Words, Words, Words and More Words

Polonius: What do you read, my lord?
Hamlet: Words, words, words.

Hamlet, 2.ii.190–191

The instantly striking feature of Victorian poetry is just how many poets there were and how much they wrote. (There are 122 named poets in Christopher Ricks’s Oxford Book of Victorian Verse (1990), 145 in Danny Karlin’s Penguin Book of Victorian Verse (1997) and 158 in my The Victorians: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics (Blackwell, 2000).) Copiousness, bigness, magnitude are the order of the Victorian textual day. It’s a muchness of poetic activity and production which manifestly mirrors the stupendous bigness of the times. This was the age of the colossal, of a numerical and physical largesse as never before experienced anywhere. It was, for instance, ‘The Age of Great Cities’, as it was dubbed in 1843, and how, according to Asa Briggs’ classic study of Victorian urbanism, ‘most Victorian writers on society thought of their age’.² Cities, those vast man-made objects – acres of bricks and mortar on a scale never before imagined let alone constructed – great because packed with people doing and making and consuming, selling and buying more things than anybody had ever done before in a single place. Inflatedness, inflation were on the up and up. Large cities were growing across the ‘civilised world’– New York, Chicago, Paris – but above all in Britain: Glasgow, Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester, London. And the greatest of these was London. The sheer

‘numerosity’ of London, its ‘senseless bigness’, quite bowled over the American incomer Henry James in 1876. He’d never seen so much or so many as this ‘enchanting’ ‘great city’ offered: ‘the biggest aggregation of human life – the most complete compendium of the world’. It was, of course, the ‘right place’ for a writer to be.\(^3\) London was the centre of world consciousness. Everything and everybody, so to say, came to it. It was the economic epicentre of the world, the market-place of the globe, centre of the largest empire and colonial enterprise the world had ever known. For their part, Manchester and Birmingham were the factories – or manufactories, as the word then was – of the world. Everything, indeed, came from them. There was nowhere on earth that Manchester stuff – literally stuff, cotton goods – did not travel to: the product of the hands of the immigrant Irish machine-operatives, or ‘hands’, packed as never before into that city’s grotesquely overcrowded slums.

So many people; so many things; so much for writers to reflect and reflect on; and so many poets (and novelists) to say it. Which is how it immediately came home to Tennyson when he was appointed Poet Laureate in November 1850. ‘I get such shoals of poems that I am almost crazed with them; the two hundred million poets of Great Britain deluge me daily with poems: truly the Laureateship is no sinecure.’\(^4\)

There was indeed much to say; and the poets did say it. Victorian poets can say almost anything, and about almost anything. They kept quiet about next to nothing. Only sex, the flesh, the functions of the lower parts of the body, which were, and are, busy writerly obsessions as they were, and are, busy human ones, had to be approached with some caution, but even then with not much caution, and certainly not with caution among friends. Of course there was plenty of public and private censorship. Podsnappery flourished – fathers suppressing anything likely to ‘bring a blush into the cheek of the young person’, like Dickens’s Mr Podsnap, pompously protective of his daughter (\textit{Our Mutual Friend} (1864–1865), I.i.11). The Bowdler Family’s \textit{Family Shakespeare} (1818), which edited out anything ‘which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family’, was a huge nineteenth-century best-seller.\(^5\) Characteristically of much current reader sensitivity, Mrs Richard Burton burnt a lot of her husband’s erotically charged papers, and filled his posthumous translation of Catullus’s poems (1894) with expurgatory dots. Verbally blunt, uneuphemizing versions of sexually explicit


\(^4\) Hallam Lord Tennyson, \textit{Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir, By His Son}, 2 vols (Macmillan, London and New York, 1897), I. 337. Known as \textit{Memoir} hereafter.

Petronius, Apuleius, Martial and Catullus texts appeared only in limited editions for posh private subscribers. Schoolboys were brought up on expurgated texts of the classical poets, as of Shakespeare. Some printers would draw the line at printing materials they thought too filthy – Swinburne’s poems, Richard Burton’s *Kama Sutra*, and so on. The Nonconformist consciences of William Henry Smith (a Methodist) and Charles Edward Mudie (a Congregationalist) kept their hugely influential subscription libraries free of ‘immoral’ books. (Smith, who started in railways bookstalls on the London and Northwestern Railways out of London’s Euston Station was known as the ‘North Western Missionary’.) There was much legal repression. An Obscene Publications Act came in, 1857. The Society for the Suppression of Vice reported in 1868 that since 1834 it had caused to be destroyed 16,220 books and pamphlets, and 129,681 prints, tons of print in fact. Henry Richard Vizetelly went to prison in 1889 for defiantly publishing Zola’s novels – thought *bestial* and *obscene* by his prosecutors. Notoriously Swinburne’s publisher Moxon withdrew *Poems and Ballads* within weeks of its publication in April 1866 because of the outcry over its sado-masochism and necrophilia. ‘Swine-born’ Swinburne, people called him. (‘There is assuredly something wrong with you’, Ruskin told Swinburne; ‘you are rose graftings set in dung’.) And so the Victorian hostilities went.6 And yet, literature, and poetry not least, abounded in what was called ‘fleshliness’ (see ‘Fleshly Feelings’ Chapter, below), in explicit eroticism, gruesome sexual gothicity, violence, perversity, fetishism, as well as blasphemy and heresy of every sort. Ekbert Faas is quite right to suggest that ‘the Victorian reading public was surprisingly open-minded’.7 (Hotton, the notorious specialist publisher of flagellation fantasy fiction, who stepped in to rescue *Poems and Ballads* for the public, was never prosecuted for issuing that ‘filth’.)

Plainly, Victorian poems offered a more or less open door to the whole wide world of things and ideas, thoughts and events, feelings and actions. Victorian poetry is not just deictic, it’s omni-deictic. *Deixis*, the linguistic action of pointing towards, pointing out, things in the non-verbal world (things of all sorts, not just objects and items, but events, persons, feelings), *this*, *that*, *there*, is what this poetry luxuriates in. Victorian poetry refers. It is ostensive, ostentatiously assuming a world, and worlds outside of

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language. It is by no means as autotelic as some bad post-structuralist theorists and theorizing have suggested poetry and poetic language automatically are. Of course there’s much self-reference in Victorian poetry – poems taking language, poeticy, textuality and their ways as subject. And, as we shall see again and again, poems do keep registering the difficulties of language, discourse, art; the problematics of reference, of telling the real, of, precisely, the deictic endeavour; registering the appeals of silence and the honesty of stymied utterance, all in a (at first blush) rather startling pre-post-modernist, ur-deconstructionist way (the large subject of my chapter ‘Victorian Modernismus’, Chapter 10, below). But what’s nonetheless arresting and exciting is that, for all of their manifest doubtings, the poets do keep taking on as subject what’s outside and beyond the poem, determined to finger, grasp, grip, mawl the world, the worldly subject, in all its apparent plenitude. And to do so plenitudinously.8

‘The world was all before them’, says Milton of Adam and Eve as they leave the Garden of Eden for ordinary fallen life at the end of *Paradise Lost*. And Victorian poets eagerly embraced that plenitude. And, commonly, at great length, unstoppably, on and on. Of course there was a reverse habit and cult of the small poem and the sequence of small poems (especially the sonnet) – as we shall see later (Chapter 6, ‘Selving’). But it is great length that is the first most noticeable thing about Victorian poetic form. Textual hypertrophy is a nineteenth-century problem. It’s no surprise that *metromania* and *metromanie*, meaning a mania for producing poetry, enter the English language in the 1790s. The Victorians were *metromaniacs* (*metro-maniac*: first recorded in English in 1830), with a mania for producing large poems. What Coleridge approved of as the *Vast*.9 Victorian readers remarked, and not always with pleasure, that Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856) had more lines than the *Odyssey* or *Paradise Lost* – 2,000 more than Milton’s great epic, gnashed Coventry Patmore.10 There are 21,116 lines in Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* (1868–1869), with even more added in subsequent editions.

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8 Deixis of course features in (famed deconstruction sceptic) Raymond Tallis’s fine meditation on pointing, *Michelangelo’s Finger: An Exploration of Everyday Transcendence* (Atlantic Books, London, 2010). ‘Pointing is the most blatant example of “deixis”, a property that connects signs with the material circumstances in which they occur. … Pointing silently utters “That … that thing … that state of affairs” and links that local explicitness with the massively elaborated explicitness that is made possible through language’. Tallis, 76.

9 See Adam Roberts, *Romantic and Victorian Long Poems: A Guide* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 1999), a big lexicon for Romantic and Victorian poems of 1,000 words or more, with a few smaller ones let in, e.g. Tennyson’s ‘Enoch Arden’ (941 lines) and Matthew Arnold’s ‘Sohrab and Rustum’ (892).

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It takes up about eighty thousand lines,
A thing imagination boggles at:
And might, odds-bobs, sir! in judicious hands,
Extend from here to Mesopotamy.

That’s Charles Stuart Calverley, the ace Victorian parodist, who couldn’t stand Browning’s bulging effort, and mocked it rigid in his ‘The Cock and the Bull’, 129 lines of rich parody Browning-ese. Tennyson told Browning that ‘Mr Sludge, the Medium’ (sic) was ‘two thirds too long’. Browning’s ‘new poem has 15,000 lines: there’s copiousness!’, the Irish poet William Allingham reports Tennyson as declaring with some wonderment in October 1863 – before he sloped abruptly off to bed (overwhelmed, perhaps, by the thought of all those words). Actually Browning did not produce a poem of 15,000 words in 1863, so it’s not easy to tell which poem Tennyson might have been referring to. But the point of the report is clear: Browning had, from the start of his career, become a by-word as the poet of many words. And in truth. His Paracelsus (1835) has 4,152 lines; his Sordello (1840) some 5,000 lines. ‘[A] nother jet from his full fountain’, said Tennyson when Browning’s Aristophanes Apology (1875) turned up (Memoir, II, 231). Indeed it was. ‘Cannot your task have end here, Euthukles?’, the character Aristophanes asks at line 2,709 of his poem. Well, no, there are another 3,002 lines to go.

Browning just loves bulking out, raising the rhetorical stake, shifting up through the verbal gears, relishing the sheer energy of the rapid verbal ride, the mere accumulation of verbal material: ‘the world of words I had to say’, as Browning’s Count Guido Franceschini puts it at the end of his second address in Book XI of The Ring and the Book (by far the longest Book in the Book). It’s a relish for excessive verbal acquisition and expression nicely illustrated in the story Browning told Elizabeth Barrett about a friend who was asked to annotate a third-party’s sonnets and just kept on upping the verbal ante. Bad, worse, worst, was his friend’s note against the first three lines. The next three were designated badder, badderer, badderest. The next three were worser, worsterer, worsterest. By which stage there was nothing for it but to label the final couplet worsterestest and worsterestest. This is only Robert Browning’s second joke, very early on in his wonderful epistolary wooing of Miss Barrett. Part of the fun of creativity for Browning is that only the most words possible, or the mostest, the mostestest even, as we might say, will do. And what’s true for him is true for lots of others – for Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for Christina G Rossetti, for Tennyson himself (if his In Memoriam and The Idylls of the King are anything

11 Hallam Tennyson, Memoir, II.285.
12 Allingham is quoted in the Appendix, Hallam’s Memoir, I. 514.
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to go by), for John Addington Symonds, it might be, for Swinburne, of course,
and for many another. Like the ‘curse’ of Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott, the epic
urge, or something like it, is come heavily upon them. They enjoy too much
writing too much. They simply can’t resist setting down yet another line of
iambic pentameters, that favourite building block of the English poet. And
another line. And another. The great length of the Biblical-classical epic The Fall
of Nineveh (1828–1868), the aweing chef d’oeuvre of Edwin Atherstone, all 30
Books and around 24,420 lines of it – he was a close friend of the great apoca-
lyptic painter John Martin and like Martin needed a broad canvas – does not
make it outstandingly bulky for its time, though the plodding sameness of its
thousands upon thousands of entirely flat iambic pentameter lines does rather
grant it First Prize for utter numbing boredom, albeit in a close-run competition
where it’s pressed close by others (in the not kind words of Virginia Woolf about
the talk in Aurora Leigh) going ‘on and on’, with the reader’s mind stiffening
and glazing ‘under the monotony of the rhythm’.14

It’s small wonder that TS Eliot should open his famous essay on Swinburne
by asking how much of a poet you have to read. The question has real force
for these Victorians. ‘[A]lmost no-one, to-day, will wish to read the whole
of Swinburne’.15 The deterring size of some Victorian poems and oeuvres
was a keynote of Eliot’s criticism. ‘One can get on very well in life without
having read all the later poems of Browning or Swinburne.’ ‘What about
Mrs Browning’s Aurora Leigh, which I have never read, or that long poem
by George Eliot of which I don’t remember the name?’16 And Eliot’s prefer-
ence for necessary skimming and overlooking has been rather widely felt. It
is why the canon of commonly read Robert Browning poems is so small.

14 Virginia Woolf, ‘Aurora Leigh’, The Second Common Reader (1932). Edwin Atherstone,
The Fall of Nineveh: A Poem, In Two Volumes (William Pickering, London, 1847). He brought
out another great epic, Israel in Egypt (1861). A revised edition of The Fall of Nineveh appeared
in 1868, four years before Atherstone’s death. ‘His works did not sell well, and he gained’, says
the DNB with feeling, ‘a reputation for verbosity.’ The ancient-looking approving pencil-marks
in my 1847 copy of The Fall of Nineveh run out on page 3 of Volume One. Monique R Morgan
makes too light work of the heaviness of the long work, Don Juan, The Prelude, Aurora Leigh,
The Ring and the Book, all read through their epicities as sets of smaller lyric encounters:
Narrative Means, Lyric Ends: Temporality in the Nineteenth-Century British Long Poem
(Ohio State University Press, Columbus OH, 2009).
15 TS Eliot, ‘Swinburne as Poet’, Selected Essays, 3rd, enlarged edn (Faber & Faber, London,
1951), 323.
16 TS Eliot, ‘What is Minor Poetry’ (1944), On Poetry and Poets (Faber & Faber, London,
1957). Some of this was bluff, the put-down of somebody who had only felt the muchness of,
say, Browning, by actually munching through it. More revealing even than Eliot’s profound
respect for In Memoriam, evidently based on much re-reading, is that moment in ‘The Three
Voices of Poetry’, where he applies two wonderful lines of Thomas Lovell Beddoes’ Death’s
Jest-Book (1851) – ‘bodiless childful of life in the gloom / Crying with frog voice, “what shall
I be?”’ – to a poet’s embryo-poems: lines at Act II.sc iii.line 294, i.e. over 1700 lines of verse
into Beddoes’s deterringly vast poetic drama.
(In the customary style of Oxford examination papers, I recently set a whole lot of Browning questions using quotations from the wonderfully satirical and literary-critical later poems, ‘Of Pacchiarotto, and How He worked in Distemper’ (1876), Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day (1887), and the like: ‘Nobody reads those poems’, protested my fellow-examiner, the poet and critic Tom Paulin; and he was right – hélas.) Philip Larkin professed to love ‘reading up and down of an evening’ in the brick-sized Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy (that volume which Hardy’s Will stipulated should be available as cheaply as possible for the benefit of the poor, Jude the Obscure-like, reader’s pocket, and which thus got reprinted and reprinted from the same old plates whose type got more and more wonderfully nicked and dinged as time went by). You were sure, Larkin said, to come across poetic gem after gem. But still, happening upon such linguistic treasure trove required persistent reading up and down, an extending acquaintance with the brick-like collection. It’s such protracted encounters the Victorian author typically demands.

Of course, as the jeers at Robert Browning’s expense indicate, many Victorian readers did not take at all to this intense contemporary plenitude, this stunning copiousness and variety. Henry James patently gets less pleasure from being stunned by the hugeness of Robert Browning (‘one of the most copious of our poets’) than he does from London’s vastness. The Ring and the Book, ‘the most voluminous of his works’, is ‘so vast and so ... gothic a structure, spreading and soaring and branching at such a rate, like a mad cathedral’, all ‘brave excrescences ... clustered hugeness ... inordinate muchness’, a ‘monstrous magnificence’.17 Many of the cavillers were, ironically, producers of great muchnesses for their own part – like Tennyson, declaring (of Robert Browning) that he much preferred ‘A small vessel’ to ‘a big raft’, when his own poetic barque often hove to quite loaded to the gunwales.18 The not particularly quiet Dante Gabriel Rossetti was keen to qui-eten the young musician-poet Théophile Marzials by getting him to ‘refrain from contributions ... in voluminosity to the poetry of the day’: a ‘perfect’ poem of six lines was worth far more than an ‘imperfect’ one of 6,000.19 Rossetti told Swinburne that William Morris was simply over-productive: ‘The fact is Topsy writes too much both for his own sake and for that of his appreciators’.20 What the very mouthy Swinburne thought of this is not known. He certainly thought Robert Browning impossibly wordy, with an

17 ‘The Novel in the The Ring and the Book’, lecture of 1912; in James’s Notes on Novelists (1914) – much discussed in Ch 9, ‘Modernizing the Subject’, below.
18 Hallam’s Memoir, II, 230.
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unstoppability he parodied in ‘The Last Words of a Seventh-Rate Poet’ (it’s fifth in Swinburne’s package of parodies called The Heptalogia):

I don’t like to break off, any more than you wish me to stop: but my fate is not to vent half a million such rhymes without blockheads exclaiming — Iam Satis.21

Iam satis: Latin for enough already. Enough is never enough for the disliked Browning. One of the most vicious assaults Swinburne, past-master at critical abuse, ever made is on Browning for not being able to stop talking, stop afflicting his audience with his inarticulate noise — his ‘windy gamut of inharmonious sound … shrieks of violated English, groans of grammar undergoing vivisection, gasps of expiring sense and moans of tormented metre’. He’s much like the missionary Swinburne has heard of ‘somewhere’ whose ‘savage’ converts had suffered his preachments to ‘such a sensibly insufferable degree’ that they ‘cut off exactly one half of his tongue and sent him back with the other half unextracted’. And still he wouldn’t shut up — ‘being quite unable to hold the tongue which remained to him he went on talking in a dialect of which no mortal could make anything.’ Peculiar surgical help — ‘judicious extirpation of the tongue’ — enabled him ‘to speak thenceforward in an audible intelligible manner, by a select use of guttural and labials’: a ‘memorable though mournful example of strenuous human perseverance’ who ‘has now been uttering for the last twenty or thirty years the inarticulate vocal appeal of a tongueless though verbose eloquence.’ ‘For a man with organs unimpaired’ this ‘would indeed be unpardonable; in the case of Mr Browning, it is more than pitiable — it is commendable’.22 For one poet cheerfully to wish such a two-part excision of tongue upon another poet is about as sick as criticism gets — even for sado-masochistic pain-worshipping Swinburne. But it does at least point to how extreme the aversion to the period’s protractednesses could get.

Matthew Arnold is, happily, less vicious in his hostility to Browning’s ‘confused multitudinousness’. It comes, Arnold thinks, from being ‘prevailed over by the world’s multitudinousness’. (This is in a letter of Arnold’s to his friend Arthur Hugh Clough, September 1848, attacking Keats for the same fault: ‘What a brute you were to tell me to read Keats’s letters’.23) Browning was trying to get too much in; to say too much. Walter Pater was

21 Swinburne, Specimens of Modern Poets: The Heptalogia or the Seven against Sense; A Cap With Seven Bells (Chatto & Windus, London, 1880).
rather inclined to approve of Browning’s generously absorbent response to an age whose overcrowdedness Pater couldn’t himself quite celebrate. The ‘complex, perhaps too matterful, soul of our century has found in Mr Browning … the capacity for dealing masterfully with it’ – the link of *matterful* and *masterful* is wonderfully contrived (and, actually, Pater thought the Decadent poet Arthur Symons, in many ways Browning’s poetic disciple, was even better than Browning in his 1889 *Days and Nights* volume at ‘concentrations, powerful, dramatic, of what we might call the light and shadow of life’).\(^{24}\) Arnold was, of course, hidebound by the classical literary theory he’d been schooled in, and was evidently attracted to the old Aristotelian idea that the most important poetry – epics and tragedies – were ‘imitations’ of *actions*, and nothing else. Arnold publicized the notion in the – very important – Preface to the first edition of his *Poems* (1853). The ‘eternal objects of poetry’, he alleged, are ‘actions; human actions’. But every reader of contemporary poetry could see not just how constraining Aristotle’s formula was, but also how it failed to fit what the poets were actually doing. WC Roscoe objected with the truth about contemporary literary production. ‘We have poems to the Lesser Celandine, to a Mouse, to the Skylark … which … are purely descriptive of natural objects’, and by no means imitations of human actions. Arnold wisely conceded his mistake in his Preface to the second edition of his *Poems* (1854). If he’d been concentrating, he said, he would have recognized from the first that Aristotle’s formula didn’t even fit the great poetic classics, Virgil and Dante and Shakespeare, let alone the poets of his own time.

Victorian poetry is indeed mouthy about almost anything under the sun:

about cod-liver oil, railway-lines and railway trains, chairs, soup, soap, paintings, omnibuses, going to the dentist, Grimm’s Law, weather in the suburbs, dead dogs, cricket players, a cabbage leaf, Missing Links, tobacco, booze, snow, sadomasochism, Psychical Research, leeks, onions, genitalia, war, New Woman, fairies, love, death, God, pain, poverty, poems, faith, doubt, science, poets, poetry.\(^ {25}\)

**The Words to Say It**

What, though, about the words in which these almost anythings are said? Across the ages, poeticaity has been taken to consist in the selection of the words used to say things – the *words in which to say it* (I’m thinking of the title of Marie Cardinal’s momentous memoir-novel of 1975, *Les Mots pour le dire*, translated into English as *The Words to Say It* (1984)) – and the way


that they’re arranged. Jonathan Swift talked up the importance of finding ‘proper words’, to be put in ‘their proper places’, stressing *propriety* of choice and deployment, a kind of verbal contract with conventionally agreed poetic goods. Coleridge went bestingly further, stressing a sort of absolute quality to be arrived at by the poet’s individual sense of what’s good: ‘the best words in the best order’. TS Eliot adapted Coleridge: ‘an arrangement of the right words in the right order’ – the poet ‘finding the right words or, anyhow, the least wrong words’ and arranging them in ‘the right way – or in what he comes to accept as the best arrangement’. Always, though, considered words and considered deployment of those words. The dual hard-word front, on which you can still find it suggested that the Victorians flopped and failed.

There’s still a travestying cliché around that Victorian poetry fails to measure up in word-choice and word-arrangement, that it is verbally slack, casual, trite, carelessly chosen, prosey, full of doggerel, too hummy and hymny, nursery-rhyme stuff, and carelessly arranged – somehow a bad and verbally inattentive parenthesis between the great force and forces of preceding times (however they’re defined) and the tighter, alerter powers of the modernists. Ezra Pound’s harshly discriminatory line on Swinburne sums up much long continuing twentieth-century hostility. Swinburne’s libertarian politics, his ‘paganism’ were good, and his ‘verbal music’, his ‘melopoeia’ (that’s the art of making melodies) were unsurpassable (‘No one else has made such music in English’), but his choice and use of words were awful. ‘He neglected the value of words as words, and was intent on their value as sound’. ‘The word-selecting word-castigating faculty was nearly absent’ (*castigating*: correcting, revising, amending). All his ‘defects can be summed up in one – that is, inaccurate writing’. Which was Yeats’s line in the notorious Introduction to his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935*

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26 ‘To find out proper words’: ‘Directions for a Birthday-day Song’, 232; ‘… when I wanted proper words’: Gulliver in Houhynhym land, *Gulliver’s Travels*, Part IV; ‘I have put the several Explanations in their proper places’, Swift tells the reader about the annotations to ‘The Grand Question debated WHETHER Hamilton’s Bawn should be turned into a Barrack or a Malt-House’.

27 *Specimens of the Table-Talk*, Vol I (1835), 84.


(1936) when he described ‘the revolt against Victorianism’ as a rejection of a ‘poetic diction’ which had less interest in the quality of the words and their organization than in ‘irrelevant descriptions of nature, the scientific and moral discursiveness of In Memoriam ... the political eloquence of Swinburne, the psychological curiosity of Robert Browning’. ‘We must purify poetry of all that is not poetry’, Yeats has his young ones say, implying that the Victorians were poetically contaminated. Oscar Wilde’s dismissiveness – ‘Meredith was a prose Browning and so was Browning’ – catches this still not banished mood. Speaking with ‘brutal frankness’ in 1934, in his often admirably word-history conscious English Poetry and the English Language, FW Bateson put the ‘faults’ of Victorian poetry, its ‘diffuseness’ and ‘vagueness’, down to its desire ‘to write poetry as prose’. A charge not altered a jot in his polemic’s second edition of 1961 (almost, interestingly, on the eve of the revolution in poetry publication brought about by the great Longman’s Annotated English Poets series which Bateson initiated and master-minded, which included Kenneth Allott’s ground-breaking Matthew Arnold (1965) and Christopher Ricks’s revolutionizing Tennyson (1969)). The weakness of Victorian poetry was history’s fault, Bateson alleged; the language the Victorians inherited had turned all prosaically prolix; but the poets were also to blame for linguistic spinelessness, with only a few exceptions – Tennyson’s rare awareness of ‘the condition of the language he was compelled to use’; Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s and Swinburne’s ‘love of words for their own sake’. Hopkins was poetically tough, but no help to his contemporaries because hidden way. Housman was verbally attentive but came too late to be of contemporary use. Otherwise the poets were ‘language proof’. Bateson’s repeatedly referred-to critical helpmeet was TS Eliot, Ezra Pound’s great critical ally and publicist, whose loud pronouncements (Swinburne’s ‘meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning’; his ‘adjectives are practically blanks’; Tennyson’s ‘Idylls of the King are hardly more important than a parody, or a “Chaucer retold for children”’)32, echoed forcibly though the critical jungle for a long time. Eliot’s Victorian suspicions were rooted in his influential conviction that a corrupting break occurred in the middle of the seventeenth century, ‘the dissociation of sensibility’ (his momentous slogan of 1921),33 a collapse in intellectual and aesthetic force, cognate with the killing of the King and the abolition of the Established Church, which the Restoration never restored and which went

31 ‘Swinburne as Poet’ (1951), 327.
32 In Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry (Alfred A Knopf, NY, 1917), reprinted in To Criticize the Critic, and Other Writings (Faber & Faber, London, 1965), 166.
on impoverishing English poetry right through the Romantic period and beyond. It was fed strongly in the twentieth century as a matter of modern – and modernist – contempt for the likes of ‘Alfred Lawn Tennyson, Gentleman Poet’, as James Joyce notoriously dismissed the Victorian Laureate when he appeared in the nightmare of the Nighttown episode of *Ulysses* (1921). Tennyson the favourite poet of Mr Ramsay, absurd representative of old-fashioned patriarchy and lamedog Cambridge philosophy in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927), who charges about the lawn of his Cornish holiday home reciting ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ to himself. Nobody reads Elizabeth Barrett Browning, poetic star of her day, said Virginia Woolf in 1932 in her ‘Aurora Leigh’ essay; ‘nobody discusses her’. ‘The primers dismiss her with contumely’ for never having learned ‘the value of words and a sense of form’. She’s aesthetically uncouth – a poetic uncouthness registered in Woolf’s pert, snooty social allegory of Barrett Browning’s low poetic place with a crew of like aesthetically impoverished ones: ‘downstairs in the servants’ quarters, where, in company with Mrs Hemans, Eliza Cook, Jean Ingelow, Alexander Smith, Edwin Arnold, and Robert Montgomery, she bangs the crockery about and eats vast handfuls of peas on the point of her knife’.

One trouble for much serious modern criticism was that Victorian poetry had entered the popular consciousness – as whole poems, bits of poems, opening lines, titles. People knew these poems, knew them ‘off by heart’ – Browning’s ‘Home-Thoughts, from Abroad’ (‘Oh, to be in England / Now that April’s there’), his ‘How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix’ (‘I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he, / I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three’); Tennyson’s ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ (‘Half a league, half a league, / Half a league onward / All in the valley of Death / Rode the six hundred’); Thomas Hood’s ‘The Song of the Shirt’; Clough’s ‘Say not the struggle nought availeth’; Macaulay’s ‘Horatius’ (‘Lars Porsena of Clusium / By the Nine Gods he swore’); William Allingham’s ‘The Fairies’ (‘Up the airy mountain / Down the rushy glen’); TE Brown’s ‘A garden is a lovesome thing, God wot’ (‘My Garden’); Lewis Carroll’s ‘Jabberwocky’ (‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves’); Edward Lear’s ‘The Dong With a Luminous Nose’; Kipling’s ‘Mandalay’, Newbolt’s ‘There’s a breathless hush in the Close Tonight’ (‘Vitaï Lampada’); Housman’s ‘Home is the sailor, home from the sea’ (‘RLS’); Hardy’s ‘Darkling Thrush’; and so on and on.

Here was a body of utterly memorable stuff – remembered of course because of the attractive sentiment, and sentimentalism, the human touches,

34 For Woolf’s quarrelsome and frequently farcical relationships with her female domestics, her very own pea-puzzled bangers of crockery, see Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants: The Hidden Heart of Domestic Service* (Penguin Figtree, London, 2007).
the patriotism, the religiosity, but memorable not least because so many of these rhymes and rhythms were easy on the ear. Lots of Victorian poems caught on because they were indeed catchy. Children took to them. They were pleasing to chant, and they were indeed chanted in school, as a key part of an unofficial national syllabus. They had lilt, in fact; they were singable (that great criterion of poetic merit according to the wise and happily old-fashioned Philip Larkin). Many of them caught on precisely because they were set to music – like ‘Come into the garden, Maud’ from Tennyson’s ‘Maud’; and Adelaide Anne Procter’s ‘A Lost Chord’ (‘Seated one day at the Organ’); and Kathleen Tynan’s ‘Sheep and Lambs’ (‘All in the April evening’); John Henry Newman’s ‘Lead kindly light, amid the encircling gloom’ (‘perhaps the most popular modern hymn in the language’, Newman’s biographer thought in 1912)\(^{35}\); and Christina G Rossetti’s ‘In the bleak mid-winter’, her ‘A Christmas Carol’, perhaps the most famous Christmas Carol in the English language ever. Many of the best known memorable Victorian poems indeed began their life as hymns – as Henry Francis Lyte’s ‘Abide with me! fast falls the eventide’ (favourite of English Football Association Cup Final crowds), and Sarah Flower Adams’s ‘Nearer, my God, to thee (famous not least for having allegedly been played by the ship’s orchestra as the Titanic went down), and Charlotte Elliott’s ‘Just as I am Without One Plea’ (the best-selling anthem of worldwide Evangelical Christianity).

**Pish-Posh?**

Here was precisely what patrons of the modern and modernist, the so-called New Poetic, jeered and fleered at as the badness of the Old Poetic – its terribly pleasing plangencies and emotional accessibilities, its words and ideas requiring (it was said) little effort from either poet or reader (what Ezra Pound thought of as a deteriorated and ossified linguisticity; an inauthentic speech according to Arthur Symons, champion of late nineteenth-century symbolism), the tones and rhythms of a terribly popular poetic. (The negative critique is most revealingly set out and endorsed in CK Stead’s still standard work of literary history, *The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot*.\(^{36}\) Lots of educated critics, especially the ones in the very new University Schools of English Literature, critical cannon-fodder for the new professionalized ways of doing reading, were for other poetic measures, other canons of taste and poeticity. The reaction to Victorian poets by IA Richards’s Cambridge audience of the 1920s – the whole of the embryonic Cambridge English faculty,

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students and teachers, gathered by Richards to find out experimentally just how poems were being read in practice, and so suggest how they might be read better, and lay down some bases for how English could be turned into a more empirical and so examinable discipline – is characteristic of the dismissive post-Victorian response. The poems chosen by Richards for lecture-audience comment were issued anonymously and without dates, but the educated audience’s anti-Victorian instincts were pretty sure. The rhymes of Christina Rossetti’s ‘Spring Quiet’ – ‘Gone were but the Winter’ – were found poor and scarcely bearable (‘I laughed at the rhyming of thrush and bush; and boughs and house. Reminds one quite pleasantly of the “poetry” one wrote when aged ten’). ‘Sentiment … utterly absurd’; metre ‘a jingle’, ‘sing-songy’; ‘slight in thought and hideously worded’. ‘This poem might have been pleasing to the reading public a few hundred years ago, but today I can see little reason why it should be read, except for historical interest. It is simple, almost childish … rambling, discursive … says nothing that matters’. Gerard Hopkins’s ‘Margaret, are you grieving’ fared a lot better (his poems, only recently published in 1918 by his friend Robert Bridges, were already enjoying the status of ur-modernistic verses among the likes of IA Richards, whose pioneering appraisal appeared in the *Dial* magazine in September 1926).37 But even so there were lots of complaints and gibes at this Hopkins poem as merely old poetic rubbish. ‘Trite thought, somewhat incoherently and badly expressed’; ‘extraordinarily bad poetry … trite philosophy.’ ‘Pish-posh!’ ‘Sentential’ [sic]. Richards was clearly grimly amused by that particular Cambridge English student who couldn’t even spell the common denigratory charge of sentimentality, but he was also plainly taken aback by what was passing for critical reasonableness among so many of these bright and clever pioneering students of English literature. The book *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement* (1929) in which his findings are analysed keeps pointing out how simply bad his readers’ responses were (‘bad reading … reading that prevents the reader himself from entering into the poem’). The repeated allegations of simplicity

and sentimentality were thoughtless and unhistorical. But for all that he doesn’t do much actually to defend Christina Rossetti from her detractors; and adding to one’s gloom over these modern poetry readers’ difficulty in taking Victorian poetry seriously is a sense that Richards himself feels the really good stuff is being produced by others than Christina Rossetti.

What emerged from Richards’s work was the canonization of Shakespeare, the Metaphysicals and Milton as the very best English poets because verbally the most complex, especially in and through the great foundational practical-critical work of Richards’s best pupil William Empson, first manifest in his Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930), and in the polemics of another of the outstanding members of Richards’s Cambridge audience FR Leavis, who became the grand critical guru of Downing College, Cambridge, and, in turn, of Leavis’s disciples spreading the critical word especially in British schools. Leavis’s extremely influential New Bearings in English Poetry (1932) was dutifully IA Ricardian in its rock-jawed dismissals of the big Victorians. Tennyson, Arnold, Morris are all poets of withdrawal from modern life. Meredith’s Modern Love ‘seems to me the flashy product of unusual but vulgar cleverness working upon cheap emotion: it could serve later poets, if at all, only as a warning.’ Browning is ‘concerned merely with simple emotions and sentiments’; his ‘sensibility’ is superficial; it’s ‘possible to consider him as a philosophical or psychological poet only by confusing intelligence with delight in the exercise of certain grosser cerebral muscles’. So inferior a mind and spirit as Browning’s ‘could not provide the impulse needed to bring back into poetry the adult intelligence’. Victorian poetry was ‘anaemic’. English poetry had to wait for its twin saviours in the persons of American TS Eliot and Ezra Pound. There was one great Victorian poet, namely Gerard Manley Hopkins – ‘one of the most remarkable technical inventors who ever wrote … a major poet’ – but, alas, unknown to his poetic contemporaries except for his friends Robert Bridges, Coventry Patmore, and RW Dixon; a poetic king locked away in Jesuit exile; only let out in 1918; ‘likely to prove, for our time and the future, the only influential poet of the Victorian age’. Leavis was pleased, and rightly, at the pioneering of his chapter on Hopkins – major critical first-fruits of the Hopkins approval coming out of the Richards world, and possibly the best critical discussion ever of Hopkins’s techniques. But still this clear-eyed espousal of Hopkins’s greatness is founded in a critically distorted faith in Hopkins’s

40 Leavis (1932), 47, 49–50.
41 Leavis (1932), 159, 193.
absolute qualitative difference from the surrounding waste and trash. A polemical faith pushed hard in the 1934 Chatto practical-critical textbook for schools and school-teachers, *Reading and Discrimination* by Leavis’s close aide and English school-teacher of English, Denys Thompson.42

Here was a set of narrow critical-historical assumptions being set in stone for student readers, at school and university.43 An ossification affirmed in the massively influential (and utterly Richards- and Empson-influenced) New Critical movement in the United States. The slighting of Victorian poets at the expense of Donne and Marvell and Co. was certainly vivid from the start in that student guide-book *Understanding Poetry* by New Critical gurus Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (1938) – and maintained in the revisions that have kept this great piece of practical-critical First Aid for the American student going steady ever since. ‘Where it [alliteration] occurs frequently as in the work of Swinburne, it often impresses the reader as a mechanical and monotonous mannerism or a too gaudy decoration.’

42 Modelled on Richards’s Cambridge experiments, *Reading and Discrimination* provided unassigned passages of writing for school-kid analysis and comparison. The passages are identified for the benefit of teachers, who are busily advised what they (and so their pupils) should think. The book’s historical and critical ‘Commentary’ is steered by repeated references to Richards, and Leavis, and Eliot. What’s on offer is the whole Cambridge package. Shakespeare, the Metaphysicals, Blake are supreme (Milton’s a bit dodgy). The Victorian texts on offer are embarrassing (Henry Newbolt), emotionally narrow (Housman, Tennyson), trite and shallow (Adelaide Anne Procter), unctuous (Robert Browning), imprecise in the use of assonance and alliteration (Swinburne – whose ‘flow of words and haze of emotion’ are excused only because he mocks his own verbally slack mode in his *Heptalogia*). Pater’s famous discussion of Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* is affected, ‘pretentious “fine writing”,’ hypnotic merely, a lot like the criticism of Ruskin and Wilde (contrast, Thompson suggests, the extract from TS Eliot on Blake for ‘an exemplary piece of explication, precise and consecutive’). ‘Which is the more interesting of the two?’, the student is asked: Shakespeare’s ‘Noe longer mourn for me when I am dead’, or Christina G Rossetti’s ‘Remember me when I am gone away’? The implied answer is clear. Of the Victorians, only Hopkins is any good. Thompson is speaking loud in His Master’s Voice. In the sonnet ‘No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief’, Hopkins ‘knows what he is doing, and uses language precisely, to invite a particular response from the reader’ – unlike Swinburne. Hopkins is Shakespearian in his ‘“imagery, and his way of using the body and movement of the language”’ – ‘As Mr Leavis observes in his *New Bearings*’.43

*Reading and Discrimination* was last reprinted in 1959, and only rewritten and stripped of its anti-Victorian hostilities in 1973, after heavy revision by Thompson in collaboration with another long-time schoolteacher of English, and prominent national leader in English studies for schools, Stephen Tunnicliffe, reflecting the impossibility of carrying on the old prejudices in the light of the recent canonizing of Victorian poetry, the great 1960s revolution in the reception of Victorian writing. The 1973 *Reading and Discrimination* has no slanted literary history or jeering at Victorian inadequacies. Hopkins’s ‘Binsey Poplars’ remains more or less prominent. The implied discrediting of Christina G at the expense of Shakespeare has gone (this volume’s pairings are ‘not done in order to praise one at the expense of the other’). But still it is noticeable that the Victorian poetic presence is much depleted. Only five Victorian poets survived – with one poem each by Hopkins, Tennyson, Arnold, Emily Brontë and Christina G. Something of the old prejudice remained, it would seem, in this criticism done by sending-to-Coventry.
Tennyson’s ‘Tears, Idle Tears’ ‘at first reading may appear to have little in common with the vigorous thinking through images that we associate with poets like Marvell and Donne. We find here no witty turns or plays on the meaning of certain words, and certainly no bold leaping from image to image or involved elaborations of some central analogy. ... There are no sharply disparate materials, no images that clash violently in their association.’ Tennyson’s patent weakness is that he’s not a verbally potent Metaphysical. The reader is invited to ‘look deeper’ into the poem. Which is good. But what this deeper inspection might unearth is only a half-hearted allowance. ‘At any rate, the reader must not conclude in advance that the strategy of poets so different as Tennyson and Marvell are in complete opposition. They need not be. Tennyson’s attempt to define what overcame him as a fit of unmotivated melancholy may in fact exhibit a real thinking through images.’

It may; but it need not. The second-rate nature of Victorian poetry had got itself embedded as a key bit of English Studies’ founding doctrine. Samuel Beckett’s cheerful mockery of the Victorian poetic heritage in his traducing of Tennyson’s ‘A Dream of Fair Women’ as *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (eventually published in 1992) sums up a common feeling: Victorian poetry was at best middling.

**More Form Than Content?**

Justification and rationalizations for this critical downgrading of Victorian poetry were of course to be found – like that allegation by TS Eliot of an ongoing mid-seventeenth-century failure of English *mentalité* and aesthetic. It was fashionable in twentieth-century criticism to believe that the real creative energy of the Victorians had moved into the Novel. If their poems were any good (Browning’s say), it was because they were managing to be like short stories, were really novellas or novels *manqués*. Henry James’s reading in his ‘Novel in the Ring and Book’ lecture of Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* as a modernist novel along Jamesian lines is a superior example of this.

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line of thought. (See its role in ‘Victorian Modernismus’, Chapter 10, below.)
WH Auden had an even more interesting (and more soundly based) theory
about the second-rate nature of Victorian poetry, working from the nature
of nineteenth-century middle-class education and the idea of poetry and the
poetic it put across to its young male partakers. Classical literature, Latin
and Greek, was the basis of the Public School curriculum (vernacular litera-
ture was peripheral to the syllabus), and boys spent a lot of their time, every
school-day, translating Greek and Latin poetry into English. But translation
is always inexact, always approximate, so that these little translators grew
up, Auden alleged, with the feeling that verbal exactitude in a poem did not,
after all, matter greatly: poems meant, but elastically. Form, though, the
large poetic shape, was not something translation affected; form was some-
thing as it were inviolate; so the idea that form was more important than
verbal meaning set in. Hence, Auden suggests in the Introduction to his
anthology *Nineteenth-Century Minor Poets* (1967), the way that Victorian
poets are particularly good at form, but are less strong on, are not specially
interested in, verbal precision.

Now the Victorians are undoubtedly attracted to form as such, and to
formal variety; they like showing off formally, showing that they know their
way around hexameters, hendecasyllabics, epilions, double sonnets, ana-
creontics, alcaics, odes, epodes. They like demonstrating that they can do
the metres of Virgil and Homer, and Catullus and Horace, can play with all
the old varieties of rhyme and meter. They’re dab hands with the available
array of different metrical feet and different kinds of line-length and line
arrangement; nobody has to remind them where the break, the caesura,
should come; and so on and so forth. These are the mere custom and prac-
tice of the well-brought-up gentleman with a classical education. And so it is
that Hopkins, say, can translate Shakespeare into Latin, into Catullan hen-
decasyllabics in fact, as it were on demand.\(^{45}\) For his part, Tennyson, accord-
ing to his son Hallam, ‘confessed that he believed he knew the quantity of
every word in the English language except “scissors”’ (an arresting as well
as amusing exception: does *scissors* consist of two heavy beats, or two light
ones, or a heavy one and a light one, or a light one and a heavy one? It can
be all of these). Upon which boasting the Tennyson family (and Browning)
demanded ‘a Sapphic stanza in quantity, with the Greek cadence’, and
Tennyson produced one at the drop of a hat.\(^{46}\) It was the easiest game for the
classically brought-up poet to play.

Swinburne wonderfully proves this part of Auden’s point. Kenneth Haynes,
Swinburne’s Penguin editor, thinks Auden’s ‘generalisation applies with par-

\(^{45}\) For this see Norman Vance, *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1997),
125. Vance’s story of Victorian Latinism is superbly detailed.

\(^{46}\) *Memoir*, II, 231.
ticular force to Swinburne’, and he’s right. Swinburne is the Victorian master of form, the Victorian expert in varieties of poetic shape, because he’s a product of the Eton system. Brought up on daily translation from Latin and Greek, on regular imitation of the ancient masters, he sports a metrical expertise that was beaten into him daily, bloodily, on the Eton flogging-horse. (Yoppie Prins rightly ascribes his ‘metrical virtuosity’ to the ‘horror of strange metres’ beaten into him at school – though she rather confuses the impetus got from all that school-time ‘swishing’ by putting his – undoubtedly influential – submission, his bondage, to Sappho’s verbally dominatrix role too much into this pedagogic picture.) No wonder he’s so good at poetic beat, at poetic din: the regular din of verse was so regularly dinned in.

I’ll give you more to cry for, you young dog, you!
I’ll flog you – flog you – flog, flog, flog, flog you.

That’s the Master in ‘Reginald’s Flogging’, by ‘Etonensis’, aka Swinburne, in his The Whippingham Papers, published anonymously in a very limited edition in about 1888. Swinburne knows all about how to do beat, or rhythm – knowledges so painfully acquired. Hexameters for instance – like the flogging ones just quoted. This was the rhythm the Victorians were most anxious to try their hand at – because, it’s been suggested, the poets were conscious of how tired-out the English staple of iambic pentameters had got through overuse in the tradition. Matthew Arnold famously had a go at hexameters in Englishing four passages of the Iliad in his Oxford lectures ‘On Translating Homer’ (1861). He made the mistake of repudiating Tennyson’s blank verse on that occasion (it was no good for translating Homer, Arnold said), a repudiation expanded in his 1862 lecture ‘On Translating Homer: Last Words.’ Incensed, Tennyson responded with a ‘Specimen of a Translation of the Iliad in Blank Verse’ in the Cornhill Magazine (Dec 1863), doing a version of Iliad VII, 524–561, a passage Arnold had himself attempted, and adding a few feisty lines dismissing English providers of ‘lame’ and ‘barbarous’ hexameters (‘On Translations of

48 Especially insightful is the ‘Suffering Metre’ section of Prins’s Victorian Sappho (Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1999), 140ff.
50 Elisabeth W Schneider’s wonderfully informative article on Victorian form, especially Hopkins’s, ‘Sprung Rhythm: A Chapter in the Evolution of Nineteenth-Century Verse’, describes ‘something like a stampede of anapaestic verse after about 1850’: PMLA, 80, no. 3 (1965), 238.
Homer. Hexameters and Pentameters’). Arnold rightly guessed that he was the target.51 Swinburne also thought Arnold’s hexameters were terrible, and guessed why. The Rugbeian Arnold (and Clough) could have done with more of the Eton educational treatment.

They look like nothing on earth, and sound like anapaests broken up and driven wrong; neither by ear nor by finger can I bring them to any reckoning. … And at best what ugly bastards of verse are these self-styled hexameters! … burlesque improvisation. … Once only, as far as I know, in Dr Hawtrey’s delicate and fluent verse, has the riddle been resolved; the verses are faultless, are English; are hexametric; but this is simply a graceful interlude of pastime, a well-played stroke in a game of skill played with language. Such as pass elsewhere for English hexameters I do hope and suppose impossible at Eton. Mr Clough’s I will not presume to be serious attempts or studies in any manner of metre; they are admirable studies in graduated prose….52

Impossible at Eton. Especially under the strong tutelary hand of the Reverend Doctor Edward Craven Hawtrey, bit-part translator of Homer, successively Headmaster and Provost of Eton College in Swinburne’s time there. About hexameters they were never wrong the Old Etonians. In fact, Old Etonian Swinburne can do anything at all in the formal line, and he shows off this formal versatility all the time. He has a formal flamboyance and perfectionism that the classicizing poetic establishment naturally applauded. The great Latinist professor and poet AE Housman of course greatly admired Swinburne’s formal powers. Of the characteristically elaborate stanzaic patterning used in ‘Dolores’ Housman said that Swinburne had ‘dignified and strengthened’ it ‘till it yielded a combination of speed and magnificence which nothing in English had possessed before’.53 (‘The metre combines iambics and anapaests in seven trimeter lines concluded by the dimeter eighth line, which always consists of an iamb followed by an anapaest; in every other stanza, the refrain is “Our Lady of Pain”. The rhyme scheme is

51 Arnold’s translations, including Iliad VII, 560–565, are in the standard edition of his Poems, ed Kenneth Allott (Longmans, 1965), 467–468. The Arnold-Tennyson encounter is dwelt on in more detail in the discussion of Tennyson’s classicizing in ‘Modernizing the Subject’, Ch 9, below.
53 1910 lecture, quoted Poems and Ballads..., Penguin edn cit, 352. Haynes suggests, loc cit, correctly, that the metre and stanza of ‘Dolores’ are very close to what the poet Winthrop Mackworth Praed, another Etonian and a protégé of Hawtrey, favoured. Haynes’s sharp point about the location of ‘Dolores’ in the feminine rhymes is a good case of the ‘rhyming with reason’ I discuss in Ch 4, ‘These Rhyming/Repeating Games are Serious’, below.
ababcdcd; where \( a \) and \( c \) are regularly feminine; “Dolores” appears nine times in this position: thus the metrically enthusiastic Kenneth Haynes.\(^{54}\)

Perfection of form indeed. But does it follow that training in and expertise at and ingrained fascination for form necessarily entail what Auden suggests as radical lack of interest in verbal precision? Auden’s educational suggestion certainly holds a bit of water. Being brought up on poetry in foreign tongues whose verbal meanings and verbal play you will never get absolutely close to, and can never hope to reproduce exactly, such being the nature of poetic words and of the translating act, might well give you a funny idea about the way words work in poetry. (Every examiner of school and university translation-papers is regularly filled with wonder at what candidates seem to believe a poet is saying: can this student really think this poem might really be saying that, believe that poetry is really that daft?) And Swinburne, the perfect form-maker, is indeed commonly accused of a too unheeding rush and gush, of producing endlessly flowing streams of verse, lines foaming along liquidly in poems not accidentally obsessed with the foaming waves of the sea: a hypnotically accumulating throb and pulse that do get to seem rather like verbal masturbation – so that all that foam and foaming, the spume of the sea, are easily suspectable of being code for ejaculate. (And it’s perhaps not too fanciful hereabouts to think of the poetico-paedagogical syndrome Auden is arrested by as it impinges on the arguments and case of the Reverend John Conington and his circle, he the Corpus Christi College, Oxford, Professor of Latin who strongly defended the Public School and University practice of classical verse composition as being precisely a most helpful initiation into poeticity – in his essay on ‘A Liberal Education’, published in his Miscellaneous Writings, edited (of course) by his lifelong chum John Addington Symonds, the Balliol classicist and poet, and fellow ‘Arcadian’, that is ‘paiderast’, or classically-inspired boy-lover, as Symonds has it; he Symonds for whom the poetic is indeed what got dinned in at Public Schools and was practised in dormitory masturbation groups, as well as, in Symonds’s case, in the arms of handsome young Viennese gondoliers and other ‘strong young men of the lower-classes’, as EM Forster would later put it.\(^{55}\) But still

\(^{54}\) Haynes, edn cit, 354.

\(^{55}\) ‘We take Latin and Greek ... as typical languages, and apply to them a minuteness of study which we cannot afford to apply to others; and part of this minute study is the practice of verse-composition. And we choose verse-composition in particular, because as a matter of fact we find that verse-composition is suited to the capacities of young boys. ... but further, I believe that a man ... will appreciate the artistic part of poetry better if he tries to write verses himself.’ John Conington, ‘A Liberal Education’, Contemporary Review (January 1868); in Miscellaneous Writings, ed John Addington Symonds (2 vols, Longmans, Green, London, 1872), I. 449–478. For Symonds, see The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds, ed and intro Phyllis Grosskurth (Hutchinson, London, 1984), and the discussion in ‘Selving’, Ch 6, below.
what Auden thinks follows from all that boyish classicizing clearly does not. Not even in the case of Swinburne. His wonderful fluency is purchased, as the manuscripts prove, by extremely hard work in mounting those fluencies.

Swinburne’s starring role in Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) is telling – and not just because it is clearly part of Empson’s polemical mission to counter the casual assumptions about Victorian verbal slackness knocking about noisily in the Cambridge of his day, assumptions riding on the back of what Empson later described as ‘the newly discovered merits of Donne, Marvell, and Dryden’, the new critical Zeitgeist driven in particular by TS Eliot’s criticism. Empson had loved Swinburne’s poems as a boy at Winchester – ‘intoxicated’ by the ‘drug’ of Swinburne’s verse, ‘a slave’ to that orgasmic fluidity, the poeticity of pain and painfully acquired adeptness. Swinburne’s ‘paean of perversity answered to his own distress’, thinks his biographer John Haffenden, providing ‘a song for his pains’, when, as Empson put it, he was (like Swinburne himself) ‘being beaten rather too often’. But in the *Seven Types* it’s Swinburne the cannily adept word-chooser and arranger who’s celebrated for working through his usual and persistent throb and swoon and foam to an engaged and engaging puzzlement of the reader’s imagination in an intellectually sharp eliding run of metaphors.

Night falls like fire; the heavy lights run low,
And as they drop, my blood and body so
Shake as the flame shakes, full of days and hours
That sleep not neither weep they as they go.

Ah yet would God this flesh of mine might be
Where air might wash and long leaves cover me,
Where tides of grass break into foam of flowers,
Or where the wind’s feet shine along the sea.

These two stanzas from Swinburne’s ‘Laus Veneris’ (49–56) are offered by Empson as examples of his fifth type of ambiguity, the one occurring ‘when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing, or not holding it all in his mind at once, so that, for instance, there is a simile which applies to nothing exactly, but lies half-way between two things when the author is moving from one to the other’. (‘Shakespeare continually does it’.)

When Swinburne comes off he is a very full and direct writer; it is no use saying these verses show interest in mere sound, or pattern of verbal cadence. It would be true, perhaps, to say that he feels it more important to keep up his effect of texture than that, in any particular case, the meanings, the chord of associations, should come through. But in a literary, not perhaps in a stage, sense, this hypnotised detachment is a powerful dramatic weapon.58

And Empson goes on to praise passages of like rich mixing in *Atalanta in Calydon* and ‘Dolores’ as well as ‘Laus Veneris’. ‘[T]he famous chorus of *Atalanta in Calydon*’ – ‘Time, with a gift of tears; / Grief, with a glass that ran’ – ‘pretends to be two elements of a list with their attributes muddled, but is in fact a mutual comparison between the water-clock and the tearbot-tle’. ‘People’, Empson says, ‘are oddly determined to regard Swinburne as an exponent of Pure Sound with no intellectual content. As a matter of tech-nique, his work is full of such dissolved and contrasted reminiscences as need to be understood; as a matter of content, his sensibility was of the intel-lectual sort which proceeds from a process of analysis’. Swinburne is capa-ble repeatedly of ‘a perfectly solid metaphysical conceit’, and so is later nineteenth-century poetry, even if its plentiful ‘conceits and ambiguities’ are so subdued as to be thought ‘sleeping’ and thus truly described as ‘decadent’,

58 “The coming of night is like the falling of fire”; the sun becomes a red, glowing, exhausted ball on the horizon, day is going out, the fire, as it burns down, glows hotter, and all the heat natural to the firmament is being brought down (as if the ceiling was weighing on me) and crushed into my temples. But when the *flame* shakes our attention is transferred to a lamp; it is lighting-up time; the indoor Victorian-furnished Venusberg becomes hotter, sunnier and more enclosed, more irritating to sick head-ache and nervous exhaustion, and the gas-jet will have to be popping from now on. Or the *flame* may be a symbolic candle; it gutters in its socket which, low in its last struggles, it scorches, and rises and falls in popping and jerking disorder, like the throbbing and swooning of headache, and casts leaping and threatening shadows on the walls. *Full*, because it has ended the time it is capable of, and because in its shaking it seems to be measuring seconds, magnified by a sickbed fixity of attention into hours; *not sleeping or weeping*, because of the poet’s insomnia and emotional exhaustion, because of its contrast with, and indifference to, his *weeping* and the approaching *sleep* of his death, and because, in the story, this mood is fixed into an eternity outside the human order, in which tears are point-less, and the peace even of death unattainable.

‘In the next verse, *air might wash*, like water, and *leaves might cover*, like the sea or the grave; then by direct implication *grass and flowers* are compared to waves; then the *wind’s feet shining along the sea*, whitening the tops of the waves, is compared, the other way round, to *grass and flowers*, and, as a fainter implication, to grassy mounds with white tombstones on them. The sea, in Swinburne, shares with earth the position of great sweet mother, is cleaner, fresher, and more definitely dead. Nor must one forget the feet, so beautiful upon the moun-tains, of him that brings good tidings of the Lord.’

or even (marvellous phrase) as ‘in part the metaphysical tradition dug up when rotten’.  

Empson’s defence of the Victorian poet’s verbal adroitness and astuteness was going on even as his tutor’s audience were denying it. It was a defence continued and affirmed when Hopkins’s ‘The Windhover, to Christ our Lord’ was called in evidence alongside George Herbert’s already canonical Metaphysical poem ‘The Sacrifice’ to illustrate the Seventh Type of Ambiguity, ‘the most ambiguous that can be conceived’, occurring ‘when the two meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings of the word defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer’s mind’. Admittedly, granting Hopkins this elevated, if highly fraught, place of verbal work was easier than polemicizing for complexities in Swinburne, because Hopkins was already emerging as an accepted exception to the conventional low estimate of the Victorians’ work (even in Cambridge, as the Practical Criticism audience showed; and Empson pays tribute to Richards for putting him on to this case of Hopkins and writing ‘excellently’ about it, presumably in his 1926 Dial article). Still, you can hear Empson rather gritting his teeth and forcing his admiration for this Jesuit priest’s Christian poem about a Christ-like Falcon whose subject prompts this militant atheist’s dislike from the start – the poem is ‘strong’ and ‘beautiful’ but its triumphant ambiguity is ‘precarious’ and even on occasion ludicrous. The poem’s now notorious exhortation ‘Buckle!’ is rich in meaning, Empson can tell, but for him rather disagreeably so. It ‘admits of two tenses and two meanings: “they [‘Brute beauty and valour and … pride’ and so forth] do buckle here”, or “come, and buckle yourself here”; buckle like a military belt, for the discipline of heroic action, and buckle like a bicycle wheel, “made useless, distorted, and incapable of its natural motion.” Here may mean “in the case of the bird”, or “in the case of the Jesuit”; and so “when you have become like the bird”, or “when you have become like the Jesuit”.’ Empson admits in a footnote that ‘the test’ for his reading is buckle. ‘What would Hopkins have said if he could have been shown this analysis? It is, perhaps, the only really disagreeable case in the book. If I am right, I am afraid he would have denied with anger that he had meant “like a bicycle wheel”, and then after much conscientious self-torture would have suppressed the whole poem’. Notably, what’s actually disagreeable in Empson’s statement remains highly ambiguous: is it the poem as a whole, the alleged dividedness of Hopkins as a Christian and Jesuit and poet, the analysis as a whole, the local ambiguity of buckle, or even Empson’s way with this particular poem? It’s by no means clear. And the fuzz adds to the sense that Empson is less happy about proposing Hopkins’s verbal forces than about advertising Swinburne’s; his

59 William Empson, ibid.
praise for Hopkins’s verbal achievements evidently comes more grudgingly. But the fact is that, grudging or not, Empson is offering it. And Hopkins is taking his rightful place alongside Metaphysical Herbert. (Empson admitted in the Preface to the Second Edition of *Seven Types* that along with TS Eliot’s propagandizing for Donne and Co. he’d been influenced by Freud. He had, it seems, in particular, been inspired by reading Freud’s review of a pamphlet by the German philologist Karl Abel on the contrary meanings of early words, namely Freud’s article ‘The Antithetical Structure of Primal Words’, which celebrates the way certain ancient Egyptian words could simultaneously carry precisely opposite meanings, and how that was rather like the way ‘slips of the tongue’ happened and like the multivalent and over-determined way Freud found dream images working. This was a philological inspiration that, clearly, carries over into Empson’s bravura follow-up to *Seven Types*, his *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), in which, once again, Swinburne stars, this time in the matter of the rich oppositional complexities of the word *delicate* and what it contradictorily conveys about human work, aesthetics, behaviour and selfhood (now fine, refined, sensitive, pleasing and delightful in the best senses, now sickly, inclined to debilitation, pleasurable and delightful in bad ways, perverse even) in ‘Hymn to Proserpine’, ‘The Leper’ and ‘Dolores’.60

And of course Hopkins’s earliest poetic education was, like Swinburne’s, all in the classics. Auden’s suggestion just won’t hold, not even in the notorious case of foaming Swinburne. Historically, it’s a washout. Auden might have paused over the fact that the authors of the most verbally tight poetry in English, the poets whose verbal strengths nobody has ever disputed, Shakespeare and The Metaphysicals and so on, the great poetic subjects who fall off the tree straight into Empson’s analytic hand in the *Seven Types*, were all brought up translating the classics, and that their education didn’t have the alleged verbal impoverishing effect on them. What is more, many of the Victorians Auden’s poetic net is presumably gathering in as alleged verbal slackers were not educated in the classics nor brought up on translation from ancient poets. The education he is interested in was limited to men of a certain class, the clientele of Public Schools and Oxford and Cambridge; it excluded the poor, who if they went to school at all went to elementary and practical schools which didn’t have Latin and Greek as main staples, and bourgeois women

(who were educated at small girls’ schools, or at home with private tutors, and were excluded from Oxford and Cambridge), and religious Dissenters (like Robert Browning) whose Dissenting Academies were less classics-obsessed and who were also debarred from Oxford and Cambridge. So the verbal ways – whatever they are – of the hordes of Victorian working-class and female and Dissenting poets must be ascribed to other causes than Auden’s.

And, on the face of it, it would be a distinct historical oddity, would it not, if suddenly writing were to collapse, fall away, go to the dogs, turn into pish-posh at the beginning of Victoria’s reign and then suddenly recover again sixty or so years later. As if a nicely running engine were to suddenly stutter and die and then just as suddenly rev up again after sixty years lying in the garage. As if the poets were doing rather well, paying close attention to words and their ways, thinking hard about their language, wrestling with it, striving like Jonathan Swift for ‘proper words in proper places’ or, like Coleridge, for ‘the best words in the best order’, and then suddenly there’s an end of the old poetic order (Coleridge happening to die 25 July 1834), followed by nothing much, a period of riding along on buckled bicycle wheels, until, just as abruptly, there arrive on the scene Joyce and Pound and Eliot and the rest, poetic bicycle wheels miraculously unbuckled, all verbally attentive and strong again and (remarkably) speaking, and acting on, the old language of care and attention once more (‘What I am seeking is the perfect order of words in the sentence’: that’s James Joyce to his friend Frank Budgen about the poeticizing word-manoeuvres of Ulysses).

The Mythic Victorian Gap

And of course this notion of the Victorian gap, a dire parenthesis for real poetry, is a complete myth. Victorian poetry can be weak and strong just as the poetry of other ages is both bad and good; it can be extraordinarily strong, both verbally and formally, whether the poet spent his youth translating from the Classics (as Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold, and Clough, and Housman did), or did not (like Browning, and Christina G. Rossetti, and Emily Brontë, and Hardy). The good Victorian poets are highly alert to their verbal doings, as all good poets have been. Wilde, the author of that double sneer at Meredith and Browning, was, of course, himself a Victorian. For their part, many Modernists, Eliot and Pound especially, greatly respect and are inspired by certain Victorian poets (it’s one of the themes of my final chapter, ‘Victorian Modernismus’). After Robert Bridges published his friend Gerard Hopkins’s poetry posthumously in 1918, Hopkins was quickly embraced as a missing father in the modern poetic faith. Cecil Day Lewis’s A Hope for Poetry (1934) acknowledges three inspirations, a trinity of powerful parents for the new Auden generation: TS Eliot, Wilfred Owen, and Hopkins.
The phenomenon of Hopkins should be taken as symptomatic of the intense self-consciousness of Victorian poets about their art (and, not incidentally, it was self-consciousness fuelled and fired in Hopkins’s case by immersion in, and evident admiration for, the formal power, the swaggering formal mastery of Swinburne’s *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Poems and Ballads*). Self-consciousness: that high Wildean criterion of poetic and critical merit. Hopkins is only the most spectacular example of the way Victorian poets are completely preoccupied with verbal quality, verbal truth, verbal experiment – their own, and other people’s. His diaries and letters in which he hammers out a poetic, theorizing form and poetic language and the responsibilities of the poet, are only special in intensity, not in kind. Hopkins’s discussion with himself and his friends RW Dixon, Coventry Patmore, and Robert Bridges is just one small segment of the large, loud, and continuous Victorian critical conversation and argument going on in private and in public. This unstoppage discussion is what generates the heat, the emotionality, hostility and scepticism of the reviews; and the great squabble over the rival merits of Tennyson and Browning; and the even bloodier bloody poetic wars, like the one over Browningesque Realism, or the Spasmodics, or the School of Fleshliness; and that extraordinary level of discussion about writing going on within poems, the frequent metatextuality of verse (what Schlegel labelled the ‘Poesie der Poesie’), which includes the great mass of pastiche, parody, mockery, the jeering undoing of others (and, as in the case of Swinburne’s ‘Heptalogia’, the undoing of oneself).

**Family Critical Business Inc.**

It was in a great measure all in the family, family business, family networking, family squabbling, a huge family conversation and argument. For in large part Victorian poets comprise a huge intellectually incestuous cousinhood, a tribe, or at least a closely interrelated and overlapping set of tribes. (Incest didn’t worry them: ‘if Byron fucked his sister he fucked her and there an end,’ as Dante Gabriel Rossetti put it dismissingly to his brother William Michael.) There are three poetic Rossetti siblings, Dante Gabriel, William Michael, and young Christina Georgina (one reason, I think, why Christina wanted to be known as Christina G was so she would patently rival big brother Dante G – he who changed his name from Gabriel Dante to Dante Gabriel: CGR wasn’t going to be outshone by DGR).

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61 As Elizabeth W Schneider nicely shows in her ‘Sprung Rhythm’ article, *PMLA*, 80, iii (1965), 237–253.

Father Gabriele was a poet and Dante-translator. There are three poetic Tennyson brothers, Frederick, Alfred, and young Charles Tennyson Turner. And four poetic Brontë siblings, Charlotte, Branwell, Emily and Anne. Rugbeian Matthew Arnold has Rugbeian Arthur Hugh Clough forced on him as a kind of adopted brother – his headmaster-father Dr Thomas Arnold’s more favoured son. Elizabeth Barrett Barrett marries Robert Browning, after a long fan-mail correspondence – the published poet EBB, Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, eliding easily into the published poet EBB, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. It was a partnership of poets in which he played George Henry Lewes to her George Eliot, as his wife’s agent and promoter – her ‘church-organ-bellows blower’, as he put it. The poet ‘Michael Field’ was a pair of lesbian lovers, Katherine Harris Bradley and her sixteen years younger niece Edith Emma Cooper. The male poets ganged up – at school and university. So many of them were at Balliol College, Oxford – Swinburne and Hopkins, and Clough and Arnold and JA Symonds (and FT Palgrave, promoter of the Pre-Raphaelites, friend of Tennyson, and the age’s greatest poetry publicist through his 1861 *Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language*) – or at Magdalen College, Oxford (Symonds and Wilde), or Trinity College, Cambridge (Bulwer Lytton, the Tennysons, Edward FitzGerald). Ted Jones (Edward Burne-Jones to be) meets William Morris at Exeter College, Oxford.

Bedding, or at least would-be bedding, was by no means confined to the heterosexuals. Hopkins adores Digby Mackworth Dolben (Eton-Balliol) who adores John Henry Newman. The Old Etonians and the Balliol and Magdalen men all fancy each other – smiled on by Jowett the Greek-translating Master of Balliol (Hopkins’s tutor as well as Swinburne’s and Symonds’s), and by the aesthetic high-priest of Brasenose College, Walter Pater, and John Conington the Latin Professor of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, that hot-bed of paiderastic longings (Robert Bridges was at Corpus, which is where Hopkins met him). Buggery and Balliol went, proverbially, together. Aesthetic life was for brothers, and brotherhoods. The career of the ritualist poet RW Dixon is quite symptomatic. A friend of Ted Jones at King Edward’s School Birmingham, he joins the Birmingham Group of Oxford aesthetes when he arrives at Pembroke College, Oxford, and through Ted Jones gets into the PreRaphaelite Brotherhood, which stars the Exeter Boys, Ted Jones and William Morris. Ordained into the Church of England ministry, he officiates at the marriage in Oxford of Morris and Janey, the daughter of a livery-stable owner a stone’s throw from Exeter College. Poor, as well as poor in spirit, he teaches at Highgate School, where one of his pupils is Gerard Hopkins. In June 1878 Hopkins, now a Roman Catholic

63 Letter to his and her publisher Edward Chapman, 2 Dec 1856: quoted in Margaret Reynolds’s Norton edn of *Aurora Leigh* (1996), 337.
priest, sends his old schoolmaster a fan-letter praising his 1861 volume *Christ’s Company*; Dixon replies, flattered, moved, and his career as Hopkins’s close poetic consultant and confidant (alongside Hopkins’s old Oxford friend Bridges and his co-religionist Coventry Patmore) takes off.64

Group consulting and advising like that is more the norm than not. Rich Ruskin (Christ Church, Oxford) takes Dante Gabriel Rossetti under his wing, is a great friend of Browning, keeps dispensing critical advice along with his financial largesse. Rossetti is intimate with Swinburne, who not only advises him about his poems, but also how to dig up his notebook from Lizzie Siddal’s grave. When Tennyson needs someone to try and find the lost manuscript book of *In Memoriam* verses he sends Coventry Patmore round to his old Mornington Street lodgings – and the book is discovered in the food cupboard. The Irish poet William Allingham fixes a relocation of his job as a customs officer from Ballyshannon to England so he can be near Tennyson on an almost daily basis. And an awful lot of reading to fellow poets went on. Tennyson read his poems to everybody who would listen (including the Queen). On one characteristic occasion he reads ‘Maud’ to Browning, while Rossetti sketches him, before Browning reads ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’ in return. Clough weeps ‘like a child’ whilst reading ‘Mari Magno’ to Tennyson in 1861. (George Eliot wept as Tennyson read ‘Guenevere’ from *Idylls of the King* – at the request of George Henry Lewes.) And mutual eating and drinking were as common as mutual reading. The widowed Browning dined out with everybody. Meanwhile, the London Celts and ‘decadent’ Francophiles – Yeats, Lionel Johnson, Victor Plarr, AE Dowson, Richard LeGallienne, John Davidson, Arthur Symons – clubbed together in the Rhymers’ Club. And the women had their groups too, like the allied Portfolio Society and Langham Place Group (Barbara Leigh Smith, Bessie Rayner Parkes, Jean Ingelow, Isa Knox, Adelaide Anne Procter). This group set up the Victoria Press to make women’s poetry more available.

And so it went. Victorian poets comprised a field of insiders, a set of mutually profitable societies. Being on the outside, continuing as an outsider, being a real loner, working mainly on your own, not being part of some critical support group, was, evidently, the exception. It was, naturally enough, the melancholy plight of just a few working-class poets, self-taught people, cobbling together an idea of how verses might go from bits of private and random reading. Like John Clare, the Northamptonshire plough-boy who was indeed taken up by literary London but remained more or less

entirely shut away inside his own richly fantasizing head and in his various lunatic asylums (he probably never exchanged a single poetic word with Alfred Tennyson when they were both ensconced in Dr Matthew Allen’s asylum at High Beech in Epping Forest). Or Janet Hamilton, the blind Scottish Calvinist poet, perhaps Victorian Britain’s most famous working-class author, much visited by celebs, who came, though, rather to stare at a writing phenomenon than to consult in any way. Or Ebenezer Elliott, the famous ‘Corn-law Rhymer’, a Sheffield iron-master, entirely self-schooled on the poems of Crabbe and Mrs Hemans. Or Thomas Cooper, Leicester cobbler and famous rhymester in the Chartist cause (he wrote his *The Purgatory of Suicides* in Stafford Gaol), who came to literature in the way of so many provincial working-class children by reading Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, taught himself Latin and Greek and Hebrew and memorized all of *Hamlet*, but never mixed in any of the contemporary literary circles (Carlyle gave him the brush-off when he was sent *The Purgatory*: ‘I always grudge to see any portion of a man’s musical talent … expended on making words rhyme’.) But these isolates (part of the crowd of provincial, working-class poets featured in ‘Modernizing the Subject’, Chapter 9, below) are rare. Strikingly, the culture was rather eager to take in and help along the promising working-class poet. Like Gerald Massey, son of illiterate bargee parents who went to work at the age of eight, but was given literary shelter under several literary wings – Sidney Dobell’s, Charles Dickens’s, John Chapman’s (Chapman edited the *Westminster Review*: many people thought Massey the original of the working-class intellectual Felix Holt in the novel of that name by Chapman’s assistant editor George Eliot). Or Ellen Johnston, the Scottish mill-worker, known as ‘The Factory-Girl’ poet, who was picked out by Glasgow newspaper editor Alex Campbell and given her own regular column for her poems and rhymed discussions with fellow contributors.65 It was simply hard at this time not to be related to other poets, or not to have such relationships thrust upon one.

Take the unpromising Gloucester Grammar School-boy WE Henley, the one-legged poet (original, it was thought, of Long John Silver in Robert Louis Stevenson’s novel *Treasure Island*). Hospitalized for months in Edinburgh Infirmary, he sends his ‘In Hospital’ sequence to Leslie Stephen at the *Cornhill Magazine* and is immediately encouraged and published (not without contention: Stephen wouldn’t take the poems lacking end-rhymes). And he ends up as snugly embedded as anyone could be in the London literary world, becoming the great promoter of Hardy and Kipling and Yeats

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and HG Wells and Robert Louis Stevenson and JM Barrie in his *National Observer* magazine of the early 1890s. (His daughter Margaret was thought to be the inspiration for Wendy in Barrie’s *Peter Pan*.) Even if you had certain trademarks of the outsider, the appearance could be deceptive. The London Jewish poet Amy Levy was rumoured to live in a garret and work in an East End factory, whereas she had been briefly a student at Newnham, the college for women at Cambridge (the first Jew to be admitted), got published in Oscar Wilde’s *Woman’s World*, and was a close friend of the suffragist Clementina Black (sister of Constance Garnett the great translator of Dostoevsky) and of Eleanor Marx (who translated one of Levy’s novels into German, was a chum of the Christian Socialist poet and novelist E Nesbit, whose sister Mary was the one-time fiancée of the blind poet Philip Bourke Marston). She died in a botched suicide pact with the novelist Olive Schreiner. (All these ‘outsider’ poets are featured, with some others, in ‘Modernizing the Subject’.)

It was simply rather hard in this culture not to be close to some literary person or other with whom to discuss your work. Even if you were a poet who upset almost everybody you rubbed shoulders with. Like the terrifying down-and-out Scottish wino James Thomson (author of the desolate urban nightmare ‘The City of Dreadful Night’), a violent, quarrelsome, falling-over drunkard, who went to prison for setting a landlady’s kitchen on fire, hung out stinkily in the British Museum Reading Room for want of a home to go to, but still managed to be great friends with the novelist and poet George Meredith and with Philip Bourke Marston (in whose room Thomson collapsed and died of a stomach haemorrhage).

### The Big Critical Conversation

And the great critical conversation went on. Unconcerned about their intimate verbal proceedings these writers certainly were not. Pound was simply wrong about Swinburne’s lack of verbal heed. Writing is an almost frantic preoccupation which Victorian writers’ diaries, notebooks, letters and manuscripts, and the reminiscences of their friends and enemies, almost over amply witness. In the first place poets discuss things with themselves. TS Eliot famously suggested that the First of the poet’s Three Voices is of the poet talking to himself (and, we should add, herself). And you hear that self-debate and argument going on on every page of poets’ work-sheets, manuscripts, and printed proofs available to us. You see its traces in the deletions and insertions, in the marks and re-marks witnessing second- and third-thoughts.

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and more, in the dense scribblings up and down and around the page, in the
repeated harsh scrubbings-out and emphatic writings-in. The manuscript
page often comes quite blackened, polluted with ink, a self-obscured mess,
close to illegibility. No wonder authors’ manuscripts are called their foul
papers. (‘[W]rite verse, / Burnt in disgust, then ill-restored, and left / Half-
made, in pencil scrawl illegible’: Clough, ‘Dipsychus’, X.131–133.67) And
when the clean page-proofs come back from the printers they’re frequently
subject to the same kind of restless correcting and nagging alteration all over
again. Poets patently can’t stop this verbal contention with themselves.

All delicate days and pleasant, all spirits and sorrows are cast
Far out with the foam of the present that sweeps to the surf of the past:
Where beyond the extreme sea-wall, and between the remote sea-gates,
Waste water washes, and tall ships founder, and deep death waits.

That’s Swinburne once more at the sea-side in lines 47–50 of his ‘Hymn to
Proserpine’ as published in Poems and Ballads (July 1866). And what an
effort it took to get there! At first the ‘spirits and sorrows’ of line 47 were
whirled, and the past of 48 that now rhymes with cast of line 47 was instead
the audio-auto rhyming world, for ‘the present that sweeps to the surf of
the past’ started off as ‘the present that cast[s] on the wake of the world’.
It’s impossible to tell whether or not it was worry about rhyming whirled
and world that sparked off the wholesale rewriting of line 48. Line 49 at
first ran ‘Where beyond the extreme sea-rocks & beyond the reach & the
reef’ (where that second & – a mere squiggle – reads like a slip of the pen
for of). At any rate Swinburne altered sea-wall to sea-rocks, and crossed
out ‘beyond the reach &’ writing ‘the black bare fangs of’ over it. But much
as he is perennially drawn to what fangs do, that alteration didn’t last and
it got crossed out in turn, and ‘between the remote sea gates’ got written
below the whole original phrase ‘beyond the reach & the reef’ – with ‘&
the reef’ now also being crossed out. How to go on then clearly gives the
poet even more pause. He writes In, and crosses it out. Starts again with
Aphrodite, and crosses that out. Starts yet again with Like, but like what is
unclear: there’s the beginning of an illegible capital letter, which is in turn
crossed out. And he starts again with The, and crosses that out too. And
begins yet once more with ‘Waste water washes, & locks up’, or maybe
‘looks up’ (the word is hard to make out). Then he crosses out the locks, or
looks, up, and writes underneath the line, ‘tall ships founder, & deep death
waits’. And line 50 is now very impressive. ‘Waste water washes’ is wonder-
fully contradictory – this water washes, even though it’s waste water, in an

67 The Poems of Arthur Hugh Clough, edd HF Lowry, ALP Norrington and FL Mulhauser
(Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1951), 279. This is the edn of Clough which I normally quote.
oxymoron that’s as good as any of the Swinburnean contradictions Empson celebrated. And the threat of this watery *waste* – the sea’s vasty wastes are notoriously scary and dangerous: a set of worrying associations, inescapable because the rhyming, alliterative, initial letters bind the water and the washing and the wasting tightly together – gets endorsed by *deep death: deep* because the oceans in which ships *founder* are *deep*, and *deep* enough easily to engulf even the tallest of ships whose height might be thought to challenge those depths.\(^{68}\)

The poet will consult with himself, like this. It’s what poets do. He might also bring his brother and his sister and his friends into the process of revision. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, that intense scrutineer of others (he copied out all of Robert Browning’s *Pauline* in the British Museum Reading Room), is not only hyper-critical of his own verses, but ropes in the family to aid the inspection. He sends the proofs of what will become *Poems* (1870) to his brother William Michael for comment.\(^{69}\) There are detailed notes and questions, 21 August 1869. William Michael responds on the 23rd August 1869. He’s ‘been reading’ the poems ‘all the evening with intense pleasure: they are most splendid and ought to be published without any not seriously motivated delay’. He’s corrected a few misprints. There are, though, some serious problems with, for instance, ‘The Burden of Nineveh’, the poem whose narrator stands outside the British Museum as a great effigy of a winged God arrives from Nineveh and reflects on the fate of deities ancient and modern, including the Christian God. One of the mummified persons now upstairs in the Museum, said the text, could well have travelled to Nineveh and seen this particular deity: for ‘even to some / Of these thou wert antiquity’. Which is true, William Michael agrees, ‘literally accepted’, ‘but you know Egyptian civilisation and art are far *older* than Ninevite, and I think the *impression* from your passage runs counter to this fact.’

Other poems require thought of a different kind. There’s a sonnet about two lovers parting after sex called ‘Placatâ Venere’ (which means something like: When Love Has Been Appeased), and beginning ‘At length their long kiss severed, with sweet smart’. That should go into the volume ‘by all means – at any rate, so long as the collection remains private. I must re-read the poem before expressing a distinct opinion as to publication’. And meanwhile that supposed Egyptian visitor to Nineveh is still a worry. He’s called ‘A pilgrim’, which William Michael now thinks won’t do. So he adds

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\(^{68}\) Detail from the photographed and transcribed and much worked-over work-sheets, in Robert Peters, ‘AC Swinburne’s “Hymn to Prosperpine”: The Work Sheets’, *PMLA*, 83 (October 1968), 1400–1406.

\(^{69}\) Jerome McGann sets Rossetti’s extreme anxiety over this volume in the context of his turn to poetry as an authentication of what he felt was his true aesthetic integrity after years of selling out – making lots of ‘tin’ by his pot-boiling painting: ‘Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Betrayal of Truth’, *Victorian Poetry* 26, no. 4 (Winter 1988), 339–361. It’s a thought.
a PS: ‘I also rather doubt the phrase “a pilgrim” as applied to these Egyptians. I understand it to mean what we should call “an art-pilgrim” – a tourist with an archaeological object. I suspect these mummies were innocent of such purposes – or at the extreme utmost would have “done” Egypt. Nineveh is very distant, and alien too. If it is a religious pilgrim – as a consulter of the Oracle at Delphi, for instance – I believe it is equally or more untenable’. He’s not yet finished with the proofs but posts off these interim suggestions.

On 26 August Dante Gabriel thanks him for his ‘valuable letter. I am attending to it, and will do so further when I get your concluding admonitions’. On 24 August, William Michael finishes going through the proofs and fires off a second letter full of his further thoughts. Placatâ Venere is still nagging. William Michael now thinks it should be published, but ‘you might perhaps reconsider the title, which appears to me a nearer approach to indecorum than anything in the sonnet itself’. On 27 August Dante Gabriel replies to this, and extremely fully. He’d already thought, he said, of that difficulty with the mummies, and been ‘troubled’ by it. He offers traveller instead of pilgrim, and a juggle with the antiquity line: ‘Nay, but were not some / Of these even then antiquity?’ But he’s still not satisfied. Perhaps ‘thine own’ antiquity would be better: ‘Which is the best?’ And ‘The word traveller I do not quite like… I meant no more by pilgrim. Do you think the change desirable?’ And apparently William Michael did not. The poem finally has alien, and a still further caution about antiquity, presumably at the insistence of the brother, who also plumped for thine own over even then.

Why, of those mummies in the room
Above, there might indeed have come
One out of Egypt to thy home,
An alien. Nay but were not some
Of these thine own ‘antiquity?’

‘What say you?’ He needs his brother’s opinion on many points. In ‘The Blessed Damozel’, for instance, is the ‘sound awkward’ in line 11, ‘Her hair that lay upon her back’? ‘Is “And her hair laid upon” etc. better?’ (The final decision went to ‘Her hair that lay upon her back / Was yellow like ripe corn’. ) How should the sea in the poem ‘Ave’ have ‘Sighed further off eternally’ for the Virgin Mary in Nazareth? Is it to be As heavy, or human, or ancient, sorrow sighs in sleep, or Like ancient sorrow or sad sleep? (The vote went to ‘As human sorrow sighs in sleep.’) And so the poet goes on, in deep and deepening detail. Which includes a return to the clearly inescapable ‘Burden of Nineveh’. ‘It occurs’ to Dante
Gabriel ‘to go back and ask your opinion’ about the stanzas beginning at what is now line 41.

On London stones our sun anew
The beast’s recovered shadow threw.
(No shade that plague of darkness knew,
No light, no shade, while older grew
By ages the old earth and sea.)
How much Heaven’s thunder – how much else
Man’s puny roar? what cry of shells
Cleft – amid leagured citadels –
How many lordships loud with bells
Heardst thou in secret Nineveh?

O when upon each sculptured court
Where even the wind might not resort
Oe’r which time passed, of like import
With the wild Arab boys at sport,
A living face looked in to see, –
And seemed it not etc …

He’s already condensed these lines once. ‘Is there anything lost by it?’ Does that make the poem too abrupt? He’s just read aloud the longer version (as above in his letter) to William Bell Scott, who ‘thinks the second half of the first stanza rather extraneous but the first half of the second a great gain’. Dante Gabriel has ‘some idea’ that Brown – presumably Madox Brown – ‘once suggested difficulties about the shells, bells, etc. Could they be heard under the earth? Were there any to be heard? etc.’ If William Michael thinks the first half of the second stanza ‘very desirable and the previous omitted lines objectionable’, he is to ‘try and suggest some point or idea to fill the gap’. And one assumes that the five lines now following ‘the old earth and sea’ are William Michael’s suggestion:

Lo thou! could all thy priests have shown
Such proof to make thy godhead known?
From their dead Past thou liv’st alone;
And still thy shadow is thine own,
Even as of yore in Nineveh.

Dante Gabriel’s list of queries is rather large (about ‘Hand and Soul’ and ‘Plighted Promise’ and ‘Our Lady of the Rocks’ and ‘A Venetian Pastoral’ and so on and so forth), but he still wants a quick response: ‘post your set of proofs to me at once on getting this letter, as I have other changes to make in them before sending back to the printers and can more shortly do them
myself than explain them to you. Please answer questions here asked as soon as possible’.  

And the business of family consultation isn’t over yet. When the next set of cleaned-up proofs comes back from the printer he’ll give probably give Christina another look: ‘I will probably apply again for Christina’s views with the next revise’.  

He finds himself on 2 September writing again to William Michael to say he has ‘benefited much by your labours as you will see’:

Your last line to the Satan sonnet [‘“Retro me, Sathana!”’] I adopted with a slight change but am rather uncertain whether I may not change back again. What you said of the foggy opening of Nocturn [‘Love’s Nocturne’] induced me to restore a second stanza which I had cut out in printing it, in case this might make things any clearer. I have also added three stanzas towards the close of this poem to develop the sudden flight of the bogy on finding another bogy by the girl’s bed, which seemed funkyish though of course the right thing if she was already in love. I have also added three new stanzas at the point I referred to in Stratton Water and made the proposed restoration (with addition) to the Nineveh. Also added a further useful stanza in the middle of Sister Helen.

He’s changed the worrying title of ‘Placatâ Venere’ to ‘Nuptial Sleep’ – so that it might appear to be about a married couple rather than love out of wedlock, ‘which I think will help it to stand fire’. He has ‘improved some lines in it’. But he’s still concerned about lines 1 and 5: he wants William Michael ‘to say if you think one can say “their long kiss severed” and “their bosoms sundered” or whether “was severed” and “were sundered” are necessary’ (brother William evidently thought the former). And the naggings go on and on. On 14 September he’s writing to William Michael again about the new proofs: ‘You will see much that is due to your labours in them. However I have been at work on them still further now and have done various things’. He’s tinkered further with the third stanza of ‘Nocturn’ (‘I think you will agree with me that this is preferable’), but is still ‘worrying about what you said of the obscurity of the opening of this poem’ and has changed it some more. And what about the fourth stanza? He’s altered it to ‘flow better’, but he’s ‘just noticed that in the present version there is “whisperings” rhyming with “rings” which is bad. But on the other hand I like the new meaning best. What is your view?’

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70 Joseph Bristow is interested in the genderized imperialism of the finalized ‘Burden of Nineveh’: ‘“He and I”: Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Other Man’, Victorian Poetry 39, iii (Fall 2001), 365–388.

71 Alison Chapman’s feminist attack on the Rossetti brothers for flattening out Christina’s ‘metric jolt’, her ‘queer rhymes’ and ‘groans’, and on her for being complicit in a ‘dis-figuring’ of the feminine subject, takes too little note of her part in editorially helping out Dante Gabriel’s poems: ‘Defining the Feminine Subject: Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Revisions to Christina Rossetti’s Poetry’, Victorian Poetry 35, iii (Summer 1997), 139–156.
‘Nuptial Sleep’ is still a bother. How should the lovers’ mouths act after love: ‘yet still their mouths, burnt red,’ and *did what* to ‘each other where they lay apart”? One possibility is ‘chirped at each other’, which ‘is expressive of the lips kissing *at* each other as they lie apart. But is it clear, or if clear is it pleasant? Would it be better “kissed at each other” or more likely “moaned to each other? Or does any other phrase occur to you? Or do you like it as it stands?’ *Chirped at* is certainly unpleasant – these lovers are not birds. *Kissed at* is not much better, suggesting the rather violent pecking of antagonists or the mere air-kissing of friends and acquaintances rather than lovers. The moaning of *moaned to* is erotically expressive enough, but *moaned to* suggests whingeing and complaining. The final choice was ‘Fawned on’ – much more realistic, and physically and erotically vivid.

At length their long kiss severed, with sweet smart:  
And as the last slow sudden drops are shed  
From sparkling eaves when all the storm has fled,  
So singly flagged the pulses of each heart.  
Their bosoms sundered with the opening start  
Of married flowers to either side outspread  
From the knit stem; yet still their mouths, burnt red,  
Fawned on each other where they lay apart.

These lines from ‘Nuptial Sleep’ were singled out by Robert Buchanan in his notorious attack on Rossetti in ‘The Fleshly School of Poetry’ essay (*The Contemporary Review*, October 1871) as ‘simply nasty’, and characteristic of Rossetti’s lack of privateness and decorum. (My Chapter, ‘Fleshly Feelings’, Chapter 7, below, begins with this egregious attack.) But at least Buchanan was right to note the apparent pains taken over the writing: ‘so careful a choice of epithet to convey mere animal sensations’. A care going right down to the smallest items, even to the choice of prepositions: chirped *at*, kissed *at*, moaned *to*, fawned *on*; *at, at, to, on* – so expressive in their variety of possible degrees of relationship, ending with the close-up positioning of intense intimacy.

Brotherly consultation and criticism had this way of paying off poetically. And not just from natural brothers. Dante Gabriel got immense help from his friend Swinburne, to whom, of course, he sent his proofs for comment. Swinburne was most useful, for instance, over Rossetti’s ‘Jenny’, that extraordinarily strong, satirical dramatic monologue about a fallen woman, uttered by the man who has used her and who assuages his guilty concern for her by paying her off, leaving some golden coins in her golden hair as she sleeps.

Why, Jenny, waking here alone  
May help you to remember one,  
Though all the memory’s long outworn
Of many a double-bedded morn.
I think I see you when you wake,
And rub your eyes for me, and shake
My gold, in rising, from your hair,
A Danaë for a moment there.

(372–379)

Having the paying lover turn himself for a moment self-mythicizingly into the God Zeus who seduced the human woman Danaë in a shower of gold coins is a shrewd thrust by the poet. But it was the possible weakness of double-bedded that attracted Swinburne’s critical gaze. ‘Surely it can only mean’, he wrote on 10 December 1869, ‘that there were two beds, implying separate sleepers; which is chaste but startling, as a suggestion – proper but improbable. Also it sounds to me to have just a shade or breath of coarseness – escaped so exquisitely elsewhere in the most familiar parts of the poem; double-pillowed, now, would evade this, and give better the idea of two heads waking together, as nobody can sleep on two pillows at once’. Actually double-bedded, as in double-bedded room, could, apparently, indicate either a bed for two persons or two single beds, and what is coarse about a double-bedded morn in Swinburne’s limited sense of double-bedded is not too apparent, unless he has in mind the classical idea of the dawn arising from night-time sleep, and the dawn is never thought of as sleeping ludicrously in two single beds. But the double-pillowed suggestion is in any case very good for the reasons of intimated intimacy that Swinburne indicates (and if Swinburne was thinking of Keats’s ‘Pillowed upon my fair love’s ripening breast’ in his ‘Bright star’ sonnet, so much the better). And double-pillowed it became.

Rossetti’s dedicated team-work evidently pays off like this, again and again. This way his poems just get better and better. Tennyson’s poems improved too, though not because of any asked-for attention from family and friends, but because of the unwanted attentions of the critics – the sort of interfering critical lecture the Victorians were so manifestly good at, whether the poets liked it or not. Tennyson never got to actually like it. As he matured he did, of course, get more thick-skinned, shrugging off certain critics’ unwanted attentions. ‘No’, ‘Not so’, ‘!!!!’, and so on, run his annotations of John Churton Collins’s suggestions about classical sources for so many of his lines (there’s more about this encounter in Chapter 9, ‘Modernizing the Subject’). Later on Tennyson could bad-mouth back (‘Friswell, Pisswell – a liar and a twaddler – / Pisswell, Friswell – a clown

beyond redemption’, was his vigorous response to JH Friswell’s 1870 criticisms), but early on he was easier prey.73

He was deeply shocked, quite knocked off his poetic perch, by the critical mauling given his 1832 Poems by JW Croker, the fierce, and Tory, but also sharp-eyed and canny Quarterly Review critic – he whose rough handlings were thought to have contributed to the death of Keats. Tennyson was ‘almost crushed’ by Croker, he said; he was minded to give up poetry entirely; and it took him ten whole years before he felt able to face the public again. But the hard knock was good for his verse. He clearly had been verbally too complacent (his poetic enemies thought he’d been carried away by the flattery of friends like Arthur Hallam who praised up Tennyson’s first (1830) volume, Poems, Chiefly Lyrical). Tennyson would never be complacent again. He furiously reconsidered and rehashed his 1832 poems for their reappearance in Poems (1842), rewriting and rewriting them massively, fearful of some Tory ‘fop’ getting his hands on his verses again – ‘I have had abuse enough’. According to Edgar Shannon’s calculations, Tennyson corrected or suppressed an enormous 70% of the passages Croker criticized.74

Croker’s Quarterly piece (April 1833) was full of sarcastically ironic praise for ‘Mr Tennyson’s singular genius, and … the peculiar brilliancy of the sense of the gems that irradiate his poetical crown’. These best, that is worst, bits Croker picked out with italics in his lengthy quotations from the poems. His play with ‘The Lady of Shalott’ and Tennyson’s response are characteristic of the whole encounter. In that poem, the merry song and the mirrored vision of the passing-by Sir Lancelot mightily attract the poem’s walled-in Lady:

From the bank, and from the river
He flashed into the crystal mirror
‘Tirra lirra, tirra lirra’
Sang Sir Lancelot.

73 For Tennyson pissing well on the hostile Friswell, see ‘The Gentle Life’ and Christopher Ricks’s headnote, The Poems of Tennyson, ed Christopher Ricks (Longmans, London and Harlow, 1969), 1230. This is the very big one-volume edition I customarily quote from. Sometimes I refer to its great and necessary supplement, Ricks’s 3 volume Poems of Tennyson (2nd edn, Longman, Harlow, 1987), which makes some corrections (though not all that it might), adds more poetry, updates the criticism, and above all includes manuscript materials from the great Trinity College, Cambridge, archive that nobody, including Ricks, was still in 1969 allowed to quote. These new materials are included in Ricks’s student-handy one-volume Selected Edition (Pearson Longman, Harlow, 2007) but only in relation to the poems it includes – it hasn’t space for a lot of the poems published in the 3-volume edn, nor in the (pretty complete) 1969 edition. ‘The Gentle Life’, for instance, is not in the Selected Edition. I do occasionally refer to the Selected. It’s the edition my students use.

That’s the 1832 version. Croker underlined ‘from the river’, ‘into the crystal mirror’, and the second ‘lirra’, adding a derisive ‘(lirrar?)’. How, the implication was, could Sir Lancelot be both on the bank and also on or in the river; and shouldn’t lirra be spelt lirrar to rhyme more closely with river and mirror? And Tennyson took the point, cutting the second tirra lirra, bringing in a purer rhyme river (even though this meant river self-rhyming with river), and meeting the position objection by now telling us Sir Lancelot is singing by the river, that is is on the bank and not on or in the water.

Croker’s italics also poked sneeringly at the Lady’s facial changes:

\[
\text{Till her eyes were darkened wholly} \\
\text{And her smooth face sharpened slowly.}
\]

The objection would seem to be about whether a face can all at once darken and sharpen. And Tennyson carefully took the point:

\[
\text{Till her blood was frozen slowly} \\
\text{And her eyes were darkened wholly.}
\]

(Later on, Tennyson noted that George Eliot ‘liked my first the best’. And he would presumably have liked John Stuart Mill’s liking of the first version and Mill’s waspishness towards Croker’s judgement: ‘This exquisite line, the egregious critic of the Quarterly distinguishes by italics as specially absurd! proving thereby what is his test of the truth of a description, even of a physical fact. He does not ask himself, Is the fact so? but, have I ever seen the expression in the verses of any former poet of celebrity?’

Croker was critical about boats as well. Tennyson had his dying Lady write her name ‘below the stern’ of her boat, which is where people read it as she floats by:

\[
\text{Knight and burgher, lord and dame} \\
\text{To the plankèd wharfage came} \\
\text{Below the stern they read her name,} \\
\text{The Lady of Shalott.}
\]

By underlining stern, Croker indicates the case that the names of boats are normally displayed at the front, the prow, and also that something written below the stern might be at or below the waterline and so difficult or even impossible to read. And again Tennyson has a rethink, getting the Lady to write her name at the prow and ‘round about’ it, not below it, which is where the Camelot citizens now read it.

Out upon the wharfs they came,
Knight and burgher, lord and dame,
And round the prow they read her name,
*The Lady of Shalott.*

One notices too that the ‘plankèd wharfage’ of 1832 became merely the ‘wharfs’—presumably because Croker had been sarcastic about Tennyson’s use of the kind of emphasis *plankèd* got (‘This use of the grave accent is, as our readers may have already perceived, so habitual with Mr Tennyson, and is so obvious an improvement, that we really wonder how the language has hitherto done without it. We are tempted to suggest, that if analogy to the accented languages is to be thought of, it is rather the acute (´) than the grave (’) which should be employed on such occasions; but we speak with profound diffidence; and as Mr Tennyson is the inventor of the system, we shall bow with respect to whatever his final determination may be’).

And so it went, on and on, the critic carping and jeering and the poet nervously amending—and improving. In the pastoral ‘Oenone’, for example, the deserted woman Oenone (deserted by Paris) tells her ‘mother Ida’ (a lovely Greek mountain adorned with fountains) how the three naked goddesses arrive for the Judgement of Paris. There ‘follows’—this is Croker—‘a description, long, rich, and luscious—Of the three naked goddesses? Fye for shame—no—of the “lily flower violet eyed” and the “singing pine”, and the “overwandering ivy and vine”, “festoons”, and “gnarlèd boughs”, and “tree tops”, and “berries”, and “flowers”, and all the inanimate beauties of the scene. It would be unjust to the *ingenuus pudor* of the author not to observe the art with which he has veiled this ticklish interview behind such luxuriant trellis-work, and it is obvious that it is for our special sakes he has entered into these local details, because if there was one thing “mother Ida” knew better than another, it must have been her own bushes and brakes’. And, sure enough, in 1842, though ‘many a wild festoon’ and ‘berry and flower’ and ‘the gnarlèd boughs’ stayed in, lines 94–97 were completely rewritten to eliminate ‘Lustrous with lilyflower, violet eyed’ and the ‘singing pine’ and ‘the overwandering ivy and vine’.

Tennyson takes the aggressive reviewer’s point, however hurtful—compelled to respond to the intense and detailed critical discussion that publication thrust him into (Victorian reviews were, by modern standards, extremely long). He rewrote the last stanza of ‘The Lady of Shalott’ presumably because John Stuart Mill thought the original ‘lame and impotent’. Mill’s objection no doubt made Tennyson worry about how the Camelot onlookers were supposed to be able to read the dead Lady’s parchment note lying on her breast in the boat, standing as they were on the river-bank. Having instead Sir Lancelot pay his tribute to her lovely face and wish her God’s
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grace makes far more sense. It is also clear, though, that Tennyson’s revising, tinkering, amending, are going some way beyond the critics’ pushes, as if the adverse voices are waking him up to the large verbal obligations good poets perenniially feel themselves to be under. Tennyson’s revisings of the 1832 verses also show him thinking for himself and not just for the reviewer. The way he ignores many of Croker’s gibes indicates this (‘gnarlèd’, for instance, gets to stay). As does the way, too, that he’ll sometimes wait a good while to respond. In ‘A Dream of Fair Women’ the ghost of Iphigeneia describes her murder:

‘The tall masts quivered as they lay afloat,
The temples and the people and the shore,
One drew a sharp knife through my tender throat
Slowly, – and nothing more.’

‘What touching simplicity’, enthused Croker mockingly, ‘what pathetic resignation – he cut my throat “nothing more!”’ One might indeed ask, “what more” she would have?’ This time Tennyson let the point mulch, only responding to it for the 1853 reprint.

‘The high masts flickered as they lay afloat;
The crowds, the temples, wavered, and the shore;
The bright death quivered at the victim’s throat;
Touched; and I knew no more.’

It’s also characteristic of Tennyson, now that he’s been prompted by the critic to think again, that he has actually gone beyond Croker, and made more sense of the stanza’s second, apparently uncriticized, line: he’s put in a verb, wavered, because it has evidently struck him that it wasn’t clear what the people, the temples and the shore were supposed to be doing. He’s made it clear: their reflections are shimmering in the water. Evidently the reviser is also his own man, and not simply the reviewer’s dummy. And Oenone is only one of Tennyson’s poems to get revised massively, way beyond any reviewer’s niggles, because the poet himself now felt the, so to say, raw poetic need and the fundamental obligation to keep scrutinizing. As Tennyson told his friend Spedding in 1835: he’d been going over his ‘old poems, most of which I have so corrected (particularly Oenone) as to make them much less imperfect’. And Tennyson would never abandon the revising habit. He became the intenest of self-revisers

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and self-scrutineers. (How amusing to find him having rather got the hang of Croker’s kind of aggressive close reading – as in 1869 when Hallam records him gibing in Croker-like terms at Dr Johnson’s famous lines from ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’:

Let Observation with extensive View
Survey Mankind from China to Peru.

‘Why did he not say “Let observation, with extended observation, observe extensively”?’

Pushed by the critics, Tennyson had joined the ranks of the most verbally careful and astute Victorians. For his part, Robert Browning thought Tennyson had given in too easily. Critics were swine, Browning thought, a ‘whole sty of grunters’. He cared little for their conduct of the large national critical conversation, especially as it affected him and Mrs Browning. Critics were like night-soil men, the city’s domestic excrement-collectors, ‘always emptying their cart at my door’. Adverse reviews meant loss of sales and so of money – of ‘bread’. Those shitty reviewers touch ‘our bread with their beastly hands’; Browning will ‘rub their noses in their own filth some fine day’ (he was feeling especially sore about the trashing his volume *Men and Women* (1855) had received). Tennyson should not have submitted to Croker. He ‘reads the Quarterly and does as they bid him, with the most solemn face in the world – out goes this, in goes that, all is changed and ranged. Oh me’. This to Elizabeth Barrett (11 February 1845); and she agreed (17 February: ‘anybody is qualified, according to everybody, for giving opinions upon poetry’) – but only up to a point: ‘I do not say that suggestions from without may not be accepted with discrimination sometimes, to the benefit of the acceptor’. This was a benefit Browning found hard to accept. Though there was a benefit, even to him.

Browning’s reactions to John Stuart Mill’s annotations of the early *Pauline* (1833) in the review-copy that Mill sent back to WJ Fox, editor of *The Monthly Repository* and which Browning saw, show his annoyance, hostility, and deep reluctance to listen to any critic, but also a begrudging acceptance of improving points. *Pauline*’s I-narrator talks of his imitative beginnings as a poet; he

78 Memoir, II. 73.
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rather sought
To rival what I wondered at than form
Creations of my own; so much was light
Lent by the others, much was yet my own. (390–393)

Mill thought the so, meaning therefore, accordingly, a ‘colloquial vulgarism’, and anyway it caused confusion as it always did in that position (should the line be read as ‘so [therefore] much’, or quantitatively as so much?). Browning took the confusion point, adding a comma after so in the 1868 edition, but with a bad grace. His notes responding to Mill’s notes grouch fiercely: ‘The recurrence of “so” thus employed is as vulgar as you please: but the usage “so in the sense of accordingly” is perfectly authorized, – take an instance or two from Milton’. And, really vexed and on the defensive, he listed a whole ten examples from Paradise Lost. But still the criticism went on ranking, so that for his 1888 text he dropped so altogether, altering it to if: ‘if much was light’: thus cutting out the confusion, and dropping the contended sense of therefore. Goaded by Mill’s critical fire he amended a lot of Pauline like this; and soon turned quite against the poem as amateurish work. It’s even been traditionally assumed that Browning went out of his way after Pauline to try and make quite clear the merely dramatic nature of his later personae as a result of Mill’s assuming that Pauline’s speaker was Browning himself (‘This writer seems to me possessed with a more intense and morbid self-consciousness than I ever knew in any sane human person’). Whatever the truth of this large career-move allegation, it’s clear that, for all Browning’s reluctance to admit it, Mill was landing many good punches in this critic-poet grudge match. The critical conversation Browning so loathed was nonetheless keeping him on his mettle.81

Ruskin and Browning Go Head to Head

As when Browning received a long letter from Ruskin in response to the new volume Men and Women (10 November 1855), which Browning had sent him. Ruskin sat up all night with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘laying siege’, as Rossetti put it, to Browning’s ‘mass of conundrums’, and then wrote ‘a bulky letter’ containing his critical responses for Rossetti to pass on to Browning.

Ruskin has ‘found some great things’ in the volume, he says; Browning is like ‘a wonderful mine’ which Ruskin will set to work digging in when he

has ‘real time & strength’ – admiration immediately undermined by Ruskin especially praising ‘That bit about the Bishop & St Praxed ... very glorious’, given that ‘The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church’ appeared in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* ten years earlier (‘Rossetti showed it me’). And Ruskin must speak out negatively: for ‘a good many more’ people are like him – they ‘ought to admire more and learn from you, but can’t because you are so difficult.’ Browning’s poems have more truths in them than anybody else’s but Shakespeare’s, but their opacity is awful. Ruskin feels like Rosencrantz in *Hamlet* who can’t make Hamlet out: ‘“I understand you not, my Lord”’. ‘I look at you everyday as a monkey does a cocoanut, having great faith in the milk – hearing it rattle indeed – inside – but quite beside myself for the Fibres’. And this common allegation against Browning is afforded by three particular charges. First, Browning’s rhythms do damage to pronunciation, playing fast and loose with the normal rhythms of English. Ruskin refers to some lines from Stanza III of Browning’s dramatic poem ‘Saul’ where David describes entering King Saul’s tent:

```
I groped my way on
Till I felt where the foldskirts fly open. Then once more I prayed,
And opened the foldskirts and entered, and was not afraid.
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This is harsh, and really prose, Ruskin thinks, and full of heavy monosyllables and what would normally be spondees – poetic feet of two heavy-stresses each – *once more / I prayed / foldskirts* – which Ruskin resents finding are turned unnaturally into ‘dactylic verse’, that is feet of three stresses, a heavy followed by two lights: `-^v: once more I; foldskirts fly`. ‘I entirely deny & refuse the right of any poet to require me to pronounce words short and long, exactly as he likes’. Then there’s a problem with Browning’s characters, people like the speakers of ‘Saul’: they’re too often mere mouthpieces for their author. It’s the old JS Mill allegation: ‘I entirely deny that a poet of your real dramatic power ought to let himself come up, as you constantly do, through all manner of characters, so that every now and then poor Pippa herself shall speak a long piece of Robert Browning’. (Pippa is the main character of the early piece *Pippa Passes: A Drama* (1841).) And third, Browning’s verse is too elliptical, too gappy: ‘your Ellipses are quite Unconscionable: before one can get through ten lines, one has to patch you up in twenty places, wrong or right, and if one hasn’t much stuff of one’s own to spare to patch with! You are worse than the worst Alpine Glacier I ever crossed. Bright, & deep enough truly, but so full of Clefts that half the journey has to be done with ladder & hatchet.’

These observations are telling, but it’s the local verbal obscurities which are Ruskin’s main problem – the poor ‘Presentation’ which is smothering the ‘Power’. For every line Ruskin can ‘make out’ there are two he cannot. He has
no time amidst his day’s work to read poetry, he says, but ‘when I take up these poems in the evening I find them absolutely and literally a set of the most amazing Conundrums that ever were proposed to me.’ And he takes the poem ‘Popularity’ – one of Browning’s many poems about being a poet, an artist, a painter, and no doubt immediately attractive to Ruskin the poet and painter and aesthete and critic for that reason – and simply takes it apart.

I
Stand still, true poet that you are!
I know you; let me try and draw you.
Some night you’ll fail us: when afar
You rise, remember one man saw you,
Knew you, and named a star!

II
My star, God’s glow-worm! Why extend
That loving hand of his which leads you,
Yet locks you safe from end to end
Of this dark world, unless he needs you,
Just saves your light to spend?

III
His clenched hand shall unclose at last,
I know, and let out all the beauty:
My poet holds the future fast,
Accepts the coming ages’ duty,
Their present for this past.

IV
That day, the earth’s feast-master’s brow
Shall clear, to God the chalice raising;
‘Others give best at first, but thou
Forever set’st our table praising,
Keep’st the good wine till now!’

V
Meantime, I’ll draw you as you stand,
With few or none to watch and wonder:
I’ll say – a fisher, on the sand
By Tyre the old, with ocean-plunder,
A netful, brought to land.

VI
Who has not heard how Tyrian shells
Enclosed the blue, that dye of dyes
Whereof one drop worked miracles,
And coloured like Astarte’s eyes
Raw silk the merchant sells?
VII
And each bystander of them all
   Could criticize, and quote tradition
How depths of blue sublimed some pall
   – To get which, pricked a king’s ambition;
Worth sceptre, crown and ball.

VIII
Yet there’s the dye, in that rough mesh,
   The sea has only just o’erwhispered!
Live whelks, each lip’s beard dripping fresh,
   As if they still the water’s lisp heard
Through foam the rock-weeds thresh.

IX
Enough to furnish Solomon
   Such hangings for his cedar-house,
That, when gold-robed he took the throne
   In that abyss of blue, the Spouse
Might swear his presence shone

X
Most like the centre-spike of gold
   Which burns deep in the blue-bell’s womb,
What time, with ardours manifold,
   The bee goes singing to her groom,
Drunken and overbold.

XI
Mere conchs! not fit for warp or woof!
   Till cunning come to pound and squeeze
And clarify, – refine to proof
   The liquor filtered by degrees,
While the world stands aloof.

XII
And there’s the extract, flasked and fine,
   And priced and salable at last!
And Hobbs, Nobbs, Stokes and Nokes combine
   To paint the future from the past,
Put blue into their line.

XIII
Hobbs hints blue, – straight he turtle eats:
   Nobbs prints blue, – claret crowns his cup:
Nokes outdares Stokes in azure feats, –
   Both gorge. Who fished the murex up?
What porridge had John Keats?
'Popularity' is really not a terribly obscure poem, but it is a characteristically jumpy one – jumpy as a flea – skittering rapidly from thought to thought, across aesthetic history and politics and practices, fired by Browning’s resentments about how some poets, like himself and John Keats, don’t get the recognition they deserve and even go hungry while other poets and artists become famous and well-rewarded, and, in the case of some painters very ironically so – through using the humble materials of their craft, in this case the colour purple which comes from a mere lowly sea-creature, the whelk, the murex, which made the Phoenicians, or Tyrians, famous for the purple dye which dyed the silks that made Solomon’s Temple so glorious, a whelk fished up by a fisherman who stays poor and anonymous while the silk-merchants and certain artists (Hobbs, Nobbs, Stokes and Nokes) prosper on the back of his efforts. ‘Who fished the murex up? / What porridge had John Keats?’: the bitter ending encapsulates the poem’s large bitterness about the way all art, as Browning sees it, uses humble materials, the stuff of the mere world, to bring prosperity to some but not, alas, to all. Not least annoying are the poem’s bystanders, the public know-it-alls who think they have a right to criticize other people’s made (the dyed) work – a most irritating thought in the Browning household. A thought which must have made Ruskin’s extended running criticisms of this very poem all the more irking.

Stand still, true poet that you are
I know you; – let me try and draw you:
(Does this mean: literally – stand still? or where was the poet figuratively going – and why couldn’t he be drawn as he went?) Some night you’ll fail us? (Why some night? – rather than some day? – ‘Fail us.’ Now? Die?) When afar you Rise – (Where? – Now?) remember &c. (Very good – I understand.) My star, God’s glowworm. (Very fine. I understand and like that.) ‘Why ^ extend that loving hand.’ (Grammatically, this applies to the Poet. The ellipsis of ‘Should He’ at ^ throws one quite out – like a step in a floor which one doesn’t expect.) Yet locks you safe. How does God’s hand lock him; do you mean – keeps him from being seen? – and how does it make him safe. Why is a poet safer or more locked up than anybody else? I go on – in hope. ‘His clenched hand – – beauty’ – very good – but I don’t understand why the hand should have held close so long – which is just the point I wanted to be explained. Why the poet had to be locked up.

‘My poet holds the future fast’. How? Do you mean he anticipates it in his mind – trusts in it – I don’t know if you mean that, because I don’t know if poets do that. If you mean that – I wish you had said so plainly.

That day the earths feastmaster’s brow. Who is the earths F.? An Angel? – a Everybody?
The chalice raising. This, grammatically, agrees with ‘brow,’ and makes me uncomfortable. Others, &c. very pretty I like that. ‘Meantime I’ll draw you’. Do you mean – his Cork? – we have not had anything about painting for ever so long – very well. Do draw him then: I should like to have him drawn very much.

I’ll say – ‘a fisher – &c.’

Now, where are you going to – this is, I believe pure malice against me, for having said that painters should always grind their own colours.

Who has not heard – – merchant sells. Do you mean – the silk that the merchant sells Raw – or what do you want with the merchant at all.

‘And each bystander.’ Who are these bystanders – I didn’t hear of any before – Are they people who have gone to see the fishing?

‘Could criticise, & quote tradition.’

Criticate what? the fishing? – and why should they – what was wrong in it? – Quote tradition. Do you mean about purple? But if they made purple at the time, it wasn’t tradition merely – but experience. – You might as well tell me you heard the colourmen in Long-Acre, quote tradition touching their next cargo of Indigo, or cochineal.\[82\]

‘Depths – sublimed.’ I don’t know what you mean by ‘sublimed’. Made sublime? – if so – it is not English. To sublime means to to evaporate dryly, I believe and as participle ‘Sublimated’.\[83\]

‘Worth scepter, crown and ball’ – Indeed. Was there ever such a fool of a King? – You ought to have put a note saying who.

‘Yet there’s’, &c. Well. I understand that, & it’s very pretty

Enough to furnish Solomon, &c.

I don’t think Solomons spouse swore. – at least not about blue-bells. I understand this bit, but fear most people won’t. How many have noticed a blue-bells stamen?

‘Bee to her groom’ I don’t understand. I thought there was only one Queen-bee and she never was out o’nights – nor came home drunk or disorderly. Besides if she does, unless you had told me what o’clock in the morning she comes home at, the simile is of no use to me.

‘Mere conchs – [art?].’ Well, but what has this to do with the Poet. Who ‘Pounds’ him? – I don’t understand –


‘Flasked & fine’ Now is that what you call painting a poet? Under the whole & sole image of a bottle of Blue, with a bladder over the cork? The Arabian fisherman with his genie was nothing to this.

Hobbs, Nobbs, &c. paint the future. Why the future. Do you mean in the future?

Blue into their line? I don’t understand; – do you mean Quote the Poet, or write articles upon him – or in his style? And if so – was this what God kept

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82 Long Acre, Covent Garden, London, street of artists’ workshops and shops.
83 Sublimed = made sublime was just old-fashioned English, common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
So Far as The Words Are Concerned

him safe for? To feed Nobbs with Turtle. Is this what you call Accepting the future ages duty. – I don’t understand.

‘What porridge’? Porridge is a Scotch dish, I believe; typical of bad fare. Do you mean that Keats had bad fare? But if he had – how was he kept safe to the worlds end? I don’t understand at all!!!!!!

Written fast, clearly, and as unpolished as can be, these annotations nonetheless drive right to the heart of the opacities of the poem – even if Ruskin’s occasional stubborn obtusenesses and his heavy-handed jocularities about corks and drunken queen-bees and porridge distract from the critical force. What the letter illustrates is just how wonderfully close-up a Victorian reader and reading could get: Ruskin’s method of attentive reading makes him sound positively Empsonian. Any idea of a period of writer-readers not being concerned with how the words are working simply vanishes in the presence of such probings. Ruskin ends up dissatisfied, but that’s a danger obviously implicit in the method’s scrutinizing scrupulosity.

Now, that is the way I read, as well as I can, poem after poem, picking up a little bit here & there & enjoying it, but wholly unable to put anything together. I can’t say I have really made out any one yet, except the epistle from the Arabian physician [‘An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician’], which I like immensely, and I am only a stanza or so out with one or two others – in by the fireside [‘By the Fire-Side’] for instance I am only dead beat by the 41–43, and in Fra Lippo – I am only fast at the grated orris root [‘Fra Lippo Lippi’, line 351], which I looked for in the Encyclopaedia and couldn’t find: and at the There’s for you [‘Lippi’ line 345] – give me six months – because I don’t know What’s for you.

He’s tried to fish the murex up, but is unsure how much purple the terrible shell of Browning’s poems really conceals.

There is a stuff and fancy in your work which assuredly is in no other living writer’s, and how far this purple of it must be within this terrible shell; and only to be fished for among threshing of foam & slippery rocks, I don’t know.

And he begs Browning to make himself clearer. ‘I would pray you, faith, heartily, to consider with yourself, how far you can amend matters, & make the real virtue of your work acceptable & profitable to more people.’

All of which annoys Browning no end, prompts him, clearly, to furious self-inspection, and to stout defence in his reply of 10 December.

For the deepnesses you think you discern, – may they be more than blacknesses! For the hopes you entertain of what may come of subsequent readings, – all success to them! For your bewilderment more especially noted – how shall I help that? … 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 fromledge to ledge of my ‘glaciers’, as you call them; not stand poking your alpen-stock into the holes, and demonstrating that no foot could have stood there; suppose it sprang over there? In prose you may criticise so – because that is the absolute representation of portions of truth, what chronicling is to history … Why, you look at my little song as if it were Hobbs’ or Nobbs’ lease of his house, or testament of his devisings, wherein, I grant you, not a ‘then and there’, ‘to him and his heirs’, ‘to have and to hold’, and so on, would be superfluous; and so you begin:- ‘Stand still, – why?’ For the reason indicated in the verse, to be sure – to let me draw him – and because he is present going his way, and fancying nobody notices him, – and moreover, ‘going on’ (as we say) against the injustice of that, – and lastly, inasmuch as one night he’ll fail us, as a star is apt to drop out of heaven, in authentic astronomical records, and I want to make the most of my time. So much may be in ‘stand still’. And how much more was (for instance) in that ‘stay!’ of Samuel’s (I.xv.16.) So could I twit you through the whole series of your objurgations, but the declaring my own notion of the law on the subject will do. And why, – I prithee, friend and fellow-student, – why, having told the Poet what you read, – may I not turn to the bystanders, and tell them a bit of my own mind about their own stupid thanklessness and mistaking? Is the jump too much there? …

The other hard measure you deal me I won’t bear – about my requiring you to pronounce words short and long, exactly as I like. Nay, but exactly as the language likes, in this case. A spondee possible in English? Two of the ‘longest monosyllables’ continuing to be each of the old length when in junction? Sentence: let the delinquent be forced to supply the stone-cutter with a thousand companions to ‘Affliction sore – long time he bore’, after the fashion of ‘He lost his life – by a pen-knife’ – ‘He turned to clay – last Friday’, ‘Departed hence – nor owed six-pence’, and so on – so would a jury accustomed from the nipple to say lord and landlord, bridge and Cambridge, Gog and Magog, man and woman, house and workhouse, coal and charcoal, cloth and broadcloth, skirts and fold-skirts, more and once more, – in short! …

The last charge I cannot answer, for you may be right in preferring it, however I am unwitting of the fact. I may put Robert Browning into Pippa and other men and maids. If so, peccavi: but I don’t see myself in them, at all events.

Do you think poetry was ever generally understood – or can be? Is the business of it to tell people what they know already, as they know it, and so precisely that they shall be able to cry out – ‘Here you should supply this –, you
evidently pass over, and I'll help you from my own stock”? It is all teaching, on the contrary, and the people hate to be taught. They say otherwise, – make foolish fables about Orpheus enchanting stocks and stones, poets standing up and being worshipped, – all nonsense and impossible dreaming. A poet’s affair is with God, to whom he is accountable, and of whom is his reward: look elsewhere, and find misery enough. Do you believe people understand *Hamlet*? …

Don’t let me lose *my* lord [i.e. Ruskin] by any seeming self-sufficiency or petulance: I look upon my own shortcomings too sorrowfully, try to remedy them too earnestly: but I shall never change my point of sight, or feel other than disconcerted and apprehensive when the public, critics and all, begin to understand and approve me. But what right have you to disconcert me in the other way? Why don’t you ask the next perfumer for a packet of *orris*-root? Don’t everybody know ‘tis a corruption of *iris*-root – the Florentine lily, the *giaggolo*, of world-wide fame as a good savour? And because ‘iris’ means so many objects already, and I use the word, you blame me! But I write in the blind-dark and bitter cold, and past post-time I fear. Take my truest thanks, and understand at least this rough writing, and, at all events, the real affection with which I venture to regard you. And ‘I’ means my wife as well as yours ever faithfully,

Robert Browning.85

Thus Browning, cornered, refuses to be knocked to the canvas, punches tellingly back. He’s absolutely clear about what his formal gappiness is for, and confident in his use of words and rhythms and his knowledge of real things like *orris* root and his not kowtowing to the needs of stupid ‘mistaking’ readers; confident too of his place in the canon, comparing his texts happily with *Hamlet*, and lining himself up with the young poet-prophet David in the Biblical Book of Samuel (since Ruskin has dragged David into the discussion), who tells the older man to ‘Stay and I will tell thee what the Lord hath said to me this night’, and all in that lovely potently punning colloquialism which Browning has made his own and which he offers as the match for any one of Ruskin’s jokey gibes (the poem ‘goes on’ in ways Ruskin has failed to appreciate, and Browning will ‘go on’ about it).

So much, as I say, for the utterly unsustainable libel, that Victorian poets – and Victorian readers – gave too little heed to getting hold of the right words and putting them in the right order.