

REDISCOVERING THE VICTORIANS

The reputation of the Victorians fared poorly in the hands of their immediate successors, the early moderns. Popular literary indictments, such as Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), depicted 19th-century Britons as humorless prigs and moralizing hypocrites. Add mean

spirited, money grubbing, aesthetically impoverished, and imperialistic,

and the dismal anti-Victorian

bill of particulars is almost

complete. Unfair and one-

sided as that picture was,

it remained the standard

view, at least among

most intellectuals, for a

goodly portion of this

century. During the past

two decades, however,

scholars and others have

taken a fresh look at the

culture and society of the

Victorians and found a richness

and humanity previously denied.

Looking at several aspects of the

Victorian achievement—from the visual arts (once dismissed as merely decorative) to the empire—our authors explain why the Victorian experience may speak more clearly to us at the end of the 20th century than it did to those who lived in its immediate aftermath.



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Signs of the Times

by Malcolm Warner

When Queen Victoria and her husband, Prince Albert, commissioned Franz Xaver Winterhalter to paint *The First of May, 1851*, they wanted a family portrait that would also be an allegory of national pride and achievement. The aged duke of Wellington—known affectionately as the Iron Duke, victor over Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo—was the idol of the people, and for many the embodiment of British courage, forthrightness, and good sense. As godfather to Prince Arthur, he came to Buckingham Palace on the afternoon of May 1 with presents for the boy on his first birthday, and this is the event that occupies the queen, the child, and Wellington in the portrait. Prince Albert, however, turns slightly away, in the direction of a distant building with the sun's rays bursting from behind—not a royal palace, as one might expect, but the Crystal Palace, that huge structure of girders and glass erected in Hyde Park for the first world's fair, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations.

The exhibition, which the queen had opened earlier that afternoon, had been largely Prince Albert's idea. The period since Waterloo had been one of unbroken peace for Britain, and it was hoped that the exhibition would help maintain peace by promoting a spirit of friendly exchange among the nations. Peace had brought prosperity, and this too would continue as a benefit of the technological progress celebrated in the exhibition's extraordinary displays of machinery. It was also hoped that bringing Britain's material achievements to the attention of the world would advertise the wisdom of its ways in politics, notably its commitment to political reform and the Liberal Party tenets of *laissez-faire* and free trade. If the Iron Duke was a living monument to the glory of the past, the Crystal Palace promised glories into the future.

Among the 100,000 exhibits in the Crystal Palace there was some sculpture, but the only paintings admitted were "illustrations or examples of materials and processes." If there had been paintings chosen as

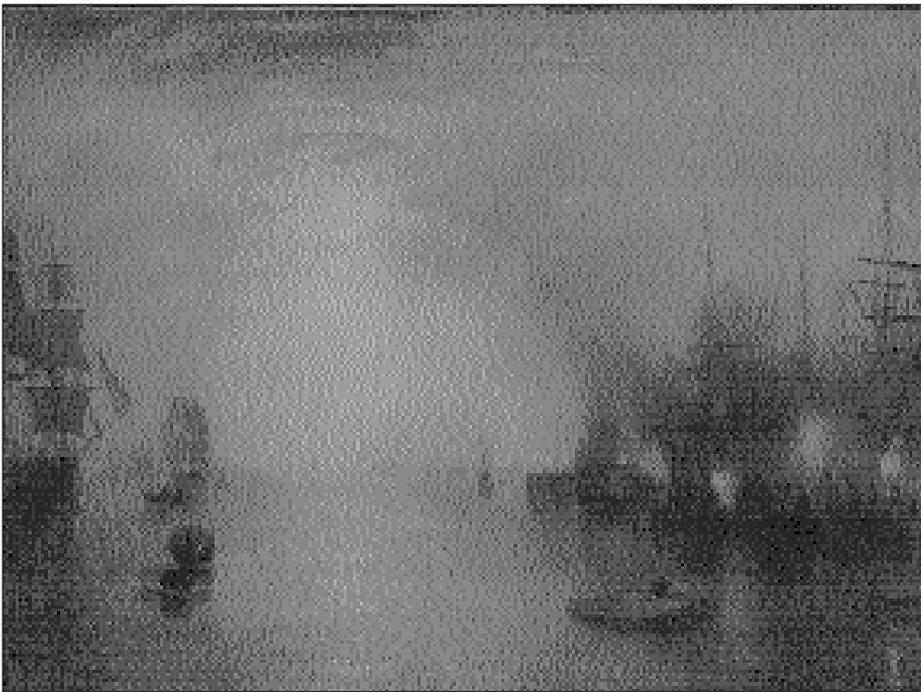


The First of May, 1851, by Franz Xaver Winterhalter

works of art, it is not difficult, knowing the eminent and popular painters of the day, to guess who the British contingent would have been; they would not, generally speaking, have presented a very bright prospect. Apart from the work of a few embattled young rebels, nothing in British painting showed even an inkling of the raw modernity Joseph Paxton had brought to the architecture of the Crystal Palace.

Some of the problems of painting in this brave new Britain appear, although the artist himself would never have seen them as such, in Winterhalter's family portrait. The Great Exhibition was the picture's whole reason for being. It proclaims the triumph of the modern and the material; but its heart is clearly elsewhere, with the traditional and the ideal. It is couched as an homage to the old masters of the 16th and 17th centuries, a would-be *Adoration of the Magi*. As the queen explained later, disapprovingly, to Prince Arthur: "Dear Papa and Winterhalter wished it to represent an Event, like Rubens—& Paul Veronese did . . . *without any exact fact.*"

Since the middle of the 18th century, the goal of most ambitious painters in Britain had been to align themselves with the tradition of European art passed down from the High Renaissance in Italy through old masters such as Veronese and Peter Paul Rubens. The mainstay of this tradition, that of the so-



Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Night (1834–35), by J. M. W. Turner

called grand manner, was the notion of the ideal. The aim of the artist working in the grand manner was not to show people and things as they appeared in real life but in the noblest manner possible. This was the aesthetic philosophy promoted by Joshua Reynolds, the eminent portraitist who had been the first president of the Royal Academy, and whose *Discourses* (delivered 1769–90) remained the canonical work of art theory in Britain. For him, the ideal was “the great leading principle, by which works of genius are conducted,” and the duty of artists “to conceive and represent their subjects in a poetical manner, not confined to mere matter of fact.” He held that they could follow no better model in this than the Renaissance master Raphael.

By the time of the Crystal Palace, however, some bright, serious critics and painters had come to believe that Reynolds’s version of the history and purpose of art was a dead hand. The critic John Ruskin asserted that the greatest of all British painters, J. M. W. Turner, had been hampered by the notion of the ideal in landscape painting, and rose to greatness despite its influence. Ruskin’s inspiring prose must have led many a young, dissatisfied painter to look to Turner for suggestions as to a way forward. But in the end, there seemed almost as little future in following him as in following Reynolds. One reason for this was an important shift in ideas by which the more extravagant productions of the Romantic

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movement, in art and literature, came to seem outdated.

This was an age that had broken away from the past as had no other in history, and it was keenly conscious of its own singularity. The “Mechanical Age,” as the social prophet Thomas Carlyle had named it in his essay “Signs of the Times” (1829), called for a progressive art in tune with its practical, inquiring tendencies. The rise of Manchester and other industrial cities had, in fact, brought about a boom period in British art. The recently enfranchised, Liberal upper-middle classes were not only wealthy enough to pay high prices for paintings but also inclined to buy the work of British artists rather than the old masters—works that illustrated the play of ideas and attitudes, the tensions and debates that exercised the middle-class mind.

The painting that would speak to the age would present the world neither as beautified and old masterly, nor as apprehended through strong, complicated, and personal feelings; like the age itself, it would deal honestly and heartily in facts. It would respect the importance of material things in themselves. The subject matter of the new painting need not be literally mechanical, showing scenes of locomotives and factories, nor even drawn from modern life. Whether modern or historical, biblical or literary, it need only be of serious interest to living men and women. The revolution would lie in the handling, the description of things in a language that was 19th-century Britain’s own. These are some of the ideas that lay behind the founding, in 1848, of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

The Pre-Raphaelites believed artists had been more humbly observant of nature before the High Renaissance, and in that sense were trying to return to an earlier time. But if their choice of name sounds regressive rather than progressive, it is misleading. In fact, their main idea was to challenge Reynolds and the grand manner; they should perhaps have called themselves “Anti-Raphaelites,” which would have prevented at least some of the misunderstanding that met their first works.

Reynolds had urged the artist to avoid the particular, but the Pre-Raphaelites believed that the particular was everything, and that the people and things in a painting should approach not the ideal, but the most painstaking, warts-and-all kind of portraiture. “Pre-Raphaelitism has but one principle,” stated the sympathetic Ruskin, “that of absolute, uncompromising truth in all that it does, obtained by working everything, down to the most minute detail, from nature, and from nature only.”

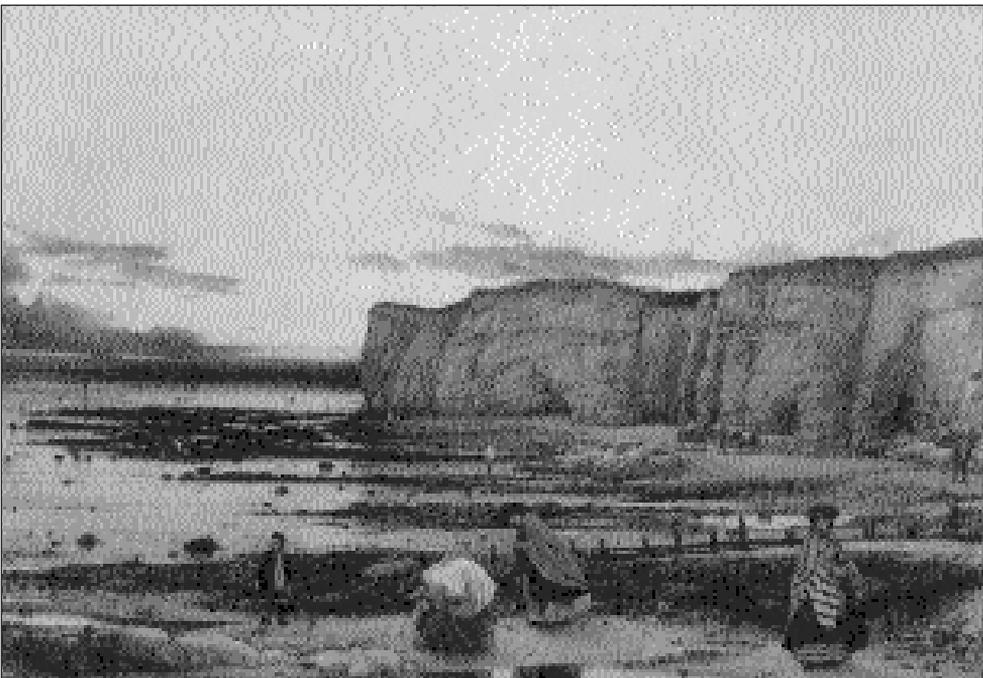
The members of the “P R B,” especially William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais, tried to approach painting with the rigor of the modern scientist: they disdained received notions, working directly and entirely from their own observations. The Pre-Raphaelites presented no glimpse or “impression” of the world; their method had more to do with collecting data than with the everyday experience of the eye. It developed in the spirit of modern empiricism and, more than any other kind of contemporary British art, in the spirit of the Crystal Palace. The Pre-Raphaelites’ pictures are great exhibi-

tions in themselves: accumulations of objects are carefully displayed, and the sheer quantity to see and consider demands a long visit.

The Pre-Raphaelites loved facts for themselves, but also as the means to a higher end. Frederic George Stephens said that the scientific approach to painting was calculated to serve art's "moral purposes" and compared the artist to a priest. It was a central idea of the period that art should be the instrument of good. It could do good even at the level of technique, by showing the right moral qualities in the way it was made. The products of intense and grueling application on the part of the painters, Pre-Raphaelite pictures embodied the idea of industry.

The moral and religious understanding of work grew naturally, in the minds of earnest painters, into a moral and religious understanding of brushwork: if it showed honest toil, it was good; if not, especially if it suggested some kind of sensual pleasure in paint as a material, it smacked of sin. Only against the background of the Victorian religion of work can we begin to understand, for instance, the fervor of Hunt as he described the fluent, old-masterly technique taught to him by his early teachers as loose, irresponsible handling, or warned that the "wildness" of impressionist brushwork "stimulates a progressive lowering of the standard of personal responsibility, and must breed increased laxity of principle in social rectitude, until the example of defiant indolence imperils the whole nation."

Art should also do good, painters like Hunt believed, through the ideas suggested by its subjects and symbols. Their paintings tell stories with morals, and present characters of interest and importance from the



Pegwell Bay: A Recollection of October 5th, 1858, by William Dyce

moral point of view. The Pre-Raphaelites found morals in everything; they revered nature not only for its glories and wonders as God's creation, but for the capacity of each object to suggest ideas. Even the man-made world, viewed in the spirit of humility and moral awareness, contained in latent symbolic form an elaborate commentary upon itself. Hunt, for example, depicts a woman's entire future in a dropped glove.

Though entirely sincere in the optimism and self-confidence they announced to the world in the Great Exhibition, the early Victorians were by no means free of private doubt and anguish. The sheer speed at which society and ideas were changing, the transitional state of everything, induced a mental and spiritual unease. The discomfort was nowhere more intense than in the sphere of religion, where people quite rightly sensed an impending crisis. The certainties of Christian faith with which most of them had grown up were beginning to fade under the influence of scientific and materialistic habits of thought. Biblical scholars had begun to study Scriptures not as divine revelation but as historical documents that could be judged to be fact or, as was disturbingly often the case, something else. More important, the whole tendency of modern geology, particularly in the work of Charles Lyell, was to show the natural world not as the once-and-for-all work of a creator but as the result of a slow, constant, and continuing process of change, operating under its own laws, over a long period of time.

Science affected people's imaginations as never before, changing their view of the world and themselves. The British coastline and its cliffs, regarded by earlier generations as the very bulwark of national stability and security, began to suggest a whole new set of associations—with troubling scientific knowledge, with fossils and erosion. Under the famous white cliffs of Dover, where he wrote the poem "Dover Beach" (1851), Matthew Arnold seemed to hear the ebbing of the Sea of Faith. In *Pegwell Bay: A Recollection of October 5th, 1858*, that most intelligent of all Pre-Raphaelite paintings, William Dyce shows himself sighting a comet over more fossil-rich cliffs, an image suggesting the immensities of both geological time and astronomical space. Pegwell Bay was where Saint Augustine landed to bring Christianity to Britain; the boy and woman looking out from Dyce's picture could almost be scanning the horizon for a new Saint Augustine to deliver the country, not from paganism this time but from doubt.

In this time of religious uncertainties, in which modern knowledge was undermining the authority of Bible and church alike, people looked for certainties from their writers and artists. It was the age of the writer as prophet, the artist as preacher. The Pre-Raphaelites were interested in religious subjects from the outset, and Hunt was to lead a realist revolution in sacred art; arising, in part, from the British Protestant's traditional distaste for devotional images, it may be more apt to call it a reformation. Taking his Pre-Raphaelite principles to their natural conclusion, he made it his practice to paint scenes from Scriptures—as far as possible—on the spot in the Holy Land, observing the local people, manners, customs, and surroundings, taking into account the discoveries and theories of biblical archaeologists. In *The*



The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple (c. 1854), by William Holman Hunt

Finding of the Saviour in the Temple (c. 1854), he painted the heads and costumes of the elders largely from models in Jerusalem. Such a picture stood as a testament to the truth of the given event and the characters involved, arrived at scientifically; if there were symbols pointing to higher truths, as there always were, they were confined to objects that would appear in the actual scene.

The spirit of the Great Exhibition held through the 1850s. But in the 1860s and early 1870s it showed signs of waning, and in the last quarter of the 19th century the early Victorian attitude of self-assured powering ahead turned into something more like coasting along. The defeat of the Liberal Party under William Ewart Gladstone in the general election of 1874, ending 28 years of Whig-Liberal domination in Parliament, marked a shift in the national consciousness. Although Britain remained the most powerful country in the world, its pre-eminence in industry and commerce was no longer unchallenged. At home, it was troubled by a growing sense of antagonism in public life, in particular by the controversy and violence over home rule for Ireland. The birthrate declined, strife between the classes increased, the countryside became more depressed, and the cities grew more polluted. By the end of the century, the optimistic Crystal Palace seemed to the young G. K. Chesterton and his contemporaries like “the temple of a forgotten creed.”

The early Victorians might have been shaky in their beliefs, but they held fast to the idea that, in the end, definite answers did exist, that there was an absolute truth to be revealed and known, even if it might take the overthrow of cherished traditions and conventions of thought. From the 1860s onward, however, ideas developed and spread that made early Victorian doubt look almost like belief. After the publication of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859), which built on Lyell’s ideas and advanced the theories of evolution and natural selection, the debate between science and faith grew more intense and upsetting.

Another, still related tendency in later Victorian thought was toward rel-

ativism, which denied the existence of absolutes, all so-called truth being relative to the mind and culture in which it appeared. Such were the ideas behind the highly seductive writings of Walter Pater, notably in his collection of essays *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). For Pater, reality began and ended within human consciousness; to comprehend experience, we should think “not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them.” The person who believed that he could think his way out of his own “dream of a world,” know things as they really were, discover the right way to live, was deceiving himself. The only life of any meaning was the inner, aesthetic life, the only faculty worth cultivating was that of taking pleasure in one’s own sensations.

The greatest wisdom lay in the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake. To the fact-loving, morally conscious, early Victorian way of thinking this was, of course, anathema—which is why Pater, though writing mostly on the art of the past, had such a radical effect on the arts of his own time.

One way in which the movement against the factual and moral idea of art showed itself was in the increasing fondness of artists for likening visual art to music, which tends by its nature to be fact-free and moral-free. As early as 1861, Frederic Leighton called a painting *Lieder ohne Worte* (Songs without Words), a title borrowed from Felix Mendelssohn. It shows a girl at a fountain listening to running water and bird song, and the artist explained to a friend that he was trying “both by colour and by flowing delicate forms, to trans-



Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl (1862),
by James McNeill Whistler

late to the eye of the spectator something of the pleasure which the child receives through her ears.” Beginning in the 1860s, James McNeill Whistler also gave pictures musical titles—symphonies, arrangements, nocturnes, and so on—with the predominant colors given in place of keys, as in *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl*. Pater stated the principle of musicality in its most quotable form when he wrote, “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.”

For Whistler and his friends, the idea of the painter as observer of facts was ridiculous. In his “Ten O’Clock” lecture (1885) he quipped, “To say to the painter, that Nature is to be taken as she is, is to say to the player, that he may sit on the piano.” The Pre-Raphaelites’ clarity of vision, their exhibitions of detail, their rawness, were strictly for the tone-deaf and lowbrow. People had come to expect too little of art and too much, ignoring the music of form and color in their desire for realism and improving stories; they had acquired “the habit of looking . . . not *at* a picture, but *through* it.”

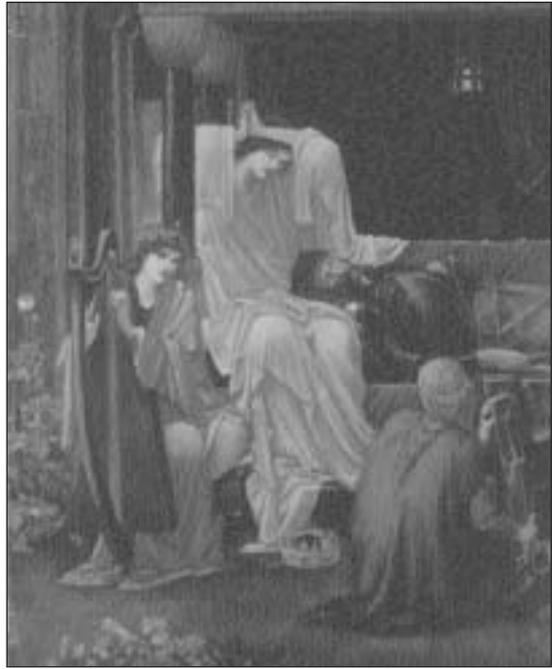
To the “aesthetic movement,” as this tendency in British art and taste came to be known, the only essential concern of art was beauty. The aesthetic artists and critics used this term more broadly and vaguely than Reynolds: it was not necessarily bound up with bodily perfection, nobility, and the classical tradition. They found it in Greek sculpture and Renaissance painting, especially in Giorgione and the other Venetians, but also in medieval art and Japanese woodblock prints, both of which Reynolds would have considered primitive. For them, beauty lay in exquisiteness, in objects that gave pleasure simply by being well formed, in works of art with an arrangement of lines, shapes, colors, and brushwork that had a life and a grace of its own, independent of whatever it might describe.

According to Whistler, the problem for art and beauty in the modern world was the rise of the commercial and industrial middle class. When art was the province of the favored few, taste was governed by artists and all was well. But when the Industrial Revolution elevated the middle class, it also elevated bad taste. To distance themselves from the prevailing spirit of philistinism in the world, he and other artists of the aesthetic movement assumed the position and demeanor of an upper class, a cultural aristocracy.

The last thing this breed of artist sought was engagement with the real world; the social turbulence of the times was something from which to remove oneself as far as possible. In a lecture to students of the Royal Academy (1883), Oscar Wilde advised them “to realise completely your age in order completely to abstract yourself from it.” The artist must be, in Whistler’s words, “a monument of isolation.” The cozy togetherness of middle-class Victorian family life held as little appeal to him, generally, as industry and commerce, politics and fashion. The studio, not the parlor, was his sanctuary. He took no great pains to disguise the fact that his pictures were created in the studio, and even relished a certain artificiality, allowing models to look like models, costumes like costumes, props like props.

For those earlier Victorians who did seek engagement with society at large, the casting of models for figures in their pictures and the catching of expressions, the signs of both character and emotion, were of the utmost importance. By contrast, the beautiful

female face that was the chief icon of aestheticism was virtually without expression, at most “hinting at sadness,” in Whistler’s phrase. The models artists chose were not representative or typical, hardly human-looking in some cases; they were merely superior, an aristocracy of beauty. Their beauty was the mainstay of art; nothing could be allowed to disturb the perfect harmony of their features, and any marked expression, artists believed, would do just that. If the aesthetic face expresses anything at all, it is tenderness and gentle melancholy. Edward Coley Burne-Jones touched upon this point in defending the minimal expressions on the faces



The Sleep of King Arthur in Avalon (detail), by Edward Burne-Jones (unfinished, begun in 1881)

of the three grieving queens in *The Sleep of King Arthur in Avalon* (1881–1898): “A little more expression and they would be neither queens nor mysteries nor symbols, but just . . . Augusta, Esmeralda, and Dolores, considerably overcome by a recent domestic bereavement.”

The aristocratic persona and serious work hardly go together, and the painters of the aesthetic movement took almost as much delight in idleness as the early Victorians took in industry. Never do their beautiful models actually do much; typically they stand or sit still, recline, even fall asleep. Seldom could their works be said to promote morality in the early Victorian sense; on the contrary, the combination of beauty and lassitude could be powerfully erotic, suggesting fleshly abandon. By the same token, artists played down any suggestion of labor in the way they painted, going for an impression of virtuosity rather than virtue, playing up the sensual side of picture making. They allowed the materials of painting a life of their own, free of the demands of describing reality. They tended to suppress space, making their compositions work first as designs in themselves, on the decorative, abstract level, and only after that as representations. They used color and technique as all-over, keynote devices, to harmonize the figures and objects in their compositions rather than to individualize them. Brushwork was there to be beautiful, to be looked *at*, not *through*. Millais, the lapsed Pre-Raphaelite, gave up painting single blades of grass in favor of a painterly bravura recalling Frans Hals and Velázquez. In *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (1875), Whistler painted fireworks in a manner that was pyrotechnic in itself,



Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket (1875),
by James McNeill Whistler

and Ruskin accused him of “flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face.”

Whistler believed that artists always had to edit the world in their art, and that 19th-century Britain presented no particular problems in that respect; he could paint warehouses as palaces in the night, factory chimneys as campanili, the industrial riverfront as a fairyland. But for many later Victorians, finding beauty in the modern world seemed impossible. The problem went far beyond that of low taste among the newly enfranchised

middle class: it was the machinelike soullessness of modern life in general.

The Victorians were haunted, ever increasingly, by nostalgia. In the optimistic time of the Crystal Palace, when progress was an article of national faith, it was easy to see the present as ascending toward an even-better future; by the 1870s, it seemed to many to be more like exile from a better past. As the Britain of the Industrial Revolution appeared ever smokier, grimmer, and more inhuman, most people longed for the handmade, for the rural, for almost any and every preindustrial era. This had a profound and obvious effect on all the arts: it was an age of revivals. Millais painted “souvenirs” of Thomas Gainsborough and Reynolds that were meant to bring back the supposed grace and refinement of British life just before industry took hold, part of an 18th-century revival that made itself felt in all the arts, as well as in fashion. John Singer Sargent’s portraits flattered people that they were like aristocrats from the time of Velázquez and Anthony Van Dyck. But there is no doubt that the greatest historical yearning of the Victorians was for the Middle Ages.

The medieval appeared to the Victorian mind as a national alternative to the classical, a rich source of stories like the myths and legends of the Greeks and Romans, only set in Britain. In a time of bewildering change, people enjoyed the thought, right or wrong, that the monarchy and other beloved institutions had

descended from the Middle Ages in a continuous tradition. The queen and Prince Albert played up to this when they had Edwin Landseer paint them as the 14th-century Queen Philippa and Edward III.

In the earlier Victorian imagination, the history and legends of the Middle Ages were seen as morality teaching by example. In the paintings of Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and others from around 1860, however, a different medieval and Arthurian world emerges, one beyond good and evil, a world of beauty, love, and mysticism. For them, the adulterous Queen Guinevere was no longer Alfred Tennyson's "wicked one, who broke / The vast design and purpose of the King," but a kind of sacred personage, whose great beauty and passion put mere morality to shame. The medieval world was a beautiful dream that no one pretended had any relation to the reality of life in that time, and paintings of it were self-consciously dreamlike.

The Victorian nostalgia for the Middle Ages was, at root, a nostalgia for that most lamented casualty of the modern world, religious faith. Burne-Jones was typical in his love of the Middle Ages as the age of faith, and of faith as a beautiful, medieval idea. Of course, he was too much a man of the 19th century to hold medieval Christian beliefs, but on an aesthetic level he could immerse himself in them totally. While at work on his large watercolor *The Star of Bethlehem* (1890), he was asked whether he believed in the miraculous story of the Magi and the guiding star. He answered: "It is too beautiful not to be true." How different his attitude toward religion and religious art was from that of Hunt, for whom beauty was hardly a consideration, let alone a guarantee of truth, and whose paintings could be described as too true not to be sometimes a little ugly. How ironic that Hunt, the earnest, modern believer and seeker after truth, received no commissions from the church, while Burne-Jones, for whom religion was more a matter of nostalgia and aesthetics, was in constant demand as a designer of stained-glass windows.

As a nation of engineers and empire builders, the most powerful on earth, the Victorians readily identified themselves with the ancient Romans. Yet the ancient culture that most interested them, perhaps for the very reason that they were like the Romans, was Greece. The ancient Greece of their imagination existed in a time that was good for all time, when eternal beauty took shape in the world.

The Victorians looked to classical culture as they looked to medieval culture, for qualities of which they felt bereft in their own. This is why the work of the Victorian classical painters, the "Olympians," as they have been called, has a quite different flavor from neoclassical art of the 18th century. For Reynolds in Britain, as for his contemporaries all over Europe, the classical world was one of grandeur, nobility, and virtue; the work of art that seemed best to capture its essence was the commanding, heroic figure of the famous Apollo Belvedere. To aesthetic taste, the sense of purposeful action about the Apollo compromised its beauty, while the writhing dynamism and emotion in a piece such as the Laocoön were anathema. The aesthetic movement chose classical touchstones showing the avoidance of emotion. They were works of the most patent grace and serenity, female and passive: the goddesses from the pediment of the Parthenon



Chill October (1870), by John Everett Millais

(then known as the Fates), and the Venus de Milo.

Unlike their counterparts of the previous century, who tended to value line and form above color, the Victorian classical painters were ardent colorists. They had no wish to carry over into their pictures the austerity of bare marble; on the contrary, they believed color to be the vital touch that could make Greece come alive in 19th-century Britain. They were given heart by recent archaeological discoveries, which suggested that originally some Greek sculpture itself had been brightly painted. Through color and brushwork, the attributes of painting as opposed to sculpture, the painter could infuse Greek form with some of the mystery and suggestiveness the modern mind craved.

The later Victorians' vision of the British landscape was almost as saturated with nostalgia and longing as their dreams of the Middle Ages and ancient Greece. Nowhere did industrialization show its dark side more ominously than in the spoiling of the countryside, made yet grimmer by agricultural depression and depopulation. As fears of irrevocable loss deepened, the painting of landscape became more charged with mood, or "sentiment," as it was commonly called. The fact-by-fact, tightly symbolic approach taken by the Pre-Raphaelites gave way to a concern with broad conditions of light, atmosphere, and weather, nature's mood-creating "effects." A pervasive sentiment of melancholy suffuses the later Victorian landscape, a dwelling on grayness and bleakness, a liking for dusk, autumn, and winter, as is evident in such works as Millais's *Chill October* (1870).

The painting of proletarian subjects, both rural and urban, took on a seriousness and grandeur far beyond traditional genre painting at this time. Like landscape, scenes of hard work, hard times, and poverty were charged heavily with sentiment, generally pessimistic in tone, and painted with an eye to broad, overall effects. The interest in such subjects

emerged from a complicated weave of middle-class attitudes that included both pity and a slightly envious admiration: the life of manual labor was tough, yet glorious in its physicality; it was free of mind-wearying complexity; its joys, sufferings, and tragedies were elemental. The fascination of country people in particular, farm workers, fishermen, and their families, was that they were supposedly in touch with nature. They were also thought of as pious, childlike in their souls, accepting of all the beautiful religious beliefs that modernity had rejected. The work they did, sowing and scything, for instance, evoked deep symbolic and biblical associations. In *A Hopeless Dawn* (1881), Frank Bramley shows a print of *Christ's Charge to Peter* by Raphael in the fisherman's cottage to make the point that fishermen were Jesus' first followers.

The pursuit of sentiment and effects in the grander forms of landscape and genre painting that flourished from the 1870s onward fostered much experimentation in technique. Artists looked with renewed admiration to the painterly touch of the old masters, to Velázquez in particular; they looked to the great painters of the British tradition, to Gainsborough and John Constable, with the thought that the free, direct, natural feeling about their brushwork expressed the national character. Most controversially, some young artists of the 1880s and 1890s developed bold techniques influenced by contemporary painting in France, including the "square" touch, in which strokes and dabs of color retain enough of their separateness and direction to give a slight all-over blockiness to the image, a highly infectious technique invented by the French painter of peasants Jules Bastien-Lepage. Walter Sickert learned his version of French impressionist technique from



A Hopeless Dawn (1881), by Frank Bramley



Sower of the Systems (1902), by George Watts

Edgar Degas, and used its uncanny power of suggesting the play of light, its glints, gleams, reflections, and color-rich shadows, to paint the highly British subject of the London music hall. His aim was to be neither moral nor particularly realistic, he claimed, but to catch the protean beauty that was particular to modern urban life.

To many older British painters, the spread of French technique appeared as an insidious disease afflicting the young. One objection was that it was un-British, not just in the literal sense but in going against the national character. For Millais, part of the essence of Britishness was being an individual; the truly British painter, Gainsborough or Constable for instance, developed a technique that was British not only in its freedom and naturalness but in being wholly and unmistakably his own. But the French-influenced painters, Millais said, “persist in painting with a broken French accent, all of them much alike, and seemingly content to lose their identity in their imitation of French masters.” To Burne-Jones, they represented simply

the dire impoverishment of painting: “They don’t make beauty, they don’t make design, they don’t make idea, they don’t make anything else but atmosphere and I don’t think that’s enough—I don’t think it’s very much.”

The most pessimistic of these older Victorians could never have suspected that a hundred years later, at the end of the 20th century, French impressionist painting would be the most beloved and celebrated art of the Western world. Now all 19th-century art tends to be measured against the French avant-garde, the impressionists and the postimpressionists, leading toward fauvism, cubism, and so on. People commonly speak of Turner, rather insultingly, as if his main importance were as a forerunner of impressionism, a voice crying in the artistic wilderness. In this light, the Victorians can seem hopelessly stuck in a preimpressionist mentality, as they did to those British modernist critics of earlier this century who did so much to blight their reputation.

Of course, it all depends on which aspects of Victorian painting, and which artists, one takes as representative. Sometimes a Victorian can almost out-modern the moderns. When urged by a friend to add some touch of realism to one of his paintings, Burne-Jones replied with the resoundingly 20th-century statement: “I don’t want to pretend that this isn’t a picture.” Like Whistler and all the painters of the aesthetic movement, he thought of a painting in protomodernist terms, as a musical arrangement of forms and colors on a surface, a thing to be looked *at*, not *through*.

It is not as surprising as it might first seem that the young Pablo Picasso admired Burne-Jones; after seeing some of his paintings reproduced in art magazines, the Spanish artist hoped to come to Britain to study them at first hand. Victorian painters even discussed and experimented with the idea of abstraction. Leighton recommended classical subjects “as vehicles . . . of abstract form,” and the briefest look at George Frederic Watts’s *Sower of the Systems* shows the leaning toward abstraction that was present in all aesthetic and idealist painting.

Looking at the Victorians within such a frame of reference, assessing their position in the history of European 19th-century art, has its value. Certainly, doing so makes for an interesting debate. But Victorian painting really comes alive when we understand its currents and crosscurrents as part of the history of the diverse movements and tendencies within what has famously come to be known as the Victorian frame of mind.

The Ends Of Empire

by David Gilmour

Until the last quarter of the 19th century, the ruler of the world's largest empire possessed no imperial title. Russia and Austria-Hungary had been ruled by emperors for centuries; Germany, recently united under Prussia, had just acquired its first, while France had just discarded its second. But Queen Victoria remained merely a queen until in 1876 her prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli, persuaded Parliament to make her empress of India.

The title was of purely symbolic significance: it did not apply to other parts of the empire and it did not even affect India, which continued to be administered by a viceroy responsible to the cabinet in London. But it reflected an increased sense of imperial purpose, a strong and growing belief in the permanence of British rule overseas. The empire still had a long way to expand: large territories in Africa and Asia had to be added before it could be claimed that a quarter of the globe was painted red. But 1876 may be seen as the apogee of imperial self-confidence. The 1857 Indian Mutiny, which briefly threatened British rule in the north, was almost a generation in the past; the "scramble for Africa" had not begun; and Britain's economic predominance was as yet unchallenged by Germany and the United States. Lord Mayo's belief that Britain should hold India "as long as the sun shines in heaven" was widely shared.

The Victorian sense of empire was concentrated on India partly because of the subcontinent's strategic importance. As Lord Curzon, the queen's last viceroy, observed, the loss of India would reduce Britain to the status of a third-rate power. But India also provided the Victorians with an imperial calling which they could not pursue in other parts of the empire. Canada, Australia, and New Zealand were settler societies responsible for their own government and without large native populations to administer. The South Africans had problems peculiar to themselves, but they too were white colonists with a hunger for land. When





At the 1903 Delhi durbar (assembly), Indian notables parade past Lord Curzon, the last viceroy appointed under Queen Victoria.

the writer John Buchan remarked that the empire was about “a sense of space in the blood,” he was talking about the great and sparsely inhabited tracts of the white colonies. But in India, the Victorians were not colonists. They saw themselves as people with a mission, administrators entrusted by Providence to rule India for the sake of the Indians and to implant British ideas of justice, law, and humanity.

It had not always been so. Since the 17th century, Britons had been sailing to India to enrich themselves. Many had been adventurers who risked the ravages of climate and disease to bring back large fortunes from Bengal. Some had liked India for itself, immersing themselves in native culture and adopting local styles of living. Both types became

almost extinct in the Victorian period, victims alike of a high-minded and intolerant zeal for Westernization.

Victorian attitudes toward empire were shaped by the Evangelical and Utilitarian movements in Britain, neither of which had sympathy for Indian customs or religion. Many people dreamed fantastically of a mass conversion of Hindus to Christianity. William Wilberforce, who was largely responsible for the abolition of the slave trade, regarded the conversion of India as even more important, “the greatest of all causes.” And even though the number of converts from Hinduism turned out to be very small, the last Victorian bishop of Calcutta believed as late as 1915 that an Indian “Constantine” would emerge and bring his followers into the Christian fold.

Few of the administrators shared this aspiration. Curzon regarded missionaries as a nuisance and believed that conversion was both improbable and undesirable. But members of the Indian Civil Service (ICS), that elite body of 1,100 men that administered the Indian Empire, were heavily influenced by the idea of secular Westernization explicit in the writings of the Utilitarians. The crucial figure was the philosopher James Mill, who in 1806 began writing a six-volume history of British India, a study regarded by Thomas Babington Macaulay as “the greatest historical work” in English since Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Mill, who had never been to India and knew no Indian language, argued that Indian society was so barbarous and decadent that it could be redeemed only by a system of government and law based on Utilitarian principles. A number of British officials, such as Mountstuart Elphinstone, the governor of Bombay, were repelled by Mill’s sarcasm, but they never refuted him in print. Mill’s volumes became a textbook at Hailybury, the college established for entrants to the civil service, and were largely unchallenged for half a century.

“Westernization” of course had its positive side: the practice of *suttee* or widow burning, was abolished, female infanticide was slowly reduced, and *thuggee*—the ritual murder of travelers carried out by thugs devoted to the goddess Kali—was suppressed. India also benefited from judicial and administrative reforms as well as from the great surge of Victorian engineering, particularly the building of railways and canals for irrigation. But an inevitable result of Mill’s thought was a deterioration in relations between British and Indians. Once it had been accepted that Indian society was barbarous and needed British help to reform itself, it was natural for the British to regard themselves as a superior race appointed to assist in the redemption of the barbarians. The consequent racial segregation—Indians in the bazaars and Britons in neat Civil Lines and army cantonments—is usually blamed on the racism and snobbery of Victorian ladies. But this is not fair. Many Victorian memsahibs no doubt were racist and snobbish, yet nobody has explained how they could have integrated into native society while

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Indian women, Hindus as well as Muslims, remained in purdah. The real villains were Mill's presumption and ignorance. Indian society was poorer and more backward than it had been in the 16th century, but solutions to its problems required both a sympathy and an understanding that a pseudo-historian in London simply did not possess.

Macaulay denigrated the East and extolled British virtues even more eloquently than Mill. His essays on Robert Clive and Warren Hastings, the two preeminent figures in the making of the 18th-century empire, encouraged the view that the acquisition of India had been an essentially heroic enterprise, a theater for the display of true British character. Just as Sir Francis Drake's plundering was played down in the making of the Elizabethan hero, so Clive's rapaciousness during his first Bengal governorship was brushed aside by the need to provide an exemplar of British virtues. Victorians were taught that their Indian Empire had been won against enormous odds by qualities familiar since the days of Agincourt: courage, self-sacrifice, duty, iron will. And if such qualities had been the formula for India's acquisition, it was logical to assume that these qualities could also be deployed for its retention. Sir James Stephen, a redoubtable administrator, defined English virtues as "the masterful will, the stout heart, the active brain, the calm nerves, the strong body."

Young district officers of the ICS were taught to believe that the future was in their hands. If they behaved as England expected, the Indians would accept them and the empire would be safe. So they dedicated their lives to the pursuit of justice, confident in their belief that all that these teeming districts needed was a solitary Englishman, straightforward and incorruptible, riding from village to village, setting up his table under a banyan tree and settling their disputes. It was an exhilarating experience, especially for young men fresh

from Oxford University sent out to govern half a million people in areas the size of a large English county. What joy, one of them recalled, "feeling that one is working and ruling and making oneself useful in God's world."

Based though they may have been on bad history and false premises, Victorian beliefs contained much that was true. Clive may not have been a spotless hero, but his military and administrative records are remarkable. The ICS officers may have believed that they belonged to a superior race, but their administration was regarded by most Indians as just; villagers divided by religion, caste, and class were happy to accept judgments handed out



Lord Curzon (1859–1925)

by a pink-faced, unbribable young man who belonged to none of their subdivisions. The statistics demonstrate how broad that acceptance was and also indicate how Western views of Indian inferiority had permeated the Indians themselves. Even after the horrors of the 1857 mutiny, Britain kept only 65,000 white soldiers in an area populated by 300 million people that now includes not only India but Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Burma. In one district of Lower Bengal, 20 Britons lived among 2.5 million natives. As late as 1939, about 28 million Punjabis—people not renowned for their docility—were governed by 60 British civil servants. No wonder Stalin grumbled that it was absurd for India to be ruled by a few hundred Englishmen.

Nearly a century after the death of Queen Victoria, we can appreciate how precariously her Indian Empire rested on the self-confidence of its administrators. But this fragility was clear neither to most of them nor to foreign observers at the time. There seemed to be a solidity about the empire that enabled Theodore Roosevelt to compare its “admirable achievements” with those of the Romans. Bismarck, the German chancellor, once declared that “were the British Empire to disappear, its work in India would remain one of its lasting monuments,” and even Gandhi was inspired to say that “the British Empire existed for the welfare of the world.” All of them could see that the government of India was a despotism, yet all believed that it was a stable and enlightened one. India helped to illustrate the boast that at home Britain was “Greek” while abroad it was “Roman.”

At the height of the Victorian empire, few people foresaw the day when India would no longer need Britain. The peoples of the two countries, believed Curzon, were tillers in the same field, jointly concerned with the harvest and ordained to walk along the same path for many years to come. Like others, he believed in the emergence of a new patriotism, common to both British and Indians, that would bind the two races forever. As he once told members of the Bengali Chamber of Commerce,

If I thought it were all for nothing, and that you or I . . . were simply writing inscriptions on the sand to be washed out by the next tide, if I felt that we were not working here for the good of India in obedience to a higher law and a nobler aim, then I would see the link that holds England and India together severed without a sigh. But it is because I believe in the future of this country, and in the capacity of our race to guide it to goals that it has never hitherto attained, that I keep courage and press forward.

British imperialists had a special feeling for India, the oldest part of the empire, but the civilizing mission was directed also to Africa. Writing in the 1890s, the young Winston Churchill asked,

What enterprise is more noble and more profitable than the reclamation from barbarism of fertile regions and large populations? To give peace to warring tribes, to administer justice where all was violence, to strike the chains from the slave, to draw the richness from the soil, to plant the earliest seeds of commerce and learning, to increase in whole peoples their capacities for pleasure and diminish their chances of pain—what more beautiful ideal or more valuable reward can inspire human effort?

Neither Curzon nor Churchill could envisage Britain without an empire. “We have to answer our helm,” declared the former, “and it is an imperial helm, down all the tides of Time.” Wherever peoples were living in backwardness or barbarism, “wherever ignorance or superstition is rampant, wherever enlightenment or progress [is] possible, wherever duty and self-sacrifice call—there is, as there has been for hundreds of years, the true summons of the Anglo-Saxon race.” And if the race did not answer that summons, if Britain became a country with “no aspiration but a narrow and selfish materialism,” it would end up merely “a sort of glorified Belgium.”

Although the empire continued to expand into the 1920s, the tide had begun to turn against the modern Rome at least a generation earlier. Toward the end of the 19th century, a growing number of ICS officers were beginning to feel that their duty should be not to preserve British India “as long as the sun shines in heaven” but to prepare the country for their eventual departure. Simultaneously, the Indian National Congress, founded in 1885 by a new breed of Indian nationalists, coupled protestations of loyalty and even gratitude to the empire with demands for greater Indian involvement in the administration. Like their sympathizers in the ICS, they understood the fundamental contradiction of the Victorian empire: that it was impossible to reconcile the imperial mission abroad with the liberal tradition at home. While in Africa the colonists were under no pressure to attempt that reconciliation, in India the issue was impossible to avoid. How, for example, could it be explained to Jawaharlal Nehru, who was educated at Harrow and Cambridge, that the British liberal tradition could be applied to him in England but not in India? How could it be argued that such a man was unfit to govern his own people?

Goaded by the Russian Revolution, the pressures of World War I, and the increasing talk of self-determination, the British government declared in 1917 that its goal—the same as Gandhi’s later on—was self-rule for India within the British Empire. Much of course had to be resolved before self-rule became a reality, and an extra delay was caused by another world war. But, in 1947, the British finally let their liberalism triumph over their imperialism and withdrew peacefully from the subcontinent. The amicability of the withdrawal and the subsequent friendliness between the two peoples surprised observers such as Eleanor Roosevelt who were determined to see British India as a typical instance of colonial occupation. But there were few parallels with the situations in Algeria, Indochina, or anywhere else. Cheered by the populace, the last British regiment marched through Bombay’s Gateway of India and sailed home. Despite differences over international issues, the respect and the affection remained: in 1979, when Lord Mountbatten was killed by an IRA bomb, the Indian Parliament went into recess to mourn the last British viceroy of their country. India’s leaders still remembered that in 1947 the British had kept their promise and departed; they had not been ejected. At the time of independence, Rajendra Prasad, who became India’s first president,

sent a message to King George VI that helps explain Indian feelings toward their recent rulers:

While our achievement is in no small measure due to our sufferings and sacrifices, it is also the result of world forces and events; and last, but not least, it is the consummation and fulfillment of the historic traditions and democratic ideals of the British race.

Within 20 years of its departure from India, Britain had withdrawn from nearly all the rest of its empire. Soon the great swathes of red paint were reduced to a handful of dots such as Hong Kong, Gibraltar, and the Falkland Islands. The center of the world's greatest empire was transformed into a modest European state. Dean Acheson famously observed that Britain had lost an empire and not found a role, but most Britons were in fact not looking for a role. They wanted to jettison the remaining parts of their empire as soon as possible and forget all about their imperial past. Politicians of the 1960s were concerned about joining the Common Market and making Britain a more civilized society by measures such as decriminalizing homosexuality and abolishing capital punishment. Historians sought to write India out of their island story or, where this was not possible, to disparage the achievements of the ICS and overestimate the importance of the Indian National Congress. Clive was reduced from the status of schoolboy hero to that of a worthy soldier who owed his success to the wealth of Bengal and the strength of the British navy.

Exhilarated by the radical spirit and hedonism of the 1960s, people in Britain looked back at the empire with a mixture of guilt and embarrassment. The change in national status was so overwhelming that it could be managed only by rejecting or belittling the past. Even the adjective *Victorian*, referring as it does to the greatest period of national consequence, became a term of mockery and abuse, aimed at the reactionary, the prudish, and the old-fashioned. Britons congratulated themselves on having shed every remnant of that age. They visited India for its gurus and its mysticism, not because their grandparents had lived there or because the subcontinent was so bound up with their history that it contained two million British graves. All they needed from the imperial past was E. M. Forster's *Passage to India*—and later the film David Lean made of it—to convince them that the Raj was both stupid and morally wrong. They were much comforted too by Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi*, which pandered to anti-Raj feeling, not least by having Lord Irwin, the benign young viceroy who was trusted and admired by Gandhi, played by Sir John Gielgud in his late seventies as a cantankerous martinet always itching to throw Gandhi in jail.

In the 1980s, the emergence of a tepid Raj nostalgia (illustrated by the growth of Indian restaurants in Britain with names such as “Lancers” and “The Indian Cavalry Club”) coincided with Margaret Thatcher's call for a return to “Victorian values” at home. Unfortunately, this term was exploited by both the prime minister and her crit-

ics for purposes of propaganda. To Thatcher, “Victorian values” primarily meant enterprise and self-reliance, while her left-wing critics talked about Victorian hypocrisy and reminded the nation of child chimney sweeps and Dickensian slums. Both sides regarded “Victorian values” as part of a remote past; neither saw nor attempted to see how many of the true Victorian values had survived in Britain and even abroad. Most of the ideals of William Gladstone, who symbolizes the Victorian age much better than its queen, are still among the ideals of British parliamentarians: liberty, free trade, international co-operation, representative government, and a foreign policy based on moral considerations as well as national interest. British political leaders often fail lamentably to uphold them, but they remain the ideals. Britons may have consigned the empire to remote and inaccurate history, but many of its values are still with them.

Ironically, the Victorian empire is remembered more clearly in India than in Britain. Indeed, the Indian people are more aware of the whole Indo-British connection than the British are. Although some of them might like to expunge the Raj from their past, too much of its legacy remains in their institutions and on their ground. The British can distance themselves from their imperial past in a way which the Indians are denied. Arriving in the colorful anarchy of modern India, visitors might feel initially that the country has cut all links with the colonial epoch. But awareness of how much of the connection still survives will soon follow, not just among the great Victorian buildings of Bombay or in the imperial capital of New Delhi but among the people and their institutions. The civil service and the judiciary system are both descendants of the Victorian era, while parliamentary government is a legacy of later British rule. Democracy is far from perfect in India as elsewhere, but it is infinitely preferable to the regimes offered by its neighbors, China and Pakistan, over the last 50 years. And at a cultural level, English is now more widely spoken in India than ever and remains the only means of communication between an educated Hindi speaker in the north and an educated Tamil from the south.

But the most vibrant Victorian legacy, one that would have astonished the Victorians themselves, is the game of cricket. This sedate sport, designed for English afternoons on village greens and school playing fields, remains almost incomprehensible outside the boundaries of the former British Empire. Yet in India, as in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the West Indies, it is played with a kind of baseball vigor and enthusiasm quite alien to England. The visitor to an Indian city on a Sunday will witness an extraordinary sight: crowded into every square yard of parks, gardens, alleys, and even cemeteries, thousands of Indian boys will be playing cricket, hitting and running and all the time shouting in antiquated English jargon. In India, cricket is truly what it never became in England—the national sport.

Enduring Fictions

by Edward Alexander

Although the Victorian period officially ended with the queen's death in 1901, its political and artistic cultures continue to have an unrivaled immediacy for us. In recent years, conservative moralists have praised the Victorian orphanage and recommended the Victorian virtues of thrift, cleanliness, hard work, self-reliance, self-respect, and national pride as solutions to American woes. At the other end of the political spectrum, university offices of moral sanitation issue pamphlets warning young women of date rape that recall Victorian manuals exhorting young women to avoid "vulgar familiarity." John Stuart Mill's schemes for flouting the tyranny of the majority by plural voting have been resurrected (albeit with the typical American emphasis on race) by the ill-fated Lani Guinier. In 1995, a magnificent exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite paintings traversed the country, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington is now the site of a major exhibition of Victorian painters.

But most of all it is Victorian novelists who exercise over Americans an appeal unmatched by that of any other group of writers. In 1996, the Morgan Library organized a sumptuous exhibition of the Brontës' manuscripts and memorabilia. Television productions of the works of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Joseph Conrad (following a run of Anthony Trollope adaptations) pour forth abundantly, and films based on the novels of Emily and Charlotte Brontë and Thomas Hardy, though less abundant than those of the pre-Victorian Jane Austen, also proliferate. The Trollope Society, founded in 1987, boasts as a vice president the current British prime minister, John Major, and flourishes mightily: in the Seattle area, where I live, there are three separate branches. In the present euphoria, it came as little surprise to learn recently that Mary Thompson, who at 120 had become the oldest living American—she died in 1996 but did not make the *Guinness Book of Records* because, as the daughter of ex-slaves, she had no birth certificate—was reported by her son to have followed a strict regimen of reading Victorian novels every evening, and of having them read to her when she lost her sight.

The Victorians themselves would have found this strange; they believed the novel was the genre least likely to survive into the next generation, much less the next century. The essayist Thomas De Quincey, writing in 1848, shortly after the appearance of *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Dombey and Son*, declared the novel an inferior and ephemeral genre. "All novels whatever, the best equally with the worst, have faded almost within the generation that produced them. This is a curse written as a superscription above the

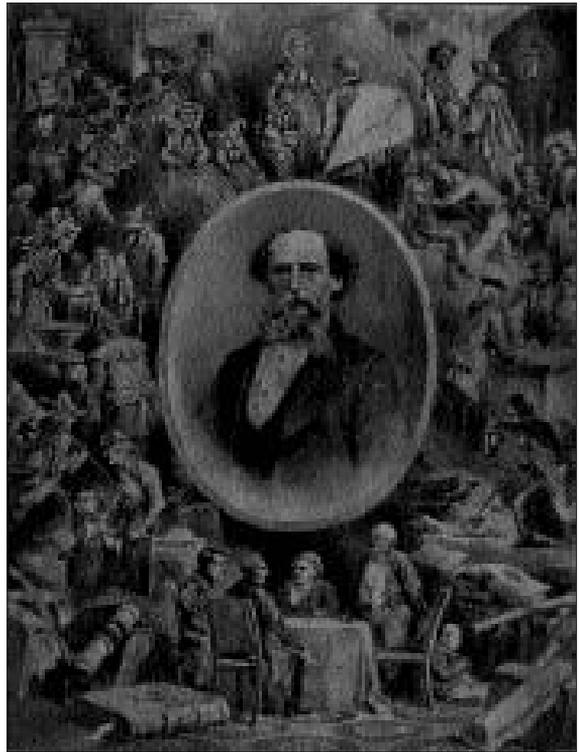
whole class. . . . It is only the grander passions of poetry, allying themselves with forms more abstract and permanent,” that, De Quincey said, could last. Mill deemed the novel an inferior genre because it could depict only outward things like manners and scenery, not the inner man: “The minds and hearts of greatest depth and elevation are commonly those which take greatest delight in poetry; the shallowest and emptiest . . . are . . . not those least addicted to novel-reading.” Matthew Arnold told Stephen Coleridge that he had been offered £10,000 to write a novel, but would not soil his hands by doing so because, as Coleridge’s famous ancestor Samuel had said, “Novel reading spares the reader the trouble of thinking . . . and establishes a habit of indolence.”

Nor were disparaging opinions of this subpoetic genre limited to poets and essayists. “By the common consent of all mankind who have read, poetry takes the highest place in literature,” Trollope said. “In his own age, [the novelist] can have great effect for good or evil; but we know as yet of no prose novelist who has influenced after ages. . . . [T]he novelist can expect no centuries of popularity. But the poet adapts himself to all ages by the use of language and scenes which are not ephemeral.”

Novelists understood better than anyone else that their characters emerge, in part, out of historical awareness. Nevertheless, all of these clever people have turned out to be wrong; and George Bernard Shaw—who said that writers who write not for an age but for all time have their reward by going unread in all times—right.

Far from being time-bound, the Victorian novelists have demonstrated a staying power unequaled by their poetic contemporaries. Is this simply because of their intrinsic artistic merit? “Dickens,” said Leo Tolstoy, “is a genius born once in a hundred years.” William Makepeace Thackeray, according to Charlotte Brontë, was on a par with the Hebrew prophets.

Brontë’s sister Emily was, said Matthew Arnold, a writer “whose soul/Knew no fellow for might,/Passion, vehemence, grief,/Daring, since Byron died” (a reminder that it was the Victorian novelists, not the Victorian poets, who inherited the prophetic passion of the Romantics). George Eliot, whose fiction after *Adam Bede* (1859) was considered by Victorian critics the standard by



Charles Dickens and his world

which her contemporaries should be judged, was described by the luminaries who tried (unsuccessfully) to satisfy her wish to be buried in Westminster Abbey as “a woman whose achievements were without parallel in the previous history of womankind.” But surely all these qualities were as evident to both common and uncommon readers at the beginning of the 20th century, when the reputation of Dickens, for example, was at its nadir, to be revived only after World War II, and Trollope was alleged by critics to have “disappeared.”

Let me, cautiously, suggest (in ascending order of importance) four reasons for the enduring—and more especially the present—appeal of Victorian novelists.

First, unlike most serious modern novelists, they were content to think of themselves as popular entertainers cultivating a warm personal relationship with their readers yet also telling them what to do or think. (Until Virginia Woolf, no lengthy fiction was detached from its teller.) Who can resist the incessant direct addresses to their readers by Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë, as in the culminating one of the 30 in *Jane Eyre*: “Reader, I married him.” Dickens used the direct address less frequently but was equally concerned to make his readers familiar and comfortable with his voice. Tolstoy attributed this intimate relationship with readers to the Victorians’ affection for their characters: “The first condition of an author’s popularity, the prime means to make people like him, is the love with which he treats his characters. That is why Dickens’s characters are the friends of all mankind: they are a bond of union between man in America and man in Petersburg.” Thackeray, alluding to the serializations favored by him and Dickens, said that after his characters had been “boarding and lodging with me for 20 months,” he knew them thoroughly, even to the sound of their voices. Those of us who were brought up on the modernist writers, so notably lacking in a tone of tender inclusiveness, now find the accents of love in the Victorians irresistibly endearing. (One of these accents is the reticent treatment of sex, in contrast to the banal explicitness of many contemporary novelists.)

We are also attracted to the Victorians by a curious mixture of the exotic and the familiar, the time-bound and the prescient. If they do not offer us precisely, as Thackeray described the world of his youth, “stage-coaches . . . riding-horses, pack-horses, highway-men, knights in armour, Norman invaders, Roman legions, Druids, Ancient Britons painted blue,” they do give us plenty of fox hunting, dowry hunting, Puritanism, Irish peers, Knights of the Most Noble Order of the Garter, First Lords of the Powder Closet, and Grooms of the Back Stairs. We find in Victorian novels a depiction of variegated manners that our more democratic polity lacks, a class system with clearly demarcated, yet crossable, lines. We may rejoice in our freedom from the Victorian novelists’ obsession (especially powerful in

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Dickens and Trollope) with becoming a gentleman, and yet be entranced by the thickness of social context in which Pip and other aspirants to gentlemanliness pursue their quest. Henry James explained his own need, as a novelist, for the Victorian English ambience in his 1879 description of “the lightness of the diet to which [Hawthorne’s] observation was condemned.” Being a young American rather than a young English novelist, Hawthorne was confronted by a negative spectacle: “No state . . . barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court . . . no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, no parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow . . . no Epsom nor Ascot!”

A third reason for the Victorians’ appeal is our recognition that Victorian society, despite its differences from the contemporary world, confronted its novelists with problems that prefigure our own: how to reconcile democracy with traditional humanistic culture; how to create a humane existence in the welter of urban life; how to find secular equivalents for fading religious faith. Foreshadowings of our dilemmas abound in the Victorian novel. Lionel Trilling justified both Dickens’ alleged “exaggeration” and his interest in the mystery of evil

when he wrote: “We who have seen Hitler, Goering, and Goebbels put on the stage of history, and Pecksniffery institutionalized in the Kremlin, are in no position to suppose that Dickens ever exaggerated in the least the extravagance of madness, absurdity, and malevolence in the world.” Readers in search of early stirrings of feminism will find them in the passionate outbursts of Brontë’s heroine in *Jane Eyre* and Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure*, as well as in the intense yearnings of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*. Joseph Conrad’s depiction, in *Heart of Darkness*, of the deterioration of imperialist idealism into a

desire to “Exterminate all the brutes!” casts a lurid, prescient shadow on the ideologues of later final solutions; his portrait of the bomb-carrying “professor” in *The Secret Agent* prefigures our “guerrillas with tenure.” In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot probed so deeply into the roots of both Zionism and a



The Brontë sisters (l.–r.): Anne, Emily, and Charlotte

Toynbee-esque variety of intellectual anti-Semitism that a street is named after her in each of Israel's three major cities. In *The Warden*, Trollope created in Tom Towers the archetype of many a *New York Times* or *Washington Post* columnist, issuing infallible bulls from "the Vatican of England," and "studiously striving to look a man but knowing within his breast that he was a god." In *Jude the Obscure* Hardy depicted with tremendous sympathy the intellectual ambition of a self-educated worker to break into the closed circle of Oxford, an ambition akin to that of American minorities to redefine the "mainstream" of our intellectual life. If Pip's quest for gentlemanly status is alien to us, the snobbish contempt for his adoptive "father," Magwitch, that results from the very "refinements" that Magwitch has purchased for Pip is a very American story, familiar—alas!—to countless European and Asian immigrants.

No single formula can encompass Victorian novelistic imaginations. Dickens insisted that all novelists report their own conception of reality from their own perspective, for "we are all partly creators of the objects we perceive." But although perception is creative, commonality of purpose may exist. Charlotte Brontë wrote of herself and her novelist colleagues as if they belonged to a trade union of moral reformers, headed by Thackeray: "I regard him as the first social regenerator of the day—as the very master of that working corps who would restore to rectitude the warped system of things." In her insistence on the moral responsibility of novelists, their intense concern with conduct and its consequences, we recognize a stark contrast to the works of contemporary American novelists who subscribe to William Gass's dictum that "Life is not the subject of fiction" and believe that the novel is mainly about itself or about its language. It is above all a longing for what Arnold called Hebraism and a sense that faith abandoned remains a more compelling presence in literature than secular creeds adopted that draw us backward to the Victorians.

A contemporary, W. H. Mallock, spoke of George Eliot as "the first great godless writer of fiction that has appeared in England." What this godlessness meant, exactly, is suggested by F. W. H. Myers's description of his conversation with the novelist as they walked in the Fellows' Garden of Trinity College, Cambridge on a rainy evening in May 1873: "She, stirred somewhat beyond her wont, and taking as her text the three words which have been used so often as the inspiring trumpet-calls of men,—the words, *God*, *Immortality*, *Duty*—pronounced, with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the *first*, how unbelievable the *second*, and yet how peremptory and absolute the *third* . . . her grave, majestic countenance turned toward me like a sibyl's in the gloom; it was as though she withdrew from my grasp, one by one, the two scrolls of promise, and left me the third scroll only, awful with inevitable fates."

To some extent, this "withdrawal" of and from God and immortality was implicit in the genre Eliot was practicing. It has been argued that deism made the genre of the novel possible because it asserted that God started the world and then went to sleep, allowing its inhabitants to fend for themselves. In this way, it freed writers from puz-

zling over origins and opened the way for historical awareness and the uncontested rule of natural law. But the “godlessness,” however caused, led Eliot to search, through her novels, for worldly equivalents of values that she believed the religious tradition could no longer sustain. “I must tell you,” she wrote to a friend in 1868,

that I am always a little uneasy about my share in the talk when it has turned on religion. . . . My books are a form of utterance that dissatisfies me less [than talk], because they are deliberately, carefully constructed on a basis which even in my doubting mind is never shaken by a doubt [as to] the relative goodness and nobleness of human dispositions and motives. And the inspiring principle which alone gives me courage to write is, that of so presenting our human life as to help my readers in getting a clearer conception and a more active admiration of those vital elements which bind men together . . . and . . . help them in gradually dissociating those elements from the more transient forms on which an outworn teaching tends to make them dependent. . . . Since you have read my books, you must perceive that the bent of my mind is conservative rather than destructive. . . . We ought . . . not to sit down and wail, but to be heroic and constructive . . . like the strong souls who lived before . . . in other eras of religious decay.

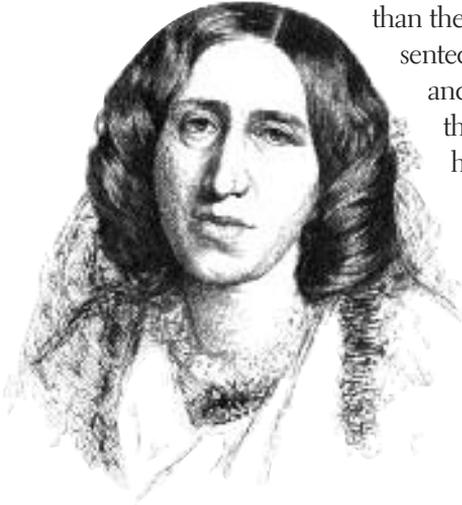
Religious decay”—a peculiar description, perhaps, of an era in which evangelical Christianity provided the still-firm moral cement of society; and yet the most consistently vilified characters in Victorian novels are evangelicals, ranging from Pitt Crawley in *Vanity Fair* to Mr. Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre* to Obadiah Slope in *Barchester Towers* and the Chadbands in *Bleak House*. (The evangelicals returned the favor, becoming the principal critics of novels as “instruments of abomination and ruin.” In the *Evangelical Magazine*, love of novels was ranked only slightly less heinous than drunkenness and adultery.) Like many of their contemporary admirers, the Victorian novelists, however dismissive of Christianity’s claim to truth, felt they were more suited to tend the sacred flame than ordained ministers who presided over “transient forms.” This may explain why Dostoevsky alluded reverentially to Dickens, who vehemently rejected such central Christian doctrines as original sin, as “the great Christian—Dickens.”

Middlemarch realized Eliot’s desire to be “conservative” of religious values in an era of religious decay. The book begins with reflections on the life of Saint Theresa, asking whether “later-born Therasas” will be able to find a “coherent social faith.” The novel’s main aspirant to Theresa status is Dorothea Brooke, whose stature, bearing, and dress, in the midst of provincial society, give her “the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible . . . in a paragraph of to-day’s newspaper.” It is left to Dorothea, who refuses to wear a cross and admits that she “hardly ever pray[s],” rather than to her clergyman husband or any other clerical figure in the novel, to uphold traditional religious values. When Will Ladislav condescendingly refers to her social idealism as “a beautiful mysticism,” she replies sharply: “Please not to call it . . . Persian, or something else geographical. It is my life. I have found it out, and cannot part with it. . . . I have always been finding out my religion since I was a little girl.” This is a secular saintliness

on the part of a character who, though occasionally satirized for confusing doing good with feeling good about what she is doing, is a part of Eliot's grand design: finding secular equivalents for religious values. In her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot even suggested a Jewish version of this design. In the preface to *Middlemarch*, she had spoken of "human hearts . . . beating to a national idea"; in *Deronda* she names the idea and creates in the protagonist an early illustration of the saying that when a man can no longer be a Jew he becomes a Zionist.

George Eliot felt no regret that people should turn to the forms and ceremonies of religion if they found comfort in them, as she herself did; but she

had "faith in the working out of higher possibilities than the Catholic or any other Church has presented," and insisted that "the 'highest calling and election' is to *do without opium*." She therefore made the moral enlargement of human sympathies the purpose of her art: "the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures." The most daring exercise of this sympathetic imagination in *Middlemarch* comes when



George Eliot

the narrator asks us to identify with the repellent Casaubon solely because he faces death: "Here

was a man who now for the first time found himself looking into the eyes of death—who was passing through one of those rare moments of experience when we feel the truth of a commonplace . . . when . . . 'we must all die' transforms itself suddenly into the acute consciousness 'I must die—and soon.'" Stepping into the void left by religion, the "godless" writer recalls her readers—then and now—to a fundamental tenet of religious belief: that we are all, even this desiccated researcher into moldy futilities, equal in the face of death.

Eliot was by no means the only Victorian writer who thought that she could draw upon traditional faith and traditional feeling through the very act of withdrawing from them intellectually. Among the novelists, Hardy comes closest to her, as when he said of himself that "although invidious critics had cast slurs upon him as Nonconformist, Agnostic, Atheist, Infidel, Immoralist, Heretic, Pessimist . . . they had never thought of calling him what they might have called him much more plausibly—churchy; not in any intellectual sense, but insofar as instincts and emotions ruled." (This passage comes from the biography written by Hardy's second wife, but was actually dictated by Hardy himself.)

Rarely do we hear in these novelists the sneer of the disbeliever or the icy indifference of the rationalist. In fact, they tended to sing the praises of Christianity: it was beautiful, it was historical, it was necessary to the preservation of morality, it was conducive to the

composition of great music and the construction of majestic buildings. The one thing they could not bring themselves to say was that it was true.

“I have been looking for God 50 years,” Hardy wrote with the painful regret of the lapsed Christian who wishes he could believe, “and I think that if he had existed I should have discovered him.” In his novels about the world of Anglican Christianity, the question that Trollope keeps asking about this ancient institution is not “Is it true?” but “What is the meaning of it?” Why has it been believed by thoughtful people, and received by generations of Englishmen? Trollope is critical of Dr. Grantly (in *The Warden*) for his theocratic defense of clerical privilege. Nevertheless, the tone of the archdeacon’s mind is inseparable from something venerable: “Who without remorse can batter down the dead branches of an old oak, now useless, but ah! still so beautiful, or drag out the fragments of the ancient forest without feeling that they sheltered the younger plants, to which they are now summoned to give way in a tone so peremptory and so harsh?”

How could one preserve the values of religion without subscribing to its “transient forms”? Arnold thought the only solution was literary: “There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything.”

In retrospect, however, it appears that it is not poetry but the novel, as practiced by the Victorians, that has come closest to fulfilling Arnold’s prediction that literature would one day take the place of religion. But how close can this be? John Henry Newman, the most powerful Victorian religious voice and a sometime novelist himself, credited the novels of Sir Walter Scott with turning men’s minds in the direction of the Middle Ages, and when he wanted an image of the disordered condition of the human race out of joint with the purposes of its creator, instinctively invoked the figure of the disinherited child named Oliver Twist.

Nevertheless, Newman’s final judgment on the imperial reach of Victorian literature was an admonition we might do well, in the midst of our current enthusiasm, to remember: “A literary religion is . . . little to be depended upon; it looks well in fair weather, but its doctrines are opinions, and, when called to suffer for them, it slips them between its folios, or burns them at its hearth.” To which one might add that admitting a devil’s advocate (as Newman is in this context) into the midst of your dearest, most sacred truths—apt to grow windy and worthless unless challenged—is also a Victorian virtue.

The Age of Philanthropy

by Gertrude Himmelfarb

Civil society” has become the rallying cry of liberals and conservatives alike, especially in the wake of the recent reform of the welfare system. The devolution of welfare to the states suggests a further devolution to local authorities, and a still further one to the unofficial but powerful institutions of civil society—families, neighborhood groups, churches, private social-work agencies, philanthropies—all those “voluntary associations” that Alexis de Tocqueville took to be the genius of American democracy.

It is surely presumptuous to quarrel with Tocqueville, yet in one small respect I venture to do so. Tocqueville presented those associations as a unique feature of American society. Although the Americans, he observed in the second volume of *Democracy in America* (1840), “took some of their laws and many of their customs” from the English, his own travels suggested to him that “the principle of association was not used nearly so constantly or so adroitly” in England as in America.

Tocqueville had visited England in 1833, just before writing the first volume of *Democracy in America*, and again in 1835, after the publication of that volume and before writing the second. But long before then, indeed almost a century before then, largely under the impetus of the Wesleyan revival, a multitude of associations (“societies,” they were often called) had sprung up in England for every conceivable purpose: to establish and endow schools, hospitals, orphanages, and almshouses, and to serve a myriad of other charitable and social functions. In the course of the 19th century many more such societies were founded, suggesting that the English used that “principle of association” at least as “constantly” and “adroitly” as did the Americans. And if the concept of civil society is extended (as surely it must be) to include the family, here too the English must take pride of place, for not even the Americans could be more reverent of the family, or of the other institutions of civil society, than the Victorians were.

Tocqueville might have contributed to one of the hoarier myths about Victorian society: that it was ruthlessly materialistic, acquisitive, and self-centered. The myth starts with the image of the hard-headed, hard-nosed Victorian employer who regarded his workers as instruments of production rather than as human beings, and who exploited them under the cloak of principle, invoking the natural, even divine, laws of

political economy. The sole function of government in this laissez-faire system is said to have been the preservation of law and order, which in practice meant keeping the potentially lawless and disorderly lower classes in a state of docility and subjugation. Those who professed a concern for the poor are dismissed as eccentric do-gooders, condescending Lady Bountifuls, or officious philanthropists who pretended to help the poor for their own self-serving motives.

Part of this myth is easily disproved. Neither in principle nor in practice was political economy as rigidly laissez faire as this picture suggests. The first of the factory acts limiting the hours of work for children was passed in 1833; within a decade it was followed by laws limiting the hours of women, and somewhat later, the hours of men. In the course of the century, Parliament enacted scores of other reforms concerning health, sanitation, housing, education, transportation, even holidays, while the municipalities assumed responsibility for the water supply, sewage, public baths, street lighting, street cleaning, libraries, and parks. All of these reforms coincided with a period of rapid economic growth, so that by the last quarter of the century the standard of living of the working classes had risen considerably, thus belying the Marxist theory of “immiseration”: the idea that capitalism inevitably results in the growing misery and poverty of the proletariat.

Even more remarkable than the improvement in the conditions of the working classes was the enormous surge of social consciousness and philanthropic activity on the part of the middle and upper classes. This is not to say that there had been no such consciousness and activity in the previous century. When John Wesley propounded the trinity, “Gain all you can. . . . Save all you can. . . . Give all you can,” he gave practical effect to it by taking up collections following the sermon and distributing the money to the poor, setting up loan funds and work projects, and instructing his followers to pay “visitations” to the sick and to prisoners in jail. It is not surprising to find Methodists and Evangelicals prominent in the founding of orphanages, schools, hospitals, friendly societies, and charitable enterprises of every kind. By the late 18th century, the principle of “philanthropy” (still car-



The mark of Victorian philanthropy was direct and personal involvement in the day-to-day lives of the poor.

rying with it its original meaning of “love of mankind”) had given rise to full-time philanthropists such as John Howard, who successfully agitated for the reform of the prison system, and Jonas Hanway, who devised the “boarding out” system to remove infants from the poorhouses. Hannah More, preferring moral reformation to philanthropy, characterized this period, not altogether in praise, as “the Age of Benevolence.” A London magistrate, deploring the corruption of “virtue” into “good affections,” complained, “We live in an age when humanity is in fashion.”

That magistrate would have had more to complain of in the 19th century, when the fashion for humanity expressed itself in a score of legislative and administrative reforms as well as a renewed burst of philanthropies and social activities. So far from supplanting private, voluntary efforts, as many people had feared, the government seemed to inspire them to greater exertions. To the French historian and critic Hippolyte Taine, this was yet another of the peculiarities of the English. Citing an article in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1861, he noted that of the £13 million spent on public education in the preceding 21 years, only £4 million was contributed by the state; the rest came from private subscriptions. (Even after the institution of compulsory, publicly supported education in 1870, church-endowed and private schools continued to play a large part in the educational system.) And education was only one of the causes that drew upon private funds:

There are swarms of societies engaged in good works: societies for saving the life of drowning persons, for the conversion of the Jews, for the propagation of the Bible, for the advancement of science, for the protection of animals, for the suppression of vice, for the abolition of tithes, for helping working people to own their own houses, for building good houses for the working-class, for setting up a basic fund to provide the workers with savings banks, for emigration, for the propagation of economic and social knowledge, for Sabbath-day observance, against drunkenness, for founding schools to train girls as schoolteachers, etc., etc.

What was even more remarkable, Taine observed, was that an Englishman regarded this kind of “public business” as “*his* business,” feeling obligated to contribute to the “common good” and bringing to it the same conscientious attention a Frenchman brought to his private business affairs.

Two decades later Taine would have had more societies to add to his roster and more reason for astonishment. The 1880s saw a veritable explosion of social concerns and activities. In 1884, the journal of the leading philanthropic association, the Charity Organisation Society, reported: “Books on the poor, poverty, social questions, slums and the like subjects, rush fast and furious from the press. The titles of some of them sound like sentimental novels.” That same year, Beatrice Potter (better known as Beatrice Webb, the Fabian) wrote in

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her diary: "Social questions are the vital questions of today: they take the place of religion."

There was, in fact, a religious, almost revivalist tone in this accession of social consciousness. Webb has left a memorable description of what she called the "Time-Spirit" of this period. The spirit was a compound of two elements: the first, a religious dedication to the service of others, inspired not by orthodox religion or a belief in God but by a secular religion, the "Religion of Humanity"; the second, the faith in science, the idea that the welfare of society could best be promoted by scientific, rational, organized means.

To one degree or another, these elements manifested themselves in the multitude of philanthropic enterprises, reform movements, humanitarian societies, research projects, publications, and journalistic exposés that flourished in the last quarter of the century. Some were overtly religious, such as the Salvation Army and the Christian Social Union. But many more exhibited the kind of sublimated, secularized "religion" described by Beatrice Webb. In this respect, the time-spirit of late-Victorian England was in notable contrast to that of earlier periods. Most of the reformers earlier in the century, such as the Evangelicals, who led the movement for the abolition of the slave trade, had been inspired by a firm religious creed; they were reformers, one might say, because they were devout Christians. Many of the later reformers were less devout but no less ardent in pursuing worthy causes. Just as they redoubled their moral zeal to compensate for their loss of religious faith, so they redoubled their humanitarian zeal as well. Humanitarianism became, in effect, a surrogate religion. This quasi-religious spirit was evident even in the socialist organizations such as the Fabian Society, which was professedly secular, or the Social Democratic Federation, which was ostensibly Marxist.

The scientific aspect of the time-spirit also took many forms. For socialists (in the Fabian Society, Social Democratic Federation, and Socialist League), science meant the rational, planned organization of the economy and society. For social workers (in the Charity Organisation Society), it meant the rational, planned organization of charity and relief. For settlement-house workers (in Toynbee Hall), it meant the education and edification of the working classes. For social researchers (such as Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree), it meant the systematic investigation and analysis of the different classes of the poor, their material and moral conditions, their problems and prospects of improvement.

It was this combination of religiosity and rationality that informed the social consciousness of the late Victorians. Critics at the time complained that the Religion of Humanity had the effect of diluting and distorting religion, replacing the old stern Puritanism with "a vapid philanthropic sentiment . . . a creed of maudlin benevolence." In fact, the new humanitarianism was neither vapid nor maudlin. The God of Humanity proved to be as stern a taskmaster as the God of Christianity. The Charity Organisation

Society instructed its social workers that “scientific” charity should not be “indiscriminate” or “promiscuous,” distributed without regard to need or worth, lest it contribute to the very evil it was designed to remedy, the pauperization and demoralization of the poor. True humanitarianism was an exercise in doing good, not feeling good—doing good to others, even if it meant curbing one’s own spontaneous, benevolent impulses.

The dispensers of charity, no less than the recipients, were held to high standards. They were expected to give generously of their time and resources and to have a sustained personal involvement in their work. This was not “checkbook philanthropy,” satisfied merely by the contribution of money (although such contributions were expected, in small amounts as well as large, since the organizations were entirely dependent on private funds). Nor was it the kind of “telescopic” philanthropy satirized by Charles Dickens in the character of Mrs. Jellyby, in *Bleak House*, who was so preoccupied with the natives of Borrioboola-Gha that she neglected her own children. Nor was it professional philanthropy in the current sense, where everyone from the director of the charity to fund raisers, social workers, and clerks is a salaried employee, paid to do a job quite like any other.

Victorian philanthropists, social workers (“visitors,” as they were called), settlement-house residents, even researchers, were personally involved in the day-to-day lives of the poor with whom they were concerned. And while they brought to their work a spirit of professionalism, seeking to dispense charity or conduct their inquiries “scientifically,” they also brought to it the dedication of unpaid, voluntary workers giving a good deal of their time, their energy, and their money to the welfare of those less fortunate than themselves.

Philanthropy was inspired by the dual motive: to serve others and to fulfill a moral need. When Beatrice Webb started work as a visitor for the Charity Organisation Society, she weighed the relative importance of the “moral facts” and “economic facts” involved in charity, “the relationship of giver and receiver,” and “the moral effect on the person who receives.” She concluded that it was “distinctly *advantageous to us* to go amongst the poor,” not only to have a better understanding of their lives and problems but because “contact with them develops on the whole our finer qualities, disgusting us with our false and worldly application of men and things and educating in us a thoughtful benevolence.” In some instances, she recognized, benevolence might take the form of “pharisaical self congratulation.” But the real philanthropist would not be guilty of this, for he would be too aware of the “mixed result” of his work (if indeed it had any result) “to feel much pride over it.”

Today, such statements are often taken as evidence of the elitist, authoritarian, self-serving nature of philanthropy. But they can as well be taken as evidence of a self-sacrificing, even self-abasing spirit, a belief that the “privileged,” no less than the poor, had spiritual needs, that they had to “give” (as Wesley said), as much as the poor had to receive, and that what they had to give was of themselves. Even the Fabian socialist Walter Besant paid tribute

to the principle of the “new philanthropy,” as he called it: “Not money, but yourselves.”

Two criticisms are commonly made of Victorian philanthropy. The older, more familiar one is that even at the time such philanthropy was obsolete and irrelevant, that the social and economic problems of late-Victorian England could not be solved by private, voluntary efforts but required either substantial legislative and administrative action by the state or radical structural changes in the economy. Philanthropy was not only inadequate but counterproductive, since it distracted attention from real remedies for all-too-real problems. From the beginning, the argument goes, and certainly by the end of the 19th century, industrialism and urbanism had created social evils that were beyond the scope of individuals. Poverty, unemployment, bad housing, overcrowded slums, and unsanitary conditions were neither the result of a failure of character on the part of workers nor of a lack of good will on the part of employers and landlords. Therefore they could not be solved or even alleviated by well-disciplined workers, well-intentioned employers, or well-wishing philanthropists.

More recently, criticism has taken another turn. The gravamen of the charge now is that philanthropy is all too often a self-serving exercise on the part of philanthropists at the expense of those whom they are ostensibly helping. Philanthropy stands condemned, not only as ineffectual but as hypocritical and self-aggrandizing. In place of “the love of mankind,” philanthropy is now identified with the love of self. It is seen as an occasion for social climbing, for joining committees and attending charity balls in the company of the rich and the famous. Or as an opportunity to cultivate business and professional associations. Or as a way of enhancing one’s self-esteem and self-approbation by basking in the esteem and approbation of others. Or as a method of exercising power over those in no position to challenge it. Or as a means (a relatively painless means) of atoning for a sense of guilt, perhaps for riches unethically acquired. Or as a passport to heaven, a record of good works and virtues to offset bad works and vices. Or (the most recent addition to this bill of indictment) as a form of “voyeurism,” an unseemly, perhaps erotic interest in the private lives of the lower classes.

This kind of criticism is often advanced as a corollary to the “social control” thesis. Just as Victorian values are said to have been an instrument for the pacification of the working class, so Victorian philanthropy is described as a device for the subjugation of the even more vulnerable class of the very poor. By discriminating between the “undeserving” and the “deserving” poor, the dispensers of charity managed to keep the former in a condition of servility in the workhouse while forcing the latter into the labor market on terms set by the employers. Thus profits were secured, the status quo was maintained, discontent was suppressed, and revolution was averted.

The difficulty with the “social control” thesis is that it can be neither proved nor refuted, since any empirical fact can be interpreted in accord with it. If some philanthropists and reformers advocated a system of free, compulsory education, it can be said that they did so only because educated workers were more productive than uneducated ones; if others opposed such a system (ostensibly out of a distrust of any kind of state-controlled

education), it was to keep the poor in a state of ignorance and submission. By this mode of reasoning, any philanthropic enterprise, regardless of its nature, purpose, or effect, can be disparaged and discredited.

The other familiar argument, that philanthropy was no solution to the problem of poverty, would have been conceded by Victorians, who never made any such claim, if only because they did not believe that poverty was a “problem” that could be “solved.” At best they thought it could be alleviated, and this only for some individuals or groups, in certain circumstances, and in particular respects. The entire purpose of Charles Booth’s monumental study, *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1891–1903), was to break down the category of “poor” into distinctive “classes,” analyzing each of them in terms not only of income but also of the regularity of their work and earnings, their living and working conditions, their habits and moral qualities. The effect was to distinguish the various problems that went under the umbrella term “poverty,” and thus the specific remedies—not “solutions”—appropriate to those specific problems.

This “disaggregation,” as we would now say, was typical of Victorian social reformers and philanthropists, who were perfectly aware of the special and limited nature of their enterprises. The Charity Organisation Society, which tried to coordinate the activities of the many philanthropic groups, made a great point of distinguishing between the functions of private charity and public relief. Where the Poor Law was directed to the relief of the indigent, charity should be reserved for those who were needy but not actually destitute, who were generally employed and might even have some resources such as savings or possessions but who had temporary problems that, unless alleviated, might lead to pauperism. Relief, in short, was meant for paupers; charity for the poor. And neither relief nor charity would “solve” the problem of poverty; at most they would alleviate it.

Nor did the reformer Octavia Hill have any illusions about solving the housing problem when she embarked upon her housing projects. She hoped that the principles she established for her houses—that tenants pay their rent promptly, that “rent collectors” (in effect, social workers) respect the privacy of the tenants and assist them unobtrusively, and that the houses include such “amenities” as ornaments and gardens as well as essential utilities—would be applied on a larger scale by private owners and institutions. But she also knew the limitations of her financial resources, the relatively small number of families she could accommodate, and, more important, the particular kinds of workers she wanted to accommodate. She made it clear that her houses were not meant for the artisans who could afford the “model dwellings” erected by the Peabody Trust and other building societies, nor for the vagrants who found refuge in the “common lodging houses,” but rather for the “unskilled laborers” who constituted the bulk of the “industrious, thrifty working people.”

Later-day critics, who fault the Victorians for not solving the problems of poverty and housing, use such words as “vague” and “illogical,” “ambivalent” and “ambiguous,” “transitional” and “half-way house,” to describe the ideas and projects of these philanthropists, reform-

ers, and thinkers. The implication is that Victorian England can be understood only as a prelude to the welfare state (or, as some historians would prefer, to socialism); anything short of that is regarded as naive and futile. If most Victorians objected to a large extension of state control, if they preferred small measures of reform to large ones and local laws and regulations to national ones, if they persisted in expending their energy and resources on private, voluntary efforts, it could only be, so it is supposed, because of a failure of imagination, or a weakness of will, or a commitment to an out-moded ideology or vested interest.

Although Victorian philanthropists did not believe that there were comprehensive solutions to most social problems, they did believe that some problems could be alleviated and that it was the duty of the more fortunate to do what they could to relieve the conditions of the less fortunate. This was the moral imperative that made philanthropy so important a part of Victorian life. But there was another moral imperative: that every proposal for alleviation produce moral as well as material benefits—at the very least that it not have a deleterious moral effect. This was the common denominator that linked together public relief and private charity, settlement houses and housing projects, socialist organizations and temperance societies. Whatever was done for the poor was meant to enable them to do more for themselves, to become more self-reliant and more responsible—to bring out, as Green said, their “better selves.” “Charity,” wrote the secretary of the Charity Organisation Society, “is a social regenerator. We have to use Charity to create the power of self-help.”

The Victorians were avowedly, unashamedly, incorrigibly moralists. They were moralists in their own behalf—they engaged in philanthropic enterprises in part to satisfy their own moral needs. And they were moralists in behalf of the poor, whom they sought not only to assist materially but also to elevate morally, spiritually, culturally, and intellectually—and whom, moreover, they believed capable and desirous of such elevation. Just as it is demeaning to the working classes to suggest (as some historians do) that work, thrift, prudence, sobriety, and self-help were middle-class values imposed upon them from above, so it is demeaning to the philanthropists to say that they promoted these values solely for their own ulterior motives. In any case, whatever their motives (and there were surely self-serving, self-aggrandizing, self-satisfied individuals among them), the values they commended to the poor were those they cherished for themselves and for their own families. It was no small achievement that people of very different political and philosophical dispositions, engaged in very different philanthropic enterprises, should have agreed on this: that the poor had the will to aspire to these same values and the ability to realize them.