

Introduction

RACHEL ABLOW

University at Buffalo, SUNY, United States

ALTHOUGH not focused on the Victorian period, John Guillory's recent *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (2022) might seem to provide a bracing counter to the premise of this special issue.¹ According to Guillory, framing our scholarly projects in political terms may ultimately be delusional, for whatever our aspirations or intentions, scholarship is rarely politically impactful. "Surely the political well-being of our society," he writes, "is better served by producing one informed, insightful, and habitual reader than by the publication of any number of scholarly essays and books, however devastating these might be as criticisms of society" (78). For Guillory, claiming political significance for our scholarship amounts to an "overstatement of aim," something he describes as "the principal form of professional deformation resulting from uncertainty about the social effects of literary study" (79).

However trenchant and timely Guillory's critique of the sometimes-hyperbolic claims of literary criticism, the essays in this issue begin to suggest some of the limitations of his depiction of the political aspirations of the literary critic. First, within Victorian studies, one could point to many critics whose work—whether feminist, queer, trans, postcolonial, antiracist, Marxist, ecocritical, or neoconservative—has in fact had direct political consequences in the world. Guillory would probably be correct in claiming that those examples are relatively few and far between, but it is nevertheless important to note their existence. Second, while those of us fortunate enough to be employed in institutions of higher education are expected to teach and to write (the two roles Guillory discusses), we are also employees—and in some cases administrators—in institutions whose practices we are in a position to contest or shape. The replacement of tenure-line faculty with adjuncts and term employees (instructors, clinical faculty, instructional faculty, etc.) is a *political* issue that touches nearly all our professional lives, whether in the form of our own professional opportunities, the opportunities available to our graduate students, the makeup of our departments, or our sense of the direction of our profession. When we speak up, push back, or organize, we are therefore doing political work. In addition, the

Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol. 51, No. 4, pp. 549–554.

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

doi:10.1017/S1060150323000712

institutions that employ (some of) us are also economic drivers: education is a major U.S. export, and institutions of higher learning often play important economic roles both within and well beyond their communities. At a moment of environmental catastrophe, of gentrification in the urban centers within which many institutions are located, of increasing burdens placed on public elementary and secondary education (and the list could go on), institutions of higher learning have a critical role to play either in exacerbating problems or in working toward solutions. Again, these are political concerns. Third, although our scholarship may have relatively little direct political impact, it is difficult not to see the attacks we are experiencing in many parts of the country as evidence that we are doing something right—if only insofar as we are able to represent an intellectual openness to difference of opinion, debate, and the possibility of changing one's mind. And finally, as almost all the essays in this issue demonstrate, what we work on both reflects and shapes not just our political investments but the ways in which we act on those investments—and not always in simple or obvious ways: if it is impossible to draw a clear line between scholarship and political practice, it is also impossible to predict in advance the ways in which the two will interact.

This last observation is in many ways where the idea for this issue began: my coeditor, Daniel Hack, and I had noticed a particular willingness among our Victorianist colleagues to step up, both within and outside of their professional lives. Whether supporting or leading union drives, faculty senates, divestment campaigns, or advocacy for the humanities—or else supporting political candidates or campaigns, or by taking to the streets—Victorianists seem to be taking on leadership positions in excess of their numbers. We were curious whether this observation is at all meaningful: whether what we work on inflects or is inflected by the way we think about the social and political worlds we inhabit, and if so, how. No field has a monopoly on politics, of course. And in a moment when not just the humanities but higher education—expertise!—is under attack, no one can remain sequestered from politics for long. Yet at the same time, the mid- to late nineteenth century was a period of acute consciousness of the power of politics to shape individual lives for good or ill. It is the period that gave us the fullest expression of both the British Empire and the industrial revolution, whose most devastating aftereffects we have yet to fully understand, let alone undo. It is also the period that gave us the beginning of the welfare state. Nearly all the essays in this issue bear witness to this specificity: to the way in

which the Victorian period was concerned with the effect of systems on individual lives—and the ways in which individuals, or groups, have the power to stand up and *do* something to change those systems for the better.

The first three essays in this issue address issues of employment—and in doing so they underscore our roles as employees as well as intellectuals. Thus, for example, Ruth McAdams’s “Three Cheers for the United Aggregate Tribunal!': Confronting Anti-Union Discourse, Then and Now,” describes how Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854) helped the author diagnose the anti-union claims being made by her employer. Serving as one of the lead organizers of Skidmore College’s non-tenure-track faculty unionization effort, McAdams was given a unique perspective on the resonances between the assertions made by her employers—regarding the status of union organizers as supposed “outsiders,” for example, or as working for their own interests rather than those of the people they claim to represent—and Dickens’s depiction of a character like Slackbridge. However clear in the retelling, seeing these resonances required a conceptual leap, for as McAdams explains, “Academics tend to see our work as a profession, a calling, a form of intellectual entrepreneurship—anything but work.” This is a state of affairs that poses very particular problems for the collective mentality required for a unionization effort.

Carolyn Betensky and Talia Schaffer’s essay “Gaskell, Ghosts, and the Common Good” comes at a similar set of concerns from a different perspective, describing how these scholars’ readings of the work of Elizabeth Gaskell helped them foresee potential pitfalls involved in speaking for impacted communities. As tenured professors, Betensky and Schaffer express their commitment to the cause of better working conditions for adjunct workers, as well as their reluctance to play “white saviors or ladies bountiful” and so occupy space more appropriately held by those directly impacted by inequitable working conditions. Gaskell offers negative examples the authors wish to avoid, but her work also provides some useful insight into how “a rapacious system extends far beyond its immediate victims.” The novelist thus begins to provide a vocabulary for discussing the fact that “adjunctification filters into every aspect of our professional lives,” regardless of whether we are working as adjuncts, finding other forms of employment, training future adjuncts, or—as Betensky and Schaffer describe—compensating for the absence of tenure-track labor.

Lena Wånggren’s “Gender and Precarity across Time: Where Are the Writing Working Women?” shifts back to the perspective of the

precariat, describing the difficulty of finding the time necessary to write while “employed on four different insecure contracts at three different UK universities” *and* serving as a trade union representative, as well as the way that difficulty is echoed in the voices (or lack thereof) of the female labor leaders Wånggren studies. The echoes between their absent voices and her own relatively-rarely heard voice constitutes a rallying point for Wånggren: “the current state of marketized higher education demands that we take collective action both inside and outside of our classrooms; if we do not, precarious and minoritized knowledges and voices will disappear.” These “knowledges and voices” belong both to female organizers in the nineteenth century and to female organizers, such as Wånggren, working within the academy today.

The pair of essays on the environment and environmental degradation that follow—Caroline Levine’s “Nuts and Bolts: Collective Action, the Divestment Movement, and Jane Addams,” and Isobel Armstrong’s “Alice Meynell and the Politics of an Image: ‘The Climate of Smoke’”—might seem to represent almost diametrically opposed understandings of the phrase “Victorianist activism.” While the first describes the activist work of a Victorianist who is inspired by her object of study, the other constitutes a Victorianist’s analysis of a nineteenth-century (implicit yet nevertheless powerful) call to arms. Yet what connects them is a strong sense of the mid- to late nineteenth century as the source of both the problem of what has come to be described as global warming and, at least to some extent, models for what solutions might look like. For her part, Levine argues that we have a responsibility to hold our workplaces accountable for the ways in which they contribute to or help mitigate the environmental disaster through which we are currently living—something we can do only if we set aside our professional tendency toward “left pessimism.” Even as Levine identifies inaction with our intellectual and professional biases, however, she also associates her object of study—the Victorian period—with both a commitment to and a recognition of the viability of change. Jane Addams’s Hull House provides the local example, but the larger context is a period that recognizes the ways in which individual flourishing is linked to collective well-being.

In her essay on the collaboration of Alice Meynell and William Hyde, Armstrong implicitly reminds us that in order to act, we must first care. The images and essays she examines constitute a moving example of the best kind of political art: that is, art that makes us both see and feel the problem—in this case the way that for Meynell, smoke = death.

“Smoke,” Armstrong explains, is “not simply pollution” for Meynell; it is “the limit case of humanly made dead matter.” To return to Guillory for a moment, description of this kind may not be “necessary,” but by helping us see Meynell’s project more clearly, Armstrong also helps us feel her passion, her fury, her disgust. These are political feelings in the sense that their fullest expression inheres in politically significant action.

The four essays that close out the issue focus in very different ways on education. The first essay in this section, “Novel Wayfinding: LitLabs and the Activism of Place,” by Jacqueline Barrios, demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between activism, education, and scholarship. On one hand, high school students’ encounters with Dickens’s work help them take ownership of their Los Angeles communities. On the other, the work of “placemaking” itself provides a way into the literature—a way to give students ownership of the literature as well. Such access, as we all know, can be a source of pleasure, but as Guillory reminds us, it serves, too, as a source of “cultural capital.” In Barrios’s account, however, rather than giving individual students access to individualized forms of capital, the LitLabs push back on the privacy and isolation we tend to associate with reading: the reading practices modeled here are communal and community-building.

Many in the Victorianist community are already familiar with the work of the *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom* website. This project is itself an instance of activism, and will also ideally lead to much more political action in the form of differently conceived courses, revised syllabi and assignments, and perhaps even a different orientation toward the classroom. In their essay “*Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom: Activism as Community Building in Action*,” Pearl Chaozon Bauer, Ryan Fong, Sophia Hsu, and Adrian S. Wisnicki provide readers with a fascinating window into not just the motivation behind the project as a whole but the care and thought that has gone into so many of its aspects—from the web design to its review practices. These authors demonstrate the manifold ways in which institutions exclude even when they seek to be most inclusive, as well as the care required to ensure the kinds of accessibility so many of us claim to value.

The third essay, Lydia Murdoch and Susan Zlotnick’s “‘What I Did at Vassar Stayed with Me’: Victorian Studies and Activism, a Case Study,” delves into the rich history of the Victorian studies program at Vassar College. Interviews reveal the importance of Victorian subject matter in helping form the activist practices of its graduates as well as the importance of interdisciplinarity and archival work. Thus, former students

describe how the program “encouraged them to see how oppressive systems were developed and perpetuated,” but also that those systems “could be (and were) challenged.” At the same time, they also describe how “[i]nterdisciplinarity in its many forms [is] work that crosses language and political divides, that demands collaboration, that brings together multiple perspectives, and that requires the ability to allow for different approaches that may check our own sense of expertise.” As the authors point out, “what our alums have attested to might be taken as a defense of the liberal arts as central to the creation of engaged members of their communities.”

Alison Booth’s essay, too, considers the activist work both made visible and performed by a website—in her case, the Collective Biographies of Women (CBW), a database with an XML schema annotating the narratives. As her essay attests, the existence of such a database makes available new kinds of questions—in this case about the role of Frances Power Cobbe and Mary Carpenter as examples for emulation. This perspective on these figures should encourage us to complicate any overly simple dismissal of evangelical reform efforts, either on the grounds of their religious motivation or because of the relative privilege of their readers. As Booth points out, theirs was important and often inspiring work that had real effects in their world.

The essays in this issue represent only a small fraction of the kinds of Victorianist activism we all see every day: the work Victorianists do as scholars, as educators, as members of the university community, and as members of the community at large. Yet taken together, they begin to indicate the range of ways in which our object of study might be bound up with our political consciousness. If nothing else, as Levine points out, the Victorians knew “we are always already collective.” That is as good a starting point for activism as any.

NOTE

1. John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022). All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.