EPILOGUE

The criminal classes are so close to us that even the policeman can see them. They are so far away from us that only the poet can understand them.

—Oscar Wilde, “A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated”

A SITE OF EXPRESSIVE DIFFICULTIES and epistemological struggles, a sublime transgression and a capital offense, a modern content and a poetic enterprise, murder supplies ample evidence of Victorian poetry’s “aestheticised politics” and “politicised aesthetics.” With measured representations of stabbings, stranglings, smotherings, poisonings, bludgeonings, and drownings, poets used the characteristic particularity and performativity of poetic form to highlight the politics of interpretation and explore the play of genre. In commending modes of cultural and textual analysis that exchange the abstract for the particular, Gallagher and Greenblatt celebrate the allure of the “encounter with the singular, the specific, and the individual” (6). These terms, and their analytical implications, aptly describe the disruptive presence of murder poems amongst the ideologies, institutions, and disciplines informing and regulating criminal discourse.

Exchanging the abstract for the particular, murders in verse, variously mediated through the elaboration of bloody details, lyrical confessions, metrical ironies, suggestive rhymes, structural ambiguities, dramatic soliloquies, legal testimonies, discursive hybrids, and generic combinations, reveal the extent to which the formal features and generic conventions of poetry generated opportunities for cultural critique and poetic experimentation. Set within a self-consciously modern culture, which was continually and publicly reevaluating
its methods of disciplining criminals and controlling crime, murder poems—as
double forms, verbal technologies, and performative speech—rather mischie-
vously administered overwhelming doses of psychological details and intimate
circumstances. In doing so, they exposed and interrogated the fictions and
abstractions of criminal theories, policies, and laws.

Attentive to the historicity of poetry and murder, we can look beyond inti-
mations of “transhistorical truth”—and rethink the stability of transhistorical
themes—and instead highlight “historically embedded social and psychological
formations” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 7). In Stallybrass and White’s formul-
tion, this allows us to see the poetics and politics of murder as an encounter with
the cultural embeddedness of “conflictual complexes.” In the poetry under dis-
cussion here, “historically embedded social and psychological formations” and
“conflictual complexes” are directly and explicitly considered. Going well beyond
transmitting ideology in “subtle or covert” fashion, they position themselves
 skeptically and polemically with respect to other legal, political, and aesthetic
representations of murder. According to Gallagher and Greenblatt, the “commit-
ment to particularity” and the recovery of “dense networks of particulars” (19)
in New Historicist methodology protects against the loss of intricate meanings
and local details. A similar kind of historicism is encouraged by all of the poems
examined here. Most explicitly rendered in the advertised “full particulars” of
astonishing disclosures, a resistance to abstraction and authority extends to the
intimate psychological struggles of the criminal poet, the expressive idiosyn-
crasies of dramatic speakers, the hybrid innovations of the verse novel, and the
modern renovations of ancient tragedies.

Finding poetic materials in the unsettled and unsettling epistemologies of
murder, these poems also establish the cultural engagements and cultural poli-
tics of Victorian verse. As Antony Harrison argues, “encounters with poetic texts
were an unusually complex psychological and emotional event for nineteenth-
century readers. This was true not only because of the anticipated formal dif-
ficulties of such texts but also because of the widespread expectations that poetic
words on a page meant a good deal more than other writing: they embodied
the voice of a being possessed of extraordinary epistemological capacities” (10).
While Harrison is primarily concerned with the middle-class experience of read-
ing poetry, his comments have particular resonance for all of the poems exam-
ined in this book, as they establish a “productive friction” (Hadley 10) between
low content and high form—and often thwart the very expectations that Har-
rison illustrates. In linking the domains of high literature and the politics of sen-
sational curiosity, we find, then, another manifestation of poetry’s double form.
Through the suggestive interplay of discourse and genre, through the semiotic
operations of content and form, these texts extended the “cultural work” of
poetic representation and established its modern content.
With an epigrammatic shorthand, Wilde, offering (much-needed) instruction to the “over-educated” and differentiating the scrutiny of the poet from the surveillance of the police, challenges the myopic failings of a disciplinary state and grants the poet the capacity for understanding and interpreting crime. In more subtle and less comical ways, the poems of this study both claim and challenge expressive sensibilities and interpretive power. Leveraging generic difference—for the purposes of political appropriation and contestation, generic variety and hybridity, and verbal particularity and incommensurability—poets adapt a variety of aesthetic modes (the sublime, the grotesque, the melodramatic, the tragic) and assume a variety of counterdiscursive stances as they reconsider the congruities and incongruities of crime and culture.

Historicizing murder and poetry, by examining dialectical relations between genre and discourse, we can begin to recover neglected texts, and, recognizing and acknowledging associations among major and minor, canonical and non-canonical, anonymous and notorious poets, we can reconsider lines of literary influence and retrace paths of intertextuality in ways that expand the terrain of Victorian poetry studies. While *Crime in Verse* has relied upon a relatively small set of close and contextualized readings to make its arguments, its methods and its conclusions support a broader reexamination of poetic representations of murder. Answering Armstrong’s call for studies in poetic networking, we might assemble or imagine networks of murder poems. However speculative or contingent, such assemblages might highlight the occasions on which the sound effects and the staged authority of verse were publicized and rhetorically posed. We might, for example, revisit the verse editorials of daily newspapers or the singsong communiqués of “Jack the Ripper.” Or, preferring more established poets, we might return to Wordsworth’s *Sonnets upon the Punishment of Death* (1841), in which the intellectual precision, iambic cadences, and rhyming couplets of the sonneteer are used to insult the sloppy sentimentality and reform-minded aspirations of abolitionist parliamentarians and pamphleteers. Or, enjoying poetic scandal and humiliation, we might reconsider Sydney Dobell’s *Balder* (1854), in which, suffering emotional traumas and generating textual confusion, the frustrated and “felonious” (281) speaker finds murderous motive in poetic ambition. As these brief references, and the preceding chapters, suggest there is much work to be done on the topic of crime in verse.