

Introduction: Critiquing the Victorian Critics

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This Special Issue of *Nineteenth-Century Prose* has been assembled to add to the growing body of critical commentary on Victorian critical theory and practice. The study of Victorian critics has been a time-honored tradition among academics. Until recently, however, Victorian criticism was more honored by passing nods to its importance for understanding the Victorians' views on canonical works of poetry and fiction rather than valued as a way to understand the cultural milieu in which those works were produced. To provide some context for this issue, a history lesson of sorts seems in order.

For my generation the principal source for studying Victorian literature was the massive *The Victorian Age: Prose, Poetry, and Drama*, edited by John Wilson Bowyer and John Lee Brooks, published in 1938 by Appleton-Century-Crofts for a student population that did not mind lugging around a 1,200-page hardbound textbook. Intended to “represent the Victorian literature in its magnitude and variety against the social, historical, and intellectual background of the period,” this tome contained generous samplings of creative and critical work by nearly six dozen figures—mostly men—from Thomas Babington Macaulay to William Butler Yeats. Sandwiched in among the poems and excerpts from novels, a meager handful of essays gave a hint of what the Victorians thought (or were supposed to think) about literature and other matters of art – and morals. Students learned about Victorian literary criticism by reading Arnold’s “The Study of Poetry,” Ruskin’s “Pathetic Fallacy,” a snippet from the Conclusion to Pater’s *The Renaissance*, and a longer selection

from his essay “Romanticism,” and scattered comments in the editors’ introductions and commentaries.

During the 1960s, other books became available. Daniel Hoffman and Samuel Hynes’s *English Literary Criticism: Romantic and Victorian*, first published in 1963 by Appleton Century Crofts in its Goldentree Books series, offered much longer selections from the works of writers already established as canonical: John Stuart Mill, Ruskin, George Eliot, Arnold (who was given greatest space and attention), George Meredith, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Pater, and Henry James. Works by a number of Victorian critics – again, almost all of them male – were addressed by John Gross in *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* (1969), a study that explained some of the reasons for the transformation of literary criticism from the province of the educated and interested amateur to the professional working in academe or for high-brow periodicals.

Of course, forty years ago one could always go to brittle Victorian periodicals stored in major research libraries to expand one’s knowledge of the practice of literary criticism a century earlier, but the task was not easy. The job of researching these old periodicals occupied Peter Morgan for some time. His *Literary Critics and Reviewers in Early 19th-Century Britain*, published in 1983, provided an assessment of literary criticism by Francis Jeffrey, Sir Walter Scott, Robert Southey, John Wilson Crocker, and John Gibson Lockhart, with briefer comments on Thomas Carlyle and Thomas Babington Macaulay.

Published a year after Morgan’s study, Harold Orel’s *Victorian Literary Critics* became one of the most important sources for study of Victorian literary critics and their work. Orel’s book covered the careers of seven men (and no women) considered by Orel and his contemporaries the most important and influential literary critics after Matthew Arnold. Orel’s purpose in writing such a study was twofold. First, he believed that, at the time he was writing, “only the most dedicated student of Victorian literature” would have been familiar with the work of George Henry Lewes, Walter Bagehot, Richard Holt Hutton, Leslie Stephen, Andrew Lang, George Saintsbury, and Edmund Gosse (2). Second, he wanted to

"refute the casually disseminated notion that British literary criticism before the Great War was undisciplined, slack in its definition of key terms, irresponsibly impressionistic, and unworthy of serious attention in our time" (3).

Thirty years later the situation has changed. Arnold's reputation has been tarnished somewhat, as the generations after the New Humanists and New Critics have found his Olympian pronouncements (celebrated by Orel, by the way) a bit too conservative and dogmatic for postmodern sensibilities. One is likely to find more about Lewes than was available when Orel wrote, and some sleuthing will turn up critical commentary on the other six as well. Nevertheless, if one compares scholarship on Victorian critics to that produced on imaginative writers, one finds that the field remains relatively unexplored. Some very good books have been published on a handful of Victorian critics (Anthony Kearney's on John Churton Collins and Ann Thwaite's on Edmund Gosse, for example).

One heartening sign in the past thirty years has been the resurrection of the reputations of hundreds of women who labored to produce copy for periodicals that were widely read by the Victorians. Mary Waters' *British Women Writers and the Profession of Literary Criticism, 1789-1832*, a self-proclaimed contribution to "the recovery of women's criticism" (2), seems almost a riposte to Morgan's 1983 book on the literary criticism of the period. Waters spotlights the contributions of women of two generations preceding the Victorians, although her chapter on Harriet Martineau is valuable to students of Victorian literature and culture. Solveig Robinson's *A Serious Occupation: Literary Criticism by Victorian Women Writers* collects literary criticism written by women during the nineteenth century, making it possible to get a sense of their contributions to literary history and theory. More recently, Linda Peterson's *Becoming a Woman of Letters* and Joanne Wilkes's *Women Reviewing Women in Nineteenth-Century Britain* have explored in detail the working methods and ideologies that informed several influential women writing literary criticism during the century.

Considerable work has also been done to elucidate the ideology that guided mainstream Victorian literary criticism. Some examples provide an idea of the trend that this form of contemporary exploration of Victorian literary criticism has taken. In *Conditions for Criticism*, Ian Small argues that “literary critical discourse cannot be properly understood as a phenomenon unrelated to the rest of the contemporary intellectual culture which produced it” (vii). Although he concentrates on the criticism of Pater and Oscar Wilde, the approach he takes in examining the importance of economics, historiography, sociology, psychology, biology, and aesthetics is useful for studying criticism produced in any period. Also of particular note is Chris Baldick’s *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848-1932*. Although Baldick is interested principally in Arnold’s contribution to shaping critical practice and the study of “English” in the curriculum, he does include commentary (albeit sometimes quite brief) on other critics, including Pater, John Churton Collins, George Saintsbury, and Edmund Gosse. Editor Gary Day’s *The British Critical Tradition: A Re-evaluation*, published in 1993, which opens with an acknowledgement of Baldick’s book, collects essays on nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary critics in an effort to determine the source of criticism’s authority. The influence of postmodern literary and cultural theories inform his thoughtful and sometimes provocative chapters, but once again the figures selected for study remind one of a famous line from the movie *Casablanca*. The “usual subjects” have been “rounded up”: Carlyle, Arnold, Samuel Butler, and Oscar Wilde, with A.C. Bradley serving as the transitional figure to modern critical practice.

Three recently published studies complement and expand the work of the earlier ones mentioned above. Jason Camlot’s *Style and the Nineteenth-Century British Critic*, informed but not overwhelmed by its theoretical superstructure, offers a sophisticated reading of the Victorian critics’ commentary on style as a means of addressing larger issues concerning the nature and efficacy of communication during the age. Also focused on the ideology underlying criticism and communication, Jennifer Phegley’s *Educating the Proper Woman Reader* explores ways literary

critics sought to create the proper female readers – and mitigate some of the dangers that were thought (by men) to arise from having a population of educated women. Carol Atherton's *Defining Literary Criticism* discusses the work of Collins, Arnold, Pater and others in shaping ideas about English literature that influenced both the content and methodology of "English" as it was practiced in the twentieth century. Atherton's examination of the rise of professional criticism offers (perhaps by way of omission) some explanation, if not justification, for the decline of interest in many of the figures profiled in this Special Issue of *Nineteenth-Century Prose*.

The contributors to this Special Issue were given wide latitude in determining the focus of their essays. Some have chosen to examine a single aspect of a critic's work; others have provided a summary (in some cases, much needed) of the careers of Victorian critics once influential but pushed aside during the first half of the twentieth century, when canon-formation trumped wider studies of cultural (and in some cases ideological) issues. Quite a few of these men and women are now known to students and scholars only through occasional mention, often in small-type footnotes.

Figures often considered canonical are examined in new ways. For example, in "To Think Anew: Arnold, the Literary, and Social Justice," Michael Kramp offers a perspective on Arnold's criticism that rescues him from recent charges of conservatism and explains the roles literature and criticism have to play in helping society adapt to changing conditions. Tamara Wagner ("George Eliot and the 'Silly Novels'") reassesses the literary as well as larger cultural significance of George Eliot's oft-cited essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," situating it firmly amidst her *oeuvre* as a critic and reevaluating its changing interpretation and influence. Sara Atwood ("Do you, good reader, know good style when you get it?": Learning to read with Ruskin") explores the conceptual framework of Ruskin's literary commentary. Swinburne's "perversity" is the focus of Nicole Fluhr's "Swinburne: Criticism as Perversion," an essay arguing that Swinburne's "perverse aesthetic" foregrounds the nonutilitarian

qualities of art that he promoted most famously in his pronouncement of the doctrine of “art for art’s sake.” Sondeep Kandola (“Rereading Oscar Wilde’s *Intentions* for ‘The Importance of Doing Nothing’”) makes the case that Oscar Wilde’s seemingly languid and playful critical writings actually constitute a serious defense of the importance of critical thinking and its power to develop not only the individual but also national life.

The works of two late-century ‘men of letters’ are examined in essays by Gillian Fenwick and Kathy Rees. Fenwick’s “The Enigma of Leslie Stephen’s Reputation” reviews Stephen’s unlikely selection as founding editor of the monumental *Dictionary of National Biography*, explaining how being in the right place at the right time, knowing the right people, and receiving silent support from one element of Victorian private enterprise put him in a position to make a lasting contribution to history and the profession of letters. Focusing on *Gossip in a Library*, Rees discusses the reception and context of Gosse’s criticism, revealing recurrent themes and stylistic traits in these essays, considering their impact on subsequent criticism, and evaluating their impact on Gosse’s subsequent reputation.

In addition to Wagner’s essay on George Eliot, six others in this volume are devoted to women. Julia McCord Chavez argues in “Julia Kavanagh, *English Women of Letters*, and Public Opinion” that Kavanagh’s evaluation of the literary qualities of women writers profiled in *English Women of Letters* is protofeminist. Despite Kavanagh’s conventional appeals to authority and acceptance of moral judgments and feminine norms, she manages to claim for the writers she profiles a place in the literary hierarchy. Similarly, Cheryl Wilson’s “Margaret Oliphant Becomes a Heroine: Tracing a Literary Tradition” argues that, throughout her career, Oliphant showed great interest in the emergence of a female literary tradition – one in which she hoped to secure her own place through her novels. Kristin Mahoney (“Ethics and Empathy in the Literary Criticism of Vernon Lee”) exposes the methodologies employed by late-century critic Vernon Lee, arguing that, although drawn to critical practices that seem to bracket ethics, Lee’s criticism demonstrates the

malleability of critical methodologies, exhibiting a capacity to open into concern for and engagement with alterity.

Joanne Wilkes ("Elizabeth Julia Hasell and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*") uses archival information to bring to light the career of a woman whose persistence allowed her to overcome numerous obstacles in getting her work accepted and published in one of the country's leading periodicals. Also using unpublished sources, Beth Sutton-Ramspeck ("Mary Augusta Ward on 'The Peasant in Literature'") explores Ward's conflicted attitudes toward pastoral literature. Lewis C. Roberts ("The Critical Response to Children's Books in Geraldine Jewsbury's *Athenaeum* Reviews") examines Geraldine Jewsbury's work as an anonymous reviewer of children's books for the *Athenaeum*, arguing that these reviews provide great insight into the books Victorian parents were buying for and reading to their children – and the values and expectations Victorians had for children's books.

Critics respected by their Victorian contemporaries but less well known today are the subjects of seven essays. In "John Churton Collins: The Critic as Pundit and Controversialist," Anthony Kearney argues that Collins deserves greater recognition from contemporary scholars, especially for his role in leading the movement to have English literature taken more seriously, both in the universities and in national education as a whole. Richard Fulton's "Richard Holt Hutton, a Retrospective" makes a similar argument for Hutton, once widely regarded as one of the best minds and one of the most accomplished essayists of his generation. Michael Flynn's essay on E.S. Dallas ("E.S. Dallas, Mid-Victorian Individualism, and the Form of the Book Review") explores the critical methodology this influential critic employed in critiquing fiction and nonfiction. John Kijinski explains in "H.D. Traill: Championing the Man of Letters" how Traill's career presents an argument for the utilitarian function of the professional man of letters who serves to guide middle-class readers in a time of cultural uncertainty.

In "David Masson, Pedagogical Reform, and the Victorian Novel" Alexandra Lawrie explains the progressive nature of Masson's work in

literary studies and in his work as a teacher. Odin Dekkers' "John Addington Symonds and the Science of Criticism" examines the ambiguities in Symonds' advocacy of scientific literary criticism, starting from the question of how far Symonds appears to have held a genuine belief in science as a way to solve certain problems criticism was struggling with at the time. Jonathan Farina argues in "Allusive Tactics: R.H. Horne, Induction, and "Desultory Criticism" that Horne's criticism is representative of the period and illustrates an essential difference between modern and Victorian critical practice: where modern critics produce arguments, Horne and his peers produced tactful, allusive, and "suggestive" descriptions.

Finally, two essays discuss the work of critics not often included in volumes such as this one. In the first, "'The Morality of Style': John Morley as Essayistic Liberal," Marco de Waard looks at Morley's theory of criticism, which de Waard describes as "essayistic liberalism," in his reviews of historical works. Barbara Leckie's "'A New Departure in Biography': Samuel Smiles' Writing" rescues Smiles from criticism that branded his work as anecdotal, fragmented, and repetitive.

The guiding principles that inspired this Special Issue and I hope have served to inform all of the essays in it were set down more than thirty years ago by Orel in the Introduction to his *Victorian Literary Critics*: "Victorian critics at their best wrote with sensibility, intelligence and style. [...] They believed that true culture is humanistic, and that good literary criticism can be, and often is, a potent force in producing a civilised society" (3). I would expand his statement to include much of Victorian criticism that attempts to perform a greater function than the simple elucidation of specific literary works. It seems to me that the Victorians viewed the critical enterprise as vital to sustain culture and the advancement of humanity. Whether we still believe that in the twenty-first century may be debatable, but it is refreshing, to me at least, to revisit the work of men and women optimistic about the role of literature in shaping society.

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