Thinking in Time

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IT is an extraordinary pleasure to be read so carefully by people whose work has shaped your own. The people I read are always the imaginary audience in my head—so to have some of them as a real audience is amazing. And they have made me see my own work in a new way, particularly the things about it that are odd, things I've lived with for so long that I don't really notice them.

One of the odd things about this book is that it has three big arguments. It has those arguments because that's where the questions led me, from the moment in the late 1990s when I began it. At that moment I was fascinated by the way Anthony Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* (1871–73) was so profoundly illuminated by theories linking the circulation of women, goods, and words, theories that came out of structuralism and poststructuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss, French feminism, and Gayle Rubin, among others. Did that fit, I wondered, mean anything other than that these theories were "true"? And why was it that the theories and the metaphorical language of the novel made Lizzie a seller of herself, when Trollope had gone through all the trouble to make her a widow with money who was, actually, buying a husband? You could see this as further evidence that the theories were true—that Victorians imagined women as economic objects, rather than economic agents, even if they did have money. Or you could ask, as I always like to do: Is there another way to see this? Those questions led me to the Victorian anthropologists, Trollope's relation to them, and their relation to the twentieth-century theorists of sexuality through whom we read Victorian novels. And they led me to suspect that if there was a fit between our theory and Victorian novels, perhaps that might be not because our theories were true but because they were Victorian, because Victorian ideas, from Victorian novelists and theorists, produced much of the theory we used to read those ideas. At the time, I thought the primary usefulness of knowing this would be to get us to reexamine our own

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theory for remnants of Victorian error. In this I was following in the footsteps of feminists writing in the 1970s and '80s (Elizabeth Fee, Rosalind Coward) about Victorian matriarchal theory's influence on twentieth-century feminism: it was important to understand past error in order not to replicate it. But as I realized that this idea—that all error comes from the past—was itself a very Victorian idea, my view changed. Was there another way to see this? If bad ideas come from the past, where do good ideas come from?

So, to answer some questions about a novel, I had to write a new history of the Victorian anthropology of marriage, a new history of the late Victorian novel, and a new history of late twentieth-century theory. Which I'm aware makes this a somewhat dense read. But the fact is, I could not separate these questions, because they were the same question, a question about how thought moves through time. Which is the particular historicism that interests me most, the historicism of thought in time. This book is as much about Victorian anthropology and late twentieth-century feminist theory as it is about Victorian novels, and depending on your own interests, one of these arguments may be what matters to you more than the others.

I have also realized that it's a bit odd that I read novels, anthropologists, and theorists the same way with the same attention. This could mean that I'm not properly literary, or that I'm too literary: I have to read everything and decide for myself what it means and how it works. And I read for what's weird. Thus my awful jokes—what they're about, in the book or when I make them in class, is the weirdness. Students tend to ignore the weirdness because they figure it's just "how people were then," but we also tend to ignore the weirdness as critics as a kind of tactfulness—we want to value the text, not dwell on its infelicities. But the weirdness is an opening. Once the world was not as it is now.

The other thing that makes this book odd—and which I've only realized since the book came out—is that I'm not actually into Victorian literature or history because I'm into realism, either as an aesthetic or an ethical practice. I came to this field through poetry, and my reading techniques and interests were developed on poetry and nonfiction prose, rather than novels. That, I think, is why this project is not about Victorian women's experience of marriage, or about how novels register those experiences. I see realism as a historically contingent set of conventions, and I'm not actually interested in using literature to access lived experience, if we imagine lived experience as something separate from structures of thought. I'm interested in thought, in what happens to it in

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time, in what happens to it when sex enters it. This is not a project, then, arguing that novels counter the oppressive abstractions of Victorian social theory with their ability to register all that exceeds abstract thought. I'm certainly not arguing that this isn't a very important way novels approach abstraction, structure, or system, but I think when we assume this is their only relation to abstraction, thought structure, or system, we only see one side of what they do. I wanted to show that these novels were also invested in structures and systems which made it possible for them to *think* about how change happens in time.

I realize that I'm being additive here again. But I do really hope that what I'm doing adds something to how we read these novels rather than replaces how we read them. Caring about thought in time means caring about scholarship as well—it has always seemed strange to me that the call to deepen and enrich our readings of the literature of the past so often goes hand in hand with a shallow and impoverished reading of the texts of our more recent critical past, as if we could throw away the past fifty years of reading practice to encounter the text in all its purity. This is not so much an ethics for me—though I think we might inquire about what it means if you have different ethics for reading one kind of text than another—but a problem of misrecognition of our own thinking and reading. There's no way I could make a claim that Victorian matriarchal theory does something more than reflect anxieties about masculinity, if no one had ever suggested that it did reflect anxieties about masculinity. And the something more I claim doesn't in any way cancel out the initial claim. Everything we add is both shaped by and changes what has come before. In many ways, this book was based on my sense that I was always reading back through time, and through all the critical past that stood between me and the nineteenth century, and of which I was, myself, a part.

Like many readers of Foucault, I have been moved by that passage from the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure* (1984) in which he describes his intellectual project: "The object was to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently."[1] I think now that my interest in what happens to thought in time starts there, with that very conditional interrogative sense of possibility. Is there another way to see this? How would we think differently if there were?

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Note

1. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 9.

Reference

Foucault, Michel. *The Use of Pleasure*. Volume 2 of *The History of Sexuality*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 1990.

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