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stops well short of following Nairn in writing off present-day Britain as a Victorian theme park, but he generally supports the notion that British modernity's lengthy gestation placed it at a disadvantage relative to countries like Germany and Japan, which (in comparison) modernized overnight. Part of this support derives from the primacy of the second industrial revolution in his definition of modernity. A modern state, for Price, is an American-style state, with a strong industrial base and a far-reaching mass market specializing in the exchange of consumer goods and political ideas. Other historians have claimed that such a definition is too narrow, since it ignores (for instance) Britain's continued influence in the realm of finance. In the future, when the United States and Western Europe have finished outsourcing most of their industrial capacity to countries like China, historians may well reperiodize British history once again. When that day comes, *British Society 1680-1980* might speak of a longer transition yet, from an pre-industrial old regime to a post-industrial (and post-modern) political economy.

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## Partly autonomous? Literary-historical reflections on Richard Price, *British Society 1680-1880*

Francis O'Gorman

How might Richard Price's bold proposal seem to a professional reader of Victorian literature? Periods in *literary* history, certainly, are easy to contest and difficult to move. The starting question of whether it makes sense to speak of 'Victorian literature' is more than an idle one and it stands the chance of producing some useful knowledge. Whether it makes better sense to speak of 'nineteenth-century literature' or 'Victorian literature' matters both as an intellectual issue – the crucial question of Romantic legacies is buried here and other intriguing subjects like the nature of the 1830s in literary term – and it also matters as a pedagogic one. University English teaching needs borders; it cannot operate coherently without them. But few good period papers/modules will begin without productively and rightly interrogating their own chronological boundaries. Period margins in literary history are difficult to relocate partly because they are impossible for teachers to do without. But, of course, they make sense beyond this mere pragmatism. The boundaries of literary history, however susceptible to debate, acknowledge swathes of multiple differences even if they accidentally, and sometimes deliberately, disguise continuities. The literature of the

Glorious Revolution – it does not need to be said to a literary critic – inhabits another space from the literature of the reign of Queen Victoria: it speaks through different terms and addresses a culture with different categories of knowledge and alternative ways of being, to say nothing of divergent aesthetic priorities. A thematic approach will certainly find strategies for speaking of two periods together. Take the stretch of time from *Oronoko* (1688) to *Daniel Deronda* (1876). One could well write a book on the development of the novel from Aphra Behn to George Eliot and do it with sense. Yet it would be impossible to think of a meaningful and coherent *period* in literary history from the end of the seventeenth century to a late decade of the nineteenth.

Richard Price's challenge to the Victorian period *qua* period through political, social, and economic issues in British society stimulates and for the literary reader it energizes the valuable and not always well-informed debate about periodicity which scholars of literature need continually to have. (On this matter, we might do well to follow Mill's advice that even widely-accepted convictions must be frequently discussed to prevent their ossification.) But at the headline level Price's reconceptualization of modern British periods avoids offering critics and teachers of post-Restoration to late Victorian English literature a workable replacement for their present, provisional, but necessary categories. The literature of the Restoration, of Augustanism, of the high eighteenth century, of Romanticism, of the Victorians: these are some of the disputable groupings with which a literary historian works but the questions about their legitimacy are not finally settled – even assuming they ever could be – by bringing them all into one super-period.

Richard Price, to be sure, does not propose that literary critics do any such thing. He suggests such a non-starter no more than he recommends musicians adopt as a workable period one that begins five years before the birth of J.S. Bach and ends three years before death of Richard Wagner. Literary history negotiates with the patterns of political, economic, and social history but it is not defined by them: it has its own partly autonomous life. Yet although Price makes no suggestion that his new period *will* serve literary critics, the reader who is conscious of the competing models of literary history – or indeed of the history of any aesthetic form – knows of a more complicated paradigm of time than it is this book's business to consider. The historical moment, with its many characteristics, events, and productions, is plural in its relation to the retrospective construction of periods. A single instant in the chronology of human society may belong to different periods when competing elements of its vast and composite identity are the object of

inquiry. Historical periods are not only disputable but layered, and the literary historian is conscious of a different patterning of time from that proposed by this stimulating book.

That difference is not only to do with the disputed but indispensable chronological boundaries of the literary historians. Literary works themselves sometimes have things to say more or less explicitly about periods, and this is certainly true for a group of early Victorians. Relationships between the present age and the past magnetically interested the nineteenth century and behind that truism lies the fresher fact that a body of Victorian imaginative writing meditates on the nature and boundaries of its own period – certainly its beginnings – in suggestive ways. Yet Price is impatient with Victorian ideas about Victorians and defines his own project against them. Historians, he remarks, ‘have too readily accepted the governing notions of the Victorians themselves as describing the appropriate historical categories of the period’ (4). But a literary critic may well be more interested in exactly the opposite and aspire, as part of his or her own historicized project, to investigate rather than cast aside the architecture of the Victorians’ ideas of themselves. Such a critic may hope to understand, as a starting point for reading a literary work, precisely that host of ‘governing notions’ that helped shape Victorian consciousnesses and by which imaginative literature is informed. Grasping the Victorians in their own terms is an uncompletable but necessary project, a task that is begun even as it cannot be finished, and it is the starting point for any sensitive and credible interpretation of the corpus of Victorian imaginative writing.

This is to describe, perhaps, simply one of the general but deeply significant ways in which the field of inquiry for the historian such as Richard Price and the literary critic such as myself is different. A literary critic’s inquiry – and obviously I am keeping a loose distinction, as throughout this response, between a literary historian and a literary critic – investigates the *shape* of ideas and rarely seeks as a primary goal an assessment of their validity. How Victorian literary texts imagined periodicity, how they thought about the genealogy of their own age, is of consequence to readers like me and to literary critics engaged in similar tasks to my own. A consideration of these acts of representation allows intriguing questions to be asked about Price’s configuration of time and his model of historical change, but ultimately the literary critic is not in *debate* with him because her or his premises are different. Price, evidently, does not regard 1832 as any crucial point in the patterns of historical shift. ‘Reform’, he remarks, ‘when it came in the 1830s, hardly represented a giant step toward a modern polity and state; it was more

an attempt to repair and restore the systems of the past' (13). His arguments about the continuities of political and social structures challenge that moment as defining, and his case is a powerful one. But, as a reader of nineteenth-century literature, I am more intrigued by the ways in which historical identity was imagined *in* history and the forms in which ideas were represented in their own time. From this perspective, 1832 seems a different matter. Perhaps historians have indeed 'too readily accepted' what Victorian historiography has claimed as true but I – not really professionally interested in accepting or rejecting – hope rather to understand how the Victorians imagined themselves with the greatest fullness I can achieve.

To consider the question of 1832. Victorian fiction offers crucial acts of the envisaging of period origins, instances of what George Eliot would call, in her famous phrase, the make-believe of a beginning. For historical myth-making and the consideration of the enabling fictions of period boundaries, Dinah Mulock Craik's hugely popular novel *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856) is an obvious text. It is unavoidable in any attempt to grasp the potent self-defining narratives of periodicity in mid-nineteenth-century culture. Figuring the emergence of a new age in its drama of an ordinary man's rise from poverty to conspicuous social success, the text gives form to the idea that a defining break with the past was, *pace* Richard Price, achieved with the Great Reform Act. At one level, *John Halifax* plays out its ideas about history with startling clarity. In understanding Lord John Russell's Act as radically shifting power from a corrupt aristocracy – grimly embodied in Lord Luxmore who kills Halifax's favourite daughter—to worthier and more ordinary representatives of working people such as Halifax himself, Craik's text silently fashions a myth of a new period's birth. It offers a potent genealogy for Craik's time as one that has finally begun the exchange of political power from the landed aristocracy to representatives of modern industry, that understands a version of meritocracy and which is, at last, capable of recognizing, and making the most of, the virtues of a true, self-made gentleman. The novel's sense of meritocracy is not a late twentieth-century one, and its embrace of a widening democracy does not involve a contemporary understanding of the democratic. Its perception of the period's newness is firm nevertheless.

Yet *John Halifax, Gentleman* is more complicated. If, in a way, Craik's novel commemorates a liberating severance from an imagined eighteenth-century past, it also offers that past, or the memory of it, as necessary to the moral stability of the present, as the guarantor of future ethical maturity. Like Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers* (1857) – an obliquer and more complicated meditation on the Great Reform Act –

*John Halifax, Gentleman* extrudes anxiety about the new age drifting too far from the virtues of its imagined eighteenth century. As Halifax, born before the nineteenth begins, lies dead at the end of the novel and at the end of his estimable life, his widow instructs their children to remember him. She tells them that they must ‘never forget’ their father, and ‘do as he wishes, and live as he lived – in all ways’.<sup>1</sup> In so speaking, she articulates the high point of the novel’s impulse to remain in touch with an age that produced such an exemplary Christian as Halifax. Politically, the text invites its reader to dispense with the mortmain of the eighteenth century; morally, it hails the same period as the century capable of producing men whose successors will steer the nineteenth century to virtue.

Richard Price exposes continuities that minimize the significance of 1832 as an inaugural moment of a new period. But within the narratives of origin that circulated in the mid-culture, in the Victorian period’s own imaginings of starting points, the Whig success was not so dispensable. This is to tell a different story about the periodicity of the Victorian – or what later becomes the Victorian – and it is different partly because it is produced by a different object of inquiry.

The focus of my debate in this response to Professor Price is on the beginning rather than the end of the Victorian. Nevertheless it would be fair to say briefly that if 1680 is a self-evidently impossible inaugural date for a Victorian literary historian, 1880 as an end point is happily coincident with a widespread sense – not uncontested – that the last two decades of the nineteenth century were a departure in literary historical terms. The arguments about the origins of Modernism or of the open-ended sense of ‘modernity’ in the writings of Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, George Gissing, John Davidson, Henry James, Emile Zola, Michael Field, are, for contemporary historians of literature, inescapable. The death of George Eliot in 1880 neatly symbolizes, in this argument, the closing of the high Victorian period in literary terms, the demise of the great exponent of realism from which later novelists dissented, the end of a writer whose concern with the moral life in a post-Christian climate belonged securely to the middle years of the Queen’s reign. The date of George Eliot’s death is a convenient accident but it allows a tidy sense of a make-believe ending/beginning which is useful and suggestively at one with Price’s very differently-derived claim. Does that overlap, that joint selection of 1880 in two very different forms of discourse, reveal more than coincidence? Are there any ways in which the narrative unfolded in *British Society* interacts with – even if it does not determine – the significance of 1880 in the periods adumbrated by literary history? It would, perhaps, be a thought-

provoking undertaking to explore what, if any, of actual relationships – necessary rather than contingent – connect the 1880 of a group of modern literary historians to that of Price's provocative thesis.

Literary historians could allow themselves to be challenged by Richard Price in other ways. There are responses to *British Society 1680-1880* that are not forced finally to admit simple difference between the methods of the political/economic historian and the literary critic. And there are probing questions to be asked that do not seek false forms of knowledge or forget the notion, to borrow George Eliot again, that retrospect will not reveal true beginnings.<sup>2</sup> The Romantic inheritance of the Victorians is one of the great defining characters of their age. Critics are not wrong to understand Tennyson, the Brontës, Robert Browning, Ruskin, Carlyle, Eliot, Dickens, Hardy – to name but a few obvious examples – as fundamentally involved in a negotiation with that past and an effort to reinterpret it for a new age. But it is easy to over-privilege the immediate history of the Victorians, to see Harold Bloom's 'visionary company'<sup>3</sup> as central to their sense of precursors, somehow to imagine that their reading was confined by an invisible border that bounded Romanticism, that their bookshelves were stocked with Byron, Coleridge, Scott, and Wordsworth only. Richard Price insists that the Victorian period remained in a continuum in important ways with the end, not of the eighteenth, but of the seventeenth century. This, detached from its political and historical argument, is a suggestive spur for literary critics to think more amply about the Victorians' relationship in cultural terms with more distant periods than the Hanoverian age, about extended forms of Victorian literary inheritances beyond the Romantic, about Victorian reading habits,<sup>4</sup> and the complicated lines of intellectual bequests. This is not to argue for the general adoption of a 'long eighteenth century' or indeed a 'long nineteenth century' in literary history. It is instead to suggest avoiding an *overly-closed* notion of the necessary but problematic category of the Victorian. It is to suggest another way in which the 'Victorian' as a taxonomical term can work as a framework not as an absolute restraint in the management of literary history. Examining unexpected connections between that period and other more distant ages allows new questions to be asked across familiar borders that expose overlooked histories and long veiled genealogies. The result, I think, is to enrich but not to overthrow, to develop but not to cast out, a sense of Victorian period identity. It is to help make an understanding of 'Victorian' fuller.

The relationship between the Victorians and the pre-Romantic eighteenth century has been subject to a good deal of caricature. This is partly the responsibility of some Victorians. Thomas Carlyle

memorably called the Hanoverian era a ‘*Sceptical century*; in which little word there is a whole Pandora’s box of miseries’<sup>5</sup> and *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1840/41) might easily be taken as representative of a widespread suspicion of the pre-Romantic eighteenth century. And yet readers did not/do not read texts only from the decades immediately before their own. Carlyle’s headline comment is not at all adequate for articulating a whole culture’s response to another entire century. Eighteenth-century literature flooded the book markets of Victorian England – and it was generally more cheaply available than Romantic texts. Thackeray, Dickens, Ruskin, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning – to give only the briefest of lists – were serious readers of the literature of the age of Pope and Richardson and the place of the eighteenth century in their writing has only recently begun to be adequately considered. An obvious starting point for further consideration might be Victorian narratives of the eighteenth century: Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), Thackeray’s *Henry Esmond* (1852), Stevenson’s *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), and even Henry James’s *Guy Domville* (1895) are part of the multiple ways in which an image of eighteenth century was handled by its successor. Characters born in the eighteenth century inhabit Victorian narratives too and suggest, perhaps, other broader features of the movement of history as they were understood in Victorian culture: John Halifax, Eliot’s Mr Casaubon and Trollope’s Warden Harding, for a start. And then there are the fruitful dealings between individual works and eighteenth-century textual ancestors: Dickens’s sustained re-writings of Fielding has recently received some thought, though not exhaustive;<sup>6</sup> Dickens’s reading, and Thackeray’s, of Smollett needs some fresh investigation; Robert Louis Stevenson’s settlement with Daniel Defoe – especially in *Kidnapped* (1886) – does likewise; the 1890s’ fascination with the Augustans is suggestive terrain. The literary relationships that eighteenth-century reading involved in the Victorian period, the transactions and debates it provoked, are contradictory, protean, and pleasingly untidy but they suggest important revisions to customary models of ‘influence’ in the period and open up some of the more tangled pathways of literary identity in the nineteenth century. To consider such literary legacies in the way my recent co-edited collection, *The Victorians and the Eighteenth Century: Reassessing the Tradition* (2004), attempted is not to challenge the usefulness of the ‘Victorian’ as a period category (it remained steadfastly in the title of our book) but rather to keep it, *après* Mill, discursively alive. It was against the lazy or uninterrogated use of ‘Victorian’, against ways of using it that unhappily occlude the full complexity of Victorian literary



identity and oversimplify the age's inheritance from its past, that our volume was envisaged.

Richard Price might stir more interest among literary critics in lost connections and underdeveloped theories of literary relationships in the Victorian period because his backward glance is so absorbingly long. That interest is, of course, a long way from his specific concern with the structures of British economic, political, and social life. But a fruitful provocation for literary readers is possible nevertheless. Victorian literary critics do need to keep period boundaries working for them rather than against, they need to keep them opening up thought rather than closing it down. Such borders should invite rather than cauterize constructive questions about literary writing, its inheritance and legacies. I do believe that there is such a thing as Victorian literature, distinctive from its past as it is distinctive from its successors. But its borders are not impermeable and thinking about what crosses them is an illuminating task.

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#### Endnotes

1. Dinah Mulock Craik, *John Halifax, Gentleman*, 1856 (London: Collins, 1954), 443.
2. This, and the idea of the 'make-believe of a beginning', from Eliot's own epigraph to Book 1, Chapter 1 of George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 1876, John Rignall (ed.) (London: Everyman, 1999), [5].
3. See Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (London: Faber, 1962).
4. Victorianists need the equivalent of William St Clair's excellent *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) of course, looks, rewardingly, at a narrower question about Victorian reading habits.
5. *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, H.D. Traill (ed.), 30 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1897-1904), 5.170. Italic original.
6. See Helen Small, "'The Debt to Society': Dickens, Fielding, and the Genealogy of Independence", in Francis O'Gorman and Katherine Turner (eds), *The Victorians and the Eighteenth Century: Reassessing the Tradition* (Burlington, VT and Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 14-40.