

Linda K. Hughes



The Cambridge **Introduction** to

Victorian Poetry

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Preface

While presenting an overview of the key developments, features, and preoccupations of Victorian poetry, *The Cambridge Introduction to Victorian Poetry* has two additional aims: to argue that Victorian poetry was inseparable from the mass print culture within which it found an audience, and to reinterpret the “rhetoric” of Victorian poetry in this context. Rather than surveying major authors, the *Introduction* maps formal practices and a series of social debates within which poems, both canonical and lesser-known, jostled against, answered, and challenged each other for aesthetic and cultural pre-eminence. It is a less tidy, occasionally even more discordant, account of poetry than is found in some literary histories, but is meant to highlight the liveliness and vibrancy of poetry in its day and to suggest sources of its continuing appeal.

I customarily pair works to indicate the dialogues in which poems engaged and those they initiated for Victorian audiences. I also indicate when poems were first published in periodicals, a medium that George Saintsbury, the prominent late-Victorian critic and literary scholar, termed the defining genre of the age in *A History of Nineteenth Century Literature* (1896). The frequency with which this notation occurs in following pages underscores Victorian poetry’s wide circulation among readers (which has sometimes been underestimated) and poetry’s intersection with other print forms in the first mass-media era.

Insofar as poetry is itself a medium, of course, it cannot be understood apart from its intrinsic aesthetic features. However briefly I take up a poem, I direct attention to the role of form in conveying its meaning, significance, and effects. Two appended close readings of narrative and lyric poems from mid-century and century’s end extend this focus.

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Introducing Victorian poetry

Of the difficulties that waylay a Victorian anthologist two are obvious. Where is he to begin? – Where to end? ... Wordsworth happened to be the first Laureate of Queen Victoria's reign ... [A]fter many months spent in close study of Victorian verse ... I rise from the task in reverence and wonder not only at the mass (not easily sized) of poetry written with ardour in these less-than-a-hundred years, but at the amount of it which is excellent. Arthur Quiller-Couch, *The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*¹

One distinction of Victorian poetry is the degree to which serious work and popular culture converged, as evidenced by snippets of poems now proverbial: "Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all"; "God's in his heaven – / All's right with the world!"; "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." These lines, from Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), Robert Browning's *Pippa Passes* (1841), and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) become reassuring clichés when shorn of their contexts. The poems themselves offer less conventional assurance: *In Memoriam* involves a male poet's impassioned grief for another man; Pippa's hope is sung against the backdrop of adultery and murder; and Barrett Browning's larger sequence opens by alluding to Theocritus and fleeing from love.

The best Victorian poetry is complex, challenging, and experimental, *and* it was read widely, thanks to its circulation during the first era of mass media. For Victorians, that mass medium was print. If Sir Walter Scott's *Marmion* (1808) and *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) sold 50,000 copies by 1836, Tennyson's *In Memoriam* sold 60,000 copies in three to four years and *Enoch Arden* 40,000 copies in mere weeks. Nearly 400,000 copies of John Keble's *The Christian Year* (1827) had been purchased when its copyright expired in 1873. To instance another print form, the *Edinburgh Review* and *Quarterly Review*, founded early in the century, peaked at circulations of 13,000 in 1813–14. *Cornhill Magazine*, in which poems by Tennyson, Barrett Browning, Matthew Arnold, and the Brontës appeared, attained a circulation approaching 100,000 with its first issue. And cheap papers aimed at working and lower middle classes, like the *Family Herald* or *London Journal*, also published original poetry and sold

between 300,000 and 450,000 copies per issue in the 1850s. Wilkie Collins estimated the audience for serial stories in these papers in the millions.²

The boundaries of Victorian poetry, like the term itself, are unstable and somewhat arbitrary.³ As Quiller-Couch observes, William Wordsworth was the first Poet Laureate appointed by Queen Victoria. Indeed, Wordsworth's greatest poem, *The Prelude*, appeared in the same year as *In Memoriam*, in 1850. If Wordsworth became a Victorian poet by virtue of longevity, neither did Romanticism end with the deaths of Byron and Shelley. The early Tennyson cannot be understood apart from John Keats, Robert Browning from Percy Bysshe Shelley, Barrett Browning from Lord Byron, or the Rossetti family from William Blake. The poems of Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon (which also influenced Tennyson and Barrett Browning) are regularly included in anthologies of both Romantic and Victorian poetry.

The question of scope also complicates attempts to identify Victorian poetry. More than 275 poets are represented in the first *Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*, including seventeen North American poets (for example, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman) as well as James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and William Butler Yeats. Far from deeming themselves Victorian poets, Joyce caricatured "Lawn Tennyson, gentleman poet," in the Proteus section of *Ulysses*; Pound termed the Victorian "a rather blurry, messy sort of a period" in 1913; and Yeats announced in a BBC radio broadcast of 1936, "My generation, because it disliked Victorian rhetorical moral fervour, came to dislike all rhetoric. In France, where there was a similar movement, a poet had written, 'Take rhetoric and wring its neck.'"⁴

In contrast to Quiller-Couch's inclusive sweep, Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange included only sixteen poets (and no women) in *Victorian Poetry and Poetics* (1959), an anthology deeply influenced by modernism. Should Victorian poetry be conceived in terms of its historical diversity and amplitude, as Quiller-Couch would argue, or by the portion most relevant to a given decade's tastes, as the example of Houghton and Stange implies? A forced choice between these alternatives is spurious. This study examines the diversity of Victorian poetry as well as canonical texts, and insists upon specific historical conditions as well as the interests of twenty-first-century readers. Approaching Victorian poetry in the context of print culture furthers these aims and, without effacing its links to larger poetic tradition (including Romanticism and modernism), helps pinpoint what is specific to Victorian poetry.

Poetic forms and themes did not definitively change in 1832, when Great Britain first extended the franchise and embarked on a course of (uneven) reform, or in 1837, when Victoria ascended the throne. The Romantic

refashioning of blank verse, ballads, sonnets, narratives, and more into vehicles for probing human psychology, political injustice, ontology, the built world, and nature was itself a form of modernity and led directly to Victorian innovations. Romantic poetry was also diverse and experimental, embracing the “Miltonic sublime” of Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” the deflating irony of Byron’s *Don Juan*, and the mundane particularity of Mary Robinson’s “Winkfield Plain.” As Stuart Curran notes, the very title of *Lyrical Ballads* is an oxymoron and points to an experimental generic hybrid, a mix of narrative and lyric, of communitarian impulse with the expression of an isolated individual.⁵

Yet fundamental changes in the material, socio-political, and intellectual conditions of British life after 1830 affected the content, form, and function of poetry in the reign of Queen Victoria.⁶ If, as Virginia Woolf alleged of post-impressionist painting early in the twentieth century, “on [*sic*] or about December, 1910, human character changed,”⁷ in 1830 nature changed. On September 15 the first intercity railway journey originated in Liverpool, and the death that day of William Huskisson, MP for Liverpool, who miscalculated the speed of the approaching locomotive (the *Rocket*) and was run over, aptly symbolizes the death of older configurations of nature. Propulsion through space and time on land had hitherto depended on the muscles, feeding, and watering of animals or human pedestrians, who generally followed roads shaped by natural contours. In contrast, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch observes, the “mechanical motion generated by steam power is characterized by regularity, uniformity, unlimited duration and acceleration.”⁸

Railway lines, moreover, cut across open land according to abstract engineering principles rather than local custom or the natural paths cut by flowing water. As the protagonist of *Aurora Leigh* (1856), by Barrett Browning, recounts,

we passed
The liberal open country and the close,
And shot through tunnels, like a lightning-wedge
By great Thor-hammers driven through the rock,
Which, quivering through the intestine blackness, splits,
And lets it in at once. (7:429–34)

Such inventions not only gave Victorians new relations to time, space, and nature but also new sounds and new rhythms. Not coincidentally, the railroad had a profound impact on the circulation of print, radically speeding up distribution and ratcheting up demand, since travelers increasingly turned to reading to pass the time and retain a sense of privacy.⁹ Fittingly, two of the

passengers on board the *Rocket* on September 15, 1830 were the future Poet Laureate of England, who celebrated this new technology in "Locksley Hall" (1842), and the man whose early death would inspire *In Memoriam*, the poem that won Tennyson the Laureateship: Arthur Henry Hallam.¹⁰

Older constructs of nature took another blow in 1830 from geologists' hammers, when the first volume of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* was published. Though James Hutton had already discovered "deep time" in the rock formations of Siccar Point, Scotland, in the late eighteenth century, Lyell systematized evidence that earth's timescale vastly exceeded biblical chronology and that earlier species had become extinct. Charles Darwin extended this impetus, remapping nature as the site of impersonal forces and a "struggle for existence" in *On the Origin of Species* (1859).¹¹ Darwin had no sooner published his magnum opus than its principal tenets were circulated to homes throughout England. In addition to widespread reviews, George Henry Lewes discussed Darwin's new book in successive chapters of *Studies in Animal Life*, serialized in *Cornhill Magazine* in 1860, while *Punch* ridiculed Darwin and the emergent discipline of social science in "Unnatural Selection and Improvement of Species. (A Paper Intended to be Read at our Social Science Congress by One who has been Spending Half-an-Hour or so with Darwin)."¹² Wordsworth's "impulse from a vernal wood" that might "teach" "more of ... moral evil and of good, / Than all the sages can" ("The Tables Turned," 21–4) became increasingly difficult to imagine when compelling new evidence pointed to a nature "red in tooth and claw / With ravine" (*In Memoriam*, 56:13–16).

The impact on traditional Christianity of such work also helps to define the Victorian era. If, predictably, these new paradigms drove some Victorian poets to unbelief or (to use the term coined by scientist Thomas Henry Huxley in 1869) agnosticism, a general sense that traditional religion was being renegotiated brought theology to the fore. Even love poems were likely to touch on religion: was earthly love a scintillation of divine, undying love or an animal instinct as transient as life? Coventry Patmore's scripting of domesticity in *The Angel in the House* (1854–63) enunciates a firm theology:

This little germ of nuptial love,
Which springs so simply from the sod,
The root is, as my song shall prove,
Of all our love to man and God. (1:537–40)

George Meredith's antiphonal lesson in *Modern Love* (1862) that marriages, like love itself, can die is grounded in an opposing cosmology: "I play for Seasons; not Eternities!" / Says Nature, laughing on her way. 'So must / All

those whose stake is nothing more than dust!” (13:1–3). Philip Davis rightly claims that “the serious relation between belief and unbelief in the period makes unbelief itself a religious phenomenon.”¹³

Another factor that pressured poets to take positions on vital contemporary issues was the explosion of print culture into a mass medium from the 1840s onward. If the philosophical and political ferment of the French Revolution and succeeding Napoleonic wars did so much to define literary production from 1790 to 1825, changes in Victorian publishing were themselves “revolutionary.”¹⁴ Steam-driven technology that made railroads possible began to be widely applied to printing presses in the 1830s and 1840s, and *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, the first of the cheap “respectable” periodicals that combined news; fiction; poetry; and informative articles on science, technology, education, political economy, and more, appeared in 1832.

The possibilities of reaching a mass audience through print were further realized in the 1840s by illustrated papers such as the *Family Herald* and *The Illustrated London News*. Books were still expensive and usually purchased only by the few, but the extraordinary success of Charles Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers*, published in twenty monthly shilling installments in 1836–7, created a new publishing trend; and much of the age’s best literature reached audiences in serial form (whether in individual parts or in magazines and weekly papers).¹⁵ This extended to poetry in some instances, and Robert Browning’s decision to issue his *Bells and Pomegranates* in eight double-columned, sixteen-page numbers from 1841 to 1846 must be seen in relation to Dickens’s publishing success.

The 1850s marked a further watershed in publishing. In 1855 taxes on newspapers (imposed earlier in the nineteenth century to limit the spread of radical thought among working classes) were abolished, and the drop in price along with technological improvements created a boom in periodicals directed to all sectors of the British reading public. In the 1850s far more Britons could also borrow reading material. Circulating libraries had long been a feature of Great Britain, but the fees charged by most excluded the masses; and even middle-class patrons had access only to limited selections if they lived outside London. In 1850 parliament passed a bill founding free libraries, and artisans in the northern industrial cities of Liverpool and Manchester soon benefited. For middle-class patrons throughout Britain, a key event was the opening in 1852 of Mudie’s Select Library in New Oxford Street, an institution that made borrowing affordable. Fiction was its mainstay, but this and other libraries carried wide arrays of newspapers and magazines in which poetry first appeared or was reprinted, and best-selling poems were also on hand. Charles Mudie purchased 2,500 copies of Tennyson’s *Enoch Arden* to lend

out, for example.¹⁶ The same year that Mudie opened his New Oxford Street quarters, W. H. Smith and Son opened railway bookstalls throughout the country, stocking one-volume novels that sold for one or two shillings, and a range of weekly papers selling for a penny or two.

In the 1860s print production became cheaper yet with high-speed rotary presses and paper made from esparto grass or wood pulp. For the rest of the century, according to Richard Altick, “periodical printing became one of the most highly mechanized of all English mass-production industries”; cheap reprints of books produced by the same methods, including volumes of recent or older poetry, put books in the hands of all who were interested.¹⁷

The effect on poetry of a surrounding mass medium of print is visible in two major poems published six years apart but composed in different eras, Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* and Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*. Both are first-person narratives of the poet’s development. Aurora’s “relations in the Unseen” nourish her poetic gift and enable her to draw “The elemental nutriment and heat / From nature” (1:473–5), a Romantic premise also evident in the poem’s tacit argument that imaginative vision can transform the world. Wordsworth’s alpine vision of “Characters of the great Apocalypse, / The types and symbols of Eternity,” and his epiphany upon Mount Snowdon of “a mind / That feeds upon infinity, that broods / Over the dark abyss” (6:638–9, 14:70–2), are answered by Aurora’s culminating, apocalyptic vision of “The first foundations of that new, near Day / Which should be builded out of heaven to God” (9:956–7).

But just as Wordsworth’s world is innocent of the train that Aurora and Marion take from Paris to Marseilles, only Barrett Browning provides a publishing history as part of Aurora’s poetic development,¹⁸ giving due attention to the impact of critical reception and even the poet’s resort to “magazines, / And weekly papers” (3:310–11) for money to support her vocation. The novel is also a palpable presence in Barrett Browning’s poem as it is not in *The Prelude* – a symptom of poetry that still commanded public readerships and prestige but was emerging when the novel flourished. In *Aurora Leigh* Marion Erle’s drugging and rape hark back to Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, while the blinding of Aurora’s cousin Romney is indebted to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Another divergence between *The Prelude* and *Aurora Leigh* is that the former is structured by the poet’s formation, conversion to the cause of revolution, disillusionment, and recovery of poetic vision, whereas *Aurora Leigh* is ultimately structured by a debate – personal, philosophical, political – about how best to reform society.

Debate itself is fundamentally Victorian, revealing an assumption that more than one perspective marks any issue and that truth is subject to contestation.