THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

On Residual Forms

JACOB ROMANOW

In and of itself, the rich variety of insights gathered here decisively confirms Josephine McDonagh's dictum that "there are many different Victorians and each of them has its own history." Periodizations and subfield formations, the essays emphasize, are functionalist, structured and restructured for the particular needs of the people using them—according to their "utility," as Barbara Black writes. McDonagh, Nasser Mufti, and Olivia Lingyi Xu all point to the respective contextual specificities of my and Emily Steinlight's critiques; likewise, Simon Gikandi elucidates the highly differentiated implications of the *Victorian* across a range of distinct institutional and cultural contexts. Conversely, Priti Joshi, Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb, and Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy Wong point to materials and perspectives that Victorian studies has shown itself incapable of assimilating (Zachary Samalin, following Raymond Williams, might prefer "institutionalizing"). These field boundaries, they suggest, are constitutive failures; that is to say, failures that constitute the field through what it excludes.

I am heartened by the insistent particularism that unifies these pieces, a particularism not always evident in the wider discourse of Victorian studies today. I enthusiastically affirm the idea that *Victorian* means differently depending when, where, and by whom it is spoken. Indeed, a primary target of my article's critique is the unexamined, catchall use of the term without explicit attention to its differentiated contextual functions. At the same time, meaning is aggregative; a local definition is never enough to wash a term clean of its accumulated implications and histories. I take one key premise of Steinlight's critique to be that mere disavowal is really a kind of

JACOB ROMANOW is postdoctoral fellow in English at the University of Texas, Austin, specializing in nineteenth-century British and imperial literature, with particular focus on the relationship between narrative form and epistemologies of privacy. His work has appeared in *ELH*, *Victorian Studies*, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, *Victorian Network*, *Essays in Romanticism*, and elsewhere.

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PMLA 141·2 (2026), doi:10.1632/S0030812926101825

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101825 Published online by Cambridge University Press

integration. Neither sanguine inclusionism ("you do you!") nor bare repudiation can render literary study innocent of its historical entanglements.

That said, I take seriously the suggestion, explicit in Raza Kolb and Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong but implicit elsewhere, that this kind of analysis boils down to an effort to reanimate a corpse. Nineteenth-century studies, literary studies, the university . . . isn't it all, in 2026, residual culture? Surely it is past time to admit that any genealogy of Victorian studies is no longer a genealogy of the present (albeit, for some, still also a genealogy of the self). If, as Steinlight suggests, Victorian studies is as "lively in its obsolescence as in its heyday," it is worth asking what kind of retreat that liveliness entails. Protracted elegizing as a means of denial? quietist escapism? or just the beating of a dead horse?

For Williams, residual culture's ongoing incorporation into the dominant is what distinguishes it from the merely archaic. Simultaneously, however, it also opens the possibility of "an alternative or even oppositional relation" by which "certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue" (122). Literature itself, I think, is by now a residual form in this sense. And without attempting a defense of literature here—readers of *PMLA* will surely each have their own—I would suggest that the theorizing of this kind of relation is precisely one of literature's vital functions.

Such a function is double-edged. "A regime of visibility," writes Jacques Rancière, "is at once what renders the arts autonomous and also what links this autonomy to a general order of occupations and ways of doing and making" (22). Literary scholarship remains one means by which such a regime is constructed. The autonomy of literature (or, if that idea seems naïve, simply its estrangement from dominant culture) is part of why it might, Chatterjee suggests, "offer insight, perhaps in radically recontextualized form," into a catastrophic present. But that same autonomy can serve as a ruse for the conscription of, say, literary scholars into dominant power structures. As a result, the literariness of the *Victorian*, though not strongly emphasized in the gathered responses, is decidedly salient to the issues they raise.

Despite the avowed interdisciplinarity of Victorian studies, its literariness and the claim to autonomy that such literariness implies are among the affordances that made the field useful as a tool of statecraft in the history that Steinlight excavates.[1] The literary offered a kind of alibi; its abstraction enabled what Mufti calls "the paradoxical apolitical tendency of [scholarship's] closeness to the state." As then, now: How many American academics see our labor through a kind of Faustian frame, in which the ability to pursue meaningful work is bought through participation (complicity?) in the structures of state power that the modern university embodies?

The negotiation of this reality is among the particular urgencies of scholarly and literary life now. For me, the consideration of Victorian studies as an object—not least because of its disturbing entanglements—has been valuable in thinking through this negotiation. In my piece, I argued for understanding the Victorian first and foremost as a literary tradition rather than a period or a structure of historical power, and I suggested that doing so can help us distinguish perspectives, relations, and ideas that imperial epistemologies (then and now) are designed to emulsify. Thus, I resisted either reading *Marita* into a vague and deracinating global Victorian framework or reducing it to a reflex of the imperial relation; taking the literariness of the Victorian seriously, I proposed, makes legible how the novel's engagement with the category generated distance, not identification. If, then, Steinlight demystifies one kind of fantasy of scholarly autonomy, I intend my piece to undercut a related fantasy of scholarly powerlessness: the idea that relations within the literary sphere are finally inconsequential.

To naturalize our inherited disciplinary categories and protocols on the one hand, or to treat them as indifferently substitutable signifiers on the other, are both ways of avoiding a real scholarly responsibility. The autonomy of the cultural sphere, such as it is, remains the source of its political efficacy—as a tool of state and a site of

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101825 Published online by Cambridge University Press

resistance. The dominant works to incorporate the residual, so for the residual to serve an oppositional function, it must remain distinguishable. If I have participated in something like disciplinary self-critique, then, I do not see it as a matter of moral audit or intellectual autobiography. It is an effort to distinguish.

Note

1. See note 4 in Joshi's essay. I would add, perhaps more cynically, that the rhetoric of interdisciplinarity itself, at least in twenty-first-century American Victorian studies, functions as a kind of opportunistic special pleading, asserting an area-studies-like ambit while retaining proprietorship of a literary-historical periodization. But periodizations are not coherent independent of methodology. And it seems clear, in any case, that Victorianists are no more, and may even be less, interdisciplinary than scholars in other period fields within literary studies.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101825 Published online by Cambridge University Press