

Voice Inverse

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LAST SUMMER I ATTENDED "VICTORIAN SOUNDINGS," A CONFERENCE SPONSORED by the Dickens Universe at UC Santa Cruz. The call for papers caught my ear, because the litany of possible topics sounded like a lyric poem:

Ear trumpets, deafness and mutism
Telegraphs, "wireless" and radios
Phonographs
Telephones

Bells, whistles, chimes
Orchestras and bands
Echoes, cries and whispers
Operas, instruments, street criers
Sound effects

Machines in motion
"ringing down the grooves of change"
Babbling brooks, sermons in stones
The sound of work
Bodily noises

Ventriloquists and dummies
Gossip/rumor/word of mouth
Speaking for/speaking to
Spirit voices/table rapping
Voices on stage

Narrative voices
Reading aloud
Rhymes and discord
Radio adaptations
Foreign accents, gendered voices
Dialect and dialogue

With each strophe of this ode to sound came the announcement of a general rubric: "Acoustic Devices," "Making Noise," "The Noise of Objects," "Sound and Speech," "Voicing Literature." There seemed to be a

progression, from the mechanical reproduction and physical production of sound, to spiritualized forms for the transformation of noise into speech, culminating in the performance of literary voices ranging from “narrative” to “dialogue.” Missing from this list, but deeply implicated in its increasingly metaphorical reading of voice, is the sound of Victorian poetry. How did poems resound within the auditory culture of Victorian England? There are many reasons (beyond “rhymes”) to read poetry as an important medium for the articulation of Victorian ideas about voice. Victorian poems circulated as “acoustic devices” for the mediation of voice, preceding and perhaps even predicting the sound reproduction technologies that emerged in the course of the nineteenth century.

The conference prompted me to think again about these multiple inventions, conventions, and configurations of voice in Victorian poetry. As I learned from my colleagues about the mechanization of sound and hearing in Victorian communication networks, I was thinking how Victorian poems also worked as a mechanism for the disembodiment of voice, and with similar contradictory effects: sometimes invoking and evoking the spoken word, but also revoking it. Over the past decade Victorianists have been interested in linking the transformation of nineteenth-century writing to new forms for the transmission, transcription, and inscription of sound, but as we are riding the crest of this new wave of “sound studies” now is a good moment to return to the question of voice in verse as well.¹ While Victorian poets were astonished that a metaphor (voice) could be carried by technology, it seems that we at a different historical moment are carried away by the desire to recover and discover the voices of Victorian poetry. Why do we insist on reading literally what the Victorians understood to be a metaphor? What is the voice we are looking for, or think we hear, when we read a Victorian poem? How can we reverse our tendency to read these poems as the utterance of a speaker, the representation of speech, the performance of song? Perhaps we need to look for the various inversions of voice in Victorian poetry, to read again its remarkable performance of voice inverse.

In this special issue of *Victorian Poetry*, we are invited into an open conversation by Linda Hughes, who has arranged the contributions “in an extended dialogue” with one another, voice to voice if not face to face. “Whither Victorian Poetry?” is a thought-provoking question that leads the contributors in different directions while also leading them back to what I take to be the critical problem of voice. It is my hope that the new “voices” in the field will call into question the old voice (the old “speaker” of the New Criticism?) that haunts our reading of Victorian poetry. Beginning with “an appropriately provocative note,” as Linda Hughes notes in Erik Gray’s reading of *Sight and Song*, and ending with John Picker’s equivo-

cal meditation on Tennyson in "The Two Voices," many of the essays in this special issue revolve, either implicitly or explicitly, around the assumption that poems are transcriptions or prescriptions for voice. Some locate a speaker in their reading of Victorian poetic genres (sonnets, ballads, odes, narrative verse, dramatic monologues, and so on) while others dislocate a speaking subject by emphasizing impersonal utterances, absent voices, empty echoes, displaced dialogue, and bits of heteroglossia; some look for voices mediated by print and visual technologies, while others hear singing, oral recitation, public oratory, and musical effects as a reminder that Victorian poetry appeals to the ear as well as the eye. Cornelia Pearsall—recalling how Virginia Woolf listened with all her ears to "what she almost cannot hear," a "humming noise" that "might be called, more prosaically, Victorian poetics"—concludes that we should follow this lead and "endeavor to listen more carefully to the 'humming' of this poetry."²

But close listening is predicated on close reading: our reading, of Cornelia Pearsall's reading, of Woolf's reading, of Victorian poems that presume a reading of something written as if it might be heard. Is the humming of Victorian poetry something we "almost cannot hear" or is it something we almost hear, but cannot? Even when a Victorian poem is spoken aloud, its auditory effects often seem to exceed the speaking voice. This line of thought is pursued by Eric Griffiths in *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*, who argues that poems circulating in nineteenth-century print culture point to an imagined voice that may in fact be unvoiceable: "The intonational ambiguity of a written text may create a mute polyphony through which we see rather than hear alternatively possible voicings, and are led by such vision to reflect on the inter-resonance of those voicings."³ In reflecting on these polyphonic effects that resonate beyond our hearing, Griffiths amplifies an insight glimpsed in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, where William Empson notes "the pathos" in a poem that may be "given by an enforced subtlety of intonation, from the difficulty of saying it so as to bring out all the implications."⁴ However, while Empson tends to fault nineteenth-century poets for too much vagueness, Griffiths sees the ambiguity of intonation as a distinctive feature of Victorian poetry "which we see rather than hear," and in the virtuosity of his close readings he makes us see how particular poems are marked by the absence rather than the presence of voice.

Nevertheless, Griffiths holds on to an account of writing as the voice of an absent person: the written word "retains" (in both senses) the spoken word and the intentionality of a speaker, even if the utterance is unspoken or its source uncertain. The inversion of this argument would be a Derridean detour (say, through Derrida's reading of Husserl in *Speech and Phenomena*), demonstrating that the spoken word also retains traces of the written, and

that writing is external to the interiority and intentionality of a speaking subject. This is by now a predictable debate in which “voice” and “writing” are each in turn idealized: Derrida (preoccupied with inscription) posits the ideality of voice as self-presence while Griffiths (preoccupied with vocalization) posits writing in the abstraction of print. As Margaret Linley points out, Griffiths could be “more historically specific” about Victorian print culture, where mechanical type and the steam powered press worked alongside other nineteenth-century technologies of inscription (a list that could be extended to include the telegraph, the phonograph, the typewriter, and other systems analyzed in the work of Friedrich Kittler).⁵ In an age of mechanical reproduction when “voice would seem to have died on the page,” Linley acknowledges that “the Derridean die is cast.” But “taking Griffiths one step further” she also suggests that voice returns “as an organic (though technologically enhanced) prosthesis for the machine-made word.” It is a fascinating reversal that opens up a future for reading Victorian poetry, not through the thesis of voice but rather its prosthesis.

Whether this prosthetic “voice” should be understood as human remains an open question, however. For Linley,

the anthropomorphic turn of Victorian poetry, and the lyric in particular, with its attempt to conjure dead, absent and lost voices while talking (figuratively) about voice, should be examined as one of the central locations for expression of anxieties and fascination arising out of the possibility that both industrial-powered print and new communication technologies such as photography, the telegraph and later the phonograph were remapping human coordinates.⁶

But perhaps these anxieties and fascinations are more our own, as we read Victorian poetry anthropomorphically in order to hold on to an idea of the human, at a time when humanities seem increasingly in question. The pathos of this lyric humanism is that we try to insert the human in the places—or poems—where it is least certain.

Hence the self-conscious nostalgia for the voice of Tennyson in John Picker’s essay on “The Two Voices.” Describing the wax cylinders on which “the great poet of divided mind etched an ostensibly permanent voice of the self,” Picker confesses that “these recordings (some still unavailable to the public, and several more in need of digital restoration) are for me the most vital link to the poet that we have, as an aural archive that puts the hum back in humanism.”⁷ What Woolf called the “humming noise” of Victorian poetry here turns out to be a prosthesis of the machine-made word. The recordings “still unavailable to the public” prompt Picker to imagine a private scene of personal identification with Tennyson (“for me

a vital link") that makes him vivid and immediate to the listener, even while recognizing that the poet of divided mind is "still" and "unavailable": not a human voice at all. Instead we have the two voices of a divided Picker, one who wishes to identify and revitalize the voice of Tennyson in the name of humanism, and one who is suspicious of a claim that "detaches the poetry from the problems of its own time and coerces it into speaking for ours" (p. 645). So the last word is given not to Picker, not to Tennyson, but to the machine that spoke in praise of "Edison's *myrakulous* invention."

Perhaps the expansion of the aural archive will indeed revive the reading of Victorian poetry. John Picker points the way in *Victorian Soundscapes*, in a lively chapter on Edison's "Library of Voices." But if this is the future history of Victorian poetry, much will depend on how we read these "voices" in the archive. Recently *The New York Times* ran an article on voice recordings by various English writers just released in two compact discs, entitled *The Spoken Word*. "IN THE MASTER'S VOICE, OLD BOOKS LIVE AGAIN," ran the headline, with a photograph of Tennyson, among others, "who can be heard reading from their works, sometimes dramatically, on CD's from the British Library."⁸ Here it is not the (dead) masters themselves but the "old books" that seem to live again, revived by a figure of voice that we should not read too literally, as surely the Victorians did not. Technologically mediated voices have become so naturalized for us that we listen without the sense of estrangement that fascinated Victorian readers and writers, for whom literary and technological inventions of "voice" were a way to perform the dissociation and disembodiment of speech.⁹

In a review of *The Spoken Word*, Bernard Richards warns against the "Phonographic Fallacy" that makes us trust in a writer's recording as authoritative. Although we might be interested in "hearing writers, especially poets, performing their own works" because "one hears where the stresses go on words, one hears how they thought the words should sound," nevertheless he maintains that the recording should not determine the final voicing of the text.¹⁰ But even the skepticism of the "Phonographic Fallacy" ("Remember! You first heard the phrase here," Richards writes) turns out to be a phonographic fantasy. Do we really hear the voice of the poets and "how they thought the words should sound," or is this our personification of the sound we are hearing and how we think the words should sound? And why must sound be attributed to a speaker in order to be understood as meaningful? Is there another way to read these acoustic inscriptions?

Consider another famous recording by another famous Victorian poet, also included in Edison's "Library of Voices." In 1889, Robert Browning was asked to recite his poetry for the newly invented phonograph, and

more than a century later the master's voice has been digitally re-mastered on a CD, for an anthology entitled *Poetry Speaks: Hear Great Poets Read Their Work from Tennyson to Plath*. This anthology insists on the centrality of voice in reading poetry; as its title announces, voice is not only attributed to the poet who speaks, but to poetry itself. *Poetry* speaks, as the very personification of the speaking voice that we are asked to assume when we read a lyric poem. The insistence on the immediacy of voice is a generic marker for poetry, reiterated by Charles Osgood in his narrated introduction to the CD: "We think of poetry as words on a page. But spoken poetry which preceded written language is where a poem comes alive. The rhythms, inflections, and intonations in the voice of a poet create an immediate impact. The poet's voice gives power, shape, and passion to the poet's words." Robert Browning is called upon to exemplify these claims, as Edward Hirsch goes on to proclaim in his brief introduction to Browning's poetry "how unusually alert it is to nuances of voice, to its own intonations, its characteristic verbal strategies."¹¹

Yet what we hear in this recording is not the immediacy of Browning's voice, but its mechanical mediation. It is difficult to decipher Browning's words, as they are broken up by the very technology that seeks to preserve them: the revolving of the wax cylinder creates a whooshing sound, and the volume of the recording fades in and out of audibility. Furthermore when Browning tries to recite from memory a stanza from "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix," he forgets his own words in the first stanza, faltering after line 3:

I sprang to the saddle, and Joris, and he;
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;
'Speed!' cried the wall to us galloping through;
The gate shuts behind us . . . the lights sink to rest . . .

Browning interrupts his recitation in order to apologize: "I am terribly sorry, but I can't remember me [sic] own verses: but one thing which I shall remember all my life is, the astonishing sensation produced upon me by your wonderful invention." After a significant pause, he adds his own name as signature: "Robert Browning," followed by bravos and hurrahs from the audience in attendance.¹²

In this recording Browning is less interested in his "own verses" than the "wonderful invention" of voice inverse; it is "the one thing" that he will remember all his life, even though (or perhaps because) he has forgotten the words to his poem. While the recitation of his poetry leaves him speechless, the phonograph repeats his stutter and turns it into speech. This inversion of voice, signed in the name of Robert Browning at the end of the recording, is not his own but a mechanical (re)production detached

from himself. The disembodied “speaker” is the phonograph, which takes the place of both mouth and ear, as it is used first to record and then to play back the recitation of the poem. The “astonishing sensation” that is “produced upon me” by the phonograph in Browning’s account is characteristic of Victorian responses to new sound technologies, making Browning into a mouthpiece for the advent of the modern. Like the rediscovered photograph of Browning that Ivan Kreilkamp reads as emblem of “Victorian poetry’s modernity,”¹³ the recording of Browning can also be read (and heard) emblematically, pointing to “a provocative new vision of him as a prophet of the ‘shocking encounters’ produced within a technologically-mediated nineteenth-century modernity.” The recording—if not Browning himself—seems to speak prophetically to the future about the mechanical reproduction of voice.

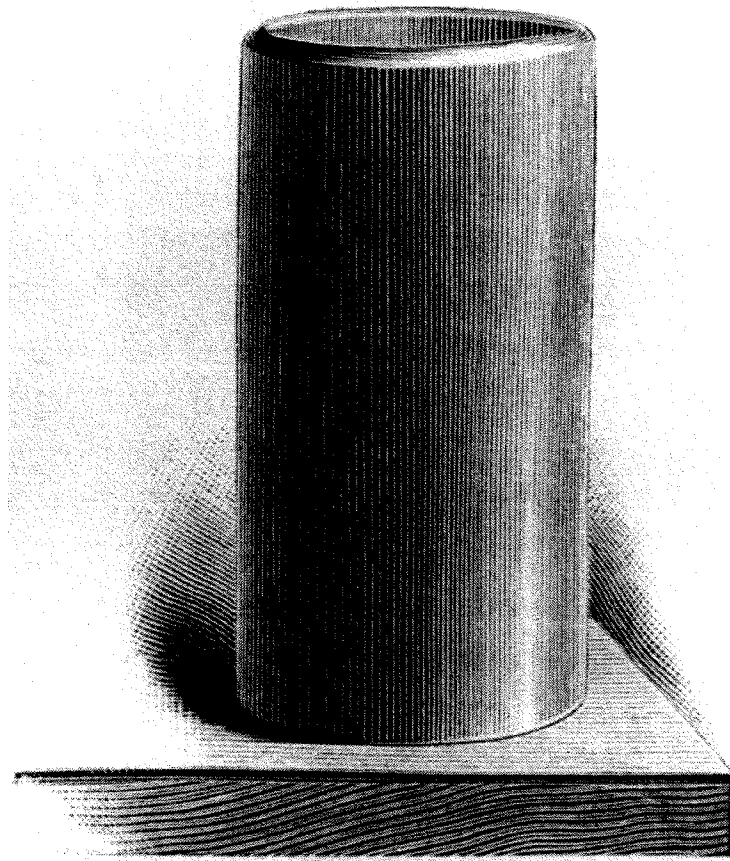
However, these modern sound technologies do not leave print behind, if we look for the *logos* (and not the *phone*) embedded in the *techne*. The mechanical mediation of voice is already figured within the poem that Browning attempts to recite, in the mechanism of the meter. What matters in “How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix” is less the content (in fact the good news remains a blank or “X”) than the metrical form of its transmission. When we scan the title of the poem, marked off in quotation marks, we can tell from the galloping anapests how they brought the good news. The meter is the motor that gives the poem its momentum, and indeed in Browning’s recording the words get lost in the thumping of the anapests. Beginning with “I sprang to the stirrup,” the poem stirs up a rapid motion that makes it difficult to fix on “I” as a speaker:

I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he;
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;
‘Good speed!’ cried the watch, as the gate-bolts undrew;
‘Speed’ echoed the wall to us galloping through;
Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest,
And into the midnight we galloped abreast.

We can see Browning’s verse speeding up, in the contraction of “Good speed!” (cried by the watchman) into “Speed!” (echoed by the wall). Furthermore, in his recording of the poem, Browning forgets to recite the cry of the watchman altogether, and instead attributes a speaking voice to the wall: “Speed! Cried the wall . . .” Like the phonograph, the wall is made to speak in a voice that is not human. Even when the speaking voice is disrupted in a series of pauses (as the next line is forgotten in Browning’s recitation), the meter is audible, still, as the marking of time measured in passing intervals, counting out the words that are missing.

In addition to making audible the metrical mediation of voice al-

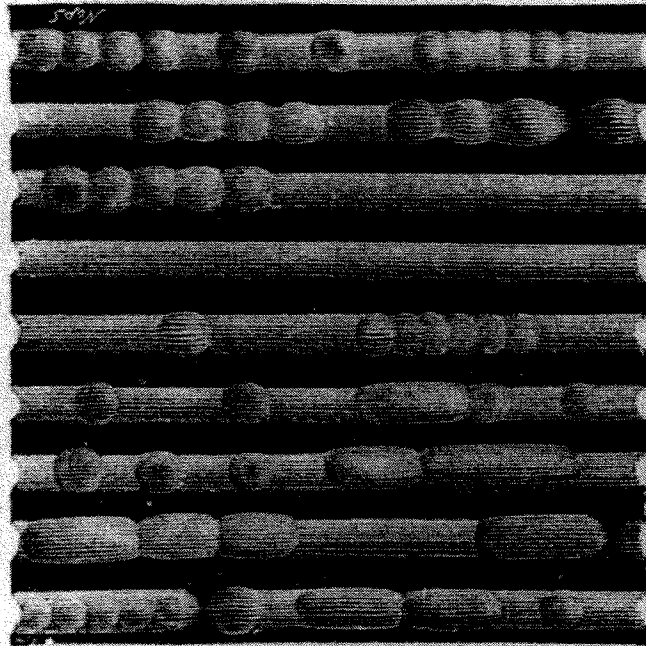
ready at work in the poem, Browning's recording on wax cylinder makes it visible. In a remarkable remediation of a new medium by an older medium, and vice versa, an illustration of the cylinder was published in the Victorian journal *Black and White*.¹⁴ Here Browning's voice is represented simultaneously through different technologies of inscription (the phonograph, the printed word, the engraving):



The Wax-Cylinder or Phonogram (half actual size), bearing the Record of Words Spoken by Browning, April 7, 1889.

The phonogram created by the phonograph is literally and figuratively reduced to the scale of print, to emphasize that we are looking at a written record rather than hearing the words spoken by Browning. Furthermore,

to amplify this mediation of voice by print, the phonogram is magnified in a second illustration where we are asked to read another kind of imprint, the impressions or “indentations caused by Browning’s voice” on wax:



A Microscopical Enlargement (400 times magnified) of part of the Wax Cylinder or Phonogram, showing the Indentations caused by Browning's voice.

The grooves marked by these indentations can be scanned visually or aurally, like metrical marks in a poem. Although the technology is new, the logic for reading the inscription of “voice” is familiar by now: the wax cylinder revolves around the inversion of voice, as a figure that must be seen before it can be heard. So the printed voice of Victorian poetry survives in the black and white of other technologies, in the form of a visual abstraction, a graphic pattern, a metrical grid.

Indeed, when Eric Griffiths describes “a double nature in printed poetry, making it both itself and something other—a text of hints at voicing, whose centre in utterance lies outside itself, and also an achieved pattern on the page,” it is Browning he quotes: “Browning names this double nature in a phrase from *The Ring and the Book*—‘the printed voice’” (p. 60). It is no coincidence that Griffiths hearkens back to Browning in the title of his book. Even more than the two voices of Tennyson forever self-divided, Browning’s poetry displays the contradictions of reading voice inverse. Andrew Stauffer develops this point in “Victorian Paperwork,” in an apt reading of another line from *The Ring and the Book*: “The thing’s restorative / I’ the touch and sight.” Stauffer suggests that Browning’s elision of the “i” and the “n” is a way to “approximate the sound of speech” and “simultaneously make a show of this attempt” as a display of print. He concludes that Browning’s poetry allows for its own “double restoration, ‘I’ the touch’ of the verse on the sensual ear and ‘I’ . . . the sight’ of its textual presentation on the page.”¹⁵

It remains to be seen why “touch” should be sublimated into the sound of speech, however, or whether it might be pointing to another kind of textual mark. In an essay for *Robert Browning in Contexts*, Herbert Tucker remarks that Browning is one poet “who greatly preferred to make his mark by making his getaway, just slipping off somewhere into the text.”¹⁶ The point is not that Browning hides behind the speakers of his dramatic monologues, or that his poems speak (for) themselves, but rather that the critical fiction of a speaker dissolves at our touch, no matter how carefully we try to listen. Tucker already pointed us in this direction in an earlier essay on “Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric,” by suggesting we approach this genre for “a training in how to read between the lines—a hackneyed but valuable phrase that deserves a fresh hearing,” precisely because this means reading for something not quite within our hearing: “In the reading of a dramatic monologue we do not so much scrutinize the ellipses and blank spaces of the text as we people those openings by attending to the overtones of the different discourses that flank them. Between the lines, we read in a no-man’s-land the notes whose intervals engender character.”¹⁷ The intervals that seem to mark the character of a speaker—engendering a voice, a persona, a person—might be understood as metrical: instead of reading between the lines to hear a voice, we can try scanning the lines themselves to mark the intervals, to read these abstract notations in excess of what can be spoken, in a “no-man’s land” outside personification.

One path I envision for the future of Victorian poetry is a return to reading Victorian meters, or what I would call “historical prosody.” In the epigraph for her introduction, Linda Hughes quotes Augusta Webster:

"Where shall we know . . . / Sign-marks to guide us on the way we go?"¹⁸ Webster learned much from Browning in writing dramatic monologues. Her essay on "Poets and Personal Pronouns" complicates the persona poetics consolidated by twentieth-century critics, who have simplified the Victorian dramatic monologue into a pedagogical model for reading poetry as the expression of a "speaker."¹⁹ But as I have suggested, Victorian poetry gives us many other kinds of "sign-marks" to guide our reading, if we can learn to see meter as graphic forms that circulate in unpredictable ways, like the metrical recitation of "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix" on wax cylinder. Paying attention to the historical circulation of Victorian meters within Victorian culture might lead us beyond reading poems expressively or mimetically as utterances attributed to a single speaker, and open up a cultural history of forms.²⁰

Various contributors to this volume also turn to questions of form, sometimes specifically with meter in mind. Lee O'Brien analyzes the performance of the ballad as "a formal pattern" that destabilizes the lyric "I," especially in women's verse, while Jason Rudy considers the use of ballad meters to restrain "the blustering blank verse" of the Spasmodics. Anne Hartman thinks interestingly about the performative poem as a cultural form, and her reading of a poem by Hemans could lead to further reflection on the performance of its meter: why a hymn measure? In Monique Morgan's call for a "politically inflected formalism," the combination of poetic and narrative theory will inevitably lead to questions about the distinguishing features of prosody; hence various contributors find themselves turning again to the prosy poetry of Arthur Hugh Clough. Stephanie Kuduk poses an important question about "how Victorian poets understand the structures of poetic meaning-making that they inherited from classical and Renaissance prosody," and Michele Martinez notes the gender politics at stake in citing a metrical translation by Elizabeth Barrett, "whose female hand could translate Homer's Greek into muscular hexameter couplets." The generic figure of the poetess (associated with particular conventions of gender and genre, as Marion Thain argues) is often associated with particular meters as well, and it would be worth developing this argument in more detailed metrical analysis of women's verse, for example in Helen Groth's reading of optical patterns in the poetry of A. Mary F. Robinson, or in Katharine McGowran's reading of a sculptural form that remains "unsunned, unscanned" in a sonnet by Mary Coleridge.²¹

The marks of meter can also be read in the larger outlines of Dino Felluga's argument about the "self-conscious re-marking of genre within a text," or Charles LaPorte's focus on "generic markers" in Victorian poetry. Metrical education is implicit in Lee Behlman's account of Foucauldian *askesis* as formal discipline, and in William McKelvey's interest in compul-

sory literacy and the place of poetry in Victorian pedagogy, and in Robert Sulcer's emphasis on teaching Victorian poetry in the classroom today. Insofar as meter was—is it still?—used for the memorization of poetry, it anticipates the logic noted by Ana Vadillo in her reading of Freud's mystic writing-pad: well before computer technology emerged as mechanical perceptual apparatus for supplementing cultural memory, meter served as "a materialized portion of mnemonic apparatus" that Victorians carried about "invisible." Finally, Rebecca Stern's use of Tennyson to find "a use in measured language" is a timely meditation on, and mediation of, a personal voice through the poetic measures of Victorian poetry, both within and beyond the classroom.²²

All of these approaches could guide us toward historical prosody, by which I mean neither a prescriptive analysis (marking correct scansion for proper pronunciation) nor a descriptive analysis (a mimetic reading of metrical effects), but a broader inquiry into the discourses about meter that informed Victorian poetics. It would mean backtracking through Victorian metrical theory and actually reading all those treatises and pamphlets and polemics and hypotheses that circulated in the nineteenth century, and connecting these surprisingly lively debates about meter to shifting ideas about the definitions, forms, and functions of poetry; it would mean coming to terms with Victorian poetry on its own terms, taking into account its highly self-conscious mediations and wide range of generic conventions rather than imposing our own ideas (or idealizations) of poetry as a genre. As an alternative to literary history that looks for continuity or continuum of development in poetics past and present, or a literary formalism that insists on a purely self-reflexive, ultimately ahistorical reading of poetic form, historical prosody might be a form of history that understands forms as historical. Reading Victorian meters would then be a way of reading the marks of culture, not limited to the expression of a speaking subject.

For instruction in historical prosody, let us ask for a brief lesson from Theodore Watts-Dunton. He is (in the words of James Najarian) one of those "minor" or "marginal" figures who can teach us much about late Victorian poetics, "what it embodies, how it is produced and how it is received in an historical moment."²³ Watts-Dunton wrote an entry on "Poetry" in 1884 for the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and maintained that "metre is the first and only condition absolutely demanded by poetry."²⁴ A disciple of Swinburne (as well as his patron), Watts-Dunton professes faith in poetry as a way of approximating the rhythms of life: "Deeper than all the rhythms of art is that rhythm which art would fain catch, the rhythm of nature; for the rhythm of nature is the rhythm of life itself," he writes, assimilating but also subordinating the laws of meter to

natural rhythm: "Being rhythm, it is of course governed by law, but it is a law which transcends in subtlety the conscious art of the metrist, and is only caught by the poet in his most inspired moods" (p. 76). Watts-Dunton acknowledges that meter is a man-made invention, but since the poet "in his most inspired moods" may at times use metrical laws to capture the "law" of rhythm, his distinction between rhythm and meter is not so clear. Insofar as poetry performs a metaphorical relation between meter and rhythm, it simultaneously allows meter to be read as a metaphor for natural rhythm and allows the rhythms of nature to be read as a metaphor for meter.

Watts-Dunton published his metrical lesson in the form of a sonnet, as well:

The Sonnet's Voice (A Metrical Lesson by the Seashore)

Yon silvery billows breaking on the beach
 Fall back in foam beneath the star-shine clear,
 The while my rhymes are murmuring in your ear
 A restless lore like that the billows teach;
 For on these sonnet-waves my soul would reach
 From its own depths, and rest within you, dear,
 As, through the billowy voices yearning here,
 Great nature strives to find a human speech.
 A sonnet is a wave of melody:
 From heaving waters of the impassion'd soul
 A billow of tidal music one and whole
 Flows in the "octave;" then returning free,
 Its ebbing surges in the "sestet" roll
 Back to the deeps of Life's tumultuous sea.

Here "voice" is attributed not to a speaker but to the "tidal music" of the sonnet which is "murmuring in your ear" like waves of the sea, or waves of sound, or waves of passion, or waves of life. The figure of "these sonnet-waves" is continually refigured, flowing from one context to the next in a perpetual movement like the never-ending rhythms of nature. The sonnet may evoke a Victorian poetry of the environment described by Nicholas Frankel, who discerns a dissolution of the self and a complete absence of the speaking voice in the intricate interwoven patterns of late Victorian verse: a textual environment that looks and sounds organic, as "nature strives to find a human speech."²⁵

But the naturalization of the sonnet is performed here as a poetic convention so self-consciously marked (as in the quotation marks around

“octave” and “sestet”) that the metaphorical logic is reversed. Its metrical lesson is not that we find the voice of nature but that nature is another projection of voice inverse. The lesson found “by the seashore” (or taught “by the seashore,” depending on how we interpret “by”) is the reiteration of a lesson learned from other poets, and explicitly stated as such in an essay published by Watts-Dunton on the sonnet. According to Watts-Dunton, the Petrarchan sonnet conventionally prescribes that the sestet “must always act as a response by way of either ebb or flow to the metrical billow embodied in the octave.”²⁶ By following this prescription, his own sonnet asks that its metrical metaphor be recognized as a metaphor. If, as Watts-Dunton claims, “the wave theory has found acceptance with most recent students of the sonnet” (p. 185), then his sonnet must be read (by generic convention as well as metrical invention) as the performance of a historically mediated “natural” metaphor.

This wave theory of the sonnet, simultaneously materialized and metaphorized in the meter of Watts-Dunton’s sonnet, wavers between two ways of understanding voice. On the one hand, Watts-Dunton invokes the voice of the poet when he attributes to the sonnet “the function of giving spontaneous voice to the emotions and passions of the poet’s soul” (p. 172); on the other hand, he recalls “the fact of the word sonnet being connected with *suonare*, to play upon an instrument” (p. 176), suggesting that emotions are produced by the motion of sound waves, thus turning the sonnet into one of those nineteenth-century technologies for sound (re)production not located within a human speaker. Like the scientific theory of sound measured in frequency or wave-lengths, the wave theory of the sonnet depends on the demarcation of spatial/temporal movement that informs Watts-Dunton’s theory of poetry in general: “It is in giving voice, not to emotion at its tensest, but to the vibrations of emotion, it is in expressing the countless shifting movements of the soul from passion to passion, that poetry shows in spite of all her infirmities her superiority to the plastic arts” (p. 80). Instead of giving voice to “the poet’s soul,” poetry articulates “the countless shifting movements of the soul” in abstract metrical form, asking us to read motion as “the vibrations of emotion.”

Extending these theoretical reflections into a metrical analysis of the sonnet, we might point to its production of an organic figure of rhythm through the mechanism of meter. For example, although the sonnet is measured mostly in regular iambic pentameter, its meter marks off places for rhythmic billowing: in the opening line, the “silvery billows” that are “breaking on the beach” break up the iambs with tri-syllabic feet, as do “billowy voices” in line 7 and “a billow of tidal music” in line 11. If “a sonnet is a wave of melody” (a perfectly iambic line), this music resounds

with a distinctly dactylic counterpoint. The continual flow of “these sonnet-waves” seems best heard in its interruption, enacted by strong caesuras in line 6 (“From its own depths, // and rest within you, // dear”) and line 12 (“Flow in the ‘octave’; // then returning free”). The meter is clearly mediated by our expectation of the sonnet form as well, for after the volta (or “turn”) from the octave, the sestet “returning free” almost seems to overturn the metrical movement in a dramatic enjambment: “Its ebbing surges in the ‘sestet’ roll / Back to the deeps of Life’s tumultuous sea.” It is through the manipulation of metrical convention—by which I mean our re-marking of the meter—that we are invited to read this sonnet as reflection on Life: an abstract rhythm never quite articulated as human speech. This may sound strange to our ears as an “expressive” model of poetry, but it resonates as one of the lessons of voice inverse. It is a lesson we might re-learn from Victorian poetry in the years to come.

Notes

- I am grateful to Linda Hughes, Virginia Jackson, and Elizabeth Wingrove for talking with me through the writing of this essay.
- 1 On the telegraph and the phonograph in relation to Victorian narrative, see, for example, Jay Clayton, “The Voice in the Machine,” *Language Machines: Technologies of Literary and Cultural Production*, ed. Jeffrey Masten, Peter Stallybrass, and Nancy Vickers (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 209-232); Ivan Kreilkamp, “A Voice Without a Body: the Phonographic Logic of *Heart of Darkness*,” *VS* 40 (Winter 1997): 211-244; “A Gramophone in Every Grave,” in Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000); and John Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003). A rationale for shifting from visual to acoustic culture in current “sound studies” is offered by Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2003).
 - 2 Cornelia D. J. Pearsall, “Whither, Whether, Woolf: Victorian Poetry and A Room of One’s Own,” *VP* 41, no. 4 (2003): 597, 602.
 - 3 Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), p. 60.
 - 4 William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Hogarth Press, 1984), p. 27. Griffiths is a more sympathetic reader of Victorian poetry than Empson, who complains of “ambiguity by vagueness, such as was used to excess by the Pre-Raphaelites” (p. 26), and claims that “the wavering and suggestive indefiniteness of nineteenth-century poetry is often merely weak” (p. 190). Griffiths departs from Empson by looking at “the wavering” of Victorian poems as their strength.
 - 5 See, for example, Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990) and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999).
 - 6 Margaret Linley, “Conjuring the Spirit: Victorian Poetry, Culture, and Technol-

- ogy," *VP* 41, no. 4 (2003): 539.
- 7 John Picker, "The Two Voices," *VP* 41, no. 4 (2003): 645.
 - 8 *New York Times*, December 12, 2003.
 - 9 In *Dumbstruck* Steven Connor notes that "the rapid naturalization of the technologically mediated voice" has produced "a loss, of a kind, namely the loss of the loss of the voice. . . . What is strange is the familiarity of the disembodied voice" (p. 411). Not taking voice for granted, nineteenth-century listeners were more attuned to the many strange forms of its disembodiment. See also Allen Weiss, *Breathless: Sound Recording, Disembodiment and the Transformation of Lyrical Nostalgia* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 2000).
 - 10 Bernard Richards, "The Phonographic Fallacy?" *Oxford Magazine* No. 217, Michaelmas Term, 2003, pp. 12-13. Thanks to Catherine Maxwell for sending me this timely review.
 - 11 "Edward Hirsch on Robert Browning," in *Poetry Speaks: Hear Great Poets Read Their Work from Tennyson to Plath*, ed. Elise Paschen and Rebekah Presson Mosby, with three audio CDs narrated by Charles Osgood (Napierville, Illinois: Sourcebooks Mediafusion, 2001), p. 11.
 - 12 The misquotation of Browning's lines is noted and transcribed by John Woolford and Daniel Karlin in *The Poems of Robert Browning*, vol. 2 (London: Longman, 1991), p. 239. Browning's apology is transcribed in Michael Hancher and Jerrold Moore, "The Sound of a Voice That is Still: Browning's Edison Cylinder," *Browning Newsletter* 4 (1970): 25-26. See also Jed Rasula in "Understanding the Sound of Not Understanding," in *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), p. 235.
 - 13 Ivan Kreilkamp, "Victorian Poetry's Modernity," *VP* 41, no. 4 (2003): 603.
 - 14 The illustration of the Browning Cylinder is reproduced from *Black and White* (December 12, 1891) with permission of the Armstrong Browning Library, Waco, Texas. I am grateful to John Picker for drawing my attention to it.
 - 15 Andrew M. Stauffer, "Victorian Paperwork," *VP* 41, no. 4 (2003): 528.
 - 16 Herbert Tucker, "Browning as Escape Artist," *Robert Browning in Contexts*, ed. John Woolford (Winfield, Kansas: Wedgestone Press, 1998), p. 21. In "Me/Not-Me: The Narrator of 'A Death in the Desert'" (included in the same volume of essays), Adam Roberts also reads Browning to show how "the text works against the imaginary vanishing point of a speaker" (p. 55).
 - 17 Herbert Tucker, "Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric," in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 231-232. Along with Jonathan Culler's essay on "Changes in the Study of the Lyric" and Paul de Man's essay on "Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory" in the same volume, Tucker's essay raises the question of voice that (twenty years later) has not yet been answered in lyric theory. While interrogating the critical fiction of a speaker within New Criticism, Tucker does not give up the ghost altogether, as he writes: "An exemplary teaching genre, the dramatic monologue can teach us, among other things, that while texts do not absolutely lack speakers, they do not simply have them either; they invent them instead as they go. Texts do not come from speakers; speakers come from texts. *Persona fit non nascitur*" (p. 243).
 - 18 Linda K. Hughes, "Introduction," *VP* 41, no. 4 (2003): 459.

- 19 "Poets and Personal Pronouns" was first published in the *Examiner* (March 12, 1878) and reprinted in Augusta Webster, *A Housewife's Opinions* (London, 1879).
- 20 I survey such an approach in my essay "Victorian Meters," in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000).
- 21 All essays are from VP 41, no. 4 (2003): Lee O'Brien, "Reading/Writing the Forgotten: The Poetry of Mary Boddington," pp. 473-481; Jason Rudy, "On Cultural Neoformalism, Spasmodic Poetry, and the Victorian Ballad," pp. 590-596; Anne Hartman, "Doing Things with Poems: Performativity and Cultural Form," pp. 481-490; Monique R. Morgan, "'Productive Convergences, Producing Converts,'" pp. 500-04; Stephanie Kuduk, "Victorian Poetry as Victorian Studies," pp. 513-518; Michelle Martinez, "Women Poets and the Sister Arts in Nineteenth-Century England," pp. 621-628; Marion Thain, "What Kind of a Critical Category is 'Women's Poetry?'," pp. 575-584; Helen Groth, "Consigned to Sepia: Remembering Victorian Poetry," pp. 611-620; Katharine McGowran, "Re-reading Women's Poetry at the Turn of the Century," pp. 584-589.
- 22 All essays are from VP 41, no. 4 (2003): Dino Franco Felluga, "Novel Poetry: Transgressing the Law of Genre," 490-499; Charles LaPorte, "Post-Romantic Ideologies and Victorian Poetic Practice, or, the Future of Criticism at the Present Time," pp. 519-525; Lee Behlman, "From Ancient to Victorian Cultural Studies: Assessing Foucault," pp. 559-569; William R. McKelvy, "In the Valley of the Shadow of Books," pp. 544-552; Robert Sulcer Jr., "Budgets and Brownings: The Function of Poetry at the Present Time," pp. 552-559; Ana Parejo Vardillo, "A Note Upon the 'Liquid Crystal Screen' and Victorian Poetry," pp. 530-536; Rebecca F. Stern, "'A Use in Measured Language': Poetry and Poetic Criticism after September 11," pp. 636-642.
- 23 James Najarian, "Canonicity, Marginality, and the Celebration of the Minor," VP 41, no. 4 (2003): 570
- 24 The 1884 essay on poetry is reprinted along with other essays in Theodore Watts-Dunton, *Poetry and the Renaissance of Wonder* (London: Kennikat Press, 1916; reissued 1970). He follows Hegel in claiming meter as the only absolute condition for poetry (p. 30).
- 25 Nicholas Frankel, "The Ecology of Victorian Poetry," VP 41, no. 4 (2003): 629-635.
- 26 *Poetry and the Renaissance of Wonder*, p. 172. Watts-Dunton's "Sonnet" essay was originally written for publication in *Chambers's Encyclopaedia* in 1891.