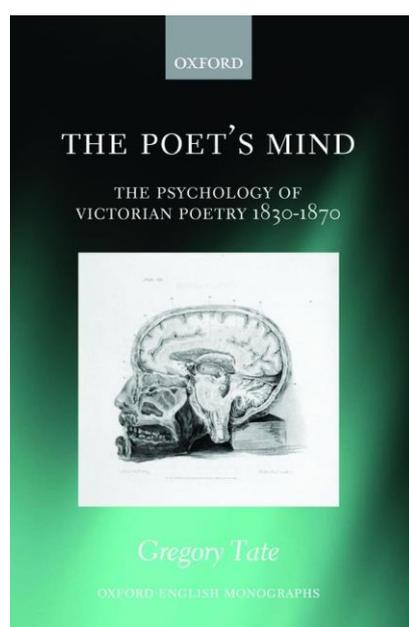


BOOK REVIEW

The Poet's Mind: The Psychology of Victorian Poetry 1830-1870, by Gregory Tate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). 214 pp. Hardback, £71.

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If, as Gregory Tate's poised and nuanced study argues, the 'self-scrutinizing stance and fragmented forms of Victorian poetry and the systematic analyses of psychologists often aim towards the same goal: the examination and explication of the processes of the mind', *The Poet's Mind* also makes clear that they are as often in tension as they are in convergence (p. 184). In chapters on Robert Browning, Tennyson, Arthur Hugh Clough and Matthew Arnold, and George Eliot's poetry, Tate outlines the various ways that poetic language was understood, and celebrated, as a particularly potent medium in which to register the questions raised by

associationist and physiological studies of psychology, which gained prominence in the mid-nineteenth century.

Connecting the chapters is the argument that 'the question of how the mind constructs and is constructed by poetry was perhaps the most important issue in nineteenth-century poetics' (p. 5), and as a result 'poetry of psychological analysis became one of the most influential poetic modes in Victorian Britain' (p. 3). While few would argue with the notion that the introspective impulse is writ large across nineteenth-century poetry, what Tate's book strongly brings out is a sense of the importance of the interaction between two kinds of discipline *qua* discipline: writing poetry and scientific theorising. A less sophisticated study might have been content to register the simple fact of exchange between, for instance, associationist psychology and spasmodic poetry, or Eliot's lesser-known poetry and the materialist psychology of her partner G. H. Lewes and Herbert Spencer. Yet Tate, for example, keeps in play, alongside the undeniable historical fact of Tennyson's interest in 'pre-Darwinian

evolutionary theories in the late 1820s', a sense of where and how the formal qualities of poetry might enable, resist, or render ambiguous, moments where these extra-poetic influences become perceptible (p. 44). This is particularly clear in Tate's reading of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850) and *Maud* (1855), in which he teases apart the ways '*In Memoriam* strives, through both its form and its language, to silence its unquiet heart and brain', and how nevertheless 'the psychological noise made by the brain, and by the body in general, remains audible throughout' (p. 94). For instance, the repeated metre and *abba* rhyme scheme allows the 'formal identity of the elegy's stanzas' to function 'to an extent as a "mechanic exercise" that soothes its speaker's mental upheaval', while at the same time the 'rhyme scheme reinforces more than it counteracts the poem's representation of a changing and self-doubting mind'. The result is a sense of 'simultaneous mutability and inertia' (p. 97). Tennyson's 'measured language' is, we are led to understand, a language of beats and rhythms which attempts to measure an unruly and decidedly unmeasured mind.

The Poet's Mind is full of well-observed zoomings-in on the cogs and gears of poems; seemingly banal or readily understandable words like 'brain', 'mind', 'heart', 'body', and 'soul' become more like Empsonian complex words. Tate ably tracks their usages and significations through a veritable thicket of semantic variability. Each chapter, though, progresses the overall argument. While never bogged down by the ambiguities he registers, this fine-grained approach helps to shape and complicate the broader claims of the chapters, and of the book as a whole. In brief, and far too broadly, the first chapter contends that Browning's and Tennyson's early poetry exhibits a tension between ideas of the embodied mind and a transcendental soul, at the levels of content, structure, and local syntax. Chapter two finds Matthew Arnold and Arthur Hugh Clough writing a decade later in close response to *The Spasmodics*, reflecting in their letters and poems on the dangers of the solipsism of the 'mind in dialogue with itself', and on the moral and aesthetic stakes of this kind of poetry. In the third chapter Tate closely reads *In Memoriam* and *Maud*, suggesting that in both long poems Tennyson is trying, in different ways, to work out how to find a place in poetry and the individual for both the soul and the brain, as well as how to figure (both in terms of understand and represent) the interactions and barriers between them. The fourth chapter juxtaposes the insistence on fragmentation discussed in the earlier chapters with George Eliot's view of poetry. For her, the technical and affective resources of poetry were ways of affirming, and rendering

coherent, a unity between mind and body not available to the experimental laboratory of prose fiction. In the penultimate chapter Tate explores how, in the closing decades of the study, Browning complicates the links between thought and physiological process, unsettling in different places the presumed priority of either. Questions of will, agency, and representation raised by the insights of materialist psychology are central, Tate argues, to understanding Browning's later work, and perceptible in the performed and often contradictory negotiations between embodied thought and metaphysical truth. Tate sees Browning searching for a moral way to bring together the insights of physicalist psychology with human intimations of spiritual transcendence. The conclusion briefly surveys poetry from the 1880s and 1890s, arguing that the mid-nineteenth century is interesting as a tipping point marking when the precursory theories and assumptions of modern psychology became integrated into poetic language, ultimately 'undermining [...] the barrier between rational thinking and poetic feeling' (p. 185).

While the remit of Tate's argument is to show the influence of associationist and materialist psychology on Victorian poetry's construction of the embodied mind, it nonetheless feels as though both Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (published posthumously in fourteen books in 1850) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) are given surprisingly short shrift in a book concerned with the psychology of mid-nineteenth-century poetry. Wordsworth and Elizabeth Browning may not have been *au fait* with the psychological theories which, Tate argues, so influenced the authors that have made it into the study. Yet a review of *The Prelude* from *The Eclectic Review* in 1850 points to similar anxieties around poetic solipsism, the new idea of epic interiority, and a sense of fragmentation:

We grant, then, to Wordsworth's detractors, that his eye was introverted, that he studied himself more profoundly than aught else but nature – that his genius was neither epic, nor lyric, nor dramatic – that he did not 'look abroad into universality' [...] But all this we look at as only a needful statement of his limitations; and we pity those who produce it for any other purpose. Future ages will be thankful that a formation so peculiar, has been so carefully preserved. The 'moods' of such a mind will be ranked with the dramas, lyrics, and epics of inferior poets. His monotony will be compared to that of the ocean surges, which break now on the shore to the same tune as they did the eve before the deluge. His

obscurities will appear jet black ornaments. His fragments will be valued as if they were bits of the ark.²⁶³

This perhaps points to a limitation of Tate's study: that Psychology as a particular phenomenon of scientific inquiry is both distinct from, and related to, psychology as a broader notion of an individual's inner life. It is a difficult word to pin down – indeed 'Psychological' is one of Raymond Williams's 'Keywords'. As he notes,

except in scientific uses, *psychological* does not normally express [...] the human mind as a whole. It indicates what is felt to be an area of the mind, which is primarily that of "feeling" rather than of 'reason' or 'intellect' or 'knowledge'. *Psychological reasons* are given, not usually because they are derived from *psychology* (except in its comparably extended sense of the understanding of the feelings or characters of others), but as a reference to this assumed area.²⁶⁴

This is, of course, no failing of Tate's work, but rather a function of the necessary boundedness of a monograph. Contributing to previous scholarly work on Victorian poetry's embodied-ness, such as that by Kirstie Blair and Jason Rudy,²⁶⁵ Tate's excellent study further textures and delineates our understanding of the relation of Victorian poetry to Victorian bodies; all the while, however, carefully tracking the dialectical obsession with *disembodied-ness*. Mid-nineteenth-century poetry, this study suggests, found considerable inspiration in figuring out how words on a page could both represent a material existence, and intimate a metaphysical or spiritual one; and recognise itself as a form which could register with special potency, in Tennyson's words, that 'damnèd vacillating state'.²⁶⁶

²⁶³ [Unsigned], "The Prelude", *Eclectic Review*, 28 (1850), 550-62. Collected in *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (London: Norton, 1979), pp. 547-50 (p. 549).

²⁶⁴ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1985 [1976]), pp. 246-47.

²⁶⁵ See Kirstie Blair, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and Jason Rudy, *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009).

²⁶⁶ Alfred Tennyson, 'Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind' (1832), collected in *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Routledge, 2014 [1969]), p. 12.

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