

REVIEWS

Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique: The Politics of Performative Language by Warwick Slinn. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2003. x, 217 pp. ISBN 0-8139-2166-X. \$39.50.

Victorian Keats: Manliness, Sexuality, and Desire by James Najarian. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. x, 240 pp. ISBN 0-333-98583-4. \$69.95.

Two recent books offer evidence that, as we pursue the complex interlacing of literature and cultural politics, Victorian poetry offers rich fields for exertion. Warwick Slinn demonstrates the ways that poems lay bare the ideological structures of language and meaning in their particular historical frames, and James Najarian traces the filiations of Keats's legacy with the Victorian culture of homophilia and the ways men thought about desire and creativity. Both Slinn and Najarian are interested in cultural history in its larger contours, but the heart of both is with the literary; their books are alive to the shifting, nuanced meanings of poetry under criticism.

Warwick Slinn's *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique* offers five excellent, strenuous readings as examples of a fresh way of thinking about what poetry has to do with cultural ideologies and practices. For too long, Slinn argues, cultural critics have paid scant attention to Victorian poetry, finding it "too self-enclosed in its formalist processes" to have much bearing on social structures. Indeed, those who have thrown a poem or two into their studies of Victorian contexts have often gone straight for the visible theme or content of the work, rendering it down from shapely, subtle verse to plain text. This book means to make considerations of linguistic form indispensable to political interpretative procedures, and thus poetry takes pride of place.

Rather than simply either reflecting or challenging the way things are, Slinn argues, poems have the special virtue of exposing (via their formal and rhetorical procedures) discourses for *what* they are: historically-contingent language games masquerading as Truth. It turns out that dramatic monologues are particularly fruitful objects of study along these lines, since such poems "reproduce verbal social behavior" within the self-conscious structures of verse, producing an alienation effect that is the precondition of critique. In this sense, Slinn has relocated Langbaum's famous sympathy-and-judgement ratio from the dramatic monologue's speaker to the surrounding cultural world, finding that the most interesting Victorian poems "enact, in terms of social context, an ongoing interplay or unresolved dialectic of reciprocation and alienation": they mirror Victorian culture in ways that reveal the discursive systems and ideological assumptions of that culture.