

## Going Back and Going On: The Uses of Re-encounter

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“The world,” wrote Robert Browning, “is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned.”<sup>1</sup> Browning’s words insist on the enduring interest of the disowned objects of our encounters, but they also hint at the value of re-encounter itself: in his “Essay on Shelley” (1852), he urges his readers to repeated engagement with a world which—forlornly, conceitedly, at any rate unimaginatively—they think they know all too well. Browning’s point has lost nothing of its force to the passage of time, but it is still worth wondering why a Victorian audience in particular needed to hear it, and why it should have been a poet that made it. One of the things that distinguishes re-encounter from other varieties of repetition is its grounding in first-person experience, and hence its self-conscious temporal relation to past and prospective engagements with the same object: be it a person, place, thing, idea, or (as Browning’s metaphor suggests) a text. As such it may carry significant ethical implications, which might involve coming to see the world (and its constituents) as neither fully knowable nor casually disposable, and one’s own experience as vitally provisional. A re-encounter, to borrow a suggestive pairing of Stanley Cavell’s, is a way of both *going back* and *going on*.<sup>2</sup>

As the essays that follow reveal, there are many possible moods, styles, and methods of re-encounter. This special issue explores both how re-encounters are represented in Victorian poems and how structures of re-encounter shape the composition and reception of poetry in the period—through the dynamics of literary influence, the translation of earlier texts, the revision of manuscripts, and the creative reconstruction of tropes, myths, and images. Unsurprisingly, then, our chosen term often brushes up against others that bear

certain family resemblances, including: representation, remediation, refashioning, recounting, revising, revisiting, revisioning, and recursion.<sup>3</sup> Such attention lends weight to Rita Felski's recent observation that "we shortchange the significance of art by focusing on the 'de' prefix (its power to demystify, destabilize, denaturalize) at the expense of the 're' prefix: its ability to recontextualize, reconfigure, or recharge perception."<sup>4</sup> Our contributors offer us many different routes into the concept of re-encounter as a resource for thinking about Victorian poetry and culture. While we have not been prescriptive about its definition, we nonetheless want to make a case for carefully scrutinizing our critical terms: all the following essays think hard about what makes "re-encounter" distinctive, as a structure of experience and as a critical idiom.

An example from one of the most well-known poems of the period gives a sense of the stakes and possibilities. Tennyson's *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1850) pursues a re-encounter with a place hallowed by memory when the poet returns to Arthur Hallam's house in Wimpole Street:

Dark house, by which once more I stand  
Here in the long unlovely street,  
Doors, where my heart was used to beat  
So quickly, waiting for a hand,  
  
A hand that can be clasped no more –  
Behold me, for I cannot sleep,  
And like a guilty thing I creep  
At earliest morning to the door.<sup>5</sup>

The syntax of Tennyson's lyric ambiguates between surveying and apostrophizing the physical objects re-encountered: the dark house and its barred doors. "Behold me" could be read as indicative (taking the house and the doors as the sentence's subject), but it sounds more like an address, whose intended audience could be the reader, or Hallam, or perhaps even the house itself, along the lines of the classical genre of *paraclausithyron* (in which the excluded lover "addresses the door and holds it responsible for his rejection").<sup>6</sup> In this last case, the house's unresponsiveness becomes an eerie figure for the devastating failure of the poet's address to his departed friend. While Hallam's gloomy abode might seem to share sympathetically in the colors of mourning, the poet finds himself disturbed by its vacancy: not only its emptiness but its blankness and silence. The poet's heart seems almost literally to rap at the door, yet answer comes there none. These lines, then, imagine not just a re-encounter with a place, but a missed re-encounter with a person. They may refer to a single crushing occasion, or a habitual scene: the poet's "once more" could be an apology for finality (just one last time) or a witness to futility, or faithfulness (yet again).

Tennyson in fact re-encounters this poignant threshold, and his own words, toward the end of the poem (the sections were probably written together and inserted at a late stage in the poem's composition) (Shatto and Shaw, p. 439):

Doors, where my heart was used to beat

So quickly, not as one that weeps

I come once more; the city sleeps;

I smell the meadow in the street; (CXIX, ll. 1–4)

As Peter McDonald suggests, the undeviating *abba* rhyming structure of the poem means that "each stanza's central hint at progression from one thing to another is undercut by the return

to and return of the *a* rhyme.”<sup>7</sup> The result, says Christopher Ricks, is a poem marked by a “continual receding from its affirmations, from what it momentarily clinches.”<sup>8</sup> But when (as in these passages) what is clinched is sorrow, the recessionary movement may itself suggest a route out of the circuits of mourning. The poem’s motion, then, might be understood not simply in terms of the circularity of repetition, but the spiraling of re-encounter. Though it maintains an “unbroken pattern,” such movement has a more complex directionality than the prefix “re-” might suggest, which is irreducible either to the circular dynamics of reiteration or the linear progress of revisitation. While eighteenth-century critics were frequently troubled by the effect of echoic structures—“perpetual returns of similar impressions lie like weights upon our spirits,” wrote one—Arthur Hallam himself discerned something more equivocal in the nature of such aural re-encounters.<sup>9</sup> As he declared in 1831, “Rhyme has been said to contain in itself a constant appeal to Memory and Hope.”<sup>10</sup> Re-encounter is a way of testing the character, as well as the uses, of constancy.

Seamus Perry writes that Tennyson’s “recurrent interest in a particular narrative of recurrence” was inherited from his precursor as poet laureate, William Wordsworth.<sup>11</sup> As Stephen Gill notes in *Wordsworth’s Revisitings* (2011), Tennyson’s predecessor continually “went back to places that had mattered to him as man and as poet” and, through fresh acts of creative re-encounter, “tested his sense of the present” as much as his feelings for the past.<sup>12</sup> This sense of test or challenge is essential to the etymological story of “re-encounter,” which can be traced to the Middle French verb *rencontrer* and its English counterpart *recounter*.<sup>13</sup> In French, that common (and seemingly commonsense) prefix “re-” carries the meaning of “again” (as in *refaire*, to do again), but also “back” (as in *renvoyer*, to send back), both of which participate in our modern understanding of “re-encounter.” The prefix is not always so substantive, however; *regarder* (to look at, face, concern), for example, no longer holds the meaning of *re-garder* (to keep back or to keep again). Historically, both *rencontrer* and

*rencounter* were used to describe not a subsequent encounter, but an initial one: an “engagement between two opposing military forces” or a “hostile engagement between two individuals,” a usage frequently deployed in Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590) as well as by that poem’s many nineteenth-century admirers, such as Walter Scott.<sup>14</sup> In particular, a “rencounter” denoted a combat that was unplanned, unlike a pitched battle or a duel, though this became something of an artificial distinction when dueling was outlawed in France, so that—as one nineteenth-century glossary notes—“affairs of honour” were consequently managed under the pretense of *rencontrer*, “as if by sudden and casual quarrel.”<sup>15</sup> These martial applications were supplemented by increasingly metaphorical usage, so that by 1845, the *Encyclopædia Metropolitana* could gloss the verb “rencounter” not only as “to engage or fight with” but “to come against, to meet with, to occur with,” retaining the early overtones of combat and happenstance.<sup>16</sup> The extra-syllabled (and less popular) “re-encounter” was used with the same meaning from the early sixteenth century, although it acquired its distinctive modern sense of a *subsequent* encounter as early as 1611, when John Florio (referencing a dubious Italian derivation) defined “reincounter” as “a meeting againe” (*OED Online*, “re-encounter, *n.*”).

Neither term, we should acknowledge, was especially popular in the nineteenth century, but this is not to say that our concerns are resolutely presentist (any more than they are narrowly historicist). What we and our contributors recognize in (and through) nineteenth-century writing is a widespread fascination with structures and habits of re-encounter. The history of the term matters not because it was a household word for the Victorians, but because tracing its buried meanings illuminates something about those structures and habits we might otherwise have missed—namely, the twin undercurrents of challenge and unexpectedness that animate so many Victorian re-encounters, and that continue to characterize our own re-encounters with the period and its literature.

We therefore find ourselves at odds with John Maynard's recent contention that "the Victorian age as a whole, sick or sound, quested not for the unique and new in pleasure but for the same old." In support of this view, Maynard adduces "the Victorian fascination with highly structured verse forms presented in extensive series" as well as the period's fondness for "repeated readings and treasuries of well-known verse."<sup>17</sup> Yet there is no shortage of Victorian delight in novelties, and (as Tennyson suggests) re-encounters do not necessarily promise the comforting routine of "the same old." Fresh experience might even require a second look for its freshness to be fully recognized as such. Freud believed that "The finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it"<sup>18</sup>—the same old instinct attaching itself to a series of new objects—but it may also be true that, as Adam Phillips observes, "There is no first impression . . . without a second thought."<sup>19</sup> For Marcel Proust, the return to childhood reading offers us a "calendar . . . of days that have vanished,"<sup>20</sup> but for many of the poets discussed in this issue, re-encounters with literature present opportunities for transformation as well as revelation, resources for finding new relations with oneself and the world. Christie Debelius's "Understanding New Media with L.E.L.: Women Poets, New Media, and the Petrarchan Gaze" traces Letitia Elizabeth Landon's engagement with old tropes and prior publications—Petrarch's poetry, Germaine de Staël's *Corinne* (1807), and the ekphrastic genre more broadly—to demonstrate how she shaped such re-encounters in relation to the new technological and media environment in which she wrote. Similarly, Mark Llewellyn's exploration of the chain of re-encounters with white peacocks that runs through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth—"On Peacocks: Feathered Re-encounters in the 1890s"—notes how the products of such re-encounters can express "both homage and pique, deference, and frustration." In exploring Oscar Wilde's re-encounter with Tennysonian peacocks, he notes how homage can be a method of putting prior works or motifs to "an adaptive purpose," invoking an existing tradition while "remodeling" it.

For Tennyson, as for Wordsworth before him, re-encounters typically disclose a puzzling apprehension of simultaneous connection and difference, an eerie imbrication of intimacy and estrangement.<sup>21</sup> Strolling through Trinity College, where his friendship with Hallam had been formed many years before, Tennyson tells us he “felt / The same, but not the same” (LXXXVII, ll. 13–14). *In Memoriam*’s unvarying stanza structure is one way of negotiating these conflicted feelings of sameness and discrepancy. For Eric Griffiths, it may “reflect a self continuous through succession, or protect, shore up, a self that is repeatedly on the verge of becoming mere series.”<sup>22</sup> For the re-encounter with an external object—whether it be a place, a person, or a poem—is always a re-encounter with the self, as several of the essays in this issue remind us. The potential for an ontological shock from re-encounter is explored in Andrea Selleri’s article, “Ghostly Selves in Augusta Webster’s Poetry,” which probes the nature and boundaries of the self and the ways in which old modes of being persist or return in uncanny ways. The re-encounter with the self, and the self’s construction through such re-encounters, are central to Jack Hart’s reading of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poetry, “Hopkins Unselved.” While Selleri finds in Webster’s characterizations an unbidden form of re-encounter, whereby old values and feelings “haunt” new versions of the self, Hart identifies an animated form of selfhood-in-the-making both in Hopkins’s efforts of redrafting and in the movement of the poems themselves.

Walter Pater associated the instability of re-encounter with the fluidity of selfhood in one of his earliest essays, arguing that experience gives us “not the truth of eternal outlines effected once for all, but a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions, shifting intricately as we ourselves change.”<sup>23</sup> In “The Poetry of Michelangelo” (1871), Pater describes how the sculptures in the sacristy of San Lorenzo express “vague fancies, misgivings, presentiments, which shift and mix and are defined and fade again,” seemingly for artist and beholder alike.<sup>24</sup> John Keats expressed his conviction that repeated engagements

with poetry had the potential to generate something new each time such that poems need not “stale,”<sup>25</sup> while more recently the art historian T. J. Clark has written of the provocations and surprises granted by sustained re-encounters with two pictures by Nicolas Poussin. “Coming to terms with them is slow work,” he writes,

But astonishing things happen if one gives oneself over to the process of seeing again and again: aspect after aspect of the picture seems to surface, what is salient and what incidental alter bewilderingly from day to day, the larger order of the depiction breaks up, recrystallizes, fragments again, persists like an afterimage.<sup>26</sup>

Re-encounters, then, even when they are sought out rather than bumped into—deliberate duels rather than unexpected challenges—are never wholly subject to the encounterer’s control. If they are not always haphazard, they always involve a certain amount of hazard. This is something that theorists of the aesthetic, of varying intellectual hues, have long recognized; the underlying conviction that no rule can provide a foundation for an aesthetic judgment, shared by thinkers from Immanuel Kant to David Hume to John Ruskin, ensures that aesthetic re-encounters always thrive on (or threaten) something more than repetition. “When I return to a short story, a painting, or a film and discover beauty in it again and again,” writes Michel Chaouli,

do I do so knowing what I will find? Were that so, then I would be treating the work like a depository where I go to replenish supplies I have used up. But the wonder and pleasure in such an experience lies precisely in the fact that there is no promise that the object may again give me pleasure, for what yesterday struck me in the way only an artwork can, may leave me indifferent today. And the wonder and the pleasure lies



not just in being rewarded once again, but in being rewarded differently, for my pleasure never seems to be exactly the same as the one I felt during previous encounters[.]”<sup>27</sup>

This sense of risk intrinsic to the experience of the aesthetic also informs the many other kinds of attachments, intentions, and investments we may form in relation to a text: as Cavell writes, “[a] work one cares about is not so much something one has read as something one is a reader of; connection with it goes on, as with any relation one cares about.”<sup>28</sup> In her article, “‘Having dared to touch with bloody hands the verses’: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Embodied Approach to the Homeric Corpus,” Allison Scheidegger Reising makes the case for understanding the poet’s persistent attention to the Homeric corpus as a form of care. Scheidegger Reising draws our attention to the ways in which we cannot help but re-encounter EBB’s own relationship with her classical antecedents in a poem as insistently modern as *Aurora Leigh* (1856). Like EBB before her, the reader occupies a sort of dipole, repeatedly tracing the distance between the positive and negative charges of classical scholarship and, in particular, readings of Homer. EBB’s horror at the violence done to the Homeric corpus by previous translators, Scheidegger Reising argues, leads to her own re-encounters taking on a combative air, evident in EBB’s marginalia, her original poetic work, and her repeated efforts of translation. In “Christ Among the Decadents: Re-encountering Religion in Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of the World*,” Joshua Brorby examines how a dialectic of time and timelessness maps onto the cycles of re-encounter depicted in Arnold’s epic life of Christ, in which the infinite nature of the divine provides a solution to the belatedness foregrounded by nineteenth-century comparative religious history.

Why should poetry in particular emerge as a locus for thinking about re-encounter in the period?<sup>29</sup> We noted earlier how poetry’s use of rhyme, repetition, meter, and stanzaic

form can embed structures of re-encounter at the level of technique. We might go further and say that in their concentration, semantic density, and mnemonic appeal, poems pose especially acute questions about the nature and uses of re-encounter: “*again*,” writes James Longenbach, “is one of the most powerful words in the language, and the act of knowing in a lyric poem is an act of coming to know again, the repeatable action of the language on the page having become more thrilling than the original action described.”<sup>30</sup> Even when it is not narrating fictional re-encounters, the lyric often testifies to “a need to go over experience” and “seek out a certain distance and clarity,” as Matthew Bevis suggests; yet “even as the poem undertakes this expressive work, the embodied motion of the seeking seems to recommit poet and reader to bafflement, immersion, confusion.”<sup>31</sup> In exploring the wealth of ways in which Victorian poetry engages with the drama of re-encounter, this issue reminds us (in the words of Susan Stewart) that “[n]o poetic utterance is absorbed by its context or completed in its use,” and charts a world of reasons for going back and going on.<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Robert Browning, "Essay on Shelley," in *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, 15 volumes, ed. Michael Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983–1995), 4: 427.
- <sup>2</sup> Cavell uses these phrases to describe two equally necessary approaches to reading. See Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2005), p. 15.
- <sup>3</sup> One of us has written extensively on recursion and its role in generating observer effects, in particular in Dominique Gracia, "The Case for Kittler: Considering Ekphrasis as Recursion," *Word & Image* 35, no. 1 (2019): 89–96, and "Dante Gabriel Rossetti at the Intersection of Painting and Poetry," in *Adaptation Before Cinema: Literary and Visual Convergence from Antiquity through the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Lisette Lopez Szwydky and Glenn Jellenik (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 213–234.
- <sup>4</sup> Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 17.
- <sup>5</sup> Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam A. H. H.* [1850], canto VII, ll. 1–8, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, 2nd ed., 3 volumes, ed. Christopher Ricks (Harlow, UK: Longman, 1987), 2: 325–326.
- <sup>6</sup> See Susan Shatto and Marion Shaw's notes to this section in *Tennyson: In Memoriam*, ed. Susan Shatto and Marion Shaw (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 43.
- <sup>7</sup> Peter McDonald, *Sound Intentions: The Workings of Rhyme in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), p. 167.
- <sup>8</sup> Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave, 1989), p. 216.
- <sup>9</sup> Daniel Webb, *Observations on the Correspondence between Poetry and Music* (Dublin: James Williams, 1769), p. 116.
- <sup>10</sup> Arthur Hallam, *Oration, on the Influence of Italian Works of Imagination on the Same Class of Compositions in England* (1832), in *The Writings of Arthur Hallam*, ed. T. H. Vail Motter (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1943), p. 222.
- <sup>11</sup> Seamus Perry, "Returns," *Alfred Tennyson* (Tavistock, UK: Northcote House, 2005), p. 21.
- <sup>12</sup> Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth's Revisitings* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), p. 9.
- <sup>13</sup> OED Online, s.v. "re-encounter, n.," accessed March 23, 2023. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/160688>.
- <sup>14</sup> OED Online, s.v. "rencontre, n.," accessed March 23, 2023. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/162379>.
- <sup>15</sup> "rencontre, s.," in Robert Nares, *A Glossary; or, Collection of Words, Phrases, Names, and Allusions to Customs, Proverbs, etc., which have been thought to require illustration, in the Works of English Authors*, 2nd ed., ed. John O. Halliwell and Thomas Wright (London: John Russell Smith, 1859), 2: 734. In his *Encyclopédie* (1751–1772), Denis Diderot defines "rencontre" as a martial term for "the clash between two corps of troops, who find themselves facing each other, without looking for each other" ("Rencontre, c'est à la guerre le choc de deux corps de troupes, qui se trouvent en face l'un de l'autre, sans se chercher"). See "rencontre," in Denis Diderot, *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers* (Neufchâtel: Samuel Faulche et Compagnie, 1765), 14: 106.
- <sup>16</sup> "rencontre, v. n.," *Encyclopædia Metropolitana*, ed. Edward Smedley et al. (London: B. Fellowes, 1845), 24: 11. As one example of "rencontre" for an initial encounter, particularly an uncomfortable or combative one, see Dinah Craik's *Olive* (1850), which describes "the awkwardness of this second meeting [between Harold Gwynne and the titular Olive], after their first rencontre" (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1871), p. 227.
- <sup>17</sup> John Maynard, "Repetition and/of/in Victorian Pleasures," in *Reading Victorian Literature: Essays in Honour of J. Hillis Miller*, eds. Julian Wolfreys and Monika Szuba (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2019), pp. 348, 357.
- <sup>18</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* [1905], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 7: 222.
- <sup>19</sup> Adam Phillips, "Two Lectures on Expectations," in *Side Effects* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 249.
- <sup>20</sup> Marcel Proust, *On Reading*, trans. and ed. Jean Autret and William Burford (London: Souvenir Press, 1972), p. 3.
- <sup>21</sup> On the Victorian fascination with déjà vu experiences, whose dreamlike fusion of presence and retrospect, strangeness and familiarity, is modeled in the poetics of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, see Fergus McGhee, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Déjà Vu*," *Victorian Studies* 62, no. 1 (2019): 61–84.
- <sup>22</sup> Eric Griffiths, "Tennyson's Idle Tears," in *Tennyson: Seven Essays*, ed. Philip Collins (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 46, 47.
- <sup>23</sup> Walter Pater, "Coleridge's Writings," *Westminster Review* 29, no. 1 (January 1866): 108.
- <sup>24</sup> Walter Pater, "The Poetry of Michelangelo," in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1980), p. 75.
- <sup>25</sup> "I have an idea that a Man might pass a very pleasant life in this manner—let him on any certain day read a certain Page of full Poesy or distilled prose and let him wander with it, and muse upon it, and reflect from it, and bring home to it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it—until it becomes stale—but when will it do so? Never." John Keats to John Reynolds, February 19, 1818, in *The Letters of John Keats 1814–1821*, 2 volumes, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), 1: 231.
- <sup>26</sup> T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 2006), p. 7.
- <sup>27</sup> Michel Chaouli, *Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2017), p. 16.
- <sup>28</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), p. 13.
- <sup>29</sup> As Jerome Meckier observes, "providential meetings and fateful returns are staples of Dickens's melodramatic realism." "Charles Dickens's 'Great Expectations': A Defense of the Second Ending," *Studies in the Novel* 25, no. 1

(1993): 37.

<sup>30</sup> James Longenbach, "Lyric Knowledge," *Poetry* 207, no. 5 (February 2016): 531.

<sup>31</sup> Matthew Bevis, "Unknowing Lyric," *Poetry* 209, no. 6 (March 2017): 585.

<sup>32</sup> Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 12.