

Viewpoint: Transatlantic Scholarship on Victorian Literature and Culture

Isobel Armstrong

Last year Sally Ledger asked me to speak on the differences between British and American criticism of Victorian literature and culture at a meeting that brought together research centres for Victorian and Nineteenth-Century studies in the UK in anticipation of the first joint meeting of the British and North American Victorian Studies Associations in the summer of 2009. It takes some temerity to do this in the twenty minutes I was allotted on this occasion. So I decided to write on three pairs of fairly recent scholarly books where a British and an American critic were writing on the same or similar topics. And on a theoretical work I could not match at the time – which was interesting in itself. I had no preconceptions – I even wondered if I might discover some mid-Atlantic style, rather as there is a mid-Atlantic accent. The books are: Sally Ledger's *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (2007), and Rosemarie Bodenheimer's *Knowing Dickens* (2007); Simon Dentith's *Epic and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2006), and Herbert Tucker's *Epic* (2008); Kirstie Blair's *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (2006), and Cornelia Pearsall's *Tennyson's Rapture* (2008). Finally, Andrew Miller's *The Burdens of Perfection* (2008) which I latterly chose to align briefly with Mike Sanders's *The Poetry of Chartism* (2009). I do not want to extrapolate massive differences from these works, but it is true that their writers are interested in doing different things. So I will concentrate on what these writers are interested in doing – I will not be offering summaries of the books or judgements of them.

Sally Ledger's book on Dickens is bold and buoyant. It is written with the confidence and pleasure of someone who knows she has discovered something important. What she does is to restore an almost completely forgotten political history to Dickens's novels. It is a history that seems blindingly obvious once she has set it out but it has been occluded. She writes: 'The cultural inheritance of the popular radical writers of the second decade of the nineteenth century in Dickens's early and middle writings cannot be overstated, nor can the extent to which this inheritance contributed to his popular appeal.'¹ The fierce satire following Peterloo, and the immensely popular attacks on authoritarian power and 'old corruption' by William Hone and Thomas Wooler had a lasting life in the popular imaginary, she argues, right through to Chartism. The use of melodrama and its conventions in radical political

critique interest her in particular because of its stark, simple, theatrical and affective disclosure of oppression. Dickens was far closer to radical politics, and to figures such as Douglas Jerrold and G.W.M. Reynolds, than we have either seen or wanted to see, she argues. Her interest is in making this history vivid again, and in making good her claim by showing how popular radical traditions and allusions to these are at work in the texts. Her splendid chapter on the use of political show trials in the Regency and allusions to them in the novels is an example of her method. Moments we have hardly noticed as political allusion stand out: Pickwick's breach of promise trial, with its allusions to the absurdly scanty evidence of Caroline Norton's adultery, resonate in Buzfuz's use of Pickwick's note about 'chops and tomata sauce'; other more sinister references in *Bleak House* (1852-3) and *Great Expectations* (1860-1) also emerge. Ledger feels no need to counter sceptical readings of Dickens the man's personal politics. What she is interested in is an impersonal history that is demonstrably *there*, both empirically and in the novels, as a structure of feeling and as fact. So what comes out is a strong, affirmative reading – and repeated political insights.

Rosemarie Bodenheimer and Ledger complement one another. For the difficult history that interests Bodenheimer is precisely what Dickens can be said to have *known*, an epistemological issue that Ledger sets aside. Her title, *Knowing Dickens*, puns on our capacity to know what he knows and the extent of his own knowing. The paradox of Dickens, the coexistence of extraordinarily sophisticated insights and the simplicities of farce and melodrama and sentiment, of subtlety and crudity, is where her meticulous book starts from. She concludes that Dickens was able strategically both to know and to ignore what he knew. But the problem of knowing carries over into the novels themselves. Thus, as in her study of George Eliot, the psychic biography that interests her is not sequential. The book is arranged thematically with chapters on 'Memory', 'Another Man' (the double), 'Streets', for example, that explore how events, traumas, passions in Dickens's life are reshaped and modulated in the action and language of the fiction. There is no simple explanatory transition from life to text, but a wonderfully concrete demonstration of the way anxieties, contradictions and repressions reappear as further problems in the novels. She is hard on Dickens's anxious class mobility, for instance, and in the 'Memory' chapter shows how consistently Dickens avoided writing about children who work in 'nondomestic jobs for regular wages', as he did himself in the trauma of the blacking warehouse: this even to the extent of an ignominious evasion of

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direct political action on the Factory Acts and the condition of children in mines.² Children in his novels both displace and recall painful memories, but the charge of feeling is all the more powerful. A magnificent account of Little Dorrit as an abused child colluding with her abuser is the fruit of such analysis. The politics and history that interest Bodenheimer are the history of identity and the politics of the self that have an unstable relation to the macro history that interests Ledger. It is this instability between different sorts of histories that should be borne in mind in relation to the theme of this paper – and to which I will return in my conclusion after a consideration of Andrew Miller’s recent work.

Simon Dentith’s crisp, concise book *Epic and Empire* could fit several times into Herbert Tucker’s insouciantly monumental study of the same genre. Despite the triumphalist rhetoric that assumes the novel both absorbed and displaced the obsolete form of epic, Tucker argues, epics persisted in their multitudes right up to the end of the century. His project is to demonstrate that epic was the primary genre of nineteenth-century modernity because it responded to the macro history of its culture. He wishes to offer a counter-narrative that shows the epic can ‘tell a sponsoring culture its own story’.³ Thus he undertakes a massive effort of codification and analysis, which reconfigures remembered and unremembered texts, in order to create this new atlas of epic. He adduces a critical mass of evidence to remake the map, and looks at the foothills of epic (and sometimes even below sea level) as well as its peaks. Thus unknown epoists such as Ann Holmes, Elizabeth Hands, Elizabeth Smith, Sara Pike (there were many female writers of epic), Richard Hole, Richard Cumberland and James Brown are constellated with William Blake, Erasmus Darwin, Robert Southey and Walter Savage Landor in the first chapter, marking the reinvention of epic as a way of addressing the scope of human action and epic itself at a moment of national crisis. At different historical moments the epic addresses crises in national history (there is a fine account of Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* as a ‘spasmodic’ epic). For Tucker ‘modern’ nineteenth-century epic uses the generic conventions of epic – invocations, listings, similes, machinery, for instance – only as second-order signs that the rubric of epic is being fulfilled, and puts them to the new uses, the exploration of a myth of development and progress in its best and worst senses.

Dentith’s much leaner book is also interested in the epic as bearer of and witness to the idea of nation. He understands epic more widely than Tucker, glossing the later period by

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the work of Tyler on primitive society and going right up to the twentieth century. The anthropologising of peoples of empire and ‘primitive’ colonial societies in the work of Haggard, Stevenson and Kipling is included under the rubric of epic. The book ends neatly, where it began, with debates on Homer’s status, by returning to more recent Homeric controversies. But he is interested not only in matching the text to a cultural moment of modernity but in the metahistory of this process: how people historicised and theorised epic, beginning with the dispute over the status of Homer and the emergence of the idea of a national poetry through Scott. Critique of critique is his aim, problematics. Scott, for instance, is caught between a ‘local, Border or Scottish, national context for poetry’ and ‘a wider British patriotism’.⁴ He too takes up the relation of epic and novel, but this elicits from him a bravura critique of Franco Moretti’s hostile reading of Bakhtin and his refusal to grant Bakhtin the polyphony on which he founds the novel. ‘[W]hat Moretti’s maps fail to include is any sense of ambivalence, or any sense that the passage from one generic world to another might be an emotionally charged one’ (*EENB*, 124). It’s instructive to compare these two critics on Morris’s *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876). Dentith looks at sources and notes the ‘novelising’ of the epic and at the same time its analytic understanding of ‘the social roots of primitive epic’ (*EENB*, 82). While he reads the poem as critique of modern economic culture, like Dentith, Tucker is more interested in the narrative dynamic of epic. The narrative dynamic is given up to the determinism of the ‘code that is the tale’ (*E*, 518), resisting a myth of progress. While Tucker is interested in the politics of form, the form history is given in the epic, Dentith is sharply interested in the way people think about history and society.

Kirstie Blair and Cornelia Pearsall are both historicists, but here I will take up the different ways they attend to the circulation of affect. For Blair this circulation is literal. Her first long chapter charts in detail Victorian medical researches into the physiology and pathology of the heart, an interest that new technologies, such as the invention of the stethoscope, made increasingly exact. A cardiac terminology – the circulation of the blood, the flow, the valve, the beat, the pulse, the throb – connected with disorders of the nervous system, with the passions, and with affect, hovers between a literal physiological meaning and a metaphorical or psychological one. The idea of the heart reaches out from the individual body to the body politic, where the transmission of affect is crucial to sickness and health. Victorian prosodists, inflecting rhythmic theory with the pulse of the heart, based theories of

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metre upon this affective and physical beat. Poetic theory is saturated with cardiac terms. Tennyson, for Blair, is the quintessential Victorian poet of the heart. She looks at the changing semantics of the pulse and heartbeat in *In Memoriam* (1850) and *Maud* (1855). Thus she is, unusually, an empirical historian of material culture and the analyst of affect.

Pearsall brings a prodigious depth of research to just four poems: ‘St Simeon Stylites’, ‘Ulysses’, ‘Tithonus’ and ‘Tiresias’. What interests her is the ethical problem of ‘seizure’ or rapture of the self by eloquence and its authority. She brings the powerful affect of different historical inflections of rapture together with politics and poetics by underpinning her study with performative theory. This is effectively a fundamental critique of current ways of approaching the dramatic monologue and it is an innovative move. Using J.L. Austin’s understanding of intentionality and performativity, utterances that perform acts, she argues that suasive, ‘efficacious language’ is both the substance and the goal of the monologue, which aims to transform its interlocutor and us and on many occasions the speaker himself.⁵ Thus the monologue is an event that takes place in the real ‘time of its utterance’ that performs the rapture it describes and is the imitation of a speech act or a *performance* of performativity (*TR*, 337). As she writes elsewhere, the monologue aims to ‘dramatize, as well as to cause, performative effects’.⁶ The speaker is an intentional being in a way that theories of the monologue usually deny, concentrating as they do on ironies of failed communication or psychological slips and betrayals of which the speaker is unconscious. Here she makes a stunning political reading, allying her formal reading with what she terms ‘Whig poetics’. In a way that revolutionises our understanding of Tennyson’s politics (he is always associated with conservatism), she shows his Whig affiliations convincingly by reference to Arthur Hallam’s correspondence, his father’s connections, and the wary relationship of both Hallam and Tennyson to Gladstone. Political action is incorporated into the very processes of the poem in this performative poetics. The speaker aims to transform, and just as the monologue brings into being a slow process of transformation, so Whig poetics reflected the process and gradualism that constituted the moderate reformism of Whig politics.

Pearsall brings a mass of material together. She is both a cultural historian and a creator of rhetorical theory. These two critics chase the tricky question of affect (you can’t *point* to it) in very different ways, Blair by describing debates about emotion inside and outside the text, Pearsall by thinking through the dynamic of the speech act. I guess the

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increasing use of Austin and ideas of performativity in criticism have subsequently prompted me to ask how one considers the success or otherwise of a performative poem. It surely cannot be the case that the mere fact of being performative is enough to guarantee a statement's communicative success. Nor does the 'real time' occurrence of performativity necessarily give it authenticity. It seems that one of the tasks ahead is to develop criteria for thinking about the success of performativity. What are they?

To recapitulate before I turn to Miller: I think all these writers are using history, but in very different ways – empirical, cultural, social – and with varying kinds of self-consciousness. For Ledger the radical tradition is a kind of impersonal, demanding ideological force that requires a response from writers, a reservoir of cultural meaning and practices to be drawn upon irrespective of the specificity of an individual subject's life and biography, whether that subject is the object of writing or the writer him or herself. For Bodenheimer's psychobiographic history it is precisely the individualised psychic experience and its convergence with empirical history that sets up a problematic relation to the text, thus requiring investigation. For Tucker the national politics of a literary form, epic, for Dentith the metahistory of epic, are foregrounded. For Blair the history of science, for Pearsall the history of a form and the politics of the emotions, determine their work. All these critics are close readers, they are all aware of gender and race, but these have been so completely assimilated into our practice that they are almost unnoticeable. More important, they are all in different ways revising what we think of as Victorian culture.

This is where I turn to Miller, who, I think, would not be interested in many of the works above, which is chastening. His is a work of high seriousness: it works through praxis (what he calls implicative criticism). Implicative criticism does not work through argument but through deictic demonstration, the effort to draw a reader into the ethical mindset of the critic. He is forging an ethical criticism, in which the attention he gives to the realist novel (actually a few exemplary texts) is intended to model the ethical reading it elicits from the text. Gone is the Barthesian 'scriptible' text (the hubristic notion that we can create the terms on which we 'read' the text and thereby write it): it is an inwardness that lives with and in and elaborates the text that he values. His sage figure is Stanley Cavell, juxtaposed rather oddly with Eve Sedgwick and Neil Hertz. His ethical language is avowedly perlocutionary (Austin's code for affectivity) and offers 'a performative experiment in method'.⁷ He explicitly (and

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very ably) repudiates both ideology critique and Foucauldian panoptical readings of power. Regenia Gagnier in her recommendation of the book speaks of his ‘return’ to ethics and, fascinatingly, the way it is ‘agitating’. For Miller resists the diktat of new historicism and regroups Victorian writing under the rubric of care of the self, the search for perfection, and brings together figures who belong to wildly different formations and political and religious affiliations in a way that amazes a paid-up new historicist (as it is probably intended to) and deliberately depoliticises. Mill and Newman rub shoulders, for instance. Kierkegaard, F.H. Bradley, Nietzsche, Browning and St Paul consort on a single page (*BP*, 15). He is reimagining the clichés of an older humanist reading of the Victorian period and making it new with what he thinks of as ‘philosophical love’.

When I think of the ‘return’ to anything (the return to ethics, the return to form) I am mindful of John Ashberry’s words – ‘return to the point of no return’. It is impossible. While I deprecate the accusatory history that ideology critique can produce, and the determinism of Foucauldian criticism, as well as the assumption by both (at their worst) that they know more than the text, I am still meditating on Miller’s praxis. His is a complex movement of thought. He argues that ‘Perfection’ involves a dialectic of belief and scepticism, for example. A valuable aspect of his praxis, and central to his position, is his reading of the realist novel through second-person mediation, a dyadic exchange – I, you, me – rather than the impersonal third person or the needy ego of the first person. But there are many things I find difficult to respond to, such as his rejection of the third person, or his understanding of the ‘optative’, the life we might lead and forego, choices forced upon us by fiction and its imagination of possibilities.

An entirely different form of ethical criticism is the work of Mike Sanders, whose *The Poetry of Chartism* (2009) is one of the most honourable acts of criticism I have read recently. Sanders makes no ethical claims for his work: what he does is to read Chartist poetry with such deep respect and historical understanding that he elicits what he calls a ‘Chartist aesthetic’. For almost the first time the terms of a body of working-class art come before us. His reading of poems in the *Northern Star*, the Chartist newspaper, is exemplary. Throughout he threads together politics, history and poetics in a way that brings political passion and the aesthetic together.

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And so, what of the differences between British and American critical interests? There are some obvious differences. American books are bigger for the most part, and rather than thinking of those jumbo packs that only American supermarkets sell, I am mindful of the resources and research time that American academics still have even in hard times. But I am tentative about pronouncing on definitive differences and giving form to an Atlantic divide. I think that Bodenheimer's concern with identity and Pearsall's interest in the performative strike a chord with Miller in the way other work does not, and this is interesting (though Miller might be arrested by Dentith's critique of Moretti's failure to detect affect, and Blair's understanding of the affect-laden text). On the other hand, British critics have grown up with the historical legacy and environment bequeathed by the Victorians – they have often learned in their (cold and insanitary) school buildings, for example. This must make a difference. I hazard that the different histories of our countries are formative of British and American criticism, particularly of the nineteenth century. While America was a republic in this century, with the right to happiness built into the constitution, England was struggling to achieve democratic suffrage, and did not do so until the twentieth century. The sharp sense of politics and a history of oppression that characterises much of the work by scholars in the UK discussed here must be down to this. The crimes of both nations were different – slavery on the one hand, working class oppression and colonial violence on the other. Americans seem to me to look at what the text is doing in its freedom. The British look at the limiting circumstances concurrent with the history of the text.

But I am aware that the tendentious generalisation is too much an inherent part of the kind of analysis I have been asked to make. It is a cause for rejoicing that so much excellent criticism of Victorian writing has arrived from both sides of the Atlantic recently, a cause for rejoicing that there is so much interchange between critics in Britain and America. Victorian criticism has always been the laboratory of theory and methodology. The books reviewed here suggest that it continues to be so.

Endnotes

¹ Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 11.

² Rosemary Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens* (Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 63.

³ Herbert Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse, 1790-1910* (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 13.

⁴ Simon Dentith, *Epic and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 42.

Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁵ Cornelia Pearsall, *Tennyson's Rapture: Transformations in the Dramatic Monologue* (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 23.

⁶ Cornelia Pearsall, 'The Dramatic Monologue', *Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. By Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), p. 79.

⁷ Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Cornell University Press, 2008), pp. 17, 27.

Also cited: Kirstie Blair, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (Oxford University Press, 2006); Mike Sanders, *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).