# The Victorian Age in Literature

*G.K.Chesterton*

`March 21-23, 2019`

This is a slim volume of supposedly literary criticism, in fact it turns out to be a personal and opinionated outpouring of unabashedly idiosyncratic opinions, yet not without undeniable virtues. True much of the writing is in the form of rantings tedious to read slipping into and out of ears without getting any traction, but it is written in a good mood and with robust, as opposed to sharp wit. There are also some observations among the rubble, embodying insights worth repeating and elaborating.

'It is a short book, divided into four chapters (in addition to a short forgettable introduction, except for his frank admission that he is incompetent for the task he sets himself) of decreasing length but of increasing interest. The first chapter titled 'The Victorian compromise and its enemies' is an attempt to get a general grasp of what is meant by Victorianism. There is much ranting and very little to lay your hands on, except original, or at least idiosyncratic couplings, such as that of Macaulay and Huxley as major signposts at the very beginning and at the very end respectively. Chesterton is a Catholic writer, as was Evelyn Waugh and a host of minor English writers to come, and his religious faith provides a fixed background against which all his opinions and assessments must be measured against. The irreligious and non-spiritual he opposes steadily as more modern writers and philosophers would take exception to post-modernism. Neither Macaulay nor Huxley were spiritual men, according to Chesterton, but they were in his words *simple men, greedy of controversy but scornful of sophistry, dead to mysticism but very much alive to morality*. He wagers that Huxley was much more of a literary man than a scientific, and notes that his rejection of rhetoric by expressing his horror of *plastering the fair face of truth with that pestilent cosmetic, rhetoric* is actually a beautiful rhetoric plastering by itself, which reminds you of Collingwood's quip that anyone who rejects metaphysics thereby makes a metaphysical statement. Chesterton notes that while Macaulay took it for granted that common sense required some kind of religion, Huxley took it for granted that it would have none, and proceeded for the rest of his life to talk about the religion he did not have, while Macaulay never mentioned the one he had. He proceeds to write about Carlyle, who made a hero of Goethe, but was superior to him in having a sense of humor, and Ruskin towards whom he is ambivalent, like almost everyone in his canon. Invoking Matthew Arnold, he notes that while Carlyle saw things, Arnold knew things. To those he adds Dickens as another fighter against solid scientific school so dominantly emergent of the 19th century, and as the most successful one to boot, because his onslaught was not based on extraordinary faith, like that of Newman, or extraordinary inspiration like that of Carlyle, nor out of detachment as with Arnold, but out of hearty dislike, with which people could readily identify. Chesterton is not a foe of science per se, but distasteful of the way it is supposed to influence our lives, in particular taking away the spiritual dimensions. Thus in particular he reserves a special distaste of Bentham and the school of utilitarianism, but has nevertheless a soft spot for J.S.Mill.

The next chapter on the Victorian novelists is more interesting. To Chesterton the essence of the novel is not the elucidation of human nature, that is far too abstract a theme, but to describe the minute differences between humans. Thus, he thinks, the special affinity to the task that the feminine intelligence brings[1]. And indeed the best novels of the 19th century, at least the English ones, were written by women, apart from a few exceptions we will get to. He is particularly enamored by Jane Austen, really pre-Victorian, and notes that shielded from experience that spinster must have been, she had a far surer command of masculine characters, such as Darcy, than those supposedly with much more experience. Thus the genius of imaginative writing has less to do with personal experience than personal inspiration. The former we can hint at and to some extent uncover, the latter is a mystery. He also writes well of Eliot, finding the suggestions that her works were written by her partner totally absurd, as well as the sisters Brontë, although one discerns that he is out of sympathy with Emily and very much prefers Charlotte. Insanity is important in their works, and Mr Rochester is really not much less insane than his wife, but he finds that Heathcliff is much more of a mere demon than a real man. I must admit though that when I read 'Wuthering Heights' on the verge of turning twenty it made much more of an impression on me than 'Jane Eyre' would do two years later, which is hardly surprising, the very Sturm and Drang character of the former is very seductive to the immature virgin innocent of any intimacy other than that of his claustrophobic self. When it comes to the exception the author brings forth Thackeray and Dickens. The former tends to be forgotten today, but at the time he probably mustered more respect than the more plebeian Dickens. The greatness of Dickens, apart from his social conscience and the way he could make the horrors of Victorian capitalism concrete and gripping was his ability to create characters whom we find interesting and immensely alive even if they are fools and villains. Dickens may not have liked everyone he came across, Chesterton muses, but he certainly loved all of the characters he created, why would he otherwise engage his imagination to such a degree, and by implication that of his readers. I was enamored by Dickens as a teenager, and 'Oliver Twist' was probably the first serious book I read in English in the fall of 1966, it led to 'David Copperfield' and the 'Pickwick Papers' and later I would read 'Great Expectations' [2] and the somewhat disappointing 'Hard Times' [3]. But when I discovered the Russians in my early twenties I became disenchanted with him. What intrigued me no end was the window they provided to the 19th century, and the classical illustrations abetted this further, how romantic did those times not appear to me. I have read a few of his books in mature years such as 'Nicholas Nickelby', 'Bleak House' and 'The Old Curiosity Shop' and found them a bit tedious. Thackeray is different, I read him in my late teens and found him more interesting actually, at least 'Vanity Fair', then somewhat later I ploughed through, more or less dutifully, 'The Book of Snobs'. Chesterton is respectful of them both, but dismisses Trollope as a minor Thackeray.

The most interesting chapter is actually on the poets. Tennyson invites very mixed feelings in the author. His work was not a balance of truth as the universe, Chesterton remarks, but a balance of whims as in the British Constitution. He had a great deal to say, the author continues, yet his powers of expression were actually too formidable for what he actually had in him to express. Nevertheless he was a very good poet, Chesterton admits, in fact he was two poets, just as Browning was, but unlike the case of Browning both were good. In his first capacity he was a pure poet, and pure poetry consists of both a compelling and pleasing arrangements of words. And the author picks up a few lines like *'Wet sands marbled with moon and cloud'* or *'When the long dun wolds are ribbed with snow'* and points out that each of those contains a key word in an arch which would fall into ruin would it be removed (Which are those key words?). There are others, such as *'Was a great water; and the moon was full'* and *'God made himself an awful rose of dawn'*. Here the key thing is not a particular word but an idea. In fact those lines are almost translatable. (Yet, what are the ideas?). But Tennyson was at his best in short poems, in the longer ones he lost his thread and got confused and often ended up expressing the opposite of what he initially set out to do without so intending.

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[1] Chesterton is dismissive of women when it comes to manly pursuits of politics and philosophy, betraying a certain patronizing mind, the pronouncements, which would invariably issue from it, would nowadays naturally invite severe censure,

[2] a movie version I had seen the beginning of and which had greatly scared me a few years earlier

[3] maybe because it lays out the issues that concerned him too clearly, as in a tract?

Browning and Swinburne were minor poets compared to Tennyson. He seems to have found Browning a bit too obscure and eccentric for his taste yet defends him against charges of having no sense of form. He is a bit more enthusiastic about Brownings wife, the invalid Elizabeth Barrett, disinherited by her father when she married, as were her other siblings who did the same. In particular her mastery of the phrase and the epigram. When Napoleon had fallen, she summarized the situation as: *'And kings crept out again to feel the sun'* which is about the most apposite things which has been said about it. Mrs Browning was confined to a sofa, and Miss Austen to her village, but such confinements seem conducive to develop intuitions which go far beyond the world of experience, and if this is not the essence of poetry, what is, one may ask. Browning, who when married and later widowered lived and continued to live in Italy (which brought him some censure), was well fitted to deepen the Victorian mind, but not to widen it, Chesterton remarks in his usual style. Browning died in Venice and was brought over to the Poets' corner in Westminster Abbey next to Tennyson, but that is not mentioned by the author.

Of Swinburne, Chesterton has a lot to say, but few of it stays in your mind. Swinburne had style, he remarks, and that was his real strength. It was a style that was uniquely his own, a style that nobody was able to imitate, least of all Swinburne himself although he tried hard in his later years[4]. Swinburne, was an inspired poet, Chesterton continues, and hence, according to him, the highest sort of poet. And then in a typical Chestertonian turn of phrase *And you never discover who is an inspired poet until the inspiration goes.*

Of Rossetti he is fascinated and terms him a remarkable man. He tried to be a painter and he tried to be a poet, but he failed in both endeavors. Had he succeeded in any of them, we probably may never have heard of him, as a poet he would be a Tennyson who painted, and as a painter he would have been a Burne-Jones who wrote poetry (assuming of course spectacular success in one of the arts). So what does Chesterton really mean by this? Just a play on words or ideas, and only half serious in both? Rossetti wrote too pictorially and painted too poetically, and thus he conquered the cold satisfaction of the Victorians, because they always looked for meaning in their art. Thus he joined both Ruskin and Swinburne in reviving the decorative instinct of the Middle Ages. And one should not forget Christina Rossetti the sister of Rossetti and who was a real poet by the way. The brother used the religious imagery irreligiously, his sister did not and thus managed to make it narrower. But going beyond them all in this medieval revival was the Nestor of the Arts and Crafts movement - William Morris. Swinburne and Rossetti had their modern moments, which actually were unconsciously more medieval than their consciously medieval ones, the author adds in customary style. And then as a fact Morris was more virile and real of them all, because he was a craftsman and he was used to work with unforgiving mediums such as wood, which makes you appreciate simplicity to the point of severeness. Your creativeness is only stimulated by obstacles, as I am fond of pointing out, and Morris wrote as if the words were not just words but actually wood. Morris was a Socialist in outlook, but as such he was censured for making money, but what is wrong with that our author seems to ask, after all one surmises that he means that Morris was steeped in reality and that means making sure that you survive and does not starve.

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[4] This reminds me of the metaphysical painter de Chirico who when old tried to forge his old paintings from his youth, supposedly for no other reason that they sold well (is there ever any other reason?). But are you not allowed to do so? How can you be forger of your own works? Or are there complex rules to the financial game of art?

The last chapter is supposed to be the most interesting, as I noted, it might not surpass the interest of his chapter on the poets (which whets you appetite to seek out the real thing as any good criticism should do), but it contains the most interesting thought in the entire book, a thought by itself making the reading of it more than justified. He notes that a mere beggar painted by Rembrandt has the solidity of a statue, you can let your soul walk around it and view it from very many different aspects. If you do not like the painting, you may at least like the beggar; and if you do not like the subject, you can admire the skill of the painter. If it is not a masterpiece it is at least interesting. No matter what point of view you may choose to regard it, it has something for you. The same with a play by Shakespeare, say Hamlet. Even if you feel that Hamlet fails as a tragedy, you may at least enjoy the tale as such. You may not agree with the playwrights moral attitudes, but you may enjoy the way they are being expressed. You can imagine the play seen not from the point of view of Hamlet, but instead that of Claudius, or Polonious, and why not the grave digger, and it still would be interesting. Both a painting by Rembrandt and a play by Shakespeare has reality and three-dimensional solidity to use an hackneyed turn of phrase. I would say that the more senses that can come to play in contemplating an object, the more real it becomes, because all those perceptions must match somehow. Celestial objects in the sky, objects which we can only behold by our sight, become less real to us than those objects we can touch as well, turn around and smell. This is also what distinguishes real people from fictional people. A king like Erik XIV of Sweden, unsuccessful suitor of Elizabeth I, comes across in the stories handed down to us as highly gifted and artistic, but also irresponsible not to say insane, stooping to murder haunted by suspicions, then deposed by his younger brother put in prison and eventually poisoned. He would be a character in a play by Shakespeare, a play depicting the jostling for royal power of three brothers. Shakespeare could have done that, he could have known the story, it all happened in his past. The point is that it all is almost indistinguishable from fiction, we know Erik XIV as we know a fictional figure, by word alone. How do we know that it is all true? Or does it even matter? Is a tale true because it says so? So much what we assume is true is taken on trust because there is no practical alternative for an individual to ascertain. And the historians who spin the tales how do we know that they do not just make it all up? There are historical documents, but historical documents can lie, in fact they often do. As the philosophical historian Collingwood cautions, no historical document should be taken on face value, the question we should ask is what does it mean. It has to be interpreted in view of other things we know. We have to reconstruct the past in view of the documents we have of it and that is an ongoing unfinished project. An event which has just one documentary source is much less reliable than one that has two independent ones. Once again, the more senses we can bring the more reliable our perceptions. Of real people we can ask questions which do not make sense for fictional people. What color of hair had Sherlock Holmes maternal grandmother when she was young and still a virgin. How can we ever find out? Who would be the authority? Conan Doyle, and he would be free to make it up, but there are so many of those questions that there is not enough time in a life time to do it. But when it comes to Erik XIV we can actually exhume his body and subject it to all kinds of forensic investigations, discovering true things, which were never documented, and which he and his contemporaries had no inkling of. Collingwood sees a historical investigation as a forensic project and as such everything is fair game, not only written records, but archaeological remains, yes anything could be potentially a source of knowledge, and in human history something else enters, namely our ability to some extent to guess or even surmise the thoughts of human actors, without which human history would be unintelligible. With the fairly recently died Swedish King we have alternate sources, but what about someone like Plato? There is no way we can ever find his bodily remains, thus his existence is less embodied in reality than that of Erik XIV, and he is much more of a fictional figure. With the Swedish king we can try to track ancestors, with Plato that is close to impossible (and with Sherlock Holmes meaningless).

So now after this digression of mine it is time to come back to Chesterton. He claims that a painting by Whistler, say a nocturne of mist on the Thames, is either a masterpiece or sheer nonsense. True, from the right point of view, the right mood, the right temperament, the appropriate foreknowledge it may be a masterpiece, it may for a split second appear as a vision never to return. A precious moment indeed of irreplaceable beauty. So either it is a masterpiece or no painting at all. It is either all or nothing, while real objects appear to us in different degrees of vividness. It is art which requires one particular aspect to come to life, if the right conditions are met, your experience is an epiphany, but if your viewpoint differs so slightly, it all collapses.

To Chesterton writing shortly after the turn of the century, this was Modernism in Art, characteristic of a *fin de siecle* pessimism and skepticism. It remains even more true as the century progressed and flowed into the third millennium. A real solid piece of art has many doors through which to enter, engendering duplicable experiences. But let us say a ghostly piece of art has only one door open only at one time, and gives an unduplicable experience, which does not differ significantly from a mirage, and whose reality you may doubt. Chesterton goes on to discuss Wilde and Wells and Henry James. The latter is best at short stories he claims, the long one involve interpersonal relations of such complexity and subtlety that could not have been sustained in real life. He is in particular fond of *The Turn of the Screw.* He is fond of Wells as well, and the way he has extended the territory of fiction, no longer regarding the Moon as just one disc up in the sky, but a real world accessible to all the senses, He also champions G.B.Shaw but is more ambivalent towards Wilde, as expected. But he does not deny his influence, even if he deems it largely negative. In fact art that requires a unique aspect to be appreciated, and thus hyper-aesthetic *l'art pour l'art*, which is really nothing but an attitude, was hailed by the likes of Oscar Wilde, thus a harbinger of decadence.

One may also note that Chesterton takes notice of Darwin, and is not too happy with the theory of evolution, which he thinks of as unfinished and tentative, and no longer, meaning at the time of his writing, as accepted as it was initially. He sees Darwin through the eyes and championship of Huxley, his bulldog, to whom he can relate more directly as a man of a literary temperament; and indeed the second coming of Darwin was at the time still in the future, it was its synthesis with Mendel's theory of inheritance which made it fully acceptable to biologists in general[5].

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[5] Professional skepticism of Darwin lingered on, even his mentor, the geologist Lyell, was doubtful, but urged him to publish anyway, and much of Darwin's tardiness in going open, may have been more due to strengthening his case for his peers than fearing religious opposition.