



Veronica Alfano

The Lyric in Victorian Memory: Mnemonic Nostalgia in Rossetti and Housman

Lyric poems, unlike canonical Victorian literary novels, resist the teleological drive of plot and vainly pursue stasis and atemporality. Brevity and patterns of formal repetition, which disrupt a poem's capacity for depicting progressive action, also impress that poem on the reader's memory. Thus Victorian lyricists, whose verses often lament the elusive nature of remembrance, tend to write highly mnemonic poems and so to pursue permanence both by dwelling on vanished beauty and by asking to be recalled. These desires are especially notable in the nineteenth century, because lyric is itself a site of cultural nostalgia in an age of realistic prose. Christina Rossetti, using exaggerated lyricism and numbed retrospection to subvert the figure of the unambitious and over-sentimental Victorian "poetess," presents memorable poems that undermine their speakers' humble requests to be forgotten. By contrast, A. E. Housman tends to grant individual remembrance neither to the lads he commemorates nor to the poems in his iterative volume. Through readings of Rossetti and Housman, I propose that lyric is the key to comprehending this era's fascination with mourning and memorializing the past. Victorian lyric's navigation between the desire to recapture lost time and the reality of inevitable transience yields unstable forms of memory that are shot through with amnesia. Poetic reminiscence thus echoes what Richard Terdiman calls the nineteenth-century "memory crisis" – that is, a secular and industrial era's simultaneous dislocation from and longing for the past.

Veronica Alfano is Assistant Professor in the Institute for Languages and in the philosophy department at Delft University of Technology. She has published numerous articles and book chapters on Victorian literature. Her monograph, The Lyric in Victorian Memory: Poetic Remembering and Forgetting from Tennyson to Housman is forthcoming in 2017.
