
Lestrade's Victorians

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BACK IN the seventies, when I was writing a book about the Victorians and ancient Greece, I was warned off the subject by both the Professor of Greek and the Professor of Latin at my university, by the former on the ground that it was too difficult, and by the latter on the ground that it was too easy. Both of them had a point. Two lifetimes might seem necessary for reception studies: one to master the ancient world, and one for more recent history. On the other hand, classical scholars have piled into this area in recent years, and published rapidly and prolifically. Which view does Goldhill take? A bit of both, it would seem.* He argues that reception study is of its nature a very hard and complex business; he has learned “painfully,” he says, “how hard it is to do interdisciplinary work seriously.” He is referring, however, to the supposed conceptual difficulty, not to the difficulty of getting oneself sufficiently informed, and his book ranges unembarrassed over three centuries and several countries. Aware that he comes late to the study of nineteenth-century reception, he duly acknowledges the pioneers, but indicates that he will bring to the subject more rigor, breadth, and critical sophistication.

The breadth is of a curious kind. Chapters 5 to 7 have a limited and coherent theme: historical novels, mostly British, about the ancient world (classical, Jewish, and Christian). The other chapters are miscellaneous. Chapter 1 discusses a few paintings by J. W. Waterhouse. Chapter 2, after some

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scrappy observations on the Victorian reception of Sappho, focuses on a painting by Alma-Tadema, *Sappho and Alcaeus*. Chapter 3, on the reception of Gluck, is concerned mainly with productions of his operas by Berlioz and Wagner in the mid-nineteenth century, and another production in London in 1911. Chapter 4, on Wagner, considers his anti-Semitism, and then Wieland Wagner's productions of the operas after the Second World War. Then follow the chapters on historical novelists. The book ends, bizarrely, with the pornographic photography of Andy Warhol.

Goldhill is lively and vigorous, with a wide range of interests, and I had rather high hopes of this book, but the result is disappointing. It shows signs of haste. On his last appearance in the first chapter, Waterhouse becomes Waterstone. As Goldhill himself remarks in another context, Freud would be interested in that. Grammar fails in a number of sentences. The mistakes may often be unimportant individually, but cumulatively they are significant. Many of the numerous spelling errors are slips of the keyboard ("encyclopaedia," etc., wrong in three different ways), but some suggest an imperfect literacy: "lightening" for "lightning" (twice), "termagent," "bragadaccio"—a rough stab at "braggadocio." In French phrases about half the accents are missing, and we also get "de rigneur," "la dance," and "d'haut en bas," while "Agamemnon vengée" turns the king female. In other languages, the wrong accent is used or the accent put on the wrong letter: "Che faró," Caldéron, *Tannhäuser*. Wagner is also assigned operas called *Maestersinger* and *Rheinmaidens* ("the second act of *Rheinmaidens*" should be "the second scene of *Rheingold*"). Greek is transliterated sometimes with macrons, sometimes without. "Austrio-Hungarian" and "divina comedia" are solecisms. "Latifundiae" is not a Latin word. Leiden is not in Germany. Edmund Gosse and his father are turned into one person. "The famous 'Agamemnon' theme" (from Strauss' *Elektra*) is actually the contrasting theme of Elektra's hatred. Among the errors in proper names are Millman for Milman, Rosetti for Rossetti, Grosvener for Grosvenor, Christchurch for

Christ Church, Whyte's Professor for White's Professor, *Waterbabies* for *The Water Babies*, "The Maiden's Tribute . . ." for "The Maiden Tribute . . .," Marianna for Mariana, Wiederman for Wiedemann, Gerôme for Gérôme, Lady Chatterly for Lady Chatterley, Brünhilde for Brünnhilde, Niebelung for Nibelung, Gibbichungen for Gibichungen. Goldhill spells the Lady of Shalott in three different ways; third time lucky. We are also given Willhelminian for Wilhelmine, "wie griechischer Statuen" for "wie griechische . . .," Strasburg for Strassburg or Strasbourg, Caiaphas for Caiaphas, Bartolemé for Bartolomé, (Angelica) Kaufman for Kauffman, Pope-Hennessy and Pope-Hennessy for Pope-Hennessy, Alyppius for Alypius. Waverley wavers between that and Waverly. Otterburne should be Otterbourne, and Keble is not buried there. Marie Corelli's real name was Mary Mackay, not Mini McKay. Windsor Palace does not exist. Varro did not live in the reign of Augustus. Tractarians are not distinct from Anglicans. "Fowle's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Byatt's *Possession* . . . both . . . have an academic narrator prodding and directing the story with an apparatus of scholarship"—neither does (and Fowle should be Fowles). There are probably plenty more mistakes of which I am unaware, but more troubling than straight error is the pervading sense that Goldhill is at sea with the material with which he is dealing. For example, it does not matter much that he gets ecclesiastical titles wrong (though it does suggest inattention); what does matter is his shaky grasp of the religious issues which were being fought over.

There are elementary mistakes in translating German. "Es ist ihr hoher Geist, den ich erkor" is not "It is her more elevated spirit that I choose" but "It is her high spirit that I chose." "Seh' ich sie zu der Göttin hohem Sitz sich erheben" is not "I see you transcend to the gods' high abode" but "I see her raise herself to the high abode of the goddess." Referring to Nietzsche as one of those Germans who claimed to find their spiritual homeland in Greece (128), Goldhill quotes from him the words "man ist nirgends mehr heimisch . . .," and translates, "one is no longer at home anywhere,"

which produces a meaning antithetical to the one required. Here he seems to have garbled whatever source he has drawn his information from. The phrase means “One is nowhere more at home”—presumably “than in Greece” (the words do not form a determinate statement as they stand). Some matters are less absolute. Goldhill makes much of the fact that Wagner’s essay ends with the word “Untergang,” which he renders “destruction” and sees as “a grim prophecy of Wagner’s power in Hitler’s Germany” (132). “Untergang” (“downfall,” “setting” (of sun or stars), “disappearance”) is a surprisingly difficult word to turn into English (*The Downfall*, for the recent film about Hitler’s last days, was not very satisfactory). In some contexts “destruction” is a possible translation, but it is certainly wrong here. Wagner is talking about “the redemption of Ahasuerus,” that is, honor being given to the Jews in return for their annihilating their distinctive Jewishness. The goal is, in words which Goldhill quotes, “that we all be united and undivided.” One may think this unattractive or perhaps hypocritical, but its demand for assimilation is far removed from Nazism. Goldhill rebukes the “distinguished Wagner scholar Dietrich Borchmeyer” for saying that this passage has nothing to do with genocide, but Borchmeyer is right, and Goldhill is not in a strong position to tell German-speakers what their language means. Indeed, Wagner’s piece is so crackpot that if one did not know its author one might doubt his mental balance, but anti-Semitism has thrived on misrepresentation, and it is important that the answering voice should be accurate.

In chapter 1, Goldhill’s leading idea is that Waterhouse was engaged in complex dialogue with some classical texts, a “self-aware manipulation of literary sources.” When the painter exhibited his *St. Eulalia*, he wrote in the catalogue, “Prudentius says that the body of St. Eulalia was shrouded by ‘a miraculous fall of snow when lying exposed in the forum after martyrdom.’” Goldhill has noticed Waterhouse’s quotation marks and also the fact the words enclosed in them do not occur in Prudentius’ poem. And indeed, the pic-

ture is strikingly different from the poet's account. Goldhill comments that Waterhouse "seems deliberately to remove the bloody violence and verbal exuberance of Prudentius' narrative." Pages follow on the painter's "reception of" and "response to" the poet: "The more knowledge of Prudentius the viewer deploys, the more it seems that Waterhouse is rejecting . . . ," etc. Goldhill often reminds me of Inspector Lestrade in the Sherlock Holmes stories: the evidence is in front of his eyes but he misses it. Surely it is obvious what has happened? Waterhouse has got the story from some modern book, and this is what he is quoting. As likely as not, he never looked at Prudentius at all. Certainly, the idea of this elaborate engagement with a Late Latin poet, in which both artist and viewers are engaged, is a fantasy. It is an academic, ivory-tower notion, lacking historical imagination and an understanding of the late-Victorian milieu.

Mariamne shows the queen being sentenced to death by her husband, Herod the Great. Waterhouse wrote in the catalogue, "see Josephus," which Goldhill absurdly calls "an archetypical ecphrastic gesture" (does he not understand English either?). Josephus gives two accounts of Mariamne, and Goldhill has noticed that Waterhouse follows neither of them. (With odd irrelevance, Goldhill notes that the word which Josephus uses for the restraint that Herod's infatuation laid on him, *pephimôto*, literally "muzzled," is "very striking." Not so: as the New Testament shows, the metaphorical use was standard when Josephus wrote.) But "how else would Waterhouse have known of this story without reading Josephus?" It is an astonishing question: Goldhill has forgotten that anything other than imaginative literature exists. The answer is, of course, "From any number of modern books." One of them, in fact, is Farrar's *The Life of Christ*, to which Goldhill devotes some pages later on. Again, the evidence is in front of Inspector Lestrade's eyes: Goldhill refers us to Byron's poem, "Herod's Lament for Mariamne" (to which he gives the wrong title). This is a short lyric piece, not a narrative: the poet assumes that the story is well

known to his readers. And so it was: Herod is a famous part of St. Matthew's Gospel, murder was his metier, and killing Mariamne was the second most famous of his murderous acts. "How rich the representation of Waterhouse's Mariamne is recognised to be," Goldhill writes, "depends on how rich a reading of Josephus underpins it." This is far astray.

Circe Offering the Cup to Odysseus shows the enchantress with a mirror behind her, in which the hero is reflected. "The lines of sight are again crucial to this canvas. Circe looks directly out towards the viewer . . ." Crucial indeed: but Goldhill has not looked carefully enough. The whole point is that Circe's gaze, downward, is not at us, but at Odysseus; the game is that we can understand this even though we see Odysseus only in mirror-image. Some other things are a matter of judgment—the author's and the reader's. I do not agree that Waterhouse was "at the very center of the turn toward classicizing art" in the late nineteenth century. That describes people like Leighton and Poynter; Waterhouse was not really a classicizer at all, but a Pre-Raphaelite epigone who occasionally took a classical theme. Nor can I take seriously the claim that he should be tied more closely to modernist aesthetics—this of a man who was still painting in a Burne-Jones manner years after *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. *Hylas and the Nymphs* is described in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (by Peter Trippi) as a picture of "mildly eroticized *jeunes filles fatales*"; that seems to me just right. Goldhill boosts the sex content, stressing that it is "a scene of abduction," the prelude to a rape. This is both crude and wrong: not abduction but seduction is the theme. In similar spirit, he finds fault with critics for not bringing out the "erotics" in Alma-Tadema's *Sappho and Alcaeus*. I would say that this is because they are not there. Alma-Tadema painted plenty of pictures of women giving men languishing looks; in this case Sappho is surely staring at Alcaeus, who is singing his verses, with the intensity of aesthetic concentration. The painter has depicted a bluestocking in Grecian dress.

In chapter 3, the leading idea is that Gluck has had a strange reception history: originally seen as a radical composer, he was largely neglected in the middle of the nineteenth century (except for the revivals by Berlioz and Wagner), and then revived as a comforting representative of a backward-looking style of neoclassicism. I am not an expert on nineteenth-century musical performance, but I believe this to be almost entirely wrong. We must consider how music was consumed at this period. At the start of the century, almost all music was modern music—it was rare to hear anything more than fifty years old—and this circumstance changed only slowly. Although Gluck’s operas may have been seldom staged, the music appears to have been widely known in other ways: through concert versions, instrumental adaptations, piano versions, individual arias. As it happens, I noticed recently a cultural building on the main square in Strasbourg, to which, probably in the 1870s, busts had been added of ten top composers. One was French (Auber), one Italian (Rossini), the rest from the German-speaking world, and Gluck was among them. These were probably the composers most performed in the town at that time. I suspect that similar evidence could be found in other European cities. In England, Novello’s vocal score of *Orpheus* seems to have sold well. Along with Bach, Handel, Haydn, and Mozart, Gluck probably had the steadiest reputation and popularity through the century of any composers before Beethoven.

Goldhill contrasts Wagner’s altering of *Iphigénie en Aulide* for a German-language production in 1847 with Berlioz’s “obsessiveness about the original score” in a production of *Orpheus* in Paris twelve years later. There is something in this, although Goldhill contradicts himself, for he also says that Berlioz “rescored the piece” (he may mean that he altered the pitch). Whatever Berlioz understood by authenticity, it was surely something greatly different from what we would understand today. As it happens, *Orpheus* presents a special problem, for there were two versions of it, written

for Vienna and Paris, and they differ very substantially; Goldhill seems to be unaware even of this. Without more evidence, it is difficult to assess all this.

In London in 1911 Goldhill has found an intriguing simultaneity: a staging of *Iphigénie en Tauride* and the first English performances of Strauss' *Elektra*. His story is that the establishment found the new work repellent and reinvented Gluck as a pallid neoclassicist to counteract this alarming reinterpretation of Greek tragedy. However, we should remember two things: first, that Strauss was generally regarded at this time as the greatest living composer—he *was* the establishment; second, that *Elektra* was and remains a rebarbative work. Goldhill's chief piece of evidence is "the notice of *Iphigénie* from *The Illustrated London News*. Viola Tree, elegantly draped in white classical robes, takes up a carefully chaste, poised pose. Her statuesque image is framed not just by the review, but by columns of portraits of the great and good of the British artistic world—like a classical gallery of busts" (119). Goldhill provides a reduced reproduction of the page in question (120); the typeface is hard to read with the naked eye, but if, like Sherlock Holmes, we take a magnifying glass to it, we get a surprise. The "notice" is not about *Iphigénie* at all; it is about *Elektra*. And although it recognizes the controversy that the work has aroused, it is lavish in praise. So Goldhill's edifice collapses. And once again, Inspector Lestrade has had the evidence staring him in the face.

Goldhill devotes much of the chapter on Wagner to the well-worn topic of his anti-Semitism, on the grounds that it and his Hellenophilia were part and parcel of one another, and he reproves Wagner scholars for having considered them separately. But no significant argument for this claim emerges. Did Wagner love Aeschylus because he was anti-Semitic? Or *vice versa*? It seems unlikely. Goldhill gives large space to Wieland Wagner's productions supposedly to demonstrate the "staggering irony" that he used ancient Greece to rescue the operas from their political taint. With

one exception, Goldhill provides no evidence for this assertion. He does provide two illustrations of Wieland's (almost abstract) sets for *The Ring*, in which I can see nothing Hellenic whatever. And the exception? The costumes of Wotan and Brünnhilde "are explicitly designed as Greek" (145). Helpfully, he offers an illustration (147). The costumes are somewhat generalized, but they are clearly medieval. In the absence of evidence, one must assume that this post-war Hellenization of Wagner is another fantasy.

Chapters 5 and 6 are much better. However, chapter 5 does not begin well, with *The Life of Christ* by Frederick Farrar (whom Goldhill breezily calls "Fred Farrar," misapprehending a standard abbreviation). He cites some unfavorable views of this book, explaining them with the strange comment that "the life of Jesus was too serious, too troubling a topic, to be handled in a *popular* way." No one who understood the nineteenth century could have written that sentence. Most of the critics whom Goldhill cites seem to me to have been fully justified, and they were not, as he supposes, stuffy conservatives, but people who were dismayed by finding this liberal churchman taking a fundamentalist approach to the New Testament. Farrar was under attack from the "left," as it were; Goldhill does not realize, for example, that the *Westminster Review* was a radical organ. Once past these irrelevant pages, he gets into his stride. He gives a good account of Bulwer Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*, and has fun with Marie Corelli and *The Unwilling Vestal*, an especially silly novel published by an American schoolteacher in 1918. He observes, correctly, that those who have discussed such novels before have stuck to a few of the best known of them, and he says that he has "surveyed" 195 of them himself, but the vast majority of these, naturally enough, go entirely unmentioned, and nothing new emerges from the remainder. And Goldhill fails to take some of the crucial tricks. He knows that Kingsley's *Hypatia* is an attack on Roman Catholicism (though he says little about how this works in practice), but he seems unaware that the

counterblast, Newman's *Callista*, is in turn an attack on Anglicanism. Here for once is a case where historical fiction really is engaged with modern antagonisms, and Goldhill misses it. And there is another near absence more important still. Almost all these books are of low literary quality; the one exception is Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*. This unusual work, Proustian *avant la lettre*, was not only much finer than any of these other novels, but more interconnected with the cultural issues and currents of the time, and vastly more influential. But Goldhill is obviously uncomfortable with it and gives it as little space as he decently can. So this is *Hamlet* with only a cameo role for the prince.

Chapter 7 is shorter and consists of potted biographies of Kingsley and Farrar. The latter is included because he wrote a novel about early Christians, *Darkness and Dawn*. This is an uninteresting work, however; Farrar's novels about school and university life, on the other hand, are very interesting in their appalling way, but that is another story. In any case, potted lives are not what we need, and this odd chapter reads like the preparation for an event which never arrives. Goldhill's desire to describe the "intellectual background" to these historical novels is praiseworthy, but unfortunately, background is what he is least equipped to provide. Across the book as a whole he has shown ambition and energy in tackling a wide and disparate collection of topics, but he has not given himself enough time to learn, think, and understand. He did not have to be so slapdash, but the task was in any case harder than he realized.