Review of Isobel Armstrong, "Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics"

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Formidable, masterly, epochal: Isobel Armstrong's study invites such adjectives and, on the whole, deserves them. Yet it is not the least of this large-minded book's virtues to raise a doubt as to what it can possibly mean to invoke so monumental a rhetoric in a Victorian poetry scholar's review of Victorian Poetry for Victorian Poetry. The appearance of a book of such ambition, such historical and cultural scope (and, yes, such sheer bulk), is an event with consequences. Consequences, though, for whom? For the relatively small circle of converts who will see these words of mine, Armstrong's is a book to read, reread, and wrestle with on specialist grounds. But one of the things that needs wrestling with is the likelihood that this book will have a wider impact than most of what our circle ever conjures--not because of any truckling to the casual reader, but by dint of Armstrong's comprehensive sweep and her way of putting intellectually sophisticated cases in the most forceful terms they will bear. Readers outside the VP circuit--Victorianists impatient with poetry, people generally curious about British literary history--will be

obliged to acquaint themselves with the main lines of Armstrong's argument. Students of Romanticism and Modernism should also find, in her dismissal of the former movement as naive and the latter as reductive, a bracing repayment in kind for their standing neglect of the Victorians. Above all, to the rising generation who will give the study of Victorian poetry its twenty-first-century shape, the book is likely to prove an indispensable guide. This will be the work that scholars new to the field turn to, and turn against, for the clearly foreseeable future.

This prediction springs from considerations that our local VP circle should welcome. Reared though we be in shade beneath some old-world abbey wall, from here we can see better than most where Armstrong is coming from, and whither she tends. We can see what readers from the outside may not: that, for all its integrity, Armstrong's synthetic synopsis of Victorian poetry is still very much a synthesis, one borne forward on the energy of a substantial, if largely unacknowledged, scholarly collaboration. To a greater degree than her often breathless documentation finds leisure to show, Armstrong's book is a summation of her own and others' labor during the past quarter-century. It is, in that sense, our book. It caps a critical generation's collective endeavor to bestow on Victorian poems an unprecedented attention, which has met its match in the unsuspectedly tough core of intellectual endeavor that is built into the poems themselves: what D. G. Rossetti called their "fundamental brainwork." For the poetic brainwork of the Victorians rehearsed time and again various problematics of theory and practice that the twentieth century was to inherit from the nineteenth, and that we continue to live with.

No student of Victorian poetics has done more to illuminate this intellectual continuity than Isobel Armstrong. Her earliest critical work on Clough and on Browning, her research into the climate of ideas within which the poetry of the age developed (***Victorian Scrutinies*** [1972]), and her speculations on its philosophical and linguistic bearings (***Language as Living Form*** [1982]), are here resumed and digested. They are also transcended. For nowhere has Armstrong declared so forcefully as in this book the relation that obtains between poetic and political culture: a relation not just parallel or contingent, but directly constitutive. In order to understand Victorian poetics, she contends, we must grasp both its embeddedness and its intervention within an inescapably politicized discourse that fixes the vocabulary of the self to the syntax of social institutions.

Such a contention is not so arresting now as it would have seemed a decade ago. One critical trend that Armstrong's Victorian Poetry crests--and that will surely facilitate its broader acceptance--is the one that has been unfolding across our discipline along newly historicist, culturally materialist lines. Assessed within this trend, one great merit of Armstrong's is the strenuousness with which she keeps the political valences of Victorian poetry dialectically answerable to its linguistic properties. We cannot, she insists, read the political history encoded in Victorian poetics by decoding the texts and throwing away the key. (The man who coined the famous slogan about the medium and the message got his start, be it remembered, as a scholar of Tennyson and Hopkins.) Reading the code that is poetry entails retaining its very codedness for analysis as a crucially political datum, "the link between cultural complexities and the complexities of language" (p. 11). Victorian intellectuals and taletellers, when they chose to write in verse, characteristically did so in order to heighten readers' consciousness of the fabrications and mediations entailed by communicative acts. Thus the communicative act that was a Victorian poem--and here Armstrong paves a firmly civic bridge--bespoke a larger awareness that communication in general was socially and politically determined.

This radical faith leads Armstrong into some interesting places: the suspicion, for instance, that the poems of the Victorian period are more intellectually demanding than its novels. That "Victorian poetry is the most sophisticated poetic form, and the most politically complex, to arise in the past two hundred years" (p. 21) is a debatable claim, and is surely meant to be. It would do

us VPers and our colleagues beyond the abbey wall a world of good to thresh it out. All parties to such debate should be grateful to Armstrong for expanding its cultural and political terms, and in such a way as to give that underdog the poet a fighting chance. She shows how to bring the public designs of Victorian poetry into critical focus, without submitting to documentary reduction the features of poetic texts that embody what is more than documentary: their creative or resistant power. A sense like Armstrong's of the dialectical relation between style and content is what the future study of Victorian poetry is going to require, if it is to maintain contact both with emerging currencies of literary study and with the formal and generic properties of poems. The most consequential achievement of Victorian Poetry, then, may prove to be the basis it lays for a historicist criticism that will be politically attuned because it has a sharp eye and a good ear, and that will find its mission in rewriting the history of form.

That much gratefully said, it must also be conceded that such a history of form is not so much provided here as it is potentially enabled. For certain important aspects of poetic form do not come readily or easily to Armstrong's notice. While the book is enriched by numerous, cogent close readings, it does remarkably little to advance our understanding of Victorian prosody. The theory and practice of metrical versification, together with larger matters of poetic structure, are regularly neglected in favor of the author's manifest forte, which lies in the semantics of linguistic reference--a benign neglect, all told, inasmuch as the details of versification when given are not seldom given wrong.

As this last paragraph will suggest, I have thus far been describing not Armstrong's book, exactly, but an idealized version of it. I have done so in the belief that the book will be most influential as an impetus to further, and better, study. This seems the likelier in that Victorian Poetry is not only a strong book but a long one, whose 500-plus pages are as densely argued as they are closely printed. Not many will read it straight through, and the author appears to have foreseen as much in framing independently viable chapters that will repay piecemeal consultation. So an overview of the central historical argument may be useful here, with discussion along the way of certain aspects in which the book proves less than ideal and leaves to others the fulfillment of its high promise.

Armstrong herself provides a serial kind of overview in introductions to the whole and to each of its three major parts, centered respectively on the 1830s, the mid-century, and more panoramically "the 1860s and after" (p. 381). These abstraction-cumbered introductions can be rough going, containing more than their share of musclebound sentences that elbowed past the copyeditors at Routledge (as, alas, did far too many errors in spelling and quotation passim). While the general prologue on premisses of method and theory may be a necessary evil, readers in even a moderate hurry would do well to skip the later introductions, which are often so congested as to be best studied after the chapters they ostensibly introduce.

Whatever you do, though, don't apply this principle to the book as a whole. Don't miss part one. Here Armstrong lays out the motivating dialectic of her cultural-historical argument, in a superbly exposited and illustrated discussion--a fine monograph in itself, really--that is alone worth the sticker price. Focussing on the first Victorian decades, Armstrong shows how there arose in the wake of the Enlightenment and Romantic Kulturkampf two parties of thought concerning poetry. Not mere schools of thought but parties, these nurseries of cultural practice took it for granted that poetry expressed and exerted social force. One party was conservative in the tradition of Burke and Coleridge; its Apostolic seat was Cambridge, its prophet Arthur Hallam, its avatar Alfred Tennyson. The other was Benthamite, progressive, and reformist; its dissenting and agnostic energies gathered in London around W. J. Fox and contributors to his Monthly Repository, and the poet it gave the world was Robert Browning.

In main outline this schema will be familiar to every Victorianist, as a reworking in specifically poetic terms of F. R. Leavis' reworking of John Stuart Mill's prescient auto-genealogy of the intellect of modern Britain. By putting this familiar schema into the service of poetry and poetics, Armstrong purchases for her account an explanatory leverage comparable Robert Langbaum's in The Poetry of Experience, which a generation ago enjoyed the kind of influence awaiting Armstrong now. The work she has done in retrieving Fox and assessing the urgent liberalism of the Monthly Repository was undertaken in a more documentary mode twenty years ago in her Victorian Scrutinies. Freshly theorized and illustrated in the new book, this scholarship not only makes a permanent contribution to intellectual history but plants poetics at the focus of early Victorian debates, and with a firmness of conviction that even VP insiders should find impressive.

That we do not know Browning's antecedents nearly so well as Tennyson's forms part of the story Armstrong has to tell. For in the course of the nineteenth century the conservative poetics of sensation--shall we call it stealth poetics?--so overcame the liberal poetics of democratically projective debate that even a radical like Swinburne was drawn to essentially Tennysonian practices; and, by century's end, the vatic poetics of Symbolism nourished Modernism on husks of Hallam's thought that were then naturalized as the triumphant aesthetics of our own formative epoch. The literary history we have had to work with, then, has been a victor's version, and so has been the poetics we have brought to bear on a whole range of works that it suits imperfectly at best. (As a result, we have only just begun to read the Brownings, and our understanding of Swinburne and Morris has even further to go.) It is not too much to say that the scholarly recuperation and theoretical acumen behind this first part of Armstrong's book, in proposing a newly historicized poetics of democratic commitment, constructs a firm basis on which to understand an entire tradition of Victorian writing that we have thus far been reading in the dark.

Nor is this all. Armstrong carries her dialectical chronicle of the yeasty 1830s into the conservative camp as well, showing how for Hallam and the Coleridgeans the modern cohesions of myth and image might be socially effective without being unproblematically believed in--at least not by the cadre of younger cultural conservatives who were, for their day, no less avant-garde intellectually than their liberal counterparts. The "poetry of sensation" advocated by Hallam and practiced by Tennyson circa 1830, Armstrong argues, was in this sense subversive of older orthodoxies, even as it declared organic cultural development to be the bearer, through "the mythic continuities of a whole people" (p. 65), of "truth as historical evolution" (p. 35). The poetic appeal to intuition and sensation circumvented ideology and offered access to a modern authenticity that was disturbingly rootless, if it was also disturbingly quietistic in its endorsement of political inertia among a whole class of national leaders-to-be.

Where Hallam and Tennyson thus went hermetic, burrowing into the sensorium and the privatized life, Fox and Browning went public. As early as Pauline (for which, as for several other Browning poems, Armstrong provides an impressive new interpretation), Browning sought to articulate a dramatic poetics that harmonized with Fox's democratic ideas, which were themselves based ultimately on Bentham's theory of the law as a perennially renegotiated civic fiction. Armstrong astutely grasps, and she foregrounds it as a fact constitutive for the entire period, that these two parties complemented each other as they did because they had so much in common. The one aestheticized politics, the other politicized aesthetics, and both did so out of a shared cultural need. For these first Victorian intellectuals of both parties were unmoored from the certainties of previous generations, and they knew it. Culturally--and with broad consequences for their manifestos and their artistic ambitions in longer genres--they were agreed that the age of innocence was gone, that a naively given social faith was an impossibility, and that they stood in an ineluctably sentimental, consciously (re)constructive relation to the inherited social order. Individually--and with intimate consequences for their practice of lyric--they brought a like

sense of belatedness home into the psychology of individual perception, producing an avant-garde poetry of sharp epistemological skepticism and phenomenological reflection on "what it is to be secondary" (p. 3).

If this sounds like Romantic poetics, it should. That the first Victorians were belated even in their belatedness is a side of her story at which Armstrong scarcely glances, and to which a fuller literary history would need to give more play. Nonetheless, on its own terms Armstrong's account of this crystallization of cultural self-awareness, "the formative moment of Victorian poetry" (p. 28), is thoroughly compelling. It should change the way we think about Victorian poetry's place within the public arena, and about how agonistically the dilemmas of modernity were registered by the art of what Armstrong calls the "double poem": a pervasively Victorian mode wherein subjective utterance became so insistently an object for investigation as to constitute a dialectically renewable poetic content. Even when Armstrong's claims seem wrong, as they will do at different times to different readers, they are emphatically wrong about the right things. The Victorians brooded like us over what should be poetry's place in a democratizing political culture, over what representation in its many senses ought to mean. Armstrong's Victorian Poetry will ensure that these questions remain focal to advanced work in the field.

The remaining two thirds of the book track the permutations of this early cultural formation, with more fluctuating attention and mixed results. Part two revisits Tennyson and Browning for a chapter apiece, to see how their earlier sense of national calling responded to fresh vocations of a newly international sort. The 1848 revolutions and the Crimean War get invoked rather tediously in the service of a generalized cultural argument that proves inadequate to the texts it is tasked to contain. The thrust of the thesis tends to run aground on the particularities of, say, topography in Maud or the politics of knowledge in "Cleon." Although Armstrong's readings of these poems happen to be particularly fine, they epitomize problems of emphasis and inertia for the book as a whole. Insofar as what is finest in them floats free of the larger thesis, literary criticism's gain becomes literary history's loss. Likewise, Morris's Defence of Guenevere volume is very helpfully read as a strong version of the grotesque poetics of oppression and resistance that Browning pioneered and Ruskin theorized; but no clear picture emerges of interpoetic comparison, or of either poet's relation to the ambience of the 1850s. Absent the former, the reader loses direction; absent the latter, Armstrong has no way of bringing into her account the political and aesthetic conundra posed by the later Morris, whom she (therefore?) omits. The closest she comes to a fully dialectical synthesis of Benthamite and Coleridgean traditions is in an intriguing but undeveloped aside on The Germ (p. 234), which is left to fend for itself, as is Pre-Raphaelitism generally in this book.

The chapters on Clough and Arnold at mid-century are more rewarding, and yet not free of something like the historical isolationism and cultural alienation which Armstrong shows was in a different way each poet's chosen curse. The interlock between these poets and their post-revolutionary moment is energetically forged, with excellent speculations on what Clough's and Arnold's shared fondness for tropes of battle reveals about the crisis of masculinity that their generation faced. Armstrong knows how fully this crisis was fed by class anxiety, and she fortifies her case about the Rugby/Oxford poets with discussions of poetry produced by and about Chartists and others from the British underclass. These readings are welcome in principle, if in proof they seem more than a bit indulgent. Yet as a piece of literary history to rival her analysis of the 1830s, the overall argument here fails to jell. It fails, I think, because Armstrong never comes directly to grips with the 1840s, that hungrily agitated decade which one might have thought merited top billing in a book correlating Victorian poetry and Victorian politics. Dividing her attention instead between the flanking decades, Armstrong has given us something less predictable than a doggedly stepwise narrative, and perhaps more valuable. But this scheme

obliges her to jump-start her part two, by importing the Continental revolutions in a way that feels partial, and that neglects inner continuities that might have fortified the history she tells.

For example, the devolution of sensation poetics into sympathy poetics (traced out apropos Tennyson in part one) arguably corresponded to the contemporary official sponsorship of an era of good feelings, which sounded chummy but had the political effect of deterring real democratic change. Sentimental in the Biedermeier and not the Schiller sense, the poetics of sympathy that governed Tennyson's work from the 1840s, and much of Victorian bourgeois culture with it, formed the backdrop against which Clough and Arnold staged their gentlemen's revolt. But Victorian Poetry, oddly, pays almost no attention to the 1840s publications of Tennyson (no "Ulysses," no English idylls, no Princess). Not to see this part of the story is not to see how Clough's and Arnold's alienation and pain imaged, with a negativity all but photographic, the regnant poetry of togetherness and complacency--or imaged, rather, the conventional and ideological commodification of those mainstream ideals. (Which may in turn explain why, for Arnold, a brand of tough pathos soon hardened into a conventionalized ware of its own, mechanically reproducible in lesser verse and critically defensible in cicerone essays like "The Study of Poetry.") The 1830s causes of this phenomenon and its 1850s effects are both amply analyzed in Armstrong's book, but not the link between them; the failure to declare their causal relation--to narrate the 1840s--condemns her chapters to episodic status.

This "failure" occurs, admittedly, at a higher order of historical synthesis than most of us VPers have been ready to attempt. Still, I would ascribe it to some hesitation in the author's mind as to whether she intends a continuous narrative or a group of discrete thick descriptions. Her preface disclaims the former ambition on principle (p. 8), yet the chronological layout of the book encourages other expectations, as do a score of unpurged local gestures toward the establishment of a canon and a master narrative. These things are currently under heavy disciplinary suspicion; and their persistence here, together with the ritual avoidance reflexes they provoke, marks Armstrong's as very much a book of our moment. (Witness the mutual cancellation of adverb and adjective in the following sentence on William Morris in 1857: "These are perhaps the great poems of desire in the nineteenth century" [p. 242].) To canonize, stratify and coordinate are functions which a book named and shaped like this one can hardly shrug off; moreover, they are functions which may have more power to help than to hinder the correction of critical vision and the redress of literary-historical injustice.

A case in point is the longest and most important chapter in part two, Armstrong's sixty pages on the tradition of women's poetry from Felicia Hemans to Mathilde Blind. A condensed monograph in itself, in its exemplary combination of feminist commitment with verbal attentiveness this sustained account stands comparison with the best recent treatments of the subject. Like her immediate precursors Dorothy Mermin and Angela Leighton, Armstrong hinges her analysis of feminine poetics upon the ambivalence of empowerment and constraint that was entailed by the nineteenth century's valorization of subjective emotion: a favor that Victorian public culture bestowed simultaneously on lyric poetry and on womanhood, and for similar reasons. Of this problematic Armstrong finds Victorian women poets universally if idiosyncratically aware. Even when speaking for a "natural" ideology of the womanly, these writers interrogated the cultural constructedness of the "nature" they spoke by. The analytic inward turn of the Victorian double poem was therefore mother's milk to the female tradition, whose airs however conventional vibrate with implications of resignation or protest that Armstrong detects in a sequence of virtuoso exercises in "looking at conformity from within" (p. 336). She has particularly illuminating things to show about the dialectics of "reserve and intensity, constraint and exposure" (p. 346), whereby women's poetics kept and shared its secrets.

In these respects and others--including notably the sociopoetics articulated by Dora Greenwell--Victorian women poets bid fair to equal their male contemporaries, and by precisely the standard of double-mindedness that matters most to Armstrong. So far, so good. But equal footing does not a match make. The separatist decision to give women a chapter to themselves purchases local coherence at the cost of dealing women out of the larger reckoning that the book as a whole conducts. This seems a shame on several scores. The extent to which men's and women's poetry constituted disparate traditions has been if anything overemphasized already; and the one formidable circumstance that upholds a separatist view never raises its head: viz., the nineteenth-century gendering of access to a classical education and the cultural capital that came with it. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for one, thought access to the tradition very important indeed; yet she gets such short shrift that Armstrong's chapter feels a little like Hamlet minus the prince. Denied reference to masculine poetic tradition, neither Armstrong nor anybody else can get far with Sonnets from the Portuguese or Aurora Leigh, which together receive less attention here, oddly, than Christina Rossetti's now equally canonical "Goblin Market."

What tells hardest against the separate-but-equal program is the obstacle it puts in the way of literary history. Such a program cannot but occlude the reciprocal influence of male and female poets, and to that degree it forecloses on any enlarged narrative of historical change that might include them both. This is so whether one looks to the feminization, and concomitant gender policing, of male poets from Tennyson through the Spasmodics to the Decadents, or to what Armstrong indicates was a weakening in the position of women poets at the fin de siecle. Thanks to the crucial work of vindication that feminist scholarship has performed, women's poetry may now expect a fair hearing. To hear that poetry faithfully, though, will be to hear how much it, and contemporary poetry by men, were hearing each other all century long, not least during the 1820s, when the Hemans and Landon poetry boom made itself felt in the very circles where Armstrong shows Victorian poetry being invented. To correlate the subversively self-checking habits of Victorian lyricism across and within the lines of gender, to assess the poets' social investment in the sex warfare of innuendo and flirtation and feint, are jobs now left to Armstrong's successors. Still, those successors will find that even in rectifying her account they are often working within her terms: the double poem, the setting and breaking of limits, the contextual politics of feeling.

A sixty-page chapter that spans a dozen writers from Letitia Landon to Amy Levy aims at other virtues than historical fine grain, and indeed from this point forward into part three Victorian Poetry is decidedly running in sampler mode. Spotlighting favorite poetic innovators who came into their own after 1860, Armstrong provides some incisive readings and arranges some memorable juxtapositions. The reactionary agon that Hopkins performed on Loyolan principles is freshly and instructively compared, following a hint from Barthes, to Swinburne's radical agon in the spirit of Sade. Meredith's Modern Love shows off its novel poetics to good advantage in the company of Patmore's Angel in the House and Rossetti's House of Life. But the overall effect of these close analyses is distinctly more fractured here than in earlier sections of the book. Armstrong continues to pursue political themes, which stand, however, as ad hoc applications rather than portions of a comprehensive vision of latter-century British culture in its industrial or imperial aspect. The author repeatedly raises the key late-century issues of poetic representation and symbolization, but never forges durable links to contemporary political analogues like the electoral franchise or the extension of empire--as she might have done by considering Idylls of the King less cursorily, or placing the Idylls in more direct relation to poems she does treat, such as Thomson's City of Dreadful Night and Hardy's Dynasts. More also might have been done with the sociological dynamics of Victorian poetry, which after all was not just a medium but a retail business. The commodification that went along with industrial and commercial advance left its brand on poetic as on other economies. In bypassing the circumstances of poetic production and

consumption, and bypassing the fin-de-siecle poetry that was most acutely and self-critically invested in these matters--the later work of Morris, most of D. G. Rossetti, practically all of Wilde--Armstrong misses an opportunity to counteract the atomization of her final chapters.

This effect may have been hastened by the fact that the poets of Armstrong's latest generation had become their own apologists. Where an elaborated poetics comes pat in a Hopkins letter or Meredith essay, there is less pressure on the historian to scour the culture for broader contextual connections. Yet without these it becomes harder to mount the sort of extended argument that makes part one of Victorian Poetry so extraordinary a coup. As the pressure towards synchronic synthesis falls off in the second half of the book, so too does its ambition for diachronic explanation. Analogies are not wanting here between the practices of late and early Victorian poets, but they tend to remain analogies, rather than affiliations bearing explanatory force. How aestheticism troped the sensationalism of Hallam and Tennyson; by what steps orthodox Tractarian poetics gave way to wild-card Symbolism; what genealogy of the grotesque may link the Shelleyan socialist Thomson to Browning via Morris or Ruskin: these are questions of a kind that the dispersion of focus in this latter part of Armstrong's book makes it hard to raise.

Part three arrives under the title "Another Culture? Another Politics?" To which one must answer: Sort Of, After a Fashion. Most of the unease I have been voicing about this or that aspect of Armstrong's literary history comes of its reliance on an ultimately steady-state model of Victorian culture. As goes culture, so goes poetics: but then what happens to poetry in the case of historical gridlock? Armstrong forthrightly declares on her last page, after pronouncing The Dynasts "the last great double poem to be written" (p. 484), that "the analyses of 1834 and 1904 have not changed in their essentials" (p. 489). And this, all told, fairly encapsulates the historical vision behind Victorian Poetry. There is much to be said on behalf of such steady-state history: it helps hold an enormous diversity of material together, and--given the pretty clear implication that 1904 is not all that different from 1994 either--it supplies the book with a raison d'etre of the most vividly immediate kind. What such static historical generalization cannot do, however, is discriminate poem from poem, or even decade from decade, so as to produce a compelling story of significant change within cultural formations and poetic forms. Now this may of course be a problem with Victorian poetry, and not just with Victorian Poetry. The only way to find out will be to take Armstrong's methodological premisses back to the historical drawing board and measure them against a less globalized, more nuanced sense of the nineteenth century. If Armstrong is right to hold that at the start of the Victorian period "civic humanism crumbled under the pressure of an economic order" that had changed fundamentally since the turn of the nineteenth century (p. 157), is it also the case that the economic order did not change thereafter, or that there were no changes of comparable profundity elsewhere in the culture during the decades that followed? If we privilege a history that says such changes did occur, with concomitant changes in poetics, we admittedly risk protracting beyond the point of intelligibility an epoch that looks awfully long already. Nobody wants to see books get longer than Armstrong's, and yet the historical category "Victorian" is not about to disappear either. So scholars promoting a more flexible or layered awareness of change within the period will probably need to conduct their literary history for the next while in shorter studies that can afford--unlike Armstrong, and yet thanks to Armstrong too--the luxury of the lesser curiosity. Putting more nuance into our literary history may be the best contribution we VPers can make toward an improved history of capital, patriarchy, and empire.

One or two further observations, and I have done. Users of Victorian Poetry, especially newcomers to the field, ought to be advised that the book is no guide at all to recent critical scholarship. I was going to list egregious omissions of studies to which Armstrong either is indebted or ought to be, until I realized that with rare and capricious exceptions her notes and index are simply not

in the business of citing fellow toilers. The paucity of collegial acknowledgment finally appears less a fault of this book than a condition of its very existence. The habit of pausing to recognize others' anticipations of her thought, like the kindred habit of anticipating others' objections to her thought, might if regularly indulged have made the book impossible to write. This is not at all to condemn of the book, but to describe how it works--which is, for that matter, how almost every critical blockbuster in nineteenth-century studies has worked, Hillis Miller's, for example, or above all Harold Bloom's. Asserting high synthetic arguments, and making them stick, evidently takes a high assertiveness to match; Armstrong has risen to the challenge.

Left thus exceptionally to her own devices, she stamps every chapter of Victorian Poetry with an exceptionally personal note, of which I single out two harmonic tones in closing. One is a certain echo or mirror effect, whereby the features of the Victorian double poem--while not ceasing to embody the historical complexes impinging on this Chartist, that woman, or the other laureate--turn out on due reflection to furnish as well an image of the committed interpreter, entoiled in the emotional complexes that attend her own double-minded dialectics. For within the reciprocation of analysis and sympathy that drives much modern interpretation, the member at greater risk is often the heart. Ask Wordsworth, Mill, the Brownings: the light of the intellect, as it converts experience to knowledge, threatens the intuitive inwardness which grounds experience, and without which we cannot pretend to have made contact with any artifact of the past, ever. Now Armstrong, being an exceptionally analytic-minded critic, knows this threat, and it is instructive to see how she defends her book against it. Typically it is by summoning up fellow feeling with the oppressed of history: women and the working classes; radical intellectuals in solidarity; and, more subtly, middle-class poets whose insulation from the actual experience of most Britons in effect disenfranchised them, too, and stymied their articulation of a national consciousness.

Armstrong's own stance of left solidarity will strike some readers as doctrinaire, and will at times confirm whatever fears of parti pris the dread word "politics" in her title may have aroused. Within the economy of her book, though, it is important to see how political sympathy functions as the major channel for a critical sensitivity whose touchstone proves to be suffering. Pain is the crimson thread that stitches Arnold's wounded pastorals to the Chartist poets', that explains the "naive" politics of Hopkins as "deeply emotional" (p. 421), that makes Sonnets from the Portuguese "hardly a happy poem" (p. 345). "What retrieves it from the endlessly self-qualifying narrative is the desperate poignancy of the loss it portrays": this is Armstrong on Clough's ***Amours de Voyage*** (p. 199), but it describes a recurrent pattern of her criticism as well. So insistent is this pattern that it can routinely take negative evidence, or absent evidence, in its stride. Although for Tennyson the Lady of Shalott expressly "delights / To weave the mirror's magic sights" (ll. 64-65, my emphasis), Armstrong is sure that "the weaving of the web is ceaseless work without escape and without pleasure" (p. 84, her emphasis). Meredith's peculiar gift is "refusing empathy even at its greatest intensity" (p. 459). And, in Armstrong's culminating chapter, The City of Dreadful Night is "an epic of mourning which refuses to mourn" (p. 472). Here are worthy insights into the elegiac bases of Victorian poetry, constantly engaged as it was in the ambivalent project of rehearsing its losses even while cutting them. Still, it is remarkable how fully a like ambivalence also structures this book at the level of critical response. The dialectic whereby pain is repeatedly honored, and interpretively overcome, may be at once the most personal thing about Victorian Poetry and the most Victorian.

The critic's personal profile also emerges in an aspect of her book which could not be more different from this high seriousness. I mean the unguarded moment, the confidential parenthesis, the sudden rallentando that disarms criticism with a reminder of how much fun it can be to read poems, even Victorian ones. To hear Swinburne appreciated with an impromptu grace for his "squandering of synonym" and his mastery of "panic and stampede" (pp. 406, 409), or the songs

of Arnold's Callicles archly judged "Keats on ice" (p. 177), is quickening. It is that and more to hear how, with the "faking of realism" behind Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi," "It is something of an achievement to have parodied and distorted common sense" (pp. 294, 301). Something of an achievement, too, to hit on a formulation so clever as this one, so true, yet so evidently available only to a criticism that is on leave from its official agendas. My favorite interlude of this kind transpires when, in the depths of her exegesis of The Wreck of the "Deutschland" (st. 8, p. 434), Armstrong comes up for air: "The whole stanza is interesting." Interesting: well, and so it is. That the whole stanza is intensely interesting we knew long ago; yet we somehow know it in a new way thanks to Armstrong's wonderfully drab, winningly vacant sentence. It is as if the critic has been smitten all over again with the stressed scapes of the crafted word--an effect highly apt, of course, to Hopkins, who once got a sonnet going with the remark that "Sometimes a lantern moves along the night, / That interests our eyes" ("The Lantern Out of Doors"). Interested eyes: what else is historicist literary criticism but the training of interested eyes? Coming on so fresh a moment, four hundred pages into meditative analytics as powerfully dense as Isobel Armstrong's, cheers me up more than I can say, even to you of the VP circle. But then, as I promised pages ago, this is a book to read for yourself. Don't say I didn't warn you.