

Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic by David Wayne Thomas. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2003. xv, 229 pp. + 31 b/w illus. ISBN 0-8122-3754-4. \$45.00.

In *Cultivating Victorians*, David Wayne Thomas attempts to reclaim from “the prevailing hermeneutics of suspicion” the redeeming aesthetic features of Victorian and modern liberal culture. Specifically, Thomas wishes to recover a more affirmative neo-Kantian view of individual agency during the mid-to-late Victorian era. Throughout, the featured antidote to tainted autonomy is self-reflection. While eagerly inviting us to reassess constructed subjectivity, Thomas often sets up a post-structuralist straw man. One wonders, by implication, whether postmodernist challenges to Kant’s idea of aesthetic autonomy (for instance, in Derrida’s *Truth and Painting*) truly grow out of reflexive suspicion, or, more possibly, whether they result from an incisive look at the nature of aesthetic response. Further, though the book’s diversity of topics proves stimulating, it also creates diffuseness.

The study opens with a learned historical overview of liberal and aesthetic agency. Though critically dense, the chapter illuminates concepts by coming at them from all sides. In fact, Thomas himself enacts the Victorian liberal ideal of “many-sidedness,” a trait discussed at length in this chapter. Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill are closely observed as exemplars of it; Thomas exposes the inconsistencies of both Arnold’s Hellenic ideal and Mill’s idea of genius as they relate to cultivated agency. Also brought into the discussion of multiple perspectives are its gender implications. That is, for some mid-Victorians, many-sidedness was often cultivated, Thomas argues, at the expense of manly vigour. Thus, a masculinist ethos further complicates this crucial character trait of Victorian liberalism. Thomas notes similar tensions in the disposition of George Eliot’s Farebrother, from *Middlemarch*, whom he sees as epitomizing a “liberal heroics.” When judiciously used, these associations and cross-referencing are theoretically probing; however, this hyper-networking of ideas often proves rather pedantic.

The discussion of Arnold and Mill also highlights conceptual strands that tie into the book’s interpretive stance. For example, though Thomas admits the incoherence of liberal agency as asserted and enacted by Arnold and Mill, he also detects in their writings a strategic move that reinforces his neo-Kantian project: “We could seek in many-sidedness some kind of coherent tendency that Mill and Arnold distort for reasons having nothing to do with their aspiration to internalize and strategically engage multiple viewpoints and forms of life.” Here, and throughout the study, Thomas repeats his overall attempt to recuperate the regulative ideal of Kantian agency. As opposed to substantive, or constitutive, knowledge, regulative ideas focus on how we think, or the dynamics of human experience. In this light, Thomas specifically promotes the