Victorian Poetry

Edited by Duncan Wu

based on
The Victorians:
An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics

edited by Valentine Cunningham

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Blackwell Essential Literature

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Victorian Poetry

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Series Editor's Preface

The Blackwell Essential Literature series offers readers the chance to possess authoritative texts of key poems (and in one case drama) across the standard periods and movements. Based on correspondent volumes in the Blackwell Anthologies series, most of these volumes run to no more than 200 pages. The acknowledged virtues of the Blackwell Anthologies are range and variety; those of the Essential Literature series are authoritative selection, compactness and ease of use. They will be particularly helpful to students hard-pressed for time, who need a digest of the poetry of each historical period.

In selecting the contents of each volume particular attention has been given to major writers whose works are widely taught at most schools and universities. Each volume contains a general introduction designed to introduce the reader to those central works.

Together, these volumes comprise a crucial resource for anyone who reads or studies poetry.

Duncan Wu
St Catherine's College, Oxford

Introduction

Duncan Wu

Recent anthologies of Victorian poetry and prose have provided readers with a remarkably diverse and wide-ranging body of work. Valentine Cunningham's invaluable *The Victorians* ranges from the late works of Wordsworth and Leigh Hunt at one end of the century to Yeats, Housman and Kipling at the other. In between he offers a rich selection of verse, including anonymous street ballads; the poetry of women poets such as Caroline Norton, Fanny Kemble, Jemima Luke, Eliza Cook and Dora Greenwell; as well as rural writers like John Clare, Ebenezer Elliot and William Barnes. The diversity is highlighted by Professor Cunningham in his introduction:

> So here are poems about cod-liver oil, railway lines and railway trains, chairs, soup, soap, paintings, omnibuses, going to the dentist, Grimm's Law, weather in the suburbs, dead dogs, cricket players, a cabbage leaf, Missing Links, tobacco, booze, snow, sado-masochism, Psychical Research, leeks, onions, genitalia, war, New Women, fairies, love, death, God, pain, poverty, poems, faith, doubt, science, poets, poetry.[1]

For range readers will require *The Victorians* – and, should they desire even more, other anthologies of Victorian writing, which reflect the catholicity of interest within the period. This volume aims to do something different. It distills into a smaller space some of the most influential poetry of the period by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alfred (Lord) Tennyson, Robert Browning, Emily (Jane) Brontë, Arthur Hugh Clough, Matthew Arnold, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina G. Rossetti, Thomas Hardy, Gerard Manley Hopkins, A. E. Housman and William Butler Yeats. Pressure of space necessarily denies admission to many of those anthologized by Professor Cunningham – James Thomson, George Meredith, William Morris, Lewis Carroll, W. E. Henley, Robert Louis Stevenson, to name a few.

What this selection lacks in range it makes up for in depth, including complete texts of 'Fra Lippo Lippi', 'The Prisoner', 'Dover Beach', 'The Scholar-Gipsy', 'The Blessed Damozel', 'Goblin Market' and 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'. The implied claim is not that these are representative – it would be virtually impossible to construct such a selection within a mere 180-odd pages – but that they are essential reading for anyone with an interest in verse of the period.

Tennyson and Browning predominate, as they are the major poets of the age. No less than the queen remarked to Tennyson that, 'Next to the Bible, *In Memoriam* is my comfort'. There are few better examples of the Victorian preoccupation with death and its aftermath. It is on the one hand an intensely private poem about one man's

[1] Valentine Cunningham, introduction, *The Victorians: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. xxxv.

grief for another, and on the other a work that speaks of the innermost anxieties of the age, exemplifying Auden's contention that Tennyson's gift was for expressing feelings of 'lonely terror and desire for death'.[2] The fruit of nearly 17 years' labour, it doubtless has its faults – it is relentless in its subjectivity, almost oppressively so – but it transcends the personal in addressing the anxieties arising from the nineteenth-century confrontation with evolutionary theories Tennyson had encountered in Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of Creation* and Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology.*[3] The natural world of *In Memoriam* is not invariably, therefore, the divinely appointed one of Wordsworth; it can be, rather, 'red in tooth and claw',[4] the product of a cosmos lacking a benevolent deity. In this sense *In Memoriam*, the most successful long poem of its day, is a product of the *zeitgeist*, a growing scepticism that was to find fuller expression in the poetry of Hardy and Housman later in the century.

Tennyson's preoccupation with states of mind looks back to Wordsworth, and is found in shorter poems such as 'Tears, idle tears', which concerns the uncontrollable emotions that run deeply in the human heart. In such sonnets as 'Surprised by joy' Wordsworth had attempted the same kind of investigation.[5] For his part, Wordsworth possessed a copy of Tennyson's important 1842 *Poems*, and welcomed an acquaintance with their author.[6] By the time Wordsworth died in 1850 Tennyson was in his early forties and Browning in his late thirties. The influence of the Romantics was felt throughout the century, but their reign had ended: Tennyson and Browning were remaking the art.

Browning's major contribution, in common with that of Tennyson, was to develop a new kind of psychological poetry – one that explored the human mind from within, through the dramatic monologue. There were precedents in the Romantic period – all 'big six' poets had tried their hand at writing plays – but the achievement of Browning and Tennyson was to adapt the form so as to bring the science of disclosure through verbal nuance to a fine art. The Ulysses who in Tennyson's poem declares his desire 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield' may not be the sort of sea-captain with whom we should set sail; from the very moment that the speaker of Browning's 'My Last Duchess' notes that the portrait of his former wife looks 'as if she were alive' we know that this is no mere compliment to the painter, Frà Pandolf – there is something darker at work. And when the speaker of 'A Toccata of Galuppi's' tells us that he feels 'chilly and grown old', something rather important has happened, on a level beyond the verbal, which it is for us to infer. As readers of such poetry we are in a privileged position; Tennyson and Browning exploited the form aware that our knowing so much more than their speakers, comprehending moral failings with a clarity not always vouchsafed in life, was the key to a new poetic. Its potential would be further championed in the modern period by Eliot and Pound.[7]

[2] W. H. Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords* ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1973), p. 226. E. Warwick Slinn helpfully contextualizes *In Memoriam* in his essay on Victorian poetry in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture* ed. Herbert Tucker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 311–13.

[3] See in particular *In Memoriam* lv and lvi.

[4] *In Memoriam* lvi 15.

[5] *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's most extensive examination of psychological process, was not published until 1850, the same year as *In Memoriam.*

[6] See Robert Bernard Martin, *Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart* (London: Faber, 1983), pp. 289–91.

[7] See for instance Pound's 'Piere Vidal Old' and Eliot's 'Prufrock', besides much else.

Browning's wife, Elizabeth Barrett, has long been the subject of myth. She began her creative life as a Romantic poet – publishing poems in national newspapers during the 1820s.[8] Her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) are a remarkable series of love poems which further exploit some of the techniques arising from her husband's dramatic monologues. In fact, they are not 'from the Portuguese' at all; they are original poems that are in some sense autobiographical. The pretence of translation sets up a bluff that allows Barrett Browning to explore her theme without anxiety, sometimes approaching the subject of romantic passion, as experienced by women, quite directly – 'active sexual demands and dangers'.[9] That freedom also licenses her to experiment with different roles, moving easily from that of poet-lover to that of beloved. In *Aurora Leigh* (1856), an experimental (and partly autobiographical) verse-novel that describes the integration of love and work, she set out to challenge more directly the gender discrimination of the day in an effort to formulate a feminist poetic. The extract from the First Book, below (see pp. 9–17), begins this process with a kind of self-portrait written in a reflective, engaging blank verse that in large measure accounts for the resurgence of this work's popularity in recent years.

Emily Brontë is best known as the author of *Wuthering Heights* (1847), but less so as the author of some of the most compelling poetry of the period. Its fascination lies partly in its brooding melancholy and the sense that its author lives in the shadow of some terrible grief in the recent past or anticipation of death to come. The emotional charge of the poetry is intense and often extreme; her subjects are love, hatred, suffering and fortitude. This is particularly evident in such lyrics as 'No coward soul is mine' and 'Cold in the earth'. 'Julian M. and A. G. Rochelle' (known in other versions as 'The Prisoner') is a different kind of poem, at the centre of which is a moment, Rochelle's vision shortly prior to expected death, which allows us to consider Brontë as a mystic writer.

Clough and Arnold knew each other from Oxford days, and are often considered as poets of doubt. This is evident from 'Dover Beach', perhaps Arnold's greatest work, in which he seeks for hope in a 'Sea of Faith', only to turn to human love when faced by a world 'Where ignorant armies clash by night'. 'The Scholar-Gipsy' is one of the great Victorian Oxford poems which tells us a great deal about how important were notions of pastoral at the time. Taking its lead (and diction) from Keats, it contrasts the 'sick hurry' of the world with the comparative calm of the landscape. Clough's agnosticism comes into sharp focus in the two poems presented here, particularly 'That there are powers above us I admit'.

The Victorians were not in themselves a movement, any more than the Romantics, but the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, formed in 1848, was. Of course, like most movements, they were less coherent and unified than they would have liked, and it is easiest to think of the group as one of visual artists. In that context their aim was to introduce the qualities of Italian medieval painting, working directly from the natural object *in situ*, using the colours of nature as they were, and to choose subjects from contemporary life. Where their subject was biblical or historical, they wanted realism, and this often meant introducing 'real' people into the work, and reproducing in

[8] See for instance 'Stanzas on the Death of Lord Byron', *Romanticism: An Anthology*, 2nd edn, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 1108–9.

[9] *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology* ed. Margaret Reynolds and Angela Leighton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 65.

minute detail the features of the natural world. As poets, Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti looked back to the Coleridge of 'Christabel' and the Keats of 'Isabella'. In matters of style they sought a simplicity of manner; a sensitivity to sensory detail; a self-conscious medievalism and a highly developed taste in decoration. In mood they cultivated a love of the morbid – listlessness, decay and desolation; and one also finds a frequent use of religious language for evocation (rather than its real meanings). There is in all this a deliberation, a self-consciousness which can sometimes produce startlingly good poetry; it can be found in Tennyson's 'Mariana' and some of the sonnets in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *House of Life* sequence. 'The Blessed Damozel' (1850) was intended as a companion piece to Poe's 'The Raven' (1845). James Sambrook notes that Rossetti's conception of the afterlife, where the blessed damozel weeps in frustrated longing to join her lover (rather than God) 'is not even remotely Christian'.[10]

Dante Gabriel was to make an art out of the decorativeness and elaboration of his verse; his sister Christina is far less preoccupied with appearances. Her poetry is full of depression and denial, and the intense morbidity of her writing finds expression even in the fairy-tale 'Goblin Market' (1862). Those feelings, which may have deterred some readers in earlier times, have in the last two decades given her work an added resonance, so that in 1995 Margaret Reynolds and Angela Leighton could confirm her place as 'one of the greatest poets of the nineteenth century'.[11] She is now one of the most widely studied of the Pre-Raphaelites.

Gerard Manley Hopkins's collected verse appeared only in 1918, nearly 30 years after his death, which is why it is easy to regard as a product of the twentieth century. In fact, its 'philological and rhetorical passion'[12] and concentration on the inner workings of the soul is pre-eminently a product of the nineteenth. He is essentially a visionary writer, his concept of 'inscape' referring to the interior perception into the being of the object. Unlike some of the Romantics, Hopkins is insistently religious in his understanding: God is the inscape of the created world. The same cannot be said of the poetry of Hardy, who is also thought of as a twentieth-century writer; indeed, most of his best poetry was written after 1900, published in *Satires of Circumstance* (1914) and *Moments of Vision* (1917). The poems included here are among the best of his Victorian period. Tom Paulin has noted how in 'Neutral Tones' the poem culminates in

> a total picture, an 'involute' or charged combination of emotion and concrete objects, which during his subsequent painful experience has become a permanently meaningful impression.[13]

Not only is there no evidence of religious faith in Hardy's poetry; nature is bleak, as in both 'Neutral Tones' and 'The Darkling Thrush', and capable of blind indifference to human mortality. In this sense it is not fanciful to consider Hardy and Housman alongside each other, except that Housman's vision is if anything even more lacking in hope than Hardy's. In Housman nature is 'heartless, witless', stripped of all the redemptive power with which the Romantics had imbued it, stripped of the religious significance it possessed for such poets as Hopkins.

[10] 'The Rossettis and Other Contemporary Poets', *The Victorians* ed. Arthur Pollard (London: Sphere Books, 1988), p. 438.

[11] Reynolds and Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology*, p. 355.

[12] Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London: Faber, 1980), p. 85.

[13] Tom Paulin, *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 31.

This collection of essential poetry of the nineteenth century would appear, then, to trace a course from the sublime hopes of Wordsworth, through the scepticism of Clough, to the outright desolation of Housman and Hardy. Except that it doesn't. Belief may be questioned, but can't be eliminated from the human soul. And in no one was it more vigorously evident than in the work of W. B. Yeats. There have been many fine books about this great writer, but I can't think of a better short guide than Kathleen Raine's *W. B. Yeats and the Learning of the Imagination* (1999). Raine writes of Yeats's place within a fugitive intellectual tradition of metaphysical and mystic thought, a pantheon that includes Thomas Taylor the Platonist, Swedenborg, Plotinus, and the author of the Upanishads:

> Yeats did not study Plato and Plotinus, Swedenborg and Blake, as episodes in the 'history of ideas' but because he was tracing a continuous tradition of knowledge, uncovering the traces of that 'vast generalization' he discerned in the fragmentary portions he assembled. This knowledge is none the less exact and verifiable for being immeasurable; its truth lies in experiences and disciplines of the mind itself and in the testimony (unanimous and worldwide) of 'revelation'.[14]

Never less than exalted in his imaginative ambitions, Yeats's poetry combines the influences of the Pre-Raphaelites, the French symbolists, the kabbalistic and spiritualist worthies with whom he consorted, Irish fairy traditionalism, and nationalist politics in a heady cocktail unlike anything else. 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' seems like an unexpected way to end a century characterized by increasing doubt and despondency, but in truth the Romantic urge to unify and idealize had never really evaporated. It underpins the medievalism of Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites, can be heard beneath the 'tremulous cadence' of the sea in 'Dover Beach', and a longing for it even informs the 'ecstatic sound' of Hardy's darkling thrush (which recalls the 'darkling' experience of Keats's famous ode). Yeats's great poetry, which would produce its finest fruits in the next century, was founded on an unquenchable aspiration, the immortal longings with which the 1800s had begun.

I am much indebted to Valentine Cunningham in what follows, and anyone with a serious interest in this poetry should turn to his anthology, listed below, for fuller scholarly treatment.

Further Reading

Cunningham, Valentine (ed.) (2000) *The Victorians: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics* (Oxford: Blackwell.)

Houghton, Walter E. (1957) *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.)

Reynolds, Margaret and Leighton, Angela (eds) (1995) *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell.)

Tucker, Herbert F. (ed.) (1999) *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell.)

[14] Kathleen Raine, *W. B. Yeats and the Learning of the Imagination* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1999), p. 76.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861)

Sonnets from the Portuguese (extracts)

XIII

And wilt thou have me fashion into speech
The love I bear thee, finding words enough,
And hold the torch out, while the winds are rough,
Between our faces, to cast light on each! –
I drop it at thy feet. I cannot teach 5
My hand to hold my spirit so far off
From myself… me …that I should bring thee proof
In words, of love hid in me out of reach.
Nay, let the silence of my womanhood
Commend my woman-love to thy belief, – 10
Seeing that I stand unwon, however wooed,
And rend the garment of my life, in brief,
By a most dauntless, voiceless fortitude,
Lest one touch of this heart convey its grief.

XVIII

I never gave a lock of hair away
To a man, Dearest, except this to thee,
Which now upon my fingers thoughtfully
I ring out to the full brown length and say
'Take it.' My day of youth went yesterday; 5
My hair no longer bounds to my foot's glee,
Nor plant I it from rose or myrtle-tree,
As girls do, any more. It only may
Now shade on two pale cheeks, the mark of tears,
Taught drooping from the head that hangs aside 10
Through sorrow's trick. I thought the funeral-shears
Would take this first; but Love is justified:
Take it, thou, …finding pure, from all those years,
The kiss my mother left here when she died.

XXIV

Let the world's sharpness like a clasping knife,
Shut in upon itself and do no harm

In this close hand of Love, now soft and warm;
And let us hear no sound of human strife,
After the click of the shutting. Life to life – 5
I lean upon thee, Dear, without alarm,
And feel as safe as guarded by a charm,
Against the stab of worldlings who if rife
Are weak to injure. Very whitely still
The lilies of our lives may reassure 10
Their blossoms from their roots! accessible
Alone to heavenly dews that drop not fewer;
Growing straight, out of man's reach, on the hill.
God only, who made us rich, can make us poor.

XXXVIII

First time he kissed me, he but only kissed
The fingers of this hand wherewith I write,
And ever since it grew more clean and white, . . .
Slow to world-greetings . . . quick with its 'Oh, list,'
When the angels speak. A ring of amethyst 5
I could not wear here plainer to my sight,
Than that first kiss. The second passed in height
The first, and sought the forehead, and half missed,
Half falling on the hair. O beyond meed!
That was the chrism of love, which love's own crown, 10
With sanctifying sweetness, did precede.
The third, upon my lips, was folded down
In perfect, purple state! since when, indeed,
I have been proud and said, 'My Love, my own.'

XLII

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and Ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of everyday's 5
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise;
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith; 10
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints, – I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! – and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

XLIII

Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers
Plucked in the garden, all the summer through

And winter, and it seemed as if they grew
In this close room, nor missed the sun and showers.
So, in the like name of that love of ours, 5
Take back these thoughts, which here unfolded too,
And which on warm and cold days I withdrew
From my heart's ground. Indeed, those beds and bowers
Be overgrown with bitter weeds and rue,
And wait thy weeding: yet here's eglantine, 10
Here's ivy! – take them, as I used to do
Thy flowers, and keep them where they shall not pine:
Instruct thine eyes to keep their colours true,
And tell thy soul, their roots are left in mine.

From *Aurora Leigh*

Dedication to John Kenyon, Esq.

The words 'cousin' and 'friend' are constantly recurring in this poem, the last pages of which have been finished under the hospitality of your roof, my own dearest cousin and friend; – cousin and friend, in a sense of less equality and greater disinterestedness than 'Romney''s.

Ending, therefore, and preparing once more to quit England, I venture to leave in your hands this book, the most mature of my works, and the one into which my highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered: that as, through my various efforts in literature and steps in life, you have believed in me, borne with me, and been generous to me, far beyond the common uses of mere relationship or sympathy of mind, so you may kindly accept, in sight of the public, this poor sign of esteem, gratitude, and affection, from

your unforgetting
E. B. B.
39, Devonshire Place,
October 17, 1856

First Book

Of writing many books there is no end;
And I who have written much in prose and verse
For others' uses, will write now for mine, –
Will write my story for my better self,
As when you paint your portrait for a friend, 5
Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it
Long after he has ceased to love you, just
To hold together what he was and is.

I, writing thus, am still what men call young;
I have not so far left the coasts of life 10