Introduction: Victorian Poetics

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In developing a characterization of Victorian poetics, it is important to recognize that literary periods are historical hypotheses that depend not only upon assumptions about historical change but also upon historical accident. The organization of literary history into historical periods is a fairly recent phenomenon. It develops from the historicism that dominated nineteenth-century thought, a historicism that was motivated by a distinct sense of modernity. John Stuart Mill begins his essay ‘The Spirit of the Age’ by observing the relationship between modernity and historicism:

The ‘spirit of the age’ is in some measure a novel expression. I do not believe that it is to be met with in any work exceeding fifty years in antiquity. The idea of comparing one’s own age with former ages, or with our notion of those which are yet to come, had occurred to philosophers; but never before was itself the dominant idea of any age.

It is an idea essentially belonging to an age of change. Before men begin to think much and long on the peculiarities of their own times, they must have begun to think that those times are, or are destined to be, distinguished in a very remarkable manner from the times which preceded them. (1963–90: XXII, 228)

We have come to rely so heavily on the interpretative categories of Romantic, Victorian and Modern that we forget that these categories were constructed as a way of defining historical progress towards the modern, from a modern perspective. The poets that we call the Romantics did not think of themselves as Romantics, any more than the Victorians thought of themselves as Victorians. Poets writing in the 1830s and 1840s conceived their work in the context of the major writers of the two previous generations — Wordsworth and Coleridge, and Byron, Shelley and Keats. The characterization ‘Victorian’ depends in part on the accident of the beginning, length and end of Victoria’s reign and takes polemical force from the efforts of early twentieth-century writers to define themselves, in Mill’s words, as ‘distinguished in a very remarkable manner from the times which preceded them’. In seeking to characterize Victorian poetics, it is important not to assume distinct breaks with the writers that we call the Romantics or with those we call the Moderns. The history of poetics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a con-
tinuous development that has sometimes been obscured by modernist polemics and by
the structure of academic specialization.

The poetry that we have come to call Victorian develops in the context of Romantic
icism. The birth dates of writers whom we identify as Victorian are not many years distant
from those of the second generation of Romantics. None the less, these earlier poets
defined what poetry was for the young Tennyson and Browning. When Browning first
read Shelley, at the age of fourteen or fifteen, Shelley quickly became his God; in his early
autobiographical poem, *Pauline*, Browning writes that Shelley’s poetry seemed ‘a key to a
new world’ (l. 415). When Tennyson, at fourteen, heard that Byron had died, he felt the
world had come to an end, melodramatically carving in stone ‘BYRON IS DEAD’. Later,
when Tennyson was at Cambridge, his close friend Arthur Hallam placed his poetry in
the school of Keats and Shelley. Although Victorian poetics came to distance itself from
Romantic poetics, the first generation of Victorian poets initially saw themselves as
writing in a Romantic tradition. Had the second generation of the Romantics not died
so young, we would not have so sharply a sense of division between these groups of writers.
Wordsworth, after all, was still writing poetry in the 1830s and 1840s, and served as poet
laureate until his death in 1850, when he was succeeded by Tennyson.

Even in early Victorian poetry, however, we can see assumptions that would generate
a distinct poetic project. Both Tennyson and Browning develop a poetic mode, distinct
from each other but with important points of contact, that embodies a poetics from which
most subsequent poetry of the century derives.

Tennyson’s friend Hallam reviewed Tennyson’s first independent book of poetry, *Poems,
Chiefly Lyrical*, in a remarkable and influential essay that defines the principles of
Tennyson’s early poetics. Hallam indicates the boldness of his critical ambition in the
title of his review, ‘On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry’. He begins by differ-
entiating the poetry of Shelley and Keats from that of Wordsworth. Wordsworth too
frequently writes a poetry of reflection, whose aim is to convince rather than enrapture.
Hallam contrasts this with what he calls the poetry of sensation. He describes poets of
sensation in the following way:

Susceptible of the slightest impulse from external nature, their fine organs trembled
into emotion at colors, sounds, and movements, unperceived or unregarded by duller
temperaments . . . So vivid was the delight attending the simple exertions of eye and ear,
that it became mingled more and more with their trains of active thought, and tended to
absorb their whole being into the energy of sense. Other poets seek for images to illustrate
their conceptions; these men had no need to seek; they lived in a world of images; for the
most important and extensive portion of their life consisted in those emotions which are
immediately conversant with the sensation. (1943: 186)

Hallam argues that such poetry is not descriptive; it is ‘picturesque’. It consists of a
combination of sense impressions through which the poet experiences and evokes a poetic
emotion. Hallam grounds this poetry in the physical laws of association. Although the
poet’s impressions are necessarily subjective, they can be re-experienced by any individ-
ual willing to exert the effort of repeating the process of their combination.
Hallam's description of the poetry of sensation resembles what John Ruskin would later criticize in *Modern Painters* as the pathetic fallacy, the attribution of human emotion to our impressions of external things. Ruskin distinguishes between 'the ordinary, proper, and true appearances of things to us' and 'the extraordinary or false appearances, when we are under the influence of emotion' (V, 204). Indulging in the latter is a sign of weakness in the poet. Ruskin feels that both Keats and Tennyson display this weakness. He thus faults the very state that Hallam claims for the highest species of poetry – emotion so powerfully felt that it imbues all impressions of sense.

For Hallam such poetry is self-sufficient; its only motive and standard is beauty. He claims that the delicate sense of fitness from which the poetry of sensation springs 'acquires a celerity and weight of decision hardly inferior to the correspondent judgments of conscience'. It is weakened by 'every indulgence of heterogeneous aspirations, however pure they may be, however lofty, however suitable to human nature' (1943: 187). This, according to Hallam, was Wordsworth's weakness; he too often indulged such heterogeneous aspirations, motivating philosophical reflection rather than sensation.

Tennyson's early poetry uses sense impressions in the way in which Hallam describes. He constructs a scene through a combination of images that convey a subjective experience. Here, for example, is the first stanza of 'Mariana':

```plaintext
With blackest moss the flower-plots
Were thickly crusted, one and all;
The rusted nails fell from the knots
That held the peat to the gable-wall.
The broken sheds look'd sad and strange:
Unlifted was the clinking latch;
Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
Upon the lonely moated grange.
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In his review of Tennyson's early poetry, John Stuart Mill praises Tennyson for the power of creating scenery 'in keeping with some state of human feeling; so fitted to it as to be the embodied symbol of it, and to summon up the state of feeling itself'. Hallam praises Tennyson in similar terms: he is distinguished by his power 'of embodying himself in ideal characters, or rather moods of character, with such extreme accuracy of adjustment, that the circumstances of the narration seem to have a natural correspondence with the predominant feeling, and, as it were, to be evolved from it by assimilative force' (1943: 191–2). In 'Mariana', for example, Tennyson conveys Mariana's desolation through the landscape that surrounds her – the moss-encrusted flower plots, the falling rusty nails, the broken sheds. This is a poetry whose focus is subjectivity, not as a universal category – the 'T of the Romantic poet – but as a particular mood or character. It uses a language of sense impressions, predominantly visual impressions of landscape, to convey these moods. Any philosophical statement is motivated by character or mood.

The poetry of sensation that Hallam describes does not place great emphasis on the cognitive capacity of language. Indeed, Hallam describes a role for pure sound in poetry,
apart from meaning. He claims that there are poems in which sound conveys meaning where words would not:

There are innumerable shades of fine emotion in the human heart, especially when the senses are keen and vigilant, which are too subtle and too rapid to admit of corresponding phrases. The understanding takes no definite note of them; how then can they leave signatures in language? Yet they exist; in plenitude of being and beauty they exist; and in music they find a medium through which they pass from heart to heart. The tone becomes the sign of the feeling; and they reciprocally suggest each other. (1945: 194–5)

Hallam here articulates the principle that gains increasing prominence as the century advances, that poetry aspires to the condition of music. He provides a theoretical basis for the characteristic of Victorian poetry many have remarked upon – its pursuit of what seems like pure sound, as in these lines from Tennyson’s ‘The Ballad of Oriana’:

My heart is wasted with my woe,
Oriana.
There is no rest for me below,
Oriana.
When the long dun woods are ribbed with snow,
And loud the Norland whirlwinds blow,
Oriana,
Alone I wander to and fro,
Oriana.

(II. 1–9)

Like the use of sensation that Hallam describes, the use of sound contributes to a poetry that produces its effects through evocation of mood.

In one of the most prescient parts of his essay, Hallam observes that the poetry of sensation that he describes results from what T. S. Eliot would later call a dissociation of sensibility. Hallam felt that the different elements of the poetic temperament – sensitive, reflective and passionately emotional – had originally been intermingled but now had become divided from each other. This division, Hallam argues, has given rise to the melancholy that characterizes the spirit of modern poetry, the return of the mind upon itself, and the habit of seeking relief in eccentricities rather than in community of interest. Modern poets thereby necessarily become alienated from their audience. The sense of the modern that Hallam describes is a burden that troubles all of Victorian poets. By the end of the century writers of the Aesthetic movement and the Decadence were to embrace the alienation and eccentricity that Hallam laments; critics who locate themselves more conservatively, as we shall see, construct a poetics whose explicit goal is to escape this sense of the modern.

The poetics that Hallam defines in his review of Tennyson’s early poems resembles John Stuart Mill’s early conception of poetry. In ‘Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties’, Mill, like Hallam, distinguishes the poetry of Wordsworth from the poetry of Shelley. In
Wordsworth, Mill argues, poetry is almost always 'the mere setting of a thought' (1963–90: I, 38). The highest species of poetry represents feeling rather than thought. Its object is to act on the emotions by exhibiting a state or states of sensibility. For Mill as for Hallam sensibility pervades the nervous system and operates through the senses; it follows physical laws of association. A dominant feeling generates a combination of images and thoughts. Thought is always subordinate to feeling, the medium of its expression. Likewise description has no place in poetry; objects like thoughts must be represented through the medium of feeling. It follows from this conception of poetry that it is of the nature of soliloquy — in Mill's words, 'feeling confessing itself to itself' (1963–90: I, 348).

After Mill wrote these two essays, he reviewed Tennyson's first two volumes of poetry: Poems, Chiefly Lyrical, which Hallam had reviewed, and the 1832 Poems (published 1853). Although Mill praises much of what Hallam had praised in Tennyson's early work, his review shows him modifying the concept of the poetry of sensibility that his earlier essays had held up as an ideal. Now Mill argues that poets must apply the faculty of cultivated reason to their nervous susceptibility and to their sensitivity to the laws of association. He warns Tennyson that he must continue to develop this faculty and finds evidence in poems like 'The Palace of Art', with its criticism of aesthetic isolation, that he has begun to do so. Tennyson's development as a poet shows his sensitivity to the conflict that Mill's early essays on poetry reveal. Tennyson feels a tension between an imaginative allegiance to the poetry of sensation and a troubled aspiration to a higher level of generalization that would enable him to address a society from which the poet has been alienated. Before I address the way in which the poetics of mid-century considers this dilemma, I will describe the poetics of Browning's early poetry, for it explores a different and in some ways more radical way of representing subjectivity than Tennyson's.

No review of Browning's early poetry gives it the synoptic overview that Hallam provides for Tennyson, and Browning's own descriptions of his poetic project are fragmentary. After his first long confessional poem, Pauline, which reflects the powerful presence and influence of Shelley, Browning turned to dramatic forms. In 1842 he published the volume Dramatic Lyrics with the following advertisement: Such poems as the majority in this volume might also come properly enough, I suppose, under the head of 'Dramatic Pieces'; being, though often Lyric in expression, always Dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine. Two things are significant in this definition: the combination of lyric and dramatic utterance and the conception of an imaginary speaker, separate from the poet. Through his development of a dramatic principle for lyrical utterance in the form that came to be called the dramatic monologue, he can at once represent and question the nature of subjectivity — how the self creates a world and constructs the character of others to support its views. Through the speakers he creates, Browning explores the power and failure of language in representing the self and the way in which history constrains what his characters can see. His speakers range from madmen like Porphyria's lover or Johannes Agricola, who parody the Romantic sublime, to historical characters like Cleon or Karshish, who allow us to explore the limitations that one's place in history imposes on consciousness, to imaginary figures like Childe Roland, whose perceptions of the world we have a much smaller basis for judging. The form allows a
wide range in its application of irony, permitting the poet to create grotesque characters whose distortions we delight in discovering (like the speaker of 'My Last Duchess') and characters whose blindness is shown to be our own.

The dramatic monologue is the single most important formal development in Victorian poetry. It ultimately shapes modernist assumptions about poetic personae. In 'The Obscurity of the Poet', the modern poet and critic Randall Jarrell identifies both the innovation and the debt: 'The dramatic monologue, which once had depended for its effect upon being a departure from the norm of poetry, now became in one form or another the norm' (1953: 13). The form is so important an achievement in the history of modern poetics because it enables the poet to move beyond the dilemmas that Romantic assumptions about poetic subjectivity had seemed increasingly to pose. Modern poetry as Hallam defined it represented the individual sensibility, a sensibility that had become alienated from society. Browning makes this a dramatic situation; he frees the poet from the burden of alienated subjectivity by attributing it to a specific character and thereby extends poetry's representational range. Tennyson also moves increasingly towards a poetry of dramatic mask, as he provides mythological identities for his lyric speakers. Using sensation to depict mood and character, his poetry is closer to the dramatized subjectivity of Browning's monologues than the contrast between their poetics would seem to suggest. Both approach, though from different directions, what in Retreat into the Mind Ekbert Faas has called 'a new psychological poetry' (1988: 5). Each transforms the universal subjectivity of Romanticism, in which the 'I' of the poet claims to represent each of us, to a dramatic representation of individual psychology that treats any such claim with irony.

The implications of such a poetics were not ones that all writers and critics were prepared to embrace. In the preface he wrote for his 1853 Poems, in which he removes his own poem *Euphrosyne* from the collection, Arnold proposes a poetics that specifically counters what he feels are the inadequate poetics of the modern age. He identifies the modern with 'the dialogue of the mind with itself' (1965: 591). It too easily leads to poems that represent a state of continuous mental distress, 'unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done' (1965: 592). Although Arnold is describing his own *Euphrosyne*, he could have as easily been describing any of a number of Tennyson's early lyrics, such as 'Mariana' or 'The Lotus-Eaters', or one of Browning's dramatic monologues. Arnold defines the aim of such a poetics as 'a true allegory of the state of one's own mind in a representative history' (1965: 598–9). This is not an adequate description of the poetics of even his own *Euphrosyne*, much less Tennyson or Browning, because it ignores the irony that the dramatic character of the poems gives to lyric utterance. Nevertheless, Arnold's characterization is significant. It reflects his effort to distance himself from a subjectivist epistemology that he associates with Romanticism.

As an alternative to the poetics that he criticizes, Arnold advocates a poetry which focuses on the representation of excellent human actions. Such actions 'most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time' (1965: 593–4). Such an art escapes the predicament of the modern: the alienation of artists from his society, their
confinement to subjectivity as the material of art, and their location in a mundane contemporaneity. Arnold advocates a style appropriate to poetry as he conceived it: the grand style, in which beauty or elaborateness of expression does not offer itself as an independent pleasure, distracting the reader from the action. Elsewhere he criticizes the styles of Keats, Tennyson and Browning for too fervent an embrace of 'the world's multitudinousness' (Arnold 1952: 97). Arnold associates a poetics of subjectivity with the kind of elaboration in style that for both Tennyson and Browning represented the movements of consciousness.

Arnold's poetics is a reactionary one in that it does not result in a poetry, even in his own work, that successfully reflects it, as his turn to criticism suggests. It is most valuable in the insight it gives us through what it rejects. Furthermore, it demonstrates the pressure in Victorian poetry to address more ambitious subjects than either the poetry of sensibility or the dramatic lyric seemed to allow. Poetry at the mid-century is a fascinating set of experiments in using the poetics of sensibility and the dramatic monologue in long forms with considerable ambition of social statement. The question of the appropriate subjects for such poems, as Arnold's preface indicates, absorbed all poets writing in those decades.

Arnold believed that the Classics offered the noblest and most significant personages and actions from which to take the material of poetry. He is critical of the 'domestic epic' dealing with the details of modern life. In her verse novel, Aurora Leigh, Elizabeth Barrett Browning articulates the opposite view. Her heroine, the poet, Aurora Leigh, claims that poets' sole work:

is to represent the age,
Their age, not Charlemagne's, - this live, throbbing age
That brawls, cheats, muddles, calculates, aspires,
And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
Between the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,
Than Roland with his knights at Roncesvalles.

(V, 202–7)

Aurora then calls upon poets to 'catch / Upon the burning lava of a song / The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age' (V, 214–16). This passage reflects not only Barrett Browning's epic ambition but her belief that such an ambition must be realized in a contemporary narrative with the sweep and fullness of detail of the novel.

Both Arnold and Barrett Browning paint a vivid picture of the poetry they feel takes upon itself the wrong subject. Arnold abjures poems 'representing modern personages in contact with the problems of modern life, moral, intellectual, and social' (1965: 594); Barrett Browning mocks the poet who does not understand that 'King Arthur's self / Was commonplace to Lady Guenever' and Camelot as flat to minstrels 'as Fleet Street to our poets' (V, 210–13). It seems that both Arnold and Barrett Browning could be describing Tennyson. This paradox indicates the complexity of Tennyson's engagement with the issue of poetry's appropriate subject. He writes poems in which he uses classical models for contemporary materials, as in his 'English idylls'. He also writes dramatic monologues on
subjects from Greek myth, like 'Ulysses' and 'Tirwhon'. Robert Browning displays a similarly complex engagement with the idea of poetic subject. He creates both contemporary and historical characters but always with the kind of detail that makes them novelistic. Although Arnold and Barrett Browning seem to articulate a stark choice in poetics, the practice of Victorian poetry is more eclectic. The most characteristic Victorian poetic projects combine aspirations from the two. Victorian poets ride history and legend for characters and stories that ground and give resonance to thickly detailed representations of sensibility; they also seek in classical forms a way of elevating domestic realism.

The question of the appropriate subject for poetry is closely linked to the issue of the long poem. Tennyson's and Browning's early poetics find their appropriate realization in short poems. In mid-century both Tennyson and Browning write ambitious long poems which none the less remain grounded in their early poetics. After writing dramatic monologues of increasing length and complexity, Browning conceives The Ring and the Book, a daring experiment in which ten monologues offer different perspectives on an obscure seventeenth-century Roman murder trial. Tennyson's long poems reflect a more eclectic set of experiments. He termed The Princess a 'medley'; it combines a modern frame with a vaguely medieval story concerning the modern issue of woman's education, and a long narrative with lyric interludes. In Memoriam is a long poem, in T. S. Eliot's words, 'made by putting together lyrics' (1964: 291). Tennyson calls Man and a monodrama in which 'different phases of passion in one person take the place of different characters'. The Idylls of the King is the most conventional of Tennyson's long poems, a set of twelve narrative romances, each of which focuses upon a character who offers a perspective upon the Arthurian ideal. As diverse as these poems are, however, each places a poetry of sensibility in a larger framework that is not articulated in a unifying and authoritative manner by the poet himself but is implied by the juxtaposition of parts. As in The Ring and the Book, the form operates by a dramatic principle, in which lyric elements are placed in a larger context that invites ironic reading. Neither Tennyson nor Browning abandons the dialogue of the mind with itself which Arnold feels is so inadequate a basis for poetry, yet both aspire to the weight of moral and social statement that Arnold believes is the poet's responsibility by juxtaposing lyric panels.

We can begin to understand how so large a poetic ambition can rest on so fragile a foundation by exploring the relationship between subjectivist and objectivist accounts of perception in Victorian aesthetics. Both Tennyson's and Browning's poetics seem grounded, as I have shown, in an understanding of perception that stresses the subjective organization of vision. Yet Victorian aesthetics contains a number of powerful objectivist accounts of perception that emphasize transparent vision of the object. In 'The Hero as Poet', Carlyle defines the ideal poet's sensibility not as 'a twisted, poor, convex-concave mirror, reflecting all objects with its own convexities and concavities' but 'a perfectly level mirror'. He urges the poet, first of all, to see: The word that will describe the thing follows of itself from such clear intense sight of the thing' (1896–1901: V, 104). In 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', Arnold repeatedly describes the ideal in all branches of knowledge, including poetry, 'to see the object as in itself it really is' (1960–77: III, 258). Ruskin's Modern Painters contains volumes of advice about depicting
the truth of rocks, the truth of clouds, the truth of water, the truth of space, the truth of trees. His strictures against the pathetic fallacy stem from a conviction that the poet's responsibility is to provide a true account of the appearances of things. It is tempting to argue that Victorian poetics contains competing, mutually exclusive accounts of perception, one objectively and one subjectively based, but such an argument would obscure the way in which objectivist and subjectivist accounts of perception in Victorian poetics tend to approach each other. Hallam grounds his poetry of sensation in universal laws of association; Ruskin's account of the truth of natural phenomena in Modern Painters provides a defence of Turner's impressionism. Both objective and subjective accounts of perception in Victorian poetics anchor themselves in the visual. The prominence of visual detail in Victorian poetry reflects this uniform emphasis on the visual in what are competing accounts of perception. A number of Victorian writers share the view that either perspectivism or impressionism could accommodate both a uniquely subjective point of view and an objective model of perception. This commitment to perspectivism as mediating between subjective accounts of perception and the aspiration to see the object whole sheds light on the form of the Victorian long poem. The long poem juxtaposes a set of perspectives in order to imply a whole. Because the vision of the whole is implicit, not explicit, such a form lends itself to ironic readings in which no single vision emerges.

Victorian theories of poetic style amplify this effect. Victorian poetic style is often baroque; it is thickly detailed, it delights in alternative formulations; it is ornate and elaborate. In The Stones of Venice John Ruskin provides a suggestive formulation for this idea of style in his concept of the Gothic. Although Ruskin is describing Gothic architecture, his insistence that the term 'Gothic' applies not to a set of architectural features, but rather to a set of mental tendencies of the artists, allows critics to use the term more broadly. The key elements of the Gothic for Ruskin are savageness, or rudeness; changefulness, or variety; naturalism, or love of natural objects; grotesqueness; rigidity, or energy giving tension to movement; and redundance, or love of accumulation and ornament. Ruskin did not intend to provide a description of contemporary poetic style. Moreover, Victorian poetry is so diverse and eclectic that it is difficult to make a single characterization of its style. Nevertheless, Ruskin's definition of the Gothic reflects the way in which critics and writers valued a style embracing elaboration, accumulation, luxuriance of energy, profusion of natural objects, variety. However different, Tennyson's and Browning's poetry shares a superfluity of detail and expressive formulation. In a review published in 1864 of Tennyson's Enoch Arden and Other Poems and Browning's Dramatis Personae, entitled 'Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning; or Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in English Poetry', Walter Bagehot criticized both poets for an excessive elaboration in their style. Bagehot's ideal, which resembles Arnold's, he calls 'pure literature', literature that describes the type in its simplicity, that is, 'with the exact amount of accessory circumstance which is necessary to bring it before the mind in finished perfection and no more than that amount' (1898: II, 341). Bagehot opposes pure art to ornate art, whose exemplar is Tennyson. The ornate style attempts to surround the type 'with the greatest number of circumstances which it will bear' (II, 351), working not by choice and selection but by accumulation and aggregation. The grotesque, exemplified by Browning, abandons the type altogether to take as its
subject the mind in difficulties, abnormal specimens, struggling with obstacles, encumbered with incongruities. In his definitions Bagehot connects subject matter to style. He understands that choice of subject matter for Tennyson and for Browning carries with it a commitment to a certain style. What is at stake for Bagehot, as it was for Arnold, is the power of generalization. The commitment that Tennyson and Browning both have in their distinct ways to representing a singular subjectivity commits them to principles of elaboration in style that Arnold saw as domination by the world's multitudinousness. Bagehot's criticism at mid-century shows that the linguistic elaboration of Victorian poetry was recognized as an important question in poetics, linked to ideas of poetic subject.

At mid-century, then, both Tennyson and Browning had evolved a distinct poetics from their Romantic roots: representation of a singular subjectivity in a dramatic context that allows ironic distance and implication; use of visual detail to mediate between subjective and objective ideas of perception; experiments with perspective to generate large poetic forms with ambition of social and philosophical statement; and an embrace of elaboration in style. Conservative critics like Arnold and Bagehot understood the radical implications of this poetry and proposed in reaction a conservative poetics. For Arnold the stakes were very high. He believed that poetry could replace religion and philosophy. It could interpret life for us, console us, sustain us. He placed upon it a responsibility for truth and high seriousness that neither Tennyson's nor Browning's poetics accommodated in the way that Arnold imagined. It is ironic that the elevation to which Arnold raises aesthetic experience, his insistence upon its separation from the world of practice, contributes ultimately to aestheticism, a view that would have been abhorrent to Arnold.

The Victorian debate about the proper role and value of aesthetic experience takes on even greater complexity in relationship to gender. The emphasis, in one strand of Victorian aesthetics, on sensibility as the most important element of the poetical character led to an identification of poetry as feminine. Tennyson, for example, most frequently represents the imagination as female, as in 'The Lady of Shalott' or 'The Palace of Art'. By the 1860s the effeminization of literature had become a topic of critical debate. Alfred Austin, who was to succeed Tennyson as poet laureate, writes that in contemporary literature, 'we have, as novelists and poets, only women, or men with womanly deficiencies, steeped in the feminine temper of the times' (1869: 96). He is particularly critical of what he sees as a feminine mode of verse, characterized by lyrical fluency, erotic ardour and circumlocution. Tennyson receives particularly harsh criticism; the muse of Mr Tennyson, Austin asserts, is 'a feminine muse'.

As Austin's criticism suggests, the increasing presence of women poets and novelists in the literary marketplace in part motivates the debate about the gender of literary sensibility. Wordsworth's predecessor as poet laureate, Robert Southey, instructed the young Charlotte Bronte that literature 'cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be'. Hundreds of women proved him wrong. The growing prominence of women writers led to a discussion of the nature of women's writing, with many critics arguing that men and women writers had distinct poetic modes. In Female Writers (1842), for example, Mary Ann Stoddart argues that the epic belongs to man, the lyric to woman. Contemporary feminist criticism has paradoxically reinscribed the Victorian separation of
men's and women's writing. Women writers, it is argued, share experiences and circumstances so distinct from those of men that they write a poetry with a unique tradition and set of characteristics. Critical work building on this assumption has brought attention to unjustly neglected women writers and provided powerful insight into the representation of gender in their poetry and into the effect of gender on poetic stance and persona. However, it has also contributed to a blindness with regard to the role of women poets in Victorian poetics. Barrett Browning, for example, did not think of herself as a poet isolated from the contemporary poetry of men; she wrote an epic in Aurora Leigh about the development of a woman poet that is very much engaged in contemporary aesthetic debates. Christina Rossetti, similarly, is very much part of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Separating women poets from their context limits our understanding of their work and of Victorian poetics, of which they are part.

Most writing on Victorian poetics sees a sharp distinction between poetry in the first and second half of the period. Although Tennyson and Browning continue to write through the 1880s, poets of the later part of the century see them as members of an earlier generation from whose example they have departed. Yet the continuity is greater than the poets acknowledge. Just as Tennyson and Browning evolved their poetics from elements in Romanticism, the poets of the 1850s to 1880s develop aspects of the poetics of Tennyson and Browning.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was the first group of artists to articulate what they saw as a new aesthetic. The term 'Pre-Raphaelite' is a difficult one to define in the history of Victorian poetics. It initially described a movement in painting, the principles upon which Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt based their revolt in the late 1840s against the academic art of their day. They insisted that they wanted to return to the purity of art before Raphael. Their painting combines microscopic fidelity to detail, abundant use of symbolic objects, medieval and religious subject matter, a white ground that produces luminous colour, and a sharply outlined depiction of the human figure. The group fell apart to reconstitute itself almost a decade later with Rossetti, William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. This second phase of Pre-Raphaelite painting was quite different from the first. Closely aligned to the Aesthetic movement, later Pre-Raphaelite painting is characterized by richly patterned canvases picturing heavily stylized erotic subjects to which are attached symbolic meaning.

The extension of the term 'Pre-Raphaelite' to poetry seems at first glance an accident of personal association. Two of the painters of the Pre-Raphaelite movement were poets – D. G. Rossetti and Morris – and other poets, including Swinburne and Christina Rossetti, were linked to it by personal relationship. Nevertheless, these poets were seen as a group by their contemporaries and successors, and the term 'Pre-Raphaelite' is useful in describing their work and its contribution to Victorian poetics.

The Pre-Raphaelites were initially known for their fidelity to detail. The early poetry of D. G. Rossetti and Morris uses minute particulars in a way analogous to early Pre-Raphaelite painting. Tiny sensual details convey the emotion that is the centre of the poem. Here, for example, is a stanza from Rossetti's 'The Woodspurge', about a man in a moment of grief:
My eyes, wide open, had the sun  
Of some ten weeds to fix upon;  
Among those few, out of the sun,  
The woodspurges flowered, three cups in one.  
(ll. 9–12)

Rossetti introduces the possible allusion to the Trinity only to insist that the flower of the woodspurges is merely a sensuous impression given significant context by his grief:

From perfect grief there need not be  
Wisdom or even memory:  
One thing then learnt remains to me, —  
The woodspurge has a cup of three.  
(ll. 13–16)

Like Rossetti, Morris is interested in the connection between sensation and emotion. In *The Defense of Guinevere and Other Poems*, he combines a use of sound and visual detail derived from Tennyson with the dramatic techniques of Browning to depict characters in the midst of passionate conflicts that they barely understand. Morris brings together the vertiginous epistemology of a poem like 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' with the Tennysonian lyric.

What separates the Pre-Raphaelite project from Tennyson and Browning is an interest in the relationship of the sensual to the symbolic. In D. G. Rossetti’s poetry this interest takes two forms. He portrays mythological female figures with a fullness and intensity of sensuous detail that make symbolic conventions concrete. His Blessed Damozel leant on the gold bar of heaven until she makes it warm. Rossetti also uses a language of shadowy personification and abstractions to depict erotic experience that cannot be articulated. Here, for example, are some lines of the Willowwood sonnet sequence, about the pain of love’s loss:

And I was made aware of a dumb throng  
That stood aloof, one form by every tree,  
All mournful forms, for each was I or she,  
The shades of those our days that had no tongue.  
They looked on us, and knew us and were known;  
While fast together, alive from the abyss,  
Clung the soul-wrung implacable close kiss;  
And pity of self through all made broken moan.  
(ll. 5–12)

These lines achieve their eerie effect not only by embodying past selves in the dumb throng that surround the speaker but in representing in disembodied form the kiss and pity of self. Rossetti experiments with a disjunctive, dissociative poetry as a way of exploring emotion that frustrates articulation.
Swinburne was the most radical of the Pre-Raphaelite circle in his exploration of the way in which a language emptied of concrete references can convey powerful emotion. As T. S. Eliot understood, Swinburne writes a poetry in which 'the object has ceased to exist' (1964: 285). He creates poetic emotion from a language so abstract, set so free from referents by its accumulation of metaphor, so dominated by its patterns of sound that his poetry tests a certain limit in poetics. Here is an example from his 'Hymn to Proserpine':

Far out with the foam of the present that sweeps to the surf of the past:
Where beyond the extreme sea-wall, and between the remote sea-gates,
Waste water washes, and tall ships founder, and deep death waits:
Where, mighty with deepening tides, clad about with the seas as with wings,
And impelled of invisible tides, and fulfilled of unspeakable things,
White-eyed and poisonous-finned, shark-toothed and serpentine-curlcd,
Rolls, under the whitening wind of the future, the wave of the world.

(ll. 48–54)

The transformation of natural objects to figures of speech (foam of the present, surf of the past), the use of adjectives that refuse sensual definition (invisible, unspeakable) and the use of metaphors that offer conflicting images (shark-toothed and serpentine-curlcd) all create a welter of words that evoke emotion without mimetic or cognitive referents. It seems paradoxical to treat poetry this abstract as part of the same poetic movement that valued minute sensuous particulars, but there is a conjunction between them. The Pre-Raphaelites share an interest in the relationship of the sensuous, the emotive and the symbolic. Swinburne portrays sensuous experience to which he gives mythic dimension by obscuring particular context. D. G. Rossetti explores the nexus and the disjunction between the particular and the symbolic in erotic experience. Morris writes intensely realized dramatic lyrics of which he obscures the context.

Contemporary critics saw the unity of the Pre-Raphaelite movement not in its poetic experimentation but in its scandalous subject matter. In a vitriolic review of Poems and Ballads, John Morley condemns Swinburne for depicting 'the unchaste lusts of sated wantons, as if they were the crown and character and their enjoyment the great glory of human life' (1866: 145). In a review of D. G. Rossetti's Poems, Robert Buchanan gave the label 'the fleshly school of poetry' to the work of Rossetti, Swinburne and Morris. He calls the school 'sub-Tennysonian'; it derives from the sensualism of 'Vivien' and Maud. Buchanan's definition is instructive because it shows that more is at stake than simply erotic subject matter, although that no doubt would be enough to earn his ire. 'The fleshly gentlemen', he writes, 'have bound themselves by solemn league and covenant to extol fleshliness as the distinct and supreme end of poetic and pictorial art; to aver that poetic expression is greater than poetic thought, and by inference that the body is greater than the soul and sound superior to sense' (1871: 355). Despite the prudery and hyperbole of his attack, Buchanan understands that Pre-Raphaelite subject matter is linked to a set of assumptions about poetry. He formulates a crude version of Arnold's criticism of Browning, Tennyson and Keats: that poetic expression offers itself as an independent pleasure.
In a response to Morley's attack on his poetry, Swinburne defends the poetry he writes as a kind of lyrical monodrama, not dissimilar to *Mand*, in which each passion represents a new stage and scene, whether the sadomasochistic love of 'Dolores' or the longing for oblivion of 'The Garden of Proserpine'. His defence resembles Browning's assertion of the dramatic character of his work. Swinburne writes, 'With regard to any opinion implied or expressed throughout my book, I desire that one thing should be remembered: the book is dramatic, many-faced, multifarious; and no utterance of enjoyment or despair, belief or unbelief, can properly be assumed as the assertion of the author's personal feeling or faith' (1925–7: XVI, 354). Despite his kinship to Browning and Tennyson, however, Swinburne presents his phases of passion with much less irony. Browning and Tennyson developed dramatic forms to distance the lyric voice; Swinburne uses them to embrace lyric energy.

The poetry of the Pre-Raphaelites shows a far greater engagement with lyric forms than that of Tennyson or Browning. The most powerful lyric poet among the Pre-Raphaelites is Christina Rossetti, but, like Morris, D. G. Rossetti and Swinburne, she is interested in obscuring the context from which the lyric voice speaks. She uses an abstract vocabulary in which physical objects are often figures of speech and emotions approach but do not quite reach personification. Her great subject is negativity; she defines the lyric voice through where it is not and what it has not. Here is a characteristic stanza from the poem 'Three Stages':

I looked for that which is not, nor can be,
And hope deferred made my heart sick in truth;
But years must pass before a hope of youth
Is resigned utterly.

(ll. 1–4)

The idiom that Christina Rossetti develops allows her to represent the constraints on women's emotional lives with particular power. She often places herself in the position of woman as men regard her and explores the constrictions of that position. She also uses the idiom of negativity that she creates to write powerful religious poetry. Christina Rossetti develops her style in a Pre-Raphaelite context, which she turns to a set of subjects that subvert conceptions of gender and passion characteristic of her brother's work.

The poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins also reflects the increased presence of lyric forms in the poetry of the 1870s and 1880s. Like Tennyson and Browning and like the Pre-Raphaelites, he is concerned with the relationship between the sensual and the symbolic, with how to mediate between psychological experience he sees as uniquely particular and an objective world he wants to make generally accessible. Like them he explores the consequences of this epistemological dilemma for the shape of the poem – its form, its language, its rhythm. Language for Hopkins, as for Swinburne, is a medium with its own texture and identity that creates poetry's unique experience.

Hopkins believes that the identity of every individual thing in the universe – natural object, person – consists in its inscape, the unique characteristics that define its particu-
lar being. To comprehend the inscape of an object, one must perceive it with a thrust of energy that Hopkins calls instress. Instress is a dynamic act; Hopkins defines it with verbs like 'greet', 'meet', 'catch'. Hopkins crafts the shape of his poems to dramatize the act of instress. The poems themselves constitute inscape in two senses: they realize the inscape of the object that the poet seeks to capture, and they create their own inscape as they themselves become unique objects in the universe. Hopkins avoids the dilemma of solipsism and non-communicability that would seem implicit in this poetics by understanding identities as unique intersections of characteristics. Metaphor thus becomes critical to his poetics, as it is to Swinburne's, for it is by the piling up of metaphor that Hopkins portrays both the effort of instress and the unique mapping of inscape, as in the opening lines of the sonnet, 'The Starlight Night':

Look at the stars! look, look up at the skies!
O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!
The bright boroughs, the circle-circleds there!
Down in dim-woods the diamond dives! the elves'-eyes!
The grey lawns cold where gold, where quickgold lies!

The set of metaphors that Hopkins generates in this sonnet for the starlight night represents the instress of inscape much as Swinburne's amassing of metaphor evokes the passion that is the subject of his poems. However, there is a critical difference. Swinburne amasses metaphors to obscure the referentiality of language. Hopkins believes in an organic relationship between words and things in which the way that words acquire multiple meanings through metaphor allows one to grasp not only the unique characteristics of an object but its place within the web of the universe. A passage from an early diary gives a sense of how Hopkins understands language to work. A horn, he states:

may be regarded as a projection, a climax, a badge of strength, ... a tapering body, a spiral, a wavy object, a bow, a vessel to hold withal or to drink from, a smooth hard material . . . , something sprouting up, something to thrust or push with, a sign of honour or pride, an instrument of music, etc. From the shape, kernel and granum, grain, corn. (Hopkins 1959: 4)

Ultimately Hopkins's poetics derives from the identity of Christ with the Word. The name of a thing is an essentialist connection for Hopkins, as it is not for most of his contemporaries. We can instress the web of sensual particulars that constitutes the universe through the web of language, with its metaphorical principles embedded in the origins of words and the spread of their meanings.

In his play with language, the poet must not fall into the ease of convention. Like Swinburne, Hopkins feels that the writing of the highest kind of poetry requires a mood of intense passion. In a letter to his friend A. W. M. Baillie, in which he confesses that he has begun 'to doubt Tennyson', Hopkins differentiates the language of inspiration from what he calls 'Parnassian'. Hopkins argues that the poetry of inspiration can only be written in 'a mood of great, abnormal in fact, mental acuteness, either energetic or recep-
tive, according as the thoughts which arise in it seem generated by a stress and action of the brain, or to strike into it unasked (Hopkins 1956: 215). Parnassian does not require this mood; it is the grand style adopted as a conventional mannerism. Like Bagehot, in his definition of the ornate style in poetry, Hopkins illustrates it with Enoch Arden. The language of inspiration for Hopkins requires a deformation of conventional syntax. It resembles Ruskin’s idea of the Gothic. Hopkins intensifies the sense of syntactic deformation under the pressure of inspiration by a unique system of poetic rhythm he calls sprung rhythm, which replaces a system of regular syllabic feet with a system of stresses governing irregular syllabic patterns. Like the use of sound in Tennyson, Browning and Swinburne, sprung rhythm results in a music that impresses itself on the reader as an independent element of the poem’s experience.

Yet Hopkins’s theology ultimately makes his poetics unique. He shares the dilemmas of his contemporaries and their interest in exploring the expressive possibilities of what Ruskin calls the Gothic style. However, Hopkins’s ability to comprehend the universal in the particular depends upon his belief in the Word, both as founding divine principle and as the organic relationship of language to the universe. This belief allows his poetry a cognitive density unique among his contemporaries. The balance that Hopkins’s theology enabled him to maintain between what he calls mortal beauty and God’s better beauty, grace, is a fragile one. He was haunted by the possibility of a universe in which one could not escape the unique particularity of one’s own experience — in the words of one of the ‘terrible sonnets’, the ‘self yeas’ of a spirit that a dull dough sours. Hopkins commits himself to the most daring and difficult poetic project of his contemporaries, for he places in a theological framework the most radical assumptions of what Pater called the Aesthetic movement.

Just as Matthew Arnold was the dominant critical voice at mid-century, Walter Pater provided the philosophical framework for the poetics of the century’s final decades. Pater had personal associations with the major poets writing then. He was one of Hopkins’s tutors at Oxford, he was a friend of Oscar Wilde, and he defended the work of the Pre-Raphaelites. Pater introduced the term ‘aesthetic poetry’ for the work of the Pre-Raphaelites in a review, first published in 1868, of Morris’s poetry. He argues that aesthetic poetry develops from Romanticism. It is an art in which ‘the forms of things are transfigured’ (Pater 1919: 1). He finds his model for transfiguration in medieval art and literature, although his description of it is remarkably similar to Hallam’s description of the poetry of sensation in emphasizing the way in which the sensation of nature conveys mood:

Of the things of nature the medieval mind had a deep sense; but its sense of them was not objective, no real escape to the world around us. The aspects and motions of nature only reinforced its prevailing mood, and were in conspiracy with one’s own brain against one. A single sentiment invaded the world: everything was infused with a motive drawn from the soul. (Pater 1919: 8)

Pater departs from Hallam in his abandonment of any belief that such aesthetic emotion provides knowledge of the real appearance of nature. In the poetry of D. G. Rossetti, Pater
writes, the sense of lifeless nature 'is translated to a higher service, in which it does but incorporate itself with some phase of strong emotion'.

The original conclusion to 'Aesthetic Poetry' became the conclusion to *The Renaissance*, in which Pater defines the solipsism that is the basis for his poetics. He first reduces experience to a group of impressions - colour, odour, texture - in the mind of the observer. He then reduces the scope of experience yet further:

Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. (Pater 1910: 1, 235)

Although we might describe Browning's or Tennyson's characters in the way in which Pater describes the conditions of consciousness, Browning and Tennyson both create a dramatic frame that enables the reader to analyse and judge such solitaries imaginings. Although D. G. Rossetti, Morris, Swinburne and Hopkins in different ways share the poetics that Pater articulates, none of them abandons with such emphasis the possibility of meaning beyond a purely subjective impressionism. Pater has given up the project that motivated earlier Victorian aesthetics: that of finding the conjunction between individual sensation and knowledge of objects. He revises Arnold's advice to the critic to see the object as in itself it really is; the aesthetic critic must 'know one's impression as it really is'.

Having reduced experience so radically, Pater asserts that intensity of experience is the only success to which one can aspire. The love of art for its own sake offers the best way to achieve the 'quickered, multiplied consciousness' that Pater desires. Aesthetic poetry provides a distillation of a transfigured world, an artificial or earthly paradise. Although Pater describes this poetry with fine discrimination, he makes more radical claims on its behalf than the poets would themselves. Swinburne, for example, refused to accept a narrow view of art for art's sake as an adequate basis for aesthetics, claiming that the artist must have the liberty of bringing within his range any subject, including moral or religious passion. Pater limits the significance of such subjects to the intensity of aesthetic experience they can provide. In a later essay, on the School of Giorgione, Pater asserts that all art aspires towards the condition of music. The mere matter of a poem - its subject, its incidents, its situation - 'should be nothing without the form, the spirit, of the handling'. This form, Pater goes on to state, 'should become an end in itself'.

Pater's work develops directly from earlier Victorian aesthetics, but it marks a radical departure. Oscar Wilde celebrated the subversiveness he found in Pater. For Wilde, art never expresses anything but itself; it has an independent life. It is, accordingly, indifferent to subject matter and to fact. It keeps between itself and reality 'the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment'. Thus, lying - the telling of beautiful untrue things - is the proper aim of art, for the liar tries simply 'to charm, to delight, to give pleasure'. Revising both Arnold's and Pater's instructions to the critic,
Wilde praises the effort 'to see the object as in itself it really is not'. Art should not be held to any external standard; its only motive is the creation of beauty. Because such a definition of art ignores the utilitarian concerns of society, the artist is necessarily alienated. Life drives art into the wilderness, a situation that to Wilde is the true decadence.

Wilde's importance as a critic stems not only from his provocative formulation of Pater's poetics but also from his use of them to define a pose and a culture. For Wilde, aestheticism is not the melancholy attenuation of Romanticism that it appears to be in Pater but a rebellion and liberation. The artist creates a personal style that itself constitutes a criticism of society. The homosexual identity that both men and women writers of the 1890s embrace – among them Wilde, Michael Field, Vernon Lee – is the profoundest expression of the separate and subversive identity they create. Artists develop a subculture in which the aesthetic becomes the point from which society's banality, hypocrisy and repression are revealed. It is one of the interesting ironies of the history of Victorian poetics that the embrace of art for art's sake at the end of the century, which had developed from the poetics of late Romanticism as articulated by Hallam and practised by Tennyson, expresses a radical social criticism.

The poetry of the Decadence illustrates a similar irony. Although many poems of the 1890s are exactly what Wilde's poetics would lead you to expect – evocative, richly patterned lyrics that present images and moods – a number of the most important poetic innovations have to do with subject matter – the use of details of modern urban life, like make-up, street girls, trains and cigarettes. The liberation of subject matter in Decadent poetry makes it seem less distant from other poetic voices of the late nineteenth century who were bringing a new realism to the lyric and who are usually thought of as an extreme contrast to the Decadents – W. H. Henley, Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling.

In many ways the best guide is Arthur Symons, whose critical prose acutely describes the poetry of the end of the century in ways that anticipate the development of modernism. Symons was the most important connection between French and British writers of the 1890s. He introduced the work of Verlaine, Mallarmé and Huysmans to his British contemporaries, and provided a name for a literary movement that could encompass poetry on both sides of the Channel in his book, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. Writing in 1893, Symons asserts that the best term to describe the new movement in European literature is 'Decadence', because current art and literature share all the qualities that mark the end of great periods: 'an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversion' (1893: 858–9). He goes on to argue that impressionism and symbolism define the two branches of the Decadent movement and that the two have more in common than either supposes. Although one works with the visible world, the other with the spiritual, both try to flash upon you in a sudden way a new and perfect sense of the artist's intuition, rejecting all ready-made impressions and conclusions. Symons's linking of impressionism to symbolism recalls how close throughout the Victorian period, from Tennyson to the Pre-Raphaelites, were a poetics centring upon visual impressions as a way of communicating an emotional landscape and a poetics evoking emotion through language distanced from its immediate referents. Impressionism develops from the poetry of sensation, as it evolves
through the Victorian period. Symbolism has analogues in the poetry of the Pre-Raphaelites, as Yeats recognized. The way in which the work of the Pre-Raphaelites encompasses both the poetry of sensation and a proto-symbolism supports Symons's argument that impressionism and symbolism are closely related branches of modern poetics. Symons dedicated *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, which he originally wanted to entitle *The Decadent Movement in Literature*, to Yeats. Yeats's own essay, *The Symbolism of Poetry*, begins with a tribute to Symons's book and then proceeds to define symbolism in a way remarkably similar to Hallam's poetry of sensation:

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become, as it were, one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion. (1973: 156–7)

Although Yeats does not mention Hallam in this essay, he says specifically in *Art and Ideas* that he developed the poetics of his early work from Hallam's essay on Tennyson, rejecting only the element of detailed description. He finds the exemplar of Hallam's poetics not Tennyson, however, of whom he is repeatedly critical, but D. G. Rossetti. Elsewhere he expresses his debt to Pater. In describing the 1890s in his autobiography, he writes, 'If Rossetti was a subconscious influence, and perhaps the most powerful of all, we looked consciously to Pater for our philosophy' (1965: 201). When Yeats edits *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in 1936, he opens it with Pater's description of da Vinci's *La Gioconda*.

These relationships are important because they demonstrate what modernist polemics often obscure: the roots that modernism has in the poetics at the end of the century, poetics that in turn developed from earlier strands in the century. Eliot's concept of the objective correlative, the set of objects which 'must terminate in sensual experience' that evokes a given emotion, resembles Hallam's idea of the poetry of sensation. Pound's idea of the image also develops from nineteenth-century impressionism and shares with it the project of connecting a precise and objective visual language with a poetry of mood and reverie. Similarly, the idea of persona, which became a cardinal principle in modern poetics, develops from Browning's conception of the dramatic monologue, as Pound acknowledged.

As the continuity between Victorian and modern poetics demonstrates, the history of poetics is not a succession of distinct, reified totalities, each coinciding with a literary-historical period. Rather, it is an evolution in which elements of previous practice and theory are assimilated and developed by succeeding generations of writers. Critics have spent much time debating whether writers whose work spans the centuries like Hardy are Victorian or modern. The question is a false one. There is no point at which one literary period ends and another begins. However, the continuity of literary history results in a retrospective influence as well as a prospective one. The choices that succeeding generations of writers make shape our understanding of the significance of the past. Victo-
rian poetry is extraordinarily various; it has many contradictory strands. The achievement and influence of high modernism has paradoxically given more prominence to Tennyson, the Pre-Raphaelite and the Decadence than to other elements of Victorian poetics.

The Victorians were the first generation of poets to think of themselves as modern in Mill's sense of occupying a present distinguished in a remarkable way from the past. As each succeeding generation of writers defines itself as modern in a never-ending regression towards the present, the challenge of writing an evolutionary literary history increases. How do we write a history of modern literature if each generation asserts its modernity by insisting on its difference from the past? Writing a history of the modern will require us to question its repeated sense of its own uniqueness.

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