FROM STEAM TO CODE: TECHNOLOGICAL ANXIETY AND POETIC RESPONSE FROM VICTORIAN ENGLAND TO THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

This article explores the similarities between Victorian and modern digital poetry, examining them thematically and stylistically. It contends that both use the technological advancements of their eras not only to analyze how technology affects faith, society, nature, and human identity but also to reveal questions about humanity's relationship with progress that continue despite variations in technological background. This study demonstrates the vital role poetry plays as a mediator between human values and technological advancement by comparing Victorian poets: Matthew Arnold, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, with modern digital poets: Stephanie Strickland, J. R. Carpenter, and Jason Nelson. Poetry's role in conveying moral dilemmas, encouraging artistic creativity, and challenging technical determinism throughout history is highlighted by such analogies between meaning-making systems, material infrastructures, and moral complicity.

Keywords: Victorian poetry, digital poetry, technology and literature, ecopoetics, industrial capitalism.

Introduction

Despite the 150-year gap between Victorian poets and contemporary digital poets, their worries about how humans interact with technology are quite similar. During the Industrial Revolution, Victorian poets struggled with steam engines, factories, and railroads, using technology as a literary symbol as well as an actual reality (Ketabgian 15). Through poetry that examines how these technologies have a significant impact on the human condition, contemporary digital poets challenge techno-instrumentalist approaches to language in the face of algorithms, data networks, and artificial intelligence (Funk 285). Both use the technical developments of their respective eras as formal innovation as well as

topic matter to examine how technology affects social institutions, religion, the natural environment, and human identity. Contemporary digital poets like Stephanie Strickland (b. 1942), Jason Nelson (b. 1970), and J. R. Carpenter (b. 1972) are direct descendants of Victorian literary traditions, carrying on and expanding the issues raised by Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889), Robert Browning (1812–1889), Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861), and Matthew Arnold (1822–1888). These poets translate inchoate concerns about the effects of technology into the exact language of poetry, articulating cultural anxieties that many people feel but find difficult to define. Thus, poetry serves as a crucial mediator between the mechanical systems of the industrial and post-industrial worlds and human consciousness.

To show an uninterrupted poetic genealogy from Victorian England to the digital age, this article explores related themes: meaning-making systems, material infrastructures, and moral complicity. Few studies rigorously trace the connections between both eras, although scholarly attention to Victorian poetry's use of technology is well-established (Armstrong; Menke), and digital poetry has drawn growing critical attention (Hayles; Pressman). This article fills that gap by showing how modern digital poets innovate forms suitable for computational media while inheriting Victorian models for technological critique. Poetry is humanity's primary weapon for moral and intellectual inquiry in the face of technological change, according to the comparative analysis.

Historical Context: Two Ages of Disruption

Unprecedented scientific and technical advancements throughout the Victorian era altered human existence. Centuries-old social hierarchies were upended by the Industrial Revolution's mechanization of production, urbanization of populations, and creation of class structures (Armstrong 3-5). Concurrently, Christian beliefs regarding humanity's role in the universe were called into question by scientific theories, most notably Darwin's theory of evolution. As factories subjugated human labor to mechanical rhythms, railroads destroyed conventional experiences of time and space, and geological discoveries revealed that biblical chronology was incorrect, religious belief, social interactions, and individual identity faced hitherto unheard-of challenges. Victorian civilization was caught between the pastoral past and the industrial future, between faith and doubt.

The change was essentially existential rather than just technological or economic. As new urban centers concentrated wealth and poverty in previously unheard-of proximity, traditional organizations of meaning, such as the Church, landed nobility, and artisan guilds, quickly crumbled (Mohammed and Mohammed 167). As gas lighting extended working hours, telegraph lines reduced distances, and mass production changed the relationship between creator and manufactured object, the whole fabric of everyday existence shifted. Victorians went through what literary historian Raymond Williams called a "crisis of belief," in which long-held beliefs vanished more quickly than new ones could emerge (Williams 87-9).

Arnold, the Brownings, and Hopkins wrote about moral dilemmas, social injustices, and spiritual unhappiness during this time of change. They investigated whether material forces, spiritual attributes, divine providence, or mechanical determinism predominated in this new arena. Rather than rejecting industrialization, these poets addressed it critically, using the formal tools of poetry to preserve human complexity in the face of mechanization's simplifying consequences. As Isobel Armstrong demonstrates in *Victorian Poetry: Poetics and Politics* (Armstrong 3-5), Victorian poets understood their role as mediators between opposing value systems, creating forums where technological progress could be questioned without retreating into reactionary nostalgia.

The digital revolution that readers are experiencing is akin to the Industrial Revolution in terms of its scope and potential for disruption (Hayles 25). Algorithms alter perception, networks connect and watch people simultaneously, and artificial intelligence systems promise to enhance or replace human cognition. Social media platforms rearrange human connection, surveillance capitalism monetizes attention, and automated systems exploit logic to make critical decisions (Mohammed and Abd 883). Modern digital poets are legitimate heirs of Victorian ideas, using computer technologies as tools for societal critique. They use hypertext, algorithms, interactive interfaces, and generative systems to explore new technological and ethical frontiers, treating technology as both a formal constraint and a thematic concern. Thematic and structural similarities demonstrate how poetry is an essential instrument for upholding moral inquiry in the face of technological development. The poetic imagination remains a force that adapts forms while remaining committed to exploring being human in a world filled with non-human systems. Both

Victorian and contemporary digital poets reject the false dichotomy between unquestioning acceptance and technophobic rejection, instead creating what literary theorist N. Katherine Hayles calls "technotexts"—works whose "conceptual content and physical form mutually question technological conditions" (Hayles 25).

Meaning-Making Systems: Faith, Data, and Algorithmic Structure
The Crisis of Belief: From Withdrawing Sea to Infinite Database

For Victorians, developments in biology, geology, and biblical criticism presented significant challenges to long-held religious beliefs. The globe is millions of years older than biblical estimates, according to Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830–1833). Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) proposed natural selection as the process of creation rather than supernatural design. Higher biblical criticism, which originated in German research, saw scripture as a historical source that could be examined through textual analysis rather than as divine revelation. According to philosopher Charles Taylor, these developments caused a "crisis of plausibility" in which educated Victorians exposed to scientific rationalism found it challenging to uphold conventional religious assertions (Taylor 299-300).

Erosion is depicted in Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (1867) through the metaphor of the retreating "Sea of Faith." Instead of heavenly order, the speaker sees a "darkling plain" where there seems to be no transcendent meaning in the world (Arnold line 35):

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar (Arnold lines 21-25)

A constant retreat is implied by the "withdrawing roar"—faith eroding like a tide, leaving behind "naked shingles," a desolate beach (Arnold line 28). Arnold's speaker must find meaning on his/her own without transcendental instruction in a world without the divine. The poem's imagery emphasizes loss as an auditory experience since the speaker hears faith's departure rather than seeing it. The Victorian experience of secularization, which is the gradual loss of religious sensibility from lived experience rather than the deliberate rejection

of God, is reflected in this shift from visual confirmation to aural absence (Mohammed and Mohammed 167).

Arnold's thematic concerns are reinforced by his formal choices (Armstrong 240-41). The poem opens with a calm iambic regularity that describes the moonlit shore of Dover. However, as the speaker's concentration shifts to the corrosion of faith, this metrical stability is disrupted. Formal instability mirroring spiritual uncertainty is produced by irregular line lengths, enjambment that breaks syntactic units, and changing rhyme schemes. The famous pessimism of the final verse, "we are here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night" (Arnold lines 35–37), uses martial imagery to argue that existence is more like aimless conflict than providential design.

In her reformulation of this topic for the digital age, Stephanie Strickland replaces faith with data as the enormous, impersonal system that requires human interpretation. Her multimedia piece V: WaveSon.nets / Losing L'una / Vniverse (2002) reflects the divided nature of modern experience lived in both physical and virtual domains by existing simultaneously as a printed book and digital artifact (Strickland, V: WaveSon.nets). Vniverse, the digital component, turns reading into an exciting voyage through constellations of meaning by giving users an interface that resembles a night sky full of interactive stars. Users must travel and create their own patterns as each star delivers snippets of poetry.

Arnold lamented the loss of transcendent faith, but Strickland poses a terrifying query: has data itself developed into a new deity—vast, pattern-generating, requiring devotion and interpretation, but fundamentally devoid of spiritual content? A question posed by Hayles (Hayles 150–52). Users can find meaning in systems that might contain only information rather than wisdom because of Vniverse's algorithmic structures, which search for connections and patterns. Users click through star fields in an attempt to make connections, much as Victorian readers of Arnold thought poetry might restore lost religious confidence. Strickland, however, does not offer this kind of restoration; instead, she delivers an infinite database whose meaning is constantly elusive, where each link promises significance but only offers more information to be deciphered.

The analogy between Arnold's retreating sea and Strickland's infinite database highlights the risk that readers live in meaning-making systems that disregard

human spiritual needs. Both poets write from times of crisis, when individuals are left to make sense of vast but meaningless institutions without ultimate leadership, when traditional understanding frameworks have collapsed. Both address the same fundamental problem: how individuals make sense of institutions that appear dishonest, like scientific rationalism or digital networks. Emphasizing the formal uniqueness in both pieces is crucial. Strickland represents the proliferation of data through algorithmic development and accessible interfaces, whereas Arnold represents the breakdown of faith through erratic measurements and auditory visuals. Form and content are intricately intertwined because both poets employ the affordances of their respective media to produce works that perform rather than merely describe their cultural eras. Poetry employs creative structures to represent transformation rather than merely comment on it, and its formal sophistication distinguishes it from other cultural responses to technological advancement.

Algorithmic Poetics as Systemic Critique

Ringing the Changes (2020) by Strickland and Nick Montfort shows how computational poetics gives Victorian moral concerns a new voice. The work shows that code itself may become a tool for ethical thinking by using complex algorithmic frameworks to produce politically and morally conscious texts instead of a simple narrative (Strickland and Montfort). The conceptual foundation is multidisciplinary: Strickland transformed the combinatorial structure of seventeenth-century "change-ringing"—the mathematical discipline of ringing church bells through every feasible sequence—into Python code (Strickland 138). Seven distinct source texts were treated by her as "bells" being algorithmically "rung," including works by philosopher Simone Weil, artist-theorist Hito Steyerl, philosopher Yuk Hui, theorist Sha Xin Wei, writer Sylvia Wynter, pedagogical texts on bell-ringing by John C. G. Sturdy, and a "medley or mixtape" with multiple authors. Such a selection of sources results in what reviewer Sarah Whitcomb Laiola refers to as a "poetics of juxtaposition": fragments of quantum physics, racial violence, aesthetic theory, and ethical philosophy collide and recombine because of the algorithm's juxtapositions (Laiola; Strickland 5).

This "algorithmic collage" forces readers to discover resonances and linkages that would never emerge in a linear exposition by comparing sentences on

seemingly unrelated subjects—police brutality, quantum physics, narrative theory, and ethical philosophy. When a victim's name is followed by a paragraph about physics and then a part from Weil's ethical philosophy, the algorithm allows for contemplation of the intersections of violence, matter, and morality. The work defies easy interpretation; viewers must create meaning from algorithmically generated combinations, just as contemporary citizens must establish ethical viewpoints from the massive, fragmented information flows of digital society.

This project exemplifies the digital evolution of the socially aware spirit of Victorian reform poetry. Strickland's algorithmic work creates a space where meaning arises not only from authorial intention but also through the methodical interaction of multiple source texts, producing significance that transcends any one perspective. This is similar to Hirsch's argument that "textual meaning is fixed while interpretation changes from one generation to another," which requires readers to distinguish between the author's intended meaning and the evolving significance readers derive over time (Mohammed and Abd 883). While Barrett Browning's protest was instantaneous and lyrical, meant to evoke an emotional reaction, Strickland's protest is systematic and structural, integrated into code-generating text. The names of racial violence victims "ring" through text like sad bells of remembrance, their recurrence algorithmically ensured, turning the Python program into a tool of moral remembrance. The form guarantees that these names will not be forgotten by readers; they will come back, ring once more, and demand acknowledgement. This is an example of realized digital poetry that is both creative and compassionate while addressing societal themes, including institutional racism, the climate crisis, and economic inequality. It does this by thinking with and through it. The piece demonstrates that moral commitment should not be sacrificed for technological advancement by extending Victorian social protest into digital media (Pressman 135–6). In reality, Ringing the Changes contends that because of its capability for complex recombination, its ability to hold numerous perspectives at once, and its resistance to mono-narratives, computational form may be appropriate for ethical thought in a pluralistic society.

Material Infrastructures: From Factory Children to Data Centers
Industrial Capitalism and Its Discontents

Massive wealth was concentrated throughout the Industrial Revolution, but urban working poor people, especially children, suffered greatly as a result. Horrible conditions, including children as young as five working twelve-hour days in factories, coal mines, and textile mills, were revealed by parliamentary investigations conducted in the 1830s and 1840s. Women and children under ten were prohibited from working underground under the 1842 Mines Act, although infractions were frequent and enforcement was lax (Armstrong 60–62). Victorian reform literature aimed to reveal the middle-class Victorians' ignorance of production circumstances while they bought cheap items made possible by this exploitation. The human cost of industrial advancement was revealed in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children" (1843), which gave voice to young workers engrossed in factory labor:

For, all day, we drag our burden tiring

Through the coal-dark, underground;

Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron

In the factories, round and round. (Barrett Browning lines 49-52)

The word "all day" is used repeatedly by Barrett Browning to emphasize the relentless nature of child labor—childhood itself consumed by industrial production, not short bursts of work interspersed with play. The "wheels of iron" going "round and round" are a metaphor for mindless mechanical movement and meaningless repetition (Mohammed & Mohammed 168). The lyric "Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers, / Ere the sorrow comes with years?" (Barrett Browning lines 1-2) is directed at mothers who neglect to protect their children by juxtaposing their suffering with adult complacency. Such a method accuses readers of cruelty and denies the distance of aesthetic evaluation.

Because the goods they purchased were produced at the expense of children's suffering, the poem forced middle-class Victorian readers to confront their culpability (Armstrong 75–77). By employing what readers may today call "supply chain consciousness," Barrett Browning draws attention to the invisible labor that enables consumer convenience. Her formal style is intentionally friendly, utilizing simple emotive appeals, simple rhymes, and simple meters to reach as many people as possible. Unlike more experimental Victorian poetry, "The Cry of the Children" promotes communication clarity above complexity

because it acknowledges that mass comprehension is essential for social advancement. But the poem is more than propaganda. Barrett Browning creates very moving depictions of child laborers in lines such as "For oh, say the children, we are weary / And we cannot run or leap" (Barrett Browning lines 13–14), where children express exhaustion that surpasses even death's peace. The poem's power comes from a combination of empathetic imagination and moral urgency; Barrett Browning examines the economic systems that lead to children's suffering while evoking that suffering in readers.

Digital Capitalism's Hidden Costs

As a modern poet, J. R. Carpenter brings this critique into the twenty-first century with *The Gathering Cloud* (2017). Rather than being an airy metaphor, the title combines technological and natural imagery to depict "the cloud" of data storage as a network of energy-intensive data centers with substantial environmental and human implications. Every digital action, including clicks, emails, and streamed videos, has concrete consequences that are hidden by layers of technological and spatial abstraction, according to Carpenter (Carpenter, *Gathering Cloud* 10–20). The piece embodies the hybrid materiality it criticizes by existing as both a print book and a digital essay. The book contrasts ethereal language with tangible reality by layering data with poetry:

The cloud is not

a cloud. It is the copper

ore mined from under

the mountains. The cloud

is not a cloud. It is the

tar sands scraped from

beneath the forests. (Carpenter 15)

Readers are forced to see data centers, fiber optic cables, electricity generation, and resource extraction where they saw convenient abstraction due to this anaphoric structure—repeated insistence that "the cloud is not a cloud"—which methodically dismantles metaphor hiding digital infrastructure. Throughout the text, Carpenter continues this demystification by describing the physical infrastructure of cloud computing, including faraway server farms, underwater cables that span oceans, exploitative mining of rare earth minerals, and electricity generated by coal-fired power plants.

It is a perfect match to Victorian industrial critique. Carpenter reveals the environmental devastation concealed behind digital interfaces, much as Barrett Browning revealed the child labor concealed behind factory walls. Both poets deal with what cosmopolitan theory refers to as the displacement of consequences: middle-class consumers profit from systems whose costs are borne by remote, invisible others, whether they are modern workers in data centers and extraction zones or Victorian factory children (Mohammed and Mohammed 168). Carpenter makes digital users responsible for the ecological cost of every email and video transmitted, while Barrett Browning made readers involved in the misery of industrial capitalism.

The human costs of digital infrastructure are also recorded by the *Gathering Cloud* (Carpenter, *Gathering Cloud* 25–40). Carpenter discusses data center workers exposed to hazardous materials, mineral extraction in conflict areas, and workers in Chinese electronics companies. She tracks particular supply chains, such as the mining of coltan in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, its processing in China, its assembly into cellphones, and its marketing as clean technology. The method of making exploitation apparent in Victorian reform literature is immediately inherited by this supply chain consciousness, even if the exploitation now comprises several businesses and spans continents. Both poets fulfill poetry's essential function: making visible what power structures render invisible, giving voice to what is silenced, and insisting readers acknowledge their position within exploitative systems. Formal innovations differ, but the ethical imperative remains constant: poetry must bear witness to suffering and compel readers toward moral accountability. Where Barrett Browning used accessible lyrics and emotional appeals, Carpenter uses documentary poetics and material analysis, but both create what we might call "infrastructural consciousness"—awareness of the hidden systems enabling everyday comfort.

Nature and the Sublime: From God's Grandeur to Cyber-Ecology
Hopkins's Natural Theology

Faced with industrial desecration of the natural world, Victorian poets sought evidence of divine order and beauty in nature. This was not naive romanticism but deliberate theological resistance to mechanistic materialism (Armstrong 300-302). If nature could be shown to retain spiritual significance despite

industrial violation, then perhaps human existence retained transcendent meaning despite scientific reductionism. Gerard Manley Hopkins's "God's Grandeur" (written 1877, published 1918) boldly declares "The world is charged with the grandeur of God" even as industrial activity mars creation: "all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil" (Hopkins lines 1, 6). Hopkins perceives both violation and resilience, insisting that despite industrial degradation, "nature is never spent" (Hopkins line 9). His innovative sprung rhythm and dense sound patterns imitate creation's vitality itself, affirming beauty's capacity to endure amid corruption.

With a concentrated intensity, Hopkins writes, "And for all this, nature is never spent; / There lives the dearest freshness deep down things" (Hopkins lines 9–10). The concept of freshness "deep down things" suggests that nature's creating power is hidden under surface damage, inaccessible by industrial destruction, and prepared to restore what has been harmed. The poem's sestet concludes theologically with "Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings" (Hopkins lines 13–14). The brooding presence of the Holy Spirit, like a bird watching over its nest, ensures nature's perennial regeneration despite human violation. Hopkins's formal innovation supports his theological worldview (Armstrong 320–25).

Stressed syllables might cluster irregularly thanks to his innovative metrical approach, sprung rhythm, which creates a rhythmic urgency that is unthinkable in conventional meter. By combining stresses, lines like "It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil / Crushed" (Hopkins lines 3–4) produce language density that enacts the concentrated spiritual energy Hopkins observes in nature ("ooze of oil / Crushed"). His extensive use of alliteration, internal rhyme, and assonance creates a rich sound that alludes to the limitless majesty of nature: "warm breast...bright wings" (Hopkins line 14); "bleared, smeared with toil" (Hopkins line 6). However, Hopkins's poetry is not unquestioningly devoted to the natural world. The octave enumerates industrial destruction with startling realism: "Generations have trod, have trod, have trod" (Hopkins line 5) emphasizes exploitation through pounding repetition. Hopkins acknowledges degradation but does not give it finality; the sestet's theological shift demands healing, redemption, and restoration. The poem's dialectical structure, which praises transcendence and acknowledges damage, makes it more than merely

wishful thinking. It is a deliberate theological defense of materialist hopelessness.

Cyber-Ecology and Digital Sublime

By envisioning natural sublime in alignment with technology's patterns and structures rather than in disalignment with it, two contemporary digital poets, Strickland and Carpenter, suggest what critics call "cyber-ecology"—finding awe in algorithmic and data systems themselves (Hayles 200–15). Hopkins's nature/industry dichotomy is significantly altered by this. Digital poets have to navigate a world where technology and nature coexist, where "natural" data can only be meaningful through technological intermediation, and when code itself exhibits strange beauty similar to that of natural occurrences.

Two modern digital poets, Strickland and Carpenter, propose what critics refer to as "cyber-ecology"—finding awe in algorithmic and data systems themselves—by imagining this natural sublime through technology's patterns and structures rather than in opposition to it (Hayles 200–15). This drastically changes Hopkins's nature/industry dichotomy. In a world where technology and nature coexist, where "natural" data can only have significance through technological intermediation, and where code itself displays peculiar beauty akin to that of natural phenomena, digital poets must navigate. When taken as a whole, these elements imply that, like natural systems, digital ones follow patterns that, if correctly perceived, can inspire wonder and produce meaning. Strickland's cyber-ecological poetics requires readers to develop a parallel "digital worldliness," the capacity to recognize beauty and meaning in computational systems without losing connection to embodied, physical reality, in the same way that cosmopolitan thinkers stress the need to preserve "worldliness"—defined as "being articulate, persuasive, daring, independent and troublesome"—while advocating for "the general application of fundamental rights" (Mohammed and Mohammed 169). Because of this worldliness, readers must concurrently negotiate a variety of viewpoints, refusing to favor either natural or technological systems and instead looking for their places of intersection and mutual enlightenment.

Similar to this, Carpenter's *This Is a Picture of Wind* (2020) uses real-time weather data to turn the invisible force of wind into concrete poetic language. The work makes the fleeting visible by using real-time meteorological data to

create poetry that reacts to current wind conditions (Carpenter, *This Is a Picture*). Carpenter sees sublimity at the nexus of natural forces and computational translation, whereas Hopkins saw God's majesty "charged" through nature. The work uses algorithms to translate meteorological data into linguistic patterns rather than only describing wind. Users see the transformation of the wind into words, transforming a natural phenomenon into computer poetry. These works imply that sublimity—the Romantic feeling of encountering forces beyond comprehension—remains possible in digital settings. Both Victorian and contemporary poets assert that sublimity arises from encountering systems that are too vast for one person's awareness to completely comprehend. Strickland and Carpenter saw this in the intersection of computer systems and natural patterns, whereas Hopkins found it in divinely infused nature. The crucial distinction is that modern poets must negotiate a world in which nature and technology coexist rather than merely opposing them. This is a refined development of Victorian and Romantic nature poetry (Hayles 210–12). Digital ecopoets investigate how computing systems could improve rather than worsen our relationship with nature, as opposed to viewing technology as nature's adversary. They suggest "cyber-ecology" as acknowledging that, in the twenty-first century, nature and technology are inextricably linked—readers cannot experience one without the intermediary of the other—rather than as giving up on nature in favor of technology.

Moral Complexity and Complicity: From Dramatic Monologue to Interactive Game

Victorian Dramatic Monologue

Victorian poetry, especially Robert Browning's dramatic monologue, was excellent at examining psychological ambiguity and moral complexity; these skills have a modern counterpart in interactive digital media (Armstrong 200–202). The dramatic monologue puts the reader in a unique situation where readers hear the speaker's story of self-justification while also seeing the moral shortcomings that the speaker is unable or unwilling to admit. Dramatic irony is produced by this discrepancy between the speaker's perception of themselves and the reader's assessment, allowing for in-depth psychological investigation. The potency of the form is demonstrated in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" (1842), where the Duke's elegant narration purports to depict a portrait

of his late wife but actually exposes his own terrifying brutality and possessiveness. Readers see a guy whose demand for total control led him to kill a woman whose only "crime" was being warm and completely human; the Duke feels he exhibits sophisticated taste and justified authority. With appalling indifference, the Duke declares:

She had

A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,

Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er

She looked on, and her looks went everywhere. (Browning lines 21-24)

The deliberate phrasing and pauses imply that the speaker is controlling words in the same way that he controlled his Duchess. His comment that "her looks went everywhere" reveals a possessive anger that she paid attention to other people instead of just him. "I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together" (Browning lines 45–46) is the most terrifyingly brief moment. While "all smiles stopped" reduces the Duchess's death to the termination of an annoyance, the euphemism "gave commands" hardly conceals murder. As they listen with the marriage envoy, the reader takes on a role of silent complicity and must make sense of the dangerous discrepancy between what the Duke says and what he discloses (Armstrong 210–13). Readers participate in the Duke's performance by paying attention, following his guided tour, and examining the portrait as instructed. The poem is more unsettling than a straightforward murder story because of this forced cooperation; the audience is made to listen to a killer's self-justification without being able to stop him.

This intricate readerly position is the formal invention of the dramatic monologue. Browning's dramatic monologue creates a similar gap to Hirsch's distinction between textual meaning—"nothing other than the author's meaning"—and significance, which varies with each reader and generation. The Duke's intended meaning differs significantly from the significance readers construct (realizing his monstrous psychology), necessitating interpretive work that reveals moral complexity (Mohammed and Abd 883). Readers comprehend and condemn, sympathize and judge at the same time. In favor of psychological complexity that acknowledges the interconnectedness of power, desire, and self-deception, the form rejects moral simplicity. The Duke is not just evil; he believes that his acts were necessary, that his possessiveness was acceptable, and that his power was justified. Although understanding his mental state does not

excuse his behavior, it does demonstrate how pure and intelligent people can commit crimes.

Interactive Complicity

Jason Nelson's *Game, Game, Game, and Again Game* (2007) updates this analysis of moral complexity for the interactive digital age. Presented as a disjointed video game poetry, the work takes viewers to strange levels with jerky images, broken text, and sarcastic remarks (Nelson). His work critiques online culture's promotion of moral detachment, gamification, and digital addiction, which reduces significant ethical dilemmas to points, levels, and successes. Similar to Browning's Duke, Nelson's work is self-revealing and manipulating, but it differs in that the reader-player participates in the structures it condemns by clicking, choosing, and navigating (Pressman 180-5). Nelson's text fragments are full of humorous self-awareness; the work is both a game and a critique of gaming, promoting engagement while posing questions about whether it is beneficial or merely addictive.

The aesthetic—distorted images, broken writing, and broken interfaces— reflects the instability of moral certainty in a society where digital algorithms gamify everything from exercise to education to social interaction. Users click through Nelson's chaotic levels, earning points and completing tasks while text pieces question the value of such activities: "winning is a side effect of playing" flashes across the screen, "the game plays you" appears amid pixel devastation. The work forces the realization that contemporary digital engagement operates through game mechanics, even when discussing serious subjects: productivity apps assign achievement badges, social media platforms reward "likes" and "followers," and news feeds are algorithmically optimized for engagement rather than importance. A significant transition from Victorian dramatic monologue to digital interactive art is shown by this change in the reader's perspective. By evaluating the Duke from outside the dramatic setting, Browning's reader was able to preserve critical distance. Nelson's player is unable to keep this distance; by clicking and moving, the user engages in the same actions that the piece criticizes. Moral involvement is strengthened by this forced complicity: what other options are there for resistance if we are compelled to take part in problematic systems like digital capitalism, surveillance, and gamification?

Both Browning and Nelson use formal innovation—dramatic monologue in the past, interactive game-poem in the present—to highlight persistent human inconsistencies, such as the ability to deceive oneself, the propensity to justify violence, and the discrepancy between stated ideals and actions (Armstrong 215–7). By rejecting the ease of passing judgment, both render players and readers participants in moral failings. While the interactive game-poem implicates via doing, the theatrical monologue implicates through hearing. In both situations, the structure of the work compels readers or players to acknowledge their own involvement in the actions that are being critiqued, turning form into ethics.

The Unbroken Line: Poetry as Critical Technology

Poetry has been a vital instrument for humanity to question the worlds we create and the costs associated with doing so for more than 150 years. While modern digital poets deal with networks, algorithms, and artificial intelligence systems that undermine individual identity and cognitive autonomy, Victorian poets struggled with steam engines, industries, and railroads that threatened spiritual, social, and natural ordering. Crucially, both groups react with creative formal experimentation rather than technophobic rejection, utilizing technology's own instruments to infuse mechanical and computational systems with human values and moral depth (Hayles 25). Strickland's data-driven search for meaning in systems that provide meaningless information echoes Arnold's crisis of faith. Carpenter's ecological critique, which shows how digital infrastructure devours the globe itself, echoes Barrett Browning's denunciation of industry exploitation. Hopkins's claim that divine majesty is preserved in nature foreshadows Strickland and Carpenter's search for sublimity in digital systems. Browning's psychologically complex dramatic monologues serve as the foundation for Nelson's interactive game-poems, which force players to collaborate with the systems they critique. Such parallels demonstrate how every major technological change brings up fundamental human issues of responsibility, faith, meaning, and purpose—issues that poetry is especially well-suited to explore (Armstrong 3-5; Pressman 200-1).

Poetry alone can express what it is like to be human within these systems, the benefits and drawbacks of adopting them, and how they alter consciousness itself. Scientific discourse can explain how systems function, while political and

economic discourse can discuss how they should be regulated (Mohammed and Mohammed 172). Poetry constantly serves as a bridge between religion and skepticism, ethics and advancement, nature and technology, and the person and the system. It creates a third place for sophisticated negotiation, rejecting false alternatives between naïve welcome and Luddite rejection. Victorian gaslight and modern screen glow are united by Strickland, Carpenter, and Nelson's successful extension of Victorian moral and aesthetic vision into twenty-first-century digital poetics, demonstrating that even as technologies change, the motivation of poetic imagination—to interpret, critique, and convey the powers of the age using language infused with compassion, irony, precision, and grace—forms an unbroken line.

Conclusion

This article has identified similarities between Victorian and modern digital poetry in three main areas: material infrastructures (industrial versus digital capitalism; nature and sublime in mechanized versus algorithmic contexts); moral complicity (dramatic monologues versus interactive media); and meaning-making systems (crisis of faith versus data systems; algorithmic poetics as ethical structure). Each parallel demonstrates how poetry performs cultural functions, such as exposing what dominant systems conceal, giving voice to what is silenced, questioning what is accepted, and insisting that technological progress be assessed not only by efficiency but also by human flourishing and sustainability. Among the Victorian poets—Arnold, Barrett Browning, Browning, and Hopkins—who created models for poetic engagement with technology that are vital are concerns about meaning-systems offering structure without transcendence; moral outrage at exploitation hidden by distance; attempts to find beauty amid degradation; and an analysis of how power functions through language. Strickland, Carpenter, and Nelson are examples of contemporary digital poets who use these patterns to develop new forms appropriate for the computer medium.

Not only is historical continuity demonstrated, but a deeper understanding of poetry's function across all technological ages is also revealed. Poetry does not settle disputes between human aspirations and technological systems; rather, it provides spaces for their analysis, emotion, and negotiation. Both technophobic rejection and techno-utopian embrace are rejected. In contrast, poetry maintains

a critical proximity that is both close enough to understand systems from the inside out and far enough to question their necessity and explore alternatives. This stance is critical in the current era, since computational systems are mediating perception, social interaction, and political discourse. As AI systems begin to produce language on a wide scale, the question of what makes poetry specifically human becomes crucial. The Victorian-to-digital history described here suggests an answer: poetry's significance lies in its commitment to articulating what it is like to be human in certain historical moments, its insistence on raising moral concerns, and its rejection of efficiency as the ultimate value. Poetry endures from steam to code, from gaslight to screen glow, because humans are attempting to understand how technology is evolving. Victorian poets helped their peers navigate the first industrial revolution, whereas contemporary digital poets help viewers navigate the algorithmic revolution. Despite technological developments, poetry's functions—bearing witness, presenting questions, producing meaning, and insisting on human value—remain relevant. This continuity makes it possible for poetry to help readers understand who they are and whom they might decide to become in the face of technology that they build and that creates them.

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