

LOOKING BACKWARD

Memoirs of an Old Victorianist

GEORGE LEVINE

1

TO my astonishment, I find myself not “old,” not as we all feel at least for moments during middle age, but *really* old: eighty-seven-years-plus as I write this piece. It won’t be finished until I am eighty-eight! That hard-to-swallow fact is what allows me this rather self-indulgent retrospective on a Victorianist career that has spanned several generations of criticism and scholarship. Perhaps, I dare to think, a look back at the arc of that career might be of interest to someone beside myself, moving as it does from the time—around Christmas 1958, when I began writing on a portable electric typewriter a dissertation on George Eliot and determinism—to this moment, when writing a dissertation on a single author seems rather risky and professionally unhelpful, especially if one tries to do it on a typewriter.

I guess I am a sort of walking history of the development of Victorian studies since the end of the Second World War and, further, in retirement, a witness to changes in the changes rung during my working years. Not that my life in the profession or out can be taken as representative; it is, after all, a singular life; the perspective is singularly my own. I have swum with the flow and paddled against it, and I make no claims to historical precision or full accuracy. But it interests (and shocks) me not only that I have become an old man, but that I have lived through many distinct epochs of Victorianist activity, and find in these latter days that the very subject—Victorian literature—has so radically changed that all

George Levine, professor emeritus at Rutgers University, with fresh interests in aesthetics, agency, and animal intelligence, has returned to his obsession with Darwin in his recent *Victorian Studies* essay, “Victorian Excess and the Darwinian Aesthetic.” Earlier Darwinisms included *Darwin and the Novelists* (Harvard University Press, 1988), *Darwin Loves You* (Princeton University Press, 2006), and *Darwin the Writer* (Oxford University Press, 2011). He continues to love George Eliot and birds.

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the assumptions with which I began may well be undercut (and, I think selfishly, all the work that I have done made obsolete). The multiplicity of the changes has perhaps jaded me. I can't say I enjoy reading most criticism and scholarship these days. My contemporaries and near-contemporaries often make a point almost to boasting of not being able to stand reading criticism (of the sort they used to write). Yet I don't look back at my past, which for most working Victorianists will seem very distinctly *past*, as "history" but as something lived and still alive.

The benefits of the golden years are greatly exaggerated. Diminished powers, a new imbalance between retrospect and prospect, a disempowerment, probably appropriate but painful nevertheless. They have sneaked up on me, and here I am, just about the oldest Victorianist still more or less working at being a Victorianist, but not comfortable in most of the places good young scholars want to go these days. Consider: I was an undergraduate during the McCarthy years, started grad school during the Korean War, served in the military in a Germany only beginning to revive after the catastrophe of Nazi power, sat nervously with colleagues on *Victorian Studies* listening to reports of the Cuban Missile Crisis and of *Sputnik*, experienced the 1960s while already over thirty (that is, past the age at which I might be trusted), marched in Bloomington, Indiana, during the Civil Rights era, taught briefly at Berkeley in the summer of curfews, violence, and the Free Speech Movement, was stunned into disbelief by the rise of Ronald Reagan and the success of the Southern Strategy. I was reviewing Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* during the hot summer of the Watergate scandals. I linger in the age of Trump. My children are senior citizens.

I had become a literature major at about the time that one of my favorite teachers (Edwin Berry Burgum) was subpoenaed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities on charges of being a Communist. He lost his job at NYU. Very shortly after, I was drafted into the army at a moment, luckily enough for me, when the fighting in Korea had ended; during basic training, during ten-minute breaks, I would read Aldous Huxley's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, largely because I loved the quotation from Tennyson, or I would memorize a new poem by Stanley Kunitz. Going overseas in a troopship, I argued about Marx for hours each shipboard day, to the annoyance of the many crowded in the rest of the hold, with another previously deferred student. And when I returned to graduate school, I discovered in a used bookstore a nineteenth-century India paper copy of *The Mill on the Floss*, which I picked up with something like disdain—what was this, after all, but a silly

novel by a silly lady novelist? My conversion was almost immediate, and complete, and I have lived with George Eliot looking over my shoulder with sober reproof ever since.

I am now about as far from my career's opening days as I was then from the late Victorians I was thinking of as belonging to a deep past. To current scholars that past will seem, I imagine, yet more distant and yet more remarkably unenlightened. I was, however, more witness to than participant in the developments that came after. In my research career, I followed my own rather large nose and my own passions so that while I gladly accepted the interdisciplinary thrust, my work remained very much on the literary side; that work was tweaked by the sorts of criticism and theory being freshly practiced all around me, but only tweaked. I never became a deconstructionist, a Lacanian, a Foucauldian, a postcolonialist, a New Historicist, just as I was never really a New Critic. The politics that marked my career and sent me to Livingston College (the new experimental branch of Rutgers University) moved me in and out of administration but never significantly altered my relation to the literature except to make me increasingly aware of some social and cultural implications that I almost surely otherwise would have missed. At most, I have been a fellow traveler, as the changes touched the margins of whatever I was working on at the moment.

The immediate provocation to write this piece came the other morning when the fact of my age and its more than personal meaning struck home with particular force. As I passed the shelf in the hallway adjoining my bedroom, I noticed a book I hadn't opened for close to sixty years. The texture and image of its hard gray cover with maroon italic title suddenly evoked the yearning to possess it that I felt as a graduate student in 1956. I was a TA, partly by way of the GI Bill, with a year and nine months of post-Korean War military service behind me (released three months early to allow me to continue my education). Somehow, wise in the ways of impecunious TA-ship, I managed to wrangle a free desk copy, although my chances of teaching a course in which such a text would have been appropriate were nil. But the book felt deliciously necessary to me. It is an essay collection of the last word on the novel—a form about which I had just begun thinking deep thoughts after a militarily interrupted student career that had begun with an almost total commitment to poetry.

Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction, 1920–1951, edited by John W. Aldridge, with a foreword by Mark Schorer (1952). Aldridge was the only name with which I wasn't much familiar, though shortly afterward

he wrote a then-important book, *After the Lost Generation*, but Schorer, of course, was one of our more important critics, whom I met once when he came from California to give a talk when I was a graduate student at the University of Minnesota. As it sits back on my shelf now, the book, in its color and texture (and table of contents), has become my “madeleine”—registering the sharp reality of the present by evoking my past and its unselfconscious assumptions.

There they all were in the table of contents, the literary and academic gods of my years as student and grad student: Percy Lubbock and Henry James, of course—the requisite and classical reading—but then those still-living legends: Allen Tate (whose course at Minnesota made me feel for the first time that I might, after all, have a vocation in academia), F. R. Leavis, Harry Levin, Edmund Wilson, Delmore Schwartz, Richard Chase, Philip Rahv, R. P. Blackmur, Lionel Trilling, Joseph Warren Beach (who ran at Minnesota a faculty/student discussion group that awed me and at the same time made me feel something like a grown-up), Malcolm Cowley, Robert Penn Warren (who had recently been at Minnesota), David Daiches, Morton Dauwen Zabel—even T. S. Eliot on *Ulysses*. . . . How could I, twenty-four or twenty-five years old, leaning toward a career in literary study, *not* want that book?

Nothing could better represent the pastness of my early career than this sudden reengagement with those essays. Did Aldridge, for a moment, ask himself why it was that almost all the critics he signed up were men? Certainly not. Nor would I have done had I been a big academic operator in 1956 instead of an aspiring graduate student with a long way to go to the credentials that would lead to my employment. Nothing could more efficiently remind me that, yes, indeed, I am eighty-seven, and that in 1952 I graduated from NYU with a head full of Gerard Manley Hopkins, and John Donne, and T. S. Eliot, and W. B. Yeats, and along with them some novelists—E. M. Forster and D. H. Lawrence, and Kafka, Dostoyevsky, Thomas Mann, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and *Partisan* and *Kenyon* Reviews.

How, then, standing bemused in the hallway, could I allow myself nostalgia for these old boys’ jabs at modernity? Distinguished and attractive as all those names are even now, such a table of contents would be unthinkable at this moment. Where were the women, or the non-English and non-European names? In 1956 the thought never crossed my mind. Now, I confess, with deference to the guys I also admire, the most interesting critics I read in Victorian studies are almost invariably women.

My sense of having sidled over the border to old age did not of course begin with that moment in the hallway. After all, I had retired in 2006, already a distant moment in the annals of academic transformations. On the other side of that border, the sense of obsolescence has grown with my experience of occasionally dipping in again to literary journals and finding myself a stranger in a strange land. How might I disentangle my responses, which, I suspect, are the inevitable condition of being of another generation, from those that I should feel my right to assert among younger academics actively pursuing careers and living right now? How, with a sensibility formed by books like *Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction*, might I reasonably understand, no less judge, what is going on now?

But to measure the change, it's important to register not only the shock of distance but the tingly pleasure evoked in remembering the first experiences of the poetry and the novels and the serious criticism geared to its current moment, how much excitement I felt in engaging with the ideas of I. A. Richards, and Brooks and Warren, and Blackmur and Empson, and—I unembarrassedly confess—F. R. Leavis, the cantankerous and dogmatic moralist included in Aldridge's collection. Staring at that table of contents, I realized that my sixty years of writing criticism since then were a sustained but rarely successful quest to feel once again the extraordinary pleasures of those first encounters. The revelatory pleasures of the literature, the excitement of brilliant criticism. I bought into *Practical Criticism* and the "intentional fallacy," the "pathetic fallacy" (which I only later discovered had been thought out first by Ruskin, of all people), and the "fallacy of imitative form," into the pleasures and the necessities of ambiguity, the wariness of paraphrase, the wonders of metaphor and irony. The joy of reading literature was a part of the "new critical" experience that rarely is discussed, but through that intense attention to language and its myriad possibilities, I felt that I had entered a world both very beautiful and full of moral significance.

Material conditions for me and my generation of future faculty were extraordinarily right as I fell for the practice of criticism and scholarship. It was only in the middle of my graduate career, despite some boring courses that couldn't, however, crush the splendor of the texts we read, that I fully realized that I wanted to become an academic—and if I could make, say, ten thousand dollars a year someday, that would be fine. Indeed, part of the moral force of my excited literary practice was that it seemed to contrast so intensely with the world of getting and spending and of dark politics and ominous nuclear threats and the

Cold War. All these seemed to me to need a very strong dose of John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, a little drunken Dylan Thomas, and even (if we could get rid of the anti-Semitism) T. S. Eliot. I was entering an academy that, until shortly before I joined it, often set quotas on the number of Jews but suddenly, after the Second World War, became a haven for secular Jews like me who still couldn't stop reading and managed to maneuver, with not much more than a wince, past "Rachel, née Rabinowitz" who "t[ore] at the grapes with murderous paws." While with several of my fellow graduate students I was smelling something fishy and getting sophisticated enough to feel the limitations (religious, formal, political, aesthetic) that the New Criticism seemed to impose on literary study, my experience of literature, of paradox, of metonymy and metaphor, of multiplicity of meaning, of formal control, was positively thrilling.

But the study of literature in those days was not confined to a purist new criticism, and New Criticism itself was rarely as acontextual as has often been suggested. Criticism, as I read it, was an implicitly moral project, resistant to the ideology of utility that governed most of the culture's activities, insistent on close attention to language and somehow capable of arousing us to the reality of others and alternative ways of being. Writers for the *Partisan Review* were rarely formalists. Their criticism had pointedly political implications in its resistance to Russian communism; it implied an essentially leftist program, even if in these later days its leftism seems to many a dangerously conservative "liberalism." What mattered in this respect, though, was that serious criticism could be so relevantly engaged with the here and now, with the political milieu of the literature we were subjecting to such detailed analysis. After all, in Aldridge's book there was Trilling, perhaps the most recognizable critic of those times, and whatever sins he has been accused of by post-1960s criticism, he did not at all confine his work to focus on formal issues. Leavis, with all his maddening assertiveness, poured a heavy dose of moral energy into the enterprise of close reading.

Of course, my ambivalently nostalgic lingering over *Critiques and Essays on Modern Criticism* was immediately inflected by my realization that all this joy, all this sense of the specialness of literature, its intrinsic resistance to the money morality that seemed to dominate all life—political, social, personal—has been read increasingly over the years since the 1960s as mere aestheticism and formalism, elitist. Formalism became something of a curse word, for, it has been argued, it was a perspective that irresponsibly (often unselfconsciously) ignored the connections

between literature and history and social responsibility, between the activities of teaching and criticism themselves and the realities of contemporary social and economic conditions; it ignored its intrinsic provinciality and class bias, the sexism, racism, classism that mark its structures and even its interpretations.

In 1956 we were not quite there, but I felt myself resisting the dominant paradigms, even while absorbing and loving them. At Minnesota, I joined a small group of graduate students who “rebelled,” if gently, inventing a journal, my favorite of all journals still, the *Graduate Student of English*, which from 1957 to 1959, in a Leavisian, Wintersian, and marvelously naïve way, made a moral turn, demanded history along with formal insight, looked beyond the canon, and became self-conscious about the nature of the profession. We were all about to enter it and at the same time were coming to recognize that its characteristics depended far more than anyone publicly said, and that most graduates knew, on the economics of academia (and the country), on salaries, structures of power, and, indeed, the “old boys’ network.” It was a moment of unprecedented expansion of academia, a postwar boom that was on the edge of breaking down established hierarchies. Since that meant that individually we would probably do quite well—that is, get good jobs—our rebellion was not as urgent as it has become with the virtual death of the job market. Nevertheless, we needed to feel free to criticize and so refused to seek institutional funding. We printed the journal ourselves on mimeograph machines. We stapled it by hand. We found ways to distribute it around the country. I wrote essays on noncanonical authors like “Mark Rutherford” and science fiction writers. I wrote, lord preserve me, a moral critique of *Madame Bovary*. Although I was one of the editors, the real mind behind it was John Fraser, a dour, brilliant Leavisian. We funded the journal by ourselves and did its publicity and managed, at our best, to get some advertising and sell several hundred copies. (Looking back on this description, I am embarrassed to find that I managed even now to leave out a salient fact, no, two facts—that *we* were all guys, that our wives cut the plates and did much of the behind-the-scenes business. We were, after all, of our moment.)

And we learned something of the sometimes guilt-inducing complications of resistance, for creating the rebellious journal turned out to be a shrewd professional move. At hiring time, we all got what now would be considered great jobs; I got five offers. *GSE*, as we called it, turned out to be my ticket to *VS*, *Victorian Studies*.

My dissertation director, Bob Stange (a wonderfully cultivated, intelligent, and inspiring teacher and scholar, who was part of a small cohort of Ivy League-trained scholars who weren't kept on at the Ivy League schools they loved), advised me to accept the Indiana offer, where another group of young, enterprising spirits had just begun their own little intellectual rebellion by starting the assertively interdisciplinary *Victorian Studies*. Phil Appleman, Bill Madden, and Michael Wolff, veterans of the war and, Michael, of the bombings of London, were uneasy with the dominant critical paradigms as well, and with extraordinary energy and shrewdness found the resources to produce what became the preeminent journal of Victorian studies. Although it is now over sixty years old (that fact a monument to the trio's skill and imagination), *Victorian Studies* was indeed groundbreaking in its determination to bring history, politics, economics, empire into the center of literary discussion, and, in fact, to be careful not to be too literary. So, I moved from one gentle rebellion into another. Pretty lucky. I want to add here that the year I arrived at Indiana (1959), Appleman, Madden, and Wolff published a book, *1859: Entering an Age of Crisis*, which has long since disappeared from the consciousness of Victorianists. In its moment, however, it was a landmark in *Victorian Studies*' attempt to demonstrate the value of interdisciplinarity. Even more important to me, the inscription in my copy, in Phil Appleman's hand, with the signature of the others, had always felt to me like my license to practice. "In token of our contentment at our new alliance. November 24, 1959." I didn't realize, at the time, that November 24 was the date of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. I am all the more moved today.

As the best part of my very good education at Minnesota had come from my colleagues on *GSE*, so it continued and developed through my work at *Victorian Studies*. Along with the trio, Don Gray, who would become one of the great teachers of my generation, served as book review editor. There were international connections, which helped enormously when I got my first sabbatical in England, where Geoffrey Best, a distinguished historian who later turned toward modern history, was our English editor. Michael Wolff, the most intensely engaged of us all, pushed the theme of interdisciplinarity out into the empire, and emulated and helped encourage connections with the developing Birmingham school of cultural studies, with Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, Richard Hoggart, and, a bit later, Stuart Hall. The times they were a-changing,

cultural study was expanding and democratizing; literary study—which has always been my focus—felt refreshed and revitalized.

The best more or less “interdisciplinary” writing that I could do throughout that early growth and change was my first, my tenure book, *The Boundaries of Fiction*. It extended or, perhaps more precisely, exemplified the argument that Bill Madden and I were making in a collection of original essays, *The Art of Victorian Prose*, which retained that commitment to the literary in which I had been trained. But the “literary” carried with it for me (and for my *Victorian Studies* colleagues) a moral energy: it was not disassociated from the world but, precisely, engaged most intensely with it.

Whereas my dissertation was on George Eliot, and probably not very good (Stange may well have thought so too), and my first published essays after *GSE* were on George Eliot, I was fascinated by and attracted to all that nonfiction prose to which Stange had introduced me: *Culture and Anarchy*, *On Liberty*, *Modern Painters*, *Sartor Resartus*, the *Apologia*, even Macaulay’s *History of England*—they all threw me into Victorian culture and its problems, which seemed to me rather close to our own. But I loved the prose as though it were “fiction” and almost had to remind myself that it was largely occasional, like op-eds in the *New York Times*, with the same kind of immediacy and urgency. I wrestled with John Henry Newman, half-angry because he was such an extraordinarily good writer; with Matthew Arnold, who, with all his commitment to high seriousness and the various elitist attitudes for which much modern criticism has condemned him, wrote wittily, brilliantly, and originally; with Ruskin, whose purple prose was almost miraculously precise as well. They were all, to put it mildly, a long way from the left-leaning traditions in which I was born and educated. Nevertheless, I loved that prose and learned from it and sucked left-leaning implications from its marrow. I regarded it as in part symptomatic of a tendency in the culture toward the novel form, as it was becoming dominant. I even dared write, perhaps too cutely, that “all Victorian art aspires to the condition of fiction,” unwittingly participating in the move in postmodern criticism to see how even the most literal writing was also fictive. So, I leaped generic boundaries and, as it were, prepared my career for a sustained study of the novel itself.

As I dabbled, with the rest of the profession, in violation of genre, we were living through the 1960s. So, while my career was bubbling along, the intense political changes, the Civil Rights movement, the outbursts of violence, the new self-consciousness about race and gender were

transforming the entire culture. I joined a faculty group at Indiana that called itself “Committee of Concern,” which attempted both to study the issues and the politics, to engage with the students in their protests, and to mediate with the administration. We weren’t very effective, but each of us felt that we needed to make our scholarly acumen somehow immediately useful, while the campus at Bloomington, like campuses all over the country, was astir. One of my last acts at *VS* was to participate in the hiring of Martha Vicinus to take over the editorship. Martha, without the bonds that tied all the early innovators to a very different critical past, would lead the journal aggressively and creatively into full engagement with the pressing issues of 1970s culture and made feminism, to which we early editors had not sufficiently attended, a focal subject, as, following her, Patrick Brantlinger was to do with empire and British imperialism.

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My sense of the relation between the profession and the “real world” had much to do with the way the rest of my career went. I left Indiana in 1968—yes, *that* year—to help found a new “experimental” college, Livingston, at Rutgers, on the part of the campus that was once the army’s Camp Kilmer (where, I must irrelevantly add, I did guard duty fifteen years before while waiting to ship out to Germany), and to develop a department that was both intellectually innovative and directed toward absorbing and engaging first-generation college students from urban New Jersey.

More ironically than I understood, I got the job as founder and chair of the Livingston College English department because I was recognized as a scholar of Victorian literature; I brought my new-critical training, my George Eliot-inspired sense of moral urgency, my interdisciplinary Victorianist successes, my rather Victorian preoccupation with social issues, to the work of engaging with the realities of contemporary civil rights crises, identity politics, radical challenges to tradition and authority. The preparations—let’s call this *litotes*—were not adequate. Theory, intention, the ability to write literary criticism, and idealist energy—they couldn’t adequately prepare me, or many of the extraordinary scholars Livingston managed to recruit, with the complex realities of life on a campus with a mixed population of progressive upper-middle-class white kids and first-generation urban poor on a site still muddy with newness, constricted space, and no frills at all.

Struggling with the realities, I had at the same time to struggle with other more familiar matters. For the profession was changing radically too. Interdisciplinarity, now bursting into full-scale cultural studies, and ready to issue out into New Historicism and postcolonial studies, had become almost a cliché; professional self-consciousness, partly exemplified and impelled by the importation of critical theory from France, provided literary study with a new, often strained vocabulary and a new sense of its distinctiveness. The moment of postmodern high theory was upon us, and literature at times seemed displaced by the criticism that was cross-examining it in very new ways. Leftist politics and high-tech theory had to work out an accommodation, and that was sometimes awkward. Meanwhile, we were finding that just as Romantic literature served as the critical literary resource for the development of “theory,” Victorian literature, written in an age of empire, with the developing genre of the novel significantly influenced by women writers, became an inevitable basis for much of the most advanced and influential feminist thinking—consider only, for example, Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* and Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*. *Jane Eyre*, which had long been treated as a young woman’s wish-fulfillment fantasy, became one of the key texts for feminist thinking. Similarly, it produced a strong reaction in the development of identity studies and postcolonialism, race and British power having so much to do with the culture.

There was a corollary complication of which I, at least, was not at the moment fully aware. Literary criticism, transforming in part into cultural studies and insisting on its moral obligations in a world that felt (and feels even more now) in crisis, was, in effect if not in intent, attempting to assert its status among the disciplines, in part by developing a vocabulary that might be taken as evidence to justify its disciplinary status. To do literature, one needed to be able to decode its particular, developing, and, from my point of view, often pretentiously abstruse language. It was anything but the “belles lettres” mode that was so easily associated with class and racial exclusivity, and that was so self-consciously and perhaps complacently assured of its importance just because it was so distinctly *not* professional. Despite Fredric Jameson’s forceful defense of the obscurity and difficulty of the language, a defense with which I at least partly agreed, I found and continue to find that profession-wide there was insufficient attention to the responsibility to write as clearly and attractively as the concepts being worked out would allow. It was, after all, for me one of the joys of Victorian prose that it was often so beautifully written—from Arnold to Newman, Ruskin, and Pater, there was an

art to their prose. But in the rapid loss of what we were learning from Bourdieu to call its “cultural capital,” academic literary criticism can blame the nature of its prose as partial cause.

Of course, that loss was sustained by far more powerful causes. But when the economic pressures that continue now to affect academia powerfully began to develop, English and language departments were the immediate victims, and the profession’s insistence on its relevance to the crises of the moment ironically damaged what was left of its cultural capital. The complications and ironies pushed far into the past the moment in my graduate student life in which the pleasures of the text had been so stimulating and seemed so valuable, even potentially revolutionary.

For me, there was and continues to be a guilt-inducing irony: the timing of my career made me more witness than victim of many of the worst of the changes. One of the nightmares in that stage of my personally lucky career was discovering that my graduate students were running into trouble. I had assumed—they being, it seemed, a lot smarter than I was at that stage—that they would be as lucky as I had been in a job market ever-expanding. Where I began, as a graduate teacher, discouraging students from too much professional activity so that they could concentrate on their dissertations, increasingly and sadly I came to realize that every graduate student needed to concentrate on building a CV, with conference papers, publication of articles, book reviews—whatever might look good to a prospective employer. Despite an occasional happy blip, the job market and the profession have never been the same since the crash in the early 1970s. Unfortunately, it is not hard to remind ourselves that extraordinarily talented graduate students have wasted years of their lives in futile pursuit of the kind of tenure-track job that had made my own life so fortunate.

The incongruity between the arc of my career and the arc of the discipline did not assuage my guilt as, with the profession narrowing, I could not stop working at “my work.” Like the literature it pretends to clarify, that work was always my greatest professional pleasure; so, I found some little time as best I could to hack away at my Royal portable electric typewriter and read with energy and enthusiasm the Victorian novels that most engaged me. While I was wrestling with texts and theories on my typewriter, outside of my study I was building the English department at Livingston, wrestling with problems of race and identity, fighting tenure fights for faculty who were torn between the social mission of the college and the research demands of the university, fumbling with

reformation of the curriculum, experimenting with teaching methods that would allow students the widest range of choices and possibilities of initiatives.

In the mid-1970s, morally and administratively exhausted, I began to tell myself that the experiment at Livingston College was failing, and I was ready to flee and rethink my academic life. It was a personal moment but one that resonated with developments all over the country: a time of experimentation and risk-taking and disillusion. I hated feeling defeated and wanted to continue to work toward new and better ways of education.

4

But a year at Stanford gave me time to reflect on the Livingston experience and make some sense of it. It encouraged me to move away from administrative work and return full-time to Victorian study. Coming back to Rutgers in 1975, I was refreshed and intent on completing the work on realism that my Livingston life had largely interrupted. For a year or two I was largely free to do that, and I found myself in another easier sort of battle, as I thrashed about in the complexities of realism, a literary method that in those heavily theoretical days was under constant siege. In the light of my persistent engagement with the Victorian novel, with its moral energy, its imaginative vitality, its moral engagement with the here and now (and its quite striking lapses, as they seemed to many of us to exhibit), I sought a way to redefine and reaffirm its value. The critique of realism was running deep, from the epistemological to the linguistic to the political. Against the background of these critiques I was finding that the Victorian realists were hardly naïfs and not at all simply ideological victims and propagandists for the new middle class. With cues from the work of deconstructionists and others, I became increasingly alert to the self-consciousness with which the novelists tried to value the ordinariness of the everyday—which they often managed to idealize and falsify—to how they dealt with broad questions of representation and storytelling, and, surprise, surprise, I found them remarkably anticipating modern theoretical positions. I hoped I was not being naïve (or complicit) in my pleasures in Victorian fiction's heavily moral (not to speak of financial) investment in realism (and the middle-class values they implicitly associated with these). But saturated with a sense of the genre's limits, I felt and insisted on the extraordinary imaginative and creative energy that went into "representing" a reality that of course was filtered through very partial sensibilities and

cultural prejudices, not to speak of the opacities and illuminations of language itself. George Eliot loomed large in my thinking—as ever—and I rather unashamedly allowed myself to read her with the grain; but I reread many other of the canonical works of fiction with an eye to the artfulness of realism and to its power, from moment to moment, to transcend the limits of the culture it purported to portray. Out of this labor of love came *The Realistic Imagination*.

It was the last book I wrote on my Royal electric portable typewriter, and it marked a turn in my career. I attribute much of what success the book had to the fact that it wasn't written on a computer. Since then it has become for me almost too easy to revise: no tearing up pages and starting each one all over again. The digital revolution made a lot of things easier, but it did not make me a better writer. It did make me a better researcher, and it is hard even to begin to assess the degree of change in scholarly and critical habits that the revolution has wrought. But alas, I am a long way from a "digital native." Most of what is happening in theory and practice is for me opaque or difficult, while, of course, my grandchildren laugh at my simplicities in computerland. I can stand back, admire, be skeptical, and occasionally blush.

But a digital stranger can understand how the effects of digitalization extend well beyond the ease, for example, with which it makes available documents, of the kind that often took weeks to find, with a mere click of a key. Digitalization has been not merely the handmaid but one of the driving forces in the expansion of the discipline beyond the limits of the single culture on which my writing and thinking had focused throughout the first half of my career. Access to remote archives, international connection—these and other consequences of the digital revolution have opened up possibilities for Victorian studies well beyond what we imagined in 1956. It has made working interdisciplinarily easier than it was when I began. The empire stretching far from the shores of the United Kingdom emerges now as central to scholarly thinking in Victorian studies not only because of a change—a virtuous democratizing—in our political relation to the texts we study, but because the internet has opened new worlds, worlds previously not easily accessible without travel grants. My portable Royal electric sat in my little study and batted away noisily and comfortably at canonical works reread with a modernist eye, while I waited for interlibrary loan.

Coming to terms with my political naïveté and my literary enthusiasms, I found for the rest of my career something of a balance between the inevitable administrative responsibilities of senior faculty and the

research ambitions that were pushing me, by the late 1970s, to further explorations of Victorian writing. The widespread assumption by the 1980s of the virtues of interdisciplinary work made my new immersion in Darwin and evolutionary biology consonant with much that was going on throughout the increasingly dispersed practice of literary criticism and scholarship—now profoundly inflected both by “theory” and by energies overflowing from the political waves of the 1960s. Darwin was for me a revelation.

5

From the time of my first engagement with great Victorian nonfiction writing, I had been prepared to bring my literary tools to bear on texts that weren't, strictly speaking, literary. As early as 1959, John Fraser, writing for the *Graduate Student of English* under the pseudonym James English, introduced me to that way of looking at nonfiction texts with a brilliant essay on Descartes (look it up if you can find a copy of what is surely now a quite rare journal: “Descartes' *Discourse*,” *GSE* 2, no. 3 [Spring 1959]: 13–22). By the time I had finished *The Realistic Imagination*, I had encountered Darwin's name so often, been so convinced that his work was central to virtually all aspects of Victorian literature (and after all, George Eliot and Lewes did more than flirt with science throughout their careers), that I embarrassedly had to admit to myself that I had never *really* read *On the Origin of Species*. With that book (almost with the same excitement I felt when I first read *The Mill on the Floss* as a graduate student twenty-five years before), I was captured. Darwin was, willy-nilly, a writer. And one who changed the way we can look at the world.

I moved into science studies with fear and trembling since my own scientific training had been so skimpy. I realized that, whatever I did as I explored with increasing complexity the extraordinary implications of evolutionary biology, I mustn't pretend to speak with any scientific authority. My job was to understand as best I could the nature of the claims the scientists were making, as they were received and understood by the lay culture. It was Darwin and culture, Darwin as a writer, Darwin as he seems to have affected lay culture, Darwin as he, in his turn, was affected by the culture. As Gillian Beer was to put it, the influence worked both ways. I might wish that one or the other of some opposing scientific contentions were correct, but I was in no position to make a judgment about it. Humility in the face of limited knowledge is essential, and yet a little hard to accept.

But Darwin as a writer and thinker was and remained irresistible to me, and with no idea where the new burst of science studies might take us, by the early 1980s I was well on in reading and writing about Darwin, reading philosophy and history of science, finding evolutionary biology an irresistible subject. Yet my Darwin studies were almost entirely driven by my primary interest in Victorian fiction: I was looking for connections between what I was reading in Darwin and what I had, for a long time, been reading among the novelists. What I found went well beyond such a simple “influence” study. Darwin’s writing and thinking were unlike most of the strictly scientific literature I had read before. He was far more “readable,” far more personally engaged with the objects he studied, than I had anticipated. The *Origin* deserved attention of the sort Bob Stange had taught me to give to books like *Culture and Anarchy*. The world transformed when I learned to look at it through Darwinian eyes, and the tools of literary criticism were indispensable. So, by 1983, I was already sketching out a book (I had written a couple of articles). The title of Lionel Stevenson’s *Darwin among the Poets* kept nudging at me—would my book become *Darwin among the Novelists*? It was in that year that a scholar named Gillian Beer, whom I had gotten to know largely through conferences celebrating George Eliot’s centenaries—a conference at Leicester in 1972 about *Middlemarch*, a notorious conference I ran at Rutgers for the centenary of George Eliot’s death—invited me to be a visiting scholar at Girton College. She knew I had begun working on Darwin; I knew that she was working on Darwin.

While I was at Girton, preparing a talk on Darwin for the Cambridge English department, Gillian showed me (as I had asked) the galleys of *Darwin’s Plots*, which had just arrived. It was a critical moment in my career, for it was obvious right from the first page that this was a book that would reshape—or, rather, shape—the field. Gillian had found just the right language to negotiate the tricky margins of the disciplines, brilliantly reading Darwin’s texts as they developed ideas that pushed the limits of a language that had emerged from cultures with very different ways of imagining and representing the world. I was both delighted and horrified, for I had finished writing my talk and there wasn’t a decent idea in it that hadn’t been fully anticipated by Gillian—I won’t speak of the “indecent” ideas. Forced by deadline to give my talk, I was embarrassed to be saying things in public that Gillian, sitting kindly in the audience, had handled more thoroughly and better. I was groping my way. Gillian was there.

The long-term result was that my Darwin studies continued, but my book took rather a different direction from the one I had been planning

(which would have been a poor man's *Darwin's Plots*, at best). And I turned my attention to writers who probably *had not* read Darwin but whose work showed significant relations with Darwin's thinking. When, after another five years, I finished the book, I knew I shouldn't appropriate Stevenson's title, but I had the imagination only to change an adverb to a copulative—"among" to "and." So, in 1988 I published *Darwin and the Novelists*. I hoped that it might be read as a kind of supplement to Gillian's book, since it took its shape just because Gillian had written *Darwin's Plots*. Different as our books were, together we were arguing that the Darwinian method was importantly connected to "realism." The thread connecting Darwin to *The Realistic Imagination* was just there. Time blurs, and by that fluke, I acquired a probably unjust reputation as being, with Gillian, an important force not only in furthering Darwin studies but in furthering more generally the study of science and literature. I have always responded doubly to the subsequent and by now conventional linking of my name with Gillian's in these matters. On one hand, there is the pleasure of being identified as though I were Gillian's peer and as a source or influence on a movement in Victorian study that has grown and much enriched our knowledge of the literature and the period, and on the other there is the embarrassment of knowing that it was Gillian who first and best formulated the approach and who most forcefully propelled further studies in that direction, including my own.

Although my bent was and remained literary, I found discussions of evolutionary biology and philosophy and history of science continually attractive, and the relations between science and literature became a kind of obsession with me over the years through to the "science wars" and beyond. Early on, it was difficult to avoid the energy behind a developing sociology of knowledge in England that was a strong force in the cultural skepticism and critique of science that was represented in its worst form in the Sokol hoax. Through it all I hung on to conceptions of objectivity and reality (I can only use a shorthand here for the complicated epistemological and critical issues) that kept me slightly at odds with the strongest of the critiques and, it is fair to add, at odds also with the dominant theoretical directions of the discipline as a whole.

Working my way through these issues, I initiated a series on science and literature for University of Wisconsin Press with a collection of essays by scholars from many fields called *One Culture* (1987). The book, like what I hoped the series as a whole would be, was devoted to breaking down the cliché of "two cultures," which had gotten so much attention

in an essay by C. P. Snow, which F. R. Leavis had famously attacked. As my preface notes, it was an attempt to “consider ways in which literature and science might indeed be embraced in the same discourse,” not to deny that “the intricate specialization of the various sciences closes them to the lay public,” but to recognize the degree to which science and criticism, even with criticism’s increasingly hermetic language, participated in and were influenced by the same cultural context.

Obviously, the science wars did not make the mutual engagement of science and literature any easier or more credible, but while not fully acquiescing in the wave of literary questioning of scientific expertise, I continued to publish—perhaps too prolifically—on nineteenth-century science and on Darwin in particular: *Dying to Know* (2002) was followed by *Darwin Loves You* (2006) and *Darwin the Writer* (2011). However diverse the languages and methods of the sciences and of literary study, Sokol hoax or no, I continue to consider the examination of their relationship critically important to our culture. Looking back at my own career, I find that relationship symbolically and literally enacted in the way Darwin, the scientist who writes and thinks so often like a humanist, and George Eliot, the humanist who aspires to an ideal of scientific precision and objectivity, loom over just about everything I have written through those years. Together they have carried me well into retirement and beyond.

6

In the mid-1980s, as my initial struggles with Darwin bore fruit, I was—inevitably, as is the way with senior faculty if they feel any kind of responsibility to their institutions—sucked back into administrative work, but in a new way. A happy combination of circumstances led the Rutgers administration to ask me to organize and establish a humanities center, and that awkward combination of scholarly engagement with what universities call “service” once again reshaped my career.

The interdisciplinarity in which I was administratively engaged as head of the Center for the Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture (CCACC, now happily shortened to CCA) was entirely compatible with the thriving interdisciplinarity of Victorian studies, into which, luckily enough, my own fascination with Darwin and science and evolution and epistemology fit snugly. My work began to spin around large issues, like secularism, positivism, empiricism, beyond the limits of the nineteenth century though with obvious roots in it. Positivism was, for example and obviously, a distinctively nineteenth-century movement.

Nevertheless, the pull of my early years of deeply “literary” orientation had not by any means diminished. I tried from time to time to wean myself from Darwin and from worrying through the implications of evolutionary biology for literature, and among other things I turned back, belatedly and in light of the various movements that have swept through literary study and Victorian studies since I entered the profession, to reading authors outside the canon in which I was trained. Many of the novelists to which Victorianist feminism had called attention engaged me intensely, particularly Margaret Oliphant, about whom I could not help writing excitedly. I was shocked at the depth of my Victorianist ignorance when I looked out at the more than one hundred books she wrote. The canon looks different in the light of her books and those like Diana Craik’s *John Halifax, Gentleman* or Charlotte Yonge’s *The Heir of Redclyffe*, both of which sold better than Dickens. I could not resist writing about these extraordinary women, though I fear it’s too late for me to catch up, or even to stay apace with those who are making these books more central to the study of Victorian fiction.

And yet Darwin has drawn me back as I enter the last phases of what has become a very long career. With a new interest in Darwin’s theory of sexual selection, I find myself returning to the science-literature question from an entirely different direction. Although Gillian dealt importantly with sexual selection in *Darwin’s Plots* as it manifested itself most particularly in the work of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, there has been a new burst of interest in mate choice in sexual selection. The theory had a notoriously hard time among scientists and was only accepted well into the twentieth century when a satisfactory explanation of how characteristics that seemed incompatible with adaptation for survival could develop. But sexual selection thrusts the idea of beauty into speciation, and from the perspective of philosophers and theorists and literary critics it often threatens to break down the boundaries between science and broader cultural issues—particularly aesthetics. The philosopher Elisabeth Grosz and, more recently, the ornithologist Richard Prum have been developing separately through the Darwinian model a theory of the “beautiful,” an aesthetics that transcends the limits of the human and makes sense of the strange developments throughout nature and among us humans of what seem nonfunctional qualities—beauty itself. The female bird, so the argument goes, chooses the male *because he is beautiful*—she is charmed by him—not because she infers from his plumage that he will be particularly effective in helping her produce healthy offspring. The subject, however, remains contentious, particularly on the

matter of whether sexual selection is compatible with the ultra-Darwinian view that all evolutionary developments are produced by natural selection; they come through increase in “fitness,” so that, for example, the extraordinary elaborations of vocal and feather patterns in birds are to be understood as manifestations of superior powers of adaptation. This ultra-Darwinian view, close descendant of T. H. Huxley’s very tough reading of evolution, makes natural selection the exclusive determinant of evolution and the exclusive explanation of surviving biological phenomena. It is this latter view that has driven “literary Darwinism,” a method that, from my point of view—and Prum’s—badly oversimplifies both the science of evolutionary biology and the art it purports to “explain.” The subject remains contentious. In any case, Darwinian aesthetics, or at least the possibility of a fruitful interdisciplinary consideration of them, are emerging as a vital subject—and the Darwin who loves you continues to evoke my love and fascination, as do the Victorians, with all their sins now boldly outlined in Victorian studies beyond the limits of the journal that helped inspire the discipline’s expansion sixty years ago.

7

As I look back at the history I have just recounted, I find that there has been more “me” than I had intended. The effort to see myself in relation to the changes that have taken place in the time of my professional career entailed a biographical focus that, I confess (I have done a lot of confessing here), I have rather enjoyed, partly in nostalgia, partly because it has given me such a sharp vision of how radical those changes have been. I have offered here my singular, but I hope generalizable, perspective. It would be quite strange if we were not in a radically different place than the one our discipline occupied when I joined the editorial team of *Victorian Studies* in 1959. I am not then surprised that this generation’s inheritors of the project that the early editors of *Victorian Studies* partly initiated have moved well beyond what we might then have imagined. It would be strange if I did not feel a little uncomfortable with what is going on. And in this concluding section I want to lay out very briefly a very personal response, here thirteen years after my retirement, to some of the discipline’s changes. And I need to preface this expression of my unease by making clear how much I do value the extraordinary expansion of the subject that recent generations of scholars have achieved, the intensity of interdisciplinary scholarship that makes many

“literary” scholars true scholars of economics, history, sociology, and anthropology as well.

But here speaks the old curmudgeon. My early training has turned on me ironically, and where at the start I joined the editors in the great interdisciplinary and democratizing push, I now feel something more than nostalgia for what I continue to think of as “literary.” No, I don’t long for the “good old days”—it is hard to deceive oneself about them—but I feel that something extremely important, one of the key sources of the excitement I then felt about literary study, is in danger. For a long time, since the great interdisciplinary swerve, we have been worrying out the elements of bourgeois apologetics, imperialism, racism, sexism ingrained in the culture and in the great writings that it produced. But they were, after all—I dare say it—*great*. And if their only importance was that they propagandized for all those awful things, the point of literary study would disappear, except for the practice of exposing complicity.

I have tried to come to terms with the sins of George Eliot and Charles Dickens. As a confirmed Darwin lover, I have had to recognize and work with his sexism, his ultimate racism (despite his hatred of slavery). Who would escape whipping? What has been hardest for me in the new work of expansive, racially, sexually, open criticism is coming to terms with the implicit and often quite explicit condemnation of the great Victorian writers. It feels to me that what has been missing and what continues to be missed in much criticism is a sense of the humane work art can do in expanding the possibilities of the imagination, of moving us through individual experience beyond individual experience, transcending the limits of its local perspectives. Art matters intrinsically in a culture so crassly utilitarian. And in mattering as art, it carries moral freight.

So, I still read the anti-Semite T. S. Eliot, the fascist Ezra Pound, the imperialist Rudyard Kipling, Thackeray making fun of Miss Schwarz, Conrad in spite of Achebe, Carlyle the racist, Ruskin the monarchist, Darwin the sexist—and not simply to negate them. All because, as W. H. Auden put it about Kipling, Claudel, and Yeats, they “wrote well.” In the current return to consideration of matters of form, apologetic as it is, “strategic” as it sometimes calls itself (implying of course that it’s at best a necessary evil), there is an indication of what for me is the essence of the matter. Form is intrinsic to meaning itself, not something separate and elite and elitist and belletristic, but the essential element of meaning in art, which is associated with the aesthetic and the beautiful, after all. That view has been reenergized for me by my recent

studies of sexual selection. What is not immediately functional, practical, useful looks now not like a late excrescence but like a primitive and essential element of life. Attention to the beautiful, to style, to art itself, is one of the minimum requirements, an absolutely essential perspective from which to read and understand the Victorians—Eliot and Darwin among them.

The case to be made for literature, above all others, is that it is aesthetically urgent. “Form,” writing well, art—these are the central subjects of literary study, and they are not simply belletristic but in each instance laden with meaning and possibilities. These may well be truisms among a generation of remarkable literary scholars who have trained themselves so impressively as historians and social scientists. But if we are to “sell” English and language departments to universities and the societies that support them, it must be because we value what art is and talk about how, whether it gets it right or wrong, art opens up possibilities, poses critical questions.

As professor emeritus, I guess I am outside the fray. But I don’t know where I would be if it weren’t for those books that sustained me through my professional life. George Eliot continues to look demandingly over my shoulder, and chapter 74 of *Middlemarch* continues to bring tears to my eyes; Darwin’s not entirely scientific prose continues to thrill me, and he keeps getting smarter and smarter. But nor do I know where I would be (yes, I am, as predicted, eighty-eight as I write this revision) if it were not for my younger colleagues (and which of you is not younger?) who have taken the ambitions of *Victorian Studies* well beyond what its originators imagined. Yes, they often annoy me, they worry and challenge me; with their critiques and their deep study, they keep that great literature alive and demonstrate how enormously important and powerful it was, for better, sometimes for worse, not to speak of how often it is very beautiful.