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REVIEW ESSAY

The Social Life of Private Notes

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Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

Simon Reader, *Notework: Victorian Literature and Nonlinear Style* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

SIMON Reader's *Notework: Victorian Literature and Nonlinear Style*, as I discuss below, pushes us to rethink how we understand notes in the nineteenth century and in our own. I will begin with the contemporary implications of Reader's argument by pairing it with Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan's *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study*. Both books foreground aspects of the research and writing life that have always supported the publish-or-perish research agenda and yet have seemed instrumental or ephemeral.

As fewer jobs reward research with protected time and better pay, it is worth a closer look at the intrinsic value of the many other forms of writing we do. In literary studies, like many other disciplines, we write much more than we publish—not only drafts and research notes but in syllabuses, emails, Twitter threads, group chats, text messages. Simon Reader's *Notework* is a book about notes, or, more precisely, "notework," that resists seeing notes as instrumental to future research. Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan's *The Teaching Archive* is a book that resists seeing teaching in opposition to "research," instead studying textual materials associated with classroom teaching as their own form of production. By naming and assigning value to informal writing, these books raise questions that matter in the broader context of the contemporary

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university: How can we understand intellectual work apart from the outcomes that have long shaped professional destiny? What models of creativity, criticism, and engagement do teaching and notework afford us?

The classroom and the notebook are elements of our working lives that invite ongoing, heterogeneous engagement between the material of the past and the circumstances of the present. In "Undisciplining Victorian Studies" (2020), Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong called us to understand "Victorianist" work beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. They quote Christina Sharpe quoting Dionne Brand to argue that we, as a field, must make space for "sitting in the room with history." Their essay reflects the imperative to reach a broader audience: it was published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* as well as in the pages of *Victorian Studies*. Responding to this call, Pearl Chaozon Bauer, Ryan D. Fong, Sophia Hsu, and Adrian S. Wisnicki founded *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom,* an ongoing, collaborative digital humanities project that "anchors itself on the idea that teaching must be taken seriously as a critical practice, as a site of disciplinary formation and transformation, and as an integral part of antiracist, anti-colonial, and decolonial organizing and activism" (https://undiscipliningvc.org). Buurma and Heffernan's *The Teaching Archive* writes a history of classroom teaching as politically, culturally, and intellectually productive.

A few of us reading this journal teach only a class or two a year, and many of us teach far more than that. Casie LeGette wisely remarked once that the best question to ask someone at a conference reception is not about their research but their teaching. Surely research lives most fully in the way we think about our courses—even for those of us who routinely teach outside the major, who, like me, routinely teach composition courses that explicitly exclude "literature." I know I'm not alone in explaining annually to my university's administration that the questions I ask in my specialized nineteenth-century research animate and transform my approach to the core curriculum.

After teaching as we knew it ended abruptly in March 2020, one comfort was *The Teaching Archive*, a book on teaching as collaborative inquiry. *The Teaching Archive* said out loud that new ways of knowing literature grow out of the classroom, and they happen in real time. *The Teaching Archive* uses documents created to organize, describe, and teach courses to revise the history of our discipline in a broader institutional context. It documents how new literary methodologies developed in classrooms, especially non-elite classrooms. *The Teaching Archive* speaks to Victorianists in our role as generalists, arguing that professors "read as

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much scholarship when constructing a new syllabus as when writing an article, and they are likely to read more widely and across more fields and even disciplines when they read for teaching" (212). Revisiting *The Teaching Archive* in the context of *Notework* makes it possible to see the importance not only of the interpersonal context of the classroom but of the many forms of writing that teaching involves.

Buurma and Heffernan lovingly re-create the paper trails linking work recognizable as academic research to courses designed and then taught by major literary figures, in accordance with university curricula. If public discussions of the university tend to focus on its hostility to intellectual work, *The Teaching Archive* documents examples of how the university classroom is central to intellectual work. Writing in the "teaching archive" is not produced for public circulation but it is nonetheless social, shaped by the context of teaching at a specific institution. In the chapter on Simon J. Ortiz and Native American Arts, for example, Buurma and Heffernan not only read the journals (which contain "poetry and prose, course descriptions and messages to his unborn child, notes about the weather and records of his extensive travels") but also the syllabi: "After a more conventional first iteration of his course in spring 1977 . . . [Ortiz] significantly revised his syllabus" (188, 184). The syllabus is a critical element of the writing life too often subsumed only under the teaching life. In the same chapter, they quote from a self-evaluation from the College of Marin personnel folder, 1976–79. Such instrumental prose has always seemed to me a step away from the critical, creative writing that research entails; nothing is further from a Moleskine notebook (a key image for the "notework" of Reader's book) than university letterhead. *The Teaching Archive* demonstrates how writing can be strictly bound to an occasion without being limited to that occasion.

Simon Reader's *Notework*, in the Stanford Text Technologies series, is a defense of notes *as* notes—not as instruments toward another end. In making a case for nonpurposive notework, Reader opens up the possibility of recognizing the many forms of writing that exceed what gets adapted or repurposed in critical or creative work. Reader resists a scholarly tendency to ransack notes for what they can tell us about major works. If George Eliot's "Quarry for *Middlemarch*" suggests the notebook was a source to be exploited for its materials, *Notework* might be understood as a book-length rebuttal of that metaphor.

Notes, in Reader's study, offer a creative space at odds with literary structure. By privileging the notebooks of Charles Darwin, George Gissing, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Oscar Wilde, and Vernon Lee,

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Notework creates a new orientation toward more familiar forms of "Victorian literature." The notebook stands opposed to sustained argument (Darwin's useless notes "can be ascribed rather to Darwin's desire to keep his thinking in pieces, to enjoy the riot of notes without forcing them prematurely into publishable and public form" [42]); to plot (Gissing imagines in *New Grub Street* a form of writing that "collects bits of 'real life' without assigning significance by means of the usual novelistic operations" [72]); and to the constraints of devotional poetry (Reader asks, "What if we stalled [at the notebooks of Hopkins], refusing to show how all of this material gets used up in the formidable lyrics"? [106]). Throughout the book, Reader draws on a wide array of critical perspectives (Barthes, Garfinkel, Bacon) to make meaning from inchoate fragments. In a way, the hero of *Notework* is Vernon Lee, who "finds a public destination for notes without sacrificing their powers of fragmentation, playfulness, intimacy, and idiosyncrasy" (25).

Part 1 of *Notework*, "Uselessness," makes the case for the importance of notes as an "aesthetic mode of documentation and containment that resists the urge to make everything immediately usable" (52). This refusal to harness scribal energies to the futurity of literary form is coded queer by George Eliot, who "marks notes as the queer element in a system of organic textual growth" through the representation of Casaubon's notes, that "long incubation producing no chick" (9). In Reader's first chapter on Darwin, Darwin's interest in useless organs becomes a metaphor for his notes: "lively, variable, but written 'for the drawer,' they perform the purposeless play of ludic change that he finds in those elements in organic structures that do not serve evident purposes in their environments" (31). Reader presents the notebooks as "a stream of fragmented and scattered existence, one that does not stop in the pleasures of beauty or sublimity but just keeps adding items to a pile" (38–9). To show the method in action, I give Reader's example in full:

> No monocotyledon plants
> ants nearby 3 feets high 2 thick with a tube at bottom
> Lichen, mosses
> Terns & Noddy on trees alight
> beautiful pink flowers on the top of mountain on trees
> vitreous feldspar & tufa alternate & dykes—white soil form bed
> Solitude on board enervating heat
> comfort: hard to look forward pleasures in prospect: do not wish for
> cold night delicious
> sea calm sky not blue

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Such parataxis amounts "not only to a record of a sensitive mind experiencing the beauty of nature but also to an idiosyncratic 'practice of the disparate'" (40). I found this example—and the examples here more generally—clear, compelling, and persuasive. Perhaps all books depend on the analysis of well-chosen examples to make their arguments, but it seems particularly important that it should be the case here, since Reader is arguing for the value of "marginal inscriptions made about ephemeral and minor experiences" while developing aesthetic concepts adequate to these inscriptions (194).

The second chapter takes up the tension between realist detail and fictional plot in George Gissing and Roland Barthes, whose works imply utopian possibilities of notes that the writers do not live to realize: they are "two ships passing in the night, neither of which lands on its desired shore" (64).

> [Barthes'] *The Preparation of the Novel* does not culminate in the publication of a novel, but instead archives Barthes's feelings about the possibility of writing one as well as his sense of inadequacy and insignificance before such a task. He fears that it will always lie beyond his ken. It is disarming to learn that the lover of fragments and the poster boy for *jouissance* reaches a point when he longs to produce continuous forms. (74)

Barthes describes a "'moral resistance' to the prospect of transforming his notes into a novel because the "fictional pretenses required to situate and give meaning to fragmentary observations about life seemed to him a bridge too far" (77). Reader connects Barthes's perspective on notes to Gissing's response to naturalism, in which "Gissing carves out a space for neutral description, where variations and differences might be assembled without always being fatally subsumed" (62). *New Grub Street*'s Biffen "hoards his minimal acts of observation into a store of potentials that needn't bear fruit either on the market or as a story" (69). The chapter concludes with Gissing's subsequent adaptation of the Commonplace Book into *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* as a step toward legitimating the formal possibilities of notework. Gissing "assembles" notations from the Commonplace Book "into a series of four essays . . . and gives them the continuity and synthesis of emerging from the consciousness of the eponymous character" (85). Gissing thus makes a claim for "the value of the insignificant, documenting phenomena without needing to enfold them into theories, providing only a transient apparatus for their containment that departs from the causal operations of plot and intrigue and proceeds by paratactical and even

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random linkages" (89). In this chapter, notework appears most clearly as an idealized, unrealized form: had Barthes and Gissing but lived, it suggests, both might have gone on to transform the novel into a form that would free notes from plot.

Part 2, "Collective," considers models of collectivity within the notebook. I was less convinced by Reader's case for unpublished notes—which were not designed for circulation and which did not circulate—as social and interpersonal. Reader links the notes of Hopkins with the ideas of sociologist Harold Garfinkel through the notion of "collective form, whether it points to the harmonies of a sunset or scenes of human interaction" (117). The distinction between nonhuman and human collectivities, which Reader elides here, seems to me an important one. The framework derived from sociology proves useful, however, because it allows Reader to reframe Hopkins's notion of inscape as a kind of perspectival synthesis. Here, Garfinkel's *haecceity* becomes the "specific, patterned, and mobile formation of elements that depends upon being noted and engaged by a writer" (107), as Hopkins seeks to capture relations among things. The verb Reader proposes for "creating relations" is *network*, as an idea "that more closely resembles drawing and collage but in which the observer includes themself as a contributing element" (102), with a sense that "seems to specify something aleatory and quick to dissipate," like clouds or bubbles (103). Chapter 4 opens with a discussion of epitome and epigram in Wilde's university notes, then shifts to epigrams in Lord Henry's conversation in *Dorian Gray*: "when epigrammatic language circulates freely in public, it loses whatever intellectual power it might have and proceeds to dismantle people's capacity for clearheaded thinking." Wilde's epigrams find a more congenial form in the 1891 "Preface" to *Dorian Gray*, which offers "lists of free-floating epigrams" that preserve the "playful but generative notational philosophical style" from the notebooks (151).

Part 3, "Swells," complements the investigation of "Uselessness" in part 1 by attending to the public life of private notes. Reader uses published notes to show how "Victorian notebooks might be published in excerpted or redacted selections, in the midst of modernist publication practices" (4). This chapter presents the triumph of the note as a register of aesthetic experience: Vernon Lee and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson "recorded their physiological responses to artworks as they beheld them" (166). Notework is both personal and social here: Lee "understands her own responses as taking place in a collective context, either alongside the ranks of many people who have grappled with

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an artwork before her (whether they recorded their impressions or not), or else with the literal *groups* of people (namely, the tourists) who filter through the museums and galleries alongside her" (176). The conclusion of *Notework* turns to Samuel Butler and the question of notes and futurity: "Butler will take his chances in a series of documentary acts recorded in his notebooks and which the future may choose to destroy or keep" (192), an openness to the value of notes that does not depend on future recognition of their greatness.

Notework pays scrupulous attention to private notebooks. Reader connects notebooks to social media in the conclusion: "we now swiftly deposit writings in online venues that in the past we might have left for future readers to discover" (193). Twitter seems to me to be closer to the co-created commonplace books of Jillian Hess's *How Romantics and Victorians Organized Information: Commonplace Books, Scrapbooks, and Albums* (2022) than it is to the private notebooks that are Reader's touchstone. At the same time, Twitter certainly also functions like another contemporary equivalent Reader invokes, the Moleskine notebook. Reader's argument reminds me that my initial response to *The Teaching Archive* was a fusillade of Tweets and texts in which I (lamentably) took pictures of pages of interest but failed to include their page numbers. I now see this as evidence that the thread was not composed as a draft for a future review but as a spontaneous register of impressions.

Taken together, these books offer a way to recognize the value of unpublished professional writing. Reader's notework is in conversation with formal publication but privileges creativity. Heffernan and Buurma help us see that, even if the university is changing and funding for humanities research is declining, the work that happens every semester in every class needn't exist in opposition to the writing and research lives we imagine for ourselves. Public-facing forms of academic writing in venues like the *LARB* and *Public Books* work to make specialized research more widely available. These books reveal a broader perspective on specialization itself, in part by construing publics beyond publication. As the job of being a scholar of Victorian literature and culture changes, it is worth recognizing the value of the work we do when we aren't preparing manuscripts.

Works Cited

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