How did Victorian poets and their poetry engage in contemporary debates about pressing social, religious, and political questions? The 2012 conference theme, "Networks," encouraged poetry specialists to consider the periodical and publishing contexts that featured verse commentary on contemporary issues; the social networks that led poets to develop—or reject—positions taken by fellow writers; and the literary transformations that occurred as verse moved among poets, between continents, and from one publishing venue to another.

This emphasis on poetry as embedded in history and, even more, as attempting to alter the course of history signals a notable shift in scholarly attitudes over the past fifty years. When the original editors of the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* set their criteria for inclusion, they omitted poetry—a decision they believed "readily defensible." Partly, the defense was practical, citing the sheer quantity of periodical verse they would need to index (over 7,000 items). Mostly, it was evaluative: "To have included verse would have added an enormous number of worthless items to Part A [the title index] and a large number of obscure authors to be identified and then described in Part B [the author index]." (Houghton, Introduction xvi). This editorial decision, as Linda K. Hughes has noted, presumed a predominance of sentimental verse in newspapers and magazines and an "association of poetry with 'filler'" (92). It failed to account for major poems first published in periodicals and for the significance of occasional verse in which poets engaged the questions of their day. Even more, it presumed that prose, however well or poorly written, was the medium for contending with serious social and political issues, whereas poetry was for expressing feelings or offering secondary commentary.

All three papers in this cluster take a different view of poetry and political engagement. Alison Chapman's "Poetry, Network, Nation"...
demonstrates how British and American expatriate poets in Italy used periodical verse to endorse Italian Unification (Risorgimento). Concentrating on three women—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Isa Blagden, and Theodosia Garrow Trollope—who “placed themselves at the center of nation making,” Chapman argues that they “predicated their writing identities on a political poetics that...circulated by a complex European and transatlantic print and manuscript culture” (275). What the Wellesley editors might have deemed “filler” verse in The Tuscan Athenaeum—Garrow’s “Aurora Rugiadosa: Lines on Gibson’s recently finished statue of Aurora” (1848)—Chapman reads not just as praise of Gibson’s “forward-moving statue” but, more importantly, as a contribution to Italian political revolution. In ekphrastically (re)creating a “feminized angel of the Second Coming” (282), Garrow used poetry to trumpet the cause and link herself with other liberal, pro-Risorgimento artists. Gibson’s sculpture and Garrow’s “Aurora Rugiadosa” became, in turn, sources for Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh, an iconic woman poet expressing her own literary and political agency. While we may today remember only Aurora Leigh (1856), the verse novel that crowns Barrett Browning’s career, Chapman recovers the culture of print, sociability, and politics of which it is a part and thereby enriches our understanding of the literary networks through which women poets worked for political change.

Kirstie Blair’s “Transatlantic Tractarians” takes up a different issue in a transnational exchange: the state of High Church Anglicanism in Britain and North America. Oxford Movement writers felt themselves beleaguered at home, disillusioned with the state of the English Church, yet hopeful about possibilities across the Atlantic. In the British Critic of 1839, Newman lamented: “the rest of the Church, either caring nothing for us, or accounting it a point of charity to wish us dead, and the State intruding its well-meant but unamiable blandishments, it is pleasant to look across the western wave, and discern a friendly star breathing peace and shedding benison” (312). Poet-priests of the American Episcopal Church responded to such transatlantic appeals by expressing “honour [to] their nursing mother” but also by asserting the vitality of their native church “in all the vigour of youth, adapting itself to a fresh state of society” (Coxe, Christian Ballads viii). Thus, while American poets learned from their British counterparts, they also produced new models of devotional verse and religious expression, trusting that a transatlantic literary exchange might contribute to “harmonizing influences which
those Churches may exert upon national relations” (Coxe, Christian Ballads vii).

The harmonizing influences sometimes failed to resolve discord. To gauge Anglo-American religious and political relations, Blair turns to verse from the Lyra Apostolica (1836) and Keble's The Christian Year (1827) that disseminated Tractarian ideas across the Atlantic; indeed, she suggests that poetry “was arguably more widely circulated and widely read [in North America] than prose contributions such as Tracts for the Times” (287). Blair uses George Washington Doane's American edition of The Christian Year (1842) and Arthur Cleveland Coxe's Christian Ballads (1840)—modeled on Keble's volume and collected from verse that appeared in the American periodical The Churchman—to show Anglo-American cooperation and competition. On the one hand, British Tractarian poets imagined their own nation as a biblical Tyre, “famous for trade and seafaring,” but “destroyed by God for arrogance” (290); on the other, they figured America as Tyre, a place where “Mammon builds beside thy mighty floods, / O'ertopping Nature, braving Nature's God” (qtd. in Blair 290). (Who serves Mammon more—the nation of shopkeepers or the dirty Yankee tradesmen?) On the American side, poets expressed respect for British Tractarian literary models, yet they also made bold literary claims that native poets merited equality with their more famous British counterparts. In this particular transatlantic network, national politics inflect religious and literary matters—and vice versa.

Julia Saville's “‘Soul Talk': Networks of Political Poetry in a Trans-Channel Literary Triangle” does not discuss periodical poetry, but its topic—Robert Browning's musings on Louis Napoleon's failures in Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society (1871)—links to political debates widely conducted in magazines and newspapers. In 1870, the year before Browning published his poem, Louis Napoleon lost the Franco-Prussian War, largely because he took personal command of the army despite a lack of military expertise; he was captured by the Germans at the Battle of Sedan and then deposed by leaders of the newly formed Third Republic. After release, he went into exile in England, issuing statements to the London Times about his physical and moral state: “Like the man in Horace, I wrap myself in my right and my resignation. Strong in my own conscience, I restrain the impatience of some, and despise the insult and treachery of others” (qtd. in “Bonapartism”). Louis Napoleon's rule—particularly his wavering between liberalism and despotism,
what Clyde de Ryals termed his "curious mixture of democratic and imperialistic designs" (46)—puzzled Browning and his contemporaries. Judgments in periodicals were often blunt, as in an anonymous letter to *Reynold's Newspaper* that compared Louis Napoleon to the highwayman Claude Duval:

> All the time France does as Louis Napoleon requires, he is nothing but gentleness and amiability. Any opposition to his will and design, however, arouses him to a state of frenzied fury, and instead of appeals to the people by means of official documents, he showers upon them a torrent of bullets, and stabs them to the heart with the bayonets under his control. ("Louis")

Browning was fascinated and perplexed by this political figure, who early in life had fought with the Carbonari against Austrian domination of Italy but later as president deployed French troops to restore Pope Pius IX as ruler of the Papal States after the Italian revolutionaries Mazzini and Garibaldi overthrew him in 1849.² Browning was disinclined to the simple judgments of newspaper writers and more interested in "soul-talk," Saville's term (adapted from Herbert F. Tucker) for "the sympathies that motivated ethico-political choices." Indeed, Saville argues that "soul-talk" is the particular province of poets and precisely what they contribute to national and transnational political debates. In a rich reading of this dramatic monologue, she pursues (or, rather, she follows Browning pursuing) "the soul's penchant for revealing itself beyond character's rational self-accounting" (301).

Although both Chapman and Saville take up political questions about Italian Unification that incited the Brownings to write poetry, their papers reflect quite different models of poetic engagement in political affairs. Inspired by Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, Chapman treats "network" as a noun and a verb—that is, she traces an interconnected web of poets, artists, and their works, while emphasizing the activism, agency, and performativity of this network. Her expatriate women poets claim to *do* something, to bring about the dawning of freedom, to "resurrect Italy's liberty" (281). Saville's network, in contrast, is a loose configuration of poets—Victor Hugo, Robert Browning, Robert Buchanan, William Michael Rossetti, and Algernon Charles Swinburne—who wrote about the impact of Louis Napoleon's reign on the French people and European politics, but not from a unified political position, nor within a coherent social community. (Swinburne, for example, had long been friends with Rossetti and
dedicated his “Ode on the Proclamation of the French Republic” [1870] to Hugo, but would have been horrified by the notion that he was in “networked conversation” with Robert Buchanan, author of the notorious review “The Fleshly School of Poetry” [1871].

Browning’s mode of political engagement in Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau differs from that of the expatriate women poets Chapman discusses and the activist poetry of Hugo and Swinburne. Although Saville gestures toward political intervention in the suggestion that Browning “uses beauty to preserve . . . spiritual resources . . . and fend off the kind of cynicism for which the Prince is indicted” (306), it’s not clear that Browning embraced the activist poetics of his late wife or expected his poem to have direct political impact. As a reviewer in The Examiner of 25 December 1871 noted, Browning does not use poetry “for working on the sentiments of [his] hearers concerning patriotism or religion, sexual passion and the like”; rather, his forte is “to analyse the minds of men as deftly as a surgeon can dissect their bodies”—hence his achievement as “a practiced soul-anatomist” in Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau (“Mr. Browning's Saviour” 1268). For political poetry committed to action rather than reflection, we would need to turn to Swinburne’s sonnets on Louis Napoleon, printed in the Fortnightly Review in 1869, then in The Examiner in 1873 after the emperor’s death. As William Michael Rossetti commented in his diary on 18 October 1869: “Swinburne sent round to me, for my perusal and opinion on one or two alternative expressions, his ruthless sonnets for the not-too-speedy death of Louis Napoleon. They are very forcible” (411). These are sonnets that curse:

If haply, or ever its cursed life have ceased,  
Or ever thy cold hands cover his head  
From sight of France and freedom and broad day,  
He may see these and wither and be dead. (“Intercession” 4.11-14)

As collected in Songs of Two Nations (1875), where Swinburne attached the title “Dirae” (the Furies), the series begins: “Go down to hell. This end is good to see” (“A Dead King” 1). In the final sonnet, “Apologia,” the poet justifies his “wrath,” which “embitter[s] the sweet mouth of song” (1), by citing the sufferings human beings have endured under Louis Napoleon’s misguided reign. Browning’s poem, published between Swinburne’s two periodical sonnet series, neither curses nor blesses. It uses the surgeon’s knife in a posthumous dissection rather than the soldier’s sword in the midst of active battle.
Perhaps these different modes of political engagement simply reflect the poets' inclinations rather than the critics' approaches to networks. Swinburne would be Swinburne (cursing the despotism of Louis Napoleon, celebrating the Third Republic), and Browning would be Browning (analyzing a political despot's psychological self-justifications), no matter what networks circulated their political views. Yet if we think further about the role of print culture, particularly periodicals, in forming networks, we will notice that print has a power to act quite apart from an individual poet's inclination or intention. Blair's study helps us observe a network and networking that emerged from a transatlantic community rooted in common religious beliefs but that became visible to its members only through print exchanges.

To take the case of Arthur Cleveland Coxe: When Coxe wrote his Christian Ballads, he had never visited England, nor had he met any English Tractarian poets or priests; as he admits in the poem “England,” he knew the mother country through old stories, hymns, and poets' “cataract of song” (53). Doctrinally, of course, Coxe believed that he and the English Tractarians were part of the same communion of saints; literarily, he acquired skills in modern devotional poetry by reading The Christian Year and Lyra Apostólica in editions he encountered at the General Theological Seminary in New York. Nonetheless, as the preface to Christian Ballads explains, what made him publish an English edition of his poems—“submit these very imperfect productions to a foreign public”—was the fact that his verse had already been “naturalized among my British brethren, by unsolicited republication, and favourable reviews” (ix). Transatlantic print culture, specifically the much-despised practice of piracy, moved Coxe's poems from the American Churchman into British periodicals. Periodical reviews made Christian Ballads known to British readers. Print culture placed Coxe within a literary network, initially without his choice.

This, however, is not the end of the story of Coxe's networks and networking, for from this early experience, he learned to actively engage both. In the 1840s, as he was publishing devotional poetry in England, Coxe also contributed articles to Blackwood's on American and European politics. His titles include “My Route into Canada,” where he revisits sites of the American Revolution and War of 1812, and “American Thoughts on European Revolutions,” where he comments on 1848 continental uprisings; both essays attempt to assuage old wounds and rebuild British-American relations. Among
Coxe's articles is "American Copyright," highly pertinent to the controversial issue of Anglo-American legal literary relations. Yet even as he explains American copyright law and describes reactions to the British authors' petition, Coxe is really not interested in passing legislation to secure an author's intellectual property. Instead, the crux of his argument is this: that America will eventually learn that "we must give away some natural liberty for the advantages to be derived from the . . . literary communion and fellowship with the British empire." Coxe wants an expanded transatlantic network, based not on financial motives or legal claims but on intellectual exchange. This communion, envisioned as "promoting the fraternization of cotemporary literature" and "holding together that precious wealth bequeathed to the world by the . . . genius of bygone generations" (546), blends the ideals of the religious and literary networks that grounded his career. Notably, in Coxe's formulation, it is the network that acts, the literary communion that networks. Print culture, both periodicals and books, creates relations that embed the poet within a global exchange.

Coxe didn't discuss poetry in his Blackwood's articles, but we might imagine his response to the Wellesley editors' decision to exclude this part of his work from the scholarly record. Poetry was the vehicle by which Coxe shared religious beliefs, literary aspirations, and political judgments for much of his career. Although his verse would be largely forgotten today were it not for Blair's remarkable research and a resurgent transatlantic studies that has spurred interest in the Anglo-American "traffic in poems" (McGill), Coxe's verse is arguably more important—in literary, cultural, and political terms—than the eight prose essays credited to his name in the Wellesley Index. Fortunately, the omission of verse is about to be remedied. As of June 2012, Natalie Houston, Lindsy Lawrence, and April Patrick released the first installment of the Periodical Poetry Index (www.periodicalpoetry.org), an online database of English-language poems printed in Victorian periodicals. Coxe's name does not yet appear, and indeed may never surface if his poems were reprinted anonymously or their titles altered. But the inclusion of poetry in periodical databases will allow a fuller answer to the question with which I began: How did Victorian poets and their poetry engage in contemporary debates about pressing social, religious, and political questions?

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Walter Houghton elaborates this point in "A Bulletin from the 'Wellesley Index,'" arguing that the editors excluded poetry because it was too difficult to decide where to "draw the line" for inclusion or exclusion based on the "calibre of the poet" (68).

A decade later in 1859, Louis Napoleon, then Napoleon III, sent French troops to northern Italy to drive out the Austrians. Barrett Browning praised this act on behalf of Italian freedom, but when Italy was then asked (or forced) to cede Nice and Savoy to France, she was dismayed; to John Forster she wrote: "Savoy has given me pain. . . . I would rather not hear Robert say, for instance: 'It was a great action; but he has taken eighteenpence for it, which is a pity'" (qtd. in Dooley and Dooley 244).

On 27 October 1869 Rossetti added: "Received a long and interesting letter from Swinburne, . . . notifying the forthcoming publication, in the Fortnightly, of his sonnets against Louis Napoleon (which I deprecate as too hard-hearted)" (413).

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"Louis Napoleon's Latest 'Little Game.'" *Reynold's Newspaper* 1 May 1870: 3.


