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Queen Victoria's Last Laureate—and After?

Francis O'Gorman

ABSTRACT

The work of the final Poet Laureate of the Victorian period, Alfred Austin (1835–1913), has not survived among readers of poetry or drama. This essay is not an argument for that work's merits, but it does claim that we miss an important local episode of literary history, involving valuable questions about literary periodization, in the years before the establishment of Modernist poetics, if we overlook not Austin but the debates in the 1890s concerning him. Concentrating on the newspapers, periodicals, and journals of this decade, my essay discusses critics' sense that British poetry had lost its way and their implicit aspiration for new directions. The essay considers what negative models of a poet the 1890s developed, and examines critics' doubts about poetry that made direct and apparently personally sincere statements on politics in the public domain. The conclusion suggests that, while the most familiar argument is that the Modernists were turning against the 'traditional' poetry of the Victorians, the case of the reception of Alfred Austin hints at a way in which some Modernists were, without realizing it, heeding the essential advice of the last of the Victorian critics and responding to their hopes.

There are, to speak in enormous generalizations, two now familiar stories about the relationship between the 'Victorians' and Modernism.¹ The recent one is that, contrary to the statements of both Modernists themselves and a corpus of critical opinion thereafter, Modernism was not simply a rejection of, or reaction against, the 'Victorian' (the scare quotation marks I will henceforth take for granted). Rather, this argument runs, Modernism—allowing it for clarity to be a single entity for a moment—drew on and re-interpreted elements of nineteenth-century practice in verse and prose, to say nothing of wider cultural and political matters, whether that be, in literary terms, James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) magnifying the realist principles of Victorian fiction or, say, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) echoing the deracinated and sterile worlds of, for instance, James Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874). It is a commonplace, following this line, to speak now of the Victorians

1 In addition to the studies to be cited in the main text, important recent contributions to this topic include Jessica Feldman, *Victorian Modernism: Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience* (Cambridge, 2002); Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London, 2010); Laura Marcus, Michèle Mendelssohn, and Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr (eds), *Late Victorian into Modern* (Oxford, 2016); Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada and Anne Besnault-Levita (eds), *Beyond the Victorian/Modernist Divide: Remapping the Turn-of-the-Century Break in Literature, Culture and the Visual Arts* (London, 2018).

anticipating Modernism—Gerard Manley Hopkins, for instance; Vernon Lee; Charlotte Mew; George Meredith—as well as to recognize the place of individual nineteenth-century writers in Modernism. Another example would be John Ruskin, who on the surface might seem securely to belong to the nineteenth century (if not to the Middle Ages), and to have as little to do with modernity as he wanted to have to do with trains, factories, and high-speed communication. Yet Ruskin has relatively recently prompted not one but two books discussing his creative presence in the early twentieth century.²

This argument about inheritances disputes, usually successfully, the self-proclaimed newness—crystallized by Ezra Pound’s ‘Make it New’, even if we are not entirely sure what the ‘it’ is—of the Modernist enterprise(s).³ It is certainly to Ezra Pound—who was, as it happens, rather interested in Ruskin—that one can turn for some peculiarly pithy declamations *contra* the Victorians, ‘a rather blurry, messy sort of a period’, Pound said in 1918, ‘a rather sentimentalistic, mannerish sort of a period’.⁴ Advertising had become a powerful agent in the commercial world at the beginning of the twentieth century and the Modernists were certainly good at finding the attractive promotional rhetoric describing their own freshness or even, like Marinetti, revolutionary originality. This point hardly needs demonstration since the ‘Modernists’ rejection of the Victorian’ has proved an idea only a little less tenacious than the assumption that Romanticism was a ‘rejection’ of the Augustan, despite literary critics’ and literary historians’ best efforts to account for the Romantics otherwise. The multiple manifestos of the Modernists—catching something of the politician’s new preference for a statement of electability—often involved the conception of spurning, or blaming, or both, something from the past.⁵ T. E. Hulme’s ‘Romanticism and Classicism’ (1913), the starting point still for many considerations of Modernist literatures, memorably set up an opposition between those two terms, defining the former as involving ‘spilt religion’ and having as its exemplars, among others, Coleridge and Swinburne—‘Wondrous pattern, leading nowhere’, Pound remarked with admiring disapproval of the latter.⁶ Hulme—whose views Al Alvarez was still rather oddly imagining in 2004 as uncomplicatedly revolutionary and decisive in, as Alvarez calls it, ‘that stuffy period’—said he did not value either the Romantic or the Classical more highly.⁷ Yet, he continued, it was time for a change. The future lay in not being the nineteenth century. It is easy to forget that the Georgians, as represented at first by Edward Marsh’s *Georgian Poetry 1911–1912* (1912), thought of themselves as a fresh departure before the Modernists, and evidence, as Marsh said, that ‘English poetry is now once again putting on a new strength and beauty’.⁸ He was not wrong, though the Georgians were

2 See Toni Cerutti (ed.), *Ruskin and the Twentieth Century: The Modernity of Ruskinism* (Vercelli, 2000) and Giovanni Cianci and Peter Nicholls (eds), *Ruskin and Modernism* (Basingstoke, 2001).

3 Cf. Ezra Pound, *Make it New* (London, 1934). There remains uncertainty as to who first came up with this—unremarkable—slogan.

4 Ezra Pound, ‘A Retrospect’ (1918), *Literary Essays* (New York, NY, 1968), 3–14 (11).

5 OED dates the first source of a party-political use of this term to 1880.

6 Ezra Pound, ‘Swinburne: A Critique’, *Collected Early Poems* (New York, NY, 1976), 261.

7 Al Alvarez, *The Writer’s Voice* (London, 2006), 38.

8 Edward Marsh (ed.), *Georgian Poetry 1911–1912* ([1912] London, 1920), unpaginated front endpapers. Cf. Marianne Thormählen, ‘Edward Marsh and Modern English Poetry’, *English Studies*, 101 (2020), 727–40.

themselves shortly to become part of the perceived problem for Modernism itself—rural Englishness, the lyric, the subjective, was not the thing—in its self-proclaimed departure from the recent past as much as Edwardian fiction was a (generalized) difficulty for Virginia Woolf.

These are huge cultural shifts—and my brief narrative cannot be anywhere near adequate. But this essay is, in fact, not directly concerned with a comprehensive claim about such an enormous topic as ‘Victorian into Modernism’, which, in a sense, like many discussions of inheritance and progeny, is as messy and as unrevealing as private family history. Rather, this essay is interested in a single event at the end of the century: the appointment of Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s successor as Poet Laureate in, eventually, 1896. The topic matters beyond its local import because of what the arguments, primarily but not exclusively from critics in the periodical press and newspapers, reveal about what was perceived to be the condition of English poetry at the end of the nineteenth century and about what might be needed at the commencement of the twentieth. I should add, perhaps, that although there is regrettably no scope in this article to consider the place of what Pater called the ‘Aesthetical Sect’ and the Decadents who followed/diverged from them, the essay is nonetheless interested in the perception of decadence, with a lower case ‘d’, in English poetry during the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.⁹ The debates—if debates they quite were amid what turned out to be pretty much consensus—are at once limited but also suggestive broadly in, and of, the uneven narrative of twentieth-century literary history and the establishment of Modernism(s). Even in the ripples of vexation within the provincial press in, for instance, Dundee (I give an example), there are, I think, some intriguing signs of Modernism’s contexts, clustered around and within discussions of Tennyson’s possible successors. This is true in particular of discussions about the man who eventually did succeed him: the disappointing but not disappointed Alfred Austin (1835–1913).

From the disputes and agreements about who should and should not follow Tennyson, wielder of the stateliest measure for the last 40 years or so, among journalists and critics (not such a sharply defined division as now, of course), emerge three distinct issues of relevance to my topic. First, most importantly, there is a problem of the recognized weakness of contemporary poetry and an entropic sense of the end of a generation without clear inheritors. Second, there is a problem with what public poetry might mean and, in addition, what being a public poet was. And third, there is a noticed, but much less noted, running dry of a specifically national (by which is meant English) creative force in poetry. What is peculiar about all of this, I claim, is how much the critics of Alfred Austin enumerated for themselves, unknowingly but aptly, some of the conditions that Modernism would, in part, seek to address or redress, even if no Modernist manifesto was ever explicitly a pitch to be saved from the poetics of Alfred Austin. In this respect, however indirectly, Modernism did not reject the late Victorian critics and their values but, strange though it is to say, agreed with them.

The Laureateship, as many observed on the death of Tennyson, had infrequently been held by poets of distinction. Indeed, the eighteenth century was mostly a dead

9 Cf. Nicholas Shrimpton, ‘Pater and the “Aesthetical Sect”’, *Comparative Criticism*, 17 (1995), 61–84.

loss, as a large number of articles reminded their readers, more than pointedly in relation to the present. The story of the Laureateship’s inglorious holders was, awkwardly, *de nous jours* while the post lay vacant, as it was through four inactive, though gossipy, years. *The Graphic*, a popular illustrated journal set up to rival the *Illustrated London News*, was, in January 1893, for instance, not unique in looking over the feeble tale of ‘sorry immortals’ who had stood as the official court poet. ‘Of Laurence Eusden [Laureate 1718–1730] little is known’, the author said characteristically, ‘nor is it easy to understand on what grounds he was selected’.¹⁰ Here was a dismal century: one ‘sad relapse’ after another.¹¹ Southey (Laureate, 1813–1843) had been a step up in the new century, thought *The Graphic*, but the two great poets to grace the role after Dryden (who had been the first official Laureate, in 1668, and that was six years before the death of *Milton*) were, a mere 200 years later or thereabouts, William Wordsworth (Laureate, 1843–1850) and Alfred Tennyson (Laureate, 1850–1892). Everyone had had to wait a very long time. But now . . . who next? Avoiding a reprise of the ‘sorry’ record of the eighteenth century was minimally, but also essentially, the task, the periodical said. And in printing almost uncannily repetitious enumerations of poets to whom the post might fall, few commentators could avoid observing that many of the names available were—not of the best.

There seemed to some commentators that there were few names anyway. Swinburne was widely regarded as the only serious poet among the living (William Morris had, after all, given over verse, as many noted, in favour of socialist speeches). ‘[E]xpert opinion’, Edmund Gosse later said, ‘was practically unanimous in desiring to see the laureateship offered to Swinburne’.¹² ‘Mr Morris’s social views would stand between him and the Laureateship’, commented the *Evening Telegraph* the day after Tennyson’s death. So, the newspaper went on, in a vein shared by many others, we come therefore to Swinburne, ‘who has been a poet of the highest distinction for more than a generation. No other name of any sufficient qualification presents itself’.¹³ Pondering the plain question, ‘Who is to be the next Poet Laureate?’ *The Review of Reviews* before Tennyson’s death had thought the same. ‘Aut Swinburne, aut nullus’, it had declared.¹⁴ Swinburne was the recognized front-runner though the complexities behind any such appointment—including the minor question of whether Swinburne would have accepted the role in the first place—were rarely hinted at, except, occasionally, there was furtive mention of his republicanism and the youthful scandal of *Poems and Ballads* (1866).¹⁵ Swinburne or no one? That was a problem. While the journals and newspapers concentrated on the immediate topical matter of who should succeed Lord Tennyson, they inadvertently—or perhaps knowingly—were indicating that Great Britain was now seemingly on the verge of being *das Land ohne Poesie*.

10 ‘Poets Laureate’, *The Graphic*, 47 (7 January 1893), 8.

11 ‘Poets Laureate’, *The Graphic*, 8.

12 Edmund Gosse, *The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (New York, NY, 1917), 276–77.

13 ‘The Late Lord Tennyson’, *Evening Telegraph* (7 October 1892), 2.

14 ‘Who is to be the next Poet Laureate?’, *The Review of Reviews*, 1 (May 1890), 398. There was a debate in Parliament during the hiatus in which a proposition was made that the Laureateship should pass to Tennyson’s son (it was rejected): Hansard Commons Debates [HC Deb] 17 July 1894 vol. 27 cc. 178–9.

15 On this context, see Francis O’Gorman, ‘Swinburne and Tennyson’s Peerage’, *English Studies*, 96 (2015), 277–92.

To *The Times* a day after Tennyson's death, it appeared ominous but inevitable to agree that recent greatness in poetry had, almost completely, come to a close. The newspaper quoted from the French *Temps*, which said *The Times*, 'speaks of Tennyson as the last survivor of one of England's literary ages, for an age which has seen Byron, Scott, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Browning, Rossetti, and Tennyson may certainly be counted such'.¹⁶ And what was presently to come? *The Fortnightly Review*—which hoped to see the Laureateship abolished—could, like others, only assemble a few names when it inquired about Tennyson's successor as early as 1890. 'Does there remain any one who can fairly compete with Mr Swinburne?', the journal had asked: 'First let us clear the ground. There are several living poets deserving of praise and honour in their kinds, who for divers reasons obviously "attain not to the first three [of the leading competitors against Swinburne]": George Meredith; Aubrey de Vere; Coventry Patmore.'¹⁷ *The Fortnightly* accepted that there were other good poets, and thought, for instance, Christina Rossetti, Augusta Webster, and A. Mary F. Robinson among the most prominent women.¹⁸ Good—but not, for *The Fortnightly*, good enough. Elsewhere, there was a greater range of candidates examined and, as the late Linda Peterson documented in 2012, many informal competitions were held in journals throughout the whole *interregnum*. Some, as Peterson reveals, more serious than others.¹⁹ All the same, the liberal *Fortnightly* could come up with only a small collection of those it thought really could be on a shortlist against the author of *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865). It was not a youthful one. Meredith, for instance, was born in 1828; de Vere in 1814; Patmore in 1823. (Swinburne, born in 1837, might hardly expect a very long tenure either.) It was a curious list that could summon only writers born well before the year of Queen Victoria's accession (de Vere, indeed, was only five years younger than Tennyson). The (male, middle- or upper-class) poetic powers of the United Kingdom seemed to be winding down.

The apparent absence of too many obvious candidates unnerved those wondering about the health of British verse. Looking back at the beginning of the twentieth century (in 1901) on the years gone by, the Bishop of Stepney, as reported in *The Times*, delivered thanks to Sir Mountstuart Grant Duff for a talk given at Mansion House to the University Extension Lecture movement on 'The Poetry of the Victorian Age'. He did so with dismay. 'The great hope', the Bishop was reported to have said, 'was that the end of the last century and the beginning of the 20th might witness a repetition of what happened at the close of the 16th and the opening of the 17th centuries, when a period of great eccentricity and extravagance and luxury in poetry passed away, and was immediately followed by the very greatest poetry which our national literature could show'.²⁰ There was certainly need for hope. And

16 'Death of Lord Tennyson', *The Times* (7 October 1892), 9.

17 'Tennyson: And After?', *The Fortnightly Review*, 47 (May 1890), 621–37 (629).

18 'Tennyson: And After?', *The Fortnightly Review*, 630.

19 See Linda Peterson, 'On the Appointment of the "Poet Laureate to Her Majesty," 1892–1896' (2012), in Dino Franco Felluga (ed.), *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, <http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=linda-peterson-on-the-appointment-of-the-poet-laureate-to-her-majesty-1892-1896> accessed 26 April 2021.

20 'The Poetry of the Victorian Age', *The Times* (6 May 1901), 14. Consecrated on 1 May 1901, the Bishop of Stepney was Cosmo Gordon Lang, later Archbishop of York then Canterbury.

those who mulled over the question of who should succeed Tennyson as Laureate were not, specifically, very keen (with some exceptions) on the person who eventually did: Alfred Austin.

Indeed, if the most obvious inference from the discussions about the succession in the media was that Great Britain, generally speaking, was short of good poets, the second most obvious was that the country had to make do with someone whom even his supporters could not fully back. George Saintsbury, shortly to become Regius Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at the University of Edinburgh, wrote to Gladstone, then Prime Minister, in 1892 suggesting that a ‘dummy’ might be offered the Laureateship to ‘[k]eep the seat ready’ for someone better.²¹ Gladstone, who did not follow this advice, simply made no appointment; neither did his successor, Lord Rosebery. What had happened to British verse? *The Leisure Hour*, a popular general periodical published by the Religious Tract Society, was one such qualified supporter of the man who eventually did take the position (‘dummy’ or otherwise). But the reviewer, commenting on the new appointment in March 1896 (Austin’s position had been announced on 1 January that year) could not offer more than tepid praise.²² ‘One of the Laureate’s merits as a lyric poet’, the journal said, hinting that the good things about Mr Austin were uncomfortably countable, ‘is apt to be overlooked in days when obscurity is deemed a virtue, and poetry which needs no commentator is regarded as commonplace. His verse is melodious, and it is eminently clear.’²³ It was a compliment, if a somewhat ambiguous one (was what Austin was clear about interesting?), which had started from the stricter, but also, as it turned out, accurate opinion that ‘Mr Austin’s facile verse is not likely long to survive the century.’²⁴ Elsewhere there was criticism disguised as politeness. The sharpest example had been *The Fortnightly Review* in 1890. ‘Another living poet who is believed to have a certain following’, *The Fortnightly* had said with a telling use of ‘believed’, ‘and to call no living man his master, is Mr Alfred Austin. We must’, the journal went on, with the appearance of apology,

be excused from discussing Mr Alfred Austin’s claims at any great length. His principles consist in repudiating the whole history of English poetry since Byron, and his practice in imitating Byron, by no means to the exclusion of his faults, with considerable facility and creditable fidelity.²⁵

The Fortnightly managed to suggest that Austin was at once belated (Byron?!) and bad at it.

Some commentators on the state of British poetry around the time of Tennyson’s death were arch—and some of those were writers themselves. George Bernard Shaw, wittily (and acidly) ruminating in July 1895 on the appointment of Tennyson’s successor, did not even mention Alfred Austin. Instead, he joked with the notion that contemporary definitions of ‘poet’ were now so low that anyone who could ‘write

21 Quoted in Edmund Kemper Broadus, *The Laureateship: A Study of the Office of Poet Laureate in England with some Account of the Poets* (Oxford, 1921), 202.

22 See ‘New Year Honours’, *The Times* (1 January 1896), 6.

23 John Dennis, ‘The New Poet Laureate’, *The Leisure Hour* (March 1896), 292–5 (293).

24 Dennis, ‘The New Poet Laureate’, 292.

25 ‘Tennyson: And After?’, *The Fortnightly Review*, 636.

rhymes' could take the name. With such a definition, Shaw went on, there is currently 'no distinction being made between Homer or Shelley and the gentlemen who write commercial odes to tooth-powders and pens'.²⁶ The modern poet, Shaw continued, might be

a person of infinitely greater dignity than a king; or he may be the sort of middle-class snob who is moved to sincere emotion, and consequently to poetic utterance, by pictures of royal weddings in the *Illustrated London News*, and photographs of princesses bending over the cradles of their babies; or he may be a mere handy rhymester, who will do anything he is paid for, from a penny valentine to a five-act drama.²⁷

The situation at the time of the appointment of Tennyson's successor, then, was in a sense worse than simply a nation full, or almost full, of poor poets. According to Shaw, the real trouble was that the baseline for poetry in the days of Tennyson's decline was so low that real excellence, supposing it to exist, had no more value or recognition than a hack who wrote—*pace* Dr Johnson—only for money. Shaw was being mischievous, of course, but the joke could only have worked if the readers recognized—and Shaw surely knew his readers would recognize—what core of truth there was in its analysis of the potential candidates, as discussed in the press, for the new Poet Laureate.

Some other literary writers had their views, of course. W. B. Yeats, for instance. He was only just beginning to make his mark but was asked with three other poets, including Robert Bridges, later Laureate himself, to write to *The Bookman* in November 1892 with his views on the future appointment. Who should it be? Yeats, as might have been expected, was not keen on the royal dimension of the job and inquired if there were not a case 'for nationalizing the laureateship'.²⁸ That meant taking it away from the court, presumably, and making it more like the modern Scottish Makar. He had nothing to say whatsoever about Alfred Austin and thought, on balance, that William Morris (whom Yeats knew well) should be offered the position, Swinburne having become 'too careful of the sound, too careless of the sense' (a line that might have had an element of self-warning in it for Yeats).²⁹ Whatever the case, Austin was conspicuous in this *Bookman* letter by not being there. It is certainly true, though, that one of the valuable features of Yeats's invited letter, with its suggestion of nationalizing the Laureateship (whatever exactly that might have meant) is that it exposes a problem implicit in much of the discussion I have so far considered: how far, and in what ways, did the appointment of a Laureate represent something 'national' about poetry? Was the appointment to be a figurehead for the art in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, or a more local and even functional role, particularly associated with the royal family at Windsor? The lack of clarity about this, hinted at by Yeats's suggestion, runs silently throughout much of

26 'Bernard Shaw' [in fact, the author], *The Idler*, 7 (July 1895), 417–18 (417).

27 'Bernard Shaw', *The Idler*, 417.

28 'The Question of the Laureateship', *The Bookman*, 3 (November 1892), 52–5 (54).

29 'The Question of the Laureateship', *The Bookman*, 54.

the anxiety documented in my article. The job description, at least as it was externally perceived, was not at all clear to outsiders.

The criticism of Austin, where he was mentioned (often though not always tempered with respect for the office of Laureate) was unconfined to the time before or around his election. Indeed, Lord Tennyson’s successor—one of whose poems uneasily began, ‘Were I a poet . . .’—struggled persistently while in the esteemed office to attract positive reviews (though there were exceptions to which I will return).³⁰ When, for instance, Austin published his long drama *England’s Darling* (February 1896) on Alfred the Great, his first substantial work while Laureate, it was no great success.³¹ ‘It would be unkind to take advantage of this volume’, said *The Graphic* on 1 February that year, thinking of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (1859–1885) in relation to *England’s Darling*, ‘to draw a comparison between the merits of the two bards who successively celebrate two of our national heroes; the more so because the present Laureate has ended his volume with “The Passing of Merlin,” an eloquent tribute to the name of his great predecessor’.³² Austin—Alfred the Little as the joke went—was rarely to come off well in comparison with Tennyson: Alfred the Great. And there was worse, even more publicly, on its way. Austin’s stature as a writer was sufficiently low, remarkably, for him to become—of all things—a joke in the House of Commons. The Laureateship has, said *The Times* in October 1892, ‘too often been only a pinnacle for mediocrity to perch upon’: it was a wry use of ‘pinnacle’, given the context.³³ But, well into Austin’s tenure of the post, a Member of Parliament speaking in the Palace of Westminster on 23 May 1906 was more impish. It is worth reproducing the whole exchange, recorded with scrupulous neutrality by Hansard:

MR BOTTOMLEY (Hackney, S.)

I beg to ask the Prime Minister whether, in view of the fact that Wednesday, the 30th instant, is the date of an important national festival at which many Members of the House are desirous of assisting, he will consider the possibility of moving the adjournment for the Whitsuntide Recess on Tuesday, the 29th.

SIR H. CAMPBELL-BANNERMAN [Prime Minister]

I do not know of any national festival which is celebrated on May 30th, and therefore I am not open to consider the suggestion put forward.

MR BOTTOMLEY

May I respectfully remind the Prime Minister that May 30th is the anniversary of the conclusion of peace with the Boers and of the birth of Mr Alfred Austin, the Poet Laureate?³⁴

The point of the joke is that 30 May 1906 was Derby Day at Epsom (won, as it happens, with a record-breaking time, by Major Eustace Loder’s Spearmint). Horatio Bottomley—later to be convicted of financial fraud and imprisoned—plays around

30 Alfred Austin, *In Veronica’s Garden* (London, 1895), 134.

31 Broadus usefully discusses the problems caused by the somewhat boastful Preface to this drama in *The Laureateship*, 204–5.

32 ‘The Poet Laureate’s New Poem’, *The Graphic*, 53 (1 February 1896), 150. On the broad topic, see Joanne Parker, *England’s Darling: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great* (Manchester, 2007).

33 ‘The Appointment of the New Poet Laureate’, *The Times* (17 October 1892), 9.

34 HC Deb 23 May 1906 vol. 157 c. 1302.

with the absurdity of a parliamentary adjournment for so inauspicious an occasion as the Laureate's birthday, presumably knowing full well that most people—the Prime Minister seemingly excepted—understood what his ruse was. It would be hard to imagine Wordsworth's or Lord Tennyson's birthday being made a comic cover story for a race meeting. Austin—it would be untrue, remarked even his obituary, 'to say that Austin [as a poet] ever ranked high in the opinion of skilled judges'—was hardly living up to the dignity of the official court poet or, if so defined, the public face of the empire's best achievements in verse.³⁵

The last element worth noting amid these various reflections on how hard it was to find an admirable figurehead for British poetry in the middle of the last decade of the nineteenth century concerns not what critics had written about Austin. It concerns what Austin had written about other poets. While a range of writers at the end of the century fretted about what was happening in English poetry—how far it was from Tennyson's age; how far it was from Shakespeare's; how the Age of Austin did not become the kingdom—one of the most controversial, though hardly influential, statements about this decline was Austin's own: *The Poetry of the Period* (1870, originally published in *Temple Bar*). Austin here, possessed by some kind of demon intent on annoying his colleagues, assailed by name Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne, Arnold, and William Morris. And there were plenty of other casualties on the way. It was *enfilade* fire across many of the names of the mid-period. And the most deadly rounds were reserved for, of all people, the Poet Laureate. 'My proposition is', said Austin, almost in the manner of someone taking up a side in a public debate and promising to try out rhetorical skill more than sincerity:

that Mr Tennyson is not a great poet, unquestionably not a poet of the first rank, all but unquestionably not a poet of the second rank, and probably—though no contemporary perhaps can settle that—not even at the end of poets of the third rank, among whom he must ultimately take his place.³⁶

Part of the collateral damage of such a statement involved the critics and the organs of criticism. Austin's implicit point is, in part, 'how did everyone get this so wrong?' Not only is the author of *In Memoriam* (1850) poor, he has pulled the wool over the eyes of an inattentive body of professional readers who are supposed to inform, or form, the public taste. This was relatively early in the period for such gloom about the condition of English poetry and Austin's way out—to which I will also return—would be, ironically enough, part of what would seem most lacking in his own Laureate poetry nearly 30 years later. But anyone able to remember the grumbling of *The Poetry of the Period*—and the book had no new editions, to my knowledge—might easily have thought it a forerunner of the temper of critics at the end of the century, bothered about just how few good poets there seemed to be as well as by the fact that Mr Austin was not one of them.

The discussions that cluster around Alfred Tennyson's replacement clinch a peculiar concern: that by a quirk of the calendar the end of the century is also, more or less, the 'last of the race' time for poetry as currently understood. Swinburne belongs

35 'Death of the Poet Laureate', *The Times* (3 June 1913), 8.

36 Alfred Austin, *The Poetry of the Period* (London, 1870), 4.

with an earlier generation and appointing him to the Laureateship—supposing such a thing could be done—would, ironically, confirm just how short of adequate candidates the United Kingdom had become. One solution would have been, as some journals suggested, to abolish the position altogether (‘if there were no such office in being, we should not at this time of day be likely to make it’, said *The Fortnightly* in 1890).³⁷ Still, for others, there remained a hope that the post might be one of distinction and might represent, however unclear the role was about this, the verve of British verse. And that, of course, was the problem—because it could also reveal the opposite.

The Georgians, as Marsh fashioned them into a public ‘movement’, made a stand, as I have said, against this pock-marked scene. And the Modernists, in all their plurality, did the same more robustly after them (and it is worth remembering that Pound might well have been included in the first Georgian anthology, which would have given literary historians a slightly different story to tell).³⁸ Alfred Austin was only just still alive by the time Pound, in 1912, crossed out Hilda Doolittle’s name and wrote ‘H. D. *Imagiste*’ on her early poems in, apparently, the British Museum tea shop (or a tea shop near the British Museum: she said different things); Austin was dead by the time of Pound’s *Des Imagistes* (1914) and T. S. Eliot’s *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) though still alive for Roger Fry’s *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* exhibition (1910) and the founding of Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry* magazine (1912); a year dead by the time of Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914); dead by the time Robert Bridges published the proto-Modernist Gerard Manley Hopkins (1918) and Amy Lowell’s *Some Imagist Poets* (1915) appeared, with its forensic Introduction; and dead by the time of the first poems that would be eventually included in Wallace Stevens’ inaugural collection, *Harmonium* (1923). But the beginnings of Modernism—which can of course be traced far back into the nineteenth century as Carol T. Christ was one of the first to argue—shared a diagnosis with the late Victorian critics even as it defined itself as breaking with ‘Victorian poetry’.³⁹ It does not matter if any Modernist knew or did not know of the actual discussions about Austin’s appointment—most likely they did not—but the critical mood, the terms that that appointment confirmed as an appropriate public way to think of the conditions of modern poetry (or poetry that was failing to be modern), were recognizably what the Modernists envisaged themselves as addressing. In their own way, the writers described so far were as concerned about the state of British poetry as, differently, T. E. Hulme, for example, or Amy Lowell in her 1915 anthology, or, looking more widely, Guillaume Apollinaire in *L’Esprit nouveau et les poètes* (1917). My point is that the late Victorians as described here already knew what the problems were. Hulme’s much-quoted essay, to stay with one example, leaves the reader with the impression that he is saying something feistily new. Yet in an important way Hulme—though he could envisage a solution that his colleagues in the 1890s could not—was still of a piece with his late-Victorian predecessors, whose concerns about

37 ‘Tennyson: And After’, *The Fortnightly Review*, 624.

38 See Dominic Hibberd’s ODNB entry on ‘Georgian poets (act. 1912–1922)’. Marsh and Pound could not agree on an appropriate poem so the idea was dropped.

39 See Carol T. Christ, *Victorian and Modern Poetics* (Chicago, IL, 1986).

the etiolation of the art of poetry had been peculiarly visible as they witnessed what they could not avoid seeing, in the death of Tennyson, as the end of an era rather than the beginning of a new one which appeared, alas, powerless to be born.

Austin's troublesome appointment to the Laureateship, and the analysis of the present consuetude of British poetry that it prompted, involves, perhaps, several other elements worth reflecting on in relation to 'what happened next'. Again, it is neither possible nor particularly relevant to trace a direct line of influence from the debates around Alfred Austin to important dimensions of some of the Modernists' most well-known convictions. The broader matter is one of overall temper, of assumptions in the air. First, then, the issue of how a poet behaved in public culture, what the relationship between his voice and his opinions were, was, I think, a notable topic early in Alfred Austin's appointment. Here, too, would be matter to which the Modernists, though they would almost certainly not have made the connection, returned.

The assumption that the Laureateship would write numerous poems on the goings-on of the royal family and the ceremonial events of state had, the newspapers tended to think, faded by the time of Austin's appointment, though it is not clear what the evidence for this was. In practice it was not true and no subsequent commentator to my knowledge has produced any evidence that it could have been. There were, though, two elements of Austin's role, criticized by some of the periodicals and, more severely on one occasion by the House of Commons, which implied a problematic conception of the public poet, and, perhaps, of a sincere one. Poetry and a national audience was, as commentators admitted, no easy topic. And, in one element of this difficulty, Austin had the unexpected help—if that is quite the word for someone involved in a minor scandal—of Swinburne, whose public interventions had already caused their own furore over several decades. The notion of an official public poet, as has been observed, did not suit all the commentators on the Laureateship. *The Times*, on 17 October 1892, for example, did not want to be rid of the post but recognized that others did. Only, the newspaper said, from a 'worn-out people might come the notion of winding up an ancient office rich in associations'.⁴⁰ But, optimistically, *The Times* went on, it was to be hoped that the new Laureate, assuming there were one, might fulfil a national role, whatever that might exactly mean (and *The Times* was no more detailed on this than Yeats). Yet, for others, a national role was the trouble, whether they agreed with the post of Laureate or no. And it was partly the trouble because Alfred Austin was so obviously defined by party politics. He had been, after all, for much of his life, a poet second and a Conservative party journalist first (again, I return to this). True, he eventually announced after his appointment that he would abjure party politics. Few other living poets, all the same, could have been more closely allied with a parliamentary party than Austin, despite that decision.

There was nothing secret about the fact that Austin's name had been suggested to the Queen by Robert Arthur Talbot Gascoyne-Cecil, 3rd Marquess of Salisbury (1830–1903), Conservative Prime Minister. This had occurred after the four-year hiatus during which, presumably, the somewhat weak list of possibilities was

40 'The Appointment of the New Poet Laureate', *The Times*, 9.

examined, though exact details of what the selection process involved have not emerged and perhaps do not survive. Salisbury, as Michael Bentley makes clear in his innovative account, was no man of culture.⁴¹ Austin was, it appeared to the outside world, a Tory appointment, selected for being a Tory poet not a poet: ‘I had’, Austin notably wrote in 1911, concerning 1887, ‘for some time enjoyed [Lord Salisbury’s] confidence’.⁴² Swinburne, in the end, might have been disqualified—accounts differ—because of his scandalous *Poems and Ballads* of 1866, his anti-monarchism, or because of his interruption of the conventions of international diplomacy including his call in 1890 for the assassination of Tsar Alexander III; Sir Lewis Morris because of his shocking private life. But the notion of the Tory poet who brought together English verse with party opinion did not sit easily with some commentators. Poetry was not supposed, as they saw it, to be so riskily partisan. Sir Owen Seaman, later editor of *Punch*, envisaged the unpoetic selection process that resulted in Austin’s elevation in his satirical volume, *In Cap and Bells* (1900). The volume narrated Austin’s life-story as he waited for the Laureateship. Then, Seaman said, referring to Salisbury, ‘At length a callous Tory chief arose’:

Master of caustic jest and cynic gibe,
Looked around the Carlton Club and lightly chose
Its leading scribe.⁴³

That sounded more as if it should have been ‘stooge’ than ‘scribe’. But the point was about the imputed lack of literary integrity in the choice. William Morris, as the press had agreed, had become a political activist (the term is proleptic) and was thus out of the running except in, most prominently, Yeats’s mind. But the ‘leading scribe’ of the Tory party, so-called, had not been disqualified, despite his role, as the *Evening Telegraph* noted, as ‘Tory pamphleteer and journalist’.⁴⁴ For the Connecticut paper *Meriden Daily Republican*, Lord Salisbury had but ‘fitted the fool’s cap on his own head for all time’ in appointing such an ‘estimable little bardling’ who just happened to be politically favourable.⁴⁵ The elision between poet, journalist, and party politician was not exuberantly welcomed.

And Austin’s first statement in poetry as Laureate was to make a bold assertion about England and international affairs, which, though not party political in an obvious way, was certainly politically inept.⁴⁶ Austin’s subject was the Jameson Raid (he revealingly said nothing about the mess in which he subsequently became embroiled in his *Autobiography* (1911)). In this somewhat mysterious mission, the British colonial administrator, Dr Leander Starr Jameson (1853–1917), led a small armed force over the New Year of 1895–1896, intending to start an uprising of *Uitlanders* in the

41 See Michael Bentley, *Lord Salisbury’s World: Conservative Environments in Late-Victorian Britain* (New York, NY, 2001).

42 *The Autobiography of Alfred Austin, Poet Laureate, 1835–1910*, 2 vols (London, 1911), 2. 192.

43 Owen Seaman, *In Cap and Bells* (London, 1900), 9.

44 ‘The Poet-laureateship’, *Evening Telegraph* (Dundee) (24 August 1895), 3.

45 ‘Literary Corner’, *Meriden Daily Republican* (18 January 1896), 6.

46 His actual first publication as Laureate, so far as I can tell, was a letter to *The Times* on the Venezuelan crisis, saying he did not think the US and UK would declare war on each other: 8 January 1896, 12.

Transvaal in defiance of the rule of Paul Kruger. Austin's poem, 'Jameson's Ride', published in *The Times* on 11 January 1896, was meant to be Jameson speaking, aware of some criticism of his (failed) effort that would, in due course, prove part of the build-up to the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). The first two and the last stanzas of Austin's ventriloquizing poem read as follows, and give a flavour of the whole:

Wrong! Is it wrong? well, may be;
 But I'm going, boys, all the same.
 Do they think me a Burgher's baby,
 To be scared by a scolding name?
 They may argue, and prate, and order;
 Go, tell them to save their breath:
 Then, over the Transvaal border,
 And gallop for life or death!

Let lawyers and statesmen addle
 Their pates over points of law:
 If sound be our sword, and saddle,
 And gun-gear, who cares one straw?
 When men of our own blood pray us
 To ride to their kinsfolk's aid,
 Not Heaven itself shall stay us
 From the rescue they call a raid.

.
 I suppose we were wrong, were madmen,
 Still I think at the Judgment Day,
 When God sifts the good from the bad men,
 There'll be something more to say.
 We were wrong, but we aren't half sorry;
 And as one of the baffled band,
 I would rather have had that foray
 Than the crushing of all the Rand.⁴⁷

Was this the kind of thing the Poet Laureate was meant to publish? Not yet having relinquished party politics, Austin, but yet two weeks into his new role, was, ironically enough, embarrassing the very government that had appointed him (and Jameson would eventually be prosecuted by that government). Whatever actually happened in terms of official involvement—and the facts are still not clear—the formal cabinet view was to condemn the Jameson Raid (which Kipling was remembering when he wrote 'If' (pub. 1910), modelled on Jameson). Officially, Lord Salisbury and his Secretary of State for War, Lord Lansdowne, disapproved.

Austin became the object of mild fun. 'Where is the Poet Laureate?' inquired Edinburgh's *Evening News* in June 1896, noting Austin's somewhat tail-between-legs disappearance from the public view following this *faux pas*. 'Since he celebrated the

47 Alfred Austin, 'Jameson's Ride', *The Times* (11 January 1896), 9.

great donkey ride of Dr Jameson’, the *Evening News* continued, ‘Mr Alfred Austin has been lost to an admiring public. Has he collapsed under the cypher telegrams?’⁴⁸ The joke was laboured but the intent clear: Austin had not done himself any favours. It was to be hoped, observed the musical journal *The Lute* in a similar spirit, that ‘Mr A. Austin will steady himself and, so to speak, pull himself together, before he next proceeds to stultify the Government whom he is supposed to serve’.⁴⁹ It was a sign of just how difficult Austin found the press at this point: even the musicians were dismayed. And there was poetic fun to be had too. Owen Seaman, again, enjoyed Austin’s gaffe in ‘England’s Alfred Abroad’ (February 1896), beginning:

Wrong? are they wrong? Of course they are,
I venture to reply;
For I bore ‘my first’ (and, I hope, my worst)
A month or so gone by;
And I can’t repeat it under this
Or any other sky.

What! has the public never heard
In these benighted climes
That nascent note of my Laureate throat,
That fluty fitte of rhymes
Which occupied about a half
A column of the Times?

They little know what they have lost,
Nor what a carnal beano
They might have spent in the thick of Lent
If only Daniel Leno
Had sung them Jameson’s Ride and knocked
The Monaco Casino.⁵⁰

For all the seriousness of the situation in South Africa, few, it seems, found Austin’s contribution edifying.

If this in itself were bad enough, two things made Austin’s situation more uncomfortable. First, the reception of ‘Jameson’s Ride’ presently bonded Austin with the only poet whom many in the press had thought actually worthy of the Laureateship: Algernon Charles Swinburne. Second, Parliament was still annoyed with him over this matter four years later. Where Austin’s Jameson’s poem had been greeted at first with amusement and parody, matters turned graver once Swinburne—whose political views had never been nuanced and very rarely ambiguous—adverted to the matter.⁵¹ Swinburne’s Anglo-Boer War poems—this is a long story cut short—were in

48 *The Evening News* (24 June 1896), 2.

49 ‘Current Notes’, *The Lute*, 158 (February 1896), 481–5 (483).

50 Owen Seaman, *The Battle of the Bays* (London, 1896), 53–4. Dan Leno: stage name of George Wild Galvin (1860–1904), musical hall performer, at this point one of the best-known comedians in the UK.

51 On the political ambiguity, see Francis O’Gorman, ‘Swinburne in Difficulty’, *SEL*, 57 (2017), 823–40.

themselves a fiery episode in his late career, not least when he vigorously supported the concentration camps (the first time the term had been employed) of Lord Kitchener.⁵² But his first comment on the War, and the failure of the Praetoria Convention that had closed the first Anglo-Boer War (1880–1881), was stark and uncompromising. Here it is in full, published, like Austin's, in *The Times* (11 October 1899) on the outbreak of the conflict:

The Transvaal
October 9, 1899

Patience, long sick to death, is dead. Too long
Have sloth and doubt and treason bidden us be
What Cromwell's England was not, when the sea
To him bore witness given of Blake how strong
She stood, a commonweal that brooked no wrong
From foes less vile than men like wolves set free
Whose war is waged where none may fight or flee—
With women and with weanlings. Speech and song
Lack utterance now for loathing. Scarce we hear
Foul tongues that blacken God's dishonoured name
With prayers turned curses and with praise found shame
Defy the truth whose witness now draws near
To scourge these dogs, agape with jaws afoam,
Down out of life. Strike, England, and strike home.⁵³

The extremity of Swinburne's response and his violent support for the repudiation of the Boers—whom he believed tyrannical and cruel not least to the black population of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State—gained few allies. There was, as an article in *The Times* later that October put it, 'intense disgust' at the poet's views.⁵⁴ And this was but the first of Swinburne's poems on the War, which would prove so controversial that they would appear in Joyce's *Ulysses* as evidence of the extremes to which an English writer would go in encouraging a conflict that had involved substantial Irish nationalist support for the Boers (and which was anyway only equivocally supported in Westminster).⁵⁵ 'I shudder', said one British army chaplain in 1901, equally appalled, this time by Swinburne's admiration for Kitchener, 'at the awful thought suggested by your lines and must express to you my horror and regret that one whom I have respected as the friend of freedom should pen such awful

52 Cf. A. C. Swinburne, 'Death of Colonel Benson', *The Saturday Review* (9 November 1901), 584.

53 A. C. Swinburne, 'The Transvaal', *The Times* (11 October 1899), 7.

54 'F. C. Selous, Wm. Willis, Wm. Dawson, A Catholic, J. W. H., et al.', 'The War', *The Times* (24 October 1899), 15.

55 See James Joyce, *Ulysses: The Corrected Text*, Student Edition, ed. Hans Walter Gabler with Wolfhard Stepe and Claus Melchior (Harmondsworth, 1986), 15:4601–4. Irish nationalists, including Maud Gonne, were, in considerable numbers, on the side of the Boers fighting against the British. Cf. Donal P. McCracken, *Forgotten Protest: Ireland and the Anglo-Boer War* (Newtownards, 2003). Cf. also Francis O'Gorman, 'Swinburne and Ireland', *RES*, 64 (2013), 454–74.

words’.⁵⁶ The complicated story behind Swinburne’s views of the second Anglo-Boer War cannot be the subject here. But what matters for the present essay is this striking moment at the very end of the Victorian period when two major poets (Austin being major because of his post rather than his writing) provoked surprise and, particularly for Swinburne, hostility because of directly political poetry. (Other poets, who wrote in related ways of different political topics and from different perspectives, include Rudyard Kipling, Henry Newbolt, and William Watson.) Was this what it meant now to be a manly poet (as distinct from, and perhaps resistant to, the detached high-art remoteness of the Aesthetes and Decadents)? Was poetry still to have masculinized, authorial commitment to tough, divisive political views?

Austin’s somewhat cack-handed interference was still a matter of irritation—no longer merely of wry amusement—in the midst of the War.⁵⁷ And a matter of irritation not in a journal but in the very chambers of power. ‘This Poet Laureate’, remarked the Irish nationalist MP William Redmond in the House of Commons as late as 25 October 1899,

and these . . . gentlemen who play on the passions of the people of this country by telling these outrageous falsehoods about the burghers [Boers], instead of being given positions of honour, ought to be punished as being calculated to lead to crime and misunderstanding between the people of the two countries.⁵⁸

Austin’s first Anglo-Boer War poem has been somewhat simplified here into blunter political and partisan writing. But, although the Jameson poem had, as Redmond was quickly reminded, been withdrawn, it clearly remained a blot, as much here to Redmond as to Joyce thinking about Swinburne in *Ulysses*. ‘This Empire can gain nothing by pursuing this war to a bitter and bloody close’, Parliament was informed a few months later by James Flynn, MP for Cork North: ‘It may satisfy those who believe in the policy of “wiping something off the slate.” That is a policy which the Tory Poet Laureate has commended in doggerel verse [. . . but one that will] drench the veldt with still more blood’.⁵⁹ Austin the Laureate’s initial sense of himself as a public poet, as a writer who could use his own new position in the national newspaper to articulate a partisan view of a major conflict, was not to be allowed unchecked, especially not by Irish nationalist Members of Parliament. Austin, for a moment an awkwardly disruptive figure, would do nothing similar again (there was a buoyant poem on the relief of Mafeking). Yet his first Anglo-Boer War poem and those of Swinburne later had combined to produce a prominent public disapproval—sometimes parodic, sometimes lightly mocking, later censorious—of a public poet apparently saying sincerely what he thought politically appropriate (Tennyson, among others, it is worth remembering, had suffered similarly earlier on

56 ‘Mr Swinburne on Boer Tyranny’, *The Saturday Review*, 92 (16 November 1901), 621–2 (621).

57 Cf. ‘The Poet Laureate’s Jingoism’, *Edinburgh Evening News* (23 November 1898), 3.

58 HC Deb 25 October 1899 vol. 77 c. 687.

59 HC Deb 7 February 1900 vol. 78 c. 875.

with some of his political poetry in the 1850s, as Kathryn Ledbetter describes in *Tennyson and Victorian Periodicals* (2007).⁶⁰

Looked at from the early years of the twentieth century, this model of the poet would be in intriguing tension with some of the new ideas. It is not the case, of course, that Modernists or modern poets did not thereafter write about war or substantial political themes—the Spanish Civil War, obviously enough; Woolf and the General Strike. No one could describe Pound as apolitical nor Yeats either. D. H. Lawrence was possessed of revolutionary aspirations. It is not, equally, the case that Austin's Toryism was the core problem. As Christos Hadjiyiannis has recently confirmed in *Conservative Modernists* (2018), Modernism is partly defined by its plural stands of Conservatism/conservatism: the refreshing and reviving of traditions and standards, the re-energizing of high culture against the deleterious effects of popular culture; the frustration with liberalism and actual Liberals, for example, together with a more specific backlash against Arthur Balfour and the disaster of the 1906 General Election. T. E. Hulme, a conservative, was, as Hadjiyiannis has also persuasively argued, indeed, partly thinking not only about the hoped-for Modernism but about the 1910 General Election in that 'Romanticism and Classicism' essay.⁶¹

There are some ways, though, in which one might think in a worthwhile manner about the relation of the public personae debates around political poetry including that of Austin and Swinburne—and Modernism. It is easy to think, perhaps, that both poets in their partisan texts for *The Times* were somewhere registering the perceived marginalization of poetry itself. Or, to put this point in the words of Austin's title for his lecture at the Royal Institution on 5 February 1904, 'The Growing Dislike for the Higher Kinds of Poetry'.⁶² Both poets shouted, it might be, because they thought that otherwise they might not be heard, even as they hardly contributed to the 'higher kinds of poetry' in the process. It is interesting, nevertheless, to reflect on the multiple origins of that strain of 'impersonal' poetics that helped define some Modernist writing and to consider how far, knowingly or otherwise, it resisted the—often though not exclusively publicly disliked—poetry of political sincerity that Austin, among others, had briefly represented in his Laureateship, and then been forced away from. The poetics of impersonality, of the oblique or the fragmented, of the suggestion not the statement, offers a challengingly oppositional writing to this political mode that might have seemed a relief to those, apart from anyone else, who found the Queen's last Laureate, as they found Swinburne, out of order (or indeed many other strident poems from others on, say, vivisection or the empire). As R. W. Chapman (1881–1960), having survived the War in Saloniki, banished, perhaps in reaction, all references to the wider political world from his subsequent editions of Jane Austen, so various forms of Modernism looked away from direct engagement with the world outside. Imagism, for instance (which, in fact, Robert Graves and

60 Kathryn Ledbetter, *Tennyson and Victorian Periodicals: Commodities in Context* (reprinted London, 2019), esp. Ch. 3.

61 As first argued in Christos Hadjiyiannis, 'Romanticism versus Classicism in 1910: T. E. Hulme, Edward Storer and *The Commentator*', *Literature & History*, 22 (2013), 25–41.

62 See *The Times* (6 February 1904), 13. This lecture can be compared with Austin's lecture in Leeds, similarly pensive about the state of poetry and of education: see 'The Poet-Laureate on Progress', *The Times* (13 October 1904), 8.

Laura Riding in their important study of Modernism in 1927 thought one of the ‘succession of dead movements at the end of the nineteenth century’); the impersonal poetics of T. S. Eliot; Surrealism; the abstracted formality of Yeats’ Noh-inspired writing.⁶³ Each variously departed from anything like the recent poetic past including the political writing of Austin and Swinburne—with, often enough, its pounding rhythms that Meredith Martin found so suggestively bound up with politics—which I have been describing.⁶⁴ They, the Modernists, mostly left behind the Georgians’ personal lyricism, yes, but also the contentious public poetry that Swinburne and Alfred Austin, and others, had offered, as the periodicals that I have described revealed, to their somewhat affronted readers.

Then there is a related aspect: Austin (and Swinburne, and Kipling, and others) writing in newspapers. The Boer examples came from *The Times* and that august paper—though it had its racy side—printed a good deal of verse.⁶⁵ Austin, nevertheless, was distinctive in his relation to journalism because he had actually been a journalist. He had co-founded *The National Review* and edited it for 30 years until 1896 and, as mentioned, he had written many leading articles for *The Standard*: both Conservative papers. He was more or less at home in the new print culture and he made a living from it. Coventry Patmore had observed in 1895 that there had been some rumours in the press that Lord Salisbury would appoint a Laureate from the ranks of journalists as a ‘compliment’ to them.⁶⁶ Patmore was more interested in a compliment to poetry. In turn, though, it is not difficult to imagine—but I have found no direct statement of it—that another issue was brought out into the open by Austin, which clinched a further problem with the decadence, the downturn, of late Victorian and Edwardian period verse that Modernism perceived: journalism itself. Again, this is a complex narrative beyond the remit of a single article. But it has, of course, been widely recognized, not least in *Conservative Modernism*, Rachel Potter’s *Modernism and Democracy* (2006), and in Patrick Collier’s *Modernism on Fleet Street* (2006), that many Modernists characteristically identified (popular) journalism as evidence, and partly the cause, of the decline of public culture and the withering of the quality of public debate. Collier in particular has demonstrated how, complicatedly, Modernists disliked the Northcliffe press even as they also on occasions contrived skilfully, though with distaste, to exploit the forces of popular media, including, as Todd Avery adds, the radio, to their advantage.⁶⁷ The dislike, all the same, was real. One wonders, in turn, if Austin’s career as an actual journalist, at the same time as writing as a poet and dramatist, implicitly added to the energies circulating around the idea that English poetry was in decline because, apart from other issues, Austin was revealing just how intimately some poetry was in bed with some

63 Robert Graves and Laura Riding, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (London, 1927), 116.

64 See Meredith Martin, *The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture, 1860–1930* (Princeton, NJ, 2012).

65 On the raciness, see, for instance, Matthew Rubery, *The Novelty of Newspapers: Victorian Fiction After the Invention of the News* (New York, NY, 2009).

66 See Coventry Patmore’s letter, ‘The Proposed Compliment to Journalism’, *Saturday Review*, 80 (26 October 1895), 548.

67 See Todd Avery, *Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics, and the BBC, 1922–1938* (London, 2016). Cf. Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford, 2007).

of the new media. Austin, mostly bad poet, as well as newspaper founder and editor, could hardly, for that strand of Modernism doubtful of Fleet Street, have embodied more of the trouble.

One further—and, again, very different—point remains. This begins simply, though with an important twist, with how much Austin's poetry struck his readers as securely English. Where Austin was admired, it was for taking up that distinctive Tennysonian element of writing that was eloquent about English nature. There was the unliked *England's Darling*, of course, but there was also the general recognition that Austin was at his best when affectionately patriotic, not least in terms of writing about English landscapes and, his own preferred territory, gardens. A single example among the Laureate poems (as opposed to those written before 1896) would be the 1898 volume, republished in an enlarged edition in 1900, of *Songs of England*. These poems dated over many years and they were optimistic about England's achievements, her peace and the strength of her people. 'Behind her rolling ramparts England lay', began a characteristic poem, 'Pax Britannica' (1898):

Impregnable, and girt by cliff-built towers,
Weaving to peace and plenty, day by day,
The long-drawn hours.⁶⁸

Aside from such loyal statements—neatly supported by the visual imagery of Austin the Laureate at home—there was also the charming poetry of the natural world, with all its national implications.⁶⁹ The Austin who celebrated English gardens in particular—not least his own rented land at Swinford Old Manor near Ashford in Kent (now destroyed)—pleased reviewers and cheered even the Queen. His presentation copy to the monarch of *The Garden that I Love* (1894) remains in the Royal Collection.⁷⁰ The Scottish poet and writer William Sharp (also Fiona Macleod) was, in turn, able to summarize Austin, at the end of the century, as 'the most typically English of living contemporary poets. Others have shown as fine a patriotism', Sharp continued,

from Mr Swinburne with his fiery proclamations of England's greatness to Mr William Watson with his organ note of remonstrance. But English people love a writer who is of themselves; whose life, whose outlook, whose deeds and sayings are the not too highly-coloured reflect of their own. There is ground for the remark sometimes made, that Mr Austin is so convincingly English that he appeals only to those of his countrymen who live south of the Tweed and east of the Irish Sea and the Welsh hills.⁷¹

The strains of such Englishness would continue among the Edwardians and Georgians. But the second decade of the twentieth century and beyond would, of course, see the powerful injection of Irish and American poetics into British

68 'Pax Britannica' from Alfred Austin, *Songs of England*, enlarged edn (London, 1900), 71.

69 See, for instance, the photo-portrait of Austin in his obituary, *The Sphere* (7 June 1913), 252. The pose and appearance is strikingly like that of Edward Elgar.

70 See <<https://www.rct.uk/collection/1082594/the-garden-that-i-love>> accessed 17 February 2021).

71 'Mr Alfred Austin', *Good Words*, 40 (December 1899), 406–10 (407).

Modernist literature, together with the new conceptual inventiveness of continental Europe particularly in the visual arts and music. Englishness of the kind for which Austin had been valued would become for some evidence of another aesthetic gap between his world and the *avant garde*. This is a familiar story and the macro narrative to explain it includes, for instance, a reaction against empire, the shocks of the First World War, and the international busy-ness and travel of the new century. But what is suggestive in the story of Alfred Austin is that one of the early, mid-Victorian, accounts from England of the need for the international to re-oxygenate modern writing came as early as 1870 from—Alfred Austin. His subject in Chapter 6 of the widely criticized *The Poetry of the Period*, 'The Poetry of the Future', was, specifically, the need for America, and especially the poetics of Walt Whitman.⁷² 'The old world is done up, no doubt;' Austin said, with his steady gift for exasperating the most celebrated British poets of the day, 'but Apollo has taken refuge in the United States.'⁷³ Whitman was not to become the source of rejuvenation that Austin envisaged (and it is, as a general point, fascinating to think that Austin admired so radically different a poet as Whitman). Austin, all the same, had once stood as an unexpected prophet of what would occur in terms of the infusion of American poetics into British Modernism primarily after his death. Whatever else he did, Austin was not wrong—though he gained no public credit from the critics, so far as I can discern—about a future turn of English poetry.

Alfred Austin, precursor of Modernism? Of course not. In all kinds of ways, his poetry and attitudes could hardly have been further from the aesthetics of the new departures, however right we are now to recognize the nineteenth-century practices and principles that were re-cast in the age of Eliot. Yet, reading Austin, and considering his reception, is not simply to survey an episode in the well-established narrative of what twentieth-century poetry needed to move away from. The opinions Austin prompted, and the arguments he started, might readily be forgotten even though they occupied many column inches in a culture that cared, as is plain, about the figure-head of British poetry. Often enough, however, those arguments—from now largely vanished critics—identified problems that were variously brought to prominence by Austin's appointment; problems to which Modernism would in due course find answers or at least responses. Austin represented lyric poetry and that would need refreshing; he regrettably emblemized what was often recognized as the impoverishment of formal poetry (the 'higher kinds of poetry') in English at the end of the century and his critics in turn expressed implicitly the need for the revival of verse (which would partly come in due course through the embrace of free verse, which Austin could presumably never have contemplated); he helped reinforce a dislike of a politicized public voice of sincerity that would eventually prove peculiarly at odds with some of the new generation's preference for the impersonal, the refracted, and the new Classicism. And he embodied, as his commentators saw it, more neutrally this time, an Englishness that would not define the new ways either.

72 On some of the satirical reactions to Austin and *The Poetry of the Period* from other poets, see Bernard Richards, *The Poetry of the Victorian Period*, 2nd edn (Harlow, 2001), 148.

73 Austin, *The Poetry of the Period*, 193.

It is an odd, though a defensible, thought that some of the topics that the newspapers and periodicals ruminated on around the time of the death of Tennyson belong, however modestly, within the story of the emergence of Modernist poetics. Odd, because they have largely disappeared into the *oubliette* of 1890s' literary history and we do not think about them anymore. Many writers for those newspapers and periodicals might have recoiled from the shape of aesthetic modernity as it asserted itself after the First World War. Yet those writers had, with a focus derived not least from the tricky subject of Alfred Austin, at least clarified what some of the difficulties for poetry were: they had spelled out the problems of life after Tennyson just as Tennyson himself had worried about life after Keats, or Shelley, or Wordsworth. 'What sets the poets of to-day apart from those of the Victorian era', said Amy Lowell firmly in 1917, 'is an entire difference of outlook. Ideas believed to be fundamental have disappeared and given place to others'.⁷⁴ The critics examined here, though, did not have so profound a difference in outlook since they were every bit as aware of the need for new poets to be apart from those of their own late-century days as, for instance, Lowell herself. The critics in the 1890s' periodicals examined in this essay were not looking for signs of the future in, say, the Decadents or the poets of the Image. But they were certain that the future did not lie with Lord Salisbury's choice of Poet Laureate. A choice, so it seemed to many, which, unintentionally or otherwise, revealed, I think, a literary world now blast-beruffled but, at least, waiting.

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74 Amy Lowell, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (New York, NY, 1917), vii.