

Response: Reading Outward

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The 2018 NAVSA conference was called “Looking Outward,” but I heard so many talks about forms of reading that I decided to take the opportunity to think about how we read and what we read for. By “reading outward,” I mean to designate a restlessness with received wisdom, a desire to strike out into fresh ideas about literary forms and histories.

We are rethinking reading, I believe, because two critical trends are converging. For the past several years Victorianists have been debating how we read: by way of surface reading, symptomatic reading, suspicious reading, distant reading, close reading, reparative reading, paranoid reading, and digital reading. The reading wars often tacitly have constructed the text itself as a vulnerable, inert, mute entity, and the reader as an active agent. We could be hurting or helping it, consolidating similar items in bulk or zooming in on one, skimming over its surface or digging into its depths. But this vision collides with a different model of textuality that I find implicit in recent work on temporality, wherein texts are somewhat more interactive, influencing one another, carrying residual marks of previous contact, prefiguring and recasting inherited techniques. In reassessing literary history, we accept a more modest and hopefully less invasive kind of agency, the stance of the careful observer assessing changed forms over time. Theorists of queer temporality have been exploring the political affordances of finding oneself outside of conventional linear (re)productive time, and the ways in which this subject position might orient one toward suspension, looking backward, or a utopian futurity.¹ This work stresses the subjective experience of temporal duration, in which time

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can feel suspended, slowed, frozen, simultaneous. This suggests a new model of understanding literary history beyond a simple linear chronology in which predecessors influence inheritors. In other words, considering time itself might provide a more generous and nuanced way of thinking about reading.

The three preceding articles bring historical interest to bear on the reading wars. Sara L. Maurer, Maia McAleavey, and Lech Harris each offer a radical proposition based on the surprising longevity of an early-Victorian textual structure. Their work models the ways in which a sensitive alertness to textual elements can reshape conventional literary history by steering between the Scylla of intrusive critical agency and the Charybdis of simplistic models of influence. They trace the long afterlife of 1810s-1830s readerly expectations, a richly residual presence that a careful reader can sense permeating subsequent work.

Sara L. Maurer's study of the evangelical religious tracts of the 1820s and 1830s reveals that they discouraged sympathetic affiliation. Rather, in Maurer's words, they "encouraged the individual reader to experience his or her own unlimited personal responsibility for developing an inner conscience in response to these texts. This weakened the tracts' potential for creating fellow feeling among transnational communities" (224). Thus the Religious Tract Society produced stories featuring someone unlike the reader, not to encourage identification, feel community, or develop sympathy, but rather in order to "foreground . . . reading as re-experience" (226). Tract readers used the text to move back into their own memories. In the early Victorian period, people practiced a form of reading that was a kind of closed loop, a solipsistic self-reference that explicitly eschewed affiliative outreach. Maurer's study shows that "embedded within the most social space of the Victorian social problem novel is a style of deeply asocial reading" (229).

Maurer accurately points out that this work problematizes Benedict Anderson's imagined community, because evangelical readers were exhorted to stop reading newspapers lest they diffuse their moral attention in imagined far-off situations instead of focusing on their own souls. These findings also challenge the study of sympathy. Today, critics debate whether readerly sympathy extends into the real world: does weeping over Tiny Tim really make one more likely to help living children in need?² Maurer, however, blocks the automatic equation of sympathy and ethical feeling. It is all the more surprising to find this asocial, solipsistic stance in the heyday of the sentimental novel, although it makes sense in terms of the history of Protestant emphasis on the formation of one's own soul and the tradition of the spiritual autobiography.

Like Maurer, Maia McAleavey recovers a form of writing that rethinks the value of social relations. McAleavey analyzes the continuity of a genre popularized by Sir Walter Scott in the 1810s and 1820s, the chronicle, which she describes as “a narrative form that prioritizes setting over plot, the episodic over the finite, and the group over the individual” (233). A story that could go on forever and can be told from the point of view of multiple characters, the chronicle lends itself well to series fiction, as Anthony Trollope, Margaret Oliphant, and Charlotte Yonge found in writing their chronicles, multiple novels with a large cast of characters in a given place. McAleavey explains that

the chronicle upends several seemingly universal features of Victorian fiction. . . . In moving narrative focus from the individual to the group, chronicles lose the logical shape of biography and its watershed events: birth, marriage, and death. Chronicles instead narrate a swathe of time that might be shorter or longer than a lifespan, often presented as a mere slice of an unfolding history. (234)

The chronicle eschews teleology to offer different models of temporality, historicity, place, and self. It asks us to read relationally, to see characters as part of a larger social group anchored in space and extending through time.

McAleavey presents nothing less than an alternative form of fiction, one that has been there under our noses all along. This is a genre that reads groups—families, nations, and clans—across time, seeking slow change from multiple perspectives anchored in space. It is the novel without the deep psychological development associated with the *bildungsroman* that has been fundamental to our conception of the genre since the 1950s. In its focus on relationality and slow change, it models opposition to the Great Man theory of history.

While McAleavey accurately identifies the chronicle form in the work of Trollope, Oliphant, and Yonge, the audience at this panel wondered whether other texts might count as chronicles. What about novels featuring particular places, such as George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871–72) or Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853)? What about other multigenerational stories, such as Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), or tales with multiple characters, such as Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1852–53)? In other words, might the chronicle idea have permeated the fiction we thought we knew? If *Wuthering Heights* is read as the intensive study of a particular individual, a Heathcliff or a Catherine, then the second generation can be dismissed (as it often is in film adaptations), but how might we read the novel if it is about the North Riding of Yorkshire?

In the final article, Lech Harris executes a startling revision of literary history in arguing that modernist style actually perpetuates, and indeed literalizes, the earlier rhetorical norms seen in Henry Fielding and William Makepeace Thackeray, among others. The congenial, chatty, digressive narrator may seem

wholly unsuited to the stringent psychological style of fin-de-siècle fiction, but Harris argues that modernist style—here, Joseph Conrad’s—subsumed rather than replaced its earlier narrative version. The difference is that the earlier version of oral narration drew on a rhetorical model of public speech, while the later used a literal transcription of speech, requiring the reader to investigate and assemble widely dispersed clues to the narratorial persona.

Style, Harris argues, has a history, and from the 1850s to the 1890s narrative style was predicated on a fresh understanding of how the author gets revealed in the text. “Style conceived under the sign of rhetoric, in which writing was understood to be merely an alternate species of orality” contrasts with the idea that “the author of style [w]as a kind of mystery, a veiled figure, who had to be traced and reconstructed through signs and symptoms embedded in the technical features of the prose” (242). Thus Harris teaches us to read Conrad not as an initiator of a new proto-modernist style but rather as “the culmination . . . of a decades-long process in which the energies and investments that had vitalized the rhetorical author were being redirected into a new dispensation. Style did not replace rhetoric: rather . . . rhetoric became style” (243). Harris not only argues for a new historical narrative about modernist style, but also speaks directly to our own development as critics pursuing suspicious readings, made possible by the idea that interiority is disseminated and concealed in clues we need to track. In this respect, he offers a literary basis for the emergence of symptomatic reading.

Harris’s theory turns modernist claims upside down. Instead of believing modernism to be divided by a chasm from the Victorian past, we now learn that the hallmark modernist quality of impersonal, experimental, internal style is a relic of the very thing that seemed its opposite: the garrulous early Victorian narrator. Similarly, if the abstract, diffuseness of difficult modernist prose is actually a careful transcription of spontaneous orality, what does this claim do to the division between speech and writing, which Jacques Derrida instantiated as fundamental to poststructuralist theory? We know that oral transmission was a big part of Victorian fictional reception—reading aloud by the domestic hearth or to workers in a shop or factory—but might the spoken word form the basis of novelistic form as well?

These three essays contribute to a new sense of history. The religious tracts teach readers to revisit their own spiritual histories, reinforcing and reinscribing that constitutive conversion experience. In so doing, the Religious Tract Society makes history into a fiercely personal account, firmly refusing any potential transnational or transperiod affiliation. Meanwhile, the chronicles—as their name implies—constitute fiction as a form of history, teaching us to

register the ways in which people change over decades as they are shaped by their particular regions. This is a genre that is all about shifting nations and eras, and about the reverberations that occur when they clash—when, for instance, an elderly person trained in one era encounters new norms, or a particular region learns to define itself as a borderland against a space that claims centrality. I am also haunted by Harris’s claim that style has a history: a mode of writing we have understood as abruptly breaking with the past can be read instead as the long tail of that past. Perhaps we ought to think of literary history itself as a chronicle, an endless story without any particular resolution, in which neither central figures nor watershed events matter because we are tracking slow changes of local cultures over time.

Harris’s article reminded me of the narrator in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Eliot famously begins the novel with a loquacious, embodied narrator, who wanders, remembers, dozes, loves, and notices that his (it is probably his) arms are benumbed. *Mill’s* narrator begins as an intrusive quasi-authorial persona, but he diffuses into a gravely omniscient guide, knowing internal movements of consciousness and larger moral affairs no human being could access. The narrative style of a patient, contemplative, sensitive, yearning observer remains throughout the novel, but by the end this must be gathered from widely distributed commentaries rather than remain localized in a particular persona.

Not for nothing is *The Mill on the Floss* set in the 1820s and 1830s: the era of Maurer’s asocial tracts. The Dodsons respond unsympathetically to Mr. Tulliver’s bankruptcy by congratulating themselves on their better preparations and their intact households; just as Maurer predicts, others’ stories function as occasions for them to turn back onto themselves. They offer moral lessons for Mrs. Tulliver, with Mrs. Glegg arguing that it is “for your own good I say this, for it’s right you should feel what your state is . . . and be humble in your mind” (Eliot 290). But it is that very self-centeredness—that multiply reinforced belief in her own moral rectitude—that allows Aunt Glegg to defend Maggie rather than to identify sympathetically with her. Perhaps a lifetime of refusing to identify with others has actually strengthened Mrs. Glegg’s “personal strength of character” to a point where she can defy her entire social world to do what she believes right (629).

Perhaps, too, Eliot imagines her reader as resembling Mrs. Glegg. After all, the narrator does not think we are able to achieve sympathetic identification with these characters, “insignificant people, whom you pass unnoticingly on the road every day” (275). Rather, witnessing this narrow, sordid, and prosaic life might give us an “oppressive feeling”; the narrator tells us “you could not live among such people” (362). Given that Eliot was the most famous advocate

of sympathy in the nineteenth-century novel, it is hard to read these claims without a certain sense that we are being accused. But perhaps a writer who grew up immersed in Evangelical religion might be aware of the value of refusing to identify.

Mrs. Glegg also thinks she is in a chronicle. She assumes that the Dodson story will go on from generation to generation, their traditions entangled in the very fabric of St. Oggs. The Dodson clan does not know they are about to be subsumed into the story of a single individual with deep psychology and a definitive ending. Yet they remain stubbornly stuck in it, an early Victorian fragment, an ineradicable presence that testifies to the possibility of a different kind of story. Eliot sets her novel in “a time when ladies in rich silk gowns wore large pockets in which they carried a mutton bone to secure them against cramp. Mrs. Glegg carried such a bone, which she had inherited from her grandmother with a brocaded gown that would stand up empty, like a suit of armour” (185). What could represent an ancient survival better than a bone? But the inherited mutton bone speaks of three generations of provincial women’s culture—domestic meals, folk medicine, brocaded dress—and of its values: thriftiness and conservation, superstition and continuity. The Dodsons’ chronicle: indestructible matter we cannot swallow, the absolutely unsympathetic Mrs. Glegg, who sticks in our craw, but whose story we must learn how to read.

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NOTES

1. For important queer temporality studies, see Edelman; Halberstam; Love; Freeman, *Time Binds*; Muñoz. Also see Freeman, *Queer Temporalities*.

2. Mary-Catherine Harrison argues that fiction teaches us to project fictional types onto real people, but Suzanne Keen remains skeptical whether literary empathy occurs and, if so, whether it would be a good idea. For accounts of sympathy in the nineteenth century, see Ablow; Festa; Greiner; Jaffe; Mitchell.

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