

Marjorie Stone

Review Article

Mirrors and Metaphors: Visions of Victorian History

The Victorian Mirror of History. By A. Dwight Culler. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1985. Pp. ix, 320. \$25.00

One would expect people to remember the past and imagine the future. But in fact, when discoursing or writing about history, they imagine it in terms of their own experience, and when trying to gauge the future they cite supposed analogies from the past; till, by a double process of repetition, they imagine the past and remember the future.

Sir Lewis Namier's witty paradox about historical discourse is one of several epigraphs cited by A. Dwight Culler in the Introduction to his fourth book, *The Victorian Mirror of History*. Certainly it pertains to the multiple Victorian visions of history that Culler explores, although he focuses more on how Victorians "imagined" the past than on how they "remembered" the future. Whether it also pertains to Culler's own historical account is more difficult to say since, unlike the Victorians, he does not seem to search for his own face or the face of his era in the "mirror" of history. He never directly relates the past he writes of to the present he writes in—that future the Victorians could only imagine by "remembering."

Culler's thesis is that the Victorian debate about "society, religion, culture, science and art" had a "historical dimension, consisting of multiple interpretations of history in conflict with each other" (7). For "science" in this list one might substitute politics because, while he has little to say about the interaction of Victorian scientific and historical discourse, some of Culler's most penetrating observations concern the ideological uses of history in nineteenth-century political controversies. But otherwise Culler's statement accurately reflects the range of his study, which takes in architecture as well. He develops his thesis with the erudition and critical insight one expects in such a leading scholar of the period, the author of three authoritative books on

Newman, Matthew Arnold, and Tennyson. He is less successful in demonstrating that the Victorians turned to history as a "mirror," in part because the richness of the materials he gathers together and the subtlety with which he investigates them continually call into question the adequacy of his metaphor. Moreover, there are some troubling omissions in this apparently comprehensive study, omissions that may be related to the curious lack of self-reflexiveness in Culler's approach.

Studies such as Alice Chandler's *A Dream of Order* and Mark Girouard's *The Return to Camelot* have established the extent to which the Victorians liked to "imagine the past" of the Middle Ages. The contrast of medieval and nineteenth-century societies carried out by Carlyle in *Past and Present* was a *topos* of the period, Culler notes in his chapter on "Ruskin and Victorian Medievalism," where he surveys manifestations of the medieval revival ranging from Pugin's defence of Gothic architecture to Disraeli's "Young England" movement, to the mammoth medieval tournament staged by the Duke of Eglinton in 1839—transformed into a muddy fiasco by two days of rain. But other past eras also absorbed the imaginative energy of the Victorians, and the most valuable contributions of *The Victorian Mirror of History* lie in Culler's analysis of the limits and inconsistencies of Victorian medievalism, and in his exploration of the Victorian preoccupation with a wide array of historical periods. Ruskin is the only major Victorian whom he acknowledges to be a thorough medievalist, although one whose vision of political and architectural history was marked by odd mixtures of metaphors and abrupt shifts in opinion: "In 1851 Ruskin knew the precise day on which Venice fell" into Renaissance decadence, Culler wryly remarks—but "he later decided he had been wrong about the century" (178). The Pre-Raphaelites D. G. Rossetti and Morris were also medievalists, according to Culler, but he notes like many recent critics that their medievalism has a peculiarly "modern," decadent quality compared to Ruskin's. "The Gothic for Rossetti is not a harmonious cathedral which happy workmen have created as an expression of their hierarchical view of society; but a dark wood or oppressive chamber in which palefaced lovers speak wanly of their frustrated passions" (231).

Carlyle and Newman are often viewed as leading figures in the medieval revival, but Culler emphasizes that neither man knew or cared very much about the Middle Ages. His argument regarding Carlyle needs to be balanced against Chandler's demonstration of the "dream of order" Carlyle found in medieval society. Nevertheless, it is true as he suggests that Carlyle's depiction of the monastery in *Past and Present* is "almost embarrassing" in its lack of reference to Catholicism, and that the time of Cromwell and the Civil War was the most

significant “mirror of history” for Carlyle, as for Macaulay, because of its analogies with nineteenth-century social and political conflicts. For Newman and for other Oxford Tractarians and their opponents—Hurrell and James Froude and Charles Kingsley—Culler convincingly shows that the periods of the early Christian church and the Reformation were the most significant because of their religious controversies. Thomas Arnold and his son Matthew, on the other hand, found in certain phases of classical Greek culture a distinctively modern note. “The largest portion of that history which we commonly call ancient is practically modern, as it describes society in a state analogous to that in which it now is,” Thomas Arnold observed (87). Matthew Arnold, along with several other Victorians, reflected a similar vision in applying the famous account of the night battle between the Athenians and the Syracusans in Thucydides to the conflicts and confusion overwhelming the “darkling plain” of contemporary life.

Like Matthew Arnold, many Victorians were inclined to lament the fact that they lived in an age of “transition”—“wandering between two worlds, one dead / The other powerless to be born,” as Arnold evoked it in “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse.” John Stuart Mill, Robert Browning and Pater were exceptions to this tendency. Mill viewed his life and the life of his age as “a continued mental progress” (57); and, as Culler shows in his chapters on Browning and Pater, the most vigorous in the book, Browning sought to foster the individualism and vitality of the early Renaissance in his own day to create a “Victorian Renaissance,” while Pater developed the Renaissance as a metaphor for the process of continual cultural rebirth he sought to achieve in his own consciousness. Both Browning and Pater contributed to the late nineteenth-century displacement of the Middle Ages by the Renaissance as the “dominant post-antique era in people’s consciousness” (249).

The principal reason why the Victorians were drawn to a number of differing historical periods is that most of them tended to imagine the past in terms of the patterns of their own spiritual or mental development. Indeed, Culler demonstrates that for Carlyle, Mill, Newman, James Froude, Matthew Arnold, Ruskin and Pater, this was the most “pervasive paradigm” structuring their vision of history (280). Thus the conversions of Mill and Carlyle explain the receptivity of both to Saint-Simonian theories of history as a process of alternating organic and critical periods. Likewise, “on the principle that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,” Culler suggests that Newman underwent in his own life both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation (108); while in writing his history of the English Reformation, James Froude presented the defeat of the Catholic Spanish Armada as “a reenact-

ment of his own personal drama, when Newman's Saints were routed by Carlyle's Heroes" (120). Culler's analysis of the interaction of biographical and historical paradigms is often very perceptive, and one can't help but wish that he had devoted more space to this sort of analysis and less to covering already familiar ground by describing Victorian philosophies of history and retelling the many stories of spiritual crisis and conversion pervading Victorian prose. More analysis of how evolutionary theories in the scientific sphere influenced Victorian visions of history would have been of interest. Culler points to this connection only once, in a tantalizingly brief but suggestive discussion of how Newman's theory of the development of church doctrine may have been influenced by Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. In *Darwin's Plots*, Gillian Beer shows how certain narrative paradigms were shared by writers as diverse as Dickens, Darwin, and George Eliot. One wonders to what extent Victorian visions of history reflect the same paradigms. Did history also recapitulate phylogeny for the Victorians?

Since Culler's study takes in so much, one should perhaps not fault it for not providing more. He also includes useful summaries of the development of such concepts as the "Augustan Age" (a late Victorian concept), the idea of modernity, the "spirit of the age," and the *Zeitgeist*—concepts among those "unities of discourse" that Foucault seeks to undermine in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Culler makes no mention of Foucault, however, and his study, rich as it is, is not informed by the persistent and probing analysis of historical paradigms one encounters in Foucault, or to take a more parallel text, in *Darwin's Plots*. This non-analytical approach in *The Victorian Mirror of History* manifests itself most notably in Culler's use of his central metaphor of the mirror, which he adheres to despite his own repeated acknowledgements that it is inadequate or misleading. It applies reasonably well to Newman's vision and use of history, which no doubt explains why Culler chooses to begin his book with Newman's account in the *Apologia* of looking at the history of religious heresy in the fifth century and seeing his own face as in a "mirror." But Newman's vision of history, as Culler later shows, is uncharacteristically static for a Victorian. Where others such as Macaulay and Thomas Arnold saw analogies between their own age and previous ages, yet emphasized the importance of different "circumstances" (33), Newman saw absolute identity, just as in his religious faith he stressed the identity of his boyhood faith with his adult conversion to Rome: "What I held in 1816, I held in 1833, and I hold in 1864" (92). For the majority of the Victorians dealt with by Culler, history was not often used or viewed as a mirror. Even for the Victorian medievalists who most resembled

Newman in their resistance to change, the mirror metaphor is "strictly inappropriate," Culler admits, because they saw in the Middle Ages not a reflection of their own society, but an ideal contrasting image of what their society might or should be (160). D. G. Rossetti likewise did not use history in a straightforward way as a mirror (232); nor did Pater, who looked down into the many-layered past as through a "stereoptic glass" (278). As Culler's own quotations from his Victorian sources indicate, history was more often viewed as a palimpsest than as a mirror by Victorians such as Carlyle and Pater (73 & 258). Or if it is mirror-like at all, it is like the Hall of Mirrors that Carlyle develops as a figure for Tradition in a striking passage cited by Culler. In this Hall of Mirrors, "each mirror reflects, convexly or concavely, not only some real Object, but the Shadows of this in other mirrors; which again do the like for it: till in such reflection and re-reflection the whole immensity is filled with dimmer and dimmer shapes; and no firm scene lies round us, but a dislocated, distorted chaos, fading away on all hands, in the distance, into utter night" (7). This vision of being lost in the funhouse of history is repeated on a smaller scale in one of Ruskin's more sceptical comments also cited by Culler: "There is no law of history any more than of a kaleidoscope. With certain bits of glass—shaken so—you will get pretty figures, but what figures, heaven only knows" (183).

It seems odd that Culler does not at least cast his title metaphor into the plural, given his citing of passages like these, and his emphasis on "the interlocking, overlapping, and contradictory visions of history which we find in the Victorian Age" (280). One is left with the impression that his attachment to the metaphor of a single mirror reflects a philosophy of history more traditional in its reliance on totalizing "unities of discourse" than that of many Victorians. His "Conclusion," in particular, manifests the manner in which he uses "the concept of a Victorian mirror of history" to obscure the very differences and complexities in Victorian visions of history that he explores throughout his study (279). Summarizing the pervasive parallel between "the life of the individual and the life-cycle of civilizations," he relates the use of biographical paradigms to both the "deep-seated organicism" and the "alienation" of the age: "the discovery of the parallel was often the means whereby the individual overcame his alienation and reconciled himself with the world. As Northrop Frye once wrote, borrowing a metaphor from Matthew Arnold, 'The culture of the past is not only the memory of mankind, but our own buried life, and study of it leads to a recognition scene, a discovery in which we see, not our past lives, but the total cultural form of our present life'" (280).

This vision of history as a collective memory that helps us find the true identity of our present selves is the traditional vision of "continuous History" that Foucault analyses in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* as the "indispensable correlative" of the "sovereignty of the subject." Such a paradigm offers the subject who studies history "the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored . . . one day the subject—in the form of historical consciousness—will once again be able to appropriate, to bring back under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference" (12). Certainly such a vision of history was very important in the nineteenth century, as Foucault acknowledges. But the excellent scholarship in Culler's study itself indicates that there were other visions. What opportunity is there for a "recognition scene" in Carlyle's Hall of Mirrors, which disseminates through reflection and re-reflection into "utter night?"

Culler never directly seeks in *The Victorian Mirror of History* to bring about a recognition scene illuminating the present for modern readers; that is, he never directly offers his own vision as a mirror of the past in which we may recover our buried selves. Yet the desire to do so seems to lie submerged in the uneasily insistent discussion of the pragmatic uses of history dominating his "Conclusion." He focuses this discussion more on the Victorians than on present-day readers, and alternates between stating that probably no "great Victorian received a helpful answer to a current problem by looking into the mirror of history," and affirming nevertheless that the Victorian study of history "ended up in a general humanization of knowledge" and, in the case of Carlyle, Mill, Newman, Arnold and Ruskin, begat a "breadth of understanding and tolerance" (282-83). This might be a difficult assertion to support. Was the elder Carlyle of *Latter-Day Pamphlets* and *Shooting Niagara: And After?* more tolerant than the younger Carlyle of *Sartor Resartus*? Was Newman more tolerant when he denounced "Liberalism" after his conversion than when he began to write "Tracts for the Times?" But Culler's rather fuzzy and hopeful assertion about the general use of studying history seems to have less relation to his finely detailed discussion of Carlyle, Newman and others than to his one reference to the present in his "Conclusion," where he addresses the displacement of history by the social sciences in the modern age. It is a displacement he seems to lament since, in another question-begging assertion, he contrasts the "value-free numbers" offered by the social sciences with a history that is "impregnated with human experience and hence with some degree of wisdom" (282). Behind this assertion seems to lie the hope that *The Victorian Mirror of History* will itself function as a pragmatic mirror to modern readers, particularly since Culler goes on to say that "the scholar must

focus exclusively on the past and yet know, in the back of his mind, that it is exclusively for the present he is writing" (283). Again, the assertion begs certain questions. *Must* the scholar focus exclusively on the past? Is such a focus possible if the present forms his audience and shapes his perception? Perhaps the Victorians were not less scholarly but simply more honest in focusing on the present as much as the past in their study of history—in acknowledging that any study of the past involves a dialogue with the present.

Culler presents the Victorian dialogue between past and present but not his own, so it is left to the reader to look for the implied reader "in the back" of the author's mind and find in that hidden reflection an image of Culler himself. What kind of "re-reflection" do we find? "History is what one age finds worthy of note in another," to cite another of the epigraphs for *The Victorian Mirror of History*, this time from Jacob Burckhardt. It is troubling to observe what Culler does *not* find worthy of note in the nineteenth century. Foucault defines history as "one way in which a society recognizes and develops a mass of documentation with which it is inextricably linked" (7). The mass of documentation assembled by Culler is almost exclusively male, with the exception of a brief and relatively disparaging discussion of George Eliot's lack of historical sense in *Romola* (242-43). Granted, the canon of Victorian prose and poetry that Culler makes his focus has been predominantly male, far more so than the canon of Victorian novels. Yet the last decade has seen a significant recovery of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's major works—most notably, *Aurora Leigh* in Cora Kaplan's 1978 Women's Press edition, and *Casa Guidi Windows* in Julia Markus's 1977 Browning Institute edition. This recovery is nowhere reflected in Culler's study. He cites Robert Browning's rejection in a letter of the cant concerning an "age of transition" (217), but he gives no attention to Barrett Browning's sophisticated satire of the same cant in Book V of *Aurora Leigh*. In fact, Culler seriously misrepresents her vision of past and present by quoting her satire of poets who scorn the present as "An age of mere transition, meaning nought" out of context, and stating that this is how Barrett Browning "flip-pantly" referred to her age (6). The misrepresentation betrays a disregard for not only the immediate context, but also the central principle in the poetics that Barrett Browning articulates in Book V of *Aurora Leigh*, in opposition to, among others, Matthew Arnold in his 1853 "Preface." Rejecting both the nostalgia of critics such as Arnold for a Classical heroic age and the fashionable medievalism of so many of her contemporaries, Barrett Browning's *Aurora* emphasizes that the poet's "sole task is to represent the age" (5.202), not lament that "the epic has died out" (5.139), not trundle

back his soul five hundred years,
 Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court,
 To sing—oh, no! of lizard or of toad
 Alive i' the ditch there,—t'were excusable
 But of some black chief, half knight, half sheep-lifter,
 Some beauteous dame, half chattel and half queen. (191-96)

Aside from misquoting Barrett Browning, Culler does not at any point in his chapter on Robert Browning acknowledge the influence of her ideas or works on her husband, or consider her complex exploration of the history of Italian politics and art in *Casa Guidi Windows*. Thus he devotes several pages to discussing Robert Browning's "Old Pictures in Florence" but omits any reference to *Casa Guidi Windows*, even though, as Julia Markus demonstrated in 1978, Browning's relatively minor poem "mirrors" many of the historical and artistic concerns, as well as the rhetorical strategies, in his wife's earlier, major poem (Markus 44). Nor does Culler mention Elizabeth Barrett as a collaborator with R. H. Horne in his *New Spirit of the Age* (1844).

The almost complete absence of any reference to Barrett Browning's exploration of the dialogue between past and present does not seem to be a deliberate omission on Culler's part, but it is nevertheless unfortunate, particularly since there are several respects in which some consideration of her works might have contributed to a study such as his. Along with *Aurora Leigh* and *Casa Guidi Windows*, her substantial review essay "The Book of the Poets"—still completely neglected even by Barrett Browning specialists—merits the attention of the cultural or literary historian. In this essay written in the 1840s she surveys English poetry from Chaucer to the Romantics with wit, penetration and remarkable comprehensiveness. The survey is especially valuable as a representative overview of the literary tradition by an important Victorian poet writing at a time when the Romantic reaction against the eighteenth century was still very much in force. Barrett Browning divides the English poetical tradition into five eras, and her presentation of the fourth era—the Dryden "dynasty," the age "pet-named the Augustan" (294)—is of particular relevance to Culler's study, since much of his first chapter is focussed on the contradictions and confusion associated with the concept of the "Augustan Age." Culler notes the conflicting uses of the term in the eighteenth century, but suggests that it dropped out of use in the nineteenth. In "the manuals, handbooks, and histories of English literature that were written in the nineteenth century, one finds no mention of it. The period is called the Age of Reason, the Neoclassical Age, or simply the Eighteenth Century, but not the Augustan Age. Not until the publication of George Saintsbury's *A Short History of English Literature*

(1898) do we encounter the phrase" (14). Barrett Browning's use of it in her historical overview, however, suggests that the term was in circulation in the early Victorian period.

Another interesting feature of "The Book of the Poets" is the attention Barrett Browning gives to minor as well as major poets. Of Gower, for instance, she notes that he "has been much undervalued" because of the inevitable contrast with Chaucer. Identifying a recurrent phenomenon in literary history, she observes that "he is nailed to the comparative degree. . . He is laid down flat, as a dark background for 'throwing out' Chaucer's lights" (247). Or she praises the not unmixed excellencies of "misprised" Renaissance poets such as Fulke Greville, Chamberlayne, Browne, and Wither, and indicates her consciousness of those she has overlooked by concluding, "May pardon come to us from the unnamed" (265). She also reveals a keen self-reflexive awareness of the metaphors that pervade historical reconstructions. Even though she defends the use of figures of speech to illustrate "the times and seasons of poetical manifestation and decay" because that is "easier and more reasonable than to attempt to account for them by causes," she nonetheless reminds her readers that the descriptions of particular eras in poetical history are often metaphors and no more (251). The self-reflexive play of wit over the surface of her survey and the attention she gives to minor figures in literary history are strengths in her essay that point to the limitations in Culler's otherwise admirable study of Victorian visions and uses of history. He does not seek pardon from the "unnamed." And although his mirror is a large one, he does not ask of himself what the Victorians asked of themselves, or what Adrienne Rich asks in "Readings of History": "Can history show us nothing / but pieces of ourselves, detached / set to a kind of poetry ...?" Yet, like all excellent scholarship, Culler's study invites such questioning even though he does not engage in it. As Oscar Wilde says in another of the epigraphs cited in *The Victorian Mirror of History*, "The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it."

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