

REVIEW ESSAY

When Reading Matters

MEGAN WARD 

S. Pearl Brilmyer, *The Science of Character: Human Objecthood and the Ends of Victorian Realism* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).

David Sweeney Coombs, *Reading with the Senses in Victorian Literature and Science* (University of Virginia Press, 2019).

ONE way to tell the story of our discipline is as a story about reading. In the early twentieth century, in order to establish the value of literary criticism, critics used the framework of professionalism to create specialized vocabulary, professional societies, and reading methods distinguished from those of laypeople. Foundational pieces of literary criticism often pry analysis apart from the affective experiences of reading literature—our sympathy, identification, shock, or sadness. Early literary critics did so in order to privilege literature’s patterns and structures to argue, implicitly or explicitly, that literature is art, not life. In other words, reading literary description isn’t a substitute for experiencing sensory perception of those settings, people, or objects. Fictional characters’ affective lives—and our responses to those lives—aren’t a way to understand our own subjecthood.

As someone in a decades-long love affair with the process and insights of literary criticism, I’m not here to denigrate that. In separating language from experience, the foundations of our discipline claimed textual expertise; our current struggle for professional relevance would have been difficult to predict. But the unintended consequences of that origin story have become increasingly clear as, in recent years, scholars have developed complex arguments to reconnect the experience of reading

Megan Ward is an associate professor of English at Oregon State University. She is the author of *Seeming Human: Artificial Intelligence and Victorian Realist Character* (Ohio State University Press, 2018) as well as pieces for a broader audience in venues such as the *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, and *Los Angeles Review of Books*. She’s currently writing a book of essays about realism.

Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol. 51, No. 1, pp. 157–165.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press.

doi:10.1017/S1060150322000201

with life beyond the page. Out of fear and anxiety over our discipline's decline, the last decade-plus has seen surges of critical interest in revisiting this initial separation. In particular, affect theory, cognitive approaches, New Materialism, and phenomenology have all offered new formulations for understanding the epistemological relationship between what we read and how we feel.

Two recent books in Victorian studies come from within this broad move, offering Victorian prehistories of the modernist separation of language from lived experience and the relevance of those histories for current debates over ways of reading. Some of the fundamental assumptions of our discipline both emerge from and turn their backs on Victorian ways of reading, argue S. Pearl Brilmyer's *The Science of Character: Human Objecthood and the Ends of Victorian Realism* (2022) and David Sweeney Coombs's *Reading with the Senses in Victorian Literature and Science* (2019). Both Brilmyer's and Coombs's works demonstrate that the disciplinary shifts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can be usefully updated by looking to the ways that Victorian literature engaged with human experiences, specifically through scientific discourses of perception, in order to reunite those experiences with the language used to represent them.

Through intellectual histories (which are carefully distinguished from historicism), Brilmyer and Coombs make quite different arguments; both are situated, however, in the overlap between historical scientific discourse, methodological debates, and Victorian literature, especially fiction. And each concludes with an epilogue disrupting some of the fundamental assumptions of our discipline by reexamining a key figure in early literary criticism (E. M. Forster for Brilmyer, Viktor Shklovsky for Coombs) by way of Victorian fiction and criticism (more on that later). Rather than attempt to capture each of these work's intricate arguments in full, this review instead hones in on those intriguing points of overlap.

Both Brilmyer and Coombs demonstrate that Victorian literature was vital to intellectual life without also losing sight of its status as literature, an accusation often levied at interdisciplinary work. These works aren't grasping at the relevance of our discipline by allying it with science in the hopes that some STEM magic will rub off. Instead, they validate literature's intellectual worth on its own terms, showing how literature was foundational to the science of human perception, not merely reflective of it. And, in doing so, they also offer us a richer story of the emergence of literary criticism, one less dependent on, as Coombs puts it, "cleaving language from the world" (166).

Published in 2019, Coombs's *Reading with the Senses in Victorian Literature and Culture* is part of a wider movement engaged with ways of reading.¹ *Reading with the Senses* connects related modes of criticism that attend to perception under the heading of "empirical reading methods" (e.g., surface reading, description) and then looks to the nineteenth century, when empiricism wasn't asked to explain reading. Instead, scientists looked to reading as an analogy for perception (4). Coombs bridges these two critical moments, exploring reading literature as itself "a perceptual experience, one that folds together the actual sensory presence of words on a page with the virtual presence of the objects to which those words refer" (9). In this way, he argues that the discipline of literary criticism and the science of perception are equally responsible for separating language from experience—and that they can be reunited through the "ways that reading acts as an aid to perception of the world beyond the page" (2).

A relatively short introduction lays this argument out succinctly and is followed by chapter 1, "Knowing Things by Description in Victorian Science," which surveys the history by which Victorian scientists came to understand perception as analogous to reading. If, as mid-Victorian scientists claimed, perception was the mental process of interpreting sensory perceptions, then it was not a huge leap to see reading as the mental process of interpreting the sensory input of print. In this, Coombs argues, scientists saw in reading "not just a metaphorical illustration of sense perception but its essence" (22). In response, they developed two categories: "knowledge by description" and "knowledge by acquaintance," separating that which we know by reading about it from knowledge acquired through experience.

At the end of the nineteenth century, though, William James's "radical empiricism" blurred this distinction between perception and sensation, between experience and language. Coombs argues that James sees in descriptive language "a means of restoring literary texts to a connecting world," a process explored in the ensuing four chapters (11). Each one draws on the history of perception set up in chapter 1 to examine how description can be a form of experience in the novels of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy before turning to the Aesthetic movement in the later chapters. I especially appreciated chapter 4, which reads Vernon Lee's essays on aesthetic perception alongside her 1888 roman à clef *Miss Brown* to formulate reading as a "relationship of intimate withholding" that stimulates feelings in the reader while also subjecting "them to a virtually asymptotic postponing of their fulfillment" (131).

Through this interdisciplinary approach combining the art and science of perception, Coombs makes his case for “how reading might help us restore literary texts to what [William] James calls ‘a connecting world’” (34).

Pearl Brilmyer’s *The Science of Character* takes up related questions of perception through the framework of character, specifically the forgotten science of ethology. John Stuart Mill proposed that human character comes not from stable, internal personality but is shaped via individual reactions to external circumstance. Brilmyer argues that, though ethology failed to catch on in the Victorian scientific community, it was taken up by the realist novel “to explore the dynamic, material processes by which character is formed” (4). *The Science of Character* traces the literary science of character between 1870 and 1920, offering a new look at a period that “has often been presented as a kind of gap or stopover between the ends of an inward-leaning realism and the beginnings of a more fully interiorized modernism” (226). Brilmyer looks to ethology to argue that, during this period, fictional character engaged with scientific discourse to produce an understanding of subjectivity as corporeally engaged with the world, ever-shifting and changing in ways that were both physical and affective. In doing so, she departs from previous studies of character that emphasize the fictionality of fictional character. Instead, Brilmyer sees character as “an aggregate of qualities” that “imaginary literary persons have in common with human beings” (11).

To capture this process of aggregation, Brilmyer offers us the term “dynamic materialism”: “the ever-changing product of physical processes” by which character is formed or “subjectively experienced events are transformed into objectively perceivable traits and behaviors” (16). In doing so, she draws on recent discussions in new materialisms and feminist science studies to insist on the material meaning and reality of language. Here, too, we can see Brilmyer in conversation with Coombs. Both authors emphasize the connection between bodily perception and semiotic signs: “If matter is as semiotic as language is material, however—if humans are not the only ones to wield signs, and if all bodies are figures—then literature need not be understood as having to overcome some sort of vast epistemological gulf to represent, interact with, and be affected by (the rest of) the physical world” (Brilmyer 9). In thinking this way, Brilmyer amplifies the Victorian “phenomenological practice of reading” identified by Coombs (Coombs 23). The body of a character, Brilmyer concludes, is not only a material substrate but also

a signifying series of signs; its representation on the page is its logical conclusion, not an incomplete gesture.

To prove this, Brilmyer engages with nineteenth-century scientists, philosophers, and novelists. This forms the bulk of her well-researched and engaging book, but one of the most compelling aspects of the work is her scholarly engagement with nineteenth-century literary critics. It made me wonder why more work on character (my own included) doesn't engage with Victorian literary criticism as part of the critical conversation rather than as historical context. When Brilmyer writes that, "for Victorian England's foremost literary theorist of character, James Sully," "character was a material phenomenon, experienced first and foremost through the senses," she creates a critical continuum from the nineteenth century to the present, one that locates and values a form of fictional character very different from inherited modernist ideals (21, 22). Though recent studies of character have questioned those values, *The Science of Character* substantially expands our disciplinary arc.

Both Brilmyer and Coombs do their most overt disciplinary work in their epilogues, launching off from rather than closing out the nuanced readings that have come before. In his introduction, Coombs claims that the history of perception and its relationship to reading "continue to reverberate in our own moment," and the epilogue takes up that claim via Shklovsky's formalism. While Shklovsky's idea of defamiliarization has the ultimate goal of helping readers appreciate the world more intensely—to make the stone stony—it does so by "specifying a distinctly literary kind of language" (165). Coombs argues that this fundamental modernist principle of literary criticism draws from nineteenth-century perception science in ways that are different from Victorian authors and critics' own engagement with that same science.

Coombs treads carefully here, attentive to the risks of interdisciplinary study as potentially annihilating disciplinary value while also claiming the need "to move more definitively beyond the restrictive dichotomy between literary signs and the other objects in the world that is part of our field's inheritance from formalism" (166). To propel this more definitive move, we might draw from Victorian literature, which modeled the attentiveness to sensations Shklovsky prizes but in a way that also "serves to draw readers closer to (rather than separate them from) the intentional objects to which those signs direct us" (166). Coombs demonstrates this idea via Oscar Wilde's little-studied novella, *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1889). The contemporary fractures in methods of reading focused on surface versus depth, empiricism, and description might do

well, this novella suggests, to understand the ways that knowledge by description can shade into knowledge by acquaintance, something that Victorian fiction already knows. “Art, as so often happens,” Willie Hughes explains, “had come to take the place of personal experience” (qtd. in Coombs 172).

In this, Coombs argues, “Victorian literature can show us a path not taken by our discipline.” That path is a “direction toward objects” rather than further into the world of language (167). While this will undoubtedly run up against objections that what distinguishes our discipline is the literariness of language, Coombs is careful to distinguish the “direction toward objects” as distinct from historicism. As is typical for monographs in our field, he does not elaborate what the payoff of this direction might be beyond disciplinary debates, but it seems clear that the implication is a renewed understanding of the lived world through the fictional experience. In this, Coombs’s work sets up Brilmyer’s beautifully, as both conceive of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a period replete with ways to read beyond the dichotomy of signs and objects, toward what Coombs calls the “connective pathways [literature] affords to other things in the world” (174).

Brilmyer’s epilogue forges such pathways through a revelatory revision of Forster’s foundational ideas of flat and round character, demonstrating how Forster made “certain terminological revisions” to Victorian criticism, which “have allowed the story of character’s ‘inward turn’ to reign supreme” (221, 221–22). Turn-of-the-century authors, Brilmyer contends, did not value interiority in the ways that we have traditionally understood it, as synonymous with “depth” and “roundness.” Instead, she argues, “the formal distinction between flat and round actually obscures the innovations” of this era of realist authors, who “aspired to produce characters that pulsed with life rather than sounded with depth” (223).

The ideals of character that structure the chapters of the book—*plasticity*, *impressibility*, *spontaneity*, *impulsivity*, and *relationality*—here in the epilogue become sutured together by a sixth, overarching term, *vitality*. Brilmyer draws this term from G. H. Lewes’s 1872 article, “Dickens in Relation to Criticism.” And she isn’t the only one who seems to have found this term useful; she argues convincingly that Forster’s famous analysis of flat and round characters in Dickens “borrows heavily” from Lewes’s very similar argument several decades earlier (224). Forster, like Lewes before him, praises Dickens’s ability to create lifelike characters despite their mechanistic repetition, citing the same central example

of the Micawbers and even using similar phrasing. The one way in which Forster departs from Lewes, though, is in his invocation of depth. For Lewes, “a truly realist character is not necessarily deep, but *lively*” (225).

Lewes’s criticism of Dickens offers an earlier node in the timeline of modern literary criticism as well as a starting point for Brilmyer’s alternate genealogy of realist character. By setting aside roundness and taking up vitality, she connects Eliot’s realism with turn-of-the-century novels by Thomas Hardy, Olive Schreiner, and others, ending with Gertrude Stein. In doing so, Brilmyer disrupts the realism-to-modernism historical trajectory, and she also, less explicitly, asks us to question the idea that our discipline was founded on the separation of literature from life. If, decades before Forster coined the term *roundness*, Lewes and other Victorian authors and critics valued vitality over mechanization, we can extend our critical genealogies to include public writing in which “literature was thought to produce real knowledge about the real world, including the figure of the human at its center” (12).

From my earliest days as a reader, I have thrilled to the essential strangeness of literary characters—their unreproducible knowability and their frustrating impenetrability alike invoked in me a kind of wonder. Yet I also find myself inspired by the idea—present in Coombs’s work and then really brought to the fore in Brilmyer’s—that “fiction, when it stages encounters between imaginary people in imaginary situations, produces knowledge about reality” (Brilmyer 5). Though trained in the disciplinary separation of literature from life, I’m seduced by the idea that we might use our knowledge as Victorianists to resuscitate a belief in literature’s ability to tell us something about human nature *and* culture. When this urge—especially when named “public humanities”—is dismissed as a last gasp of the humanities’ power or a publicity grab by the university, I can’t help but wonder (earnestly, as the Victorians did) why we would want to deny the public value and importance of the very thing we spend our time studying so intently.

Brilmyer and Coombs have written volumes that are unquestionably scholarly: impeccably researched, painstakingly argued, and speaking to debates familiar only to those in the field. These works speak effectively to us, the audience most invested in those debates. They also make the case (even if unintentionally) for reaching the larger audience of pleasure readers who contemplate questions about human perception, reading, and the illusion of character outside of those disciplinary debates. This isn’t to say that these scholarly volumes shouldn’t exist—far from it—but rather to point out how, in making the case for our discipline’s

value, work such as this also makes the case for the public humanities. Not as a last-gasp effort to attract majors (though of course I'd be happy if that worked) but because while these ideas matter differently inside and outside academia, they still, somehow, seem to matter.

Given this, let's have more experiments like the publication of Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong's "Undisciplining Victorian Studies" in the more publicly accessible version in *LARB* before it came out in *Victorian Studies*. And, of course, let's push for hiring and promotion standards that recognize the value of this kind of publication. Literary criticism-adjacent sites such as *n+1* and *Public Books* offer ways to filter research into cultural criticism, and scholarly book publishing seems poised to explode with new possibilities. It's undoubtedly an imperfect system—writing for sites like these is no replacement for the disappearance of tenure-track jobs—but it may be an imperfect system tapping into Victorian literary criticism in generative ways. If we are the experts on the Victorian period—when literature and life were more explicitly connected—we may also be the writers to model why reading matters now.

NOTE

1. Surface reading and descriptive criticism are the two primary methodological debates that Coombs engages with, pointing toward the 2009 special issue of *Representations*, *The Way We Read Now*, edited by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus as a "flashpoint" for the first and the 2016 issue of *Representations* edited by Marcus, Best, and Heather Love for the second (3). Coombs also cites Eve Sedgwick's famous essay, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," as marking, in retrospect, "the moment that literary criticism began a so-far unfinished major reassessment of its methods" (180n9).

WORKS CITED

- Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus, eds. *The Way We Read Now*. Special issue, *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009).
- Chatterjee, Ronjaunee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong. "Introduction: Undisciplining Victorian Studies." *Victorian Studies* 62, no. 3 (2020): 369–91.
- . "Undisciplining Victorian Studies." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 10, 2020. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/undisciplining-victorian-studies>.

- Marcus, Sharon, Heather Love, and Stephen Best, eds. *Description across Disciplines*. Special issue, *Representations* 135, no. 1 (2016).
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You." In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performance*, 123–52. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.