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VICTORIAN STUDIES AND CULTURAL STUDIES: A FALSE DICHOTOMY

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I WOULD RATHER not think of Victorian studies and cultural studies in antithesis because *both* terms are misleading and obstruct research. We should not be choosing between either, but trying to think of a way of working that dissolves this antithesis. The first point I would like to make is that Victorian studies came into being as an interdisciplinary project just after the second world war — the journal of that name started up in the fifties. So, paradoxically, Victorian studies emerged conceptually after modernism was over and the study of modernism was well under way. I think that one of the reasons why Victorian studies appeared post-war was slightly suspect — the seeming comfort of a period not torn by the anguish of war (wrong — there were colonial wars going on all the time, they just were forgotten). A little while ago I looked to see if *Victorian Studies* contained any kind of statement about its project when it began. The first issue of *Victorian Studies* in September 1957 contained a cautious statement about its project, describing the Victorian "era" in terms of "events and personalities" and speaking of the "coordination" of disciplines rather than their transformation (3). This was innovative for its time, but imposed conceptual limits on research. If one looks back at the early issues, they are impressively scholarly and seem to be doing bits of history so-called official historians do not do. They are still very useful, actually, but interdisciplinarity seems to have meant adding empirical history to the remit of English studies rather than thinking how they might be changed. These issues are demanding, but they are also comfortable because they do not question what interdisciplinarity implies.

There's always been a "comfort" element to Victorian studies — famously the Himmelfarb conservative think tank pamphlet entitled *Victorian Values and Twentieth-Century Condescension* defending Thatcher's account of "Victorian values," an intervention of the early eighties. Gertrude Himmelfarb produced this pamphlet in 1987 for the Centre for Policy Studies, the conservatives' semi-official policy forum (a body central to Thatcherite thinking and legislation). This was a deliberate political act, a deliberate association of herself with Thatcherite ideas. In the pamphlet she links manners and morals, approving the substitution of manners for morals because this provides formal guidance for conduct. All social classes can lean on manners, which provide a unifying element for society. She attacked "history from below," (11) the working-class history being developed through such bodies as History Workshop, whose work denigrated "bourgeois" history. Three aspects of Victorian values were praised. The belief in heroism

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(Carlyle is seen as the norm here!), the commitment to "thrift, prudence, diligence, temperance, self-reliance," (12) and, strangely, the prevalence of hypocrisy. The "smaller" values such as thrift, she argued, were deeply democratic, guaranteed independence, and were open to all levels of society. She scorned the possibility that these virtues were exploited as a form of social control, and saw hypocrisy as in essence ethical, upholding standards whatever one's personal failures. In another book, *Marriage and Morals Among the Victorians* (1986), Himmelfarb defended Dickens's lies about his marriage and relation with Ellen Ternan, suggesting that he believed so strongly in the sanctity of marriage that he upheld the general case despite his own shortcomings! To such contortions is the defense of the Victorians reduced. My point is that this kind of casuistry could never emerge but for the need to cling on to a general, all-embracing, unifying historical category, *the* Victorians. Once we begin to break down this homogenizing concept and see how varied the period was, ideologically and ethically, how varied political and moral positions were, both between and within class groupings, the term *the* Victorians becomes almost useless. The corollary to this is that Victorian studies is not a helpful term either.

In reaction to this homogenizing, ethical romanticism about the Victorians, there is a Foucauldian history, which is abrasive about such soft-centered readings. It argues for the existence of disciplinary regime of regulation and surveillance — the form of social control Himmelfarb repudiates. Every text becomes evidence of a form of regulation, demonstrating a panoptical motivation. I am thinking of two fine studies in particular, D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* and Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer.* Crary, for instance, sees the new optical culture developing in the nineteenth century as panoptical in character. The new terrain of the microscope, the optical toys of popular culture, all these belong to technologies of control of the eye, an organizing scopic subjectivity. Yes, to some extent, one answers, but, exclusive and total control? Impossible, and even if that were the case the many occasions on which panopticism breaks down are more interesting than an assumption of totalizing power. However different they may seem, the Victorian values and Foucauldian readings are dialectically related. Both depend on a homogenized account of the nineteenth century and of Victorianism in particular in order to sustain, not simply an argued case but the very concepts on which the case is based. So Himmelfarb and Foucauldian arguments are positive and negative forms of one another. One goes for value, the other brackets it, but both work with the same homogenized nineteenth century. Both positions ignore groups, subgroups, and the subtleties of nineteenth-century formations.

If the "disciplinary" Foucauldian reading that seeks to escape an ethical reading constitutes a false polarization, so is another binary often associated with it, that between the "high" literary text and cultural production. If we recast aesthetic and literary works in economic terms purely as "cultural production," the argument goes, then questions of value disappear, along with distinctions between high and low culture. Stuffy, ethical Victorian studies, with its "events and personalities," disappears. But in fact the antithesis has changed its form rather than disappearing.

This is the nexus of debates under discussion in this forum. I think they are stronger and more divisive, for reasons I find it hard to pin down, in America than in England. For instance, John Guillory's work on cultural capital is not very well known in England. But these either/or positions are surely rather sterile. To see the aesthetic as a bourgeois category of elite culture which means that one has to think of literature only in terms of cultural production, and to study the texts that Adorno describes as not falling into categories of the official

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culture in preference to literary texts is actually to give teleological status to Bourdieuian ideas of cultural capital rather than cultural value and brings in a theory of value by the back door. You look at so-called alternative materials because the texts of "high" culture are auratic and privileged, and so you seal them up in the aesthetic just as effectively as if you studied them as such, and recognize the category, leave it unchanged, even if you dislike it.

My colleague Steve Connor and I have been having an ongoing discussion about practicing a form of work we have begun to call "cultural phenomenology." Steve has a long account of it on the Web <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/Departments/English/Staff/cultphen.htm> and has thought much harder about this than I have, but though I disagree with some of his positions, I do think what he calls cultural phenomenology holds out some promise of dissolving the antithesis I have described. This work doesn't respect conventional boundaries, assumes the critic is always reckoning with his/her own intervention in the material of study as well as with the materials, wants a kind of permeability to the object of study, and to open up a range of experience for thought, from sensoria and affect to the forgotten objects of a culture. Heidegger refuses a history which is simply the object of a science and asks of the things of the past, what they *were,* and in what sense they are no longer here. He even wonders if they can ever be "past" or in what sense they can be past. This kind of speculation provides the context for our inquiries. We are both interested in working in other ways than with what have become rigidified categories of investigation. Once useful, categories such as cultural production, power, class, race, gender, or poststructuralist terms such as difference, or the body (such categories come from all sorts of methodological and ideological directions), have become hardened and do not provoke the original work they once did. The phenomenologists are attractive, and offer different possibilities, despite the huge variation in phenomenological thought, because they are interested in perception as well as in thought, and dissolve the dualism of subject and object at the same time as they keep a relational structure between two subjects in play. Merleau-Ponty's work on perception, for instance, is a re-reading of the visual. How seeing works, rather than what it is, is what interests him. How different cultural meanings accrue to sense experience at different times, and the interaction of sense experience with environment, are ways of exploring a phenomenological history. Steve Connor and I are both trying to relate the sensoria and environment at specific historical moments. That, at least, is a part of our project.

Steve is working on ventriloquism. My book on the cultural meaning of mass produced glass in the nineteenth century is something I have called, at different times, a poetics, a phenomenology, cultural critique, historical poetics. I am trying to make the researcher's mediation apparent. Glass is one of Heidegger's things of the past whose pastness is a puzzle. It isn't even made in the same way today, but it is still called glass. Though I offer a history of the glass industry at certain points in the book, I cannot get at what "happened" to different groups of people who were subjected to mass transparency and a new scopic culture as a result of the massive increase in glass production. But I can try and read glass, read texts, from novels to parliamentary papers, to think about how glass was imagined in the nineteenth century by different groups of people. That's the core of the work, the reading of an array of texts, visual, documentary, fictional. Manufacturers and the workmen who made glass, spectacle created through glass, inventors of the kaleidoscope, builders and users of windows, all form the substance of my exploration. The two major mass-produced elements in the period, the glass panel and the lens, produced a proliferating culture of glass, and I concentrate on what I have come to think

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of as the first scopic phase of modernity, from 1832 to the early twentieth century (the second, our scopic phase, depends on the screen). The book has the Crystal Palace (the palace made of windows, as *Punch* called it) at its center. The Crystal Palace was the apotheosis of a glass-created public space. Its 300,000 panels were manufactured by one firm in a matter of weeks, and were all made from blown glass, formed by human breath. It was at the center of innumerable debates, economic and aesthetic, about the implications of glass. It brought glass consciousness into a new prominence.

As an example of the way I read glass in documents and literary texts, and the attempt to read with an awareness of sensoria, the researcher's permeability to material and the material's or history's permeability to the inquirer, I begin the first chapter with what it meant to break a window at different times in the nineteenth century — it made a difference if you were artisans from the hungry forties or a late-century suffragette. And you would also be breaking blown sheet glass in one case and plate glass in the other. I draw material from the Wellington papers, from Mallarmé, Emily Brontë, newspaper reports. Wellington writes incessantly and obsessively of the danger of window-breaking. When the windows of Apsley House were broken by political agitators in 1830 he tried to claim compensation. It was disallowed because compensation was only allowable if a felony had occurred. There was no felony. The windows were just shattered, violently. The perpetrators were anonymous and almost always got away. This throws light on the nature of the act — the aesthetic *jouissance* of the practice for the window breaker and the safety of the operation despite its risk. If for Wellington window-breaking signified both an outrage on costly property and luxury, and a tediously routine way of expressing political animus on the part of the "mob," for the window-breaker something else was at stake, the satisfaction of violence and artistry. Emily Brontë recognized this when she made the adolescent Heathcliff threaten to break the windows of Thrushcross Grange. Luxury products marked with labor, made from blown glass to about the 1860s and 70s, windows contained the residues of the breath of the artisan who blew the glass; they were made out of a stranger's skills if you bought them as a rich man. The window breaker, on the other hand, was destroying the product of labor more than likely made by a fellow artisan, but bought to affirm luxury.

For me combining literary and other texts certainly raises methodological and conceptual problems. But literary texts often problematize more deeply, complexly and richly than other documents. If that is to "privilege" the text, so be it. Combining historical poetics, phenomenology, and textual analysis at least escapes from the rigidities and false antitheses of the debates between Victorian and cultural studies.

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