

The Electric Poetess

ROBINSON, HEMANS, AND THE CHARGE OF ROMANTICISM

Striking the electric chain wherewith we are darkly bound[.]

—Byron, *Childe Harold* (1818)

IT WAS ELECTRICITY'S SEEMING UNIVERSALITY OF EXPERIENCE that, from the beginning, most inspired eighteenth-century thinkers. Electrical shocks affected everyone, regardless of age, sex, race, or class. In sentiments echoed by many of his contemporaries, for example, Joseph Priestley writes in his *History and Present State of Electricity* (first edition, 1767) that “the electric fluid is no local, or occasional agent in the theatre of the world. Late discoveries show that its presence and effects are every where, and that it acts a principal part in the grandest and most interesting scenes of nature. It is not, like magnetism, confined to one kind of bodies, but every thing we know is a conductor or non-conductor of electricity” (Priestley, 1:xiv). Richard Lovett makes a similar claim in his 1774 *Electric Philosopher*: “The electric fluid . . . appears to be a universal agent in the strictest sense, so



as to occupy and fill all space, not only all free and open spaces, but the minutest vacuities and interstices or powers of the most compact and solid bodies” (quoted in Ritterbush, 18). Historians of science have shown how Enlightenment thinkers turned to electricity to support universalizing ideals in everything from metaphysical philosophy to political theory. Benjamin Franklin’s electric experiments, for example, were linked in Britain and France to his democratic politics and the founding of the United States (Riskin, 134–36; Fulford, Lee, and Kitson, 179–97).¹ Thomas Simmons Mackintosh’s *“Electrical Theory” of the Universe*, a faux-scientific treatise from 1838, represents the general opinion among the British public, consistent into the early Victorian period, in its endorsement of “ONE UNIVERSAL LAW, that shall comprehend every action and re-action, both physical and moral” (Mackintosh, 5). Employing a language of vibration dating back to David Hartley’s 1749 *Observations on Man*, Mackintosh proposes electricity as the governing force behind practically everything in the universe:

The unity of this universal science will be rendered still more evident if we further consider, that the motion of all inanimate matter, of atoms, worlds, and systems of worlds, is due to the action and re-action of the ultimate forces of attraction and repulsion, and that the motions or actions of all animated beings, of individuals, families, communities and nations, in short, *all animated nature*, is due to the action and reaction of the same ultimate and universal forces, through the sensations, a force of moral attraction being manifested towards such objects as give pleasure, and the moral repulsion towards such as give pain. (53; emphasis mine)

Electricity for Mackintosh links the moral to the physiological. In this utopian vision, electricity reveals the interconnectedness of all human beings, thereby supporting not only a hackneyed version of Romantic principles but also, as Iwan Rhys Morus has suggested, the socialist ideals that Mackintosh and others connected to the nascent Chartist movement of the 1830s (Morus, 135–38).

Whether poetic impulses could have a similarly universal effect remained a question, however. That is, could words rhythmically arranged on a page communicate with electrical universality? In her preface to *Sappho and Phaon*, her 1796 sonnet sequence, Mary Robinson—actress, novelist, poet, and

sometime consort to the Prince of Wales—suggests that “different minds are variously affected by the infinite diversity of harmonious effusions.” Nonetheless, Robinson continues, “there are, I believe, very few that are wholly insensible to the powers of poetic composition” (RSP, 147). Like the simultaneous shock felt by the monks connected in Nollet’s circuit (see introduction to the present volume), poetry is seen as forming communities through affective experience (Nollet had wondered at “the multitude of different gestures” taken on by his electrified monks but also “the instantaneous exclamation of those surprised” [quoted in Heilbron, 312]). Though distinct in their responses, both the monks and Robinson’s readers share a simultaneity of experience that links them in a network of feeling, a kind of “sociability,” as John Mullan puts it, “which is dependent upon the communication of passions and sentiments,” and which literary critics have long identified as characteristic of eighteenth-century writing (Mullan 1988, 2).²

Whereas Robinson emphasizes the potential in verse for communal experience, her contemporary Hannah More takes a more circumspect approach. More had at one time tutored the young Robinson, but as an advocate for political and cultural conservatism she came ultimately to “resent[] her connection with her old pupil,” the sensational and politically radical “Perdita,” as Robinson was called (Byrne, 8). In her 1786 poem “The Bas Blue,” More points to the limits of communal understanding while describing the “circulation” of “Conversation” among sympathetic thinkers within her intellectual set:

In taste, in learning, wit, or science,
 Still kindred souls demand alliance:
 Each in the other joys to find
 The image answering to his mind.
 But sparks electric only strike
 On souls electrical alike;
 The flash of intellect expires,
 Unless it meet congenial fires.

(More, 1:17)

Like the electricity that darts from hand to hand in Nollet’s circle, a “flash of intellect” connects the thinkers in More’s salon as ideas pass from one to



another. But More suggests a limited, less universal experience of her intellectual “sparks.” Whereas everyone experiences Nollet’s electric shock, only “kindred souls” will enjoy the sympathetic “alliance[s]” of More’s clique. More here aligns herself with the culturally conservative strain of eighteenth-century sensibility, those who believed, as G. J. Barker-Benfield observes, that “[d]egrees of sensibility . . . betokened both social and moral status”—that, for example, a man of high social standing would by nature exhibit a more powerful response to a scene of pain than an uneducated worker (Barker-Benfield, 9).

It is no coincidence that the poetics of sensibility emerged at roughly the same time scientists such as Nollet were publicizing their electrical experiments on the human body. Inspired by the influence of Locke and like-minded empiricists, both poets and scientists turned to sensory experience as the most reliable source of knowledge. Hume writes in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) that only through “feeling and sensation” can “an idea can have access to the mind” (Hume, 98). Poets and scientists of the late eighteenth century took this maxim to heart, engineering both literary works and scientific experiments that isolated the human body and its myriad feelings and sensations. But as the above passages from Robinson and More suggest, the question remained whether electrical and poetic effects would always act on individuals in the same way. Like any language, the effectiveness of poetry as a mode of communication depends at some level on the universality of its experience. Susan Stewart has written that, “[a]s metered language, language that retains and projects the force of individual sense experience and yet reaches toward intersubjective meaning, poetry sustains and transforms the threshold between individual and social existence” (Stewart, 2). In this chapter, I historicize the “threshold,” as Stewart describes it, “between individual and social existence” as it manifests in the decades leading up to the 1830s and the years of Victoria’s reign, using electricity as a figure through which to understand these interpersonal and aesthetic relations. After establishing a more concrete sense of electricity as it was understood at the turn of the nineteenth century, I will make two arguments about the nature of Romantic sensibility and its electric dispositions. First, using Mary Robinson as a model, I will suggest that British poetry at the turn of the nineteenth century offers readers dramatic portrayals of bodily feeling but not mimetic embodiments of physiological

experience. The accoutrements of sensibility—pulses, heartbeats, tears—figure prominently in Robinson’s poetry, but we are meant to use our thinking minds (as opposed to our feeling bodies) to sympathize with her various passionate tableaux. The second point concerns the role played by the electrical and physiological sciences in the Romantic distancing of “feeling” (understood as an abstract emotional state) from “sensation” (bodily experience). Felicia Hemans serves as a touchstone for this move away from the physiological, in which electricity becomes a figure for a kind of imaginative feeling that might supercede bodily sensation. For all their talk of bodily sensation, then, the practitioners of Romantic sensibility keep physiological experience firmly at the level of the discursive; only in subsequent years would poets embrace the affective potential in poetic form, and in rhythm specifically. Victorian poetry’s turn to the body, the subject of the chapters that follow, will be all the more palpable after examining the Romantics’ surprising resistance to a poetics of felt experience.

ROMANTIC ELECTRICITY

Scientific experiments seemed consistently to challenge a hierarchical view of sensibility, the belief that some are more affected by sensation than others. One especially provocative scene in the history of the electrical sciences, an experiment that might be seen as contesting the idea of nervous “refinement,” took place at the University of Glasgow on 4 November 1818, roughly six months after the publication of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Dr. Andrew Ure later delivered an account of the proceedings to the Glasgow Literary Society on 10 December 1818; his lecture was published the following year in the *Quarterly Journal of Science, Literature and the Arts*. As Ure recounts the event, the body of an executed murderer, having been “suspended from the gallows nearly an hour,” was brought to the “anatomical theatre” at the university, where Dr. Jeffray, “distinguished Professor of Anatomy,” was to perform a series of groundbreaking “galvanic experiments” (Ure, 288). A voltaic battery was charged in the theatre as the audience awaited the corpse. Upon its arrival, two incisions were made in the dead body: one at the nape of the neck, revealing the “spinal marrow”; another at the hip, accessing the sciatic nerve. Into each opening, Dr. Jeffray placed a “pointed rod” connected to one end of the charged battery, at which point “every muscle of the [dead man’s] body was immediately agitated with convulsive movements, resembling



a violent shuddering from cold.” Variations of the experiment proceeded: “On moving the second rod from the hip to the heel, the knee being previously bent, the leg was thrown out with such violence, as nearly to overturn one of the assistants, who in vain attempted to prevent its extension” (289).

The results of these first experiments would have been fairly predictable, following from the work of Luigi Galvani, who in 1791 had shown how electricity inspired muscular contractions in disembodied frog legs, and Alessandro Volta, who one year later had used whole frogs, both dead and alive, to show that electricity excites nerves, which subsequently provoke convulsions in muscles.³ Jeffray’s experiment also comes at the peak of what Sharon Ruston has called “the vitality debate,” stretching from 1814 to 1819, in which physicians such as John Abernethy speculated that electricity was the source of all life (Ruston, 43).⁴ Previous experiments, such as those performed by John Aldini on an executed criminal in 1803, had established that a dead human body would jerk spasmodically in response to electrical currents. Aldini was able to inspire movement that “almost . . . [gave] an appearance of re-animation” (Aldini, 9). But Jeffray’s work in 1818 was to move into frightening new territory. An electrical current applied to the left phrenic nerve (which, as Ure explains, connects to the diaphragm) inspired the contraction of the respiratory muscles, simulating breathing in the dead body: “Full, nay, laborious breathing, instantly commenced. The chest heaved, and fell; the belly was protruded, and again collapsed, with the relaxing and retiring diaphragm” (Ure, 290). Finally, an incision was made in the forehead, revealing the “supra-orbital nerve” and thereby facilitating the most striking experiment of the day: “The one conducting rod being applied to [the supra-orbital nerve], and the other to the heel, most extraordinary grimaces were exhibited every time that the electric discharges were made. . . . [T]hus fifty shocks, each greater than the preceding one, were given in two seconds: every muscle in his countenance was simultaneously thrown into fearful action; rage, horror, despair, anguish, and ghastly smiles, united their hideous expression in the murderer’s face, surpassing far the wildest representations of a Fuseli or a Kean” (290). Audience members were shocked by this progression of apparent emotional states through the body of a dead man: “At this period several of the spectators were forced to leave the apartment from terror or sickness, and one gentleman fainted” (290). Shortly after, the charge was applied to the man’s forefinger and the

corpse “seemed to point to the different spectators, some of whom thought he had come to life” (291).

Ure’s narrative, and especially the disgusted responses he recounts, reveals a handful of thoughts that make it a helpful anecdote. Dr. Jeffray’s experiments point to a certain ambivalence that accompanies early nineteenth-century ideas of electricity, an ambivalence that becomes especially clear when electricity and physiology (nerves, muscles) cross into the space of human feeling and sensibility. The ambivalence manifests specifically, in this example, when electricity inspires in the dead man what seem to be a variety of emotional states, including “rage, horror, despair, [and] anguish.” It is one thing to consider the mechanism of our muscular contractions and to understand that such mechanisms rely on electrical nerve impulses. It is quite another matter to think of human emotion itself as mechanical in nature. If a dead man may express horror or anguish in the same manner as a living human being, then what is to be thought of those feelings and sentiments we like to imagine as making us most human? Jeffray’s experiment hints that such feelings and sentiments may not be nearly as unique as they once might have seemed; flip the “anguish” switch through the supraorbital nerve, and a seemingly genuine display of anguish crosses the visage of the dead criminal. But the experiment is at least as provocative as it is horrifying. If the dead criminal might respond to electrical impulses, then perhaps thought, feeling, and emotion are simply hardwired into our own all-too-human (that is, mechanical) bodies. It may very well be that we are all, in various ways, merely conduits for electrical impulses.

Provocative, horrifying, or both, Dr. Jeffray’s experiments return us to the universality that Mackintosh and others located in electrical experience. Any one of us, were we so unfortunate as to be put in Dr. Jeffray’s anatomical theater, would respond similarly to his electric shocks—respond not only with muscular spasms, but also with expressions of great passion. That these signs of feeling are only an outward demonstration, a muscular response to electricity rather than an indication of genuine feeling, hardly matters to Jeffray’s audience. Ure compares the dead man’s passionate expressions to those presented by the painter Henry Fuseli and the actor Edmund Kean, with the passions inspired by electricity far exceeding anything invented by either artist or performer. That is to say, the dead man’s passions seem more real, more genuine, than anything that could be achieved



via aesthetic representation, even though we know that the apparent emotions of the criminal are purely physiological and bear no relation to anything the dead man may once have felt or thought. Electricity in Dr. Jeffray's laboratory thus seems to function as a vehicle for feeling itself, not simply the muscular representation of feeling. This understanding of electricity-as-vehicle is what Percy Shelley had in mind when referring in 1821 to "the electric life which burns within [the] words" of the "more celebrated writers of the present day"; it is the "electric" quality of poetry that converts mere language into something greater, the compositions that make poets unacknowledged legislators of the world (Shelley, 7:140). Whereas Hannah More insists that "sparks electric only strike / On souls electrical alike," Dr. Jeffray's experiment indicates that this simply is not true. At issue with the dead criminal is not the "soul" or the intellect, but the physical body: nerves and muscle tissue, components common to all human beings.

In its play on the physical human body, Jeffray's electricity functions outside the realm of intellect. When one moves from the scientist's corpse to living human beings, the Romantic electric shock works primarily as extralingual affect, comprehended—like the shocks of Nollet's monks—through sensory experience ("sensation"), which is then translated, unconsciously, into emotion ("feeling"). Byron suggests something of the nature of this progress while meditating on the process of grief in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (Canto IV, published in 1818):

23.

But ever and anon of griefs subdued
 There comes a token like a scorpion's sting,
 Scarce seen, but with fresh bitterness imbued;
 And slight withal may be the things which bring
 Back on the heart the weight which it would fling
 Aside for ever: it may be a sound—
 A tone of music,—summer's eve—or spring—
 A flower—the wind—the ocean—which shall wound,
 Striking the electric chain wherewith we are darkly bound;

24.

And how and why we know not, nor can trace
 Home to its cloud this lightning of the mind,

But feel the shock renew'd, nor can efface
 The blight and blackening which it leaves behind,
 Which out of things familiar, undesign'd,
 When least we deem of such, calls up to view
 The spectres whom no exorcism can bind,
 The cold—the changed—perchance the dead—afew,
 The mourn'd, the loved, the lost—too many!—yet how few!
 (Byron, 2:132, lines 199–216)

According to Byron, we know not what will trigger the “sting” of grief, but it is most often inspired by sensory experience: the sound of music, the feel of wind, the sight or smell of a flower. Whatever it is connects us instantaneously, through the “electric chain wherewith we are darkly bound,” back to the original experience of loss. This chain is simultaneously a link between each individual and sensory experience, and a link among all human individuals: we all experience music, summer’s eve, and the wind, and are thereby “bound” together, even if consciously “we know not” the details of this fundamental connectivity. Byron suggests subtly, through the off-rhyme of “sound,” “wound,” “bound,” that there may be an imperfect connection between sensory experience and emotional affect. But there can be no question that our emotional feelings are “bound” necessarily to our physiological experiences, just as human individuals are connected with one another, imperfectly or not.

Sensibility is the term that, from the mid-1700s through the early nineteenth century, best articulates the physiological and affective experiences described above as “electric.” But within this electric sensibility rests a contradiction, or at least a tension, between the bodily and the semantic. Although Byron, for example, writes compellingly of the “electric chain” through which our sympathies might resonate, the actual stanzas of *Childe Harold* depend on language and conscious thought for the transmission of meaning. We understand Byron to possess sensibility, but our perception of that sensibility comes by means of our intellectual engagement, not by a “natural” resonance with the poet’s language or the particular form his words take on the page. This is, in part, the point of Wordsworth’s insistence on recollection in tranquility, which removes the poet from overwhelming sensibility and enables what Coleridge calls “manly reflection” (Coleridge, 53). Mary Robinson and Felicia Hemans demonstrate a keen awareness of



this paradox at the heart of sensibility. Each poet turns to electricity in negotiating the immediate physicality of poetic experience, the bodily “sensation” that Wordsworth, Coleridge, and even Byron generally keep at a thoughtful, reflective distance.

MARY ROBINSON'S ELECTRIC UNIVERSE

Mary Darby Robinson was a genuine celebrity, capturing the imagination of the British public during the last three decades of the eighteenth century. Not only a famous Shakespearean actor and a “fashion icon,” as Paula Byrne shows, with various articles of clothing named in her honor—the “Robinson Vest,” the “Robinson Hat” (Byrne, 193)—she was also viewed by her contemporaries as “arguably *the* poet of sensibility” and “the poster girl for unfettered female passion” (RSP, 48, 42). She was known to have spent an evening on the “Celestial or Magnético-electrico bed” in Dr. James Graham’s “Temple of Health and Hymen,” where wealthy patrons of the 1780s went “to cure impotence and infertility by channeling the ‘electric fluid’” (Fulford, 25). And through the so-called Della Cruscan movement of the 1780s and ’90s, Robinson and her fellow Della Cruscans strikingly elaborated the connections among poetry, sensibility, and electricity. Consisting of Robert Merry (“Della Crusca”), Hannah Cowley (“Anna Matilda”), and, somewhat peripherally, Robinson (“Laura”), the Della Cruscans exchanged poetry of exaggerated feeling via publications in *The World*, a journal of polite society first printed in 1787. British readers followed the amorous exchanges with voyeuristic glee, as first Anna Matilda and Della Crusca fell in epistolary love, and then Robinson—seeing an opportunity for more celebrity—buted her way into Della Crusca’s heart, much to Anna Matilda’s rage and agony.

For my argument, the narrative of these exchanges matters less than the Della Cruscan style, with its constant reference to the thrilling, pulsing effects of (poetic) love. Note throughout what follows how Della Cruscan feeling remains at the descriptive level. Poetry for these writers is meant to play upon and inspire the human body, but it does so through suggestion, not direct stimulation. For example, in the first of what would be a nearly two-year series of poetic exchanges with Della Crusca, Anna Matilda urges her fellow poet, “SEIZE again thy golden quill, / And with its point my bosom thrill” (*BA*, 3; 10 July 1787).⁵ Della Crusca replies in kind: “The quick’ning sense, the throb d’vine, / Fancy, and feeling, all are thine” (*BA*,

11; 21 August 1787). Anna Matilda's "bosom" responds to the figurative press of Della Crusca's quill, just as Della Crusca's senses quicken while he reads Anna Matilda's poetic missives. To read Anna Matilda's descriptions of throbbing hearts is thus, theoretically, to feel one's own heart throb in sympathy. One need not touch a physical body to inspire the sensation of physical touching; words and a properly active and sympathetic imagination will more than suffice. Yet there is little more than suggestion to inspire such an emotive response, and the unsympathetic reader will find—as generations of subsequent readers have found—mere sentiment in the Della Cruscan style.⁶

Critics have thus often noted what Jerome McGann calls the "consciously artificial" world of Della Cruscan poetry (McGann 1996, 86). There can be little doubt that Anna Matilda's "quick'ning sense" and "throb d'vine," for example, seem removed from anything resembling genuine expression (does anyone, ever, really talk like that?). But an artificial or poorly articulated vehicle need not diminish the truth of a metaphor's tenor. Behind Anna Matilda's overwrought figuration, one might still discern feelings—love, loss, anger, jealousy—with which most adult readers might readily identify. Indeed, in many ways, the Della Cruscans foreground their artificiality so as to interrogate the process by which thought and feeling might be communicated in measured language. Much as Hannah More wonders at how "intellect" might be transmitted via electrical shocks of sensibility, Anna Matilda and Della Crusca address through their poetry the conflict between unselfconscious, passionate feeling and reasoned thought. In her "Ode: To Indifference," Anna Matilda positions sensibility as the antagonist to an imprisoned "Reason":

Oh SENSIBILITY! thy scepter sad
 Points, where the *frantic glance* proclaims THEE MAD!
 Strain'd to excess, Reason is chain'd thy slave,
 Or the poor victim shuns thee in the grave;
 To thee each crime, each evil owes its birth,
 That in gigantic horror treads the earth!

SAVAGE UNTAM'D! she smiles to drink our tears,
 And where's no *solid ill*, she wounds with *fears*;



Riots in sighs, is sooth'd when most we smart—
 Now, while she guides my pen, her FANG's within my heart.
 (BA, 70; 16 January 1788)

These verses are meant to show the formal “[s]train[s of] excess” that come, according to the poem, from a too-active sensibility; though the lines are roughly iambic, one stumbles over the intentionally awkward rhythmic inversions (“*Strain'd to excess, reason is chain'd thy slave*”). On the surface, intellect would seem to have nary a place in Anna Matilda's poetics; one finds here little of the “[r]eason” that sensibility seems to have imprisoned. But Anna Matilda's “consciously artificial” style bespeaks a sort of reason, discernable beneath the passage's inflated rhetoric and halting rhythm. One must process intellectually the “horror” that Anna Matilda wishes her readers to experience; those who want to engage with the Della Cruscan must find a corresponding mental picture—“gigantic horror . . . !” “Savage untam'd!”—for each image offered up in the poetry. Like the body in Jeffrey's experiment, the reader of these verses is meant to respond, here to the charge of affect rather than electricity itself. But the reader of Della Cruscan poetry must engage his brain, at least in part, and not rely simply on physiological charges.

The Della Cruscan became a literary phenomenon at a time when, according to Janet Todd, sensibility in Britain was on the decline, seen as self-centered and corrupt (Todd, 62). Their popularity came in part because their turn from “reason” offered British readers a welcome distraction from domestic and international unease (Pascoe, 87). Mary Robinson, ever perceptive of the shifting fashions, eagerly joined in the epistolary fray. She writes as “Laura,” playing the part of a reader moved to passion by Della Crusca's verses:

Since his lov'd voice first caught my ear,
 Oft have I tried to calm my woe,
 Oft have I brush'd away the tear—
 The tear his numbers taught to flow.
 I seize the Lyre, to sooth my grief,
 Court mazy Science for relief;—
 Vain is the effort, 'tis in vain—

The fierce vibration fills my brain,
Burns thro' each aching nerve with poignant smart,
And riots cureless in my bleeding heart.

(*BA*, 301; 1 March 1789)

Robinson here is interestingly conflicted in pinpointing the source of her passion. First attracted to Della Crusca's "voice," she then takes instruction from "his numbers" (the formal metrical effects of his verse), which teach her tears "to flow." The "numbers" seem to win out, echoed in Robinson's "fierce vibration" and, we are meant to imagine, in the rhythmic play of her verses. Robinson has apparently caught the "epidemic malady" of the Della Cruscan, as her contemporary William Gifford put it, which spread like an infectious disease "from fool to fool" (Gifford, xii). Or, one might say, like an electric shock. By the poets' definition, Della Cruscan experience is instantaneous and universal, like the experience of electricity. Though the poetry requires a degree of mental processing, the assumption implicit in the Della Cruscan style is that the poetry will be experienced in the same way by all readers; each individual will respond similarly to the idea of "horror" or "savagery," for example, because such concepts and feelings are universal.

Robinson's contributions to the Della Cruscan phenomenon consistently turn to the language of shock to convey ideas and sensations understood as universal; indeed, throughout her writing career, Robinson employed the trope of electricity to describe the sudden apprehension of thoughts or feelings. In her *Memoirs*, for example, the suggestion that the young Mary Robinson should take to the stage "rushed like electricity through [her] brain"; at one of her first performances, Robinson's curtsy "seemed to electrify the whole house"; and encountering an old acquaintance resulted in a startled tremor, "as if he had received a shock of electricity" (Robinson 1895, 125, 132, 108). Electricity starts out in these examples simply as a figure for physiological shock, but at key points in her poetry, electricity stands as a model for egalitarian human relations, a kind of democratic ideal of shared experience. One such example from Robinson's Della Cruscan period is her 1790 poem "Ainsi va le Monde," a response to the French Revolution that she inscribed to Della Crusca. It concludes by triangulating the powers of poetry, "Freedom," and "Promethean fire":



Apollo strikes his lyre's rebounding strings,
 Responsive notes divine Cecilia sings,
 The tuneful sisters prompt the heavenly choir,
 Thy temple glitters with Promethean fire.
 The sacred Priestess in the center stands,
 She strews the sapphire floor with flow-ry bands.
 See! from her shrine electric incense rise;
 Hark! "Freedom" echoes thro' the vaulted skies.
 The Goddess speaks! O mark the blest decree,
 TYRANTS SHALL FALL—TRIUMPHANT MAN BE FREE!

(RSP, 113-14, lines 331-40)

In this poetic fantasy, Apollo's musical playing sets off a chain reaction by which the French people, inspired by a kind of celestial resonance, achieve political liberty. Robinson begins with an ethereal, noncorporeal god, but her image of "rebounding strings" takes readers ultimately to physiological, bodily experience. Freedom for Robinson—a political ideal—depends on individuals coming alive to bodily experience and recognizing the shared, human nature of that experience. "The rapt'rous energies of social love" that had long been "wasted" and "numb'd" will now come to life, inspired by the ideals of freedom (RSP, 111, lines 256-60):

Thro' all the scenes of Nature's varying plan,
 Celestial Freedom warms the breast of man;
 Led by her daring hand, what pow'r can bind
 The boundless efforts of the lab'ring mind.
 The god-like fervour, thrilling thro' the heart,
 Gives new creation to each vital part;
 Throbs rapture thro' each palpitating vein,
 Wings the rapt thought, and warms the fertile brain;
 To her the noblest attributes of Heav'n
 Ambition, valour, eloquence, are giv'n.

(RSP, 108, lines 157-66)

Robinson here anatomizes the effects of freedom on the human body—its "heart," "each vital part," "each palpitating vein," "the fertile brain"—using

end-stopped rhymes to emphasize her physiological attention. These are not individual hearts, veins, and brains, but universal body parts; in our shared physiology, we likewise share the thrilling fervor of celestial freedom. This, in effect, is the foundation of the Della Cruscan style: the belief that bodily experience—anything from the fluttering of a lover's heart to the fervor of a French revolutionary—might be communicated universally through poetry, through the arrangement of images, thoughts, and feelings in measured language.

Robinson also follows the lead of her Della Cruscan peers in calling attention to her poetry *as poetry*, as an aesthetic creation. If Robinson's verse "thrill[s] thro' the heart," it does so because Robinson informs us that freedom, and by extension her poem on the subject, has this effect on those who truly experience it. The effect is not unlike the laugh-tracks that accompany television sitcoms, instructing viewers to find a particular scene funny, to laugh along with the crowd. So, too, Robinson never hesitates to broadcast her self-consciousness as a poet writing to an audience, coaching her readers throughout on the appropriate response to her verses: *now*, she seems to say, "throb rapturously."⁷ In this way, Robinson creates the "parallel universe" that Stuart Curran describes as characteristic of her later poems; like Coleridge, who took her lead, Robinson "attempt[s] through poetic effect to create a parallel universe that seems to be akin to ours but to operate by laws to which our norms are alien" (Curran, 20). Curran identifies Robinson as a precursor to such Victorian creations as Tennyson's "Mariana" and her isolated grange, poetically fabricated but entirely visceral in a reader's experience.⁸ Robinson's Della Cruscan world is importantly distinct from Tennyson's—Robinson creates not universes of sonic effects, as Tennyson does, but communities that arise through imagined affective experience—but Curran is right to see her style as a precursor to early Victorian poetic experiments. Like Tennyson, Robinson asks her readers to leap headfirst and without deliberation into the space of her poem. If "consciously artificial" in its style, Della Cruscan poetry aims for the genuine in its effects. Robinson's poetic ideal resembles what Robert Langbaum has called the poetry of experience, poetry in which "the imaginative apprehension gained through immediate experience is primary and certain, whereas the analytic reflection that follows is secondary and problematical" (Langbaum, 35). For Langbaum, such poetry signals Romanticism's turn



away from Enlightenment objectivity, and it becomes the primary mode for nineteenth- and twentieth-century poets. For Robinson, the poetry of experience, the peculiar sensation of navigating her poetic “parallel universe,” is a political vehicle enabling one to identify with one’s fellow human beings, to recognize through a kind of sympathetic experience the human condition.

This becomes especially clear in six poems Robinson published from April to May 1798, a series she called “Poetic Pictures.” These poems—“The Birth-day of Liberty,” “The Progress of Liberty,” “The Horrors of Anarchy,” “The Vestal,” “The Monk,” and “The Dungeon”—were eventually incorporated into *The Progress of Liberty*, a blank verse work published posthumously in 1801 (RSP, 298). They are explicitly political poems, reflecting Robinson’s involvement with radical politics—she associated in the 1790s with William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft (Byrne, 321–23)—and they take to an extreme the ideal of affective community arising imaginatively through physiological experience.

In “The Monk,” published first on May 12, 1798, Robinson offers a “poetic picture” of a sheltered, insidiously antisocial monk. Whereas Nollet’s monks link together in an affective community, Robinson chastises her monk for isolating himself in “the grey horrors of his narrow cell” (RSP, 307). Not merely isolated from any form of community, the monk has lost all physical sensation:

A torpid spell
Benumbs life’s fountain, while the feeble pulse
Marks the slow progress of Time’s weary course,
With languid circulation.

(307)

The failure of interior circulation, of blood coursing through the human body, reflects the monk’s failure to circulate within a broader community of individuals. As the poem progresses, Robinson strips the monk of his corporeality precisely insofar as his body fails to interact with other human bodies: “Poor, breathing Ghost!” she writes, “a wretched, ghastly thing thou art, / Robb’d of thy outward form!” (308). At last, Robinson turns to the figure of electricity to interrogate her monk’s isolation:

O! Did the spark,
 Th' electric spark which kindles fancy's Fire,
 Ne'er in perspective bright unfold such scenes
 As bade thy bosom glow, ambition warm'd,
 Or melt in rapt'rous visions? What art thou?
 Deluded, sad, forgotten!

(308)

Robinson's monk is "[i]nert, enfeeb'l'd, useless, and debas'd" (309) because his self-imposed isolation removes him from an affective community. His atomization finally leaves him "[b]enumb'd," his body senseless to the world around him (309). He would do well, Robinson suggests, to heed the "electric spark" that might kindle his fancy and shift his perspective, turning his vision outward toward a sympathetic human community.

The 1798 "Poetic Pictures" show the staying power of Della Cruscan poetics in Robinson's work, even though she apparently came to regret her involvement in the fad, believing it to have discredited her reputation as a poet (Byrne, 250). We can see in "The Monk" Robinson's continued efforts to evoke sympathetic identification by constructing a mini-world—Curran's "parallel universe"—around the poem's central figure. Adam Smith teaches in his 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that "it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are [another individual's] sensations. . . . By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him" (Smith, 9). Robinson facilitates this process of identification through a kind of ekphrasis, sketching for her readers a miniature "poetic picture" that brings the subject under consideration into imaginative view.⁹ The reader pictures in her mind a sort of tableau in which, for example, the "wasted" monk "is seen" ("The Monk"; RSP, 307). In "The Vestal," Robinson offers a similarly ekphrastic "poetic picture":

DIM was the Cloister, where the VESTAL sad
 Wither'd thro' life's dull hour in ling'ring death;
 Her spring of youth chill'd by untimely frost,
 And all the warm perceptions of her soul,



Spell-bound by sorrow! What were her pursuits?
 Fasting and pray'r; long nights of meditation;
 And days consum'd in tears. The matin song,
 By repetition dull, familiar grown,
 Pass'd o'er her lip mechanically cold,
 And little mark'd devotion.

(305)

Through a kind of theatrical visibility (one imagines a curtain rising to reveal the scene of the dim cloister), Robinson attacks the “[p]repost’rous sacrifice” of the young woman, “[c]ondemn’d” like the monk “to waste [her] bloom in one dull speck / Of freezing solitude” (307). As much a call to communitarian sensibility as anything else, Robinson’s poem demands that her reader enter the imaginative space of the wasting vestal. Like the poet George Dyer, who in 1802 argued that lyric poetry is particularly adapted “to enliven[ing] the social and tender affections” (Dyer, 1:1xxii), Robinson here anticipates the work of later poets, many from the working classes, who would, as Anne Janowitz has shown, insist on a “collective, embedded experience” as central to the work of lyric poetry (Janowitz, 7).

Yet the great perversity of Robinson’s verse, and perhaps what helps to make her style difficult for modern readers to appreciate, is how aloof it seems—on a formal level—from the electrical sensibility it so insistently describes. Robinson regularly gestures to affective experience, what she calls in “The Cell of the Atheist,” a poem of 1799, “the thrill / Of Heav’n-born POESY” that “[d]art[s] the electric fire” “thro’ every vein” (RSP, 312). But her poems fail to demonstrate, except through the imagination, the actual physiological power of such electric life. Later poets such as Tennyson, Hopkins, and the so-called Spasmodic writers of the 1850s (discussed in subsequent chapters) turned to poetic form—to rhythm, meter, rhyme, and various sonic effects—to induce in their readers “the thrill / Of Heav’n-born POESY.” But such practices are not part of Robinson’s repertoire. This is not to say that Robinson was uninterested or unaccomplished in formal technique. But Robinson’s oeuvre avoids the physicality of sensation one finds in the works of later Victorian poets, who not only describe feeling but also use poetic form to compel the *experience* of that feeling.¹⁰ In this, Robinson was at one with her peers at the turn of the nineteenth century. Robinson gestures to the manifestation of sensation in the physical body, but sympa-

thetic identification remains throughout her poetry at the level of imagination: a scene playing out that readers witness from afar, as in a drama, rather than participate in actively. If one feels an electrical thrill in identifying with the isolated monk or the devout vestal, the spark comes entirely of one's own powers of identification and imagination. Robinson urges us toward this work of identification, but the structure of her poetry does not in itself compel a reader to feel, literally, the "[d]art" of "electric fire."

HEMANS'S ELECTRIC TOUCH

Robinson's form may not compel physiological sensation, but her poetry makes constant reference to the physical body; she is a poet entirely comfortable describing her throbbing, pulsing heart and limbs, especially while in her Della Cruscan mode. Felicia Hemans, who emerged as Britain's foremost female poet in the 1820s, explicitly distances herself from such engagement with the body, removing sensation instead to a more theoretical space of reflection. I have suggested elsewhere that Hemans stood as the early Victorians' most beloved poet in large part because she restrained the passionate gush or overflow common in her Romantic predecessors.¹¹ According to her sister Harriet Hughes, Hemans never practiced "such strain of hyperbole as used to prevail in the Della Cruscan coteries" (quoted in Mason 2006, 34). Francis Jeffrey's important *Edinburgh Review* essay of 1829 might stand as representative of public opinion. Hemans's verses, he writes, are "singularly sweet, elegant, and tender—touching, perhaps, and contemplative, rather than vehement and overpowering; and not only finished throughout with an exquisite delicacy, and even severity of execution, but informed with a purity and loftiness of feeling, and a certain sober and humble tone of indulgence and piety, which must satisfy all judgments, and allay the apprehensions of those who are most afraid of the passionate exaggerations of poetry" (Jeffrey, 34). Hemans took to heart the Wordsworthian injunction to recollect in tranquility her spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling, and so her poetry focuses less on the physical body's passionate experiences than it does on the mind's subsequent analyses of those moments. Even moments that move toward literalized touching maintain a conscientious distance from the purely physiological. In "Properzia Rossi" (1828), for example, the sculptor Rossi addresses her work of art, a version of Ariadne:



Forsaken Ariadne! thou shalt wear
 My form, my lineaments; but oh! more fair,
 Touched into lovelier being by the glow
 Which in me dwells[.]

(Hemans, 2:99)

Hemans plays here with “touch” in both its emotional and its physical senses. But clearly more important than the literal touch with which Rossi creates her sculpture is the touching “glow” of Rossi’s sentiment, which brings real life to the figure. Hemans always defers to the experience of internalized affect rather than the kind of palpitating, rapturous language of Mary Robinson and her Della Cruscan peers.

That said, when electricity enters Hemans’s writing, the poet’s distance from physiological affect frequently becomes a subject for concern. Even as she celebrates the emotional connections that an electric-like lyric sensibility facilitates, Hemans wishes for a more physiologically grounded poetic style. For example, in a poem from 1830, “The Lyre’s Lament,” the lament of the lyre is precisely that it is *not* being touched by human hands. It hangs from a rock by the sea, “murmuring” as the wind passes over its strings. “O melancholy wind,” sighs the lyre,

Thou canst not wake the spirit
 That in me slumbering lies,
 Thou strikest not forth th’ electric fire
 Of buried melodies.

(2:259)

“Where,” asks the lyre in conclusion, “Where is the touch to give me life?” (2:260). The wind produces in Hemans’s lyre music of a sort, as with an aeolian harp, but it needs an actual hand’s touch to achieve “life.” Without such a touch, the lyre fails to make audible “the spell—the gift—the lightning— / Within [its] frame concealed” (2:259). Poetry, in other words, requires inspiration (the breath of wind), but it falls short of ideal if it is not also grounded in the experiences of the human body. Electricity here—both the “electric fire / Of buried melodies” and “the lightning— / Within my frame concealed”—is an internal phenomenon, a vital quality located

within the speaker's physical body, struggling to make itself known. Hemans thus shifts uncomfortably between two aesthetic poles; she maintains, on the one hand, the quiet and dignified reserve celebrated by Jeffrey and many others, while on the other hand she longs for something of the passionate, physiological expression that we see regularly in the work of Mary Robinson.¹²

With her conflicted approach to physiological poetics, electricity stands throughout Hemans's writing career as a figure for an ideal organic sensibility, a touch that, like that of Properzia Rossi, works to both physical and emotional effect. Hemans was also clearly inspired by the idea of electricity as a unifying force of nature, located both within the human body and outside, in the natural world. Her 1816 work, *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy*, recounts a singing voice whose "energies resound, / With power electric, through the realms around" (Hemans, 1:127). And in a poem published in 1834, a year before her death, Hemans describes a hymn that "[o]'erflows [the] dim recesses" of a cathedral,

leaving not
 One tomb unthrill'd by the strong sympathy
 Answering the electric notes.
 ("Cathedral Hymn"; 2:451)

Hemans here imagines a kind of dispersed lyric subjectivity, a lyric that speaks through, among, around—but not necessarily *to*—others. As music, "electric notes," the hymn inspires a kind of sympathetic resonance. The hymn passes by, that is, and the individual bodies (here corpses) experience the thrill of its passing. The process is not didactic or directed, but rather—as Mill judged it in the year prior to this poem's composition—overheard.¹³ More accurately, it is *overfelt*. A captive audience, the dead bodies form a kind of ideal community, a reflection of the church-going congregation in which they had once participated:

And lo! the throng of beating human hearts,
 With all their secret scrolls of buried grief,
 All their full treasures of immortal hope,
 Gather'd before their God! Hark! how the flood



Of the rich organ harmony bears up
 Their voice on its high waves!—a mighty burst!

(2:451)

This is the sort of passionate experience Hemans can sanction without hesitation. Passion in the space of the cathedral or the graveyard is, as Hemans represents it, entirely unself-conscious—grounded not in the individual's personal thoughts, concerns, and desires, but in reverence for the Christian divinity. The “harmony” of the organ's music suggests for Hemans a universalized sensibility arising from transcendent, spiritual experience as opposed to the bodily sensuousness of Robinson's Della Cruscan epistles. One might well connect Hemans's ideal of poetic transcendence to E. T. A. Hoffmann's nearly contemporaneous assertion that music—specifically, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony—“leads the listener imperturbably forward in a climax that climbs up and up into the spirit world of the infinite” (Hoffmann, 85). Like Hoffmann, Hemans urges her readers away from a materialist or physiological experience of the artwork and toward an ideal or transcendent, spiritual engagement.¹⁴ But unlike Hoffmann, whose sights are set distinctly on the infinite, Hemans's ultimate goal remains the communal good. In pushing readers toward transcendence, Hemans highlights—in Emma Mason's words—the “radically pedagogic” function of poetry: “moralizing, christianizing and rendering [readers] emotive and thoughtful” (Mason 2006, 34). That Hemans accomplishes such grand effects among a community of the dead should not obstruct the ideal of her vision, though it may suggest the difficulty of its enactment. “Join, join, my soul!” she writes, “In thine own lowly, trembling consciousness, / And thine own solitude, the glorious hymn” (2:451).

Hemans's dispersed and undirected lyric sensibility follows in a tradition of Romantic women poets who, as critics have recently argued, seemed self-consciously to evacuate a strong sense of selfhood from their verses.¹⁵ In working with familiar tropes, these women poets privilege the generic over the individual, promoting a more universal experience of their verses. Hemans—like Robinson in *The Progress of Liberty*—thereby imagines a shared lyric sensibility as a model for a better sort of British community. But electricity also enables Hemans to enact a form of lyric sensibility that evades the purely physiological, and to “touch,” figuratively, what she saw as spiri-

tual, internal, and more profoundly universal than sensory experience alone ever could be. We might imagine Hemans here writing against the ideas suggested by Dr. Jeffray, whose electrical experiments elicited from a corpse displays of “rage, horror, despair, anguish, and ghastly smiles.” Like Jeffray, Hemans also touches dead bodies with electrical shocks, but Hemans’s shocks are always figurative, and are meant to strike the body not with physical force but with what she took to be a kind of transcendent spirit. Hemans writes specifically against the materialist tradition that would locate human life in the body. In so doing, she transforms electricity from a literal shock to a figurative impulse: an impulse to inspire a communal conscience. Poetry for Hemans thereby enacts a transition from body to spirit, from individual to community, and electricity offers an ideal figure for this movement.

Hemans uses such a figure for transcendence, Byron’s image of “the electric chain wherewith we are darkly bound” (discussed above), as an epigraph for three poems published in 1828 and 1829. In each instance, Hemans’s reading of Byron encompasses both the figurative and the literal. The original quotation, of course, refers to the process of grieving—specifically, the phenomenon of being reminded, as by a shock, of a weighted sadness. This is the subject as well of Hemans’s three poems. In “The Voice of Music,” published first in *The Winter’s Wreath* of 1829, one of the many literary annuals to which she contributed, Hemans again finds in music the power to connect with a greater force, spiritual in nature:

Something of mystery there surely dwells,
 Waiting thy touch, in our bosom-cells;
 Something that finds not its answer here—
 A chain to be clasp’d in another sphere.

(Hemans, 2:297)

In the conclusion to the present volume, I return to this image of an electrical chain stretching into “another sphere,” a vision of spiritual communication that was hugely popular in the mid-Victorian period. Poets later in the century imagined poetry, and specifically poetic rhythm, as a potential vehicle for transmission between the living and the dead. Hemans here imagines music as a less-literal mode of communication; she hears music that “wake[s], by one gentle breath, / Passionate visions of love and death!” (2:297). Like



Robinson, who understands affect to be universal and, as a result, ideally suited as a grounding for democratic citizenship, Hemans writes of the emotional pull of music that was not written with her specific emotions in mind. How, she asks, can the music speak so distinctly to her as an individual? “What is thy power, from the soul’s deep spring / In sudden gushes the tears to bring?” (2:297). The answer is that all humans experience such feeling; music “touch[es]” those feelings inherent to human nature. Hemans sees this universality as proof of something greater than existence in this life, greater than any individual human life: “[T]hou tellest my soul that its birth / Links it with regions more bright than earth” (2:298).

The Byronic epigraph appears again in “The Spirit’s Mysteries,” published as part of the 1828 *Records of Woman*. The speaker in this poem finds “in sweet sounds” feelings that she never experienced but recognizes as common to human nature:

The power that dwelleth in sweet sounds to waken
 Vague yearnings, like the sailor’s for the shore,
 And dim remembrances, whose hue seems taken
 From some bright former state, our own no more;
 Is not this a mystery?—Who shall say
 Whence are those thoughts, and whither tends their way?
(2:168)

Oscar Wilde expresses a similar sentiment in “The Critic as Artist” (1891) when he writes that playing Chopin always makes him “feel as if [he] had been weeping over sins that [he] had never committed, and mourning over tragedies that were not [his] own. Music . . . creates for one a past of which one has been ignorant, and fills one with a sense of sorrows that have been hidden from one’s tears” (Wilde, 1011). Hemans marvels over the “[v]ague yearnings” that music stirs, the mystery that sound inspires such powerful emotions. This phenomenon, according to Hemans, functions very much like an electric shock, the images “flash[ing]” over our minds (2:168).

Byron’s phrase the “lightning of the mind” (*Childe Harold IV*, stanza 24) seems echoed in the third poem of Hemans to have the “electric chain” epigraph, “The Haunted Ground,” published in the *New Monthly Magazine* of January 1828. Hemans writes of “a thrill on the chords of the

stricken mind” that, wandering in a cemetery, finds itself weighted by “[t]he chain by those spirits brought back from the past” (1:654–65). The speaker of Hemans’s poem reflects on the feelings and experiences of the dead around her:

Song hath been here—with its flow of thought,
 Love—with its passionate visions fraught;
 Death—breathing stillness and sadness round—
 And is it not—is it not haunted ground?

(1:654)

In passages such as this, Hemans positions herself directly on the “threshold,” as Susan Stewart calls it, “between individual and social experience.” Hemans uses the lyric precisely as a meditation on this porous boundary, moving imaginatively through the passionate experiences of those long dead and buried. The ground is “haunted” because Hemans and others like her exert their powers of imagination to reflect on those whose lives have passed. In this way, the poem implicitly acknowledges the generic nature of feeling; only because human experience is common—shared, familiar—can Hemans imagine feelings that had once been experienced by others. Dr. Jeffray’s experiments also point to the generic nature of human feeling, but the scientific laboratory leaves room only for a mechanical, materialist understanding of the human body and its experiences. Hemans works through sympathetic identification to breathe a different kind of life into her dead bodies. Poetry is a vehicle for feeling, encouraging readers to imagine sympathetically the experiences of others, experiences that are universal to human life.¹⁶ Like Jeffray’s corpse, then, both Hemans (as she strolls through the graveyard) and her readers (as they read her poems) experience electric-like shocks. But this is less a cause for alarm—recall the horrified, sickened witnesses in Jeffray’s theatre—than it is an occasion to celebrate the deep-rooted feelings that connect us as human beings: an echo, no doubt, of what Wordsworth called our “primal sympathy.”

This sympathy of thought and experience is what Hemans’s contemporaries most praised when reviewing her poems. She works, according to the *Edinburgh Monthly Review*, “by a fine tact of sympathy, a vivacity and fertility of imagination. . . . She excites emotion which endures, and which gives



fresh delight on repetition, by expressing natural feeling, in a sweet flow of tenderness, or a sustained and deep tone of pathos” (Review of *Tales and Historic Scenes*, 207). Hemans’s “natural feeling” strikes a noticeably different tone than Robinson’s verses, which were consistently attacked as sentimental and, in many ways, false.¹⁷ Yet both Robinson and Hemans ostensibly set out to encourage the kind of social bonds seemingly idealized in the passage of electricity through communities of human bodies. The freedom that for Robinson was inspired by the French Revolution and explored in “Ainsi va le Monde” is for Hemans a more abstract belief in personal sovereignty, and both women see poetry as central to the achievement of these political goals.¹⁸ The difference lies primarily in their approach to emotional affect. Whereas Robinson directs her readers through the experience of each passion—atomizing the effects of love, for example, on each body part—Hemans avoids the language of pure physiology, insisting instead on a thoughtful, even intellectual experience of emotion. Yes, Hemans seems to say, the physical body is important, but there can be nothing of value to a muscular spasm if it does not reflect or inspire in some way a more deeply rooted feeling. Poetry, for Hemans, must work against the mechanized view of sentimental literature, the belief that, like the pseudo-emotions of Dr. Jeffray’s corpse, the emotions inspired by novels and poems are by nature prefabricated and mechanical. According to Hemans, the poetics of sensibility need not function in such a manner. As much as Jeffray’s corpse writhes, its contortions mean little next to the genuine feelings of the living and to the real power of sympathetic identification embodied in Hemans’s verses.

The work of poetic embodiment, and the particular difficulties in navigating between false and genuine affect, remained central to poetic theory well into the Victorian period. It was an especially vexing concern for the young Alfred Tennyson, who grew up listening to his mother read Hemans aloud (C. Tennyson, 14). Tennyson’s early “poetics of sensation,” as Arthur Hallam called it, develops and pushes in new directions Hemans’s abstract language of electric sensibility. Like Hemans and Robinson before her, Tennyson imagines poetry as a force for communal ties and democratic citizenship, but Tennyson’s commitment to such ideals was made increasingly difficult by the 1832 Reform Bill and the movement toward universal manhood suffrage. Tennyson struggles both to deploy and to contain the

language of sensibility, but he ultimately proves more comfortable than either Robinson or Hemans with a poetics of the body. The political challenges inherent in the move toward a truly physiological poetic form, and Tennyson's central role in these developments, are the subjects of the chapter that follows.