

UNIT 12

Victorian poetry

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Introduction

This survey of Victorian poetry deals with a period in Britain which was viewed by some who lived in it as a 'pewter age' (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*), an age which had degenerated from a 'Golden Age' which had existed at some misty point in the past, and by others as a Golden Age where gods of industry and heroes of empire-building walked the English earth. The Victorian period is rife with such contradictions and self-consciousness, and this is reflected in its poetry. My Introduction places the poetry in the context of its time, with a look at the major social, political and religious developments of the nineteenth century. The inheritance of the past and the need for the Victorians to place their own age in relation to past ages is introduced and will be a theme running through this unit. The influences of John Ruskin, Thomas Carlyle, Charles Darwin, Charles Lyell and John Henry Newman are also outlined. Turning to the poetry, my discussion of Tennyson and Browning introduces the debate over subjective and objective poetry, the post-Romantic elements in Victorian poetry, and the distrust of Romantic subjectivity. The tension between subjective and objective poetry is most emphatically played out in the dramatic monologues of Tennyson and Browning, and also in the tension between the private and public aspects of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Debates over the role of literature, and particularly of poetry in society, are foregrounded with reference to the divergent philosophies and the very different poetries of Matthew Arnold and Arthur Hugh Clough at mid-century. Of the Pre-Raphaelite poets, the main discussion is centred around the poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, William Morris, George Meredith, and Algernon Charles Swinburne. Again, the dialectic between subjective and objective poetry is important here, and is linked to a particular perception in Pre-Raphaelite painting, as well as to questions of power, and, especially in Christina Rossetti's poetry, to questions of gender. Swinburne and Gerard Manley Hopkins are both transitional figures between Victorianism and modernism. Both poets experiment with old metrical forms and with the sound of poetry, but Swinburne's use of the symbol looks forward to the work of the French Symbolists who were to be an important influence upon modernism, while Hopkins's poetry was appropriated for modernism by the early

modernists because of its metrical experimentation which allowed a greater freedom in the poetic line. I will begin this unit, then, with extracts from two poems that exist, respectively, at the centre and beyond the edge of the Victorian period:

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born...
(Matthew Arnold, *Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse*, 1850–5)

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?
(Yeats, *The Second Coming*, 1920)

Both Arnold in the 1850s and Yeats in 1920 saw themselves as living in an age of anticipation, an age which was still waiting to be born. Matthew Arnold belongs most decidedly to the Victorian age, a period which his poetry and prose so often attempted to define and to come to terms with, and the period which is to be the focus of this unit. But what ‘age’ did Yeats consider himself to be a part of? He wrote ‘The Second Coming’, partially quoted above, after the First World War, in an age which was aggressively defining itself as ‘modernist’, especially in reaction to the Victorian age. Nevertheless, Yeats did live and write within the Victorian period; his early poetry was written through the 1890s and he is included in Quiller-Couch’s 1912 collection of *The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*.

Yeats’s case is an example of just how blurred the dividing lines between historical or literary ‘ages’ can become. In our own case today we partly live with the legacy of the early modernists, who in their enthusiasm for the birth of a new century, and perhaps also for the death of an old monarch, wished to slough off the Victorian age like a dead skin. Joyce’s sneering nickname for the poet Tennyson, ‘Lawn-Tennyson, gentleman poet’, gives some indication of the modernist reaction to the Victorian period. It is a reaction which we are still influenced by today, and the twentieth-century perspective on the previous century is still that it was ‘repressed’, ‘moralistic’, ‘heavy’ and as suffocating as the popular image of a Victorian parlour full of bear rugs, bric-à-brac, and overstuffed horsehair sofas. At the end of the twentieth century, however, this view of the previous century is under revision. An exploration of some of the major poetry of the period may serve to question some of the labels the age has been given, and also serve to explore the most popular label which the Victorians gave to their own time, ‘the age of transition’.

The Victorians were acutely self-conscious about what they often termed the ‘Spirit of the Age’. This term was first used by Hazlitt to name a group of essays published in 1825, before our period. But the term was used later by John Stuart Mill, the essayist and utilitarian social reformer. Mill’s essay, ‘The Spirit of the Age’ was first published in a radical newspaper in 1831, the year before the Great Reform Bill, the first of three reform bills in the nineteenth century which were to greatly extend the franchise, first to the middle classes, and eventually to the

working classes. Mill described the age as in a 'crisis of transition', and by this he was referring principally to what he and many others saw as the crucial necessity of Britain's transformation of its government from one controlled by men of landed wealth to one which more equally represented the British manufacturing classes and the population in general. But the 'age of transition' could refer to many of the complex and changing features of culture, politics and society in the nineteenth century which include: expansion of the empire; revolutionary advances in science; internal and external challenges to the Established Church; expansion of industry and the corresponding movement from the country to the city.

As Britain extended her empire over foreign nations and races which were now to become part of a British 'family', questions of assimilation versus difference, and of national and racial definition came to the fore. How was England to define herself as nationally and racially different from other nations and people over which she ruled? One way was through language, and in the nineteenth century linguists and philologists searched for evidence of a 'pure English', a language unadulterated by the Latin and French words and phrases which are so imbedded in the English language. Many linguists found this 'pure English' in Anglo-Saxon, and some poets of the period also turned to the use of earlier poetic forms found in medieval alliterative poetry or Anglo-Saxon verse in their own poetry (notably William Barnes, Hopkins and, occasionally, Hardy and Swinburne).

Victorian Britain also sought self-definition by attempting to place its own age within history. In a time of political, social and religious uncertainty it became important to 'stabilize' the past, to fix former historical eras so that those living in the nineteenth century could look to a known past to see where they had 'progressed' from (and the idea of 'progress' was crucial to the Victorian world-view) and so gain a clear understanding of where their transitional age was proceeding to. The particular age that an artist chose to evoke in Victorian painting, novels and poetry often varied according to his or her political or religious bias. Generally, however, historical periods which most often found their way into artistic representation at this time were: the biblical (Old and New Testament); the classical of ancient Greece and Rome and, of particular importance in the poetry, the medieval (for instance in the poetry of Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites) and the Renaissance (as in Robert Browning's poetry, and later, Walter Pater's writings).

John Ruskin (1819–1900) wrote prolifically and influentially on numerous subjects in art, culture and society. The historical period which he held up as a positive example to the Victorians was the medieval because it represented in his view a pre-capitalist era of feudal and Christian values. Ruskin vilified the utilitarianism, self-interest and competition of his own time. The so-called Gothic Revival which had begun in the late eighteenth century in reaction to the classicism of that century, was a movement in art and architecture which imitated medieval, pre-Renaissance art. The medievalism which Ruskin and the Gothic Revival helped to popularize in the nineteenth century was an important influence upon the poetry of the time.

The Victorian concentration upon uncovering the 'truth' of past historical events was particularly intense because the truth of the past, especially as told in written documents, was being disturbingly shaken in the nineteenth century. The primary

written document which was not only supposed to hold the truth, but in fact to *be* the essence of Truth and The Word itself was the Bible. In the 1830s biblical 'Higher Criticism' from Germany was beginning to take intellectual hold in England. This criticism questioned the authority of the Gospels, and through scholarly research, questioned the *historical* truth of the Bible. If the validity of the Bible was under attack from historical scholarship on the one hand and from the recent advances in geology and evolutionary theory on the other, then it is understandable that the Victorians became anxious about how to locate and then fix the truth of the past, whether that past was told through religious or secular history. If the Bible was no longer a written document that could be trusted to speak truth, then what written document or historical account *could* be trusted?

The historian and social critic Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) gave six lectures in 1840 on 'Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History'. The immense popularity of these lectures (they were published the following year) reveals much about the yearning to find a stable perspective on the past, to find the true facts and meaning of history. Carlyle opened his first lecture with the statement that, 'Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of Great Men' (Carlyle, [1841] 1993, p. 3). In other words, we can find truth in history by searching for the inner nature of particular men. This view of history which concentrated upon the subjectivity of an individual was to influence Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, as discussed below. But Browning's wife, Elizabeth Barrett, an enormously popular poet in the nineteenth century, had her own views on her age's fascination with the past:

Ay, but every age
Appears to souls who live in it (ask Carlyle)
Most unheroic. Ours, for instance, ours:
The thinkers scout it, and the poets abound
Who scorn to touch it with a finger-tip:
A pewter age – mixed metal, silver-washed;
An age of scum, spooned off the richer past,
An age of patches for old gaberdines,
An age of mere transition, meaning nought
Except that what succeeds must shame it quite
If God please. That's wrong thinking, to my mind,
And wrong thoughts make poor poems.

(Aurora Leigh, Book V, ll. 156–66)

She saw those around her as wrong in viewing their age as one made up of an unheroic hodge-podge of different periods, uncertain of its own definition. But a dissatisfaction with the time, a searching for past periods for models, and uncertainty, almost inevitably accompany a period of transition; if Elizabeth Barrett felt that these were 'wrong thoughts' which would make 'poor poems' they are nevertheless thoughts which are at the base of many of the major Victorian poems to be discussed in this unit. (For a discussion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning within the broader context of women's writing see Unit 23, pp. 622–4.)

An important factor contributing to the general uncertainty of the period was spiritual doubt, partly effected by the new advances in science. In his *Principles of Geology* (1830–3) the geologist Charles Lyell put forward his theory of uniformitarianism, a theory of the earth's development which gave geological evidence that the earth was far older than previously believed. This evidence flew in the face of scripture and especially the story of creation in Genesis. The naturalist Charles Darwin published his *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. His account of natural selection and the 'struggle for existence' not only discounted the story of creation in Genesis, but also disturbingly undermined a Romantic view of a natural world in harmony with man: this new natural world, as popularly conceived by the many readers of Darwin, was alien, indifferent to man, and those who lived in it were involved in a cruel struggle for survival. Darwin's theory, and the popular conceptions (and frequently, misconceptions) of his work had a profound impact upon the intellectual and religious climate of the day, an effect which is certainly evident in the poetry.

Under attack externally, through scientific evidence, the Church was also experiencing radical, internal changes. Dissenters and Nonconformists had broken away from the Established Church, and the evangelical movement gained great strength in the Victorian period. But there were controversial and divisive trends within the Established Church itself. The most important of these, the 'Oxford Movement' (also known as 'Tractarianism') was a movement within the Church of England which endeavoured to ensure that the Church remained a divine institution and did not become subordinate to the State. Followers of Tractarianism wished to revive High Anglican rituals and practice, rituals which were derived from those of the Roman Catholic Church. A number of followers of the Oxford Movement did convert to Roman Catholicism, the most famous of these being John Henry Newman (1801–90) who had been the leader of the movement until his conversion in 1845. Twenty years later he was greatly to influence the undergraduate poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins.

In the midst, then, of this 'age of transition' it was crucial for the Victorian British to find a stable self-definition both as an age and as a nation. An internal or domestic definition of the nation and of national stability was founded upon the central importance of the family unit, and particularly of the middle-class family and middle-class morality. A more global definition of the nation, of the place of the British Isles in the world, was founded upon the nation's view of itself as of central importance and power on the globe (or at least as central in the British empire which at this time could be found in most parts of the globe). These two aspects of national definition, the domestic/internal and global/external, come together in this sentimental poem by the minor nineteenth-century poet, Charles Tennyson Turner (elder brother of Alfred Tennyson). The poem is entitled 'Letty's Globe'.

When Letty had scarce pass'd her third glad year,
 And her young artless words began to flow,
 One day we gave the child a colour'd sphere
 Of the wide earth, that she might mark and know,

By tint and outline, all its sea and land.
 She patted all the world; old empires peep'd
 Between her baby fingers; her soft hand
 Was welcome at all frontiers. How she leap'd
 And laugh'd and prattled in her world-wide bliss;
 But when we turn'd her sweet unlearned eye
 On our own isle, she raised a joyous cry –
 'Oh! yes, I see it, Letty's home is there!' –
 And while she hid all England with a kiss,
 Bright over Europe fell her golden hair.

'Our own isle' pointed out by a baby's finger on the globe domesticates the image of England as powerful centre of the expanding empire ('her soft hand / Was welcome at all frontiers') and presents the isle of England as 'Letty's home'. Home and empire, domestic and global, sentimentally define the nation here. In addition to national definition, the poem offers a reduced and manageable image of the earth: it has been made into a 'colour'd sphere', a child's plaything. At a time when geology was disturbing previous beliefs about the age and creation of the earth, and increased travel, imperial expansion and the new science of anthropology were expanding British understanding of the complexity of the nations and peoples on earth, this move to reduce the earth to the simplicity of a child's toy is perhaps understandable.

Romantic poetry, and especially that of Wordsworth, assumed that man could and should live in harmony with nature. But the increasing alienation from nature through the growth of cities, industry and science meant that the Victorians began to lose the sense that there could be an emotional or psychological correspondence between their minds or internal selves and nature. In Wordsworth's poem *The Prelude*, for example, the poet describes the River Derwent that ran near his childhood home as 'the fairest of all rivers' which 'loved / To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song' and which 'sent a voice / That flowed along my dreams...' (*The Prelude*, Book 1, ll. 271–4). The Romantic poet's early childhood is nurtured by the river, and the harmony between his psyche and the river is so complete that it can even enter his unconscious self, flowing along his dreams. A radically different description of a river occurs in Thomas Hood's poem, 'The Bridge of Sighs' (1843). The poem describes raising the body of a prostitute who has drowned herself in the Thames. The river is 'black, flowing' and 'rough', a polluted river of 'muddy impurity' flowing through a city in which social problems of poverty, homelessness and prostitution are rife... 'O, it was pitiful! / Near a whole city full, / Home she had none'. This river, far from harmonizing with man, must be repellent to him because it is polluted not only by the effluence of London, but also by the suicides and murders which are a sign of the city's moral ills. The poet challenges the reader to drink and wash in the river, thinking of the dead woman: 'Dissolute Man! / Lave in it, drink of it, / Then, if you can!'. Thomas Hood (1799–1845) wrote a number of popular poems on themes of social problems which plagued nineteenth-century Britain, the most famous being 'The Song of the Shirt' (1843) which draws attention to the sufferings of overworked and underpaid seamstresses.

The above comparison of rivers in a Romantic and a Victorian poem draws an extreme contrast. Of course there is a great deal of Victorian poetry which describes the beauty and peace found in nature. Even so, these descriptions of nature do not see the same harmony and commensurability between man's inner self and the outside world; rather, the poems often evoke either a yearning to find a harmony with the world outside the self, or a disturbing alienation from that world. The often anguished relationship between the internal or 'subjective' perspective and the external or 'objective' will be a central and recurring theme in the following discussion of Victorian poetry. Subjective versus objective poetry was a contention within Victorian poetics, particularly in reaction to Romantic poetry (which was seen as subjective). The development of these two perspectives in the poetry of the day is an important gauge of the changes in the relationship of self and society, man and earth, man and God, nation and empire.

For further discussion of themes addressed in this introductory section see Williams (1973), Cosslett (1982), Culler (1985), Jay (1983) and Armstrong (1993).

Texts, authors, contexts

'The Web Floats Wide': Tennyson and Browning

In 1850 Tennyson published his long poem *In Memoriam*, his great elegy to his friend Arthur Hallam who had died in 1833, at the age of 22. The poem had been seventeen years in the making, and it was to ensure that Tennyson received the Poet Laureateship the following year in succession to Wordsworth. Also in 1850 Wordsworth published the long poem which he had been working on for many years, *The Prelude*. The coincidental publication of these two poems at mid-century, one by a poet regarded as quintessentially Victorian, and the other by a poet regarded as quintessentially Romantic, together with the passing of the Laureateship from the one to the other, serves as a reminder of the difficulty of fixing a date to when 'Romanticism' in poetry stopped and 'Victorianism' began.

Alfred Tennyson (1809–92) and Robert Browning (1812–89) are two Victorian poets, close contemporaries, whose poetic careers both span and poetically evoke the nineteenth century. For these two poets, who lived through a greater part of the century than any of the other poets discussed here, the legacy of the Romantic poets was both an influence and a poetic inheritance against which they defined themselves.

From the medieval scholastic philosophers to the present day, the terms 'subjective' and 'objective' have been used and debated in a variety of discourses. In the Victorian period these terms had become popular catchwords in discussions of art and literature. Because these terms are particularly important to nineteenth-century poetry I will clarify them by giving the dictionary definitions which come closest to their Victorian usage. Subjective is defined as 'Relating to the thinking

subject, proceeding from or taking place within the subject: having its source in the mind' (*OED*, 'subjective', def. 3); also, 'Expressing ... the individuality of the artist or author' (*OED*, 4.b.). Sometimes in this period 'subjective' carried the negative connotations of 'given to brooding over one's mental states' (*OED*, 4.c.), and this connotation will be apparent in Matthew Arnold's assessment of the subjective, discussed below. The definition of 'objective' for our purposes is more straightforward; 'Dealing with ... that which is external to the mind; treating of outward things or events, rather than inward thoughts or feelings' (*OED*, 'objective', def. 3.a.).

Much Victorian ink had been spilt over the terms 'subjective' and 'objective' poetry by the time Browning wrote his 'Essay on Shelley' in 1851. In this essay, Browning both eulogizes the Romantic poet who had so influenced him, and also marks out and defines how he differs in his own poetic project. Shelley, according to Browning, was a subjective poet, that is, a poet who writes from the perspective of the inner self, and whose concerns transcend the objective, material world. In this essay it becomes clear that Browning wishes to identify himself as an objective poet. Far from rejecting the agenda of the subjective poet, however, Browning writes in the 'Essay on Shelley' that the human mind's needs in poetry alternate between the subjective and objective perspective. But he feels that at the time he writes, the 'general eye' has had a surfeit of the 'loftier visions' and abstractions of the subjective poet (Jack *et al.*, 1991, p. 428). The danger of a subjective poetry which is never relieved by objectivity is that man may begin to live in a shadowland of visions, a mirage of ideals, in which, as Browning writes, 'the world is found to be subsisting wholly on the shadow of a reality, on sentiments diluted from passions, on the tradition of a fact, the convention of a moral, the straw of last year's harvest' (Jack *et al.*, 1991, p. 428). Browning clearly sees this situation as signalling his moment for poetic action; the moment of the objective poet who presents the world from a slightly distanced objective perspective, but through whom the world, its phenomena and men and women will be seen directly and not through a haze of abstraction. He writes that there will be in objective poetry a supply of 'new substance', and many 'objects for men's outer and not inner sight, shaping for their uses a new and different creation from the last...' (Jack *et al.*, 1991, p. 428).

In the 1830s when Tennyson and Browning were beginning to publish their poetry, there was an awareness that the subjective poetry of the Romantic school had lost much of its impetus, and little seemed to be happening to fill the gap left by the death of Shelley, Keats, Byron and the old age of Coleridge and Wordsworth. If Tennyson and Browning are, as we term them today, 'Victorian' poets, does this mean that their poetry was caught up in a great swing of the pendulum, such that all subjective concerns in poetry were to be discarded so that the day of the objective poet could have its turn? Or did these poets, and others who began writing later in the century, forge something new and distinctively Victorian by attempting to bring together the subjective and objective view? The poet Elizabeth Barrett certainly thought the latter the case in the poetry of her future husband, Robert Browning. She wrote in her second letter to Browning

(January, 1845; a letter written before she had ever met him, and before their famous elopement):

You have in your vision two worlds – or to use the language of the schools of the day, you are both subjective and objective in the habits of your mind. You can deal both with abstract thought and with human passion in the most passionate sense. (Kintner, 1969, 1, p. 9)

Employed by Tennyson and Browning, among others, the dramatic monologue is one poetic strategy which allows for a vision in two worlds of the subjective and objective: the poet writes a monologue in the voice of a character, allowing the *character* to be completely subjective, but allowing the distanced poet and reader to remain objective. Often these *dramatis personae* (the title of Browning's 1864 book of poetry) are historical figures, or at least characters who could have existed according to nineteenth-century versions of history.

Tennyson

'The Lady of Shalott' (1832, rev. 1842) is one of the most famous of Tennyson's poetic *dramatis personae*. The poem is not a dramatic monologue, so we do not see into the Lady's subjective self with the same immediacy as we do in some other of his poems such as 'Maud' or 'St. Simeon Stylites'. The Lady does speak in the poem, but the true insight into her subjectivity is gained by witnessing the moment in the poem in which she moves from a stagnant subjective world to an alien, objective world. The shock of this transferral kills her. The Lady of Shalott lives in a castle tower on an isle, completely isolated from the world and human contact.

Four gray walls and four gray towers
Overlook a space of flowers,
And the silent isle embowers
The Lady of Shalott.

(ll. 15–18)

The Lady of Shalott weaves a tapestry in her castle tower. She is under a curse which dictates that she may not look at the world outside her window directly, but only at its reflection in the mirror before her. Into the tapestry she weaves scenes from the outside world that she has seen reflected in her mirror: a reflection of a reflection.

And moving thro' a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.

(ll. 46–8)

Many critics have interpreted the lady weaving as a figure for the artist or poet, and the tapestry as a figure for art or, specifically, for poetry. If she is a figure for the poet, then the poem seems to interpret the poet's world as one of 'shadows' or reflections of reflections of reality (the mirror and the tapestry being doubly-removed from the outside world), rather than a direct representation of life.

According to this interpretation, the poet may not 'stay / To look down on Camelot', at the objective world, just as the Lady may not look out the window. If the poet does so, the curse of the poem would seem to declare that he or she (as artist) and the poem will be destroyed.

Some critics have argued that even though the tapestry, the artistic creation, may not engage directly with the real world, it is a thing so beautiful that the embowerment and isolation of the artist from the world is worth it. According to this interpretation the lady should have stayed in her tower away from exposure to the curse and death. But Tennyson's poem is more complex in its imagery than this interpretation allows for.

In line 70 the lady sees reflected in her mirror, 'two young lovers lately wed' and this leads her to admit, 'I am half sick of shadows'. The desire for communion – represented by the wish for love and sexual union – with the outside world, and the erotic symbolism in the ensuing stanzas when she watches the reflection of Sir Lancelot in the mirror is a clear indication of her need for direct connection with the world below her tower. The quiet solitude of her 'silent isle' is only broken in the first eight stanzas (before she sees Lancelot) by her singing, which 'Only reapers, reaping early' hear the echo of. The silence, solitude and the fairy song heard by few are abruptly interrupted by the noisy arrival of Sir Lancelot. It is the sight of Lancelot in her mirror which tempts her to move away from the world of reflection and shadow and to take a direct look at life.

In the crisis stanza of the poem she discards the solitude, stillness and silence of her turret room and tapestry or 'web', and moves energetically towards the outside world;

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces thro' the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
 She look'd down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
'The curse is come upon me,' cried
 The Lady of Shalott.

(ll. 109–17)

In turning from her loom, from her art to join the everyday world outside her tower and (as she hopes) Lancelot, the lady seems to abandon her artistic expression (her tapestry, her song) for the rather dubious quality of Lancelot's 'artistic expression' revealed in ll. 107–8: "'Tirra lirra", by the river / Sang Sir Lancelot.' Lancelot may be handsome, 'bold' and 'brazen', but he is no poet.

Can this poem, then, be seen to represent the dilemma of the poet? If the Lady and her tapestry represent the poet and his poetry, then is the move to join the objective world (the journey to Camelot) an inevitable abandonment of the poetic art? A number of critics have interpreted the poem in this way, and have seen it as foreshadowing Tennyson's anxiety over accepting the Poet Laureateship in 1850. Naturally the Poet Laureateship is officially the most public role a poet may have.

Apparently, Tennyson vacillated over accepting it, even writing 'two letters, one accepting and one declining, and threw them on the table, and settled to decide which I would send after my dinner and bottle of port' (quoted in Ricks, 1972, p. 232). Again he said, 'but I wish more and more that somebody else had it (the Poet Laureateship). I have no passion for courts but a great love of privacy' (Ricks, p. 232). The Lady of Shalott, however, has a 'passion for courts'; specifically to find passion and life, rather than a world of shadows, in the court of Camelot.

In John Stuart Mill's review (1835) of this very popular poem he castigated those who seek to know 'the precise nature of the enchantment' which is on the Lady of Shalott (Jump, 1967, p. 88). Like many of Tennyson's poems, the meaning of 'The Lady of Shalott' relies partly upon accepting the 'mystery' of her curse and allowing the poem to remain ambiguous. An interpretation which allows for this uncertain quality in the poem is one in which the Lady's abandonment of her loom is not a discarding of her art, but an abandonment of a wholly subjective poetry. In this light the embowered desolate isle and the tapestry she weaves there is equivalent to a subjective, internalized or even solipsistic art. This subjectivity needs to be abandoned for some experience of the direct gaze, and communion with outside phenomena or the 'objective'. Indeed in his 'Essay on Shelley' Browning sees a wholly subjective poetry as in danger of resulting in a 'world' which is 'found to be subsisting wholly on the shadow of a reality', and as the Lady of Shalott says of the reflections in her mirror and tapestry, 'I am half sick of shadows'.

When 'She made three paces thro' the room' the lady exhibits a more surprising energy and violence than anything that Lancelot, the man of 'bold' and 'brazen' action exhibits below the castle towers. The mirror is cracked and 'Out flew the web and floated wide'. Rather than this entailing a destruction of her tapestry (art, poetry), the web or tapestry floats 'wide' out the window for everyone in the outside world to view. It is no longer kept hidden in the tower.

As for the Lady's 'fairy song' which previously had been heard only by the reapers, it is now heard by all the countryside as she is carried by the boat on the river current into Camelot: 'Singing in her song she died / The Lady of Shalott' (ll. 152-3). The Lady, as a figure of the artist/poet, dies on her journey towards the world, not of shadowy representations, but of objective reality. According to this interpretation there is much anxiety over the move from subjectivity (the silent enclosed spaces of isle and turret room) to objective reality (the court, the riverside world of commerce). This journey may lead to death, but in the Lady's death there is a type of immortality: the 'web floats wide', her song is heard, and she is no longer virtually anonymous because before her journey on the boat, 'round about the prow she wrote / *The Lady of Shalott*' (ll. 125-6).

The Lady of Shalott's poetry and name are known, but she dies as a result of a direct gaze upon the world. The poem is ambiguous and open-ended over the wisdom of the Lady of Shalott's choice. Subjective and objective hang in a precarious balance in this important poem, which after its publication in 1832 was much revised for republication in 1842. The choice between these two types of vision (and the possibility of having both) are also evident in the poem 'Ulysses' (1842) of the same period. 'Ulysses' is a dramatic monologue, spoken entirely in the voice of the Greek hero of

Homer's epic, after he has returned to Ithaca from his adventures. Tennyson takes up the hero *after* his final moment in Homer's *Odyssey*. Ulysses' voice is no longer that of the epic hero trying to get home; he has reached the goal of Homer's epic but now is restless, dissatisfied with the domestic life and yearns to return to sea travels. The dramatic monologue catches Ulysses in a moment of transition between the domestic 'still hearth' of Ithaca and the epic adventures on the seas. The poem opens:

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees. . .

Ulysses plans to leave Ithaca again, passing on 'the sceptre and the isle' to his son Telemachus who is characterized by a 'slow prudence'. Telemachus is 'centered in the sphere of common duties' and of him his father says, 'He works his work, I mine'. The *centrality* of Telemachus is crucial here; if he is 'centered' in the round of Ithaca's administration and rule, he is also centred in an embowered isle, similar in some ways to the Lady of Shalott. Although, unlike her, he is not completely isolated from human company, the 'still hearth' of Ithaca still seems to be separated from the outside world and an active life of adventure. Telemachus is 'centered' and Ulysses wishes to move as far from the centre as he can go, to the margins of the world: '... for my purpose holds / To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths / Of all the western stars, until I die' (ll. 60–1). Ulysses defines himself by what he has seen and known in that objective world: 'I am a part of all that I have met'. Centre versus the margin; the domestic in contrast with the life of the world; the balance between the subjective and the objective; the role of England within an expanding empire: these are a few of the oppositions and dilemmas within Victorian poetry and culture which are represented by Ithaca versus the 'margins of the world'.

Ulysses' yearning is, as expressed in the final line of the poem, 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield'. The poem ends with a powerful dedication to the active life and to a search for the objective world outside the self. However just as the conflicting images in *The Lady of Shalott* lead to an ambiguity over the consequences of subjective versus objective at the end of that poem, so *Ulysses* contains a similar dilemma, and part of this ambiguity comes from the powerful epic which lies behind the poem.

Ulysses' wife, Penelope, is referred to in the second and third lines of the poem; she is the 'aged wife' who has her proper place by the 'still hearth' within the domestic sphere. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope waits for Ulysses through the many years of his wanderings as he tries to reach home. She ensures that there will be a home for him upon his return by refusing the many suitors who try to gain her hand and the kingship of Ithaca. This she ensures by bargaining with them that as soon as she has finished the tapestry that she is weaving, she will choose a man for husband and king. But every night she unravels the tapestry she has woven in the day, as a delaying tactic. Like the Lady of Shalott, Penelope weaves a tapestry on her island.

Penelope's 'art' (both her weaving and her wiles) ensure that she can remain chaste and Ulysses' wife, so that if he does return, there will be a place for him to return *to*. Since Homer's epic is the story of a journey home, it would not exist without Penelope's weaving. And since Tennyson's poem is derived from Homer's, neither would the Victorian poem exist without the 'aged wife' and her tapestry in the background. In a poem which so powerfully points to the active, objective life of the world, Penelope's 'web' which represents internalized, subjective art may not be discarded or forgotten. As in *The Lady of Shalott* 'the web floats wide': both poems represent a product of the subjective (the tapestry, the poem) without which the objective (the journey out to the world) would never be known, or would not exist.

In a review in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1850, the novelist and proponent of 'muscular Christianity', Charles Kingsley, hailed Tennyson's *In Memoriam* as 'the noblest English Christian poem which several centuries have seen' (Jump, 1967, p. 183). Kingsley, who was a clergyman, saw the poem as an affirmation of faith in an age of religious doubt. The poem was immensely popular, going through three editions by the end of 1850, and eighteen editions by 1866. Kingsley was clearly not the only Victorian who saw in this elegy a powerful affirmation of immortality and of spiritual belief; Queen Victoria herself told Tennyson that she had found great solace in the poem after the death of her husband Albert in 1861.

The poem, made up of 132 sections of varying numbers of stanzas, was written in memory of Arthur Henry Hallam, Tennyson's closest friend whom he met while they were Cambridge undergraduates. The stanzas are composed of four octosyllabic lines, rhyming abba, and although the elegy was composed over seventeen years, the poetic time is three years which are marked particularly by three stanzas taking place at Christmas (poems XXVIII, LXXVIII, CIV). In the elegy Tennyson confronts his grief over Hallam's death and this confrontation brings to the fore many of the central anxieties and debates of the Victorian period: religious doubt; evolution; questions of memory and the fading of grief; of the subjective versus objective view. The many aspects of the poet's mind are presented not as a coherent whole, but as a fragmentary narrative of alternating vacillation, indecision, hope, despair and struggle towards faith.

Because the poem is an expression of loss and of mourning for a beloved friend it is naturally subjective, representing inner thoughts and emotions. In section CVIII Tennyson recognizes the danger of a subjectivity so intense that it could become solipsistic and removed from mankind. Tennyson addresses his dead friend in stanzas 1 and 4, respectively:

I will not shut me from my kind,
And, lest I stiffen into stone,
I will not eat my heart alone,
Nor feed with sighs a passing wind:

...

What find I in the highest place,
But mine own phantom chanting hymns?
And on the depths of death there swims
The reflex of a human face.

When the poet's mind raises itself to the 'highest sphere' to search for Hallam's spirit, he finds only his own 'phantom', and when he descends to the 'depths of death' he sees 'the reflex of a human face', and that face, again, is his own, not Hallam's. At this point the poem becomes a nightmarish vision of self-reflection and subjectivity. The poet cannot escape himself, and therefore the firm determination of the first line of the section, 'I will not shut me from my kind' becomes crucial. Carol T. Christ has written about the anxiety which is implicit in Tennyson's and Browning's move away from what they saw as the subjectivity of the Romantic poets; she writes that they saw it as 'a disabling focus upon the self' and that the two poets 'often associate the imagination's inner voice with madness' (Christ, 1984, pp. 5–6). Certainly in many of Browning's dramatic monologues the intense subjectivity of some of his characters could be viewed as madness (or at least extreme idiosyncrasy), and in Tennyson's dramatic monologue 'Maud: A Monodrama' (1855) we see the isolation and solipsism of the narrator's fragmented self approach madness and paranoia.

Although Tennyson's elegy is deeply personal, and therefore subjective to a degree, it does not 'shut' him from his 'kind' because it addresses many of the concerns of his Victorian contemporaries. Through a personal vision he writes often in the poem of an objective world, as, for example, in Sections LIV–LVI in which he deals with the troubles of religious doubt brought about by the advances in science. In Section LIV, st. 3, the poet attempts to trust in God that all the arbitrariness and cruelty that he sees around him in nature is part of a divine plan. He struggles to have faith,

That not a worm is cloven in vain;
That not a moth with vain desire
Is shrivell'd in a fruitless fire,
Or but subserves another's gain.

Rocking the poet's spiritual faith is an objective study of geological evidence, inspired, most probably, by Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830–3, see Introduction). The evidence of geology indicates to the poet that nature is both 'careless of the single life' and also of the 'type':

'So careful of the type?' but no.
From scarped cliff and quarried stone
She cries, 'A thousand types are gone:
I care for nothing, all shall go'.

In this moment of doubt, the immensity of the geological timescale, exhibited in the fossils of the 'scarped cliff', diminishes humanity: humankind, rather than being God's chosen, receiving his special care, is simply a 'passing type' which will die out as have other types that leave their remains in the rock.

Another great Victorian elegist, Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) was born at the time when Tennyson was composing his elegy to Hallam. His group of elegaic poems in memory of his first wife Emma, the 'Poems of 1912–1913', falls outside the period which we may officially term 'Victorian' (Victoria died in 1901).

Nevertheless Hardy wrote both his poems and novels (see Unit 11) throughout the Victorian period and was considered in the early twentieth century, as he is today, one of the 'late, great' Victorians. Hardy's poem 'At Castle Boterel', one of the 'Poems of 1912–1913' also takes up the theme of geological time versus human time. In the poem Hardy has returned to the scene of his courtship after many years, and looking at a scarp of cliff that faces a road, remembers when he walked that road with Emma in their youth:

Primaeval rocks form the road's steep border,
And much have they faced there, first and last,
Of the transitory in Earth's long order;
But what they record in colour and cast
Is – that we two passed.

(st. 5)

While Tennyson doubts and almost despairs when faced with the geological record, Hardy challenges its potential obliteration of the importance of the single human life; of his walk with Emma, he writes, 'But was there ever / A time of such quality, since or before / in that hill's story?'. He challenges nature's indifference to human life by locating the most important moment that the cliff has witnessed, not in the millions of years' change over the geological epochs, but in a single moment of two human lives. Hardy, essentially an atheist, cannot believe like Tennyson that there is an afterlife, but through elegy he can attempt to 'immortalize' in verse a single moment in the human time-span.

Tormented by doubt in Section LVI of *In Memoriam*, Tennyson asks, 'What hope of answer, or redress?' and answers himself in the next line 'Behind the veil, behind the veil'. The answers to all the spiritual questions which disturb him as he looks upon a 'Nature, red in tooth and claw' (Section LVI) will, he trusts, be granted when he passes behind the veil which separates life and death. The elegy ends with an epithalamion (a poem celebrating a wedding) for his sister Cecilia. Hope for mankind in this ending to the poem is both figuratively and literally 'behind the veil': behind the veil of the afterlife, but also behind the veil of the bride, as in her union she will give birth to children, a hope for the future. Tennyson sees these children as part of an evolutionary process in God's plan towards the gradual improvement of the human race. His dead friend Hallam was a superior man, 'Appearing ere the times were ripe' ('Epilogue', st. 35). The poet's hope and faith is that men and women are gradually improving: 'No longer half-akin to brute', they may one day attain the distinction and superiority of a man like Hallam. Tennyson's trust in the evolutionary process that this may be accomplished is evident in the epithalamion and also in the fact that he named his own son Hallam. These hopeful gestures, both in the poem's ending and in the naming of his son, are somewhat tempered when we hear Tennyson's own verdict upon *In Memoriam* as told to James Knowles in 1893:

It begins with a funeral and ends with a marriage – begins with death and ends in promise of a new life – a sort of Divine Comedy, cheerful at the close. It is a very impersonal poem as well as personal ... It's too hopeful, this poem, more than I am myself'. (Jump, 1967, p. 172)

A poem which goes a long way to defining the central concerns of the Victorian period, it is both objective and subjective ('impersonal' and 'personal') and subject to the uncertainties of an 'age of transition'.

Suggested further reading on Tennyson: Ricks (1972), Culler (1977), Sinfield (1971) and Colley (1983).

Browning

Thomas Hardy made an entry in his notebooks in December 1865 which plays with the subject's understanding of the timescale he (or in this case, it) occupies: 'To insects the twelvemonth has been an epoch, to leaves a life, to tweeting birds a generation, to man a year' (Millgate (1984), p. 56). In Hardy's poem 'At Castle Boterel' discussed above, a single moment in the human timescale was juxtaposed with the daunting geological and evolutionary timescale. In the quotation above Hardy again juxtaposes timescales as seen by insects, leaves, birds and finally, man. As with these various living organisms, so with man it is the case that an understanding of one's 'time', of one's particular historical 'moment', is highly subjective.

As mentioned in the Introduction, Thomas Carlyle's lectures in 1840 on 'Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History' presented a way into the historical past through the 'History of...Great Men'. In a sense, history becomes subjective because Carlyle's biographical approach concentrates on the personal life stories of these men rather than upon factual documents recounting battles, treaties, sieges – a more traditional definition of history. Like Carlyle, Browning finds a way into the past through a subjective approach; through the dramatic monologue he presents a character from the past in a particular moment. However, Browning's historical characters are not the 'Great Men' of whom Carlyle spoke: they are, on the contrary, usually minor or secondary players in history. Too busy concentrating upon themselves and their everyday needs, they are often ignorant or indifferent to their role in history (which would be far less likely in a 'great man' of Carlyle's definition). The gaps in the understanding of these minor figures enable us to distance ourselves from the character, to note the lacunae in the character's knowledge of his own context, and fill them in for ourselves.

One such minor historical character is the Duke Alfonso of Ferrara, the speaker of Browning's dramatic monologue, 'My Last Duchess' (1842). Browning chose not only a minor character but a minor moment in history, which nevertheless lies shrouded in a certain degree of conjecture and mystery: in 1564 Duke Alfonso II of Ferrara was negotiating for the hand in marriage of the niece of the Count of Tyrol. His first wife had died three years before at the age of 17 and it is thought that she had been poisoned. The poem's moment is one of transition: the former wife is dead and the contract for the new wife has not yet been signed. Browning is fond of depicting both personal and historical moments of transition: they reveal much about a person or an era, because they are times which are less defined and may therefore more easily disclose essential qualities and anxieties. Perhaps these 'moments of transition' are also interesting to the poet because they reflect in some ways his own era's sense of being in that state.

The dramatic monologue 'My Last Duchess' takes the form of a speech that the Duke makes to one of the envoys from the Count of Tyrol, sent to negotiate the new marriage contract. He has taken the envoy upstairs to view his art collection, and draws the curtain which reveals the painting of his 'last duchess'. The poem opens:

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? –

At the opening of the poem we realize that we, as well as the envoy, are being asked to look at the painting. Unlike the envoy, we cannot see the painting directly, but only through the description given us by the Duke's lecture. The painting, framed in itself, is also framed by the poem and in order to interpret the poem we must 'read' in a double act of interpretation both the Duke's words and the painting.

In fact the poem is partly about 'reading' and the tricky act of interpretation; the Duke goes on to explain

– I said
'Fra Pandolf' by design, for never *read*
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus.

(my italics, ll. 5–13)

But did the envoy 'turn and ask' about the Duchess's expression? It seems, on the contrary, that the Duke is interpreting the viewer of the painting, and it becomes clear as the poem continues that this Duke is capable of dangerous *over*-interpretation. His pride, jealousy and perhaps paranoia lead him both to read conjecture into the envoy's expression (conjecture as to who the Duchess is smiling and blushing *for*) and to misinterpret the flush and 'spot of joy' which lies on the Duchess's cheek in the painting. The Duke ominously explains that her 'earnest glance' and blush were brought to her face not by 'her husband's presence only'; the Duchess experienced equal joy by the painter-friar's mild compliments and by a number of small things such as the sunset, cherries, a ride on her horse. In her love of so many things around her she did not make the Duke feel sufficiently appreciated. He would not 'stoop' to correcting her behaviour, but simply states, 'I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together' (ll. 45–6). Her smiles upon him and upon others are erased by his 'commands'. How is the envoy, and how are we to interpret this? Did she become melancholy because he gave her severe orders? Or did his 'commands' order her poisoning, erasing her smile through death? Browning leaves the historical facts still in mystery, but the tone of the poem is certainly ominous.

Just as the Duke of Ferrara wishes to control the thoughts and behaviour of his

'last Duchess', so he wishes to control the envoy's (and, by extension, our) interpretation of the painting. He alone may reveal the painting ('since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I'). But the Duke is doomed to failure in his desire to control thought or interpretation, for once the painting is revealed, once the poem is there to be read, the 'web floats wide' – the work of art (the painting and its 'frame', the poem) is open to interpretation. This is not to say, however, that Browning is claiming that it will be easy or even possible to find one, true interpretation of this historical moment. Indeed the poem makes us aware that the Duke's interpretation is only one of many possible, but that the other 'readings' of this history which we may wish to know are not available to us because they have been silenced. Browning has silenced the envoy, because his poem is a dramatic monologue (although it would be a brave soul who would interrupt the Duke, anyway); the last Duchess is of course most emphatically silenced with poison and paint; and it does not appear that the new Duchess-to-be will have much of a chance to voice her opinion with all the counts, dukes and envoys speaking for her.

The duchess-to-be is alluded to in the last lines of the poem:

The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

The Count's daughter is 'objectified' in that she is defined in terms of money (the dowry), but in addition the Duke unconsciously reveals that he has the same plans for her as he had for his last Duchess, who is now part of his art collection. He says that 'the daughter's self ... is my object' and then immediately goes on to draw the envoy's attention to another object in his collection, the bronze statue. As feminist critics would point out, women who have been 'objectified' have as little voice, as little chance of expressing desires, will, or opinion as would a bronze ornament or a painting. Their silence in literature and history compared with the voices of men is part of their 'objectification' within a patriarchal power structure which denies a voice to their subjectivity. Again, and this time from the perspective of gender, 'subjective versus objective' is at issue. But of course it is not only the women who are silenced in this poem. The intense and idiosyncratic subjectivity of the Duke of Ferrara has probably inspired him to 'silence' many men and women, through death, fear and the wielding of his power and name.

Browning's 'My Last Duchess' makes us aware of the silences, the lacunae in history to which we do not have access, and makes us aware that it is very difficult to hear the 'whole story' because it is made up of many versions, some of which are silenced. The poem draws attention to the fact that there are subjectivities which are closed to us, not only in history, but in the everyday lives of those around us in the present day.

The Duke finds his last Duchess's pleasure in momentary, transitory things insulting because she seems to gain as much gratification from things of the moment as from his ancient lineage. As in Hardy's and Tennyson's poetry discussed earlier, there is again in Browning's poem a juxtaposition of timescales: the momentary pleasures of the Duchess, and the Duke's 900 years of the House of Este. Browning's dramatic monologues also juxtapose the moment with the centuries, by giving a few moments from centuries ago a present-tense immediacy.

Browning's choice of the Renaissance as the historical setting for many of his poems is a reaction against the medievalism so popular in the Victorian period, and as such an expression of his religious and political views. Medievalism was often associated with the Anglo-Catholicism of the Oxford Movement, because both looked back to the early Christian period of art, faith and ritual. Browning was brought up in a Dissenting family and he was highly suspicious of both Roman- and Anglo-Catholicism. As a result he peoples his dramatic monologues with a number of unsavoury and unholy representatives of the Catholic Church: a materialistic bishop giving orders for the decoration of his tomb to his illegitimate sons as he lies on his deathbed ('The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church'); a furiously vitriolic (and very funny) monk in 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister'; and the friar-painter Fra Lippo Lippi who, in the poem named after him, is caught having just returned from the 'red light district' of fifteenth-century Florence. Browning's agenda in these poems was partly to dispel what he saw as a wrong-headed nostalgia for the rituals of the Catholic Church, but the Renaissance setting is also attractive to him because it is a time of great artistic energy and change.

Both his anti-Catholicism and his admiration for the Renaissance are evident in the poem 'Fra Lippo Lippi' (1855). Lippo Lippi was a fifteenth-century Florentine painter and Carmelite monk, known for his naturalistic, realistic style, the latter seen particularly in his painting of sweet, young Madonnas (he was notorious for having affairs with his female models).

Browning saw Lippo Lippi's work as embodying the transition from a medieval style of painting to the more naturalistic style of the High Renaissance. The monks are shocked at Lippo Lippi's realistic portrayal of the human body. They see it as 'a devil's game' because in their eyes the function of religious painting is to make people forget the material world of flesh and blood, to 'lift them over it' to the spiritual. Lippo Lippi thinks differently, and in his defence of his art, he voices also Browning's poetic manifesto: art which looks at the world objectively, which attempts to represent things as they really are, is itself a path to the transcendent or the spiritual:

— we're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
And so they are better, painted – better to us
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
God uses us to help each other so,
Lending our minds out.

(ll. 300–6)

The relation between Lippo Lippi's view of his artistic role and Browning's becomes clearer if we remember Browning's 'Essay on Shelley' discussed earlier. In that essay it is evident that Browning wishes to be an 'objective' poet, a poet who *sees* and records 'objects for men's outer and not inner sight'. In the last quotation from 'Fra Lippo Lippi' above, Browning refines this goal: the artist who can record the outer objects of men's sight will, if he represents them truly and objectively, cause those outer objects to enter the inner sight of man. An artist must see, so that he can help others to see, and sight in this case is not simply visual, but visionary. The poet approaches the elevated role of 'prophet' that he occupied in Shelley's 'Defence of Poetry' (1821), when the Romantic poet described poets as 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world'. But, unlike Shelley, Browning sees this goal as being attained not by writing subjective poetry dealing with abstractions, but by writing objective poetry which deals with the material world.

Suggested further reading on Browning: Bristow (1991), Flowers (1976), Armstrong (1974), Bloom and Munich (1979) and Day (1991).

Arnold and Clough

Like Tennyson and Browning, Matthew Arnold (1822–88) and Arthur Hugh Clough (1819–61) were born within three years of each other. They were at school together at Rugby, were undergraduates together at Balliol College, Oxford, and had both taken fellowships at Oriel College, Oxford. They both wrote poetry. Alike in many ways, they differed over the latter. Their friendly criticisms of each other's poetry produced a dialogue which reveals much about what was thought of as poetry's role in culture and society, and its developments at mid-century.

In his seminal critical statement, the 'Preface' to his 1853 volume of *Poems*, Matthew Arnold began to formulate what was to become one of the major literary-critical voices of his time. The 'Preface' begins with Arnold's explanation why he decided to omit the poem 'Empedocles on Etna' from the 1853 volume. Arnold felt that this poem was of an overly subjective, even morbid nature, and goes on to explain why he believes both his own poetry and indeed all new poetry should move away from subjectivity:

What then are the situations, from the representations of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived? They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. (Allott and Allott, 1979, p. 656)

Clearly this unhappy situation must be avoided, and Arnold then gives his famous formula for the best poetry; an excellent poem must be based upon 'an excellent action':

and what actions are the most excellent? Those, certainly, which most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time. (Allott and Allott, 1979, p. 657)

Arnold however is rather paradoxical when he advises that the contemporary poet seek these 'excellent actions', these 'elementary feelings' in the *past* – and particularly within classical literature. If these 'feelings ... subsist permanently in the race', why cannot the poet write about them as they appear in his own time?

This is a question which Clough may have asked of his friend. Clough's poetry, with its contemporary settings, and colloquial, even slangy language is itself a challenge to Arnold's demands and definition of excellent poetry. We can hear Clough's poetic differences with Arnold in his periodical review of Arnold's poetry in July, 1853. He says of Arnold's poems:

Not by turning and twisting his eyes, in the hope of seeing things as Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, or Milton saw them; but by accepting them as he sees them, and faithfully depicting accordingly, will he attain the object he desires. (Dawson, 1973, pp. 75–6)

Arnold

Matthew Arnold looked to past ages and literature for the 'excellent action', because, like many Victorians, he seems to have felt that his own time was unheroic. The tone he seems to give to his own time in his poem 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse' (1855) is 'autumnal': 'The autumnal evening darkens round, / The wind is up, and drives the rain' (st. 2, ll. 1–2). The age is, like the subject of the poem, in a state of disturbing and uncertain transition:

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head,
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.

(ll. 85–8)

This language, expressing the confusion and doubt of the times, is echoed in the following passage from the 'Preface' of 1853. Here he is referring specifically to literature, but as will become clear, for Arnold the relationship between literature and life is very close indeed:

The confusion of the present times is great, the multitude of voices counselling different things bewildering, the number of existing works capable of attracting a young writer's attention and of becoming his models, immense. What he wants is a hand to guide him through the confusion, a voice to prescribe to him the aim which he should keep in view ... (Allott and Allott, 1979, p. 663)

Although he states that 'Such a guide the English writer at the present day will nowhere find', Arnold wrote and worked for most of his life to become that guide. His many essays, his thirty-five years of work as a School Inspector, and his Professorship of Poetry at Oxford did much to guide and to change the way in which English literature was taught and valued in Britain.

It is somewhat ironic that Arnold himself only rarely took up his own poetic challenge made in the 'Preface' of 1853. He wrote little new poetry after this time, and devoted himself to the prose writings for which he is so famous. A number of his poems do look back to classical literature, however: the subject of 'The Strayed Reveller'

(1849) is Homer's Ulysses on Circe's island; 'Philomela' (1853) takes up a story from Greek myth, and his 1867 poem 'Palladium' takes place during the Trojan War. Nevertheless many of Arnold's best-known poems are not those of great or 'excellent actions' from the past, but contemplative, subjective poems which deal with the poet's present state of mind, and often, with his personal response to the age in which he lives. These are poems such as 'Dover Beach' (1867), 'The Buried Life' (1852), 'To a Gypsy Child By the Sea-shore' (1849) and 'To Marguerite – Continued' (1852).

The latter poem, essentially a poem of parted lovers, also deals with the isolation of man:

Yes! in the sea of life enisled,
With echoing straits between us thrown,
Dotting the shoreless watery wild,
We mortal millions live *alone*.

(ll. 1–4)

Arnold frequently uses sea imagery to symbolize human beings as isolated islands, shut out from reading each other's inner lives. (He describes that inner life, or the unconscious self as 'the buried life' in his poem of that name.) As he writes in the last line of 'To Marguerite – Continued', the lovers (and, by extension, all humankind) are separated by 'The unplumbed, salt, estranging sea'.

'Dover Beach' is thought to have been written when Arnold was at Dover at the beginning of his honeymoon. Appropriately perhaps, the sea imagery which begins this poem is *not* 'estranging' to the lovers:

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits...

(ll. 1–3)

He calls to his wife: 'Come to the window, sweet is the night air!'

Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

(ll. 7–14)

Even the most intimate moment with the beloved is disturbed by the 'grating' of pebbles and sea, and by 'an eternal note of sadness'. In the third stanza of the poem the sea becomes the 'Sea of Faith' which in an age of spiritual doubt is now receding from the world. The cry in the last verse, 'Ah, love, let us be true / To one another' is a cry for some trust or faith in a world which has been left 'dear', 'confused' and vulnerable ('the naked shingles of the world') through loss of faith.

But in much of Arnold's poetry, the chance that two souls will be able to find communion and reveal their 'buried lives' to each other is uncertain. 'Dover Beach'

ends on a confused and melancholy note. Will the poet find a haven from the 'darkling plain' of the world with his lover? Because Arnold places so much faith in literature, and especially in literature of the classical period, it could be argued that his connection with the soul of the Greek tragic dramatist, Sophocles, is more likely than a spiritual connection with the beloved woman at the window in the poem. Listening to the retreat of the sea on the pebbly strand, Arnold notes:

Sophocles long ago
 Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
 Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
 Of human misery...

(ll. 15–18)

Arnold so often writes that we are essentially alone, 'enised' by our subjectivity or 'buried lives'. Yet he also writes in the 1853 'Preface' that there are 'great primary human affections', 'elementary feelings' which we all share. How may we gain access to those shared feelings so that we are no longer so isolated from one another? For Arnold, an emotional and intellectual connection with the great writers of the past opens a way to communion with those around us in our own time. In an age when the 'Sea of Faith' is receding, this secular-humanist project takes on for Arnold almost religious overtones. The truths of the Bible may have been questioned, but one may still 'believe' in the plays of Sophocles.

Suggested further reading on Arnold: ApRoberts (1983), Honan (1981) and Carroll (1982).

Clough

Thomas Carlyle saw history through the lives of 'Great Men', and Browning more frequently through the lives of minor figures. Arnold thought poetry should base itself on great or 'excellent actions', Clough on minor actions. Arnold wrote in the 1853 'Preface' that 'a great human action of a thousand years ago is more interesting to it [i.e. the elementary part of our nature] than a smaller human action of to-day' (Allott and Allott, 1979, p. 657). Arthur Hugh Clough's two long narrative poems, 'The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich' (1848), and 'Amours de Voyage' (1858), together stand against and do much to refute Arnold's judgement. Rather than heroic actions, 'The Bothie' relates the summer vacation dalliances of a group of Oxford undergraduates on holiday in Scotland, and 'Amours de Voyage' humorously relates in epistolary form an abortive romance between two English tourists in Rome.

Although Clough did not turn to classical literature for thematic inspiration, he did employ the hexameter, traditionally a Greek metre, for both 'The Bothie' and 'Amours de Voyage'. Clough had translated a number of the classical poets, and at the time he was composing 'The Bothie' he was considering translating Homer's *Iliad* into English hexameters (a project which he never finished before his early death). Clough chose the hexameter, rarely used in English verse, primarily because it gave him more freedom with the poetic line, enabling him to use colloquial and

often slangy language. This is particularly evident in 'The Bothie' in which the undergraduates' jargon is mixed with epigraphs to each Canto of the poem taken from the classical authors. Clearly Clough's look back to the classical period is not in accordance with Arnold's quest for the heroic, but is mock-heroic.

'Amours de Voyage' is a verse novella in epistolary form (again in hexameter) which is set at the time of the French siege of Rome in 1848. This siege brought down the Roman Republic which had been established the year before. Clough had been in Rome at the time of the siege, and had witnessed the political and military strife at first hand. One might expect, then, that this setting would offer more scope to satisfy Arnold's call for great actions in poetry: 1848 may be far removed from the classical period, but it was certainly a year of 'action', indeed of revolution, in much of Europe. However, Clough ignores the opportunity for heroics that the Roman siege might have given him. Claude, an intellectual Englishman visiting Rome and Clough's central character, is for the entirety of the poem in two minds – whether or not to commit himself politically and take an active part in the events around him, whether or not to commit himself romantically and declare his love for Mary Trevelyan, one of an English family also visiting Rome. Claude never makes up his mind, and the poem peters out with all his possible intentions. We hear of the dramatic political events and characters through the letters of various characters, but as in the following example, these events hardly take a central place in the poem or in the minds of the characters. A minor character (Mary's sister Georgina) writes to a friend in England: 'George has just seen Garibaldi, dressed up in a long white cloak, on / Horseback, riding by, with his mounted negro behind him' (Canto II, ll. 218–19) and a few lines later she reveals her true concerns:

Mary allows she was wrong about Mr. Claude *being selfish*;
He was *most* useful and kind on the terrible thirtieth of April.
Do not write here any more; we are starting directly for Florence:
We should be off to-morrow, if only Papa could get horses;
All have been seized everywhere for the use of this dreadful Mazzini.

(Canto II, ll. 226–30)

In spite of the revolutionary events occurring around her, Georgina is really far more interested in what is happening between her sister and Claude. When she does mention the political events in this passage she is concerned with details such as what Garibaldi was wearing, and whether the leader Mazzini will prove an inconvenience by making it difficult to find horses for their journey. It is a highly trivialized and subjective account of major historical events.

The poem is written in the early days of Thomas Cook's travel agency, which greatly contributed to the phenomenon of the British middle-class tourist by providing inexpensive and pre-arranged travel packages to Europe. Catering to the middle-class traveller were the famous guide books of the era, Baedeker's from Germany and Murray's from Britain. Before Cook, Murray and Baedeker, a first-hand knowledge of European art, architecture and customs had been the privilege of the aristocratic or upper class, and especially of the wealthy youth on his 'Grand Tour'. Now the middle-class tourist could experience Europe and even further afield

for himself, rather than relying upon the writings of Ruskin or the numerous travel writers of the day.

The tourists in 'Amours de Voyage' are, however, peculiarly oblivious both to the great historical events happening about them, and to the backdrop of immense and powerful 'pastness' in Italian art and architecture. Claude finds his surroundings in Rome 'rubbishy' and 'disappointing':

What do I find in the Forum? An archway and two or three pillars.
Well, but Saint Peter's? Alas, Bernini has filled it with sculpture!

(Canto I, ll. 43–4)

Certainly this assessment of Rome would not agree with the Baedeker or Murray's guide-books of the day. Murray's, for example, adopts a stately, rather awed tone at the opening of its introduction to Saint Peter's:

We shall therefore commence our description of the churches with this most magnificent of Christian temples, which our great historian of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire designates as 'the most glorious structure that ever has been applied to the use of religion'. (Blewitt, 1843, p. 381)

Like the more adventurous middle-class tourists in E.M. Forster's novel *A Room With A View* (1908), Claude travels without his Baedeker or Murray's Guide, but, unlike them, does not allow Italy to 'enter his soul'; he trivializes the vast history of the city and feels the momentous political events of 1848 as anticlimactic because that is the state of his own mind. The subjective view wins over the objective in this poem, but it is a Pyrrhic victory because Claude's mind is incapable of progress or decision (just as Claude's travel progress through Europe seems to have no goal). This indecision or ambivalence is a feature of a number of Clough's poems, and the title of his well-known poem 'Dipsychus' (first published posthumously in 1865) is the Greek for 'double-mindedness' or ambivalence. Like Tennyson, Clough writes convincingly about doubt and uncertainty, but while Tennyson struggles in his poetry towards certainty and faith, Clough rarely does so. Fluidity, flux, the divided mind, are what Arnold referred to as 'the confusion of the present times' which it was necessary to attack by concentration upon great actions. Clough hears Arnold's call to action, but is more wary. As Claude rather limply says towards the conclusion of 'Amours de Voyage':

Action will furnish belief, – but will that belief be the true one?
This is the point, you know. However, it doesn't much matter.

(Canto V, ll. 21–1)

Suggested further reading on Clough: Biswas (1972) and Greenberger (1970).

The Pre-Raphaelites

The 'Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood' came together in September 1848, and of its seven original members only one, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, directly concerns us in the sphere of poetry. The other members were primarily painters, and formed the

Brotherhood in reaction to what they saw as the limited, stale strictures on painting style and theme at the Royal Academy, which was the main exhibition space and school of art in Britain.

The 'PRB', as they styled themselves, had various and diverse interests, and as they matured their work developed in different and separate ways. In a discussion of poetry, the term Pre-Raphaelite is almost meaningless in itself, as it refers more to the members' aims in painting. They had been inspired by Ruskin's many-volumed work *Modern Painters* to look at early Italian art preceding the work of the Italian painter Raphael (1483–1520). Nevertheless, in spite of the looseness of association and varying styles of the members of the Brotherhood, and in spite of the vagueness of the term 'Pre-Raphaelite' with regard to poetry, there are themes common to the Brotherhood which shift and change in emphasis from the middle to the end of the nineteenth century. These themes or interests include, in both the painting and the poetry: medievalism; a preoccupation with colour, light, the meticulous detail of objects, and often an endowing of these objects with symbolic value; depiction of scenes of intense moral crisis; use of themes from literary sources. A well-known example of the latter is Holman Hunt's painting, *The Lady of Shalott*, which was inspired by Tennyson's poem.

The interests of the Pre-Raphaelite movement are too diverse and interwoven to fully unravel here (William Morris (1834–96), for example, was poet, painter, early socialist, and designed and made furniture, tapestry, wallpapers, stained glass, etc.). But an exploration of some of their poems serves as a guide to the century's poetic progress. Their response to the debate over subjective and objective poetry is also a helpful guide to the composition and reception of poetry in the later Victorian period.

The poets Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–82) and Christina Rossetti (1830–94) were the children of an Italian émigré who had been forced into exile because of his political activities promoting Italian liberty. Their mother, who was three-quarters Italian, was a devout Anglo-Catholic. The influence of Anglo-Catholicism and the Oxford Movement ran deep in the family: Christina's and Dante's sister became an Anglican nun; much of Christina Rossetti's poetry is devotional, and religious (specifically, Catholic) imagery and symbolism is common in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting and poetry.

Their father was a Dante scholar and named his son after the Italian poet (1265–1321). Dante Gabriel took his name very seriously indeed, and the Italian poet was an enormous influence upon his poetry and painting. The Pre-Raphaelite Dante addresses his father in a poem entitled 'Dantis Tenebrae':

And did'st thou know indeed, when at the font
Together with thy name thou gav'st me his,
That also on thy son must Beatrice
Decline her eyes according to her wont. . .

(ll. 1–4)

'Beatrice' was Dante Alighieri's poetic and spiritual muse. He had loved her, he writes in his *Vita Nuova*, since she was a 9-year-old girl and when she died in

1290, Dante in a sense beatified her as his spiritual guide. In his great work, the *Divine Comedy*, it is Beatrice as well as God who is the goal of the spiritual journey. This mixture of sensuous and divine love for a beatified woman/poetic muse was taken up by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and became an intense focus for many of his paintings and poems. The combination of sexuality and spirituality may be seen in his poem 'The Blessed Damozel' (first published 1850), in which the beloved woman waits in heaven for her lover to die and so join her in bliss. It is a bliss which is 'fleshly' as well as ethereal, for, as 'The blessed damozel leaned out / From the gold bar of heaven', by stanza 8 her leaning has become as tangible as the warmth of skin:

And still she bowed herself and stooped
Out of her circling charm;
Until her bosom must have made
The bar she leaned on warm. . .

(st. 8)

William Morris exhibits the same delight in the erotic-ethereal in his poem 'Praise of My Lady' (1858). The poem's twenty-two stanzas are devoted in turn to a catalogue of his lady's nose, forehead, hair, lashes, brows, eyes, underlid, lips, neck, hands and the 'slim tree' of her body. Each of the three-line stanzas repeats the refrain 'Beata mea Domina!', becoming in its repetition like an eroticized series of 'Hail Marys', reminiscent of the Roman Catholic prayers which make up the Rosary.

Algernon Charles Swinburne's (1837–1909) poem 'Dolores', from his 1866 *Poems and Ballads*, is reminiscent of the above formula, with its refrain to a beatified (or, in this case, demonized) lady. This poet's lifelong fascination with sadism, and the symbolic association of sex, death and the spiritual in his work ensured that this notorious poem and a number of others in the collection were either ridiculed or vilified:

Cold eyes that hide like a jewel
Hard eyes that grow soft for an hour;
The heavy white limbs, and the cruel
Red mouth like a venomous flower;
When these are gone by with their glories,
What shall rest of thee then, what remain,
O mystic and sombre Dolores,
Our Lady of Pain.

(ll. 1–8)

This playing with the dividing line between flesh and spirit, erotic and religious, is simply one of a number of themes in the poetry of Rossetti, Morris and Swinburne. Nevertheless it was prevalent enough in their work to gain them the title in 1871 of 'The Fleshly School of Poetry' in a vitriolic article by George Buchanan by the same title in the *Contemporary Review*.

Christina Rossetti (see Unit 23, p. 622) provides her own comments on the traditional role of the beloved lady in early Italian poetry. In the foreword to her

sonnet sequence *Monna Innominata* (undated, possibly circa 1866) she notes that there may be a price or penalty to pay for becoming a beatified lady in poetry. This price entails an idealization which renders the woman 'scant of attractiveness' because she is unreal, and lacks individuality and her own poetic voice. Rossetti conjectures that some of these ladies may have had 'poetic aptitude' themselves, and wonders what the result would have been if the lady had 'spoken for herself'. These voiceless and unnamed women ('innominate') are perhaps just as common in her brother Dante Gabriel's or in other Pre-Raphaelite poetry as they are in traditional early Italian poetry. As a sister to the Brotherhood, and an ambitious poet in her own right, it is little wonder that she conjectures what the poetry would reveal if the beloved lady were to find her voice. In many Pre-Raphaelite poems the lady never speaks. Some important and powerful exceptions to this are William Morris's Arthurian poems 'The Defence of Guenevere' and 'King Arthur's Tomb' (1858), and, to a lesser degree, George Meredith's sonnet sequence, *Modern Love* (1862).

Meredith's poem *Modern Love* lives up to its name in many ways: its sexual politics are more 'modern' than Victorian in that it chronicles sexual infidelity and the break-up of a marriage with surprising openness. The wife's loneliness, alienation and pain which both lead to and result from her sexual infidelity are hinted at, although it would be too much to claim for Meredith that he allows the woman to speak for herself. In fact it is only very rarely that she is heard in the poem, and when she is, it is because the powerful voice of the male persona is quoting her. It is in Meredith's novels, such as *The Egoist* and *Diana of the Crossways*, rather than in his poetry, that he most effectively presents the woman's point of view. This may be accounted for by the very nature of nineteenth-century poetry as opposed to the novel: at this period poetry has not yet developed the multivocal range of the most ambitious nineteenth-century novels; it is far more subjective and univocal. *Modern Love* tells of a man's feelings of exposure, jealousy and thwarted love in his own voice. The husband's affair, subsequent to that of his wife, adds to the complexity of the sexual and power relations between men and women in 'modern love'. (For a discussion of Meredith's novel *The Egoist*, see Unit 11, pp. 288–90.)

Christina Rossetti's poetic voice is primarily subjective and private – so private in fact as to become at times coy and secretive, as in her poem 'Winter: My Secret' which opens:

I tell my secret? No indeed, not I:
Perhaps some day, who knows?
But not today; it froze, and blows, and snows
And you're too curious: fie!
You want to hear it? well:
Only, my secret's mine, and I won't tell.

(ll. 1–6)

The colon after 'well' in the penultimate line gives the reader a pause to hold his or her breath. 'Well' seems to indicate that the speaker will give in and tell, only the rhyme of 'well' and 'tell' in the last two lines of the stanza endow a note of finality,

a 'snapping shut' of the stanza and the speaker's mouth as it is about to disclose the secret. The following stanza also ends with a rhyming of the last two lines, to similar effect. The final stanza, however, ends abruptly with:

Perhaps my secret I may say,
Or you may guess.

Hope that the secret may be revealed is raised once more, only to be dashed by this sudden and jarring conclusion, the final and shortest line of the poem. It is a tantalizing, humorous poem and plays with the delight of having secrets, and the desire to tell them. A secret is by definition a very private matter; it is internalized, held within the subjective self. But a secret is defined not only by its private quality, but also by the possibility that it may become shared or public. In a poet whose work is often melancholy, deeply religious and internalized, 'secrets' are an important symbol of the constant play and ambivalence over the public and the private life, or between the objective and the subjective.

The cold 'nipping' day in 'Winter: My Secret' convinces the speaker of the poem to keep the chilly draughts from the outside world away, and to curl into herself and the privacy of her secret. In Rossetti's poem 'Love from the North' the lover enters like a chill blast of northern air, putting a stop to her wedding to a lover from a 'soft south land'. The speaker cannot keep the cold out this time because the northern lover will not take no for an answer; he abducts her from her wedding, 'But never ask'd me yea or nay' (st. 7). This lover is completely alien to her, arriving from a climate quite opposed to her 'soft south land'. Her former lover concurred in all her moods and desires:

He saddened if my cheer was sad,
But gay he grew if I was gay;
We never differed on a hair,
My yes his yes, my nay his nay.

This eventually rejected lover is a complete reflection of herself. The structure of the stanza above reproduces the reflective or mirroring effect of her first lover: saddened/sad; gay/gay; nay/nay. Finally the speaker wishes to stay with the northern lover; the air may be cold, but it is different and bracing. Could the difference, the otherness of the northern lover be in some way Christina's comment upon the love poetry of her brother and other members of the Brotherhood? After all, a convenient aspect of the 'blessed damozel' type of muse in many of their poems is that she cannot say 'yea' or 'nay' because she cannot say anything at all. Without a voice in the poem, she can be a perfect reflection of the poet's desires, and often that is a reflection of himself – either in the lady's eyes (a common figure in early Italian poetry) or, as in Dante Gabriel's lines from *The House of Life*, in a reflection in water. He writes, 'Our mirrored eyes met silently / In the low wave' and

Then the dark ripples spread to waving hair,
And as I stooped, her own lips rising there
Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth.

(*The House of Life*, 'Willowwood', Section 1, ll. 6–7 and 12–14)

In Christina Rossetti's poem 'Love from the North' the desire is finally for a lover who is not simply a reflection of oneself. The 'mirrored eyes' and the lover's absolute concurrence in desire belong to a love poetry which she rejects: its mirroring imagery is a vision of complete self-reflection or subjectivity. Christina Rossetti resists this subjective or even solipsistic vision, reaching for the outer, objective world of the northern lover.

Pre-Raphaelite painting is marked by its intensity of colour and acute detail. As we have seen in, for instance, William Morris's poem, 'Praise to My Lady', the poetry sometimes mixes abstract, intangible qualities of the spirit with a plethora of very tangible, fleshly detail. In a number of Pre-Raphaelite poems the concentration upon physical detail is so intense under the gaze of the poetic subject (whether he be the poet or not) that the object appears both to the viewer's inner and outer vision, or to his subjective and objective gaze. This simultaneous vision often marks the poetry of Rossetti, Morris and Swinburne.

Two comparable moments of vision in Rossetti's 'The Woodspurge', and Morris's 'Sir Galahad' bear this out. In Rossetti's poem a man sits in deep despair and gazes at the ground as he bends over his knees. The last two stanzas are as follows:

My eyes, wide open, had the run
Of some ten weeds to fix upon;
Among those few, out of the sun,
The woodspurge flowered, three cups in one.

From perfect grief there need not be
Wisdom or even memory:
One thing then learnt remains to me, –
The woodspurge has a cup of three.

This posture of numb and 'perfect grief' as the figure sits with his head between his knees contemplating the ground, is found also in Morris's poem 'Sir Galahad'. In both poems the gaze upon the ground limits the sphere of vision, and allows for an intense concentration upon the insignificant objects which lie before the poem's subject. In Morris's poem, Sir Galahad is 'wearied and forlorn' and sits down near the chapel at night. He looks down on the floor between his feet:

I saw the melted snow that hung in beads
Upon my steel shoes, less and less I saw
Between the tiles the bunches of small weeds:
Heartless and stupid, with no touch of awe
Upon me...

(ll. 12–16)

In 'The Woodspurge' grief has left the speaker blank and numb, so much so that all he can remember ('wisdom or even memory') is an image of weeds and a flower. But this image of nature is not one that he can wax poetical about in the conventional sense. He does not extol the beauty of the woodspurge, but keeps to facts, and begins to sound faintly like an amateur botanist rather than a poet as he counts that there are *ten* weeds, and repeats that 'the woodspurge has a cup of three'. This is all

he can ascertain or remember from that moment of 'perfect grief'. Similarly, as Sir Galahad is numbed into a half-sleep through weariness and despair, all *he* knows as he stares between his feet is that there are beads of melting snow on his armoured boots, and, as in 'The Woodspurge', bunches of small weeds.

This is not to argue, of course, that the poetic symbol was completely dead in the latter half of the century. In much Pre-Raphaelite poetry, the object of attention (a flower, flesh, blood, breath, etc.) fluctuates between functioning as a symbol (transcending itself) and simply being the object that it is, in all its 'fleshliness' or materiality.

Nowhere is this more apparent, or taken further, than in the poetry of Swinburne. Isobel Armstrong has written of Swinburne that he 'bring[s] together ... spirit and matter in the symbol' (Armstrong, 1993, p. 404). Words, which are in themselves symbols – linguistic signifiers which 'stand for' a signified meaning – in Swinburne's poetry 'yearn after an unreachable or unknown beyond which transcends their limits ... Words have to transgress their limits and move beyond the boundaries constituted for them' (p. 405).

One way in which Swinburne forces his words to 'transgress their limits' is by 'taking them in vain', or blaspheming. The poem, 'Dolores', for example, is subtitled, 'Notre Dame des Sept Douleurs' invoking a title usually reserved for the Virgin Mary. But Swinburne's 'Our Lady' is intoned and 'prayed to' as 'Our Lady of Pain' in highly charged sexual and sadomasochistic imagery. This inversion of Christian prayer and symbolism is common in Swinburne, and is one of the tropes which he employs to bring flesh and spirit together in a Christian symbolism which he twists around, transgresses and blasphemes against.

Suggested further reading on the Pre-Raphaelite poets and poets associated with them: Rees (1981), Battiscombe (1981), Mayberry (1989), Pater (1889), Stansky (1983), Lindsay (1975), McGann (1972), McSweeney (1980), Henderson (1974) and Beer and Harris (eds) (1983).

Gerard Manley Hopkins

In terms of the *reception* of his poetry, Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89) could be termed a modernist rather than a Victorian. Very few of his poems were published until his friend, the poet Robert Bridges, brought out a first edition in 1918. In *The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* (1912) only one poem by Hopkins appears, while in the *Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936) Hopkins is the first poet in the volume and nineteen pages are dedicated to his verse. His readership, then, began with a generation of modernists, many of whom wanted to leave behind Victorianism.

Modernists appropriated Hopkins as a precursor to their linguistic innovativeness: they hailed his experiments with metre, rhythm, diction and imagery as un-Victorian, and they viewed his innovativeness as part of a literary project which they would continue to push against the limits of, as is evident in their experiments with free verse or in the writings of James Joyce.

But this modernist perspective, in its decided rejection of the Victorian period,

has somewhat skewed our understanding of Hopkins's poetry. Hopkins was in fact very much a late Victorian, influenced, especially while an undergraduate at Oxford, by Tractarianism, by Matthew Arnold's lectures, and by Walter Pater's teaching of what has come to be known as Aestheticism, a late-nineteenth-century movement concerned with the study of beauty, and 'art for art's sake'.

In 1864, the year after Hopkins came to Oxford to study classics, John Henry Newman published his famous spiritual autobiography, *Apologia pro Vita Sua*. Newman had been the leader of the Oxford Movement (also known as 'Tractarianism': see Introduction) until he converted to Roman Catholicism in 1845. Newman's eloquent defence of his faith won the respect of many Victorians. Hopkins was already disposed through his upbringing to High Anglicanism and the Oxford Movement, and moved gradually closer to Roman Catholicism. In 1866 he was received into the Roman Catholic Church under Newman's sponsorship. Two years later he began his course of study and preparation to become a Jesuit priest.

After his decision to enter the priesthood he wrote little poetry until 1876, when he composed 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' while studying in a seminary in North Wales. Later on in his short life, Hopkins was to refer to his time in North Wales as his 'salad days', partly perhaps because it was here that he began to write again, and here that he developed his own language of poetics. The latter included his development of what he termed 'sprung rhythm', 'inscape' and 'instress'.

'Sprung rhythm' was Hopkins's name for his particular use of metre. Modernists have responded to sprung rhythm as if it were a precursor of free verse, and certainly its metrical system did give Hopkins great freedom with the poetic line. But at the same time that Hopkins's metrical system was looking forward, in a sense, to modernist freedom and innovation, it was also looking back to very old forms of English and Welsh poetry. Sprung rhythm is founded upon the number of strong stresses in a line, rather than the number of syllables, and disregards the number of unstressed syllables. Hopkins was inspired to use this accentual verse through a study of medieval alliterative poetry, Anglo-Saxon poetry and nursery rhymes. As discussed in the Introduction, Victorian philologists turned to Anglo-Saxon in their search for a 'pure' form of English, untainted by Latin and French. Hopkins was interested and influenced by their work, although his exploration of early forms of English does not exhibit their nationalist, Anglo-Saxonist agenda. Anglo-Saxonists often regarded the Celtic languages as belonging to a conquered and inferior people. Hopkins, however, brought no such prejudice to his study of British languages, and this is evident in the enthusiasm with which he studied the Welsh language, Welsh metre (*cynghanedd*), and in the fact that he wrote a number of poems in Welsh. The freedom which the Anglo-Saxon and Welsh metres allowed him was as much a product of the philological studies of the Victorian period, as it was a precursor to the modernist.

Hopkins thought of 'inscape' as the essential and individual pattern or quality of each thing in Nature: 'inscape' makes the thing unique and means that it can never recur. 'Instress' is the divine power which upholds the inscape of every

thing, and also the divine force which makes it possible for inscape to be impressed upon the mind of the observer. For Hopkins, an important part of the poet's role is to make inscape apparent to others; through poetry, then, the essential pattern of each thing (inscape) may be impressed upon the minds of others (instress). A theological influence upon Hopkins's poetic thinking was the Scottish Franciscan theologian Duns Scotus (c.1266 or 1270–1308) who developed his theory that while God was inherent in everything in the universe, each thing had its own individuality or 'thisness' (*haecceitas*). This theory of individuality clearly appealed to Hopkins's sense of the uniqueness of each thing in nature within the divine plan or hierarchy.

Hopkins saw an analogy between medieval or feudal hierarchy and God's divine hierarchy, as becomes clear in his poem 'The Windhover'. The poem's heady, almost ecstatic alliteration and stress imitate the flight of a kestrel. It is an example of Hopkins's linguistic innovation in which the language itself aspires to become meaning, rather than our usual expectation that meaning will determine the language chosen:

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of wimpling wing
In his ecstasy!

(ll. 1–5)

The words 'minion', 'kingdom', 'dauphin', 'wimpling' and the poem's theme of falconry harken back to the court hierarchy of the medieval period, and in the second stanza, again, the same language hails 'O my chevalier!'. But the 'chevalier' who is owed knightly service is clearly 'Christ Our Lord' to whom Hopkins dedicates his poem. Hopkins saw medieval or feudal hierarchy as an order in which the individual's place was fixed and ordained, but paradoxically, also as an order which allowed for individual expression. As Carol T. Christ has noted, for Hopkins, 'The fecundity and variety of the gothic appeared to express the virility of the will to individuation in a unified culture. . .' (Christ, 1984, p. 438).

Hopkins's poetic project is devotional, attempting to make apparent to his readers the 'inscape' or particular pattern of all nature in God's hierarchy. He wants others to *see* the essential qualities and patterns around them, which without poetry they may overlook. (Compare this with Browning's poetic manifesto as spoken in 'Fra Lippo Lippi', discussed earlier.) To Hopkins's thinking the hierarchy of the medieval period allowed for individual artistic expression as opposed to nineteenth-century industrial methods of production. If this hierarchical structure enabled artistic expression, then in Hopkins's theology, the hierarchy of God's universe allows for each individual's particular and unique transcendence. If Tennyson's most powerful poetry could be said to issue from his religious doubt and anxiety, much of Hopkins's could be said to arise from his religious certainty and his faith in a fixed and (literally) ordained place in God's hierarchy.

In his intense concentration upon the things in the world about him, whether

'thrush's eggs' or 'finches wings', Hopkins gazed hard and long at the material objects of the objective world. Through 'instress' he brought those objects to man's inner attention, into the reader's subjective world. In his own treatment of the subjective and objective view, in his religious influences, in his elegaic nostalgia for the past, Hopkins was very much a Victorian. Hopkins's response to Nature was conservationist; as he writes in his poem 'Inversnaid', 'Long live the weeds and wilderness yet'. In this and in many other ways he speaks to our own time, as he spoke to the early modernist period with the energy and freedom which he gave to poetic language.

In 'Binsey Poplars' Hopkins regrets that his 'aspens dear' have been cut down, and that the 'growing green' of the countryside is being 'delved', 'hewed', 'hacked' and 'racked' to make way for the growing cities, their industry and residential suburbs – those same suburbs of the nineteenth century which he called 'the base and brickish skirt' dividing the city from nature in his poem 'Dun Scotus's Oxford'. The elegy of 'Binsey Poplars' to the 'rural scene' could also be an elegy to a type of poetry which was coming to an end at the close of the nineteenth century. The Introduction to this unit discussed the differences between the representation of nature in Romantic poetry and later nineteenth-century or Victorian poetry, arguing that in much Victorian poetry there was a growing disillusionment with the idea that nature was in harmony with humankind. Nevertheless, Victorian poetry was most often still faithful to the Romantic tradition of using nature as a fund of poetic settings, themes and imagery.

The 'base and brickish skirt' of the suburbs encroaches upon the natural world and upon poetic themes increasingly in the later nineteenth century. A poet of the 1890s, John Davidson, writes rather differently of the suburbs than did Hopkins. His satirical dramatic monologue is spoken by a city clerk who is struggling to raise a family on 'thirty bob a week' (also the poem's title). The clerk says nothing about the countryside or the solace of nature – he is too busy trying to survive by making the journey every day from the suburban to the urban, as he explains in the third stanza:

For like a mole I journey in the dark,
A-travelling along the underground
From my Pillar'd Halls and broad Suburban Park,
To come the daily dull official round;
And home again at night with my pipe all alight,
A-scheming how to count ten bob a pound.

The suburban is a transitional place, lying in between the country and the city. In this light, the journey of Davidson's speaker in this dramatic monologue from his 'Suburban' home to work in the city mirrors the transition of poetry at the end of the nineteenth century from the rural or natural concerns of much Romantic and Victorian poetry, to the modernist preoccupation with the urban environment. Indeed, T.S. Eliot admired Davidson's poetry, and particularly 'Thirty Bob A Week' for its grim urban imagery. While many nineteenth-century novels had already turned to the city for its setting and theme (the novels of Dickens, Gaskell and Kingsley are especially relevant here) poetry was slower to do so, perhaps because urban themes and imagery imply a

fragmentation and a multiplicity of individual voices which are ill-suited to the subjectivity of the lyric poem, or to the single persona of the dramatic monologue. John Davidson's poem makes the transition from the suburban to the urban, and although it is a dramatic monologue, it is also a precursor to the fragmented, alienated voices which, in the poetry of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and many other writers, was to become a defining characteristic of modernism.

Suggested further reading on Hopkins: Storey (1984), Robinson (1978), North and Moore (eds) (1984) and Ong (1986).

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