second edition

Victorian Poetry

Poetry, Poetics and Politics

Isobel Armstrong

VICTORIAN POETRY

In *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, Isobel Armstrong rescued Victorian poetry from its longstanding sepia image as 'a moralised form of romantic verse' and unearthed its often subversive critique of nineteenth-century culture and politics. In this uniquely comprehensive and theoretically astute new edition, Armstrong provides an entirely new preface that notes the key advances in the criticism of Victorian poetry since her classic work was first published in 1993. A new chapter on the alternative *fin de siècle* sees Armstrong discuss Michael Field, Rudyard Kipling, Alice Meynell and a selection of Hardy lyrics. The extensive bibliography acts as a key resource for students and scholars alike.

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VICTORIAN POETRY

Poetry, Poetics and Politics

SECOND EDITION

Isobel Armstrong

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Much has happened in the world of Victorian poetry criticism since the publication of the first edition of this book in 1993. The long nineteenth century has often been the matrix of new forms of thought and critical practice and that is still true today. New scholarly editions have emerged and with them new readings of the scholarship of editing. The steady expansion of work on women's poetry is the most notable development, though we are only just beginning to see criticism that works with male and female texts side by side. Digital Humanities have provided us with online texts and data, from periodical runs to manuscripts, that have created access to the formidably rich materials of Victorian culture – so much so that digital humanities have themselves been newly theorised. The history of the book, the technologies of nineteenth-century print culture and media and the problematising of orality, print culture's dissemination in the market place, poetry's place in state education, the responses of a hitherto unknown readership, have emerged as important branches of study as a result, just as non-canonical writers and poets from the colonies have gained purchase through access to new data. Periodicals have taken a central place in research. In other historical and theoretical contexts there have been important shifts. A turn to affect has been to the benefit of the poetry of this period. New methodological concepts have been generated round Voice and Address. Most dramatic is the overwhelming move to the poetry of the *fin de siècle*, with a consequential diminution of scholarship in the mid-Victorian period. Though there are signs that the 1820s are attracting critics. The emergence of two seemingly oppositional ways of reading have marked and indeed dominated twenty-first-century Victorian poetry criticism, the turn to form and the move to historical poetics, though both are equally alert to prosody and metrics.

The new edition of this book registers these movements through an added bibliography that traces the trajectory of Victorian poetry criticism over the last half century, and where the principal figures exploring new ways of reading Victorian poetry are referenced. Errors have been corrected and some minor adjustments have been made to the original book, but I have not made substantial changes. The final chapter has been shortened and the 'Postscript' deleted in order to create room for a new chapter on the *fin de siècle*, 'Alternative *fins de siècles',* to make

good its omission in the first edition. Otherwise I have not made major changes, not because I believe they are not necessary, but simply because the book is as it is, a book published in 1993.

The reasons for the omission of the late century illuminate the intentions of the original book. I felt even then that criticism was becoming lop sided in its attention to the end of the century, and so the omission of a substantial chapter on late-century poetry was deliberate. It has been gratifying and deeply engaging, however, to read the work of Kipling, Field, Hardy and Meynell in some depth, often revising my earlier readings. I believe this addition is still true to the aims of the book. These were to create a cartography of Victorian poetry that made it readable through its aesthetic, philosophical and political affiliations, the ideas that shaped and animated poetic writing, seen through periodical reviews, the poets' own reading, and the major cultural texts of Victorian thought, from Ruskin to Darwin, Carlyle to Lyell, Pater to Müller, as well as through the cult texts of the formations and coteries to which the poets belonged. This required, above all, in-depth readings of poems. The book is a study of formations and networks, and included little known poets with 'major' figures. The work of labouring-class and working-class poets, Chartists and music hall poets, figured alongside these networks. Women's poetry featured powerfully for me. To the best of my knowledge no other book attempts the same comprehensive range.

Poets speak to their future readers as well as to their contemporaries. I was lucky in the time of writing: the coercions of theory were retreating and new historicism had not yet exerted its later grip, and so it was possible to work with both, and through close reading that moved between them. Though close reading for me meant, not always prosody, but attention to semantics, syntax and contemporary nineteenth-century theories of language.

I have many debts: I thank Polly Dodson and Zoe Meyer of Taylor & Francis for their patience. David Gillott's invaluable scholarship and research prowess has been crucial in creating the bibliography. His meticulous research has been a constant aid. George Levine, Joseph Bristow, Josephine McDonagh, Laura Marcus, Ana Parejo Vadillo, John Plunkett, Anna Henchman and Clara Dawson have been interlocutors providing constant sources of support and advice. I thank Clara Dawson for bibliographical advice. Jan Montesori and Benjamin Westwood helped finesse information. Friends, Steven Connor, Derek Attridge, Mary Hamer, Danny Karlin, Samantha Matthews, John Woolford, Cornelia Pearsell, Lee O'Brien and Daniel Brown have many times offered seminal ideas in conversation. In particular, invitations to speak from Jessica Valdez, Julia Kuehn, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, Warren Boutcher and Lucy Hanks have been invaluable in sharpening ideas, as have the graduate classes I have taught latterly at Harvard, Johns Hopkins and Princeton.

My late husband, Michael Armstrong, will not see this new edition, but he was instrumental in its evolution.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The poetry and poetics of the Victorian period were intertwined, often in arresting ways, with theology, science, philosophy, theories of language and politics. As cultural and intellectual change became progressively more apparent, two traditions of poetry developed, one exploring various strategies for democratic, radical writing, the other developing, in different forms, a conservative poetry. I have taken John Stuart Mill's description of these two movements, 'two systems of concentric circles', as the title of my first chapter, though I do not think these circles met and merged quite as he would have liked them to, particularly if one remembers the working-class and women poets who often worked outside these spheres. However, a study of these two great interacting circles discloses the immense sophistication and subtlety of Victorian poetry. It is a poetry, whether it belongs to democratic or conservative formations, which asks more demanding and radical questions of its culture than other genres of the period, experimenting with forms and poetic language commensurate with this complexity. The novel, with its need to gain the consent of a wide readership, could not afford such experiments. In reading the poets in this way I have excluded much material. But it seemed that this exploration would best reveal how the prolific creativity of these writers belongs recognisably to our own cultural situation and, conversely, exists in sharp separation from it. Victorian culture is our precursor culture, but, like the duck/rabbit, with its mutually exclusive configurations, we find in it important affinities – and differences which are just as important. Victorian poetry was written, for instance, in a society which was not a democracy. On the other hand, that was what Arnold called one of its 'modern problems', and one of the excitements of reading the poetry of this period is to understand the imaginative energy invested in such 'modern problems'. My study begins, of course, before Victoria came to the throne in 1837, because Tennyson and Browning identified 'modern problems' in their early work of the 1830s.

Beyond the horizon of one book, like Pope's mountain peaks, another usually appears, a prospect both pleasurable and daunting. While this book was being completed my work opened up possibilities for further research. Women's poetry and working-class poetry by both men and women are capable of very much more extensive discussion. Anglophone poetry written in Britain's colonial territories

during the nineteenth century is technically 'Victorian' poetry, but it seemed appropriate that such work should be studied by scholars familiar with the history and culture of those regions.

Victorian texts are now being re-edited to the high standards of modern textual scholarship. Where I could not use such modern editions I have cited generally available texts. I was not able to take advantage of the Longman Annotated Texts edition of Browning by John Woolford and Daniel Karlin. Like many, however, I owe an enormous debt to Christopher Ricks's great edition of Tennyson's poetry in the Longman series, which has enabled scholars and critics to explore Tennyson with a depth and richness quite impossible before its appearance. I have benefited from the abundance of criticism of Victorian poetry which has appeared in the last decade. Lack of space has prevented me from referring to it in detail. But the importance of the pioneering work of Martha Vicinus on working-class poetry and W. David Shaw's explorations of Victorian epistemology should not go unmentioned.

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I am grateful to Professor R. A. Foakes for asking me to write a critical history of Victorian poetry, and for his patience and encouragement while it was being written. The greater part of this book was completed while I held a Chair of English at the University of Southampton. I should like to thank Derek Attridge, Frank Stack, Maud Ellmann, Robert Young, Jonathon Sawday, John Peacock, Laura Marcus, Tony Crowley, Peter Middleton and Ken Hirschkop for creating an academic environment in which it was a pleasure to write. Tony Crowley spared time to read and check parts of the manuscript and I benefited from his suggestions and comment. I am grateful in particular to Maud Ellmann for the warmth of her intellectual generosity. Graduate students now themselves teaching in universities were an inspiring and challenging presence. I owe special thanks to Steve Bamlett, Steve Barfield, Joseph Bristow, Andy Cooper, Tom Furniss, Josephine McDonagh, Carl Plasa, Lindsay Smith, Andrew Thacker and Steve Vine. George Levine and Elaine Showalter both discussed the early stages of this book with me and offered valuable comment. I thank the University of Southampton for providing me with funds for research assistance. Dr Catherine Sharrock's energy and enthusiasm were as helpful as her meticulousness. Any shortcomings in the book are my own. Alison Hamlin's patience in preparing the manuscript was as enduring as her cheerfulness. Laurel Brake, Tom Healy, Michael Slater, Andrew Sanders, Carol Watts and Helen Carr provided helpful support during the completion of the book after I moved to Birkbeck College, University of London. Above all I thank P. A. W. Collins for years of inspiration and support.

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INTRODUCTION

Rereading Victorian poetry

What kind of history?

Critical history generally divides literature into blocks, corresponding with literary periods. I begin with the difficulty of thinking about history in this way.

The habit of thinking of literary periods as segments creates the same kind of history that produces it. The Victorian period has always been regarded as isolated between two periods, Romanticism and modernism. Thus Victorian poetry is seen in terms of transition. It is on the way somewhere. It is either on the way from Romantic poetry, or on the way to modernism. It is situated between two kinds of excitement, in which it appears not to participate. What has been called the 'genetic' history of continuous development through phases and periods, a form of history which the Victorians themselves both helped to create and to question, sees Victorian poetry as a gap in that development.[1] Modernism, in spite of its desire to see itself in terms of a break with history, actually endorses that continuity, for a radical break must break with something. And correspondingly it endorses the gap which Victorian poetry is seen to inhabit. The anxieties of modernism, trying to do without history, repress whatever relations the Victorians may seem to bear to twentieth-century writing. Thus Joyce's frivolous 'Lawn Tennyson, gentleman poet' appears dressed for tennis in *Ulysses*. Virginia Woolf dissociates herself from the Victorians in her unscrupulously brilliant impressionistic account of them in *Orlando*.[2] There ivy covers buildings and large families come into being with almost equally magical suddenness. She intuitively registers the drive to produce in Victorian society, whether it is children or industrial goods, and the need to muffle. The eroticisms and the euphemisms of bourgeois capitalism and its ideology, its inordinate excesses and concealments, are embodied in the voluptuous taxidermy of the stuffed sofa.

So the major critical and theoretical movements of the twentieth century have been virtually silent about Victorian poetry. As the stranded remnants of high bourgeois liberalism, the poets have been consigned to sepia. New criticism, encouraged by T. S. Eliot, who said that Tennyson and Browning merely 'ruminated', considered Victorian poetry to lie outside its categories.[3] When Raymond Williams began to theorise the cultural criticism which has been so fruitful in

Culture and Society, he concentrated on the nineteenth-century novel.[4] Feminism likewise made its claims through a critique primarily of the novel.[5] Deconstruction concentrated on Romantic poetry, blatantly periodising in a way which goes against its theoretical preconceptions.[6] No major European critic has seen Victorian poetry as relevant to his or her purpose. It is symbolism and imagism which have proved attractive when the novel was displaced as a centre of interest. Walter Benjamin wrote wonderfully on Baudelaire,[7] but Lukács or Bakhtin on Tennyson would be unthinkable. Oddly, biography in this area *has* flourished. The worse the poets seem to be, the more avidly their lives are recuperated. We 'covet' biography, as Browning once brilliantly said.[8] And biographers have dominated in literary scholarship of the Victorian period, even though Browning turns out to be a brash opportunist and Tennyson a surly and duplicitous snob.[9] An honourably uncovetous study is Lionel Trilling's classic biography of Matthew Arnold.[10]

What, then, can be the motive for writing about Victorian poetry? Is it worth it? The enterprise cannot be justified in terms of the genetic history which would simply fill in the gap, re-create continuity and restore the forgotten. Some principles must govern this reclaiming process beyond the notion of even continuity and positivist accounts of development. For if continuity exists at all, we create it ourselves. There is no unbroken continuity independent of us with its own external process. Foucault's suspicion of positivist history is based on a belief that it is precisely asymmetry, discontinuity and difference, which we also create ourselves, that are important.[11] Nor can this poetry simply be 'revalued', for since value is a function of the unstable movement of current adjustments of aesthetic worth, the likelihood is that a body of literature will be unquestioningly translated into the terms of whatever theory is deemed to be important at the moment. Unless some principles secure revaluation, it becomes simply a means of appropriating new literary territory. However transcendent it may seem, the notion of value is as relativistic and incoherent as positivist history. Too often to 'revalue' the Victorian poets is to claim that they were like us, but inadvertently.

A way of beginning to rediscover the importance of Victorian poetry is to consider the heavy silence surrounding it in the twentieth century as a striking cultural phenomenon in itself. We have to see that silence historically. T. S. Eliot's dismissive account of Tennyson deflects attention from the Tennysonian echoes in *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*. Yeats, virtually quoting Shelley in 'The Second Coming', silently appropriates Tennyson's 'The Kraken' as the governing motive of his poem.[12] We have learned to understand that to constitute something as a gap is a strategy for concealing anxiety. What kind of anxieties could the Victorians have created for the twentieth century and why are they still culturally significant? To clarify these anxieties it is necessary to see what the Victorian poets themselves were worried about.

They thought of themselves as modern. 'Modern', in spite of its long history, has a resurgence as a Victorian term – the 'modern' element in literature (Arnold), 'modern' love (Meredith), a 'modern' landlord (William Allingham).[13] To see yourself as modern is actually to define the contemporary self-consciously

and this is simultaneously an act which historicises the modern. Victorian modernism sees itself as new but it does not, like twentieth-century modernism, conceive itself in terms of a radical break with a past. Victorian modernism, as it emerges in its poetics, describes itself as belonging to a condition of crisis which has emerged directly from economic and cultural change. In fact, Victorian poetics begins to conceptualise the idea of culture as a category and includes itself within the definition. To be modern was to be overwhelmingly secondary. Harold Bloom's term, 'belatedness', would be useful to describe this perception, except that his belatedness is far too restricted. It is narrowed to an essentially personalised oedipal struggle with the precursor poet – Browning and Shelley, Tennyson and Keats, Arnold and Wordsworth. If his term is adopted it must be used to designate a far wider and more consciously searching understanding of what it is to be secondary.[14] The Victorian poets *were* post-Romantic but to understand the political and aesthetic consequences of this it is necessary to see what being post-Romantic entailed. For to be 'new', or 'modern' or 'post-Romantic' was to confront and self-consciously to conceptualise *as* new, elements that are still perceived as the constitutive forms of our own condition. Whether a poet was a subversive reactionary, as Tennyson was, or attempting to write a radical poetry, as Browning was, such a poet was 'modern' or secondary in a number of ways, all of which involved the reformation of the categories of knowledge. A belated poet was post-revolutionary, existing with the constant possibility of mass political upheaval and fundamental change in the structure of society, which meant that the nature of society had to be redefined. Belatedness was post-industrial and post-technological, existing with and theorising the changed relationships and new forms of alienated labour which capitalism was consolidating, and conscious of the predatory search for new areas of exploitation which was creating a new colonial 'outside' to British society. It was post-teleological and scientific, conceiving beliefs, including those of Christianity, anthropologically in terms of belief *systems* and representations through myth. Simply because of its awareness of teleological insecurity, Victorian poetry is arguably the last theological poetry to be written.

Lastly, the supreme condition of posthumousness, it was post-Kantian. This meant, in the first place, that the category of art (and for the Victorians this was almost always poetry) was becoming 'pure'. Art occupied its own area, a self-sufficing aesthetic realm over and against practical experience. It was *outside* the economy of instrumental energies (for in Kant art and technology spring into being simultaneously as necessary opposites). And yet it was at once apart and central, for it had a mediating function, representing and interpreting life. These contradictions were compounded by post-Kantian accounts of representation, which adapted Kant to make both the status and the mode of art problematical by seeing representations as the constructs of consciousness which is always at a remove from what it represents. Thus the possibility of a process of endless redefinition and an ungrounded, unstable series of representations was opened out. So the Victorian poets were the first group of writers to feel that what they

were doing was simply unnecessary and redundant. For the very category of art itself created this redundancy.

The writer who seized the interrelationship of these new conditions – the conditions of being post-revolutionary, post-industrial, post-teleological and post-Kantian – was Carlyle. Carlyle's pathology, which is itself a part of the conditions he describes, has often deflected attention from his understanding of a new historical situation, an understanding as bold as that of Marx, writing a decade after Carlyle in the 1840s. The reactionary and the radical critiques converge. In his essay, 'Signs of the times' (1829), Carlyle perceived that the new distribution of wealth generated in an industrial nation had transformed the structure of society and was 'strangely altering the old relations'. The relationship of labour to the products of labour, in a situation in which 'nothing is now done directly . . . old modes of exertion are discredited and thrown aside', radically changed the conceptualisation of work.[15] Mechanisation, compounding the effect of the division of labour, depersonalised the labourer and arbitrarily removed the products of labour from him, thus opening up a gap between work and its results. Self-creation through work was no longer possible because the *connection* between work and the world which labour supposedly transforms had been severed. The labourer had no control over his products and the visible cause-and-effect relationship in work and its results had been eliminated. Carlyle attributed this to mechanisation, Marx to the nature of capital, but they both describe alienated labour.[16]

Carlyle extended this alienation to political structures. Democracy was a form of alienation and mechanisation because in the same way that products were dissociated from workers and outside their control, political representation was actually a way of dissociating people from relationships by depending on a depersonalised proxy form, the vote, which was empty of content. It is in fact a mere empty 'sign' of the times. (We must remember that none of the poems discussed in this book was written in a full democracy.) The vote is another example of a situation where nothing is done 'directly'.[17] People leave a mark or sign on a voting paper, but nothing else. The paradoxical conservative argument that democracy is the most abstract way of conceiving of people enables him to ask oddly radical questions: what does representation represent? What are signs signs of? In *Sartor Resartus* (1831) Carlyle connects the representational signs of mechanised printing with the nature of money. 'Movable types', he writes punningly, can demobilise armies and create revolutions of democratic reform.

He means, of course, that rapid mechanical reproduction and dissemination of language can influence as never before in history because the printed word can belong to everyone. But he also means that 'type' is movable because printing removes language and places it and its effects beyond the control of the writer. It is subject to arbitrary interpretation and because of this the fixed and universal 'Type', ultimately a theological notion, embodying permanent values, can no longer sustain itself and is the subject of arbitrary signification. Money works in the same way and the currency of money and print are connected. A piece of leather, marked with a sign and exchanged for goods, becomes a representation

or substitute which, separated from the things it represents, can take on varying meaning in circulation and become the subject of arbitrary regulation. Carlyle was as aware as Marx of the capriciousness of money as a metaphorical system. Money and movable types work together as forms of arbitrary power.

> He who first shortened the labour of Copyists by device of *Movable Types* was disbanding hired Armies, and cashiering most Kings and Senates, and creating a whole new Democratic world: he had invented the Art of Printing. The first ground handful of Nitre, Sulphur, and Charcoal drove Monk Schwartz's pestle through the ceiling: what will the last do? Achieve the final undisputed prostration of Force under Thought, of Animal courage under Spiritual. A simple invention it was in the old world Grazier, – sick of lugging his slow Ox about the country till he got it bartered for corn or oil, – to take a piece of Leather, and thereon scratch or stamp the mere Figure of an Ox (or *Pecus*); put it in his pocket, and call it *Pecunia,* Money. Yet hereby did Barter grow Sale, the Leather Money is now Golden and Paper, and all miracles have been out-miracled: for there are Rothschilds and English National Debts; and who has sixpence is Sovereign (to the length of sixpence) over all men; commands Cooks to feed him, Philosophers to teach him, Kings to mount guard over him, – to the length of sixpence.[18]

The move which makes the produce of exploited and alienated labour in a free market structurally similar to alienated political representation, to the uncontrolled representations of language circulating through mechanical printing and to the arbitrary signification of money, brings work, politics, economics and language strikingly together under the problem of representation and the alienated sign. Carlyle himself is torn between conservative dread and celebration but he retrieved a Pyrrhic victory from his analysis by later conceiving the sign as mythos. The *mythos,* the Greek name for 'word', is society's representations, the imaginative symbol by which it lives. The mythos is continually open to new definition. Renewed representations are the means by which change occurs. The mythos, or a view of culture as a series of representations, is the idealist's version of ideology, the product of imaginative and not material conditions. Christianity, Carlyle thought, would be superseded.[19] The mythos creates as many problems as it solves, for if it unifies it also fragments, and if it secures a place for imaginative representation it simultaneously undermines it and makes it vulnerable by allowing it to be perpetually dissolved and recomposed. In fact, the essence of the mythos is its secondariness, its capacity for failing to relate to the circumstances of its production, to be always mismatched, because history is always superseding it. Indeed it contributes to its own supersession by undoing and remaking history. The mythos itself is alienated. It is secondary.

We could find this matrix of problems of which Victorian poetry is a part at many points in the nineteenth century, but Carlyle expresses them most incisively.

They are familiar to anyone reading Romantic poetry, too. But this should not be surprising since, as Carlyle recognised, they belong to fundamental changes wrought at the end of the eighteenth century. It is the habit of marking off Victorian from Romantic which disguises the anxieties common to early and later nineteenth-century writers. But there is a difference, a difference in perception, for Victorian poets lived with these problems in an acute and morbid form because they intensified with continued economic and political change in the nineteenth century. With that change new forms of knowledge arose, knowledge of science in particular, which now demanded negotiation. And Victorian poets had to include, in their comprehension of these conditions, the Romantic experience of them as well. Hence the intensely historicised consciousness I have described. That historicised consciousness is also a deeply politicised consciousness, political in the sense that the displacement of the aesthetic realm into secondariness forces the poet to conceptualise him- or herself as external to and over and against what comes to be seen as life. A crisis of representation both engenders and is engendered by this act of division. There is a multiple fracture, as it were, for life itself, working in contrary motion to the alienation of art, is established as a condition of estrangement. Relations are indirect and mystified where 'nothing is now done directly', where the self separated from nature cannot be created through an economy of harmonious work on the world. Victorian poetry is obsessed with a series of displacements effected by these redefined relations, and helps to bring these redefinitions about. The problems of agency and consciousness, labour, language and representation become central. Teleology is displaced by epistemology and politics because *relationships* and their representation become the contested area, between self and society, self and labour, self and nature, self and language and above all between self and the lover. Gender becomes a primary focus of anxiety and investigation in Victorian poetry which is unparalleled in its preoccupation with sexuality and what it is to love. For the creativity of love epitomises the act of relationship itself and dramatises its vulnerability. Carlyle puts the failure of romantic love at the centre of *Sartor Resartus* and this motivates the politics of the book.[20] And since the terms of both self and other in all these acts of relationship are unstable, the poet constantly works to create their content anew and constantly revises representations of them, making the act of representation a focus of anxiety. It is for this that Tennyson's 'idle' tears are shed (for the tears of the lyric subject precisely do not 'work' but dissolve the world and the self), that Browning's 'infinite passion' is expended in excess of the finite object and for which Christina Rossetti's goblin fruit are exchanged. The effort to renegotiate a content to every relationship between self and the world is the Victorian poet's project. It is a simultaneously personal and cultural project and carries the poet into new genres and a new exploration of language. It entails renegotiating the terms of self and world themselves.

It is possible now to return to the modernists' silence about Victorian poetry. It is clear that the nature of the experiencing subject, the problems of representation,

fiction and language, are just as much the heart of Victorian problems as they are the preoccupations of modernism. The difference is that the Victorians see them as problems, the modernists do not. Where the Victorians strive to give a content to these problems, political, sexual, epistemological, and to formulate a cultural critique, the moderns celebrate the elimination of content. Victorian problems become abstracted, formalised and aestheticised. The difference is ideological, as the stuffing of the Victorian sofa disappears and art becomes self-reflexive and self-referential. Eliot shores up the ruins of a culture with the fragments of art, Yeats strives to make the golden bird of aesthetics sing out of the frenzied images of creation. The modernist repression of the Victorians comes surely from an understanding that the Victorians had anticipated the self-reflexive condition and rejected it. The modernists are haunted by the Victorians because they are haunted by the plenitude of content which eludes them. For them the Victorians are lumpenly ethical or theological.[21] The task of a history of Victorian poetry is to restore the questions of politics, not least sexual politics, and the epistemology and language which belong to it. I have left the generalisations about modernism here flagrantly unsupported in the belief that a study of Victorian poetry will bear them out. It is interesting, though beyond the scope of this study, that postmodernist writers often attribute a teleology to modernism in just the same way that modernists denigrated the teleological Victorians.

I have answered the question of 'what kind of history?' by deciding to concentrate on those moments in Victorian poetry where its cultural project was defined, and to write a series of essays rather than a continuous history, in which the allocation of space to different poets is deliberately uneven. Thus the two fundamentally different intellectual formations, which defined themselves as avant-garde, and to which the early poetry of Browning and Tennyson respectively belonged, are given considerable attention because they engender two kinds of poetry. One depends on aestheticised politics and the other depends on politicised aesthetics, and these traditions evolve and interact later in the century.[22] The coded words 'Grotesque' and 'Type' often refer to a radical and conservative poetry respectively. The poets clustered round these formations and who have now vanished are discussed, not because they have vanished, for often they have vanished with good reason, but because they illuminate the projects of the two groups. In Part II chapters on Clough, Arnold and Morris pursue the debates of the earlier formations. These are followed by two essays on what happened to Tennyson and Browning in the 1850s and by a chapter on women's poetry, where I have chosen to put Christina Rossetti at the centre. This is partly because renewed contemporary feminist interest in Elizabeth Barrett Browning makes the task of writing at length about her poetry less urgent than it used to be. Space can thus be given to the poetry of Mrs Hemans, L. E. L., Dora Greenwell, Jean Ingelow and others in a long and powerful tradition of women's poetry. The experiments of Meredith, Hopkins, Swinburne and James Thomson occupy the last part of this book, experiments which we might call premodernist. The history of Victorian poetry

is the gradual assent to self-reflexive art and the struggle against such an assent. I have not attempted a policy of inclusion, but have decided to write on what seems important to the reconsideration of Victorian poetry now. Therefore Matthew Arnold and Dante Gabriel Rossetti feature less strongly than the customary canon of Victorian poetry might insist. I have also assumed that much of what goes on in the 1890s is pre-empted by earlier poets. I have looked at some working-class writing. But, even accepting these principles of selection, I am well aware, as my Preface points out, how restricted my discussion is.

Though revaluation for its own sake does not seem to me appropriate, it is obvious that I have made a number of value judgements in the cause of rereading Victorian poetry. In the depth and range of their projects and in the beauty and boldness of their experiments with language, Tennyson, Browning and Christina Rossetti stand pre-eminent. If it is incumbent upon the writer of a critical history to ask 'what kind of history?' it is also necessary to ask 'what kind of criticism?' in order to indicate why particular choices have been made.

What kind of criticism?

The most arresting discussions of Victorian poetry recently have come from Marxists, feminists and deconstruction. A critical history cannot be written from outside these debates with a false neutrality, for these are the contexts in which readers will read new discussions and the poets themselves.

Alan Sinfield's is an impressive Marxist intervention which has quite properly shaken up accounts of Victorian poetry,[23] reads Tennyson as a cultural materialist and inevitably sees him, as he was, as a conservative poet. This hindsight enables him to argue that Tennyson's aesthetic solutions to political problems were either timid or straightforwardly reactionary. The poet's evasiveness leads to a perpetual emptying out of signification in which language resorts to a fetishistic preoccupation with its own surfaces rather than being deployed in the service of exploring meaning. But a difficulty emerges in the necessity to establish an unequivocally reactionary Tennyson. In order to pin Tennyson to political and religious positions, the author has to eliminate the possibility of ambiguity in poetic language. Eve Sedgwick's brilliant feminist reading of *The Princess* in *Between Men* adopts rather the same strategy.[24] She argues that far from being a para-feminist poem, as the stated project of *The Princess* insists, Tennyson's poem actually or 'really' deals with the patriarchal homosocial bonding which makes women an object of exchange between men. She makes an impressive analysis of the structure of the poem in order to demonstrate the case. However, she makes her argument stick by first excluding ambiguity, or staying with those elements of ambiguity which corroborate the case. Secondly, the deconstruction of the poem has to take place by the introduction of a very narrow form of intentionality. Tennyson 'meant' to write a poem in celebration of women but the manifest intention of the text is subverted by its latent homosocial desires. This distinction between what is meant and what

happens assumes that the text has a manifest and a latent content, a conscious and unconscious desire. The difficulty about this is that everything that is observed is all there in the text anyway, and it is a strangely arbitrary decision which makes some elements of the text manifest and some latent, some conscious and some unconscious, since all elements of the text are actually manifest. A process of selection has gone on, in which the critic has decided to select an intentional and an unintentional project. To simplify a text's projects and then to invoke the complexities of the text itself to undermine the simple project is an odd procedure. A text is not quite like a patient in analysis and actually anticipates these strategies of deconstruction by enabling them to take place.

The problem of deciding what is 'really' a poet's interests politically or what is 'really' intentional as against unconscious can be circumvented by a more generous understanding of the text as struggle. A text is endless struggle and contention, struggle with a changing project, struggle with the play of ambiguity and contradiction. This is a way of reading which gives equal weight to a text's stated project and the polysemic and possibly wayward meanings it generates. 'The Lotos-Eaters', for instance, can be read as a struggle with an impossible ideology of consciousness, labour and consumption which lays bare the poverty of accounts of social relationships underlying these conceptions in a language which libidinously orchestrates the deranged perceptions and desires of the subject, who is either consumed by work or destroyed by cessation from it. Rather than longing for retreat, the poem struggles with what constitutes the self as divided between labour and the cessation of labour. Its exploration is nearer to Marx's understanding of the estranged labour which converts all energy expended outside work into subhuman or animal experience than to an account of the text as a simple desire for escape and exploitation of resources. The desire for escape is involved, of course, in the struggle with the nature of work. But it is not the primary 'intentional' project of the poem.

To see the text as a complex entity defining and participating in an area of struggle and contention is to make intentionality a much wider and more complex affair and to include the contradictions and uncontrolled nature of language within the text's project. For the escape of language from univocal order becomes one of the text's areas of contention and not part of its latent unconscious. (And, as I have suggested in my discussion of Carlyle, the advantage of this strategy is that the Victorians themselves were aware of the 'escape' of language from control.) Perhaps this encounters the danger of accepting complexity to the extent that we can map deconstructive processes on to the text, and, as it were, leave the text alone with its intricacies and to its ludic activities. To do this, however, would be to attribute to the text a composure with its difficulties which few texts have. It would be precisely not to engage in that understanding of the unsettled nature of the text which deconstruction has elicited. And it ignores the ideological struggles of the text. Post-Derridean criticism, however, tends to ignore the aspect of active struggle in a text. Volosinov, taking up a different form of the Hegelian tradition than the one from which deconstruction stems, puts the struggle with language

at the centre of a text, and such a concentration on language should help in the rereading of Victorian poetry.[25]

A clever critic of Browning has noticed the linguistic intricacy of Victorian poetry and used the strategies of deconstruction in *Browning's Beginnings* to elicit Browning's complexities, but he tends to stay with them rather than to probe what is problematical and conflicting.[26] To concentrate on the ludic energies of language rather than its conflicts is to miss the underlying element of struggle in poetry of this period, its engagement with a content, its political awareness. What is linguistically and formally complex in Victorian poetry seems to me to arise from stress. To understand what is stressful, and why, it is important to link linguistic and formal contradictions to the substantive issues at stake in the poems – issues of politics, gender and epistemology, the problem of relationship and the continual attempts to reinvest the content of self and other. An earlier generation of writers attempted to understand the form of Victorian poetry as the function of a complex of social and psychosocial problems. E. D. H. Johnson, in *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry,* explored the terms of Victorian poetry in relation to an increasingly severe lesion between the poet and society.[27] Robert Langbaum in *The Poetry of Experience* studied the dramatic monologue as an attempted solution to a cultural crisis in which the conceptualisation of the self and its relations acknowledged a split between insight and judgement, empathy and detachment.[28] Though Johnson tends to remain too narrowly with existential subjectivity and Langbaum's readings return a trifle rapidly to the ethical, these books are important in their attempts to read Victorian poetry in a sophisticated way in terms of a cultural analysis, attempts which, along with Morse Peckham's readings of Victorian poetry, seem to have terminated the valuable project they began.[29]

Perhaps what was lacking in these studies (and which may account for the subsequent lack of creative followers) was an account of the language of Victorian poetry in relation to both formal and cultural problems, an attempt to see these things as inseparable from one another. The link between cultural complexities and the complexities of language is indirect but can be perceived. We might start with the nature of language in Victorian poetry. For to read a Victorian poem is to be made acutely aware of the fact that it is made of language. Whether it is the strange, arcane artifice of Tennyson's early poems or the splutter of speech in Browning, the limpid economy of Christina Rossetti, Swinburne's swamping rhythms, Hopkins's muscle-bound syntax, the sheer verbalness of poetry is foregrounded. It is as if the poet's secondariness takes a stand on the self-conscious assertion of the unique discourse of poetry. This is connected with the overdetermination of ambiguity. The open nerve of exposed feeling in Tennyson is registered in a language fraught with ambiguity. Christina Rossetti's distilled exactitude analyses into an equally precise ambiguity. Signification in Browning shifts and lurches almost vertiginously. The structural ambiguities of Romantic syntax have intensified to an extent that coalescing syntax and semantic openness is the norm. In an age of 'movable type' and

mechanical reproduction in which signification moves beyond the immediate control of the writer it is as if the writer can only resort to an openness in advance of the reader, testing out the possibilities of systematic misprision. Such language draws attention to the nature of words as a medium of representation. In the same way poets resort to songs and speech, as if to foreground the act of reading a secondary text, for the song is not sung but read, and the speech is not spoken but written.

Hopkins saw the openness of his contemporaries as anarchy and flux and desperately tried to arrest it, reintroducing an agonised, sundered language of ambiguity in spite of himself.[30] Arnold saw it as the product of disorganised subjectivity, and in a brilliant phrase, summed up nineteenth-century poetry as 'the dialogue of the mind with itself', and attempted to freeze poetry back into classical form.[31] Neither, however, saw that this was a systematic and organised ambiguity. The doubleness of language is not local but structural. It must be read closely, not loosely. It is not the disorganised expression of subjectivity but a way of exploring and interrogating the grounds of its representation. What the Victorian poet achieved was often quite literally two concurrent poems in the same words.

Schopenhauer wrote of the lyric poet as uttering between two poles of feeling, between the pure undivided condition of unified selfhood and the needy, fracturing self-awareness of the interrogating consciousness.[32] The Victorian poet does not swing between these two forms of utterance but dramatises and objectifies their simultaneous existence. There is a kind of duplicity involved here, for the poet often invites the simple reading by presenting a poem as lyric expression as the perceiving subject speaks. Mariana's lament or Fra Lippo Lippi's apologetics are expressions, indeed, composed in an expressive form. But in a feat of recomposition and externalisation the poem turns its expressive utterance around so that it becomes the opposite of itself, not only the *subject's* utterance but the *object* of analysis and critique. It is, as it were, reclassified as drama in the act of being literal lyric expression. To re-order lyric expression as drama is to give it a new content and to introduce the possibility of interrogation and critique. Mariana's torture in isolation, for instance, is the utterance of a subjective psychological condition, but that psychological expression is reversed into being the object of analysis and restructured as a symptomatic form by the act of narration, which draws attention to the reiterated refrain of the poem as Mariana's speech, speech which attempts to arrest temporality while time moves on in the narrator's commentary. The poignant expression of exclusion to which Mariana's state gives rise, and which is reiterated in the marking of barriers – the moat itself, the gate with clinking latch, the curtained casement, the hinged doors – is simultaneously an analysis of the hypersensitive hysteria induced by the coercion of sexual taboo. These are hymenal taboos, which Mariana is induced, by a cultural consensus which is hidden from her, to experience as her own condition. Hidden from her, but not from the poem, the barriers are man-made, cunningly constructed through the material fabric of the house she inhabits, the enclosed spaces in which she is

confined. It is the narrative voice which describes these spaces, not Mariana as speaker.

The dramatic nature of Victorian poetry was understood by its earliest critics, by W. J. Fox and Arthur Hallam in particular, but seems to have been lost to later readers.[33] Twentieth-century readers have been right to see the dramatic monologue as the primary Victorian genre, even though they have too often codified it in terms of technical features. Other devices, such as the framed narrative or the dream, dialogue or parody, are related to it. All enable double forms to emerge. Rather than to elicit its technical features, it is preferable to see what this dramatic form enabled the poet to explore. By seeing utterance both as subject and as object, it was possible for the poet to explore expressive psychological forms simultaneously as psychological conditions *and* as constructs, the phenomenology of a culture, projections which indicate the structure of relationships. I have called this objectification of consciousness a phenomenological form because phenomenology seeks to describe and analyse the manifestations of consciousness rather than its internal condition. Thus such a reading relates consciousness to the external forms of the culture in which it exists. The gap between subjective and objective readings often initiates a debate between a subject-centred or expressive and a phenomenological or analytical reading, but above all it draws attention to the act of representation, the act of relationship and the mediations of language, different in a psychological and in a phenomenological world.

The double poem is a deeply sceptical form. It draws attention to the epistemology which governs the construction of the self and its relationships and to the cultural conditions in which those relationships are made. It is an expressive model and an epistemological model simultaneously. Epistemological and hermeneutic problems are built into its very form, for interpretation, and what the act of interpretation involves, are questioned in the very existence of the double model. It must expose relationships of power, for the epistemological reading will explore things of which the expressive reading is unaware and go beyond the experience of the lyric speaker. It is inveterately political not only because it opens up an exploration of the unstable entities of self and world and the simultaneous problems of representation and interpretation, but because it is founded on debate and contest. It has to give the entities of self and world a provisional content in order to dramatise the debate. The Victorian dramatic poem is not the dialogue of the mind with itself so much as the dialogue of the poem with itself, using the dialogue of the mind, the labour of the self on the world, as its lyric entry into the phenomenological world which is a labour on that labour. If the poet knows that the act of representation is fraught with problems, and if it is not clear to what misprisions the poem might be appropriated, then a structure which analyses precisely that uncertainty and which makes that uncertainty belong to struggle and debate, a structure which fills that uncertainty with content, is the surest way to establish poetic form. The surest way to answer uncertainty is creative agnosticism.

The dialogue created by the debates between expressive and phenomenological modes might seem to lead to a kind of poetry which can be described as 'dialogic' in Bakhtin's terms. Bakhtin denied poetry the dialogic form on the ground that it was irreducibly monologic, the product of a single, unified and non-conflictual poetic voice. It would be easy to educe examples of poetry, and particularly Victorian poems, which suggest otherwise, but there are difficulties in assimilating Victorian poetry to a dialogic model, although this is a step in the right direction.[34] The struggle between two kinds of reading is highly complex. It is not a question of a simple dialogue or dialectic form in which the opposition between two terms is fixed and settled. Such an opposition too often is what the dialogic has come to mean. But we have only to look at 'Mariana' to see that the cultural or phenomenological reading which changes the status of Mariana's utterance as lyric expression is subject to unsettling pressures in its turn. In the phenomenological reading, Mariana's anguish becomes no longer something for which she is psychologically responsible. When under the scrutiny of phenomenological critique the terrible privacy of her obsessional condition, her inability to gaze on the external world except at night, becomes the function of a death wish to which she has been induced without fully realising that she has been driven to it. On the other hand, this suicidal condition asks questions of the cultural reading. Is not the phenomenological reading too ready to concede that this is a situation 'without hope of change', too ready to metaphorise Mariana's emotions in terms of projection onto the external world ('blackest moss', 'blacken'd water'), which becomes an extension of her condition even though the landscape operates quite independently of her? The external world becomes both her psychic environment and an existence from which she is irretrievably estranged. The phenomenological reading seems uncertain of these relations. Is it not too ready to narrow the grounds of feminine sexuality as the passive object of experience (notice the 'wooing wind')? Thus it arrives at a self-fulfilling reading of estrangement in which Mariana *must* be alienated. And so the status of the phenomenological reading is changed. It cannot be metacommentary with clean hands entirely in charge of the grounds of debate. And this reflects back onto Mariana as subject. Her loathing of the day and the derangement of her perception is a rebellious act in this context, and questions have to be asked about her autonomy and the extent of her passivity. It might well be that the fragmented self she becomes is both cause and effect of a particular way of conceiving of feminine subjectivity. And it is difficult to say whether Mariana's condition is a violent protest or a passive response to such conceptions of the feminine. What is here is nothing so straightforward as a simple opposition but a dynamic text in which lyric description and analysis are repeatedly redefining the terms of a question and contending for its ground. To probe the status of one form of utterance is to call forth an analysis of the status of *that* interpretation, and so on. If this is a dialogue or a dialectical form it is so in all the antagonistic complexity of the Hegelian master–slave dialectic in which the mediations between different positions are so rapid and subtle, so continually changing places in the relationship of authority, that the play of difference can

hardly be resolved. Bakhtin's dialogism is clearly derived from this, indeed, just as Volosinov's (preferable to me) linguistic model is, but it is worth going back to Hegel to restate the complexity of the case. For the status of the hermeneutic act is continually reinvestigated in the double poem at the same time as the terms of the struggle are invested with a new content.

To see the text as struggle continually investing terms with a new content is to see it as a responsive rather than as a symptomatic discourse. Both the Marxist and feminist readings to which I have referred consider the Victorian poem in different ways as a symptom of the political unconscious and thus irrevocably blind to its own meaning. No text can account for the way it is read in future cultures but it can establish the grounds of the struggle for meaning. There is a difference between what is blindfold and what is unpredictable. What I would call a new Hegelian reading avoids symptomatic interpretations, just as it avoids the endless ludic contradictions which sometimes emerge from deconstruction. A text which struggles with the logic of its own contradictions is in any case arguably nearer, though not identical with, Derridean principles, in which a text is threatened by collapse from internal oppositions, than to the systematic incoherence which deconstruction sometimes elicits.

True to its status as a transitional form Victorian poetry has either been used to confirm a general critical theory, as in the readings of Bloom, or been seen simply as an instance of a particular historical case, for which a particular critical reading is necessary, as in the readings of Johnson or Langbaum. What I have done is to develop the political implications of Johnson's work and the epistemological implications of Langbaum. Langbaum is also concerned with the double reading, though his way of seeing the judgemental reading as a *control* on the empathetic reading seems to me to state the problem too rigidly in moral rather than analytical terms. It is without that sense of a new content which evolves when the subjective reading reverses into critique and so back and forth between critique and expressive form. 'Mariana' is an exemplary case of this process.

When the full importance of Victorian poetry is recognised, however, it becomes apparent that it need not be discussed either as illustrative material for theory or as a particular case. It surely marks an extraordinarily self-conscious moment of awareness in history. A poetic form and a language were evolved which not only make possible a sophisticated exploration of new categories of knowledge in modern culture but also the philosophical criticism adequate to it. The sense of secondariness with which Victorian poetry comes into being produces the double poem, two poems in one. The double poem, with its systematically ambiguous language, out of which expressive and phenomenological readings emerge, is a structure commensurate with the 'movable type' which Carlyle saw as both the repercussion and the cause of shifts in nineteenth-century culture. The double poem belongs to a post-teleological, post-revolutionary, post-industrial and post-Kantian world and its interrelated manifestations. The double poem signifies a godless, non-teleological world because as soon as two readings become possible and necessary, the permanent and universal categories of the 'type' dissolve. For

the 'type' is of course an ancient theological word, meaning those fixed categories of thought and language ordained by God which governed relationships, well before it becomes associated with print. The double reading inevitably dissolves such fixity, just as it means a shift from ontology to epistemology, a shift from investigating the grounds of being to a sceptical interrogation of the grounds of knowledge, which becomes phenomenology, not belief. In a post-revolutionary world in which power is supposedly vested in many rather than a privileged class, the double poem dramatises relationships of power. In the twofold reading, struggle is structurally necessary and becomes the organising principle, as critique successively challenges and redefines critique. Movable type, where technology mobilises the logos, makes the process of signification a political matter as it opens up a struggle for the meaning of words which is part of the relations of power explored through the structures of the poem. Hence the poet's systematic exploration of ambiguity. This reveals not only the confounding complexities of language and the anxieties this generates but boldly establishes that play of possibility in which meaning can be decided. It draws attention to the fact that meaning *is* decided by cultural consensus even while its ambiguity offers the possibility of challenging that consensus through the double reading. The poem of the post-industrial world recognises the displacement of relationships in its structure as well as in its language. The formal ploy in which the uttering subject becomes object and the poem reverses relationships not once but many times indicates that epistemological uneasiness in which subject and object, self and world, are no longer in lucid relation with one another but have to be perpetually redefined. The structure of the double poem emerges from the condition in which self-creation in the world is no longer straightforward but indirect and problematical and in which, as Carlyle said, 'nothing is done directly'. Finally, the double structure inevitably draws attention to the act of interpretation, since one reading encounters another and moves to a new content in the process. Hermeneutic self-consciousness leads in its turn to concentration on the nature of representation, for if interpretation is in question as a construct, so also are the categories of thought it deals with. In a post-Kantian world the double poem becomes a representation of representation, not only secondary historically but a second-order activity in itself. Mariana's poignant utterance is framed as the solipsistic constructions of her world and this reflects back on the complexity of the framing process which presents that self-enclosed utterance. It too cannot be exempted from the second-order status. If one utterance is a representation, so is the other. Both are ideological and both confront one another.

It would not be too much to claim that the genesis of modern form and its *problems* arise in the double poem, just as the possibilities for a criticism which interrogates the nature of the speaking subject and deconstructs the contradictory assumptions of the text are generated out of the double reading. The philosophical premises for a criticism commensurate with this complexity arise in the twentieth century and not in the nineteenth century but they follow from nineteenth-century poetic experiment which, I suggest, is bolder and more

self-conscious than most poetry subsequent to it. This is not to argue neatly that Victorian poetry should be studied because it 'produces' and confirms the deconstructive moment and that here we have the 'original' deconstructive form. Rather it should be recognised that the deconstructive moment *is* a historical moment, and that Victorian poetry anticipates its strategies and moves beyond it. For, committed to going through the process of 'movable type', the double poem confronts the scepticism of the deconstructive moment and challenges it. Victorian poems are sceptical and affirmative simultaneously for they compel a strenuous reading and assume an active reader who will participate in the struggle of the lyric voice, a reader with choices to make, choices which are created by the terms of the poem itself. The active reader is compelled to be internal to the poem's contradictions and recomposes the poem's processes in the act of comprehending them as ideological struggle. There is no end to struggle because there is no end to the creative constructs and the renewal of content which its energy brings forth.

Rereading Victorian poetry, then, involves a reconsideration of the way we conceptualise history and culture, and the way we see the politics of poetry. It also involves rethinking some of the major criticism of this century, Marxist and feminist criticism and deconstruction, and considering how the language and form of Victorian poetry question the theories they have developed. Putting the stuffing back into the Victorian sofa then becomes a process of reconstruction which asks living questions.

Throughout this introduction I have used Tennyson's 'Mariana' as a running commentary on the arguments I have put forward about the double poem and its significance. As a tail-piece I include a brief discussion of Browning's 'Love among the Ruins' to indicate how the general principles discussed above might work.

The risk-taking, ambiguous forms of the double lyric are present in the first poem in *Men and Women,* 'Love among the Ruins'. Why was this poem, an ostensibly affirmative statement of subjective values, 'love is best', given primacy in the two volumes, and how is its title to be interpreted – *Love* among the Ruins, Love among the *Ruins*? Are these teleological as well as material ruins? Both present and past reject an ordered universe, one by depending on private subjectivity and the other by depending on violence. The different emphases on 'Love' and 'Ruins' enunciate contending terms, the certainties of private passion over and against a communal but now fragmented history and culture which has become simply archaeology. Perhaps Volney's *The Ruins of Empire* (1791) is behind the title of the poem.[35]

A lover anticipates a meeting with a girl on the site of an unnamed, obliterated city – Babylon, Rome, anywhere. The poem looks like a simple antithesis between the consummation of intense passion and the wasteful aggression, violence and cupidity of a vanished society – a primitive will to power through war and gold. It is arranged as a series of flowing lines which alternate with curt, abrupt, single anapaests and are punctuated by them like a drum beat. (Browning rearranged the stanzas after 1855 but this does not affect the essential form of the poem.) The short lines mockingly disrupt the easy, homogeneous flow of the long lines but – and

a conviction of the strangeness of *this* poem grows – the long lines make perfect sense without them. The short lines can be repressed. Except for the fifth and the last stanza and for the completion of each stanza, they are inessential. It is as if another more critical language is refusing to be excluded and threatening private feeling with a mocking analysis of its limitations. This is movable type, or removable type, in action. There are two poems here. One is a simple celebration of private feeling, which attempts to exclude everything but the moment of union. The other is an assent to, or at least a recognition of, the subversive and dangerous energies of an alien culture, its aggression and power and its predominantly male hierarchy.

> Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles,
>   Miles and miles
> On the solitary pastures where our sheep
>   Half-asleep
> Tinkle homeward thro' the twilight, stray or stop
>   As they crop –
> Was the site once of a city great and gay,
>   (So they say). . . .
>
> (i)
>
> All the mountains topped with temples, all the glades'
>   Colonnades,
> All the causeys, bridges, aqueducts, – and then,
>   All the men!
> When I do come, she will speak not, she will stand. . . .
>
> (vi)

In the first stanza the short lines impart a suspect tedium and torpor to the pastoral, a tedium which is absent without them. The plenitude of the city and above all its populace is repressed in the sixth stanza without the short lines to insist upon them. 'Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles,/On the solitary pastures where our sheep//Tinkle homeward thro' the twilight'. 'All the causeys, bridges, aqueducts, – and then,/When I do come, she will speak not'. 'Shut them in', the lover says of the competitive violences of the past, but with inadvertent ambiguity. The long lines attempt to shut away the mocking pressure of the half-lines, but they are shut *into* the poem, for the lovers' privacy is defined against them. 'Love is best' is defensively defined against the ironies and energies the short lines represent. The relationship between the long and short lines, each a critique of the other, is what enables the poem to be both actor and spectator of itself. Browning knew about the hubris of lovers, and gives assent to passionate feeling, but subjective experience becomes its opposite, the object of investigation. It shuts out history, culture, here. The lovers exist in 'undistinguished grey' (v), extra-historical, extra-cultural, contextless, not redeeming, but perpetuating 'the Ruins' about them. In stanza v history converges on them as the violent figures of the past, 'breathless, dumb', are allowed to share the same syntax with the

girl who is also, the structure allows, 'breathless, dumb'. The will to see passion as self-sufficing is as aggressive and exclusive as the desires of the dead society for triumph and empire. All history waits 'Till *I* come', one form of the syntax hubristically proposes. Revelation in history is reserved for the puny lover. There is a struggle between two interpretations of the same syntax here and this culminates the series of reversals in which the priorities of the language of feeling and its values and the language of history change places as first one and then another achieves dominance. The pressures of power explored in the structure of the post-revolutionary double poem are apparent here.

'Love among the Ruins', written the day after 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came' and sharing with it the landscape of ruin and tower, initiates *Men and Women* because it enacts and subverts a contemporary mythos inherited from Romantic values, a myth about the all-sufficing energies of mutual passion and the setting up of private enclaves of feeling against the crude values of threatening culture. But the structure of the poem makes it clear that this myth is a construct and entails and depends upon another more seductive but equally vitiating myth. The values of private passion necessarily entail a structuring of social and cultural relationships in terms of fracture, the splitting off of individuals from an alien culture. The lesions and breakages which come into being in the arrangement of the long and short lines are inherent in the account of isolated human nature, the myth of estrangement, the fall from a unified culture.

> How different with us moderns! With us too the image of the human species is projected in magnified form into separate individuals – but as fragments, not in different combinations. . . . We see not merely individual, but whole classes of men, developing but one part of their potentialities. . . .
>
> It was civilisation itself which inflicted this wound upon modern man. Once the increase of empirical knowledge, and more exact modes of thought, made sharper divisions between the sciences inevitable, and once the increasingly complex machinery of State necessitated a more rigorous separation of ranks and operations, then the inner unity of human nature was severed too, and a disastrous conflict set its harmonious powers at variance.[36]

This is Schiller defining the fractures of modern scientific culture. 'Love among the Ruins', more savagely controlled and ironical, points to the fallaciousness of the account of original unity as well as analysing in its form the structure of estrangement. Browning is likely to have found this kind of cultural diagnosis in Carlyle as well as directly from the German writing which was frequently Carlyle's source. In *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle asked for a new *mythos* and new *symbols* to emerge from the ruins of the old. The 'Genius of Mechanism' smothers the soul, and the poet, a phoenix out of the fire (one is reminded of the fiery landscape at the end of 'Childe Roland'), 'Prometheus-like can shape new symbols', a

Shelleyan task, 'and bring new Fire from Heaven to fix it there'. Symbols emerge out of silence, and 'Fantasy', the Promethean imagination, 'plays into the small prose domain of sense'.[37] 'Love among the Ruins' is about the exhaustion of symbol and the emergence of a new and impoverished mythos. However, the new symbol creates a silence in which the poet's Promethean task can, perhaps, begin again. The girl, 'breathless, dumb', 'will speak not'. Perhaps when she *does* speak, instead of being the addressee of a lover haunted by the male culture of the past, the present can be changed. After all, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was writing *Aurora Leigh* (1856) when this poem was being written. But the poem carries with it the possibility that the cry for mythos may itself be a symptom of exhaustion. The last cry of secondariness. It stands at the head of *Men and Women* because it implicitly interrogates the possibility of creating a Promethean symbol in a culture which defines itself as fragmented. It knows itself as a sceptical representation of the mythos and understands its second-order status. Lawrence intuitively and perhaps unconsciously grasped something of the meaning of 'Love among the Ruins' when he made Birkin quote it as he approaches London with Gerald in *Women In Love* (chapter 5). He quotes it just after he is wondering whether it is possible to have a total and all-sufficing relationship with a woman and just before he wonders if twentieth-century culture is not so exhausted that it should be destroyed: 'Humanity is a dead letter' because it can produce no new embodiment of 'the incomprehensible'. Thus he arrives at Carlyle's definition of symbol. Browning's poem is uncannily prescient: it sees just how long the myths about myth and cultural exhaustion and fragmentation might last. It is a step ahead of Lawrence, however, because it refuses the romantic account of the feminine with which Birkin struggles.

The regressing ironies of this poem mean that it refuses to privilege the statement 'love is best'. But this *is* a double poem, and sceptical and affirmative readings struggle actively with one another to gain the ascendent in a strenuous effort to reorder the processes of the poem's movable type. The deficiencies and impoverishment of the subjectivist confessional are declared through the critique mounted by the energy of past society. The violence of that society, however, establishes the need for love and negatively enables the statement 'love is best' to be given a new content. The reordering is always provisional, always dependent on the evolution of new possibilities from the particulars of the poem, but it is necessarily a continuous process of construction and reconstruction.

This post-Hegelian reading recognises the antagonistic struggle of dialectic rather than its resolutions or its free play. It assumes that an active ideological creativity is constitutively at work in the poem's structure and language and is thus necessarily a political and cultural way of reading. Such a criticism is particularly appropriate to Victorian poetry, perhaps, but it is relevant to all nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry. Since Victorian poetry is the most sophisticated poetic form, and the most politically complex, to arise in the past two hundred years it is proper that Victorian poems should generate principles for reading the poetry of the past two hundred years.

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Part I

CONSERVATIVE AND BENTHAMITE AESTHETICS OF THE AVANT-GARDE

Tennyson and Browning in the 1830s

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1

TWO SYSTEMS OF CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

One fact, however, is sufficiently evident, that we are in a state of transition: that old things are passing away and giving place to new; and that society is in the very act, an act ever attended with convulsive throes and conflicting fears and hopes, of assuming a new form, – brighter and happier may it be than all the past! Whichever way we look we behold symptoms of change. The billows are tossing and tumbling, heaving, rolling and breaking, at every point of the compass. The public mind has outgrown public institutions, which must soon be shattered unless possessed of flexibility to admit of a proportionate expansion. Our forms, laws, establishments, whether for the purpose of education, commerce, politics, or religion, are become so insufficient to represent the intelligence, harmonize with the condition, satisfy the wants, and realize the desires of the community that they must evidently undergo extensive changes, – gradual and peaceful changes it is to be hoped. . . . The work has commenced, we are in the process of renovation; in some departments its rate may be more rapid than in others, but it extends to all. The conflict for reform in the Legislature is but the type and index of a wider, deeper, and mightier conflict between principles which began their struggle for mastery over man in the Garden of Eden, and shall continue till the Kingdoms of this world become the Kingdoms of our God and of his Christ. That struggle is like the elemental strife of the material world. It is like the storm that clears the heavens. It is the process by which Providence conducts mankind to higher and yet higher degrees of knowledge and happiness.

According to the law of progress, both individual and social, by which God governs the world, the transition is made from one gradation of order, harmony, and beauty to a higher gradation, by the intervention of a state of apparent confusion and conflict. . . .

The question of reform in the representation of the people could never have arisen into its present interest and importance but in connexion with a strong and general conviction of the necessity of a multitude of other changes which it is expected will be facilitated by the adoption of that

measure. The Church cannot remain as it is; its temples have long ceased to be national, in any other respect save that of the taxation by which they are supported. . . . The Law cannot remain as it is . . . public opinion demands more than any man will be found bold enough to propose in an unreformed parliament . . . almost every man who has either had occasion to enforce the payment of a just debt, or to resist an unfair demand, is impatient of the needless delay, complication, and expense of the present system. Education cannot remain as it is. The poor must be educated, though it be at the public expense . . . nor will the word education continue to designate merely reading and writing for the offspring of poor parents, and Latin and Greek for that of the rich ones. Science, history, and morals, the elements of real knowledge, are ceasing to be excluded. . . . The means for disseminating information cannot remain as they are. The taxes on paper, books, newspapers etc., have been rightly described as taxes on knowledge. They intercept information in its passage to the people. . . . They suppress or restrict. . . . Above all, the relative condition of the working class cannot remain the same. A different principle in the distribution of wealth must gradually make its way into society, and speedily commence its operation. It cannot be necessary to civilized society, that the producers of its wealth should be kept on the very borders of starvation, and paupers succeed to paupers, world without end. It cannot be necessary that the interests of the lower classes, and of all above them, should be in a state of interminable and bitter hostility. . . . These evils have made themselves felt through the whole frame of society. The perception of them has generated the science of political economy.

(W. J. Fox, *Monthly Repository*)[1]

One duty I still feel I have to perform . . . it is my last but my greatest: when I think of it, I am full of hope, and to it all my thoughts and feelings turn: It is to lend my hand to do the great work of regenerating England, not by Political institutions! not by extrinsic and conventional forms! By a higher and a holier work, by breathing into her the vigorous feeling of a Poet, and a Religious man, by pouring out the dull and stagnant blood which circulates in her veins, to replenish them with a youthful stream, fresh from the heart . . . my hope is in ourselves [R. C. Trench, John Sterling, F. D. Maurice], and in that spirit of a higher feeling which the young men of this age universally possess. . . . Wordsworth has begun. . . . My plan of operation I will expound . . . thus much, that we must strike through Education, and first at the Universities. . . . We shall do nothing until we get rid of AntiChrist, and he walks abroad boldly in a Doctor of Divinity's hood, and his thought and cry are 'Nego!'

(Letter from John Kemble to William Bodham Donne, from Germany, 1829)[2]

> The country is in a more awful state than you can well conceive. . . . While I write Maddingley [sic], or some adjoining village, is in a state of conflagration, and the sky above is coloured flame-red. This is one of a thousand such actions committed daily through England. The laws are almost suspended; the money of foreign factions is at work with a population exasperated into reckless fury.
>
> (Letter from Arthur Hallam to Richard Chenevix Trench, 1830)[3]

The passages which introduce this chapter have a characteristic rhetoric. William Johnson Fox, writing as editor of a radical Utilitarian and Unitarian journal at the beginning of 1832, the year of the great Reform Bill, argues passionately for fundamental structural change in the country's institutions, in religion, parliamentary representation, the law, education, a change which necessitates the redistribution of wealth. Nothing, he reiterates, can 'remain as it is'. It is a pre-eminently public debate, mounted through the polemic of the printed word in the cadences of political oratory. The second group of quotations is from the private letters of a university coterie, the opposite pole from public journalism, a group of friends who all belonged to an exclusive society, the Cambridge Apostles, in the 1830s. Written with the sophisticated élan of shared intimacy, the project under discussion is not political change but the 'regeneration' of society, not revolution, as Arthur Hallam's sickened fear of the rick-burners round Cambridge indicates, but a transformation of the mind of the country. They were as much against the 1832 Reform Bill as Fox was for it. Browning was associated with Fox and the *Monthly Repository* group, Tennyson belonged to the Apostles. These groups represent two quite different intellectual formations in the 1830s. Yet both conceived themselves as avant-garde, experimenting with the new in political, theological and aesthetic matters, defining new categories and defamiliarising the old. Avant-garde as a term for experimental minority groups had not been invented. But arguably these two formations were the first recognisably avant-garde groups to emerge in Britain. Both were in the process of defining what minority groups of intellectuals might mean in a culture, and since the very notion of a culture was new, and the idea of the minority intellectual, this entailed constructing the idea of culture and defining what in particular a literary culture was. While the *Monthly Repository* was dissenting and radical, and the Apostles were subversive conservatives nominally assenting to the Anglican establishment, they did have some things in common. Both groups belonged to a new middle-class intelligentsia who repudiated aristocratic privilege and wanted change. Both saw themselves as living in a time of unprecedented crisis when poverty was endemic and violence ever possible. By virtue of dissent the radicals were excluded from power. Theoretically, the Apostles were not. However, both groups explored a theology which transgressed orthodoxy and both saw literature and politics as inseparable from one another. In fact, both groups are at the beginnings of the conceptualisation of literature and the 'literary' as a distinct category with a particularly important part to play in the education of a mass culture.

Later in the century these groups, or their formative ideas, interpenetrated and together developed the terms in which literature, and poetry in particular, was to be discussed. They were both part of the 'shock' spreading from what John Stuart Mill described in 1838 as 'two systems of concentric circles' created by Bentham, the 'Progressive', on the one hand, and Coleridge, the 'Conservative', on the other.[4] The way in which they 'meet and intersect' conditions the form of discussions of poetry and poetry itself. But in the early 1830s the experience of crisis and the radical intellectual and political events which Mill both describes and participated in were perceived differently by each group. To borrow from Walter Benjamin's distinction, the *Monthly Repository* group developed a politicised aesthetics while the Apostles developed an aestheticised politics. This chapter describes what this meant for the early work of Tennyson and Browning and the poets surrounding them. But since the way these groups conceptualised poetry and culture is fundamentally important to the nature of Victorian poetry up to the time of the early Yeats and Hardy, this chapter explores the formative moment of Victorian poetry at some length. For radicals and conservatives were both, as Mill put it, 'the greater questioner of things established'.[5] Both were writing at the limits of what has been called the conventional 'doxa'. One group developed Benthamite thought, the other the thought of the late Coleridge.[6] One wrote at the limit of the radical, one at the limit of the conservative doxa. So much so that there are no real equivalents for these formations in twentieth-century thought and one must be cautious about using terminology.

There is no simple reflective relationship between the poets and the intellectual positions of the groups to which they were connected, no straightforward co-relation between theory and praxis. Rather, both Tennyson and Browning belonged to intellectual formations developing strenuous and often contradictory debates. Both poets are actively in dialogue with the ideas circulating in their groups. Nevertheless their intellectual provenance is recognisable. Tennyson is marked by the dazzling brilliance and insouciance of Arthur Hallam and Browning by the energetic polemic of William Johnson Fox, whom he called his literary godfather. Hallam reviewed Tennyson's early poems in 1831. Fox printed some of Browning's earlier poems in the *Monthly Repository* and reviewed *Pauline* in 1833. Indeed, since *Pauline* sold no copies it did not exist except in the pages of the *Monthly Repository*.

Before considering the early work of Tennyson and Browning it is important to look briefly at the debates being negotiated in each group to see what possibilities open up for two kinds of art. In both a highly self-conscious debate on the interconnected questions, literature and ideology, consciousness and knowledge, language and the nature of class, culture, race and gender, was being pursued on very different lines. Though these headings are not strictly separable they are convenient and will indicate the sophistication of the enterprise undertaken both by the *Monthly Repository* and the Apostles. Discussion of the individual poets later in the chapter will elaborate this preliminary account of two formations.

When W. J. Fox took over the *Monthly Repository* in the early 1830s (he became editor in 1828 and bought it in 1831) it is clear that its project changed. From being a sectarian and Unitarian organ with radical traditions it became a more overtly political journal with the aim of forging a Utilitarian, Benthamite aesthetic. Fox's aim was to deepen and enrich the Benthamite tradition by correcting misapprehensions of it and associating it above all with literature. His reading of Benthamism meant in the first place, the dissemination of *pleasure* in its widest sense, the democratisation of literature and the exploration of the links between literature and politics. These links were not simply between the *Zeitgeist* or a loosely defined 'spirit of the age' but involve the conceptualising of what we would now call an ideological relation between literature and the power structure of society.

It is typical of Fox that he welcomed album books, popular gatherings of contemporary writing for the middle classes, while Tennyson viewed them with contempt or professed contempt. Fox was excited by these as sociological phenomena indicating the wider dissemination of literature, and commented on the accessibility of the writing in contrast to the narrow and intimidating presentation of tales and poems in former times.[7] This political and sociological awareness is part of a *Monthly Repository* tradition: in 1820, Thomas Noon Talfourd had attacked Hazlitt's anti-levelling account of art, in which Hazlitt had described the 'literature of power' in hierarchical terms as an aristocracy of letters, distinguishing the aristocracy of taste from actual political democracy. Talfourd saw this celebration of arbitrary power and superstitious faith as an ideological manipulation for political purposes which went back to Burke, who 'made the cause of tyranny appear the cause of the imagination and the affections'.[8] Hazlitt's radical and Unitarian background must have made this resort to the reactionary a major betrayal. It does not seem to have occurred to Talfourd that Hazlitt was being ironical, so serious is his democratic feeling. Fox's constant attack on Scott and his politics of privilege are of a piece with such positions.[9] But he went much further than other writers to make 'the imagination and the affections' belong to a radical analysis. Talfourd had argued that particular imaginative associations do not belong of necessity to evocations of power. They can be directed towards a range of phenomena, particularly the natural landscape which, he thought (perhaps naively), is innocent of class. Imaginative associations can be constructed through culture. Fox carried this analysis much further into cultural relativism. A proper democratic poetry should take modern subjects and scenes such as the French Revolution or the prisons as its materials. It should also become a poetry of the poor: and poetry *for* the poor or *about* the poor would be different from poetry *by* the poor because the history of the working class is formed in different circumstances. He did not seem to be aware that there already *was* a working-class poetry of broadside ballads and street songs for the barely literate which often took the workhouse and the factory as their theme, but instead he thought of this as a poetry of the future. Poetry will differ, and the interpretation of poetry will differ, according to the 'peculiar mental habits' of generations and classes.[10] In other words, it is historically specific.

In 1832 the *Monthly Repository* published a series of surveys of Herder's work.[11] Fox has clearly read Herder as a cultural relativist – in contrast to the Apostles who read him as the theorist of historical continuity and racial and cultural cohesion. His view that poetry is 'incarnate' in different cultural forms at different points in history, that it depends on class and country, barbaric and civilised, oriental or northern environments, comes out of Herder, who developed the recognisably modern and intertwined ideas of race, nation and culture. What Fox added is that poetry will be different if it is written by a rich man or a poor man – and he might have also added that it would be different if it were written by a woman.

Fox never really solved the problem of creating a poetry which was genuinely popular any more than he resolved the problematical status of poems written by middle-class poets – something which Browning seems to have recognised – but he did attempt an ideological analysis of the difficulties of a working-class writing. He published the work of Ebenezer Elliott, the corn-law rhymer, throughout his editorship. He published directly political lampoons by R. H. Horne and others: Horne's 'Political Oratorio' has a chorus of mechanics demanding a share in the results of their labour. And he published poets who wrote (sometimes rather weakly and derivatively) in the style of Shelley, the poet of revolution, transformation and change.[12] Though he came near to presenting poetry as a form of social and psychological engineering, because the poet can 'influence the associations of unnumbered minds', he never ceased to believe that poetry participates in critique and creates ideological change.[13] For him Wordsworth and Coleridge had reneged on radical principles and he could only accept them by arguing that they were unintentionally radical and Benthamite. Thus 'Mr Coleridge is . . . a "greatest happiness" man'.[14]

Where Fox began with an analysis of power, cultural relativism and political change, the Apostles started from an idea of historical continuity and a unified culture. But – and this is what makes their propositions about literature and ideology complex and contradictory – they were fully aware that continuity and unity were constructs rather than a possible reality. There is an uncertainty of definition about their political readings. Arthur Hallam was instrumental in publishing Shelley's 'Adonais', Fox's revolutionary poet, though he seems to have admired Shelley as a mythic poet of what he called 'sensation' rather than for any revolutionary possibilities.[15] The Apostles were described as a 'Wordsworthian-Germano-Coleridgean' group, and this was the intellectual formation they developed. And yet R. C. Trench, renouncing 'despairing' and the reading of Shelley and his revolutionary views, clearly once possessed political sympathies with Shelley.[16] With John Kemble, Trench took a major part in attempting to restore the liberal pretender to the Spanish throne in 1830.[17] Hallam and Tennyson took a minor part in the enterprise. This anti-reactionary expedition, underplayed and minimised by their descendants and biographers alike, was a traumatic affair which ended in the execution of one of their friends. It is one of the unspoken repressed elements of Tennyson's early poetry. Robert Boyd was shot for treason on the beach at Malaga.

If the Apostles were not above becoming 'foreign factions', as Hallam put it, in Spain, they dreaded and probably fantasised about the work of such interlopers at home during the Captain Swing riots of the early 1830s. They wanted a transformation of the mind of the country, but not through direct political change. Like Carlyle, they thought of institutional reform as mechanistic, superficial and *abstract*. In his brilliant review of Tennyson's early poems Hallam analysed the cultural fracture and alienation of post-revolutionary Europe as the modern condition.[18] If it could be retrieved at all, and Hallam doubted that it could, a lost *organic* national unity could be, as it were, artificially re-created by the re-education of the whole social imagination through the deep powers of myth. It is a paradoxically demythologised belief in the revival of mythic structures, which are self-consciously historicised as the possession of the nation's past. Where Fox was a positivist demythologiser who hoped for a new working-class art, the Apostles looked self-consciously to a revival of the *peasant* imagination. This is another possible reading of Herder, who said that national myth represented the lost wholeness of intuition as experience and sensation. The poetry of sensation rather than thought advocated in Hallam's review is a covert acknowledgement of Herder and comes together with the references to the traditional ballads of Scott as a programme for a new poetry.

The Apostles read Herder, Schiller and indigenous British mythographers on Indo-European forms of myth, Faber, Bryant and Sir Henry Jones.[19] However, their conceptualisation of myth is both sophisticated and contradictory. Schiller had seen mythic writing as the province of the 'naive' poet. The modern, self-conscious reflective poet has moved beyond its simplicities. Hallam, however, deftly reintroduces the mythic poetry of sensation in his review by proposing that the knowing, modern 'sentimental' poet consciously writes a belated or latter-day 'naive' poetry of the senses which deliberately excludes reflection.[20] In this way the poet achieves a devious power in a split and fragmented culture. And yet such poetry seems to disrupt the unity it is claiming to create. The poetry of sensation, as Hallam called it, is a marginalised minority poetry, working from the outside, defamiliarising habitual forms of thought by exploring disruptive conditions of perception which will ultimately reconfigure consciousness but which act immediately as a kind of ideological solvent through the non-rational power of mythic experience. This is a subliminal critique, operating subversively and secretively, in contradistinction to Fox's conscious critique.

Thomas Keightley's *The Fairy Mythology* (1828) seems to have been a cult book among the Apostles and no work more demonstrates the irreconcilable elements of their theory. Keightley writes that myth is unifying, the expression of folk imagination imaginatively grasped by other classes. It works through intuition and sense as another form of knowledge prior to the division between subject and object. It is used by the powerful as the repressive weapon of the dominant class and thus frequently changes its meaning and its application. It is not *true*.[21] It is not clear to whom myth 'belongs' in Keightley's discussion, but it appears to behave like ideology because it is a representation and severs the correspondence between representation and fact.

The Apostles were stronger on the notion of representation than the Fox group, for whom poetry was not exactly 'truth' either. Instead, for these reconstructed Utilitarians, it was pure expressive *feeling* more often than a mediated representation. This created problems, as will later be seen. But the matter of representation leads to epistemological questions of consciousness and knowledge and is best discussed through them.

Just as Fox looked to a literature of change his philosophy of mind was concerned with the psychology of active agency which worked on the world. The Apostles, on the other hand, were more concerned with the 'pure' nature of identity. Interestingly, associationism, where experience was thought to be built up through the connections of data from the exterior world, was seen as the progressive theory of mind at that time and politicised by being connected with the radical ideas of Bentham. Coleridge has done his work too well by suggesting that associationism is a mechanistic, sterile and inchoate account of consciousness, and we now see it in these terms: associationism, however, was taken seriously as the democratic form precisely because it emphasised the influence of environment and the external world on the self rather than the innate and privileged independent power of mind. Associationism held out the possibility of transforming consciousness through training and education, culture and nurture. Moreover, the *tabula rasa* meant that everyone starts off with the same handicap. Fox sees associationist psychology as central to a new art. Poetry will be concerned with analysing 'modern' conditions of mind, dramatically projecting and exploring different associative processes as they are formed in different environments.[22] It is in this way that poetry is knowledge based on science, a science of mind. When one remembers that Unitarian theology came nearest of all forms of dissent to a humanistic religion in which God, if not to be identified with pure human mind, at least provides a model for it, it is clear that a humanist teleology is at work in Fox's aesthetic.

Fox's epistemology throws great emphasis on the energetic interpretative act of the perceiver or reader in two ways. First, in poetry, mental events are represented and externalised through a kind of dramatic projection which makes them publicly accessible. It is open to all readers to perceive and analyse the public significance of a dialectic of feeling. There were disagreements between *Monthly Repository* writers here, as will be seen when Browning's reworking of dramatic epistemology is discussed. Mill preferred to remain with the dialectic of feeling alone. But for Fox this elides to a theory of drama and is a belief in drama as the central art form. Drama is ideologically important because it objectifies self-projection and conflict, and explores the structure of relationships in their full complexity. It is an open form.[23] The intense concentration of the *Monthly Repository* on dramatic criticism and its political significance – there was a running debate on the politics of *Coriolanus*[24] – makes the adoption of drama as a form by writers such as Talfourd and Browning understandable. It is no accident that Browning's first play, *Strafford,* presaging later work, goes back to the civil war in England, the time when democratic principles were first at stake, or, to the early nineteenth century, seemed to be.

Drama throws emphasis on to the hermeneutic act and the status of the text in the psychology of reading. Advanced German biblical criticism, which found its earliest disseminations in the *Monthly Repository,* gave rise to a tradition of analysis in the journal. A discussion of Schleiermacher's study of St Luke's Gospel in 1827, for instance, takes the unstable text for granted. The narrative of the Gospel is transmitted through a chain of second-generation witnesses and thus its 'truth' must likewise be the construction of the reader. What constitutes a text is an active process of construction and reconstruction. Its only ground is the hermeneutic history of previous acts of construction.[25]

Hallam professed himself to be partially a Hartleyan associationist, but unlike Fox he saw associationist psychology as passive and fragmenting. The continuity of identity through time could only be guaranteed by a Kantian a priori act which assumed the coherence of identity. (The Apostles' passion for German thought is everywhere testified: Kemble in Germany is described as immersed in 'metaphysics and meerschaums, smoking [probably opium] and Schelling'.[26]) However, the self is continually trembling back into a condition of sensation. The self is discontinuous, formed of 'fragments of being', the 'common character of a series of momentary beings'.[27] In his essay on Cicero Hallam defended Epicurean epistemology and insisted that emotion is the ground of consciousness and true knowledge: 'the agent acted from feeling, and *was* by feeling: thoughts were but the ligatures that held together the delicate materials of emotion'.[28] As we shall see, one of the problems here is a failure to describe what 'sensation' and 'feeling' really were. However, the mass of primal sensation which Herder thought to be constitutive of consciousness seems to Hallam a richer intuitional and imaginative experience than reflection and paradoxically nearer to the moral life because it has a *content,* whereas thought is abstract. It is not surprising to find that Hallam's God in 'Theodicaea Novissima', in contrast to the Unitarian God of mind, is a God of love, a God of libido and absolute unmediated sexuality, the model of which is sexual consummation itself. Hallam's God is a God of the body.[29]

As for Schiller, so for the Apostles; the true moral life consists in a free play emancipated from the demands of the practical. It is significant that the Apostles, in contrast to Fox's interest in technology and sociology, found the 'pure' sciences of particular importance to them, and were often informed of the more recent developments in astronomy, geology and philology well before scientific work was published. And, of course, poetry, too, must be pure of practical morality. It was misconceived and misdirected to attempt direct instrumental practical change. Not only does the regeneration of society come about through the transformation of imaginative life, but rather than creating change consciousness *is* change itself in a world of flux. Scientific theory endorsed this theory of flux. We know flux rather than essence. William Whewell, for instance, well known to the Apostles, considered the instability of the universe in his Bridgewater Treatise on astronomy. Scientific scepticism endorses a world in which all truth must be representation superseded by further representation.[30] In the essay on Cicero Hallam professed himself unalarmed by the propositions of either geology or

the higher criticism on the grounds that changing representations are all we can know.[31] This affirmative deconstruction has something in common with the hermeneutic constructs of the Fox circle. Both, it is worth emphasising, were equally liberating intellectually. Both were seen in political terms. The difference is that where the *Monthly Repository* circle find a public context for theorising consciousness the Apostles do not. Consciousness is necessarily concerned with the politics of privacy.

If representation of the world and its constructed nature are at issue, it is to be expected that theories of language will be, as they are, critically important to both the Fox and Apostles formations. Again, the difference between them is congruent with differences in politics and epistemology. For the Fox formation language is made by culture, for the Apostles it is given. J. S. Mill and Fox were interested in different kinds of language theory, but again, a clear Benthamite tradition emerges which emphasises the capacity of language to reorder and restructure experience. Mill's essays on poetry in the *Monthly Repository* owe some of their propositions on language and culture to Dugald Stewart. Stewart argued that language was a thoroughly artificial, culturally created system. Stewart pays great attention to the reordering capacities of syntax, when the 'normal' successive order of a sentence is disrupted. It is too easy to anticipate the end of a linear sentence. Poetic ordering of language disrupts expectations and makes possible a new grasp of structural relationships through syntax, as if the language is restructuring successive associative chains in order to give them a new shape and relationship. Language is a play with succession and simultaneity which can retrain experience.[32]

It is to Bentham himself that this group owed their most interesting theory of language, which developed out of Bentham's examinations of legal fictions, a theory of which Fox certainly knew, and which Browning seems to have absorbed.[33] For Bentham language is at once the greatest conjuror of illusion and the greatest social invention. Language for Bentham is made rather than given, since it creates 'fictions', that is words, such as 'soul', for which there is no corresponding entity in reality.[34] The status of these constructs is logically puzzling. On the one hand we anchor them by treating them as if they represent what is 'real' and thus human invention genuinely impinges on and transforms social experience. On the other hand they are conceptual phantasms and constantly threaten to become the distortions of solipsism. Linguistic fictions can be used, as in law, for the purpose of exploitation and oppression.

The Apostles avoid the epistemological insecurity of language by viewing meaning as a given through the continuity of history. It is equally a construct, but history is the bearer of truth, truth as historical evolution, through the independent workings of etymology and philology. Above all precision of language is necessary because it must be obedient to the etymological truth of history. Language, like myth, is a possession of the totality of a culture and not that of individuals.

Herder said that each culture's physiognomy showed in its speech and it is to him that Hallam probably owes a physiological theory of language. In his essay on Tennyson he insisted that the pure aural sign could be in itself the bearer of

meaning through the sensations rather than ideas it evoked. It is as if he is working towards a language of pure feeling which is exempt from conceptual reference. It reaches down to the primordial flood of sensation which is at the basis of language. Herder had suggested that language and consciousness are born simultaneously when the primal mass is abstracted into categories, but Hallam remains with the delicate and complex organic filaments of sensation prior to consciousness, adopting the sophisticated primitivism characteristic of the Apostles.[35] It is always to the deep continuities and structures that the Apostles are attracted. Hence Grimm and Bopp attracted Kemble: through them the Indo-European roots of the English language became apparent.

Where gender and sexuality are concerned, critical to both formations, the same pattern of conceptualisation emerges. The Fox group questions the immutability of social arrangements and the fixed nature of gender. The Apostles start from the fixity of gender. Gender was crucial to the Fox group because it exposed a fundamentally oppressed group and repressive and authoritarian institutions. The campaign for political liberation and suffrage was intense – Fox and his peers were probably the first organised *group* of British feminists. Mill called women slaves, toys and property in an article which sees the status of women as culturally determined and anticipates his essay *On the Subjection of Women* by twenty-five years.[36] Women and divinity, women and education, women and politics, are central preoccupations.[37] Fox not only published women writers (such as Harriet Martineau) and actively encouraged them but made sure that his male writers were feminists. Horne, for instance, attacked Hazlitt in an aside – 'It would appear . . . that he had never met . . . with any woman of superior intellect.'[38] These views were outrageous in the early 1830s. There is indeed an element of outrage in the campaign. The Saint-Simonians were embraced, Milton's treatises on divorce were espoused – indeed Mill recommended polygamy rather than prostitution – and Fox and Mill carried out the repudiation of marriage in their personal lives. Browning's elopement later is of a piece with this behaviour.

The Apostles, of course, were quite different but in their own way as subversive. Hallam celebrates women not because they can be played with but because they can *play*. Women are liberated into a complex life of sensation and the affections and, because they are not doomed to abstraction and rationality, like men, are closer to the rich productive life of emotion and imagination. Both Herder and Schiller had seen women as privileged because they are close to the life of the non-rational. It follows that women are closer to the transforming mythic imagination. Hallam praised women's special consciousness in poem after poem. They 'prisoner take/Th'enmarvailed *sense*' (my emphasis). They 'change our being's mode' and 'break/In twain the bonds of custom'.[39] Tennyson's *Arabian Nights* gives him the remembered sensation of sucking sherbert, and by sense Hallam means the corporal physicality of eye, ear and mouth, the world to which women belonged.[40] Women are like the poet of sensation, subversively attacking entrenched, habitual opinion by dissolving and re-forming associative patterns. Thus they are the real agents of cultural transformation through the imagination. They are at work in the

semiotic code, as Kristeva puts it. The conceptualisation of gender is neither as patronising nor as unsubtle as it might seem. And clearly, by asking for a poetry of sensation, Hallam was putting the feminisation of poetry – and men – at the centre of his project. At least the male appropriation of the feminine suggests an admiration for it.

Subsequent chapters will explore the intense dialogue between Tennyson and the post-Coleridgean formation and between Browning and the post-Benthamite formation and will expand and clarify the general positions marked out here. In some ways, Tennyson with Hallam, and Browning with Fox, posthumously debated the questions explored in the 1830s for the rest of their poetic lives – though it has to be remembered that they anticipated questions which began to circulate more generally only in the 1850s. It should already be clear that, however different, both groups were formulating an aesthetics commensurate with a 'modern' situation, with a culture which was post-teleological, post-technological, post-revolutionary and post-Kantian. Mill was right not to polarise the Coleridgean and Benthamite traditions. He saw even in 1838 that the Victorian episteme would be the history of the interpenetration and realignment of these formations in many and complex ways.

The two groups shared an intensely self-conscious cultural awareness. They saw the connections between literature and power and acknowledged that poetry was a cultural construction. The mythic poetics of the Tennyson group and the dramatic poetics of the Browning group diverged, as one moved to the past rather than the present, and to a seemingly depoliticised, universalising mode of writing rather than direct class awareness and political intervention. But both saw that the definition of consciousness was the key to the problem of agency and the labour of the self upon the world which was threatened in a mechanistic society and made problematical by incipient political upheaval. Both saw that the teleological world was passing over into an epistemological order where questions of representation were critical because a world of symbolic constructions could no longer be grounded in universal, permanently valid truths. The consequential realisation that language and theories of language must be a contested area in an era of movable type and the unstable sign is common to both groups. Both saw that the question of gender is crucial to their aesthetics.

Both formations move towards the double poem in different ways. The theory of the Browning group enables the poem to be staged as an expressive fiction or psychological moment which becomes critique when its dramatic nature emerges in the structure of the poem. Though Hallam silently appropriates and endorses Fox's dramatic theory in his review of Tennyson in 1831, and conflates this quite permissibly with the poetry of sensation which projects feeling on to objects, he reaches the double poem by his awareness of the existence of two consciousnesses in writing. The unself-conscious, simple and unreflective feeling of the naive poet he discovered in Schiller is being contrived by the highly self-conscious reflective poet of a sophisticated modern culture. The poetry of sensation is being created by the poetry of reflection by a ruse which returns the poem to a dramatic status.

Mill characterised the Benthamite formation by the externalising empirical question, 'Is it true?' and the Coleridgean formation by the inwardness which asks, 'What is the meaning of it?' It is arguable that he neutralises and effaces Bentham's radicalism in the cause of making him acceptable as an empirical codifier, but the two kinds of question do suggest how the double poem can be reached as it were from opposite ends. The literal, psychologised moment of a Browning poem begins with the question 'Is it true?' and ends by asking about the meaning of the poem's configuration of language. The arcane, symbolic mythopoeic Tennyson poem persuades an inwardness of reading which can gain entry into the text by asking 'What is the meaning of it?' and only later proceeds to the problematical question of truth. It may be that the friction between the two kinds of question is what brings the double poem into being. Foucault thinks of the post-Enlightenment sense of crisis, from which emerges a re-formation of knowledge, as the origin of a two-way epistemological fracture. The double fracture is the result of the problematical relation between consciousness or self and the 'mode of being of objects' or the world.[41] Knowledge which fragments into positivist empirical analysis a posteriori puts aside the status of consciousness just as synthesis a priori puts aside the status of the empirical: and both have problems with the nature of representation because both postpone an essential element in the representative process. Mill's different questions, 'Is it true?' and 'What is the meaning of it?', seem to correspond to the analysis a posteriori and the synthesis a priori. In these terms one could see the double poem as a product of problematical understandings of representation and epistemological fracture, both questioning and reproducing its problems in innumerable ways.

Certainly just as Mill speaks of the concentric circles of 'shock' given by two forms of thought one can think of the 'shock' created by the early poetry of Tennyson and Browning as rippling outwards into the century. Though both were coterie poets until the 1840s, both dominated the century. Tennyson's hold on intellectuals loosened in the 1860s after the watershed of the Crimean war, though his general popularity grew. Browning's appeal was restricted to intellectuals until the 1890s and spread to a wider group subsequently. Even while Tennyson seemed an old-fashioned and tedious writer to young poets, particularly after the publication of Edward Fitzgerald's version of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* in 1859, the aesthetics of the Hallam group was reappropriated and reinterpreted in different ways by other groups almost until the end of the century. In fact, the poetics of the aestheticised politics of the Hallam circle is recognisable even when its principles are used against Tennyson himself, while the radical politicised aesthetics of the Fox circle disappears or becomes oddly assimilated to later manifestations of Hallam's poetics. Clough and Arnold divide uneasily over the question of politics and aesthetics. A new kind of compromised liberalism emerges from their conflict. In Swinburne a radical politics modulates into a transgressive individualism based on sensation. Morris normalises the poetry of sensation in his later poetry by assimilating it to a therapeutic aesthetics in direct opposition to the pathologising of sensation which appears in the poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and in his own

earlier and much more radical work. But Morris's early poetry is revolutionary in content and form, as he fuses the poetry of sensation with a new radical aesthetic derived from Ruskin. It is harder to see what is going on among women poets because they do not work within male traditions.

Benjamin's terms, aestheticised politics, and its opposite, politicised aesthetics, are convenient, but have to be adopted with caution because they refer to a different historical situation, that between the great wars of the twentieth century. He was not thinking of the early nineteenth-century context when he developed his terminology. It is as difficult to account for the staying power of Hallam's poetics as it is to explain the slow disappearance of the radical tradition. The subversive conservatism of the Hallam group was not fascist in the sense that Benjamin understood it. Indeed, Tennyson was no Tory. As Cornelia Pearsall has conclusively shown in her path-breaking study, both Hallam and Tennyson belonged politically to the Whig tradition. What I have called Tennyson's subversive conservatism, she affirms, belongs to a Whig poetics.[42] It was a contradictory collection of ideas. It held to an idealised cultural unity at the same time as it explored private political subversion through the shock of sensation. It took the form of conservative anarchy, understanding all representation as trope, the constant change of an ungrounded flux of new representation, even while it held to the organic continuities of history and myth which could somehow hold new representations in check. Its strength was its understanding of the power of myth, the imaginative hold of myth and its permanent possibility of reinterpretation. This was the very thing the Fox group foundered on. It tended to literalise poetry as psychological experience. While it asked fundamental questions – what is a truly political and democratic poetry when it is not the simple replication of political principles? – with a seriousness unknown to the Apostles, it failed to address the question of representation as fully as the Apostles. Only Browning found a way, through Bentham, of engaging with the strenuous imaginative exercise of constructing ideological fictions. But fictions, though perhaps capable of a more radical critique than myth, are historically specific and possibly more vulnerable, requiring an immediate grasp of detail and reference not intrinsic to myth. Add to this the capacity of fictions to create an infinite regression of hermeneutic activity in which a sophisticated consciousness grasps poetic materials as constructions along with its own response to them, and it is possible to see why fictions lack the reproducible solidity and substance of myth. This may be one of the reasons why a great, radical experiment did not find successors. The concern of this chapter, however, is with the early formations in which neither the subsequent decadence of aestheticised politics nor the decline of politicised aesthetics was apparent. It is concerned with a phase of intense experiment and innovation. Chapters 2 and 3 consider Tennyson's early work and his dialogue with Hallam and other contemporary poets. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss Browning's early work and his dialogue with Fox and the poets round the *Monthly Repository*.

2

EXPERIMENTS OF 1830

Tennyson and the formation of subversive conservative poetry

Tennyson, winner of the Chancellor's Gold Medal with the prize poem, 'Timbuctoo', at Cambridge in 1829, was already the contributor to a volume of poems before he arrived there, *Poems by Two Brothers* (1827) – actually written by three brothers, for Frederick Tennyson contributed to the volume as well as Charles and Alfred – and the writer of some precocious juvenilia. It is *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830), however, which startles with its experiments, coming out of an intellectual environment arresting for the boldness and intensity of its enquiries and insouciant originality.

Poems, Chiefly Lyrical, ends with a Heraclitean lyric to impermanence, '*Οἱ ῥέοντες*', which is well aware of the Pyrrhic victory of scepticism: 'All truth is change'.

> All thoughts, all creeds, all dreams are true,
>   All visions wild and strange;
> Man is the measure of all truth
>   Unto himself. All truth is change:
>
> (1–4)[1]

If we have faith in what we 'dream', and if 'all things are as they seem to all' (7), if all experience is representation, then there can be 'Nor good nor ill, nor light nor shade,/Nor essence nor eternal laws' (10–11). The paradoxically firm certainties and negations of this scepticism may owe something to Goethe's Faust's celebration of life as dream and representation at the end of *Faust,* but the consequences of the paradox are understood in the laconic footnote: 'this very opinion is only true relatively to the flowing philosophers'.[2] The relativist position is itself subject to the relativist principle. The 'true' sceptic must accept that his own position can be undermined by relativism itself. The poem's placing at the end of the volume throws the contents of the book retrospectively into flux and makes its explorations provisional. It makes each poem an experiment in those discontinuous moments of consciousness which, Hallam was to insist, were the self.

The 'flowing' philosophers were being redefined in terms of the new physics, astronomy and geology at Cambridge. William Whewell, Master of Trinity when Tennyson was at Cambridge, and whose speculations he would have known, was deeply involved in theorising astronomy in terms of flux. He opened up a world in which the stability of the universe could not be guaranteed. The poem is part of this new discourse. Whewell was to write later in volume III of the Bridgewater Treatises (*On Astronomy and General Physics,* 1833):

> The fact really is, that changes are taking place in the motions of the heavenly bodies, which have gone on progressively from the first dawn of science. . . . The moon has been moving quicker and quicker from the time of the first recorded eclipses, and is now in advance, by about four times her own breadth, of what her place would have been if it had not been affected by this acceleration. . . . Will these changes go on without limit or reaction?[3]

It is an odd position, because the Bridgewater Treatises were endowed to consolidate natural theology by bringing in the weight of new scientific discovery to endorse it. Whewell makes it clear that the nature of the physical world does not guarantee the positions of natural theology, which sees evidences of God in the natural world. He rests on revealed religion. The importance of this to Tennyson's early work is not simply that his poems constitute a rejection of natural theology or even that they assent to a permanently destabilised universe. First, the world is a strange, *un*natural, not 'natural' place, properly a place of 'visions wild and strange'. Secondly, a condition of change without limit makes all experience the materials of retrospection. In particular we are trapped into a series of questions about origins which are forever displacing one another. This produces, as Whewell realised, a continual state of backwards questions as the consciousness is forced to 'pursue this train of enquiries unremittingly'; necessarily every question becomes secondary and subject to instability by the nature of the 'acceleration' of change the moment it is being asked.[4] Experience must always be a series of backwards questions about one place *from another place,* an alternative place which is never the place where one 'would have been' because, like the moon, we are in motion. The strangeness of Tennyson's early poems, one's sense of their being written from another place or an alternative space, their quality of secondariness, comes from this experientially retrospective world. Such a world calls into question not only the coherence of consciousness but the possibility of what Whewell called 'free volition'.[5] How far is 'free volition' rather than material necessity a possibility in this universe? The question applies to both God and man.

Already the possibility of the double poem is available in this retrospective mode, where experience can only grasp experience by positing a prior consciousness which is under analysis by a subsequent state. It is only by turning this scepticism on its head and making it the condition of knowledge that one can return,

though perilously, to an understanding of volition and continuity, the continuity of a history of reconstruction. That Tennyson can shift such philosophical weight with the agile movement of a light, graceful lyric is evidence of his confidence at this time. The poem exhibits the confidence of the Apostles. At the forefront of new thinking, it is a confidence which is always paradoxical, dismantling traditional positions whether on politics, theology or aesthetics with an exhilarating iconoclasm and yet endorsing those traditional positions with a new, iconoclastic traditionalism. The deftness of 'Oἱ ῥέοντες' goes some way to explaining why these early poems, so slight, perhaps, in comparison with *In Memoriam* or *Maud,* should have seemed remarkable in 1830, producing readings which struggle with one another. These poems, with their highly wrought artifice of simplicity, are like fragile-looking objects which weigh unexpectedly heavy in the hand. *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* has to be seen as a maverick collection, as wayward and experimental as any avant-garde twentieth-century poetic experiment.

The innovative nature of the 1830 poems can best be grasped by seeing what kind of work was acceptable as poetry at the time as a preliminary to a discussion of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*. To do this I shall consider one of the popular album books which Tennyson professed to despise, though he wrote for them. My theme is Tennyson's gradual retreat from the daring of the earliest poems as he realised the implications of these texts in subsequent work published in 1832 and 1842. The decadence of the poetry of sensation manifested not only in his work but in that of his group posed serious problems for an aesthetic of subversive conservatism. The search for new solutions is apparent towards the end of what we think of as the first phase of Tennyson's work up to 1842. He was tempted towards the more reactionary strain of Tory poetry which was current when he began writing and this tradition is also discussed. But Tennyson never fully conceded to it.

'Three summers back . . . I swore an oath, that I would never again have to do with their vapid books', Tennyson wrote in 1836.[6] The 'vapid' books were the popular annual album collections of poetry and prose which represented themselves as anthologies of polite literature, appealing productions for a literary public anxious to be acquainted with current literature. Tennyson had contributed poems both to *The Gem* and to *Friendship's Offering*. A look at some of the contributions alongside his in *Friendship's Offering* for 1832 immediately suggests why the poems of 1830 were so striking.

Actually, the individual poems reproduced in this anthology are less suspect than the indiscriminate and incoherent eclecticism of the collection, which is a mixture of poems and tales. It is a mélange of poems of every style, and, interestingly, by poets from widely differing social classes. It contains poems by John Clare ('The Thrush's Nest'), the rural poet thought of as a peasant writer, by the gentleman-poet Barry Cornwall ('For Music') and by Allan Cunningham, the stonemason poet from Dumfries, whose poem is a vigorous Burns-like Scots vernacular song, 'The Poets Love. A Song', whose last stanza ends, 'I'm drunk with her love'. Cornwall and Cunningham were recommended as models to Tennyson

in 1832 by John Wilson ('Christopher North') in his banteringly hostile review of *Poems,* 1830.[7] The collection ranges from a Keatsian pastiche by Thomas Pringle, 'A Dream of Fairy Land', which transforms the Keatsian dream into an un-Keatsian moral allegory about the struggle between the 'deluded' 'Senses' and 'Spirit', to a lyric by the Hon. Mrs Norton, 'There is no Trace of Thee around'.[8] Turning strongly and violently on itself with 'I *know* thou hast been here:/I know thou hast, though nought remains', after beginning with a description of loss, simply generalised through landscape, Norton's lyric owes something to the formulaic quality of ballad writing:

> There is no trace of thee around,
> Beloved! in this abode;
> The winds sweep o'er the silent ground
> Where once thy footsteps trode.
> There is no shadow in the glen –
> No echo on the hill –
> The sun that sets, shall rise again
> And find them lonely still!

Yet this strong lyric is jostled by 'vapid' lyrics such as Cornwall's 'For Music', and James Montgomery's 'The Lily'. 'Come again! Come again!/Sunshine cometh after rain', Cornwall's lyric begins, with its faintly literary diction ('Called by many a vernal strain') and ends, 'Come again! O, come again!/Like the sunshine after rain'. Montgomery's poem is in praise of female innocence and virginity.

> Flower of light! forget thy birth,
> Daughter of the sordid earth
> Lift the beauty of thine eye
> To the blue etheral sky.

The girl whose name is Lily will be rewarded for virginity by a life in heaven.

> So may she whose name I write,
> Be herself a Flower of Light,
> Live a life of innocence,
> Die, – to be transported hence
> To that Garden in the skies,
> Where the Lily never dies.[9]

The model for most of the poems is the simple song; demotic or literary, or the didactic lyric.

Since Tennyson's elaborate, self-conscious simplicity was described by Wilson as 'distinguished silliness' – 'Alfred cuts a foolish figure' – and since it is clear that his offence for Wilson is among other offences to have celebrated the erotic, and to

be classified as effeminate, it is as well to have an example of what was offered as conventional simplicity in the annuals before looking at Tennyson's work.[10] Turning to some of the lyrics of 1830, what makes them look 'silly' is both a contrived, highly literary, self-conscious lyricism and their presentation of this *as if* it is innocent. For the poems have no built-in account of their meaning, no indication as to why they exist. Arthur Hallam, who also privately circulated a volume, *Poems,* in 1830, a month before *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* appeared in June, writes far more explicitly than Tennyson of sexuality, of feverish social upheaval, of theories of mind, of a redefined God, of scientific ideas, of theories of art and myth. In Tennyson's poems these are concealed and coded. The description of the *Poems* as 'Chiefly Lyrical' allies them with Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads,* which Hallam mentions in his review, and the epithet points silently to a tradition of subversive experiment. But these are not quite the lyrical ballads of Wordsworth's collection any more than they are like the songs and ballads of the albums. Wordsworth's work was viewed equivocally by Hallam, as we shall see, and the ballad was reinterpreted in a sophisticated and highly literary way. As the word 'lyrical' suggests, meaning is to be derived from song-like, seemingly spontaneous utterance, through the configuration of expressive form and language and through the sequence of narrative. Meaning is not explicit, but emerges through the temporal movement of the poem and the changing psychological relationships it makes. It is a poetry which can only be understood through the process of change itself. This procedure, as will shortly be explained, is the result of the aesthetic and cultural theory of the Apostles group and its distrust of reflective verse. But this is only a part of the explanation.

One problem for Tennyson is the bewildering number of Romantic models before him – Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Byron. There are traces of all these poets in the early work but they are not 'influences'. Rather a self-conscious critique is made of them. The 'silliness', the contrived and strangely inaccessible naiveté, is partly a way of circumventing imitation of prior Romantic models, but it is also a way of making strange the nature of the poetic act itself and revealing it as artifice. This in its turn makes for the 'visions wild and strange' which the 'flowing philosophers' endorse. It enables the poem to be an experiment with the experience which comes from another place, an experiment in alternative worlds and consciousnesses. The poet, 'in advance', as Whewell would say, of what his place would have been had it not been displaced by the acceleration of change, experiments with the strange disjunctions between one form of life and another. That is why the early poems not only take their materials from myths and legends but are about constituting myths and legends and their mysterious alienation. The inaccessible naiveté is a prerequisite for rendering the closedness of the past which the retrospective poet addresses with his backwards questions. The poem is at once expressive artefact and deeply analytical structure as it opens up a space between the alternative experience being constructed and the processes of its construction.

The twin poems, 'The Merman' and 'The Mermaid', which aroused Wilson's anger and Fox's enthusiasm, are arresting examples of Tennyson's arcane

simplicity and simultaneous analytical interrogation. They both begin with identical questions in two-stress lines which cunningly combine frailty and strength. ‘Who would be/A merman bold,/Sitting alone’ (1–3). ‘Who would be/A mermaid fair,/Singing alone’ (1–3). It is a reversal of the conventions, for, as in John Leyden’s ‘The Mermaid’, which Tennyson read in Scott’s *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border,* it is usually mermaids who seduce human beings, not humans who consider becoming mermen. ‘In her dwelling, and in her appearance, the mermaid of the northern nations resembles the Syren of the ancients’, the preliminary note to ‘The Mermaid’ runs in Scott’s collection.[11] So the poem constructs an alternative myth of the northern ‘Syren’ and questions what this means by an extraordinary act of elision. The first sections are ambiguously seductive invitations by mermen and mermaids, and at the same time they can be read as possibly human questions by gendered men and women. Who *would* be a merman or maid? In each case the questions have a different meaning. They are like two sides of a dialogue conducted simultaneously in the same words. Not only does the nature of volition, the meaning of ‘would’, change according to the human or non-human status of the speaker but if the questions are asked by mermen, they become the seductive invitations of another species who understand ‘would’ as unproblematical desire. If they are asked by human beings they are speculations on identity and difference, likeness and unlikeness, and ‘would’ carries the cautious self-interrogation of the subjunctive and speaks of volition and the will.

W. J. Fox is right when he sees the poems, acutely, as about ‘the principle of thought injected by a strong volition’, the impossibly self-conscious human will to imagine and be the life of another species.[12] John Wilson is equally right and acute when he complains of the flagrant sexuality of subaqueous life – ‘Her mother ought to keep a sharp lookout upon her’, for ‘she is of an amorous temperament, and a strong Anti-Malthusian’.[13] Interestingly, when showing that the principles of deduction and perception will be different according to the place where the perceiver is, Charles Lyell chooses to exemplify the completely coherent but completely provisional conclusions and categories of the perceiver by positing the perceptions of some ‘dusky melancholy sprite’, ‘like Umbriel’, a being ‘entirely confined to the nether world’, unable to ‘emerge into the regions of water and of air; and if this being should busy himself in investigating the structure of the globe, he might frame theories the exact converse of those usually adopted by human philosophers’.[14] *The Principles of Geology* and Tennyson’s mer-poems were published in the same year. Both fantastically propose an alternative world, in the order of science fiction, where ‘theories’ of life differ from those of the upper world, though Tennyson’s beings have emerged into the ambiguous ‘regions of water’. Both explore the implications of consciousness in another place.

Unlike Leyden’s unwilling human lover who says, ‘That heart, that riots wild and free,/Can hold no sympathy with mine’,[15] if you ‘would’ be a merman in Tennyson’s poem you would be given over to the sheer liberation of sexual frolic and pursuit, a pure principle of male ‘power’ – ‘I would fill the sea-halls with a voice of power’ (10). The freedom of the non-human Ariel in *The Tempest,* which

echoes in the refrain 'Merrily, merrily' is a freedom defined through sexuality. There is a reminiscence of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* in 'The Mermaid', but both the paired poems invoke the landscape of freedom in Shelley's poem which can emerge when one kind of 'will', the will to tyranny, power and political despotism, has been abandoned.[16] 'Blue Proteus and his humid nymphs' will no longer track the path of human ships 'by blood and groans,/And desolation, and the mingled voice/Of slavery and command' (*Prometheus Unbound,* III. ii. 29–30). The poems are rather like the cosmological frolic of freedom in Act IV of *Prometheus* in their metrical virtuosity. The leaps and chases, the skirmishes with precious stones, 'Turkis and agate and almondine' (32) which are simply innocent ammunition here, not luxury articles, take place in a world free of any economy but the pleasure principle. Tennyson may have remembered the rather sinister story prefacing Leyden's 'The Mermaid' in which an explorer in a diving-bell unsuccessfully tries to seize the precious stones in a merman's palace.[17]

Interestingly, the mermaid's negotiations with sexuality are rather different from that of the merman. The mermaid is confronted with a sea snake who approaches and surrounds her hall, but she masters its phallic power with her song. The power of her song transforms events, extinguishing the immortality of the mermen who 'Die in their hearts for the love of me' (30). W. D. Paden, whose book on Tennyson's use of contemporary writings on mythology is one of the lasting works on Tennyson's poetry, points out that true human love extinguishes the immortality of a merman.[18] He is uncertain of the status of the serpent, but thinks of it elsewhere as an ambiguous principle of evil and good capable of perpetual self-renewal, as described in G. S. Faber's religious mythologising, which Tennyson knew. In Leyden's poem, the mermaids are exhorted to 'chain' a huge and evil sea monster, but here it seems that the mermaid's power can persuade the monster's ambiguous nature to metamorphose into love. So far, so Shelleyan, but, like the ambiguous serpent, this poem has a slippery double nature. In the mermaid's exultant subaqueous world subservient sexual roles are reversed as she cavorts among 'diamond-ledges', as she selects her lover-king, and as she attracts with her power the concentrated gaze of all the beings of the watery universe. Their united gaze seems to define her being as serpent and sea creatures are 'coiled' and curl peaceably round her: 'All things that are forkèd, and hornèd, and soft. . . ./All looking down for the love of me' (53, 55). The last lines are an erotic and blasphemous adaptation of the liturgy – 'All things . . . praise Him'. The adoration of the universe is deflected from God and His being to the mermaid. The mermaid's fierce predatory energies are no more relevant to the ethical or to the divine than Blake's proverbs of Hell in which 'Exuberance is Beauty'.[19] As such, her sexual energies are celebrated. But to see what the poem is doing beyond this, one has to remember Fox's realisation that the mermen and maids are imagined by a human being. Just as the worthless sea diamonds would become negotiable, as riches in the human world, so the mermaid's powers would be transformed by being subject to human categories, among them, possibly, the moral. The poem is nothing like so simple as a plain opposition between the 'non-moral' sea world and the human