Victorian poetry was read and enjoyed by a much larger audience than is sometimes thought. Publication in widely circulating periodicals, reprinting in book reviews, and excerpting in novels and essays ensured that major poets such as Tennyson, Browning, Hardy, and Rossetti were household names, and they remain popular today. *The Cambridge Introduction to Victorian Poetry* provides an accessible overview of British poetry from 1830 to 1901, paying particular attention to its role in mass-media print culture. Designed to interest both students and scholars, the book traces lively dialogues between poets and explains poets’ choices of form, style, and language. It also demonstrates poetry’s relevance to Victorian debates on science, social justice, religion, imperialism, and art. Featuring a glossary of literary terms, a guide to further reading, and two examples of close readings of Victorian poems, this introduction is the ideal starting-point for the study of verse in the nineteenth century.

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The Cambridge Introduction to Victorian Poetry

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For

Carroll, Colin, and Haley
Contents

List of figures ix
Preface xi
Acknowledgments xii
Editions cited xiii

Introducing Victorian poetry 1

Part I The forms of Victorian poetry 13

1 Victorian experimentalism 15
   Dramatic monologue 15
   Hybrid forms 21
   Experiments in rhyme and rhythm 25
   Experiments in language, image, symbol 32
   Conclusion 37

2 Victorian dialogues with poetic tradition 40
   Classical tradition 40
   Modern European forms 64

3 The impress of print: poems, periodicals, novels 89
   Periodicals and poetry 90
   Poetry and Victorian novels 96
   Conclusion 109

Part II The rhetoric of Victorian poetry 111

Introduction to Part II 113

4 Poetry, technology, science 118
   Technology and social justice 120
   Technology and poetic mobility 124
   Science and the crisis of new epistemologies 128
   Huxleyan poetics 134
| Chapter |
|------------------|--------|
| 5 | Poetry and religion |
| | Poetry and worship |
| | Woman poets and biblical scenes |
| | Poetry and religious dispute |
| 6 | Poetry and the heart’s affections |
| | Poetess verse |
| | Domestic affections |
| | Death and mourning |
| | Erotic love and courtship |
| 7 | Poetry and empire |
| | 1851 and the Great Exhibition |
| | The Indian Mutiny |
| | The Scramble for Africa |
| | Imperial obliquity |
| 8 | Poetic liberties |
| | Liberty abroad |
| | Liberty at home |
| | Liberty for women |
| | Taking liberties |
| 9 | Resisting rhetoric: art for art’s sake |
| | Aesthetics at mid-century: *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* versus Tractarian poetics |
| | Foreign diversions: Swinburne and French decadence |
| | Platonic and Sapphic strains: same-sex desire in Pater, Symonds, Michael Field, and Wilde |
| | W. B. Yeats and the resources of myth |

### Part III Coda Close readings

| 10 | Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* |
| 11 | Ernest Dowson, “*Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam*” and Thomas Hardy, “Friends Beyond” |

**Glossary**

**Notes**

**Further reading**

**Index**
Figures

2  D. G. Rossetti, Frontispiece, in Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1862); Mark Samuels Lasner Collection
3  Alfred Tennyson, *Maud* (London: Edward Moxon, 1855), pp. 2–3
5  Rudyard Kipling, “McAndrew’s Hymn,” *Scribner’s Magazine* (December, 1894), cover
6  Charles Ricketts, cover design for Oscar Wilde, *The Sphinx*, illustrated by Charles Ricketts (London: Elkin Matthews and John Lane, 1894); Mark Samuels Lasner Collection
While presenting an overview of the key developments, features, and preoccupations of Victorian poetry, *The Cambridge Introduction to Victorian Poetry* has two additional aims: to argue that Victorian poetry was inseparable from the mass print culture within which it found an audience, and to reinterpret the “rhetoric” of Victorian poetry in this context. Rather than surveying major authors, the Introduction maps formal practices and a series of social debates within which poems, both canonical and lesser-known, jostled against, answered, and challenged each other for aesthetic and cultural pre-eminence. It is a less tidy, occasionally even more discordant, account of poetry than is found in some literary histories, but is meant to highlight the liveliness and vibrancy of poetry in its day and to suggest sources of its continuing appeal.

I customarily pair works to indicate the dialogues in which poems engaged and those they initiated for Victorian audiences. I also indicate when poems were first published in periodicals, a medium that George Saintsbury, the prominent late-Victorian critic and literary scholar, termed the defining genre of the age in *A History of Nineteenth Century Literature* (1896). The frequency with which this notation occurs in following pages underscores Victorian poetry’s wide circulation among readers (which has sometimes been underestimated) and poetry’s intersection with other print forms in the first mass-media era.

Insofar as poetry is itself a medium, of course, it cannot be understood apart from its intrinsic aesthetic features. However briefly I take up a poem, I direct attention to the role of form in conveying its meaning, significance, and effects. Two appended close readings of narrative and lyric poems from mid-century and century’s end extend this focus.
Acknowledgments

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Permission to quote these poems has been granted as follows: M. E. Braddon, “Delhi,” by Jennifer Carnell; Emily Brontë, “No Coward Soul is Mine,” by Oxford University Press; John Clare, “Sonnet” (“I am”), by Curtis Brown Group Ltd., London, on behalf of Eric Robinson (© Eric Robinson 1966); Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Spring and Fall,” by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Province of the Society of Jesus; and Christina Rossetti, “Up-hill,” “A Better Resurrection,” “Angels at the Foot,” “Who Has Seen the Wind?” and “When I am dead, my dearest” by LSU Press.
Poems in this study are cited from the following editions (unless otherwise indicated in notes). Line numbers are given in the text.


Coleridge, Mary E. *Poems*, London: Elkin Mathews, 1908


Davidson, John. *Ballads and Songs*, London: John Lane, 1894


    *Sight and Sound*, London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1892
    *Underneath the Bough: A Book of Verses*, London: George Bell and Sons, 1893
Gray, John. *Silverpoints*, London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1893
Hardy, Thomas. *Wessex Poems and Other Verses; Poems of the Past and Present*, London: Macmillan, 1908
Kendall, May. *Dreams to Sell*, London: Longmans, Green, 1887
    *Songs from Dreamland*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1894
    *Xantippe and Other Verse*, Cambridge: E. Johnson, 1881


Robinson, A. Mary F. *The Collected Poems Lyrical and Narrative of A. Mary F. Robinson (Madame Duclaux)*, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1902


Of the difficulties that waylay a Victorian anthologist two are obvious. Where is he to begin? Where to end? ... Wordsworth happened to be the first Laureate of Queen Victoria’s reign ... After many months spent in close study of Victorian verse ... I rise from the task in reverence and wonder not only at the mass (not easily sized) of poetry written with ardour in these less-than-a-hundred years, but at the amount of it which is excellent. Arthur Quiller-Couch, *The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*.

One distinction of Victorian poetry is the degree to which serious work and popular culture converged, as evidenced by snippets of poems now proverbial: “‘Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all”; “God’s in his heaven – / All’s right with the world!”; “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” These lines, from Alfred Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (1850), Robert Browning’s *Pippa Passes* (1841), and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) become reassuring clichés when shorn of their contexts. The poems themselves offer less conventional assurance: *In Memoriam* involves a male poet’s impassioned grief for another man; Pippa’s hope is sung against the backdrop of adultery and murder; and Barrett Browning’s larger sequence opens by alluding to Theocritus and fleeing from love.

The best Victorian poetry is complex, challenging, and experimental, and it was read widely, thanks to its circulation during the first era of mass media. For Victorians, that mass medium was print. If Sir Walter Scott’s *Marmion* (1808) and *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) sold 50,000 copies by 1836, Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* sold 60,000 copies in three to four years and *Enoch Arden* 40,000 copies in mere weeks. Nearly 400,000 copies of John Keble’s *The Christian Year* (1827) had been purchased when its copyright expired in 1873. To instance another print form, the *Edinburgh Review* and *Quarterly Review*, founded early in the century, peaked at circulations of 13,000 in 1813–14. *Cornhill Magazine*, in which poems by Tennyson, Barrett Browning, Matthew Arnold, and the Brontës appeared, attained a circulation approaching 100,000 with its first issue. And cheap papers aimed at working and lower middle classes, like the *Family Herald* or *London Journal*, also published original poetry and sold
between 300,000 and 450,000 copies per issue in the 1850s. Wilkie Collins estimated the audience for serial stories in these papers in the millions.\(^2\)

The boundaries of Victorian poetry, like the term itself, are unstable and somewhat arbitrary.\(^3\) As Quiller-Couch observes, William Wordsworth was the first Poet Laureate appointed by Queen Victoria. Indeed, Wordsworth’s greatest poem, *The Prelude*, appeared in the same year as *In Memoriam*, in 1850. If Wordsworth became a Victorian poet by virtue of longevity, neither did Romanticism end with the deaths of Byron and Shelley. The early Tennyson cannot be understood apart from John Keats, Robert Browning from Percy Bysshe Shelley, Barrett Browning from Lord Byron, or the Rossetti family from William Blake. The poems of Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon (which also influenced Tennyson and Barrett Browning) are regularly included in anthologies of both Romantic and Victorian poetry.

The question of scope also complicates attempts to identify Victorian poetry. More than 275 poets are represented in the first *Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*, including seventeen North American poets (for example, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman) as well as James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and William Butler Yeats. Far from deeming themselves Victorian poets, Joyce caricatured “Lawn Tennyson, gentleman poet,” in the Proteus section of *Ulysses*; Pound termed the Victorian “a rather blurry, messy sort of a period” in 1913; and Yeats announced in a BBC radio broadcast of 1936, “My generation, because it disliked Victorian rhetorical moral fervour, came to dislike all rhetoric. In France, where there was a similar movement, a poet had written, ‘Take rhetoric and wring its neck.’”\(^4\)

In contrast to Quiller-Couch’s inclusive sweep, Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange included only sixteen poets (and no women) in *Victorian Poetry and Poetics* (1959), an anthology deeply influenced by modernism. Should Victorian poetry be conceived in terms of its historical diversity and amplitude, as Quiller-Couch would argue, or by the portion most relevant to a given decade’s tastes, as the example of Houghton and Stange implies? A forced choice between these alternatives is spurious. This study examines the diversity of Victorian poetry as well as canonical texts, and insists upon specific historical conditions as well as the interests of twenty-first-century readers. Approaching Victorian poetry in the context of print culture furthers these aims and, without effacing its links to larger poetic tradition (including Romanticism and modernism), helps pinpoint what is specific to Victorian poetry.

Poetic forms and themes did not definitively change in 1832, when Great Britain first extended the franchise and embarked on a course of (uneven) reform, or in 1837, when Victoria ascended the throne. The Romantic
refashioning of blank verse, ballads, sonnets, narratives, and more into vehicles for probing human psychology, political injustice, ontology, the built world, and nature was itself a form of modernity and led directly to Victorian innovations. Romantic poetry was also diverse and experimental, embracing the “Miltonic sublime” of Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” the deflating irony of Byron’s *Don Juan*, and the mundane particularity of Mary Robinson’s “Winkfield Plain.” As Stuart Curran notes, the very title of *Lyrical Ballads* is an oxymoron and points to an experimental generic hybrid, a mix of narrative and lyric, of communitarian impulse with the expression of an isolated individual.\(^5\)

Yet fundamental changes in the material, socio-political, and intellectual conditions of British life after 1830 affected the content, form, and function of poetry in the reign of Queen Victoria.\(^6\) If, as Virginia Woolf alleged of post-impressionist painting early in the twentieth century, “on [sic] or about December, 1910, human character changed,”\(^7\) in 1830 nature changed. On September 15 the first intercity railway journey originated in Liverpool, and the death that day of William Huskisson, MP for Liverpool, who miscalculated the speed of the approaching locomotive (the *Rocket*) and was run over, aptly symbolizes the death of older configurations of nature. Propulsion through space and time on land had hitherto depended on the muscles, feeding, and watering of animals or human pedestrians, who generally followed roads shaped by natural contours. In contrast, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch observes, the “mechanical motion generated by steam power is characterized by regularity, uniformity, unlimited duration and acceleration.”\(^8\)

Railway lines, moreover, cut across open land according to abstract engineering principles rather than local custom or the natural paths cut by flowing water. As the protagonist of *Aurora Leigh* (1856), by Barrett Browning, recounts,

```
we passed
The liberal open country and the close,
And shot through tunnels, like a lightning-wedge
By great Thor-hammers driven through the rock,
Which, quivering through the intestine blackness, splits,
And lets it in at once. (7:429–34)
```

Such inventions not only gave Victorians new relations to time, space, and nature but also new sounds and new rhythms. Not coincidentally, the railroad had a profound impact on the circulation of print, radically speeding up distribution and ratcheting up demand, since travelers increasingly turned to reading to pass the time and retain a sense of privacy.\(^9\) Fittingly, two of the
passengers on board the Rocket on September 15, 1830 were the future Poet Laureate of England, who celebrated this new technology in “Locksley Hall” (1842), and the man whose early death would inspire In Memoriam, the poem that won Tennyson the Laureateship: Arthur Henry Hallam.10

Older constructs of nature took another blow in 1830 from geologists’ hammers, when the first volume of Charles Lyell’s Principles of Geology was published. Though James Hutton had already discovered “deep time” in the rock formations of Siccar Point, Scotland, in the late eighteenth century, Lyell systematized evidence that earth’s timescale vastly exceeded biblical chronology and that earlier species had become extinct. Charles Darwin extended this impetus, remapping nature as the site of impersonal forces and a “struggle for existence” in On the Origin of Species (1859).11 Darwin had no sooner published his magnum opus than its principal tenets were circulated to homes throughout England. In addition to widespread reviews, George Henry Lewes discussed Darwin’s new book in successive chapters of Studies in Animal Life, serialized in Cornhill Magazine in 1860, while Punch ridiculed Darwin and the emergent discipline of social science in “Unnatural Selection and Improvement of Species. (A Paper Intended to be Read at our Social Science Congress by One who has been Spending Half-an-Hour or so with Darwin).”12 Wordsworth’s “impulse from a vernal wood” that might “teach” “more of … moral evil and of good, / Than all the sages can” (“The Tables Turned,” 21–4) became increasingly difficult to imagine when compelling new evidence pointed to a nature “red in tooth and claw / With ravine” (In Memoriam, 56:13–16).

The impact on traditional Christianity of such work also helps to define the Victorian era. If, predictably, these new paradigms drove some Victorian poets to unbelief or (to use the term coined by scientist Thomas Henry Huxley in 1869) agnosticism, a general sense that traditional religion was being renegotiated brought theology to the fore. Even love poems were likely to touch on religion: was earthly love a scintillation of divine, undying love or an animal instinct as transient as life? Coventry Patmore’s scripting of domesticity in The Angel in the House (1854–63) enunciates a firm theology:

This little germ of nuptial love,
Which springs so simply from the sod,
The root is, as my song shall prove,
Of all our love to man and God. (1:537–40)

George Meredith’s antiphonal lesson in Modern Love (1862) that marriages, like love itself, can die is grounded in an opposing cosmology: “‘I play for Seasons; not Eternities!’ / Says Nature, laughing on her way. ‘So must / All
those whose stake is nothing more than dust!” (13:1–3). Philip Davis rightly claims that “the serious relation between belief and unbelief in the period makes unbelief itself a religious phenomenon.”\(^\text{13}\)

Another factor that pressed poets to take positions on vital contemporary issues was the explosion of print culture into a mass medium from the 1840s onward. If the philosophical and political ferment of the French Revolution and succeeding Napoleonic wars did so much to define literary production from 1790 to 1825, changes in Victorian publishing were themselves “revolutionary.”\(^\text{14}\) Steam-driven technology that made railroads possible began to be widely applied to printing presses in the 1830s and 1840s, and Chambers’s \textit{Edinburgh Journal}, the first of the cheap “respectable” periodicals that combined news; fiction; poetry; and informative articles on science, technology, education, political economy, and more, appeared in 1832.

The possibilities of reaching a mass audience through print were further realized in the 1840s by illustrated papers such as the \textit{Family Herald} and \textit{The Illustrated London News}. Books were still expensive and usually purchased only by the few, but the extraordinary success of Charles Dickens’s \textit{Pickwick Papers}, published in twenty monthly shilling installments in 1836–7, created a new publishing trend; and much of the age’s best literature reached audiences in serial form (whether in individual parts or in magazines and weekly papers).\(^\text{15}\) This extended to poetry in some instances, and Robert Browning’s decision to issue his \textit{Bells and Pomegranates} in eight double-columned, sixteen-page numbers from 1841 to 1846 must be seen in relation to Dickens’s publishing success.

The 1850s marked a further watershed in publishing. In 1855 taxes on newspapers (imposed earlier in the nineteenth century to limit the spread of radical thought among working classes) were abolished, and the drop in price along with technological improvements created a boom in periodicals directed to all sectors of the British reading public. In the 1850s far more Britons could also borrow reading material. Circulating libraries had long been a feature of Great Britain, but the fees charged by most excluded the masses; and even middle-class patrons had access only to limited selections if they lived outside London. In 1850 parliament passed a bill founding free libraries, and artisans in the northern industrial cities of Liverpool and Manchester soon benefited. For middle-class patrons throughout Britain, a key event was the opening in 1852 of Mudie’s Select Library in New Oxford Street, an institution that made borrowing affordable. Fiction was its mainstay, but this and other libraries carried wide arrays of newspapers and magazines in which poetry first appeared or was reprinted, and best-selling poems were also on hand. Charles Mudie purchased 2,500 copies of Tennyson’s \textit{Enoch Arden} to lend...
The same year that Mudie opened his New Oxford Street quarters, W. H. Smith and Son opened railway bookstalls throughout the country, stocking one-volume novels that sold for one or two shillings, and a range of weekly papers selling for a penny or two.

In the 1860s print production became cheaper yet with high-speed rotary presses and paper made from esparto grass or wood pulp. For the rest of the century, according to Richard Altick, “periodical printing became one of the most highly mechanized of all English mass-production industries”; cheap reprints of books produced by the same methods, including volumes of recent or older poetry, put books in the hands of all who were interested.

The effect on poetry of a surrounding mass medium of print is visible in two major poems published six years apart but composed in different eras, Wordsworth’s The Prelude and Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh. Both are first-person narratives of the poet’s development. Aurora’s “relations in the Unseen” nourish her poetic gift and enable her to draw “The elemental nutrient and heat / From nature” (1:473–5), a Romantic premise also evident in the poem’s tacit argument that imaginative vision can transform the world. Wordsworth’s alpine vision of “Characters of the great Apocalypse, / The types and symbols of Eternity,” and his epiphany upon Mount Snowdon of “a mind / That feeds upon infinity, that broods / Over the dark abyss” (6:638–9, 14:70–2), are answered by Aurora’s culminating, apocalyptic vision of “The first foundations of that new, near Day / Which should be builded out of heaven to God” (9:956–7).

But just as Wordsworth’s world is innocent of the train that Aurora and Marion take from Paris to Marseilles, only Barrett Browning provides a publishing history as part of Aurora’s poetic development, giving due attention to the impact of critical reception and even the poet’s resort to “magazines, / And weekly papers” (3:310–11) for money to support her vocation. The novel is also a palpable presence in Barrett Browning’s poem as it is not in The Prelude – a symptom of poetry that still commanded public readerships and prestige but was emerging when the novel flourished. In Aurora Leigh Marion Erle’s drugging and rape hark back to Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa, while the blinding of Aurora’s cousin Romney is indebted to Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre. Another divergence between The Prelude and Aurora Leigh is that the former is structured by the poet’s formation, conversion to the cause of revolution, disillusionment, and recovery of poetic vision, whereas Aurora Leigh is ultimately structured by a debate – personal, philosophical, political – about how best to reform society.

Debate itself is fundamentally Victorian, revealing an assumption that more than one perspective marks any issue and that truth is subject to contestation.
Victorian poetry is characteristically dialogic, presupposing and even harboring the existence of multiple voices. Print materialized the many-voicedness of Victorian poetry, since one poem or volume was sure to be challenged by another and all participated in the roiling, unceasing, sometimes chaotic flow of print through millions of hands in the form of books, newspapers, magazines, or paperbound serial parts. Isobel Armstrong demonstrates that the multivocality of Victorian poetry was not just an effect of material culture, however. She terms the defining form of Victorian poetry the “double poem”: one that expresses an emotion or point of view yet, through formal means, simultaneously calls into question the poem’s grounds for representing its subject and who or what should figure in poetry. This philosophical skepticism is manifested as poetic technique, so that the double poem is intrinsically aesthetic yet opens a space for cultural politics. In so doing the double poem challenges Immanuel Kant’s assertion that art exists unto itself, apart from politics. Rather, the debate that surrounds poetry in print culture (and informs its content) inhabits its aesthetic foundations.19

The dramatic monologue illuminates the point. A key Victorian contribution to modern poetic tradition, and most typically a “double poem” in Armstrong’s sense, the dramatic monologue subjects the lyric utterance of an individual to a social context, positioning that speaker in relation to a specific time, place, situation, and tacit or explicit auditor. By doing so, the dramatic monologue calls attention to the artifice of lyric utterance, which can appear to be direct and unmediated yet emerges from a specific cultural perspective or location and constructs an implied response for its readers. The dramatic monologue also negates the presumption of a universal poetic “I” that speaks for all humanity since a specific individual speaks, and utterance readily becomes a site of investigation because its social context is legible to readers.20

To take one of the best-known examples, in Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” an imperious duke with blood on his hands brazenly negotiates marriage terms for his next wife. His power and arrogance are clear, but whether he deliberately hints that he ordered the murder of his first wife, who was insufficiently impressed by his “nine-hundred-year-old name” (33), or inadvertently reveals his guilt is left for readers to resolve. If readers assume the former, they must also determine why he would implicate himself in murder. In thus calling attention to speech acts (the Duke even quotes himself in line 6), the monologue calls attention to, and questions, all monological, one-sided utterance. In Browning’s poem not only the socially inferior envoy is excluded from speech, but also the last duchess whose two-dimensional portrait is jealously controlled by the Duke (9–10), and the next duchess who is
intimately affected by but not a party to the negotiations governing her fate. The dramatic monologue thus acts not only to challenge the universality of Romantic lyric and subjectivity, but also to open poetic utterance to analysis of its power relations and consideration of those excluded from speech. Monologue is used to express the Duke’s sensibility but, as a form, also turns against itself.

Still, the role of print culture in poetry’s dialogism should not be underestimated. The mass medium of the periodical and newspaper effectively transformed even brief lyrics into approximations of dramatic monologues, since the lyric placed on its own page or huddled into a column jostled against fiction, gossip, political argument, travel writing, news, satires, science reports, art criticism, sociological analysis, musical entertainments, theatrical notices, or snippets of the latest “intelligence.” The lyric, no matter how complex or finely crafted, could in this context offer only a contingent rather than transcendent perspective, forced as it was to compete with other voices and views for authority.

One of Christina Rossetti’s best-known lyrics, “Up-hill,” can serve as a useful example:

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?
Yes, to the very end.
Will the day’s journey take the whole long day?
From morn to night, my friend.
But is there for the night a resting-place?
A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.
May not the darkness hide it from my face?
You cannot miss that inn.
Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?
Those who have gone before.
Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?
They will not keep you standing at that door.
Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?
Of labour you shall find the sum.
Will there be beds for me and all who seek?
Yea, beds for all who come.

To eyes accustomed to free verse, the dominant mode of serious poetry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the regularity of Rossetti’s quatrains and \textit{abab} rhyme scheme, as well as her occasional resort to archaisms like “morn” and “Yea,” may seem most striking. Readers familiar with William Blake’s \textit{Songs of Innocence and Experience} will recognize one source of Rossetti’s reliance on simple diction and question and answer to
address the end of life’s journey, just as Blake’s “The Lamb” addresses its origins: “Little lamb, who made thee?” (1). The poem’s focus on religion and its restrained tone are also consistent with the decorous piety that Victorian readers expected from the “poetess” in an era when Bible reading and sermons were part of daily life.

In all these ways “Up-hill” seems highly traditional. But Rossetti’s lyric slips free from overdetermined patterns of form and meaning and repays close attention with successive surprises. The engraving Blake devised for “The Lamb” makes it clear that a little boy addresses a lamb in the song; Rossetti’s questioner and respondent are ungendered and untethered. The length of the journey and a night-time arrival establish the “I” as a pilgrim-through-life seeking answers about death, but who answers? The echo in “Up-hill” of Matthew 7:7 (“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you”) may suggest that Christ responds in Rossetti’s even-numbered lines. Yet this respondent claims the casual relation of mere “friend” to the poem’s questioner and proffers assurance only that the long, hard struggle of life culminates in a place to lie down and sleep. Indeed, the respondent pointedly refuses certain knowledge to the anxious question, “Shall I find comfort ..?”; “Of labour you shall find the sum” may imply that the speaker’s deeds of a lifetime will determine the conditions meted out in the afterlife, or the line may allude bleakly to Ecclesiastes, in which the implied answer to the question “What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” (1:3) is “nothing.”

The poem, like its elusive respondent, throws the basic question of who is speaking back upon its reader. The poet herself could be the respondent, acting as the proverbial reader’s “friend,” who here provides answers about death. If so, the “poetess” abandons feminine humility and takes on the mantle of the prophet – an assertive intervention in an age that still denied women public authority in the church. Or the respondent might be death itself, a possibility that displaces piety and religious assurance in favor of irony and alienation as the inquiring pilgrim confronts the supremely confident figure of death awaiting its inescapable harvest. In this interpretive scenario death’s successively stressed words of line 6, which mimetically retard the pace of “slow dark hours” and suggest the tolling of the death knell, might be read as taunting the questioner with death’s grim approach and the tedium of eternity. The undecidable identity of the respondent shores up the mystery that surrounds life’s end no matter how the poem is read, but whether the mystery is sacred, terrifying, or bitterly ironic remains unclear.

Nor is the poem always rhythmically stable, though its rhymes are perfect and their scheme unvarying. The questioner consistently speaks in lines of five feet, predominantly in iambic pentameter; the respondent’s rhythms vary
unpredictably from the iambic trimeter that seems established in the first stanza. Line 6 has as many feet, while line 12, somewhat unnervingly, answers back in the same iambic pentameter used by the pilgrim to pose a question. Does the mirroring rhythm signify sympathetic harmony, empty echo, or parody? The respondent shrinks back to tetrameter in line 14 of the final stanza, then closes as in the beginning with a trimeter line, falsely seeming to assure the reader of stability where there is none.

Chiselled and chaste, the lyric “Up-hill” unleashes a surprising number of possible voices, tones, and perspectives. The lyric is structured as a dialogue to begin with, and the two speakers’ possible identities bring divergent frames of reference to bear upon the exchange. For the poem’s very first public readers, the lyric’s opening onto a range of voices and competing beliefs would have been reinforced by its initial appearance in the February, 1861 issue of *Macmillan’s Magazine* (see Figure 1).

Flanking articles on “Trade Societies and the Social Science Association” and “The Ghost He Didn’t See” summon the very challenges and fallibilities that make life’s journey an uphill battle indeed. “Trade Societies” closes by examining the rights of workers to organize based on the principle derived from political economy that “class-life is a battle”; “The Ghost He Didn’t See” concerns a soldier back from the Crimean War whose kin seek no general accounts of battle because the “electric telegraph and express trains” and “Own Correspondent” of *The
The relentless secularism surrounding the poem challenges the primacy it allot to mystery and eschatology, and introduces competing visions of what matters most in existence. This context so characteristic of Victorian poetry situates lyric, too, within a specific linguistic, rhetorical, and social milieu, registering – as in a dramatic monologue – other perspectives and an audience. To recover the materiality as well as the astonishingly varied and breathtaking language of Victorian poetry, then, is to realize how deeply it was intertwined with public and daily life, how significant a cultural medium it was for its readers.

This realization also underscores the reach of Victorian poetry in time and space. “Up-hill” circulated widely in America when Living Age reproduced the poem in its July 26, 1862 issue, in a notice pirated from Eclectic Review. This transatlantic route to yet more readers may have fostered poetic cross-fertilization. Though Emily Dickinson never mentioned Rossetti, as she certainly did Emily Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the uncanny pedestrian journey of Rossetti’s questioner headed toward “A roof for when the slow dark hours begin” has a counterpart in Emily Dickinson’s “Because I could not stop for Death,” written around 1863, in which a carriage ride takes Dickinson’s speaker to

a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground
The Roof was scarcely visible
The Cornice – in the Ground – (17–20)

Though Dickinson’s technique is the more obviously unconventional, the two poems share concision and a refusal to soften the strangeness or opacity of their authors’ imaginative responses to death. Given such poetic kinship it is fitting that in the first Oxford Book of Victorian Verse Quiller-Couch places the two poets, both born in 1830, on the same page. In such juxtapositions and poetic exchanges we glimpse not only the specificities of Victorian poetry but also its larger role in poetic tradition.

The remainder of this study examines the issues raised by “Up-hill” across a wide range of poems to illuminate the contours and achievement of this vibrant, diverse poetry in Victorian print culture. Part I, “The forms of Victorian poetry,” looks at the role of experimental and inherited poetic forms – genres, metrical and stanzaic patterns, rhyme schemes – as well as the impact of classical tradition, modern tradition, and the mass medium of print on Victorian poetry. Part II, “The rhetoric of Victorian poetry,” assumes poetry’s coexistence and exchange with other print forms, just as the Macmillan’s Magazine “Up-hill” enters a debate with surrounding articles over what battles of life have greatest significance. Chapters in Part II explore...
poetry’s participation in Victorian considerations of science and technology, religion, affect, empire, and reform, as well as the aesthetic movement’s growing skepticism about such public exchanges. A coda presents close readings of three poems to indicate ways that Victorian poetry might be read and to suggest why it remains vitally interesting.
Part I

The forms of Victorian poetry
Chapter 1

Victorian experimentalism

Dramatic monologue 15
Hybrid forms 21
Experiments in rhyme and rhythm 25
Experiments in language, image, symbol 32
Conclusion 37

The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
Changes, surprises, – Robert Browning, “Fra Lippo Lippi” (1855)

All literary writing is mediated by form, but poetry’s very look on the page and sounds during recitation call attention to its artifice. Closely adhering to forms handed down over time might preserve and pay tribute to the past but can also stifle invention or dissent. Beginning with Wordsworth’s preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), nineteenth-century poets repeatedly argue for new ways of approaching poetic language and meter. In a century anxious about revolutions but also propelled by innovation in industry and the marketplace, the “new” became a desirable feature of poetry, especially as increased publishing opportunities required poets to distinguish themselves both from precursors and from numerous contemporaries. Modernity and a market-driven economy thus helped encourage what has always been a feature of memorable poetry: its ability to connect with readers yet repeatedly surprise them by unexpected turns in thought, image, language, or form. Experimentalism, then, is another defining feature of Victorian poetry. Because the dramatic monologue is so often cited as its distinctive development, I begin there.

**Dramatic monologue**

First-person utterances by fictive characters predate the Victorian era in Shakespearean and other dramatic soliloquy as well as in a long line of laments and declamations. The Victorian dramatic monologue departs from precedent insofar as it operates within a problematical epistemology and demands that readers
negotiate a range of ambiguities. Does the poet agree with what the character is saying? Is the character sincere or self-interested? Does the auditor comprehend what the speaker is actually saying? Is the reader meant to take the utterance at face value, or is it ironized in keeping with the poet’s desire to question how we know what we know and the social grounds on which utterance is predicated? Does even the speaker have command over the utterance and what it reveals?

The earliest dramatic monologues of Tennyson and Browning take up this last issue as part of an investigation of radical psychological states. As Ekbert Faas points out, the dramatic monologue and new scientific study of the mind and its processes emerged simultaneously, driven by intensified interest in introspection as both a philosophical and scientific method. A spate of treatises in the 1820s, including *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (1829) by James Mill (father to John Stuart Mill), as well as periodical reviews and essays, elicited further interest in psychological analysis and helped equip readers to comprehend mental process in poetry. Thus when Tennyson’s “Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind not in Unity with Itself” appeared in *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830), W. J. Fox, editor of the *Monthly Repository*, could readily articulate its psychological interest in the *Westminster Review*, a periodical that James Mill co-founded:

Mr Tennyson … seems to obtain entrance into a mind as he would make his way into a landscape … The author personates [in this poem] a timid sceptic, but who must evidently always remain such, and yet be miserable in his scepticism; whose early associations, and whose sympathies, make religion a necessity to his heart; yet who has not lost his pride in the prowess of his youthful infidelity; who is tossed hither and thither on the conflicting currents of feeling and doubt, without that vigorous intellectual decision which alone could “ride in the whirlwind and direct the storm” … we do honestly think this state of mind as good a subject for poetical description as even the shield of Achilles itself. Such topics are more in accordance with the spirit and intellect of the age than those about which poetry has been accustomed to be conversant.

Fox accurately describes the fictional apparatus that distinguishes the speaker from Tennyson but adds that if the poet impersonates characters, “still it is himself in them, modified but not absorbed by their peculiar constitution.” From the first, then, the dramatic monologue was perceived as a site of multiple voices and perspectives. In the poem a governing trope of the sacrificial lamb introduced in the opening lines ironizes the speaker’s utterance: “Men say that Thou / Didst die for me, for such as me” (2–3). But Christ as sacrificial lamb becomes linked to the spring lamb sacrificed only for human consumption rather than an afterlife (156–71) and the “lost lamb” his late mother would
have wished safe in the fold of belief (105–6), suggesting both the egocentrism and near blasphemy underlying the speaker’s timid fears.

The poet can also be detected in the dissonance of steady iambic tetrameter rhythm versus highly irregular rhymes, which suggest that the speaker’s second-rate mind can only fitfully find harmony among clashing ideas. After the opening couplet, for example, the terminal “me” of line 3 finds no closure until line 8 (“misery”), and the poem is also notable for several half-rhymes (faith/scathe, tarn/forlorn, on/one, underneath/death), another experimental device used to psychological ends. Unsettled yet unrelinquished faith strands Tennyson’s speaker in irresolution and makes the poem’s end point as arbitrary as the diction is forced and artificial: “O damned vacillating state!” (190).

Browning, in contrast, depicts a mind unhinged by too much certainty and a doctrine that transmutes divine love into capricious love, hate, and injustice. “Johannes Agricola” first appeared in the January, 1836 Monthly Repository: the Unitarian, socially progressive journal edited by Fox, Browning’s friend. The headnote Browning affixed to the poem – which identified Agricola as the founder of the Antinomians, who believed that “good works do not further, nor evil works hinder salvation; that the child of God cannot sin … that murder, drunkenness, &c. are sins in the wicked but not in him” – would have immediately established an ironic framework for readers. More notable in the history of the dramatic monologue is the poem with which it was paired, “Porphyria” (later retitled “Porphyria’s Lover”), which poses a test case of murder that Agricola and his followers are willing to overlook in a “child of God.” Browning perhaps expected his title to recall Porphyry (c. 234–305), the Greek philosopher who authored Against the Christians, another repudiation of Christ’s example. In 1842 Browning paired the monologues under the label “Madhouse Cells,” providing another frame within which they were to be read. But the 1836 poem was more daring, thrusting readers into a murderer’s mind before they could sense who the speaker was or where the poem was going.

After an odd account of nature’s malevolence in the opening lines (1–4), the poem seems to settle into the tale of a privileged woman’s tawdry affair with a cottager, and the poem momentarily swells from iambic tetrameter to a single line of pentameter in the moment Porphyria gives herself to the speaker (36). In unnervingly direct, ordinary terms the speaker then describes strangling his lover with her own blonde hair and the erotic fulfillment that follows:

I warily oped her lids: again
Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.
And I untightened next the tress
About her neck; her cheek once more
Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss. (44–8)