

**John Drinkwater**



*Victorian  
Poetry*

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# PREFACE

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This book is called *Victorian Poetry* for convenience. It does not, it need hardly be said, pretend to anything like a thorough examination of the voluminous poetry of the Victorian era in all its aspects. Significant criticism of Tennyson alone, to take a single instance, has already filled many volumes, a reflection which may well make the title chosen for this little book look like an impertinence. But while the present study does not profess to any exhaustiveness, it is about Victorian poetry, so that I may perhaps be allowed the choice, which is an easy one.

Certain omissions in the poets dealt with will occur to every reader. Chief of these, perhaps, is Mr. Thomas Hardy, but although Mr. Hardy might be claimed as at least partly Victorian in date he seems as a poet to belong to a later age in everything else. His own achievement is post-Victorian in character, and his influence upon the tradition of English poetry is one that is too presently active for definition yet awhile. So that I felt that to bring a consideration of his poetry into these notes would be to disturb the balance of the scheme. The same thing may be said, perhaps with rather less excuse, about George Meredith. He, more strictly than Mr. Hardy, belongs to the Victorian age, but it is by accident rather than by character. American poetry, save for a casual reference here and there, I have not mentioned at all. To have done so would not have furthered my design, nor could I have done it adequately within that design.

Whitman, who is a law unto himself, could come into no design and needs a separate gospelling.

This brief study inevitably deals chiefly with the work of Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Rossetti, Swinburne and Morris. Poets of almost equal eminence, such as Coventry Patmore, Mrs. Browning and Christina Rossetti, are less constant *motifs*, but, I hope, not unduly neglected. Of the great number of less celebrated poets, who contributed beautifully to the poetry of their time, I have referred only to such as have afforded some apt illustration for an immediate argument. Poets like Landor and Emily Brontë, although they worked into the early part of the period dealt with, Landor, indeed, well into it, have not been treated as Victorians, since they belonged by nature no more to the Victorian age than did Wordsworth.

There could be no hard dividing line between the two parts of the study. Frequent references to the content matter of Victorian poetry were inevitable in a consideration of its technique, just as it has suited the argument often to refer back from the substance to the manner. For the rest, the main purpose of the essay has been merely to note some poetical characteristics of an age and their relation to the poetical characteristics of other ages.

I have used such terms as Augustan age and Romantic age as meaning what they are commonly held to mean in English criticism. That their fitness as terms may be sometimes challenged by critics of authority does not matter for the present purpose. They are convenient labels and may as well be used as any others. In choosing quotations for illustrative purposes, I have inclined when

possible to such passages as are commonly known to readers of poetry, and since this book may be read by some who are not so erudite as my critics will be, I have thought it not superfluous to set out even so familiar a piece as *Crossing the Bar*, shall we say, in full.



# VICTORIAN POETRY

# **PART I: THE MANNER OF VICTORIAN POETRY**

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## **Chapter I The Poet and His Age**

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The division of poetry into periods is artificial and yet not without reason and its uses. If we look at the poets of an age at close quarters we shall commonly find little resemblance between one and the other. A liberal reader of poetry in 1670, for example, would be discussing the recently published *Paradise Lost*, he would know John Dryden as a poet who was establishing a reputation, he might still have bought from his booksellers the first edition of Herrick's *Hesperides* and have found on the poetry table the early issues of John Donne, Richard Crashaw, Henry King, Richard Lovelace and Henry Vaughan, among others. In these, his contemporaries, our reader would naturally see an immense variety of technical method, spiritual mood, and traditional allegiance. Cavalier and Puritan, secular and religious, these would be schools clearly distinguished in his mind, and little enough relation would be apparent between the monumental epic of Milton and the primrose lyric of Herrick. And yet these were all seventeenth-century poets, and at this distance we perceive something characteristic in seventeenth-century poetry that touched the work of all these men alike. We to-day are going through the same

experience with our own contemporaries. Two hundred years hence Georgian poetry—and in this term I do not include only the work of the poets selected by Mr. Marsh for his anthologies—will have certain clearly definable characteristics which for the reader mark it apart from the work of other ages. And yet to us, if we really read the poetry and do not merely pick up a smattering of critical generalisation about it, the differences must be found more striking than the resemblances. At close quarters it is absurd to pretend that there is any close kinship between the work of, say, Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie, Mr. W. H. Davies, Mr. Walter de la Mare, Mr. John Masefield and Mr. Wilfred Wilson Gibson. What happens is that there are two governing influences in all poetry of any consequence, the poet's own personality, and the spirit of the age. That personality is something which is plain to a sensitive reader from the first, but the spirit of an age is hardly ever; definable to the age itself. Criticism may already be sure about the personal quality in the work of Alice Meynell or A. E. Housman, can in some degree say why it is personal and mark in each case its particular contribution to the record of the human spirit, but criticism cannot clearly at present say what it is that relates these two poets to each other or both of them to Gordon Bottomley. That there is such a relation only becomes an established fact when we look back and see it asserting itself among the poets of a period from one age to another. Milton was a poet engaged in a titanic struggle with the problems of the soul, believing but battling always for his faith, blending in one mood a stern asceticism with voluptuous passion, a poetical technician familiar with

every classic example and at the same time liberal in experiment; and just such a poet in his own measure was Matthew Arnold. Herrick, on the other hand, for all his parsonage, was the lyrist of fleeting beauty, of ghosts in the blossoming meadows, of exquisite and poignant moments, with no gospel but that with beauty loved comes beauty lost, a poet who used simple and established measures with perfect mastery and little questioning. And so again on his own scale such a poet was Swinburne. And yet in some essential respect Milton is of a kind with Herrick and Arnold of a kind with Swinburne far more clearly than is Milton with Arnold or Herrick with Swinburne. When the question of personal quality has been finally considered Milton and Herrick remain of the seventeenth century and Arnold and Swinburne of the nineteenth. The purpose of the present essay is to ascertain as far as possible what it is that distinguishes what we call the Victorian age in English poetry from the great ages that preceded it. In order to do this it will be necessary to consider the personal quality in several poets, but this will be done rather to discover the common spirit than to present a series of individual studies.

# Chapter II

## Diction in English Poetry

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Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837. The date is not an inconvenient one to set at the beginning of a study of the poetry of the age to which she gave her name. Shelley, Byron, and Keats were dead, Wordsworth's most important work was finished, Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Elizabeth Barrett had made their first appearances in print, Matthew Arnold was at school, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his sister Christina were children, William Morris and Algernon Charles Swinburne had just been born. Walter Savage Landor, one of the strangest figures in our poetical literature, whose first poems had been published in 1795, was still at the prime of his genius, but the small body of his best work does not mark him very definitely as either Romantic or Victorian. There were a number of less famous but by no means inconsiderable poets whose work will call for notice as we proceed.

The Romantic Revival in English poetry is generally accepted as having Blake and Gray and Collins for its pioneers. It must, however, be remembered that the earlier part of the eighteenth century, the age of reason, had not been wholly without the Romantic note. To read the work of the almost forgotten smaller men of that time is to chance often upon a phrase in which the tenderness, and heart-ache, and the warm sense of colour and natural beauty, which were so to dominate the great epoch from Wordsworth to Keats, break through the witty and balanced

argument of an age when it was not considered to be the thing to say too much about the heart. Even the master, Pope himself, in some of his pastorals and elegies, and in such a poem as *Eloisa to Abelard*, sometimes lets the glow of passion play upon a poetic habit that was not used to have its cold and logical brilliance ruffled except by anger. In those days, however, the Romantic note when it was struck seems rather to have been struck by accident than by deliberation, while in Gray and Collins there is continually an instinct for it, in conflict with an inherited tradition that gives it no encouragement. Blake, although he definitely helped the Romantic Revival on its way, was himself, like Landor, rather an isolated manifestation of poetry belonging not very clearly to any particular age. The Romantic Revival, when it did come, came with a full force of reaction against the age of reason, with its often admirable rhetoric, its emotional timidity and its concern with etiquette at the expense of character. But the Romantic Revival, for all the splendour of its common spirit and the great personal genius of its masters, had one radical condition of weakness, namely, that it was a revival. In many ways it was, and remains, the richest period in English poetry, but it was also the first period in English poetry that had something in the inspiration of its actual poetic method that was second-hand and not original. This is not to say that Wordsworth and the others were not original poets. The discovery of nature, the revolutionary passion, the preoccupation with the everyday life of the emotions, one or another of these marked Keats and Shelley and Byron, and the rest of them, as discoverers. But in the actual machinery

through which their poetic mood worked there was often something literary and remembered in a sense more marked than can be observed in the practice of poets in England before. It is true that no good poet has ever worked without some example in his mind, but the Elizabethans were conscious of an Italian influence as of something vivid and present among them, a very part of their own lives, as it were, whereas the Elizabethan influence upon Keats was something deliberately remembered, something won back from a long past age. Without in the least detracting from the achievement of Keats, which must remain among the greatest in English poetry, it may be said that in this respect the Elizabethans were Italians but that Keats imitated the Elizabethans. The poets of the Romantic Revival were as rich in creative endowment as the Elizabethans themselves, certainly richer than the Augustans. But, in a sense, even the polished formality of Pope's verse and the artificiality of his manner were more exactly his own than were the free music and luxurious emotional life the unaided discoveries of the Romantics who used them in the next age.

This circumstance of the Romantic Revival has had a profound influence upon English poetry ever since, and so far as may be prophesied it is likely to continue to do so. Poetry since the death of Keats and Shelley and Byron has acquired many new interests, chiefly intellectual interests, which did not belong to it before their time, or, at least, did not belong to it in anything like the same measure, but it has, also, become definitely a less original thing both as to manner and in its emotional content. Whether this is a gain or loss is for each reader to determine for himself, but in the

conclusion it is likely that there would be at least as many people glad of the fact as sorry for it. I must elaborate this position first as to the manner, and later as to the content.

I would be dogmatic at once and say that in spite of all the experimenters in *vers libre* and polyphonic prose and what not, there is now no new verse form to be discovered in English. Every poet as he comes along can invent new combinations of existing forms, often enchantingly, but that is another matter, though even this becomes increasingly difficult. Poetry will never take kindly to free verse as a common method, though any poet is likely to practise it at intervals. So-called polyphonic prose, which is only a variety of free verse, may lend itself often to admirable writing when it happens to be used by an admirable writer, but for most of us it is incapable of the peculiar delight given by regular verse forms which have been evolved through centuries of experience. The introduction of classical metres into English poetry is a lost cause, as it always has been, attractive though it may be to a fine spirit now and again. There remains for the use of the poets the vast technique of recognised verse form with its infinite variety of line length and stanzaic structure. None of the considerable poets in our literature has ever found it irksome to work within these limitations, an observation which is as just to-day as it ever was. Since the Romantic poets the possibilities of line and stanza in themselves have hardly been extended in any important manner, unless we allow to the contrary, for example, Swinburne's exploitation of anapæstic measures, which, on the whole, was to the bad rather than to the good in spite of its occasional triumphs. Strictly speaking, as to

line and stanza in themselves, it might be said that even the Romantics did nothing that could not be matched somewhere or another in English poetry before them. Their technical invention was mostly rediscovery, though none the less creditable to them for that. Their rediscovery was of something so forgotten that they might claim that it was new, but, however that may be, there has been nothing new since them in the strictly formal contour of English verse. What has been new, and what must always be new when a true poet is at work, is the rhythmic beat within that contour, and the genius of our language is happily such as to give this beat boundless freedom. Among our contemporaries no one has achieved a technique more distinctively his own, perhaps, than Mr. Walter de la Mare, but upon examination it will be found that this distinctiveness is entirely one of his rhythmic beat, and that there is no invention of metrical form.

“Is there anybody there?” said the Traveller,  
Knocking on the moonlit door;

is peculiarly marked by Mr. de la Mare’s rhythmic genius;  
but alter the beat a little and you get—

And they changed their lives and departed, and came  
back as the leaves of the trees.

And again, to go back beyond Morris, we come even to—

What are the wild waves saying,  
Sister, the whole day long.