

INTRODUCTION

THIS ISSUE OF *Browning Institute Studies* examines the periodization of nineteenth-century British culture, particularly its literature, in ways that open to question not only the received categories but the very frame upon which they are made. We chose a set of essays which explore the crucial divide upon which the Victorian period, as a literary-historical construct, might be said (in French) to found itself. Switching the metaphor only slightly, this volume uses an architectural divide, a threshold, as a way of thinking about a passage in time that, perceived or not in the actual moment, leaves its travellers with a sense of having come into a new place. We adopt this metaphor in what we think is a new spirit, in a spirit of enthusiastic reluctance, of cheerful skepticism, more painfully alert to its shortcomings than we might have been (passing back across some other divide, yet to be named) ten or fifteen years ago, less convinced of its flat irrelevance than we may become when, soon enough, the millennium rolls in, making, in retrospect, Shelley and Browning seem like classmates in the same way that an earlier millennium brought Plato closer to Saint Paul than either of them would have liked to imagine possible, had either been able to imagine it at all.

We approach the Victorian threshold screaming but not kicking. A threshold suggests both continuity and discontinuity. It suggests an Other. What we pass from defines a way of being in the world while what we pass to is historical time, defined by a female monarch. Victoria and her female subjects pass from silence to language to multivoicedness. Fairies retreat as the sublime comes down from the mountains – Mont Blanc and Chamonix – and invades stony urban lanes. Bees, like specters, haunt the imagination. The sublime may be a worker, or a woman.

Were two perspectives to view the idea of a Victorian threshold – from the outside and from the inside – their dialogue might proceed cautiously:

INSIDE: Where is it? A threshold is a place defined by two *theres* not making a *here*. Here, inside, I am absolutely clear about one thing: you are outside. Coming through the door, there are many instants one might capture in dozens of frames of a slow motion film of how you do so that would show you in various arrangements of being neither inside nor outside altogether, your hand swinging in and out more than once if you approach at some reasonably relaxed pace. And in this progress, you are always more or less on or in or passing through the threshold. So the threshold is a place of alternation between opposites which also interpenetrate and exchange places, exchange, if it comes to that, air and light and reflections. Altogether a difficulty, beginning either here or there.

OUTSIDE: It may be my amusing task to confound your only certainty. I'm not so convinced that I *was* outside when you saw me there, absolutely clearly. Or, if there was a threshold, at some moments it was only a thin line separating me from you, with not even a step enabling us to cross it. It seems an accident of germs, or revolutions in balmy climes that killed off those poets who otherwise might have been living presences beyond the years when Elizabeth Barrett wrote her *Battle of Marathon* (1817 or 18) and Robert Browning confidently addressed himself in *Pauline* (1833) to Romantic poets ever young and safely dead. It may in fact be a fault of reading which created that gap in the nineteenth century we draw as a threshold. Why do we confidently set our stone here and not there? If I am outside arriving in, I might notice a change in light, as did Andrea del Sarto, "a common greyness silvers all," or I might, as did Virginia Woolf, notice a change in humidity, a swelling, making everything multiply darkly as mushrooms and mold or like moss in Mariana's neglected garden. If, once crossing that bar, I found the light, it seemed dim. If I faintly trusted your inner light, from that vantage, an outsider looking in through the arch or looking backward, the ruins were not quite romantic.

INSIDE: The problem with threshold is the same one you have whenever you start taking some metaphor as a monument or some abstraction as a *mise-en-scène*. But there it is, people actually do

make these transformations. So the problem is a big cultural complaint with triumphal arches and baptistry doors and colonnades.

OUTSIDE: Instead of getting on with the business at hand, we stand at a threshold, sensing with Christabel that helping a stranger over it surely will be dangerous. Let us read, or write, around it.

Adrienne Auslander Munich

Robert Viscusi