
Part One
History in Focus

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1832

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Finding the Beginning

When did the Victorian age begin? While the senescence of Victorian England has been located anywhere from the Queen's Golden Jubilee in 1887 to the Battle of the Somme in 1916, its beginning – the “Victorian prelude” (Quinlan) – has been placed at least as far back as the 1780s, which saw the moral reaction in English manners portended by the Wesleyans and the Evangelical revival. Here “Victorianism” is simplistically equated with a social conservatism that both antedates and postdates the queen herself; Mrs Grundy, it seems, was on the throne longer still. A literal reading of the term implies that the Victorian era begins with the accession of Victoria to the throne in 1837 and ends with her own demise in 1901. Yet the first generation of authors we now know as “Victorian” was born at the end of the eighteenth century and in the first two decades of the nineteenth. Carlyle, Mill, Macaulay, Newman were all publishing in the 1820s; Tennyson and Browning in the early 1830s. Strict adherence to the dates of reign ignores these larger continuities.

The *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* has canonized another date: 1824, the year of Byron's death and of the founding of the *Westminster Review* as a party organ for the Benthamites, designed to add a Radical voice to the select upper-middle-class reading scene dominated by the Tory *Quarterly Review* and the Whig *Edinburgh Review*. More recently, Richard Cronin has chosen the year 1824 to identify a generation of “Romantic Victorians” like George Darley, whose careers fall mostly outside what has generally been taken to be mid- or “high” Victorianism. Byron's own contemporaries saw his

death in symbolically charged terms. As Edward Bulwer (later the much-maligned Bulwer-Lytton) put it in his study of English society, politics, arts, and manners, *England and the English* (1833), "When Byron passed away, the feeling he had represented craved utterance no more. With a sigh we turned to the actual and practical career of life; we awoke from the morbid, the passionate, the dreaming" (286). For Bulwer, the utilitarian Bentham had succeeded the romantic egoist Byron as the cultural symbol of his day. The very strength of the recoil from Byron was a tribute to the sway his passionate and sometimes morbid nature had exercised over the reading public. Yet even Byron had prepared the way for Bentham, to the extent that the poet's own assaults on national prejudices had engendered a more skeptical climate receptive to Bentham's interrogation of national institutions.

Byron and Bentham as twin cultural symbols have a powerful resonance for the student of the period. But between them they do not begin to account either for the multitude of voices counseling different things in the years immediately preceding Victoria, or for a rapidly changing political climate. While it may be more suspicious than auspicious to proclaim the emergence of a distinctive self-awareness at a particular moment in history, most of us do so at the beginning of a new decade; we use the terms "sixties," "seventies," "eighties" to encode a cluster of political and cultural assumptions; and if we keep diaries and watch our own biological clock the onset of a new decade is likely to breed still more self-examination than a new year. One can make a case for 1830 as one of those possible Victorian beginnings. Two diarists in January 1830 saw that something was afoot, and they did not like what they saw. One of them was Charles Greville, the diarist of the reigns of George IV, William IV, and Victoria, whose sheltered position as clerk to the Privy Council gave him unparalleled access to politicians of all factions. On January 7 he wrote, "The revenue has fallen off one million and more. The accounts of distress from the country grow worse and more desponding" (Greville I, 224). Ten days later finds him in a more perturbed vein: "The country gentlemen are beginning to arrive, and they all tell the same story as to the universally prevailing distress and the certainty of things becoming much worse; of the failure of rents all over England, and the necessity of some decisive measures or the prospect of general ruin" (226). The other is one of those country gentlemen, General William Dyott, a Staffordshire magnate then 68 years old, writing on New Year's Day 1830: "I believe a year never opened with less cheering prospects to a country than the present for old England; distress attending all classes of the community . . . Meetings held in various parts of the kingdom to represent the distress of the country" (Darwin I, 248). For such disturbed but insular observers, the question was whether the Duke of Wellington and Robert Peel between them could produce any program capable of alleviating the widespread economic distress of the countryside, and thus a threat to the old order.

More shocks, some of them not altogether unwelcome, like the death of the widely discredited old rake George IV on June 26, followed throughout the year. At home, talk of reform, the antislavery agitation which Greville attributed to the bothersome Methodists, and a new Parliament in his words "full of boys and all sorts of strange

men” all seemed to herald transition. So, abroad, did the overthrow of the French monarchy, in the three days of July, which in England revived radical hopes and fears; for the first time since the 1790s, the tricolor was hoisted in several English cities, and even the cautious Whigs were viewed by some of their more conservative colleagues as contemplating a doctrinaire reform in the French style. It was, again, Bulwer who sensed the impending change and embraced it openly:

Just at the time when with George the Fourth an *old* era expired, the excitement of a popular election concurred with the three days of July in France, to give a decisive tone to the *new*. The question of Reform came on, and, to the astonishment of the nation itself, it was hailed at once by the national heart. From that moment, the intellectual spirit hitherto partially directed to, became *wholly* absorbed in, politics; and whatever lighter works have since obtained a warm and general hearing, have either developed the errors of the social system, or the vices of the legislative. (288–9)

The Reform currents given new life in England by events on the Continent had, by the time *England and the English* was published, found expression in the First Reform Act of 1832. That date itself is indeed the most convenient point around which to gather the various reforming clusters of the decade preceding Victoria’s accession, and to mark an evolution from older paternalist to newer entrepreneurial ideas of the social order. Yet the latter part of Bulwer’s statement suggests another aspect of the 1830s which is particularly striking to the student of literature: the displacement of works of the imagination by the all-consuming task of Reform, or their subordination to the political agendas which so preoccupied the larger public.

The paradox of the 1830s has often been described in terms of the striking contrast between the richness of their political history – Reform, the growth of political and labor unions and at the end of the decade the movement for the redress of working-class grievances, Chartism, the first stirrings of the Anti-Corn Law League, the beginning of systematic government intervention in prison conditions, education, welfare, working hours, and public order – and the apparent barrenness of the cultural scene. That prodigiously diligent later Victorian woman of letters, Margaret Oliphant, trying to account for the strange hiatus in poetry and fiction between about 1825 and 1840, wrote that “the period which witnessed Her Majesty’s happy accession was not in itself a very glorious one, at least as far as literature is concerned. It was a season of lull, of silence and emptiness, such as must naturally come after the exhausting brilliance of the days just gone by” (I, 1). But Bulwer’s post-Byronic characterization of a shift in sensibility from the dreaming to the practical suggests a more productive approach. It echoes in the attempt of more recent scholars to isolate a distinctive “public voice” in English literature of the 1830s and 1840s, a voice intended to “transcend the doubt which by 1830 had fatally touched the fundamental Romantic faith, while the self-consciousness of this effort found expression in the ‘private’ voice which qualified the work of the best writers” (Madden 97). But those writers must first of all be seen in the context of an age which itself was coming to greater self-consciousness about its aims and purposes.

Georgian or Victorian? The Political Scene

The man who succeeded George IV as king in 1830 was hardly of the stuff to give his name to an age. The choleric, well-intentioned Duke of Clarence had earlier discarded a mistress in the interests of respectability and in the hope that one of his legitimate children, should there be any, might inherit his throne. Known as Sailor Bill because of his navy career, he was also, on account of his fondness for making intemperate and embarrassing public utterances, referred to by the even less dignified sobriquet of Silly Billy. Harriet Martineau described him as “a sovereign who could not help agreeing with the last speaker, and who was always impetuous on behalf of his latest impression” (III, 42). Or, as one of Greville’s colleagues observed, “What can you expect of a man with a head shaped like a pineapple?” Yet William IV, irrisolute and capricious though he sometimes was, warrants some credit for restoring an aura of respectability to the monarchy after the reign of his dissolute brother. He was not, however, the best-equipped of men to preside over an age of Reform.

Reform has its origin in the 1820s, with the repeal of Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 and Catholic Emancipation in 1829, both of them measures aimed at easing the political disabilities that had hemmed in the rights of Protestant dissenters on the one hand and Roman Catholics on the other. These measures deeply divided the governing Tory party, factions of which participated in the overthrow of Wellington’s Tory government in 1830. Tories were disgusted by the duke’s willingness to move in the direction of free trade and by his about-face on Catholic Emancipation, and they paved the way for the Whig government of Earl Grey, whom the king summoned to office at the end of 1830 following Wellington’s refusal to countenance any further change in the British constitution.

The calls for Reform were spurred on by those riots among farm laborers and that manufacturing unrest which echo in the diaries of Dyott and Greville. In March 1831 Lord John Russell introduced a bill in the House of Commons that removed parliamentary representation from many small electoral boroughs and gave such representation to the nation’s growing industrial centers. The bill also attempted to regularize inconsistencies in the relationship between property-holding and the right to the franchise. It passed by a majority of only one at 3:00 a.m. on March 22, but still required a clause-by-clause reading and the approval of a hostile House of Lords. The defeat of one of the clauses led Grey to advise the king to dissolve Parliament and ask for new elections. The result was a referendum on a single issue: “the bill, the whole bill, and nothing but the bill” (Arnstein 12). Many elections in England at this time were uncontested, but in those boroughs where there was a contest, it was the reformers who were returned to power. Russell’s second version of the bill commanded a substantial majority on its second reading in Commons, but ran aground in the House of Lords, where it was defeated after a five-day debate.

The opposition of the Lords seemed to call into question the very viability of the constitution. The cities were outraged; arsonists destroyed Nottingham Castle; Bristol

succumbed for a few days to mob rule. That December, Grey's government went back to work and produced a third reform bill much like the second. With the bill threatened once again by a hostile House of Lords, Grey called on the king to create 50 new peers to override the opposition. William IV thought 50 a bit much; Grey found the counter-offer of 20 too few, and resigned. The Duke of Wellington, however, whom the king called back to power, was incapable of meeting the rising storm of discontent. At that juncture the king turned to Grey and reluctantly acceded to the demand to create new peers, but the House of Lords, reading the tea leaves, acquiesced in the bill rather than permit itself to be swamped with new appointees. The bill became law on June 7, 1832.

The first Reform Act is itself a transition piece, much like William's reign; it looks different from different angles. Along with the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, the 1832 bill may well have saved England from revolution, and it certainly moved the country peacefully and without Continental-style convulsions toward democracy. Those Whigs who orchestrated Reform in the difficult first months of the decade saw the bill quite differently, as an end rather than a beginning. As one historian puts it, "the Bill had been like the legitimate heir of a loveless marriage, the child rather of necessity than of desire" (Kitson Clark 64). Though prodded by Radical colleagues on their left, with whom the Whigs had an uneasy relationship, the drafters of the bill viewed traditional social groups as providing the essential frame of reference. Grey's charge to the Committee of Four which he appointed to draft the bill is revealing. The legislation, he wrote, should be "of such a scope and description as to satisfy all reasonable demands, and remove at once, and for ever, all rational grounds for complaint from the minds of the intelligent and independent portion of the community." This in essence was Macaulay's famous advice to Parliament in his speech of 1831: "Reform, that you may preserve." Though Peel had opposed Reform, after its passage he accepted it in his Tamworth manifesto to the electors as "a final and irrevocable settlement of a great constitutional question," and his Whig opponent Lord John Russell earned the nickname "Finality Jack" for the emphasis with which he insisted, both on the floor of the House and in writing, that the authors of the bill were "peculiarly committed to finality" and that to tolerate further Reform measures "would be to confess that [the reformers] had deceived the people or themselves" (Southgate 99).

Viewed in this way, the bill looks more like Georgian farewell than Victorian halloo, just as the England of that year to many of its citizens probably seemed not so very different from the latter years of the eighteenth century. In 1833, writes a leading administrative historian, England "was not orderly, it was not planned, it was not centralized, it was not efficient, and it did little for the well-being of the citizens." Education, health, and poor relief lay beyond the purview of the national government, and the last was administered erratically by 15,000 parishes also in charge of public order (Roberts 195). Hindsight makes clearer the beginnings of slow, almost glacial changes beneath the surface of daily events. Contemporaries feel the shocks but not the trends; the earthquakes, not the subtle erosions or the drawn-out process of

sedimentation. The England that James Fenimore Cooper visited in the late winter and early spring of 1828 was still the England of the great Whig houses and the breakfasts of the poet Samuel Rogers, one of the last of the Augustans, where Cooper met Coleridge, Sir Walter Scott, Thomas Campbell, John Gibson Lockhart, Thomas Moore, Earl Grey, and Lord John Russell. Cows still grazed in the heart of London. Green Park and St James's Park were "one open space" separated only by a fence, the first in Cooper's words "nothing but a large field, cropped down like velvet, irregularly dotted with trees, and without any carriage way" (28). This England survived well into the 1830s. Jeremy Bentham died in 1832 at the age of 84; as an undergraduate he had attended Blackstone's lectures on law at Oxford in the 1760s. Charles Grey, who shepherded through the first Reform Bill in 1832, was nearly 70 and, like his party, had spent almost half a century in the political wilderness; in the 1790s he had joined the Society of Friends of the People and introduced his first motion on parliamentary reform. John Scott, Lord Chancellor and first Earl Eldon, was 81 when, to his disgust, the Reform Bill became law; as Attorney General he had been identified with various of the repressive acts of the 1790s and at the turn of the century was opposing the abolition of the slave trade. But power was passing to Palmerston, Russell, and Peel, while at the further end of the age spectrum the young Gladstone at 22, listening to the Reform debates in the galleries, was still a few months from his first seat; Disraeli, six years and four defeats from his.

One striking symbol of transition is Grey's successor as the leader of the Whigs. William Lamb, second Viscount Melbourne, was the last prime minister ever to be dismissed unilaterally by a reigning monarch and the first to become prime minister as the result of a general election, against that monarch's will. Melbourne was in his mid-50s upon his appointment as prime minister in 1834 and therefore presumably at the height of his powers if he chose to use them. It was an open question whether or not he would. Elegant, languid, debonair, with a political record at best equivocal on the major issues of the day, the jotter of numerous cynical reflections on society in his commonplace book, Melbourne told his secretary, upon being offered the reins of government, that it was "a damned bore" to decide whether or not to accept. It is one of the finer ironies of the decade that this Whig aristocrat, twice cited as an adulterous co-respondent in the Brandon and Norton divorce cases (the second of these during his prime ministership), should be found in 1837 at the ear of the impressionable, rather conventional young queen as avuncular counselor and friend. Perhaps, with the changed moral atmosphere that journalists of the day were already commenting on, the transition from Regency gentleman to Victorian paterfamilias was not so difficult or arduous after all, but then Melbourne was nothing if not flexible. Much of the foregoing description is, of course, caricature; Melbourne was capable of decisive action, abandoning the dilettante's pose for a complicated mixture of deference, courtly admiration, and firmness in dealing with the 18-year-old queen (Vallone 3, 199).

Meanwhile, the Whig assumption of "finality" in political arrangements was already being battered by changes which the Reform Bill could hardly have been

drafted to prevent and which made it clear that 1832 was an opening salvo, not a concluding salute. The creation of inspectors of factories (1833) and prisons (1835), the New Poor Law (1834), the new Education Committee of the Privy Council, represented stages toward the centralization which Dickens's Mr Podsnap, a quarter of a century later, was to decry as "not English." Government was becoming increasingly conscious of its own powers. It is no accident that the 1830s saw the rise of statistics-gathering, of select parliamentary commissions on matters requiring reform, of "blue books" that constituted the gathering of evidence for the purpose, and in general an almost obsessive documentation of "the condition of England question," which resonates in the novels of Disraeli, Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, and Kingsley in the next decade. Perhaps the very *ad hoc* nature of much of this activity was responsible for what looked to foreign observers like a remarkably resilient political system. The spirit of English legislation, Alexis de Tocqueville thought when he visited the country in 1835, was "an incomprehensible mixture of the spirits of innovation and routine, which perfects the details of law without noticing their principles" (82). He saw stability in the openness of the aristocratic class to newcomers and the absence of class hatred, the presence of a relatively democratic group of reformers who respected religion and property, and the spirit of individualism that flourished under the government, along with a fair amount of administrative muddle. "In France," marveled another French visitor, the Baron d'Haussez, "a revolution is accomplished in three days. In England, the country deliberates many years before the work of reform is entered on and, once commenced, the results are without danger, for the passions . . . are already cooled" (I, 154–5).

Such assessments may have been both accurate and premonitory. Some worried Englishmen of the day would have seen them as premature. The six points of the People's Charter (1837) called for universal manhood suffrage, annual Parliaments, voting by secret ballot, equal electoral districts, the abolition of property qualifications for members of Parliament, and pay for members of Parliament. The passing of the Factory Act of 1833, limiting the working hours of children in factories, and the agitation against the seeming inhumanities of the New Poor Law (which readers now know chiefly through Dickens's vivid portrayal of the workhouse in *Oliver Twist*) are both symptoms of a broader and less focused discontent than that which clustered around the Reform Act. Reform, after all, did not bring about economic change, though it generated some utopian hopes.

Historians continue to divide on the extent to which the Act of 1832 was a genuine step forward, and if so what step it took. Influential studies by Norman Gash and D. C. Moore have suggested the danger of using the Reform Act to underplay trends and events long antedating and postdating it. A more traditional view, recently reargued, has been that the Act made possible the steps toward "an essentially modern electoral system based on rigid partisanship and clearly articulated political principle" (Phillips and Wetherell 1995: 412). For most of the reforming Whigs, the bill was intended to seal the past by increasing the total British electorate from 435,000 to 813,000 out of an adult male population of some six million, and it was drafted to guarantee

that the counties would not be overbalanced by the new towns. In five general elections between 1832 and 1847 only just over half of the constituencies were contested. But it was also true that “the general election of 1841 was the first in which the government of the day, previously holding a majority in the lower House, was defeated by a disciplined opposition for electoral purposes” (Gash xii–xiii).

Nonetheless, what was not fully understood at the time turned out in the event to be a harbinger of significant if deferred change. The significance of the Reform Act was less in the measurable difference it made in the atmosphere than in the precedent it set for the Acts of 1867 and 1884: something sacred, in this case the constitution itself, had been proven nonetheless to be alterable.

The Missing Generation

On the night of October 16, 1834, the skies over London were irradiated with a glow that could be seen miles away. The Palace of Westminster had caught fire, and while the next morning’s light showed that Westminster Hall had survived, the old Parliament House of St Stephen and the surrounding lawcourts were destroyed. In 1835 a Parliamentary Commission set up to consider the rebuilding of Parliament decided to hold a competition that was to require the submission of architectural designs in either the Gothic or Elizabethan modes. The winning design, submitted by a young architect named Charles Barry, constituted a clearcut identification of England’s political glories with the Gothic.

In part, this has been seen as a moral revulsion against the age of the Georges, for whom the classic had been the dominant style. In part it anticipates the concurrent movement toward the Gothic as an attempt to evoke the piety as well as the pride of the medieval past, a movement emblemized in the publication in 1836 of Augustus Welby Pugin’s *Contrasts*, which polemically juxtaposed pictures of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century buildings with the ugly creations of his own day. For a more recent writer, the building of the Houses of Parliament in 1834–7 marks “a cultural monument of a time neither Georgian nor Victorian,” but rather “a tribute to the power of creativity between orthodoxies” (Rorabaugh 174–5). But the initial decision to exclude classical models is perhaps the most striking attribute of the competition itself. What was at stake was both a return to real or imagined national origins, and a rejection of what the immediately preceding era had come to symbolize.

The shift from “Georgian” to “Victorian” in the broader political and cultural context is almost as delusively tidy and elusively traceable as the shift from “Romantic” to “Victorian” is for the literary historian. In the visual arts, the deaths of the brilliant young painter and watercolorist Richard Parkes Bonington in 1828 and the fashionable portraitist Thomas Lawrence in 1830 can be set against the continuance of the work of Constable, Haydon, Turner, and Martin throughout the decade (Constable dying first of these, in 1837). But in poetry Keats died in 1821, Shelley in 1822, Byron in 1824. Sir Walter Scott, his life shortened by his gallant efforts to pay

off creditors, died in 1832. Coleridge lingered on until 1834 and Wordsworth until 1850, but only the most ardent revisionists now contest the fact that their best creative work lay behind them. Scholars have made the most of such symbolically charged moments as Wordsworth's toast to the young Robert Browning upon the publication of *Paracelsus* in 1835, or Tennyson's highly unsatisfactory interview with the sage of Rydal Mount in 1845, during which the younger poet sought, unsuccessfully by his own account, to rouse the flagging interest of Wordsworth in natural beauty. But the fact is that there is very little to be made of such occasions as these; they heighten, rather than minimize, the effect of disjuncture. It is startling to recall that Wordsworth's successor as national literary sage, Thomas Carlyle, was only a few weeks younger than Keats, but that at the time Keats died Carlyle had barely embarked on a career as a hack writer for the encyclopedias.

The 1830s do indeed see the beginnings of several brilliant, though sometimes slow-starting, careers. But they provide little evidence of an 1830s equivalent for what has been called the Auden generation of the 1930s. In both decades an atmosphere of impending crisis pervades the scene, but the emerging writers of the 1830s were too young, their lines of activity too disparate, and Carlyle too idiosyncratic to serve as a consistent mentor. If to be, to act, and to conceive oneself as part of a literary generation require a developed self-consciousness as well as a defined corporate identity, the emerging writers of the thirties do not qualify. Yet in measurable ways all of them were products of a common historical milieu and all of them are barometers of what we can now define as a post-Romantic ethos. A number of these lines of development have been traced by scholars: the dwindling cult of Byron, the exhaustion of the Wordsworthian paradigm of the unity between man and nature, a growing uncertainty as to the nature of the audience for high literature, and a concern with political themes drawn from the past, often in a context – as in Browning's *Sordello* (1840) or Henry Taylor's once-popular verse drama *Philip van Artevelde* (1834) – which suggests the limits of the individual hero in an unheroic age. Even in their collectivity, however, these themes stop short of providing us with a genuinely synoptic view of the decade.

Another way to assess that decade is less thematic than generic. One of the most interesting phenomena of the 1830s is the blurring of conventional generic distinctions: Tennyson's inward-turning lyrics which chart new journeys of the mind, Browning's disruption of the conventions of historical narrative in *Sordello*, Dickens's imposition of a reformist vision on the eighteenth-century picaresque novel, or Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1834), by turns autobiographical fragment, philosophical treatise, novel, and editorial doodling – possibly the biggest put-on in English literature since *Tristram Shandy*. It is tempting to make Carlyle the generic center of the decade, beginning with his splendid review-essay "Characteristics" in 1831, continuing through such works as *The French Revolution* (1837) in which history fades into a drama of lived memory, reawakened by the more recent three days of July 1830, and culminating in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, the lectures of 1840 in which Carlyle attempts to proclaim a new ethic of leadership.

Yet a work like *Sartor* requires also to be read in the context of its original place of publication, *Fraser's Magazine*, whose brilliant and eccentric editor William Maginn collected a veritable rogues' gallery of wits and satirists who left subscribers reeling. Similarly, Dickens in the latter 1830s was a young journalist whose *Sketches by Boz* (1836) can now be seen, more clearly than by Boz's first readers, as a trial run for *Pickwick Papers* (1837). The generic issue here is linked to a larger one: the need to go beyond masterpieces to explain the wonderfully diverse achievements of the 1830s. As scholars of Victorian popular culture like Patrick Brantlinger have shown us, the decade offers a remarkably pristine case for testing the familiar, recurrent process whereby literature is refreshed from below; de Tocqueville's comments on the openness of the English upper class to new influences from the emerging middle class can be replicated in the context of "high" and "low" art. Thus, behind the careers of the two major novelists of the forties and fifties, Dickens and Thackeray, lies the *Punch* circle of the late thirties – Mark Lemon, the Mayhews, Tom Hood, Douglas Jerrold and others, nearly all of whom had experienced bankruptcy and debt, who wrote reformist melodramas (Jerrold) or poetry enlivened by popular idioms (Hood), some of which is visible in the early dramatic lyrics of Browning. This middle world which at intervals feeds the high literature of the time should be expanded to include the larger world of popular tracts and stories for working-class audiences: not only the collection of Cobbett's *Rural Rides* in book form at the beginning of the decade, but Harriet Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy* in the form of didactic stories (1832–4), the commencement of Charles Knight's *Penny Magazine* in 1832, or the numerous pamphlets issued beginning in 1825 by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. And in turn beneath that world, much of which admittedly smacks of keeping a lid on working-class discontent, lie such attempts to give voice to the inchoate class consciousness as are represented by *The Poor Man's Guardian* or the Chartist *Northern Star*.

The novel of the 1830s has often been viewed as a barren stretch, enlivened perhaps only by the sea stories of Captain Marryat, and certainly it is difficult to see much that is redeeming in a time when the prolix and sometimes embarrassing Bulwer has come to stand as the chief figure, chronologically speaking, between Scott and Dickens. For nearly half a century, the rest has been relegated to the classification – a form of dismissal – of large numbers of works into "silver fork" novels (of high society) and "Newgate" novels (drawing on popular literature of crime and punishment). But in fact such fictional subgenres are much more permeable than the classifications admit. A single novel may draw on both Newgate and silver fork elements, because writers of the 1830s, as well as their audiences, were aware of increasingly fluid class boundaries: wild speculation in the early years of uncontrolled entrepreneurship, with the enhanced possibilities of making and losing entire fortunes, and the breakdown of older Tory theories of class obligation. We cannot hold fiction such as this to the test of mid-Victorian realism of George Eliot or Anthony Trollope, with its emphasis on compromise, the repatterning rather than the jettisoning of the social order, the process by which an individual consciousness comes to maturity in the context of a

larger and organically evolving community. Harriet Martineau's fine (and still too seldom read) *Deerbrook* (1839) is perhaps the earliest novel in which we can even glimpse such Middlemarchian possibilities.

The thirties also offer an almost unexampled opportunity to explore public rhetoric. Civic discourse appeared along a political continuum that ranged from post-Tory prophetic radicalism à la Carlyle on the right to the leftist radicalism of James and John Stuart Mill, as well as of the less philosophically articulated but increasingly visible analysis practiced by working-class authors. Between these extremes, public rhetoric centered on the language of compromise represented by Macaulay, Russell, and Peel's Tamworth Manifesto. Brantlinger sees in the literature of the 1830s a movement from utopian, Shelleyan politics on the liberal side, or from the corporatist Tory thinking of Southey and Coleridge on the conservative side, toward gradual social improvement. For this purpose he suggests as a fitting epigraph Macaulay's famous aphorism "an acre of Middlesex is better than a principality in Utopia" – an early intimation of the mid-Victorian gospel of progress. But Macaulay is as dangerous an example as Carlyle (whose atypicality is widely proclaimed by many of his contemporaries and present-day historians alike), perhaps all the more so because the neatly balanced antitheses of Macaulay's rhetoric, with its Augustan appeal to reason and restraint in speeches that seem to have been designed more for posterity than for the passage of legislation, suggest all the rationalities of that compromise with which the liberal imagination is comfortable. Psychic as well as political terrors lurk close to the surface in this decade, and Macaulay enjoyed no exemption: the public man gives little hint of the lonely, passionate bachelor whose letters to his sisters breathe what has struck many readers as more than fraternal devotion. Since liberty and order are issues of the self as well as of politics, the history of public and private languages of the 1830s may indeed affirm both the emergence of a centrist rhetoric and the disruptive potential which it keeps at bay. Beneath these contestations, a common ground can be found for understanding the aspirations of sages, politicians, maybe even gentleman-diarists, and almost certainly the yet-nameless writers struggling to come to terms not only with the first industrial revolution but with the very meaning of reform itself.

How It Struck Some Contemporaries

For some Victorians at mid-century, the 1830s were an originary decade which was already assuming the status of myth. In *Middlemarch* (1872), but even more lovingly in the opening pages of *Felix Holt* (1867), George Eliot revisited a pastoral time in which "the glory had not yet departed from the old coach-roads" and the railroads were only barely thought of, while as late as 1911 Frederic Harrison's *Autobiographic Memoirs* evoked a green and pleasant space on Muswell Hill subsequently blanketed with suburban sprawl in his own lifetime. For John Henry Newman, this narrative of origins even had a date: July 14, 1833, when John Keble preached the Assize

Sermon in the University Pulpit at Oxford on the subject of "National Apostasy," "the start," Newman put it in his *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864–5), "of the religious movement of 1833" (ch. 1). The ensuing Tractarian Movement was itself a myth of origins, an attempt to lead the Church of England back to its own Catholicity and thus to offer a *via media* between Rome and Protestantism. On the eve of Keble's sermon, Newman's emotionally charged homecoming from his mysterious illness in Sicily to England takes on the character of a pilgrimage providentially guided by his rediscovery of the early Church Fathers and culminating more than a decade later at the hands of the Passionist priest who received him into the Roman Catholic flock.

But for those writing as the decade was unfolding, particularly those for whom the rediscovery of Catholic orthodoxy was no solution, there were no origins, only an end not yet discernible in the events of the day. For, perhaps more than in any preceding decade in England, writers of the 1830s were conscious of theirs as a time of transition. The popularity of such terms as "the spirit of the age," the title of an essay by William Hazlitt in 1825, was seized upon by John Stuart Mill with the remark that he did not believe it was "to be met with in any work exceeding fifty years in antiquity." Carlyle's "Signs of the Times" (1829) and "Characteristics" (1831), both published in the *Edinburgh Review*, Mill's own "The Spirit of the Age" published in the weekly *Examiner* from January through May of 1831, and Bulwer's already-mentioned *England and the English* (1833) are all evidences of the fascination – if not, indeed, the obsession – with that process by which one becomes aware of something different and as yet not fully formed in one's own times. Carlyle the transcendentalist skeptical of transitory political nostrums, Mill the rationalist discovering alternative worlds in Wordsworth and in Coleridgean political thought, Bulwer the dandy-reformer who asked Mill to write an appendix on Bentham for *England and the English* but later turned Conservative, make uneasy company; yet enough of a common temper enters these works to explain Carlyle's first hope that Mill was a "new Mystic" and Mill's exhortation to Carlyle to read Bulwer. Though Carlyle had earlier expressed the belief that Bulwer was a "poor fribble," he concluded his reading of *England and the English* with an expression of astonishment at "the contrast of the man and his enterprise."

What were the common elements of these disparate works? Even Carlyle, who in such catch-phrases as "spirit of the age" and "progress of the species" professed to find symptoms of that disease of self-consciousness which he felt had paralyzed the times, was forced to the task of anatomist he deplored. Like Carlyle, whose "Characteristics" began with the words, "The healthy know not of their health, but only the sick," Mill resorted to a medical metaphor when he attempted to describe the inconstancy of opinion in an unsettled time: "The men of the present day rather incline to an opinion than embrace it; few, except the very penetrating, or the very presumptuous, have full confidence in their own convictions. This is not a state of health, but, at the best, of convalescence." Mill's desire for greater social confidence resembles what Carlyle called "spontaneity" and "unconsciousness," the signs of a healthy organism, individual or social, working harmoniously: "Had Adam remained in Paradise," the sage of Chelsea succinctly observed, "there had been no Anatomy and no Metaphysics."

Of the three, Bulwer was perhaps unexpectedly the most eloquent. Like Carlyle he saw the uncertainties of an era marked by the eclipse if not extinction of earlier verities as a necessary if painful preface to reconstruction. "We live," Bulwer wrote,

in an age of visible transition – an age of disquietude and doubt – of the removal of time-worn landmarks, and the breaking up of the hereditary elements of society – old opinions, feelings – ancestral customs and institutions are crumbling away, and both the spiritual and temporal worlds are darkened by the shadows of change. The commencement of one of these epochs – periodical in the history of mankind – is hailed by the sanguine as the coming of a new Millennium – a great iconoclastic reformation, by which all false gods shall be overthrown. To me such epochs appear but as the dark passages in the appointed progress of mankind – the times of greatest unhappiness to our species – passages into which we have no reason to rejoice at our entrance, save from the hope of being sooner landed on the opposite side. (318–19)

While Bulwer here refers to the millennialism of the latter-day *philosophes*, James Mill and Bentham, and thus exhibits one of those curious and characteristic recoils from those he professes to admire, Mill and Carlyle read disquieting signs of the thirties in the prophecies of Edward Irving and other preachers predicting the approaching Second Coming. In "Signs of the Times," Carlyle had distanced himself from Millites and Millenarians alike as false prophets, and in "The Spirit of the Age" Mill comments with subdued amazement on how "even the religious world teems with new interpretations of the prophecies." Though Mill and Carlyle differ on the role of a new religion, they are not far apart in seeing the crisis as, finally, one of faith. For Carlyle, the "noblest class" of would-be believers are neither those who "take up with worn-out Symbols of the Godlike" nor those who, denying all forms of faith, seek only pleasure, but rather those who "have dared to say No, and cannot yet say Yea." This is not so far from Mill's pronouncement that "at present, we are in a mixed state; some fight fiercely under their several banners, and these chiefly the least instructed; while the others (those few excepted who have strength to stand by themselves) are blown about by every breath, having no steady opinion – or at least no deep-rooted conviction that their opinion is true."

More wedded than Carlyle to a specific political program, Bulwer and Mill stood together in seeing the displacement of an aristocratic class from political power as a necessary step toward the restoration of stability; their concern was that the transition be peaceful, and that power be relocated in the hands of the most competent, which the upper class, what Mill called the "stationary part of mankind," manifestly was not. Carlyle, though he did not tackle this issue in "Characteristics," would have agreed to the extent that in his view outward trappings in church, state, or society were merely a hollow shell of pretense, the "old clothes" he denounced in *Sartor*. Bulwer's denunciation of the materialist tenor of English philosophy, which he regarded as having been essentially at a standstill since Locke, is likewise not far from Carlyle's lament at the ascendancy of "mechanism" over "organism" in English society.

Finally, all three men were concerned with an issue of fundamental importance in the politics of the decade: how stability and change might be mutually accommodated. In particular, Carlyle and Mill took full account of, and gave due credit to, those with whom they might have been expected to have little in common. Surveying an apparently widening gap between rich and poor, Carlyle confessed that “the ancient methods of administration will no longer suffice,” that in change there was “nothing terrible, nothing supernatural,” and that “if Memory have its force and worth, so also has hope.” On the other hand, it is not a little curious to see the son of James Mill affirming that old prejudices were preferable to new impressions, that free discussion might weaken error without insuring its replacement by informed opinion, that wise men and not merely an enlarged electorate were demanded by the times, and that the object of an age of transition, rightly guided, was to call forth a new “natural state” in which “worldly power, and moral influence, are habitually and indisputably exercised by the fittest persons.” When the younger Mill declares that “every age contains in itself the germ of all future ages as surely as the acorn contains the future forest,” utilitarian rhetoric has at least been brushed by Romantic organicism.

A curiously paradoxical decade, then, in that while in politics and social life the sense of division must have seemed deeper than ever, this was also arguably the last decade in which such fundamentally different persons as Bulwer, Mill, and Carlyle could agree on something resembling a common diagnosis of social ills and their remedies. Conversely, as England experienced the crises of the Hungry Forties that followed, they took diverse paths. Carlyle’s earlier generosity of spirit seems to evaporate in the increasingly shrill harangues that culminate years later in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850) and “Shooting Niagara” (1867), while for his part, Mill spent much of the remainder of the decade as a publicist for the increasingly chimerical goal of forming an effective Radical party in Parliament, an object for which Carlyle had no sympathy and for which Mill’s own hopes were to be finally and effectively dashed by the election of 1841. Bulwer, longing for the life and status of a landed gentleman and never fundamentally at ease with many of his Radical colleagues, ended his political journey by making his peace with the Conservatives and briefly holding a cabinet post under Derby at mid-century, while energetically pursuing his own career as a popular novelist.

Literature courses that focus on such mid-Victorian sages as Carlyle, Mill, Arnold, Newman, and Ruskin tend to overemphasize their representativeness. Most of these prophets reposed on the far side of a gulf which was widening between them and the larger public, and as is all too often apparent from the reviews, they tended to be regarded as at best idiosyncratic and at worst irrelevant. One may view the 1830s either with regret as marking the recession of hopes for a shared cultural consensus or with interested curiosity as inaugurating an invigorating interchange between “high” and “low” forms of art. The first is perhaps an especially dangerous oversimplification because it represents a particularly egregious form of cultural elitism; by any reasonable modern standard, there was nothing resembling a mass audience for their diagnoses. Yet in their own ways Carlyle, Mill, and Bulwer all read the signs of

the times with considerable accuracy. Through their voices resonate those larger symptoms of cultural uncertainty that give the 1830s their peculiar character. Such thinkers knew more clearly than the generation of political leaders reaching the end of their careers that the thirties were not Georgian aftermath but the seedtime of a new era.

See also ADMINISTRATIVE; FICTION, SAGE WRITING, HISTORIOGRAPHY; SHORES

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