

Two Books on the Victorian Interest in Hellenism

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In the 1980s there appeared two books about the Victorian attitude toward the ancient Greeks, or about how the Victorians felt about and incorporated the ancient Greek culture. The two books are Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980) and Frank M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984). Although they deal with the same subject, their approaches toward the subject are quite different from each other. In this paper, I will pick up two themes from each book-- "Greek Gods and Mythology" and "Plato and his Philosophy" -- and see the difference in their approaches.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Victorians and Ancient Greece by Richard Jenkyns and *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* by Frank M. Turner--these two books seem to be like each other; judging from their titles, they seem to give us the same kind of stories about the Victorian attitude toward the ancient Greece. But as it turns out, these two books are totally unlike each other. Of course, no two books are not, or should not, be the same, even if they treat the same subject matter. But in the case of the two books mentioned above, despite the identity of the subject matter--the Victorians' approaches to the ancient Greeks--they are almost diametrically different from each other. That is, although they deal with the same subject, their approaches to the subject are completely different. Jenkyns' book gives us a general view of how the Victorians accepted the various heritages of the ancient Greek culture, while Turner's book, limiting itself to the main famous figures, gives an academic account of how the Victorians tried to understand the ancient Greeks and to incorporate them into their own age.

This difference in approaches to the Victorians' attitudes toward the ancient Greeks between Jenkyns and Turner will become clearer when we read again, and compare the "prefaces" with each other. In *The Victorians and the Ancient Greece*, Jenkyns says he will include in his book:

both important and unimportant people, the former for the part that they played in giving the age its character, the latter because they often reflect that character more simply than their more eminent contemporaries. I am not writing a history of scholarship, and professional scholars appear only if they widely influenced Victorian culture, or else may be used to illustrate it. (v)**

Here Jenkyns says, as he actually does in the book, he will treat both important and unimportant people in

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**All the quotations from these texts are indicated by the page numbers in the brackets.

his book so that the Victorian climate can be more clearly understood.

On the other hand, Turner's book is more academic and scholarly. He does not pay much attention to the poets but to the scholars and thinkers on the ancient Greece, and gives us a bird's-eye view of the change, through the lapse of the time, of the academic attitude toward the ancients. In the "preface" Turner says that there are almost no major studies on the Victorian treatment of the classical world:

Except for a few notable books such as Douglas Bush's *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry* (1933), M. L. Clarke's *Greek Studies in England 1700–1830* (1945), Warren D. Anderson's *Matthew Arnold and the Classical Tradition* (1965), David J. Delaura's *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England* (1969), and Richard Jenkyns' *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (1980). . . .

But even these, he thinks, primarily concern themselves about "the relationship of antiquity to English literature. None of these works attempts to explore commentary on antiquity as a means of more fully understanding Victorian intellectual life itself." (xi–xii)

Turner thinks that the Victorians tried to understand the ancient Greeks "on the terms of their [own] day and with the concerns and purposes of that moment" (xi). Turner does not want to stop at the superficial level on which only the Greek influences on the Victorians are to be looked for, but tries to go deeper to the psychological level on which he wonders why the Victorians took up this or that Greek theme and why they treat it in a certain way. Jenkyns' approach may be sometimes called passive; but Turner's approach is definitely forward-looking.

This difference in approaches may be accounted for by the fact that Turner's book is the later-comer of the two. Published four years later than Jenkyns' book, it could have had some good hindsight about the approaches to this subject. In this paper, we will pick up the two themes which are treated by both Jenkyns and Turner, and see the differences in the approaches between these two authors more clearly.

2. GREEK GODS AND MYTHOLOGY

The difference in attitude toward the Victorian approach to the ancient Greeks between these two authors becomes clearer when we see their views of the specific subjects. First of all, let us see the difference between Jenkyns and Turner in seeing the Victorians see the Greek gods and mythology.

Jenkyns, in the chapter "The interpretation of Greece," talks about Victorian attitude toward the Greek gods under the heading "The Gods" (174–91). Here, beginning with a quotation of J. E. Flecker's poem *Donde Estan?*

Where are they, the half-deceivers,
Statue-forms and young men's fancies,
Gods of Greece?

Jenkyns summarizes the attitudes of the main Romantic and Victorian poets and writers—Mrs. Browning, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Ruskin, J. A. Symonds, Pater—by citing the passages that best show the characteristics. Here he shows the poets' and writers' laments over the disappearance of the Greek gods. All those gods are now gone because, he says:

The growth of Christianity completely destroyed the great Indo-European pantheons,

Norse, German and Greco-Roman. Some time in about the sixth century A. D. the last man died who believed in the existence of Juno and Venus and Apollo, and in the succeeding centuries Asgard and Niflheim went the way of Olympus. (175)

In talking about Ruskin, Jenkyns furthermore says that the Greek religion looks like romantic pantheism, God's immanence in every object of the natural world. However, he says, these two are completely different things. The Greek concept of the gods is not the same as the pantheistic thought. In order to show what the Greek gods are like, Jenkyns quotes a passage from Ruskin, of which only a sentence is cited here:

there is somewhat[something] in, and greater than, the waves, which rages, and is idle, and *that* he calls a god. (180)

In this way, in talking about the Greek gods, Jenkyns focuses upon the literary aspects of these now gone gods, and upon how the Victorians made poetic use of these gods.

In quite a contrast, when dealing with the Greek gods and religion, Turner focuses upon the psychological process of how the Greek gods and mythology were formed in the minds of the ancients. His view of the nineteenth-century is more detached. He even says that the romantic poets did not only cry over the disappearance of the gods:

Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley, as well as many lesser figures, had regarded the Greek myths and mythical thought in general as constituting not mere conventional window dressing for literature but rather forms and symbols once alive in the human mind and spirit and still capable of new life. (77-78)

The Victorian approach to the Greek myths started with Geroge Grote, who was also a utilitarian banker and an advocator of democracy. Grote grappled with this ancient mythology from a historical point of view. He started his argument with the presumption that the Greek myths were not historical facts: what they told did not actually happen in history; rather they were the results of the ancients' attempts to understand nature surrounding them. They had to protect themselves, by making the myths, against nature, at the mercy of which they might easily have become without them. The myths were also useful in providing the people in the tribe with such information as "ethical precepts" of the tribe and "a plausible account of the past." (88-89)

Such function of the myths signifies their unifying aspect. The myths were supported by the people's faith in them, and this faith united the people. It does not matter whether the myths were true or false; it was the people's faith in them that counted. The community functioned as a body by the people's faith in the myths.

As time passed, however, there appeared the intellectual, rationalistic ways of thinking. The Sophists advocated this mode of thought. According to Grote, because of this rationalism, people no longer believed in the myths and the religion they constituted. This skeptic attitude toward the myths finally led to the Athenian democracy, but rationalism had not completely replaced the old mythological thought. In other words, the Athenian democracy was far from perfect because there were some remnants of the myths, and this defect, Grote thought, made totally rationalistic Socrates drink the cup of hemlock.

This thought of Grote had not a small influence on the later scholars. For example, Walter Pater made a psychological and aesthetical approach toward the ancient myths; for him they were the "existential images of perennial needs and associations of human beings" (100). According to him, as this is similar

to Grote's explication, the ancient Greeks could not help making the myths because they had to adapt themselves to the nature surrounding them; Pater says they were the "projection of the self into nature" (97). However, his opinion diverges conspicuously from Grote's on the point that he made much of the myths because of his aesthetic approach, while Grote's emphasis was on the subsequent intellectual progress. Pater furthermore tried to give a new role to the idea of the myth in the contemporary scientific age: he wanted to reunite the community by the "new mythic thought" (89).

John Addington Symonds, for another example, had an eye on the role of the tragedy. For Symonds, tragedy, such as made by Sophocles and Aeschylus, was the synthesis of the myths of the earlier religious world and the logic of the later intellectual world. The myths were not completely incompatible with the intellectual logical thinking, and the tragedians, he thought, had tried to show the people the combination of religion and intellect, by attempting "to purify the myths and to present images of the gods worthy of the power they possessed" (101). Furthermore, Symonds applied this role of the Greek dramatists to that of the Victorian religious reformers. Just as the Greek dramatists tried to purify the myths, Symonds thought, the Victorians should try to make the ossified Christianity applicable to the Victorian age.

There were other attitudes toward the ancient Greek mythology. For example, Friedrich Max Müller came up with the solar theory that the myths were originally the words of the Sanscrit language, which had been dispersed and took on different meanings. There were also archaeological and anthropological interest—advocated by Andrew Lang, J. G. Frazer and so on—rising in this period. But in this paper, Grote's understanding of the Greek religion will be enough to show us the difference between Turner's and Jenkyns' approaches to the Victorian view of the Greek gods. The latter deals with the Victorians' sentimental attitude to the now lost gods, while the former scientifically and even psychologically investigates how the gods were made in the Ancients' minds.

3. PLATO AND HIS PHILOSOPHY

Next, let us see the difference between these authors when they discuss the Victorian view of Plato. Here let us begin with the summary of Turner.

Plato had not been given much attention during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, compared with Socrates and Aristotle. But toward the end of the eighteenth century, various attempts were made at his translation, and this philosopher gradually began to be in focus again. In the Victorian period, there were mainly three approaches toward Plato.

The first approach was to see him as a Christian in the Anglican world in which people had come to lose faith. They tried to elicit from Plato the moral disciplines and to use them against the materialistic and utilitarian atmosphere of the Victorian world. They did not attach importance to his logic, but to the emotion, feeling, and the mystical aspect of the Platonic texts. Some of the famous scholars who held this kind of view were Broke Foss Westcott, J. A. Stewart, Alfred Edward Taylor, and John Burnet. This incipient stage of Platonic reception by the British was later to be taken up again in a somewhat different form by Benjamin Jowett and Richard Nettleship.

The second approach was to see Plato as a radical reformer. They did not try to impose a system upon the Platonic text, but held that the most important in the Platonic dialogue was the method of negative dialectic. They thought Plato put the established system to rigid criticism before accepting it. This attitude is clearly seen in the utilitarian banker George Grote. Grote, in *Plato and Other Companions*, mentions that Plato was "a radical questioner," while other scholars had regarded him as "the defender of established morality, religion, and politics" (390). For Grote, Plato especially attached importance to the Protagorean dogma "Homo Mensura" —that a man is the measure of all things. Plato held that

each man should judge by his own standard. This individualistic thought might lead to subjective relativism, but Grote thought, it would ultimately arrive at mutual toleration of the members of the community.

Holding Plato as a radical questioner of the established system, Grote did not accept the authoritarian government as explicated in *The Republic*, which he thought would sacrifice the individual freedom for the society. Grote thought that Platonic epistemology and metaphysics were not applicable to politics. This view of Grote was shared by James Martineau who held that human beings should not be deprived of the most important thing— their freedom— by the society.

However, there was also a contrary view. John Stuart Mill, for example, argued for the bureaucracy by the elites and Walter Pater in *Plato and Platonism* argued for the centripetal society. Except about politics, Pater's view of Plato was similar to that of Grote; he praised Platonic dialogue as "the literary mode of expression most particularly suitable for analytic thought" (407). But when it comes to politics, Pater diverts from Grote. Grote argued for democracy or centrifugal society where every individual had his own freedom; Pater argued for the centripetal one where every member would choose to relinquish his own freedom for the good of the society. In developing this idea, Pater had in mind the medieval Church where every man was united. But the only problem with this idea of Pater is that criticism itself was the purpose; he had no intention to improve the society itself by the philosophy of Plato.

The third approach to Plato is similar to the first one. But in a fundamental sense, it is completely different from the first one. As was explained in the case of Aristotle, the first approach was to see the ancient philosopher in terms of Christianity; but this third approach was to re-view Christianity in terms of his ideas. Benjamin Jowett, who was the spokesman of this third group, "did not make Plato a Christian; rather, he transformed liberal Christianity into a moral stance that could be justified. . . by appeal to the wisdom of Plato" (415). Jowett understood that the Christian belief was gone. And he wanted the Platonic reason to replace Christianity; or at least, he wanted to vindicate Christianity by using the ideas of Plato. Furthermore, Jowett goes on to think about the community which is constituted by each one of the members. In *The Dialogue of Plato, Translated into English with Analyses and Introductions*, Jowett made much of the concept of "commonwealth," in which each member was united on the "new ethics based on duty" (422), which is the ethics deduced from Plato. Social collectivism or cohesion was what Jowett—and Richard Nettleship a little later—always put an emphasis on when discussing Plato. Perhaps this reflected the political and social situations of the time.

In this way, according to Turner, the Victorian views on Plato are classified into three groups. The first is to see Plato as a Christian, the second as a rational questioner of the society, and the last as giving the examples of ethics which contribute to the social cohesion.

Jenkyns, it may be mentioned, seems to follow the similar, if not the same, classification: Plato as a prophet of Christianity, as a radical reformer of the society, and as a vindicator of the Christian virtues. But the emphasis is completely different. Where Turner spends thirty-one pages(383–414) on George Grote and his thought on Plato as a questioner of the existing society, Jenkyns only spends one paragraph(243–44). And even when Jenkyns writes about Plato as a prophet of Christianity, he mentions the names of only two thinkers—B. F. Westcott and J. S. Mill—while Turner mentions several more. Why this difference in emphasis? Because while Turner investigates the scholarly, and even sociological, Victorian approach to the ancient Greeks, Jenkyns focuses upon the literary, aspects of the Victorian writings about the ancients.

When explaining the third group, Turner says that Benjamin Jowett regarded Plato as the vindicator of Christianity. Here Turner seems to be saying that the readings of Plato formed the background of Jowett's thoughts. He does not seem to find any harm in this point: Jowett only saw the world through the ideas of Plato. On the other hand, Jenkyns follows Jowett's writings more literally, and wonders whether he borders upon infidelity. Jenkyns says, "His profession of faith was honest, but like Newman and

Gladstone he found that Greece had a strong and perilous allure. Again and again he likened Plato's teaching to Christ's" (250). Furthermore, he says, "Jowett comes perilously near to saying that Plato is a better Christian than certain modern divines" (251). That a man has turned to Plato for justification of his thought does not mean that he has returned to paganism. It seems that Turner more impartially tries to understand Jowett in the totality of his thought: Jenkyns seems parochial and to go no further than the superficial level of understanding in this point.

We also notice the differences between Turner's and Jenkyns' arguments when we see the arguments about Pater. Both used the text *Plato and Platonism*, but the understanding of this writer is different. Turner, as mentioned above, focuses upon Pater's concept of what the community should be like. He says Pater argues for a centripetal society in which every member is organized like the medieval Church. In this there is an element of aestheticism: Pater does not have the intention to achieve this kind of society whatsoever. Jenkyns, however, over-exaggerates this aesthetical element of Pater. He does not mention Pater's concept of the community, but Pater's love for Plato's form, or style of writing. He says, "Pater was attracted to Plato less as a philosopher than as an artist and a personality" (254). Plato is like a "poet" to Pater. But, Jenkyns says, it is this aesthetic view of Plato itself that ruins the book. Here also, Jenkyns sees Pater's book itself and not beyond that, while Turner tries to get a fundamental psychological picture which Pater had in his mind when writing his book.

In this way, in dealing with the Victorian approaches to Plato, there is a large difference between Turner and Jenkyns: Turner tries to get into the inside of the Victorians' minds and to get the general climate of feeling during the period; while Jenkyns, with an emphasis upon the literary aspect, tries to understand each of the works itself and remains on the superficial level of understanding.

4. CONCLUSION

With only two examples to be dealt with, the difference in the attitudes between Turner and Jenkyns may not have become clear enough. Besides, because of some misunderstanding, I may have given some wrong idea of what these two books are about. On the whole, Jenkyns makes us see how the Greek influences are inherited in the works of Victorian literature; while Turner's book gives us very intriguing and sophisticated accounts of how the Victorians understood the ancient Greeks and incorporated their thoughts.