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Victorian Poetry and the Culture of Evaluation

Clara Dawson

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Clara Dawson is a lecturer in Victorian Literature at the University of Manchester and her book, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of Evaluation* is the publication of her thesis written under the aegis of the late romantic and post-romantic scholar Michael O'Neill. Her intuition is that, before Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, the printed media market retroactively influenced the poetic production of poems in 19th-century Great Britain. In the first part, entitled "Poetic Voice : Evanescence and Animation in Early Victorian Voice", she studies "the inventive presentations produced by poets in the new media landscape they inhabited" [28]. Most Victorian poets were judged in periodical reviews "according to their handling of voice, particularly in regard to voice's union of sense and sound" [33]. She illustrates her point with close readings from poems by William Wordsworth, Felicia Hemans, Tennyson ("Alfred Tennyson's Voices of Enchantment"), Letitia Landon ("Letitia Landon and Periodical Poetry") and Robert Browning ("Robert Browning and Voice's Wandering Aims"), in which she revisits *Pauline* and the repercussions of its publication.

The second chapter, "Poetic Style : Jewellery and

Value in Victorian Poetry" is dedicated to an exploration of jewellery as "a metaphor to express and calculate the kind of value that literature could offer" [73]. She starts by underlining the growing tension between the commercial value of the book object and the aesthetic value of the poetry within. In many reviewers, this involved separating form and content. A corollary of this practice of evaluation was the development of gift-books and the production of anthologies. Faced with these trends, poets could accept or refuse the dilemma. In the first subpart, entitled "Gift Annual Poetry and the Jewelled Style", Clara Dawson delineates a parallelism between the production of jewellery and literary culture. Reviewers kept using "jewel" metaphors in their articles, facing poets with the alternative of conformity or resistance to them. In the second subpart ("Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning : Resistance to the Jewelled Style"), she shows how Elizabeth Barrett Browning, particularly in *A Drama of Exile*, and Robert Browning, in "Popularity" and in *The Ring and the Book* – as readers remember that the 20 000 line poem in twelve books starts with the display of a jewel, a ring, and the famous opening question: "Do you see this ring?" The fact that they prefer to have their styles called "rough" is a clue to their resistance to the culture of evaluation. However, their choice of metaphors testifies to the necessity to "take account of these contemporary standards, even as they resisted them" [122].

The third chapter, "Poetic Address : 'Poet's Public' and 'Public's Poet' ", focuses on the mode of address poets chose to communicate with their audience, alongside and beyond reviewers. Clara Dawson identifies three modes of lyric address within poetry and reviews in the mid-Victorian period [125]: the " 'I' lyric which turns its back on the reader"; an " 'I-you' relationship" between speaker and reader or between one character to the other; and a "collective 'we' which encompasses both poet and reader in a communal identity". Of course, generic hybridity between the three modes within a poetic work is in order as poets try to engage with their audience in different ways. In the subpart entitled "The Spasmodic School", Clara Dawson contrasts William Aytoun's 1854 parody of Spasmodic poetry with one of its targets, Philip Bailey's *Festus*. Also connected to the reception of Spasmodic poetry, and fascinated by the proper subject matter of poetry, Matthew Arnold's "Empedocles on Etna" demonstrates "a vexed relationship to periodical culture". In this second

subpart (“Matthew Arnold : *Empedocles on Etna*”), Arnold’s deep concern with the culture of periodical reviewing is explored.

In the fourth chapter, “Poetic Address : Shaking the Hearts of Men”, Clara Dawson studies the “closely integrated relationship between poetry and reviews” in the work of three poets of the Victorian Era: Alfred Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Arthur Clough. In “Alfred Tennyson : *In Memoriam* and *Maud*”, she studies the evolving patterns of address of Tennyson to his reading public. Then, in “Elizabeth Barrett Browning : *Casa Guidi Windows*” and “Arthur Hugh Clough : *Amours de Voyage*”, she studies the strategies displayed so as to “reach an audience but retain a strong and distinctive voice” [191], at the same time as they develop a political voice “at a remove from London’s literary bustle”. In the Afterword, Dawson emphasises the vitality of the Victorian poets’ responses to the ephemerality of the print culture of their time. Dawson develops her analyses through convincing and well-documented close readings of poems. However, Dawson chose to veer away from a sociological approach about the newspapers and the poets, as developed in Pierre Bourdieu’s *Rules of Art : Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (translated and published by Stanford University Press in 1996). This perspective might have provided further insights about poetic strategies about how to deal with reviews in the Victorian era. Finally, it is a relief to find footnotes at the bottom of the page (as opposed to what was the norm for decades: footnotes at the end of a chapter or of the book). A comprehensive bibliography and an index facilitate the circulation in a very readable and interesting book.

☞ Illustrated version on The Victorian Web :

http://victorianweb.org/authors/reviews/dawson.html

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