

Charles LaPorte *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011. Pp. xi + 286. ISBN 978-0-8139-3158-6 Hardcover: \$45.00

When the accepted virtues of a culture lose their relevance, their death is most often painfully prolonged. A culture would rather sublimate these virtues into idealized personages where they can still survive in a permanent vegetative state, in stale pages and fading memories. Egalitarianism thwarted the rein of white, Protestant America: hence, the judgmental “Jeezus” of the Bible Belt, a crude rendering of the altruistic Jesus. Modern weaponry thwarted the strength and valor of the chivalric hero: hence, the superhero.

Victorian literature, at least according to the common understanding, would appear to similarly fit this cultural pattern. For most in the present day, Victorianism evokes something akin to Twain’s Emmeline Grangerford in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a maudlin recluse composing trite poetry from obituaries and saintly sketches of women mourning over dead birds. With its stifling chastity, religious dogmatism, and metaphysical fixation upon death and immortality, it is among the most relentlessly caricatured eras in the Western canon. However, it is not so much these embodied characteristics in and of themselves that warrant such parody. It is rather the backdrop of scientific advancement and unabashed critical inquiry against which these characteristics are set that render Victorian literature as a desperate, and at times quixotic, attempt to preserve faith in an era of post-Enlightenment, Darwinian doubt.

However, in his work, *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible*, Charles LaPorte finds this conventional view of the “Victorian association of poetry and religion as a form of *compensation*” to be a drastic oversimplification (7). While he concedes that Victorian poetry is, to a certain extent, a reaction to the modern hermeneutic of doubt, this reaction is not so much to the outright apostates as to the well-intentioned heretics, collectively labeled as the “higher criticism.” Figures of this school, while questioning the historicity of canonized scripture, remained devoted to their respective denominations out of an appreciation for the poetic cogency of sacred text. LaPorte argues accordingly that the five Victorian poets featured in his work—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Arthur Hugh Clough, Robert Browning, and George Eliot—interpret this emphasis of the poetic over the factual in sacred text as an invitation to an open canon, in which they can embrace the scriptures while creating new scripture through their craft.

LaPorte devotes his introduction to the origins of this aestheticism in the reading of inspired text. These sources, as he demonstrates, are bifurcated in their intention: while some carry the aforementioned rationalism that undermined biblical infallibility, others are antithetical or otherwise indifferent to these progressive movements. In the former case, German intellectuals of Göttingen University—most notably David Strauss and Ludwig von Feuerbach—were among the first to dispute the historicity of the Bible due to its fragmentary, and in some cases contradictory, structure. In the latter case, the merging of poetry with religion in large part arose out of an increasing effort to disassociate poetry with the novel, which was still considered an inferior medium by most 19th century intellectuals despite burgeoning dissension. In a last ditch effort to maintain the sanctity of poetry, the Victorians embraced a view largely championed by the theologian George Gilfillan that portrayed the likes of King David and St. John as “biblical bards.” To equate poetry with religious truth such that “they [were] effectively synonymous” would virtually render it a sin to allow poetry to mingle with “dusty prose,” as Gilfillian himself terms it, under the blanket classification of “literature.” However, what is particularly surprising about this effort is that as much as Victorianism is a conservative reaction

to the progressive egalitarianism and Byronic sensuality of romanticism, its poets derive the opposition to the novel in part from this preceding movement. “Romantic poetic theory,” as LaPorte points out, “revolted against the burgeoning world of modern letters,” including “the rising of status of the novel,” amongst the other distilling forces of rationalistic thought (11).

Of course, such an attempt to preserve poetic hierarchy does not come without unintended ramifications. In particular, to equate poetry with religion is to inevitably subject the Bible to aesthetic evaluation. As Rowland Williams states in the anthology *Essays and Reviews* (one of LaPorte’s most cited examples of the higher criticism, and one “whose notoriety,” he claims, “eclipsed even that of *The Origin of the Species*” among contemporary Evangelicals), “the passage of the Red Sea...may be interpreted with the latitude of poetry” (7, 9). “It was Williams’s ‘latitude,’” LaPorte comments, “that smacked of heresy” (9). He rightly points out this “latitude” as a legitimate concern for stalwart Evangelicals, too, considering that it would allow someone like Nietzsche to famously claim later on, “It was subtle of God to learn Greek when he wished to become an author—and not to learn it better” (Nietzsche 2000, 276).

While few Victorians would have agreed with Nietzsche had he been among the Göttingen crowd of those times, it still became necessary to clarify that religion was poetry *at its best*, a claim that makes LaPorte’s analysis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning particularly surprising. She, of all the poets, is the most unlikely figure for LaPorte’s model, considering that “she resisted the most radical conclusions of the higher critics,” going so far as to affirm “the much-disputed creation account of Genesis” (24). Moreover, her early work—LaPorte particularly references “Earth and Her Praisers”—sets herself as a Christian even against poets, as if the latter were only seeking praise for themselves in their praise of creation. Thus, her oeuvre presents a contradiction between this Christian modesty and the echoes of Chateaubriand and Swedenborg heard later in Aurora Leigh’s haughty self-conception as a “prophet-poet.”

A greater irony is observed in LaPorte’s analysis of George Eliot. Despite the plethora of accolades received for the novel *Middlemarch*—which is still her most widely renowned work—she seems to hold greater ambitions for her lesser known poetry. As a translator of Strauss and Feuerbach, she undoubtedly carries the intentions of the higher criticism in her cited creed to Harriet Beecher Stowe for “religion...to be modified—‘developed,’ according to the dominant phrase” (213-4). “Though skeptical of the Christian afterlife,” as LaPorte further points out, Eliot still seeks an afterlife in poetic immortality, a desire made explicit in her most recognized poem, “O May I Join the Choir Invisible” (218-9). It is a desire “to make undying music in the world,” something a novel cannot fulfill since it is, according to Eliot, “more profitable than verse only in a ‘worldly sense’” (203).

While both Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning also seek this immortality in their poetry, they exhibit far less skepticism than Eliot toward the biblical scriptures, even in the face of debunked historicity. Both poets, in fact, convey an intention in their work to divorce the criterion of a coherent narrative in a text from its inspirational status (81, 159). Just as Fellini would later accomplish in film with Petronius’ *Satyricon*, Tennyson revives the fragmented Arthurian legend in *The Idylls of the King* without so much as bothering to unify the accounts into a consistent whole. Browning goes so far as to assert a converse relationship between inspiration and coherence in his *Rashomon*-esque *The Ring and the Book*, such that its speaker claims, “Fancy with fact is just one fact the more”; Browning expects his readers to “meet [him] halfway” and fancy with his spurious amalgamation of facts, constructing their own meaning from the text (158-9). Thus, through an observation of the disparate accounts in both of these texts, LaPorte goes beyond instantiating his thesis to provide potential early counterexamples to

the Bakhtinian generalization of all poetry as monologic, though his work only alludes to Bakhtin in other contexts.

However, LaPorte observes the consequence of this dialogic model in the work of Arthur Hugh Clough. Clough is arguably the most explicit devotee to the higher criticism. He is, in fact, probably why LaPorte began researching the links between Victorianism and higher criticism in the first place, considering that one of the poems discussed is entitled “Epi-Strauss-ium,” after—you guessed it—David Strauss (LaPorte unfortunately misspells the work “Epi-Strauss-ism,” possibly a bit too entranced with his own wordplay). Clough specifically advocates an open religious canon, such that “every rule of conduct, every maxim, every usage of life and society, must be admitted” (151). However, if everything is to be admitted into this canon—just as if everyone were to be admitted into Eliot’s “choir invisible”—there would be no distinction and thus no incentive to contribute to it. LaPorte observes this realized consequence of Clough’s theory to be his ultimate downfall, crippling his efforts to finish his magnum opus *Dipsychus*, much less begin on its Faustian sequel (151-2).

Whether these poets’ efforts were ultimately successful or not, LaPorte is ultimately successful in reevaluating their intentions as far more respectable than the reactionary zeal for which they are often stigmatized. While the reading is awfully dry at times, it is partially redeemed by the multifaceted sources interlaced into the work, which includes the poets’ correspondence, numerous citations from the higher criticism, trace graphics (including a portrait of Barrett Browning that perfectly captures the “poet-prophet” image of Aurora Leigh), and meticulously close—at times, too close—readings of selected poems (LaPorte is probably the only person who would glean “parent’s grief” from an interruption in iambic meter) (211). These minor flaws aside, LaPorte offers exceptional analysis into a literary era both unexpectedly transcendental and, at times, startlingly self-aware.

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