

A VICTORIANIST SQUINTS AT Y2K

Herbert F. Tucker

No pretty job lies before me, my good friends, but someone has to do it. Did I ask to be your party-crashing doomsayer, *persona non grata*, the wicked fairy with the curse, a prophet without honour in his own discipline? Never in my life. But how could I keep silence when I read the signs of the times? How, your calls for papers adrift across my screen, your conference programs a-tangle on my desk, how could I not speak? As we tarry in the tattoo parlour of doodling Mnemosyne; as we finger our portfolio of Victorian bequests in paper and ink, wax and oils and emulsion baths of silver nitrate; as we trifle with amnesia, savour misprision, flirt with fantasy--in a word, as we forge full speed ahead with Victorianist business as usual--are we not forgetting something? We speak, we respond, we rejoin; but do we conference-attenders really attend?

The clock is ticking, friends; and from its hushed stepwise chuckle, could we but still our bustle and hear, there might whisper into cacchination an honest, a huskily Ecclefechanian rasp, not unfamiliar in its time to Midas Ears alight with wholesome shame. For a storm is in the offing, one that bids fair to crack our disks however hard, and blow clean away these paper labours of ours to refine what the Chelsea sage must be mocking from his grave, for very sooth, as the Theory of Defective Verbs, conjugated for these our Latter Days. Victorian Futures, is it? I'll show you the future, all right. I will show you fear in a handful of pixel dust. But will you know it? Are you ready for the plain truth that, disregarded now on every hand, must hereafter be ever remembered in heaviness and sorrow? Ready to face that great change which even the Dryasdust groggiest with denial must full soon hail as the Undeniable? Are you ready, O colleagues, ready for the Year Two Thousand?

Well, okay, so maybe you were. The occasion of the foregoing impersonation has come and gone, not to mention the Y2K catastrophe it apprehended.¹ And yet the disciplinary apprehensiveness that arose with it a year ago may still have some claim to an adjourned hearing on such a page as this. For the fortunes of Victorian