

The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s edited by Joseph Bristow. Athens: Ohio UP, 2005. xxxi, 352 pp. + 33 b/w illus. ISBN 0-8214-1627-8. \$55.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-8214-1628-6. \$24.95 (paper).

I'll come right out and say it: *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s* is one of the most important books in the field of *fin-de-siècle* poetry of the last twenty years. Erudite, bold, and impressive, this collection offers new ways of reading the poetry of the 1890s and demonstrates just how rewarding those new ideas can be.

Such work is long overdue. Although I hope most nineteenth-century criticism is now free from the unthinking disparagement of *fin-de-siècle* poetry, our students still encounter this reflexive sneering. One major teaching anthology of British literature until recently dismissed Yeats's early poetry as "the false manners of his pre-Raphaelite upbringing," while another apologizes for his early work but adds anxiously that "even his first, 'nineties' phase is productive of interesting poems." Mary Karr, introducing the Modern Library edition of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, asserts that in "1888 ... bombastic Victorian poems were flooding magazines in English alongside the self-conscious, long-winded twaddle of poets like Swinburne, who fancied themselves decadent." Moreover, Modernist criticism still often assumes that the *fin de siècle* consisted of minor prancing figures producing twee verse in the long twilight of Victorianism, waiting for the virile giants of Modernism to stride heroically from the shadows. For anyone who writes this way – or reads the critics who write this way – *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem* ought to be required reading. This book makes us take the poets of the period seriously.

It is unusual to say this about a collection, but I find that the book actually works best if read consecutively, especially the introduction and the first five articles. Joseph Bristow's rousing introduction is the right place to start, with its invigoratingly irreverent account of earlier critical assumptions about the poetry of the period. Bristow sets up two themes that will run throughout the book: problematizing Yeats's pervasive myth of the Tragic Generation, and analyzing the material book as a fundamental aspect of poetic practice at the *fin de siècle*.

The first two articles, by Jerusha McCormack and Holly Laird, dissect the Tragic Generation myth, with revelatory results. McCormack demonstrates that 1890s criticism collapses art into biography, but instead of deploring this as a critical mistake, she cleverly turns it around to reveal that the poets of the *fin de siècle* were actually the ones who conflated them; they used their theatrical context, their predilection for orally performed poetry, to generate biographical narrative. "Is it not true," she asks, "that the stereotypical 1890s poem works by actually generating the life myth by which it is to be read?" In other words, male 1890s poets felt compelled to live out the myths they constructed for