

The background of the book cover is a painting of a Victorian woman and a young boy in a garden. The woman, on the right, has long red hair and is wearing a light blue dress with a darker blue skirt and a purple sash. She is holding a small book. The boy, on the left, is wearing a dark coat and a white flower lei. They are standing in a garden with white lilies and dark foliage.

OXFORD

THE VICTORIAN Verse-Novel

Aspiring to Life

STEFANIE MARKOVITS

THE VICTORIAN Verse-Novel

The Victorian Verse-Novel: Aspiring to Life considers the rise of a hybrid generic form, the verse-novel, in the second half of the nineteenth century. Such poems combined epic length with novelistic plots in the attempt to capture not a heroic past but the quotidian present. Victorian verse-novels also tended to be rough-mixed, their narrative sections interspersed with shorter, lyrical verses in varied measures. In flouting the rules of contemporary genre theory, which saw poetry as the purview of the eternal and ideal and relegated the everyday to the domain of novelistic prose, verse-novels proved well-suited to upsetting other hierarchies, including those of gender and class.

The genre's radical energies often emerge from the competition between lyric and narrative drives, between the desire for transcendence and the quest to find meaning in what happens next; the unusual marriage plots that structure such poems prove crucibles of these rival forces. Generic tensions also yield complex attitudes toward time and space: the book's first half considers the temporality of love, while its second looks at generic geography through the engagement with Europe and the form's transatlantic travels. Both well-known verse-novels such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Arthur Hugh Clough's *Amours de Voyage*, and Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, and lesser-known examples are read closely alongside a few nearly related works including Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*. An Afterword traces the verse-novel's substantial influence on the modernist novel.

Jacket image: *Aurora Leigh's Dismissal of Romney ('The Tryst')* (detail), 1860, by Arthur Hughes (1832–1915). Bequeathed by Beresford Rimington Heaton 1940.

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THE VICTORIAN VERSE-NOVEL

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

A Short History of a Long Form

I. VERSE-NOVEL?

By the time Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "novel-poem"¹ *Aurora Leigh*—an early and influential example of the form—entered the literary lists in 1856, the generic field of long narrative verse was a recognized battleground. Matthew Arnold and Arthur Hugh Clough had sparred, both privately and in print, over the need to modernize epic in response to the rise of the novel and the perceived cultural marginalization of poetry. Clough had experimented recently with the combination of verse and novel in *Amours de Voyage*, an epistolary mock-epic in hexameters relating a failed courtship between English tourists in Italy during the French occupation of Rome in 1849 (Clough wrote a first draft as the shells fell, although he did not publish until 1858). Arnold countered with his Preface to *Poems* (1853), probably the most important piece of British mid-century poetic criticism. There, Arnold bemoaned the state of epic and condemned calls for the modernization of verse: "A great human action of a thousand years ago is more interesting to [our passions] than a smaller human action of to-day, even though . . . the representation of this last . . . has the advantage of appealing by its modern language, familiar manners, and contemporary allusions to all our transient feelings and interests. These, however, have no right to demand of a poetical work"—which belongs, instead, "to the domain of our permanent passions"—"that it shall satisfy them; their claims are to be directed elsewhere."²

"Elsewhere" for Arnold meant the novel, the proper place, according to Victorian genre theory, for portraying the quotidian present. Epic poetry, in contrast, required temporal distance; as William Edmondstone Aytoun put it, reviewing *Aurora Leigh*: "poets in all ages have shrunk from the task of chronicling contemporary deeds"—rightly, he felt.³ But Barrett Browning explained in her poem that "King Arthur's self / Was commonplace to Lady Guenever; / And Camelot to minstrels seemed as

flat, / As Fleet Street to our poets"; the aura was an optical illusion, the product of historical distance.⁴ Hence her self-conscious effort to bring epic into the here-and-now. And she recognized that this translation involved not only a temporal shift but also a formal one: "I am inclined to think we want new *forms* . . . as well as thoughts—The old gods are dethroned. Why should we go back to the antique moulds . . . Let us all aspire rather to *Life*."⁵ Enter a distinctively Victorian literary form: the verse-novel.

This book will consider what it means to "aspire . . . to *Life*" and how a particular generic form might help realize the aspiration. But before I proceed with my inquiry, I must linger a moment over a more fundamental question: What is a *verse-novel*? What texts can be comprehended under this generic aegis? Some authors, including Barrett Browning, let us know themselves by appending the term or one of a set of related generic labels, such as "novel-poem" or "story in verse," to their productions. But many didn't, so some preliminary clarification is in order. A plausible definition for the genre runs along these lines: "a verse-novel is a long narrative poem realistically chronicling bourgeois life within a contemporary setting." But not all of the poems I look at in the following pages will fit such a definition neatly. In fact, in choosing examples, it may at times seem like I am following something closer to a "pornography model" of generic determination: in the phrase made famous by the now-discarded legal standard, "one knows it when one sees it." (Given, as we shall see, the abhorrence with which the verse-novel form was often met, and its predilection for taboo subjects, the comparison is not quite as facile as it appears.)

Undoubtedly, this procedure for selection will leave some choices open to dispute. Yet, as many recent theorists point out, genre is a heuristic device, one enabling readers and authors to imagine "horizons of expectation" (as Hans Robert Jauss so influentially put it). *Pace* Goethe, they are not *Naturformen*. My own understanding of genre resembles that offered by Ralph Cohen:

Classifications are empirical, not logical. They are historical assumptions constructed by authors, audiences, and critics in order to serve communicative and aesthetic purposes. Such groupings are always in terms of distinctions and interrelations, and they form a system or community of genres. The purposes they serve are social and aesthetic. Groupings arise at particular historical moments, and as they include more and more members, they are subject to repeated redefinitions or abandonment.⁶

With such a conception of genre, it matters less that any particular reader agrees that a specific text I consider here belongs to a "grouping"

designated by the term *verse-novel* than that I am able to convince said reader that there are benefits to considering the given text in the context of this grouping. It also matters that I can demonstrate that the generic categorization helps reveal and explain how and why a set of overlapping and “social and aesthetic” purposes arose at a “particular historical moment.”

As it happens, while they had a number of terms and phrases cognate or synonymous with “verse-novel,” the Victorians themselves did not, generally speaking, use the word *genre* in its modern literary sense, being far more likely to refer to “poetry” as a normative but generically inclusive category.⁷ Thus E. S. Dallas’s 1852 *Poetics: An Essay on Poetry* considered all three of Goethe’s three primary *Naturformen*—epic, drama, and lyric—in both verse and prose. When, however, David Masson published the first book-length treatment of the novel in 1859, *British Novelists and Their Styles*, he opened with a chapter that asked, “What can Verse do in narrative fiction that Prose cannot?—and, on the other hand, are there any compensating respects, in which, in the same business, Prose has the advantage of Verse?”⁸ The questions indicate an interest in generic distinctions and a belief in what Caroline Levine has recently termed the “affordances” of different literary forms.⁹ And indeed our modern usage of *genre* was available, as the *OED* notes; it records examples of definition 1. b., “*spec.* A particular style or category of works of art; esp. a type of literary work characterized by a particular form, style, or purpose,” from as early as 1770, and it gives instances from throughout the nineteenth century, including from George Eliot’s prose writing.¹⁰

Nevertheless, all the works I will consider as verse-novels are “poetry” in the simplest sense that they are lineated (no prose-poems here, at least until my Afterword); all are long (thousands rather than hundreds of lines, although the length varies dramatically), and—this is a crucial feature of my principle of selection—all show self-conscious kinship with the novel, even if only the wavering kinship of a prodigal son who refuses to return to the fold. So while most of the poems this book explores would fit neatly into the definition I proposed above, others, like Tennyson’s chivalric *Idylls of the King* (1859–85) and Robert Browning’s historically remote *The Ring and the Book* (1867–8), would not. Still, these works are, I hope to show, sufficiently concerned with what it means to write narrative poetry in the age of the novel to merit consideration in a study conducted within this generic rubric. Those more marginal examples of the form that I have included here are present because they demonstrate some kind of recognizable novelistic allegiance—recognizable both by the authors of the works in question and by their audiences. For example, Browning offered the subject of *The Ring and the Book* not only to Tennyson but also to

Trollope before deciding to attempt it himself, while Swinburne wrote of Tennyson's *Idylls*, "Treated as he has treated it, the story is rather a case for the divorce-court than for poetry. . . . [S]uch 'camelias' should be left to blow in the common hotbeds of the lower kind of novelist."¹¹ But I am interested, too, in how they resist this allegiance. The tug-and-pull between the constituent parts of my central category of observation, verse and novel, constitutes a large part of the story I want to tell about the form.

Surprisingly, though, despite Barrett Browning's insistence on both the novelty and the novelism of her enterprise, critics have often been hesitant to consider even *Aurora Leigh* as belonging to a recognizable group of mid-century verse-novels. While the past decade has witnessed an outpouring of work on epic of what can (perhaps inevitably) be described as epic proportion—most significantly, in Herbert Tucker's magnificent and monumental *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse*¹²—the genre that Barrett Browning saw herself as mothering in *Aurora Leigh*, the novel in verse, has been comparatively neglected. Several of the books that I will be discussing in what follows have been subjected to close scrutiny under the auspices of their relationship to epic, and their generic hybridity has also been explored. In fact, its investment in regendering epic through shifting generic allegiance toward the novel ("Never flinch, / But still, unscrupulously epic, catch / Upon the burning lava of a song / The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age," the poet reminds herself [V.212–15]) has made *Aurora Leigh* itself a favorite text for feminist scholars concerned with the interplay between gender and genre.¹³ But even in the rare instances where critics constellate works like and including the ones I will consider in these pages as a group, they tend to skirt round the issue of categorization. Thus while a few essays—most notably by Dino Franco Felluga—have attempted a head-on account of the genre, Natasha Moore generally prefers to avoid naming the contested category of the novel in verse in her lucid and stimulating exploration of *Victorian Poetry and Modern Life* (her title is also silent regarding the length that is so crucial a selection criterion for her study).¹⁴ Similarly, when Rod Edmond investigated the prevalence of love plots in Victorian poetry thirty years ago in *Affairs of the Hearth: Victorian Poetry and Domestic Narrative*, he made little effort to gather his various forms of poetic "domestic narrative" under the auspices of the novelistic.¹⁵

Partly, these critical decisions reflect a widespread nervousness about genre as a category of inquiry, especially when the category in question must be constructed as a hybrid entity. In her useful work on the recent resurgence of the form, Catherine Addison goes so far as to frame the issue of classification as a question: "The Verse Novel as Genre: Contradiction

or Hybrid?" This fundamental instability of kind holds on a more basic level for generic categories: as Jacques Derrida has remarked (in terms that Cohen echoes at the end of the passage I cited above), "at the very moment that a genre or a literature is broached, at that very moment, degenerescence has begun, the end begins."¹⁶ As Lord Kames had acknowledged already in 1762, "literary compositions run into each other, precisely like colours: in their strong tints, they are easily distinguished; but are susceptible of so much variety, and take on so many different forms, that we can never say where one species ends and another begins."¹⁷ But its very hybridity makes the verse-novel, the predominantly mid-Victorian form that I am attempting to capture here, particularly slippery. With its multiple moving components—not just verse and novel, but lyric, epic, romance, monologue, drama, travel narrative, sage discourse, and so on—it feels especially prone to uncertainty. Generic labels, however combinatorial, inevitably appear inadequate. Think of Clough's description of his *Amours* as "my 5-act epistolary tragi-comedy, or comi-tragedy," a categorization that fails to mention his debt to either the novel or the epic.¹⁸

Nevertheless, the preferred focus on epic—as well as the relative critical neglect of many of the poems I will be considering in the pages that follow—has consequences. First, this focus (and its resulting attention to war and nation-building) has tended to obscure the generic implications of these poems' explorations of love. Yet, as Isobel Armstrong has argued, love poetry lies at the very heart of Victorian verse; she actually begins her path-breaking study *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* with the observation that the poetry of the period "is unparalleled in its preoccupation with sexuality and what it is to love." Such preoccupation finds generic expression, as Armstrong observes: "The effort to renegotiate a content to every relationship between self and world is the Victorian poet's project. It is a simultaneously personal and cultural project and carries the poet into new genres and a new exploration of language."¹⁹ As I hope to show, the verse-novel is a "new genre" that is particularly demonstrative of the exploratory impulse she describes. And, in fact, many of the most sustained considerations in print of verse-novels actually come in books that contemplate Victorian poetry's investment in romantic relationships. I have already noted Rod Edmond's *Affairs of the Hearth*; Natasha Moore includes a chapter on "The Marriage Plot"; and Patricia M. Ball views the contemporary long poem as essential to her theme in *The Heart's Events: The Victorian Poetry of Relationships*.²⁰ The emphasis on love intersects in complicated ways with these poems' generic orientations, and teasing out those complications will be a recurring project throughout this book. But the sheer length of the poems affects how they address emotion. While

length is unsurprising in the context of the epic (“epic scope” is tautological) or the novel (ditto), it becomes more interesting when viewed through the lens of love poetry, so often the close-bounded province of lyric.

Second, the favored focus on epic fails to acknowledge the potential for novelistic forms of radical expressiveness. In the wake of Foucault, the policing force of the novel—as vigorously explained by critics including D. A. Miller and Nancy Armstrong—became, and with good reason, something of a critical mantra.²¹ Yet for Bakhtin, the novel’s strength comes, rather, from its defiance of generic law, from its embrace of a fundamental generic “impurity.” Felluga and Meg Tasker, two of the most astute commentators on the form of the verse-novel, have both offered accounts of the novel’s impact on Victorian poetry that take such subversiveness seriously. They go back to Bakhtinian “novelization,” the argument that as genres become more novelistic,

They become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the “novelistic” layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the opened present).

Indeed, Bakhtin believes that as the novel exerts its influence on other genres, it also sparks their “renovation,” “infect[ing] them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness.”²² He might easily have been describing the evolution of the verse-novel.

Crucially, most Victorian verse-novels manifest “inconclusiveness” at the most basic structural level. As David Duff has argued, the hybrid poetry of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries tends toward what he calls “smooth-mixing,” the blending of genres within a medium of consistent metrical form (paradigmatically, blank verse). But Victorian verse-novels far more frequently “rough-mix,” awkwardly but powerfully combining passages of radically distinct verse forms.²³ Most commonly, these works intersperse blank-verse narrative sections with embedded or intercalary songs and short poems. As Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins have shown, though, such shorter works were progressively more likely to be identified as examples of “the lyric,” a term that was also in the process of changing its significance. Over roughly the same period that the concept of *genre* and the particular genre of the *novel* were accruing their modern literary critical meanings, *poetry* was becoming increasingly associated with the abstraction that became codified in the twentieth century as *lyric*: a pure, ecstatic representation of immediacy, subjectivity, and