

Part One: Field – English Poetry 1832-1922

Writers and artists associated with the early twentieth-century avant-garde defined the newness of their work as much by what it was not as by what it promised to be. Particularly, literary modernism's self-presentation as a stylistic, temporal, and social rupture was complemented by loud declarations of its departure from the styles and positions of the Victorians. To Virginia Woolf, "human character" changed around December 1910 and literary style would change with it; W.B. Yeats believed that the dawn of modernity meant that nineteenth-century centers of meaning "cannot hold"; T.S. Eliot critiqued the Victorians for their untenable synthesis of art and sentimentality throughout his career. However, recent critical moves to resituate the modernist art object within its broader cultural contexts have demonstrated that literary modernism actually adopted and adapted the very characteristics its representative voices deemed *passé*. Demystifying the continuities between Victorian and modernist poetics has revealed one more center that cannot hold: the inflexibility of traditional periodization.

A survey of the previous three decades of criticism on the poetics of the Victorian and modernist periods—both in studies that analyze these periods discretely and that address their complex interactions—illustrates in miniature the broader trends and developments in academic criticism since New Criticism. Carol T. Christ's *Victorian and Modern Poetics*, one of the first comprehensive studies of positive engagements between the Victorians and moderns, is grounded in a formalist methodology that uses style and artistic strategy to demonstrate the shared aesthetics of these periods. In the decades since, such a pure formalism has given way to a number of new critical models, including deconstruction (E. Warwick Slinn), New Historicism

(Carrie Preston), feminism (Cassandra Laity), and queer studies (Richard Dellamora). As poetic criticism and theories of literary historiography have developed and are still continually reshaped, a focus has remained constant on the cultural and political implications of poetry and its many materials—the lyric voice, the poetic object, the shape of the poem, and the innumerable paths we can take towards interpreting it. Thus, no matter what interpretive model is put to use to parse through the difficulties posed by Victorian and modernist poetries, and their parities of subject and style, what remains is a focus on the revelatory power of poetic language; it is only what the language reveals that modulates.

Part I: Field – critical trends in the fields of Victorian and modern poetry

In *Victorian and Modern Poetics* (1984), Carol T. Christ works through the exaggerated vitriol that many modernists expressed towards Victorian poetry and form to recover the affinities in their poetics. According to Christ, this affinity, which emanates from their shared rejections of the Romantic emphasis on subjectivity as the wellspring of *poesis*, manifests in both periods in an interest in refining discourse and personality out of poetry. Christ locates contact points between Victorian and modernist poets in their shared strategies of poetic masking and persona poems and common theories of the undiscursive image, through which “each of the major Victorian and Modernist poets reacts against the subjectivity which he associates with Romanticism by attempting to objectify the materials of poetry” (3). While *Victorian and Modernist Poetics* is a significant contribution to contemporary genealogies of poetic history and development, Christ’s central focus on orthodox canons for both the Victorians and modernists (Tennyson and Browning are the central personages for the former; Yeats, Pound, and Eliot for the latter) unfortunately limits the complexity of her study. Indeed, her focus on objectivity as a

critical fulcrum to articulate the shared Victorian/modernist rejection of Romantic subjectivity particularly curtails a rich tradition of lyric poetry that runs throughout both periods, including works by Victorian poets Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Gerard Manley Hopkins, *fin-de-siècle* poet Arthur Symonds, and the early modernist Georgian poets, all of whom repurpose lyric subjectivity for new aesthetic ends.

Subsequent elaborations on the relationship between Victorian and modernist poetics by Jessica Feldman and Anne Jamison have done much to expand the discussion to include previously marginalized figures and a more thoroughly transnational context; in doing so, they respond to the contemporary critical imperative to displace traditional centers of value and, in turn, examine both the expansiveness and limitations of conceptual categories such as “modernism” and its movements in the globalized context of the twentieth century. Feldman’s *Victorian Modernism: Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience* (2002) echoes Christ’s study in its emphasis on the continuities between the Victorian and modernist period, uniting them through four common pragmatic modules: aestheticism, domesticity, sentimentality, and sublimity. Feldman introduces the concept of “Victorian Modernism” to locate figures on either end of the temporal continuum who “fuel their pragmatist search for linked and contingent truths with the energies and tensions of fancy and tender feeling” (2). However, because she uses philosophic pragmatism to bring the Victorians and modernists together and focusing exclusively on a subset of modernists (particularly Proust and Henry James) who eschew the period’s avant-garde aesthetics, Feldman’s desire for Victorian-Modernist continuity cannot account for the very different social, political, and artistic conditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, the predominantly positivist affective and aesthetic positions taken by the figures her study focuses on may offer *one* adumbration of proto-

modernism in the Victorian era, but can only accommodate a very select strand of literary modernism.

Anne Jamison offers an alternative narrative of continuity in *Poetics en Passant: Redefining the Relationship Between Victorian and Modern Poetry* (2010), in which she locates suggestions of proto-modernist formal experimentation and formalist rupture in nineteenth-century poetry and its public reception in Victorian England. Whereas Feldman's "Victorian Modernism" depends on epistemological positions like appreciation, feeling, and sentiment, Jamison instead follows modernist aesthetic categories "shock" and "rupture" as they develop in the shared poetics of shock of Charles Baudelaire and Christina Rossetti. While Jamison limits her study to these two nineteenth-century poets, the transnational proto-modernist poetics that emerges in her monograph has more general implications for studies of post-Enlightenment poetry and poetic history. She challenges traditional canons by inserting Rossetti—often considered a socially detached spinster-poet and thus disregarded in discussions of literary innovativeness—as a central figure in the history of aesthetic and genre developments whose attraction to "values such as formal difficulty, linguistic materiality, impersonality, and experimentation foreshadows the dominant trends of twentieth-century avant-garde poetry" (6).

Feldman and Jamison thus offer two antipodal accounts of the aesthetic relationships between Victorian and modernist poetics. Feldman's *Victorian Modernism* expresses continuities through traditionally Victorian registers like domesticity, contact, and positivism, and thus emerges with a modernism that looks curiously Victorian; Jamison's *Poetics en passant* recovers confrontational aesthetic positions characteristic of the twentieth-century avant-garde to reveal a Victorian period that seems thoroughly modernist. Together, they demonstrate the

flexibility of literary historiography and periodization in general, how the introduction of new figures, theories, and histories can perpetually recenter ideas of aesthetics, culture, and taste.

The characterization of modernism as an aesthetic of shock, fragmentation, and alienation motivates Michael Levenson's foundational history of literary modernism, *A Genealogy of Modernism* (1984). Levenson focuses on the aesthetic debates surrounding a number of the so-called "men of 1922"—Pound, Eliot, Ford Maddox Ford, and Wyndham Lewis—to trace the shifting philosophical bases for modernist experimentations with consciousness and perspective. Levenson argues that the early impressionist modernisms of Ford and Joseph Conrad, inflected by the philosophy of Henri Bergson, retreated from the scientific materialism of modernity to bolster the agency and will of the artist—a return to historically Romantic conceptions of artistry and personality. However, later developments in the modernist *avant-garde* (which Levenson dates to around the conclusion of the first World War) sought reprieve from the strictures of realism and formalism in an increasingly abstracted, nonrepresentational, and classicist aesthetic. Levenson's history of literary modernism is informed by movements in modernist painting, and he develops a compelling argument that the move from impressionist to abstract modernism was anticipated and shaped by the works of Kandinsky and Gaudier-Brzeska. Levenson turns to T.S. Eliot and modernist conceptions of the literary tradition in his final chapters, arguing that Eliot's disciplinary modernism and displacement of coherent centers of meaning marks a final and decided shift away from Bergsonism. Whereas the earlier impressionist modernism placed the onus of aesthetic production on the individual and his cognitive interpolation of the modern world into art, Eliot's late modernism tasks the artist with objectively organizing the contexts of modernity into order from the outside: the "cult of inner experience has passed to outer control; personal expression has given way to critical discipline. In the place of freedom and spontaneity,

art is now characterized in terms of order, restraint, and authority ... Self-expression yields to self-suppression” (3).

While Levenson’s *A Genealogy of Modernism* proffers an important understanding of the modernist art object as fragmentary and alienating, the significance of the indefinite article “A” in the study’s title must not be ignored. Subsequent genealogies of literary modernism by Jamison, Cassandra Laity, and Carrie Preston suggest that the alienation and fragmentation of modernism is no more than a performative posture and enable new understandings of what the modernist art object can do and how it is made. Laity’s *H.D. and the Victorian Fin-de-Siècle: Gender, Modernism, Decadence* (1999) does just that, situating H.D. in the development of modernism from nineteenth-century styles. The motivation behind Laity’s study echoes Anne Jamison’s in *Poetics en Passant*: although H.D., like Christina Rossetti, has been traditionally underrepresented in discussions of Victorian-modernist relations, Laity recovers aspects of Victorian and *fin-de-siècle* sexual and aesthetic themes in her poetry and prose fiction. Laity argues that H.D. adopted the same decadent ‘perversions’ seen in the works of Swinburne, the Pre-Raphaelites, and Walter Pater, and which mainstream male modernists Yeats, Pound, and Eliot loudly rejected (though often implicitly adopted). Laity argues quite compellingly that H.D. constructs her own literary modernism from the very materials these mainstream modernism abjured, encoding and authenticating the lesbian erotics of her poetry, translations, and novels through such Victorian models of perversity. Particularly persuasive is Laity’s argument that H.D.’s translation of *Hippolytus Temporizes* (1927) demonstrates H.D.’s interest in a subversive sexual aesthetic, as H.D. uses ambiguous auditory tropes to construct erotic dialogues based more on sound patterns than on visual images and codified visual images (Laity 104-5). Like Swinburne, who deploys rich language and evocative prosody to project intense

and subversive sexualities, H.D. uses the sound of the poem as a space to enunciate nonnormative desires.

With a similar dedication to incorporating inventive and original models of literary influence within her study of a collection of female modernists, Carrie J. Preston identifies a new “genealogy of modernism that has been overlooked” (4) in her recent monograph treating modernist kinesethetics and mythic typology, *Modernism’s Mythic Pose: Gender, Genre, Solo Performance* (2011). By recovering a strain of antimodern classicism in the works of figures as diverse as Augusta Weber, Charlotte Mew, Isadora Duncan, and H.D., Preston covers an expansive multidisciplinary terrain to refocus modernist historiography and accommodate the female voices (and choreographies) that shaped its aesthetic formations. Her study is particularly important in its reformulation of the dramatic monologue. Extending Robert Langbaum’s reader-response account of the genre, Preston suggests that through the modernist period the dramatic monologue accumulated the influences of François Delsarte, the James-Lange theory of emotional expression, the university discipline of recitation, and a twentieth-century interest in Christian typology to extend connections with a simultaneously vibrant and belated mythic past. Her argument treats now well-represented figures like Rossetti and H.D. alongside still-marginalized poets Weber and Mew, all of whom were interested in the relationship between mythic typology and the social conditions inhabited by the modern female subject.

This critical turn towards situating literary modernism within broader social and aesthetic conditions resonates in recent approaches towards the cultural politics of Victorian poetry. While the tendency of Victorian poets to use strategies of dislocation and detachment—from the exotic and historical settings of Robert Browning’s monologists and Tennyson’s medieval sagas to the austere detachment of Pre-Raphaelite aestheticism—can threaten to obscure their

imbrication within greater nineteenth-century social and political matrices including educational reform, prostitution, slavery, worker's rights, and the anti-vivisection movement. Recent criticism has taken up the task of resituating Victorian poetry within the conditions of its cultural production. Isobel Armstrong's *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Politics, and Poetics* (1993) invokes the Derridean concept of the "double poem," defined as "two concurrent poems in the same words" with intertwining but countervailing meaning to show that even the most detached Victorian poem can carry a political message (12). An early and representative text of this politicizing of Victorian poetry, Armstrong's *Victorian Poetry* focuses on the ways that Victorian lyric and narrative poetry embed latent political meaning and cultural significance within their lines. However, Armstrong's project unfortunately replicates a common fate of pure poststructuralist critique: a tendency to reduce the politics of gender difference. Armstrong isolates her only chapter on Victorian women's poetry, writing that the inassimilable affective and experiential differences between Victorian men and women render their poetics fundamentally incompatible (320).

Angela Leighton echoes Armstrong's position on the poetic effects of gender difference in *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (1992), though Leighton further posits that the large gulfs that separate the men's and women's Victorian poetic traditions were precipitated by self-conscious strategies deployed by women to produce a more faithfully 'feminine' poetry. Leighton structures her book in a unique fashion, offering biographical narratives of the eight featured poets at the beginning of each chapter before turning to close readings of their poetry. In doing so, Leighton overtly emphasizes the importance of the individual life to the production of each woman's poetry while also directly avoiding the issues that emerge from densely biographical interpretation. While the insulation of the Victorian women's tradition practiced by

Armstrong and Leighton is certainly a tenable critical position, it nevertheless diminishes the tremendous experimental capacities of women poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti, who helped develop and transform traditional genres such as the sonnet sequence and the dramatic monologue. Particularly, Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1845-6) and Rossetti's "Winter: My Secret" (1862) complicate the privacy expected of a female lyric subject by playing it off of these traditionally masculine, public literary genres in a way that neither Armstrong nor Leighton could account for in their pure women's traditions.

Indeed, Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins propose that inclusionary efforts to accommodate nineteenth-century women poets such as these came with the presupposition that women poets enable the archetype of the "Poetess": "not a lyric subject to be reclaimed as an identity but a medium for cultural exchange, a common name upon which much depends ... As a type, the poetess exemplifies the theory of her own apparent historical obscurity, and it is a theory that has gone virtually unrecognized" (523). The Poetess's unitary mode of expression is in the voice of an inexorably feminine subjectivity that collapses into the subjectivity of the poet herself. While the lyric form does presuppose the personal expression of the poet (or some dramatic recreation thereof), Jackson and Prins suggest that forcing nineteenth-century women poets into the category of Poetess seals off the ways that women poets themselves actively created and displaced representative female identities and voices: rather than see the lyric as a vehicle for self-expression, these women poets utilize it as a perpetually developing means of self-creation and self-displacement.

As Jackson and Prins demonstrate, literary criticism must be attentive not just to the latent meaning encoded in the work but also to the ways the literary work itself functions performatively, creating meaning and enabling particular interpretive methods. E. Warwick

Slinn puts the speech-act theory of J.L. Austin to use for similar ends in *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique: The Politics of Performative Language* (2003). Like Austin's performative, Slinn argues that "poems gain meaning and cultural significance from their function within social contexts and within established cultural discourses" (38). This leads Slinn to a tremendous interpretation of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Jenny," which he sees invoking and problematizing the male gaze so as to naturalize the archetype of the liberal male subject as socially and ethically progressive (123). Although a decade removed from Isobel Armstrong's *Victorian Poetry*, Slinn demonstrates the continuing need to harvest the latent politics in Victorian form. While both Armstrong and Slinn successfully demonstrate the embeddedness of Victorian poetry within cultural formations with attention to language and poetic form, they do so through competing critical means: Armstrong's poststructuralist method focuses on clandestine alternative narratives that operate within the original poem, while Slinn is invested in the surface-level performance of social discourses.¹

These dichotomous critical positions come together in studies of homosexuality, Hellenism, and Victorian literature by Richard Dellamora and Linda Dowling, which, in line with the central thesis of Michel Foucault's foundational *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, address queer identities within a paradoxical matrix of ideological suppression and proliferative discourse. Dellamora argues in *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (1990) that the poetics of intra-male desire in studies such as Sedgwick's, which insist that strategies of sublimation and triangulation were mobilized to facilitate homosexual contact, tend to obscure a strong surface-level narrative of expressed male erotic attachments in nineteenth-century literature. Dellamora refers to the literary manifestations of such attachments as a transgressive "sexual aesthetic" clustered around the elite high-cultures of Oxford (particularly

Walter Pater and the influence of *The Renaissance*) and Cambridge (Tennyson and the Cambridge Apostles). He argues that the tensions between institutional repressions of sexuality and the intense male bonds between university students precipitated homosexual overtones expressed in nineteenth-century poetry. Although homosexual desire find a *direct* means of expression in some nineteenth-century poetic works—especially in the group of Uranian poets (which included Lord Alfred Douglas, John Addington Symonds, and Rev. E.E. Bradford)—Dellamora is principally interested in strategies of sublimation as they recur in the sexual aesthetics of figures like Tennyson, Hopkins, and Swinburne. His reading of Whitman as a latent signifier of male desire in Hopkins’ “Epithalamion” is particularly evocative of the degree that male desire crept into the work of one of the most politically and religiously conservative nineteenth-century poets. According to Dellamora, the “sexual aesthetic” of Hopkins and a number of other male Victorian poets functioned as ambiguous or ethereal spaces to obliquely represent desires that were otherwise impermissible within more general social contexts.

Linda Dowling introduces Hellenism as another signifier of male desire in nineteenth-century Oxford in her study *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (1994). Dowling argues that the educational reforms initiated by Benjamin Jowett to instill a Hellenic education in the Oxford curriculum implicitly challenged the binary imperative of eighteenth-century gender discourse, associating effeminacy and male love with the highest of virtues and coupling its tutorial system with a strong erotic attachment between men. Whereas Dellamora’s project focuses on homosexuality as a cultural ‘deviation’ that is obliquely suggested and subsequently repressed through various social, political, and temporal contexts, Dowling instead favors a narrative of pedagogical legitimation that was not explicitly regulated or socially debilitated until the “crisis of homosexuality” in the 1890s. To Dowling, Hellenism functions as something of a

queer utopia in the nineteenth century; as she argues in her particularly strong third chapter, the exaltation of Hellenic male love as the pinnacle of civic virtue enabled an acceptable cultural history to homosexuality. Thus, Walter Pater and the Uranian poets were able to recuperate a Hellenic spirit and circulate new ways of conceptualizing male love.

Part II: Focus – new readings of Mew, Rossetti, and H.D.

While the past three decades of poetry criticism have uncovered many affinities between the Victorian and modernist periods, there remains important work to be done to truly understand the complexity and breadth of the borrowings and lendings between the nineteenth- and twentieth-century traditions. Focusing purely on the affinities between the Victorian and modernist periods does more to obscure than reveal; discounting literary modernism's avant-garde repugnance of the Victorians as no more than a performative posture, as Feldman does in *Victorian Modernism*, only accounts for one aspect of their intricate relationship. Rather, a more complete model of Victorian-Modernism need to accommodate both correspondences and tensions, engagements with and reformulations of received genres and ideas, in a dialectic of ambivalent exchange. This new account of Victorian-Modernism can provide a more complex and comprehensive understanding of the breadth of "modernism" and the difficulties of marking when, how far, and how successfully it broke from Victorian aesthetics. A close reading of Charlotte Mew's "Madeleine in Church" as a poem that encapsulates Mew's liminality between Victorian tradition and modernist experimentation demonstrates the flexibility and pedagogic value of this model. While "Madeleine in Church" adheres to the qualities of the Victorian dramatic monologue, it nevertheless registers the unique affective and material conditions of twentieth-century modernity; reading Mew's poem between traditional constructions of

Victorian and modernist poetics effectively can contribute to a new understanding of Victorian-Modernism as a complicated site of appropriation and revision.

Stylistically and thematically, Charlotte Mew's "Madeleine in Church," published in her 1915 volume *Farmer's Bride*, occupies an intermediary position between traditional categories of Victorian and modernist poetics. While "Madeleine in Church" is a representatively Victorian expression of doubt towards religious authority articulated in the shape of the dramatic monologue, an emblematic form of the period, the poem's prosodic irregularities, ambiguous persona, and ambivalence towards commercial-materialist impulses echoes the works of mainstream modernists such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. The poem records the internal thoughts of Madeleine as she reflects variously on mortality, past romances, her childhood, the proximity of the divine, and the life of Mary Magdalene (whose name echoes in her own) while she sits in a church's minor chapel. Madeleine has absconded to this side chapel out of expressed preference for its spiritual proximity and a suggested anxiety over traditional centers of ecclesiastical authority:

Here, in the darkness, where this plaster saint
 Stands nearer than God stands to our distress,
 And one small candle shines, but not so faint
 As the far lights of everlastingness
 I'd rather kneel than over there, in open day
 Where Christ is hanging, rather pray
 To something more like my own clay,
 Not too divine (25)

Madeleine's predilection for the "plaster saint" equates to a rejection of the spiritual phenomenology of venerated devotional objects such as the Crucifix, a preference that dovetails with the very materialism that the religious life forecloses. The plaster saint is irreducible from its tangible, physical presence in a way that the Crucifix, so deeply connoted by a Biblical typology that supersedes and displaces its material existence, cannot be. Mew's emphasis on the

plaster saint's materiality as a statue made of plaster indeed circumscribes this object of devotion into the plenum of the man-made world, as Madeleine venerates it for its physical presence rather than its iconographical significance. Further, in Mew's turn-of-the-century England the term "plaster saint" referred derogatorily to "a person who makes a show of being without moral faults or human weakness" (OED); thus, a plaster saint is not a saint at all, but rather a person simulating one. Mew's Madeleine may inhabit a place of devotion, but she ultimately finds solace in the solipsism of a material world in which man produces religious icons for the devotional consumption of man.

The setting, theme, and form of Charlotte Mew's "Madeleine in Church" echo those of Robert Browning's comparably irreverent poem "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" (1842). Composed in the pugnacious voice of a friar who expresses profound distaste for a fellow Brother, "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" generates a tension between the incendiary inner thoughts of the speaker and the solemnity of the setting similar to that of "Madeleine in Church." In the poem's final lines, Browning's speaker is called for evening prayer but his enmity for Brother Lawrence cannot be dislodged as his primary focal point: "'St, there's Vespers! *Plena gratia / Aye, Virgo! Gr-r-r – you swine!*" (29). The poem encapsulates Browning's more general interest in the juxtaposition of social propriety and internal barbarism, but the speaker's reference to Brother Lawrence as a swine, expressions of deep animosity, and use of common vernacular and speech patterns rather than the eloquent rhetoric expected of a clergyman effectively encapsulate Victorian uncertainty about the spiritual authority of religious institutions

To say that "Madeleine in Church" has a uniquely Victorian color simply because the poem charts Madeleine's expression of doubt only partly registers the poem's adherence to a Victorian theme; quintessential modernist texts such as Eliot's *Waste Land*, Woolf's *To the*

Lighthouse, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Beckett's existentialist dramas similarly displace Western religious authority, as the very program of literary modernism is imbued with skepticism to traditional structures of meaning. The noticeably Victorian texture of Mew's "Madeleine in Church" is a result of the form in which such doubt is expressed: the dramatic monologue. For Browning, setting "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" in the form of a dramatic monologue is essential for the elaboration of his theme, as allowing readers to inhabit the mortifying mental space of its speaker and recite his irreligious rhetoric draws attention to the incompatibilities between doctrinal Christian self-presentation and the realities of human nature and relationships. Mew uses the dramatic monologue to similar effect in "Madeleine in Church," as it enables her to strategically exploit the Christian venue by offsetting it with Madeleine's internal logic, her preference for the material world, and ponderings whether "If there were any Paradise beyond this earth that I could see" (26). Indeed, Madeleine's empiricism boils over into an erotic phenomenology that emphasizes the physical embodiment of lived experience and, thus, further augments her detachment from the ephemerality of spiritual belief. Her imagined scene of Mary Magdalene's dream of Christ emphasizes the importance of tactility as a means of verifying spiritual phenomena: "But if she had not touched Him in the doorway of the dream could she have cared so much? / She was a sinner, we are what we are: the spirit afterwards, but first, the touch" (30). Both in form and in content, "Madeleine in Church" is representative of Charlotte Mew's imbrication within nineteenth-century forms and aesthetic positions. Like Browning, she uses the dramatic monologue both to chart the (socially aberrant) psyche of her speaker and to express skepticism towards a religiosity that cannot be empirically verified. Mew occupies such a position throughout *The Farmer's Bride*, in which ideological institutions such as compulsory

heterosexuality, marriage, domesticity, and the social ties of the rural village are exposed as the fragile and unnatural precipitants of social and political discourse.

Still, while “Madeleine in Church” may express paradigmatically Victorian beliefs in a recognizable Victorian verse form, it nevertheless participates in the aesthetic experimentations of modernism that were ongoing in the early twentieth century. The imagery and rhythmic arrangement of “Madeleine in Church” has much in common with the more radical and experimental bent of literary modernism. Although the severity of the spiritual doubt expressed in Browning’s “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” is attenuated through the speaker’s absurdity, overstatement, and humorous onomatopoeia, the irreligiousness of “Madeleine in Church” is redoubled with a political and amoral intensity more common in literary modernism. Though Mew’s poem predates Wallace Stevens’ “Sunday Morning,” her Madeleine shares the dissatisfaction with the distance between the material world and the religious that Stevens’ poem expresses; Madeleine’s disillusionment can be encapsulated in the central question posed by the woman of Stevens’ poem, “What is divinity if it can come / Only in silent shadows and in dreams?” (67). In the closing lines of “Madeleine in Church,” Madeleine reflects on her schoolgirl understandings of Christ’s image and reality:

When I was small I never quite believed that He was dead:
 And at the Convent school I used to lie awake in bed
 Thinking about His hands. It did not matter what they said,
 He was alive to me, so hurt, so hurt! And most of all in Holy Week
 When there was no one else to see
 I used to think it would not hurt me too, so terribly,
 If He had ever seemed to notice me
 Or, if, for once, He would only speak. (31)

Madeleine’s desires for a more tangible spiritual experience come to a head in her erotic imagination of Christ. What she desires more than anything else is a physical, relational experience with divinity: one in which Christ will not only touch with “His hands” but will also

“notice me” when she addresses him. Her identification with his pain only augments this desire for relationality. While this is coded as the desire of a schoolgirl, not of the adult Madeleine, it nonetheless occupies a privileged place in the poem and echoes her earlier preference for the more accessible plaster saint.

The seditiousness of these lines, with Mew’s suggestion of female masturbation and thorough eroticization of the Christ body, suggests a connection to the radical imagery of modernist aesthetics and, specifically, the graphic descriptions of female desire we see in works like fellow English poet Mina Loy’s *Songs to Joannes* (1907). Indeed, Loy similarly debases the sacred through the sexual in *Songs to Joannes*:

We might have coupled
 In the bed-ridden monopoly of a moment
 Or broken flesh with one another
 At the profane communion table
 Where wine is spill’d on promiscuous lips. (54)

Although Loy’s lines are more pointedly obscene, her juxtaposition of the Last Supper with such a richly described sexual encounter echoes the eroticized Christ of Mew’s “Madeleine in Church.” Compared to Victorian expressions of female desire such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and Christina Rossetti’s fairy tale-mediated “Goblin Market,” “Madeleine in Church” is thoroughly modern in its explicitness and profane context. Indeed, the conclusion of “Madeleine in Church” resembles another modernist work, the eroticized self-flagellating Christian martyr in T.S. Eliot’s unpublished “The Love Song of St. Sebastian.”² In a truly modernist posture, traditional centers of meaning such as religion and female virtue are not *merely* questioned but also profaned in “Madeleine in Church.”

The modernism of Charlotte Mew’s “Madeleine in Church” carries over into its formal structure, as Mew’s syncopated rhythm and unique rhyme scheme are suggestive of the more

liberal formal schemas of the twentieth-century avant-garde. The dramatic monologues of Browning and Tennyson are typically arranged in blank verse; even though these poems are meant to replicate the tenors of the speaking or thinking voice, they do so within a recognizable formal structure. The stanzas of “Madeleine in Church,” in contrast, are varied in length and metrically irregular, and the meaning dictates the poem’s lineation rather than a need to adhere to a codified metrical schema. Mew’s highlighting of the rhythms and variations of the mind in thought reveals yet another modernism of her poetics, aligned not just with the monologues of Pound and Eliot but also the modernist experiments in psychology and stream-of-consciousness narrative undertaken by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Still, Mew’s engagement with the limits of poetic style and form do not sever her ties with the Victorian period but rather enhance them, intensifying the psychological drama of the dramatic monologue and the poem’s religious doubt.³ Indeed, her poetry brings together Victorian and modernist impulses, placing them in dramatic tension to precipitate aesthetic meanings that are both radically new and circumscribed within a recognizable tradition. Considering the place of Charlotte Mew in literary history can both elaborate the experimental capacity of traditional Victorian styles and pose a new understanding of the development of modernist form.

Staking out the place for lyric poetry within the age of cultural studies may seem a formidable task, given the immediate discordance between lyric’s focus on the expression of an individual subjectivity and the ambitions of cultural studies to use literary interpretation as a means of accessing greater social and cultural understanding. Reflecting on the rather enervated place of poetry in the contemporary academy, Jonathan Culler writes that any attempts to revive lyric poetry must necessarily amplify those very qualities unique to lyric:

Lyric is the foregrounding of language, in its material dimensions, and thus both embodies and attracts interest in language and languages—in the forms, shapes, and rhythms of discourse. If we believe language is the medium for the formation of subjectivity, lyric ought to be crucial, as the site where language is linked not only to structures of identification and displacement before the consolidation of subject positions but especially to rhythm and the bodily experience of temporality, on the one hand, and to the formative dwelling in a particular language on the other. (205)

In short, Culler argues that new approaches to the study of poetry must return to its most essential material: language, its synesthetic effects on body and mind, and its capacity to reveal both personal and cultural histories. The preceding three decades of criticism on Victorian and modernist poetry have emphasized the necessity of this position towards lyric verse: from the formalisms of the New Criticism, Christ, and Langbaum towards a plurality of critical positions that depend as much on historicism as they do on matters of form and expression, the power of language has remained a central focus. Although the poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not, we currently inhabit a critical terrain transformed by poststructuralism, feminism, queer theory, and postcolonialism, still relevant in their reminders that language shapes and creates not just individual subjectivities but also the larger social and political categories these subjectivities occupy and challenge, make and remake. The power of lyric to embody multiple sensorial experiences—the play of the line as it affects and enhances our visual, aural, and vocal engagement with the text—leaves us subject to the poem and the synesthetic domain it produces. As Culler posits, “poems seek to inscribe themselves in mechanical memory ... ask to be learned by heart, taken in, introjected, or housed as bits of alterity that can be

repeated, considered, treasured, or ironically cited” (205). They become a part of us that is not quite us, challenging our understanding of otherness by being both without and within.

Recent critical approaches to Victorian and modernist poetry have emphasized the manner in which poetic language both reflects and refracts modern subjectivity and acts of subject-formation, even at the moment that the poem itself seems to reject such subjectivity in favor of objectivity or a strategically lyrical or dramatic dislocation. Even the most seemingly personal, subjective, and isolating poem has something to teach about the simultaneously private and public spaces it occupies, a position emphasized in works as varied as Slinn’s reading of performative language in Victorian poetry, Preston’s interdisciplinary genealogy of modern dance and monologues, and Dowling’s interest in homosexuality and educational reform. Throughout, poetic language is justly treated as a revelatory source of cultural, social, political, and aesthetic meaning. It is revelatory in a twofold manner: it opens a horizon onto the producing subjectivity (or of a subjectivity self-consciously performed) and the social, political, and cultural conditions of the periods. That is, more than expressing a single subjectivity, the lyric poem expresses a subjectivity reticulated within ideological formations and can make these ideologies visible, whether that subjectivity be that of a Victorian woman self-consciously operating around a phallogentric tradition to create a poetry all her own or a mainstream male modernist rejecting the conditions of scientific materialism to rehabilitate a sense of control through critical objectivity. Perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned from post-Romantic thought is that the voice of the poem—variously the poet-speaker, the narrative voice (or voices), or even the lyric “I”—is never enclosed upon itself, but is instead a marker of its cultural production. That is, the lyric “I” is both an index of a single speaking voice and of a litany of cultural, social, and political contexts. Such a lesson both informs the recent body of criticism

on Victorian and modernist poetry, and is integral to understanding the aesthetics of objectivity, dramatic masking, lyricism, and cultural critique expressed by Victorian and modernist poets alike.

¹ Interestingly, the respective emphases on latency and performance in these studies by Armstrong and Slinn echo Victorian-era debates over the function of poetry as a vehicle for the expression of private feeling or as a circulating public document that must be conscious of its influences.

² For a discussion of the homosexual erotics of Eliot's "Love Song of St. Sebastian," see Richard Kaye's "A Splendid Readiness for Death': T.S. Eliot, the Homosexual Cult of St. Sebastian, and World War I," *Modernism/modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 107-134.

³ As Carol T. Christ notes, the dramatic monologue was indeed a popular form among many mainstream modernists who looked to recover an anti-Romantic objectivity. While poems like Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" and Pound's "Homage to Sextus Propertius" repurpose the dramatic monologue, they do so for explicitly modernist ends – to critique the modern city and tie the modernist project to antiquity respectively. There is a difference with "Madeleine in Church," as Mew, a liminal figure between the Victorian and modernist periods, aligns with modernism's formal experimentation while expressing more representatively Victorian content.

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