

Poetry

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Our sense of what ‘poetry’ means will probably be changed by the internet just as surely as our conception of the “Victorian” will be changed. The first because we will locate poetry and theories of poetry . . . in ‘unofficial’ class and gender contexts, British and American. Poetry in *Eliza Cook’s Journal* will look different than the poetry published by, say, *The Monthly Repository* or in *Scribner’s*. The second because we will probe “unofficial” history as well. . . . [W]e will undo the very notion of a central, dominant historical narrative for the nineteenth century.

—Isobel Armstrong, “The Victorian Poetry Party”¹

SINCE the last moment of self-reflection in 2004, when Isobel Armstrong wrote this passage, scholars have, indeed, been overturning the very idea of “poetry” as anything like a unified subject in the Victorian era thanks, in large part, to research afforded by online archives. From the adjectives that might describe a poem (sweet, uplifting, smooth, mournful, delicate, song-like, marching) to the terms (meter, rhythm, tone, pitch, voice, cadence, sound, sense) to the genres in the back of our *Norton Anthology* (epic, ballad, song, ode, lesser ode, elegy, lyric, parody, dirge, sonnet), contemporary scholarship on Victorian poetry has become a wildly contested field that now questions not only the stability of most of the words I list above, but has also come to question the once-believed distinctions between so-called literary and popular forms. Moreover, we are reading nineteenth-century poems in transatlantic and global contexts of circulation and exchange. These contexts have pushed us, finally, to be wary of that age-old tendency to apply (those very Victorian) progress narratives to English poetry and English poetic form, or to follow the well-worn ideologies of poetry’s civilizing power. Though there are exceptions, the move contemporary scholars are making when they encounter Victorian poetry, wherever they might find it, is to view it from several angles at once. First, scholars are questioning the narratives of how we should read Victorian poems, how and why we have been taught to read them in the ways that we have. We see how scholars of the twentieth century have read back onto the wildly heterogeneous and geographically immense world of nineteenth-century poetry in ways that have limited horizons and have curtailed certain questions. New work in nineteenth-century poetry

thinks broadly about poetry, its readers, and the ways it conditioned its readers—readers of all genders, races, and countries—to read.

Why this turn toward reception? Though scholars of the history of poetics like the late T. V. F. Brogan began the laborious work of reading through and cataloguing the thousands of works that fell out of the regular canon of literary history as early as the 1980s, the availability of digital archives in the past ten years has accelerated the contemporary re-examination about Victorian media, print, and format to an astounding degree. A scholar of “poetry” in the Victorian era can now quickly search across millions of pages beyond single volumes in library catalogues in order to think through how “poetry” was used in non-literary contexts, complicating and querying long-held hierarchies between “verse” and “poetry” or the older distinctions between “poetry” and “prose.” Scholars have used distant reading technology to show how the cultural currency of the word “meter” across the Victorian era intersected with both enthusiasm and dismay over the idea of English national culture or to survey how technology may make the perfectly educated human ear obsolete in evaluating a poetic line.² And by opening up what was once thought of as purely literary, we are now reading Coleridge as not only a poet and critic but also a journalist, we are tracing poems across reprints and continents, and we are reading the long canonized poets of the Victorian era as well as newly canonized poets like Toru Dutt as deeply embedded in a global network of circulation, imitation, and parody.³ Though scholars have long been exploring global Anglophone poetry, questions of education, cultural appropriation, and translation are now central to discussions of poetic form and national identity in England and the colonies.⁴ And English poetry now means a richer and deeper examination of the communities that wrote and read poems—from Chartists to working class poems in Scotland, to the influence of the Bible on how Victorians read poetry to the generic forces of melodrama and musicals, opera and art-songs, visual art and tableau. Each of these sub-fields developed and maintained its own sense of a poetics—a poetics as reading practice that has complicated and enriched our understanding of the period.⁵ What was once held apart as “the aesthetic” is now fundamentally historical in our understanding of the nineteenth-century; historiography, as a Victorian invention, is embedded in our understanding of the development of Victorian aesthetics.⁶

We are now reconsidering poetry published across various periodicals and newspapers alongside volumes of poems in circulation, and we

are also reconsidering where and how serious discussions of poetics were taking place. We have turned to previously unexamined literary histories; introductions to poetry; widely reprinted grammar books whose examples might become canonical; manuals of rhetoric; guides to elocution; introductions to the English language; newspapers with reviews that criticize the poetic technique of another poet or offer a new reading; reviews of prosody handbooks, manuals, and treatises; in addition to the handbooks, manuals, and treatises themselves; introductions to individual poets that include explanations of the poet's prosody; and parodies, collections of parodies, and histories of prosody. Until recently, this kind of material didn't seem to count in the history of poetic form. Rather than see only one or two Victorian critics of poetry (Mill, Arnold) defining the field, we now see Victorian poetic theory as richer and more various; scholars who were once thought to have been the most influential are now read in the much broader context of a culture that used poems and poetry to appeal to several kinds of audiences at once and disagreed fervently about what counted as poetry. Victorian readers were canny connoisseurs of genre; the nineteenth-century, that great era of evolving taxonomies, produced poets who knew the suppleness of generic categories—this we already knew. What we now understand is how generically conditioned Victorian readers were to apprehend the mixing, upending, and manipulating of the poems they read. Contemporary critics must no longer read anachronistically, back-projecting our current ideas about poetry onto an imagined Victorian reader. Scholars of nineteenth-century poetry (and by implication, readers of poems in any period) must rethink the social, institutional, and generic histories that have governed the reading of poetry then and now, including the determinations for what counts as poetry worth reading.⁷ Historical poetics both broadens and deepens our understanding of the poetic canon and English literature as a discipline, providing for scholars of poetry what many of the newer discoveries about canonicity have provided to scholars of prose—a sense that expanding our archive destabilizes inherited notions about genre, and a sense that we might begin to trace the contours of how those inherited notions came to be passed down to us in, and as, a discipline. And it expands the archive of Victorian poetry in crucial ways that are difficult to navigate—by seriously considering paratextual materials, histories of circulation and reading, and other influences on poetic discourse. Whether we bring all of these to bear on our close readings of nineteenth-century poetry matters less than the fact that our vision of the archive, the material, and the genre of any particular poem is not

taken for granted as stable or exhaustive, nor is our own critical vantage point a place that can go unexamined.

In the essays marshaled in the two-volume, field-stating *Victorian Poetry* special issues, edited by Linda K. Hughes, Armstrong noted that the only category missing seemed to be race, and the ability to join cultural studies to textual studies. Armstrong predicted that cultural and textual studies would be more and more intertwined, but nowhere other than in a brief mention of Jason Rudy's essay did she see how an expansionist view of the field could be compatible with intense formal study. But that is precisely what Rudy's 2004 essay augured for the field—a responsibility to view Victorian poetry and poetics in a global history of circulation, keeping close track of how the categories of gender, class, and race were not only understood in nineteenth-century contexts but often embedded into the contours of the verses themselves.⁸

NOTES

1. Isobel Armstrong, "The Victorian Poetry Party," *Victorian Poetry* 42, no. 1 (2004): 9–28.
2. T. V. F. Brogan, *English Versification: 1570–1980: A Reference Guide with a Global Appendix* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); Meredith Martin, *The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture: 1860–1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); and Jason David Hall, *Nineteenth-Century Verse and Technology: Machines of Meter* (New York, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
3. Meredith McGill, ed., *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), and *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting 1834–1853* (2003; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Her argument is expanded by Ryan Cordell and David Smith's Viral Texts project, viraltxts.org; Jason Rudy, *Imagined Homelands: British Poetry and the Colonies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017); Tricia Lootens, *The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).
4. Heidi Thompson, *Coleridge and the Romantic Newspaper: The "Morning Post" and the Road to "Dejection"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Yopie Prins, *Ladies' Greek: Translations of Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Annmarie Drury, *Translation as Transformation in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

- Press, 2015); Mary Ellis Gibson, *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011).
5. Margaret Loose, *The Chartist Imaginary: Literary Form in Working-Class Political Theory and Practice* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2016); Kirstie Blair, *The Poets of the People's Journal: Newspaper Poetry in Victorian Scotland* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2016), *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland: Poetry, Press, Community* (forthcoming), and *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Charles LaPorte, *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); Carolyn Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Justin Sider, "‘Modern-Antiques,’ Ballad Imitation, and the Aesthetics of Anachronism," *Victorian Poetry* 54, no. 4 (2016): 455–75.
 6. Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Justin Sider "Aesthetic Categories and the Social Life of Genre in Victorian Criticism," *Victorian Studies* 59, no. 3 (2017): 450–56; Naomi Levine, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Historiographical Poetics," *Modern Language Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (2016): 81–104; and Naomi Levine, "Tirra-Lirrical Ballads: Source Hunting with the Lady of Shalott," *Victorian Poetry* 54, no. 4 (2016): 439–54.
 7. See historicalpoetics.com for a full discussion.
 8. Jason Rudy, "On Cultural Neoformalism, Spasmodic Poetry, and the Victorian Ballad," *Victorian Poetry* 41, no. 4 (2003): 590–96.



Politics

MARK ALLISON

A PROLEGOMENON

I want to approach this vexed subject indirectly. Consider the following events:

- **24 March 1832:** Edward Bulwer [Lytton] votes for the Reform Bill, which passes the House of Commons.