

REVIEW ESSAY

## **When Is a Victorian Poet Not a Victorian Poet? Poetry and the Politics of Subjectivity in the Long Nineteenth Century**

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All except one of the very significant studies under review include the word “Victorian” in their titles as an historical marker. Consider, for a moment, an alternative history. Suppose Victoria reigned from 1837 to 1852. Her male successors reigned from 1852 to 1880 and from 1880 to, say, 1915. In such a history the signifying force of “Victorian” would be dramatically different, allowing a multiplicity of paradigms to arise for a time span that could not be deemed monolithic by virtue of a long reign. It is unlikely that the

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*The following books are under consideration in this review:*

**Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition**, by Anne Janowitz; pp. xii + 278. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, \$59.95.

**Victorian Poets and the Politics of Culture: Discourse and Ideology**, by Antony H. Harrison; pp. 181. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998, \$32.50.

**Ideologies of Epic: Nation, Empire and Victorian Epic Poetry**, by Colin Graham; pp. 194. Manchester: Manchester University Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998, \$79.95.

**Victorian Sappho**, by Yopie Prins; pp. 279. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, \$18.95, paper.

**Supreme Attachments: Studies in Victorian Love Poetry**, by Kerry McSweeney; pp. 186. Aldershot, UK and Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998, \$68.95.

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epithet, "Victorian," would have become part of a cultural mythology as it is today. For in addition to being a purely descriptive historical marker it can be an insidiously homogenizing and deeply unhistorical term, encouraging the search for some quintessentially Victorian ethos. The element of distortion, crude or subtle, that emerges from such falsely unifying preconceptions is a stronger argument against using the category than republican arguments against using monarchs to denote periodization. Linda Shires's collection of essays *Re-Writing the Victorians* (1992), and works like it, have demystified and complicated the category and initiated new work. Nevertheless, the diversity and complexity of the period we call "Victorian," a diversity borne out by the group of books reviewed here, convinces me that we now need to jettison the term altogether. It is an irrelevant if not a misleading category. There were no typical Victorians. Nor were there "other" Victorians asserting a mirror image of the "true" figures of the time, just as there was no counter-culture in opposition to the dominant; such formulations, for all their modifications, leave the conceptualization of a homogeneous period unchanged. Even to argue that some Victorian thinking is unexpected for the period (as I have done myself), or more appalling than one would ever believe possible, such as the vicious racism that emerged in the Eyre controversy, simply reinforces the notion of an ideologically seamless historical period. It is rather a shame that the only term that would suit the fractured and diverse "long" nineteenth century, "early modern," has been quietly and cannily appropriated to replace the outmoded terms, "Elizabethan" or "Renaissance." "Antemodern" for the years 1790-1914 is the best I can do.

A number of different nineteenth centuries emerge in these five studies, often but not wholly related to the differing cultural theories, political and historical models and critical methodologies of their authors. They can be usefully put in dialogue with one another. In some ways this work constitutes an anthology of available critical procedures. Theoretical work has been a late-comer, on the whole, to the study of "Victorian" poetry, but now that it has arrived, some new and intellectually exacting questions arise, questions that could not have arisen so sharply had they been posed of texts outside the nineteenth century. This can be seen in the work of Anne Janowitz, who derives her *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* from the recent "blending" of "the insights and methods of cultural materialism and social history" and the "new group of historians of romanticism [that] has developed what we

might think of as an E. P. Thompson-derived theme of *plebeian studies within romanticism*" (3); in Antony H. Harrison's *Victorian Poets and the Politics of Culture: Discourse and Ideology*, a work that adapts new historicism by fusing Foucauldian discourse theory with Marxist-derived accounts of ideology, so that "discursive practices can have ideological effects because they perpetually constitute and reposition the subjects engaged in them" (5); in Colin Graham's *Ideologies of Epic: Nation, Empire and Victorian Epic Poetry*, which explores and modifies a Bakhtinian reading of monologism that is "forced into dialogue by the expression of its (cultural and linguistic) opposite" (56); in Yopie Prins's poststructuralist *Victorian Sappho*, which—beginning with interpretations of Sapphic fragments (her poems were literally torn into strips)—investigates the implications of the proper name, "known only by its variants, not a fixed identity but a series of inflections" (9); in Kerry McSweeney's *Supreme Attachments: Studies in Victorian Love Poetry*, which returns to the traditions of close reading that were generated in England by William Empson and F. R. Leavis and in North America by Cleanth Brooks.

What questions emerge from these studies? I'll begin with Janowitz's major work, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition*, the only study not to use "Victorian" in its title, or anywhere, as far as I noticed, even though the book sweeps from Thomas Spence and William Wordsworth in the 1790s to William Morris and W. J. Linton in the 1890s. This superb act of archaeological retrieval uncovers, for almost the first time, the vitality and persistence, the plenitude and detail of plebeian and working-class poetry and its continuities through the century. Janowitz's exuberant study starts from the revolutionary poetry of Spence and its radical communitarian vision (deriving from the agrarian and rural proletariat and an oral tradition, but also making use of print culture and urban communications) of a utopian society without distinction and common rights to land.

Combining Edenic millenarianism and strategic interventionist tactics in his periodical *Pigs Meat*, so called from Edmund Burke's characterization of the swinish multitude, Spence stands at the end of a formation belonging to customary or non-wage labor, with its refusal of instrumentality and rationalized clock time, and the beginning of an urban poetic tradition. For custom has its progressive side despite being the result of an aristocratic order (for tactical reasons Janowitz leaves aside the oppressive aspects of custom). Janowitz tracks communitarianism from the work of George Dyer and R. C. Fair, and

in the poetry and poetics of Allen Davenport on the cusp of Chartism, through “Labour’s Laureates,” the work of the Chartist poets Thomas Cooper and Ernest Jones, to the radicalism of Linton and the socialism of Morris. The book does full justice to the anonymous or citizen poets, ordinary readers of the Chartist *Northern Star*, for example, who were participants in, and the makers of, this tradition. Indeed, Janowitz argues that Chartism itself was built on an aesthetic of communal poetics and shared poetry writing. The evolution of an urban poetry from its first response to the drama of Chartism’s egalitarian claims of popular sovereignty in a people’s poetic, to the end of the century, when international labor movements and the intense, symbolic significance of the Paris Commune of 1871 shaped subsequent poetry, is one of the themes of the study. It ends with a fine explication of Morris’s *The Pilgrims of Hope*, serialized in the independent publication *Commonweal* in 1885 through 1886. But Janowitz’s book is more than an examination of a politics of non-hierarchical collectivity. Janowitz demonstrates that there is an aesthetic of transpersonal lyric as well as a politics of communitarianism, and conducts her analysis of politics with a close attention to the specificity and varying forms and idioms of this often choric poetry, the forms of which—ballad, satire, street song, hymn—evolved from an atavistic four-stress line. “There is blood on the earth all wild and red— / It cries to our God from the freeman’s bed! / It will not fade or be washed away.”

Janowitz does not seal up the lyrics of labor in a self-contained plebeian tradition. Instead she considers the interaction of plebeian with “polite” poetry and the reciprocal relation of polite, “educated” poets with self-taught plebeian texts—for her this is the dialectic of romanticism. William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley are icons for communitarian poets, for example. She distinguishes the public, non-personalized rhetoric of communitarian lyric from the “voluntarist” lyricism of the inner, individual self that becomes the major tradition of literary romanticism. John Stuart Mill’s understanding of the solitary singer oblivious of everything but the privatized self, which is “overheard” rather than “heard,” glossed by Charles Taylor’s philosophical account of individualism in *Sources of the Self* (1990), constitutes her model of the poetry of an autonomous, confessional subjectivity. The interaction of the two traditions accounts for some of the best moments in the book: Shelley’s response to the poetry of communitarian culture, not only in “The Mask of Anarchy” (1819) but in “Ode to the West Wind” (1820); John Clare’s

piercing understanding of the terrible encumbrance of the educated “unencumbered” subject unmoored from community; Chartism’s “nativist” patriot response to the poetry of landscape, transmuted to the collectively made rather than the object of reverie; Linton’s reading of a responsible autonomous self committed to the collective.

Though she stresses that the two traditions—“low” communitarian transpersonal writing and the “high” expressive mode of the privatized self—are in dialogue, I came away with a question posed partly by the strategies of cultural materialism. The liberal-individualist tradition Janowitz scrupulously describes at the outset of the book becomes, progressively, the difference between a literal and figurative rhetoric, a poetic rather than political tradition, an expressive, autonomous poetry as against a collective voice. It finally warrants the description Paul de Man used to attack romantic subjectivity—the aesthetic ideology. “Tintern Abbey” (1798) that much vilified text, stands for the aesthetic ideology and its vices—for Janowitz seems to harden against middle-class expressive poetry as the book goes on. My question is, is cultural materialism right to assume that “polite” poetry *is* expressive in structure? Is it really the case that this poetry is “about” the individualist, unencumbered self, with its logical conclusion of “confessional” poetry? Are there alternative descriptions? And even if there are not, how can cultural materialism offer a productive critique that does not push a century of writing into the corner of its own subjectivism?

Antony Harrison’s important *Victorian Poets and the Politics of Culture*, another fine study, provides an answer by starting with the social rather than with the self. His book concludes with a critique of Harold Bloom’s separation of the aesthetic from the political and his presumption of the necessary elitism of the high romantic poetic tradition of aesthetic autonomy. Harrison’s Introduction steers a considered course between a constructed social subject and one which can seize some power of contestation and control in the face of the framework of meanings and values that order the self, so that the self is formed by both “collusions and collisions” of ideology (5). On the one hand the subject is organized through “unified groups of ‘more or less stable aggregated discourse’” (he quotes here from an influential essay of 1993 by Trevor Purvis and Alan Hunt in the *British Journal of Sociology*) (5). These are prefabricated and “virtually monolithic,” but permeable and multiple, so that, on the other hand, the social subject is always under construction and can discover a space for “struggle and contestation” (5). A subject

may be positioned but has the chance of repositioning him- or herself—or texts have the chance to achieve this, perhaps unbeknownst to their maker. Poetry, its sensuousness as cultural artifact guaranteeing it a privileged entry into the psyche, is particularly well-fitted to seize discursive power because consciousness can be enthralled by the sensoria in a way that blocks analysis—Harrison agrees with Eagleton here. The argument is more complex than I have conveyed, but it is clear that Harrison wants to hang on to both ideology, the naturalizing of a telos, and discourse theory's understanding of the circulation of power through discursive formations, in order to load the dice against the individualist, unencumbered "lyric" subject.

How does this work out? Two magnificent chapters end the book. The penultimate chapter is an exemplary analysis of Matthew Arnold's paradoxical strategies of disavowal, both rejecting power and claiming it by self-consciously stationing himself at the margins of culture, outside culture and over and against history. Harrison explores these strategies by studying Arnold's ambivalent identification with and distancing from the recurrent trope of the gipsy as cultural outsider. He shows, in some pages of bravura scholarship, how prevalent the discourse of the gipsy as deeply distrusted "other" was in mid-nineteenth-century culture. And yet, the figure was also idealized. Arnold took advantage of this shifting discourse to claim cultural immunity from the zeitgeist, which then guaranteed him his superior capacity to analyze the modern situation. This, Harrison argues, gained Arnold and his values of aesthetic disinterestedness a hegemonic power not only in his lifetime but for a number of subsequent generations. The final chapter, mainly on Christina Rossetti's prose, demonstrates how her rigorous obedience to the logic of Christian ideas overturns orthodoxies and reestablishes them as revolutionary positions. Harrison's scrupulous close readings consolidate his case. This is another contribution to the complex readings of an inexhaustible poet, here made compelling by Harrison's supreme familiarity with Rossetti's work.

Along with Morris, Tennyson, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Swinburne, Arnold appears at the start of the book in a demonstration of the different ways in which poets could be in "collusion and collision" with the discourse of medievalism; Harrison convincingly and brilliantly offers "Dover Beach" (1867) as a text in the discursive formation of medievalism. It is in the discussion of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and in the later chapter on Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859-72), that the limits of

discursive theory begin to appear. Harrison sees Rossetti's medievalism in "The Blessed Damozel" (1850) as both parody and hysteria—in other words as a poem at the mercy of medievalism's construction of emotion at the same time that it grotesquely pulls away from it. But I am mindful of Jerome McGann's account of Rossetti's poetry as a "devotional offering to the ideal it can only ever seize by desire." It is not necessary to understand this either as expressive subjectivity or ideology—rather, an analysis of consuming desire—to accept McGann's terms. Similarly, Harrison believes that the *Idylls* adopts an indeterminate "sage discourse" (51) to assert authority and symbolic power. The general fiduciary terms of this discourse one has to take on trust because, in their extreme abstraction, they are empty of meaning. And this emptiness allows the poem to manipulate ideological conformism to reactionary values. Another of Tennyson's tactics is to pose an uninterpretable allegoricity, a saying otherwise that ducks reference. This way the text can occlude the contradictions of the dominant discourses it wants its readers to accept (for example, the contradictions between Christianity and capital) and enable its audience to write into its terms whatever conservative ideological positions it is invited to construct—whether religious, monarchical, imperialist, antifeminist.

I wonder if Harrison's conviction that dominant discourses are monolithic and stable leads him to surrender too readily to the conservative elements in the text. At times, despite his understanding of ideology in process, his methodology forces him to posit a wholly unfractured or prefabricated conservative dominant in order to prove his poets' consent to or dissent from it. Certainly Arthur's daunting list of round table obligations—"To reverence the king [. . .] To break the heathen [. . .] To love one maiden only [. . .] teach high thought [. . .] And love of truth" (465-80)—is crushingly authoritarian and imperialist in spirit. What are the implications of reading differently?

Interestingly, Graham's *Ideologies of Epic* takes up some of the passages Harrison discusses—including Tennyson's disavowal of his intention to write epic in the *Idylls*—but interprets them rather differently. Graham's understanding of ideology and discourse to some extent converges with that of Harrison, but his Bakhtinian model more emphatically refuses the monolithic status of discourse. He adroitly adapts Bakhtinian paradigms, arguing, as Bakhtin did, that the only context in which monologism is possible as an aspiration is the epic. Three elements of epic preserve a single discourse: the unity of a

national past, a national tradition, and the distance of the epic world from the contemporary—a solid, self-contained, imagined community (he uses Benedict Anderson’s phrase here) that moves up or down through history. Nevertheless, the monologic mode cannot escape the dialogic penetrating to its heart, for monologism calls out dialogism as its necessary contradiction even in the epic form. Though the epic struggles to deny the dialogic it can never succeed in excluding it.

Graham prepares for his reading of the *Idylls* through an analysis of the mock medieval Eglinton Tournament of 1838, showing that its confected historicity politicized the spectacle by critiquing the present. With epic distance thus lost, contemporary concerns leaked into the meaning of the tournament and became deconstructively present. An astute reading of the prologue to Tennyson’s original “Morte D’Arthur” (1842), in which he spots a self-consciously historicizing link with Scott’s *Marmion* (1808) through the trope of the wassail bowl, precedes his discussion of the *Idylls*. In the *Idylls*, the monologic homogeneity of nation, with its containing impulse, conflicts dialogically with the heterogeneity of empire, with its need to expand borders. Thus the impossibility of the chivalric code “pleadingly” offered to Guenevere, who recognizes its monologic inadequacy, is a structural feature of the poem. Graham believes that the poem is “riddled” with anxiety about nation and empire (27): after the coming of Arthur there is no period of hegemony, the coherence of the Round Table immediately begins its process of decline; Arthur’s power is obsessively retold throughout the poem to establish a performative hegemony; the “three” Arthurs intended as state hero are uneasily discrepant—the Celtic chief, Arthur Hallam, Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington.

I suspect that Harrison’s response to such arguments would point to his agreement with Graham about Tennyson’s conservatism. He would point out the authoritarian, reactionary stance of the poem and the *accidental* leakage of dialogical critique. For though it is true that Harrison’s poets “wrest cultural power” (86) by capturing discourse, this is not because they have a critical distance from it: rather, they are caught up in the power relations generated by discourse itself. Both Harrison and Graham agree in bracketing intentionality. But I wonder if such bracketing leads to an impasse despite its success in circumventing Janowitz’s individualist poetry of the romantic tradition: we may have to find another way into intentionality, or a redefinition of it. If we assume that texts ask questions about hege-



monic positions rather than closing upon them, and that their authors are to some extent in possession of these questions as tools of *analysis* rather than of *expression* (or perhaps expressive poetics *is* an analytical poetics), we can go some way to arriving at a non-individualist, transpersonal lyricism without sacrificing the important political insights elicited by Harrison and Graham.

One brief example: Harrison finds Merlin's mystifying riddle concerning Arthur's origins a particularly exasperating example of evasive, referentially empty sage discourse—"Rain, rain, and sun! a rainbow in the sky!" ("The Coming of Arthur," line 402). But there are actually several accounts of Arthur's origin and legitimacy, including his own, that he is legitimated simply by his success in his first battle, and that success arose simply because the knights believed in him—"Thou dost not doubt me king" (line 125). Yet the argument from pure trust is simultaneously completely absolutist and totally sceptical, leading as much to totalitarianism as to relativism. One could read this as Harrison's indeterminacy or Graham's dialogical leakage, but one might also read it as a posing of the problem—Tennyson's analysis of the implications, for the nation, of the loyalty based on belief alone, the phyrnic victory of conservative requirements of trust without formal institutional or civic power. For Merlin there is no unitary ideology, as the many-colored rainbow attests. Whether the rainbow is in the sky or on the lea, and whether the viewer is more aware of sun than of rain, or vice versa, will radically change and fracture vision. One of the questions the poem is posing, using the modern Victorian optics of Tennyson's newly scopic society, is about the contradictions of a relativist theme in an authoritarian framework, the epic, and, implicitly, in national culture. This is not to duck ideology or to turn Tennyson into a radical despite himself, nor to return him to individualist lyric, but to see him analytically exploring the implications of his own premises.

Although I read differently from Harrison and Graham, I value the importance of their work and its contribution to new understanding of the poetry and politics of this period. Harrison, for example, has some splendid readings of Morris and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, seeing the former in direct opposition to dominant discourses of sexuality and the latter as appropriating conservative discourses—of the poet, of women, of motherhood—and inadvertently mobilizing their radical possibilities. Barrett Browning dealt with subversive themes in reassuring ways and with reassuring themes in

subversive ways, confirming and breaking expectations. Graham, moving from the mainstream, has some powerful discussions of the Irish poet Samuel Ferguson's epic, *Congal* (1872) and of Edwin Arnold's translations from the *Mahabharata, Indian Idylls* (1883). Having seen "dialogical leakage" in Tennyson's poem, he goes on to describe the constant struggle to assert monological language on Ferguson's part as he wrestles with Ireland's status as both colonized other to England, and, as home of a Protestant gentry, England's equal. He finds both monological assertion and dialogical leakage in Arnold's work. Arnold's translation breaks down the binary opposition between Christianity and Buddhism. At the same time it gives monological coherence to the "other" as a national epic. Translating an epic in order to enable the British to understand Indian consciousness precisely consolidates that consciousness as powerfully apart from the European subject.

It is interesting that "Victorian" poetry is the perhaps unlikely site of new possibilities and questions in cultural materialism, ideological and discourse analysis in a new historicist mode, and Bakhtinian critique, as authors test out these frameworks. On the face of it one might not expect a poststructuralist study to belong to the same debate. However, I think Yopie Prins's *Victorian Sappho* has much to contribute to it. Hers is the only one of these studies to discuss the epithet "Victorian" in her title. One reason for it is that Victoria herself participated in Sapphic discourse as a young woman, making an engraving of the tragic poet who killed herself for love of a man, a heterosexual image that lasted until late in the century before the lesbian Sappho displaced it. Another is that the Sapphic trope points to an insistent gender politics around feminine desire and its representation that requires a revisionary reading both of culture and poetry in the nineteenth century. Prins's main aim is to "historicize and theorize in further detail the *logic of lyric reading* that has produced the idea of Sappho" (7, emphasis added). In this difficult and complex book, which will deter readers with preconceived or superficial understandings of poststructuralist textuality as infinite regression, she is attempting to understand the logic of nineteenth-century lyric through the consequences of the fragmentation of Sappho's texts. This logic is that the first person singular is always problematized, precisely not singular, not simply because Sappho's texts are culturally mediated through a long history of the construction of Sappho through translation, but because the lyric

subject in the fragments is fractured through the very process of naming, whether by a “self” or an other: “Only in the complex mediations between the first, second and third person can Sappho be named as a hypothetical lyric subject” (10).

The consequences of this problematization for conceiving of the lyric subject become considerable. We can confront both Janowitz’s private lyricism of the unencumbered subject and the tendency to ideological determinism in Harrison and Graham with Prins’s revisionary lyric subject. The lyric subject may be steeped in ideology both as a cultural idea and through its thematics, but it also becomes possible, once released from its purely expressive connotations as an originary voice, for the lyric subject to give up its anthropomorphic character so that it can be *used* “as structure for shifting identification, rather than the fixing of an identification” (20). Here she takes issue with de Man’s understanding that to historicize the expressive lyric as an ideology of subjectivity is in some sense to do away with it. On the contrary, the use of the first person is consistently fertile precisely because we can see it as artifact and analytical tool together.

After looking at variant translations of Sapphic lyric in a virtuosic historical survey to adumbrate a constantly shifting field of meaning, Prins deliberately begins with the cool, non-personal lyric voice of Michael Field, the two women poets who adopted this pseudonym. The consequences of the double voice of *Long Ago* (1889), two women poets writing as a man writing as Sappho, is that the Sapphic name opens up a play of meaning, a we that is “neither one nor two” (106). The poems clear a space for mediation in which mediation itself becomes thematized. The duality of authorship and its interchangeable nature is explored, bringing with it inevitable revisions of binary sexuality and a lesbian language that “addresses women differently” (105). Prins shows that once we pull on the thread that leads from the stable name, we move from figures of wholeness to fragmentation. In a subtle account of Swinburne, she locates a “Sapphic sublime” that disarticulates the body, manifesting the materiality of language rather than a subjectivity that finds its defining cohesion in the sublime moment. She reads Swinburne’s pounding rhythmic experiment as a sadomasochism that has incorporated and internalized flagellant metrics, literalizing violence as well as providing a figure for it. This brings a problematic of violence and power into the very beat of the line and dares to offer perverse readings of power. Her final chapter demonstrates how the

incessant writing of and to Sappho, and the recapitulation of the suicidal Sapphic leap, by “sentimental” nineteenth-century women poets, including Letitia Landon, Barrett Browning, Rossetti, and particularly the much-neglected Caroline Norton, uses sentimental subjectivity. Taking issue with the individualist politics of Mary Poovey, who is interested in the self-authorization and empowerment of Norton, she argues that it is the sentimental lyric self as textual phenomenon that constitutes the political maneuver of Norton’s verse. By creating a rhetorical female personhood that compensates for the legal denial of women’s identity after marriage Norton’s poetry critiques the legislative denial of representation. This is an intricate book that sometimes obfuscates, and the line of a poststructuralist politics and sexual politics is not always clear, but it is a necessary complexity—one would not be without its passionate punning and intensity—and contributes brilliantly to what will be a long debate on the voluntarist subject of poetry in the romantic tradition.

Kerry McSweeney’s *Supreme Attachments* is a comprehensive study of the love poetry of Browning, Tennyson, A. H. Clough, George Meredith, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Coventry Patmore, Thomas Hardy, and three women poets, Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Emily Dickinson. He looks at Victorian love poetry through the categories of “Later Love,” “Anticipation as Virtual Fulfillment,” and “Invitation to Love.” He attributes “the importance attached to love relationships” (4) to the crumbling of traditional religious certainties, so that the love relationship appeared to offer a compensatory spiritual stability. This constitutes the new “Victorian” element in love poems. This is a learned book, aware of the importance of classical and biblical scholarship to the reading of poems of the period (McSweeney notes that the three love lyrics of *The Princess*—“Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal” (1847), “Come Down, O Maid” (1847), “Ask Me No More” (1850)—belong eclectically to the traditions of Theocritan pastoral, Persian *ghazal*, and Elizabethan lyric respectively); it is deeply attentive to metrical pattern; it is sensitive to language and so full of insights that it is hard to pick one key chapter in the volume, though the study of Meredith is particularly interesting; it is informed by general theoretical reading—Theodor Adorno, Georg Simmel, Luce Irigaray, for instance—though it does not, as one might expect, give up the individualist subject.

Direct, responsive, and alive to textual detail and verbal ambiguity, it is not part of this study's agenda to engage with the political problems of the other books reviewed here. It would deem these oversophisticated cultural studies, I think, that might usefully concentrate instead on ethical and aesthetic questions. Though I would disagree, I did wonder how Harrison and Graham and even Prins might look with the inclusion of other poets, such as Clough and Browning. But the book's importance is that it is admonitory in its reminder that precise close reading is the core of literary analysis. Some readers will find McSweeney's allocation of only seventeen pages to three major women poets more than a little difficult to accept. He is adamant that this poetry does not warrant more, however, and though I disagree with him, I do think his methods interestingly elicit a bossy, rather domineering voice in Barrett Browning's work that needs to be accounted for more fully than it has been. Other readers will be put out by the many confident judgments that pepper the work: for instance, he makes the astute comment that "importune," that odd word Browning uses to describe his search of empty alcoves in "Love in a Life" (1855), is commonly used to signify to "solicit for an immoral purpose" (24). But the subtlety of the observation is lessened by the question, "Is this pursuit a wholesome exercise?" (24).

The problem that McSweeney's close reading approach suggests is the privileging of the ethical against the cultural. Why is it taken for granted that these must be in opposition? Doesn't the ethical sneak its way into work as different and as sophisticated as that by the four writers above? This book comes from a long and honorable tradition in Browning studies, the tradition of Roma A. King, Jr., W. O. Raymond, Donald Smalley, and H. N. Fairchild, to name a few of those postwar studies that have been overshadowed. Only Robert Langbaum's work survives from this period. So it is significant that a tradition from which we have all learned so much is still alive.

"Not so bad for poetry," Rossetti said, when he earned a substantial sum from it, Harrison tells us (38). Not so bad for "Victorian" poetry: to have elicited pressing new questions through the study of nineteenth-century poetry by critical methods that had their genesis in the study of other texts and periods—cultural materialism in the early modern period, poststructuralism in Romantic studies, for instance—is an achievement of considerable significance. These studies teach us to forget about a unified Victorianism. Whether they

start with the social or the self, they open out the politics of the unencumbered subject, socially, textually, ideologically, in ways that will be with us for some time. Whether these will invite a new ethical turn remains to be seen.

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#### **WORKS CITED**

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