

Reviewing Generations: Professionalism and the Mid-Victorian Reviewer

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Let us speak the plain truth at once. Everyone who turns from the periodical literature of the present day to the original 'Edinburgh Review' will be amazed at its inferiority. It is generally dull, and, when not dull, flimsy. [...] One may most easily characterise the contents by saying that few of the articles would have a chance of acceptance by the editor of a first-rate periodical today.

Leslie Stephen (243-4, 248)

Leslie Stephen's comment, written with all the confidence of an editor of just such a 'first rate periodical' looking back on a literary phenomenon which had influenced his father's generation, could be regarded as that of a successful man of letters appropriately sceptical of the older generation. But in fact his view of the early decades of the *Edinburgh* was a widely held one from the 1850s onward. For Stephen, some of the fault lay in the fact that the reviewers were not sufficiently committed to their role as critics:

The chief contributors were in no sense men who looked upon literature as a principal occupation. [...] Work, taken up at odd hours to satisfy editorial importunity or add a few pounds to a narrow income, is apt to show the characteristic defects of all amateur performances. A very large part of the early numbers is amateurish in this objectionable sense. [...] A clever man has turned over the last new book of travels or poetry, or made a sudden incursion into foreign literature or into some passage of history entirely fresh to him, and has given his first impressions with an audacity which almost disarms one by its extraordinary *naïveté*. (248-9)

The early *Edinburgh*, he concluded:

was the instrument used by a number of very clever young men to put forward the ideas current in the more liberal section of the upper classes, with much occa-

sional vigour and a large infusion of common-sense, but also with abundant flippancy and superficiality, and, in a literary sense, without that solidity of workmanship which is essential for enduring vitality. (269)

It had been an enormous leap to the present system, the 'system according to which much of the most solid and original work of the time first appears in periodicals' (269).

The signal for a reappraisal of the earlier generation of reviewers – of which Stephen's essay is one of many – had come fortuitously at mid-century from several collections of reprinted reviews. What was to become a widespread, if not routine, practice of reprinting one's reviews and essays in volume form was then comparatively recent. Macaulay had reprinted his *Essays*, mainly from the *Edinburgh*, in 1843, with phenomenal success. The following year, Francis Jeffrey published four volumes of his *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review*, still only a fraction of the two hundred he originally wrote. These had been followed by *Selections from the Writings of Sydney Smith* (1855) and Henry Brougham's *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review* (1856).¹ But most of the critical attention focussed on Jeffrey. For Stephen's generation, he epitomized the world of the early reviews.

The *Contributions* received only a muted response when they were first published, but Jeffrey's death in 1850, followed by Henry Cockburn's two volume *Life of Lord Jeffrey with Selections from his Correspondence* in 1852, prompted a full scale retrospective. Longman's issued a one volume version of the *Edinburgh* essays the following year.² Among other things, Cockburn had pronounced Jeffrey 'our greatest British critic' and this not surprisingly provoked comment if not a downright challenge.

The general reassessment of the first *Edinburgh* reviewers that followed these publications prompted discussion about the nature of criticism and the role of the critic, about how reviewing had been done, and how it was done at the present time. Jeffrey's legendary gaffs were recalled. His put-down of Wordsworth's 'The Excursion' ('This will never do'), his undervaluing of Wordsworth and Coleridge, his over-estimation of Crabbe, and the singling out of Rogers and Campbell as the two Romantic poets most likely to endure were remembered by most reviewers. But more interesting was what was said about Jeffrey's methods as a critic:

It was the *taste* of Jeffrey that constituted his special accomplishment as a critic: where that was right, he was right; where that was at fault, he was at fault. [...] His self-appointed task was that he, the Scotchman Jeffrey, should tell of every important new literary composition as it came out, whether he liked it or not, and what passages he liked, and what he did not like in it, and something, also, of his reasons for so liking and disliking. This, and nothing else, was the task which Jeffrey prescribed to himself as a critic. ([Masson] 317)

The anonymous reviewer, David Masson, who was soon to become, like Leslie Stephen, a prominent member of the new generation of critics, went on to say that the 'sketchy "beauty and blemish" species of criticism in which Jeffrey excelled, has now passed out of date, and has been succeeded, at least in all our higher periodicals, by a kind of criticism *intrinsically deeper and more laborious*' (322). There had been a 'rise among us of an altogether higher sense of what criticism is, or may be –'. It was not the case, he went on, 'that there is greater positive ability than formerly' in the critics, but rather that 'the new principle [...] established in the art of periodical writing, compels those who betake themselves to it, be their abilities what they may, to task these abilities harder' (322):

Merely to note the beauties and blemishes of a new book, or the merits and defects of a known author in that rapid superficial way [...] is not now the business of a critic in the *Quarterlies*. What is usually required of him is, either some original disquisition [...] or some critical appreciation of a new intellectual tendency running through simultaneous scores of books [...] or, some thorough dissection of an important new book, considered as the product of a peculiar mode of thought exhibited nowhere else; or, lastly, and perhaps most frequently, some elaborate literary monograph, or study of character, in which the attempt is made to delineate in exact portraiture the features of some representative man, and to trace the stamp of these in his writings. [...] (323)

The task of the reviewer and of criticism in general, in other words, was much more ambitious than in those early days.

Many of the reviewers of the *Life* and the *Edinburgh* essays compared Jeffrey unfavourably with Carlyle and Sydney Smith, finding him wanting in substance and in originality. Some, and Walter Bagehot in particular, argued that in contrast he possessed a unique ability to express what most readers thought:

If Jeffrey was not a great critic, he had, what very great critics have wanted, the art of writing what most people would think good criticism. He might not know his subject, but he knew his readers. People like to read ideas which they can imagine to have been their own. ('The First Edinburgh Reviewers' 30)

Lord Jeffrey, a shrewd judge of the world, employed himself in telling it what to think; not so much what it ought to think, as what at bottom it did think, and so by dexterous sympathy with current society he gained contemporary fame and power. ('Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning' 340)

There were then two popular perceptions of Jeffrey the critic. First, the man in the street, albeit a patrician, highly articulate and cultivated man in

the street, who expressed more forcefully what most people thought about a work of literature, a critic who knew the public's mind. The second was of Jeffrey the judge, or lawyer, who, quoting David Masson again, 'met all things at intellectual sword-point, and approved or condemned, right and left, without any hesitation' (309). The latter was the style which Coleridge in chapter 21 of the *Biographia Literaria* had called the *Edinburgh's* 'damnatory' style of criticism, a style in which he said 'assertion' was substituted for 'argument' (113). This was the mode of criticism that mid-Victorian reviewers found inadequate, superficial, and 'flimsy' and that produced no little self-satisfaction when they contrasted it with their own practice.

What I propose to do in this study is to look at some of the literary criticism in periodicals from mid-century onward, and to explore whether there were significant changes in reviewing practice or in the quality of the reviewing to warrant the self-satisfaction, not to say smugness, of these mid-Victorian critics; or whether, as I suspect, the changes in reviewing came much later, and that what was occurring in the middle decades of the century was a new self-consciousness on the part of critics, a belief in the profession of 'the critic' as opposed to the amateur performances of the earlier generation, and a wide-spread conviction of the importance of criticism in literary culture. In this process, the role of Arnold was to assume an increasing significance. In order to give some focus to the discussion, I am going to concentrate on reviews of poetry. In doing so, I am conscious that there may be different conclusions to emerge from a reading of other critical discourses, the criticism of the novel for example, or of forms of non-fictional prose.

A number of smaller points emerge in these mid-century assessments of Jeffrey and his colleagues that are worth noting. One is the sense that most of their reviewing did not warrant reprinting. They had been written for the moment, not for posterity: 'None of his articles, in truth, were conceived and executed with a view to immortality. He would never have reprinted them of his own accord'. That was the view of his old rival John Gibson Lockhart and of Whitwell Elwin reviewing Cockburn's *Life* in the *Quarterly* (152). Writing in 1878, the same year as Stephen, and reviewing as he had done a privately printed selection of the letters of Macvey Napier, Jeffrey's successor at the *Edinburgh*, John Morley, commented that three-quarters of Jeffrey's reviews would not bear re-reading in the present day (267).

Such comments were not confined to Jeffrey. By the time of Macaulay's death in 1859, his *Essays*, which had acquired a legendary reputation when published originally in the *Edinburgh* and then when collected, were being dismissed in similar terms. The *British Quarterly*, for example, found his essays on literary subjects 'wanting in depth, imagina-

tion, and simplicity' ('Lord Macaulay' 291); there was in them a 'decided want of reflective power' (297); 'We cannot remember a single author whose works Lord Macaulay has really analysed, whose central thoughts he has attempted to penetrate, whose ideas he has exhausted and reviewed, or whose poetic gifts he has ventured to enumerate' (309-10).

An impartial observer could be forgiven for thinking that the collective tut-tutting about ephemerality was rather rich coming from a group of critics whose collected essays and reviews were to roll off late-Victorian presses at an unprecedented rate: Stephen's *Hours in a Library* and *Studies of a Biographer*; Bagehot's *Literary Studies* and *Biographical Studies*; Morley's *Critical Miscellanies*, *Studies in Literature*, and *Literary Essays*. Malcolm Woodfield reminds us that Richard Holt Hutton published no less than six collections of his periodical essays followed by two posthumous collections as well as four editions of the works of his friends Bagehot and W. C. Roscoe (20).

As well as the sense of the ephemerality contrasting with the present day when, as Stephen would have it, 'much of the most solid and original work of the time first appears in periodicals', there was also a sense of the changing readership of periodical criticism, of a dramatic increase in that readership, and a shift from the upper class readers of the early reviews to the less homogeneous, and less well educated middle class audience of the present. Bagehot, in 'The First Edinburgh Reviewers' (1855), writes of the demands of the modern reader 'who takes his literature in morsels, as [he] takes sandwiches on a journey' (2), the modern reader who turns from the book he is reading 'to the railway, to the shares, to the buying and bargaining universe' (3). Leaving aside Bagehot's mockery, perhaps even snobbery toward the man for whom 'tallow is "up"' and 'teas are "lively"', his modern reader is middle-class and, he suggested, 'half-educated'. 'The number of readers grows daily, but the quality of readers does not improve rapidly', he lamented in a later essay. 'The middle class is scattered, headless: it is well-meaning, but aimless; wishing to be wise, but ignorant how to be wise'. ('Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning' 338-9). Bagehot goes on to talk about the need to instruct this reader in portions of reading material which he can manage: 'The modern man must be told what to think – shortly, no doubt – but he must be told it'; the 'essay-like criticism of modern times is about the length he likes' ('The First Edinburgh Reviewers' 6).

The length of reviews and the frequency of the periodicals in which they were published was another common thread. Robert Vaughan, reviewing Jeffrey's *Life* in the *British Quarterly*, notes that 'during the last twenty years at least, the average writing in the *Times* has been writing of much more power than the average writing in the *Edinburgh*' (178). 'The review may speak with more weight, and with more fullness than the newspaper,

when it does speak; but the newspaper more than compensates for its disadvantage in this respect, by the promptitude and frequency of its utterances'. He was referring to the political articles in the reviews, but the general assumption was that the leisurely pace and expansiveness of a review-article on any subject in the quarterlies was too long for modern taste. Later still, Innes Shand, writing on journalists in *Blackwood's*, argued for the upgrading of literary reviewing in the daily press:

Long-winded literary articles are going out of date; and a good thing too. They never fell properly within the province of the "dailies", which ought to be prompt in their judgments before everything. [... But] concise and pointed notices of the various publications of the day should surely be as much of a recognized department as the notes on the trade in hides or tallow'. (661)

Literary criticism then will be included, but in even smaller parcels, and on a daily basis, so that it will have an impact on sales, and be of some benefit to the author.

What does this proliferation of comment tell us about mid-Victorian reviewing, about perceptions of the role of the critic and of criticism in the second half of the century? One element which is undeniable is the self confidence of this generation of critics. John Morley, reviewing Macvey Napier's correspondence in the *Fortnightly* in 1878, exuded the same confidence about criticism's comparative state of health as had Stephen, Bagehot, and Masson: 'Of literary ability of a good and serviceable kind', he wrote, 'there is a hundred or five hundred times more in the country than there was when Jeffrey, Smith, Brougham, and Horner devised their Review in a ninth story in Edinburgh seventy-six years ago' (269).

Was this confidence justified? Was it borne out in the quality of reviewing in the second half of the century? How much of what was being written in the middle decades of the century about the earlier generation of reviewers was part of a predicable cycle in which a younger generation sloughs off the influence of their elders and questions the foundations of their inflated reputations – a phenomenon not unknown, after all, to critical generations since the nineteenth century? Do we, as the inheritors of Victorian criticism, seek to impose a meliorist reading of it in which Victorian reviewing gradually evolves into a practice which we, as modern academic scholars and critics of literature, can recognize?

As part of my title, I use the term 'professionalism', which I need to clarify. I am not, as it happens, concerned with professionalisation of reviewing, as Christopher Kent has taught us to see it, in which the universities and the emerging professions provided the new 'higher journalism' with talent. Nor am I concerned with the professionalising of academic disciplines and the impact of this on late nineteenth-century

criticism, about which Ian Small has written so persuasively in his *Conditions for Criticism* (1991). By professionalism I mean a self consciousness and a self confidence that I see in the critics from the 1850s onward, an awareness that they were engaged in a serious and a significant activity.

Several modern critics have identified a point at which Victorian literary criticism changed. In her richly informative introduction to *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry 1830 to 1870*, Isobel Armstrong identifies the 1860s as the point when criticism of poetry underwent a significant development, one which she links to the critics' belated adoption of Coleridgean ideas and terminology. Ian Small, in *Conditions for Criticism*, argues that in the twenty-five years between 1865 and 1890 'the nature of critical writing underwent profound changes' (3). John Gross, in *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, named the 1870s as the period when criticism ceased to be driven by moral, political, or religious concerns. 'By the end of the 1870s', he wrote, 'the winds of doctrine were dying down, the lay sermon was giving way to the causerie, the emphasis had shifted to Appreciation' (131).

John Woolford, in an impressive essay entitled 'Periodicals and the Practice of Literary Criticism 1855-64', sees a change in the 1850s, or more precisely, in the period between 1855 and 1864, between the reviews of Browning's *Men and Women* and the later *Dramatis Personae*. During these years, he argues, the critics' conception of their own role, in relation to the poet and to the public, was revolutionized. During those years, literary criticism moved from what he terms 'adjectival' criticism, characterized by self-display and superiority on the part of the critic, to more analytical criticism, in which the critic positioned himself in the role of advocate and interpreter (and indeed reader), rather than judge of his subject. In adjectival criticism the tone is one of 'self-display' (113). It is the critic's personality which dominates, rather than the writer's work. Woolford emphasizes the role of anonymity and the use of the ubiquitous 'we' in promoting an assertiveness on the part of the critic, who has 'dissolved his individual identity into the collectivity of a wider consensus'. His virulence of language, argues Woolford, 'stems from the enormous and overbearing authority he derives from this centrality' (115).

The impact of the shift from 'adjectival' to 'analytical' criticism, according to Woolford, was felt most immediately by Browning. The enthusiastic reception of *Dramatis Personae* in 1864 in contrast to the muted and even hostile response to *Men and Women* in 1855 marked a decisive change in his reputation. But more generally, he argues that a major reorientation of the idea of criticism had taken place. He sees the transition as the final rejection of the methods of Romantic reviewers like Jeffrey and also as a complex response to the writing of Arnold. Instead of telling the readers what to think (or what they did think) of a poet or a

work, the critic now positioned himself on the side of the poet, rather than in judgment over him – struggling, as do all readers, to understand and in so doing helping to interpret the poet to other readers. In other words, analysis replaced judgment. One of the changes Woolford notes is that critics began to engage in something akin to modern ‘practical criticism’.

Modern readers of Victorian reviews of poetry frequently comment on the absence of technical language and the reluctance on the part of reviewers to engage in close reading or practical criticism. John Jump, in his introduction to *Tennyson: the Critical Heritage*, highlights the ‘leisurely comparisons and confident generalisations’ (17) that characterized so much of Victorian reviewing. In this he is correct, but he is also astute in his observation that the modern reader should not underestimate the closeness of the reading that underlies these ‘general formulations’ or ‘the delicacy of the analysis which can be conducted in these general terms’.

Isobel Armstrong links the absence of technical or specialized critical vocabulary in the reviews to a ‘grand disregard of the purely aesthetic’ and an ‘imperial refusal in Victorian criticism to regard the poem as a self-contained, sealed-off entity on which moral and social questions external to it do not impinge’ (4–5). Exclusively ‘literary’ criticism did not exist, she points out, and the Victorian critic would ‘cross boundaries established by the restrictions and delimitations of literary criticism today without even knowing that they were there’.

Armstrong argues too that the extensive quotations that characterized the reviews of poetry were part of the critical process, and not, as the modern reader is tempted to think, an example of desperate or irresponsible padding. She suggests that, to the contrary, critical assumptions and evaluations emerge in the kind of tone a writer adopts and in the way he (and I do mean he) presents the theme, form, and language of a poem as much as in the explicit statements he makes. She suggests that modern reprints of Victorian reviews which omit the quotations (for reasons of space) lose an essential element of the texture and argument of the reviews.

Is John Woolford right – was there a definite change in reviewing practice in the sixties, a move towards close reading, practical criticism, ‘analysis’, and away from assertion, judgment, and self-display on the part of the critic? From my reading of reviews of poetry, I think there was a gradual change – but I think it came not in the sixties but much later. There is in some of the reviews of *Dramatis Personae* an attempt on the part of the perplexed reviewer to ‘read’ these difficult poems, to interpret them for the benefit of other readers, to champion Browning, as in the review in the *Athenaeum* (June 18, 1864). On the other hand, I do not see much evidence of new sophistication in the reviews of Tennyson’s *Enoch Arden* volume in

the same year (see, for example, the *Athenaeum* [August 13, 1864]). Reviewing both volumes, and drawing a contrast between what he terms the 'pure' poetry of Wordsworth, the 'ornate' or Romantic poetry of Tennyson, and the 'grotesque' poetry of Browning, Bagehot, in his 1864 essay 'Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning: or, Pure, Ornate and Grotesque Art in English Poetry', sees criticism imbued with a new seriousness: 'Years ago, when criticism only tried to show how poetry could be made a good amusement, it was not impossible that criticism itself should be amusing. But now it must at least be serious, for we believe that poetry is a serious and a deep thing' (341). Serious he may be, but the methods are the old ones. The self-display is there; Bagehot as a critic trades on it. The review is over fifty pages in length. In the course of it, he quotes five sonnets by Hartley Coleridge (in full), forty-one lines from 'Empedocles on Etna', sixty lines from *Paradise Lost*, forty from 'Enoch Arden', forty-four from Browning's 'Caliban upon Setebos' and thirteen stanzas from his 'Holy Cross Day' – all essential to his project of demonstrating the emergence of alternative strands of sensibility in modern poetry.

'When poetry was noisy, criticism was loud; now poetry is a still small voice, and criticism must be smaller and stiller', Bagehot suggests in the same essay. There were two occasions, one in the 1850s and one in the 1860s, when the criticism of poetry was anything but small or still, when the tone was reminiscent of the squibs and satire of the 1820s, when the reader could have been forgiven for thinking he had moved back forty years. One was the furore over the so-called 'Spasmodic' school of poets – Alexander Smith, P. J. Bailey, and Sydney Dobell – triggered by a spoof 'review' in *Blackwood's* of a non-existent poem, 'Firmilian: a Tragedy' by T. Percy Jones, who was in fact the Scottish poet William Edmonstone Aytoun. The fall out from the review was extensive, and the 'Spasmodics' became the butt of critical jokes in the mid 1850s. As Valentine Cunningham observed in the headnote to 'Firmilian' in his recent *The Victorians: an Anthology of Poetry and Poetics*, the success of Aytoun's spoofs, which were taken seriously, was 'a rather salutary, even shaking exercise for criticism and poetry' (389). In its own way, Aytoun's attack on the extravagant subjectivity of modern poetry was as serious as Arnold's in his Preface to *Poems* 1853. But as Mark Weinstein points out in his study of the Spasmodic controversy, whereas few readers today know 'Firmilian', Arnold's Preface, in his words, 'stands secure as a classic' (106).

Another occasion when the line between critical excitement and personal attack was blurred, an occasion when the savagery of reviewing was reminiscent of the attacks on the 'Cockney School of Poets', was the publication in 1866 of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*. The ramifications of this extended to the publication of Rossetti's *Poems* 1870 and beyond. John Morley's review of *Poems and Ballads* in the *Saturday Review* for

4 August 1866, in which he referred to Swinburne as, among other things, 'the libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs', has become one of the legends of Victorian criticism. In fact, his was only one of a chorus of reviews that attacked the work variously for sensuality, paganism, and blasphemy. The furore was notable for the intemperate language of the reviewers and for Swinburne's vigorous response to his critics. The extent and the nature of the critical attacks linked him in the minds of his contemporaries with Byron, as did the pugnacity of his replies. It might have seemed yet another return to the rough and tumble of the 1820s, but there was a very serious edge to the discussion. A generation of readers was at war with the poet.

One of the original reviewers of *Poems and Ballads* whose review in the *Athenaeum* was published on the same day as Morley's was the poet Robert Buchanan. Buchanan persisted in a series of attacks on Swinburne, and then in the *Contemporary Review* for October 1871, under the pseudonym 'Thomas Maitland', he published a review of the fifth edition of Rossetti's 1870 volume with the title 'The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr. D.G. Rossetti'. This triggered a further war of words the nature of which was unprecedented in Victorian reviewing of poetry. Buchanan's review is one of the most notorious of landmarks in the history of Victorian reviewing.

Buchanan linked Swinburne with Rossetti as practitioners of the sub-Tennysonian 'Fleshly School' of poetry. For once a mid-Victorian reviewer did engage in a version of practical criticism, or as the Victorians called it, 'minute criticism'. Buchanan quoted lines and segments from various of Rossetti's 'House of Life' sonnets as illustrations of their erotic content, in a manner which suggested, as modern critics have observed, that he was rather enjoying some of the 'fleshly' aspects that he was condemning. The tone of the review was curious:

Passages like these are the common stock of the walking gentlemen of the fleshly school. We cannot forbear expressing our wonder, by the way, at the kind of women whom it seems the unhappy lot of these gentlemen to encounter. We have lived as long in the world as they have, but never yet came across persons of the other sex who conduct themselves in the manner described. Females who bite, scratch, scream, bubble, munch, sweat, writhe, twist, wriggle, foam, and in a general way slaver over their lovers, must surely possess some of the extraordinary qualities to counteract their otherwise most offensive mode of conducting themselves. It appears, however, on examination, that their poet-lovers conduct themselves in a similar manner. They, too, bite, scratch, scream, bubble, munch, sweat, writhe, twist, wriggle, foam and slaver, in a style frightful to hear of. [...] We get very weary of this protracted hankering after a person of the other sex; it seems meat, drink, thought, sinew, religion for the fleshly school. There is no limit to the fleshliness, and Mr. Rossetti finds in it its own religious justification. [...] (1335)

Rossetti's response, in the *Athenaeum* (16 December 1871) entitled 'The Stealthy School of Criticism', was also an exercise in 'minute criticism' of a kind, taking on Buchanan line by line, passage by passage, refuting the charge of eroticism. But his most telling point was Buchanan's pseudonymity, writing as he did from 'behind his mask'. The article concluded: 'And thus the sheath of deceit which this pseudonymous undertaking presents at the outset insures in fact what will be found to be its real character to the core'. Rossetti's counter-attack bore his signature.

Recent reassessments of the 'Fleshly School' controversy have gone some way to demonstrate the complexity of Buchanan's position, emphasizing his considerable reputation as a poet, his extensive acquaintance with erotic literature and later stance on literary censorship, his sense of exclusion from Pre-Raphaelite circles, and his recantation of the attack as late as 1883.³ But even if the attack was not motivated purely by personal venom or opportunism, neither it nor Aytoun's spoof in *Blackwood's* sits well with Masson's sense of a new kind of criticism 'intrinsically deeper and more laborious' or Stephen's view of the present when 'much of the most solid and original work of the time first appears in periodicals'. Of course I am choosing examples of critical indecorum quite deliberately. I could just as easily have identified Masson's important 1853 article 'Theories of Poetry and a new Poet', which he published in the year following his review of Jeffrey's life, as an example of a new critical sophistication. This was a wide-ranging article on poetic theory, ostensibly a review of Alexander Smith's *A Life Drama* and E. S. Dallas's *Poetics* that prompted Arnold's Preface to his *Poems* 1853. But before we rush to see a new seriousness in reviewing post 1850, we need to remember Hallam's review of Tennyson's 1830 volume, and also that by W. J. Fox, Mill's two important essays in the *Monthly Repository* for 1833, 'What is Poetry and 'Two Kinds of Poetry', and many of the other reviews of early Tennyson. Seriousness and substance, in reviews of poetry at least, were not a mid-century innovation.

So when, if at all, was there a decisive change in reviewing practice? The move towards a more recognizably 'modern' style of reviewing can be seen, I suggest, in the poetry reviews in the *Athenaeum* in the 1880s and 1890s. Rosemary Scott, in a comparative snapshot of poetry reviewing in the weekly in 1851 and 1881 identifies the change with Theodore Watts-Dunton's tenure as chief poetry reviewer from 1876. It was Watts-Dunton who secured the services of a number of poets, particularly women poets, and it was at this time too that the appearance of the weekly changed, with larger type fonts for both text and quotations. Features such as a weekly poetry column to partner the longer running 'Novels of the Week' brought more new poets and poetry to the attention of the public. As Marysa Demoor points out in her book *Their Fair Share*

(2000), the suggestion that technical language and practical criticism played little part in Victorian reviewing of poetry is countered by the *Athenaeum*'s sustained attention to the formal properties of poetry in this period and its emphasis, too, on close quotation. The latter was not the expansive 'sampling' favoured by mid-Victorian reviews, but carefully focused quotations which were illustrative of the reviewers' points.

Demoor writes of the impact made by the addition to the reviewing staff of the *Athenaeum* of poets Mathilde Blind, Edith Nesbit, Mary Robinson, Rosamund Marriott Watson, and Augusta Webster. Collectively their reviews are distinctively modern; Augusta Webster's – to chose one example – are a revelation.

In his obituary of Webster (*Athenaeum* [15 September 1894]), Watts-Dunton claimed that 'as a conscientious and painstaking critic [...] she had no superior, scarcely an equal'. Her reviews of poetry, more than 200 in the 1880s and early 1890s, outnumbered those of Watts himself (Demoor 114). The anonymous reviews were those of a practitioner, a successful and confident poet in her own right. She was tough, knowledgeable, and, at times, crisply dismissive, as with William Allingham's *Flower Pieces and other Poems* (18 May 1889): 'We ask for something better from a man of Mr. Allingham's repute and ability'. She considered Robert Bridges' *Eros and Psyche* not a patch on William Morris's treatment of the story in *The Earthly Paradise*: 'If Mr. Bridges had known it he would scarcely have spent his poet's pains on retelling the tale Mr. William Morris has told' (3 April 1886). She wrote scathingly of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt's preface to *A New Pilgrimage and other Poems*: 'On the whole Mr. Wilfrid Blunt would be wise to desist from reforming English poetry and content himself with trying to write his best' (1 March 1890).

In contrast to the irritable tone which pervaded the reviews of some of her male contemporaries, Webster's praise of Michael Field's *Underneath the Bough* (9 September 1893) was a cause for celebration by the two women poets:

The intellectual strength and originality – the acquired mannerism – the rich condensed expression – the fine intensity, planned and dominantly present, yet skilfully kept half concealed – the splendid control of metre [...] – are, while always recognizable in any of Michael Field's songs and brief separate lyrics, brought into still stronger prominence as essential characteristics by the close kindred resemblance apparent when these poems are grouped together. (345-6)⁴

It is difficult to convey in these brief extracts the modernity of Webster's reviews, their texture, the close attention to technical details, her professional grasp of what is at stake and what is happening in the poems.

There is, of course, a gender issue here, which is highlighted by Marysa

Demoor. In the reviewing of poetry up to the 1870s, women were conspicuous by their absence, both as subjects and as reviewers, at a time when the number of practising women poets was increasing. Whereas women regularly reviewed fiction, biography, art, history, and even political economy, until the 1870s very few wrote reviews of poetry. In her discussion of what she terms the 'gendered space' of Victorian periodicals, Laurel Brake identifies poetry, along with politics, science, psychology, philosophy, and the classics as subjects associated with men, and by extension, male reviewers. It was novels, popularly associated with women readers and authors, that were regularly assigned to female reviewers (Brake 30). Demoor notes the boost given to women's poetry in the *Athenaeum* once their presence on the reviewing staff made itself felt. Virginia Blain, in a recent essay, similarly notes the impact of Webster, and also later Alice Meynell, in improving the treatment of women poets in the *Athenaeum*.

My focus on the *Athenaeum* in the 1880s and 1890s is not just to make the point that women reviewers enhanced the profile of women poets, although this was true. Nor am I arguing that the practice of having poets review poetry led to more professional and technical reviewing. Poets had regularly reviewed each other throughout the nineteenth century. Rather, it is to underline the fact that it took much longer for reviewing practices to change in the nineteenth century, that the development of a technical language in reviewing, the practice of close reading, or 'practical criticism', took much longer to make an inroad. And by the time that the new style of reviewing was in place, ironically, poetry had moved to the margins of literary culture, and the professionalisation of literary criticism had begun. To quote Ian Small: 'Literary and art criticism became the province of an academic and intellectual establishment. Critical practices, hitherto "unsystematic" and "amateur", became institutionalized' (57).

Before we rush to applaud the use of technical language and the advent of close reading in the last decades of the nineteenth century, seeing in these developments something akin to our present practice as critics, we might do well to reflect on the points made by Isobel Armstrong and John Jump that I quoted earlier, about the subtleties and sophistication of Victorian reviews of poetry, the impact of lengthy quotations, and Jump's observation that the modern reader should not underestimate the closeness of the reading that underlies these 'general formulations' or 'the delicacy of the analysis which can be conducted in these general terms'.

The influence of contemporary reviews and of critics on the morale if not the writing practice of individual nineteenth-century poets is well documented, at least in the case of major figures. One persuasive testimony to the collective impact of nineteenth-century criticism and to the non-ephemerality of that criticism is contained in the introductory essays in A. H. Miles's monumental ten-volume anthology, *The Poets and*

Poetry of the Century (1891-7). The essays were the work of late-nineteenth-century poets and critics who offered retrospective assessments of their subjects – assessments which are shot through with the words of their Victorian and early-nineteenth-century critics. Miles and his fellow editors effectively offer a history of nineteenth-century poetry through the eyes of its reviewers. ‘It is unnecessary to linger among these “cob-webs of criticism”’, Samuel Waddington inserts apologetically, after an account of Arnold’s treatment at the hands of his critics (5: 92). But this is precisely what most of the introductory essays provide, a digest of contemporary critical assessments. Old arguments are revisited, telling phrases repeated, critical foresight and blindness recalled in a series of quotations which, while truncated, still convey some of the texture of the original reviews. The centrality of nineteenth-century criticism is inscribed by Miles and his fellow anthologists. Insubstantial, flimsy, ephemeral, lacking in seriousness as Stephen, Masson, Morley, and Bagehot and their generation may have regarded the writing of their predecessors, the criticism of both generations is essential to an understanding of the writing lives of nineteenth-century poets.

What was crucial to the reviewing of poetry up to the end of the nineteenth century was the underlying assumption of poetry’s central position in literary culture. Mid-Victorian critics, like their early Victorian and Romantic counterparts, were interested in poetry in its broad cultural contexts. The proper materials for poetry, the role of the poet in the modern age, the attractions and the dangers of subjective poetry, the anxiety that the age was inimical to poetry – these were the questions at the heart of Victorian poetics, which were canvassed in the reviews of individual poets and volumes of poetry. The use of a technical or specialist vocabulary was deemed inappropriate for a discussion of such wide ranging issues and concerns. By the end of the century, poetry had moved to the margins of literary culture and Oscar Wilde’s cynical remark in *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1890), as Joseph Bristow notes, was historically accurate: ‘In England, the arts that have escaped best are the arts in which the public take no interest. Poetry is an instance of what I mean. We have been able to have fine poetry in England because the public do not read it, and consequently do not influence it’ (qtd. in Bristow 20). The ‘modern’ methods of reviewing poetry that we detect in periodicals like the *Athenaeum* at the end of the century are directed towards a readership that was smaller, more specialized, more discriminating than any addressed by either Jeffrey’s generation of reviewers or by Stephen’s, Bagehot’s, or Morley’s. And the reviews reflect their readers.

And yet occasionally, even at the end of the century, there are touches of the old fire, the passionate tones of an earlier reviewing era. An editorial in the *National Observer* for 5 November 1892 headed ‘The Cheap-

ening of Poetry' was eager to quash any suggestion that the enormous crowds that had thronged the streets of London to witness Tennyson's funeral, in contrast to the handful that had attended Wordsworth's in Grasmere some forty years earlier, denoted a change of heart as regards popular perceptions of poetry. Responding to an article by Edmund Gosse in the *New Review* (no.42, November 1892), the editorial insisted that it was up to the critics of poetry to reinforce the point that literary merit was not commensurate with popularity:

The critic who is worthy his name and office will still insist that books and poems are not to be esteemed, like loaves of bread or pots of ale, by the number of their purchasers; that popularity, save in such rare instances as Tennyson's, is the most fallible of tests; that literature exists of itself and for itself; that the wail of grief which was put up at Tennyson's death can affect English poetry neither for evil nor for good. For poetry dwells apart from the People, and needs no influence for its production save the genius of the Poet. ('The Cheapening of Poetry')

Jeffrey could not have put it better.

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NOTES

1. *Selections from the Writings of Sydney Smith*, 2 vols. (London: Longman 1855); Henry Brougham, *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review*, 3 vols. (London & Glasgow: R. Griffin, 1856). Smith's works were collected in 4 volumes (Longman 1839-40), in one volume (New York: Edward G. Taylor, 1844), and in a 'new' edition (London, 1850), in volume 3 of *The Modern British Essayists* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1848), in 3 volumes 1854, 2 volumes 1859, and in *Essays by Sydney Smith reprinted from the Edinburgh Review 1802-1818* (London: G. Routledge, 1874).
2. A second edition of the *Contributions* was published in 3 volumes in 1846, and a selection published as volume 6 of *The Modern British Essayists* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1848).
3. See Christopher Murray, 'D. G. Rossetti, A. C. Swinburne and R. W. Buchanan, The Fleshly School Revisited', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 65:1, 206-34, and 65:2, 176-207; Dennis Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody 1840-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and J. B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: fear and desire in painting, poetry and criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). I am grateful to Gavin Budge for drawing my attention to this discussion.
4. Field's journal entry for the following day recorded, 'the *Athenaeum* review of *Underneath the Bough* is taken up to a high knoll top, encircled with

bushes of oak. We read, rejoice, dance madly, pluck the oak apples. [...] (qtd. in Demoor.117).

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