



The Poetry of Indifference: From the Romantics to the Rubaiyat

By Erik Irving Gray

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Indifference is a common, even indispensable element of human experience. But it is rare in poetry, which is traditionally defined by its direct opposition to indifference?by its heightened emotion, consciousness, and effort. This definition applies especially to English poets of the nineteenth century, heirs to an age that predicated aesthetics on moral sentiment or feeling. Yet it was in this period, Erik Gray argues, that a concentrated strain of poetic indifference began to emerge.

The Poetry of Indifference analyzes nineteenth-century works by Wordsworth, Keats, Byron, Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Edward FitzGerald, among others?works that do not merely declare themselves to be indifferent but formally enact the indifference they describe. Each poem consciously disregards some aspect of poetry that is usually considered to be crucial or definitive, even at the risk of seeming "indifferent" in the sense of "mediocre." Such gestures discourage critical attention, since the poetry of indifference refuses to make claims for itself.

This is particularly true of FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát*, one of the most popular poems of the nineteenth century, but one that recent critics have almost entirely ignored. In concentrating on this underexplored mode of poetry, Gray not only traces a major shift in recent literary history, from a Romantic poetics of sympathy to a Modernist poetics of alienation, but also considers how this literature can help us understand the sometimes embarrassing but unavoidable presence of indifference in our lives.

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Review

"Extraordinary from start to finish. Once I began reading it, I continued reading it almost nonstop, even in a period full of other obligations. The book is electric in its revelations and in its quality of writing a small work of art."—Elaine Scarry, Harvard University

"A first-rate piece of work: original, daring, witty—just very perceptive page after page. . . . I can't imagine a more engaging treatment of an aspect of the poetic enterprise I'd never considered."—William H. Pritchard, Amherst College

"It is the nineteenth-century poets who interest Gray, because 'they enact the indifference they portray by neglecting basic terms of the Romantic contract'"—*Keats-Shelley Journal*

From the Back Cover

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About the Author

Erik Gray is assistant professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University.

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