

Abstraction

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COMPARED with the category of the concrete, “the abstract” tends to induce more critical suspicion in contemporary literary studies.¹ As a philosophical method and a cognitive style, abstraction often invokes negative judgments based on the claim that it eliminates the beauty of individuality, reduces details and nuances to rigidity and formality, and serves collectively oriented ideologies. The recent postcritique moment renders this category more unlikable. Yet in Victorian fictions, the word “abstract” registers a more complex semantic field with heterogeneous ethical and aesthetic judgments. In *Middlemarch* (1871–72), George Eliot uses “abstracted” to describe Dorothea’s unnamable physical appearance and mental situation after she decided to marry Casaubon.² In *Felix Holt* (1866), Esther describes her father’s deep contemplation triggered by the identity mystery of Maurice Christian as “a fit of abstraction.”³ In *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Thomas Hardy describes the way Little Father Time sees the world as “abstract.” Unlike other children who begin with details, Little Father Time seems to “have begun with the generals of life, and never to have concerned himself with the particulars.”⁴ *Jane Eyre* (1847), as Sharon Marcus has shown, embodies Charlotte Brontë’s use of abstraction as a paradoxical strategy of “self-effacement and self-advertisement” to deal with the literary market.⁵ For Victorian authors and readers, abstraction means a wide range of mental, bodily, cognitive, and social activities. It identifies a provisional detachment from interpersonal communications, a movement of emotions and expectations to an unknowable space of “beyondness,” and a synthesizing approach to projecting economically recognizable values. Such referential diversity points to this concept’s underresearched productive ambiguity, which, I argue, indexes contradictions and tensions in capitalist modernity, statistical thinking, and interdisciplinary mediations that trace significant parts of their histories back to the nineteenth century and still heavily inform our current Victorian scholarships.

Capitalism as a crucial driving force of nineteenth-century culture is a well-treaded line of inquiry. The historian Eric J. Hobsbawm calls the

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period from 1848 to 1875 “the age of capital.”⁶ A significant character of capitalist modernity, especially from Marxist theoretical perspectives, is its grand shaping force that transforms society into a “culture of abstraction *par excellence*,”⁷ a social world “constituted through abstraction to a hitherto unthinkable extent.”⁸ Roberto Finelli describes this force as “the emptying-out of the interior and the intensification of visibility of the exterior.”⁹ Treating abstraction as a category that has transhistorical value, Ernest Mandel suggests that “the ‘concrete’ capitalism of the final quarter of the twentieth century is much closer to the ‘abstract’ model of *Capital* than was the ‘concrete’ capitalism of 1867, when Marx finished correcting the proofs of Volume 1.”¹⁰ Mandel’s description indicates a critical potential of abstraction in contextualizing and conceptualizing two temporalities. One is relevant to the Victorian society starting to experience the totalizing and alienating powers of capital, and the other is pertinent to our contemporary present, which is thoroughly fueled by abstract social entities like intangible currencies, imperceptible financial markets, virtual realities, and immaterial forms of labor. Considering that Marx understands “abstract labor” as the defining source of exchange value, abstraction also serves as a concrete placeholder through which to investigate the capital-labor conflict, working conditions, and surplus value. Perhaps more important for Victorian scholars, the theorizing energy afforded by abstraction can animate an endeavor to explore and promote broader, publicly recognized values of Victorian studies under the new contexts of professional precariousness in the humanities, global postcoloniality, and climate crisis.

Abstraction also implies a cluster of aesthetic judgments toward literary styles and the methods for studying literary styles. It points to the debates between the large-scale digital humanities that (re)visualize textual phenomena into abstract patterns and the small-scale close readings that take pride in their thick descriptions and attentiveness to irreducible and nonreproducible contexts. Ryan Heuser’s recent study “Abstraction: A Literary History” applies cutting-edge computational semantics and word-embedding models to measure degrees of abstraction in the large literary corpus from 1600 to 2010.¹¹ This research reiterates the conventional description of a historical trajectory where there is a general increasing resistance against abstract expressions in fiction. But Heuser’s charts also show that Victorian fiction from 1850 to 1900 poses an exception to this trajectory: the level of semantic abstraction in this period experienced an interesting upward development. This new finding offers literary scholars in Victorian studies opportunities to investigate why fiction writers in the second half of the nineteenth

century increasingly “hesitated” to resort to concrete wordings in their composition. Integrating digital mappings with microlevel interpretations, this inquiry will not only give new accounts of Victorian fiction but also foreground literature’s significant agency of being an index of “various social forms of real abstraction constitutive of the (sensuously) unrepresentable totality of modernity itself.”¹²

Abstraction in the Victorian period also entails the historical consideration of statistical thinking and its roles in formulating social patterns and regulations based on collecting and analyzing large data. From F. W. Bessel’s concept of “probable error” in 1815 to Émile Durkheim’s sociological research of suicide rates in 1897, from Auguste Comte’s advocacy of positivism to Wilhelm Wundt’s invention of quantitative psychology, from the establishment of the Statistical Department in the General Register Office for England and Wales in 1837 to Adolphe Quetelet’s idea of the “average man,” the nineteenth century witnessed the development of using statistics to confront increased social uncertainty and indeterminism. To use Ian Hacking’s description, the nineteenth century is a historical moment of two entangled developments: “one is that of physical indeterminism; the other is that of statistical information developed for purposes of social control.”¹³ Hesitating to completely echo this Foucauldian logic, I suggest that abstraction could be reconceptualized as a more nuanced space of productive ambiguities and epistemological tensions facing both sciences and the humanities in the Victorian era. To abstract represents a vast spectrum of actions and enactments, one of which being to creatively organize and distribute the *limited* social and natural resources with an awareness of the environmentally compromised world. As Anna Kornbluh has recently claimed, abstraction invokes “a shared vision of the world, extending a joint analysis of social relations, tendering common commitments to objective improvements.”¹⁴ Such a conceptual and emancipatory complexity requires an effort to read many Victorian texts and archives in a new light that refuses to treat abstraction as a reductive given but, rather, understands it as a vital and open-ended mediating process that tests out ways of flourishing.

NOTES

1. Ian Watt associates the rise of the novel with the emergence of an “aesthetic tendency in favour of particularity” and against “abstract

- and general terms.” Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 17.
2. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871–72; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 42.
 3. George Eliot, *Felix Holt: The Radical* (1866; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 171.
 4. Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (1895; New York: W. W. Norton, 2016), 226.
 5. Sharon Marcus, “The Profession of the Author: Abstraction, Advertising, and *Jane Eyre*,” *PMLA* 110, no. 2 (1995): 207.
 6. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital: 1848–1875* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), 29.
 7. Alberto Toscano, “The Culture of Abstraction,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 25, no. 4 (2008): 67.
 8. Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 2000), 18.
 9. Roberto Finelli, “Abstraction versus Contradiction: Observations on Chris Arthur’s *The New Dialectic* and Marx’s ‘Capital,’” *Historical Materialism* 15 (2007): 67.
 10. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1867; London: Penguin Books, 1990), 82.
 11. Ryan Heuser, “Abstraction: A Literary History,” PhD diss., Stanford University, 2019.
 12. David Cunningham, “‘Very Abstract and Terribly Concrete’: Capitalism and *The Theory of the Novel*,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42, no. 2 (2009): 315.
 13. Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 6.
 14. Anna Kornbluh, “In Defense of Feminist Abstraction,” *Diacritics* 49, no. 2 (2021): 57.

