

Introduction to Victorian Era; Victorian Poetry

MJC SEM –VI

“The sea is calm tonight,” observes the somber speaker of Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” (1867), listening to “the grating roar / of pebbles” at the shore, “The eternal note of sadness” over the waters. In Arnold’s mid-19th-century Britain, another metaphorical sea, “The Sea of Faith,” was ebbing irretrievably: “But now I only hear / Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar”; once seemingly “So various, so beautiful, so new,” Arnold’s world had “really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.” More than a century and a half after its publication, “Dover Beach” remains a durable expression of Victorian poetics: its intricate patterning and stagy theatrics, its nostalgia for simpler times, and its uncertainties about an increasingly mechanized modernity. Arnold once wrote that “poetry is at bottom a criticism of life,” an enterprise of the utmost artistic and moral stakes. Over the course of Queen Victoria’s long reign (1837–1901), Arnold and his contemporary British poets criticized contemporary life amid its epochal changes: the radical ideas of evolution and materialism, shifting understandings of gender and class, and an economic and industrial explosion that helped make the British Empire the largest in history.

When we remember Victorian literature, we might think immediately of the three-volume novels of the Brontë sisters and Charles Dickens, the extravagant comedies of Oscar Wilde and Gilbert and Sullivan, and the unforgettable fictional characters—Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, Lewis Carroll’s little Alice, Bram Stoker’s Dracula—who populate world culture to this day. But in 19th-century Britain, poetry was as prestigious as ever: thanks to advances in literacy and publishing, poetry had never been read by a wider audience (from schoolchildren to Queen Victoria herself) or been more profitable commercially. Books by the most popular poets routinely sold out through several editions.

Victorian poetry’s most distinctive qualities may stem, paradoxically, from its proximity to other genres and forms: theater, fiction, music, and art, all of them poetry’s competitors in a fully stocked cultural marketplace. Asking in the 1833 essay “What Is Poetry?” the philosopher John Stuart Mill responded with terms pilfered from drama: “Poetry is feeling, confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude. ... All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy.” In the era’s most heralded poetic innovation, Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Robert

Browning hybridized drama, fiction, and lyric into the dramatic monologue form: a poet impersonates a fictional or historical character and addresses a silent audience without any narrative framing or guidance. Visually minded poets—including the poet-painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the writer-designer William Morris, both associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood—pushed poetry toward the picturesque, relishing pictorial detail and painterly embellishments. Tennyson, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote lyrically lush poems that aspired toward music, delighting in mesmerizing meters, (such as Hopkins’s invention, sprung rhythm) and virtuosic braids of alliteration and rhyme.

When Victorian poets looked back into literary history, they uncovered roles fit for dramatic reenactment in myth, Arthurian legend, and the plays of William Shakespeare. And they peered up close at the inspired poets of British Romanticism, their immediate predecessors, whose radical fervor and imaginative boundlessness they were too sourly skeptical to recreate. When poets looked forward, they saw a depersonalized future in which (in the words of Tennyson’s “Locksley Hall”) “the individual withers, and the world is more and more.” That expanding, stifling “world” saw innumerable advances in the natural and social sciences. None were more earthshaking than evolution or Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection, introduced in his landmark book *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and applied to human evolution in *The Descent of Man* (1871); his designer-less account of life precipitated a crisis of religious disbelief. If one reaction to that apparently senseless world was the world-weariness of Tennyson and Arnold and later Thomas Hardy, another was the redoubling of a newly urgent religious poetry, ranging from the plain, impassioned, devotional verse of Christina Rossetti to Hopkins’s riveting spontaneity. Still another reaction was an embrace of senselessness in the nonsense poetry of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll (aka Charles Lutwidge Dodgson): a master draftsman and a mathematician, respectively, who both brought to English poetry not only their learning but also reveries and comic disproportions, gleeful non sequiturs, and bewitching neologisms, such as “runcible spoon” and “frabjous day.”

This period of tumultuous change at home was also the peak of England’s so-called imperial century. Accelerated by the Second Industrial Revolution and the transformative technologies of the steamship and telegraph, the British Empire embarked on a period of unrivaled naval

and military expansion, colonization and competition, and global trade. By the end of Victoria's reign, the Empire encompassed territories on every continent but Antarctica, living up to its hyperbolic epithet: "the empire on which the sun never set."

Britain's imperial reach affected Victorian poets of all styles and subjects: their poems responded to headline news explicitly—Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade"—or translated it to allegory—Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market." Notoriously, some poems cheered on racist imperialism—Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden." Others answered mounting desires for exotica and Eastern themes, such as the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, Edward FitzGerald's translations of quatrains by the 11th- and 12th-century Persian astronomer and poet. As white men exercised power over the globe, back in England, women were expected to meet the domestic, self-sacrificing ideal of "the angel in the house" (the title of Coventry Patmore's once everywhere-read, now everywhere-bemoaned, poem). Yet no previous era in English poetry boasted more models of women poets, from the feminist reinventions of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to the pseudonymous personae of Emily Brontë (published under the pen name Ellis Bell) and the collaborative pair of Katharine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper, writing together under the name Michael Field.

To early-20th-century modernists who defined their art in opposition, and even to contemporary readers, the adjective *Victorian* can connote prudishness, moralizing, or outmoded conventionality. But late Victorian poetry looks forward to Modernism's estrangements and extremes, with its fixation on moral and cultural decadence, transgressions of norms around identity and sexuality, and esteem for the artistic values of difficulty and compression. "Art for art's sake," an English translation of the French motto "*l'art pour l'art*," crystallized the late-19th-century doctrine of aestheticism, which swerved away from nihilistic despair over life's meaninglessness by wagering everything on the meanings made within art. Aestheticism's most eloquent proponent was the critic Walter Pater: "To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life," he concludes in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873); "we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more," so "our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time." With his teaching and rhapsodic prose alone, Pater emerged as an important influence on his former students Oscar Wilde and

Gerard Manley Hopkins, who transformed aestheticist principles into verse-lines of overpowering sensation and ardent queer eroticism.

The following poets, poems, guides, articles, and recordings survey the many poetries springing up during the Victorian era. Included are laureates and bestsellers, as well as marginalized poets recovered by 20th- and 21st-century readers. When read and reread, this already diverse era has become, over time, only more diverse: this introduction offers one snapshot of a vibrant, ever-changing period.