



## PREFACE

In *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s* the contributors address a field of study that has for years been subject to extensive misrepresentation in widely circulated literary-historical accounts of the era. In my introduction, I show readers how and why poetry of the 1890s has seldom been well served by the trio of critical terms—"aestheticism," "Decadence," and "fin-de-siècle"—that have for the most part cast such leading figures as Ernest Dowson, Arthur Symons, Lionel Johnson, and Oscar Wilde in unfavorable critical light. I reveal, too, how the traditional overconcentration on these male writers as representatives of a seemingly declining age has by and large occluded the recently acknowledged achievements of distinguished women writers such as Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper), Amy Levy, Dollie Radford, A. Mary F. Robinson, and Graham R. Tomson (later Rosamund Marriott Watson). As the present volume makes plain, fresh inquiries into this period bear witness to the fact that women poets were central to London's literary circles. Likewise, this was an era that saw remarkable innovations in literary publishing, since it was during the 1890s that the aesthetic book came into its own. Further, as the lists of such pioneering publishers as Elkin Mathews and John Lane reveal, some of the finest binding and printing of literary works at this time took place in the sphere of poetry.

But, as I also make clear, if we take some modernist accounts of the literary 1890s on trust, then it becomes extremely difficult to draw anything but the discouraging conclusion that this was in no respect a poetically fertile era. To this day the engaging but negative perspectives of W. B. Yeats and the funny but misleading caricatures of Max Beerbohm (both men are closely linked with this decade) have done an untold amount of damage to the received, mostly dispiriting understandings of the poetic fin de siècle. In their influential view the intoxicating self-destructiveness of this era's characteristic male protagonists expressed a depressive purposelessness of the age, often in antiquated forms and pretentious rhetoric

whose excesses supposedly accentuated the superficiality of the fin-de-siècle poet's art.

Jerusha McCormack's chapter develops this line of inquiry into critical estimations of the period by exploring how a "drastic narrowing of the 1890s poets came about." McCormack's main focus is how certain biographical myths served to create a sexual division of labor in the poetic marketplace. Where the male poets cultivated a rather theatrical manner in the presentation of their Decadent work (much of which, in any case, showed a strong interest in performance, whether by famous actresses, female dancers, or women on the music-hall stage), well-regarded women poets such as Alice Meynell did the opposite by fostering a rather private, angelic persona that hardly squared with the supposed irresponsibility of her male peers. Meynell was considered by many members of the literary establishment to be a strong candidate for the laureateship, which became vacant upon Tennyson's death in 1892. (The post, owing to much wrangling over who should succeed him, remained open for four years.) But Meynell's life of devotion to her family of seven children and her faith (she had converted to Catholicism in 1864) for decades made it difficult for historians to acknowledge that by the 1890s she had come to attention as one of the foremost essayists and poets published by Mathews and Lane's imprint, the Bodley Head. As McCormack discloses, in the case of Rosamund Marriott Watson—one of the most widely published English poets of the 1880s and 1890s—the fact that this accomplished writer endured two divorces, losing in the process custody of three children, in many ways accounted for her unwillingness to develop a public persona in later life.

In the second chapter, Holly Laird turns attention on how and why biographical accounts of leading male fin-de-siècle poets such as Davidson, Dowson, and Johnson (as well as the somewhat older James Thomson) have been intent to view these writers' achievements, even in their own time, as built on self-murder. Laird observes that these life myths tend to ignore the significance of suicide as a pressing topic that absorbed these poets' imaginations. Rather than assume that these writers' interest in self-murder inspired their untimely deaths, she urges readers to consider how and why their aesthetics remained enduringly fascinated with formal and stylistic structures of fragmentation and destruction. By broadening her analysis to include the suicidal subject matter of three women poets—Amy Levy, Charlotte Mew, Adela Cory Nicolson—Laird reveals

how tricky it has proved for scholars to imagine that the topic of hopelessness might be understood as separate from these authors' decision to end their lives.

Linda K. Hughes, in the third chapter, maintains the focus on fin-de-siècle poets' enduring interest in fragmentariness by returning our attention to Rosamund Marriott Watson, whose oeuvre dramatizes an almost unmatched fracturing of identity. But, like Laird, Hughes is aware of the pitfalls of relying on biographical events in order to explain this poet's formal and thematic preoccupations. While it was the case that Marriott Watson's changing marital circumstances resulted in changes of name (she emerged as R. Armytage, then wrote as Graham R. Tomson, and then took the family name of her common-law husband), such information scarcely accounts for this writer's fascination with a range of poetic forms and styles—from ballades, rondeaus, and villanelles to impressionist nocturnes—that provided her with various masks behind which she enjoyed the freedom to articulate forthright sexual passion. The fact that poetic masks worked in Marriott Watson's favor in part accounts for her outstanding success in placing her work in a wide variety of journals. Hughes also makes a special point of showing how the print media in which Marriott Watson appeared in her transforming guises—whether an ostensibly conservative periodical such as W. E. Henley's *Scots Observer* or a finely bound and illustrated volume issued by John Lane—discloses some of the connections between what have been conventionally viewed as discrete, if not antipathetic, sections of the 1890s literary world.

The next two chapters accentuate the frequent emergence of fin-de-siècle poetry in volumes that exemplify decisive trends in the history of the book. Nicholas Frankel draws detailed attention to the Rhymers' decision not to present their collective poems as the kind of aesthetic artifact that John Gray's *Silverpoints* (1893) most emphatically was. As I point out in the introduction, Charles Ricketts's distinctive designs for the lizard-green binding and unusual page layout ensured that Gray's first book of poetry became one of the most visually arresting volumes of the 1890s. The Rhymers' two books looked comparatively plain, with running headers stating "The Rhymers' Club" at the top of pages printed in a uniform style. The typographic reiteration of "The Rhymers' Club" certainly makes sense in volumes in which the identity of a single author remains far less significant than the topics that absorb the authors' works. Their books,

rather than relate individual poets to groups of poems, insist that it is the subject matter of the contributions that has decided the order in which their works appear, and such themes of course have implicitly arisen from the exchanges among members of the club. On this view, it becomes possible to see how Yeats's famous lyric "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" forms part of a dialogue with a lyric by Ernest Radford, a link that shows the depth of Yeats's involvement in a grouping whose camaraderie taught him his trade. Frankel contends that the typographic uniformity of the Rhymers' books anticipates the designs that influential publishers such as Faber and Faber (in Britain) and New Directions (in the United States) would adopt in order to present their stable of poets.

Jerome McGann, in the next chapter, looks closely at the neglected but gifted writer whose expertise in other arts—notably architecture—made a decisive contribution to the *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, the avant-garde periodical that fostered vital critical debate at this time. In his study of Herbert P. Horne's compact volume *Diversi Colores* (1891), printed to perfection at the Chiswick Press, McGann discusses the poet's "bibliographical aesthetics." In a series of adept readings, McGann shows that when Horne pays homage to earlier forms—whether Christian devotional works or Robert Herrick's lyrics—his dedication is neither to orthodox religion nor to a seventeenth-century forbear. Instead, Horne's commitment lies in the kind of pastiche that discloses that each poetic articulation stands as a typographical performance. McGann's point is that Horne's volume should not be read in a solely vehicular or referential mode, since the words on the page possess a decidedly material significance. Thus, as readers, we need to observe not so much what the language of the poem signifies as the beautiful medium through which the printed word creates such significations. "Horne devotes himself to glorifying Beauty by making a beautiful thing," McGann writes, and in the process of such glorification the poet requires us to consider the non-semantic aspects of poetic textuality.

In chapter 6, Julia Saville considers how two coauthors explored the fin-de-siècle interest in the unity of the arts through the development of highly accomplished ekphrasis. In *Sight and Song* (1892), Michael Field's third collection of poetry, the aunt and niece Bradley and Cooper responded to Walter Pater's call to respond to the Old Masters in a manner of self-restraint, thus enabling such artworks to speak for themselves. Saville

shows how Bradley and Cooper drew upon this Paterian perspective, first developed in his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) and amplified in later essays such as “Prosper Mérimée” (1890), when they took lessons from the young art historian Bernard Berenson, whose critical engagement with physical detail and color in Renaissance art intersected with Pater’s emphasis on the viewer’s self-discipline. The result of such withholding of any subjective interpretation is that Michael Field’s ekphrastic poems permit each artwork to produce lyrical significations that complicate how an otherwise small detail might be interpreted. For example, in Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus*, the position of Venus’s left hand covering her genitals might not be seen, as some viewers have thought, solely as a token of modesty. In their poem, Bradley and Cooper suggest that, in this painting, “Universal pleasure sex / Must unto itself annex”—a gesture of self-pleasuring that gives the somnolent Venus a previously unacknowledged agency. Through their particular adaptation of Paterian ascesis, the coauthors suggest that such restraint on their part enables them to engage in what Saville calls a “playful erotic allusiveness.” Bradley and Cooper’s finely wrought ekphrasis was probably too advanced even for their teacher, and, sadly, like so much of the ambitious poetry that they produced during the 1890s, *Sight and Song* went largely unnoticed.

The seventh chapter, by Linda Hunt Beckman, turns attention to another woman poet, Amy Levy. Beckman maintains that Levy, who took her life in 1889, stood at the forefront of British poets who absorbed *Symboliste* poetics in the name of producing a decidedly urban poetry. Until recently scholarship has suggested that the poetic interest in the metropolitan scene was the preserve of volumes such as Symons’s *London Nights*, Henley’s *London Voluntaries* (1893), and John Davidson’s “London” (1894), which memorably celebrates “[t]he heart of London beating warm” (John Davidson, “London,” in *John Davidson: A Selection of His Poems*, ed. Maurice Lindsay [London: Hutchinson, 1961], 69). Beckman’s argument is that Levy’s city poems, which appeared in the poet’s final volume, *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* (1889), reveal that this exceptional writer was deeply acquainted with the urban poetics of Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Levy’s fascination with the city’s modernity, as Beckman shows, predates the writings of the 1890s male poets, who are usually credited as the progenitors of a distinctly new poetry that confronts the fracturing experiences of modern London. Beckman also makes it clear

that Levy draws on *Symboliste* sources in a manner that anticipates Eliot's and Pound's engagement with Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857, expanded in 1861) and Mallarmé's *Poésies* (1887).

In the chapter that follows, Ana Parejo Vadillo explores the haunting poetry of A. Mary F. Robinson, who, like Levy, came to notice prior to 1890, and whose writings absorbed aspects of avant-garde French poetry well in advance of Symons's influential essay, "The Decadent Movement in Literature" (1893). Robinson's earliest collections share with Levy's slightly later writing an interest in the *Symboliste* poetics of the city. Vadillo contends that Robinson's wide reading in the work of French poets such as Verlaine and her responsiveness to Pater's aestheticism resulted in an experimental type of writing in which the cityscape could supply figures that intensified particular states of mind. Thus in "London Studies" Robinson's poetic voice attempts to integrate the bleak, darkened urban scene with acute feelings of helplessness. In Vadillo's view, such evocative, abstract writing results in an "immaterial poetics," one that negates physical experience by stressing the kind of disembodied soul that Symons would later perceive as a defining aspect of the Decadent movement in literature.

In chapter 9, Yopie Prins sustains the focus on poetics in a close study of Alice Meynell's enduring fascination with another abstract phenomenon—the metrical measure. As Prins explains, Meynell proved immensely responsive to the New Prosody that had its origins in Coventry Patmore's path-breaking "Essay on Metrical Law" (1857). As Patmore saw it, the craving for metrical measure is not just characteristic of poets; it defines the very movements of the human mind. In light of Patmore's and (much later) George Saintsbury's research on meter, the study of prosody became interested in identifying, counting, and then quantifying the spaces that operated within English systems of accentual-syllabic verse. As she reflected on Patmore's essay, Meynell drew a number of intriguing conclusions about the ways in which this new engagement with the measuring of meter disclosed that systems of rhythm structure almost every aspect of our lives. Meynell, as Prins shows, became particularly fascinated by the intervals or pauses between beats. It was in these unspoken metrical spaces that Meynell realized a universal rule. In her view, the orbit of the sun, the pangs of motherhood, and the reappearance of disease and subsequent recovery are governed by patterns of silent but powerful recurrence. She asserted that poetry, which is based on interval-

lic principles, has an unrivalled capacity to celebrate the all-pervasive but otherwise unnoticed metrics that govern our diurnal lives.

The tenth chapter, by Tricia Lootens, considers another frequently sidelined but fundamental aspect of fin-de-siècle poetry. Lootens draws a comparison between two writers whose movement from the colonial periphery of India to London suggested that the preoccupations of much fin-de-siècle poetry, no matter how avant-garde its claims, belonged firmly to the metropolitan heart of empire. By comparing the works of Anglo-Indian Rudyard Kipling with those of Indo-Anglian Toru Dutt, Lootens shows how these authors, in very different ways, put the spotlight on the “alien homelands” of an increasingly burdensome empire whose conflicts during this period would result in the brutal Second Anglo-Boer War. In poems such as Kipling’s “Chant-Pagan,” Lootens identifies how the raw, “pagan” vernacular of an irregular soldier serving in South Africa affronts the elevated poetic diction consecrated by the English literary tradition. Combining urban and military slang, snatches of Afrikaans, and Cockney dialect, the speaker of this “chant” wonders, in light of his wartime life, whether he can remain a patriot to the old country. It would seem that this speaker’s home has become instead the South African landscape where he has witnessed so much bloodshed. By comparison, Toru Dutt—who died at the age of twenty-one in 1877, and whose works London critics continued to discuss extensively in the 1880s—produced poems that relocated, in productively questioning ways, her deep knowledge of the English Romantics to her Bengal birthplace. Dutt, who received part of her education in Europe, was in many respects an Indian cosmopolitan; her cross-cultural experiences encouraged her to absorb and honor England’s poetic heritage while exposing, in the far reaches of empire, some of its national—if not nationalist—limitations.

In the final chapter, Marion Thain moves beyond the turn of the century to consider the later, largely forgotten poetry of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper. In the early stages of their collaboration as Michael Field, Bradley and Cooper swore themselves to paganism. Their later poetry, however, records their conversion to Rome, which occurred when their reputation had long suffered serious decline, making them arguably the obscurest of those poets who had first tried to win an audience during the fin de siècle. In her pioneering discussion, Thain shows that the coauthors’ decision to embrace Catholicism does not mark a break in

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Michael Field's prolific output but in fact reveals continuity with the aestheticism that they espoused in their first book of poetry—based in part on Sappho's fragments—titled *Long Ago* (1889). In order to secure their conversion, Bradley and Cooper turned to John Gray, author of *Silverpoints*, for guidance, and in the process they developed a series of poems that drew on the imagery of St. John of the Cross, whose own poetic writings Gray had explored in his second volume, *Spiritual Poems* (1896): a volume, designed by Ricketts, that defined Gray's developing identity as a Catholic aesthete. Many of the most significant poems about their faith appear in one of the most hard-to-obtain volumes among Michael Field's extensive but rare editions. Published by Lucien Pissarro's monument to fine woodblock printing, the Eragny Press, in 1914, *Whym Chow: Flame of Love* was issued in only twenty-seven copies. The fact that the poems in this inaccessible book focus on the death of Michael Field's Chow dog, and their eventual belief that their beloved pet embodied the Holy Spirit, may well deepen the impression that the coauthors' eccentricities knew no bounds. But, as Thain clarifies, the poems in *Whym Chow*, like the posthumously published works that focus on Bradley's and Cooper's conversions, derive from a highly developed system of personal myth: one that shows that these coauthors—aunt and niece, as well as lovers—carefully reflected on how their earlier paganism prefaced their turn to Rome. By showing that such idiosyncratic writings should not be summarily dismissed but seriously reassessed, Thain's study provides a fitting conclusion to *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem*.

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Since this collection of essays refers to a great many fin-de-siècle poets, it includes an alphabetical list of writers who established their reputation either just before or during the 1890s. In addition, there is a chronology that lists the most notable works of all of these poets; this list, while it cannot include each and every volume published during this era, aims to help readers understand the widening scope of the field. The select bibliography and the notes to the chapters that follow refer readers to the most noteworthy essays and books that have assisted in positively reshaping our knowledge of the poetry of the time. (The select bibliography does not include single-author studies. Instead, it lists anthologies and critical sources that touch on the work of a range of fin-de-siècle poets.)

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For the sake of clarity, in each chapter readers will find the dates of publication of each work that is mentioned. In the main, the contributors to the present collection agree that the term “fin-de-siècle” should be viewed as a periodizing (rather than valuational) one that focuses on the cultural life of the 1890s (the term, after all, made its earliest appearances in the British press in 1890). It is, however, the case that a number of writers who established their careers in the mid-1880s—such as Amy Levy and A. Mary F. Robinson—bear significant connections, whether in style or subject matter, with the writers more conventionally associated with this era. In a similar manner, the chronology of poetical works extends through the outbreak of World War I, since several writers who became prominent during this period continued to produce noteworthy volumes long after the *siècle* reached its end.

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