Victorian Poetry, Europe, and the Challenge of Cosmopolitanism

Keirstead, Christopher M.

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Through my work on this book, which has sought to understand how a diverse range of Victorian poets engaged, critiqued, and in many cases transcended the frameworks of cosmopolitanism available to them in their time, I have been reminded now and then of another, much more visible inheritance from the nineteenth century. Since their revival in Athens in 1896, the Olympic Games have been a recurring feature of global culture, apart from the interruption of two world wars. I have been struck, for instance, by the parallels between the opening ceremony of the Games and Casa Guidi Windows, which bears witness to its own Parade of Nations in the streets of Florence:

Last, the world had sent
The various children of her teeming flanks—
Greeks, English, French—as if to a parliament
Of lovers of her Italy in ranks,
Each bearing its land’s symbol reverent. (1.511–15)

Representatives from different European nations celebrate Italy but also something larger: the promise of Italy’s future, the beginning of that “advance, / Onward and upward, of all humanity” (49–50), as Barrett Browning would
describe it later in “Italy and the World.” Likewise, the opening ceremony of the Olympics typically celebrates the accomplishments of the host nation before inviting athletes from around the world to march in under their own flags and then to mingle together in the center of the arena—a symbolic representation of national internationalism first devised for the Melbourne games of 1956. Spectators cheer one’s nation but, it is hoped, subsume that self-interest within universal ideals of fellowship and fair play. The Olympics thus attempts to channel the spirit of nationalism into something nobler even as it puts national rivalries on display. For Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern games, “Olympism” was “a religious sentiment transformed and enlarged by the internationalism and democracy that distinguish the modern age.”

*The Dynasts* and the Olympics may share an even stronger kinship. Both were conceived amidst the political tensions of the fin de siècle when Europe seemed to be gearing up for another great military conflict. By staging his own “drama of nations” within a greater, nobler philosophical framework, Hardy could redeem war, recasting it as part of the movement toward Kant’s perpetual peace and universal, cosmopolitan future. *The Dynasts* likewise reflects the peculiar blend of ancient and modern that is the Olympics, which gestures back to classical times and stresses its spiritual continuity with Europe’s cultural origins. Hardy dresses his poem in the language and perspectives of a quasi-ancient Greek chorus, who offer a broad philosophical and historical perspective on human events. Ultimately, *Casa Guidi Windows, The Dynasts,* and the Olympic games all strive to redeem patriotism and channel it toward higher ends.

So far I have managed to conduct this study, however, without paying tribute to perhaps the most famous display of cosmopolitan pageantry in all of Victorian poetry. If Alfred Tennyson’s verse exists largely outside of the Anglo-European spaces of identity cultivated by the Brownings or Swinburne, he did flirt briefly and vividly in “Locksley Hall” (1842) with contemporary cosmopolitan thinking. It is only fair, in some sense, to give him his due, since all of the poets I examine here were writing against him to varying extents, or at least the Tennyson of *Idylls of the King.* Tennyson writes,

> For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see,  
> Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be;  
>  
> Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails,  
> Pilots of the purple twilight, dropping down with costly bales;
Heard the heavens fill with shouting, and there rained a ghastly dew
From the nations’ airy navies grappling in the central blue;

Far along the world-wide whisper of the south-wind rushing warm,
With the standards of the peoples plunging thro’ the thunder-storm;

Till the war-drum throb’d no longer, and the battle-flags were furl’d
In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world. (119–28)

In an almost psychedelic rerendering of Kant’s “spirit of commerce,” Tennyson, in the space of ten lines, works his way through an era of competitive free trade and global conflict before finally depositing mankind at the threshold of world cooperation and unity. Colorful and dynamic, Tennyson’s effort to represent symbolically the ideals and abstractions of nineteenth-century internationalism could find a place, one imagines, in an Olympic opening ceremony even now (perhaps London in 2012?).

Tennyson’s reflections on internationalism continue in the poem, but before delving more deeply into them, I wanted to cite another Victorian cosmopolitan dream that helps to put Tennyson’s achievement in a wider literary context. And I do mean wide: Philip James Bailey’s Festus, published first in 1839, revised and expanded in 1845, and again in subsequent editions up until 1889, when it reached nearly 40,000 lines, emerged out of the same apocalyptic epic tradition that gave rise to Robert Pollok’s even more popular The Course of Time. Bailey, however, would opt for a much more inclusive final reckoning, one inconceivable under Pollok’s stern Calvinism. Based loosely on Faust, the poem’s protagonist, like Goethe’s, is forlorn in love but espouses a more deeply earnest poetic sensibility. With Lucifer’s assistance, he travels across time, across the globe, even across space to Venus and the Moon, before reconciling his lost loves and paving the way toward world peace—thus bypassing Tennyson’s epoch of free trade entirely. In Bailey’s postmillennial universe, all are saved, Lucifer too, as everyone and everything disappears within the oneness of God:

Time there hath been when only God was all:
And it shall be again. The hour is named,
When seraph, cherub, angel, saint, man, fiend,
Made pure, and unbelievably uplift
Above their present state—drawn up to God,
Like dew into the air—shall be all Heaven;
And all souls shall be in God, and shall be God,
And nothing but God, be.\(^3\)

Thus what Herbert F. Tucker calls Bailey’s “Big Hug of no-fault apocalypse,” one that typifies how “the spasmodic epic replaces the . . . evangelical atonement of 1820s epic with nicer things like welcome and pardon, all in support of the unobstructed epiphany of self.”\(^4\) The poem indeed offers an intoxicating vision of poetic power: before this final heavenly consummation, dethroned kings bow before Festus in observance of what Tucker calls a “postnationalist cult of personality.”\(^5\)

It should perhaps come as no surprise, then, that Bailey’s poem was on Matthew Arnold’s mind in the early months of 1848 when, as we saw, events on the political stage seemed to forecast the impending arrival of Europe’s cosmopolitan future. At first Arnold credited Bailey in a letter to Clough with being one of the most technically adept and “promising English verse-writers” of the day.\(^6\) By the following spring, however, Arnold’s enthusiasm had cooled. Festus had failed the all-important test of Europeanness:

England has fallen intellectually so far behind the continent that we cannot expect to see her assisting to carry on the intellectual work of the world from the point to which it is now arrived: for to what point it is arrived not 20 English people know: so profoundly has activity in this country extirpated reflexion. So we may expect to see English people doing things which have long been done, & re-discovering what has been discovered & used up elsewhere, like Faustism.\(^7\)

With respect to the intellectual and spiritual confederation Arnold later called for in “The Function of Criticism,” Festus perhaps fell into the category of being careful what you wish for. However positive-minded and ambitious Bailey’s poem was, however well Bailey could hold the line poetically, the poem’s intellectual appeal could not endure. Festus cast its vision across the cosmos and deep into the future, but in some crucial sense it never even made it across the English Channel.

Arnold’s judgment of Festus brings me back to “Locksley Hall” and the perhaps inevitable tension that can emerge between cosmopolitan dreams and realities. What Arnold made of Tennyson’s poem is not known, but we, at least, should recognize that it has something more to teach us with respect to cosmopolitanism than Bailey, something beyond the “argosies of magic sails” in the passage already quoted.\(^8\) Indeed, after juxtaposing that vision with the kind of world the poem imagines later, it becomes clear that
“Locksley Hall” forms a critique of the deceptive, intoxicating rhetoric of the competing global agendas available at the time. Later, in fact, the speaker rejects notions of European-led world progress for a kind of orientalist fantasy: “There methinks would be enjoyment more than in this march of mind, / In the steamship, in the railway, in the thoughts that shake mankind” (165–66). Finally overcoming his disillusionment with Amy, the English woman he imagines betrayed him, he proclaims, “I will take some savage woman, she shall rear my dusky race” (168). The speaker then quickly backs off of this alternative and reaffirms his role in Europe’s march to the future—following up his sexism with one of the more forthright expressions of Eurocentrism to emerge out of the Victorian period: “Thro’ the shadow of the globe we sweep into the younger day; / Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay” (183–84).

Determining where Tennyson himself stands on these proclamations is difficult, and attempting to do so in fact diminishes the poem’s rhetorical effectiveness as a dramatic monologue. John Lucas aptly describes the speaker’s thoughts as “the near-hysterical strategies of a man trying to convince himself that he can make sense of himself and therefore of the world out there.” The unusual format of the poem, with its double-spaces between couplets, likewise suggests someone incapable of tying his thoughts together in a more sustained analysis. “I know my words are wild” (173), he concedes in a brief moment of self-containment. Tennyson’s point, in fact, might be just how difficult it was to describe in reasoned, measured tones what motivated the Victorian encounter with the wider world, never mind the future results it would lead to. Self-absorption overlaps with fellow-feeling, universalism slips easily into Eurocentrism—a critique often made of Kant as well, whose cosmopolitan vision entails an indefinite preliminary imperial stage, with Europe, the seat of progress, always pointing the way ahead. The mixed, unstable prophecies of “Locksley Hall” thus may have turned out to be more accurate than the cosmopolitan dreams of many of Tennyson’s contemporaries. The road to European and finally global cosmopolitanism, if that was indeed where the world was headed, would be a confusing one with numerous digressions, one defined by conflict and competition as much as cooperation.

Such a realization, however, begs the question of whether Arnold’s intellectual and spiritual confederation of Europe—along with similar, more global constructs—contains a contradiction at its very heart: can any such attempt to manifest this idea in poetry be spiritual and intellectual at the same time? Or, like the Olympics, is it a performance that, under closer scrutiny, always seems to undermine the cosmopolitan “religious sentiment” that
Coubertin claimed inspired them in the first place? In other words, when it comes to performing cosmopolitanism, does the attempt to “dream big” inevitably entail the abandonment of some key intellectual anchorage and critical awareness? Poetically speaking, Festus, perhaps, stands most open to this charge, but we should recall that The Dynasts and Aurora Leigh also raked in high stakes as they drew to a close, predicting a better, happier future for the world. The ultimate answer to the intellectual and spiritual question may lie in the recognition that cosmopolitanism, if it is to be performed well, involves taking risks, a recognition that gets to the heart of the challenge of cosmopolitanism as recounted in this book. Cosmopolitanism demands that one look to the future—to have faith in that future regardless of whether some divine agency is driving it or not—while not losing sight of the political realities of the present—the need to test and refine that dream.

Tennyson meets this effort in “Locksley Hall” if only on a smaller scale than each of the poets examined in the preceding chapters, all of whom worked hard, in a sense, to test and refine the cosmopolitan, Anglo-European spaces they invented. Hardy refused to let readers rest comfortably either in nostalgia for early-nineteenth-century Britain or in the belief that the Immanent Will would become aware of itself just by itself, without human intervention. The present-day limitations of Clough’s Europe were also never far from his mind, but it was still a poem that stepped tentatively toward the future in its closing envoi. Clough’s was a cosmopolitanism of negation, as I have called it, but one that in other ways simply posed a greater challenge for the future, insisting we demand more out of love and more out of the political and cultural affiliations that sustain us. We should recall as well how Robert Browning brought the high-flying Miranda down to earth in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, denying him his Festus-like moment of transcendence and instead reminding us that expanding cultural and spiritual horizons meant immersing oneself deeply, and often uncomfortably, within the identities and thoughts of others. Swinburne took this lesson one step further by embracing the sensations of sickness and contamination that have always adhered to the most threatening—and necessary—kinds of cultural crossovers. And Morris’s Sigurd the Volsung, so closely tied up with notions of race, concerns itself just as fully with how to assimilate the demands of local identities within larger social and geographic environments. Finally, it was Elizabeth Barrett Browning who took the greatest risks over the course of her career in pursuit of a cosmopolitanism that would inspire readers to a higher, more responsible sense of European and global citizenship. Entry into Barrett Browning’s world church, broad and open as it was, still demanded the kind of political and aesthetic toil that character-
ize the conclusion to *Aurora Leigh* and the deep, unflinching self-interrogation of “Mother and Poet.”

Together, these poets underscore Victorian poetry’s largely unrecognized potential as a form of analytical, critical cosmopolitanism. Throughout this book I have deliberately avoided using cosmopolitanism in a simple laudatory sense that positions works against each other on an idealized scale of cultural receptivity. The encounter with Europe in Victorian poetry took a different conceptual compass heading, one that wrung more out of the concept of cosmopolitanism. This more strategic effort, I think, is the essence of Arnold’s intellectual and spiritual confederation of Europe, one that emerged, we should recall, out of his demand for a smarter, more objective kind of cultural criticism. His “Europe” was always as much a *state of mind*, a kind of hermeneutic, even, as an actual place.

“Europe,” of course, remains a site of intense philosophical and critical inquiry, as Rodolphe Gasché underscores in *Europe, or the Infinite Task* (2009), his fine analysis of four twentieth-century philosophers’ attempts to grapple with this most elusive of signifiers. As his title indicates, Europe is “a conception that is always only in the making, never closed off, and structurally open to future transformation and change.” If Gasché refuses to pin down more precisely just what “Europe” is and what it is working towards, it is only to capture how fluid its conceptual boundaries have necessarily become. Étienne Balibar makes a similar kind of move when he proposes the intriguing concept that Europe itself is a “border,” a site of continuous exchange and renegotiation: “This is perhaps what all of Europe, and not just its ‘margins,’ ‘marches,’ or ‘outskirts’ must today imagine, for it has become a daily experience. Most of the areas, nations, and regions that constitute Europe had become accustomed to thinking that they had borders, more or less ‘secure and organized,’ but they did not think they were borders.” Jacques Derrida forms the capstone to Gasché’s investigation, as he inevitably must, having gone farther than anyone in attempting to work critically through ideas of Europe, cosmopolitanism, hospitality, and, late in his career, religion and spirituality. Derrida recognizes that to speak of Europe at all is to engage in a dialogue with the future that is also inextricably bound with past projects undertaken on behalf of specifically Eurocentric notions of progress. “Europe takes itself to be a promontory, an advance,” he writes in *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe* (1992), “the avant-garde of geography and history.” However, if Europe must no longer be privileged as the center of world culture, it remains the site of one of the greatest concentrations of different languages and national identities and can still be a model to the rest of the world for negotiating difference. Derrida remarks elsewhere
in *The Other Heading*, “it is necessary to make ourselves the guardians of an idea of Europe, a difference of Europe, but of a Europe that consists precisely in not closing itself off in its own identity and in advancing itself in an exemplary way toward what it is not, toward the other heading or the heading of the other.”

Derrida’s Europe is thus one that is carefully reconstructed in light of its volatile history and legacy of colonialism. To simply elide his notion of Europe with Arnold’s has not been my goal in this book, but juxtaposing them with each other does underscore the degree to which, then and now, “Europe” could be a durable, flexible site of critical and aesthetic investigation—one that checked patriotic, self-centered excesses of various kinds. Like Arnold, the other poets I have examined here were citizens of the world’s dominant power at the height of its empire-building, but they knew that that alone did not truly make them *citizens of the world*. In Europe and beyond, the cosmopolitan idea they gave voice to in their poems remains a possibility. They challenged themselves to become more open to that possibility, and they challenge us as well: to cultivate the same kind of intellectual openness and, not least importantly, to reevaluate Victorian poetry’s capacity to engage meaningfully with the larger geopolitical forces that have shaped history and continue to shape our lives today.