MACMILLAN ANTHOLOGIES
OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

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OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

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MACMILLAN ANTHOLOGIES
OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

THE
NINETEENTH
CENTURY
(1798–1900)

Edited by
Brian Martin

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Contents

Acknowledgements	xiv
General Introduction	xv
Introduction: The Nineteenth Century	xvii
Note on Annotation and Glossing	xxvi
Note on Dates	xxvi
WILLIAM BLAKE	1
To Autumn	2
Song: My silks and fine array	2
From <i>Songs of Innocence</i>	
Introduction	3
The Lamb	4
The Little Black Boy	4
The Chimney Sweeper	5
<i>The Book of Thel</i>	6
<i>Visions of the Daughters of Albion</i>	10
From <i>Songs of Experience</i>	
Introduction	17
Earth's Answer	18
The Sick Rose	18
The Chimney Sweeper	19
The Garden of Love	19
London	20
The Tiger	20
'And did those feet in ancient time'	21
WILLIAM COBBETT	23
From <i>Rural Rides</i>	
[South-east of Hampshire and the Surrey Weald]	24
MARIA EDGEWORTH	27
From <i>Castle Rackrent</i>	
[Sir Condry's Generosity]	27
JAMES HOGG	29
From <i>The Confessions of a Justified Sinner</i>	
[Colwan's Predicament]	30

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH	
From <i>Lyrical Ballads</i>	34
Tintern Abbey	35
‘She dwelt among the untrodden ways’	39
A slumber did my spirit seal	40
Composed upon Westminster Bridge	40
I wandered lonely as a cloud	40
From Dorothy Wordsworth’s <i>Journal</i> [Daffodils]	41
From <i>Poems 1807</i>	
My heart leaps up when I behold	42
Ode: Intimations of Immortality . . .	43
Nuns fret not at their convent’s narrow room	49
She was a Phantom of delight	49
From <i>The Prelude</i>	
From Book I	50
From Book II	55
From Book XII	59
From the Preface to <i>Lyrical Ballads</i>	63
SIR WALTER SCOTT	66
<i>Lochinvar</i>	67
From <i>The Lady of the Lake</i>	68
Pibroch of Donuil Dhu	69
From <i>Old Mortality</i>	
[The Archbishop of St Andrews . . .]	71
SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE	80
The Eolian Harp	81
On a Ruined House in a Romantic Country	83
From <i>The Rime of the Ancient Mariner</i>	84
Frost at Midnight	86
This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison	89
Kubla Khan	91
Metrical Feet	93
From <i>Biographia Literaria</i>	99
Dejection	101
ROBERT SOUTHEY	110
The Ebb tide	111

From <i>The Curse of Kehama</i>	112
JANE AUSTEN	113
From <i>Emma</i>	
[Emma's Matchmaking]	114
From <i>Persuasion</i>	
[Captain Wentworth's Resolution]	121
CHARLES LAMB	128
From <i>Elia</i>	
The Old and the New	
Schoolmaster	129
WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR	134
Rose Aylmer	134
Progress of Evening	134
Lines to a Dragon Fly	135
WILLIAM HAZLITT	136
From <i>The Round Table</i>	
On Good Nature	137
From <i>The Fight</i>	141
LEIGH HUNT	154
To the Grasshopper and the Cricket	154
From <i>The Nymphs</i>	155
Rondeau	156
THOMAS DE QUINCEY	157
From <i>Confessions of an English Opium</i>	
Eater	
[Triumph over Addiction]	157
From <i>Society of the Lakes – I</i>	
[Inhabitants of the Lake District]	160
THOMAS LOVE PEACOCK	166
From <i>Nightmare Abbey</i>	
[The Temporary Supremacy of the	
Devil]	166
From <i>The Misfortunes of Elphin</i>	
The War Song of Dinas Vawr	168
GEORGE GORDON (LORD) BYRON	170
The Destruction of Sennacharib	171
So we'll go no more a-roving	172
<i>The Prisoner of Chillon</i>	173
From <i>Don Juan</i>	183
From letter to Thomas More	193

From letter to John Murray	193
PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY	197
From <i>Alastor</i>	198
Ozymandias	200
From <i>Prometheus Unbound</i>	201
To a Skylark	203
Ode to the West Wind	206
From <i>Adonais</i>	209
Autumn: A Dirge	212
From letter to Leigh Hunt	213
JOHN CLARE	221
I Am	221
The Fear of Flowers	222
From <i>Remembrances</i>	223
Schoolboys in Winter	223
JOHN KEATS	224
On first looking into Chapman's	
Homer	225
From <i>Sleep and Poetry</i>	226
From <i>The Eve of St Agnes</i>	228
La Belle Dame Sans Merci	233
Ode to a Nightingale	235
Ode on a Grecian Urn	237
Ode on Melancholy	239
To Autumn	240
From letter to Benjamin Bailey	241
From letter to George and Tom Keats	243
From letter to Fanny Brawne	244
THOMAS CARLYLE	246
From <i>Notebooks</i>	
Charles Lamb at 56	247
From <i>The Life of John Sterling</i>	
S.T. Coleridge at 53	248
From <i>The French Revolution</i>	
[The Fate of Louis XVI]	249
From <i>Past and Present</i>	
Gospel of Mammonism	253
MARY SHELLEY	258
From <i>Frankenstein</i>	
[Frankenstein's Success]	258

THOMAS HOOD	261
Ode: Autumn	261
THOMAS BABINGTON MACAULAY	264
From <i>John Bunyan</i>	
[Review of <i>Pilgrim's Progress</i>]	265
WILLIAM BARNES	270
Be'mi'ster	270
The Bwoat	271
Lydlinch Bells	272
Shaftesbury Feäir	274
JOHN HENRY NEWMAN	276
From <i>The Pillar of Cloud</i>	
Lead, kindly Light . . .	277
From <i>The Dream of Gerontius</i>	
Praise to the Holiest in the height	278
From <i>Apologia pro Vita Sua</i>	
Position of my mind since 1845	279
From note A, <i>Liberalism</i>	281
From <i>The Idea of a University</i>	
[Literature in University Education]	284
BENJAMIN DISRAELI	286
From <i>Henrietta Temple</i>	
Unexpected Visit to London	287
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING	293
<i>Sonnets from the Portuguese</i>	
I though once how Theocritus had sung	294
Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand	294
How do I love thee? Let me count the ways	294
JOHN STUART MILL	296
From <i>The Subjection of Women</i>	
[Women's Role in Society]	297
EDWARD FITZGERALD	300
From <i>The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam</i>	300
ALFRED LORD TENNYSON	304
<i>The Lady of Shalott</i>	305
From <i>The Lotus-Eaters</i>	
Choric Song	310

<i>Morte D'Arthur</i>	314
<i>Ulysses</i>	321
From <i>In Memoriam A.H.H.</i>	323
The Charge of the Light Brigade	325
ELIZABETH CLEGHORN GASKELL	327
From <i>North and South</i>	
Looking South	328
WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY	337
From <i>Vanity Fair</i>	
Family Portraits	338
CHARLES DICKENS	345
From <i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i>	
The Death of Little Nell	346
From <i>A Christmas Carol</i>	
Christmas at the Cratchits	353
From <i>Hard Times</i>	
Mr Gradgrind and Mr Bounderby in Coketown	359
From <i>Our Mutual Friend</i>	
The Veneering Dinner-Party	364
ROBERT BROWNING	375
My Last Duchess	376
The Lost Leader	377
Home-Thoughts from Abroad	378
A Grammarian's Funeral	379
How it Strikes a Contemporary	383
Fra Lippo Lippi	386
EDWARD LEAR	397
<i>Limerick</i> 'There was a Young Lady of Greenwich'	397
The Owl and the Pussy-Cat	397
ANTHONY TROLLOPE	399
From <i>The Warden</i>	
The Conference	400
From <i>Barchester Towers</i>	
Mrs Proudie's Reception – Concluded	407
CHARLOTTE BRONTË	419
From <i>Jane Eyre</i>	
[Mr Rochester's Announcement]	420

EMILY BRONTË	424
From <i>Wuthering Heights</i>	
[Lockwood's Visit to Wuthering Heights]	424
ARTHUR HUGH CLOUGH	430
From <i>Amours de Voyage</i>	431
Say not, the struggle nought availeth	432
From <i>Dipsychus</i>	433
CHARLES KINGSLEY	434
From <i>Yeast</i>	
[The Instruction of Lancelot]	435
GEORGE ELIOT	440
From <i>The Mill on the Floss</i>	
A Variation of Protestantism	
Unknown to Bossuet	441
The Last Conflict	445
From <i>Middlemarch</i>	
[Ladislaw and Casaubon in Difficulties]	454
JOHN RUSKIN	473
From <i>Modern Painters</i>	
Venice	474
From <i>Time and Tide</i>	
The Use and Abuse of Money	477
From <i>Praeterita</i>	
The Rhone	480
MATTHEW ARNOLD	482
From <i>Sohrab and Rustum</i>	483
From <i>The Scholar-Gipsy</i>	485
From <i>Thyrsis</i>	488
Dover Beach	490
From <i>Culture and Anarchy</i>	
[Sweetness and Light]	491
From Barbarians, Philistines, Populace	493
COVENTRY PATMORE	500
From <i>The Angel in the House</i>	
The Cathedral Close	500
A Farewell	501

WILLIAM WILKIE COLLINS	503
From <i>The Woman in White</i>	
[Hartright's Reception by Mr Fairlie]	504
[Mrs Fairlie's Ghost]	510
WALTER BAGEHOT	518
<i>Henry Crabb Robinson</i>	518
GEORGE MEREDITH	522
From <i>Modern Love</i>	
Stanzas I–V	522
Lucifer in Starlight	525
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI	526
Lovesight	527
Sudden Light	527
The Woodspurge	528
Without Her	528
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI	530
From <i>Goblin Market</i>	530
A Dirge	534
LEWIS CARROLL	535
From <i>Alice's Adventures in</i>	
<i>Wonderland</i>	
Who stole the Tarts?	535
From <i>The Hunting of the Snark</i>	
The Landing	538
WILLIAM MORRIS	540
From <i>The Earthly Paradise</i>	
An Apology	541
October	542
A Garden by the Sea	543
JAMES THOMSON	544
From <i>The City of Dreadful Night</i>	545
SAMUEL BUTLER	548
From <i>Erewhon</i>	
Current Opinions	548
WILLIAM SCHWENCK GILBERT	557
The Yarn of the 'Nancy Bell'	557
ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE	561
Choruses from <i>Atalanta in Calydon</i>	562
The Garden of Proserpine	563

WALTER PATER	567
From <i>The Renaissance</i>	
Leonardo Da Vinci	567
THOMAS HARDY	570
From <i>The Mayor of Casterbridge</i>	
[Henchard's Corn-dealing]	571
From <i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i>	
[Stonehenge]	580
From <i>Jude the Obscure</i>	
[Phyllotson's Magnanimity]	586
ARTHUR O'SHAUGHNESSY	593
Ode: 'We are the music-makers'	593
GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS	596
The Wreck of the Deutschland	597
God's Grandeur	606
The Windhover	607
Pied Beauty	607
Hurrahing in Harvest	608
Binsey Poplars	609
<i>Justus quidem tu es . . .</i>	609
Letter to R.W. Dixon	610
ROBERT BRIDGES	613
I will not let thee go	613
WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY	615
From <i>Life and Death</i>	
Out of the night that covers me	615
I am the Reaper	616
ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON	617
From <i>Treasure Island</i>	
At the Sign of the 'Spy-Glass'	618
OSCAR WILDE	622
From <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i>	623
From <i>The Ballad of Reading Gaol</i>	626
General Bibliography	630
Index of First Lines	632
Index of Authors	636
Source List	638

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BWM

General Introduction

There can often be a gulf between the restricted reading required by a school, college or university syllabus and the great expanse of English literature which is there to be explored and enjoyed. There are two effective ways of bridging that gulf. One is to be aware of how authors relate or have related to their contemporary situations and their contemporaries, how they accept, develop or react against what has been written by their predecessors or older contemporaries, how, in short, they fit into the long history of English literature. Good histories of literature – and there is a welcome increase of interest in them – serve to place authors in their context, as well as giving a panoptic view of their careers.

The second way is to sample their work, to discover the kind or kinds of writing they have produced. Here is where the anthology contributes to an enjoyment of reading. It conveys the flavour of an author as nothing but reading that author can. And when an author is compared to his or her fellow writers – a thing a good anthology facilitates – the reader gains several extra dimensions, not least an insight into what thoughts, what fears, what delights have occupied writers at different times. To gain such insights is to see, among other things, the relevance of past authors to the present, to the reader. Reading an anthology shows something of the vast range of our literature, its variety of form and outlook, of mood and expression, from black despair to ecstatic happiness; it is an expansive experience widening our horizons, enhancing specialised study, but also conveying its own particular pleasures, the joy of finding familiar pieces among unfamiliar, of reacting to fresh stimuli, of reaching new conclusions about authors, in short, of making literature a part of oneself.

Anthologies also play a part in the life of a literature. If we are the beneficiaries of our literary inheritance, we are also trustees for it, and the maintenance of the inheritance for future generations requires new selections of properly edited texts. The Macmillan Literary Anthologies, which have followed on from the Macmillan Histories of Literature, are designed to present these texts with the essential pertinent information. The selection made of poetry, prose and plays has been wide and inclusive, authors appear in the order of their dates

of birth, texts – with the exception of the Middle English section – are largely modernised and footnotes are kept to a minimum. A broadly representative policy has been the aim of the general editors, who have maintained a similar format and proportion in each volume, though the medieval volume has required more annotation.

ANJ
MJA

Introduction: The Nineteenth Century

It is generally accepted that the neo-classical, or Augustan, age in English literature came to an end in 1798 with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge which was revolutionary in style and content. Their poetry was part of a literature which, like art or politics, was the product of society at that particular time; and, of course, as society slowly altered, so, too, did the things which arose from it or depended on it.

The French Revolution of 1789 had seriously affected political and social outlooks: so had the Agrarian Revolution, which forced a shift of the labouring class in England away from the countryside to the towns and cities, and the Industrial Revolution, which caused changes in living conditions in urban areas. The nation's literature was bound to be coloured by such changes. Nevertheless, it was a gradual process. The order, harmony, objectivity, restraint and logicity of the neo-classical approach to literature gave way gently to the variety, contrast, immediacy and imaginative freedom of the romantic frame of mind which characterised writing of the first half of the nineteenth century.

The American philosopher Arthur O. Lovejoy has argued that the word 'romantic' has come to mean so many things, that by itself, it means nothing. Yet the phenomenon of romanticism has still to be investigated and some sort of definition sought. The creative influences which arise from society itself have first to be understood, in order to understand the nature of the literature which they themselves have produced. The English critic F. W. Bateson considered the key to romanticism a tenor of mind, a subjectivity which is perhaps best expressed by Wordsworth's claim for his lyrical ballads 'that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and the situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling'. The Romantic Movement, which dominated art and literature particularly in Germany, France and England, involved a heightened consciousness of 'individualism', itself connected in various ways with the radical French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, and also with nationalism.

On one level, social and political factors influenced the minds of authors; there is evidence for this in the work of, for example, Byron, Hazlitt or Cobbett. On another level, aesthetic and intellectual forces were at work: great stress was given to inspiration and the working of the imagination, particularly by Coleridge in his famous chapter IX of *Biographia Literaria*, and to a personal response to the natural world, especially by Wordsworth. In short, what was of paramount importance for most early-nineteenth-century writers had not been so for eighteenth-century writers. Times, and concerns, had changed: literature changed with them.

Naturally, the process was gradual. The poetry of Collins, Shenstone, Churchill, Akenside, Crabbe, Cowper, gave a hint of a change in tone from the strictly classical, while Blake and Burns (who died in 1796) wrote poetry in complete contrast to that of, for example, Alexander Pope or Samuel Johnson. Most of Burns's poems are unrestrained, direct and intensely personal, couched in colloquial dialect: the penultimate stanza of 'To a Mouse' is a good example:

But Mousie, thou art no thy lane, [not alone]
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft a-gley, [go often awry]
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promised joy.

John Keble, on the other hand, an eminent nineteenth-century cleric and man-of-letters, published in 1827 a Victorian best-seller, *The Christian Year*, his collection of poems written in the archaic, out-of-date diction of the eighteenth century. Much of his diction was precisely what Wordsworth had in mind when he condemned neo-classical style in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. Readers should not draw clear lines of distinction between periods conveniently labelled by critics and teachers: they should see literature as a development, as a body of writing which changes gradually in style and attitude as much as the language in which it is written constantly changes. Jane Austen, the last writer of the Augustan tradition, was a younger contemporary of Wordsworth, the greatest of the English romantics.

The shift to Romanticism is most clearly seen in poetry. The first half of the nineteenth century provided some of England's greatest poets. Wordsworth wrote some of the most memorable poems of the period. 'Tintern Abbey', and the 'Immortality Ode' which Keble regarded as 'The finest poem of the greatest poet in our times'.

Coleridge produced 'Kubla Khan', now regarded without dispute as the most romantic of Romantic poems, and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a revival of the ballad form which tells in a flight of imaginative fancy the damnation and salvation of an old sailor. John Keats, Shelley and Byron followed in the new Romantic vein. Keats clearly recognised the difference between himself and his predecessors, and expressed it in the romantic couplets of 'Sleep and Poetry':

The blue
 Bared its eternal bosom, and the dew
 Of summer night collected still to make
 The morning precious: Beauty was awake.
 Why were ye not awake? But ye were dead
 To things ye knew not of, – were close wed
 To musty laws lived out with wretched rule
 And compass vile; so that ye taught a
 school
 Of dolts to smooth, inlay, and clip, and fit,
 Till, like the certain wands of Jacob's wit,
 Their verses tallied. Easy was the task:
 A thousand handicraftsmen wore the mask
 Of Poesy.

In addition to his great odes, of which 'Ode to a Nightingale' is the most celebrated, Keats wrote some of the finest poems of the romantic imagination, for example, the narrative poem 'The Eve of St Agnes', and the short, haunting poem, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. His poetry has a sensuous beauty which is unparalleled by any of his contemporaries: a stanza from 'The Eve of St Agnes' shows this:

A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,
 All garlanded with carven imag'ries
 Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,
 And diamonded with panes of quaint device,
 Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
 As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;
 And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,
 And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,
 A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens
 and kings.

Byron's poetry is as dashing and romantic as the poet was himself. Today many hotels in Greece are named after him because he was a hero in the struggle for Greek independence. Ostracised by polite

English society, he sought refuge abroad, and finally, ill from a chill caught after riding his horse through dank marshlands, he died far from home, bled to death by his doctors. This was the man who had swum the Hellespont to prove it was possible, and who swam for a wager, in trousers, from the island of the Lido up the Grand Canal of Venice to the spot where the lagoon opens to Fusina. His long, unfinished epic satire in *ottava rima*, 'Don Juan', survives as his most popular poem.

At first glance, Shelley seems to have little in common with his friend, Byron. Yet both were aristocratic, both opposed to the social and literary establishments in England, both made the continent their home, and both looked to Greece as the land of liberty. They wrote quickly and gave little time to correction of their work. Byron was a wordly man, a materialist: Shelley, by contrast, an idealist, whose vigorous poem 'Ode to the West Wind' best illustrates the point. Shelley contributed, in his time, spiritual freedom and audacity to English literature, and the conviction that the intellect was subordinate to the imagination. He was possessed by a vision of neo-Platonic intellectual beauty, demonstrated in his 'To A Skylark':

What thou art we know not;
What is most like thee?
From rainbow clouds there flow not
Drops so bright to see
As from thy presence showers a rain of melody.

Like a Poet hidden
In the light of thought,
Singing hymns unbidden,
Till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not:

Like a high-born maiden
In a palace-tower
Soothing her love-laden
Soul in secret hour
With music sweet as love, which overflows her bower:

The creative, literary spirit was at work in more than poetry. The novel had already made a diversion into the Gothic in romances such as Mrs Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*; Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* took it to its purest extreme and the novel again advanced in the hands of Sir Walter Scott who found a stimulus for his own

imagination and that of his readers in tales of medieval romance. Jane Austen explored that level of society in which she was brought up, and exposed its manners and foibles. The familiar essay, as practised by Hazlitt and Lamb, became popular; and many famous literary reviews were founded, the *Edinburgh Review* in 1802, the *Quarterly Review* in 1809, and *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1817. Criticism, and Shakespearean criticism in particular, found voice in Coleridge, Lamb and Hazlitt. Coleridge was one of the century's most influential critics. His originality revealed itself in the huge, uneven range of *Biographia Literaria*, and was the means of disseminating ideas from the continent, especially from Germany. Many of his ideas on Shakespeare, as the American critic Norman Fruman has shown, were the result of plagiarising the views of A. W. Schlegel.

A change in style and tone of thought, reflected in literature, began to take place in the 1830s. In 1830 Tennyson published his *Poems*; in 1832 the Reform Bill was passed in Parliament. Queen Victoria succeeded to the throne in 1837. Romantic tales, imaginative fantasies, still gripped readers' minds, but increasingly as an escape from the ordinary, and rather philistine preoccupations of urban, industrial and commercial life. Tennyson composed long narrative poems based on the Arthurian legend: the Pre-Raphaelites looked back to the Middle Ages for sources of inspiration and diversion. Their paintings, too, reflected this interest; and D. G. Rossetti painted pictures to illustrate some of Tennyson's poems, for example, 'Sir Galahad' in the Moxon edition of his *Poems* (1857). Architects modelled designs on medieval Gothic buildings, a fashion which drew to a close with William Butterfield's extravagantly decorated, polychromatic Keble College, Oxford, the high point of that style.

The nation's chief concern was with the creation of wealth, and to that end, the extension and consolidation of empire after the accession of Queen Victoria. Literature, itself a product of society, became occupied with industrial, materialist themes. It was forced to assert its ideals in the face of a hostile world of money and economic theory. The latter had its exponents in the Utilitarians and political economists: J. S. Mill and Jeremy Bentham are representative. Conversely, writers such as Carlyle, Kingsley, Tennyson (in poems such as 'Maud' and 'Locksley Hall') and Dickens (in *Hard Times*) showed the world of economic materialism, the nation's grovelling to Mammon, for what it really was. Pursuit of material gain more often than not stifled the interests of the soul, aesthetic sensibility, and faculties of artistic

creation and appreciation. The accumulation of wealth could become all-consuming. It was necessary, in such an age, for polemicists to emphasise the virtues of art and literature: Ruskin was an agitator in this cause. Those who made great wealth had to be persuaded that art and literature needed time and attention, and, equally, finance and patronage. The vigorous ferment in Victorian society produced other significant thinkers, spiritual masters such as Cardinal Newman, and aestheticians such as Walter Pater.

Of all Victorian writers, Tennyson and Browning were foremost among the poets, and Dickens and George Eliot among the novelists. Tennyson was Poet Laureate from 1850 until his death in 1892. His *Poems* (1842), of which many were revisions of those in his 1832 volume, firmly established his reputation. He retreated from the intellectual romanticism of Wordsworth or Shelley which preceded him, and paid greater attention to craftsmanship and technique. In *Morte D'Arthur* his verse reflects exactly the difficulty of Sir Bedivere's progress through rugged terrain:

Dry clashed his harness in the icy caves
And barren chasms, and all to left and right
The bare black cliff clanged round him, as he based
His feet on juts of slippery crag that rang
Sharp-smitten with the dint of armed heels –
And on a sudden, lo! the level lake,
And the long glories of the winter moon.

The long monosyllables and the labials of the last two lines reinforce the relief of reaching the shoreline of the lake. He was the master of narrative, descriptive verse, which was wanting only in profound or witty thought: Carlyle remarked of the 'Idylls of the King' that they were the 'inward perfection of vacancy' but that 'the lollipops were so superlative'.

At the same time, Tennyson showed himself a child of the Industrial Revolution who did not quite understand its technicalities. In 'Locksley Hall' he used a train image: 'Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of time.' Subsequently he confessed, 'When I went by the first train from Liverpool to Manchester [1830], I thought the wheels ran in grooves'.

Some of his poems are remarkable for their declaration of Victorian values hardly acceptable now. In 'Locksley Hall' the narrator's arrogance, and extreme self-confidence, are expressed in his view of

the superiority of European civilisation: 'Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay'. What he really meant, of course, was England rather than Europe. Typical of the people and the age, though, and admirable in tone, is the sentiment which rings clearly out from the closing lines of *Ulysses*. The Victorian spirit of action and adventure, the expression of the Protestant work ethic which took root-hold in society, show themselves with force and conviction in lines with which the nation closely identified:

that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Towards the end of the century Robert Browning's reputation rivalled Tennyson's. Browning was quite a different poet. His two series of *Dramatic Lyrics*, included in *Bells and Pomegranates* (1841–6), established his greatness as a lyric poet, and indicated the way in which his dramatic genius could develop. The lyrics possess a variety of form, and are noted for their vividness and sense of immediate reality: many of them give promise, too, of the dramatic monologues which were to appear in *Men and Women* (1855). Some of the monologues combine lyric form with a sense of the full emotional significance of a glance or chance remark, of a landscape or of an ambition. 'The Last Ride Together' is an example:

My mistress bent that brow of hers,
Those deep dark eyes where pride demurs
When pity would be softening through,
Fixed me a breathing-while or two
 With life or death in the balance: Right!

The blood replenished me again;
My last thought was at least not vain.
I and my mistress, side by side
Shall be together, breathe and ride,
So, one day more am I deified.
 Who knows but the world may end to-night?

Others are more complex, sustained intellectual exercises such as 'Bishop Blougram's Apology' which shows Browning's profound, subtle, jesuitical turn of mind. On an intellectual level, Browning was

thought the equal of Henry James, and London literary society courted them both to attend salons, soirées and dinner-parties; James presents an enigmatic portrait of Browning as the poet Clare Vawdrey in his short story, 'The Private Life'.

The practitioners of prose fiction had nothing to fear from comparison with the achievements of Tennyson and Browning in poetry. The novel had many exponents, and in Charles Dickens and George Eliot, two of the most outstanding novelists in the history of English literature. Dickens was remarkable for his incessant industry and extraordinary craftsmanship: he allowed little to interfere with the act of composition. He would continue writing at his fireside table, simultaneously conversing with friends who had dropped in to see him. Such were the demands of deadlines for instalment writers. A busy magazine editor himself, he could not fail to keep them. He is distinguished for his highly developed social conscience. It has become fashionable to regard him as a mere reflector of public opinion on social issues, but *Hard Times* and *Our Mutual Friend* give the lie to that impression. The postscript to *Our Mutual Friend* in particular, makes it quite clear that one of his main intentions in the novel was to persuade his readers that the operation of the Poor Law was iniquitous: he brought a reformer's zeal to his writing, and was unequivocal in his condemnation of the law:

I believe there has been in England, since the days of the STUARTS, no law so often violated, no law habitually so ill-supervised. In the majority of shameful cases of disease and death from destitution, that shock the Public and disgrace the country, the illegality is quite equal to the inhumanity – and known language could say no more of their lawlessness.

He revealed here, too, that he was a victim of the Industrial Revolution. He was involved in one of the first recorded train derailments and nearly lost part of the manuscript of *Our Mutual Friend*. After a 'terribly destructive accident' on the South-Eastern Railway, he climbed back into his carriage which had nearly fallen into a viaduct and rescued 'Mr and Mrs Boffin (in their manuscript dress of receiving Mr and Mrs Lammle at breakfast)'.

George Eliot is an example of the strong tradition of women novelists in the nineteenth century which includes Jane Austen, the Brontës and Elizabeth Gaskell. Her novels are distinguished for

her faculty of close observation, which enabled her to reproduce authentically the mannerisms of rustic habit and speech. She understood the countryside, villages and small towns, their interrelations, their social hierarchies and different standards of value: she composed a comprehensive picture of life. Occasionally her intellect dominated her novelist's gift, and her interest in scientific progress and her philosophical digressions stand out awkwardly in her writing.

In the early part of the century the most influential critical thinker had been Coleridge. In the later part it was Matthew Arnold. Dismayed by the huge, ill-educated mass of working people which had resulted from the rapid advance of a successful, prosperous, industrial and commercial society, he elaborated his ideas for the cultural enlightenment of the middle class. He envisaged a clerisy which would dispense 'sweetness and light' to an under-privileged, ignorant multitude. Arnold indeed paved the way for twentieth-century criticism, which has been much concerned with the relation of literature to society, particularly in the work of T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis and Raymond Williams.

Drama, of all the literary genres, suffered an eclipse during the century: there was a dearth of playwrights. It had partly to do with the Theatre Licensing Act, not repealed until 1843, which restricted 'legitimate theatre' productions to two London theatres, Drury Lane and Covent Garden. It is true that some of the poets tried their hands at verse plays, Shelley with his *Cenci* and Browning with *Stafford*, but they did not appeal to the theatregoing public; and then, as now, the test of a successful production lay in box-office receipts. It was not until the end of the century, with the arrival of Oscar Wilde and his plays, revivals of the comedy of manners, that drama gained momentum again.

Readers will discover that the nineteenth century is one of the richest periods in literature: it produced a great number of different sorts of writers, many of whom found time, or enjoyed leisure, to write copiously. There were brilliant story-tellers, inspired poets, provocative, stimulating and often abrasive thinkers, polemicists and controversialists. Subjects were aired that are of lasting concern and are still discussed today – liberty, conscience, human rights, the nature of God. The literature of the century remains the most lasting monument to the spirit, aspirations and achievements of the age.

Note on Annotation and Glossing

An asterisk * at the end of a word indicates that such words are glossed in the margin.

A dagger † at the end of a word or phrase indicates that the word or phrase is annotated, or given a longer gloss, at the foot of the page.

Note on Dates

Where dates appear at the end of extracts, that on the left denotes the date of composition, that on the right, the date of publication.