

ON AIR: Channeling Attention in Victorian Poetry

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Abstract:

Victorian poetry is distinguished by a particular interest in soundscapes. Attention is regularly called to the acoustic resonances lyrical texts conjure up both by means of a sonic imagery (such as winds, waves or rills) and a paranomastic rhetoric (including rhyme, assonance, and—most importantly—alliteration). Sound imagery and rhetoric are part and parcel of a strategy that recasts the classic rhetoric of amplification to allow for an enhanced auditory reading experience. This strategy comes to the fore in the latter half of the eighteenth century—the heyday of speaking machines—and will hold sway well into the early age of acoustic engineering. In my presentation, I would like to exemplify the auditory turn within the rhetoric of amplification in a close reading of Swinburne's *Hendecasyllabics*, which will also contextualize the poem in the greater developments of art, society, phonetics, and technology in the Victorian age. I aim to show that the text functions as communication channel. The noisescap in the air broadcasts a soft, but amplified, signal. That Swinburne calls attention to these signals ON AIR speaks to a general trend towards a lyrical sound reinforcement system at work in Victorian poetry.