

James Eli Adams

A HISTORY OF VICTORIAN LITERATURE (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) pp. xii + 463.

Reviewed by David Riede.

If it is true, as Lytton Strachey affirmed, that the history of the Victorian age can never be written because we know too much about it, it would seem almost equally true of the history of Victorian literature, itself a much studied, complex and multitudinous representation of a supposedly unrepresentable age. And yet James Eli Adams, in well under 500 pages of cogent and elegant prose, has achieved at the very least a superlative version of such a history. Obviously, as Adams recognizes, such a history cannot aspire to encyclopedic comprehensiveness, but he nevertheless has interesting things to say even about the subjects he regrets lacking space for: “the economics of publishing, history, literature by working class authors, science writing, and writing from and about imperial dominions” (x). An excellent, if brief, account of the literary marketplace circa 1830 (11-14), for example, valuably contextualizes the early writings of Dickens, Carlyle, Tennyson and Browning. It is primarily with such “literary” figures and with the literary genres of poetry, the novel, drama and, for lack of a better term, “sage-writing” that the history is concerned. To provide as full a sense as possible of the impact of Victorian writers on their own times, Adams wisely chooses to lean heavily on contemporary reviews and responses to the works discussed, though in the interest of conserving his space he very sensibly chooses not to engage extensively with later critics of Victorian literature. Consequently, though his readings are richly informed by his obviously broad and deep knowledge of the work of other Victorianists, the history is not designed for

specialists so much as for more general readers, and he is able to sustain a pace and freshness of perception that will consistently engage and reward them.

Still, if I seem to be suggesting--to paraphrase Arnold's *Strayed Reveller*-- that "not deep the [critic] sees but wide," I consider Adams' breadth a virtue. If his necessarily brief analyses lack the space to develop radically new perspectives, their often epigrammatic *aperçus* will appeal even to specialists. Further, the very breadth of Adams' treatment leads to a depth of contextualization and sometimes to surprising juxtapositions that illuminate the common ends and aims of seemingly diverse works. Adams begins his history not from the arbitrary date of Victoria's coronation, 1837, but from the symbolic end of the Romantic era with the death of Byron in 1824 and the new awareness of a "spirit of the age" that resulted from England's turn inward after the Napoleonic wars and the political ferment about various reforms around 1830. Adams divides the period into three chronological blocks: "'The Times are Unexampled': Literature in the Age of Machinery, 1830-1850," "Crystal Palace and Bleak House: Expansion and Anomie, 1851-1873," and "The Rise of Mass Culture and the Specter of Decline, 1873-1901." No doubt these chronological divisions are themselves somewhat arbitrary, but the more manageable mini-periods enable Adams to write his history as a kind of "thick description" somewhat akin to the Carlylean mode he cites (76). As he says of Carlyle's history of the French Revolution, Adams's own narrative "shifts abruptly" at times "between highly particular description" of the works of one author or within one genre to more general description of the historical moment or to the works of another author or movement. Inevitably some of these shifts seem slightly arbitrary or abrupt, as when he darts from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Casa Guidi Windows* to

Tennyson's *The Princess* with only the tenuous connection that the latter is "A more oblique response to a different political struggle" (132) Such juxtapositions, however, seem necessary to accurately reflect the almost chaotically multitudinous nature of the times. Though Adams avoids simplifying the historical sweep of the age by providing an unbroken narrative sequence, his clarity and quiet authority assure that the representation of a confused and confusing age never falls into confusing prose or laxity of focus. Rather, his thick description situates the works historically more than biographically.

We first see the works of Tennyson and Browning, for example, in the context of the rise of utilitarianism that "increasingly relegated poetry to the realm of the trivial or childish" and of the feminization of poetry associated with the hegemony of ladies' keepsake annuals in the late 1820 and 1830s. Then we see the works of Tennyson and Browning in the context of mid-Victorian concerns about political ferment on the continent, increased bureaucratization of society at home, the Crimean war and the call for new types of masculine heroism. Still later, we see their works in relation to the rise of imperial concerns and of the aesthetic and decadent movements in the arts. But Adams also gives authors their due. Combined with the recurrence of such major figures as Carlyle, Dickens, Tennyson and Browning across chronological divides and cultural shifts, Adams' charting of social and generic changes across time helps to give this history its continuity and narrative thrust. They in turn justify Adams's assertion that the book is best read as a whole, with the introduction rather than the index as a starting point (ix).

The only conspicuous flaw in this otherwise magisterial overview of Victorian literature is that it evidently needed one more edit to eliminate its fairly numerous and

sometimes jarring errors, such as the assertion that Macaulay found Wordsworth's *Prelude* "to the last degree Jacobitical" (69) rather than Jacobinical, the quotation of a passage from Swinburne's "Hymn to Proserpine" as from "The Garden of Proserpine" (254), and, inexplicably, the attribution of Lizzie Hexam's paternity in *Our Mutual Friend* to Rogue Riderhood (227). For the most part, however, such errors are merely typos (Jude Hawley for Jude Fawley, 393) and are not likely to be seriously misleading in a book that can be generally relied upon both for the accuracy of its facts and for the intelligence and sophistication of its analyses.

Finally, when due allowance is made for what cannot be covered in a book of this size, its breadth of coverage is staggering. It includes all the major figures and genres of the age, hosts of relatively minor authors and works, and all the important subgenres. Also, by placing the individual works in their ever-shifting literary and cultural milieus, it provides a depth of insight lacking in more narrowly conceived studies. The rather surprising juxtaposition of *Little Dorritt* with the contemporaneously published "Charge of the Light Brigade," for example, affords Adams the opportunity to offer fresh perspectives on both works as well as on the cultural climate of 1854. Less surprisingly, the linking of Dickens's early work with the vogues for silver-spoon and Newgate novels may not enlighten the specialist, but it promises to deepen common readers' appreciation of Dickens and extend their awareness of the less familiar subgenres of Victorian fiction. Also, it may well stimulate an exploration of the work of such important but neglected authors as Ainsworth, Disraeli and Bulwer-Lytton, not to mention such utterly forgotten authors as Catherine Gore. Adams, in fact, seems to have read so much of the relatively minor and currently neglected literature of the entire period, and writes about it with such

gusto and infectious enthusiasm that he extends the breadth and depth of the entire field of Victorian studies and will doubtless inspire specialists as well as less advanced students of the period to read works they might otherwise have viewed as expendable. The book is indeed so replete with valuable insights into so many works and authors that the reader who has taken in its chronological sweep by reading from the introduction through the epilogue will undoubtedly return over and over again via the index to review the readings of particular works.

Finally, *A History of Victorian Literature* is a full undergraduate and graduate education in the field, an indispensable guide that for a new generation of scholars will take the place of classics such as Richard Altick's *Victorian People and Ideas* and Jerome Hamilton Buckley's *The Victorian Temper*. At the very least, it will take its place as a fixture on graduate reading lists while also offering more general readers a lively, engaging and full introduction to the unlimited literary riches of the Victorian age. Matthew Arnold's "touchstone" phrase from Shakespeare aptly describes this book: "infinite riches in a little room."

David G. Riede (<http://english.osu.edu/people/person.cfm?ID=865>) is Professor of English at the Ohio State University.