

Helen Groth, *Victorian Photography and Literary Nostalgia* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), £45.00, \$72.00. pp.244, 29 illus. ISBN 0199256241

Helen Groth traces the fascinating stories behind the production of photographically-illustrated books of poetry during the nineteenth century. She maps the increasingly sophisticated relationship between text and image in the work of acclaimed figures such as Wordsworth, Scott, Barrett Browning, and Tennyson as well as lesser-known poets like Augusta Webster and A. Mary F. Robinson; each of her six case studies is propelled by the drama of reading poetry through a photographic lens, highlighting its varying resistance to and assimilation of the visual medium. The book takes up some of the issues raised by Carol Armstrong in *Scenes in a Library: Reading the Photograph in the Book, 1843-1875* [1998] concerning the problems faced by a reader who is unsure whether the text or the image is to take priority, as well as extending the debate initiated in Susan Stewart's *On Longing: Narrative of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* [1993], by its exploration of different articulations of nostalgia.

Groth's book embraces several discourses: not simply the practice of image-creation but also its relationship with the process of poetry-making, the force of nostalgia in visual culture and its commercial mediation. Informed by these considerations, Groth starts in the 1830s with Daguerre and Fox Talbot's inventions, moving through the 'cartes de visite' craze of the 1850s, to an analysis of the expanded illustrated press of the 1880s. She traces how during this period, writers, photographers, and publishers sought new ways of mediating texts through photographic images, in their desire to isolate, and re-sequence 'fragments' of time, to preserve authentic insights into the past. Groth explores the interplay between the struggle of Victorian poets to communicate the 'arrested moment' and the function of the camera to capture that mimetic ideal. She shows how powerful tensions emerge between that apparently paradoxical alignment of the modernizing and democratizing medium of

photography and the discourse of poetry as a mode of reminiscence. Groth introduces us to the form of the photographically-illustrated anthology through its first exponent: W.M. Grundy's *Sunshine in the Country* [1861]. Targeted at the urban observer, this anthology arranged rural pastoral images by such photographers as Peach Robinson and P. H. Emerson, alongside Nature verses by a range of poets including John Clare, Mary Howitt, H.W. Longfellow, Alexander Pope and Thomas Gray. Through this example, Groth re-presents the reading experience of the Victorian 'literary tourist'.

The promotion of cultural tourism was certainly a motivating factor in the publication of illustrated versions of the work of Wordsworth, Scott, and Barrett-Browning. Starting with Wordsworth, Groth moves from the panoramic to the specific: she demonstrates how the publication of his poems enhanced by landscape views encouraged literary pilgrimages to the Lake District, but also how a photograph of the poet's grave is haunted by Wordsworth's prophetic verses, the syncretism of two memorializing and melancholic forms. In the case of Sir Walter Scott, George Washington Wilson's use of stereoscopic lantern-shows to mediate the poet's newly-invented Scottish traditions, demonstrates how technological advances in photography facilitated the creation of dramatic illusion: nostalgic images of medieval abbeys were animated by Scott's literary and historical description promoting a popular if short-lived enthusiasm for armchair travelling. With Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Groth adopts a different strategy, exposing in her poetry a deep engagement with early photographic discourse: in particular, the verses of *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) reveal her fascination with 'fixing' moments, with evoking scenes as 'snapshots', and of describing space 'stereoscopically', that is, presenting background and foreground with equal intensity.

Groth offers insights into photography's engagement with the commercial aspects of Victorian literary culture through his study of Julia Cameron's illustrations for Tennyson's 1874 Cabinet Edition of his works, published by Henry S. King. This ten-volume edition was

designed to be accessible to the English 'working man' and to popularise the Laureate, so King and Tennyson needed conventional images that would promote sales. Cameron's signature style of ethereal, 'out-of-focus' images, self-consciously poetic in their own right but illegible to a mass audience, precipitated a clash of interests. Groth demonstrates that the subsequent reduction of Cameron's blurry photographs into stylized engravings by Thomas Lewin tempered and compromised Cameron's disturbing but resonant interpretations. King's preference, furthermore, for the conventional image of Tennyson by John Mayall as frontispiece to the Cabinet edition rather than Cameron's portrait of him as 'The Dirty Monk' illustrates the tension between public celebrity and private genius.

Groth's final chapter takes us to the 1880s, by which time photographic portraits had become integral to the new publicity-conscious literary culture, responding to the growing demand for access into the pictorial lives of celebrities. Groth examines the situation of lesser-known poets like Webster and Robinson who resented the patronizing treatment they received in the pages of such lavishly-illustrated magazines like *Harper's New Monthly*, but who could not afford to ignore its promise of legitimation and recognition. This persuasive study of the Victorian photographically-illustrated book, itself enhanced by pertinent photographs, all fully realised by subtle and evocative close-reading, raises many issues about the problems and potential generated by the pairing of these two powerful media. Connected by Groth's thread of robustly theorized discussion, each case study tells a distinctive and satisfying story. Its lateral perspective on Victorian culture makes it thought-provoking reading for research students of nineteenth-century cultural history as well as those working in the specific disciplines of Victorian photography and poetry.