

“What Is Historical Poetics?”

Yopie Prins

Abstract In posing questions about what is “historical” and what counts as “poetics,” historical poetics cannot separate the practice of reading a poem from the histories and theories of reading that mediate our ideas about poetry. While nineteenth-century verse cultures revolved around reading by generic recognition, a reading of poetry as a form of cognition emerges among later critics like I. A. Richards, who illustrates how a line from Robert Browning is read in the mind’s eye, as if in the present tense. But Browning was already doing a version of historical poetics, in writing “Pan and Luna” as a poem about reading other poems about Pan, among them “A Musical Instrument,” by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In the composition and reception of her poem, we see how Victorian poetry foregrounds its multiple mediations, including the mediation of voice by meter as a musical instrument. The recirculation of her popular poem through citation and recitation, illustration and anthologization, prosody and parody, demonstrates a varied history of thinking through—simultaneously “about” and “in”—verse.

Keywords voice, prosody, parody, genre, the Brownings

Inside Out, Outside In

The question posed by my title appears in quotation marks because it repeats the question posed by the title of an essay by Simon Jarvis, repeating a question that I had posed, about a question that many are now posing.¹ Pointing to its own iterability, the question is best answered

¹ Jarvis (2014: 97) begins “What Is Historical Poetics?” by asking: “Yopie Prins has recently recommended that the study of lyric poetry proceed as a ‘historical poetics.’ . . . But what is historical poetics?” He is referring to my contribution (Prins 2008) to “The New Lyric Studies,” a *PMLA* forum contributing different perspectives on the

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by our asking it again: what do we mean by “historical,” and what do we mean by “poetics”? Both are “essentially contested concepts,” to borrow from political science a term for abstract ideas about which there is agreement that something real is at stake but which involve, and indeed require, as a foundational part of their complex structure, ongoing disputation about how they are to be realized.² The contestation is itself productive: in current debates about historical poetics, different approaches give form to radically different reading practices, research projects, aesthetic claims, and critical agendas.

To open a space for debate, the initial announcement for the 2014 conference “Poetic Genre and Social Imagination: Pope to Swinburne” (University of Chicago 2014) observed that “scholars of English and American poetry have recently called for a new historical poetics capable of analyzing relations between culture and poetic form (including meter and rhyme as well as specific verse forms . . .)” and suggested that “two approaches have dominated this conversation. The first recovers lost ways of thinking about form—in prosody manuals, recorded performance, private correspondence, newspaper reviews, and so on—and reads them back into cultural history. The second historicizes poems from the inside out, making evident social affinities and antagonisms in literary form by comparative description.” The schematic division into two kinds of historical poetics—one practiced by cultural historians, who read from the outside in, and the other by literary critics, who read from the inside out—implies that the former are more interested in discourses about poetry and its mediations, and the latter in the poems themselves. While we might be tempted to see these concerns in opposition, I believe that we cannot separate the practice of reading a poem from the histories and theories of reading that mediate our ideas about poetry. I am committed to a historical poetics that works recursively as a loop, reading simultaneously from inside out and from outside in.

study of lyric, in response to Marjorie Perloff’s Modern Language Association presidential address.

² For this reformulation of “essentially contested concepts” (Gallie 1956), see Connolly 1993: chap. 1.

Perhaps divergent approaches to historical poetics turn on what counts as historical. Jarvis offers one accounting in “What Is Historical Poetics?”—further elaborated in “Superservice Poetics,” in this issue—through a virtuosic reading of the prosodic virtuosity of poets like Alexander Pope and Robert Browning. Threading Russian formalism through the aesthetic theory of Theodor W. Adorno, Jarvis (2014: 100–101) argues that “works of art are records of a historical process of thinking-through-making” and for this reason “the (historical) truth-content of works of art is to be sought precisely in their technical organization, which, far from being a transhistorical frame for the work of art, is instead its most intimately historical aspect, that which is most vulnerable to becoming obsolete or to missing its moment.” I couldn’t agree more. But while this proposition is central to Jarvis’s ongoing exploration of prosody as cognition—a way of thinking in verse—I think of prosody as recognition. These are two sides of the same coin that pay and repay close attention to poems: if one side is the historical process of “thinking-through-making,” the other is “thinking-through-reading.” Poems are read through the generic conventions that make up the history of reading poetry. Where Jarvis invests his coin in technique, in the singular event of the poet’s composition (or the reader’s active recomposition) of a poem, I invest mine in genre, in the repeated readings that compose the poem’s reception, each an act of recognition.

To think historically about genre and the diversity of nineteenth-century poetic genres in particular, a group was formed ten years ago by scholars working on British, American, and anglophone poetry and poetics of the long nineteenth century. We coined the term *historical poetics* for our group, which emerged from a conference organized at Rutgers University in 2002 by Meredith McGill and leading to the publication of *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poems and Transatlantic Exchange* (2008). Over the years other scholars have joined and left the group, and, thanks to Max Cavitch, we held another conference in 2010 at the University of Pennsylvania, “Crossing the Bar: Transatlantic Poetics in the Nineteenth Century.” Although our common interest is nineteenth-century historical poetics, that rubric hovers over several research agendas, and those agendas have changed places and shapes over the last decade. Even within the group each of us would

probably give a different answer to the question “What is historical poetics?” Perhaps the best way to think about what we do together is to view us as a lab research team (without the white coats). We are not formulating an ideology of historical poetics in our laboratory; we are conducting parallel experiments in genre theory, in the history of prosody, in poetry and public culture, in poetry circulating in and out of print, in poetry as media, in the translation and global circulation of poetry, in ballads and poetess verse and dialect poetry and popular parodies and other subgenres, too many to list at any one time. Although we do not write our articles and books collectively, what we write individually emerges from the sort of research collective that is less common in the humanities these days than it is in the social and natural sciences.³

I enter into the broad field of historical poetics by way of a particular interest in the multiple mediations of voice in Victorian poetry as it revolves around the problem of voice in verse, or “voice inverse” (Prins 2004).⁴ One nineteenth-century version of this problem is *The Science of English Verse*, published in 1880 by the American poet and prosodist Sidney Lanier (and what could be more vulnerable to becoming obsolete or missing its moment than this idiosyncratic treatise?). Lanier’s ideas about the musical notation of meter make prosody a way of thinking through verse that differs from our own thinking, yet I find this historical difference productive for theorizing as well as historicizing the inversion of voice (Prins 2008). Through repeated attempts by Lanier and other nineteenth-century readers to scan the metrical breaks in Tennyson’s poem “Break, Break, Break,” we see how they foreground voice as a figure not for speaking but for breaking (Prins 2011). Indeed, it is precisely the predicament of utterance in Tennyson’s poem—the wish

³ The nineteenth-century historical poetics group as it stands now includes Max Cavitch (University of Pennsylvania), Michael Cohen (University of California, Los Angeles), Virginia Jackson (University of California, Irvine), Tricia Lootens (University of Georgia), Meredith Martin (Princeton University), Meredith McGill (Rutgers University), Yopie Prins (University of Michigan), Eliza Richards (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Jason Rudy (University of Maryland), Alexandra Socarides (University of Missouri), and Carolyn Williams (Rutgers University). I thank the group for ten years of conversations that have made this essay possible.

⁴ For other approaches to voice in Victorian poetry, see Griffiths 1989 and Smith 2015.

in the first stanza that “my tongue could utter / the thoughts that arise in me” and the yearning in the final stanza “for the sound of voice that is still” and “will never come back to me”—it is precisely this problem of voicing *in* and *of* the poem that provokes so many nineteenth-century readings.

By the end of the century that predicament had become so familiar—so generic, we might say—that it could be parodied as part of the transmission of Tennyson’s poem, as we see in a popular anthology of poetic parodies from the early twentieth century (Wells 1904: 158):

The Musical Pitch
 Break, break, break,
 O voice!—let me urge thy plea!
 O, lower the Pitch, lest utter
 Despair is the end of me!

With “O voice!,” this parody mocks its own poetic apostrophe. Proclaiming a voice yet begging it to “break, break, break,” the poem is perched on the brink of “utter despair,” simultaneously uttering despair and despairing of utterance. The parodic play with voice performs in excess what has been at stake all along in reading Tennyson’s poem: the more the meter is read by analogy to music, the more it measures its distance from a speaking voice, raising it to the musical pitch where the voice is not normalized as that of a speaker. Nor can it be naturalized as that of a singer, since the poem is estranged from song by its comic insistence on the strain of the voice, a double entendre that leaves us wondering what kind of voice is straining to sing (a female voice breaking the high notes? a male voice breaking from high to low? the voice of a musical instrument?). Through parody we recognize that the voice has been an unstable metaphor all along, vacillating between tenor and vehicle, pitched as a mediating figure for the reader who will recognize the echo, loud and clear, of Tennyson’s poem.

Within the prenormalized state of Victorian poetics (exactly the opposite state, I would point out, from that attributed to Victorian poetry by the misleading critical narrative of a great divide between nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetics), the instability of such figures of mediation often turns out to be the content of poems. As Adorno might say, mediation is what Victorian poems are made of, their aesthetic glitter.

And these mediating figures are not discourses outside the poems but how the poetry works from the inside out. Their instability is also part and parcel of the ways in which Victorian poets thought about poetry as a set of verse genres, many of which we have been unable to read because the history of reading has made poetry into a genre.⁵ When Tennyson's poem is parodied, we know that it is a generic marker for pitching a question about "voice" that has been recognizable (albeit in different ways) by readers from the nineteenth century on. The appeal of "Break, Break, Break" to prosodists and parodists alike makes it possible to trace the generic conventions by means of which Tennyson's poem—and indeed Tennyson himself—is increasingly claimed for lyric reading. And this historical process is worked out in the reception of other Victorian poets as well.

Perhaps, then, the more pressing issue is not what counts as historical but what counts as poetics. According to Jarvis (2014: 115), "The relationship between thinking *about* verse and thinking *in* verse is not necessarily a cooperative one," and he concludes that "historical poetics needs above all to be wary of thinking that it can exit from the painful difficulty of specifying the history of verse technique by filling that space up with representations, with the way in which verse has been talked about, mediated, and distributed." For Jarvis, such representations are diversions from the presentation (or making present) of verse-thinking in the moment of its performance. But why is *The Science of English Verse* not another kind of verse-thinking, even if it is not how we now think in (or even about) verse? And are parodies of Tennyson not another way of thinking in verse? The recirculation of poems by prosodists or parodists—or by means of memorization, recitation, visual illustration, anthologization, and other poetic practices—demonstrates a historical process of thinking *through* (simultaneously *about* and *in*) verse. Paying attention to such practices in nineteenth-century verse culture is not an exit from the painful difficulty (and aesthetic pleasure) of specifying the history of verse technique, but another point of entry into diverse histories of reading that inform ideas of poetry, then and now.

⁵ I am borrowing here from Virginia Jackson's lyricization argument (for a concise version, see Jackson 2012) and from Carolyn Williams's work on Victorian generic recognition (on parody and genre, see Williams 2012: chap. 1).

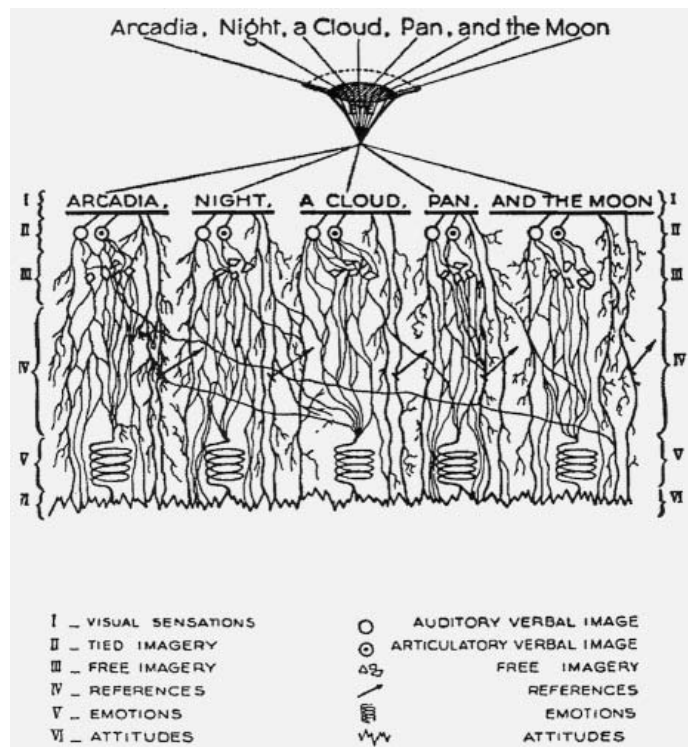
The Reading Eye

If the pressing issue is poetics (how poetry is written and how it is read, some tangle of the two together), there is no better place to begin than where Jarvis and I might agree a certain history of poetics is at stake, namely, in the work of I. A. Richards, at a moment when the question of reading poetry was clearly up for grabs. In *Principles of Literary Criticism*, published in 1924, Richards was interested in “the analysis of the experience of reading a poem,” and in chapter 16 he gives a diagrammatic representation (he calls it a “hieroglyph”) of what we might call your brain on poetry (fig. 1). Above the diagram five terms appear—“Arcadia, night, a cloud, Pan, and the Moon”—from which lines lead into a funnel labeled “EYE” and then radiate down to an elaborate, spidery network of what turn out to be neurons, descending toward what look like mechanical coils at the bottom. On the right and left margins, roman numerals indicate six layers of mental experience (beginning with “visual sensation” of the printed words, associated with “tied imagery” and “free imagery” in the mind, and further internalized in thinking about “references,” “emotions,” and “attitudes”). Below the diagram is a key or legend with tiny symbols, indicating the conversion of words into “auditory” and “articulatory” verbal images as well. Drawing on terms from nineteenth-century elocutionary science as well as twentieth-century neuroscience, this pseudoscientific scheme outlines what happens in the mind of a reader: it is “not a picture of the nervous system,” Richards explains, but an attempt to imagine “the events which take place when we read a poem” as an experience in the present (Richards 2001: 106).⁶ In his (re)presentation of these events, the eye scanning a series of words on the page turns a visual experience into poetic imagery in the mind’s eye, as if the neural network of the brain were hardwired to recognize a line of poetry.

Of course, it matters that this sequence of words already has been recognized as poetry: it is the final line of “Pan and Luna” (1880) by Robert Browning, who has his own way of imagining how a poem comes to be, through a different tangle of associations. Browning (2007) begins

⁶ Since Richards was interested in the variability of response (see Ferguson 2014), he was trying to be descriptive, not prescriptive. On his contribution to twentieth-century lyric reading, see Jackson and Prins 2014: 160–61.

Figure 1.
Diagram by
I. A. Richards.
From “The Analysis
of a Poem,” in
*Principles of
Literary Criticism*
(1924)



with an epigraph taken from Virgil (*si credere dignum est*) and translates the Latin phrase to introduce the tale of Pan and Luna: “O worthy of belief I hold it was, / Virgil, your legend in those strange three lines!” (ll. 1–2). But Browning also introduces some questions about the credibility of the legend (the Latin epigraph is actually a conditional, “*if* it deserves to be credible”), as his poem narrates how the modest moon goddess Luna (“the naked Moon, full-orbed,” wrapped in a white cloud on a black night) is trapped by the rapacious Pan (“half-god half-brute”) (ll. 20, 83). Through a series of questions that punctuate the poetic narrative, Browning wonders how the legend has been and might be read, not only as an etiology of the lunar eclipse (“Then—does the legend say?—first moon-eclipse / Happened”) but as a shady tale of sexual violation (ll. 89–90). The last stanza defers to Virgil to tell the rest of the tale:

Ha, Virgil? Tell the rest, you! “To the deep
Of his domain the wildwood, Pan forthwith
Called her, and so she followed”—in her sleep,
Surely?—“by no means spurning him.” The myth

Explain who may! Let all else go, I keep
 —As of a ruin just a monolith—
 Thus much, one verse of five words, each a boon:
 Arcadia, night, a cloud, Pan, and the moon.
 (ll. 97–104)

Here “those strange three lines” that have prompted Browning’s poem are translated from Latin in quotation marks and interrupted by another question to call attention to Virgil’s ambiguous representation of Luna: in response to Pan calling (*vocans*), she does not resist his calling (*nec tu aspernata vocantem*).⁷ Is it rape or seduction, and who is speaking for whom? Browning for Virgil? Virgil for Pan? Pan for Luna (whose name is eclipsed in the last stanza)? Much depends on how to read the mediating figure of voice, always a complex issue in Browning’s poetry. Ultimately, it is left to the reader to read between the lines: “The myth / Explain who may!”

We already see historical poetics at work inside Browning’s poem, which highlights its own mediation through the transmission, translation, transformation, and reinterpretation of Virgil’s lines that compose the legend of Pan and Luna, now recomposed by Browning. To expose the narrative reduction, or redaction, of a story that has become the unwritten history of his poem, Browning ends with “thus much, one verse of five words, each a boon,” a line verging on caricature or even parody, if we did not recognize its poetry: “Arcadia, night, a cloud, Pan, and the moon.” Or as David S. Shaw (1974: 11) observes, “The last line of ‘Pan and Luna’ is the quintessence of the whole poem,” because “the poet’s search for meaning and his goal in pure immediacy give[s] unexpected value to the cryptic parataxis.” This yearning for the “pure immediacy” of poetry may be what appealed to Richards in that line, where the juxtaposition of nouns has the effect of suspending the poem

⁷ Virgil, *Georgics*, 3.391–93: “Si credere dignum est / Pan deus Arcadiae captam te, Luna, fefellit / In nemora alta vocans; nec tu aspernata vocantem” (Virgil 1969). For a careful reading of Browning’s reworking of these lines from Virgil, I am indebted to Jane Wright, who observed in our discussion at the Cambridge English Faculty Nineteenth Century Seminar that Browning himself is doing historical poetics in “Pan and Luna,” using Virgil to reflect on the longer history of reading the myth, including the possibility that Luna is more active than passive in her encounter with Pan.

in the present tense: here the pastoral legend of Pan and Luna is reduced to another kind of legend, an explanatory list of symbols or an index to a tale that remains to be deciphered.

But when Browning's list of words that a poem might be made of becomes Richards's image of what poetry is, something important has happened in historical poetics. It is unnerving to see Richards take that parodic gesture and make it into the very image of a poem. His diagram illustrates (but without the parody) a further reduction of Browning's poetic line, detached from the tangle of its narrative context into a series of discrete words, transmitted via the eye directly into the tangled neural network of the brain, where it assumes the immediacy of mental experience: it is an illustration of reading in the present tense, without the mediations of history. The closest Richards (2001: 120) comes to acknowledging some sort of historical process in reading is in a paragraph toward the end of the chapter:

It is difficult to represent diagrammatically what takes place in thought in any satisfactory fashion. The impulse coming in from the visual stimulus of the printed word must be imagined as reaching some system in the brain in which effects take place not due merely to this present stimulus, but also to past occasions on which it has been combined with other stimulations. These effects are thoughts; and they in their grouping act as signs for other thoughts. The little arrows are intended to symbolize these references to things outside the mind.

However, those "little arrows" are so little that we have to squint to see them on the diagram. For Richards, it seems difficult to imagine (or represent) how poems refer to things outside the mind, or how reading poems might connect us with other minds. The analysis of a poem is a solitary process, conducted by a single eye that also stands in for the first-person singular "I" of the reader. It is the history of this reader that matters to the poem; the history of the poem survives for Richards only in this reader.

Double Reading "A Musical Instrument"

Yet in the longer history of reading this poem by Robert Browning, there is more than meets the eye. In the minds of many readers, one of those

little arrows in the Richards diagram points to other poems about Pan, especially the series of Pan poems written by Browning’s late wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (EBB).⁸ His description of Pan as “half-god half-brute” recalls her description of this classical figure: “Yet half a beast is the great god Pan,” from “A Musical Instrument,” published by EBB in *Cornhill Magazine* and edited after her death by Robert Browning for *Last Poems* (Barrett Browning 1860, 1862). But EBB is more explicitly critical of Pan, as various feminist critics have observed (e.g., Chapman 2003; Hurst 2015; Leighton 1992; Mermin 1989; Morlier 1999). While his poem is framed as an aesthetic form that represses a story of sexual violence by performing a poetic redaction, her poem tells the painful story of aesthetic mediation as a history of sexual violence. Her classical pretext is Ovid rather than Virgil, as “A Musical Instrument” takes over some lines from the *Metamorphoses* to reimagine the transformation of another innocent maiden who has fallen into Pan’s rapacious embrace—not Luna but Syrinx.

The story is familiar, but I will rehearse it quickly as a prelude to reading “A Musical Instrument.” Ovid’s Syrinx is an elusive wood nymph pursued by Pan; she runs to the bank of a river, where she appeals to her sisters the water nymphs to change her form (*ut se mutarent*). The Latin verb *mutare* is the cue for her mutation into a river reed, and so, “when Pan thought that he had at last caught hold of Syrinx, he found that instead of the nymph’s body he held a handful of marsh reeds. As he stood, sighing, the wind blew through the reeds and produced a thin plaintive sound” (Ovid 1955: 47–48).⁹ This metamorphosis, a primal scene of music making, is a topos in later poems, including “The Garden” by Andrew Marvell (1978), who describes how “*Pan* did after *Syrinx* speed, / Not as a Nymph, but for a Reed” (ll. 31–32), or “Hymn of Pan” by Percy Bysshe Shelley (2002), who begins by celebrating the “sweet pipings” of the god (l. 5) but ends by questioning this identification:

⁸ On “Pan and Luna” as a response to the Pan poems of EBB, see, e.g., Davies 2006 and Hair 1974. On poetic interchange between the Brownings, see also Davies and Stone 2006, Pollock 2003, and Sullivan 1987.

⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.703–8: “Hic illam, cursum impredientibus undis, / ut se mutarent liquidas orasse sorores; / Panaque cum prensam sibi iam Syringa putaret, / corpore pro nymphae calamos tenuisse palustres, / dumque suspirat, motos in harundine ventos / effecisse sonum tenuem similemque querenti” (Ovid 2004).

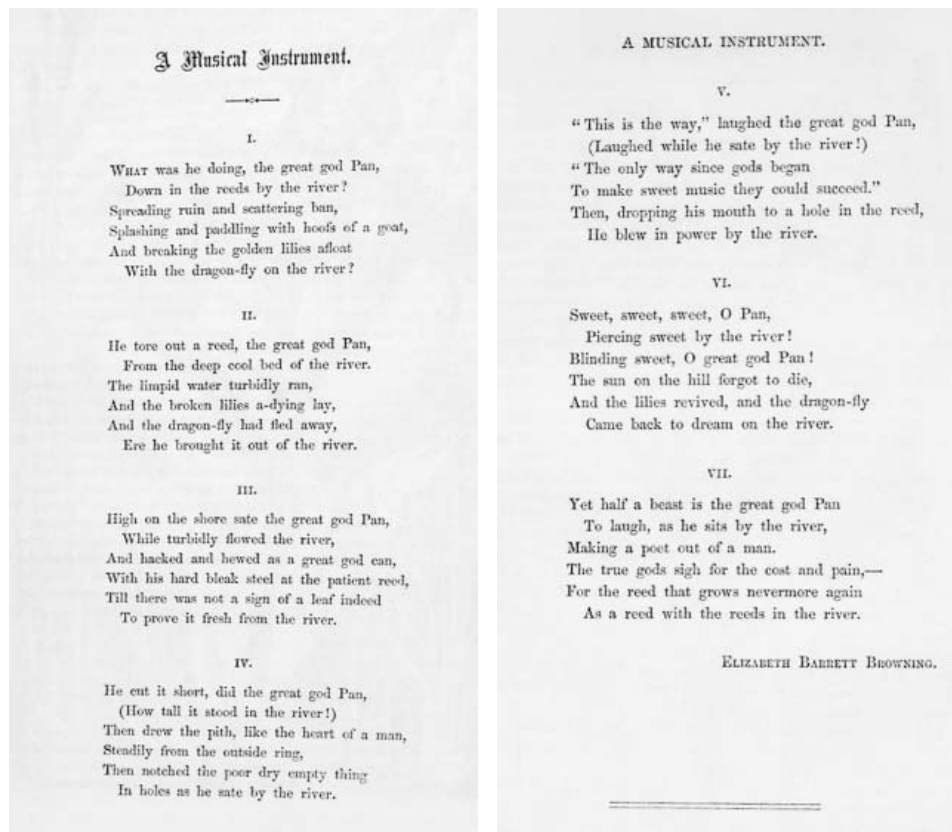


Figure 2. “A Musical Instrument,” by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. From *Cornhill Magazine* (1860)

I pursued a maiden and clasped a reed.
Gods and men, we are all deluded thus!
It breaks in our bosom and then we bleed.
(ll. 31–33)

Both poems reflect on the ambivalent desires of, and for, the nymph to be transformed, as a figure for the sublimation of the body into song and its transfiguration into a poetic corpus that can be read.

Both poems are also important intertexts for “A Musical Instrument,” in which EBB reflects further on the damage done by this metamorphosis (fig. 2). Rather than identify with the god, however, her poem plays out an identification with his musical instrument that emphasizes the destructive violence implicit in Pan’s creative impulse. Her poem alternates between imagining the god’s musical powers and the painful suffering of his “patient reed”: “he tore out a reed” from the river (stanza 2); “hacked and hewed as a great god can” (stanza 3); “cut it

short,” “drew the pith,” and “notched the poor dry empty thing” (stanza 4). Finally, stanza 7 moralizes about the “cost and pain” of this transformation, making the name of the great god Pan synonymous, almost rhyming, with pain. He is a questionable figure in an antipastoral poem that interrogates the limit of pastoral conventions, as announced by the question that opens the first stanza: “What was he doing, the great god Pan / Down in the reeds by the river?” (ll. 1–2). The punctuation at the end of that stanza (a question mark in the first publication of the poem in *Cornhill Magazine*, later changed to a period) opens up a double reading of Pan’s poiesis: is he doing or undoing the poetics of pastoral poetry?¹⁰

The first publication of EBB’s disturbing poem included an illustration by Frederic Leighton that makes Pan look sinister, even diabolical (fig. 3). In this engraving he is a phallic figure, “half a beast,” as described by EBB, with hairy goat legs and split hooves and two small horns on his head, but also long delicate fingers caressing the panpipes as he is poised at the moment of making music, breathing into the instrument to give new life to the reeds that he has cut out of the river. Although he appears in a serene pastoral setting (at the top of the illustration there are sheep on the distant horizon), he



Figure 3. Engraving by Frederic Leighton for “A Musical Instrument.” From *Cornhill Magazine* (1860)

¹⁰ As noted by Rowena Fowler and editors of the recent scholarly edition of the complete works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “With a period here [at the end of the first stanza], the previous lines are the answer to the opening question; a question mark here would indicate that even with this more detailed activity, the question remains open” (Barrett Browning 2010: 59).

is also creating a disturbance in nature: at the bottom the reeds cut off midstem in midstream are visual evidence that the goat-god has done exactly what EBB writes in the first stanza:

What was he doing, the great god Pan,
Down in the reeds by the river?
Spreading ruin and scattering ban,
Splashing and paddling with hoofs of a goat,
And breaking the golden lilies afloat
With the dragon-fly on the river?

In the engraving it is possible to see one lily left in the water and a dragonfly just leaving the scene it has witnessed, the violation of nature being also a scene of sexual violence.

There is a long iconographic and indeed pornographic tradition around the figure of Pan and the history of writing about Pan (Boardman 1998), but “A Musical Instrument” marks a turning point in Victorian readings of this figure: the poem by EBB “not only says a great deal about Pan that had scarcely been said before, but does so in vivid phrasing and a compulsively memorable meter that have combined to make it an anthology piece for the widest reading public” (Merivale 1969: 83). The poem also became a popular recitation piece, compulsively memorized in the nineteenth century and beyond: T. S. Eliot liked to walk around his house reciting the final stanza, and “A Musical Instrument” was featured by Ted Hughes in *By Heart: 101 Poems to Remember*. Hughes’s (1997: xiii) introduction defends the practice of memorizing poems by combining “conscious use of visual imagination” with “another kind of imagination”:

Without conscious effort, what then comes to our help is musical or audial memory. In many people, the audial memory is much stronger than the visual. It is wide open to any distinct pattern of sounds. It likes such patterns, and has an extraordinary ability to hang on to them whether we want them or not—as with musical melodies. The closest thing to a musical melody in a line of verse is the pattern of sounds made by the sequence of syllables. That pattern includes rhythm and overall inflection along with the alternation of vowels and consonants. The stronger the pattern is, the more memorable the line will be.

To demonstrate the persistence of the musical imagination in poetry, it is no accident that “A Musical Instrument” is printed as poem 101, the last

in the Hughes anthology. The final lines of the EBB poem resonate with, and perhaps even allegorize, his prescription for the memorization of poetry through the conscious conversion of a visual emblem into auditory memory: “For the reed which grows nevermore again / As a reed with the reeds in the river” (ll. 41–42). With its pith (or heart) cut out by Pan, the reed becomes an instrument for double reading, inviting the reader to reincorporate the music of the poem by learning to recite it by heart.

Hughes went on to record his own recitation of the poem in an audiobook to accompany his anthology. As another way of playing the poem by heart, this recording uses sound reproduction technology to turn his voice into the musical instrument of “A Musical Instrument.” There are many effects we may recognize as characteristic features of “the voice of Ted Hughes,” as he plays with the sound patterns that make the poem memorable for him: his pronunciation of vowels and consonants to create various kinds of assonance and dissonance, his inflection of “the great god Pan” at the beginning of each stanza to suggest subtle variations of meaning, his reiteration of “river” twice in each stanza to suggest the rhythmic flow of a refrain. In reclaiming the musical melody of this poem as he remembers it (in his “audial memory”), Hughes is also making a larger claim about the merits of memorizing poetry, as announced in the blurb to his audiobook: “What has happened to the lost art of learning poetry by heart? Why do we no longer feel that it is necessary to memorize some of the most beautiful poems in the language? In *By Heart* Ted Hughes has collected together 101 poems that are both personal favorites and particularly suited to his own method of memorizing.” By collecting and recollecting his favorite poems for this sound recording, Hughes becomes the mouthpiece for modern nostalgia about a nineteenth-century culture of recitation and the cult of “the memorized poem” (Robson 2012: 2).

But anyone who listens to the sound track of Hughes reciting “A Musical Instrument” will be stopped in her tracks, as I was, by the realization that stanza 6 has been cut out of the recording. Was it lost in a splice? Did Hughes forget to recite this part of the poem? Like Pan, he cuts it short. What he recites “by heart” is missing the musical heart of the poem, the moment when it imitates the sound of the panpipe:

Sweet, sweet, sweet, O Pan,
 Piercing sweet by the river!
 Blinding sweet, O great god Pan!

In these lines, which Hughes leaves unheard, we might hear an echo of John Keats's (1982) famous lines from "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter: therefore, ye soft pipes, play on,
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.

For Keats, sweet melodies heard by ear are surpassed by soft pipes playing on pleasingly "not to the sensual ear." But for EBB, Pan's music is "piercing" and "blinding" sweet, painfully splitting the ear by cutting up the meter of the poem with a repetition of "sweet, sweet, sweet" that loses the sense of sweetness in the (non)sound of the caesura: a metrical effect reminiscent of "break, break, break" in Tennyson. This is not a moment when music transcends poetry but another disarticulation of voice by meter, making the line difficult to pronounce. Perhaps this is why Hughes forgot to recite the stanza, or decided not to, repressing the problem posed by metrical reading when it assumes a speaking voice as its instrument of articulation.

The Ebb of Sound

Instead, we might say that the musical instrument of the poem is the meter itself, as any Victorian reader would have recognized, especially George Saintsbury (1910) in his sweeping *History of English Prosody*.¹¹ Although Saintsbury hated the "horrible and heartrending cacophonies of rhyme" in EBB's poetry, he praised the "increasing variety and intricacy of audible delight" in her prosody as "instruments of accomplished art" (301), and he singled out "A Musical Instrument" as "her very highest attainment, perhaps, in poetry" (248). Indeed, to demonstrate its "flawless music," he remembered the very stanza that Hughes later forgot (fig. 4). Stanza 6 is reprinted in a footnote, with lines divided into

¹¹ On Saintsbury as an important figure in late Victorian discourses about meter, see Hall 2011, Hurley 2010, Martin 2012, and Prins 1999.

she had never before attained such
flawless music as in “A Musical Instrument” itself.¹

¹ Sweet, | sweet, | sweet, | O Pan !
Pier|cing sweet | by the riv|er !
Blind|ing sweet, | O great | god Pan !
The sun | on the hill | forgot | to die,
And the lil|ies revived, | and the drag|on-fly
Came back | to dream | on the riv|er.

I hope it is not necessary to add the exquisite final stanza—her very highest attainment, perhaps, in poetry.

Figure 4. George Saintsbury, footnote on “A Musical Instrument.” From *A History of English Prosody* (1910)

feet, as a script for metrical performance that appeals as much to the eye as to the ear. These bars illustrate how the first three feet of the stanza are cut short; or, if we were doing beat prosody instead of foot scansion, we could imagine virtual offbeats at each comma in the first line and a virtual (or unrealized) beat at the end of the second line. As an effect of silent reading, these rhythmic cuts denaturalize the music of the poem, reminding us that its seemingly natural flow (figured by the river) is metrically mediated by a series of artificially measured intervals. While stanza 6 creates nostalgia for a “lyric” moment forever suspended in the present tense (a temporal suspension of the sun that forgets to die, the revival of the broken lilies, and the dragonfly returning to dream on the river), this desire for song is interrupted in stanza 7 by the very act of reading the poem, turning the reed cut out of the river into denatured sound, “the reed which grows nevermore again / As a reed with the reeds in the river.”

The act of writing the poem also involved various forms of cutting, as we see in EBB’s drafts of the poem.¹² “A Musical Instrument” was composed not as a spontaneous musical expression but in lines laboriously revised and excised on the page. Figure 5 shows a partial draft in messy handwriting, especially interesting in the revision of lines 3–6 in stanza 1 at the top of the first page. The description of Pan “doing” or “making

¹² I thank Rowena Fowler for sharing with me her research on drafts of “A Musical Instrument.”

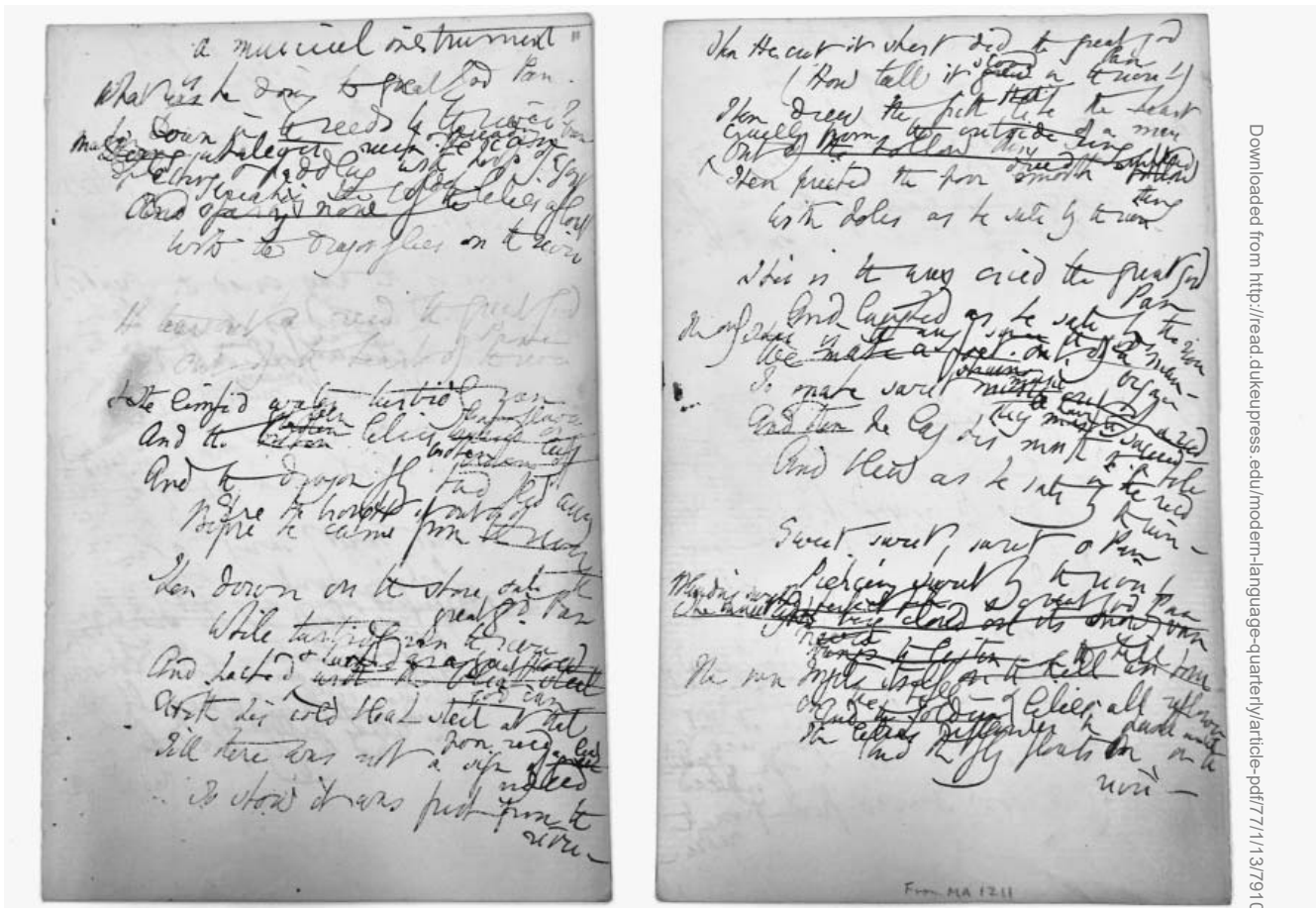


Figure 5. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, drafts of “A Musical Instrument.” Courtesy of The Morgan Library and Museum, New York

whatever ruin he can” ultimately turns into “spreading ruin and scattering ban,” and the line “sparing none of the lilies afloat” is crossed out and revised into a more active form of disruption, “breaking the golden lilies afloat.” Both metrically and thematically, in form and in content, the central action is breaking, repeated again and again, as if the poem itself had become “the patient reed” that must be patiently read: not spoken aloud but broken up in written form. Beginning with “he cut it short,” stanza 4 at the top of the second page emphasizes the violence of this act in the adverb “cruelly” (later replaced with “steadily”) and cuts out the word “smooth” in revising the description of the reed from “poor smooth hollow thing” to “poor dry empty thing.” And in stanza 6 the description of Pan’s music as “piercing sweet” is underscored and

crossed out with dark black lines that disrupt the flow of the verse, making it look discontinuous.

The music of “A Musical Instrument” is predicated on many forms of interruption, marked in the meter and in the writing of the poem, and sometimes made legible in printed marks as well, such as the punctuation and typographical arrangement of the poem in *Cornhill Magazine* (fig. 2). For example, the comma in the first line cuts out a space for the metrical caesura between “What was he doing” and “the great god Pan,” and the numbering of the stanzas is another kind of metrical effect. The parentheses in stanzas 4 and 5 undercut the narrative continuity of the poem (“how tall it stood in the river!” and “laughed while he sate by the river”), and in stanza 5 the combination of enjambed and end-stopped lines (“The only way, since gods began / To make sweet music, they could succeed” [ll. 27–28]) breaks up the musical flow as well. But perhaps the most dramatically end-stopped line is in stanza 7, cut off by the dash after “pain,” as if the reed that once stood tall in the river had been graphically altered from a vertical into a horizontal mark. It is also worth remarking the two parallel lines at the bottom of the page, another visual detail that turns EBB’s poem into a graphic form to be seen and not heard: a double bar marking the end of Pan’s barbaric music but also underscoring the transformation of “A Musical Instrument” into a poem for circulation in print. Broken up into stanzas composed in tetrameter and trimeter lines, with “the river” as a repeating refrain, the poem plays on the reinvention of ballads in nineteenth-century print culture.¹³ But if the poem looks as if it should sound like a ballad, it is also classicizing the literary fiction of popular song and making it into a classical figure for the music of poetry. Indeed, its variation on ballad meter could almost be scanned in hexameter at times, as in the first two lines of the poem: “*What* was he *doing* the *great* god *Pan*, down in the *reeds* by the *river*?”

That opening question is ultimately addressed to the reader: instead of asking what Pan was doing in the reeds, we might ask ourselves what we are doing in reading this poem. Do we read it in silence or out loud, as a poem for the eye or for the ear? If we recognize the “sweet, sweet, sweet”

¹³ On the transmission of ballads in print and the importance of print format, see McGill forthcoming, one of a cluster of essays on ballads written by members of the historical poetics group and edited by Michael Cohen for *Nineteenth-Century Literature*.

sound of Pan's pipe as an echo of Tennyson's "break, break, break," we repeat a metrical break that simultaneously creates and interrupts the music of EBB's poem, leaving us to wonder if "A Musical Instrument" is a poetic figure for music or a musical figure for poetry. Either way, to read her poem is to replay the painful violence of a sweet melody—"blinding" sweet, piercing the eyes as well as the ears—that cannot be heard. The sublimation of this violent rupture into musical rapture is precisely what EBB was calling into question, and what Robert Browning was recalling in "Pan and Luna," repeating another story about Pan to wonder about what was left unspoken: "The myth / Explain who may!" In different ways, both poets were asking how to tell the story of a poem's mediation.

This is part of the longer history of Victorian poetry that Richards is asking readers to forget, in order to tell a different story about reading in the present tense. In diagramming "one verse of five words" from Robert Browning as a model for "The Analysis of a Poem," his chapter reduces the complex dialogue between the Brownings to a single line with a new legend attached, as we have seen in figure 1: the eye scanning the page produces an "auditory verbal image" and an "articulatory verbal image" in the mind's eye that takes the place of metrical analysis. Indeed, Richards is inventing another kind of visual prosody, no less idiosyncratic than the musical notation of Lanier or the metrical theories of other nineteenth-century prosodists but perhaps more recognizable to twentieth-century readers. As Richards (2001: 127) writes in his next chapter, "Rhythm and Meter," these elements of poetry are internalized so that the "effect is not due to our perceiving a pattern in something outside us, but to our becoming patterned ourselves." The poem is thus presented—made present in—the mind that perceives it, as an abstracted musical form: a "lyric."

Poetics of Parody

Given the critique of Pan's music in "A Musical Instrument," it is remarkable how often EBB's poem is invoked as a model for musical versification, and increasingly toward the end of the nineteenth century. Shortly after her death a review of "Mrs. Browning's Last Poems" quoted the poem in its entirety to demonstrate that her later poetry was more

“harmonious” than the “distorted versification” of her early writing, and therefore more memorable: “These verses are probably known to many of our readers, but their rare excellence is such that, in our opinion, they cannot be too often quoted” (*Critic* 1862). Likewise the *British Quarterly Review* (1861: 350) insisted that EBB’s last poems “betokened an increasing mastery over her beautiful art,” especially in “A Musical Instrument”: “Never was Pagan god brought more clearly or delightfully before the fancy than Pan amongst the Reeds.” A more critical review, one that finds her last poems “disfigured by many instances of extreme harshness” because “she abuses poetic license by violent and rugged transposition,” nevertheless concludes that her poetic “genius” finds perfect expression in “A Musical Instrument”: “There, by an analogy finely conceived and powerfully sustained, is taught the truth that only through suffering can the poet learn ‘that which he teaches in song’” (*London Quarterly Review* 1863).

A decade later the American critic E. C. Stedman quoted the poem to transform EBB into the very embodiment of her own musical figure. According to Stedman (1875: 114, 122), “her whole being was rhythmic,” revived in the rhythms of “A Musical Instrument” where “for a moment, indeed, as she sang a melody of the pastoral god, her ‘sun on the hill forgot to die, / And the lilies revived, and the dragon-fly / Came back to dream on the river.’” Hiram Corson (1895) went even farther to praise the poem as a musical allegory with “mystical meaning” that he discovered already in the title of the poem: “It is more fitting that the title should bear on the figure which is carried out than on what is figured” (259). To ward off any doubts about what Pan might have been doing in the reeds, Corson insisted on a highly idealized reading in the form of a rhetorical question: “What do the reeds represent but musical (or poetical) capability?” (260). According to Corson, “Poetic genius . . . must be taken ‘out of the river’” and “the potential poet, symbolized by the reed, has been lifted by his spiritual affinities ‘high’ above the turbulent current, and is there being prepared for his divine apostleship. This preparation is symbolized by the hacking and hewing to which the reed is subjected” (261). This reading goes well beyond assuming EBB to be the subject (or embodiment) of her own poem, in order to read the reed as the symbol for any “potential poet,” and the poem as the symbol for the potentiality of all poetry.

The invocation of “A Musical Instrument” as an exemplary lyric was most clearly articulated by the English essayist and poet A. C. Benson. To the question that begins the poem, Benson (1896: 224) gives a resounding answer:

What was he doing, the great god Pan, down in the reeds by the river? The splendid shock of the rhythm, like the solid plunge of a cataract into a mountain-pool, captivates, for all its roughness, the metrical ear. There is not a word or a thought too much: the scene shapes itself, striking straight out into the thought; the waste and horror that encircle the birth of the poet in the man; the brutish elements out of which such divinity is compounded—these are flung down in simple, delicate outline: such a lyric is an eternal possession of the English language.

According to Benson, “the splendid shock of the rhythm” appeals to “the metrical ear” to open the mind’s eye to the scene, “striking straight out into the thought”: a striking description indeed, in which the violence of the poem—what is shocking, captivating, rough, striking, brutish, and flung down—is transferred from its content to its form and then transmuted into a “simple, delicate outline.” Through this act of lyric reading, the poem becomes an eternal lyric to memorize and (mis)remember, as in Hughes’s *101 Poems to Remember*.

But the lyricization of “A Musical Instrument” also opens it up to parody, as we see in a late Victorian caricature by Harry Furniss (1887: 20). Included in his “artistic joke” on paintings at the Royal Academy is a comic sketch with a poem titled “The Origin of Pan. *A Musical Instrument*. (After Mrs. Browning.)” (fig. 6). Her poem about Pan is represented here as the origin of a series of bad imitations, as Furniss replays the meter of “A Musical Instrument” in a clever parody:

What is he doing, this crookshank’d Pan,
Down in the reeds by the river?
You’re welcome the puzzle to solve—if you can.

Transposing the past tense (“What was he doing?”) into the more prosaic present (“What is he doing?”), Furniss mocks Pan as a model for modern poetry and art:

He’s classic-contorted, this nondescript Pan,
In the startled reeds by the river;
And therefore he’s built on the neo-Greek plan.



Model (*loquitur*): "Oh! what a relief!"

No. 20.

THE ORIGIN OF PAN.

A Musical Instrument.

(After Mrs. Browning.)

What is he doing, this crookshank'd Pan,
Down in the reeds by the river?
You're welcome the puzzle to solve—if you can.
Just fancy him stroke in an Oxford boat,
This mixture of athlete, and Pan-pipe, and goat,
What a charm he'd lend to the river!

He's classic-contorted, this nondescript Pan,
In the startled reeds by the river;
And therefore he's built on the neo-Greek plan.
An artist who's bent on the mystical lay
Could hardly do better, at this time of day,
To give one the neo-Greek shiver.

"This is the way," laughs the great god Pan
(Laughs as he sits by the river),
"The only way, since *renaissance* began,
To prevent a poor god being left on the shelf:
How can one do better than *puffing one's self*?
And he puffs, as he squats by the river.

This picture will be recognised at once as what may be called "a disappointment." There is lots of muscle in it, but little mind. It is "muscular paganism." Academical anatomy gives it its subject, cheap classicality its *raison d'être*, modern poetry its name. Bell, *plus* Lemprière, *plus* Browning. "What's in a name?" indeed. Why, a great deal. It makes all the difference between an anatomical diagram and a popular picture. *This* is a popular picture. The raw material thereof is seen above.

Figure 6. Harry Furniss, "The Origin of Pan." From *Harry Furniss's Royal Academy: An Artistic Joke* (1887)

His ironic description of “this nondescript Pan” in a contorted neo-classical pose makes explicit the distortion of a classical ideal implicit in EBB’s poem. Furniss’s Pan is a crude subject for “an artist who’s bent on the mystical lay,” a double entendre that plays out the sexual innuendo of the panpipe and makes its music into a good lay “to give one the neo-Greek shiver.” The third and final stanza of the parody erupts in laughter, again turning the past tense of EBB’s poem into the present tense—“‘This is the way,’ laughs the great god Pan / (Laughs as he sits by the river)” —to emphasize the self-mockery of a modern Pan, “*puffing one’s self*” as a pseudoclassical god for artists and poets to imitate.

Along with his poem Furniss published a sketch of Pan, who appears to be taking a break from his classical pose to advertise himself as an artist’s model: he holds up a calling card with his name and address, and in the caption below the picture we read: “Model (*loquitur*): ‘Oh! what a relief!’” It would seem that ventriloquizing “A Musical Instrument,” with its burden of poetic allegory, is too much of a strain for this modern Pan, as Furniss goes on to gloss his parody: “This picture will be recognised at once as what may be called ‘a disappoiner.’ There is lots of muscle in it, but little mind. It is ‘muscular paganism.’ Academical anatomy gives it its subject, cheap classicality its *raison d’être* [*sic*], modern poetry its name. Bell *plus* Lemprière, *plus* Browning. ‘What’s in a name?’ indeed. Why, a great deal. It makes all the difference between an anatomical diagram and a popular picture. *This* is a popular picture.” From Leighton’s hypermasculine illustration of Pan to the queerly effeminate picture by Furniss, this parody exposes the generic conventions that have made Pan legible as a figure for “academical anatomy,” “cheap classicality,” and “modern poetry.” Assuming that it “will be recognised at once” by his readers, Furniss presents his parody as a model for generic reading: whether we read this representation as “anatomical diagram” or “popular picture” depends not on how it is seen in the mind’s eye (as in a Richards diagram) but on what others choose to name it (“‘What’s in a name?’ indeed. Why, a great deal”). And just to make sure that we do recognize his parody, Furniss provides a popular picture for broad circulation.

What we see in this parody, “After Mrs. Browning,” in other words, is a process of generic recognition by means of which Victorian poetry was read and circulated in the nineteenth century. The popularity of such

poetic parodies by the end of the century, published in periodicals and reprinted in popular anthologies by Carolyn Wells and others, is a logical extension of nineteenth-century reading practices predicated on the continual interaction and transformation of historically specific poetic genres. As Carolyn Williams (2012: 12) observes, “Parody is a primary mode of genre formation, for new genres are never entirely new, but emerge from the assimilation and critique of older genres.” And of course parody was not the only mode of genre formation at work in nineteenth-century verse culture, as generic recognition is also at stake in the reworking of pastoral and ballad conventions by EBB, or in nineteenth-century discourses about meter and music, or in the mediation of voice in print, or in various practices of recitation, memorization, illustration, and anthologization. My version of historical poetics therefore depends on thinking more about genre, whereas critics oriented toward transhistorical poetics might depend on particular concepts like “technique” or more abstract concepts like “form.”¹⁴ As even the brief readings I have offered here attest, genre was a malleable concept and a versatile aspect of any poet’s technique or any poem’s form. If we think of genre as a mode of recognition instantiated in discourse (Gitelman 2014: 2), then we need to think about the nineteenth-century discursive arrangements in which readers recognized and poets produced various verse genres, not because these arrangements provide “context” or “cultural history,” but precisely because such discursive arrangements made poems possible from the inside out. And finally, rather than ask, “What is historical?” or “What is poetics?,” we need to rethink our present assumptions about reading in order to ask “What *was* historical poetics?” at moments in history other than our own.

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¹⁴ For a recent defense of “form” in general for transhistorical reading, and a more specific reading of EBB’s prosody as a form of rhythm, see Levine 2015.

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