

Queen Victoria's Computers

This genre-transcending science fiction novel by the co-inventors of "Cyberpunk," William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, is set in an alternative version of Victorian London, circa 1855, with many of its familiar historical features intact: pea-souper fogs pierced with the dim glow of the first gaslight lamps, a war being fought in the Crimea, ladies in crinolines, gents in top hats, prodigies both of squalor and of nouveau riche excess. But then, and it is quite an enormous "but then," the authors have decreed that one crucial datum of history shall be other than it was: that sometime in the 1820s the mathematician Charles Babbage succeeded in constructing an operational Analytic Engine, a clockwork computer powered not by electricity, but by steam engines. The historical, cultural, and scientific repercussions are enormous, as they have been in our own time, and the resulting counter-Victorian era is elaborated with a Dickensian density of imaginative detail.

The crucial historical difference generated by this Difference Engine is an acceleration of the process of industrialization and its attendant political strife. In the 1830s, the Duke of Wellington confronts an Industrial Radical Party, headed by Lord Byron (although the real Lord Byron died in 1824). The Rads win, and Byron becomes the country's tyrannical prime minister, while Disraeli is only a Grub Street hack: "This fellow Disraeli, whose father founded Disraeli's *Quarterly*, you know. Bit of a madcap. Writes sensation-novels. Trash. But he's steady enough when he's sober." This is the verdict of T. H. Huxley, whose situation as a propagandist for Darwinism is not much altered, except that in this Victorian age, agnosticism is not a source of scandal but a mark of respectability.

This setting provides the background for a mystery-adventure plot with three distinctly separate, successive strands. The protagonist of the first is Sybil Gerard, the "ruined" daughter of an executed Luddite agitator, now a London dollymop (prostitute) who apprentices herself as an adventuress to the cunning press agent of Sam Houston, a political refugee from the independent state of Texas. Sybil's adventures continue just to the point where she comes into possession of the MacGuffin at the

heart of the plot—a box of celluloid punch cards containing a program not to be revealed, naturally, until the end of the book.

Meanwhile, like some immense, all-conquering parenthesis, we have the story of Edward Mallory, a foursquare Victorian hero of unimpeachable stolidity and rectitude. A paleontologist lately returned from an expedition to Wyoming, where he unearthed the bones of the first brontosaurus (and supplied guns to the Indians on behalf of the Foreign Office, which has succeeded in its policy of balkanizing the North American continent), Mallory comes into possession of the MacGuffin during a Derby Day encounter with Byron's daughter (and Babbage's protégée) Ada. Thereafter he is hounded by a whole rogue's gallery of villains bent on reclaiming the MacGuffin. He also picaresquely bumps into various representative eccentrics of the counter-era, among them a professional associate of Sybil Gerard's, with whom he enjoys a night of illicit love that is the most probable rendering of Victorian erotic seaminess this side of Anonymous's more comprehensive work, *My Secret Life*.

As Mallory's adventures mount ever higher, London succumbs to an ecological catastrophe, the Stink, created by an inversion layer that traps the city's rampant and wholly unregulated pollutants. The rich flee, the lower orders run amok, and for fully one hundred pages there is a sustained set-piece of riot and anarchy that rivals the equivalent chapters of Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge*. Here, to hint at the flavor of that event, is the text of a broadside that is plastered on a wall near a scene of "rapturous looting":

AN APPEAL TO THE PEOPLE! Ye are all Lords of the Earth, and need only COURAGE to make triumphant WAR on the Whore of BabyLondon and all her learned thieves. Blood! Blood! Vengeance! Vengeance, vengeance! Plagues, foul plagues, et cetera, to all those who harken not to universal justice! BROTHERS, SISTERS! Kneel no more before the vampyre capitalist and the idiot savantry! Let the slaves of crowned brigands grovel at the feet of Newton. WE shall destroy the Moloch Steam and shatter his rocking iron!

After Mallory's derring-do, the plot's shift to the viewpoint of the detective Laurence Oliphant can't help registering as a letdown, and this is compounded by the fact that the solution of the mystery represented by the MacGuffin is not a real mind-boggler. However, the authors have kept one major surprise in reserve, and it is an aesthetic one. The concluding chapter, "MODUS: The Images Tabled," is a montage of pseudo-historical texts and vignettes that unlooses a deluge of new data about the

counterworld, opening up new vistas of extrapolation just as one expects the many loose ends of the plot to be tidied up. It's as if the authors had come right out and said their story was just a pretext for the real science-fictional excitement of building new worlds. The honesty is breathtaking.

The best science fiction has always worked by the power of suggestion, and seldom has that power source operated so effectively as in *The Difference Engine*. Working together, Mr. Gibson and Mr. Sterling have written a book that is even better than their earlier and considerable solo efforts. Grateful readers can only hope that this represents the beginning of a long and fruitful collaboration.