The Victorian Poetry Network will be happy to hear about the September 2011 issue (60-61) of George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Studies dedicated to George Eliot’s poetry. Edited by Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi, the special issue consists of articles by both young and well-established scholars including Isobel Armstrong, Alexis Easley, Charles LaPorte, Kathleen McCormack, Katherine Newey, Linda H. Peterson, Valerie Sanders, Stella Pratt-Smith, Kimberly J. Stern and Herbert F. Tucker.

This special issue tries to reclaim Eliot's place in the literary canon as a poet by exploring the challenges that her poetry posed and still poses to its readers today. All its contributors experiment with different ways of reading Eliot's poems in their own right rather than as narratives that happen to be in poetic form. In so doing, the aim is to sketch out 'an Eliot who is barely visible in her novels'. I thought that a preview into the introduction (see abridged version below) may help to foster discussion on the cultural place of Eliot’s poetry.

GEORGE ELIOT AND THE POETICS OF DISBELIEF

by

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A mind in which, or rather, in whose voluntary activity, intelligence takes precedence of sympathy (by however brief an interval) cannot produce what we have most of us agreed to call the highest order of poetry, but it may produce poetry of high rank in an order which is subsequent. (Browne 82)

In November 1866, two years before George Eliot’s poetic debut with The Spanish Gypsy, Matthew Browne posed a question in the Argosy that still challenges us today: “Will George Eliot contribute poetry to English literature?” (rpt. in Every Saturday 81). Browne argues that, in spite of the lyrical freedom of her early fiction it was not before he read The Mill on the Floss that “the idea that this author might write poetry” crossed his mind (80). This was because, in his view, only a writer who had “intelligence” “flexibility of sympathy” and the mimetic power “of reproducing the surfaces of things” would be able to produce poetry (80). Browne’s appraisal calls attention to the different discourses within Victorian poetics, between poetry as prosody and poetry as the ability to achieve affect. Yet while Eliot’s novels might often be praised for their poetry, her actual verse has struggled to garner anything like such a glowing reaction.

This special issue explores the challenges that Eliot’s poetry posed and still poses to its readers today; it correspondingly seeks to assess its place within her canon and Victorian literature more generally. What is intriguing about Browne’s question is the bad faith that goes with it. As is also evident from my epigraph, Browne, who also edited an illustrated edition of her complete poems in 1887, doubts Eliot’s ability to maintain the fine balance between “intelligence” and “sympathy” which for him, and many other critics, is key to the production of “the highest order of poetry” (82). Interestingly, in her 1868 essay “Notes on Form in Art,” Eliot expresses a similar idea when she claims that poetry begins when feeling becomes a mode of understanding, or, in her own words, “when passion weds thought by finding expression in an image.” But in her case, as the essays to this special issue show, her poetry begins out of the incongruity between style and thought.

By building on contemporary scholarship on historical poetics, this special issue argues that this disjunction between Eliot’s experimentations with form and feeling cannot be seen separately from the nineteenth-century questioning of poetry (including women’s poetry) as a critical category. In her 1869 essay “Versification,” Eliot puts forward the idea that breaking the rules of versification can be as pleasurable as the compliance to metrical rules:

Many have given themselves trouble to write poems after the shape of wings, arrows, hearts or flowers, but posterity has not greatly thanked them, any more than it has thanked the confectioners who shaped the sugar and pastry of our ancestors into castles and armed knights, into shepherds, shepherdesses and their flocks, or other mimicries that pleased the fancy of the time. Every irregularity is good if it can be shown to be the secrecy of a higher pleasure than the unbroken observance of a rule. Fortunate irregularities are discoveries in art: they are the stages of its developments, and go on living according to a natural selection. (rpt. in CSP 2: 188)

For all her adhering to rules of scansion and meter, Eliot’s poetry was indeed “irregular” in its strangeness within her own literary canon. In his essay for this volume, Herbert Tucker argues that Eliot’s position as a minor poet was a deliberate one, and stemmed from her desire to cultivate “a versatility [with form] that made the [lyric] instrumentality of her medium impossible to forget” (22).

Taking Eliot’s writing in verse as a “fortunate” irregularity” this special issue explores and problematizes the “higher pleasures” which motivated her poetry. Some of the questions individual essays ask are the following: What critical categories does George Eliot’s poetry belong to? Does its “irregularity” correspond with what Isobel Armstrong has described as the “doubleness” of Victorian women’s poetry, whereby the adoption of “affective mode, often simple, often conventional” belied the way these selfsame conventions were investigated, questioned, reinvented or hollowed out from within (324)?

In his seminal article “George Eliot, the Poetess as Prophet,” Charles LaPorte claims that “Eliot’s thoughts on women’s poetry seem separable from her censure of women’s prose” (159). Her 1857 review of Aurora Leigh did employ many essentializing aspects of Victorian poetic discourse. However, at the same time, as I have mentioned elsewhere (see Hadjiafxendi 95-118), her own poetry often seems to refuse such definitions:

Mrs. Browning is, perhaps, the first woman who has produced a work which exhibits all the peculiar powers without the negations of her sex; which superadds to masculine vigor, breadth, and culture, feminine subtlety of perception, feminine quickness of sensibility, and feminine tenderness. It is difficult to
point to a woman of genius who is not either too little feminine, or too exclusively so. But in this, her longest and greatest poem, Mrs. Browning has shown herself all the greater poet because she is intensely a poetess. (307)

For all her praise of Barrett-Browning, the reception of Eliot’s own poetry was much more awkward and equivocal. In George Eliot’s Poetry and Other Studies (1885), for instance, Rose Cleveland uses the classical myth of the golden apple of Discord to ask why The Spanish Gypsy, in contrast to Aurora Leigh, fails to make itself felt as a poem despite the perfection of its prosody. Defining poetry not in terms of prosody – which for Cleveland is related to poetic form – but in terms of the affective impact that a poem has on its audience, the latter locates the flaw in Eliot’s epic poem not in its faultless, yet cold, scansion but in its structure of feeling. Drawing attention to the discord between prosody and poetry in The Spanish Gypsy, Cleveland argued that Eliot could not be a great poet because of her agnosticism, which she tenuously associated with Eliot’s growing disbelief in the capacity of her art to extend her readers’ sympathy with one another.

Does this then suggest that Eliot was challenging the categories by which other women poets were judged? Or rather, does it betoken an artistic failure? How, indeed, do we interpret and analyse Eliot’s poetry given that its position is so overshadowed by her fictional output? As Armstrong points out in her preface to this special issue, the belatedness of Eliot’s poetry made it easy to think of her poems as “footnotes to the novels” (3). It is only when we become aware of our own disbelief in her poetry as poetry that reading can begin. This special issue experiments with different ways of reading Eliot’s poems in their own right rather than as narratives that happen to be in poetic form. In so doing, its aim is to sketch out, as in the case of the cover page, “an Eliot who is barely visible in the novels” (3).

The question of how to read Eliot’s poetry is one that equally vexed her contemporaries. Generally speaking, they were either bewildered or unimpressed with her turn to poetry. When The Spanish Gypsy was published, the Edinburgh Review noted that such a shift meant that “an author finds himself in serious competition, not only with a fresh class of authors, but with the very elements of his own fame” (523). Six years later, when The Legend of Jubal was released, Henry James was still concerned with how to position Eliot’s poetry. Wondering what the reader would think of it “if she had never published a line of prose,” he ultimately dismissed the question as an impossibility, concluding that “The author’s verses are a narrow manifestation of her genius, but they are an unmistakable manifestation of her poetry” (484). James’s verdict, which grudgingly included her poetry as part of her oeuvre, was more charitable than many others. On giving its judgment on The Spanish Gypsy, the Edinburgh Review was typical in its criticism that “the bark of song is easily over-freighted with thought” and that “Romola is, undoubtedly, a finer poem than The Spanish Gypsy” (536). Eliot, it seems, could be at her most poetic by not being a poet. The different definitions of Victorian poetics meant that she could be regarded at her least poetic (in terms of lyrical, affective impact) when she was attempting to her most poetic in terms of her formal experimentation with verse and its metrical laws.

The controversy around Eliot’s poetics of irregularity raises the question with which Charles LaPorte engages in his postscript to the special issue: Is there a place for George Eliot’s poetry? The disbelief in Eliot as a poet was an oft-repeated tenet of criticism which still casts a long shadow; for instance, a review of The Spanish Gypsy in the Galaxy, again made the point that Eliot’s versification took her away from poetry rather than into it: “This is not poetry, unless poetry consists chiefly in a rhythmic arrangement of language remote from that of common life” (280). The Atlantic Monthly was even harsher, noting that “She betrays her unfamiliarity with the mere letter as well as the spirit of poetic art” ([Howells] 380); thus even when trying to demonstrate her technical capabilities, it seems that Eliot was found wanting.

Another related element of the criticism of Eliot’s lack of poetic effect is that philosophic conceptions dominated over formal and lyric considerations. In an 1872 essay for the Contemporary Review, Edward Dowden opens his article by claiming that “the idea and the matter do not really interpenetrate; the idea stands above the matter as a master above a slave, and subdues the matter to its will” (100-101). This parallels, according to Dowden, the way in which Eliot’s historical person and authorial personae – as a major writer and minor poet – do not really cohere:

The poems are conspicuously inferior to the novels, and a striking indication that poetry is not George Eliot’s element . . . The ideal motives of “The Spanish Gypsy,” of “Jubal,” of “Armgart,” can be stated in a concise form of words. For the mystery of life there is substituted the complexity of a problem of moral dynamics, a calculable composition of forces . . . The little modeled verses are masks taken from the dead faces of infantile lyrics that once lived and breathed. (100-1)
quality of her poetry made them feel, according to Dowden, as if they were “held suspended in a dream with brain asleep” (116). Victorian discussions of dreaming were key in scientific debates about “double consciousness” and multiple personalities, which was part of an exploration of discussion of hidden traces within the mind. It is this modern notion of the self, which Eliot’s poetry communicated with its preoccupation with voice and the dissolution of the authorial ego in the 1870s, which her contemporaries found troubling.

Dowden’s reference to Eliot’s poetic characters as masks of dead lyrics echoes a point that the Byronic hero Don Juan makes in The Spanish Gypsy; that the poet is not a person but just a mask:

Juan is not a living man by himself
His life is breathed in him by other men,
And they speak out of him. He is their voice
Juan’s own life he gave once quite away.

Eliot’s fascination with poetry in her nostalgia for a lost past, before the emergence of a mode of medieval literature to which epic poetry belonged (35). Marx’s observation is important since it can help to locate Eliot’s aesthetic with poetry in her nostalgia for a lost past, before the emergence of a mode of authorship, when poets, though “poor in coin” to use Juan’s words from The Spanish Gypsy, were visionary. Perhaps what Eliot discovered in poetry were new types and understandings of pleasure in artistic labour within which she could operate more freely. It is precisely in this relationship between minority, pleasure and versatility that Eliot’s irregularity as a poet lies. It is hoped that this volume will contribute to a reassessment of the place of Eliot’s poetry in her canon, building on recent work that recovers the wealth and diversity of Victorian women poets. Unlike other “minor” poets, Eliot does not need to be recovered from posterity but, as Armstrong pointed out, recovers the wealth and diversity of Victorian women poets. Unlike other “minor” poets, Eliot does not need to be recovered from posterity but, as the contributions in this volume demonstrate, new approaches and context can restate the importance of poetry to her canon of work.

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**NOTES**

1 The Complete Shorter Poems of George Eliot 2: 182; subsequently cited as CSP.

**WORKS CITED**


