

Simon Dentith, *Nineteenth-Century British Literature Then and Now: Reading with Hindsight* (Routledge, 2016)

Routledge's Nineteenth Century Series is edited by Vincent Newey and Joanne Shattock and aims

to reflect, develop and extend the great burgeoning of interest in the nineteenth century that has been an inevitable feature of recent years, as that former epoch has come more sharply into focus as a locus for our understanding not only of the past, but of the contours of our modernity. (ii)

But problems associated with reading texts with reference to their histories have plagued critical debates for decades. Simon Dentith's contribution to this series is an enjoyable and cogently argued book. As its subtitle indicates, it directly addresses the challenges of reading texts with hindsight.

His argument begins with an exploration of the ambivalences inherent in the term. While it may promise 'improved knowledge' and a 'reconstructive backward look,' which could help to 'make fuller sense of the past,' hindsight also threatens to 'sell short the legitimate beliefs, attitudes and actions that were taken or adopted in the light of the best knowledge then available' (1). But rather than repudiate hindsight as a possible source of ironies that could rob 'the past of its authenticity', Dentith argues that such ironies should be considered encouragement for readings that understand the relationship between the past and present in terms of both continuity and difference (1). This position, he contends, makes it possible for critics to respect the authenticity of nineteenth-century writers and their original readers. It also enables considerations of ways in which nineteenth-century ideas have persisted throughout history to challenge contemporary social assumptions. Drawing on the differentiation between 'memory' and 'memories' in the work of Paul Ricoeur, Dentith shifts his focus from individual to historical hindsight. Ultimately he suggests that critics should read intersections between Victorian texts and the modern world dialogically, following the traditions of Mikhail Bakhtin and Hans-Georg Gadamer (19). Having established this as the principal approach of the book, Dentith turns his attention to specific examples to argue that the connections made with cultural artefacts of the nineteenth century are grounded in traceable histories.

One implication of reading with hindsight is to recognise that historical and present-day texts may fictionally anticipate futures that look back on their pasts and, in so doing, pass oblique commentary on the social contexts of their composition. Dentith provides readings of Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843) and Alfred Tennyson's 'Locksley Hall' (1835) and 'Locksley Hall Sixty Years After' (1886) as nineteenth-century examples to illustrate this claim. Establishing parallels with contemporary texts to further demonstrate the functions of hindsight, he also considers the temporal shifts in *The Book of Prefaces* (2000) by Alisdair Gray, *The Good That We Do* (2001) by John Lucas and a diary piece by John Sutherland published in the *London Review of Books* on 21 August 2003. This discussion then serves as the backdrop for a series of chapter-long readings of Victorian novels including George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1859-1860) and two of Anthony Trollope's works, *Phineas Finn* (1867 - 1868) and *Phineas Redux* (1873-1874). In his analysis of Eliot's work, Dentith demonstrates how issues of gender, sexuality, and female education in *The Mill on the*

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Floss come to the fore for the character and author, as well as for twentieth and twenty-first-century feminist critics. *David Copperfield* serves as a model text for Dentith to demonstrate how reading with hindsight enables critics to examine previous assessments – in this case, those made by D.A. Miller and Mary Poovey – in light of the multiple interpretive possibilities that occur when historical continuity and contradiction collide.

The argument then progresses to show possible ways in which reading with hindsight reveals how nineteenth-century insights and concerns can be used to critique current social and political climates. To do this, Dentith considers the political realism of Anthony Trollope. He argues that *Phineas Finn* exploits the author's personal ambivalence about the parliamentary system by restaging the debates about democracy and the extension of the franchise in the Second Reform Act of 1867. *Phineas Redux*, Dentith continues, builds on the political examination of the first novel and demonstrates how extending the franchise serves only the elite, an inevitability over which Trollope remains conflicted. Just as Trollope's novels present imaginative parallel universes he created to examine political possibilities of his time, so Dentith invites readers to reconsider contemporary political states of affairs, such as Thatcherism or the economic crises of 2008, through a process of defamiliarisation, as mirrors of Trollope's nineteenth-century concerns. Similarly, Dentith pairs John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* (1860) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) in two penultimate chapters to show how these works 'suggest equally complex relations to current concerns' as well as 'challenge too easy an assimilation to our present preoccupations,' with a particular focus on ecological issues (101). Applying Georg Lukács's label of 'romantic anticapitalist' to Ruskin, Dentith illustrates how unfair the practise of substituting current vocabulary on evolving political economies and terminology can be, as it inevitably leads to misreading. Dentith considers Morris to be Ruskin's most significant successor. He argues that re-contextualising Morris's utopian novel is only valid if critics engage with the text aware of their propensity for falling into 'bad hindsight' (142), especially given the critical emergence of the so-called 'Green Morris'.

At this point, the argument changes focus again and, in a final chapter that can best be described as anticlimactic, shifts from the act of reading to the act of writing with hindsight. Here the chapter length is counterproductive. Dentith is unable to fully develop the level of detail in his interpretations of his examples of Neo-Victorian novels that have been the hallmark of the book's analyses so far. Its conclusions, as a result, seem perfunctory and unsatisfying.

But this does not detract from Dentith's argument as a whole, nor does it in any way negate the enjoyment of his fine and subtly polemical prose and masterful readings. The work is not only a fine addition to the Nineteenth Century Series; it serves as a clear invitation to further study in this field.

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