

# THE ENDS OF HISTORY

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Victorians and "The Woman Question"

Christina Crosby

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**THE ENDS OF HISTORY**  
Victorians and “The Woman Question”

CHRISTINA CROSBY

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For  
Jane Miller Crosby  
and  
Kenneth Ward Crosby

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# Acknowledgments

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The conventions of the scholarly study are strict, and dictate that any book must have an aura of completion and internal sufficiency. Framed by an introduction and a conclusion, a book offers little evidence of the processes by which it is produced: the inexplicable false starts, corrected only with the help of others; the fortunate encounters, which in retrospect are so indispensable; the revisions which are revised again on the strength of another reading. Only the acknowledgments explicitly open up the text and gesture towards the innumerable relations which are its condition of possibility – which is why I always read them first when I pick up a book.

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# Introduction

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Nineteenth-century British thought is indelibly marked by two inter-related features, a passion for “history” and faith in historical explanation of all sorts, and a fascination with “women,” the ceaseless posing of “the woman question.” The logic of the relation of “history” and “women” is the subject of this book: I argue that in the nineteenth century “history” is produced as man’s truth, the truth of a necessarily historical Humanity, which in turn requires that “women” be outside history, above, below, or beyond properly historical and political life. Constructing history as the necessary condition of human life, as so many nineteenth-century texts do, ensures that “man” can emerge as an abstraction, can know himself in history, find his origin there and project his end – but only if there is something other than history, something intrinsically unhistorical. “Women” are the unhistorical other of history.

All the texts I consider, from Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* to Wilkie Collins’s melodrama, *The Frozen Deep*, from Patrick Fairbairn’s *The Typology of Scripture Viewed in Connection with the Whole Series of the Divine Dispensations* to Mayhew’s survey of “labour and the poor,” from *Daniel Deronda* to *Villette*, are engaged in some way with this conception of history. Indeed, all participate in a widespread discourse about history. Whether novels or journalism, philosophy or history or theology, these texts actively produce history as an object of knowledge and as a way of knowing. History becomes in the nineteenth century a specific method of investigation, a discipline with its own rules of evidence and methods; a narrative mode, characteristic of nineteenth-century novels; a principle of social investigation, guiding the work of social reformers; an object of philosophical speculation, developed in systematic philosophies of history. Indeed, in the nineteenth century history becomes both

an epistemological and an ontological principle, the determining condition of all life and therefore of all knowledge.<sup>1</sup> At this foundational level, the ends of history, its limits and its goals, are both positive and negative, a tension which makes the concept almost infinitely productive.<sup>2</sup> As negativity, history is the end of the theological, the disappearance of God and the loss of the guarantee of immortality: human life is ineradicably marked by finitude, by death. Moreover, as a finite being, "man" – in this sense a particular modern concept – is disqualified from immediate self-presence; he cannot know himself simply through reflection because he is inscribed in a history that precedes and exceeds him, which, in fact, determines his mode of being. Yet this history in all its rigors is also profoundly positive, for history is the evidence of the collective life of humanity, and the positive end of history, its purpose, is to reveal man to himself, show where humanity has been and where it is tending. History is, thus, first a displacement and then a reconfirmation, at a more profound, more abstract level, of man himself.

Producing "history" as the truth of man has very important social and political effects, for this project necessarily entails constituting various categories which relate to history in quite different ways. "Women" is such a category, a collectivity that is positioned outside of history proper, identified rather with the immediacy and intimacy of social life. "Savages" and all "primitive" men are another; either they stand at the threshold of history, or, like the Jews of Orientalism, are the outmoded remnants of an historical "moment" now past. "The poor," too, are like "savages," barbaric but capable of development. In these ways, "man," that generic, universal category typifying everything human, is in fact constituted through violently hierarchical differences.<sup>3</sup> "Women" must be radically other to history and to men; "primitive" men must be barely human, potentially but not actually historical.

Women live most intimately with the white men of the English bourgeoisie (those properly manly men), thus the Victorian obsession with "women," with their nature, their functions, their aptitudes, their desires, with, above all, their difference from men. The nineteenth century is the time both of history and "the woman question," the time of Hegel and the angel in the house, of the progress of history and the fallen women. Men are constituted as historical subjects and find "man" in history by virtue of locating women elsewhere. The spectacular inflation of women's value is inextricably a part of the Victorian investment in history, and the tremendous

effort to understand women, to manage them, to find out what they want – the ceaseless asking of the woman question – is the price of discovering the truth of man in the far reaches of history.

To read the relation of “women” and “history,” then, is to consider “history” more as a concept than as an event or the record of events, and “women” more as a collectivity generated by discursive operations than as a phenomenal entity in itself. This is not to dissolve either women or history into “nothing but” language, but to approach both as the effects of a production of knowledge. Further, it is to consider how such a production is inseparable from politics, from the construction of specifically English and middle-class subjects and the achievement of middle-class hegemony. This achievement depends crucially on sexual politics and on a conception of knowledge that identifies knowledge with history, which makes history “itself” an epistemological foundation, the guarantee of truth.

Thomas Carlyle sets out the terms of this guarantee in his 1829 essay, “On History,” in which he declares,

The Past is the true fountain of knowledge. . . . [W]e do nothing but enact history, we say little but recite it: nay, rather, in that widest sense, our whole spiritual life is built thereon. For strictly considered, what is all Knowledge too but recorded Experience, and product of History, of which, therefore, Reasoning and Belief, no less than Action and Passion, are essential materials?<sup>4</sup>

History is indeed self-consciously embraced over the course of the century, from the early and great popularity of Sir Walter Scott’s historical novels, to the introduction of “modern history” as a discipline in the universities and the founding of the scholarly *English Historical Review* in 1886. From mid-century on, various antiquarian, archaeological, and historical societies for the preservation of buildings, the collection and printing of manuscripts, and the exploration of ancient remains are organized, with local branches across the country;<sup>5</sup> the medieval revival is fueled by an enthusiasm for the feudal past and all things “gothic”; massive historical narratives such as Macaulay’s *History of England* are published to popular acclaim. This fascination with history is itself much-observed and discussed, not least by Victorians themselves. To John Stuart Mill the concept of history, of the relation of the present to the past and to the imagined future, distinguishes his “age,” for, he says, “[t]he idea of comparing one’s own age with former ages, or with our

notion of those which are yet to come, has occurred to philosophers; but it never before was itself the dominant idea of any age."<sup>6</sup>

The "dominant idea" of Victorian Britain is indeed profoundly historical. It is equally teleological, as the present necessarily issues from the past and will lead ineluctably to the future. The *telos* of history may be rendered in patently ideological terms, as when J. C. Bruce, in *The Roman Wall: A Historical, Topographical, and Descriptive Account of the Barrier of the Lower Isthmus*, compares Britain to ancient Rome:

Another empire has sprung into being, of which Rome dreamt not. . . . Her empire is three-fold that of Rome in the hour of its prime. But power is not her brightest diadem. The holiness of the domestic circle irradiates her literature, and all the arts of peace flourish under her sway. Her people bless her. We may . . . learn . . . on the one hand to emulate the virtues that adorned [Rome's] prosperity, and on the other to shun the vices that were punished by her downfall. The sceptre which Rome relinquished, we have taken up. Great is our Honour – great our Responsibility.<sup>7</sup>

Here the Roman wall is as much a site of ideological investment as of archaeological remains; historical comparison sanctifies domesticity and imperialism. But the crassly obvious ideology of this "history" is not to be separated from the judicious statements made by the editors of the *English Historical Review* in the inaugural issue of their journal in which they write:

We believe that history, in an even greater degree than its votaries have as yet generally recognised, is the central study among human studies, capable of illuminating and enriching all the rest. And this is one of the reasons why we desire, while pursuing it for its own sake in a calm and scientific spirit, to make this Review so far as possible a means of interesting thinking men in historical study, of accustoming them to its methods of inquiry, and of showing them how to appropriate its large results.<sup>8</sup>

Thinking men need to know how their thoughts, how they themselves are historical, how scientific enquiry can reveal what human life has been and what it might be. The results of historical study are so large precisely because history is everything. It is both something to know and the way of knowing, and ensures that men will know themselves if they will but learn how to think through history. "History" thus leads inexorably to the men who can think it, to educated English-

men, to the most historically advanced men of the most historically advanced nation.

In this way, history, even when described as an “unseen power” and an “ever-acting force,” is also home-like, the guarantee that the present – and the present order of society – is the necessary development of the past. Frederic Harrison, who so characterizes the irresistible power of “the Past” in his 1862 lecture “The Use of History,” is equally certain of its consolations: “We see intelligible structure, consistent unity, and common laws in the earth on which we live, with the view, I presume, of feeling more at home in it, of becoming more attached to it, of living in it more happily.” For history is nothing but the history of man (“[w]hilst Man is wanting, all the rest remains vague, and incomplete, and aimless”); and man is nothing but his history (“in all ... human questions whatever, history is the main resource of the inquirer”).<sup>9</sup>

This logical circle ensures that man’s subjection to the irresistible force of history will in the end confirm him as the subject of knowledge. The “unseen power” manifests itself in the world, is intelligible, and acknowledging its laws is the way to feel at home, no longer alien. Indeed, the intelligibility of history, the fact that this invisible force can be read in its effects, transforms it from the end of man, his dissolution in finitude, to the end towards which he aims. As Matthew Arnold writes, to survey the past is first to be oppressed by “that impatient irritation of mind which we feel in the presence of an immense, moving, confused spectacle, which, while it perpetually excites our curiosity, perpetually baffles our comprehension.” In this view, history depresses and alienates, is a vision of heterogeneity and purposeless movement which seems indifferent to order. But Arnold finds in this same history man’s salvation from aimless disorder: “The deliverance consists in man’s comprehension of this present and past. It begins when our mind begins to enter into possession of the general ideas which are the law of this vast multitude of facts.”<sup>10</sup> In this way history is not so much a displacement of the theological as a repetition of its logic, a secular guarantee of order and meaning, of the necessary relations of origins and ends, and, above all, of the man who enters into possession of himself through the possession of this history.

Indeed when the *Antiquary: A Magazine Devoted to the Study of the Past* published its first issue in 1880, its editor took as an epigraph these lines attributed to Schiller, “Time doth consecrate;/ And what is grey with age becomes religion,” and went on to declare,



There is in the breast of our "nation of shopkeepers" a deep-seated reverence for antiquity, a *religio loci*, which shows itself in the popular devotion to ancient art, whether in architecture, in painting, in design, or in furniture, and in the eager reception accorded to fresh discoveries of relics or works of antiquarian interest.<sup>11</sup>

This reverence for the past on which the *Antiquary* sought to capitalize is, in fact, a confirmation of the "nation of shopkeepers" which strips that phrase of its critical force, which lifts up the commercial middle class from the material to the spiritual. "History" is imbued with religious properties, and what is more, this sacred past has led ineluctably to the present, to 1880, to the domestic and imperial triumphs of the English bourgeoisie. The very difference of past ages, legible in the "relics" of history, reveals the deep continuity between what has been and what is now, and affirms the "spiritual life," as Carlyle says, of those who recognize their historical condition.

In his study, *The Victorian Mirror of History*, Dwight Culler observes that thinking historically is a "habit of mind" of nineteenth-century Englishmen, and "[t]heir historical consciousness [is] a mode of self-consciousness, an awareness of the self by means of the other."<sup>12</sup> Culler's book is a carefully detailed discovery of this habit as it manifests itself in a wide variety of texts, but like so many who have recognized history as the "dominant idea" of the nineteenth century, he explicates the idea of history without ever questioning the terms of the concept, its consequences or its costs.<sup>13</sup> "Self-consciousness" is no innocent achievement, and if middle-class Victorian men become aware of themselves by means of "the other," then "otherness" is only conceivable as the means to an end. The otherness of history must be read as a problem, not an answer, a process in which differences are produced only to reflect the truths of certain men, a process which constructs an imaginary unity of Englishmen then projected as the image of universal man, a process which entails the radical exclusion of "women" from the historical, which makes women "other" to history itself. To look at the mirror of Victorian history without asking how it produces these images is necessarily to reflect its "truths."

The chapters which follow are all essays in reading the work of "otherness," the strange familiarity of "history" and the troubling but necessary difference of "women." I begin with Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* because, of the various texts, it is driven most powerfully



to produce “history” and to speak the truth of “man.” Its famous double plot, with Gwendolen Harleth’s story making up one half and Deronda and Mordecai’s story the other, sets “women” in their necessary relation to a “history” which guarantees man’s transcendence: here the Jews represent what Eliot calls the “ideal forces” of history, while women (most notably Gwendolen and Deronda’s mother) are shown to be essentially unhistorical. The women characters are systematically excluded from the properly “world-historical” realm; “women” are imagined as the bearers of human affection, the medium of cultural transmission. As the representatives of historical man, the Jews are raised up, elevated at the expense of the women who are forced to assume a strictly limited, unhistoric position. For all her sympathy with Gwendolen and her unhappy life, Eliot must do violence both to Gwendolen and Deronda’s mother to ensure the historical humanity of man.

Further, the Jews, who are evidently lifted up at women’s expense, are actually no more exempt from the covert violence which produces historical totality, for the text effects a transformation of Judaism quite as fatal to Jewish principles as “history” is to the women in the novel. To make the Jews represent historical “man,” Eliot must imagine Judaism as an idealism and conceptualize the Jews as the incarnation, the embodiment of history. She assimilates the Jews to a Greco-Christian philosophical tradition; more precisely, she transforms Judaism into a kind of Hegelianism, making Mordecai, her Jewish prophet, speak Hegelian concepts while referring to Jewish literature, the Talmud, the Midrash, the Kabbala, the Bible. Most importantly, she makes Mordecai a Zionist. If history is to be transcendental, Judaism must be Zionism and Israel must be a nation again, for in Eliot’s Hegelian terms, unhistorical time becomes history only through the abstraction of a national life, the corporate existence of a nation-state.<sup>14</sup>

In *Daniel Deronda* the violence done to women in the name of history is more obvious than the forced assimilation of the Jews to an alien philosophy of incarnation and transcendence, for women must be radically excluded while the Jews are sublated, cancelled, and preserved in the totality of history. To read these processes, especially to read them in their interrelation, is to see both “history” and “humanity” as decidedly political concepts which confirm Anglo-European men at the expense of others, at the cost of producing historical differences only to eradicate them. This clearly is not a reading authorized by Eliot; it is at odds with what she “herself”