

## 1. Research Plan

“On the Hurry of this Time” (1882)

With slower pen men used to write,  
Of old, when “letters” were “polite”;  
In Anna’s or in George’s days,  
They could afford to turn a phrase,  
Or trim a struggling theme aright.

They knew not steam; electric light  
Not yet had dazed their calmer sight; -  
They meted out both blame and praise  
With slower pen.

Too swiftly now the Hours take flight!  
What’s read at morn is dead at night:  
Scant space have we for Art’s delays,  
Whose breathless thought so briefly stays,  
We may not work - ah! would we might! -  
With slower pen.  
(Austin Dobson)

### Historical Background and State of Research

Various aspects of the change in the experience of time in nineteenth-century Britain have been examined by historians and sociologists. E.P. Thompson, for example, traces the effects of the industrial revolution, which forced an ever larger percentage of the lower strata of society into precisely timed, monotonous and relentless work-routines under the regime of machine and clock.<sup>1</sup> The symbolic importance of the clock for the Victorians is aptly documented in one of the age’s central lasting monuments. As Lawrence Wright points out, “the clock tower of Big Ben [installed in May 1859], has become symbolic of the beating Heart of Empire, of Parliamentary government, of a disciplined if somewhat repetitive British way of life” (155). Functioning as a symbol of social status, clocks were, however, no longer the sole privilege of the mighty and wealthy. In his encompassing history of clock and watch making, David Landes explains that while the eighteenth century saw immense progress in the precision of time-keeping, only in the nineteenth century, with incipient mass-production in Geneva and the US, did ownership of clocks and pocket-watches gradually turn from a luxury good into a widely affordable necessity (287, 318). It was a necessity not only because labour was put under an increasingly rigorous time-regime, but also because, in a rapidly urbanized society, the coordination of daily life more and more depended on punctuality and the orientation of timetables, schedules and deadlines. As Georg Simmel pointed out at the turn of the twentieth century:

The relationships and concerns of the typical metropolitan resident are so manifold and complex that, especially as a result of the agglomeration of so many persons with such differentiated interests, their relationships and activities intertwine with one another into a many-membered organism. In view of this fact, the lack of the most exact punctuality in promises and performances would cause the whole to break down into an inextricable chaos. (13)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As Thompson points out, this has to be understood as an uneven process fraught with struggles between employers and the labourers, who had to be painstakingly socialised into an acceptance of the rule of abstract, standardised machine time.

<sup>2</sup> Punctuality indeed became such an important concern that a rather heated discussion arose over the course of several issues of *The Times* at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century about the inconsistencies between public clocks in London. Although the differences amounted to a mere couple of minutes, some citizens apparently keenly felt this to be a scandal and a disgrace: “Accurate time is to the civilised man the essence of all his undertakings ... A cheating yard wand is not a greater robber than a false dial. The loss in London through inaccurate timekeepers is appalling. ... Time is the factor whereby the units of a great community may economically move and act in concert. The clock is the co-ordinator of society” (“The Synchronisation of Clocks.” 18 Jan, 1911; original ellipses).

While Simmel focused specifically on the metropolis, abstract and standardised time was introduced on a national level by the spread of the railway network, which first brought so-called “railway time” into the rural areas.<sup>3</sup> In spite of occasional local resistance, by the middle of the century most local times in Britain had been effectively displaced by Greenwich Mean Time as the railway standard, although it was only legally affirmed as Britain’s national time in 1880.<sup>4</sup> As Sally Mitchell points out, the extension of the mail-system, with several daily deliverances, the wider availability of daily newspapers and, later in the century, the spread of the telegraph contributed to make a new concept of time and the importance of temporal coordination ever more widely felt throughout the country (71-83; cf. also Lawrence Wright 154-159).

Austin Dobson’s poem, which serves as an epigraph to this proposal, serves to illustrate the time pressure that entered into the daily life of writers with the rapid expansion of the print market resulting from the introduction of steam-powered printing presses. Periodicals, newspapers and serial publication introduced deadlines that kept authors on strict work schedules, which Trollope lamented as “the rushing mode of publication” (*qtd. in* Downes 18). As Daragh Downes points out, Dickens, a former journalist, continued over decades to direct his writing according to the maxims “[u]rgency, punctuality, dispatch, deadline” (18). With little patience for a theory of serendipitous inspiration, “[w]riting for Dickens was always and ever a *job*,” which he worked at under a strict temporal routine (19).

Work was timed with increasing precision, but so was leisure. Thorstein Veblen famously diagnosed the rise of the “leisure class,” a wealthy middle-class which paraded its social status not only by means of “conspicuous consumption,” but also by “conspicuous leisure.” Extensive studies of the history of leisure like Hugh Cunningham’s *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution* show how the conception and use of “free” time changed throughout the century, and also that the best way to spend leisure time became the subject of much concern among nineteenth-century intellectuals and pedagogues. Male middle-class authors devoted much thought to the proper use of free time by members of the working class and middle-class women. The problem of the proper use of their free time by the latter, who were largely restricted in their activities to the home, gave rise to the publication of numerous manuals and became a contended issue in discussions of the “Woman question.”

Beyond these everyday practicalities, time was also redefined by nineteenth-century scientific achievements. If scientists and intellectuals of the eighteenth century discovered history and turned their attention to processes of genealogy, cause and effect, as Michel Foucault has influentially argued, this dynamic redefinition of knowledge came into its own in the nineteenth century with the publication and publicity of the theories of Darwin and Lyell, with the work of Marx and Engels and with critical theologians like Strauss. Living in an “era more strenuously devoted than any earlier one to the historical record and the historical method” (Buckley, *Triumph* 15), the Victorians not only immensely extended the range of time many million years into the past. Evolution and uniformitarianism also brought them face to face with the transformative potential of time, beyond teleology (cf. Haber 384-5). The present face of the earth and its inhabitants could no longer be granted as a fact of creation, nor could change be rationalised as teleological; rather it presented itself as the result of a dynamic process, continually changing and open-ended.<sup>5</sup> On a more human scale, Jerome Hamilton Buckley suggests, the Victorians’ interest in history led to a degree of moral relativity: “Since to understand is usually in some degree to condone, the deepening knowledge of other times and places engendered an increasing relativity of judgment. [...] Once men asked whether an idea was true, whether a policy was sound and good; now they asked how the idea came to be credited, how the policy was adopted and developed” (*Triumph* 19-20; cf. also Altick 99-101). Most disturbingly for the Victorians, this historical relativism also began to erode the foundations of religious belief (Newsome 195). With human existence restricted to the historical, “time pressed more heavily upon man,” as “the only medium in which human life unfolded and fulfilled itself” (Meyerhoff 95). The influence of time’s arrow became ubiquitous, whether this awareness of historical change led to a belief in progress or in the inevitability of gradual dispersion of energy.<sup>6</sup> On all these fronts, a growing awareness of historical change and developments in time threatened to undermine a trust in eternity.

This redefinition of time through science contributed to the spread of a scientific, abstract idea of time throughout Victorian culture. According to Helga Nowotny, in the nineteenth century,

[t]he time-structure of the linear, homogenized, arbitrarily divisible continuum is transferred through the machine from the realm of nature to that of society. The scientist feeds into the machine, which is his creation, the time of nature, whereby it was endowed with a temporal ordering power in face of which all other social notions of time would prove inferior, if not impotent. (83)

<sup>3</sup> The history of the railway and its immense influence on Victorian life and culture has been the subject both of specialised scholarship (Hylton; Perkin; Simmons) and of works directed at a wider audience (Wolmar).

<sup>4</sup> The story of the increasing standardisation of time has been told with varying degrees of detail by Bartky; Howse (especially 91-97, 114-15) and Lawrence Wright (143-9).

<sup>5</sup> As Stephen Gould illustrates, Lyell himself long resisted this unsettling logic of time’s arrow and only accepted it late in his career (132-79).

<sup>6</sup> Lord Kelvin’s statement of the Second Law of Thermodynamics in 1851 introduced irreversibility into thermodynamic processes at the same time as providing an influential check to an unqualified faith in progress.

While the competition between “merchant time” and “sacred time” emerged already in the Middle Ages (Le Goff), the nineteenth century saw an acceleration of a process in which a religious regulation of time, typically characterised by bells marking important moments (the time for prayer, the time for work and for rest, the time for religious feasts), is replaced by what Walter Benjamin has influentially called “homogeneous, empty time” (254), a time of the machine that runs continuously and evenly. The importance of machine time for an increasingly industrialised, urbanised and secularised capitalist society led Lewis Mumford famously to announce that “[t]he clock, not the steam-engine, is the key-machine of the modern industrial age” (14). However, for the particular situation of the Victorians the implications of these two key-machines must be understood to be inextricably interwoven. The temporal regime which constitutes one of the cultural foundations of Victorian society, both in its material conditions and in its structures of knowledge and thought, is thus centrally marked by two interrelated aspects: the regularity, punctuality and abstraction of the clock and the unilinear acceleration of measurable temporal progression whose most apt representation is the railway.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars with an interest in the effect of these developments on literature have frequently turned their attention on modernism (Kern; Marder; Meyerhoff; Quinones; Randall; Ricci; Sayeau; Schleifer; Stevenson). For the modernists, time becomes an obvious obsession and much of their formal innovation has its roots in a painful awareness of abstract, quantifiable time as a problem which found its philosophical expression in Henri Bergson’s concept of *durée*. Among the numerous studies on the importance of time for modernism Stephen Kern’s excellent study *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* particularly merits mention, as it provides a lucid discussion of the modernist endeavours to escape from a time-regime which had been ever more firmly established under Queen Victoria’s reign. Though major Victorian poets were still alive and active during the time-span Kern addresses (poet laureate Tennyson only died in 1892), Kern focuses entirely on writers commonly considered modernist and identifies time as a particularly modern and modernist problem.

In Victorian literature, time itself is far less frequently addressed directly as a problem, but it is implied in many of the era’s central preoccupations. Studies which contribute to a better understanding of a Victorian sense of time as it manifests in literature thus tend to focus on specific aspects of the developments mentioned above: on evolutionary thought with its anxieties of progress or degeneration (Beer; Holmes; Lightman and Zon; Richter, *Literature after Darwin*), on eschatology (Bulfin; Pordzik), on time measurement or temporal coordination of society (Ferguson; Downes; Pettitt), on the impact of the railway on Victorian culture (Carter; Daly), on the resistance of the “New Woman” to the dominant time regime (Murphy), on the cultural value of the moment (Zemka), or on concepts of history, memory, nostalgia and expectation (Chapman; Colley; Gilmour; Rosenberg). Others use literature primarily to illustrate broader claims about temporal regimes, like Aleida Assmann’s endeavour to chart the rise and fall of a modern time-regime, Harald Weinrich’s musings about the scarcity of time, Peter Bowler’s engagement with a Victorian ideology of progress or David Newsome’s discussion of the Victorian world-picture. The most encompassing attempt to chart the Victorians’ attitude towards time to date still is Jerome Hamilton Buckley’s 1966 study *The Triumph of Time*. Buckley explores all “four faces” of time in Victorian literature – past, present, future and eternity – focussing on the broad topics of history, progress, decadence, nostalgia, the eternal and the moment. He quotes widely from both prose and verse literature to illustrate his claims, but his ambitious project leaves no room to discuss specific texts in more detail, or to consider how temporal discourses are not only discernible in literature, but also influence its form and ways of production.

Still, Buckley’s work is rather an exception in that much of his primary material is poetry. Most of the studies mentioned above focus primarily or exclusively on the novel. Partly, this is due to the unprecedented publication success of the Victorian novel, which seems to make the genre particularly pertinent for an understanding of the Victorian literary landscape. Another reason might be found in an apparent critical disdain for Victorian poetry. In her seminal study published in 1993, Isobel Armstrong lamented that Victorian poetry has often been misconceived as moralist and uninteresting – a misjudgement which her own work did much to dispel.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps most importantly, however, the study of time in connection with literature is generally associated with the sequential structure of narratives.<sup>9</sup> Paul Ricœur goes so far as to consider “temporality that

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<sup>7</sup> If Nowotny is right, this machine-dominated time-structure is today coming under pressure again in the face of the realities of an increasingly globalised world and new technologies which demand for flexibility, mobility and simultaneity of the non-synchronous. Compare also Robert Hassan’s concept of “Network Time.”

<sup>8</sup> The apologetic tone of Bernard Richards’ introduction to his study *English Poetry of the Victorian Period*, published in 1988 may be considered representative. Richards declares that “Victorian poetry is not as impressive an achievement as Romantic poetry or seventeenth-century poetry;” “[i]t is probably only the exceptional and slightly unusual Victorian poems that *really* catch the attention of the modern reader;” and “[i]n its totality the Victorian novel is almost certainly a better reflection of the age than the poetry [...] and it is probably a more impressive literary achievement” (3; original emphasis).

<sup>9</sup> Most influentially by Paul Ricœur, in *Time and Narrative*, but also in the work of numerous other scholars who consider the role of time in/and literature more generally (Currie; Hentsch; Higdon; Holdheim; Keunen; Lloyd;

structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent” (“Narrative Time” 165). Narrative, according to Ricœur tightly links the experience of the condition Heidegger calls our within-time-ness with historicity, by combining the temporal movement within the story with the sequential logic of the plot. Poetry, in contrast, is widely understood to be in essence atemporal, itself a “timeless present” or “a fictional time in which nothing happens but which is the essence of happening” (Culler 149, 152).

Where scholars do turn to poetry to discuss time in nineteenth-century literature, they mostly focus either on the work of individual authors (Baker; Chell; Lanzano; Liu), discuss narrative poems (Morgan), or stress the atemporality of lyric poetry (Cameron). Notable exceptions are Christopher Miller’s study of Romantic evening poetry, *The Invention of Evening*, in which he shows how the topic of evening allows for a distinctly lyrical engagement with the passage of time, and Jennifer Ann Wagner’s discussion of the nineteenth-century sonnet form as *A Moment’s Monument*, which focuses “on the dynamics of the form in which historical time gets represented” (21).

### Research Focus and Aims

The wider ideological implications of temporal change and how they affected literature have thus been the focus of broad, if not exhaustive study. The focus of my own research, however, does not lie on the discursive and cosmological dimensions of time which occupied Victorians (on the progress of civilisation, on geological “deep time,” on evolution etc.), but deals with the way time is implicated and created in practice on the level of the individual, that is, in the intersections of what sociologist Barbara Adam calls social time and body (or embodied) time (*Time* 101). Aspects of such intersections are, for example, the influence of schedule, timetables, deadlines, and time pressure on the individual mind and on poetic practise, as in Austin Dobson’s poem “On the Hurry of this Time”; or the anxieties and values attached to spells of “empty” time, as evidenced in poems like Augusta Webster’s “Circe”, or Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “Ulysses” or “The Lotos Eaters;” or again, the deep mistrust of change and the pessimism concerning the future of poetry which pervades much of Matthew Arnold’s verse. In effect, I am asking for the way in which lived and experienced time emerges from Victorian poetry, how poetry itself changed under new temporal conditions and to what degree it was influenced by the fundamental changes to the material and discursive manifestations of time in the nineteenth century.

Literary analysis is particularly fruitful for an examination of temporal experiences, since literary texts are almost by definition situated in the intersection between the public and the private. Arguably this applies particularly for poetry. Ever since the Romantics, poetry has been widely associated with individual expression of subjectivity and emotions. John Stuart Mill reinforced this understanding of poetry influentially for the nineteenth century in his *Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties*, in which he defined poetry as a “delineation of states of feeling” (94), “of the nature of soliloquy” (95).<sup>10</sup> However, poetry’s value for gaining a better understanding of the temporal experience of the Victorians has so far been largely overlooked, precisely because it may at first seem counter-intuitive to turn to poetry for an investigation of questions of time, since it is generally considered to be an atemporal genre.

It may be true that poetry is atemporal to the extent to which lyric poetry especially generally lays its emphasis not on the linear temporality of cause and effect but on the significant moment. As Sharon Cameron puts it: “The moment is to poetry what the sequence is to the story” (204). But while time must be conceived of as a sequence, its sequentiality can only be *experienced* in the present moment. This is in fact the paradox of time which has occupied philosophy from Augustine to Heidegger and beyond (and which Ricœur attempts to redress in his correlation between time and narrative). Augustine addresses this emergence of time from the present in the following passage:

For if there are times past and future, I wish to know where they are. But if I have not yet succeeded in this, I still know that wherever they are, they are not there as future or past, but as present. For if they are there as future, they are there as “not yet”; if they are there as past, they are there as “no longer.” Wherever they are and whatever they are they exist therefore only as present. [...] Thus it is not properly said that there are three times, past, present, and future. Perhaps it might be said rightly that there are three times: a time present of things past; a time present of things present; and a time present of things future. For these three do coexist somehow in the soul, for otherwise I could not see them. The time present of things past is memory; the time present of things present is direct experience; the time present of things future is expectation. (Book XI)

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Middeke; Morson). Indeed, “literature” and “narrative” can repeatedly be found to be used almost synonymously (cf. e.g. Meyerhoff 3; West-Pavlov 9-10).

<sup>10</sup> This definition may seem to be restricted to lyric poetry, but one central feature of Victorian poetry is precisely the tendency to mix and merge the lyrical, the narrative and the dramatic. While the focus of my analysis will be on poetry as subjective expression and thus on poems which are clearly discernible as the utterances of a lyrical subject, I will also consider the specific temporal engagement such generic hybridisation allows for.

This momentary presence of past and future in the present, which Edmund Husserl later was to speak of as “retention” and “protention,” must be understood as the basis for any broader understanding of time, be it linear or circular, historicity or a Being-unto-death.<sup>11</sup> In other words, while narrative constructs larger temporal sequences, the lyric moment can become a privileged site of temporal experience. Narrative may thus be the appropriate place to turn to in order to understand the way individuals attempt to impose structure on time, but poetry, as I would suggest, provides insights into the way time is being felt in the moment.

There is another reason, however, why the novel has usually been privileged in investigations of a Victorian experience of time. After all, it is the typically Victorian form of the realist novel which addresses directly the social and cultural conditions of its day. The rise of the Victorian realist novel itself, indeed, must be understood as intricately interwoven with the conditions shaped by and shaping the new temporal regime, in the logic of its progressive narrative structure, in its forms of publication and, indeed, in the growth of an audience, which found itself with “free” time to spend on education and reading. The novel thus might seem to be a more obvious choice of study object for an exploration of Victorian conceptions of time.

Poetry, meanwhile, is traditionally understood to aim for eternal truths instead of transitory narratives. As Shelley put it emphatically in his “Defence of Poetry” in 1821 (published posthumously in 1840):

A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other connexion than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the Creator, which is itself the image of all other minds. The one is partial, and applies only to a definite period of time, and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; the other is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature. (485)

According to Shelley’s influential ideal, the truth of poetry is thus a truth that is untouched by time, a truth which remains eternally valid. While narrative is concerned with the particularities of time and place and with the linear logic of cause and effect, poetry focuses on human nature which is presumed to remain the same.<sup>12</sup> Seeming thus to elude a temporal logic of progression and change, poetry also resists the second aspect of Victorian time, that of mechanical uniformity, since its close association with subjectivity, feeling and individual expression appears to set it in opposition to the regularity and abstraction of the machine.

From these observations, the Victorian age does indeed emerge as an “*unpoetical* [...] age,” as Matthew Arnold lamented (131, original emphasis). While the novel thrives under the temporal conditions taking firm hold of society during the reign of Queen Victoria, poetry is facing a world in which some of its most fundamental premises are being questioned. A temporal logic based on objective abstraction and regularity as well as accelerating progression seems to be hostile to the emergence of poetry on several levels. On the level of content, in a world increasingly marked by rapid changes and spreading secularisation the eternal may be ever more difficult to hold on to. Poetry’s atemporality seems untimely. As John Stuart Mill put it: “In an age of revolutions, the cotemporary [sic] poets, if they are not before their age, are almost sure to be behind it” (*qt. from* Bristow “Reforming” 13). In fact, one central point of contention in nineteenth-century poetics was the question to what extent poetry could address topical issues without compromising itself (Bristow “Reforming” *passim*).<sup>13</sup> On a formal level, poetry generally resists the kind of temporal progression that marks narrative, or subordinates it to a larger pattern of repetition and formal unity. At the same time, verse must not succumb to mechanical regularity in order to avoid monotony. On the level of production, an age of feverish activity following the logic

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<sup>11</sup> Intriguingly, it is in the recitation of a poem that Augustine finally finds the solution to his paradox: “I am about to repeat a Psalm that I know. Before I begin, my expectation is extended over the whole; but when I have begun, how much soever of it I shall separate off into the past, is extended along my memory; thus the life of this action of mine is divided between my memory as to what I have repeated, and expectation as to what I am about to repeat.” The unitary form of the psalm, which can be held in expectation and memory in its entirety presents the basis for an understanding of time, since “this which takes place in the whole Psalm, the same takes place in each several portion of it, and each several syllable; [...] the same holds in the whole life of man, whereof all the actions of man are parts; the same holds through the whole age of the sons of men, whereof all the lives of men are parts” (Book XI).

<sup>12</sup> Leah Price thus argues that in the nineteenth-century publishing environment novels had more in common with newspapers than with poetry, which was published to be re-read and put on display (50). However, as Andrew Hobbs and Claire Januszewski have recently pointed out, this picture might be distorted by a critical neglect of the publication of poetry in newspapers and periodicals.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Arnold, for one, vehemently resisted the depiction of the contemporary age in poetry. Nevertheless, this does not mean that poetry which is set in the past is not equally resonant of its own age. Quite on the contrary, Arnold also stressed the importance for critics to consider the conditions of the age in their assessment of a poet (cf. Jane Wright).

of progress hardly seems to allow for the moments of recollection in tranquillity which seemed so central for poetic inspiration to the Romantics. Concomitantly, the increasingly commercialised publishing industry saw little profit in poetry at a time in which authors of prose could make a living from their returns (cf. Matthews). Due to its very nature, poetry thus resists the epistemic change from Order to History which Michel Foucault has dated to the end of the eighteenth century (220).

Precisely because it seems to resist the logic of the dominant Victorian time-regime, however, poetry acquires a particular interest in the context of this study. By its immediate successors, Victorian poetry was often criticised for being both “too involved in Victorian society [and] too isolated from it” (Psomiades 29). I would like to suggest that one of the reasons for this impression can be found in the attempt of Victorian poetry to negotiate contradicting temporal exigencies.<sup>14</sup> I am thus following Isobel Armstrong’s lead in supposing that Victorian poetry is struggling with “the logic of its own contradictions” (*Victorian Poetry* 15). I would propose that it is in the forms this struggle is taking, and in the solutions and resignations that resulted from it, that the Victorian experience of time becomes palpable.

Of course, there is much in such experience that is highly subjective and individual. In spite of the high level of individuality and idiosyncrasy in temporal experience, however, it is equally strongly conditioned by social and cultural factors. Moreover, the experience of time is not only culturally specific but also strongly dependent on gender, class and profession. Victorian society was highly stratified along class and gender boundaries and the choice of poetry as the starting point for an interrogation of a Victorian temporal experience further exacerbates gender and class differences. Taking up the pen was difficult enough for both women and members of the working class,<sup>15</sup> but for poetry, gender and class privilege was particularly well entrenched (cf. Boos; Brown; Valentine Cunningham 101-105). Time use and time experience, however, differed strongly along gender and class lines. As Patricia Murphy points out, the dominant Victorian time-regime was intrinsically male – women were either exploited by it or remained for the most part excluded from its economic and progressivist logic (15-23). While a large part of the working-classes, which increasingly had to submit to the strict regime of regular work, were directly affected by the drastic changes in temporal practices, the middle classes faced the intellectual consequences of the changed conceptions of time and were instrumental to the establishment of an economic time regime stressing quantification and elevating time thrift and punctuality as central values of the age (cf. Prignitz 64; Newsome 73-4). A poetic expression of individual experience is thus always articulated within a framework of collective norms and conceptions which it adheres to or resists. A specifically Victorian time experience must emerge from within such an interaction between the individual and the general.

My research thus interrogates Victorian poetry for the ways in which it registers a particularly Victorian experience of time. The aim is threefold: 1) to provide new insights into the forms and concerns of Victorian poems by reading them against the background of the significant changes in the use and understanding of time during the nineteenth century; 2) to gain a better understanding of the Victorian world-view by focusing on the way temporal experiences structure Victorian perceptions and 3) to identify culturally and historically variable aspects of temporal experience.

### Questions and Hypotheses

In the attempt to do justice to the complexity of temporal experience in my analysis, I turn to the work of the sociologist Barbara Adam, who throughout her work emphasises the multifaceted and openly contradictory nature of time. Frustrated with the simplified conceptions of time anthropologists tend to use in order to suggest fundamental differences between the temporal perceptions of Western and “other” non-Western cultures, Adam draws attention to the complex facets of temporal experience which elude any binary construction between “time and temporality, clocks and natural rhythms, linearity and cyclicity, change and order, history and myth, quantity and quality, events in time and time in events” (“Perceptions” 508). She calls for the necessity to acknowledge the complexity of temporal experience and prefers to speak of “timescapes,” which she defines as “a cluster of temporal features, each implicated in all the others, but not necessarily of equal importance in each instance” (*Time* 143). Thus Adam identifies four different though mutually implicated aspects of temporal experience: “time frame,” “timing,” “temporality” and “tempo” (“Perceptions”). These four aspects will structure my investigation of the timescapes of Victorian poetry.<sup>16</sup> For each aspect in turn I will highlight some of the tensions, negotiations and contradictions from which the particularities of a Victorian experience of time arise. Moreover, any discussion and understanding of Victorian timescapes will have to take questions of

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<sup>14</sup> For an exemplary reading of Swinburne’s “A Forsaken Garden,” in which diachronic and synchronic temporalities as well as form and content come in conflict, see Joyner; and Richter, “Swinburne.”

<sup>15</sup> The difficulties women faced when trying to define themselves as authors have been investigated seminally in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s magisterial work *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

<sup>16</sup> In her later work, Adam adds a number of further aspects, which she had before subsumed within the initial four aspects: “time point,” “time patterns,” “time sequences,” “time extension” and “time past, present, future” (*Time* 144). For the structure of my argument, the more manageable original set-up seems more promising, however.

gender into consideration. Gender differences in the experience of time will therefore feature as a central element in the discussion of all of the four aspects of time listed below.

1) According to Adam, we refer to “time frames” whenever we situate an event (or ourselves) in time. The primary time frame of contemporary Western culture is clock and calendar time, but this is by no means the only way in which we locate events in time. Other events, social relations and cultural, personal or natural processes equally serve for orientation in time: thus one might remember a particular event in one’s own past not as having occurred in a particular year but as having happened during a particular stage of one’s personal development, or as concurrent with a memorable historical incident. Adam warns that “[n]otwithstanding conventional analyses that polarize ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ societies, clock and calendar time are not our only sources of reference and cannot therefore be contrasted with natural, social and religious times. We need to recognize that considerations relating to social interaction and to the physical environment have not been replaced by the rationalization of time” (“Perceptions” 509).

Even if the actual dominance of rationalised time in Western societies may thus be overestimated, I would agree with Helga Nowotny that the Victorian age contributed to the firm establishment of a secularised, scientific clock time as the primary time frame in the coordination of society. I will trace the ways in which Victorian poetry resists or pre-empts modernism in calling upon different time frames (abstract, natural, historical or personal) and staging objective and subjective time as contradictory, complementary, in harmony or in conflict. My central claim here is twofold: For one, I argue that in Victorian poetry secularised and mechanised clock and calendar time only gradually emerges as the primary temporal frame of reference. Thus, an abstract scientific time of the clock vies openly with alternative time frames, be they religious, natural, or historical. The Victorian age saw a gradual fortification of the rule of the clock and its poets variously negotiated, endorsed or resisted that which the modernists already recognised as universal and chafed under. The second aspect this claim involves concerns the interrelation between subjective time and objective time frame, while for the Victorians, the latter is not necessarily conceived of as based on clock-time. If modernism focuses on the discrepancy between objective and subjective time, in Victorian poetry we find an interrogation of the ways in which objective time not only differs from but also influences and may concur with subjective time experience. Subjective time experience thus emerges as at least partly dependent on the kind of objective temporal frame it refers to, while both the choice of objective time frame and its relation to subjective experience may turn out to be strongly gendered.

2) “Timing,” the second aspect Adam discusses, is concerned with the Greek concept of *Kairos*, the opportune moment, or “‘good’ or ‘bad’ times for action” (“Perceptions” 509). This involves a qualitative aspect of time which singles out individual moments from the abstract, even flow of mechanical time and ascribes them a particular significance. A consideration of the role of the significant moment in Victorian poetry unfolds on the one hand in the development from Wordsworthian “spots of time”— moments whose memory preserves and nourishes a mind in the face of the world – to modernist epiphanies emphasising revolution and discontinuity. On the other hand it is situated in the tension between what Michael Sayeau discusses as the everyday and the event. I will suggest that the continuities and discontinuities implied in the Victorian lyric moment show the struggle of Victorian poets to understand and redefine the relevance of the moment in a time dominated by the dual logic of continual progression and mechanical monotony. I will further discuss the strongly gendered implications an ideology of progress has for the (self-)assessment of the life of an individual and examine the conflicted stance of the Victorian poets with regard to continuity and change.

3) Under the term “temporality,” Adam subsumes all aspects of time that imply an awareness of the unidirectionality of time: “the fundamental knowledge of irreversible change fused with cycles of return” (“Perceptions” 510). In my discussion of temporality, I will focus on the one hand on Victorian endeavours to reconcile an experience of constant change with a threatened belief in eternity. I will argue that the increasing destabilisation of eternal guarantors, human, natural or divine, turns into a central problem for poetry’s self-understanding, which ultimately results in a modernist appropriation of the new and unprecedented to justify the existence of poetry. On the other hand, I will examine the appropriation of narrative structures and historical perspectives in Victorian poetry and discuss them as an attempt to incorporate temporality within lyric frames.

4) The final aspect of time Adam covers is “tempo.” On a subjective level, tempo refers to our experience of the passing of time as rapidly or slowly, but tempo also concerns the respective speed of a given time-frame. Thus time can be measured in hours or seconds, in leisurely summer evenings or short winter days. Furthermore, tempo refers to the rate or intensity of activity in time. Of course, acceleration has long been recognised as one of the key cultural experiences of industrialised Western Culture, one that is often fraught both with hopes and anxieties (cf. Rosa). In focusing on aspects of tempo in Victorian poetry I will address the assessment of speed and haste as well as the depiction of moments of idleness, of temporal stagnancy. My central proposition will be that Victorian poetry can be seen to be fundamentally torn between a condemnation of haste and a suspicion of idleness. The idle moments which constituted the basis of poetic production (and reception) for the Romantics become morally suspicious to the Victorians. In a time in which the dominant social role of a “leisure class” (Veblen) is gradually superseded by a spreading “protestant work ethic” (Weber), poetry has to struggle for its justification and the very conditions of its existence.

As Adam emphasises, these four aspects of time are indissolubly interwoven: “Rates of action and reaction, be they metabolic or social, are fundamentally implicated in how much can be achieved within any given time frame, in the timing of actions, and in the temporality of existence. All, in turn, are involved in our experience of the speed of time passing” (“Perceptions” 511). Thus, the individual sections of my discussion will emerge to be closely interrelated and even partly overlapping. Far from being redundant, however, each perspective will add a further layer of complexity to an emergent picture of a particularly Victorian timescape.

### Method

My investigation approaches these issues from four different but interconnected angles: Focusing on the *content* and the subject position of the poetic speakers, I examine their explicit and implicit concepts of and attitudes towards time. I further ask for the ways in which such temporal concepts influence poetry on the *formal* level and not only contribute to innovations in genres, metres and poetic forms, but also necessitate a reconsideration of poetry’s *raison d’être*. Focusing on *tropes* of time, I examine changes in their usage over the course of the century, and finally, I will investigate the *modes of production and reception* of Victorian poetry and their implication in the poetic timescapes that can be identified.

In this, my project will proceed in two steps. Initially, I will focus on the work of canonical authors, most importantly Tennyson, the Brownings, Matthew Arnold, the Rossettis, Swinburne and Hardy. In a further step, I plan to use the insights gained so far to develop appropriate search parameters to allow me to identify relevant lesser-known poetry with the help of encompassing full-text search engines, like the Chadwyck-Healey collection of English poetry. In-depth analysis of individual poems will therefore be complemented by a survey of a wide and varied text corpus, which shall serve to confirm or qualify the results gained from the analysis of the canonical works. The new possibilities digital archives open up for research should enable me to make a broader and more nuanced case about the representation of time and temporal experience in Victorian poetry than hitherto possible.

### Importance of the Project

Within the study of literature, the relevance of my project lies, first, in providing a new perspective on Victorian poetry, both in a new reading of canonical texts and in a broader consideration of the poetical production of the time, while also reconsidering the role of poetry in an age dominated by narrative prose. Second, my project will serve to question the general assumption of the atemporality of poetry, by emphasising the many ways in which time informs poetic form and content. It will therefore help to open up a new perspective on the analysis of poetry more generally. Third, I consider my project part of an ongoing endeavour of the humanities to develop new research methods, using digital resources.

I also consider my project relevant on a more general, interdisciplinary level. Immanuel Kant proposed in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that time does not exist in itself, but is the basis of all experience and representation. The way we conceptualise time accordingly conditions our perceptions and our knowledge. To explore the way Victorians understood and experienced time therefore means to gain a better understanding of the preconditions of Victorian thought and knowledge and to trace the formation of conceptions of time which still influence dominant time regimes today.

Today’s late-capitalist society is obsessed with issues of time. Efficient time-management is valued as an important ability. Institutions and companies offer courses on the topic and manuals as well as self-help books giving advice on a better use of time proliferate. Frequent cases of burn-out further testify to a widely felt anxiety about the scarcity of time in the face of an excess of things to do. In spite of such acute awareness of time, the way time is organised and understood as abstract, empty and quantifiable has been entirely naturalised. “Time,” as Russel West-Pavlov has it, “in its common-sense meaning is the most everyday but also the most ubiquitous practical codification of contemporary capitalism in its self-presentation as our planetary destiny” (5). At the same time, it has been suggested that with the advent of the internet, increasing globalisation, new work forms like home office and flexible hours and new forms of consumption, characterised by flexibility, immediacy and simultaneity, late-capitalist societies are currently experiencing another shift in temporal perceptions (Hassan; Hassan and Purser; Nowotny). At this moment of transition, throwing some light on the influence of time regimes on the individual can offer useful insights. Considering the way time was conceived of and experienced in the nineteenth century helps to grasp the social construction of time regimes. The Victorian’s tendency to personify “Father Time,” their anxieties about empty time, their confidence in universal progress and their investment in eternities may seem foreign from today’s perspective. To endeavour to understand this “strangeness” not only sharpens our view of Victorian realities but also introduces some critical distance into our own experience and “throwness” into time.



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