Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century

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Afterword

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This Afterword argues that the history of literary languages in the long nineteenth century is one of conflict between a desire for local authenticity and the global extension of a standardizing anglophone culture. It suggests that the articles on literary languages in this issue of *19* foreground three key themes that each flourish within different literary genres. First, dialect literature is embodied in vernacular and dialect poetics during the period. Second, literary dialect is intertwined in the forms of the Romantic historical novel and its heirs in regional Gothic fictions. Third, the process of unwriting and rewriting colonial narratives in alternate, resistant literary languages is registered in a range of textual formations across the century and into the present. The Afterword situates George Eliot's *Middlemarch* in the context of this tension between linguistic standardization and global mobility. It concludes that the articles in this issue are part of a broader — and hope-filled — scholarly argument that the diversity of literary languages in Britain now should be a story of rich opportunities not of deficit.

The history of literary languages in the long nineteenth century is one of conflict between a desire for local authenticity and the global extension of a standardizing anglophone culture. From the intention 'to imitate [and] adopt [...] the very language of men' in Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) through the verisimilitude of dialect in the High Victorian realist novel, to the repression of the Welsh language through state education curricula, the languages of literature embody a politics of place, identity, and mobility that remains alive still in Britain today.[1] As Karin Koehler and Gregory Tate point out in their introduction to this collection, literature in the long nineteenth century is not a mere mirror to the linguistic changes wrought by industrialization, migration, and mobility in the period; the agency of literary forms affirms and evaluates languages. Literature has the means to preserve, circulate, and amplify the plurality of languages living in nineteenth-century Britain. It also has the power to delegitimate alternative national linguistic cultures as mere provincialisms and transcribe dialect as orthographic violence in which unvoiced consonants are replaced by apostrophes indicating a deficit of social and cultural capital.

Long after the publication of the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, the idea of authenticity through the 'plainer and more emphatic language' of 'low and rustic life' empowered nineteenth-century dialect poetics.[2] In this issue of *19*, Sue Edney explores the nostalgia for a now lost world of linguistic localism evident in the preservational work of William Barnes and his fellow dialect poets. Yet, as Veronica Alfano and Simon Rennie contest, dialect poets were also invested in remaking the world. Barnes's inventive flow of neologisms creates a hyperlocalism that writes back to global modernity with its own version of a distinctive linguistic future for Wessex. Rennie's Cotton Famine poets secured a critical local voice in the global circulation of commodities through crafting a distinctive and disruptive orthography for Lancashire speech and dialect in the 'standard' press. The process of state-sanctioned standardization of speech and dialect across the nineteenth century — brilliantly charted by Lynda Mugglestone's contribution to this issue — created opportunities for resistance in which the literary is a place of interruptions. Only when a global anglophone news network had created its own literary standards of newspaper form and circulation could the satirical regional voice of the poets Rennie examines be legible at scale as a voice of alterity visible against the regularity of standardized speech.[3]

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[1] William Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. by Duncan Wu (Blackwell, 1994), pp. 357–62 (p. 359).

[2] Ibid., p. 357.

[3] See Martin Dubois, 'Dialect, Victorian Poetry, and the Voices of Print', *English Literary History*, 90.4 (2023), pp. 1069–98 (p. 1070), doi: 10.1353/elh.2023.a914016.

If the poetic forms explored in this collection can be characterized as preservationist 'dialectic literature', when it comes to fiction the examples explored are more squarely those of 'literary dialect'.[4] Starlina Rose charts the regular function of minor characters in the Romantic and early Victorian-era novel: the Welsh English of servant characters in Anna Maria Bennett's fiction serves to distinguish protagonist and sidekick, pathos and comedy. In this work, and so many other novels of the long nineteenth century, literary dialect is a means to decentre the narrative function of a character through sociogeographic provincialization. It is vanishingly rare as the century continues to find a lead protagonist who speaks with marked dialect or accent. All too often the claim of a character to a leading role as narrative focalizer is made patent by their use of a more standard form of literary language than others in the novel. The spotlight of universalizing moral experience so often tracking protagonists of the nineteenth-century realist novel is incompatible, it seems, with the local shades of literary dialect. The exception remains in genres that more directly preserved the inheritance of the Romantic nationalisms of Walter Scott and Maria Edgeworth, most notably the supra-realisms of regional Gothic literatures. Katerina García-Walsh's excellent article in this collection traces how the ghosts of nationalism return in subtle modulations of Scots speech across characters of different social classes in Margaret Oliphant's later fictions, charting the fractured imperial world of the end of the century.[5]

The matter of global mobility, insurgent nationalisms, and the drive to preserve local cultural identity is of course more present with us now than perhaps it has been since the end of the Victorian era. Lars Atkin explores how the contemporary novelist Zoë Wicomb returns to the life and work of the Scottish emigrant writer Thomas Pringle to examine the layerings of language, culture, and violent settler-colonial dispossessions that still impact South Africa today. Peter Mackay illuminates the live connection between the Gaelic poetry of Màiri Mhòr nan Oran and the troubling currents of exclusionary nativism in current political discourse. Màiri's political poetry, Mackay argues, constitutes a 'rewilding' and reversal of preservationist enclosure of Gaelic poetry in a sea of English. And yet that passionate, exclusionary blood-and-soil attachment to nation cannot be overlooked as a live global and political problem that remains with us today.

Other ways of living national languages are possible. The research network that underpins this issue of *19* was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council

[4] Patrick Honeybone and Warren Maguire, 'Introduction: What is Dialect Writing? What is the North of England?', in *Dialect Writing and the North of England*, ed. by Patrick Honeybone and Warren Maguire (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), pp. 1–28 (p. 4), doi: 10.3366/edinburgh/9781474442565.001.0001.

[5] See also Paolo D'Indinosante's contribution to this collection on Kipling's conscious deployment of Scots in the context of the new imperialism.

with a grant which enabled events to be fully respectful of the multiple languages of Britain in its practical forms as well as its intellectual content. Participating in the network event at the University of Bangor in January 2023 had a profound impact on my frame of reference as a long-term scholar of nineteenth-century British literature and culture. The full and expert support of simultaneous translators across the event between Welsh/Cymraeg and English as well as the exploration of Welsh periodical literatures in several papers effected a decentring of my own Anglocentric provincialism that no mere written argument could ever have achieved. It is one thing to conceive of the idea of a multi- or translingual literary Britain; it is another to be speaking and listening to it. The impact of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure (2011) ensuring that Welsh is the official language of the state and must be treated no less favourably than English in public life is the countermeasure to the long history of state repression of languages and dialects in Britain as mere provincialisms to be erased by public education. The noticeable — and hopefully temporary — decline in Welsh speakers in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent closure of education settings demonstrates the power of the state through education to create future communities of language that embrace those arriving more recently in Wales. Respecting and growing a multilingual approach to British culture is possible without retreating to nationalist politics of preservationism and exclusion.

As Lynda Mugglestone observes in her study of 'Speakers' — anthologies of extracts for practising reading aloud — the nineteenth-century conceptualization of British literature was self-consciously transnational. These polite selections highlighted the regional and national diversity of literatures while insisting on standardized delivery as a necessary feature of education. The need to surmount locally distinctive speech patterns in order to achieve social and geographical mobility was the clear context that fuelled the popularity of 'Speakers'. Mugglestone's example of John Connery's *New Speaker: With an Essay on Elocution* (1861) is characteristic of an increasingly visible anxiety about the effects of seeming provincial from 1860 onwards. Research by Helen O'Neill has documented a long nineteenth-century history in which *provincialism* moves from denoting a non-standard accent or dialect, to accumulate increasingly negative connotations of awkwardness, ignorance, and general belatedness.[6] Connery's *New Speaker* sought to erase such 'defects which are called *national*, *provincial*, and *peculiar*' — the very collocation of terms here suggesting the slide from positive cultural and political identities to marginalized awkward otherness.[7] Matthew Arnold argued in

[6] Helen Anne O'Neill, '"I didn't know there were so many kinds of people and so many sorts of provincialism in the world": Tracking Provincialism through the Nineteenth-Century Corpus', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 29.1 (2024), pp. 7–24, doi: 10.1093/jvcult/vcad032.

[7] John Connery, *The New Speaker: With an Essay on Elocution* (Saunders, Otley, 1861), p. 13, emphases in original.

'The Literary Influence of Academies' in 1865 that Britain was behindhand in necessary centralization and standardization of literature and culture. In literary style, as well as speech, British art and literature were dogged by a 'note of provinciality' full of uneven outbursts of genius lacking classical balance and proportion.[8]

George Eliot's acute awareness of the cultural and stylistic politics of such provincialism is written through her letters and her fiction. Eliot built her reputation (and fortune) in the late 1850s on the basis of *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857), *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and *Silas Marner* (1861) — stories that were praised for their materialization of Midlands character and locality through the speech patterns of minor characters such as Mrs Poyser, Bartle Massey, the Dodsons, and Dolly Winthrop. In this early phase of her career the racy humour and plain-speaking dialectal veracity of 'common' people in small towns and villages was the chief fare for positive reviews of her works rather than the sententious wisdom of the narrator that came to feature later. For much of the 1860s, however, Eliot worked away at literary forms that were deliberately less localized. Her lengthy struggles with the historical novel *Romola* (1862–63) set in fifteenth-century Florence and the long narrative poem *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868) were, she wrote to a well-meaning friend, the price paid for works never intended to be 'popular' in the mode of her early fictions set in the English Midlands.[9] The elevated register and diction of dialogue in *Romola*, for instance, is a visible estrangement from the familiar and local; characters' speech materializes the aspiration to universal humanism that is at the novel's philosophical heart.

Yet in 1870 Eliot returned to that setting of the English Midlands for *Middlemarch* and actively embraced the increasingly reviled cultural category of provincialism in her novel's subtitle: *A Study of Provincial Life*. *Middlemarch* uses the smoothing over of dialect and provincial speech that spanned the nineteenth century as a linguistic marker of generational change and new mobilities even within the town. As Lynda Mugglestone has explored in depth elsewhere, Eliot demonstrates a 'hypersensitivity to the social import of language' as a means to materialize character and place.[10] The concretizing power of regional speech is a key innovation in realist character and form in Eliot's works. According to Eliot, Dickens's capacity to at once capture cockney colloquialism

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[8] Matthew Arnold, 'The Literary Influence of Academies', in Arnold, *Essays in Criticism*, intr. by Clement A. Miles (Clarendon Press, 1918), pp. 37–63 (p. 60). For a full discussion of Arnold's views on provincialism, see Ruth Livesey, 'Middleness: Provincial Fiction and the Aesthetics of Dull Life', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 29.1 (2024), pp. 25–36, doi: 10.1093/jvcult/vcad029.

[9] Letter to Sara Sophia Hennell, 14 July 1862, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon Haight, 9 vols (Yale University Press, 1954–1978), IV: *1862–1868* (1955), pp. 48–49 (p. 49).

[10] Lynda Mugglestone, '"Grammatical Fair Ones": Women, Men, and Attitudes to Language in the Novels of George Eliot', *Review of English Studies*, 46.181 (1995), pp. 11–25 (p. 12), doi: 10.1093/res/XLVI.181.11.

and yet devise 'preternaturally virtuous poor children and artisans' springing fully formed from those environments was 'false psychology' and 'transcendent unreality' to be deplored for its social and ethical effects.[11] Characters, environments, and speech travel as one in Eliot's fiction. The mutual incomprehension of town-reared Silas Marner and the immobile villagers of Raveloe only a county away dramatizes the micro-localities of English character and environment on the cusp of erasure in a globalizing nineteenth century.

The literary languages of *Middlemarch* dramatize this tipping point of standardization in the 'just' past of living memory.[12] One of the first things we learn about Middlemarch and its fortunes as a town is that it is already networked into global flows of commodities through its role in the silk industry and that the pace of that circulation is about to accelerate with the arrival of the railway. Geographical mobility goes hand in hand with increased opportunities for social mobility in *Middlemarch* — and with that comes an intergenerational shift in speech and, it is implied, accent. In its self-conscious status as a novel of the 'just' past of very recent history, *Middlemarch* stages a retrospective view of the sociolinguistic impact of increased mobility that Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* celebrated and mocked at the time, as Carolyn Oulton suggests in this collection. The Vincy family embodies this world of transition in which the provincial town looks and sounds increasingly like the metropolis; the centrifugal force of a capital city that exports fashion plates, publications, and politicians while importing the new generation of middle classes into its educational establishments and professional associations. As I have explored elsewhere at more length, the novel's preoccupation with redefining what is common — in morals, manners, accent, and experience — relates to this increasingly delocalized nineteenth-century world.[13]

The first sight we have of Rosamond and Fred Vincy with their mother picks up and plays with this idea of standardized speech and literary language with joyous effect. To Rosamond's assertion that she will look above the local youth when looking for a husband — in keeping with the ambitions fostered by her education at Mrs Lemon's select academy for young ladies — Mrs Vincy responds:

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[11] [George Eliot], 'The Natural History of German Life', in Eliot, *Selected Essays, Poems, and Other Writings*, ed. by A. S. Byatt (Penguin, 1990), pp. 107–39 (p. 111).

[12] For the concept of the 'just' past in the Victorian novel, see Ruth Livesey, *Writing the Stage Coach Nation: Locality on the Move in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2016), doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198769439.001.0001.

[13] Ruth Livesey, '*Middlemarch*, High Realism, and the Victorian Everyday', in *Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition: The 1870s*, ed. by Alison Chapman (Cambridge University Press, 2025), pp. 127–45, doi: 10.1017/9781108954792.007.

> ‘So it seems, my love, for you have as good as refused the pick of them; and if there’s better to be had, I’m sure there’s no girl better deserves it.’
> ‘Excuse me, mamma — I wish you would not say, “the pick of them”.’
> ‘Why, what else are they?’
> ‘I mean, mamma, it is rather a vulgar expression.’
> ‘Very likely, my dear; I never was a good speaker. What should I say?’
> ‘The best of them.’
> ‘Why, that seems just as plain and common. If I had had time to think, I should have said, “the most superior young men”. But with your education you must know.’

Mrs Vincy — the daughter of a Middlemarch publican with little education herself — is happy to use a direct vernacular phrase but conscious that more elaborate expression such as ‘the most superior young men’ might seem a little posher. Rosamond’s chief educational gift is her rapidly adept mimicry in music and expression and hence she has quickly picked up that a Middlemarch notion of polite expression is in fact a clear signal of the arriviste lower-middle classes. As Fred chips in, ‘Superior is getting to be shopkeeper’s slang’ for marketing best tea and sugar. Rosamond’s almost sociopathic ability to rapidly mirror her preferred social identity is materialized through her linguistic insistence on the classical simplicity of ‘the best of them’. Her absolute inflexibility regardless of context is drawn out in her emphasis on a correct standard of speech at all times — even in the face of her shared marital and financial disasters with Lydgate later in the novel. To Fred’s relativist insistence that ‘All choice of words is slang. It marks a class’, Rosamond replies, ‘There is correct English: that is not slang.’ Fred’s rejoinder is that ‘correct English is the slang of prigs who write history and essays. And the strongest slang of all is the slang of poets.’[14] Fred’s ability to stay and thrive in Middlemarch despite his early mistakes and misfortunes elsewhere is embodied in his flexible valuation of speech and speakers of all styles and social markers.

There is of course a knowing and playful irony working across this scene. Mrs Vincy’s initial description of Rosamond refusing ‘the pick of them’ is the most illuminating and dynamic version of the interplay of choice and being chosen and social and financial hierarchies in Middlemarch. Mrs Vincy’s second version — ‘the most superior young men’ — equally embodies the mercantile culture, material underpinning, and introspective self-regard of the provincial town. Rosamond’s term ‘the best of them’ simply does not add up. What objective criteria underlie that ‘best’, we are left wondering? Certainly, the first encounter with Ned Plymdale, the prime

[14] George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, ed. by David Carroll and David Russell (Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 91–92.

Middlemarch bachelor rejected by Rosamond, leaves no assurance of the intellectual, social, or aesthetic qualities that might form that judgement. And Lydgate might think of himself as far superior to Middlemarch and hence the 'best' husband for Rosamond, but his destiny is to realize that he is in fact quite common, not exceptional at all, and probably the worst choice she could have made.

All this is to say that close reading for traces of dialect and non-standard speech in Victorian novels is highly rewarding — and perhaps most rewarding when captured on the point of vanishing into standardization. That writing was a strenuous craft was, as Will Abberley reminds us in this issue, a belief amplified by later Victorian writers on the cusp of the Aesthetic Movement — and no less so by Eliot with her emphasis on the materiality of her textual web. The labour of High Victorian realism was to materialize society, character, and place through direct speech but also to reflect the psychological dynamics at play in the code-switching and aspirational elocution of an increasingly mobile and interactive nation. That challenge to represent, preserve, and value the multitude of languages and dialects that interplay around us surely remains one of the joyful reasons for literature and for teaching it as well. More than ever in these difficult times for our discipline we need to think forwards and together — across all levels of education and between arts practice and literary research. It is a source of hope that scholars of the nineteenth century are playing a part in forging a collective sense of the function of literature in valuing voices, hosting multi- and translingualisms, and making clear that the diversity of literary languages in Britain now should be a story of rich opportunities not of deficit.[15]

[15] In addition to the work of contributors to the AHRC Nineteenth-Century Literary Languages network, see also work by Tom F. Wright on oracy, Speaking Citizens <https://speakingcitizens.org> [accessed 7 March 2025].