

REVIEW FORUM

The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel, edited by Deirdre David.
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HOW WE DO THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

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The Cambridge Companion series – in particular a volume that covers so large a territory as “The Victorian Novel” – poses a complex set of challenges to its editor and its contributors. Addressed to beginning postgraduates, advanced undergraduates, and even to the well-informed general reader, these volumes would ideally create a forum in which the most talented and influential critics would invite readers into the mysteries of the field as it is practiced at this historical moment. Contributors face the problem of summarising complex material in accessible ways, as well as the more daunting prospect of figuring out a way to talk about shifts within a seventy-year period while at the same time choosing representative novels for specific analysis. The editor – along with her task of selecting, inviting and persuading fine scholars to contribute – must decide how to break up this vast terrain into chapter categories that will do at least some justice to the many ways we read Victorian fiction in 2001.

It seems to me that editor Deirdre David and the quite stellar cast of critics she has assembled have done a remarkably good job of meeting these requirements. The essays are – with one or two exceptions – highly readable, fashioned for the purposes of the volume, and packed with up-to-the minute ideas, strategies of analysis, and invaluable information. It is no secret that recent criticism has focused on questions of gender, sexuality, and race; or that it is more interested in popular genres than in “high realism”; or that the balance of critical interest has recently shifted toward the concern about racial degeneration at the *fin-de-siècle*. David’s volume accurately reflects our moment; at the same time it points forward – in particular through the essays by Jeff Nunokawa and John Kucich – to promising directions in Victorian studies. One could wish that Nancy Armstrong’s essay had been vigorously edited, that Kate Flint’s piece on the Victorian novel and its readers had not overlapped quite so much with Simon Eliot’s study of Victorian publishing, or that Robert Weisbuch’s essay on the Oedipal struggle of American writers had found a more appropriate place of publication. But these are quibbles. Would I assign this book in my graduate courses? I would – because the individual essays are mostly well-written and useful, and also because the book as a whole throws such an interesting light on the concepts and assumptions that fuel our contemporary study of the Victorian novel. For the remainder of this review I want to concentrate on the play of three concepts which turn up regularly: realism, desire, and capitalism. These intertwined terms might be said to constitute one underlying plot in current readings of Victorian novels.

“The domestic realism that ruled the form for most of the period,” as David puts it (1) turns out to be the black hole at the centre of our current vision of the Victorian

novel. It is invoked only to be sheered away from, denied, subverted, made into a straw person, or employed as a convenient receptacle for ideas we no longer cherish. For Linda Shires, classic realism is defined as order, hierarchy, coherence, and privileged knowing; it is associated with conformity to middle-class norms (65). Having established that, Shires goes on to show how Victorian novels are *really* about the tension between Romantic individuation (desire by another name) and social discipline, between unresolvable ideologies, between different kinds and levels of discourse. But it is only late in the century, she suggests, that such fissures, inherent in the novel, cease to be covered over by the formal structures of realism. Shires is surely right to “undo” her original definition of realism, but I wonder why she needed it in the first place. In this essay and others, realism seems to stand for a way of reading Victorian novels that we have rejected. It is the centre of order against which we celebrate transgression. As Nancy Armstrong says, “Gothic fiction simply dramatises the magical thinking that inhabits the heart of realism”; it pops up in order to destroy the boundaries realism draws (115). Ronald Thomas identifies realism with “the entire ideologically laden notion of Victorian moral character,” arguing that the detective novel replaces that notion with “the more physiologically-based but socially defined conception of Victorian identity” (182-83). Lyn Pykett begins her comprehensive historical survey of sensation and the fantastic with a bow to “‘the classic realist text,’ a conservative literary form concerned to reinscribe a commonsense view of things as they are” (192).

I have no case to make for realism as a particularly enlightening or valuable term; my own tendency would be to define it as an effect, an illusion created through the juxtaposition of different genres of storytelling within a single novel. Yet in this volume realism only gets interesting again once it is placed not alongside our own privileging of individual desire or identity, but in relation to other Victorian disciplines. In his essay on intellectual debate in the Victorian novel, John Kucich (in a new, post-transgression phase of his work) rehabilitates realism by showing how it was worked out in conjunction with the methods and problems raised by science: “Victorian realism was the first literary aesthetic to be comprehensively shaped by the methods, the procedures, and the analytical goals of science, and to make a sophisticated awareness of scientific epistemology the basis for formal ordering” (219). Kucich is hardly the first to begin this kind of discussion, but his essay in this volume marks a growing and welcome tendency to read Victorian fiction for its intellectual accomplishments as well as its cultural symptomatics.

Like the notion of realism, the idea of capitalism tends to play various roles in our critical discourses. It, too, is often placed in an explicit or implicit relation to variously defined notions of desire. A reader who based her conclusions on this volume alone would be tempted to make a distinction between the pragmatic British critics (Kate Flint, Simon Eliot and Lyn Pykett) and the Americans. Flint, Eliot and Pykett focus on the novel as an economic enterprise. They elaborate the details of the Victorian literary marketplace, showing not only how fiction was packaged and published but how literary capitalism created and responded to desire by appealing to the psychological fears and fantasies of its audiences. In American criticism

capitalism has tended to reign in its more theoretical guises. In Linda Shires's essay late capitalism appears for a moment as a threat to the possibility of stable selves or nations (63). In Joseph Childers's essay on industrial culture and the novel, capitalist entrepreneurship creates both the problem of poverty and the self-protective middle-class response to it: Childers argues that the novel worked to disseminate information about the poor in such a way that "Knowledge as a commodity had appropriated the force of moral argument" (80). In one of the several arguments that Nancy Armstrong packs into her essay on gender, she recapitulates her earlier work on how the novel, in collusion with capitalism, scapegoats the undisciplined desires of women for national problems of poverty. Capitalism and desire shift positions, however, in a newer Armstrong argument about why there are no "real men" in Victorian novels. Beginning with Darwin's mixed ideas about sexual selection, Armstrong contends that the successful, capitalist male has to be feminised and purged of economic dominance before he is an attractive sexual choice for the heroine. It is not entirely clear to me how this intriguing argument sits in relation to her idea of capitalism, or her continuing insistence on the conflict between the "feminine" socialised woman and the "female" desiring one. Of the essays in the volume, this one is most in ferment and least reader-ready.

On the other hand, Jeff Nunokawa's related essay about sexuality wins the prize for the most ingenious solution to the challenges raised by the *Companion* format, as well as for the most forthright, flexible treatment of capitalism and desire. Nunokawa liberates desire from its ideological position of opposition to capitalism, bourgeois femininity, or anything else. He offers five brief readings of novels which set out five different ways in which desire is "formed" through its connection with specific historical forces. Thus desire itself acquires a name and a habitation rather than functioning as an empty but privileged term. In two different models, Nunokawa links desire with capitalism in convincing ways. One concerns the tendency of the Victorian novel to promise ultimate sexual fulfilment as a reward for the renunciation of desire, a model that imitates the deferral of desire implicit in capitalism. The other merges desire and capitalism in a study of the similarly disappointed quests for money and love in *Vanity Fair*. The other three models that Nunokawa proposes are equally insightful and suggestive.

Given a larger canvas, I would add evolution and devolution to the list of organising concepts common to current readings of Victorian fiction. But I would like in closing to comment briefly on aspects of the novel that are obscured by this collection. Despite Linda Shires's valiant efforts to describe the multiple discourses that contend within Victorian novels, readers will not learn about the variety of activities performed by nineteenth-century narrators: satire, irony, parody, melodrama, free indirect discourse, or retrospection; about the ideological effects of juxtaposed stories; about objects, places, metaphors; in short, about all the narratological inventions and effects of this remarkable art form. All that, we are forced to suppose, is subsumed in mere realism, and consigned – if we are lucky – to the undergraduate classroom.
