Newspaper Poems: Material Texts in the Public Sphere

NATALIE M. HOUSTON

In recent years, material and textual studies have expanded our critical understanding of the contexts in which poetry was written, published, and read during the Victorian period. Studies of the economic and social structures of publishing have offered new accounts of the position of different genres within the larger literary marketplace. Studies of Victorian literary criticism have demonstrated the role of the periodical press in shaping readers' opinions and in making new poems known to large numbers of readers. Studies of particular poets have explored the aesthetic and political implications of Victorian revision and publication practices. However, because most studies of poetry in the periodical press have tended to focus on particular poets or on the selection processes of particular journals, relatively little attention has been paid to the history of poetry published in large-circulation general newspapers.[1]

The rapid growth in literacy during the Victorian period coincided with economic and technological changes that made the publication of inexpensive daily newspapers possible. Newspapers and journals tailored to different classes of readers and to different political interests were central to the development of the Victorian culture of information. The newspaper, the railroad, and the telegraph made rapid communication and distribution of all kinds of information possible, shaping an increasingly industrial and commercial world in which poetry's purpose and future were undecided and subject to debate.

ABSTRACT: While recent studies of Victorian literary criticism have investigated poetry's place in the periodical press, little attention has been paid to the history of poetry published in large-circulation general newspapers. This essay discusses poetry published in *The London Times* during the 1860s, examining the literal place of poetry within the newspaper, its themes and formal characteristics, and its relation to authorship. I suggest that reading these poems in relation to their original material context raises theoretical questions about the history of reading, intertextuality, and poetry's function in the public sphere.

WINTER 2008

It is certainly true that Victorian readers who sought new poems or extensive literary reviewing would look to many other periodicals before turning to the daily newspaper. At mid-century, for example, a wide range of periodicals including *Macmillan's Magazine*, *Cornhill Magazine*, and the *Athenaeum* regularly published poetry alongside fiction, literary reviews, and nonfiction essays. Nineteenth-century readers and publishers frequently distinguished between the fleeting topicality of the newspaper and a more reflective literary culture (Brake 23). The rapid growth in newspaper publishing, often lamented as a potential threat to serious reading, was also linked to the increasing prevalence of prose, and especially prose fiction, in the Victorian textual marketplace.

Yet, there *are* poems in the pages of many Victorian newspapers. As part of a larger project concerned with poetry's place within the culture of the 1860s, I have begun examining newspaper poems to investigate poetry's ideological function within the public sphere. In this paper, I discuss the literal place of poetry within *The London Times*, its themes and formal characteristics, and its relation to authorship.

The lengthy quotations included in many periodical reviews of new books were important sources for many Victorian readers' knowledge of current poetry. Book reviews included in *The Times* were no exception, and in the 1860s the paper published reviews of volumes by Robert Browning, Christina Rossetti, Jean Ingelow, Matthew Arnold, and Eliza Cook, among others. The paper also occasionally printed excerpts from prize-winning university verses (written in Latin) or other newsworthy verse, such as the new Belgian national anthem in 1860 (in French) ("A New National" 9). Such publishing practices assumed an educated reading audience with some literary interests.

But *The Times* also frequently printed poems that required no particular literary knowledge to be appreciated: satires, commemorative verse about current events, and memorial poems for public figures. The vast corpus of nineteenth-century light verse is rarely, if ever, included in our studies of Victorian poetry because its historical function as topical commentary makes it difficult to read when extracted from its original context. The privileging of individual authorship within traditional bibliographic studies and literary criticism has also tended to devalue works like newspaper poems which were often published anonymously. Reading these poems in relation to their original material context can illuminate important questions about the history of reading, intertextuality, and poetry's function in the public sphere.

In the 1860s, poetry held a consistent place in the pages of *The London Times*: works of poetry appear in the back third of the paper, following the editorial leader and significant news articles but before the small print advertisements from businesses and publishers. Poems were printed among a set of regular informational columns, including "Naval and Military Intelligence," "University Intelligence," "Sporting Intelligence," "The Public Health," various court reports, and letters to the editor. Page eleven or twelve of a typical mid-week paper, where the poems usually appeared, thus offered a dizzying array of factual information: the schedule for upcoming regiment reviews; horse racing results; the total number of deaths in London and twelve other major cities during the previous week, broken down by causes; average daily temperatures and wind speeds for the previous week; and accounts of recent criminal cases. On page eleven of *The Times* on Wednesday, 30 October 1867, for instance, we learn that the 1,239 London deaths in the week previous were eighty persons fewer than the average for the forty-third week of the year, and of that total, four died from burns and scalds, twenty-seven from diarrhea, one hundred from pneumonia, and so forth. We also find a poem entitled "St. James's Street (By a Dyspeptic)" which opens:

> St. James's-street, of classic fame!
> The finest people throng it!—
> St. James's street? I know the name!
> I think I've passed along it!
> Why, that's where Sacharissa sighed
> When Waller read his ditty;
> Where Byron lived, and Gibbon died,
> And Alvanley was witty. (1-8)

This poem, published here under initials, was pirated and altered by the *Queen's Messenger* in 1869 and then published the following year in a collection entitled *London Lyrics* by its author, Frederick Locker. Locker substantially revised the poem for later editions of the same collection, and it was also included in several Victorian anthologies of light verse. The poem evokes past periods of social grandeur, mentioning the famous clubs of the Regency period, the dandies' dress, and the neighborhood ghosts of Pepys and Nell Gwynne, and it characterizes the modern day as but a pallid imitation:

The street is still a lively tomb
For rich, and gay, and clever;
The crops of dandies bud, and bloom,
And die as fast as ever.
Now gilded youth loves cutty-pipes,
And slang that's rather rancid,—
It can't approach the prototypes
In tone—or so I've fancied. (33-40)

Because the poem is surrounded on the page by gloomy Victorian statistics of death and sewage, it is tempting to read its description of St. James's Street as a nostalgic celebration of the once-fashionable aspects of an urban culture marked by wit, literature, and fashion. But because it was conventional to print poems in this part of the newspaper, I hesitate to propose a detailed contextual reading of its contents. Instead, I will suggest that this poem raises a number of important questions about the history of reading.

The inclusion of poems within the Victorian newspaper resists a simple definition of the page's contents as purely informational. In considering the reception history of newspaper poems, we have to wonder who actually read these pages and with what kind of attention. Perhaps a humorous poem served as a kind of relaxation for the mind wearied by data or by more letters to the editor about the price of meat (a recurring concern at mid-century). The meter and alternating rhyme typical of Victorian light verse make reading the poem a rapid and easy process, unlike the information that fills the rest of the page. Certainly, the indenting of poetic lines makes even short poems like sonnets visually stand out among the paper's six tightly packed columns. The white space around the poems (and around the tables of racing results) possibly, even probably, caused some readers to look more closely at the text; it is just as likely that others immediately turned away, to information of immediate, practical advantage. The materialist study of figures like William Blake or William Morris has flourished because of the self-conscious and deliberate attention they paid to the physical production of their work; the newspaper page as a material artifact which shaped the historical reading experience also deserves our attention, even when we have no individual author or editor to credit with the specific arrangement of text on the page.

Although the poems printed in *The Times* only rarely reference the topics treated in the surrounding columns, many do refer to events

or topics treated elsewhere in the newspaper, either in the same issue or in preceding ones. Important topics were usually the focus of ongoing commentary in the newspaper, and so a poem like "Through Fire and Water; Or, the London Volunteers," published on 14 June 1860, participates in a textual conversation of several weeks' length. National anxieties about possible invasions of British coasts led to a flourishing volunteer military movement throughout the 1850s. In the spring of 1860, the Volunteers were practicing drills in preparation for the Queen's review of their regiments on 23 June, and *The Times* had been announcing places and times of such drills. This poem, based on the eighteenth-century popular song "The British Grenadiers," praises the Volunteers' fortitude in facing the season's particularly rainy weather:

> Some talk of Alexander,
> And some of Hercules,—
> The Chief whose martial dander
> Asked worlds to stand at ease—
> The Sayers of the Prize-ring
> In high Olympian spheres,—
> But both, I'll be bound, now-a-days would be found
> Enrolled in the Volunteers.
>
> Our soldiers they are heroes,
> We know, in facing fire;
> Our tars reduce to zeros
> All fears the seas inspire.
> But for going through fire *and* water,
> —To say nothing of small boys' jeers—
> There's no service, I swear, that can compare
> With the London Volunteers. (1-16)

After praising the patriotic fervor of the volunteer regiments (who "can laugh at fire and fleerers, / As we've laughed at heavy wet" [43-44]), the poem concludes with a wish for "one dry day" for the Queen's review (55). This poem comments upon current events affecting thousands of persons involved in the Volunteer movement and the many more Britons who planned to observe the Queen's review a week later. Even more topically, it comments upon the weather—notes about which do not actually appear on the same page of this issue, but might well have.

A note in *The Times* indicates that this poem was published in

Punch; such republication was quite common and is one marker of the way that Victorian newspapers engaged with the larger periodical publishing market. In this instance, the poem appears in an issue of *Punch* dated two days later, on 16 June 1860, but as with most Victorian periodicals the actual date of public issue frequently preceded the printed date. So the poem appeared in both publications within only a few days of each other, mutually reinforcing the patriotic and sympathetic commentary that the verse suggests. Later, Walter Hamilton reprinted the poem in 1884 in his collection of *Parodies of the Works of English and American Authors*, along with many other parodies of traditional military songs (82).

Although humorous or parodic poetry was frequently published in *The Times*, some newspaper poems were more conventionally literary in form and content. The sonnet form was often used to convey perceptions of a place or event, distilling an observer's experience into fourteen lines, as in this sonnet by Richard Chenevix Trench on the Queen's review of the Volunteer regiments, published five days afterward, on 28 June 1860:

> No pause, no stay—a glorious hour and more,
> And that loud-clashing music is not dumb,
> For still the thick battalions come and come,
> As though all England the long pent-up store
> Of her deliberate valour would outpour,
> Not flaunting in war's trappings, rich and gay,
> But all in sober green and working gray,
> O, Lady of the Land! thy feet before.
> High beats thine heart, the Lady of a land
> Which breeds such men, and theirs beats proud and high,
> Who only, with step statelier and more grand,
> Would move beneath thy recompensing eye;
> Moving, if that day came, to make reply
> On some great field to duty's last demand. (1–14)

The Times' commentaries about the Queen's review on 22, 23, and 25 June emphasized the shift in public culture that had taken place with the Volunteer movement, which called on ordinary citizens to participate in military training. The Volunteers were frequently praised for their patriotic willingness to defend the nation; even though their drills were sometimes clumsy, their intentions, magnified

by their ever-increasing numbers, were seen as crossing class boundaries to unite the people. Before the event, much concern was voiced about the logistics required to bring 30,000 troops into Hyde Park efficiently, and the review itself lasted "for quite an hour and a half" according to *The Times* ("Review" 9). Because the Volunteer regiments were founded in local towns and regions, each had its own costume, and *The Times* noted that "when the companies were first organized it was feared they might run to an excess in costume, and adopt dangerously brilliant colours. We are not sure but there has been a slight excess the other way; the neutral tints are in masses sombre" ("Review" 9). This sonnet thus repeats the main features of the newspaper's account of the review and connects the idealism of the volunteer troops with the nation's reverence for the Queen. Absent from this sonnet are either the conventional first person plural of *The Times*' prose columns about the review or the participatory first person plural of "Through Fire and Water"; instead the event is memorialized into an aesthetic object suitable for contemplation, which was a fairly common use for the sonnet form in the nineteenth century (see Houston 353–54).

This sonnet also raises interesting questions about how authorship functioned for newspaper poems, which frequently were published without any signature. This poem is subjoined with the initials "R. C. T.," and Trench's identity was probably known by some proportion of the paper's readers, who might have been familiar with his several published books of poetry, literary criticism, etymological study, and biblical commentary. But it is equally important not to underestimate how many of the paper's readers would not have known Trench's work or would not necessarily have connected these initials with his authorial persona. Trench republished the sonnet in his 1862 collection *The Story of Justin Martyr and Other Poems*, with some revisions and under the title "On the Review of the Volunteers in Hyde Park by the Queen, 1860." This title summarizes the contextualizing work performed by the poem's original time and place of publication, when it required no title other than "Sonnet." Poems published in *The Times* and other newspapers participated in the larger shared public discourse of current events, which makes them valuable to us as documents of historical interest and as examples of poetry's capacity to offer emotional responses to current events in different language than that of the daily news.

The poem "Zermatt Churchyard," published on 30 August 1866, directly addresses the question of readers' response to news events:

> They warred with Nature, as of old with Gods
> The Titans; like the Titans too they fell,
> Hurled from the summit of their hopes, and dashed
> Sheer down precipitous tremendous crags,
> A thousand deaths in one. 'Tis o'er, and we
> Who sit at home, and by the peaceful hearth
> Read their sad tale, made wise by the event,
> May moralize of folly and a thirst
> For barren honour, fruitful of no end. (1-9)

As had been widely reported in *The Times* and other papers the previous year, the first successful ascent of the Matterhorn, the last great European peak, had taken place on 14 July 1865. Tragically, four members of the climbing party (Michel Croz, the guide; and three members of the London Alpine Club, Charles Hudson, Douglas Hadow, and Lord Francis Douglas) died as they were descending the mountain; one survivor, Edward Whymper, lived to write about the accident. For several weeks in July and August of 1865, *The Times* published columns and letters about the accident, the search for the remains of the climbers, and their burial at Zermatt. This unattributed poem (only an initial "B." identifies the author) examines not the event itself but its interpretation in the minds of the paper's readers, and it offers several different readings of the tragedy. The poem first suggests that it is too easy for readers safe by the hearth to moralize about the ambition of the climbers or their lack of preparedness. (The editorial in *The Times* on 9 August 1865 had said, "It is, of course, futile to draw morals, particularly when the conclusion is such a truism as that no one ought to attempt Alpine ascents who is not thoroughly competent for them" [8]). The poem also offers a romantic reading of the climbers, seeing them as "the foremost of an Alpine band" (28), a group of men who "in the life of cities pine and pant / For purer air" (29-30) and whose youthful energy should be valued: "Youth has its teaching, too, as well as age" (39).

Midway through the poem, the speaking voice is specifically located "here in Zermatt—here beneath / The fatal peak" in the churchyard signaled in the poem's title (43-44). The poem functions as a second-order memorial experience, describing the codification of public memory into a set of literal memorial markers ("the black cross

with the golden names / Of men, our friends upon it" [45-46]) as well as the media accounts read widely throughout England, into which this text itself is inserted. Published a year after the tragedy—a year in which many other climbers attempted the Matterhorn, the accident having only fueled the craze for mountain climbing—this text exemplifies how newspaper poems were used to refine, amplify, or comment upon the emotional responses that news reporting could produce.

These few examples from the poems published in *The Times* during the 1860s suggest, I think, that poetry functioned as one of several interpretive frameworks for public events during the nineteenth century. Poetry was one way that individuals participating in the communal, nation-defining experience of reading the newspaper described by Benedict Anderson were guided toward emotional and aesthetic interpretations of different national events. Further study of such texts might usefully complicate critical approaches to material textuality, to the history of reading, and to Victorian poetry in general. The recovery of under-read texts and the accompanying expansion of our academic literary canons has in the last few decades been largely governed by aesthetic and ideological interests; in order to deepen our historical and cultural analyses of the period, it would be useful to begin reading a still wider sample of the topical poetic texts that Victorian audiences encountered in the media culture that surrounded them.

University of Houston

NOTES

[1]See, for example, Erickson; Murphy; Kennedy; Kooistra; Ledbetter; and Demoor, Easley, and King. Hughes compellingly demonstrates the need to study poetry's publication in a wide range of Victorian periodicals.

WORKS CITED

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* Rev. ed. London: Verso, 1991.

B. "Zermatt Churchyard." *The Times* (30 Aug. 1866): 11.

Brake, Laurel. *Print in Transition, 1850-1910.* New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Demoor, Marysa. *Their Fair Share: Women, Power, and Criticism in the* Athenaeum, *from Millicent Garratt Fawcett to Katharine Mansfield, 1870-1920.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000.

Easley, Alexis. *First Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media 1830-70.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.

Editorial. *The Times* 9 Aug. 1865: 8.

Erickson, Lee. *The Economy of Literary Form: English Literature and the Industrialization of Publishing, 1800–1850.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Hamilton, Walter. *Parodies of the Works of English and American Authors.* London: Reeves and Turner, 1884.

Houston, Natalie M. "Reading the Victorian Souvenir: Sonnets and Photographs of the Crimean War." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.2 (Fall 2001): 353–83.

Hughes, Linda. "What the *Wellesley Index* Left Out: Why Poetry Matters to Periodical Studies." *Victorian Periodicals Review* 40.2 (Summer 2007): 91–125.

Kennedy, Judith, ed. *Victorian Authors and Their Works: Revision Motivations and Modes.* Athens: Ohio UP, 1991.

King, Andrew. *The London Journal 1845–83: Periodicals, Production, and Gender.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.

Kooistra, Lorraine Janzen. *Christina Rossetti and Illustration.* Athens: Ohio UP, 2002.

Ledbetter, Kathryn. *Tennyson and Victorian Periodicals: Commodities in Context.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.

L[ocker], F[rederick]. "St. James's Street." *The Times* (30 Oct. 1867): 11.

Murphy, Paul Thomas. *Toward a Working-Class Canon: Literary Criticism in British Working-Class Periodicals, 1816–1858.* Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1994.

"A New National Anthem." *The Times* (21 Aug. 1860): 9.

"The Review of the Volunteers." *The Times* (25 June 1860): 9.

"Through Fire and Water; or, the London Volunteers." *The Times* (14 June 1860): 12.

T[rench], R[ichard] C[henevix]. "Sonnet." *The Times* (28 June 1860): 12.

Trench, Richard Chenevix. *The Story of Justin Martyr, and Other Poems.* 5th ed. London: Parker, Son and Bourn, 1862.