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Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom - Langan,C

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864.* by Mary Poovey

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and essays by Amanda Gilroy, Robin Jarvis, and Jeanne Moskal. The number of these that appeared after *Romantic Vagrancy* must have been in press suggests our growing critical concern in this area. Celeste Langan's efforts open discussions of great potential, as we continue to engage the meaning of our own mobility.

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MARY POOVEY, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830–1864*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. x + 255. \$34 cloth; \$12.95 paper.

One of the features of Mary Poovey's work that has made it influential over the last decade is its vigorous skepticism. Poovey has opened valuable lines of investigation by pursuing the topoi of New Historicism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and critical theory into eighteenth- and nineteenth-century records and emerging with accounts of "uneven" historical processes, which pose stubborn counterexamples to totalizing theories. An important motive for Poovey's resistance has been her commitment to individual experience—notably women's experience—as a form of knowledge and basis of opposition. That position became increasingly difficult to sustain as Poovey affiliated more closely with New Historicism. The eight essays in this volume are drawn together, Poovey states in the introductory chapter, in order to refute "New Historicist representations of modern power as a totalizing force" (p. 14) and to "direct . . . our critical gaze beyond the identity categories to which we have become accustomed" (p. 19). These goals are somewhat complicated by the fact that of the eight essays in this volume, five are reprints, originally written "under the sign of identity or the influence of the New Historicism" and sparingly revised so as "not to efface all of the traces of the theoretical conditions that made their writing possible" (p. 19). In tension with those traces, as Poovey explains, is an implicit interest in historical epistemology—the practice that Poovey self-consciously adopts in the three new essays. This collection serves to highlight the considerable flexibility of the neopragmatist practice of historical epistemology, particularly in avoiding the conundrums of identity-based analyses. But this method also forestalls a robust defense of experiential knowledge as well as presents new impasses.

The process of making a social body—a national identity—is one marked by conflicting demands for aggregation and disaggregation, organicism and mechanism. Three of the reprinted essays—two concentrating on James Phillips Kay’s *Condition of the Working Classes* (1832) and one on Edwin Chadwick’s *Sanitary Report* (1842)—document both the incoherence of the representational mode Poovey evocatively terms “anatomical realism” and the abilities of individuals to resist its incursions. Kay and Chadwick represented the Other—women, Irish, the poor—in such a way as to produce a nonnative British identity while paradoxically incorporating deviant elements in a system of moral reform and scientific observation. But whereas Poovey once stressed the power of the subjugated to manipulate the incoherencies in dominant representations in order to acquire real material gains, these essays are reticent about what might constitute improvements in the conditions endured by Others’ bodies. Neither New Historicism nor historical epistemology lends itself to assessments of the material outcomes of various representational practices, a concern that is difficult to avoid when discussing such matters as cholera epidemics.

The other reprinted essays deal with literary texts: chapter 7, “Homosociality and the Psychological: Disraeli, Gaskell, and the Condition-of-England Debate,” and chapter 8, “Speculation and Virtue in *Our Mutual Friend*.” Chapter 7 analyzes novelistic representations of individualized characters as a retort to the abstract aggregations by which reformers and political economists sought to represent the social domain. Poovey credits both novelists for insisting on the political relevance of imaginative engagement—an argument recently revived by Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum, among others. Nussbaum’s position closely resembles Gaskell’s mode of knowing—one of sympathetic identification—though Poovey stresses that Mary Barton’s interiority also functions as a domain that escapes surveillance and administration.

Masculinity is key to Poovey’s discussions of *Conningsby* and *Our Mutual Friend*. Disraeli’s novel, Poovey argues, erases women as part of its rejection of the social domain and offers the “homoerotics of manly conversation” as an alternative to the social reforming of a Kay or Chadwick. Dickens tries to recuperate masculine virtue, threatened by the representational strategies of 1860s capitalism, by negotiating it through gender and race as interdependent modes of difference. Both discussions parallel Eve Sedgwick’s account of homosociality in many respects, and a comparison between Sedgwick’s and Poovey’s

treatments of *Our Mutual Friend* points up some of the virtues of Poovey's analyses of contradiction. Whereas narrative contradictions evince for Sedgwick the self-contradiction of the double bind, Poovey sees contradictions as sites of opportunity for the subjugated.

Two new essays are "The Production of Abstract Space" (chapter 2) and "Thomas Chalmers, Edwin Chadwick, and the Sublime Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Government" (chapter 5). The latter juxtaposes these reformers in order to demonstrate the paradoxical, diverse, irrational features of the promulgation of disciplinary individualism as the normative form of agency. Poovey concludes from the example of the New Poor Law that the growth of nineteenth-century government realized no ulterior logic, but that among its effects were administrative routines that exist in a dialectical relationship with a subjectivity informed by voluntary submission. The interdependence of "modern forms of individualism and administration" calls for "a new narrative to describe—and account for—change" (p. 114). One would hope, however, that this system of interdependence does not amount to a closed circuit, precluding the very sorts of resistance to normalization that Poovey convincingly cites as reasons why the New Poor Law failed.

In "The Production of Abstract Space" Poovey powerfully combines some key concepts from Henri Lefebvre's 1974 exploration of a "unitary theory" of physical, mental, and social space (from which her essay takes its title) with the sort of careful historical research and textual analysis that make her previous books of such enduring value. Lefebvre's arguments are congenial to Poovey's practice in that they were designed to challenge a whole range of influential philosophical positions—including those of Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, and Chomsky—as well as the powers of the state. Poovey begins with a discussion of space and representation, leading to an analysis of nineteenth-century images of society as a machine and the social body. She then proceeds, through a detailed account of Ellen Henrietta White Raynard and the Female Bible Mission she founded in 1857, to work out how the uneven development of abstract ways of knowing along with the persistence of older rationalities produce a picture of complex change. Poovey notes that the historical evidence she examines "keep[s] alive the possibility of a kind of knowledge that is based not on generalizations abstracted from disinterested observation but on personal experience, preferably gained by one body's immediate contact with another" (p. 54). Surely this is to be welcomed, and what we might look forward to—beyond historical epistemology—are Poovey's responses to the efforts in philosophy, literary criticism, political the-

ory, and science to negotiate between the categories of abstraction and experience and to adjudicate among truth claims.

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DEIRDRE DAVID, *Rule Britannia: Women, Empire, and Victorian Writing*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996. Pp. xvi + 234. \$29.50.

Current interest is high in (and on) Victorian “fictions of empire,” that system of mirrors carefully deployed on the one hand to reflect colonizing man at twice his size—as he needed to be in order to undertake the preternatural, even taboo, enterprises of “opening” the world—and on the other hand to deflect or ration his knowledge of his own multiple motives in these enterprises. Writing the nation meant continual negotiation between this need and this knowledge—self-critique pulled up by, and into, self-justification, self-parody sliding toward self-praise.

In Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* (1912), for instance, the adventurers’ conscious motives include scientific honor, the love of a sporting risk, and the desire to win the fair Gladys. They affect not to notice at the end that they got what they also wanted: the worship of their native guides, a parade down Picadilly, and a personal fortune in diamonds. In a later Doyle story of rape disguised as brain surgery, Professor Challenger puts an eight-mile-long steel and electric probe into the quivering quirk of the planet herself because, as he conceives, she has paid insufficient attention to the evolving “fact” of “man.” He gets the Mother’s attention all right: the story is called “When the World Screamed.” But even if the story of Professor Challenger was parody, it was also praise: its mad protagonist was a mere scapegoat like Cecil Rhodes, while the driller-technician hero, a phlegmatic descendant of Carlyle’s Plugson of Undershot named Peerless Jones, drills the earth with the author’s full approval.

Boys’ adventure tales expose these fictions of empire most disarmingly, as Martin Green and Patrick Brantlinger have shown us. Now Deirdre David joins the list of scholars making important contributions to this topic. A compelling chapter on Rider Haggard’s *She* and *King Solomon’s Mines*, toward the end of her new book, teases out the pride and fear of the Victorians about the project of mastering the body of the earth. In these stories, David interestingly shows, the