

REVIEWS

Elegy for an Age: The Presence of the Past in Victorian Literature by John D. Rosenberg. London: Anthem P, 2005. 292 pp. + 1 colour plate, 7 b/w illus. ISBN 1-84331-156-9. \$75.00; £45.00 (cloth). ISBN 1-84331-154-2. \$25.00; £14.99 (paper).

A reviewer of this book, approaching it from its expansive title alone, has high expectations of a comprehensive treatment of its announced topic – the Victorians’ lament over the passing of an age (which age of several possible ones? or the whole of the recorded past, viewed by poets, writers of prose, and novelists alike?). One quickly discovers that the volume is nothing of the sort, but a collection of eleven free-standing essays on selected aspects of the wide theme.

No matter. The fact is that, as Garry Wills says in his jacket praise of *Elegy for an Age*, it represents the capping of John Rosenberg’s distinguished career as a writer on Victorian subjects – “his magnum opus.” These are truly essays in appreciation, a form of criticism, or literary journalism, that has sat below the salt for well over a century. Now the genre has been rehabilitated, thanks in part to the fashion for close reading of texts set by the New Critics a half-century ago and now the quiet elegance of style that distinguishes the writings of a few gifted scholar-critics like Rosenberg.

He is at the top of his form when he concentrates on a specific body of text, ranging in length from the entirety of *In Memoriam* – he is hardly the first critic to do so, but arguably the most perceptive – to a single number of *Fors Clavigera* (Letter 20, August 1872), “Benediction,” an amalgam of Ruskin’s “many voices ... preacher, social critic, exegete, diarist, tourist, Master of St. George’s Guild.” A second essay on Ruskin, “Water into Wine,” an expanded version of a lecture delivered at a conference in 2000, makes a large claim: that the final chapter of *Praeterita* represents “Ruskin’s private miracle in transforming incoherence and panic into a dazzling display of his own genius” and that “All that was most vital in Ruskin’s life, all that is most central and luminous in *Praeterita*, returns and is transfigured in his last words.” The line-by-line argument occupies twenty-seven pages and has the authority – and all the sober grace – of Rosenberg’s long devotion to Ruskin studies.

All but one of these so-called elegists (the term is generously stretched throughout) belong to the canon of mainstream English literature – including Wordsworth, who is often invoked for his relevance to the ensuing generation of elegists. The Victorian exception is Charles Darwin (the chapter on whom, a little jokingly is titled “Mr. Darwin Collects Himself”) whose fragmentary *Recollections of the Development of my [sic] Mind and Character* was begun