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## *A Humanist Romanticism?*

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**British Poetry of the Nineteenth Century**, by Stephen Gurney. *New York: Twayne, 1993. 341 pp. \$26.95.*

Critics sometimes come to resemble the writers they study, even when they are being critical. Stephen Gurney's history of nineteenth-century British poetry, a doctrinally humanist study, owes a thing or two to a period that cut the legs out from under humanism. Gurney surveys his subject in two period overviews ("The Romantic Ethos," "The Victorian Ethos"), followed by sequences of chapters that attend to particular writers or movements. This way of arranging things subordinates narrative to a system of parallels and analogies that the historian reads into and out of the particular cases. This is the way of the "cultural" history that Hegel and his successors developed; romantic concepts of imagery, mood, and genius had much to do with its analogical methods. As Gurney puts it, "the Romantics saw themselves as healing the breach between the worlds of fact and fancy, imagination

and reality" (11); just so, he draws parallels between social and intellectual history in his overviews, and explores their reflections in the lives and letters of his writers in the chapters that follow. Perhaps the immediate source for this kind of history is less Hegel than Thomas Campbell or William Hazlitt, whose public lectures on the British poets parallel the genius of the age with the genius of its leading voices. A lecturer would delineate the character of the age of Elizabeth, Anne, or George, and explicate its resonances in the verse of the era. The poets—Shakespeare, Pope, or Wordsworth—were called in as privileged witnesses (see-ers and seers) whose elevated points of view could be replicated through the medium of appreciation. When English studies were finally incorporated into the college curriculum at the end of the last century, this impressionistic way of presenting literary history became the staple of the

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survey course. Stephen Gurney's book is a printed version of such a series of classroom lectures, and it will prove very useful to readers who elected out of Brit Lit, or, as sometimes happens, had their minds on other things.

But Gurney's application of the word "ethos" to his overviews implies a second way of construing a writer's relation to his or her age, a relation that is agonistic and not simply reflexive (function of the times), on the one hand, or transcendently detached, on the other. The Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis lurks behind this cultural story of the shift from neo-classical, to romantic, to Victorian. But ethical choosing properly belongs to narrative rather than cultural history, for it foregrounds the possibility that writers might reject and actively resist the intellectual and social norms of their epoch. This is certainly how the writers Gurney discusses perceived themselves: a small remnant pursuing the life of the spirit in a materialist age. Here, too, Gurney displays an affinity for his subjects, rejecting the critical norms of our own time in order to restore insights into the human condition in danger of being lost amid our contemporary fascinations with power and social reconstruction. While literary surveys are thick on the ground, Gurney's Christian humanism sets this book apart. Accounts of nineteenth-century literature typically look for explanations to changing understandings of nature and the imagination, the challenge to literary convention, changing conceptions of the poet's social role, the challenge of de-

mocracy, or the course of empire. It is most uncommon to grant religion the central role, despite the fact that the life of the spirit is a prevailing theme of nineteenth-century poetry. Our relative neglect of religion probably derives from the considerable influence of Matthew Arnold: "Arnold's substitute for religion was poetry—a substitution that links him, ironically, with a growing phenomenon in Victorian letters: namely, the doctrine of art-for-art's-sake, in which the aesthetic experience is divorced from normal human preoccupations with how to live and the work of art is adjudged exclusively on the basis of its technical merit" (202-03). If Arnold himself could not discuss poetry without considering its relation to religious belief, this is not true of his successors in the academy. By making theism the core of his literary history, Gurney helps twentieth-century readers appreciate the profound dilemmas confronting a range of poets, while resisting the tendency of twentieth-century expositors to reduce the poetic utterance to a reflex of cultural history. In addition to the nineteenth-century poets, Gurney calls in a select group of Christian witnesses to the life of the spirit: G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, Simone Weil, and T. S. Eliot.

This is not to say that *British Poetry of the Nineteenth Century* presents itself as a Jeremiad—its echoes of Carlisle, Ruskin, or Emerson are occasional and diffused amid a presentation that in most respects is conventional enough. There is no mistaking the dead hand of received opinion in the larger selection and arrangement of

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material, which is only to be expected in a book intended as an introduction. Yet it is most attractive in its departures. While Gurney's appreciations attend to the formal dimensions of the verse, he does not, like academic formalists, adopt the scientific attitude towards his subject. In discussing Byron's adaptation of Spenser's stanza, for instance, he engages his reader by engaging himself: "such poetry is hard to resist. To be sure, when examined closely, the stanzas are full of generalized emotion and indistinct imagery, but the pacing of the verse is impeccable. We can feel those eagle wings expanding in the long alexandrine of the first stanza and partake of their gradual ascent as the long vowels rise to a higher pitch and the line lengthens out in soaring flight. And the second stanza, with its series of periodic clauses rising to a climax on the resounding plosive 'speak,' carries us along with irresistible force, until in the last two lines the cathartic outburst subsides into stoic resignation and deliberate constraint. The concluding swagger with which Byron flings the sword of articulate aspiration back into the scabbard of voiceless despair is irresistible" (77). Such prose aims at what Hazlitt described as "gusto," since banned from the academy at considerable cost to the profession of letters. The medium of print, which has become all-in-all to academic criticism, does not favor the performative dimension of literary criticism. Performances in the lecture hall were instrumental in establishing English studies in the first place.

In another respect, however, *British*

*Poetry of the Nineteenth Century* departs from nineteenth-century understandings of British poetry: Gurney's selection of authors is, with a couple of exceptions, that of the modern academy and not that of the Victorian reader. It reflects not only the culling of modernist critics, but the habit of modernist critics of reducing the canon to those writers who figure prominently in a genealogy of modernism. While this includes most of the major writers, there are notable omissions. The many proletarian and female romantic poets, whatever their technical demerits, are vital to understanding the aims and progress of nineteenth-century verse. It is important that a wider range of persons were publishing verse than ever before or since, and that they were doing so without benefit of a classical education. This has had important consequences; this demotic trend in literature continues today as verse is pushed aside in favor of popular fiction. Clerks and plutocrats no longer write verse, though they often enough try their hand at novels. The neglect of popular as opposed to "literary" verse reflected in Gurney's choice of subjects stems from a modernist more than a nineteenth-century understanding of poetry. His omission of Walter Scott and Thomas Moore, the romantic poets whose work defined "romanticism" for nineteenth-century readers, is also striking. The term "British" appearing in the title is a misnomer, for the book discusses no Scottish or Irish poets, despite their prominence and the high praise bestowed on Celtic genius by Matthew

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Arnold himself. This exclusion is telling, because it goes to the heart of what we are to understand by “romanticism,” and with it the kind of judgment we bring to nineteenth-century poetry.

Gurney uses “The Ode to Evening” by William Collins to specify “the principal characteristics of Romantic verse: a shift in emphasis from the poem as generalized statement or satiric commentary to a concern with the spiritual process that goes into the poem’s making; a return to the lyric as the form in which the unalloyed essence of poetry itself is best distilled; a sense of language, heightened, to be sure, by expressive touches beyond the range of ordinary prose, but more attuned to the living voice of common speech; a reverence for nature as a matrix of mysterious and unfathomable forces; a tendency to make the poem a psychodrama that reflects the poet’s own adventures of consciousness. Virtually all of the foregoing qualities are central to Wordsworth’s definition of poetry in the ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads*” (7). Wordsworth’s preface marks the great transition in Gurney’s account, not only because it is a manifesto of modernist poetics, but because in many respects it is a humanist document. But had his history taken Collins’s “Superstitions Ode” as its point of departure, another, more inclusive and typical account of romanticism would have emerged, one in which the principal characteristics of romantic verse would include a gothic lust for the antique and the supernatural, accompanied by the primitivist’s admiration

for the mentality of children, the illiterate, the savage, and eccentricity and madness generally. While these topics are not wholly absent from Gurney’s account of nineteenth-century poetry—how could they be?—they are firmly subordinated to modernist and humanist priorities. As a result, it is the Saxon Wordsworth, and not the Celt Macpherson, who gets credit—wrongly, in my view—for setting the priorities in nineteenth-century verse.

In making his selection of poems and writers, Gurney thus slips what I thought would be a central issue in a humanist account of nineteenth-century verse: Irving Babbitt’s critique of romanticism. He does allude, briefly, to “that ‘infinite indeterminate desire’ for which Irving Babbitt scolded the Romantics in his disapproving study *Rousseau and Romanticism*. But this desire has always had its partisans, not the least of whom is C. S. Lewis, who spoke of it as ‘the inconsolable secret which hurts so much that we take our revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence’ ” (20). So much for what might be regarded as the most telling critique of romanticism ever written. Babbitt’s book argued that “the innovations in ethics that are due to romanticism reduce themselves on close scrutiny to a vast system of naturalistic camouflage. To understand how this camouflage has been so successful one needs to connect Rousseauism with the Baconian movement.” This Gurney refuses to do, choosing instead to accept Wordsworth’s or Arnold’s self-evaluation as opponents of modernity rather than participants

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within it. As a result, the account of humanism that emerges is often murky, as in this impressionistic sketch of the eighteenth century: "in the age of Pope, poetry was concerned with the issues of the moment. Poets were not expected to indulge their private sentiments in lyrical effusions or to exploit their intimate experiences in rhapsodic confessions. To the contrary, their purpose was to crystallize, in language conspicuous for its clarity, balance, and poise, the inherited values of Christian civilization and classical antiquity" (1). Lacking a detailed account of how one gets from "issues of the moment" to "inherited values"—their connection is hardly self-evident—it becomes difficult to understand the larger social and intellectual problems to which nineteenth-century poets were responding. Nor does the organization of a book like this one encourage the sustained narrative or argument that would be necessary to unravel the twists and turns of humanism in the nineteenth century. Gurney is good on the Oxford movement, but thin on Victorian Hellenism.

But this would require a different kind of book. What this one offers the contemporary humanist is an apologia for romantic verse. From the purview of a certain type of Christian humanism (as opposed to the Babbitt variety) the yearning for the infinite and the indefinite is no bad thing. Gurney's accounts of Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Arnold, where humanists might expect to find comfort, are sturdy but conventional. The book becomes more interesting when it

takes up poets who ought to be anathema to humanists: Keats, Shelley, Dobson, the Rossettis. Here Gurney brings in the biographical material necessary to make the romantic spiritual quest seem ethically interesting—for instance, by relating Keats's morbidity to the experience of nursing his brother. When poets go wrong in this book, which they sometimes do in spectacular ways, they do so for morally comprehensible reasons. Gurney reminds us that Christian virtues can be practiced not only by pagan poets but by readers like ourselves: "the key to an understanding of these poets is charity—a necessary key for anyone who wishes to appreciate their art" (283). By treating the romantic quest as a religious inquiry rather than as a literary trope or epistemological conundrum, Gurney demonstrates why it might interest humanist readers. The claims made in his preface—that one studies poetry because it "enables us to rise above the restrictive or reductive vantage point of our present moment" and because the concerns of our ancestors are "permanent, elementary, and enduring" (vii, viii)—are close to contradictory: we are asked to assume a vantage that is both timely and timeless. But this is very much the Christian humanist position, passionately delivered in Gurney's peroration: "as long as such beliefs continue to engross the human imagination, Thompson's ode will continue to be valued as a testimony to an experience central to the Christian humanism that has shaped Western civilization from the Middle Ages to the near present. Of course, the time

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may arrive, and for some may already have arrived, when such an experience seems anachronistic and marginal to a society that has so thoroughly standardized its conception of human personality and so programmatically curtailed its sense of human possibility to the realm of secular aims

and goals, that experiences such as those to which Thompson gives utterance will be regarded as a temporary aberration in the delivery of the mind from all loyalties and inklings unworthy of notice by the social engineer" (297). The nineteenth century often said as much.