



Neo-Victorian Poetry

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The centrality to neo-Victorian studies of A. S. Byatt's 1991 novel *Possession*, in which invented "Victorian" poetry is crucial to the text and indeed plot, could suggest that poetry would be central to subsequent literary and cultural responses to the Victorian age; however, it is extremely rare to see articles focusing on poetry in books and journals dedicated to the neo-Victorian poetic genre. This could be due to a number of reasons: the current relative obscurity of Victorian poetry beyond very canonical (and often disliked) anthology texts; the enduring influence of early to mid-twentieth-century poetry on contemporary verse, with its own attendant scepticism of Victorian poems, and a mirroring in neo-Victorian studies of the dominance of the novel in its Victorian equivalent. This chapter is the first chapter of any book concerning the neo-Victorian to deal specifically with poetry and will demonstrate the breadth and diversity of poetical responses to the Victorian age, focusing on "found poems" in a concluding case study. Such poems offer a way out of the diagnosis Marie-Luise Kohlke makes of many neo-Victorian texts, and their readers, that collectively they want to "have their cake and eat it too" (2017, 185).

NEO-VICTORIAN POETRY IN CRITICISM

There have been some—though not many—recent critical appraisals of neo-Victorian poetry. Overviews can be found in David Wheatley's chapter "Dispatched Dark Regions Far Afield and Farther: Contemporary Poetry and Victorianism" (2013), though it does not use the term "neo-Victorian"; in sections of Rosie Miles' *Victorian Poetry in Context* (2013); and, in most depth,

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in Annika Merk's *The Contemporary Dramatic Monologue in Britain and Ireland* (2018), though the focus of this book is wider than just neo-Victorian poetry as its title suggests. There are also considerations of the legacies of Victorian poetry in the 2009 collection *Tennyson Among the Poets* edited by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and Seamus Perry, and in the 2020 essay collection *The Fire that Breaks*, edited by Daniel Westover and Thomas Alan Holmes, which considers twentieth-century poetical responses to Hopkins. That book followed a 2016 anthology of such responses, *The World is Charged*, edited by Westover and William Wright, which is probably the closest we have currently to an anthology of neo-Victorian poetry—though it is not unfair to say that, following the model of the poets they anthologise and consider, these books both approach Hopkins as an early twentieth-century, radically “new” poetical voice, as opposed to a Victorian. More focused considerations of particular poems and poets can be found in my own articles on Mick Imlah and Alan and Hollinghurst, and Imlah and Anthony Thwaite, along with my more recent piece on neo-Victorian poems about science though, as Merk notes, the first of these, while the first article in *Neo-Victorian Studies* concerning poetry, also considers a work of prose fiction. Recently, Ann F. Howey considered poetry in a section of her 2020 book *Afterlives of the Lady of Shalott and Elaine of Astolat*, and Eleonora Natalia Rivizza published an article entitled “Poetic Hospitality: Dramatic Monologue as a Neo-Victorian, Post-modern Genre” in 2020. This is still, however, a relatively small list of critical studies, especially if we consider there are the same number of articles on neo-Victorian poetry—one—in the journal *Neo-Victorian Studies* as there are on video games and theme parks. The novel, along with cinema and television, dominates the field.

POETRY IN NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION AND FILM

This is not to say that neo-Victorian literature and film do not concern themselves with post-Romantic, nineteenth-century poetry (my definition here is deliberately broad, in order to include works in English which consider Charles Baudelaire and Emily Dickinson, among others). Since the publication of Byatt's *Possession* and *Angels and Insects* (1995; one of whose stories is related to Arthur Hallam and Tennyson), we've seen novels such as *Strange Music* (2009) by Laura Fish (concerning Elizabeth Barrett's family); *The Quickening Maze* (2009) by Adam Foulds (concerning John Clare and Tennyson); *The Stranger's Child* (2012) by Alan Hollinghurst (set post-1900 but containing within it a homosexual relationship which is associated to the friendship of Tennyson and Arthur Henry Hallam); Lynn Truss' comic novel *Tennyson's Gift* (1996); Louisa Hadley's 2022 novel-in-verse *The Poet*, about a PhD student who has stalled in her work on Charlotte Mew (I will not be dwelling extensively on this novel as it primarily concerns Mew as a post-1900 poet, and is written in a poetical form inspired primarily by Plath and Modernist poets); Lisa Robertson's 2020 memoir *The Baudelaire Fractal*; Michael Cunningham's 2005 *Specimen Days* (which considers the legacy of Whitman); plus the 2016

biopic of Emily Dickinson, *A Quiet Passion*; and an episode of the 2008 BBC archaeology comedy-drama *Bonekickers* involving the discovery that Alfred Tennyson and Arthur Hallam were guardians of Excalibur. There are, no doubt, others as well. This is before one considers the myriad allusions to Victorian poetry in unexpected cultural locations; for instance, one can find quotations of Tennyson in films as diverse as *Skyfall* and *Hellboy: The Golden Army*, on the wall of the 2012 London Olympic village, and in the introduction to the rapper Method Man's 1994 song "What the Blood Clot."

There is a rich field of poetry which we might consider neo-Victorian; and that some of this poetry, especially "found" poetry, gestures towards ways in which neo-Victorian writing might avoid the "having cake and eating it" approach to the period and subject matter, outlined by Kohlke. She claimed that readers "want the re-imagined nineteenth century served up on a plate as a virtual delectable, as we relive and consume historical Others" lives as fictions—and fictions as real life" (Kohlke 184–85). This is partly a result of the tendency she discerns in neo-Victorian texts to provide an "accumulation of incongruous elements—according to whichever aspect of the present the past's adaptive reuse is intended to reflect or illuminate" (172). Many of the examples of neo-Victorian poetry introduced below could be critiqued in this manner, yet in its often indirect and challenging forms, neo-Victorian poetry is perhaps less direct in its methods and aims than this, and as a result can be seen as more generative if less immediately satisfactory.

The chapter is organised in two parts: The first will provide an overview of key interventions in neo-Victorian poetry. The second will consider the neo-Victorian "found poem" (in a definition that is again fairly broad) as a form which demonstrates the generative potential of writing poetry about the nineteenth century.

NEO-VICTORIAN POEMS

In spring 1995 issue of *Victorian Poetry*, the pre-eminent journal dedicated to that form of writing, a letter to the editor was reproduced and unusually given pride of place before the editor's introduction, presenting some new discoveries by a nineteenth-century poet, Christabel LaMotte. The majority of readers of the journal would likely be aware that this was part of the postmodern game being played at the time by A. S. Byatt, whose inventions these poems are, the fictional work of a poet from her then-recent novel *Possession*, presented in a letter by another fictional character, Maud Mitchell-Bailey (eagle-eyed readers would note that she seems to have married the novel's other late twentieth-century protagonist after the book finished). Despite Byatt's pastiches of aspects of Victorian verse being highly accomplished, it is hard to see many readers of *Victorian Poetry* being unaware of the provenance of the poems, since their "Victorian" author is otherwise unmentioned in the journal's index and is in fact revealed as a fictional character in the editor's introduction. This speaks both to the near-immediate impact of *Possession* at the time of its

publication on not just contemporary literature but also Victorian poetry; this is demonstrated by the ease with which the poetry therein could be both mistaken for actual nineteenth-century verse and also assimilated into the canon of Victorian studies more generally. Byatt drew primarily on the poetry of Robert Browning in creating the poems of her fictional, canonical poet, Randolph Henry Ash, and the measured iambic lines and often complex vocabulary are well-handled. The poems of Christabel LaMotte, the more obscure of the two, are perhaps less convincing, in part because they are modelled on a more idiosyncratic and less characteristically Victorian poet, Emily Dickinson. For instance, in addition to Byatt's LaMotte poems being frequently hyphenated, "hearts may tap like loaded bombs" (229) is very similar to Dickinson's "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—" (2018 [1929], 1184).

In drawing on Robert Browning for the poetry of the more famous of her two fictional poets, Byatt was both adhering to literary history but also—maybe less obviously—performing her preference in verse in that she claimed that it is "no good ... trying to claim that Elizabeth Barrett Browning is anywhere near as good a poet as Robert" (quoted in Wachtel 1993, 85). It is undoubtedly the case that the default form of the neo-Victorian poem, until fairly recently, has been the Browningsque dramatic monologue. This mirrors the convention in neo-Victorian prose fiction in the forms of the earlier writings being knowingly replicated, with the 1000 pages of Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (1999), complete with Tennyson-derived title, the clearest example of this kind of self-conscious formal inspiration.

There have been relatively few directly neo-Victorian collections of poetry, in their entirety and form. The clearest examples are Richard Howard's 1969 *Untitled Subjects* and Anthony Thwaite's 1980 *Victorian Voices*, a short collection of dramatic monologues voiced by Victorian characters, mostly drawn from history. Thwaite noted that this was "the book [of his that] people like" (1999, 51), yet critical responses have been mixed, with Merk claiming the poems therein are "what Browning's masterpieces would sound like had they been written by a lesser poet," and are thus double parodies, both of Victorian culture, but also a mockery of Browning himself (85, 90). In my own work on Thwaite, I see the poems, while clearly an example of Kohlke's cake-having, as rather more sympathetic to the characters they're drawing. Ruth Padel's 2009 book-length *Darwin: A Life in Poems* is not as clearly indebted to Victorian verse in its form as Thwaite's collection, but it would nonetheless be remiss not to mention it as probably the other most well-known neo-Victorian poetry collection. The same is true in terms of non-Victorian form of *Ada Unseen* (2019), by Frances Presley, a collection of experimental poems loosely organised by associations with Ada Lovelace, and *Loom* by Sarah Gridley (2013), which responds in a very non-Victorian form to Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott."

The most widely circulated neo-Victorian poems are unquestionably dramatic monologues. Richard Howard's 1995 "Nikolaus of Mardruz to his Master Ferdinand, Count of Tyrol, 1565" (2018 [1999], 1864) is included in the *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, stalwart of countless University reading lists,

and is a direct response, in the same form, to Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" (its epigraph as given in the *Anthology* claims it as "A tribute to Robert Browning," though this is not replicated in his collection *Inner Voices* (2007, 347)). In the poem, which snakes down the pages, the speaker is the fictional addressee of the Victorian poem, who reveals that the artistic treasures described therein are poor quality (the portrait of the duchess evidence only of "a mountebank's/proficiency" (2018 [1999], 1867, lines 141–42)). The supposedly impeccable rhetoric and control of Browning's speaker have been completely seen through, with his implicit claim of killing his former Duchess "no more of a menace / than the rest of his rodomontade" (1868, lines 190–91). The power plays in the Victorian text are exposed as easily overcome; so the dowry discussed at the end of Browning's poem will be provided in instalments relying on the new Duchess' continuing good health, likely only necessary for a few years as the Duke is "no longer young" (1867, line 167). The poem is entertaining on its own, with the pomposity and bluster of the ageing Duke openly mocked, but a knowledge of the earlier Browning poem is essential for a full understanding. This makes it very much of a piece with other 1960s neo-Victorian texts, perhaps most notably Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), yet in a sense its neo-Victorianism is at one remove given the poem's setting in the Renaissance, just like Browning's self-consciously historically distanced poem.

Howard also produced a collection entitled *Untitled Subjects* in 1969 which again requires a fair amount of knowledge of literary and political history on the reader's part, and which might well have provided a model for Thwaite. Its dramatic monologues are titled by year of their voicing and are spoken by mostly real-life nineteenth-century voices, with some speakers slightly less clearly defined (for instance, we're told in the notes which preface the collection that the speaker of the poem "1864" is "probably Thackeray ... though there is no record of Thackeray having had a son" (1969, n.p.). Howard originally intentionally half-observed the identities of the speakers in collection. The poem "1851," for instance, was originally titled "John Ruskin: a Message from Denmark Hill," though the collection's notes identify the poems' speakers and appear before the poems, as opposed to Thwaite's which appear at its end. The tone of the collection is in general slightly less ostentatiously strange when compared with Thwaite's, the speakers chosen more for the ironies and resonances of their situations than their nineteenth-century oddness. But both Thwaite and Howard share something in the tone of their work, which is very clearly related back to the style and patterns of Robert Browning in particular, and which rewards a generous if nonetheless slightly patronising view of the nineteenth century (though maybe not its poetry, which is generally deferred to by both writers in their adoption of its forms and tone).

That the dramatic monologue is a pre-eminent neo-Victorian form is to have been expected, given its centrality to the canonically remembered Victorian corpus of poetry. Isobel Armstrong's concept of the "double poem" (1993, 13) as characteristic of Victorian verse (including but not limited to dramatic monologues) is easily adapted to comprise neo-Victorian dramatic

monologues, too. The double poem is “a deeply sceptical form” which “dramatizes relationships of power”; such poems provide a “representation of representation” (13–16). This definition, suffused in belatedness, could easily describe poems such as Howard’s, and other dramatic monologues voicing nineteenth-century figures, for instance Carol Ann Duffy’s “Mrs Darwin.” Like much post-Victorian writing about famous Victorian figures, this poem undercuts the self-seriousness of the Great Men whose legacies dominate histories of the age; on a trip to the Zoo in 1852, the titular speaker says to “Him” with the capital letter highlighting the reverence afforded this secular saint, “Something about that Chimpanzee over there reminds me of you” (Duffy 1999, 20, lines 2–3). Duffy’s suggestion here is not only that Darwin’s wife was perhaps amusingly cruel, but that she was also, possibly unwittingly, the source of the theories he went on to develop throughout the 1850s, a clear dramatization of power here, to return to Armstrong’s theories.

A focus on power can also be seen in more recent monologues. Rosie Miles’ 2015 poem “Wragg,” for instance, voices a figure mentioned in Matthew Arnold’s “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” who strangled her young illegitimate child. She has been told that, “Mr Arnold pities me,” and she reflects on, after her execution, how only her name will remain:

Wragg. Sally Wragg. Silly Wragg. Stupid fucking
cunt of a Wragg. Tomorrow at eight
I’ll stand on that trap and think of England
and I defy you to look me in the eye
you English men. Look me in the eye. (Miles 14, lines 55–59)

This fits the model of much neo-Victorian writing, with its inclusion of profanities and revisiting of—and giving life to—a figure who is only a name in the nineteenth-century text which inspired the poem and, in this case, whose “hideous” name is dwelt on in detail by the Victorian author, too (Arnold 1993 [1864], 40). The direct appeal to the reader owes a debt to the direct address to the fictional audience in Barrett Browning’s “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” which is also a poem about a mother who has murdered her child; in this indirect allusion, Miles here suggests a patriarchal mistreatment of women that crosses nineteenth-century borders, but also the inherent humanity of the names invoked for their “hideousness” by Victorian intellectuals—the founders of the academic study of English literature.

Aside from the book-length collections mentioned above, a standout neo-Victorian sequence of poems is Mick Imlah’s “Afterlives of the Poets,” which appears at the end of his 2008 collection *The Lost Leader*. This sequence comprises two extended poems about Victorian poets, “In Memoriam Alfred Lord Tennyson” (first published, in slightly different form, in 1992), and “B. V.” (concerning the Scottish poet James Thomson), as well as a brief, breath-taking final note which Imlah’s recently opened archive suggests was written in one sitting in the *Time Literary Supplement* offices. Imlah’s archive shows that his

elegy for Tennyson was always intended to begin by adopting the *In Memoriam* stanza initially, but even there takes direct issue with the titular concept of “memory,” opening with “No one remembers you at all” (2010, 115, line 1). The full stop, in the first line of the poem, is a nod to the expansive use the Victorian Laureate makes of his signature stanzaic form, Imlah immediately arresting the forward momentum of the poem and demonstrating that, much as he knows the potential of the form, he will not necessarily be deferring to the Victorian’s authority. This becomes clearer as the poem progresses; Imlah, inspired in part by Henry James’ recollection of “the full, the monstrous demonstration that Tennyson was not Tennysonian” (James 1956, 591), has his poem’s narrator accosted by a figure who could either be a Tennyson impersonator or a ghost, who outlines a purgatory of Victorian “Great Men” with figures declining from view over time, including Arthur Hallam, subject of *In Memoriam*, who “but for my friendship his luminous half-life would choke underground” (Imlah 2010, 118, line 69). The poem’s interest in the afterlife concludes with “Tennyson at a séance” who does not receive the answer he wants when asking, “Are you my boy Lionel?” (168, lines 85 and 93). That Imlah knows the intimate details of Tennyson’s life (this is a reference to Tennyson’s son, who died young) and can infuse such a parodic poem with tenderness at its end is testament to his unusually close engagement with Victorian poetry, which is derived in part from his unfinished postgraduate studies on the Victorian epic, and follows on from his early poem “The Zoologist’s Bath” where a fictional Victorian scientist claims, partly via biblical “evidence,” that man is in fact descending back into the state of sea-creature.

Other responses in verse to Victorian literature are similarly direct and comic. Following the tradition begun by Richard Howard as discussed above, Roger McGough’s 14-line poem “The Revenge of My Last Duchess” retreads Browning’s famous monologue, but this time giving the Duke’s narrative again, in brief, couplet form, only in this telling, the Count directly admits to killing not just the Duchess but also Frà Pandolf who painted her portrait. This turns out to be unwise, however, as the Duke ends his monologue: “You cry vengeance. I beg, sir, what harm have I done? / Frà Pandolf! Oh god, I see him now, you are his son!” (2003, 447, lines 13–14). The poem is not only a comic revision of Browning’s original; it also bears the influence of other Browning dramatic monologues such as “Mr Sludge, the Medium,” (1864) where the fictional audience has a part—in that case, also violent—to play.

Anthony Hecht’s “The Dover Bitch” also tells a famous Victorian poem from a different perspective, where the fictional female addressee of Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” (1867) is imagined as bored and unfaithful, responding to Arnold’s desire—slightly reworded—to “Try to be true to me, / And I’ll do the same for you” by saying “one or two unprintable things,” her desire for Arnold (and for a trip to France) unfulfilled, before Hecht’s speaker tells us that he is conducting an on-off affair with her:

We have a drink
 And I give her a good time, and perhaps it's a year
 Before I see her again, but there she is,
 Running to fat, but dependable as they come. (1967, 17, lines 3–4, 22, 25–28)

Jokes about sexual desire left unfulfilled by self-important Victorian men are hardly uncommon in neo-Victorian writing, but the misogynist term “bitch” in the title and the casually unpleasant discussion of the woman’s body here are hard to stomach; the poem can however be read fruitfully as a self-conscious critique (or possibly unconscious example) of the limitations of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, where women are still seen as objects, and whose speaker, in identifying the frustration of the object of “Dover Beach,” cannot avoid objectifying her in the end as well.

A more expansive and moving return in verse to a Victorian text can be found in Sasha Dugdale’s “The Ballad of Mabel” (2017),¹ which is directly inspired by a throwaway remark in *Alice in Wonderland*: “her eyes filled with tears again as she went on, ‘I must be Mabel after all’” (Carroll 1998 [1865], 19). This is from an early section of the novel, where Alice is wondering if she has changed into one of her peers from school. Mabel comes to mind because “I know all sorts of things, and she, oh! she knows such a very little” (18). Alice’s inability to remember a poem convinces her of this potential change, resulting in the phrase Dugdale uses for her epigraph, which is followed by Alice reflecting on her classmate’s “poky little house, and ... next to no toys to play with” (19). As in neo-Victorian texts such as *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the poem provides a fleshed-out backstory for a previously overlooked minor character (if we can even call Mabel this, so fleeting is the reference); it is perhaps no coincidence that the poem is found in Dugdale’s collection *Joy*, whose title poem concerns Catherine Blake, wife of William. While Lewis Carroll was clearly not entirely onside with Alice’s disparaging description of Mabel and her house, the reference designed to demonstrate the breadth but also the limits of Alice’s imagination, nonetheless Dugdale exposes the limitations of the worldview presented in this seminal Victorian text, interspersing a semi-internal monologue by Mabel with quotations, in italics, from Alice herself. Dugdale gives Mabel a very unhappy biography, with a family member killed in the Crimean War and another seemingly guilty of sexually assaulting her. So much, so stereotypically neo-Victorian (if very well done), yet the poem’s ending hints at an imagination the equal of Alice’s:

Alice has a hoop and a man takes her boating
 And her tea is ready on the table
 Alice once had a dream she was floating
 In tears, and feared she was Mabel.

The river is quiet, it’s late and dusk
 Mabel is wetting her toes

And watching the fish swallow her crust
 In gold little O's.
 She'll catch it, she thinks, if the splashes are heard
 Or if she's seen—
 But here she can lie in her spreading skirt
 And dream her own dream. (24–25, lines 33–44)

The poem maintains a shaky rhyme scheme in this style throughout, reflecting its unpolished protagonist, as does its mostly straightforward vocabulary; but the force of the last line, in its juxtaposition with the earlier reference to Alice's dreaming and implicit union of the two girls, suggests that the poem must be read not as a critique of Alice, but of Carrol himself—not only for imagining a heroine so capable of cruelty, but also for imposing his ideas as Alice Liddle's dreams, commemorated in literature for posterity; and, even more seriously, his paedophilia. Alice and Mabel are in fact united as the objects of sexual desire (and in Mabel's case, abuse) by family and adult friends of the family. Dugdale, too, has in another collection tackled head-on the centrality of another paedophile, Eric Gill, to twentieth-century art and design.

In providing an alternative narrative to one from a literary history dominated by men, Dugdale is here of a piece with earlier poets in the twentieth century, including Elizabeth Bishop, in her 1945 poem "The Gentleman of Shalott." In her version, rather than relying on a mirror to view the world, the mirror is in fact inserted into, or a part of, the body, where it is impossible to tell which is reflection and which is the real body of the gentleman, since there is a mirror "Somewhere along the line / Of what we call the spine" (Bishop 1980, 11, lines 1415). The poem ends, too, with another implicit comparison with the Lady of Tennyson's poem, where we are told that the Gentleman is not unhappy with his situation, and "wishes to be quoted as saying at present: / 'Half is enough'" (1980, 11, lines 43–44).

This is an allusion to Tennyson's Lady, who, prior to seeing Lancelot and being struck by her curse, says that she is "half-sick of shadows" (Tennyson 1969 [1832], 358, line 70). On seeing the Knight, she is permitted to see things directly, but doomed to die soon after; Bishop's Gentleman seems much happier with his life which, unlike the momentary glimpse in the earlier poem, is completely experienced half in reflection. This is not Bishop's only response in poetry to nineteenth-century verse; in the same 1945 collection, her first, she also includes a short response to Felicia Hemans' 1826 "Casabianca" which reflects ironically on its status as a piece often recited in schools, where "Love's the boy stood on the burning deck / trying to recite." "The boy stood on / the burning deck" (6, lines 1–3). This links her to other poets who situate their poetical responses to Victorian verse in the classroom, seemingly most often when writing about Hopkins. For instance, Kwame Dawes' 1995 "The English

Room,” where the poem’s speaker, who can be said to closely resemble Dawes, reminisces on past English lessons, when “Hopkins’s sprung verse, uncaged passion / in praise of God and colour, was our appropriated / tutor” (68, lines 7–9). This personal reminiscence of the vitality of Hopkins’ work can also be seen in Leontia Flynn’s poem “Gerard Manley Hopkins.” In a section of her collection *The Radio*, which is very personal, we read of her father who would, when hearing Hopkins’ name, “Would exercise the right / To revert to type. That is to say: devout; that is, proscriptive” (2017, 9, lines 2–3). The father in this poem refuses to countenance his children’s observations of “‘gay this’ and ‘gay that’” when discussing Hopkins, whose works have been widely read in a queer perspective in the last thirty or so years (9, line 5). Both Flynn and Dawes’ poems are self-conscious responses to Hopkins’ poetry and poetics, the unusual rhythms and enjambments, and the internal rhymes and half-rhymes demonstrating the enduring appeal of his style.

These personal responses suggest an enduring personal lyric quality to some poetic responses to Victorian verse, notwithstanding the postmodern questioning of the stability of the self and its performed quality. One of the most widely read poems which deals with the personal experience of the legacy of the Victorian is Sylvia Plath’s *Wuthering Heights*. While one always must exercise caution in claiming that the narrators of any poem are the poet, especially in verse post-1900, nonetheless Plath’s poem has been seen as a directly autobiographical account of a visit to Top Withens, the ruined farmhouse claimed as Emily Brontë’s inspiration for the location of the Earnshaw house in her novel; Heather Clark, a recent biographer of Plath, claimed that she and Ted Hughes “often hiked there over the moors in 1956 when they had blithely identified themselves with Cathy and Heathcliff” (2021, 665). Other than its title, however, the poem (published in 1961) does not refer directly to the novel, much as the stifling atmosphere of Plath’s landscapes might share something with the intensity and ultimately doomed romances of the earlier novel with “The sky leans on me, me, the one upright / Among all horizontals” (Plath 1985, 38, lines 37–38). The influence and endurance of this poem might be behind Leontia Flynn’s request, in “The Brunties: an Elegy”: “Let’s not have any more poems on the Brontës,” asking for a “reboot” to avoid “all that doom, / cod as their umlaut” (2017, 6, lines 1, 8, 7); this poem suggests a desire not just to avoid the clichés of the family being read via their untimely deaths, but also, more generally, of returns to the Victorian age which reinforce tired old literary narratives. Other ways in which the poem performs its novelty is its irreverent rhyming of the name Brontë with “*al dente* / gruel” (6, lines 3–4). Yet the poem itself is unable to avoid lingering on Emily near the point of death, as she “watched dance / the cherry tree, the Autumns sun’s low rays” (6, lines 12–13).

While Katrina Naomi’s pamphlet *Charlotte Bronte’s Corset* (2010) might provide some of the “poems on the Brontës” which Flynn expressed fatigue with, Naomi takes a similar stance, playfully rethinking the dominant narratives about the family and their memory. Written after Naomi had been

writer-in-residence at the Brontë Parsonage Museum, the poems therein have a consistently irreverent approach to the writers who inspired them and situate the poet (or, at least, a humorous performance of the figure of poet) as central to their action. For instance, in “Overnighter at the Brontë Parsonage Museum,” the poem’s speaker claims to hide behind the “Victorian frills” of a bed, where they wait until the “metal concertina / of shutter” closes, before eating sausages with the “two- / pronged fork” of the Reverend, and then “put on [his] stained white nightgown” (11, lines 7, 9–10, 18–19, 23). Many of the poems take this comic tone, recounting the strangeness of handling corsets, stockings, shoes, and childhood toys in an archive environment. The poems’ focus on such human ephemera has much in common with Virginia Woolf’s observation, in her novel *Night and Day*, that even the most learned and high-minded admirers of literature will be moved more often by their handling a writer’s pair of slippers, than a manuscript of a famous poem (Woolf 1992 [1919], 269). Naomi also demonstrates her own awareness of the vogue for positions such as the one she was granted at the Parsonage by writing a poem, “Ghosts,” which is not about the literal ghosts of the Brontës, but rather about the work of Sam Taylor-Wood, an earlier artist who exhibited at the Parsonage. Yet Naomi’s humorous focus on the modern-day experience of being a writer in residence does not preclude her own—again possibly fictitious—personal literary responses. As the protagonist of the “Overnighter” poem sleeps, we hear: “There’s no Cathy at the window, / And I dream of bad-boy Branwell” (2010, 11, lines 25–26). Naomi’s narrator might fail to experience the exact sensation of a character from *Wuthering Heights*, but nonetheless experiences her own haunting, this time a potential encounter with the “forgotten” Brontë sibling, Branwell.

Other poets have responded in a similarly playful way to nineteenth-century poetry in their own semi-autobiographical non-fiction. The poet Lisa Robertson, in her 2020 novel *The Baudelaire Fractal*, opens by presenting herself (or a version of herself) waking up one morning in the late twentieth century as the creator of all of Baudelaire’s poems; Susan Howe, in *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), creates a wide-ranging response both to previously overlooked aspects of Dickinson’s verse and also the position of women in the canon more generally.

As well as the contemporary dramatic monologue, poets have frequently and self-consciously returned to characteristic forms of nineteenth-century verse. See for instance Peter McDonald’s 2007 “*Quis Separabit*” (Latin for “Who will separate us?”), which as Matthew Campbell has noted, adopts the *In Memoriam* rhyme scheme (if not its indentations). Campbell suggests this is chosen in part thanks to its ability to contain “irreconcilables,” something which McDonald observed in Victorian rhyme: “parting and restoration, distance and proximity” (2017 [2007], 45). The accessible rhymes and short lines of Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* (1859) also inform poems in Clare Pollard’s 2011 collection, *Changeling*, where straightforward rhymes and fairy-tale settings conceal, as in Rossetti, sinister narratives of patriarchal

violence. Hollie McNish’s “A Response to ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’” (2015, the original of which dates from 1854) takes direct issue with the celebration of needless military death implicit in the Victorian’s “Honour the charge they made!” (Tennyson 1969 [1854], 1036, line 53) but nonetheless fully adopts Tennyson’s rhythms and phrasings in a poem which has, never to my knowledge, been transcribed. It is only available as a recorded performance.² The seemingly widespread knowledge of Victorian (and it must be said, usually Tennysonian) forms—especially “The Charge”—also provides a moment of comedy in the childhood memories of the protagonist of Paul Beatty’s 2015 Booker-winning novel, *The Sellout*, where, in the archly named fictitious neighbourhood of Los Angeles known as Dickens, a crack addict who is “hallucinating high on his own supply and Alfred Lord Tennyson’s brooding lyricism” (2016 [2015], 37) stands up on the bed of his truck, naked, and recites his poem “The Charge of the Light-Skinned Spade,” punctuating the reading with shots from his gun (a nod to the rhythm of Tennyson’s poem being an attempt to mimic the noise of horses in a charge). In his version, we hear of the “Olde English Eight Hundred,” named after a potent type of malt liquor, who ride “half a liter onward” (38). A S.W.A.T. team arrives, but cannot stop giggling, as the poet declaims, “Theirs not to reason what the fuck, / Theirs but to shoot and duck” (38). The poet is convinced by the protagonist’s father to hand over his gun and car keys, and is thus able to finish his recital prior to his arrest:

When can their shine and buzz fade?
 Oh the buckwild charge they made!
 All the motherfuckin’ world wondered.
 Respect the charge they made
 Respect the charge of the Light-skinned Spade
 The noble now empty Olde English Eight Hundred. (39)

In a review of the novel, Seth Colter Walls suggests that this passage thus “gives Tennyson partial credit for the birth of gangster rap” (2015, n.p.). Beatty might well know, however, that this poem is recited as part of the introduction to “What the Blood Clot,” a Method Man song from 1994. This African-American return to the nineteenth century can also be discerned in the work of Amanda Gorman (2021), as well as in the choice of nineteenth-century typography and costume (a loose-fitting Louis Vuitton white shirt with a white tied neck) in the 2022 “Mr Morale” live show by Kendrick Lamar.

THE NEO-VICTORIAN “FOUND POEM”

The above overview is inevitably partial, and there are many poets and poems who are not considered due to this chapter’s space constraints. What follows here is an account of a type of neo-Victorian poem—the “found poem”—which is not only a frequently returned to form of poetry considering

nineteenth-century subject matter, but also demonstrates a way to engage in a fresh, but nonetheless “authentic,” manner with the complexities of the Victorian age, in verse. “Found poetry” excerpts from prior works, altering them somewhat, adding and deleting text, and producing a collage that evokes new meaning from prior works, like Victorian poetry.

Tom Phillips’ ongoing work, *A Humument* (1966–) has been considered neo-Victorian by several critics, but not as poetry. This text—typically seen either as a work of visual art or as a “treated novel”—has been written about specifically as neo-Victorian by Christine Ferguson (2013) and Tammy Lai-Ming Ho (2015). The text takes the form of a copy of William Hurrell Mallock’s 1892 novel *A Human Document*, with each page radically treated and transformed, words obscured, images interposed, and the text manipulated in many other ways as well. As such, despite usually still being described as novel by critics, it can be seen as a work of poetry, in the tradition of both William Blake’s illustrated texts,³ but also because of its participation in the late twentieth-century tradition of generating new literary texts—specifically, poetry—through the erasure of parts of an earlier text.

Phillips notes his inspirations were John Cage and William Burroughs (Phillips 2016, 372), but the approach of *A Humument* to its source text differs considerably from their approaches to “found” material, and Phillips’ work is noted as a key influence (and potentially the very first instance) in the tradition of poetical erasure, for instance by Janet Holmes in her explanatory text for her 2009 book *The MS of My Kin*. Holmes’ title is itself a product of erasure, reduced from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, with a self-aware nod to the source material via the phrase “MS”; this is, of course, a “manuscript” composed entirely of words originally written in a different form by a different person. Holmes takes poems written by Dickinson in 1861 and 1862—the first two years of the American Civil War—and erases parts of them, in what Holmes calls an act of “Oulipian restriction” (n.d., n.p.) in order to create new poems, that are often voiced by real-life figures involved in the Iraq War. Thus Holmes builds on the models of Phillips, and of Ronald Johnson, who erased sections of the first four books of *Paradise Lost* to create his 1977 book *Radi Os*. Holmes says of her technique that it allows Dickinson’s original word “Transport” for example, to be read as designating a literal military vehicle while still retaining her original meaning, luminescent and now tinged with irony, underneath.

We can see such a technique, with words resonating with both nineteenth-century and twenty-first century meaning, in “1861.4. (198–209)” where we read:

a fine invention
Emergency

more distinctly seen—
the surge (Holmes 2009, 7, lines 9–12)

The word “surge” here refers to the controversial 2007 increase in the number of US troops active in Iraq. Holmes’ book simultaneously reminds us of the political context in which Dickinson was writing—few would consider any of her works “war poems”—but also, in making poetry which was already sparse even more skeletal, allows the phrases and words which are retained to resonate further in the context of so much blankness. This affords an opportunity for a direct dialogue between past and present, using only the words of the literature of the past—a more direct version of neo-Victorian art than can be found in most other forms.

One other book-length neo-Victorian poetry collection is *Pictures from Mayhew* (2005), by John Seed, along with a second volume that follows the same format, *That Barrikins* (2007). According to Seed’s foreword:

Every word in the pages that follow is drawn from Henry Mayhew’s writings on London published in the *Morning Chronicle* from 1849 to 1850, then in 63 editions of his own weekly paper, *London Labour and the London Poor* between December 1850 and February 1852 and then in the four-volume work of the same title. (7)

This situates the collections very much in the tradition of “found poetry,” a form which can broadly be defined as poetry which takes words, phrases, and more from pre-existing sources (not necessarily poetical) and re-presents them, often amended in some way, as “poetry.” Marjorie Perloff uses the term “reframe” and also links the popularity of this form to “the media world of our moment” (2012, 503–4). Seed’s re-presentation of the print media of the nineteenth century is part of a trend in “found poetry” to return to the first age of mass media in verse. To demonstrate the power of Seed’s approach, in the first section of the poem we read:

When I goes
home I just
smokes a pipe
& goes to
bed that’s all (Seed 13, lines 61–5)

Seed does not name the voice; the words are taken directly from “The Maimed Irish Crossing-Sweeper” in *London Labour and the London Poor* (Mayhew 1861, 2, 494). The space given to these words, which are simply included as a single-sentence paragraph in the tiny font of the Mayhew, allows the reader to dwell on the situation here, and in the other excerpts provided by Seed, the words thus resonating more strongly, shorn of context. Seed also changes the word “and” to an ampersand here and elsewhere, and a comma after “pipe” in this extract, making the passages appear as if in note form, encouraging the reader to understand the poems as unguarded personal statements in unrhymed lyric snippets. Seed is well aware of the issue of veracity in

Mayhew—even if, as Robert Douglas-Fairhurst notes, there is “no proof that he tampered with the evidence” he and his team collected on the impoverished inhabitants of London, their seemingly verbatim accounts of their lives were nonetheless, collected, edited, and presented anew by a Westminster School-educated journalist (Douglas-Fairhurst 2010, xxvii). By representing the words of Mayhew’s characters in this way, Seed is demonstrating both the artistry of the provision of voice in works claiming to be verbatim, as well as asking his readers to question what they had previously seen as “voice” in poetry about the nineteenth century; that is, the carefully crafted dramatic monologues of Browning and Tennyson, among others. Seed’s collections do, however, give the impression that each section is voiced by a single character from Mayhew, when often the poems in such sections are taken from various voices in the earlier text, again underlining the shaping hand of the poet. This means that the speaker above could easily be seen as the same of an earlier part in the same section, describing carrying “coals in sacks” (Seed 2005, 12, line 24), the words of a coalbacker in Mayhew (3, 243), and indeed of the speaker immediately before the section quoted above (a scurf labourer (2, 237), who says:

I hadn’t a rag left to my back
 everything was worn to bits
 in such hard work
 & then I got the sack. (Seed 13, lines 57–60)

One can also see here Seed consciously choosing a section with a rhyme, which at once demonstrates the poetry in the voices of the previously voiceless, but also his own centrality to the choice and organisation of the words on the page, like Mayhew before him.

Seed’s books (2005 and 2007) are perhaps the most disciplined instances of neo-Victorian collections of “found poetry,” yet despite their directness, they are nonetheless intensely self-aware. This self-awareness of the ultimate fictionality of the verbatim media being used as source material can also be found in Ciaran Carson’s 2003 collection *Breaking News*;⁴ in several poems therein, Carson reworks newspaper reports from the Crimean War by William Howard Russell, to whom the collection is dedicated. Carson’s collection was published on March 27, 2003, seven days after the Iraq war began, and thus was likely composed in the context of the September 11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent war in Afghanistan, along with the media coverage of these conflicts. Sections are taken verbatim from Russell, or else, as the poet notes, Carson has “changed them only slightly to accommodate rhyme and rhythm” (74). It would be wrong to suggest that this is plagiarism—the words from the nineteenth century are given a chance to resonate, their impact and significance accentuated by the space on the page surrounding them. We can see such power in the poems “The Indian Mutiny” and “The War Correspondent,” the latter organised in sections named after battles from the Crimean war. Carson’s return to Howard’s reporting is in part a postcolonial act, with Carson

returning to the same source material as Tennyson did for “The Charge of the Light Brigade”, whose rhymes were inspired by the phrase “some hideous blunder” in an early report on that failed assault (Morton 2018, 129) in order to create “new” war poetry from the stance of a Northern Irish Catholic who grew up in a city, Belfast, with roads named after famous imperial battles.⁵ The poetry, like Seed’s and Holmes’, derives its power from the focus afforded by the reorganisation of the words; while some poems admittedly have longer lines, a sense of this impact can be found:

Sergeant Talbot
 Had his head

 Swept off
 by a

 round-shot
 yet for half
 a furlong

 more
 the body kept
 the saddle

 horse and rider
 charging on

 regardless. (Carson 2003c, 26, lines 1–13)

The interventions Carson makes, as he himself has noted, alter the rhythm, rhyme, and style of the original text while trying to retain the visceral details of violence and, towards the end of the collection, looting, which he wants to highlight as both conflict-specific (hence the names of battles and locations being prominent) but also innate to all war (hence the title of the above poem, simply “War”).

Other poets amend their “found” material still further. In recent years, Andrew Motion has experimented with verbatim and found poetry, including the sequence “Peace Talks,” made up of several poems “based on conversations with soldiers and their relatives” (Motion 2015, 117). Motion says of his approach to such “found” material that the poems “have their origins in other people’s books or words, and often borrow from and/or adapt them” (Motion 2015, 117). Two such poems in his recent collections have topics related to the nineteenth century—“The Conclusion of Joseph Turrill” (from *Peace Talks*, 2015) and “Cecelia Tennyson” (in *The Cinder Path*, 2009). The latter is taken in part, as Motion acknowledges, from Sir Charles Tennyson and Hope Dyson’s family biography *The Tennysons: Background to Genius*; it was first published in a 2009 issue of *The Reader* magazine commemorating Tennyson’s bicentenary,

wherein Motion noted that the poet from history he'd most like to meet is "Tennyson" (2009b, 24), demonstrating that he likely had the legacy and memory of the poet in mind that year. The poem, about the "eleventh of the twelve Tennyson children," is set "in the beginning of the new century" (2009a, 41, lines 10–12), and is voiced by a friend of Zilly Lushington, daughter of Cecelia Tennyson, who recalls the woman remembered by Tennyson and Dyson as "eccentric," in very old age, at Park House, near Maidstone. Motion focuses on the way that, as Tennyson and Dyson say, "fate had dealt harshly" with Cecelia (Tennyson and Dyson 1974, 168, 170), as his character "stopped / to stroke the bust of her first-born Edmund" (Motion 2009a, 41, lines 18–19); he died at 13, and she lost two other children at the ages of 19 and 21, with Zilly her only surviving child. Motion repeats the anecdote from Tennyson and Dyson's book, where Cecelia would go out into the gardens of their house after tea for 20 minutes before returning and

always saying to Zilly, if it were winter-time,
In a deep, complaining and mournful voice,
"Very dark tonight," to which Zilly replied
"Of course it is, my dear. The sun has gone down." (2009a, 42, lines 37–40)

While other sections of this poem are added to substantially by Motion, the ending is almost directly taken from the Tennyson and Dyson book, with only a couple of words amended (Tennyson and Dyson 1974, 175). The focus on lonely members of the upper middle class who, despite her own tentative literary efforts is only remembered because of the surname she had before her marriage, suggests a similar interest on Motion's part, on the impact of literary legacies on their otherwise "obscure" relatives, as demonstrated by Motion's friend Alan Hollinghurst in his 2011 novel *The Stranger's Child* (which also, obliquely, considers Tennyson's legacy), not least the legacy of the Victorian age, living on into the twentieth.

The later examples of "found" neo-Victorian poetry above demonstrate that there is more to the genre than the politicised interrogation of mass media as suggested in Perloff's definition of "found" verse. Motion's sources are neither straightforwardly literary, nor taken from news reporting, and his manipulations of the autobiographical sources he has found demonstrate the capacity for non-poetical memoir to take on, via reorganisation and (limited) rephrasing, the form of lyric, and the dramatic monologue. Motion is undoubtedly self-aware in this act, taking words from a marginal nineteenth-century figure, and repurposing them as the most characteristic Victorian poetical form.

The tensions in the neo-nineteenth-century "found" poem are also demonstrated by Amanda Gorman, whose 2021 poem "The Soldiers (or Plummer)" combines the prose diaries of Roy Underwood Plummer, an African-American soldier in the Great War with Gorman's own verse where she "imagine[s] new writings" (2021, 116), and in doing so, draws on the brevity of his diaries by responding via haiku and other minimalist forms. Gorman has chosen his

diaries in part because they reflect on the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, and thus correspond to the COVID-19 pandemic she was experiencing at the time of writing, and she expands on the “found poetry” tradition by presenting this poem on scans of blank lined pages of Plummer’s diaries, using a font to mimic the style of a typewriter. It is hard in places to discern whose words we are reading, despite Gorman’s outlining of her own method in a footnote.

What these “found” poems share, to varying extents, is a self-awareness about their own created nature; and self-awareness is undoubtedly one of the key characteristics of most neo-Victorian writing. However, the neo-Victorian “found poem” is a form which, while various in execution, offers truly generative potential in its demonstration of the ways in which nineteenth-century texts might be directly adapted, changed, and repurposed in ways which bear the hand of the contemporary artist much less clearly than anything prose fiction, drama, television or film can offer. If all these texts are mediated and self-aware, then the neo-Victorian “found poem” is a form of writing which provides access to nineteenth-century voices which—if still illusory—feels far less mediated, and (whatever its intent) far less indirect, than almost all other neo-Victorian forms can provide.

This chapter is inevitably a partial account of the various forms, styles, concerns, and contexts of what is a thriving, if inevitably non-central, part of both contemporary poetry and of neo-Victorianism. With this, we can see the potential of the neo-Victorian “found” poem to avoid the pastiche and parody that so frequently characterise other forms of neo-Victorian production. If it is undoubtedly the case that “no-one remembers [the Victorians] at all,” directly; nonetheless, neo-Victorian poetry and in particular the neo-Victorian “found” poem offers a way to revisit the nineteenth century and avoiding the “cakeism” of so much neo-Victorian production.⁶

NOTES

1. Reprinted by kind permission of Carcanet Press, Manchester, UK.
2. See Morton (2018).
3. It is not entirely a coincidence that the book was found at a shop on Peckham Rye, not far from where William Blake claimed to have seen an angel.
4. By kind permission of the author’s Estate and The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, Oldcastle, County Meath, Ireland.
5. See Morton (2018).
6. With thanks to Matthew Campbell, Emily Critchley, Robert Selby, Cherry Smyth, and Daniel Weston for their suggestions.

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