
At the start of this stimulating and enjoyable book, Kirstie Blair notes that the Victorians were acutely aware of the heart’s dual status as both ‘the organ within the breast’ and the signifier of ‘romantic love, spirituality, and the play of the emotions and passions’ (p.2). Blair herself uses this duality to great effect, presenting the heart as both a specific image within Victorian poetry and a capacious term bound up in a wide range of cultural contexts. *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* succeeds brilliantly in describing the links between the uses of the heart in Victorian poetry and the wider cultural interest in the heart in the mid-nineteenth century, and the book’s examination of poetry’s place in Victorian culture is particularly welcome given the overwhelming focus on the novel in recent historicist studies of Victorian literature. The author assembles an impressive range of sources to show that concerns about the workings of the heart, and its potential pathologies, were widespread in Victorian culture, and she makes a compelling case for the importance of poetry in shaping and reflecting those concerns. Blair is conscious of the difficulties involved in claiming that literature influenced or was influenced by other discourses, arguing instead for ‘a mutual exchange of ideas about the heart’ in the Victorian period (p.18). She supports her position with some fascinating and convincing evidence, taken both from poems and from other texts such as an 1873 article in the *Edinburgh Medical Journal* that used metrical terminology to analyse the human heartbeat (p.74).

In her introduction, Blair positions her work in the context of previous studies of the literary heart. She also helpfully outlines the method and structure of the book, describing how it will examine the Victorian poetic heart in relation to the discourses of ‘medicine, religion, and gender’ (p.10). After an initial chapter describing Victorian
conceptions of heart disease, and a second investigating the well-established association of poetic rhythm with bodily rhythms such as the pulse and heartbeat, the final three chapters of the book examine these three discourses through readings of individual poets: the work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning is used to consider the gendered heart, that of Arnold to describe the heart’s role in religious faith and doubt, and that of Tennyson to examine Victorian fears about the pathological heart. This approach allows the author to connect her exploration of Victorian culture’s various appropriations of the heart to detailed readings of specific poems, perhaps the most impressive of which is an analysis of In Memoriam that puts the heart at the centre of the elegy and compares the poem’s circular rhyme scheme and structure to the circulatory system.

The book is at its most interesting when considering the problems and ambiguities that attend its subject. Blair draws attention to the uncertain status of the heart in a culture that demanded that poets ‘write “from the heart”’ even as ‘heart-centred imagery was becoming associated with passionate and pathological desires and emotions’ (p.114). She describes the ‘mixed messages’ sent out by Victorian medical writers who debated the relative importance of the heart, the brain and the nerves in the ‘bodily hierarchy’, and suggests that this conceptual contest is also traceable within Victorian poetry (p.44). Blair also acknowledges that the prevalence of the heart in Victorian poetry means that it ‘now might seem like a dead metaphor or a sentimental commonplace’ (p.21). This book rescues the heart from that fate, revealing its importance to Victorian culture and demonstrating its central place in the concerns of Victorian poetry.

Gregory Tate
Linacre College, Oxford