

Contemporary Poems About Victorian Science

John Morton, University of Greenwich

[mj20@gre.ac.uk](mailto:mj20@gre.ac.uk)

Keywords:

Neo-Victorian, Poetry, Imlah, Thwaite, Padel, Darwin, Science, Evolution

Abstract:

This article considers the work of three contemporary poets and their engagement, in verse, with Victorian science. Beginning with the outlandish 'theories' of Mick Imlah's 'Zoologist' in his bath, it goes on to consider two works of biografiction – Anthony's Thwaite's poem 'At Marychurch', considering Philip Henry Gosse's doomed attempts to unite evolution and Christianity, and Ruth Padel's *Darwin: A Life in Poems*. Considering John Glendening's idea that science in neo-Victorian fiction provides the opportunity to characters for self-revelation if fully embraced, this paper will consider the rather less happy resolutions of each of these texts, while in addition considering the ways in which these poems perform the formal changes and hybridity considered within them.

## Contemporary Poems About Victorian Science

Ever since Tennyson wrote of 'Nature, red in tooth and claw' in *In Memoriam* LVI (Tennyson 373), Victorian poetry has been linked to the age's advances in scientific thinking. This is perhaps best articulated by the evolutionist Stephen Jay Gould (1941-2002), who chose to commemorate the 1992 centenary of Tennyson's death via an essay on the aforementioned line from *In Memoriam* which is, Gould claimed, the 'canonical descriptor' for 'Darwinian evolution' (Gould 65). If Tennyson provided a neat summary (before the event) of Darwinian theory, it is also the case that the implications of Darwin's theories have had a profound influence on both the content of literary works but also their form; very often literary works concerned with Darwin demonstrate mutation, hybridity and mutability in formal terms. This essay will examine the ways in which three contemporary poets, in works which present Victorian theories of evolution, perform various kinds of experimentation with subject matter and form.

John Glendening's *Science and Religion in Neo-Victorian Novels: Eye of the Ichthyosaur* (2013) is the most comprehensive survey of the neo-Victorian interaction with science to date, following Daniel Candel Bormann's earlier monograph *The Articulation of Science in the Neo-Victorian Novel* (2002) – itself one of the earliest book-length considerations of the neo-Victorian. I will focus for now on Glendening's work, since Bormann's, while providing a general methodology for the consideration of science in the Neo-Victorian novel, only focuses on two texts and its methodology cannot quite do justice to the myriad novels published post-2002. Glendening focuses on the transformative power that science seems to possess in many neo-Victorian novels. He notes: neo-Victorian fiction concerned with science and religion expresses a form of wonderment: the capacity of the mind to perceive, make sense of, creatively adapt, and enjoy the world out of which it has evolved - in short, to endow it with the meanings that make it most liveable. Protagonists who experience the world in this expansive way largely escape self-anxiety and alienation. (2)

The pattern which Glendening identifies in most of the novels he considers sees science (usually Darwin's theories of Natural Selection) presented as a force for good if fully embraced, one capable of making 'fraught identities' more coherent and stable. This separates these narratives from more general neo-Victorian considerations of faith and doubt, which Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben have identify as 'interactive foils or mirrors of present-day traumas' (Kohlke 13). The frequency with which neo-Victorian writers return to questions of science and religion demonstrates the pertinence of Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's focus in their study of the neo-Victorian:

[T]he 'neo-Victorian' is *more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century. [...] [T]exts (literary, filmic, audio/visual) must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*. (4)

This self-consciousness sees writers often returning directly to questions of religion and science, reflecting a Victorian interest in the subject but also more recent critical reappraisals. Yet despite Heilmann and Llewellyn's theoretically including verse within the scope of their definition, their 2010 book on *Neo-Victorianism* rarely mentions poetry. This mirrors a more general trend in neo-Victorian studies: compared to the recent explosion in monographs, edited collections and journal articles considering Neo-Victorian fiction (in prose or filmed form), to date there have been very few considerations of what we could term neo-Victorian poetry.<sup>i</sup>

One of the most quintessentially neo-Victorian poems is Mick Imlah's 'The Zoologist's Bath' (1983), in which the poet, according to David Wheatley, 'combines homage and subversion' (Wheatley 301). Imlah often presents his poetry with epigraphs, and this poem is no exception, including the following:

'Among the more eccentric exponents of evolutionary theory...

[was] ... Arthur William Woolmer (1833-80). His most controversial thesis, detailed in the posthumous *Decline of the Mammal*, that land species, having descended from sea-going forms, would strive to return to their original element, won few adherents... his "crowning race" would have been the merman.'

– T. A. Paish, *The Sciences in the Victorian Age*, 1949, p. 139 (42)

Neo-Victorian literature frequently presents the reader with seemingly authentic 'documentary' evidence which is in fact invented, on aspect of its hybrid status, yet despite the obviously outlandish nature of this theory, Imlah's epigraph also requires us to believe that a Victorian could have thought this feasible – David Wheatley is perhaps correct to argue that Imlah here 'teases the reader', who desires this to be true (Wheatley 301). As such, the poem definitely fits the usual evolutionary-focused trend in neo-Victorian literature concerning science; that Woolmer's fictional work was published 'posthumously' indicates that it postdates *On the Origin of Species* and its attendant controversies. As with neo-Victorian fiction, this poem returns to the forms of the age with both reverence and irreverence, and is consequently formed of two dramatic monologues – the first by the sister of the Zoologist in question, and the second from himself. The latter is ostentatiously absurd, and no less compelling for that. Woolmer begins by outlining how his 'scientific method' – sitting in a bath – has its classical antecedent in the scientists of Syracuse, who sat thinking every day in 'the civic lavatory' (43). Yet Woolmer in his monologue is as much theologian as scientist, spending the majority of his monologue discussing Biblical clues for the veracity of his theory. Woolmer believes that Noah was, in fact, a whale – 'Noah's ark / Was Noah, the chosen mammal'. The evidence for this is that 'the eye-witness account appears in *Jonah*, / Those ghosted memoirs of the bashful Shem' (45). He also recounts the parting of the Red Sea:

It occurs to me that Moses

Was vestigially amphibious; his tribe,  
Adaptable; the Egyptians, stony lizards. (45)

The clincher – which ends the poem – is a discussion of Jesus:

Nor in the days of His ministry was Christ  
Ever unsilver, ever coarse with hair  
Or long in the open air. Two points should seal it;  
First, did He walk on water? Did He need to?  
And secondly, what emblem did they choose,  
His persecuted followers, and why?  
And does not man aspire to that? Do I?  
I wrinkle, underwater, in ten minutes.  
Before the hour I shall have a fin. (46)

At this point the poem seems very far from Glendening's discussion of the benefits to neo-Victorian characters of an engagement with science, and this demonstrates a problem with neo-Victorian historical hindsight – that if the science embraced has not endured to the present day, the 'character development' cannot be as complete as it might otherwise and might even look close to uncharitable mockery of the Victorian age.

However outlandish the theory, the setting is too realistic for such a conclusion to be drawn. We start off with the 'tea' and petit-point' of Woolmer's sister, settling down for 'an ordinary week-day evening's entertainment', when a strange noise causes her to rush to confront her brother in his bath:

I was up the flickering stairs in a moment and running

Beyond the awakening tentacles and startling teeth

Of the landing gallery and into his bubbling chamber [...]. (42)

One might consider this part of the reason why Peter Porter saw Imlah's early work as being "Browning in the world of Hammer films" (qtd. in Fuller, 18). Yet the scene, seemingly in keeping with neo-Victorian gothic speculative fiction, might be something rather more true to life. The staircase is 'flickering' surely as a result of candle-light being disturbed by the movement of the narrator; the 'chamber' bubbling because of its being a bathroom; the tentacles and teeth the equivalent of the Victorian gargoyles at Knebworth House, or the stonework of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, where scientific discoveries become decoration. Even the scientific observations seem inflected with this Victorian Gothic – the Zoologist observes 'the slow waving of my little hairs / Like reeds above a monster' (43).

Imlah's Zoologist, for all that the theories and verse invites the reader to suspend disbelief, is very clearly fictional. Most other poets who have considered Victorian science in their work have focused on real-life subjects. In Richard Howard's poem '1825', voiced by Sir Walter Scott, the narrator tells us of his activities in the last few days, including a visit to the American ornithologist John James Audubon, who was in Edinburgh to deliver some lectures on American birds:

For tea, varied with camomile, from

Audubon the ornithologist

And a boy, sixteen, name of Darwin

Studying from him how to stuff such birds and beasts

As are found in Scotland,

Though he passes for a medical student here.

[...] The lad seems dull enough,

No match at the tea for Audubon

Who has followed that pursuit of his  
By many a long wandering in the dark woods  
Of North America. (10)

Howard has elsewhere spoken of the core feature of the dramatic monologue, his chosen form, being that of the 'necessity of the secret that the speaker, who does not know it, must reveal' (McClatchy). The 'secret' here must, in part, be Scott's misguidedness – though Darwin was at the time a very young student, this judgment, and the naming of Darwin, must be intended to draw shock and amusement from the reader who knows full well which of these names – Scott, Audubon, or Darwin – will be most resonant at the time of Howard's publication, 1969. Howard's poem, which fuses biography and fiction, errs towards the latter in this episode – Darwin did hear Audubon lecture but did not learn taxidermy from him.

That Scott betrays, unbeknownst to him, a rather embarrassing opinion in the light of history perhaps unites Howard with Imlah in their enthusiasm for revisiting the Nineteenth Century to focus on the dispossessed of history, in this case those who failed to understand the central truth of Darwin's thoughts or apparently dismissed him early in his life. The British poet Anthony Thwaite similarly returned to the strangeness and failures of Victorian science in his 1980 poem 'At Marychurch'. The narrator of this dramatic monologue is not named directly – to discover his identity we have to turn to the end of the collection, *Victorian Voices* (of which 'At Marychurch' is the opening poem). Therein we find a paragraph on Philip Henry Gosse, which tells us:

Gosse (the 'father' of Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*) published his explanation of Creation, *Omphalos*, in 1857: Darwin, whom Gosse knew, published *The Origin of Species* in 1859. Marychurch, on the Devon coast, was where Gosse lived for over thirty years, and here he made many of his observations of marine biology. (41)



The reference to Darwin here foregrounds his 'victory', with the dates seemingly mentioned in an effort to demonstrate that Gosse's was one of the theories which Darwin's book demolished. The tone of the monologue is in a sense similar to that of Imlah. Gosse, a pioneering naturalist who focused on marine biology, describes how 'the flasks / Ripple and throb with all the simulacra / Providence has provided', and his description of one of his specimens seems otherworldly:

Ha! Here is the little architect

Ready to answer for himself; he thrusts his head

And shoulders from his chimney-top, and shouts

His cognomen of *Melicerta ringens*.

Look! He is in the very act of building

Now. Did you see him suddenly

Bow down his head and lay a brick upon

The top of the last course? And now again

He builds another brick; his mould a tiny cup

Below his chin, his sole material

The floating floccose atoms of his refuse. (1)

The exhortation to the unnamed audience to 'Look!', and the exclamation 'Ha!' at the beginning of the extract are a clear inheritance from Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, whose speakers often communicate in sounds rather than words – for instance, the 'Ch! – Ch!' of 'Mr Sludge, the "Medium"', as his interlocutor throttles him [18, VI p. 285]. The Browningsque utterances of Thwaite's Gosse leave us in no doubt as to the narrator's very Victorian enthusiasm for his subject, and this also manifests itself in the deeply strange manner of narrating what sounds like an otherworldly, alien organism (one remembers Imlah's interiors here), but is in fact a genuine marine organism – one which Gosse wrote about, in his most controversial book.

For many years (and maybe even today), Philip Henry Gosse's chief interest in historical terms has been as the zealous Christian father in Edmund Gosse's landmark autobiography, *Father and Son*, wherein Edmund Gosse presents his father's alternative theory of evolution (or lack of) rather coyly, saying that in the late 1850s, his father, among other 'reactionaries, [...] never dreaming of the fate which hung over them' (62), were nonetheless working on their own accounts of descent. Edmund Gosse is kinder to the theory, which was recounted in a book entitled *Omphalos*, than many of its critics, but even he struggles to give a fully serious account of 'this curious, this obstinate, this fanatical volume' (64):

It was, very briefly, that there had been no gradual modification of the surface of the earth, or slow development of organic form, but that when the catastrophic act of creation took place, the world presented, instantly, the structural appearance of a planet on which life had long existed. (63)

The book is entitled *Omphalos*, the Greek for 'navel', in reference to the debate over whether Adam would have possessed one given his lack of a mother (the elder Gosse thought so). Edmund Gosse later discusses his father's mind, 'so acute and at the same time so narrow' (70), and tries his best to articulate the central dilemma his father faced:

Geology certainly *seemed* to be true, but the Bible, which was God's word, *was* true. If the Bible said that all things in Heaven and Earth were created in six days, created in six days they were, – in six days and twenty-four hours each. The evidences of spontaneous variation of form, acting, over an immense space of time, upon ever-modifying organic structures, seemed overwhelming, but they must either be brought into line with the six-day labour of creation, or they must be rejected. (70)

Edmund Gosse is noticeably kind to his father's poorly-received theories, but his recent biographer, Ann Thwaite, is less so.<sup>ii</sup> Noting his praise for the early publications of Darwin, she cites Gosse's

praise: 'This is a most wonderful process; so wonderful that it would be utterly incredible, but that the researches of Mr Darwin have proved it incontestably to be the means by which the wisdom of God has ordained that the little water-flea should be transformed into a stony barnacle' (Ann Thwaite 208). Thwaite notes that nowhere in the article to which Gosse refers does Darwin mention God.

Gosse's zeal to prove something that all later generations know will be futile also inflects Anthony Thwaite's poem. His narrator asks:

could God have made these plants,  
These animals, this creature that is Man,  
Without these retrospective marks? I tell you, no!  
A tree-form without scars limned on its trunk!  
A Palm without leaf-cases! (2)

The exclamation marks again demonstrate his commitment – they should, technically, be question marks – but also indicate his misguidedness. Darwin is a ghostly presence as the poem ends:

The flasks ripple, subside. I am tired. And miles away  
I know who sits and writes and tests and proves  
Quite other things and other worlds. I fix  
My microscope on Case-fly and on Julus,  
The field left clear and undisputed for  
The single witness on this other side,  
Whose testimony lies before me now:  
'In Six Days God Made Heaven and Earth, the Sea,  
And All that In Them Is.' Amen. Amen. (3)

The emphasis of the second 'Amen', hints at a doubt which is somewhat at odds with the historical presentation of Gosse in both *Father and Son* and Ann Thwaite's biography, and this, combined with the reference to the unnamed 'other' (who the reader assumes to be Darwin) leaves the poem on a note of poignant irony; the hint at this in Thwaite's endnote on Gosse matches the poem itself. It is certainly the case that the protagonist here, despite an engagement with science, is not able to, in Glendening's words, 'escape self-anxiety and alienation' (2), and this might unite him with Imlah's Zoologist and Howard's Scott.

Instead of the vague doubts we see in Thwaite's poem, *Omphalos* itself ends with an ostentatious parading of five key claims, of which this is the last:

The field is left clear and undisputed for the one Witness on the opposite side, whose testimony is as follows:-

'IN SIX DAYS JEHOVAH MADE HEAVEN AND EARTH, THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IN THEM IS.' (371)

Thwaite has taken these lines wholesale from the original and refashioned them into his poem, where the switch to verse, changes in capitalisation, and the addition of the repeated 'Amen' serve to lessen the conviction of the original. This is not Thwaite's only direct borrowing from Gosse's text – earlier in *Omphalos*, we read:

Ha! here is the little architect ready to answer for himself; he thirsts out his head and shoulders from his chimney-top, and announces his scientific cognomen as *Melicerta ringens*.

Look! He is in the very act of building now. Did you see him suddenly bow down his head and lay a brick on top of the last course? And now he is busy making another brick; his mould is a tiny cup-shaped cavity just below his chin; his material the floating floccose atoms of vegetable refuse. (211)

There are very few changes made to this prose as it appears (as quoted earlier) in Thwaite's poem (aside from the switch to verse form, 'announces his scientific cognomen as' changes to 'shouts his cognomen of', 'lay a brick on top' changes to 'lay a brick upon the top', 'now he is busy making' changes to 'now again he builds', and 'tiny cup-shaped cavity' changes to 'tiny cup'). This is not the only instance of direct borrowings from Gosse therein (in a poem of 91 lines); this might demonstrate not only the quality of Gosse's published prose and its malleability into a very different form, with little sense of depreciation in meaning or tone, but also the idea of poetry as mutable, capable of accommodating very different kinds of writing within its ostensible boundaries.

This formal mutability is not limited to neo-Victorian poetry about science. Randal Keynes's 2001 book *Annie's Box: Darwin, His Daughter, and Human Evolution* is something of a hybrid mixture of family memoir and biography, in which the naturalist is not privy to the same kinds of revelation which his work affords others in fictional returns to the age. The mixture of biography and family history is present in another work on Darwin, published in his bicentenary year, 2009 – Ruth Padel's *Darwin: A Life in Poems*. In her introduction, Padel makes clear the issue of her own descent, recalling conversations with her grandmother, Nora Barlow, Darwin's granddaughter and editor of his *Autobiography*, as well as preferring the Christian name, Charles, to the surname throughout. This is mirrored outside her text: on the book jacket, her relation to the subject is referred to in the first line of the first recommendation (by Claire Tomalin) and is mentioned twice in the synopsis on the inside cover of the dust jacket. Padel's presentation of Darwin follows Keynes's book in presenting Darwin as complex and tortured – and most definitely modern. In this they might share something in common with one of Glendening's later conclusions on the neo-Victorian engagement with science – that it reflects an ongoing concern over 'whether modernity can connect us to or only separate us from a liveable world. What meanings can we attach to an inherently meaningless universe?' (228)

Despite this seriousness of intent, it is clear that at times in Padel's book there is a sense of retrospective humour at the Victorians' expense, as there is in Imlah's poem. For example, the poem 'Survival of the Fittest' begins:

'I've sent ten thousand barnacles out of the house  
and am sorting species notes. I am unusually well  
but excitement and fatigue bring on dreadful flatulence.'

He doesn't say 'fart'. Maybe he doesn't know the word.

'Breeding domestic animals, you get rid of sickly offspring.' (108)

Darwin's letters do contain complaints of flatulence, and there is indeed no recorded use of 'fart', though the latter word was in widespread use in the Victorian period; while excusing Darwin's ostensible prudishness, Padel seems to equally reinforce it. More happily, in this poem we also see, just as in Thwaite's 'At Marychurch', a delight in the potential of scientific phrasing for poetry:

'Pouters', 'Tipplers', and 'Fan-Toes.' White down  
on pink claws like pleats of a ballerina  
curtseying the floor. (108)

The 't' sounds here evoke something of the delight of observing and naming new species, and there is added relish in the image of the ballerina, lending the natural world an effortless ability to mirror the grace and poise of a trained dancer. The attempt to locate literary beauty in scientific terms and observations is not limited to literature concerning the Nineteenth Century. One might think here of Ian McEwan's his research on brain surgery in *Saturday*, and his attempt therein to link the craft of novel-writing to that of the surgeon – 'I wanted to write a major operation at the end but it would really be about writing, about making art' (Smith). While it is not the case that Padel, Thwaite or

Imlah specifically link the figure of the scientist to that of the artist, they nonetheless hint at a shared dedication to a craft, potentially irrational (more so in the cases of Thwaite and Imlah than Padel, for obvious reasons).

It is by now clear from my earlier examples that works of art which focus on evolution and creation also tend to exhibit an interest in how this might relate to form. Padel has specifically addressed this in an interview:

One of the most common words in all of Darwin's writings is 'form'. Evolution wasn't a new idea [then], what was new was his understanding of the mechanism of natural selection [...] [B]ut nobody had imagined that, over time, a species would actually change its form – to an adapted form. For me, that [learning] had a relation to how poems can change form too.

Perhaps the clearest example of how a text with an interest in Darwin might experiment with form is Harry Karlinsky's 2012 novel *The Evolution of Inanimate Objects*, presented as 'The Life and Collected Works of Thomas Darwin (1857-1879)'. Paradoxically billed on its own front page as a 'novel', it blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, with a documentary style (letters lovingly-presented as they would be in a standard Victorian *Life and Letters*, genuine photographs, extensive reading lists and footnotes) belying its ostentatiously strange subject matter (this Thomas Darwin believed that cutlery was in a process of 'evolution'). While this formal experimentation is not unique to Karlinsky's novel, and is often a hallmark of neo-Victorian (and more generally postmodern) writing, it nonetheless demonstrates that a literary focus on Darwin often leads to a writer considering mutation and mutability in formal terms (along with hybridity, which is not a dominant focus of interest in Darwin's work). Padel's 'Life in Poems' is a similar attempt, as she says, to reflect mutability in verse form – demonstrated not least by its publication status as 'poetry/biography'.

The predominant form of Padel's poem – an internal monologue, voiced in the third person – betrays not only her work's Victorian roots (following this most Victorian of poetical forms) but

also its distance from them (an ironized third-person separation close to that of James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*). A good example is 'Plankton', which concerns Darwin on the Beagle in 1832, 'heading south through the Atlantic towards the Cape Verde Islands' (29). The first stanza runs:

The deck is dazzle, fish-stink, gauze-covered buckets.

Gelatinous ingots, rainbows of wet flinching amethyst

and flubbed, iridescent cream. All this

means he's better; and working on a haul of lumpen light. (29)

The indentation of the second and third lines immediately brings to mind one of the most famous Victorian forms, Tennyson's *In Memoriam* stanza. Yet Padel drops the capitalization from the opening word of the final two lines, and the number of syllables in a line changes from Tennyson's regular eight to a scattering of twelve, fifteen, nine and fourteen. This reflects the young Darwin's zeal for his work as well as his renewed physical fitness, meaning that the language cannot be constrained by the restrictions of the verse form. Despite Padel's willingness to be linked to Tennyson (she has edited and introduced his work, and provided the chapter on Tennyson for the recent *Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*), this may be a typically neo-Victorian comment on the literary style of the Victorian age, in a sense following the criticisms of writers such as Ezra Pound who believed that in terms of rhythm, writers should 'compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome' (Woods 450). The focus on Darwin and evolutionary theory also affords Padel the opportunity to critique, through verse form, the limitations of Victorian dramatic monologues which voiced 'men and women' (to borrow Robert Browning's famous collection title); one of her poems is voiced by an Orang-utan at London Zoo.

This variety in form is a poetical reflection of Darwinian theory, then; but as already noted, the poem is also a hybrid in terms of its combination of poetry and biography. The verses on the



page invariably come with explanatory notes, providing brief biographical contexts for poems (as demonstrated above in the reference to the Verde Islands – this note appears in smaller font on the right-hand margin of the page), along with occasional textual references, usually to the text being directly or indirectly referred to – thus in ‘The Black and the Green’, which is situated in ‘Downe Church’ at the funeral of his son Charles Waring, we read ‘He’ll write the book at once. / A mournful one. The infinity of loss’, and the attendant marginal note informs us that this is ‘*On the Origin of Species*’ (127). Another example of this appears earlier, in ‘The Devil’s Chaplain’, where we read:

The red ants battle black.

Rainwind lashes trees in the garden and the leaves toss,  
they bash the rain back. ‘Nature is prodigal of the forms

of life. The fit will be preserved, the weak  
exterminated utterly – as myriads have been before:  
battle within battle, ever recurring.’

Annie was, if you have to say these things, his favourite. (103)

The note in the margin directs us to ‘*On the Origin of Species*, Chapter 4’, and this is indeed where Darwin outlines the central theory of Natural Selection; yet these words do not appear therein. Instead they are a synthesis of observations from Darwin’s notebooks which came to be cut down to *On the Origin of Species*. Therein we find that ‘she [nature] is prodigal of the forms of life’ (225), that if a species is not fit it will be ‘utterly exterminated as myriads have been’ (225), and we read of ‘the great battle for life or death’ (227). Padel thus draws our attention to our pre-existing knowledge of Darwin’s theories, while at the same time undermining readerly assumptions about the provenance of the words in the poem. This also underlines the formal mutability of Padel’s poems – with non-

fiction prose reincorporated as semi-fictional verse – something it shares in common with Thwaite’s poem on Gosse.

Imlah had previously packaged his poem about Victorian science with faked ‘historical context’, and in this he and Padel both follow a common neo-Victorian pattern. Kym Brindle has written recently on the phenomenon of neo-Victorian Gothic novels incorporating ‘documentary “evidence”’ with a view to ‘more closely explore the violent psychological recesses of murderous minds’ (286). Brindle identifies this as a legacy of the focus on ‘found’ documents in eighteenth-century Gothic fiction and in Victorian sensation fiction, and quotes Maria Beville who believes that this aspect of postmodernism in fiction is shared with the Gothic, as both focus on ‘crises of identity, fragmentation of the self, the darkness of the human psyche, and the philosophy of being and knowing’ (296). Brindle’s focus on these Gothic legacies of the documentary leads her to conclude that neo-Victorian writers ‘re-live Victorian times in cyclical returns and fragmentary conditions that creatively reanimate spectres of the past for new audiences’ (296-7). While Padel’s narrative is much more firmly rooted in fact than either of Brindle’s case studies (Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* and Beryl Bainbridge’s *Watson’s Apology*), it is nonetheless clear that Padel does share an interest in the ways in which Beville’s list of focuses are reflected in Darwin’s life and works. The aforementioned poem ‘Survival of the Fittest’, wherein Darwin initially ponders ‘sickly offspring’ in animal life, sees him subsequently wondering whether he is part of the eventual evolutionary ‘victors’, having married his cousin and seen several of his children die young. The re-presentation of Victorian prose as verse is something of a Modernist inheritance – even, potentially, an anti-Victorian one. W. B. Yeats opened his 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* with a passage from Walter Pater’s *The Renaissance* refashioned into blank verse, and this model of re-presenting prose as verse is continued today by poets such as Vanessa Place and Rosemarie Waldrop who incorporate non-poetical texts (respectively, court proceedings and philosophical works) within the body of their poetry.

There is certainly a tension in neo-Victorian poetry about science, following a wider trend in neo-Victorian writing which can end up looking little more than scornful in its consideration of some of the less successful attempts to marry religion and science, and the returns, with hindsight, to the topic in the work of both Thwaite and Imlah could appear patronising if handled a little less expertly. This separates it from the trend of self-revelation identified in its prose counterpart by John Glendening. However all these poems perform, formally, the hybridity they also describe, incorporating faked 'documentary' evidence, bona fide scientific language, compelling monologic voices, and lyric flourishes, often very close to one another. Poetry, it would seem, provides fertile ground for neo-Victorian experimentation.

#### Bibliography

Beer, Gillian. *Darwin's Plots*. London: Routledge, 1983.

Blair, Kirstie. *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart*. Oxford: OUP, 2006.

Brown, Daniel. *The Poetry of Victorian Scientists: Style, Science and Nonsense*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Bormann, Daniel Candell. *The Articulation of Science in the Neo-Victorian Novel*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002.

Brindle, Kym. 'Dead Words and Fatal Secrets: Rediscovering the Sensational Document in Neo-Victorian Fiction', *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*. Eds. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012.279-300.

Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. Ed. Nicola Bradbury. London: Penguin, 2003.

Fuller, John. "The Early Poetry of Mick Imlah." *Oxford Poetry* 13.2 (2009):13-21.

Garlick, Barbara. "The Message from Her: Anthony Thwaite's *Victorian Voices* and George

- Meredith's *Modern Love*." *Victorian Turns, Neo-Victorian Returns*. Eds Penny Gay, Judith Johnston and Catherine Waters. Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008. 193-204.
- Glendening, John. *Science and Religion in Neo-Victorian Novels: Eye of the Ichthyosaur*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2013.
- Gosse, Edmund. *Father and Son*. Ed. Michael Newton. Oxford: OUP, 2004.
- Gosse, Philip Henry. *Omphalos*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Gould, Stephen Jay. *Dinosaur in a Haystack*. London: Crown, 1996.
- Heilmann, Ann, and Mark Llewellyn. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Holmes, John. *Darwin's Bards*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
- Howard, Richard. *Untitled Subjects*. New York: Atheneum, 1969.
- Imlah, Mick. *Selected Poems*. Ed. Mark Ford. London: Faber and Faber, 2010.
- Karlinsky, Harry. *The Evolution of Inanimate Objects*. London: Friday Project, 2012.
- Keynes, Randal. *Annie's Box: Darwin, His Daughter, and Human Evolution*. London: Fourth Estate, 2001.
- Kohlke, Marie-Luise, and Christian Gutleben. 'The (Mis)Shapes of Neo-Victorian Gothic: Continuations, Adaptations, Transformations'. *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*. Eds. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012. 1-48.
- Mayhew, Henry. *London Labour and the London Poor Vol. 1*. London: Charles Griffin and Company, 1865.
- McClatchy, J. D. 'Richard Howard, The Art of Poetry No. 86', *Paris Review* 169 (Spring 2004), accessed on 10 February 2014 at <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/29/the-art-of-poetry-no-86-richard-howard>
- Miles, Rosie. *Victorian Poetry in Context*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Morton, John. "'No one remembers you at all': Mick Imlah and Alan Hollinghurst Ventriloquising Tennyson." *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* 6.1 (2013): 22-40.

- Morton, John. 'Robert Browning and Mick Imlah: Forming and Collecting the Dramatic Monologue', *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, 18.3 (2013). 84-98.
- Padel, Ruth. *Darwin: A Life in Poems*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2009.
- Pratt-Smith, Stella. 'Boundaries of Perception: James Clerk Maxwell's Poetry of Self, Senses and Science', *James Clerk Maxwell: Perspectives on his Life*. Eds. Raymond Flood, Mark McCartney, Andrew Whitaker. Oxford: OUP, 2014. 233-257.
- Ramaswamy, Chitra. 'Interview with Ruth Padel', *The Scotsman Magazine* 8 February 2010, accessed on 10 February 2010 at <http://www.ruthpadel.com/interview-in-the-scotsman-magazine-february-2010/>
- Reef, Catherine. *e.e. cummings: A Poet's Life*. New York: Clarion, 2006.
- Seed, John. *Pictures From Mayhew. London, 1850*. Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2005.
- Smith, Zadie. 'Ian McEwan Talks With Zadie Smith', *The Believer* 3.6 (August 2005), accessed on 10 February 2014 at [http://www.believermag.com/issues/200508/?read=interview\\_mcewan](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200508/?read=interview_mcewan)
- Tate, Gregory. *The Poet's Mind: The Psychology of Victorian Poetry 1830-1870*. Oxford: OUP, 2012.
- Tennyson, Alfred. *The Poems of Tennyson* ed. Christopher Ricks (Harlow: Longman, 1987), Vol. II.
- Thwaite, Ann. *Glimpses of the Wonderful: the Life of Philip Henry Gosse, 1810-1882*. London: Faber and Faber, 2002.
- Thwaite, Anthony. *Victorian Voices*. Oxford: OUP, 1980.
- Wheatley, David. "'Dispatched Dark Regions Far Afield and Farther": Contemporary Poetry and Victorianism', *The Oxford Handbook to Victorian Poetry*. Ed. Matthew Bevis. Oxford: OUP, 2013. 291-306.
- Woods, Tim. "'Preferring the wrong way": mapping the ethical diversity of US twentieth-century poetry', *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture*. Ed. Christopher Bigsby. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 450-468.
- Yeats, W. B. (Ed.) *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. Oxford: OUP, 1936.

The relation of poetry and science of the Victorian period is equally clear from recent publishing which has seen Victorian scientists re-presented as poets in their own right. Daniel Brown published a substantial study, *The Poetry of Victorian Scientists: Style, Science and Nonsense* in 2013, in which he notes ‘That the great inventors of Victorian nonsense Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll also practised science, the former as a natural history illustrator, the latter as a mathematician, suggests that the relation between the two fields is not merely contingent’ (Brown 9). The recent essay collection *James Clerk Maxwell: Perspectives on his Life* contains a chapter on the poetry of the physicist by the literary critic Stella Pratt-Smith.

#### HYBRIDITY!

Recent criticism has emphasised this connection. Gregory Tate’s 2012 monograph *The Poet’s Mind: The Psychology of Victorian Poetry 1830-1870* considers the ways in which Victorian conceptions of the mind influenced poets in the mid-Victorian period; John Holmes’s 2009 *Darwin’s Bards*, dealing with verse of the Victorian period and more recent poetry, considers the effect Darwinian thinking had on poets; Kirstie Blair’s *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (2006) considers the idea of the heart in poetry, in anatomical ways among others. These studies undoubtedly owe a debt to Gillian Beer’s still-indispensable *Darwin’s Plots*, which, while focusing on prose fiction, clearly demonstrated the interrelation between Victorian literature and the scientific thinking of the time. This is not a trend which is unique to literary critics.

---

<sup>i</sup> Notable writings on neo-Victorian poetry include: the final chapters of Rosie Miles’s *Victorian Poetry in Context* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), David Wheatley’s chapter on contemporary poetry in *The Oxford Handbook to Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), Barbara Garlick’s ‘The Message from Her: Anthony Thwaite’s *Victorian Voices* and George Meredith’s *Modern Love*’ in *Victorian Turns, Neo-Victorian Returns* ed. Penny Gay, Judith Johnston and Catherine Waters (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008) 193-204, and my own ‘Robert Browning and Mick Imlah: Forming and Collecting the Dramatic Monologue’, *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, 18.3 (2013). 84-98 and “‘No one remembers you at all’: Mick Imlah and Alan Hollinghurst Ventriloquising Tennyson’, *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* 6 .1 (2013), 22-40.

<sup>ii</sup> In recent years Ann Thwaite, wife of the poet, has published a biography of the elder Gosse (2002) – which followed her biography of the son (1985). There can be little doubt that the husband and wife’s interest in Gosse overlaps – one of her eventual chapters even shares a title with his poem, ‘At Marychurch: 1857-1860’.