
Joseph Bristow, ed. *The Fin de Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture in the 1890s*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005. 352p.

ANTHONY FLINN
EASTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

W.B. Yeats and *The Norton Anthology English Literature* have a great deal to answer for, according to Joseph Bristow and eleven other heavily credentialed scholars of British poetry of the 1890s. The truth about that brief era has not made its way into the standard anthologies and therefore into the minds of undergraduates or even the generalist professoriate. For instance, though “Michael Field” (Edith Cooper and Katherine Bradley) have made an appearance in *The Norton Anthology* for some time now, it is as a marginal rather than central presence. The general vision, guided by Yeats’ *Autobiography*, of the poets of the time is that they were mostly male, drunken, self-destructive, obsessive, and minor. The contributors to *The Fin de Siècle Poem* have a far more interesting and critically productive story to tell.

This book is a masterful collection of articles that seeks to freshen critical interest in this strange transition period between the apparent softness of Victorian poetry and deliberate hardness of the modernist poetry waiting around the century’s corner. I say “freshen” rather than “restore” or “resurrect” because the works of this mini-era have never enjoyed the wash of critical attention afforded the Romantic, Victorian, and Modern eras. A borderland like the 1890s has principally lured critics to its liminality, its relation to predecessors and successors, to what lingers from earlier forms and what emerges in anticipation of coming trends. Liminal studies have also given this brief period critical attention because the sexual and emotional transgressions of its poets appeal to critics for their use in exploring identity politics. In either case, most of the recent criticism has studied the 1890s poetry as a means rather than an end.

This book, though a collection of independent essays, is described its contributors as being arranged in “chapters.” At first that description seems more of a hope than a fact, an unearned assertion of coherence over a range of critics with different poet-subjects and different critical perspectives. However, by a third of the way through my reading, it became clear that the “chapter” designation was pleasingly justified. The “chapters” plot an arc of examination that takes us from problematizing the conventional Yeatsian view of narcissistically doomed male poets of precious verse to a radical opening of our conceptions of the era to include accomplished, canon-worthy, female poets. That in itself would be a minor enterprise, for it has been tried before, and the Yeatsian reading of the era still prevails in the literary histories undergraduates are faced with. But the arc of thought is far more critically productive than simply the foregrounding of the work of women. Without foregrounding

a political agenda, the chapters progressively distinguish between male and female poetic expression among poets of this era, suggesting that the male poets trap themselves in narcissistic self-publicizing, the women poets in liberating convolutions of identity. Essentially, the book frames the poetic expression of the male poets, those undermined by Yeats' characterization—Dowson, Johnson, Gray, Davidson, and Wilde—as self-regarding performances requiring an admiring, pitying audience. And as the chapters explore the works of female poets, the self-staging of the speakers enacts a private exploration of identity, forging, in both senses of the word, ways of being that can thrive outside social and sexual conventions. It is a fleshing out, in both the literal and conventional sense of the term, of intense feeling and the delicate framings of mind that the poetry grants room to explore.

The Fin de Siècle Poem's preface by the editor, Joseph Bristow, provides concise synoptic accounts of each of the twelve chapters to come. He follows it with a crisply written introductory chapter gracefully informed with historical background, insisting that “this much misrecognized literary decade” brought us “fresh poetic models that could engage with the modern before further shifts in poetics became identifiably modernist” (39). The next two chapters, by Jerusha McCormack and Holly Laird, lay out the opposing expressive paths that the male and female poets took. As McCormack argues, the male poets' was toward the explicitly performative expression of their sensual and emotional torments, and the female toward less obtrusive, more private and controlled poetic speakers. Laird's treatment of these choices dwells on the apparent lure of suicide for both, and nimbly problematizes the link between poets' biographies and their poetic language of self-annihilation. Both critics, heroically I think, avoid the temptation to dismiss the men as narcissistic in their prominence, or to cast a victim's shroud over the women.

Then Linda Hughes, in a chapter on Rosamund Marriott Watson (Graham R. Tomson), analyses the interplay among her social and poetic masks and her range of verse forms as a way to discuss the liberation of sexual feeling in verse. Like Laird, Hughes never lapses into biographical cause and effect. This phenomenon of dispersed poetic identities is then picked up by Nicholas Frankel's intriguing chapter on the Rhymers' Club and its members' efforts to publish two collections of their verse. Frankel makes two claims that are especially compelling given these poets' self-dramatizing personae: that the two collections avoid foregrounding the work of individuals, and that the effect of such poems as “The Lake Isle” is altered when read in the responsive context of his fellow Rhymers' work. This chapter is followed by the only anomalous contribution, Jerome McGann's discussion of Herbert Horne's *Diversi Colores*, which McGann argues is an integration of the language with the medium of its typographic presence. Yes, like Frankel, McGann is interested in the

bookness of books, but this contribution seemed an unnecessary bump in the arc of mind projected by the other chapters.

The remaining six chapters focus exclusively on the poetry and evolving identities of the principal female poets of the era. While Julia Saville gives us a brilliant study of Bradley and Cooper's (Field's) "ekphrastic poems," verse descriptions of paintings from "detached" perspectives that are strikingly, idiosyncratically allusive and sexually playful. In the last chapter, Marion Thain returns us to Bradley and Cooper to examine their late post-conversion poetry, and feelingly establishes the link to their earlier, pagan work, displaying "the fluidity of a poetic identity that interlaces past and present, self and lover," private myth and contemporary culture (332).

The next two chapters explore the French symbolist influences on and the resulting innovations from Amy Levy and Mary F. Robinson. Linda Hunt Beckman demonstrates that Amy Levy, before her male contemporaries, responded to the modern urban experience poetically, the fragmentation of community providing images of "self-estrangement." Likewise, Ana Parejo Vadillo traces Robinson's symbolist presence in language of physical removal, a "negation of physical experience in favor of the disembodied soul" (252). And in the following chapter, Yopie Prins takes us into Alice Meynell's studies of metrical measure, where Meynell finds echoes of human experience in these rhythms, not so much in the beats as in the reflective pauses between. Then, Tricia Lootens pulls us out of 1890s, placing the experience of the time into the larger context of the empire, pairs Rudyard Kipling with Bengalese poet Tora Dutt (whose work was new to me). As Kipling brought India to England, so Dutt brought the British Romantic tradition, especially Wordsworth, to India, adapting his vision to a native Indian voice.

My brief descriptions of these intricate and elegant studies cannot hope to convey my sense of how remarkable is their reconsideration of an era most of us have taken little time and pleasure in, even as we specialize in late Victorian or Modernist literature. This book, with its fine, lucid writing, its unembarrassed passion for neglected poets, brought me back to my graduate student days, when so much was new, so much to be discovered. For those sensations, I am grateful. ✱