



# VICTORIAN POETS

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A CRITICAL READER

EDITED BY  
VALENTINE CUNNINGHAM

WILEY Blackwell



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# Victorian Poets

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# Introduction

This collection of critical essays presents some of the Newest New Criticism of the Victorian Poets. It illustrates the range of new, or newish, critical approaches to this extraordinary body of poetry and poetics, to the poets and their ways with their texts, their words, their forms, their modes and sub-genres. Here are Now re-readings and re-interpretations – contentious often (and often contended) – driven variously by contemporary ideological interests, including especially gender questions, selfhood and body issues, compelled too by recent textualities promoted by structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction, all applied in critical practice to the grand, and less grand, masters of the traditional canon and to the newer arrivals in the now greatly afforced canon, women, homosexuals, regional and working-class poets.

The number of Victorian poets now demanding and getting reader attention, the canon of Victorian poets, the authors of the poems now on the syllabus, makes a vast crowd. The bulkier modern anthologies shout the story of currently accepted Victorian largesse – Christopher Ricks's *New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* (1990: 112 poets), Daniel Karlin's *Penguin Book of Victorian Verse* (1997: 145 poets), my own *The Victorians: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics* (Blackwell, 2000: 158 poets). At the core of the canon, as they have been for a long time, are the two uncontestedly major figures, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Victoria's Poet Laureate, and Robert Browning. They're the quality of the quality, assisted by a still highly regarded troupe of male producers: Gerard (Manley) Hopkins, Matthew Arnold and his friend Arthur Clough, Algernon Swinburne, A E Housman and Oscar Wilde, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris, Edward Fitzgerald, Robert Bridges and

Thomas Hardy. A strong male band rather cleanly divided on educational, which is to say, class lines. On the one hand, the gentlemen poets from the ancient English universities of Oxford and Cambridge – Tennyson and Fitzgerald (Trinity, Cambridge), Hopkins, Arnold, Clough and Swinburne (Balliol, Oxford), Morris (Exeter, Oxford), Housman (St John's, Oxford), Wilde (Magdalen, Oxford), Bridges (Corpus Christi College, Oxford). On the other hand, the Others, who didn't go to an ancient English university: Browning, D G Rossetti, Hardy, denigrated in their own time, and even after that, as not educated enough, too philistine and uncouth to be taken as seriously as the scholarly gents. But nonetheless a group comprising a coherent all-male school, until it was, as it were, forced to go mixed, with women admitted as literary equals, and sometimes more than equals. Notably, of course, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina G Rossetti, now thought of as very powerful women poets, a canonized pair more and more supported by a host of other women canonistas – the likes of Felicia Hemans, George Eliot, Emily Brontë, Mary Coleridge, Augusta Webster, Constance Naden, Lizzie Siddal, Dora Greenwell, Alice Meynell, Margaret Woods, Amy Levy. Many of them, of course, bourgeois, even rather posh and well-off (like Elizabeth Barrett Barrett and Alice Meynell), daughters of vicars (like the Brontës), comfortably-off wives (like Margaret Woods, wife of the President of Trinity College, Oxford, or Augusta Webster, wife of a Fellow of Trinity, Cambridge), even undergraduates (like Amy Levy, who spent two terms at the new women's Cambridge College, Newnham). Women put firmly on the literary map not least by anthologies such as *Victorian Women Poets 1830–1900* (Dent, 1994), edited by Jennifer Breen, and *Victorian Women Poets*, edited by Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds (Blackwell, 1995).

If not all that long ago the Big Four Victorian Poets were Tennyson, Browning, Arnold and Hopkins, now – supposing it's not too silly to go on talking in these terms – they are Tennyson, Browning, Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Though many critics and syllabus-makers would prefer that quartet to play as a quintet, with the fifth chair going to Hopkins, or Swinburne, or Wilde. (My own preference is for Hopkins.) Women critics, and feminist criticism, are, of course, largely responsible for the strong upgrade of Barrett Browning, Christina G, and the other women canonistas. And it's modern shifts of critical interest and ideology, of Theory in other words – the latest moves in the ever shifting, shoving, tilting, switching politics of reading, of literary history, of canon-making – which are responsible likewise

for the other party and partisan inclusions in the Victorian canon, as well as for the recent/recentish re-readings, re-envisionings of established canon members.

The present presence of so many proletarian poets in the canon, for example, is the result of potent Marxist and Marxized critical preachments, especially, though not exclusively, as they draw breath in the long shadow of revived historicism, the so-called New Historicism. The House of Poetry now gives bed and board to lots more residents than heretofore, the onetime poetic homeless, rescued from the aesthetic ghetto, working men and women from the provinces, from proletarian quarters of cities, the field, factory and mine, the loom and the kitchen-sink: Ebenezer Elliott the 'Corn-Law Rhymers'; John Clare the poor-boy ruralist; Thomas Cooper the Chartist; charity-boy James ('The City of Dreadful Night') Thomson; Ebenezer Jones another Chartist; Gerald Massey, the 'Red Republican', son of illiterate bargee parents put to work thirteen and a half hours day in a silk mill at the age of eight; Joseph Skipsey, Northumberland coal-miner; John ('Thirty Bob a Week') Davidson; blind Scottish spinner and weaver Janet Hamilton; self-educated Eliza Cook; the 'Factory Girl' from Glasgow, Ellen Johnston; Dundee ploughman's daughter Elizabeth Duncan; Ruth Willis, lame Leicester factory worker; Mary Smith, the one-time domestic servant from Cropredy, Oxfordshire; and so on. (Sterling propagandizing and availability of poems in Brian Maidment's compendium *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-Taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain* (1987) and Florence S Boos's *Working-Class Women Poets in Britain: An Anthology* (2008).)

The hand of Michel Foucault is to be felt everywhere in these canonical recruitments. His Marxized historiographical criticism, all about the rescue of the subjugated, the disregarded and the disapproved, from under the oppressive gaze of marginalizing power, has had great critically recreative effect. It has revitalized older feminisms of course, and is uniquely responsible for the massively important Post-Colonial and Queer Studies of recent times. The post-colonial awareness, which has attended to the blackness of the West Indian Creole Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the woman liberated by feminist criticism from her house-arrest as 'The Mad Woman in the Attic', nowadays homes in on the blackness of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, of her husband Robert Browning, and for that matter, of Alice Meynell, all offspring of miscegenated planter families in the West Indies. It has made attending to the orientalism of Tennyson's *Maud* a *sine qua non* of reading that poem now. Queer (or Q) criticism, a main branch of the big field of modern gender studies, has resulted in

the canonizing of once ignored homosexual poets – chief among these the pair of lesbians Katherine Harris Bradley and her niece Edith Emma Cooper writing under the name of Michael Field (important not least for their major part in the significant Victorian poetic cult of Sappho, whose female pronouns for the desired beloved they restored in their translations and adaptations; ‘my two dear Greek women’ Browning called them, with large liberal affection). Q studies are also responsible for the way long well-regarded poets Hopkins and Housman and Wilde have been as it were officially re-branded, re-stamped, as gay poets (their homosexuality and homoerotic interests coming to matter as much as if not more than anything else that matters about them). Q interests have made sure that the homosexual tenor of Tennyson’s cult of his dead friend Arthur Hallam will be given what’s now thought of as due prominence.

So: new readings, new scenes and focusses of reading, and new tools for reading. The politicized considerations that have burst the old canon’s banks to let in onetime occluded and marginalized, even excluded writers – women, homosexuals, proletarians, the poor and the proletarian, miscegenated women in the attic, political and religious dissenters and nonconformists, the regionally accented, dialect speakers, the many far from and short on what Matthew Arnold, Oxford’s massively influential Professor of Poetry, praised as ‘the tone of the centre’ – have released for critical attention, indeed made mandatory attention to, literature’s dealings as subject matter with questions of gender and race, as well as sharpening up the attention paid to class (that rather long-established British critical interest: less so, traditionally, in the USA). All this is a grand politicizing and historicizing, which inevitably motor an awkward-squad nagging away at the doings of power, and at how selves, persons, their bodies as well as their minds and souls, people in their skin as well as in the societies they inhabit and compose, are, as they say, ‘constructed’ in literature. This is to see literature, in other words, as a main actor in what Michel Foucault called the ‘discourses’ that collaborate to imagine and so create persons and societies. ‘Discourses’, because Foucault recognized the collaboration in these imperious ideological doings of all forms of textual activity. Texts of all kinds, medical, political, religious as well as fictional; art of all sorts, especially in Victorian times painting and the latest medium of representation the photograph, but all modelled on writing, the stuff of literature, which gives literature a main place in these considerations. And Foucault’s political analyses greedily, and for his time naturally, inhabit what we now think of as



the mid-twentieth-century 'linguistic turn', that granting of precedence to language and its ways in all thinking about cultural production. The textuality, the linguistic work, the rhetoric, metaphoricity, the 'figural', of the historical, empirical, ideological: it's a contentious convergence, obviously; in fact, a difficult marriage teetering always on divorce.

The linguistics in question, of course, is that of the most influential linguist ever, the great Ferdinand de Saussure in his early twentieth-century lectures, which became his (posthumous) *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, the famous *Course of General Linguistics*. The linguistics that gave rise to structuralism, and eventually post-structuralism, to the idea of literature, and literary practice, as being above all self-reflexively about itself as writing, the way the text works, the internal play of its words as such, as (in de Saussure's terms) *signifiers*, not *signifieds* (or *signata*), that is words pointing to the world outside. In other words, texts as systems of verbal *difference* rather than *reference*. The assumption being that a poem is a self-mirroring space, utterly inward looking – *abysmal*, as the code has it, that is plunging for meaning deeper and deeper into its own textual self. Hotly self-referential, intra-textual, the poem on this view does as it were squint beyond itself, but always in a textually constrained way: it has outside relations, but with other writings, the writings near and distant, which generate it and which it generates, its 'intertextual' relations. And, according to the influential German theorist, Wolfgang Iser, the text's self-subjectivity builds in possible ways of reading it – 'implicit' or 'implied' readings, which in effect construct an 'implicit' or 'implied' reader. All in all, though, this is the *autotelic* text, influentially refigured by Jacques Derrida as 'deconstructive', that is made of language at war with itself, with language's ancient and persisting desire for presence and fullness of meaning, for reference to the world; and so here language is stuck on a border, a threshold, where access to meaning and value is frustrated, even barred. The Derridean word for this is *aporia*: the *aporetic* text.

Such textual/intertextual assumptions have animated literary criticism, and not least the reading of Victorian poetry, as much as, if not more so than, the pressing ideological concerns. Together they comprise the interests of what is known as Theory. Interests that are not as innovatory as they are sometimes claimed, but which have certainly been strongly renovatory. Literary criticism proceeds historically, of course, by from time to time refuelling and retooling the persistent Basic Trio of critical concerns, the Big Three (as old as Aristotle) of *text-producer*, *produced text* and its meanings, and the *contexts of production*.