Victorian Literature and Culture (2007), **35**, 697–709. Printed in the United States of America.
Copyright © 2007 Cambridge University Press. 1060-1503/07 $9.50

SPLIT ENDS? LITERATURE AND POLITICS AT THE *FIN DE SIÈCLE*

By Jock Macleod

AS AN UNDERGRADUATE IN THE 1970s, my introduction to the 1890s was perfunctory. Squeezed into a couple of weeks in the middle of a year-long course on "Victorian and Modern Literature," the literature of the decade was reduced to aestheticism and decadence and presented as something of a preliminary to the real business of modernism. Such a focus reflected the scholarship of the time, in which the *fin de siècle* was constructed as a moment of transition, one in which the political and socio-ethical dimensions so central to high Victorian literature were evacuated, as arguments for the autonomy of art came to dominate the literary cultural landscape. The organising principle was one of bifurcation: the separating out of *avant garde* from bourgeois culture, the high from the low and, of particular relevance to this essay, literature from politics.

About fifteen to twenty years ago, the *fin de siècle* started to come into a much sharper scholarly focus. Although the sense of a transition towards modernism occasionally remained (and still remains) as something of an organising principle, the new scholarship focused on the period as one of shifting cultural and social tectonics in which key categories, discourses, formations, and institutions were riven by intense conflict and contradiction. An exemplary, though by no means exhaustive, list of works appearing in the late 1980s and early 1990s would include Linda Dowling's *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* and Regenia Gagnier's *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (both 1986), John Stokes's *In the Nineties* (1989), Elaine Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (1990), Ian Small's *Conditions of Criticism* (1991), and Judith Walkowitz's *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* and Karl Beckson's *London in the 1890s* (both 1992).

These works laid down new directions for thinking about late Victorian literary culture. They were cultural as much as literary histories, and they brought to our attention the importance (and fascination) of the period, whether understood as the 'nineties or as a longer moment, starting in the 'eighties or even the 'seventies, to the point where now the *fin* probably receives more scholarly attention than any other part of the Victorian period. Most critically, they examined both the politics of culture and the cultural politics of those decades, opening the way for a rush of later books on the construction and representation of gender and diverse sexualities, on empire and race, and on the ways in which these problems of identity intersected with multiple experiences of modernity. Much of this later work concerned itself with popular culture (especially the gothic and detective fiction), as it was here the anxieties and fears of a generation were most clearly played out.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150307051728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In addition to this direction in the scholarship, there has also been a body of fine work devoted to *fin-de-siècle* literature in relation to publishing and periodical culture, as well as work focusing on specific authors and less politically inflected topics. That work lies outside the purview of this essay. The books under review here are all examples of the different ways scholars have continued this interest in the specifically political dimensions of *fin-de-siècle* literary culture. The first of them, *Cultural politics at the Fin de Siècle* (1995), edited by Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken, provides a useful point of entry because it clearly manifests the expanding nature of the field at the time. In their introduction to the collection, Ledger and McCracken define cultural politics as "the recognition that culture is never fixed or stable and that cultural artefacts are the product of dialogue, debate and conflict" (1), a perspective that drives the emphasis on "cultural and political conflict" (2) which characterises so many of the essays in the book. The result is a picture of the *fin de siècle* as a time of contradiction and instability, riven by anxieties about the fragmentation of existing categories and the emergence of new ones. Thus in "The New Woman and the crisis of Victorianism," Ledger examines inconsistencies in the category of the New Woman, constructed as she was through contending medico-scientific, sexual, imperialist and socialist discourses. As Ledger demonstrates, the effect of such discourses was not only suppression, but also liberation. For example, the deployment of a eugenic discourse in New Woman novels "could be seen as an attempt to appropriate and transform a dominant socio-scientific discourse for subversive feminist ends" (34).

The impact of Foucault is apparent in this approach, and this holds true for several of the other essays in the collection as well. Thus Ruth Robbins shows how masculinity had become an "unstable entity" by the end of the nineteenth century by basing her argument "on Foucault's view of unstable relationships between discursive strategies in the 'world of discourse'" (138); Ed Cohen explores "the contrapuntal play between governmentality and creativity through which new possibilities for sexual pleasures and sexual meanings coalesced into the stories that we now use to signify what it means to desire affective and erotic intimacies with people of the 'same sex'" (87); and Judith Halberstam analyses the ways the "technologies" of *Dracula* gothicize certain bodies "by making monstrosity an essential component of a 'race,' a class, a gender or some hybrid of all of these" (262–63). Whether or not Foucault is consciously taken up in individual essays, one of the chief preoccupations of the book is with the discursive construction and representation of subjectivities as points of conflict, manifested textually as forms and narratives of fear and anxiety.

Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle is now over ten years old, but the preoccupation with the politics of subjectivity has remained a central concern for scholars of the period. In this sense the collection might be approached not only as a representative overview of scholarship going on at the time, but also as a useful introduction to much of the work that has come out since its publication. While this is one of the book's major strengths, it also shows up what seems to me to be a problem in *fin-de-siècle* studies. That problem is a particular conception of the political. Specifically, many of the essays are organised in terms of a conflict between dominant and oppositional (especially transgressive) discourses, behaviours, and forms. Thus for Sally Ledger, "the New Woman and her advocates were, although a transgressive socio-cultural force, in many respects complicit with residual elements of the dominant Victorian ideologies concerning gender roles, sexuality, 'race,' empire and social class" (41); and for Laura Chrisman, "far from seeing the scene [in George Egerton's *Keynotes*] as a proof of the radical oppositionality of Egerton's sexual, cultural and racial ideology

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150307051728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to dominant ideologies," it illustrates her "collusion with an imperialistic orientalism" (55).

This is all fine up to a point, but critique can come from within as well as without and can take different forms from those based on fracture and transgression. The pieces by Terry Eagleton and Regenia Gagnier, which act as the bookends of the collection, go some way towards grappling with the problem. For Eagleton, "the Victorian end-of-the-century poses an implicit challenge to those for whom the 'turn to the subject' has been an alternative to revolutionary politics rather than an essential correlate of them" (11), and in a much-quoted passage, he goes on to argue that *fin-de-siècle* intellectuals "blend belief systems with staggering nonchalance, blithely confident of some invisible omega point at which Baudelaire and Kropotkin consort harmoniously together and Emerson lies down with Engels" (12). Eagleton's point that there is "a good deal of modishness, eccentricity and excessive credulity in all this" is well taken, but for all its wit, his formulation fails to do justice to the seriousness with which many late Victorian and Edwardian intellectuals took their capacity and need to integrate – or at least to hold in some kind of conscious relation – their political and cultural views. As J. A. Hobson put it in 1909, "what is most needed now is a fuller consciousness among those who in different fields of thought and work are moved by this spirit [the "transformation of life"], a recognition of their unity of purpose and a fruitful co-operation." It isn't that literature is to serve politics, but that literature, politics, and other fields have as their common aim "the transformation of life."

Regenia Gagnier doesn't put it exactly in these terms, but she too analyses the homologies between literature and other fields – in this case the economic. In a piece that would become part of her much acclaimed *The Insatiability of Human Wants* (2000), Gagnier explores a contest between "the belief that the unconstrained development of markets and technology will provide the values most conducive to the social good . . . and the belief that the values of the market are insufficient to produce the social good" (291). This contest in values is generated against a backdrop where economic thought shifts its interest from production to consumption after about 1870, a shift homologous with the emergence of concepts of aesthetic pleasure. The significance of Gagnier's argument is that aesthetic heroes such as Pater and Wilde have critical validity, not simply because they are transgressive (indeed, their transgressiveness can appear as merely one aspect of consumerism), but because they are *also* pre-occupied with finding ways of articulating what she calls "substantive value" (306).

This opening out of interests is a defining feature of the second book under review, *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History, c.1880–1900* (2000), edited by Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst. As the editors point out in their Introduction, the period "has come to be regarded as a critical historical matrix" characterised by an "extra-ordinary sense of cross-fertilization between forms of knowledge" (xx, xxi). In this spirit, the *Reader* offers a wide selection of primary material organised into sections, whose topics range from degeneration, the metropolis, the new woman, through political discourses such as the new imperialism, socialism, and anarchism, to the new human sciences of psychology, anthropology and sexology and the pseudo-science of psychical research. Each section has approximately half-a-dozen readings, usually representing opposed or significantly different views on the topic. There are also useful brief introductions to each section, editors' notes at the end of each section, and a helpful bibliography of secondary material. Like any *Reader*, it necessarily has to limit its scope, and the editors make it clear that the absence of topics

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150307051728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

more specifically political or scientific partly reflects their "culturalist bias" (xx). Given this bias, I was nevertheless surprised not to see sections on key aspects of the institutions of culture (such as debates about the press and popular culture more generally, the economics of authorship, cultural democracy, and the like). As these debates intersected with so many of the discourses taken up in the book, they would have worked nicely with the editors' laudable aim of recovering "the echoes, interconnections, and different orders of knowledge that operated in the *fin de siècle*" (xx). Nevertheless, this is a useful collection of primary material which has doubtless become a popular textbook for courses on the cultural history of the period.

Steve Attridge's *Nationalism, Imperialism and Identity in Late Victorian Culture* (2003) and Morag Shiach's *Modernism, Labour and Selfhood in British Literature and Culture, 1890–1930* (2004) are fine examples of this expansion and interconnection of fields. They are also valuable because of the ways in which they try to drill down into the changing particularities within which complex and contradictory representations are produced and consumed. While Attridge's book can be located in relation to important earlier work on the culture of imperialism, it moves beyond this work in several respects. Firstly, it approaches the Empire as "a protean and sometimes arbitrary vessel" whose loyalties "could be confusing, even to itself, and its policies convoluted and contradictory" (5). Secondly, it is concerned with the shifting internal boundaries between state and civil society, between "civil and military worlds" and between class antagonisms and national projections as they are played out in this protean and ambiguous context. Attridge does this through an analysis of representations of the military world in the music halls, the press, and a body of poetry and fiction ranging from the popular to high culture. Finally, his analysis of these representations deliberately moves beyond the concept of "discourse" which, he argues, "is a prescriptively collective rather than a specifying noun." In particular, he takes issue with Edward Said's discourse of Orientalism which "does not allow for consideration of specific literary or cultural form or differences between forms" (10). Against this, Attridge focuses on the specifics of cultural forms in juxtaposition with the historical and political, an approach that allows him to show up the inherent instabilities of the discourse. Thus "the 'discourse' of power and domination functions ambivalently; just as the Other (the object of discursive domination) is not in a fixed position of passivity, so the discourse itself can reveal, in its juxtaposition of the historical, the political and purely imaginative, its own inherent instabilities" (10–11).

This approach offers richly rewarding readings of the complicated Imperial politics of *fin-de-siècle* culture. Of the music hall, for example, Attridge notes that "songs are essentially musical forms in which the words do not necessarily take precedence. In performance, they also generate different meanings according to context" (28), a point that allows him to explore important differences between West End and East End music halls. The function of the latter "was to reflect a keen interest in localized day-to-day realities and pleasures" (33), but even where the performances did include patriotic material, they often manifested powerful working class antagonisms to authority and a sense of bitterness at the discrepancy between the common soldier's role in war and his exclusion at home. A fine chapter on images of the common soldier of the Boer War explores this further, showing how books such as James Milne's *The Epistles of Atkins* lauded "the variegated richness of the culture that created him" (53) and arguing that "the foundations of his own morality are seen to have been created at home and retain a strong domestic appeal" (61). While these representations tended to idealise the common soldier as an expression of working class civil society,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150307051728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Rudyard Kipling's *Barrack Room Ballads* offer a very different reading of Tommy Atkins which makes the relations between Empire and nation and between the military and civil worlds much more problematical. As Attridge puts it, "the *Ballads*' insistence upon and celebration of violence could only unsettle a view of the empire emphasizing the civilizing mission of imperialism" (82), and he convincingly shows how negative responses to the world of Kipling's coarse, vulgar, and violent soldiers were part of broader anxieties about the barbarism and hooliganism of the working classes.

Attridge is right to see this rejection of Kipling as a political matter, and in his following chapter he nicely traces out the ambiguities of "the hooligan problem," showing how "a single image becomes a focus for confrontation, sharpened by political conflict over the Boer War" (102). But the political rejection of Kipling was not simply a result of middle class anxieties about a degenerative working class. It also came from anti-Imperialists who were also largely pro-democratic in both the political and cultural realms, and I would have liked to have seen what Attridge made of the ways their political and cultural critiques rest on Kipling's lack of realism rather than his vulgarity. Nevertheless, his overall argument about the politics of class antagonism and national identity in *fin-de-siècle* culture is well made, not least in his final two chapters, which are best read as a pair. In the first of these, he argues that a raft of Indian Mutiny novels published in the late 'nineties and early Edwardian years "are an attempt to reclaim certainties about nation and nationhood when the Boer war was in fact complicating imperial politics and making many certainties ambiguous" (139). This attempt is figured largely through representations of the officer class, which "acts as an image of authority over both the Indian population and its own troops, drawn mostly from the British working class" (155). By contrast, the heroes of many of the Boer war novels published at the same time tended to be common soldiers, often figured as outsiders. Such a move expresses "an ambivalence towards the army in general and the officer class in particular" (158), reflecting the writers' efforts "to imagine just what Britishness meant in this conflict with a handful of Dutch farmers" (160). The richness of these two chapters bears out Attridge's larger arguments about the limitations of "discourse," and offers a compelling case for the need to re-think some of our widely-held assumptions about the cultural effects of late Victorian Imperialism.

In contrast to the large Imperial canvas of Attridge's texts, those addressed by Morag Shiach are concerned with the more immediate world of everyday work, particularly forms of work available to and inhabited by women. Yet as Shiach notes, modern forms of the self are persistently explored "in and through the activity of labour" (2), whether as a space of liberation and self-fulfilment or of alienation and self-sacrifice. Although the Edwardians, not the late Victorians, are at the heart of her study, the book necessarily extends back into the nineteenth century and offers valuable insights into the effects on conceptions of the self wrought by the massive changes in the nature of work which occurred in the second half of the century. Shiach begins with a chapter devoted to "traditions of philosophical writing" which set in play "ideas, aspirations and arguments" (15) about labour and selfhood. The chapter offers brief and suggestive readings of Locke, Adam Smith, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Carlyle, Marx, Ruskin, Morris, Nietzsche, Herbert Spencer, Olive Schreiner, and Freud on labour, but there is no real sense of the impact of their texts on the circulation of ideas, aspirations, and arguments about labour and selfhood, nor of the grounds for this particular selection. Perhaps this is asking too much of a single chapter whose principal aim seems to be to enumerate the different and competing "imaginings and theorizations of labour"

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150307051728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(15) available to Edwardian writers. However, the chronological order of the chapter, and a concomitant narrative that takes us from Locke's conception of labour as the source of private property, through Hegel's vision of new collective social relations triggered by the isolating and fragmentary nature of modern work, to Marx's belief in the alienation of human labour in industrial capitalism from its essential creativity, and on to Ruskin's and Morris's attempts to formulate ways of healing such a breach, for example, suggests that Shiach is trying to do more than simply enumerate available ideas and arguments. The subtext seems to be that the changed conceptions owe something to the changing nature of labour as industrial capitalism developed in the nineteenth century, but this is not drawn out. Nevertheless, the chapter does provide a wide-ranging overview showing how labour became such a key term of value by the second half of the nineteenth century and how the content of that value took different forms.

Having established these broad parameters, Shiach goes on to examine a number of examples where various kinds of labour are explored, particularly in relation to what they might mean for women. The chapters on typewriting and washing as technologies of labour and on Sylvia Pankhurst are of most relevance to *fin-de-siècle* scholars, and I will leave aside the later chapters on Lawrence and on the general strike. Shiach notes that "the typewriter provided a figure for the exploration of new forms of labour and their relation to the possibility of autonomy both for individuals and for women as a social group" (68), and in her analysis of different literary representations of typists and the labour of typing she draws attention to the ways some writers saw the possibilities inherent in this form of labour while others saw it in terms of the inauthenticity of modern life. In other words, though she doesn't put it quite this way, there is a politics of the typewriter; or at least, the typewriter is a contested space where the politics of gender and the politics of labour were played out in *fin-de-siècle* and Edwardian literature. So too with washing, which provides "a figure for the examination of social fantasies, anxieties and fears associated with class and gender mobilities" (82). As with the long chapter on philosophies of labour and selfhood, I found this chapter to be interesting and suggestive, but somehow frustrating. I think this is because, despite her earlier insistence on the "multiplicity and messiness of cultural history" (11), Shiach organises her readings of the relations between labour and selfhood in terms of an opposition between labour as liberating, self-realising, and a space of freedom and labour as limiting, alienating, and a space where freedom is negated. She chooses her examples nicely to show the tensions between these poles, and she is good on drawing out the ways in which representations of the technologies of typing and washing are overdetermined by questions of gender as well as labour, but the opposition, valid as it is, seems to force her to narrow down her argument. As a cultural historian, she focuses on the multiple meanings of labour for late Victorian and Edwardian writers, but I was hoping she would have used this to explore something of the *systems* of meanings which created hierarchies and ordered effects at the time. How might these meanings of labour help us re-think larger issues about turn of the century sexual and class politics, rather than merely show us the complicated dialectical relationship between autonomy and alienation in the modern self? How might they open up questions about the problematics of authority and legitimacy (gendered and otherwise) so fraught at the time? How might they be read against Regenia Gagnier's argument in *The Insatiability of Human Wants* about the late Victorian shift from a productive to a consumerist economy and aesthetics?

We get more of a sense of these larger issues in the chapter on Sylvia Pankhurst, which is probably why I found it more satisfying. Here Shiach uses the example of Pankhurst to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150307051728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

examine "the ways in which labour entered into the texts and arguments of one of the most important political movements of the period" (13). In the process, she addresses issues such as the arguments for women's productive labour as a counter to charges of Parasitism and thus to a particularly virulent argument against women's suffrage; the arguments about what was and what wasn't "appropriate" work for women; the nature of collectivism and the ways in which long-standing notions of female self-sacrifice entered into the debates about women's work (see 100–26). The chapter concludes with a fine account of Pankhurst the artist, which treats firstly, the question of art as work, and secondly, Pankhurst's representations of working women. Shiach's reading of Pankhurst's overdetermined accounts of and representations of women's labour against the "larger social forces which make independence and financial security increasingly hard to realize" (119) is largely convincing, and I think opens up further possibilities for understanding the gendered politics of culture at the time.

The great virtue of the Attridge and Shiach books is that they move beyond the "hegemonic-oppositional" framework that still underscores a lot of *fin-de-siècle* scholarship. In that framework, the hegemonic is usually taken to be something called liberalism. Sometimes construed as bourgeois liberalism, sometimes as liberal humanism, depending on the context, its putative rationalist epistemology, universalist ethics, and repressive tolerance are read as underpinning the continued domination of various subordinate subject positions. Without wishing to downplay the blindnesses or effects of late nineteenth century liberalism, we would do well to remember that the Enlightenment ideals of liberation and sociability which fed into strands of liberal thought had as much potential to be enabling as repressive. Amanda Anderson makes much the same point in a recent piece in *Victorian Studies*, where she argues that critique "was already part of the society, voiced from within", and that what is needed is "a fuller retrieval of the literary forms of political modernity" (197, 201). There are problems with Anderson's argument, not least her reduction of the multiple modernities of the nineteenth century into her "political modernity" and "aesthetic modernity" schema. Nevertheless, I think she is right to draw our attention to the continuities and importance of the reformist dimension within what we might loosely term liberal culture. Such a "fuller retrieval" of liberalism as cultural critique, not just in Victorian literary culture, but in Victorian culture more broadly understood, has started to emerge in the last few years. One direction within this scholarship, such as Patrick Joyce's *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (2003) and Jordanna Bailkin's *The Culture of Property: The Crisis of Liberalism in Modern Britain* (2004), has addressed problems of liberalism in relation to various forms of material culture; a second direction, represented by Anderson's *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (2001), Lauren Goodlad's *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State* (2003), and David Wayne Thomas's *Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic* (2004), has been concerned primarily with literary culture.

Only the Anderson and Thomas books are under review here. Both cover the broad sweep of the Victorian period, but each has a chapter on Wilde, and their larger arguments about Victorian liberalism open up new ways of thinking about the politics of *fin-de-siècle* culture. They both examine modes of liberal subjectivity, with the focus on liberalism as a practice of the self or "ethos" where they delineate various ethical and cultural effects of liberalism in the formation of the liberal subject. This focus is both understandable and appropriate, given the pre-occupation of Victorian liberalism with ethical self-development

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150307051728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as the basis of political progress, and with the need for both individuals and society to reach their full potential.[1]

As the title of her book suggests, Anderson is concerned with practices of detachment, "encompassing not only science, critical reason, disinterestedness, and realism, but also a set of practices of the self, ranging from stoicism to cosmopolitanism to dandyism" (7). Detachment, that is to say, was not simply a matter of method; or at least, methodological questions were also ethical questions for the Victorians. Thus Mill, for example, struggling to achieve "an impartiality tinged with sympathy" (16), "seeks to redress the dangers of detachment through appeal to the cultivated practices of individuals . . . a set of willed practices that become habitual" (20). These "dangers of detachments" are, of course, just the sorts of criticism laid against liberalism above, the point being that high Victorian liberals such as Mill, Eliot, and Arnold were well aware of the problematical nature of detachment. Even so, "despite their apprehensions, [they] emphasize the potentialities of modern powers of distance" (20). In short, detachment for the Victorians was problematical but worth cultivating in some form or other, "an aspiration more than a certainty" (32). The value of this for Anderson is that it allows her to reclaim the Enlightenment as an unfinished project (*pace* Habermas) against what she sees as a widespread assumption in the modern academy to concentrate on "ironic detachment" as the only legitimate form of critique. Anderson's polemic is perhaps a little too strongly stated (are such critics really "unable to imagine critical distance as a temporary vantage, unstable achievement, or regulative ideal"?), but I think she is essentially right in her effort to reinstate the importance in the cultural realm of attempts to "transcend partiality, interests, and context" (33). As she notes, those attempts are always bound to be shaped by the contingencies of their time and place, but her examination of the ways they are "thoughtfully engaged in a complex process of self-interrogation and social critique" (33) offers a supple and compelling reading which qualifies assumptions about the supposed hegemony of a monolithic liberalism.

The substantive chapters of the book examine texts by Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, Arnold, George Eliot, and Wilde. I want to focus on the last of these because it is the one most relevant here. In it, Anderson develops a reading of the Wildean epigram "as a way of further elaborating Wilde's approach to forms of detachment, and specifically in order to advance our understanding of the relation between aesthetics and ethics in his work" (148). She focuses on the epigram because it "enacts an *ironic* detachment – it pulls back and comments upon a topic, a prior response, a set of conditions" (158), a form of detachment associated with the Wildean dandy. Anderson is particularly concerned to show the difficulties Wilde faces in pursuing epigrammatic irony in order to bolster her own argument against what she sees as "a tendency among postmodern critics to valorize detachment only if it is fully ironized or otherwise defined against reflective reason" (175). She develops her account of Wilde through an analysis of the society comedies, arguing that their epigrammatic irony "remains in large part a purely negative and reactive practice" which he supplements with attempts to offer "a positive normative dimension" (173). Anderson's location of this dimension primarily in Wilde's treatment of key female characters is in itself not particularly new. Nor is the recognition that Wildean aesthetics has an ethical purpose. What is valuable, it seems to me, is the way her emphasis falls: Wilde is deeply *ambivalent* about his project of ironic detachment (read "dandyism"), and in this he replicates the uncertainties and ambivalences of his Victorian liberal forebears. Ironic detachment, like other forms of detachment cultivated by Victorian liberals, was a technique of critique that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150307051728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was regarded as necessary but problematical. How far has Anderson succeeded in her goal of "pluraliz[ing] and defend[ing] the ideal of cultivated distance, and thereby defend[ing] much of the modern project" (180)? I have to say it's a goal I'm very much in sympathy with myself, though whether the excessively polemical note adds to or detracts from that goal is more of a moot point.

David Wayne Thomas's *Cultivating Victorians* (2004) also offers us a valuable way into re-thinking the politics of positive critique within late Victorian literature. Thomas's subject is "a liberal vision of 'many-sidedness,' a temperamental and intellectual attainment involving practices of self-criticism, open-mindedness, and earnest conduct" (x), a vision that clearly has much in common with Anderson's forms of "detachment," and the two books bounce nicely off each other. Thomas, too, is concerned to defend key aspects of liberal culture in the contemporary academy, though without quite the same polemical tone that characterises *The Powers of Distance*. He develops his argument through the problematic of "cultivating," which on the one hand can refer to "heroic self-fashioning subjects" and on the other to the objects of cultivation. Cultivation, Thomas argues, is a mode of liberal agency which, because of its connotations of cultivating others in liberalism's self-image, has come to be reduced to hegemony in many modern readings. Thomas is well aware that cultivation "can equally name a kind of noble elevation above provincial conditions and also a kind of hegemonic ruse" (27), a tension that he shows was also apparent in Victorian liberals' efforts to cultivate "many-sidedness" as a way of dealing with the pressing concerns of the 1860s and after.

But he is also interested in articulating a convincing defence of the liberal cultivation of "many-sidedness." He does this in a dense and complicated – but rewarding – first chapter, by taking on some of the main critiques of liberalism, which argue that liberalism "valorizes an abstract regime of rights-based individualism that does not properly credit thickly constituted selves and specific collective identities" (15). There is not the space here to follow through his argument in detail, but at its heart lies Kant's distinction between regulative and constitutive knowledge. From this, Thomas constructs a case for the importance of our tendency "to ask questions and to posit relations beyond those that can be determined within human ratiocination" (23). It is this *aspirational* dimension that Thomas defends in liberalism, over against specific contents where its aspirations are contradicted by its practices. Liberal agency might well exhibit "a certain incoherence and lack of consistent outcomes" (39), but "arguments about human agency and sociality that set themselves up in opposition to liberalism's privileging of critical self-consciousness tend to admit, in one form or another, elements of agential reflection with debts to the liberal model of critical agency" (40). In short, it is to be understood as "a partial but nonetheless meaningful feat of critical reflection and action" (154).

In addition to his "measured affirmation" of liberal agency, Thomas also puts forward an historical argument that mid-Victorian liberal agency – fundamentally socio-political in nature – deeply informs late Victorian aesthetic culture. He develops this in the second part of the book, where the problematics of originality and authenticity, which carry a primarily socio-political weight in the first part, now carry a primarily aesthetic weight. One chapter takes this up via the notion of replication (Dante Gabriel Rossetti's practice of replicating his own paintings and the large-scale replica of pre-industrial Manchester in 1887) and another via Wilde's strictures on originality. Both are superb examples of Thomas's close reading combined with a deft grasp of unexpected theoretical arguments, and their upshot is to give us a new take on the liberal heart of late Victorian subversive aestheticism. As he says of Wilde,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150307051728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

his seductiveness seems "to emerge from his availability to the identificatory yearnings of a profoundly modern and self-divided *ambition* of critical agency," an ambition linked "to a broadly modern liberal aspiration – an aspiration to a kind of agency endorsed through acts of reflection and judgment" (186). Running through all of this is Thomas's engagement with "the difficult question of literature's status as a tool for or against ideology" (182). His book refuses to answer that question explicitly, but its implicit answer, through his exploration of various modes of "regulative" liberal agency, is one of the most suggestive contemporary lines of argument for those who want to realign cultural critique with the positive dimensions of social and political progress.

The great virtue of the Anderson and Thomas books is not only that they re-open the liberating quality of Victorian liberalism while remaining aware of its repressive qualities, but that they also establish important continuities between mid-Victorian liberalism and late Victorian subversive aestheticism. To that extent, they have made major contributions to our understanding of the articulation of politics and literature at the *fin de siècle*. However, the mutations *within* liberalism are largely missing. It's probably fair to say that Thomas's argument regarding regulative as distinct from substantive liberalism offers some defence against this charge, but in both books the late Victorian period comes down mainly to Wilde. While this might be understandable given their arguments with contemporary theorists, the emphasis on Wilde downplays the importance in the literary culture of quite distinct forms of political radicalism. Many *fin-de-siècle* and Edwardian writers were directly engaged with reformist and radical politics, were actively involved in advanced groups and circles, and worked for a range of progressive newspapers and periodicals. As Henry Nevinson, the radical journalist, novelist and poet put it in his reminiscences, "we regarded our life in that epoch [the 1890s] rather as a Renaissance than as a Decadence. To us it was a time of adventure and life renewed" (110). Nevinson, a radical liberal, supporter of the suffragettes, member of the Kropotkin circle and close friend of many Anglo-Irish nationalists, is not an atypical figure in this respect. Like J. A. Hobson, mentioned earlier, Nevinson was part of a significant formation of advanced liberals (encompassing New Liberalism and its cultural variants) who played an absolutely central role in literary culture through their work on progressive dailies, weeklies, and periodicals. These writers and journalists have been largely forgotten in the scholarship, but their political vocabulary significantly inflected their literary cultural categories.[2]

The final book under review is a collection devoted to Grant Allen, not strictly a member of this formation, but closely associated with it through his membership in the Fabian Society and other overlapping groups, as well as his contributions to the *Speaker*, the *Contemporary Review* and the *Wesminster Gazette*. In their Introduction to *Grant Allen: Literature and Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* (2005), William Greenslade and Terence Rodgers point out that "perhaps one of the biggest gaps in critical appraisals of Allen and his significance has been the absence of any sustained attempt to grapple with his politics and radical sympathies" (11), possibly because he "operated in a politically *ad hoc* and interventionist manner" (12). That's true enough, but another explanation is also possible. Unlike radical compeers such as William Morris, Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis, and Olive Schreiner who have received scholarly attention, Allen's progressive socio-political ideas are more reformist than revolutionary, and as Nick Freeman notes in his essay on *The British Barbarians* (1895), "he was desperate to distinguish between his attacks on contemporary society and those from more radical quarters" (118). Like the advanced liberal formation mentioned above, he

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150307051728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

critiqued largely from within the culture, utilising mainstream organs of publication. This is a position that has not been fashionable for contemporary scholars working on the *fin de siècle*, though as Anderson and Thomas have rightly argued, it is a position that now needs to be recuperated. In this context, a book on Allen is particularly welcome. As Greenslade and Rodgers put it, “to resituate Grant Allen as part of the progressive dissenting politics of his time is to create an opening to restate his relationship to late nineteenth-century modernity” (17).

The aim is laudable and the editors have done a fine job insofar as the collection of essays places Allen in relation to many of the themes and issues raised in the other books discussed here: the biological and evolutionary discourses at the heart of late Victorian progressivism, the nature of literary work, the effect of the literary marketplace, the politics of gender and the effect of new technologies are just some of a broad range of topics under discussion. This is not surprising, given the breadth of Allen’s interests and, indeed, the intersection of issues amongst progressives more generally. How then is the progressive politics of this man of letters understood in relation to his literary works? John Lucas suggests that “as a man of letters engaged with issues of the day, he is most usefully seen as an energising force. He doesn’t have to be right” (51), and in that context argues that if we think of *The Woman Who Did* (1895) “as part of a continuing debate about women’s rights, we are likely to be more sympathetic to it without having to take Allen’s side (52). That is to say, we can approach the book not as good or poor literature, nor even as sound or unsound ideology, but as “a perfectly acceptable form of writing to the moment” (53).

Lyssa Randolph is similarly concerned with the moment – in her case “the space created for franker discussion of sexual issues” (66) – within which *The Woman Who Did*, *The British Barbarians*, and *A Splendid Sin* (1896) were written. Randolph develops this further, though, in an interesting discussion of the ways in which the books were located in terms of categories (purpose novels as opposed to literary novels) then organising the literary field. The values attributed to these categories were contested, and Randolph goes on to read them against assumptions about gender at the time. Her reading of these intersections in “the moment” is exemplary, but her conclusion that “Allen is worthy of our critical attention not because he was a progressive liberal with advanced views, but more precisely because his thought also reveals the eugenicism, racism and anti-feminism which was rife in the cultural and sexual politics of his day” (77) surely misses the mark. Of course they were rife at the time and it’s important we keep that in mind, but to emphasise that at the expense of the “progressive” Allen is to radically reduce the political dimension of his cultural practice and output. A better way of putting it would have been to say he is worthy of our attention precisely because he *was* a progressive liberal with advanced views, *even though* his thought also reveals the eugenicism, racism and anti-feminism of his day. As Chris Nottingham puts it after discussing Allen’s “enthusiastic espousal of the Celtic, his concern with the rights and wrongs of women, and his application of the doctrine of Darwinian evolution to social and political developments” (101), what we make of him depends on what we make of the progressive community of which he was a part (107). It’s a community which, for all its foibles, is worthy of our respect. We can gain some sense of the extent of his involvement in that community partly through Peter Morton’s biographical essay but even more through his checklist of Allen’s publications. The extent of these publications is staggering, but it also gives us a snapshot of the intersection of the social, cultural and political realms for late Victorian progressives.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150307051728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The ten years between the Ledger/McCracken and Greenslade/Rodgers collections reveal a great deal about the ways in which scholars have conceptualised the cultural politics and the politics of culture at the *fin de siècle*. The emphasis has clearly been on the former, but as the Anderson and Thomas books indicate, the latter is now on the scholarly agenda. In particular, the liberalism of *fin* literary culture is starting to come more into focus, though the progressive end of the liberal spectrum is still in need of major scholarly work. What is also missing is an account of specifically Tory culture in terms other than a dismissal of its political values. They might well be values with which many of us strongly disagree, but their examination will add further to the recuperation of a *fin* where literature and politics are not conceived separately.

Griffith University

NOTES

1. For a useful overview of this, see H. S. Jones, *Victorian Political Thought* (London: Macmillan, 2000).
2. I examine something of this formation in "Between Culture and Politics: Liberal Journalism and Literary Cultural Discourse at the *Fin de Siècle*," forthcoming in *ELT* 51.1 (2008).

WORKS CONSIDERED

Anderson, Amanda. *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.

———. "Victorian Studies and the Two Modernities." *Victorian Studies* 47. 2 (Winter 2005): 195–203.

Attridge, Steve. *Nationalism, Imperialism and Identity in Late Victorian Culture: Civil and Military Worlds*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Bailkin, Jordanna. *The Culture of Property: The Crisis of Liberalism in Modern Britain*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004.

Beckson, Karl. *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History*. New York: Norton, 1992.

Dowling, Linda. *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986.

Gagnier, Regenia. *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1986.

———. *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000.

Goodlad, Lauren. *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2003.

Greenslade, William, and Terence Rodgers, eds. *Grant Allen*: *Literature and Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005.

Hobson, J. A. "The Task of Realism." *English Review* 3 (Sept. 1909): 324–34.

Joyce, Patrick. *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City*. London: Verso, 2003.

Ledger, Sally, and Scott McCracken, eds. *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.

Ledger Sally, and Roger Luckhurst, eds. *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History*, *c. 1880–1900*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

Nevinson, Henry. *Changes and Chances*. London: Nisbet, 1923.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150307051728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Shiach, Morag. *Modernism, Labour and Selfhood in British Literature and Culture, 1890–1930*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.

Small, Ian. *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: CP, 1991.

Thomas, David Wayne. *Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic*. Philadelphia: U of Philadelphia P, 2004.

Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. London: Virago, 1992.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150307051728 Published online by Cambridge University Press