The Imagination of Class

Bivona, Dan, Henkle, Roger B.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Bivona, Dan and Roger B. Henkle.
The Imagination of Class: Masculinity and the Victorian Urban Poor.
The Ohio State University Press, 2006.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/28186.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28186

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1177548
hen he died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of fifty-four in October of 1991, Roger B. Henkle left behind many grieving family members, colleagues, and students, past and present, from Brown University, where he taught for many years. I was one of the latter. Roger directed my dissertation, which I completed in 1987. As with all the others, I appreciated Roger’s wit, his enthusiasm, his intelligence, his energy, and his bonhomie; and, like the others, I felt his loss keenly.

Roger also left behind a very interesting but unfortunately rather incomplete manuscript which he had been working on up to the time of his death. It was entitled *The Imagination of Class: A Study of the Middle Class Victorian Representation of the Urban Poor*. At the request of a number of Roger’s colleagues and friends at Brown, including Robert Scholes, Michael Silverman, and L. P. Curtis, I agreed in 1992 to take on the task of writing, rewriting, and reconstructing the manuscript. Roger’s wife and literary executor, Carol, generously agreed to make me coauthor and gave me permission to make whatever changes were necessary to bring the manuscript up to final form.

I was somewhat reluctant at first to take on this task. I had just finished my first book and had begun research for my second, and I was wholly unable at the time to forecast when I might be able to begin the labor of reshaping Roger’s manuscript. The project itself I also found somewhat daunting in conception: however much freedom I had been given to remake the manuscript, it was not my manuscript. I worried about the expectation that I would produce “Roger’s” book and
whether or not I could reconcile my vision of the material with his. The manuscript itself needed more than simple editing: there were unwritten chapters and written ones in need of some rather dramatic changes; the amount of work involved would require that I dedicate more time to mastering the material than Roger had. Moreover, to be asked to take on someone else’s manuscript is rather a strange affair when you think about it. I felt myself anything but a clone of Roger Henkle and not at all well equipped psychologically for the task of bringing someone else’s dream to realization through my own efforts. I was not even sure that I agreed with his thesis. Would I want to write a book that contested his main claims?

In any event, the demands of my own career required me to put off serious work on the manuscript until four years ago when I began researching the subject in earnest. During the process of researching I discovered my own interest in the issue of poverty and its representation in discourse. I began to see my own way through the material. When I began rewriting the manuscript in earnest after having done the research, I felt a renewed appreciation for what Roger had already accomplished, but I also felt tensions emerging between my view of the material and his. At times, it seemed as if I was carrying on an argument with the dead. I had always been more of a post-structuralist than Roger, and differences between the way I would word something and the way he had worded it threatened, at least in my own mind, to promise irreconcilable conflicts of perspective that might find their way into inconsistencies in the book. What struck me initially as a serious, and potentially project-ending, problem became, as I worked my way through the material, an opportunity to refashion the material in a way that took cognizance of these differences. My argument with the dead, finally, I think, helped me to sharpen the argument. At least I hope it did. The jury is still out. In any event, I do feel obliged to acknowledge that the “we” of this text is a more factitious “we” than is usually the case in coauthored books. My “collaboration” with Roger on this book was, unfortunately, never face-to-face.

I benefited greatly from the advice of a number of people in putting together this book. These include Patrick Brantlinger, who read and commented on the original manuscript, and Roger’s colleagues at Brown, Robert Scholes, Michael Silverman, and L. P. Curtis. I am indebted to Carol Henkle for agreeing to allow me coauthor status, and for not losing faith that I would ultimately bring this project to
completion. I wish to thank the English Department at Arizona State University for supporting this project by assigning me some research assistants who assisted me greatly. They include Laura Nutten, Heather Hoyt, and Amy D’Antonio. The latter two gave especially useful advice on the manuscript. I appreciate the advice I received from colleagues at a number of conferences at which I presented this material in recent years including the Interdisciplinary Nineteenth-Century Studies conference, the Midwest Victorian Studies Association conference, and the Pacific Coast British Studies conference. I also want to thank the students in my seminar “Imagining Class in the Nineteenth Century” in spring of 2002 who contributed, sometimes despite themselves, to helping me think through the issues discussed here. I also wish to thank Kara Wittman for many discussions that helped to sharpen my thoughts.

None of these people should be blamed for any inconsistencies, omissions, or incomplete thoughts in the final product, not even Roger Henkle, my coauthor. For those, I take full responsibility myself.

Lastly, I want to thank my family: my wife, Jeanne, and my children, Laura, Michael, and Kate. They consistently had greater faith that this would be finished than I did.

Dan Bivona
Arizona State University
May 2005