went one step further still, forging spurious texts allegedly based on materials in his possession.⁴

4. The most famous example, which led to his discovery and undoing, was a forged edition of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets of the Portuguese*, allegedly privately printed in 1847 by Mary Russell Mitford, two years before their inclusion in *Poems* (1849). The backstory Wise had concocted was that

Autograph manuscripts allow a certain feeling of intimacy and privileged insight, not afforded by print, into the secret of creativity itself (see Dever 2019). That feeling could spark in poets themselves and their relationship with their manuscript, to which I will turn in the first section below. W.B. Yeats's composition method, for instance, changed noticeably depending on the type of support. His drafting became more expansive when he employed large, vellum-bound notebooks with hand-made paper. Compared to the more contained, linear progression that we find when he uses smaller, loose leaves, his accretions and alterations in these notebooks are splurged across the page in different directions and spill over on to the facing pages, leaving wide gaps of unused space. Yeats's case testifies to the profound connection that exists between the material page and creativity. As he relished their sumptuousness, the notebooks were a symbolic vehicle for his poetic gift suited to make the process itself permanent (Gould 1985: 824).

This connection between page and writing sits at the heart of this treatment of the manuscripts of modern English poets. Starting and finishing with the artefact itself, this chapter will lay out some of the different aspects that affect and elucidate poetic creation. These aspects concern how poets experienced their manuscripts, which is the subject of the first section on "Objects". For some it was a functional tool to get their poems into existence; others had a special relationship with their manuscripts, seeing them as objects with a special value as an extension of their selves. The second section on "Creativity" will trace a significant historical transformation which started in the early nineteenth century when poets adopted a more sophisticated view of inspiration and composition, acknowledging the labour involved in fleshing out the momentary vision that prompted the poem. The next section on "Creative Traces" surveys the protocols of writing that are common to modern poets. The final section takes up these protocols again but looks at them from a cultural perspective. Poetic composition was traditionally considered the work of solitary creative genius. A comparison of poets' working methods across historical periods, however, reveals similarities as well as idiosyncrasies. Poets as temperamentally diverse as William Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot show remarkable parallels in the way they composed their work. The reason is that writing – using pen and paper – is culturally determined in a way that is not yet fully understood.

Objects

The history and practice of collecting poetry manuscripts is the history of the special value placed on the writing of the poet. In theory, the manuscript is simply a functional tool that the writer uses to record a text or to capture its coming into being. But their physical or material appearance can be significant as well (Bushell 2009b: 236). The relationship a writer has with paper and the page is frequently more than just practical, involving personal choices and preferences. Swinburne had a predilection for smooth, blue paper with a Britannia watermark. Sylvia

the poet had sent the original manuscript to her friend Mitford with the permission to publish them, but he had fabricated the edition and its false imprint himself (Gerty 1973: 55–56).

Plath acquired a habit of writing on pink Smith memorandum notepaper. What had started as a raid on the stationery cabinet while she was teaching at Smith College in the academic year 1958–59 turned into a psycho-genetic obsession with the “pink, lovely-textured Smith memorandum pads of 100 sheets each: a fetish” (Plath 2000:344). Back in Britain, she contacted Alfred Young Fisher, her former tutor at Smith, in 1962 asking if she could possibly buy a dozen or so of these pads. “My muse is mad for them!” she told him (Plath 2018:781). Furthermore, without fail she would turn the paper so that the pre-printed heading appeared upside down at the bottom of the page. All of this makes sense when we consider that writing is an embodied experience and the page part of the poet’s creative sanctuary. The interaction with the support as a “sensory interface” (Cram 2016:214) becomes part of the ritual in which the poet manages her creative space.⁵ This special relationship with the page can sometimes take extreme forms: Coleridge copying a poem on a piece of dried seaweed (see below), Beckett writing his “Mirlitonades” on the inside of cigarette packs, or Ted Hughes recycling a manila envelope for drafting a new poem. The poetic materiality is worth looking into for what it conveys about the value of manuscripts.

In the period after 1700 in Britain, poetry manuscripts did not lose their exchange value. Throughout the early modern period, manuscript copies had remained an important means of disseminating texts alongside the printed book; even in the eighteenth century when the printing press had assumed its dominance, the sharing of manuscript copies did not entirely cease. Literary coteries, such as those around the writer Samuel Richardson, the bookseller Robert Dodsley and the poet William Shenstone, actively participated in such exchanges, even if (or rather because) they were compiling poetry miscellanies to put in print (Schellenberg 2016: 2, 20). The popular reception of James MacPerson’s *Ossian* was in no small part due to the promotion and pre-publication circulation in manuscript of his verse in Elizabeth Montagu’s Bluestocking circle (Schellenberg 2016: 80). Montague was a patron of the arts and avid collector. Byron’s manuscripts were widely read in Regency London where his audience was privy to some of his private codes (McGann 1992: 192–94). Wordsworth frequently gifted copies of poems to friends and acquaintances as a token of his estimation. He and Coleridge also engaged in sharing work in progress with each other and a close circle of friends in what quickly amounted to a cottage industry of manuscript production. As Michelle Levy observes, the “intimate scene of writing” cannot be separated from “a sociable one” as “creation, revision and dissemination for Wordsworth were individual and collective” (2020: 57). In particular, the women in the group, Wordsworth’s sister Dorothy and his wife May, produced most of these copies. These exchanges were not exceptional, though. Anna Barbauld shared her manuscript poems with Wordsworth, who circulated them more widely while entering a copy in a notebook of his own; without Wordsworth’s efforts many of Barbauld’s poems would not have survived (Levy 2020: 56). At the latter end of the nineteenth century, John Masefield did the

5. Cram uses the term “sensory interface” to refer to the intimate haptic experiences involved in archival research; see also Dever 2019: 5–6 on the “heightened materiality” of paper documents. Both terms are equally useful to capture the writer’s interaction with the support.

same for the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, though he pasted Hopkins' manuscripts into a notebook without making them public (Bartlett 1951: 52). Sometimes, however, the private circulation of manuscripts had unforeseen effects; in the preface to the first edition of *Elegiac Sonnets, and Other Essays* (1784), Charlotte Smith complained that friends to whom she had given copies of her poems had shared these with other people; her poems, as a result, found their way into magazines, published without her consent and in a corrupted state (Levy 2020: 38). In the second half of the twentieth century, we still find manuscripts circulating semi-publicly; poets of a certain fame, such as Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, were wont to hand-copy poems for fundraisers and charity auctions.

In Wordsworth's case, manuscript copies were emblematic of the values he held dear as a poet: the value of friendship and the high regard he had for the "office" of poet. Rather than their exchange value, precisely the incidental nature of their existence is important. The nexus between friendship and creativity is illustrated by the circumstances surrounding the making of "The Solitary Reaper". In the autumn of 1805, Wordsworth sent a copy (BL Add MS 60, 580) to Thomas Wilkinson as a token of his appreciation. Wilkinson's *Tours of the British Mountains*, which Wordsworth had read in manuscript, had provided him with the incident that inspired the poem: a scene describing a lonely female figure singing to herself while cutting the grass in a remote field in the Scottish Highlands (Gill 1989: 245). Wilkinson's passage describing the girl's "sweetest human voice" that sounded "tenderly melancholy" and "delicious" affected Wordsworth deeply; remembering his own earlier tour of Scotland, the scene represents one of the few second-hand experiences that Wordsworth turned into verse. The emotion of the reading was so special for him that he gifted the poem to Wilkinson. Two years later, Wordsworth copied the passage again for himself in his commonplace notebook (DCMS 26, f. 50v).

Coleridge's "Fancy in the Clouds: A Marine Sonnet", copied out on a piece of dried seaweed, further illustrates this point about personal association and friendship.⁶ An unusual literary artefact, the manuscript is tied to a deeper poetical concern about mutability. Coleridge composed the sonnet in 1817 while he was staying at Littlehampton on the Sussex coast. In a letter to Dr James Gillman, he described the moment of its conception:

As I came in this evening after a glorious sunset a sort of lazy poetic mood came upon me and almost without knowing it I compos'd the following sonnet, which merely because it is the first Resumption of the Rhyming Idleness Mrs. G. will have me send you – It has the character of a Sonnet – that it is like a something that we let escape from us – a Sigh, for instance.
(Coleridge 1959: 779)

A celebration of the fancy and the imagination, the sonnet tells of the pleasure the poet takes in seeing shapes in the clouds as he walks along the beach. But then the poem compels the reader, after the caesura, to imagine that we are blind Homer who on the strand on the island of Chios "with inward light | Beheld the Iliad and the Odyssey" (Coleridge 2001: 1153). The poem deftly

6. The manuscript was sold at Christie's on 3 March 2004. For a reproduction, see https://www.christies.com/lot/lot--4239356/?from=salesummary&intObjectID=4239356&lid=1&sc_lang=en.

links the ephemeral with the enduring, a link that is reinforced in the poem's physical embodiment: the brittle nature of the dried seaweed that the poet had picked up on the beach at Littlewood. The first sonnet he had composed in many years, Coleridge made several copies for his friends, including the fair copy that he sent to Dr Gillman in Highgate. The seaweed copy he sent a year later to his friend Charles Lamb (Lamb 1935:II.223). As an object, the manuscript is at once a symbol and a performance, carrying within itself a set of diverse meanings concerning the reciprocity, real and symbolic, between fragility and ephemerality on the one hand and permanence on the other. It touches moreover upon different spheres of human interest – the imagination, poetry, friendship – while at the same time connecting with cultural practices of gifting and collecting autographs and literary paraphernalia.

The Wordsworth and Coleridge examples are indicative of a literary sphere in which personal networks are imbricated with creative practices. None other than the creative friendship between Wordsworth and Coleridge itself illustrates this connection. From collaborating on *The Lyrical Ballads* (1798) to Coleridge's championing of Wordsworth's philosophical poetry, the creative symbiosis between the two poets extends beyond normal bounds. The fact that Wordsworth drafted a section of *Home at Grasmere* in his interleaved copy of Coleridge's *Poems* (1796) (DCMS28) is both an act of homage and desecration. Wordsworth's handwritten lines spill over from the blank leaves onto the adjacent pages, encroaching on Coleridge's text as they are layered in between and sometimes on top of the printed lines. Wordsworth's draft possibly channels some of the uneasiness that Wordsworth felt towards the other poet as his words almost literally suppress Coleridge's. Coleridge had been critical of Wordsworth settling in remote Cumbria and became increasingly possessive of Wordsworth's writing, as Coleridge wanted him to write his great philosophical poem that was never to be, *The Recluse*; at the same time, Wordsworth needfully fretted over Coleridge's support and approbation (Wu 2002:136, 138, 192). Of course, one cannot exclude the likelihood that, by going over Coleridge's words, Wordsworth interiorised his friend's poetry (see Bushell 2009a), just as one cannot exclude that Plath and Hughes mutually influenced one another when they used each other's discarded manuscripts as scrap paper.⁷

Creativity

The manuscripts described in the previous section are all in a way special. Their unique nature is intrinsically connected with the value of the personal association, but they also speak explicitly to the poets' conception of creativity. These nineteenth- and twentieth-century poets no longer admitted the power of the muses. Yet the belief persisted in a special poetic sensibility, which presumes, as Edward Young articulated it in his *Conjectures on Original Composi-*

7. To use a printed book as support is not the most obvious choice, which indicates less an act of desecration than using what is most immediately to hand. Even by Wordsworth's standards, the handwriting is very rough and difficult to read, which may suggest that he was writing in transit – either in a coach or out walking – while he did not have any paper with him. See Bushell and Cowton 2008 for a facsimile reproduction.

tion (1759), that poetry “rises spontaneously from the vital root of Genius; it grows, it is not made” (Young 1759: 8). Keats, for example, was of the view that “if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all” (Keats 2002: 97). The poet’s struggle with the ineffability of language is a late-twentieth century variety of the classical muse withholding inspiration; it stems from the fact that, even for the poet, creativity remains mysterious and unknowable (see Lancashire 2010: 37). Be that as it may, if we want to look for a turning point in the understanding of the creative process, we need to go back to the Romantic poets who believed so vehemently in the power of the imagination.

Shelley did not deny that the Muse “dictated” *Paradise Lost* to Milton, yet he made a distinction between Milton conceiving his great poem “as a whole” from the moment (or moments) “he executed it in portions.” Differentiating between writing and inspiration, Shelley (as did Robert Graves almost exactly 200 years later) placed the initial vision above writing: “when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline” (Shelley 1977: 504). Nonetheless, he was the first English poet to recast composition as a process. Graves was to follow him in this in the twentieth century. Using the psychological language of his time, he identified two phases in the creation of a poem: the first involves the “supra-logical suspension” of the poet’s normal rational habits to work in a “trance-like” fashion; the second involves testing and revising what was written to make it fit for public reading (Graves 1995: 3–4). Composition was for Graves something that happened *on* the page.

Here was another rejection of the Romantics. For Shelley inspiration in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) was as fickle as an “inconstant wind” which for a moment “awakens” a hot coal to “transitory brightness” before fading out again. The unpredictability of this force points to another human frailty: inspiration cannot be willed (Shelley 1977: 503–504). Possibly Shelley had Hazlitt in mind, who wrote in “On Genius and Originality” (1814) that “wherever there is true genius, there will be true labour” (1902–1904: XI.216). Genius rather must exert itself; the work of art is wrought, not begotten. But where Shelley spurns “the toil” demanded by critics (Shelley 1977: 504), other poets were not as fastidious. Thomas Moore, *à propos* of Byron’s revisions to *The Giaour* (1813), spoke of “that law which imposes labour as the price of perfection” (Byron 1830: I.286). Elizabeth Barrett Browning, likewise, was concerned that the “sense of power” that comes with writing was only a momentary illusion that would only lead to “disappointment & humiliation” on seeing her poem in print. More importantly, she too felt that creating poetry was not a momentary act, but an on-going experience: “one lives in composition surely” (*Brownings Correspondence* 2021: #1870). Since the nineteenth century, consequently, poets have stressed that writing poetry takes time and effort. The process, Seamus Heaney indicated, exists in two distinct modes: a poem can come into being either as incubation, a long, natural simmering of the poem until it is ready, or as an active forging, physically pushing the words around on a piece of paper (as Simon Armitage once described it).⁸ Heaney acknowledged – a lesson he had learnt from Yeats – “that revision and slog-work are what you have to

8. Armitage made the remark during his Opening Address at the T.S. Eliot International Summer School, Institute of English Studies, University of London, on 9 July 2011.

undergo if you seek the satisfaction to finish" (1980: 110). Ted Hughes likewise considered writing poetry a day job and, like Keats before him, was of the view that a fixed routine, tying yourself to the desk for a set number of hours each day, was good practice. Where Shelley was of the view that inspiration cannot be willed (Shelley 1977: 503), Hughes believed in taking control. This is what he wrote about the development of Keith Douglas's idiom: "The impression is of a sudden mobilizing of the poet's will, a clearing of his vision, as if from sitting considering possibilities and impossibilities he had stood up to act" (Hughes 1964: 12).

The fruits of this labour did not only result in poetry, but also in scores of drafts and fair copies. These manuscripts were inherently private documents, however. Some poets binned their drafts, while others kept them for their personal archive. Accepting that the final work is what matters, they felt apprehensive that someone might look over these discarded, faulty scribbles. Charles Lamb was probably being tongue in cheek when he vowed never to step in the workshop of a poet again after seeing the Milton manuscripts in the Wren Library. The poems in their transient state surprised him, for the verse that he had thought perfect and permanent appeared here in front of him with all their alterations and crossings-out (Lamb 1820: 369).⁹ Tennyson decreed that none of his manuscripts should ever be made public; he considered the bibliographical obsession with variorum readings – he called them "the chips of the workshop" – reprehensible and believed that only "his best should remain" (Tennyson 1897: 1.118). When donating his manuscripts of *The Four Quartets* to Cambridge, T. S. Eliot likewise expressed his reticence about "subtracting these papers from the national supply of pulp" (qtd in Gardner 1978: v). Writing in adjacent rooms in their Florence apartment, the Brownings did not even show the output of their days' work to each other (Forster 1988: 278).

There are examples to the contrary too. Ordinarily a sceptic, Ted Hughes believed that the time he spent poring over Sylvia Plath's drafts had enriched her poems for him (Hughes 1994). The realisation that manuscripts are more than collector's items, but have "textual" value as well, emerged in the post-war period. Famously, in France, this resulted in the creation of a new field, *critique génétique* (see Hay 1967). In Britain the appreciation for the literary draft developed when the British Museum mounted an exhibition in 1967 to show off its rich acquisitions that had been made possible by Arts Council funding. The purpose of the exhibition was to present "the manuscripts as physical objects, as specimens of autograph, and as materials for textual study" (Stratford 1974: xvi). The initiative was accompanied by the usual rumblings; when sending his autograph drafts to the British Museum, Charles Tomlinson annotated one of the pages with the remark: "I am not sure whether it is like parting with one's life blood or one's underwear" (qtd in Stratford 1974: 78). Nonetheless, as the event was organised by a national institution, it sanctioned the critical examination of methods of composition, altering our perspective on poetic creativity.¹⁰

9. See also Chapters 1.1.2 and 1.1.4 in this volume.

10. The first monograph in English devoted to the study of poetry drafts is Jon Stallworthy's *Between the Lines: Yeats's Poetry in the Making* (1963). This book was preceded by Phyllis Bartlett's *Poems in Process* (1951) which made extensive use of archival material to explain poets' working methods.

Creative traces

The abundance of cancellations, hesitations and modifications that are visible in the manuscripts of poets from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century suggests that poems are made rather than begotten. Does this belie the idea of inspiration? Charles Lamb certainly thought so. But the notion that revising a poem is a rational intervention and therefore secondary to the first thoughts of the original moment of inspiration is one that dominates the discourse about poetic creation (*pace* Graves 1995: 3–4). The presence of a process, however, does not make the poem that is written and worked over less a product of the imagination. Robert Graves' distinction between a creative phase and a revisionary phase is perhaps too neat.

At face value, the process of revision may seem largely mechanical, especially considering there are only three protocols: adding, deleting, and substituting (which is in effect deleting and adding). But not all revisions are premeditative tinkering with a text that is already finished, especially not for those poems which fail to proceed linearly. Writing poetry, however, is an iterative process. Revision, therefore, already happens in that first moment of creation when the poet is thinking out the poem on paper. This is evident from the convoluted drafts that so many poets left behind with their intricate, overlapping layers of lines and half lines, false starts and dead ends; the multiple strikethroughs, rewritings, and connecting arrows splurged across the page render these manuscripts difficult to decipher. Yet the vigour with which the poet seeks for the right image and turn of phrase unfolds itself visually for us, creating the feeling that we are looking over the poet's shoulder. The impression is not quite that of a measured, rational process.

At the same time, less elaborate revisions can look misleadingly simple and thus still contravene Graves' division. Making late revisions to poems that already look complete is often derisively called tinkering. Typically, these changes are tiny, but not necessarily minor. A small revision in A. Conan Doyle's "Ypres September 1915", an occasional piece written for *The Queen's Gift Book* (1915) in aid of Queen Mary's convalescent hospitals, provides a good case. In this jingoistic poem, taunting the German commander, Albrecht, the Duke of Württemberg, to attack the English line around Ypres, Doyle substitutes all instances of the nondescript "Tower" for "Belfry" throughout the poem:

You've been some little time, my Lord. Perhaps you scarce remember,
The far-off early days of that resistance.
Was it in October last? Or was it in November?
And here ~~was~~ you are in August at the border of September
Still staring at the ~~Tower~~ Belfry in the distance.¹¹

Originally a military term, "Belfry" is in this context an ambiguous word, referring to the *Belfroy* (or Dutch *Belfort*) tower on the Linen Hall in the town centre. The alteration in meaning

11. Transcription simplified. The manuscript was sold at auction by Bonham's in 2013, <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/20922/lot/131/>.

is slight, but the effect on the audience is not. For the Duke, or the informed English reader, the poet leaves no doubt as to which specific tower he means. For the less perceptive reader, “Belfry” may still call to mind that most idyllic of images: a steeple far-off in the landscape.

Done on a fair copy, the change is of course in Graves’ system a conscious act. But does it make the creative impulse less genuine? Doubtless, revisions of this kind bring us as close to the workings of the poet’s mind as we can ever get, especially when an element of prevarication is involved.¹² Before Wilfred Owen hit upon the word “flutter” in the opening line of “Conscious” (“His fingers wake, and flutter up the bed”), he had gone back and forth between “flicker” and “flitter” at least four times, and once contemplated “travel”, before settling on “flutter” (BL Add MS 43721 f. 45 and 46; Owen 2013: 139).¹³ Although prompted by a critical rereading of his own draft, the invention of “flutter” was impromptu rather than extemporaneous, because the word occurred to him spontaneously in redrafting the poem from scratch.

The cognitive impulses that prompt composition and revision may in fact be much more alike than is generally understood (see Van Mierlo 2020). Likewise, because the image of the poet as solitary creative genius is such a powerful one, the belief that creative practices are highly idiosyncratic is equally strong. But this is too a commonplace that is in need of re-examination. A comparison of working methods across time reveals in fact a large degree of commonality between poets that can be temperamentally very different.

Such a comparison basically reveals three modes of poetic composition: (1) poems that are worked out mainly in the head; (2) poems that come into existence in a fairly linear manner; (3) poems that are compiled following a convoluted process of bricolage.

Poems that are composed in the head before being written down are not uncommon, but we are usually talking about quite short lyrical poems. Keats could dash off a sonnet in a matter of minutes. He and Leigh Hunt often held competitions to see who could write the best sonnet on a topic they set beforehand within a quarter of an hour (Gittings 2001: 111). The assumption is that the strict form of the sonnet, very much like modern rap, was in fact conducive to their ready composition; the regularity of form makes the structure and cadences innate. It needs to be said, though, that these competition sonnets are not among Keats’s best poems. Naturally, poems that are committed to paper whole from the mind do not leave any material trace of their inception, unless they are further revised after the initial writing out.

Linear composition, then, follows composition in the mind in that the poem comes into being from its first to its final line, except that the recording now takes place on paper. For most of history both short and long poems were written in this way. Although it must have been quite a challenge, evidence suggests that (for the most part) Keats’s *Endymion*, Wordsworth’s *Prelude*,

12. Naturally, we can never precisely reconstruct what a poet was thinking in the act of creation and we should be wary of sliding into “psycho-genetics”. Nonetheless the drama of writing that unfolds in the writing traces on the page is revelatory of a process that we can observe, analyse and understand. In the very least, we can grasp the poet’s mind-set during revision, such as Tennyson’s who would “pounce” on any metrical imperfection in a line to redraft it “in correct form” (Ormond 1993: 154).

13. The drafts are reproduced in *The First World War Poetry Digital Archive* at <http://wwwilit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/wwilit/items/show/7567> and <http://wwwilit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/wwilit/items/show/7564>.

and Barrett Browning's *Casa Guidi Windows* were all written sequentially. Such linear progression creates the impression that these poems grew organically. But the interplay between mind and paper plays no less a part. The convoluted drafts of Shelley's *Epipsychidion* and *The Triumph of Life* are a case in point, showing the poet struggling to make his lines cohere. Printed editions of *The Triumph of Life* give the feeling that he abandoned the poem mid-line, unable to provide the crucial answer:

“Then, what is Life” I said ... the cripple cast
His eye upon the car which now had rolled
Onward, as if that look must be the last,
And answered.... “Happy those for whom the fold
Of
(Shelley 1977: 470)

Shelley's untimely death by drowning on 8 July 1822 just days after writing these words, meant he never returned to complete the poem. Even so, the draft of *Triumph of Life* is quite fragmented, full of gaps and incomplete ideas that needing filling in revision.¹⁴

The drafts of Sylvia Plath's late poems are a good illustration of the interplay between mind and paper. The first few stanzas are usually written with a certain ease, having been pre-composed in her mind. Later parts of her poems, by comparison, were not as fully formed, showing a far greater level of hesitation and rewriting. In one particular case, her poem “Stings”, this hesitation continues even on the typescripts. She had already struggled with the final stanza, striving to express the queen bee's sublime moment when, “[m]ore terrible than she ever was”, she soars into the air leaving the beehive, the wax mausoleum, in which she had been ensconced on her first mating flight (Plath 1982: np). Typing out her poem to produce a clear text that she could revise further, she deliberately created space to trial different revisions. She typed the final stanza four times, each time in a slightly different wording; these versions she vetted and revised further by hand. But even after she had arrived at a satisfactory form, she kept reshaping the stanza in later typescripts.

Composing line by line does not, therefore, imply an orderly process. From Blake to Yeats, writing involved, as Yeats called it, “much labouring” (Yeats 1989: 132). Indeed, Yeats may have largely composed his poems linearly, but his poems in the earliest stages of composition are always quite rough. While he blocks out his stanzas in terms of shape, the lines themselves are sometimes no more than keywords. These keywords suggest future imagery in its most embryonic form, while at the same indicating the beat of the line. Like Wordsworth, Yeats was an aural poet; he intoned his verse, while beating their measure with his hand as he wrote down – or attempted to write down – his lines. Consequently, a lot more of his thinking passes on to paper than is the case with other poets. Thus, the opening lines of “Coole Park, 1929” run in all their splendour: “I meditate upon a swallow's flight, | Upon an aged woman and her house”

14. Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. c. 4., see f.53^r for the “end” of the poem. The complete manuscript is available in facsimile in Shelley 1986. A digital colour facsimile is available from the archived website of the Bodleian's *Shelley's Ghost* online exhibition, <https://wayback.archive-it.org/org-467/20160519101207/http://shelleysghost.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/draft-of-the-final-lines-of-triumph-of-life>.

(Yeats 1989: 357). In the first draft, the poem's beginning sounds hesitant and pedestrian, as Yeats searched for his rhythm and opening image:

~~An old bare house about eve[nin]g~~
 I sing an old
 intricate
~~An old square white washed house~~
 ~~White washed many window[ed] house~~
~~About the intricacy of windows of the woods~~
 I sing an ancient many windowed house
~~The intricacy of window [?]ays~~
~~Mu I sing a bare intricate ancient house~~
 spread wind
 About it lie the woods intricacies, –

(NLI 13,518, f.14^r; Yeats 1999: 107, with my corrections)

Yeats's method of composition comes close to an act of *bricolage*, not only in cobbling together the lines from their inchoate beginnings, but also in establishing the poem's structure. Because the stanzas of poems in progress were delimited by the unit of the page when writing on loose-leaved pages, it is certainly possible that their order was determined or modified by shuffling the sheets. *Bricolage* is a mode that Swinburne called writing in parcels (1918: 1.171) and applies to the writing of his long poems like *Tristram of Lyonesse*. It involves the accumulation of poetic fragments, often in the absence of a clear structure and *telos*; fragments which at a later stage are sifted through and fused together. The best-known instance is *The Waste Land*, whose famous line, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins", is not only a self-reflexive comment on the poem's own structure, but also represents its genesis. Originally reading "These fragments I have spelt into my ruins" (Eliot 1971: 81), in the meaning of "To fit with bars or cross-pieces" (*OED*, s.v. *spell*, v.6), the line is a comment on how Eliot put his poem together. As it happened, the order of the poem's five parts follows the chronology in which they were written, but this was not the result of a fixed plan.¹⁵ At a more granular level, we can see, first of all, that *The Waste Land* recycles materials from poems that Eliot wrote as early as 1913 (Gordon 1974) (while at the same time the discarded extended version of "Death by Water" would later be re-used for "The Dry Salvages"). Other segments of the poem too – the "River sweats" song and the "Highbury bore me" vignette, the only drafts to survive in autograph, as well as the cancelled Boston scene – were written as separate units. In Eliot's view, the poem's structure was always quite fluid; not only did he refer to it as "poems" in the plural during the early stages of writing, the poem's boundaries could be easily permeated with other materials. When *The Waste Land* was to all intents and purposes completed, he wondered if he might not append

15. Or rather the chronology in which they were *typed*. In the absence of autograph drafts for most of the poem, it is impossible to say that composition followed the same trajectory. On the dating of the typescripts, see Rainey 2005.

“Gerontion” to the start and cut the “Phlebas the Phoenician”, the only remaining segment of “Death by Water”. Ezra Pound advised against both (Eliot 2009: 629–630).

That composing a poem from fragments written earlier is not exclusively a modernist practice is evidenced by several other long poems that were produced this way, starting with Pope’s *The Dunciad* (1728) and *The Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735) (Bartlett 1951: 149–150). Despite being written sequentially for the most part, Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* has various moments of *bricolage*. Its earliest beginnings at the back of an already well-used notebook (DCMS 19 in the collections of the Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere) consist of a mish-mash of verse fragments, some written in reverse, others inscribed crossways on the page.¹⁶ Like Yeats, Tennyson used the page as a unit of composition, confining the stanza to a single page, and used single sheets torn out of a notebook to decide on the order of poems at a late stage in the composition. He also made extensive use of cutting and pasting to move line segments to other parts of the poem. *The Princess* (1847), Tennyson’s utopian long poem in blank verse on female education, provides the best case in point. Not only are the various short lyrics that interrupt the narrative composed in a separate notebook, the main narrative was not written in sequence. The manuscript, now at the Cambridge University Library (MS Add. 6345), was bound and the pages arranged in the narrative order of the printed version after Tennyson had completed the poem; matching tea stains that seemingly appear at random points in the bound manuscript provide evidence that the order in which the poem was written was not that of the final version. Ted Hughes, finally, was also an avid *bricoleur* who employed the cut-and-paste method. Several typescripts in the *Birthday Letters* archive in the British Library have strips of paper with retyped lines sellotaped on top of the main pages, sometimes several layers at the same time. In some cases, as in the typescript of “The Bee God”, the “page” is not an actual sheet of paper, but a type of Frankenstein page comprised of several snippets taped together approximately to form an A4 sheet (BL Add. MS 88918/1/5, ff. 81–88).¹⁷

Ted Hughes’s working method provides, furthermore, a rare alternative form of *bricolage*, which we might term *découpage*. This mode of composition involves working towards a body of writing rather than an individual poem. With most poets, it is obvious that their oeuvre resulted from a cumulative process; this is the case, for instance, with Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* and Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, works that were expanded through each new edition. Also, Wordsworth worked cumulatively, especially with the major works whose publication was always uncertain. *The Recluse* in particular was to be the long philosophical poem for Coleridge that he never realised; his procrastination over it caused him significant anxiety, but in the words of one critic Wordsworth had no “reason to fret”. While he never completed *The Recluse*, a vast body of work exists that was written for – or, to be more precise, alongside – it, deriving its motivation from the same “lines of thought” that informed his intentions for *The Recluse* (Wu 2002: 156–157). Likewise, from *Crow* (1970) to *Birthday Letters* (1998), Ted

16. A digital facsimile is available in Bushell and Cowton 2008. See Van Mierlo 2013: 18–20.

17. For conservation, the British Library has now removed the sellotape that was originally there when the archive was first made available to readers.

Hughes did not think of his work in terms of the poetry volume. He saw them as projects from which one, sometimes more, volumes would be distilled. The publication of *Crow* followed a long period of conceptual development and early publications; over time Hughes added to and removed poems from the project. Whereas Smith, Wordsworth and Whitman built up their poetry projects, Hughes went one step further and dissembled poems to put the parts to new uses. *Birthday Letters* furnishes an even more elaborate example of this. It was a writing project at first never meant to appear in print at all. Begun some time between 1969 and 1971, Hughes initiated *Birthday Letters* as private confessional, revisiting and remembering his deeply troubled relationship with Sylvia Plath (Bate 2015: 511). Over time Hughes produced a significant number of poems, not all of them retained, that he pushed through extensive and repeated cycles of *réécriture*. Poems he no longer considered adequate could be abandoned or cut up into pieces that were used as the basis for new poems. Following a more intense period of writing in the late 1990s, Hughes finally decided to release the poems as a book.

The idea of *bricolage*, finally, brings to mind exogenetic activities or acts preparatory to composition that poets undertake. This includes unique cases like Wordsworth lifting phrases and images from Dorothy's journal, who as a co-creator would frequently record her impression for her brother's use (Woof 1992: 176). The scrapbooks of Scottish poet Edwin Morgan (1920–2010), which are part autobiography, documentary and work of art, may be tangential to the writing process, but they are nonetheless an important source of inspiration. More direct are Edward Thomas' (1871–1917) notebooks in which he recorded daily observations about nature and his surroundings, drawing upon them to find subjects for his poetry; the most famous is an entry on a random stop in June 1914 at Adlestrop station in Gloucestershire while he was travelling from London to Ledbury to visit Robert Frost (Harvey 1999); the entry occasioned "Yes, I remember Adlestrop–," the opening line of Thomas' most famous poem, "Adlestrop" (Thomas 1999: 9). More commonly, preparatory writing involves capturing some scraps of poetry for later use, as Wordsworth did on the flyleaves of the first *Prelude* notebook (DCMS 19). Many other poets, Keats and Emily Dickinson among them, had the habit of writing such scraps on small pieces of paper that they would stow away for later use. Alexander Pope, Walt Whitman, Thomas Hardy, Siegfried Sassoon, Stephen Spender, W.H. Auden and others did the same, but wrote down their ideas in a notebook (Bartlett 1951: 114–115, 144, 149–150).¹⁸ Marianne Moore kept a notebook with discarded elements salvaged from her normal writing process (Moore 1961), confirming the extent to which writing poetry is an accretive as well as an iterative process. It underscores furthermore the extent to which the format and function of the notebook are conducive to this mode of composition, making it at once a creative space and a repository for writing.

18. Hardy also kept separate notes on rhythm, metre and poetics that informed his practice (see Dalziel and Millgate 2009: xii).

Conclusion

Running through the last section of this chapter is the argument that the support plays an important role in the creative dynamic of poets. Since writing is an embodied activity, the support is one ingredient that is part of the wider physical environment. Whether conscious or not, the choice of paper (as much as choosing the right pen) channels the creative impulse. The support's affordances, moreover, have a direct bearing on the nature of composition. The size of the paper, for instance, determines how extensive drafting and revision can be made. Large-format pages almost naturally result in a more complexly layered manuscript. This finding, however, has a bearing on the chapter as a whole and the special status our culture affords to the poetry manuscript. This is in respect of three functions of the manuscript: (1) as object of value and valued object, (2) as document containing the traces of the creative process, and (3) as material object whose physical traits impact on its use and hence on the creative process. Still reflecting the influence of classical theories of the imagination, which reach a pinnacle in the Romantic period, the creation of poetry remains associated with creative genius. Creative ability is of course a necessary condition. But creative genius and method of composition are not one and the same. What a comparative study of poetry manuscripts from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century shows is that there are fewer idiosyncrasies of method than one might assume. The way poets have used the page through the ages to bring their poems into being is, in fact, remarkably stable and culturally consistent.

Abbreviations

BL Add MS	British Library, Additional Manuscripts
DCMS	Dove Cottage Manuscripts, The Wordsworth Trust
NLI	National Library of Ireland

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