Victorian Poetry in Context

Rosie Miles
Victoria Poetry
in Context
Texts and Contexts

Series Editors: Gail Ashton and Fiona McCulloch

Texts and Contexts is a series of clear, concise and accessible introductions to key literary fields and concepts. The series provides the literary, critical, historical context for texts and authors in a specific literary area in a way that introduces a range of work in the field and enables further independent study and reading.

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Victorian Poetry in Context
Texts and Contexts

ROSIE MILES
For my Victorian literature students, and all who work at
Gladstone’s Library, Hawarden
While critics don’t need to be poets, and while poets don’t have to be critics, each might well feel tempted by the beauties and powers of the other. All should mingle more.

MOLLY MCQUADE (2000)

Read for oneself, expose the mind bare to the poem, and transcribe in all its haste and imperfection whatever may be the result of the impact.

VIRGINIA WOOLF, on reading Christina Rossetti (1932)

‘As to poetry, you know,’ said Humpty Dumpty, stretching out one of his great hands, ‘I can repeat poetry as well as other folk, if it comes to that – ’

‘Oh, it needn’t come to that!’ Alice hastily said, hoping to keep him from beginning.

Humpty Dumpty explaining ‘Jabberwocky’, in Alice Through the Looking Glass (1871)
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**Series editors’ preface**

*Texts and Contexts* offers clear and accessible introductions to key literary fields. Each book in the series outlines major historical, social, cultural and literary contexts that impact upon its specified area. It engages contemporary responses to selected texts and authors through a variety of exemplary close readings, by exploring the ideas of seminal theorists and/or a range of critical approaches, as well as examining adaptations and afterlives. Readers are encouraged to make connections and ground further independent study through ‘Review’, ‘Reading’ and ‘Research’ sections at the end of most chapters, which offer selected bibliographies, web resources, open and closed questions, discussion topics and pointers for extended research.
When I was an undergraduate I was asked to read a poem by William Morris entitled ‘The Haystack in the Floods’ (1858). It begins with two rhetorical questions:

Had she come all the way for this,
To part at last without a kiss?
Yea, had she borne the dirt and rain
That her own eyes might see him slain
Beside the haystack in the floods? (1–5)

The poem tells of a character called Jehane who is placed in a disturbingly entrapped position whereby she must ‘yield as [the] paramour’ (71) to one Godmar or her lover Robert ‘will not see the rain leave off’ (72). Jehane faces an impossible dilemma: she ‘cannot choose but sin and sin’ (95). Although there is narrative tension the poem repeatedly suggests that this tale is not going to end well, and the opening lines above are refracted into an erratic, intermittent refrain, which erupts into the poem’s tetrameter (four beat) couplets like some numb return of the repressed. The psychological intensity of the situation writes itself through Jehane’s body and her refusal to yield bespeaks an integrity and purity. It also unleashes an episode of violence that wouldn’t be out of place in a film like Reservoir Dogs (1992).

I discovered that the poem was in dialogue with medieval sources, and read more about William Morris. I found a man of multiple talents, whose organic wallpaper and textile designs now adorn a hundred and one surfaces, and who was instrumental in establishing the Socialist movement in the 1880s. Throughout his varied career and commitments, poetry remained. I also discovered Pre-Raphaelite art, and during an exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite drawings heard a series of lectures on ‘The Brotherhood’. Morris’s opening inscription in his first volume – ‘To my friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti – painter –
I dedicate these poems’ – started to make sense. Poetry and painting frequently spoke to each other in the Victorian era.

My reason for starting here is that this Victorian poem had a profound influence on my life. At some level it helped shape subsequent decisions I made about what I was going to do with myself. This may be the kind of assertion of which some Victorian commentators on poetry would have heartily approved, as they strove to make sense of what poetry and the poet could mean in an era of increasingly utilitarian values. What place should poetry have in our national life? How can poetry speak to massive social change? Is there a ‘proper’ subject for poetry? If it speaks of the past, what is its relation to the present? What is the ‘right’ relationship between art and life?

This book considers the range and breadth of poetry written between 1830 and 1900. In-depth readings of specific poems feature in Part Two. The outer chapters contextualize Victorian poetry in wider social, cultural, intellectual and literary frameworks, as well as commenting on its critical fortunes and how Victorian poetry has lived on into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Ultimately it is poetry that gives life to everything written here and I hope this book will return the reader to the original poems, again and again.

I have assumed that readers could be accessing the Victorian poems discussed here in any number of different editions. The majority are available in the anthologies cited in the Bibliography. Line numbers from the poems are given after quotations throughout. Quotations followed by p. or pp. are taken from critical commentary.
My thanks to Gail Ashton for commissioning this title, and Fiona McCulloch as Series Co-Editor. Colleen Coalter and Laura Murray have been patient and encouraging editors at Continuum. I’m also delighted that a painting from Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery appears on the cover.

The School of Law, Social Sciences and Communications at the University of Wolverhampton, and Dean of School Judith Burnett, supported this book by awarding me a sabbatical. Florence Boos, Aidan Byrne, Mike Conley, Mark Jones, Martin Kratz, David Mabb, Rachel Mann and Jacqui Rowe all suggested references for Chapter 10.

I wrote some of this book at Gladstone’s Library, Hawarden, North Wales, and there is no more conducive place to produce a Victorian writing project. A National Teaching Fellowship award (2011) facilitated these trips.

Special thanks go to Di Bishop, Jean Gilkison and Terry McKevitt. My favourite non-Victorian poet, Nicola Slee, has lived through this book’s progress alongside me, and although I have yet to persuade her of the merits of Tennyson, she deserves my heartfelt love and thanks.

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PART ONE

Contexts
Social and cultural contexts

The varieties of Victorian poetry

Victorian poetry ranges from the soul-searchingly serious to the nonsensically comic; it encompasses Alfred Tennyson and Matthew Arnold and Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. It is the protest poetry of Ebenezer Elliott’s *Corn-Law Rhymes* (1831) and Thomas Hood’s ‘The Song of the Shirt’ (1843). It is also the finely wrought jewel of Theodore Wratislaw’s ‘Orchids’ (1896), in which ‘bizarre sweet rhymes shall creep / Forth from my brain and slowly form and make / Sweet poems as a weaving spider spins’ (16–18), and Mary F. Robinson’s aesthetic sonnet ‘Art and Life’ (1891). It is awash with doubt, most famously in Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (*IM*) (1850), but also in the sardonic tone of Arthur Hugh Clough and much of Arnold: ‘We mortal millions live alone’ (4), stresses the unhappy speaker in ‘To Marguerite’ (1852) By contrast Gerard Manley Hopkins celebrates the diversity of a world still ‘charged with the grandeur of God’ (‘God’s Grandeur’, 1918, 1).

Victorian poetry can be satiric, ready to mock the latest fads and fashions. Poet, dramatist and librettist William Gilbert teamed up with composer Arthur Sullivan to produce some of the most famous comic operas in the British tradition, including swipes at ‘Professor of Aesthetics’ Oscar Wilde and the cult of aestheticism in *Patience* (1881), and Tennyson’s long poem *The Princess* (1847) and the ‘Woman Question’ in *Princess Ida* (1884). Pick up any edition of the humorous magazine *Punch* (started 1841) and light verse lampoons political, social and cultural subjects. Gilbert’s *The ‘Bab’ Ballads: Much Sound and Little Sense* (1868, 1872) point to the