In Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth (1883), George Meredith takes a crack at reviewers in a pleasingly clumsy sonnet entitled "The Point of Taste," which speaks to his fellow poets:

Unhappy poets of a sunken prime!
You to reviewers are as ball to bat.
They shadow you with Homer, knock you flat
With Shakespeare: bludgeons brainingly sublime
On you the excommunicates of Rhyme,
Because you sing not in the living Fat.

Meredith's poem falls near the end of a long list of nineteenth-century verses written by poets complaining about the power, tone, and insight of their reviewers. Lord Byron defended his honor (and launched his career) with English Bards and Scotch Reviewers (1809). In "To Christopher North" (1832), addressed to the alias of the critic John Wilson, Alfred Tennyson thumbed his nose at "fusty Christopher" for mishandling the poet's first book in Blackwood's. In 1856, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh worried that "Near-sighted critics" would "analyse to smutch" her careful verses (AL 5.507). And the original draft of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "The Stealthy School of Criticism" (1871)--longer and potentially libelous--begins with a rude limerick that ponders "what gift in the skunk / Guides the shuddering nose to Buchanan."

Aside from snark and spats, though, how did the institution of reviewing shape the production of poetry during the Victorian period? Clara Dawson's Victorian Poetry and the Culture of Evaluation educes three "aspects of form"--voice, style, and address--with which poets absorbed or rebuffed the tutelage of reviewers. Through figures of poetic voice, styles "jeweled" or snarled, and shifting fictions of address, Dawson teaches us to see how poets internalized the conditions of their reception. Victorian "poetic form," she argues, "takes shape through both assimilation and resistance to the culture of publicly oriented poetry" (14). Periodical reviewers claimed to speak for the tastes of an emergent mass reading public. Consequently, the protocols of reviewing (and the implicit aesthetic and commercial values contained therein) necessarily inflicted attempts by Victorian poets to accommodate that public.

Dawson's approach is dialogical, tracking the interplay between poetic and critical discourses. As Victorian poetry made its way through the world of print, critics appraised its voice, style, and address, using just these terms when they judged how well "poetry accommodated itself" to public consumption and its mediation by print (17). Would the latest book transmit the poet's authentic voice, or speak movingly to the masses? In the eyes of reviewers, success required the kind of poetic address that would reach a wide audience--by means that the reviewers themselves defined. When poets experimented with voice or style, they spoke directly back to the reviews. By scrutinizing reviews, then, Dawson foregrounds the "immediate reception" (1) of poetry and the exchanges--constructive, hostile, or otherwise--between poets and critics.

Highlighting an understudied period, chapter 1 considers the 1820s and 1830s, when the Romantic idealization of voice--as both figure and theme--became more difficult to sustain. In the poetry of Letitia Landon as well as the early poetry of Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning, Dawson argues, Romantic gives way to Victorian as lyric is debilitatingly ensnared by context. Mediated by the stresses of print, poetic voice comes apart; the "materiality of voice" no longer seems to coincide with "its idealized essence" (25). All three poets, we are told, "dramatize voice's predicament" in order to redeem it (72); songs, spells, or shouts go astray.

Of the three, Landon perhaps gains most through Dawson's analysis, which nicely reveals the self-consciousness that enabled her to thrive in and yet also resist commodity culture. "Medallion Wafers," a sequence of poems published in The Literary Gazette in 1823, was new to me, as were the titular wafers themselves: "an innovative variation on the wafers used as decorative seals for letters and [which] usually carried an image from classical myth" (36). These small tokens enabled
Landon to signify that even when mediated through a mass-reproduced object, her voice was still "redolent with love and song" (41).

Chapter 2 shows how both Victorian poems and Victorian reviews signified the relation between matter and manner through images of gemstones and jewelry. According to Dawson, reviewers favored poems with the edges polished off. "Content, meaning, or thought," she writes, "is represented by a pure or polished metal or gem, and style or form is taken to be the surrounding debris or dross which must be whittled away so that the truly valuable part of the poem, the meaning, can be manifest" (74). (The latter metaphor is somewhat confusing: wouldn't it be more apt to say that style is the cut, however rough or fine?) This "jeweled style," so called, was polished to a shine in the gift books and annuals, which prized poems that could be extracted and reset—poems of perfect clarity with tidy, consumable morals. After showing how the public appetite for such poems was gratified by gift books (with titles like The Casquet of Literary Gems, The Gem: A Literary Annual, and Gems from British Poets), Dawson finds examples of resistance in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's A Drama of Exile and "The Cry of the Children" as well as Robert Browning's "Popularity" and The Ring and the Book. In rhymes of EBB that tease and test the ear, and in Robert Browning's "crabbed and confused sentences" (105), both poets make form a source of meaning rather than an impediment to its expression. By contrast, the "jeweled style" turns poems into commodities, draining them—the Brownings thought—of aesthetic value.

The last two chapters treat poetic address, including the use of the first-person pronoun. Given reviewers' demands for sincerity from poets, Philip Bailey's Festus (1839) and Alexander Smith's A Life-Drama (1853) offered poet-figures speaking in the first person: poets who eventually learned to put aside self-isolating fame so as to address the public through a poetry of common humanity. By contrast, Matthew Arnold declined to address the mass public. While several of his friends and correspondents became his most important reviewers, as Dawson nicely observes, he could not express the kind of sympathy voiced by Bailey and Smith. In dramatizing his "resistance to mediation" by reviewers, "Empedocles on Etna" critiques the culture of evaluation based on mass appeal.

Arnold's anxieties set the stage for the final chapter, which considers public awareness and address in Tennyson (In Memoriam A.H.H. and Maud), EBB (Casa Guidi Windows), and Arthur Hugh Clough (Amours de Voyage). Dawson's lovely description of address in Casa Guidi Windows might apply to the work of all three poets: "Address in the poem is not a fixed mode but a restless and continual process" (205). All four poems struggle to make poetic address bridge the gap between the isolated voice and the mass public while maintaining a distinctive poetic identity.

Though Dawson's study is wide-ranging, she misses some opportunities. Rightly avoiding a long survey of Victorian periodicals, she highlights terms like voice and style that serve as points of contention between poets and their reviewers. But what about the formal and rhetorical dimensions of the reviews themselves, which often worked by "summarizing, parodying, speaking for and through poets' voices" (1), as Dawson herself observes? In an essay called "On Not Close Reading: The Prolonged Excerpt as Victorian Critical Protocol" (The Feeling of Reading, ed. Ablow, 2010), Nicholas Dames considers the "theory" of literature implied by the use of lengthy excerpts in place of commentary. Does this practice show its impact only in the over-polished gems of the gift books (or in the subversion thereof)? What about, say, Matthew Arnold's touchstones? Readers may also wonder about the reach of the study's key term--the culture of evaluation. Must any Victorian poem that departs from stylistic norms prescribed by reviewers be construed as a response to the periodicals? The reviews positioned themselves as arbiters of public opinion, and poets responded accordingly. Treating the reviews as expressions of mass culture in general, though, sometimes ignores the specific complexity of the relation between the poems and reviews examined here.

While the impressionistic vagueness of Victorian reviewing seldom prompts us to take it as a serious repository of poetic theory, Dawson's study encourages us to look again. It helps us to see once again how Victorian poets could develop formal solutions to social or institutional problems. In particular, Dawson illuminates figures of aesthetic value that were shared between poems and reviews—figures that crystalize notable Victorian ideas about poetry's worth and reach. In this thoughtful and stimulating work of scholarship, Dawson enriches our understanding of Victorian poetry and print-culture alike.

Justin A. Sider is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Oklahoma.