

Keywords

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FOR most readers of this journal, the term “keywords” will call to mind Raymond Williams’s *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976)—a book that is itself largely Victorian in focus. We are happy to pay homage to Williams’s great book as the inspiration for this, our inaugural issue as editors of *Victorian Literature and Culture*; however, we have not taken his *Keywords* as our model. Bringing together over one hundred mini-essays, this special double-issue of the journal seeks to capture the wide range of interests and issues currently animating the field of Victorian studies. As such, ours is a collaborative and distributed project, with each essay separately authored. Additionally, rather than encyclopedia-style entries focused solely on the etymology and historical development of important terms and concepts, we invited essays that leverage or indeed skip over such accounts in order to stake out a position, promote an agenda, and advocate directions for future research. And rather than deciding in advance or by ourselves what keywords to include, we asked our contributors to write on terms of their own choosing. In short, our contributors’ task was to make the case for the importance of their chosen terms—an importance determined not necessarily by the Victorians’ priorities and preoccupations, but also or instead by our own.

We recognize, of course, that it is not possible to capture the precise contours of the field of Victorian literary and cultural studies (even if, as this issue grew, we began to fear that we were constructing a map like the one described in Lewis Carroll’s *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, “on the scale of a mile to the mile”¹). Indeed, we do not mean to suggest that the field even has precise contours, since what counts as “Victorian” not only changes over time but also at any given moment is subject to geographical variation, disciplinary and subdisciplinary differences, and all manner of contestation. But none of this deprives the concept of Victorian studies of its descriptive and heuristic value, let alone its institutional reality. And while no collection such as this one, however broad, can claim to be the sample of an even web, we took several steps to make this issue as inclusive and representative as possible: we both issued a general call for papers and solicited contributions from scholars based in several

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countries and at all stages of their careers; we not only invited contributors to propose their own keywords but also allowed multiple contributors to write on the same term (thereby adding a topographical dimension to the map); and we encouraged dialogue and collaboration among scholars with shared interests. As the lucky first readers of these essays, we have learned a great deal about a great many things, and learned to question a great deal we thought we knew. We have also gained a better sense of the field as a whole.

So what is that sense? As one would expect of a mature, long-established field, one sees a great heterogeneity of topics and approaches, but also, less predictably, we are struck by what seems to us a mood of excitement and discovery. It seems plausible to claim that, intellectually, there may never have been a better time to be a Victorianist—even as there may never have been a worse time institutionally to try to become one. There may be a logic to this grim irony: the constant need to defend the value of one's scholarly and pedagogical expertise in the face of the imploding academic job market and the broader crisis in the humanities is pernicious as well as potentially demoralizing; however, on the evidence of this issue of *VLC* alone, it is clear that many Victorianists in a position to do so are responding to these challenges by both recommitting to and rethinking their work as Victorianists, and doing so with a sense of urgency.

This felt urgency is not restricted to conditions in the academy. On the contrary. One clear trend visible even in our table of contents, for example, is the explosion of interest in the environment. The reasons for the interest are obvious, involving as they do the coming together of our current state of emergency and the role of the nineteenth century in both creating and considering this emergency. Similar arguments could be made for the interest in terms relating to imperialism, globalization, and war. Because of nineteenth-century Britain's privileged relation to many of these issues, the literature and culture of this period offers a potentially relevant resource for the present moment. We all live on the edge of an abyss, and it is impossible for the work that we do to remain impervious to this fact. This is not to say that these essays are presentist in the sense of claiming a purely instrumental relation to the past. Instead, we see something like a desire for more tools to think with—tools that the literature and culture of the nineteenth century in certain cases seem able to provide. Suspicion is not dead in these pieces, but instead often exists in productive tension with something like receptiveness—and even, still, curiosity.

Alongside essays relating to explicitly political issues is a large group of essays taking on many of the terms we use to define and describe cultural artifacts and aesthetic experience. The number of these essays to some extent registers the formalist turn in literary studies, but these essays tend to resist any easy formalist/historicist dichotomy—as do many of the essays keyed to less obviously literary or aesthetic terms. Moreover, essays on even the hoariest of keywords (we won't name names), while engaging with and extending an existing tradition of inquiry, make the issues raised by those keywords feel newly pressing.

Throughout this volume more generally, the rich history of Victorian studies is treated variously, sometimes virtually simultaneously, in a spirit of indebted appreciation and one of revision or critique. At the same time, we are struck by the relative paucity of attention to certain topics that have loomed large in the history of the field: gender and sexuality above all, but also (relatedly) concepts associated with the work of Michel Foucault. We also note a relative absence of interest in political economy. We might begin to explain these omissions with the banal observation that the field evolves. But these particular shifts—if indeed our large but not 1:1 map is accurate—may be linked to the much-ballyhooed turn away from suspicious reading and, relatedly, the increasing tendency of critics (as noted above) to look to Victorian literature and culture itself for theoretical models and resources.

Then again, that turn may be overhyped, and our map may not be fully accurate. We hope this volume will spark continued exploration of these and so very many other questions, and we hope that that discussion and debate will continue to find a home in these pages. In that spirit, we will note that one of the felt absences just flagged will be addressed, and perhaps redressed, by a forthcoming cluster of articles on the future of feminist Victorian criticism. We will also treat at greater length the history and evolution of the field through a series of retrospective pieces by influential, senior figures. For these features and much more, we invite readers whose appetites are whetted by the wealth of erudition and argumentation on display in the following pages to stay tuned.

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We would like to thank John Maynard and Adrienne Munich, our predecessors as editors, who established *VLC* and kept it vibrant for so long. We greatly admire the work they have done over the past twenty-six years. We

know we have a very hard act to follow, and we are grateful for the generosity with which they have handed over the reins to us.

NOTE

1. Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 169 (emphasis original).

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