

The Oxford English Literary History. The Victorians. Volume 8: 1830-1880

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The Victorians is the second volume to appear in *The Oxford English Literary History*, a series commissioned by the late Kim Scott Walwyn to replace the fifteen-volume *Oxford History of English Literature* (the last part of which was published as recently as 1997). The general editor, Jonathan Bate, claims that all the contributors to the *OELH* write 'in the belief that literary history is a discipline necessary for the revelation of the power of imaginative writing to serve as a means of human understanding, past, present, and future'.(p. vii) Such a high-minded claim may overstate the value of literary history but it certainly takes for granted its status as a discipline of knowledge (with all the connotations of objectivity and authority which that label implies). In so doing it flies defiantly in the face of David Perkins's observation, made over a decade ago, that literary history is a practice whose 'purposes are unclear' and whose 'traditional forms, procedures, and concepts have been theoretically undermined'.⁽¹⁾

That process of theoretical critique exposed two different orders of problems. The first is to do with historiography itself, and concerns a post-modern scepticism about how we know the past, and the status of that knowledge. The second is to do with what we might term 'literariness' and the attitude of the literary historian towards his or her subject matter. Although the first problem, that of how we know the past, is obviously the more disabling to a project such as the *OELH*, its relatively limited impact on history proper suggests that it can for the moment be set aside. Even Perkins himself acknowledged that however compelling post-modern literary historiography, there was still 'a very real question' as to whether it could

'serve the purposes for which histories are written if these purposes are still to organize the past, to make it comprehensible, to explain why it had the character and tendency it did, and to bring it to bear on our own concerns'.⁽²⁾ One might add here that it is exactly these sorts of ambitions which will lead most readers to pick up a work such as *The Victorians*.

More pertinent to Davis's volume, then, is the second kind of problem, the dimensions of which can be glimpsed via a further series of questions. Is literary history to be an account of authors, movements, or styles? Is it about defining a canon or contesting a canon? A certain sort of literary history can take as given a particular definition of literary identity and value and proceed to document and interpret in any one period those works which answer to such a label; alternatively, another sort of literary history can be conceived more critically, as a mode of analysis which seeks to undercover the historical processes whereby at any one moment in time only certain sorts of works come to be labelled and valued as literature. Choosing between these two possibilities in turn rests upon assumptions about the relationship between literary history and other accounts of the past, such as social, intellectual, economic or political history. Finally there is also the vexed question of how literary history relates to cultural history (and how, in turn, culture itself is to be defined).

In the opening chapter of *The Victorians*, Davis claims that one of the most confounding problems in a society of vertiginously rapid change and seemingly endless 'facts and sequences' was finding what Matthew Arnold termed 'a steadying idea'. (p. 38) It is tempting to add that this is also the most intractable problem for Davis himself - as, indeed, for any historian of the period. Given the extraordinary variety, complexity, as well as sheer quantity of literary production between 1830 and 1880, what sort of story is it possible to tell in just 545 pages (a figure which excludes the 60 pages of author bibliographies and suggestions for further reading).

Davis begins conventionally enough with four chapters devoted to what traditionally-minded historians used to call 'context'. Entitled 'Rural to Urban 1830-1850', 'Nature', 'Religion', and 'Mind', they are designed to give a sense of what Bate terms, in the General Editor's Preface, 'the relationship between literature and broader historical continuities and transformations'. (p. vii) Most of the ground here is familiar: the reader is taken through the various social and intellectual problems posed by industrialisation (those related to poverty, over-crowding, mechanisation, and disease); the rise of a new kind of empiricist science, particularly in biology and geology, and its consequences for the conceptualisation of nature and the notion of what is 'natural'; the decline in religious faith (as signalled by, for example, the *Essays and Reviews* controversy, or the conflict between the Broad Church and the Tractarians); and the tensions between scientific and philosophical theories of the mind (specifically, in a brief overview of phrenology, Associationism, Idealism, and mesmerism).

Davis makes strenuous attempts to exhibit the relevance of this material to literary works by interweaving literary critical analysis of selected novels (and much less frequently poems) with quotations from contemporary works of non-fiction. For example, Chadwick's famous 1844 *Report* and the pamphlets of Richard Oastler are set along side Dickens's *Hard Times*, Disraeli's 'one-nation' trilogy, and Gaskell's *North and South*. Davis also finds room for the work of writers now not commonly read. Thus the chapter on religion is broad enough to include John Henry Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* as well as *Phases of Faith* by Newman's brother, Francis; likewise, a discussion of Mary Ward's novel *Robert Elsmere* is complemented with an examination of *Oakfield* by W. D. Arnold, the younger brother of Mary's much more famous uncle.

In these chapters Davis wears his learning lightly, moving elegantly between his various source materials to provide an informative and highly readable narrative. Paradoxically, though, that very elegance and economy is also a potential source of weakness. Most obviously, it runs the risk of over-simplification and distortion. For example, Davis states that Oastler 'did not believe in what in 1849 . John Stuart Mill was to call 'economic man', but in what Bishop Latimer in 1548 . had called 'the whole man". (p. 45) This statement is not in itself incorrect; the problem is rather that it carries the implication that Oastler's understanding of humanity was more rounded than that of Mill, when it was actually Mill himself who pointed out as early as

1836 that 'economic man' was a mere abstraction, a specialised concept of use only in very limited contexts, and in no way meant to represent a complete understanding of humankind. A similar sort of objection might be made to Davis's mention of Karl Marx. His name is invoked several times in these opening chapters, yet on no occasion is it pointed out that Marx's works were virtually unread in Britain until the late 1880s, when some of them began to appear in English translation.

These may seem quibbling objections, but they bear on a larger limitation of Davis's fluid technique. By eliding distinctions between different sorts of documents, he implies that when writing about their environment, poets, novelists, political economists, theologians, and journalists were all on the same intellectual footing as each other, so much so that differences in their analyses were the result of personal choices. But social phenomena (such as poverty, for example) are never simple 'givens' to which creative writers respond; rather, they are always partly constructed by particular discourses, some of which are more authoritative or persuasive than others. These in turn constrain the ways in which those phenomena are perceived and understood as *problems*. A simpler way of putting this might be to say that Davis is unclear about the thorny question of 'influence', and therefore about the precise nature of the relationship between literary and non-literary documents (as I hinted earlier, there are a number of different and competing ways to model these relationships).

The General Editor's preface claims that '[l]iterary history is distinct from political history, but a historical understanding of literature cannot be divorced from cultural and intellectual revolutions or the effects of social change' (p. vii). This (perhaps deliberately) gnomic statement obscures the vexed question of the epistemological role of literary works *qua* literary works. What sort of knowledge or experience, exactly, do they provide the reader with, and how does literary understanding (whatever that means) relate to other forms of knowledge? More pertinently, perhaps, what role do literary works play in those larger 'continuities and transformations' invoked by Bate in his preface? Davis often hints that Victorian literature - or, more specifically, the realist novel - presents a special kind of analysis, that it 'comes into existence to mark and to explore' the gaps, confusions and contradictions in Victorian culture (p. 132). In the Introduction he states that literature is special because it is 'to do with the closest we can get to individually experienced thoughts and feelings'; only 'literary language', Davis argues, can offer 'the direct imaginative experience of deep meaning that reading constitutes for serious Victorians'. (pp. 9-10)

Some readers will be surprised to find such assumptions at work within a literary history published in 2002, given that it is exactly this sort of thinking which, as David Perkins noted, has been so vigorously attacked over the past two decades. I should stress here that I am not implying that such views of literariness are necessarily unsustainable, only that they do require a robust defence, and that *The Victorians* would have been considerably strengthened if Davis had used some of his Introduction to provide a systematic theoretical justification of his position. Personally, I have sympathy with the idea that there is a quality to aesthetic experience which cannot be collapsed wholly into the political or ideological. In this respect, one of the undoubted merits of Davis's volume is that the reader is never allowed to forget that literary works are special sorts of documents; his attention to questions of form and language, so often forgotten in broad-stroke literary histories, is especially commendable. At the same time it is exactly this insistence on the 'difference' of literature which calls attention to the absence of any sustained explanation of what precisely constitutes (and constituted) literary experience. Likewise, the question as to whether Victorian readers experienced works such as *Hard Times* differently from modern readers seems implicit in much of what Davis has to say about the 'seriousness' of our forebears. Such a distinction, though, still begs the question as to what exactly Davis has in mind when he justifies using what he terms an 'extensive amount of direct quotation' in order, *pace* Arnold, "to make you *feel*." Feel what exactly? Is the contextual information Davis supplies an attempt to place the modern reader in the same position as the Victorian reader? And even if such a goal is possible - and most recent philosophers have denied it is - what does it mean to imply that an appreciation of Victorian literature *requires* such positioning? Why is a Victorian understanding of their literature preferable to our own?

Moving on to the rest of the book: Chapter 5 focuses on 'Conditions of Literary Production', providing the reader with information about issues such as changes in printing technology and the institutions of

publishing (which Davis attempts to connect to certain stylistic features of realist fiction), the rise of women writers, and the significance of the regional novel. A brief Chapter 6 concentrates on 'Drama', recounting, once again, what is a familiar story about the tension between the social realism attempted by figures such as Tom Robertson and the light-hearted satire of W. S. Gilbert. Chapters 7-9 are devoted to varieties of fiction, categorised as two kinds of 'post-aristocratic' novels, the 'sensation novel', 'fairy-tales and fantasies', and novels of 'high realism'. In these chapters Davis wisely eschews coverage (an impossible goal given the amount of fiction published at this time), and concentrates instead on analysing the work of pairs of what he sees as representative writers. Thus, for example, the chapter on 'high realism' proceeds by a pairing of Maria Edgeworth and Harriett Martineau, which is followed by one of Trollope and Eliot. Here, as elsewhere, Davis exhibits a subtle critical sensibility, providing sensitive and consistently interesting interpretations of particular works. The remaining chapters -10 and 11- cover, respectively, 'Lives and Thoughts' (which includes biography, autobiography, and travel writing), and 'Poetry' (which concentrates for the most part on the well-known canon of Tennyson, the two Brownings, Arnold, Clough, Hopkins, Rossetti, and Swinburne). The conclusion compares the novels of Meredith and Hardy, writers who exemplify what Davis terms 'alternative endings' to the period 1830-80. According to Davis, both writers inherited a vast, unstable, post-Darwinian world, but where Meredith responds to it with a 'detached comic spirit', for Hardy the legacy is tragic. Davis goes on to claim that Hardy's pessimism is in fact the 'real ending for Victorianism', in that '[a]fter Hardy's tragic novels, it is as if nothing is left - save a few small survivors' (p. 545).

The reason why it is Hardy rather than Meredith who provides Davis with the more appropriate *terminus ad quem* for his volume is because the story which he has been telling has been that of the rise of fiction or, more particularly, the rise of the realist novel (at times one feels that for Davis the realist novel *is* Victorian literature). For scholars such as Isobel Armstrong and Angela Leighton, who have written so eloquently in defence of nineteenth-century poetry and poetics, this may be a source of dismay; they may also be surprised to have to wait until the last chapter before encountering Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Davis passes over the opportunity to integrate this poem into his discussion (in Chapters 2 and 3) of religion and science, despite the fact that it contains some of the most famous lines on the relationship between Victorian knowledge and Victorian belief. The recent proliferation of anthologies of Victorian poetry - Valentine Cunningham's compendious *The Victorians: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics* (Blackwell; Oxford, 2000) runs to over 1000 pages - also make Davis's decision a little odd.

There is a suspicion here that the effective relegation of poetry to a discrete chapter (it is only intermittently discussed in other parts of the volume) may have something to do with Davis's tendency to value literary works in terms of their capacity to represent. That is, the reason why the realist novel figures so strongly in his history is because it lends itself much more easily than poetry to a 'contextual' approach. It is probable that a modern reader who knows nothing of the religious controversies of the nineteenth century will find a novel such as *Robert Elsmere* at best exceedingly dull and at worst incomprehensible. By contrast, it is possible to enjoy *In Memoriam* without knowing anything about Charles Lyell and Robert Chambers. As I have hinted earlier, such a distinction bears crucially on the question of what literary history is for: the kind of history which we find in *The Victorians* is necessary only for a particular kind of understanding of what constitutes literariness.

A final issue which also bears on the question of literariness is that of periodization. There is no need to rehearse the general difficulties that attend the concept of the historical 'period' - decisions about where to cut the historical cake will always create controversy, because they will always privilege one kind of story over another. In the case of *The Victorians*, the main story which Davis excludes is that of the Aesthetic Movement, and the role Aestheticism had in contesting the values of high Victorianism. At first glance this omission seems strange, for the choice of 1880 as a cut-off date would suggest the inclusion of Aestheticism - a movement which is generally understood as centring in Britain on Pater's 1873 *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Pater does appear from time to time in *The Victorians*; so, too, do Swinburne, Rossetti, Mallock, and Robert Buchanan. Yet none of these figures are connected together, and Aestheticism itself does not even merit an entry in the Index.

One reason may be that this topic will be dealt with in Volume 9 of the *OELH*, *From 'Victorian' to Edwardian'* (which is confusingly described as beginning in 1870 on the dust jacket of *The Victorians* and 1875 in the front pages). Chronological overlap between volumes - treating 'beginning and ending dates . . . flexibly' (p. ix) - is explained by Bate as a pragmatic response to inevitable disagreements about periodization. Such pragmatism, however, leaves the reader in something of a quandary, for it implies that for a 'full' understanding of the period from, say, 1870 to 1880, he or she will need to have two volumes of the *OELH* to hand. The same reader might also wonder whether and how volumes 8 and 9 will dovetail with each other over that crucial ten-year period. Will there be differing accounts of the same writers, for example? Doesn't attention to the Aesthetic Movement require a radical revision of Davis's notion that 'Hardy is the real ending for Victorianism'? Many recent historians have seen Oscar Wilde as the mediating figure between the Victorian and the modern, and his trial of 1895 as marking the moment when - to borrow Davis's terms - 'everything is really over'; except that this notion of 'everything' refers to the very opposite of the nihilistic despair that Davis attributes to Hardy, that 'no *real* order exists in the world' (p. 545). It was the existence of an order only too real, the criminal court at the Old Bailey, that brought such a swift closure to Wilde's career. It is also perhaps worth noting in passing that the 'few small survivors' of the realist novel included figures as prolific and popular as Wells, Galsworthy and Bennett - a legacy which has tempted other historians, notably John Carey in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (Faber and Faber; London, 1992), to suggest that the death of Victorianism, as Davis defines it, was greatly exaggerated.

Further awkward questions might follow, such as why it is that Davis can extend his chronology to include *Jude the Obscure* (1895), but not Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), a novel which one might argue provides a more important literary contextualisation for *Robert Elsmere* (1888) than, say, *Oakfield*. Likewise, it may also seem odd that in a volume which defines the literary history of the nineteenth century largely in terms of 'the rise of prose' (p. 222) there is no discussion of Pater's seminal 1889 essay 'Style', and his own reputation as a prose-stylist. (The only extended discussion of Pater's aesthetics is in relation his influence on Hopkins.)

To raise these sorts of questions is of course to do little more than imply the obvious: that the need for selectivity means that any one particular literary history will inevitably gesture towards other possible histories. Moreover, the better informed the reader of *The Victorians*, the more likely he or she to be irritated by what has been marginalised, distorted, or left out. In this respect, it is important to end this review by keeping in mind the target audience for the *OELH*. For the student or general reader who is relatively new to the period, *The Victorians* offers a lucid, informative, and entertaining account of a richly various and complex literary culture. As such it presents an excellent enticement to further reading, and should thereby be judged as having ably fulfilled what ought to be a central ambition for a volume of this kind.

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Notes

1. D. Perkins, ed., *Theoretical Issues in Literary History*, *Harvard English Studies*, 16 (Harvard

University Press; Cambridge, MA, 1991), p. 6.[Back to \(1\)](#)

2. *Ibid.* In his later book, *Is Literary History Possible?* (John Hopkins University Press; Baltimore and London, 1992), Perkins attempted to confront the paradox that although a 'dubious enterprise intellectually', literary history nevertheless had 'indispensable functions in cultural life and in the reading of history'.[Back to \(2\)](#)

Philip Davis writes: 'I try not to reply to reviews directly. But, lest I seem to be avoiding the intellectual issue, I do address some of the concerns outlined here in an article to be published in the new Blackwells internet journal, *Compass*, which will appear in January 2004.' For more details about *Compass*, please click [here](#) [2].

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