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# I

JOSEPH BRISTOW

## Reforming Victorian poetry: poetics after 1832

### I

Historians of nineteenth-century British writing sometimes claim that the Victorian period properly begins some five years before Her Majesty the Queen ascended the throne. There are good reasons to justify why 1832, rather than 1837, should open the Victorian age. To be sure, the obligation within the discipline of English literature to compartmentalize historical periods often imposes barriers that can obscure important continuities between what precedes and follows a supposedly defining moment. Delimiting fields of study according to hard-and-fast distinctions looks all the more incoherent when we consider that some epochs such as the Romantic characterize a dynamic intellectual movement, while others like the Victorian remain subject to the presiding authority of a monarch. But whatever disputes we may have with the peculiar manner in which we find ourselves dividing one period from the next, 1832 designates a decisive turn of events.

The year 1832 witnessed the passing of the Great Reform Bill. This parliamentary act acknowledged a massive transformation that the nation had been undergoing for almost two decades – one whose repercussions would resonate long after Her Majesty expired in 1901. Once the Battle of Waterloo terminated the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, Tory-governed Britain moved into a phase of political unrest. In this respect, the most famous conflict occurred at St Peter's Fields, Manchester, in 1819 when some 80,000 people demonstrated for annual parliaments, universal suffrage, and the lifting of the Corn Laws (which made bread, the staple diet of the poor, costly). Mown down by a troop of hussars, eleven people were killed and some four hundred seriously injured. Occurring in the year before his premature death, Peterloo impelled radical poet Percy Bysshe Shelley to denounce Britain's ruling elite. In "The Mask of Anarchy" (1819) – a poem censored until 1832 – he personified the Prime Minister, Robert Stewart

(Viscount Castlereagh), as “Murder.”<sup>1</sup> And in the famous sonnet “England in 1819” he condemned “An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King” (George III) for siring a disreputable family of future “Rulers” whose “leechlike” behavior was sucking the blood out of a “people starved and stabb’d in th’ untilled field.”<sup>2</sup>

More than ten years would pass before a newly elected Whig government embarked on its eighteen-month campaign to lead the Bill through parliament. Unquestionably, this legislation opened up deep social rifts. The conservative William Wordsworth, for example, bewailed the Bill in early 1832, fearing an imminent “popular commotion.”<sup>3</sup> In his view, both the insurrection in Paris that overthrew Charles X’s reactionary Polignac ministry in July 1830 and the riots that set Bristol ablaze in October 1830 “prove[d] what mischief may be done by a mere rabble.” Not surprisingly, the Tory press expressed similar fears. Just before the Bill (in the first of its three versions) entered parliament in January 1831, the *Quarterly Review* declared that it was dangerous to “dignify” as “*public opinion*,” such widespread disturbances as “burnings and machine-breakings.”<sup>4</sup> If “democratic influence,” it contended, “should be increased” in the House of Commons, then “successive stages of vote by ballot” would inevitably lead to “the extinction of the aristocracy and the monarchy, and to the entire prostration of rank and property at the feet of a Jacobin faction” (256). By contrast, left-leaning journals such the *Westminster Review* advanced Utilitarian arguments about the urgency of reform. Even though it felt that the Bill remained “full of anomalies,” the *Westminster* approved the Whig ministry for having “wisely judged the signs of the times,” “prudently” following “the onward march of events.”<sup>5</sup> Public feeling could not have been more divided.

Eventually passed in June 1832, the Great Reform Bill for the first time acknowledged an electorate whose class and political affiliations were more diverse than the Tories had been willing to countenance. Even though the Bill managed to double the size of the voting public, only one in six men had the suffrage. Harold Perkin observes that this parliamentary act gave “little direct power to the urban, emancipated middle class.”<sup>6</sup> “The radical change produced by the Reform Act,” he wryly remarks, “was from aristocratic rule by prescription to aristocratic rule by consent.”<sup>7</sup> But the passing of the Bill nonetheless admitted that political influence would increasingly emerge from a growing bourgeoisie whose interests often lay in a commercial, industrial, and urban world that contrasted sharply with the conservative values upheld by the superannuated gentry. Since the Bill slightly redrew the electoral map, expanding cities such as Birmingham, Manchester, and Preston could now send Members to the Commons,

though the majority of seats still lay in the counties and smaller boroughs. Thereafter, as the middle class gained ascendancy in many spheres of Victorian culture, the later Reform Bills of 1867 and 1884 would turn their attention to another – eminently vocal – group: the laboring men whose earliest trades unions flourished after the founding of the London Working Men’s Association in 1834. Such events remind us that if the Victorian period begins on a resounding note, then it concerns structural changes in class relations – ones that have somewhat minor relevance to a young, inexperienced, and (in the early years of her career) uninfluential queen.

1832, to the historian of literature, stands as a significant year for poetry as well. During the months leading up to the passing of the Bill, the earliest work of Alfred Tennyson came to public attention. In 1832, he published his third collection titled *Poems*, whose contents featured “The Lady of Shalott,” “The Lotos-Eaters,” and “The Palace of Art.” These famous poems, along with several others, would undergo extensive revision for republication in the first of the two volumes of Tennyson’s next major work, once again named *Poems* (1842). His 1842 volumes so solidly established his reputation that eight years later he was appointed Poet Laureate: the official state position that won him considerable favor with Her Majesty. Since he held the position until his death in 1892, Tennyson’s career looks almost synonymous with the Victorian period itself. Certainly, in the annals of literary history Tennyson ranks – both in stature and precedence – as the first Victorian poet.

But Tennyson’s fame was far from immediate. At the start of the 1830s, Tennyson’s writings formed part of a heated debate about the state of poetry in general. Modern critics often claim that pointed criticism of his writings forced the sensitive Tennyson into a monastic “ten years’ silence.” It is fair to say that at the start of his career the first Victorian poet met with a measure of unsuccess. According to some prominent contemporaries, Tennyson’s poetry seemed to embody the widespread deficiencies of his age. Reviewing *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, the conservative John Wilson declared that “England ought to be producing some young poets now, that there may be no dull interregnum when the old shall have passed away.”<sup>8</sup> “It is thought by many,” he added, that “all the poetical genius which has worked such wonders in our day, was brought into power . . . by the French Revolution.” The present time, Wilson argues, bears comparison with the events of 1789: “Europe, long ere bright heads are grey, will see blood poured out like water; and there will be the noise of many old establishments quaking to their foundations, or rent asunder, or overthrown” (724). Is Tennyson equipped to meet the impending revolution? The answer is flatly no. Especially depressing in

Wilson's view are Tennyson's patriotic lyrics such as "National Song" ("There is no land like England" [AT 1]): "It would not be safe to recite them by the sea-shore, on invasion of the French" because they are "dismal drivel" (726). There is indubitably "fine music" in Tennyson's work; indeed, the young writer's "fine faculties" are such that Wilson can confidently assert "that Alfred Tennyson is a poet" (740). But "he has much to learn . . . before his genius can achieve its destined triumphs."

Only by returning to the fraught discussion of poetry in the early 1830s can we see why the first Victorian poet on occasion failed to convince his readership that his talents were suitably robust for the age. In fact, when we look at some of the more decisive statements on poetics from that decade, Tennyson's work provides a key reference-point in a debate that rarely reaches consensus on the function and purpose of poetry. This chapter examines how early and mid-Victorian intellectuals explored the competing demands made upon the poet either to participate in or retire from the turbulence of modern society. Was the time ripe for poetry to embrace politics in the name of social change? Or should poetry repudiate social discontent and fix its attention instead on spiritual ideals? Whatever answers to such questions were forthcoming, one thing was for sure: The language of poetics remained inextricable from reform – a word that certainly dramatized the uneasy relations between the poet and the people.

## II

During the months when Tennyson's early collections were faring unevenly in the press, another – now largely forgotten – writer attracted much more positive attention, not least because of the topicality of his work. In 1831, the fifty-year-old Ebenezer Elliott published an anonymous pamphlet titled *Corn-Law Rhymes*, a series of mostly short lyrics protesting the ban that the Tories imposed on imported wheat at the end of the wars against France. In one exuberant poem after another, Elliott deplores an agricultural system in which inflated rents support idle landowners whose exploitative tenants keep the price of bread beyond the reach of the laboring poor. "England!" exclaims Elliott, "what for mine and me, / What hath bread-tax done for thee?" (I, 73).<sup>9</sup> If only there were free trade, Elliott declares, then bread would be affordable once more. In the meantime, working people remain the victims of nothing less than robbery: "What is bad government, thou slave, / Whom robbers represent?" (I, 63). The answer, we learn, is "the deadly *Will*, that takes, / What labour ought to keep" (I, 64). Indeed, it is the "deadly *Power*, that makes / Bread dear, and labour cheap."

The sources of Elliott's polemic were well known. These sentiments derived from T. Perronet Thompson's frequently reprinted *Catechism on the Corn Laws* (1827). Thompson, who owned *Westminster Review* from 1829 to 1836, analyzed the severe shortcomings of the Corn Laws from a Utilitarian perspective: "The attempt to prevent one man from buying what another is willing to sell to him, and oblige him to buy from a third person with the avowed object of making him pay that third person a greater price, is so manifestly of the nature of robbery, that nothing can make it tolerable in a country where ideas of justice and civil liberty have made any considerable progress."<sup>10</sup> Elliott dedicated *Corn-Law Rhymes* to "all who revere the Memory of OUR SECOND LOCKE, JEREMY BENTHAM, and Advocate" who espoused the doctrine of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (I, 45) – the slogan that encapsulated Utilitarian thought. A radical writer hailing from industrial Sheffield, the working-class Elliott articulated the kind of oppositional voice whose political authority progressive campaigners such as Thompson wanted to secure in the public domain.

But if committed to repealing the Corn Laws, Elliott nonetheless knew that he was on less secure ground when using poetry to contest injustice. Though the *Athenaeum* applauded Elliott's "bold, *sculptured*, and correct versification," it nevertheless stated that his "mere twopenny pamphlet" gave the impression "that the Sheffield Mechanic consider[ed] poetry a mere vehicle for politics."<sup>11</sup> "If politics are to continue the burden of his song," it added, the poet's "coarse invective, technical allusions, and fierce denunciations, will mar his claim to the title of poet." To those readers who felt that his work presented a conflict between poetic expression and political principles, Elliott offered the following defense:

The utilitarians say, that poets are generally servile fools, and that poetry, when it is not nonsense, is almost sure to be something worse; while the more elegant critics complain that the union of poetry with politics, is always hurtful to the politics and fatal to the poetry. But the utilitarians can hardly be right, and the gentlemen critics must be wrong, if Homer, Dante, Milton, Cowper, and Burns were poets. Why should the sensitive bard take less interest than other men, in those things which most nearly concern mankind? The contrary ought to be, and is, true. All genuine poets are fervid politicians.  
(I, 49)

While aligning himself with Bentham politically, however, Elliott understood that he was at odds with him poetically. In *The Rationale of Reward* (1825), Bentham had made some crushing remarks on the utility of poetry in relation to the quality of pleasure that it might generate. "Prejudice apart," Bentham states dryly, "the game of push-pin is of equal value with

the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either.”<sup>12</sup> Further, “push-pin” – a children’s game – gives pleasure to a much larger number of people than poetry: “Everybody can play at push-pin: poetry and music are relished only by a few.” On this account, the value of poetry can only go from bad to worse. “Push-pin,” we learn, “is always innocent: it were well that could the same be said of poetry.” As Bentham sees it, poetry wrongly maintains a “natural opposition” with truth. Bound by its “false morals” and “fictitious nature,” the poet devotes his art to “stimulating our passions, and exciting our prejudices.” Given that poetry builds an elaborate “superstructure” of “ornaments,” it follows that “[t]ruth, exactitude of any kind, is fatal to poetry.” Little wonder that its pleasures appear dubious: “If poetry and music deserve to be preferred before a game of push-pin, it must be because they are calculated to gratify those individuals who are most difficult to be pleased” (207). In fairness, Bentham admits that poetry might produce satisfaction, even if it does so mischievously. But throughout his discussion he stresses that the genre appeals to the “few” (not the many), the “false” (not the true), and the “difficult” (not the simple). In sum, “push-pin” emerges as a more honest and indeed democratic source of pleasure.

Keenly aware of Bentham’s reservations, Elliott pursues his belief that “genuine poets are fervid politicians” by turning the Utilitarian philosopher’s thinking on its head. Emphasizing the fervor that “the sensitive bard” like Dante or Milton takes in “those things which most nearly concern mankind,” he asks rhetorically: “What *is* poetry but impassioned truth – philosophy in its *essence* – the *spirit* of that bright consummate flower, whose root is in our bosoms?” (I, 49). On this model, poetry appears everywhere in British culture, all the way from *Macbeth* (“a sublime political treatise”) to the “fine . . . illustrative poetry” in the contemporary prose of Bentham himself. But Elliott boldly contends that it is not the just the political and philosophical aspects of poetry that command our attention. Poetry matters because its roots reach deep into our understanding of historical experience. “Where,” he wonders, “will our children look for the *living* character of the year 1793” – which marked the beginning of the French wars (I, 50)? Certainly not to the conservative Edmund Burke whose writings – denouncing such decisive events as the French Revolution – would hardly concur with the laboring poet Robert Burns who stated that hereditary “titles are but the *guinea’s stamp*.”<sup>13</sup> Instead, future generations will learn from “the writings of Burns, and *from his life*, that, during a certain crusade for ignominy, it was necessary, yet perilous, and in his case, fatal, to say, ‘the man’s the goud for a’ that.’” By

quoting from one of Burns's finest lyrics, Elliott presents *Corn-Law Rhymes* as "the earnest product of experience," one that embodies the "signs of the times" (I, 51).

As John Johnstone acknowledged in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* (a journal sympathetic to the Utilitarian cause), Elliott wrote poetry "entirely different from the sounding brass and tinkling cymbal of ordinary minstrelsy."<sup>14</sup> The "impassioned truth" of such writing, in Johnstone's view, made Elliott "an original writer in an imitative age" – "a time tending in literature to feebleness and effeminacy." On this point, even Wilson agreed. Although it was obvious that "on the question of the Corn Laws" his Toryism and Elliott's radicalism were necessarily "opposed,"<sup>15</sup> Wilson could not help but admire the poet's resilience. "Elliott," Wilson declared, "is a worker in iron" who "undertakes to instruct you and people like you – not in his craft . . . but in his condition – its vices, its virtues, its trials and temptations, its joys and its sorrows . . . in the causes that, as he opines, oppress it with affliction not inevitable to such lot, and cheat him when he has 'broken a ton,' out of half his own and his children's rightful claim to bread" (821).

In many ways, Elliott possessed those stalwart qualities that Wilson and other critics felt that Tennyson lacked in an era of reform. But the future Poet Laureate had several staunch defenders, including one in the Utilitarian camp. Reviewing *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* in the *Westminster*, W.J. Fox upheld the Benthamite commitment to calculable progress by stating that the "machinery of a poem is not less susceptible of improvement than the machinery of a cotton-mill."<sup>16</sup> Noting that the "great principle of human improvement is at work in poetry as well as everywhere else" (74), Fox discovers in Tennyson's writing a highly advanced state of perception, one that enables him to "obtain entrance into a mind as he would make his way into a landscape" (76). In Fox's view, this astonishing capacity becomes most vivid in poems like "The Merman" where Tennyson "takes" the "senses, feelings, nerves, and brain" of a particular character, "along with their names and habitations," while retaining his own "self in them, modified but not absorbed by their peculiar constitution and mode of being" (77). Wilson characterized Fox's statement as "a perfect specimen of the super-hyperbolic ultra-extravagance of outrageous Cockney eulogistic foolishness" (728). (Here the moniker "Cockney" defines the radicalism that *Blackwood's* had for years disapproved in the work of poets such as John Keats.) As if such fulmination were not enough, Wilson poured scorn on another review, one that appeared in a short-lived periodical praising Tennyson in rather different terms. "The Englishman's Magazine," Wilson remarked, "ought not to have died" (724). "An Essay 'on the Genius of

Alfred Tennyson, ” however, “sent it to the grave.” Published in early 1831, the review in question was by the poet’s closest friend Arthur Henry Hallam. Even if it made Wilson “guffaw,” Hallam’s discussion advanced a powerful argument to rethink the relations between a particular type of poetic genius and the poet’s frequently unappreciative audience.

A gifted critic, Hallam remains best known as the subject of Tennyson’s lyric elegy *In Memoriam* (1850), which preoccupied the poet for some seventeen years after his friend’s demise from a brain hemorrhage in September 1833. (At the time of his death, Hallam was twenty-two years old; he had also recently become engaged to Tennyson’s sister Emily.) Repeatedly the elegiac voice of *In Memoriam* insists on Hallam’s indisputable greatness: “He still outstript me in the race; / It was but unity of place / That made me dream I ranked with him” (AT XLII, 3–4). The “place” that they first shared was Trinity College, Cambridge, where Hallam emerged as one of the most talented members of the select debating society whose twelve members called themselves the Apostles. They had immediate experience of political struggle. During the long vacation of 1830, they traveled to the Pyrenees to supply Spanish rebels with funds and messages in support of their campaign against Ferdinand VII. (Eighteen months later, the rebel leader General Torrijos was captured and executed.) At the end of 1830, they witnessed rural Cambridgeshire blazing with the rick-burnings ignited by the “Captain Swing” riots. Writing to another Apostle in December that year, Hallam observed:

The game is lost in Spain; but how much good remains to be done here! The country is in a more awful state that you can well conceive. While I write, Maddingley [*sic*], or some adjoining village, is in a state of conflagration, and the sky above is coloured flame-red. This is one of a thousand such actions committed daily throughout England. The laws are almost suspended; the money of foreign factions at work with a population exasperated into reckless fury.<sup>17</sup>

Even though Hallam does not “apprehend a revolution,” it remains the case that England teeters on the brink of collapse. His distrust in the belief that reform will better all aspects of English culture informs his essay on *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*. In Hallam’s view, Tennyson’s poetry possesses special qualities that contest the belief that “the diffusion of poetry must be in the direct ratio of the diffusion of machinery”<sup>18</sup> – phrasing that echoes, only to refute, Fox’s commentary. Rather than subscribe to the idea that poetry should form part of an “*objective* amelioration,” Hallam contends that the genre must resist the “continual absorption of the higher feelings into the palpable interests of ordinary life” (190). In other words, if and

when poetry becomes a mere instrument of social improvement, then “*subjective* power” will be inevitably diminished. As he sees it, the great virtue of Tennyson’s volume lies in its refusal to succumb to the “prevalence of social activity.”

Hallam establishes this opinion by recalling Wordsworth’s remarks toward the end of the “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface” (1815). “Mr Wordsworth,” Hallam observes, “asserted that immediate or rapid popularity was not the test of poetry” (183). In his “Essay,” Wordsworth insists that one should banish “the senseless iteration of the word, *popular*, applied to new works of poetry.”<sup>19</sup> According to Hallam, Wordsworth’s comments presented a “truth” that “prevailed” against both “that hydra, the reading Public” and “the Wordsworthians themselves” (184). But just at the point where Hallam appears to make Wordsworth’s doctrine his own, he resists ventriloquizing the Romantic poet’s voice. Observing that “even the genius cannot expand itself to the full periphery of art,” Hallam finds fault with both Wordsworth and his followers for claiming that “the highest species of poetry is the reflective.” By “reflective,” Hallam loosely means philosophical: “much has been said by [Wordsworth] which is good as philosophy, powerful as rhetoric, but false as poetry” (185).

Yet, as Eric Griffiths suggests, both here and elsewhere in Hallam’s writings it proves somewhat difficult to prize poetry and philosophy apart. On the one hand, Hallam claims that “false art” results from “[w]henever the mind of artist suffers itself to be occupied . . . by any other predominant motive than the desire of beauty” (184). On the other hand, he concedes that “beauty” may be found “in those moods of emotion, which arise from the combinations of reflective thought.” Then again, it seems more likely to Hallam that “a man whose reveries take a reasoning turn” will ultimately “pile his thoughts in a rhetorical battery” that aims to “convince” an audience (184–85). Griffiths observes that underneath this rather unstable opposition between poetry and philosophy lies a “conceptual distinction between emotion and intellect,” which “come[s] to Hallam from Kant, more generally from that Kantianism diffused in England principally by Coleridge.”<sup>20</sup> In *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant makes a distinction between *Anschauung* (“intuition”) and *Begriff* (“concept”). For Kant, neither one can subsist without the other. Hallam, however, wishes to place particular emphasis on the role that *Anschauung* plays in shaping the poetic imagination. He believes that the highest poetry gathers its energy from intuition.

At this juncture, Hallam praises “a new school of reformers” (185) whose works contest the Wordsworthian “reflective mode.” But the poems of these so-called “reformers” manifest decisive poetic changes rather than

political ones. He maintains that these poets' works "contain . . . more genuine inspiration . . . than any *form* of art that has existed in this country since the days of Milton." In this regard, the leading lights are Keats and Shelley: writers "of opposite genius" who nevertheless share "a groundwork of similarity sufficient for the purposes of classification." "They are," Hallam insists, "both poets of sensation rather than reflection" (186). Having elevated this type of writer to such heights, he explains the immense distance that necessarily exists between the poet of sensation and his readership. "The public," he remarks, "very naturally derided" Keats and Shelley "as visionaries, and gibbeted *in terrorem* those inaccuracies of diction occasioned sometimes by the speed of their conceptions." As a consequence, such writing may at times prove unintelligible. Is it really the case, then, that "we must be themselves before we can understand them in the least?" The only way to resolve this problem lies in placing a new responsibility upon the reader. "Every bosom," Hallam writes, "contains the elements of those complex emotions which the artist feels" (186–87). Yet the ability to "understand his expressions and sympathize with his state" involves "some degree of exertion" (188). Assuming that "those writers will be most popular who require the least degree of exertion," Hallam argues that the finest poetry "is likely to have little authority over public opinion" (190).

Tennyson remained divided on this issue, as *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* shows. Two inclusions in this volume adopt antithetical positions for the writer of poetry. In "The Poet," he depicts an idealistic image of one "born" "in a golden clime" (AT 1) whose "thoughts" like "viewless arrows" (11) traveled across Europe, filling the "winds which bore / Them" (17–18) with "light" (16). "[L]ike the arrow-seeds of the field flower" (19), the poet's "fruitful wit" took root. In Romantic imagery familiar to readers of Keats and Shelley,<sup>21</sup> these poetic "seeds" grew into a "flower all gold" (24) whose "wingèd shafts of truth" (26) continued to propagate. "Thus," we learn, "truth was multiplied on truth" (33), eventually enabling a female icon of "Freedom" to emerge. Upon her hem, the word "WISDOM" (46) appeared. This "sacred name" (47) could "shake / All evil dreams of power" (46–47). "Her words" (49) rumbled with both "thunder" and "lightning" (50), "riving the spirit of man" (51). But her capacity to "riv[e]" the human spirit was in no respect violent: "No sword / Of wrath her right arm whirled" (53–54). Instead, she upheld "one poor poet's scroll" (55), shaking Europe with "*his* word" (55). "The Poet," therefore, advances the view that the male poet's truth can indeed fortify the world. Though taking flight upon "arrow-seeds," his truth actually relies upon another source of power: a "mother plant" that finally gives birth to a female icon of

“Freedom.” For some reason, “The Poet” suggests that his truth must be mediated through forms of femininity because they more adequately represent his authority than he himself can. The male poet remains implicitly unable to influence a whole continent on the basis of his gender.

“The Poet’s Mind” reverses the scene depicted in “The Poet.” In this poem, the poet needs to be kept safe from any “[d]ark-browed sophist” (AT 8) who intrudes upon his sacrosanct “ground” (9). “Vex not thou,” the speaker proclaims, “the poet’s mind / With thy shallow wit” (1–2). The “sophist” threatens to bring “cruel cheer” (15) onto this “holy” (9) domain. For that reason, “holy water” (12) will be poured around this enclosed garden where “the merry bird chants” (22). “In the middle,” we discover, “leaps a fountain” (24). Bright with “lightning” (25) and murmuring with “low melodious thunder” (27), its waters draw on those distinctly Romantic energies already noted in “The Poet.” Indeed, the fountain “sings a song of undying love” (33). But should the “sophist” approach it, he “would never hear it” (35), for “It would shrink to the earth” (37) if that “dull” (35) person ventured in. Herbert F. Tucker claims that “[t]here is something mean-spirited about the claim of ‘The Poet’s Mind’ . . . that nobody understands the message of the excluded, exclusive poet; but we may pardon him when we reflect on the way the poet is estranged from his very message.”<sup>22</sup> The fountain, Tucker observes, derives its power from other sources: namely, the “brain of the purple mountain / That stands in the distance yonder” (29–30), which in turn receives its streams “from Heaven above” (32). To some degree, the secluded poet thrives on reserves that are not entirely his own. For all their differences of emphasis, both “The Poet” and “The Poet’s Mind” appear to agree on one point. The poet – whether known throughout Europe or sequestered in his garden – requires other agencies to support him.

Tennyson’s work played a significant role in the distinguished liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill’s developing ideas about the role that poets should adopt in the contemporary age. In his generous 1835 review of Tennyson’s early volumes, Mill identifies how the poet “luxuriate[s] in sensuous imagery.”<sup>23</sup> But much as Mill would like to praise this aspect of Tennyson’s work, he expresses some misgivings about the ways in which the poet’s “nominal subject sometimes lies buried in a heap of it.” Better, Mill argues, for Tennyson “to strengthen his intellect for the discrimination” of “truths” – the “exalted purpose” of poetry. He recommends Tennyson to “cultivate, and with no half devotion, philosophy as well as poetry.” “[S]tates of emotion, embodied in sensuous imagery” need to advance to a higher condition so that they can symbolize “spiritual truths.” Mill’s advice, however, points as much to his own uncertainty about the role

of poetry as it does to any deficiency in Tennyson's art. In fact, his belief that Tennyson should aspire to "philosophy" runs somewhat against the grain of two earlier essays – "What Is Poetry?" and "The Two Kinds of Poetry" – that he published during his late twenties in 1833. To understand how these influential essays form a significant part in Mill's changing attitudes to how the poet might relate to the public in an era of reform, it is useful to turn momentarily to the personal and political struggle that he underwent as an emergent intellectual.

During this turbulent period of Mill's life, poetry began to provide the emotional sustenance that his strict Utilitarian upbringing had denied. In his *Autobiography* (1873), he recollects how the rigorous education that his father James Mill gave him insisted "that all mental and moral feelings and qualities, whether of a good or a bad kind, were the results of association."<sup>24</sup> Here "association" characterizes the psychological mechanism that induces feelings of pleasure or pain. (The terminology originally derives from David Hartley's *Observations on Man* [1749], a work that plays a vital role in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* [1817].) The young Mill grew up to believe "that the object of education should be to form the strongest possible associations of the salutary class; associations of pleasure with all things beneficial to the great whole, and of pain with all things hurtful to it." Yet by the time he turned twenty, doubts were stirring in the "old familiar instruments" to quantify pleasure and pain that he inherited from his father. Gradually he saw how "the habit of analysis has a tendency to wear away the feelings." In due course, the "cultivation of the feelings became one of the cardinal points in" Mill's "ethical and philosophical creed" (147). Suffering from depression, he turned to poetry. Wordsworth's 1802 "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* taught him "that there was real, permanent happiness in tranquil contemplation" (153). After meeting the poet in 1831, Mill informed a friend that although he had "differences" with Wordsworth (just as he would have with "any other philosophic Tory"), he remained overwhelmed by the "largeness & expansiveness of his feelings."<sup>25</sup> Two years later, Mill would declare that the "object of poetry is confessedly to act upon the emotions."<sup>26</sup> He invests so deeply in the emotional capacities of poetry that he removes it, in some ways like Hallam, from the world of public intercourse. The resulting version of the poet that we find in Mill's two significant 1833 essays provides the core of the cultivated individual – the one for whom "self-protection" stands paramount in the face of social dominance – that takes center stage in his *Of Liberty* (1859).<sup>27</sup>

First published in Fox's *Monthly Repository* (a Unitarian journal with strong Utilitarian sympathies), Mill's 1833 essays warrant attention

because they count among the most strenuous attempts to theorize how, “in an age of revolutions, the cotemporary [*sic*] poets, if they are not before their age, are almost sure to be behind it” (364). Rather than view poets as figures who directly exert influence over historical events, he claims that they exist in “solitude” (348), unaware of an audience. “All poetry,” he maintains, “is the nature of soliloquy” (349). In this respect, poetry must be distinguished from eloquence. Although Mill agrees with Elliott that “poetry is impassioned truth” (348), he points out that eloquence might also come under that rubric. To refine the argument, he states that where “eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*.” “Eloquence,” he adds, “supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener.” At all costs, true poets refrain from any “desire of making an impression upon another mind” (349). Since this model precludes direct contact between author and reader, it seems obvious why poets cannot “head the movement” that “break[s] up old modes of belief” (365). Less clear is how “those who have any individuality of character” might stand “behind” – in the sense of supporting the mood of – the age. The answer seems to lie in the true poet’s acutely sensitive constitution. Having lauded Wordsworth in 1831 for his capacity to feel, in these later essays Mill asserts that he “never seems *possessed* by any feeling; no emotion seems ever so strong as to have entire sway, for the time being, over the current of his thoughts” (359). Since Wordsworth proves too philosophical, Mill looks to Shelley as the figure for whom “voluntary mental discipline had done little,” while “the vividness of his emotions and of his sensations had done all” (359). Yet Mill pays no attention to Shelley’s support for political reform, characterizing him instead as a man whose responsiveness to the era lay in the “susceptibility of his nervous system, which made his emotions intense” (360).

### III

Mill’s 1833 essays promulgate a view that one influential contemporary could not withstand. “It is damnable heresy in criticism,” wrote Thomas Carlyle in 1826, “to maintain either expressly or implicately that the ultimate object of Poetry is sensation.”<sup>28</sup> In all probability, Mill rethought how and why “sensual imagery” ought to aspire to “spiritual truths” during the early 1830s when he developed a somewhat fragile friendship with Carlyle. Although Carlyle would for some time praise Mill “as one of the best, clearest-headed and clearest hearted young men now living in London,”<sup>29</sup> they would more or less part company within a matter of years. So great was the political chasm that eventually separated them that

by the time of the Second Reform Bill they embodied two completely different sides of Victorian politics. In 1865, the Governor Eyre controversy – which involved the brutal massacre of protesting black workers at Morant Bay, Jamaica – split public opinion. On the one hand, the liberal Mill headed the Jamaica Committee that condemned Eyre’s unhesitating use of excessive force to quell a minor public disturbance. (Eyre declared martial law. His officers shot or hanged 439 people.) On the other hand, Carlyle lent his support to the Eyre Defence Fund, which he followed up with “Shooting Niagara: And after?” (1867) – his well-known essay that berates “these ballot-boxing, Nigger-emancipating, empty, dirt-eclipsed days.”<sup>30</sup> By the mid-1860s, Carlyle stood as one of the most outspoken critics of liberal democracy – whether such democracy involved abolishing slavery, extending the franchise, or promoting *laissez faire*.

Part of the reason for Mill’s absorption in Carlyle’s early essays, which began to appear in the mid-1820s, lay not so much in what they said but how they said it. To Mill, reading Carlyle’s “haze of poetry and German metaphysics” proved one of the main “influences through which [Mill] enlarged [his] early narrow creed” (*Autobiography*, 181). “[T]he good his writing did me,” Mill recalled, “was not as philosophy to instruct, but as poetry to animate” (182). Certainly, the very texture of Carlyle’s prose, shaped by a hardly inconspicuous Calvinist heritage, seeks to enliven readers to do anything but philosophize. Instead of pursuing “moral goodness,” he says, the Benthamites of the world “inculcate” the belief that “our happiness depends on external circumstances” such as legislative reform (“Signs of the Times” [1829], XXVII, 67). Little wonder that Carlyle concludes “Signs of the Times” by insisting that “to reform a nation, no wise man will undertake” (XXVII, 82). Accordingly, “the only solid, though a far slower reformation, is what each begins and perfects on *himself*.” Although Carlyle’s phrasing often sounded like an “insane rhapsody” to Mill’s ears (*Autobiography*, 169), he recognized that the man who would become the ultimate Victorian sage “was a poet” (183). “I,” Mill adds, “was not.”

Strictly speaking, Carlyle – for all the stamina of his writing – was no poet either. Nor do his private notebooks suggest that his enthusiasm for poetry ran deep. “What is poetry?” he queried. “Do I really love poetry? I sometimes fancy almost, not” (*Two Notebooks*, 151). But in his published essays he never ceases to invoke poetry as part of the cure-all to a culture where “*Mechanics*” (the attention to “external circumstances”) have full reign. He deplores how modern society remains bereft of “*Dynamics*”: “the primary, unmodified forces and energies of man, the mysterious springs of Love, and Fear, and Wonder, of Enthusiasm, Poetry, Religion” (“Signs of

the Times,” XXVII, 68). Unlike the “Mechanism” enshrined in such things as the “unspeakably wearisome Reform Bill,”<sup>31</sup> “Poetry” counted among those “primary . . . energies” that possessed a “truly vital and *infinite* character” (V, 68). Carlyle claims that in Victorian England those near-divine “energies” have waned. Return to earlier times like those of the “Roman Republic” and it becomes evident that “Society was what we name healthy” (“Characteristics” [1831], XXVIII, 14–15). “The individual man in himself,” he observes in the same essay, “was a whole, or complete union.” Given this marvelous state of completeness, “Opinion and Action had not yet become disunited.” “[T]hus,” he contends, “instead of Speculation, we had Poetry.” And the “Poet” like the “Priest” stood as the “sign of vigour and well-being” (XXVIII, 16). The poet, however, embodies something more than an animating principle. Echoing Philip Sidney’s famous disquisition on poetry, Carlyle elsewhere asserts that the poet “is a *vates*, a seer” (“Burns” [1828], XXVI, 272). The wellspring of true poetry, therefore, comes from prophecy.

Carlyle would endorse these prophetic capabilities throughout his lecture, “The Hero as Poet” (1841). Such heroism emerged from the “kind of inarticulate unfathomable speech, which leads us to the edge of Infinity” (V, 83). Once again, however, he stresses how the “*Vates* poet . . . seems to hold a poor rank among us” (V, 84). Only the likes of Dante and Shakespeare, as “Saints of Poetry” (V, 85), fulfill this hagiographic role. Yet in other writings Carlyle discerns at least two modern writers who in different ways incarnate vatic qualities. One is Burns: “He shows himself at least a Poet of Nature’s own making” (XXVI, 272). Like Byron, Burns counts among those “sent forth as missionaries to their generation, to teach it a higher Doctrine, a purer Truth” (XXVI, 316). Carlyle, however, reserves some of his highest praise for Elliott: “a voice coming from the deep Cyclopean forges, where Labour, in real soot and sweat, beats with the thousand hammers ‘the red son of the furnace’” (“Corn-Law Rhymes” [1831], XXVIII, 138). In every respect, Elliott manifests those capabilities that energize Carlyle’s vision of the poet: “Here is an earnest truth-speaking man; no theoriser, sentimentaliser, but a practical man of work and endeavour, man of sufferance and endurance. He has used his eyes for seeing” (XXVIII, 145). Without question, Elliott is “a Reformer, at least a stern Complainer, radical to the core” (XXVIII, 145). But Carlyle asserts that Elliott’s politics remain unimportant when we see how “under the disguises of the Radical, the Poet is still recognisable.” Everywhere in the Corn-Law Rhymer’s works, Carlyle detects “a certain music” that “breathes through all dissonances.” Such discoveries encourage Carlyle to repeat once more that “all Reform except a moral one will prove unavailing” (XXVIII,

160). By looking to a poet such as Elliott – one who bears traces of “the antique spirit” – we discover a “true man.”

Carlyle’s emphasis on the “true man” was certainly gendered, as his notebooks reveal. Contemplating “the true relation of moral genius to poetic genius; of Religion to Poetry,” he concluded that that “the *faculties*” for both “always go together” (*Two Note Books*, 188). On reflection, however, he realized that this “relation” was exclusively male. Undoubtedly, there were “female geniuses” whose “minds” both “admire[d] and receive[d].” But women, he felt, could “hardly create.” One acclaimed writer would absorb Carlyle’s ideas about the poet as prophet, only to contest the belief that “poetic genius” was a male preserve. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was in her forties – the time of her liberating marriage – before she staked a distinctly feminist claim upon the poet as *vates*. In some respects, her political outlook contrasted with Carlyle’s. “The Bill has past [*sic*],” she declared in 1832. “We may be prouder of calling ourselves English, than we were before it past . . . & stand higher among nations, not only a freer people, but as a people worthy of being free.”<sup>32</sup> There were, though, types of reform – especially those connected with “*Mechanics*” – that drove Barrett Browning in the 1850s to refashion Carlyle’s ideas in ways that proved that “female geniuses” could not only “admire” and “receive” but also “create.”

Barrett Browning’s longest work, *Aurora Leigh* (1856), pits the poetic talents of her eponymous protagonist against those of her cousin, the social reformer Romney Leigh. Aurora and Romney (though ultimately destined for marriage) embody clashing ideologies. Aurora often champions her poetic vocation in near-Carlylean terms. Poets, she claims, stand as “the only truth-tellers now left to God” (*EBBAL* I. 859). But sometimes Aurora appears less confident than Carlyle when elaborating how poets can morally reform the nation; “Thus is Art,” she argues later, “Self-magnified in magnifying a truth / Which, fully recognised, would change the world / And change its morals” (VII. 854–56). This statement noticeably remains in the tentative conditional tense. As her narrative proceeds, Aurora discloses that poets – figures whom she says maintain a “twofold life,” “staggering ’neath the burden as mere men, / Being called to stand up straight as demi-gods” (V. 381, 383–84) – fail to transform humanity through lack of recognition. “If a man,” she maintains, “could feel, / Not one day, in the artist’s ecstasy, / But every day,” then he would experience how “The spiritual significance burn[s] through / The hieroglyphic of material shows” (VII. 857–61). Structured like a syllogism, these lines articulate a disparity between the wished-for result and the actual state of affairs. Try as they might, poets cannot exert sufficient influence

throughout a culture that needs interpretive help in reaching the “spirit” veiled by “material” signs.

Elsewhere, however, Aurora attributes considerable authority to poetry when she chooses to depart from Carlylean thought. In an important passage, she begins by restating “The Hero as Poet” when she claims that “every age / Appears to souls who live in’t (ask Carlyle) / Most unheroic” (V. 155–56). But she then performs a most unCarlylean maneuver to uphold the idea that the inhabitants of any epoch cannot always perceive its glories. Rather than condemn the Victorian era outright, she urges poets to address “this live, throbbing age, / That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires” (V. 203–04). Instantly, the very “life” pours forth in “the burning lava of a song,” whose molten flows express “The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age” (V. 214–15), reminding future generations of “the paps we all have sucked” (V. 219). With its passionate lava and life-giving milk, this striking image stands among Barrett Browning’s most memorable efforts to represent poetic eminence in an unapologetic female form.

Such imagery supports Aurora’s frequent battles with Romney’s condescending attitude toward her professional ambitions. Early in *Aurora Leigh*, Romney insists that “men, and still less women, happily, / Scarce need be poets” (II. 92–93). Better, he thinks, for Aurora to marry him and join in his plans to reform class relations through “phalansteries” (II. 756) that put into practice the type of collective living advocated by utopian thinker Charles Fourier. But rather than accept his offer, Aurora states that what he loves “Is not a woman . . . but a cause” (II. 401). In any case, she feels that he has “a wife already” – namely, his “social theory” (II. 409–10). Her polemic against his principles intensifies. “Ah, your Fouriers failed,” she argues, “Because not poets enough to understand / That life develops from within” (II. 484–85). “[I]t takes a high-souled man,” she tells him, “To move the masses” (II. 480–81). Although she admits that he could be correct in feeling that “a woman’s soul / Aspires, and not creates” (II. 487–88), she wishes to prove him wrong. And so she does. Where Aurora gains in poetic celebrity, Romney’s loses in reformist zeal. Stressing the mistaken nature of his political idealism, Aurora describes Romney’s aborted wedding to the working-class Marian Erle in imagery that rivals the less palatable moments in Carlyle’s prose. As she looks at the laborers attending the ill-fated celebration, Aurora observes how “They clogged the streets, they oozed into the church, / In a dark slow stream, like blood” (IV. 553–54). Even if such similes aim to dramatize the “peccant social wound” (IV. 542) that working people wrongly bear (since they appear “Lame, blind, and worse” [IV. 543]), their “finished generation” (IV. 548) induces more horror than compassion in Aurora. Such grotesque descriptions serve

to legitimate how and why Marian must not marry Romney. By the end of the poem Romney's "phalanstery" has been razed to the ground, the flames leaving him blind. But this literal lack of sight converts him to Aurora's vatic perspective. "Fourier's void," he finally concedes (IX. 868). Such words give Aurora her cue to reiterate how "The man, most man, / Works best for men . . . / . . . gets his manhood plainest from his soul" (IX. 880). As a result, her poetic vocation turns out to be her romantic fulfillment, triumphant over his reformist designs.

Barrett Browning herself never endured such a tumultuous courtship. Early in her intense correspondence with Robert Browning (which led to their clandestine marriage in September 1846), she celebrated their shared respect for Carlyle: "the great teacher of the age . . . who is also yours & mine."<sup>33</sup> "He fills," she added, "the office of a poet – does he not?" Even though Robert Browning at times expressed misgivings about Carlyle's outbursts (he felt that "Shooting Niagara" resembled a "grin through a horse-collar" – in other words, a bad joke),<sup>34</sup> he reproduced the sage's teachings about poetry, most explicitly in his "Essay on Shelley" (1852). In his youth, he emulated Shelley to the point that he professed, like his idol, atheism. But soon afterward the adult Robert Browning recovered his faith to espouse a distinctly religious model of poetry. In his essay, he examines the relative merits – ones that Hallam and Mill analyzed twenty years before – between two types of poet. He begins by detailing the limited gifts of the "objective poet": "one whose endeavour has been to reproduce things external," and whose insights enhance the "average mind."<sup>35</sup> Altogether greater is the "subjective poet," the "seer" whose work stands not in reference to "the many below" but to "the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth" (I, 1002). The "subjective poet" "struggle[s]" toward "[n]ot what man sees, but what God sees – the *Ideas* of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand." Such reasoning provides the basis of his belief that "had Shelley lived he would have finally ranged himself with the Christians" (I, 1009). Although Robert Browning does not say it, one imagines that reading Carlyle's essays would have finally disabused Shelley of "mistaking Churchdom for Christianity, and for marriage . . . the law of sexual oppression," ensuring that the radical poet focused his attention on "the Divine" (I, 1010) rather than the people.

#### IV

To conclude this chapter, I want to look briefly at two contrasting responses to the models that critics and writers put forward to secure a place for

poetry in an era of reform. Born in 1821, Matthew Arnold presents the strongest extension and revision of Carlyle's thought. Where Carlyle set "*Dynamics*" above "*Mechanics*," Arnold eventually forged a vocabulary in the late 1860s that positioned "Culture" over "Anarchy." In the late 1840s, he echoed Carlyle when condemning the "damned times."<sup>36</sup> Yet while stating that the problems of the age lay in "the absence of great *natures*," no one – including the sage – proved free from scorn. He regretted "unavoidable contact with millions of small [*natures*], newspapers, cities, light profligate friends, moral desperadoes like Carlyle, our own selves." His frustrations did not diminish. "Carlyle," he observed eight years later, "is part man – of genius – part fanatic – and part tom-fool."<sup>37</sup> Unlike Carlyle, Arnold could not pledge faith in poetry to bring about moral and spiritual reform. He persistently disparaged "how deeply *unpoetical* the age & all one's surroundings" were.<sup>38</sup> In the late 1840s, he held Keats responsible for creating "harm . . . in English Poetry." Arnold contends that what he sees as Keats's restlessness manifests itself in Robert Browning whose poetry obtains "but a confused multitudinousness."<sup>39</sup> "They will not be patient," he observes. What they need to do is "begin with an Idea of the world in order not to be prevailed over by the world." Even in 1857 when Arnold admitted for once that the "*time*" proved "a first class one," he still felt that Victorian poetry appeared overwhelmed by and thus "not *adequate* to it."<sup>40</sup>

Arnold nevertheless produced remarkable poetry that grappled with its inadequacy to the age. "Resignation: To Fausta" (1849), for example, proposes that poetry should neither be caught in the impulsive passions nor remote from the bustling life of Victorian England. Opening with a list of historical events and rituals (from "pilgrims, bound for Mecca" [MA 3] to the "Goth, bound Rome-wards" [9]), the speaker looks skeptically on any such "struggle" (25) to reach "A goal" in the belief that once it has been "gained" it "may give repose" (17). Preferable by far is the Wordsworthian desire, stated in the 1802 "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, to derive poetry from "emotion recollected in tranquillity"<sup>41</sup>: "an unblamed serenity / . . . freed from passions" (23–24). But if following Wordsworth in one direction, the speaker departs from him in another. He implicitly questions the poetic vision promoted in "Tintern Abbey" (1807) that states that "with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things."<sup>42</sup> Returning with Fausta to "the self-same road" (86) that they visited ten years earlier, he lends a different inflection to notions of harmony of mind and depth of insight while surveying the landscape around them.

Instead of actively seeing "into the life of things," the speaker claims that the poet – "to whose mighty heart / Heaven doth a quicker pulse impart"

(144–45) – carefully “Subdues” that divinely granted “energy” in order to “scan” the world before him in a mood of resignation. Though God-given, the poet’s faculties are not so much those of a prophet as a witness to a world that in every way remains greater than his vision. Whether the poet “looks down, / At sunset, on a populous town” (164–65) or “mingle[s] with the crowd” (162), one thing is for certain – he “does not say: *I am alone*” (169). The negation is intriguing. In the process of situating the poet’s role, the speaker reminds us of what it is not. The repudiation of what the poet might claim to be continues when the speaker “scan[s]” Fausta’s responses to his musings. “*He leaves his kind*” (211), he imagines her thinking of the poet, “*And flees the common life of men*” (212), since this figure supposedly breathes “*immortal air*” (207). In the speaker’s view, such exalted ideas only amplify what most of us might eventually grasp. Even if the poet’s privileged vision is “*wide*” (216), such insights – no matter how much they broaden the “scope” (218) of human “affections” (219) – still leave individuals (poet and people alike) looking upon “Far regions of eternal change” (222): a world that endures as an “Eternal mundane spectacle” (228). Poetic vision, therefore, cannot bring about change, only recognize its paradoxical permanence. Significantly, Arnold arrived at this viewpoint by turning away from European sources – ones that may have only compounded his frustrations – to Eastern philosophy, particularly the spiritual wisdom expressed in the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

“Resignation” may be read in autobiographical terms, conflating the speaker with Arnold and Fausta with the poet’s sister, Jane. But these persons and personae are not necessarily the same. After all, the speaker declares that “fate grudge[s]” both himself and Fausta the “poet’s rapt security” (245–46). Yet such a “grudge” hardly works to their disadvantage. Suspicious of the claims that might be made upon the poet, the speaker sets a resigned distance between himself and that elevated identity. In the ensuing decades, Arnold struggled with the problem of how poetry might best serve society. By the 1870s, he had more or less given up writing poetry, advocating the critical study of it instead. Toward the end of his long career – most of it spent as an Inspector of Schools – he sought to reconstitute the genre by focusing on its educational use: “In poetry, as a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our race will find . . . its consolation and stay.”<sup>43</sup> On this view, it is not poets who will improve the world. Instead, better readers will make a better culture – though not, it seems, immediately.

In the early 1860s, Algernon Charles Swinburne made unsparing criticisms of the culture-saving graces of poetry that absorbed Arnold’s

attention. Throughout his groundbreaking review of Charles Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* (the sexually risk-taking collection that the French state censored in 1857), the twenty-four-year-old Swinburne insisted upon the anti-Utilitarian, unprophetic, and amoral condition of poetry. Swinburne styled both his analysis and his praise on what Baudelaire wrote in his own 1857 *Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe*. There Baudelaire memorably denounces "the heresy . . . that the aim of poetry is a lesson of some sort, that it must now fortify the conscience, now perfect morals, now in short *prove* something or other which is useful."<sup>44</sup> (Such remarks resonate with many of Poe's observations in "The Poetic Principle" [1850] where he condemns "the heresy of *The Didactic*," claiming instead that the "poem is written solely for the poem's sake."<sup>45</sup>) Vindicating the French poet, Swinburne makes it clear why Baudelaire's "flowers of evil" impart a distinctly modern type of wisdom: namely, their refusal to "redeem the age and remould society."<sup>46</sup> "No other form of art," declares Swinburne of poetry in general, "is so pestered with this impotent appetite for meddling in quite extraneous matters." "[B]ut," he laments, "the mass of readers seem actually to think that a poem is the better for containing a moral lesson or assisting in a tangible and material good work." Disregarding the spirit of philanthropy, having no use for any "theory of progress," and disconnected from the "tangible and material" concerns of society, the best poetry in Swinburne's view exists purely for itself.

Rather than educate, moralize, or preach to a readership, the poems collected in *Les fleurs du mal* filled Swinburne with admiration because they gave precedence to "physical beauty and perfection of sound or scent" (999). Wary, however, that English readers might follow their French counterparts by laying charges of immorality against Baudelaire's work, Swinburne suggests that such thoughts are only the products of semi-educated, if not vulgar, minds. He argues that the persistent critical demand for a moral message necessarily degrades poetry like Baudelaire's. "If any reader," writes Swinburne, "could extract from any poem a positive spiritual medicine – if he could swallow a sonnet like a moral prescription – then clearly the poet supplying these intellectual drugs would be a bad artist." As a consequence, the moral-making poet is little better than a tradesman, "no real artist, but a huckster and vendor of miscellaneous wares."

Such commentary usurps the *vates*, toppling him from divine heights and throwing him into the streets. Swinburne's review stands as a forthright rejection of those Carlylean precepts that influenced much thinking about poetry in the decades that followed 1832. But in disentangling the genre from its supposed moral mission, and encouraging it to embrace previously

unrecognized sensations, Swinburne occupies a position that has a certain familiarity. Swinburne's firm belief in "art for art's sake" – partly derived from Théophile Gautier's "Préface" to the sexually controversial novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) – in some respects led poetry back into the Tennysonian garden where the poet's mind had to be protected from intruders. It would be left to later Victorian poets to figure out if it were possible – or even desirable – for their art to return to the people.

## NOTES

My thanks to James Walter Caufield for casting his critical eye over this chapter.

- 1 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "The Mask of Anarchy," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 301.
- 2 Shelley, "England in 1819," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 311. This poem was first published in 1839.
- 3 William Wordsworth, "To Lord Lonsdale," 24 February 1832, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, second edition, ed. Chester L. Shaver et al., 8 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967–93), V, 499.
- 4 [John Fullarton,] "Reform in Parliament," *Quarterly Review* 45 (1831), 283; further page reference appears in parentheses.
- 5 [Anonymous,] "Parliamentary Reform Bill," *Westminster Review* 15 (1831), 150.
- 6 Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 313.
- 7 Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society*, 315.
- 8 [John Wilson,] "Tennyson's Poems," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 31 (1832), 723; further page references appear in parentheses.
- 9 Ebenezer Elliott, "The Black Hole of Calcutta," in Elliott, *The Splendid Village: Corn-Law Rhymes; and Other Poems*, first collected edition, 3 vols. (London: Benjamin Still, 1834); volume and page references appear in parentheses.
- 10 [T. Peronnet Thompson,] *A Catechism on the Corn Laws; with a List of Fallacies and the Answers*, third edition (London: James Ridgway, 1827), 22.
- 11 [Anonymous,] "Poetry by the People," *Athenaeum* (11 June 1831), 370.
- 12 Jeremy Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward* (London: John and H.L. Hunt, 1825), 206; further page number appears in parentheses.
- 13 Robert Burns, "Song – For a' that and a' that" (1795), in Burns, *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), II, 762.
- 14 [John Johnstone,] "The Radical Poets," *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* 1 (1832), 140; further page number appear in parentheses.
- 15 [John Wilson,] "Poetry of Ebenezer Elliott," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 35 (1834), 821; further page reference appears in parentheses.
- 16 [W. J. Fox,] Review of Tennyson, *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, *Westminster Review* 14 (1831), 210–24, reprinted in Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry, 1830–1870* (London: Athlone, 1972), 71; further page references appear in parentheses.

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- 17 Arthur Henry Hallam, "To Richard Chenevix Trench," December 2, 1830, in *The Letters of Arthur Henry Hallam*, ed. Jack Kolb (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1981), 387. Three months later, Tennyson remarked that "the instigating spirit of reform" would "bring on the confiscation of church property and maybe the downfall of the church altogether"; he saw the "Sect of St Simonistes" as "a proof of the immense mass of evil" developing at the time: "To Elizabeth Russell," 18 March 1832, in *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), I, 69.
- 18 Arthur Henry Hallam, "On Some Characteristics of Modern Poetry," *Englishman's Magazine* 1 (1831), 616–28, reprinted in *The Writings of Arthur Hallam*, ed. T.H. Vail Motter (New York: MLA, 1943), 190; further page references appear in parentheses.
- 19 William Wordsworth, "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), III, 83.
- 20 Eric Griffiths, "Tennyson's Idle Tears," in *Tennyson: Seven Essays*, ed. Philip Collins (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 43. Hallam's categories may have other sources derived from Kant, including Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters* (1793), trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 33–35; on this point, see Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), 61.
- 21 Ricks notes many of the echoes in "The Poet" from Keats's and Shelley's poetry: *The Poems of Tennyson*, I, 243–44.
- 22 Herbert F. Tucker, *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 88.
- 23 John Stuart Mill, "Tennyson's Poems," *London Review* 1 (1835), 402–35, reprinted in Mill, *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson et al., *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 33 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963–91), I, 414.
- 24 John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, 141; further page references appear in parentheses.
- 25 John Stuart Mill, "To John Sterling," 21–22 October 1831, in *The Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill*, ed. Francis E. Mineka (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), 81.
- 26 John Stuart Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties" (1867), reprinted in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, 344; further page references appear in parentheses. This essay combines and revises "What Is Poetry?" and "The Two Kinds of Poetry," *Monthly Repository* n.s. 7 (1833), 60–70, 714–24.
- 27 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, XVIII, 223.
- 28 Thomas Carlyle, "Notebook Entry," 3 December 1826, in *Two Note Books of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. Charles Eliot Norton (New York: Grolier Club, 1898), 71; further page number appears in parentheses.
- 29 Thomas Carlyle, "To Leigh Hunt," 20 November 1831, in *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. Charles Richard Sanders and

- Kenneth J. Fielding et al., 26 vols. to date (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1970– ), VI, 265.
- 30 Thomas Carlyle, “Shooting Niagara: And after?” in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, 30 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1896–99), XXX, 24; further volume and page references to this edition appear in parentheses.
- 31 Thomas Carlyle, “To William Graham,” 17 October 1831, in *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, VI, 21.
- 32 Elizabeth Barrett, “To Hugh Stuart Boyd,” 9 June 1832, in *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, ed. Philip Kelley et al., 14 vols. to date (Winfield, KS: Wedgestone Press, 1984– ), III, 25.
- 33 Elizabeth Barrett, “To Robert Browning,” 27 February 1845, in *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, X, 101.
- 34 Cited in Fred Kaplan, *Thomas Carlyle: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 494.
- 35 Robert Browning, “Introductory Essay” [“Essay on Shelley”], in Browning, *The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), I, 1001; further volume and page references appear in parentheses.
- 36 Matthew Arnold, “To Arthur Hugh Clough,” 23 September 1849, in *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 3 vols. to date (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1996– ), I, 156.
- 37 Arnold, “To Thomas Arnold,” 28 December 1857, in *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, I, 370.
- 38 Arnold, “To Arthur Hugh Clough,” early February, 1849, in *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, I, 131.
- 39 Arnold, “To Arthur Hugh Clough,” December 1848, in *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, I, 128.
- 40 Arnold, “To Thomas Arnold,” 28 December 1857, in *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, I, 369.
- 41 Wordsworth, “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*, in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, I, 148.
- 42 Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, 13th July 1798,” in *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797–1900*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green, The Cornell Wordsworth (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 117.
- 43 Matthew Arnold, “The Study of Poetry” (1880), in Arnold, *English Literature and Irish Politics*, ed. R.H. Super, *The Complete Prose Works Of Matthew Arnold*, 11 vols. (Ann Arbor, MI: University Of Michigan Press, 1960–77), IX, 163.
- 44 Charles Baudelaire. “New Notes on Edgar Poe,” trans. Lois Hyslop and Francis Hyslop, in *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Criticism since 1829*, ed. Eric W. Carlson, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 56.
- 45 Edgar Allan Poe, “The Poetic Principle,” *Sartain’s University Magazine*, October 1850, reprinted in Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G.R. Thomson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 75–76.
- 46 [Algernon Charles Swinburne,] “Charles Baudelaire: Les Fleurs du Mal,” *Spectator* 35 (1862), 998; further page reference appears in parentheses.