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ELECTRIC METERS: VICTORIAN PHYSIOLOGICAL POETICS

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Reviewed by Meredith Martin.

Is cultural studies a formalist pursuit? Ten years ago, Herbert Tucker's "The Fix of Form: An Open Letter" called for a "Cultural Neoformalism" that would, in practice, generate a literary criticism attentive to the minute details of form as well as the broader trends in cultural studies. Scholars of poetry have been negotiating the inherent dangers of writing historically informed but still formally rigorous criticism ever since. Sometimes we lose the poetry, or, rather, we lose the careful attention to close reading (championed by Susan Wolfson in her 1997 *Formal Charges*) as "culture" is brought under the close-reader's gaze and perceived as so many interacting and colliding forms (see the recent exchange in *Victorian Studies* among Caroline Levine, Tucker, and Carol Dever). These recent critical turns in culturally aware formalist criticism inform the present book—its author's first.

Rudy's premise is ambitious. "Victorian poets and poetic theorists," he argues, "negotiate the cultural and political dynamics inherent in artistic, and specifically poetic transmissions" through the "figure" of electricity. For Rudy, electricity is a cultural field that goes far beyond the thematic of lightning bolts, sparks, and charges. As he theorizes electricity, it becomes "a figure for interpersonal communication – the negotiation of self and world" (11). The idea of electricity is rigorously historicized in this study, not only as

a "figure" for various transmissions that reflect the advent of new electrical technologies over the course of the nineteenth century, but also as a "figure" for the way that poetry acts to take charge of a reader's physical reaction to a poem, transmitting its affect through formal "spasms" that become physical. More broadly, Rudy reconfigures poetic "transmission" through context of electrical sciences to highlight the ways that poetry works on a body. Rudy's connection of nineteenth century scientific discourses to philosophical and poetic theories of transmission proves that many poets and poetic theorists were intensely engaged with formal questions about how poetry works by *working on* you.

After explaining—in a concise and helpful introduction—how nineteenth century writers put the body literally at the center of their intellectual investigations (as opposed to the eighteenth century's tendency toward the figurative), each of Rudy's chapters shows how poets used electricity in various ways as a figure of transmission. Beginning with poetry of "sensation" in the early nineteenth century, Rudy reads poetry by Mary Robinson and Felicia Hemans to show the pre-history of electricity as a metaphor for connection, an ideal for unmediated social communion. For Robinson and Hemans, "electric connection" is a figure for citizenship; the formal elements of their poems, Rudy argues, resist disruption in favor of a transparent model for social and national belonging. For Tennyson, the telegraph's electric circuit is a complicated figure for insecurity about gender and class relations in *The Princess*. In Rudy's analyses of these poets, electricity is a central model for poetic transmission signaled in both thematic and generic registers. The model of electricity as a figure for transmission, Rudy rigorously and carefully shows, was in itself dynamic and fraught with complex political associations. By placing

experiments in “sensibility” and “sensation” in the context of electricity and technological advance, Rudy subtly alters the traditional approach to them; he thus forcefully lays the groundwork for his next topic: mid-nineteenth century attention to the poetics and politics of the body as both generator and conduit for a kind of poetic thinking.

The body is central to Rudy’s account of the electrical sciences; for Hemans, Robinson, and Tennyson, Rudy cites two potential electrical models: Jean-Antoin Nollett’s 1746 “great communal spasm” (6) and James Jaffrey’s 1818 experiments animating a corpse, producing what Rudy argues is the possibility for universalized non-intellectual response to electrical stimuli (21-24). Both of these experiments seek to define electricity as a vehicle existing outside the realm of intellectual understanding. Thus they raise the frightening or exciting possibility that, in the same vein, poetry-as-vehicle may be able to act on *all* bodies, irrespective of social difference, and thus unite society as a whole.

For Tennyson, the possibility of poetry-as-vehicle was especially fraught with social concerns; in both chapters two and three, Rudy shows Tennyson altering his model of what he calls “telegraphic” poetics toward the more pointedly “physiological” poetics of the book’s title. In Chapter two, Rudy politicizes the famous reviews of early Tennyson by William J. Fox and Henry Hallam. Juxtaposing them with John Stuart Mill’s essays on poetry—“What is Poetry?” and “The Two Kinds of Poetry”—he argues Tennyson’s poetry provides a conduit through which Fox, Hallam, and even Mill begin to conceive of emotional transmission via electrical and poetic vehicles as a process that is both political and national. In his early work, Tennyson aimed to redraw the boundaries

between individual sensation and communal experience for political as well as aesthetic ends. For early Tennyson he concludes, "telegraphic" poetics "allows for a community of individuals who will each find his or her own meaning in the affective experience of the poems" (74). While making this argument, Rudy links fascinating details about the physiological experience of the electrical telegraph (61) with the affects of coherency-in-incoherency stirred by the different genders and genres of the medley of protagonists in Tennyson's *The Princess*. Like the "electrified girls" of its beginning, Tennyson's "telegraphic poetics" (for which Rudy gives us a "user's manual," of sorts, on p. 64) must show the disparate pieces of the poem (the poem's "lyric" disruptions, the rotating polyphony of the medley), its mechanistic and unruly generic clicks and taps, in order for us to reconcile its three main themes: "sensibility, gender, and Chartist politics" (66).

By chapter three, as the concept of "electricity" has been fully elaborated and explored, Rudy turns his attention wholly (and finally) to a consideration of how electricity can help us understand the concept of poetic meter or, more accurately, spasmodic rhythm. According to Rudy, the mid-nineteenth-century project of the poets known as "Spasmodic" (Sydney Dobell and Alexander Smith) fulfilled what Robinson, Hemans, and the early Tennyson aimed to do; that is, the spasmodic poets attempted to achieve poetic transmission physically. In both the poetic theories and poetry of Sydney Dobell as well as in the reactionary essays and poetry of William Edmonstoune Aytoun, poetic form is explicitly, and threateningly, physical. Rudy writes:

> 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 (14).

This concept of a reader's "unmediated experience" – in which poetry becomes a kind of electricity – proved inspiriting as well as threatening to mid-Victorian poetics and political structures. While Rudy shows how such an unmediated shock might have led Coventry Patmore to champion regularity and order in his *Angel in the House* and in his theories of meter, Rudy also reveals that Patmore was sympathetic to the Spasmodic project in his book *The Unknown Eros.* Much more can be said about Patmore's theories, his reviews, and his later poems; Rudy has opened up a field of study that I hope other scholars will follow attentively.

Moving away from the figure of electricity and more solidly toward the figure of irregular rhythm as rupture, shock or spasm, the final three chapters explain "physiological poetics" in terms of Spasmody (or a response to it) rather than electricity. Applying Dobell's physiological poetics to Victorian poetry, Rudy provides new readings of Tennyon's "Maud," and Gerard Manley Hopkins's "The Wreck of the Deutschland," before moving to consider how Algernon Charles Swinburne and Mathilde Blind engage with physiological poetics to attain rapturous and material ends. In the final chapter, Rudy expands his cultural field to include the popularity of "spiritualist" transmission and its engagement in poems by American poet Lizzie Doten and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Throughout the final chapters, Rudy shows how concepts of poetic form become something powerful, charged, and networked as electricity that touches a reader's body and communicates anxiety about that touch at both individual and communal

registers. This anxiety especially clear in Rudy's careful attention to the ways that women poets negotiate the charged terrain of poetic experiment; evidencing both mastery and critique, Rudy shows how the "electric poetess," by the late nineteenth century, might not want to feel unmediated communion with a nation or society that keeps her at the threshold of universal experience (at once embodying it and unable to participate in it wholly).

Throughout *Electric Meters*, Rudy proves his mastery of poetic theory, literary history, Victorian and pre-Victorian scientific discourses, and his ability to communicate about a poem's formal and cultural valences. This is an important new book that should appeal to those who have been following the developments in "Neo-Formalist" poetics for the past ten years, but is equally valuable as a broad, well-researched, and carefully written introduction to Victorian poetry and poetic theory.

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