

Critical Vagrancy: On Reading with Elaine Freedgood

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All things counter, original, spare, strange . . .

—Gerard Manley Hopkins

ONCE asked his opinion on the appropriateness of irony to poetry, the poet Charles Olson reportedly answered, “I don’t get the ‘iron’ in it.”¹ There are few who have the ability to be as (delightfully) literal-minded as Olson in this quip, and then there’s Elaine Freedgood: so literalist that she probably *would* get the iron in irony. Surely, if iron were to be found in figurative language, Freedgood would be the first to uncover it, track it to its sources, and tell us about its extraction, manufacture, and circuits of global exchange. Similarly, if we were to ask Freedgood to interpret Olson’s meaning, she might first investigate the history of iron and steel production in the United States—discovering how the industry grew, peaked, and then sharply contracted during Olson’s lifetime, with centers of production shifting from the Rust Belt to locations in Japan, the Soviet Union, and, later, China.² She might also relate that steel was once the largest industry in Olson’s hometown of Worcester, Massachusetts, and the American Steel & Wire Company its largest employer, until the company withered and finally shuttered in 1977, just a few years after Olson’s death.³ Through such a literalist lens, we would surely begin to see how, having lived his entire life in a world of steel, Olson could neither fail to notice the iron in irony nor allow it to stand as an abstraction. Becoming alert to these extended contexts, we might begin to hear, underlying the deadpan, the way Olson recalls his audience to working-class realities while commenting on the manner in which figurative and poetic language can alternately mask or reveal—make palpable or render abstract—the

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material foundations of our lives, caught up as they are in structures and movements of global capital.⁴

From early scholarship on Victorian ballooning memoirs, lace books, and fringe,⁵ to her deeply defamiliarizing materialist readings of the Victorian novel in *The Ideas in Things*, and to the extension of these projects in her ongoing, patient, and prismatic unraveling of literary realism, Elaine Freedgood's work steers an eclectic course through nineteenth- (and often also twentieth- and twenty-first-) century literary productions. Though she's situated in the field of literary studies as a specialist in Victorian and postcolonial literature, culture, and theory, Freedgood's thought obeys no parameters but those defined by its own curiosity, and her scholarship readily traverses geography, period, subject matter, genre, and discipline. Her errancy is recorded in bibliographies containing, in addition to the expected literary titles and scholarly monographs, such fare as *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers* (1862), *Hints on Household Taste* (1878), *Wonderful Balloon Ascents* (1870), *The Atmosphere* (1873), and *Wood: A Manual of the Natural History and Industrial Applications of the Timbres of Commerce* (1902).

As motley as they appear, Freedgood's bibliographies and references are anything but random. Instead, they chart critical peregrinations compelled by a persistent set of political, ethical, and inseparably formal concerns, centering on the histories and legacies of racial, sexual, geopolitical, and class-based oppressions. More particularly, the constant core of Freedgood's scholarship keeps the focus on how we, as literary historians and theorists, abet real-world oppressions in the ways we practice and teach our arts of interpretation. For example, in a 2016 *PMLA* article, "Literary Debt," Freedgood demonstrates how recent studies in the "history of *the* book" (with emphasis on the definite article) present an unabashedly European and North Atlantic genealogy of the book that occludes the rich publishing histories of Africa, Asia, and the Indigenous Americas. Furthermore, she argues, such studies too often elide the unseemly, entwined histories of publishing and colonialism—the story of how publishers and empire worked together to control literary production and consumption in the colonies and postcolonies, "turn[ing] a profit at every stage of empire and decolonization."⁶ Freedgood reminds us that we are positioned within the histories we write, and that it is the work of criticism to challenge the givenness of dominant historical narratives and the power structures they legitimate.

Similarly, in *The Ideas in Things*, Freedgood argues that the prevailing historicist approach to reading and interpreting the novel has made it

extraordinarily difficult to see the real for the realism, so to speak. She shows how much we miss out on when, in our scholarly sophistication, we skim past the descriptive trappings of the novel—like the “blue and white check curtains” decorating Mary Barton’s Manchester home, or the old mahogany furniture with which Jane Eyre decorates a rural cottage—choosing, when we *do* pause to consider these novelistic details, to read them symbolically: never literally or metonymically. Confronted with Freedgood’s deeply inquisitive and impressively unruly readings of those same curtains and furniture (wherein she traces them from their fictional settings to their sociohistorical contexts in the transatlantic slave trade and European colonialism), our more routine interpretations of such items—as symbols of a certain class status, or of domesticity, or simply as realism’s detritus—appear torpid, dismissive, and even negligent.

In contrast, I want to describe the way Elaine Freedgood reads as *athletic*.⁷ Simply put, her work takes a tremendous amount of effort. It requires trips to the outer reaches of the library stacks, reading far afield of the P call numbers, and a willingness to put oneself out of one’s depth: to ask open-ended questions and to follow obscure paths to uncertain ends. Freedgood hula-hoops with the hermeneutic circle—so vigorously she bends it out of shape, giving us the hermeneutic ellipse, which then cracks open into a parabola, a kind of boomerang, that inevitably winds up stuck in some way-off branches of knowledge. So she travels out to retrieve it, and the path of Elaine Freedgood going to meet the boomerang traces a post-Euclidean, posthermeneutic figure: something like a Mark Lombardi drawing, which, in keeping with Freedgood’s scholarship, articulates the connections between seemingly disparate actors and spheres, reminding us over and over again of what she calls our “one-worldly condition.”⁸

Freedgood’s work begins to pull back the blue-and-white checked curtains on the myriad ways in which the realist novel of the nineteenth century onward teaches its readers how, precisely, to disregard and deflect reality. The realist novel, she argues, encourages its readers to “[rely] on forms of omniscience—governments, gravity, laws of the market, expert advice, and so on—to keep narrating various aspects of reality for us.”⁹ It shields us from potential engagements with difference, by modeling the “practices of space and time that allow us to imagine and enact expansion and colonization—of territory, of the future, of other minds.”¹⁰ Finally, the realist novel provides us “with reference that can always be returned to the fictional realm in which it is enclosed”¹¹—a strategy of containment well suited to the liberal subject, who thrives in

environments built through obsessive compartmentalization: of fiction from fact, home from abroad, private from public, aesthetics from politics, and so on.¹² Freedgood's work countermands such efforts at segregation and sanitation. Her wide-ranging, border-crossing approach to scholarship draws the world a little closer together and reveals the messiness that's there, which is also *here*.

When I started writing this essay as a talk for *Elainefest!*, a celebration of Freedgood's career, I imagined the occasion as a kind of roast, and I was sincerely tempted to begin by declaring: "Elaine Freedgood does not know how to read." I felt such an opening would strike an appropriately humorous chord, because, as is often the case with humor, it's imbued with an element of torqued truth. Clearly, I didn't begin in this manner, but I've come around to it here, since, after all, I do think it important to probe the kernel of sincerity inherent in that discarded opening. Teasing its substance out a little further, I would put it this way: Elaine Freedgood neither knows how to read, nor, I suspect, does she particularly *want to know* how to read. If, and invariably when, our interpretive practices become "known"—which is to say fixed, codified, and naturalized—she intervenes in order to interrupt routine.

In more than one way, Freedgood gives the lie to the self-evidence and self-assuredness of our reading habits. She calls attention to the ideological blind spots we bring to reading, which prevent us from seeing signs or finding meaning where it hides in plain sight. As in her article "Divination," Freedgood also points out that even though we think we know *how to* read, much of the time, we don't begin to understand *how it is* that we read what we come to read. This is to say that with the rise of computerized, networked research and reading, most of us don't comprehend the codes and languages that undergird our reading habits: We simply don't know how JSTOR retrieves a particular article, or Google a given web page. We don't see, let alone read, the chevrons and backslashes punctuating our sentences behind the scenes—instructing a word to appear in italics, adding metadata to make an article discoverable, or simply rendering a series of keyboard strokes legible to a browser or word processor. We "cannot begin to scrutinize the order, the disorder, of digital information as it now exists," Freedgood writes; "We access it almost as we would throw the *I ching* or read the liver of a sacrificial goat."¹³

While Freedgood is certainly critical of the ways in which programmers and machines are increasingly responsible for shaping what and how we read, she also claims she wants "to celebrate our digital divinations partially."¹⁴ There's something in the way this "algorithmic divination"

may open new avenues of reading and research that appeals to her sense of scholarship as a queer utopian practice—one that finds us “always imagining a future in which we break out of the intellectual bonds that now hold us back.”¹⁵ As she writes, with Michael Sanders, in their response to the V21 Forum on “Strategic Presentism” in *Victorian Studies*, “As intellectual workers, our ethical responsibility is to follow what William Blake called ‘crooked roads.’ Intellectual inquiry should be open-ended because we are never sure what we will find, or how we will think about it once we do find it.”¹⁶ Freedgood practices such errant thinking with a passion. One of the greatest gifts she has given her colleagues and students: she teaches us to unlearn the ways we’ve learned to read. Her work provokes a reassessment of what, in all our myriad cultural productions, and particularly within the ones we call “literary,” we regard as meaning-bearing. She challenges us to reconsider what, in effect, *can* be read, and in what widening contexts, in connection with what else, down what strange byways, through what unexpected leaps, and in what improper manner.

The stakes of this work are clear and definite. What is, perhaps, even more profound is that the pleasure of the work is equally definite and, I would argue, entirely of a piece with its politics. Freedgood takes everything seriously, including play. So, we often find her reveling in language—as when she describes the wilderness depicted in a Canadian “emigration novel” (“which may or may not be a genre,” she adds) as “a giant muffin in waiting,”¹⁷ or elsewhere pronounces ghosts bourgeois,¹⁸ or when she’s swept up, as she often is, in the pleasures of lists, as in: “Milton, Medusa, moisture, mist, monastic orders, musical instruments,”¹⁹ or “post chaises, handkerchiefs, moonstones, wills, riding crops, ships’ instruments of all kinds, dresses of muslin, merino, and silk, coffee, claret, cutlets.”²⁰

Passages like these make it abundantly clear that Freedgood’s labor forges the utopian space where it may be, as she herself professes, at least “fleetingly . . . unalienated.”²¹ Furthermore, they evidence her deep attachment to this world, of which literature is a part, even when it would have us believe otherwise. Elaine Freedgood’s commitment to our world bodies forth in the pleasure she takes and gives in language and scholarship, as it does in the fierceness of her critique. Her commitment is contagious, and so I add it to the growing list of things I’ve acquired from her—along with one more, which is an appreciation of the value and beauty of concision.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Hamill, *A Poet's Work*, 177.
2. Warren, *American Steel*, 301.
3. Mahoney and Ricciardi, "Washburn and Moen"; Worcester Historical Museum, "Enterprise Timeline."
4. Admittedly, I exaggerate Freedgood's method just a little. She doesn't often lavish such attention on an isolated word; instead, she typically focuses her critical acumen on objects of representation and the representational strategies of novelistic fiction.
5. See "'Fine Fingers': Victorian Handmade Lace and Utopian Consumption," *Victorian Studies* 45, no. 5 (2003): 625–47; "Fringe," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30, no. 1 (2002): 257–63; and *Victorian Writing about Risk: Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
6. Freedgood, "Literary Debt," 1487.
7. Though Victorianists are not often celebrated for their athleticism, I would note that Freedgood is also a boxer.
8. Freedgood, "Hetero-ontologicality," 99.
9. Freedgood, "The Novelist and Her Poor," 221.
10. Freedgood, "Hetero-ontologicality," 92.
11. Freedgood, "Fictional Settlements," 410.
12. "The liberal subject needs worlds—a world of aesthetic autonomy, for example, and a world of plantation slavery—in which to dwell: that is already science fiction" ("Hetero-ontologicality," 95).
13. Freedgood, "Divination," 222.
14. Freedgood, "Divination," 222.
15. Freedgood, "We Are Not Yet Queer," 445.
16. Freedgood and Sanders, "Strategic Presentism," 119.
17. Freedgood, "Fictional Settlements," 401.
18. Freedgood, "Ghostly Reference," 47.
19. Freedgood, *Ideas in Things*, 111.
20. Freedgood, *Ideas in Things*, 1.
21. Freedgood, "Presentism," 120.

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