



I N T R O D U C T I O N

Physiological Poetics

O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!

—John Keats, letter to Benjamin Bailey (1817)

Man acts by electricity.

—Alfred Smee, *Instinct and Reason: Deduced from Electro-biology* (1850)

NEARLY FIVE HUNDRED YEARS SEPARATE THE FLORENTINE poet Angelo Poliziano from the American Charles Olsen, but the two agree in their understanding of poetry as a dynamic, charged mode of communication. Echoing Plato, Poliziano describes poetry as working like a magnetic stone, exerting its “hidden force” on readers; for Olsen, poetry “is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader” (see epigraphs to this book; Poliziano, 125; Olsen, 240).¹ The discerning reader confronts in both Poliziano and Olsen two possible—and somewhat contradictory—directives for poetic experience. The first treats literature figuratively and understands poetry to be *like* a magnet, *like* the transfer of energy. The experience of reading poetry in this model remains primarily an intellectual endeavor; the



individual who picks up Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, for example, feels the tug of strong emotion because she has thought strongly about Tennyson's words and the ideas and feelings they represent. The energy transferred from poem to reader occurs here through the medium of the thinking brain. Not so for the second model of poetic experience, which erases the distance between the poem and the reader and understands poetry quite literally *as* magnetic, a direct transfer of energy. In this instance, the reader of *In Memoriam* feels Tennyson's charge of thought/feeling as it moves—magnetically, electrically—from page to body. The reader remains mostly unconscious of the transference of energy; she experiences the poem viscerally, intimately, bodily. This second model of poetic experience, which locates the body as central to the individual's encounter with a poem, rests at the heart of *Electric Meters*. This book tells the history of physiological poetics in the British nineteenth century, focusing on the period between 1832 and 1872 as the height of Britain's poetic engagement with bodily modes of experience.

Indeed, the history of Victorian poetry is in no small part a history of the human body. Whether we look to Alfred Tennyson's "poetics of sensation," the midcentury "Spasmodic" phenomenon, or the so-called fleshly school of the 1870s, Victorian poetry demands to be read as physiologically inspired: rhythms that pulse in the body, a rhetoric of sensation that readers might feel compelled to experience. Like Poliziano and Olsen, Victorian poets turned to various manifestations of electricity—lightning strikes, electric shocks, nerve impulses, telegraph signals—to articulate the work of physiological poetics. The electrical sciences and bodily poetics, I argue, cannot be separated, and they came together with especial force in the years between the 1830s, which witnessed the invention of the electric telegraph, and the 1870s, when James Clerk Maxwell's electric field theory transformed the study of electrodynamics. Because much of nineteenth-century electrical theory had to do with human bodies, and specifically with the ways that individual human bodies might be connected to one another, electricity offered Victorian poets a figure for thinking through the effects of poetry on communities of readers. Electricity, in other words, serves in the nineteenth century as a tool for exploring poetry's political consequences. Scholars have long identified the political work of Victorian poetry, just as they have recognized the astonishing physicality of Victorian poetics.² *Electric Meters* insists that these phenomena be understood as two sides of the same coin,

and it uses electricity as a model for reading that aesthetic and physiological conjunction.

More specifically, I argue that Victorian readers understood the connections between bodily and poetic experience in ways that took more seriously the unself-conscious effects of poetic form. “Physiological poetics” thus refers to the metrical, rhythmic, and sonic effects that, along with other formal poetic features, were increasingly imagined as carrying physiological truths. Whereas the predominant eighteenth-century model of poetic transmission privileged the mind’s interpretive role (the brain acting as mediator between the poem and the individual), nineteenth-century readers gave credit to the body as an arbiter of poetic truths. Whether one ought to read Poliziano and Olsen figuratively or literally, then, depends on the period in which one encounters their texts. Readers prior to the physiological trends of the Victorian period were more likely to opt for figuration, to understand a poem’s semantic presence but not its mimetic facility. In contrast, the Victorian poets and critics at the center of this study err on the side of the literal: the poem is itself a magnetic force, “a high energy-construct” (Olsen, 240).

POETRY AND ELECTRICITY

Through the 1860s and ’70s, while devising equations to describe the physical relations among electricity, magnetism, and light—the consequences of which formed an important cornerstone for Einstein’s theory of relativity—James Clerk Maxwell also found an occasional spare moment to compose poetry.³ His verses are neither entirely serious nor of the sort that rewards extended reflection, but they remain suggestive of the curious, persistent interplay through the nineteenth century between poetry and electricity. Maxwell composed the following riff on Tennyson’s “The Splendour Falls,” one of the great lyrics from *The Princess*, in 1874:

The lamp-light falls on blackened walls,
 And streams through narrow perforations,
 The long beam trails o’er pasteboard scales,
 With slow-decaying oscillations.
 Flow, current, flow, set the quick light-spot flying,
 Flow, current, answer light-spot, flashing, quivering, dying.
 (quoted in Campbell and Garnett, 409)



Maxwell refers here to the mirror galvanometer developed in the 1850s by William Thomson (later Lord Kelvin), a device used to measure the flow of electric current through submarine telegraph cables. The galvanometer was crucial for transatlantic telegraphy, as it enabled the reading of very weak electric currents.⁴ The sonic resonances of Tennyson's bugle song, "Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying," thus become in Maxwell's hands the flow of electricity through a cable, which is then made visible by the "oscillations" of a "lamp-light . . . on blackened walls." Maxwell does not mean for us to take his verse too seriously; entitled "Lectures to Women on Physical Science" (part D), the poem is at least as concerned with the erotics of instruction as it is with physics ("O love!" the speaker apostrophizes in the third stanza, "you fail to read the scale / Correct to tenths of a division" [410]).⁵ But if Maxwell turns to poetry to interject some play into the laboratory—"A little literature helps to chase away mathematics from the mind," he writes in November 1863 (quoted in Campbell and Garnett, 253)—many of his less scientific contemporaries did the reverse, turning to electricity and the physical sciences to inspire new ways of thinking about poetry. This book will show, among other things, why in the nineteenth century Tennyson's echoing bugle song might so seamlessly have been aligned with the pulses of an electric telegraph. More broadly, I demonstrate how the electrical sciences came to offer the Victorians a valuable framework for reading and understanding poetry.

Electricity has long been a privileged figure for those describing the ineffable qualities that make poetry *poetic*. Percy Shelley tells us that poetry "startle[s]" with "the electric life which burns within . . . words," and this electric life is precisely what enables poetry, in Shelley's view, to rejuvenate language and thought (Shelley, 7:140). This figurative yoking of electricity and poetry articulates some of the most pressing concerns of nineteenth-century poetic theory. Newly harnessed as a tool of industry, science, and communication (the electric telegraph being the most important of electricity's new uses), electricity serves as a touchstone for nineteenth-century poets reflecting on the complex interactions of thought, emotion, and physiological experience. From the earliest electrical experiments, electricity has been depicted as having physiological and noncognitive effects on those who encounter it (the shock of an electric current, say), and poets throughout history have turned to the same language of bodily shock in describing

“lyrical” experience. “[L]ike a lightning flash,” writes Longinus, “[the sublime] reveals, at a stroke and in its entirety, the power of the orator”; Longinus’s primary example of such sublime power is the poetry of Sappho, which “gather[s] soul and body into one, hearing and tongue, eyes and complexion; all dispersed and strangers before” (Longinus, 23–24). Through the “shock” of a felicitously placed word, a compelling linguistic friction, or a moving rhythmic pressure, poetry transmits, lightning-like, new truths to its readers.

The following chapters will demonstrate that in different ways, Mary Robinson, Felicia Hemans, Alfred Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Algernon Swinburne, and Mathilde Blind look to electricity to make sense of poetry’s effects on the human body, distinguishing themselves from their predecessors in their overriding concern with physicality, with the material human body through which we experience poetry. Yet this physicality must be read within a larger political framework for nineteenth-century poetry and poetic theory. Whitman’s “body electric” is only the most familiar of nineteenth-century poetic elisions between physiology and electricity, elisions that ask us to think about affinities between bodily affect and poetic communication, between physiological shock and intellectual absorption, and between individual experience and communal consciousness. In Maxwell’s rewriting of Tennyson, for example, the telegraph’s pulsing electric current represents a mode of communication already implicit in the original poem. Tennyson’s “The Splendour Falls” transforms into poetic language, rhythm, and sound the echoing of a bugle song Tennyson heard over a lake in Killarney, Ireland, during an 1848 visit (H. Tennyson, 1:291–93): “Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying, / Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying” (ALT, 2:231). This work of transformation—a transcription of sonic waves into written form—becomes in Maxwell’s poem the translation of an oscillating light into a telegraphic message (the telegrapher “reads” letters from the to-and-fro swaying of the lamplight). Both poems explore the intersection of poetry with sensory experience and different modes of communication. The following chapters foreground such intersections of poetry, physiology, and the electrical sciences, suggesting how “physiological poetics” both depend on and enhance the phenomenon I call “electric meters,” the complex interplay of poetic form and electrical epistemologies (ideas or structures of thought inspired by the work of electricity).



In focusing on the interplay of physiology and electricity, I remain true to scientific history. The human body is very much at the heart of the earliest electrical experiments, and it was often by means of their own bodies that scientists, from roughly the 1740s on, came to understand the nature of electric charges (Delbourgo, 25–30). I want to emphasize from the outset the distance in these experimental moments between bodily feeling (experiencing the electric shock) and thoughtful engagement with scientific ideas (thinking through electrical theories, hypotheses, and physical laws). Electricity becomes a compelling literary figure in part due to the gap between physiological experience and mental cognition. Consider, for example, the language Benjamin Franklin uses to describe an electrical shock, an accident that occurred during an experiment in 1750: “It seem’d an universal Blow from head to foot throughout the Body, and followed by a violent quick Trembling in the Trunk, which went gradually off in a few seconds. It was some Minutes before I could collect my Thoughts so as to know what was the Matter. . . . My Arms and Back of my Neck felt somewhat numb the remainder of the Evening, and my Breast-bone was sore for a Week after, as if it had been bruised” (letter to William Watson, 4 February 1750; quoted in Cohen, 94). Franklin does not lose consciousness from the shock, but at the moment of electrification his physical body takes center stage, fully pushing his active mind to the wings. Only after “some Minutes” can Franklin “collect [his] Thoughts” as he gradually awakens from his stupor, the point at which he becomes conscious of what happened. Franklin’s physiological experience makes apparent the truth of electricity’s vast power, yet only subsequently is Franklin’s brain able to perceive the truth of his experience; the electric shock imposes a temporal gap between experience and cognition.

Franklin’s mishap was accidental, but attempts to make sense of electrical shocks and their noncognitive effects on the human body were surprisingly common in the mid-1700s. Perhaps the most infamous of these experiments transpired in 1746, when Jean-Antoine Nollet, a French scientist who was soon to become the foremost European expert on electricity, amassed a circle of nearly two hundred Carthusian monks, each linked to his neighbors by a twenty-five-foot line of iron wire. When Nollet connected the ends of the wires to a rudimentary electric battery, a great communal spasm among the monks offered spectators one of the most important scenes in eighteenth-century science. “It is singular,” wrote Nollet after the experiment, “to see

the multitude of different gestures, and to hear the instantaneous exclamation of those surprised by the shock” (quoted in Heilbron, 312).⁶ Like the temporal lapse between Franklin’s physiological experience of the electric shock and his conscious realization of what had happened, Nollet here achieves knowledge only subsequent to and at a distance from the violent, noncognitive physiological experiences of the Carthusian monks. Nollet’s experiment both demonstrates the communicative potential in electricity (the circuit of electrified monks might be thought of as leading ultimately to the development of the electric telegraph in the 1830s) and suggests the necessarily physiological nature of such communication.

Nollet’s and Franklin’s experiments also resonate with a mounting interest in the physiology of poetic experience. Writing in 1757, Edmund Burke frames his discussion of *Paradise Lost* with language that echoes, and seems to make use of, contemporary electrical science: “The mind” of Milton’s reader “is hurried out of itself, by a cro[w]d of great and confused images” (Burke 1968, 62). Poetry communicates not by conscious thought but “by the contagion of our passions” (175). Those genuinely affected by poetry experience emotional shocks that, in their disjunction from conscious thought, seem not unlike the electric pulses enjoyed by Nollet’s monks. “If the affection be well conveyed,” Burke concludes, “it will work its effect without any clear idea; often without any idea at all of the thing which has originally given rise to it” (176). Burke’s language looks forward to the poetics of sensibility that soon would dominate eighteenth-century aesthetics, imagining poetry as affective experience transmitted, via spoken language, from composing poet to reading individual. My point here is not to suggest that eighteenth-century science makes the physiology of poetic experience suddenly visible. Poetry has always, in various ways, been associated with bodily experience, from Longinus’s exhortations on Sappho’s sublimity, to Poliziano’s magnetic attachments, to the “heavenly harmony” celebrated in Dryden’s 1687 “Song for St. Cecilia’s Day.” But there can be little doubt that the poetics of sensibility push physiology to the foreground of poetic theory in new and increasingly demonstrative ways, setting the scene for the Victorians’ all-out engagement with a poetics of the body. We witness this attention to physiology in reading John Stuart Mill’s 1833 assertion that poetry represents “thoughts and words in which emotion spontaneously embodies itself”; poets, he concludes, are “[t]hose who are so constituted, that emotions



are links of association by which their ideas, both sensuous and spiritual, are connected together” (Mill, 1:356). Across the nineteenth century, poets and literary critics grappled with this notion of embodied lyricism, from Arthur Hallam’s poetics of sensation in 1831 to Robert Buchanan’s 1871 critique of the “fleshly” school of poetry. In the many permutations of these thoughts, poetry remains a bodily experience, felt like an electric shock through and through.

It is as physiological experience that poetry facilitates the “association”—in Mill’s words, which intentionally reference the associationist tradition of Locke, Hume, Hartley, and others—of “ideas . . . sensuous and spiritual.” The very qualities of associationist philosophy that made Coleridge wince—that is, its privileging of the “primary sensations” and its skepticism of “an infinite spirit . . . an intelligent and holy will” (Coleridge, 75)—were for Mill and many of his Victorian peers fundamental to poetic practice in its ideal form.⁷ This ideal remains in circulation today: for example, with Barbara Hardy’s suggestion that lyric poetry “does not provide an explanation, judgment or narrative; what it does provide is feeling, alone and without histories or characters” (Hardy 1977, 1), and Susan Stewart’s description of lyric creation as “the transformation of sense experience into words” (Stewart, 26). The continuity among these writers rests in their understanding of poetry as physiological and essentially noncognitive. Within this mode of poetic interpretation, a mode that came to dominate poetic practice in the nineteenth century, electricity most powerfully stands as a figure for poetic experience. But electricity is not simply a trope used to describe or to elaborate a poetic function. In the nineteenth century, electricity was the most prominent figure for a more widespread and pervasive interest in communication, from William Cooke and Charles Wheatstone’s invention of the electric telegraph to Alexander Bain’s analysis of nerve impulses in the human body. The nineteenth century, as John Durham Peters has argued, “saw unprecedented transformations in the conditions of human contact,” which played out through new technologies for transmitting and recording information (Peters, 138). Recent work by Paul Gilmore, Richard Menke, Laura Otis, and Katherine Stubbs has suggested how profoundly and variously these electrical technologies, and the electric telegraph in particular, altered the Victorian literary landscape.⁸ But this literary history has almost exclusively focused on prose fiction as the object of analysis.⁹ It was inevitable

that poets, too, would take an interest in these advances, and that they would come to think differently about their work as a result. Jay Clayton's recent insight into the intensely physical nature of telegraphic communication—a physicality that Friedrich Kittler, among others, overlooks—suggests in part why poets would have had an especial investment in this new technology; much as “the telegraph links hand, ear, and letter with remarkable power” (Clayton, 68), this book shows how Victorian poets ultimately came to see their work as physiologically based, as connecting intimately and instantaneously word, mind, and body.¹⁰

The Victorians' physiological approach to poetry manifests both thematically and, more important, as a part of poetry's formal structure. Rhythm in particular becomes a key element for poetic communication, suggesting through its stress and release a physiological give and take that, like a telegraphic transmission, connects individuals via bodily sensation. In this approach to Victorian poetics, I build on the work of critics who in the past decade have reinvigorated the study of poetic form, and drawn attention to the necessary interactions between form and the human body. Matthew Campbell's *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* (1999), for example, encourages readers to experience rhythm as “more than just a sound,” to understand poetic impulses as permitting “the speaker to express an experience of the activity of the body” (Campbell, 18). Kirstie Blair's *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (2006) situates such bodily rhythmic experiences within the Victorian physiological sciences. Blair shows how rhythm pervades Victorian scientific discourse and comes to be understood “as an organic force, related to bodily movements and hence able to influence the breath or heartbeat of both poet and reader” (Blair 2006b, 17). Yopie Prins's work on meter has pushed our understanding of form in new and important directions, most especially by way of her notion of a “linguistic materialism” that allows voice to “materialize” in Victorian poetry “through the counting of metrical marks” (Prins 2000, 92).¹¹ These studies suggest that nineteenth-century advances in the physiological sciences had a particular influence on poets, who understood their work to be connected necessarily to the human body and its functions. Yet with few exceptions, poetry has remained peripheral to the recent surge of interest in literature and physiology. In Anne Stiles's fine collection of essays, *Neurology and Literature, 1860–1920*, for example, “literature” means almost exclusively prose, and the novel in particular.



Nicholas Dames's provocative inquiry into what he calls "physiological novel theory," though important as a focused reading of Dames's genre of choice, has implications beyond the study of the novel. In fact, the three Victorian theorists whom Dames identifies as central to physiological novel theory—Alexander Bain, George Henry Lewes, and E. S. Dallas (Dames, 9)—all made important contributions to the theorization of poetics.¹² Even when writing about essays explicitly on the nature of poetry—Paul Valéry's lecture "Propos sur la poésie" and George Eliot's "Notes on Form in Art"—Dames resists acknowledging that it was often to poetry that nineteenth-century thinkers turned when considering the connections between literature and physiological affect (Dames, 26–27, 49). In a way unprecedented in the Western tradition, nineteenth-century poets understood what Derek Attridge calls "the psychological and physiological reality" that poetic rhythm conveys to "reader[s] and listener[s] alike" (Attridge 1990, 1016). Recent studies in the field of cognitive poetics by Reuven Tsur and Andrew Elfenbein articulate in modern terms ideas that surfaced first among Victorian thinkers such as Bain, Lewes, and Dallas, among many others.¹³

The physiological thrust of Victorian poetics develops in tandem with, and in necessary relation to, a series of formal poetic innovations. Bridging the genteel refinements of neoclassicism and the radical austerity of modernism, the nineteenth century was a period of audacious poetic experiment, much of which has been glossed over and dismissed as either aesthetically deficient or atypical of the period. While critics have long recognized the importance of the dramatic monologue as a Victorian invention, comparatively little attention has been given to the period's metrical and rhythmic innovations. Those formal innovations that *do* get attention—Whitman's early nod toward free verse, for example, and Hopkins's invention of "sprung rhythm"—are most often identified as not belonging to the arc of nineteenth-century poetics (Hopkins especially has long been read as a "modern" poet, an anomaly of the Victorian period).¹⁴ This blindness to the diversity of Victorian prosody has resulted in a proliferation of critical misreadings: a long-standing refusal, for example, to take seriously the contributions of the Spasmodic poets; an insistence that poets such as Hopkins and Swinburne somehow stood outside the general trends of British poetics; a resistance to perceiving the crucial role of Romantic women poets in Victorian reading practices.¹⁵ From the metrical novelty of Coleridge's "Christabel" (1816) to

Coventry Patmore's midcentury attempts to bring classical quantitative verse into English, nineteenth-century prosody surprises with its creativity and its willingness to break with the often rigid formality of earlier periods.¹⁶ The Victorians' formal dexterity must be read within the context of the period's engagement with both physiology and the electrical sciences. Within this broader historical and cultural context, the century's more outlandish experiments (Sydney Dobell's "Spasmodic" poetics and Patmore's quantitative verse) seem somewhat less outlandish, whereas a number of more familiar works (Tennyson's *Princess* and Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*) emerge as more extraordinary than might once have been thought.

Electric Meters thus enters the ongoing conversation around physiology and literature to help make sense of the enormous shifts in British poetics that occur across the nineteenth century, and to explicate more specifically the cultural and political nature of these changes. It has often been suggested that Victorian poetry can be distinguished from that of earlier periods by poets' attempts to communicate differently, for example, via the dramatic monologue or the prose poem. More broadly, according to Isobel Armstrong, "The effort to renegotiate a content to every relationship between self and the world is the Victorian poet's project" (Armstrong 1993, 7). In the nineteenth century, there can be no greater figure for interpersonal communication—the negotiation of self and world—than electricity, and no greater manifestation of this phenomenon in literary form than poetic rhythm. Accordingly, the chapters that follow track the shifts in poetic theory, from the Romantic poetess tradition through to late-Victorian figures such as Hopkins and Swinburne, that engage both philosophically and formally with the electrical sciences and technologies. In positioning their work within scientific discourses, Victorian poets and poetic theorists negotiate the cultural and political dynamics inherent in artistic, and specifically poetic, transmission.

ELECTRIC METERS

The story I tell begins in the eighteenth century, with the "philosophical nightmare of muddled ideas, weak logic and bad writing" that has been called the literature of sensibility (Ellis, 7). Victorian readers looking to understand poetry's physiological effects often started in the late eighteenth century, when poets such as the Della Crusicans brought the human body—its sighs



and tears and passionate thrills—to the fore of poetic composition. Sensibility has its origins in the body, as John Mullan has argued: “‘Sensibility’ was a word that began by referring to specifically bodily sensitivities, and only in the mid-eighteenth century began commonly to denote an emotional, and even moral, faculty: ‘Sensibility’ with a capital ‘S’” (Mullan 1997, 427).¹⁷ My first chapter, “The Electric Poetess,” uses the trope of electric charge to read the poetry of Mary Robinson, who wrote at the peak of eighteenth-century sensibility and participated in the Della Cruscan movement, and Felicia Hemans, a late-Romantic contributor to the poetics of sensibility. The electric connections within and among individuals as they are imagined by these women poets take up in diverse and productive ways the “language of feeling” heralded by Hume, Richardson, and others. Unlike Wordsworth, whose directive to “recollect[]” passionate feeling “in tranquility” (Wordsworth, 460) points to a necessary distance between the feeling body and the thinking poet, Robinson and Hemans suggest a less comfortable balancing between physiological intimacy and thoughtful communication. This uneasy balancing would come to haunt poets in the later nineteenth century. Robinson and Hemans are also necessary figures insofar as their works make explicit the political consequences of physiological poetics. In different ways, Robinson and Hemans consider how poetry might function as a model for democratic citizenship: how the experience of reading a poem might allow an individual to connect intellectually and emotionally to other individuals who share in that poetic experience. Electricity offers both poets a figure for the sort of connection poetry might provide: an intellectual shock of recognition, the sudden realization of communal sympathy.

The remaining four chapters concentrate primarily on the forty-year period separating Alfred Tennyson’s “sensational” poetics of the 1830s and the uproar in the 1870s over Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Swinburne, and the “fleshly” school of poetry. Much as Arthur Hallam, following in the empiricist tradition of Locke, Hartley, and Hume, had argued in 1831 that “sound conveys . . . meaning where words would not,” Robert Buchanan opens his 1871 screed against Rossetti deploring those who value “poetic expression” over “poetic thought” (Hallam, 96; Buchanan, 335). Both critics address essentially the same point, though from opposite argumentative positions; that is, reading poetry in the mid-Victorian period seems no longer an intellectual endeavor, but a full-bodied, physiological experience.

In this period, electricity advances from being primarily a trope, as it is in the main for Robinson and Hemans, to representing a new, physiological mode of poetic transmission. And whereas Robinson and Hemans each understand the political implications of electrical poetics, only in the early Victorian period—in the years following the 1832 Reform Bill and the advent, via Chartism, of a strong and vocal working class—do poets realize the full political potential of poetic form. My work here builds on Isobel Armstrong's study of the politicization of poetic sensibility in the 1830s, as well as Matthew Reynolds's more recent account of political consciousness in Victorian poetics (Armstrong 1993, 25–111; Reynolds). I argue especially for the importance of human physiology within this political and aesthetic dynamic. With increasing enthusiasm, Victorian poets came to understand the necessary connections between bodily sensation and poetic experience. Tennyson's poetry of sensation evolves naturally into the Spasmodic poetics of the 1850s—the subject of chapter 3—which in turn inspire the intensely physiological experiments of Hopkins and Swinburne in the 1860s and '70s discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 2, "Tennyson's Telegraphic Poetics," situates the poet's 1847 "medley" *The Princess* within this highly politicized poetic discourse, showing how the poem's hesitant engagement with both the new electrical sciences and the poetics of physiological sensation reflects a similarly hesitant approach to working-class culture following the uprisings of the 1830s and '40s. I argue that Tennyson models the poem's structure—a succession of male storytellers, each of whom takes a turn contributing to the tale—on a circle of girls who electrify themselves, much like Nollet's monks, in the poem's opening pages. The figure of a human electric circuit inspires Tennyson to meditate on the relation between physical bodies and aesthetic form, while the political dynamics of the poem's narrative connect that physiological structure to some of the most important social questions of the day, including the Victorian struggles for and against class and gender equality. The chapter puts Tennyson in dialogue with his contemporary, Thomas Hood, as well as with some popular writers on the telegraph, to develop more fully the interplay of class and sensation suggested in my reading of *The Princess*.

The central chapter of the book, "Rhythms of Spasm," concentrates on a little-known group of working-class poets who came to prominence at the

midpoint between Tennyson's sensationalism and Rossetti's so-called fleshliness. Labeled the "Spasmodic" school by their detractors, Sydney Dobell and Alexander Smith conducted important experiments through the 1850s on the communicative potential of poetic rhythm. Their poetry and poetic theories, largely overlooked in the present day, were immensely popular and influential in the 1850s. I argue that Dobell's 1853 epic poem *Balder* couples a theory of bodily sensation, inspired by the electrical and physiological sciences, with a formal model of poetic composition. Rhythm for Dobell expresses metonymically the physiological conditions of the human body—its pulses either harmonize with or strain against the throbbing of our physical beings—and poets communicate most readily through a reader's sympathetic and unmediated experience of these rhythmic impulses. Only with the Spasmodic poets does the physiological shock of electricity approach literal enactment in poetic form. Like the sensation fiction that followed closely on the heels of spasmody, Dobell's poetry is meant to be felt like a literal, bodily shock. Precisely because of the intimacy imagined between the working-class poet and the bourgeois reader, Spasmodic poetry was seen to threaten Victorian middle-class cultural values. In the second half of the chapter, I examine the conservative turn against Spasmodic poetics, a response manifested formally in renewed attention to metrical structure. Tennyson's *Maud* occupies a middle ground in this debate, both incorporating elements of the Spasmodic style and suggesting, through the insanity of the poem's speaker, the ultimate failure of unfettered physiological poetics.

The post-Spasmodic period witnessed a surge of interest in prosody, a widespread effort to understand in objective terms how poetry works; the later decades of the century were influenced as well by the new "dominance of the nerves" in popular scientific discourse (Blair 2006b, 227), which grounded the physiological effects of poetry in tangible, scientific evidence. Chapter 4, "Patmore, Hopkins, and the Uncertain Body of Victorian Poetry," focuses on two of the more extreme experimenters in this period: Coventry Patmore and Gerard Manley Hopkins. The study of Patmore's poetry and poetic theory has been for the most part occluded by what readers know of his most popular work, *The Angel in the House* (1854 and 1856). But Patmore's 1857 *Essay on English Metrical Law* and his 1877 volume of odes, *The Unknown Eros*, show Patmore to be more innovative, and more

interesting, than most critics have allowed. His work is especially important as a tonic to the physiological extremes of his contemporaries, as Patmore strove to maintain an intellectual reserve against the bodily pull of poetic rhythm. The chapter closes with a reading of Hopkins's "Wreck of the Deutschland" (1876), situating Hopkins's "sprung rhythm" as an elegant refinement, unrecognized by modern critics, of Spasmodic poetics. Hopkins works to abstract or spiritualize the intensity of bodily shock, making electricity a figure for religious transcendence as well as aesthetic transmission.

The fifth and final chapter, "Rapture and the Flesh, Swinburne to Blind," examines the work of two late-Victorian poets—Algernon Swinburne and Mathilde Blind—and what I call the poetics of rapture. "Rapture and the Flesh" continues the work of chapter 4 in thinking through post-Spasmodic physiological poetics, here with attention to an understanding of rhythm as unifying not only individuals, but also the living world in its entirety. Inspired by the electric field theory developed at midcentury by Michael Faraday and James Clerk Maxwell, as well as by Darwin's insights into the place of rhythm in the evolution of species, British poets reconsidered the place of individual physiological experience within their communities and, widening the view, within the universe as a whole. I read Swinburne's "By the North Sea" (1880) and "The Lake of Gaube" (1899), and Blind's *Ascent of Man* (1889), among other poems, as meditations on the possibility for "rapture"—that is, physiological, emotional, and spiritual connection—in the modern, post-Darwinian, post-Maxwellian world. In the aftermath of spasmody, these poets depict electricity and poetic rhythm as unruly entities that often keep individuals apart from one another, failing to act—as Tennyson and Dobell, for example, had imagined—as intimate, connective tissue among human individuals.

Electric Meters concludes with an examination of spiritualist poetics, a phenomenon that stretches across the nineteenth century but peaks, along with spasmody, in the 1850s. Electricity and rhythmic experience took on entirely new and fantastic meanings as a result of the spiritualist movement. Several poets at midcentury claimed the ability to communicate with the dead through rhythmic patterning, a formal elaboration of what was popularly called "spirit-tapping." In the preface to her 1864 *Poems from the Inner Life*, for example, Lizzie Doten describes how she would "catch the thrill of the innumerable voices resounding through the universe, and translate their



message into human language” (Doten, viii). Spiritualist poetry especially exemplifies the Victorian desire for connectedness, the seeming need to communicate, as Tennyson put it, beyond “[v]ague words” and in a language understood universally, in the human body (*In Memoriam* XCV; ALT, 2:413). In canonical poetry, too, most notably in the work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, we can see the spiritualist ideal playing out as a fantasy of connectedness that moves beyond individual bodies (as in the Spasmodic model), beyond the living world (as in Swinburne’s and Blind’s poems), and encompassing the vastness of all things physical and metaphysical. As the flip side of the scientific culture to which most of this book makes reference, spiritualism offers a fitting afterthought to the preceding chapters, a way of reframing electric models of poetic communication.

Like nerve impulses that seem universal in their experience, the rhythmic pulsing of electric meters inspired poets to consider how, or whether, language might be reconfigured to vibrate in tune with all human individuals. Nineteenth-century poets looked to electricity in anticipation of a language that might render indistinct the boundaries between sound and sense, between emotion and thought, and—perhaps—between individuals isolated in the modern world. Keats’s early call for “a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!” echoes throughout the century as a fantasy of interpersonal connection and communication. *Electric Meters* examines the enthusiasms and, ultimately, the frustrations inspired by this utopian project.