The Imagination of Class

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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.

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On the contributors’ page for the Spring 1992 issue of NOVEL, the editors list Roger Henkle, whose article on George Gissing, Arthur Morrison, and urban poverty in late-nineteenth-century British fiction it contains. Following Roger’s name, they indicate that he “was at work on a book-length study of the fiction of urban poverty in late-Victorian England before his untimely death on October 5, 1991.” Thanks to Professor Daniel Bivona of Arizona State University, The Imagination of Class is at last the completed version of that book-length study. I am certain that Roger, our mutual friend and Dan’s former mentor and dissertation advisor, would be more than pleased with and proud of the result.

In the same contributors’ notice, the editors of NOVEL announce that I had “agreed to edit the almost completed manuscript.” Friends of Roger’s at Brown University, including L. P. Curtis and Mark Spilka, had indeed asked me to take a look at and hopefully edit the manuscript of what is now The Imagination of Class. I gladly did so and recognized that it was, like his earlier book Comedy and Culture (1980), original, ambitious, and on its way to becoming a major contribution to Victorian studies. However, the manuscript was less complete than we hoped. Though much of it was finished, major portions remained to be written, and I did not feel that I was the right person to become Roger’s coauthor. That person turned out to be Dan Bivona, who deserves much praise not just for finishing the portions that Roger was unable to complete but also for bringing the entire project up-to-date in a well-informed, sophisticated manner. He says in his preface to this
volume that he often felt he was “arguing with the dead,” but in my view the collaboration was much more about agreement than about argument.

The Imagination of Class deserves to take a prominent place among recent—and I stress recent, especially in the sense of up-to-date—studies of nineteenth-century British literature focused upon urban poverty and social class. Bivona has brought this book into dialogue with such recent works as Seth Koven’s Slumming and Simon Joyce’s Capital Offenses, both published in 2004. Whenever the issue of Victorian representations of slums and the poor arises, one thinks immediately of Dickens, from Oliver Twist to Our Mutual Friend. But numerous Victorian novelists, economists, journalists, and social critics dealt with aspects of class and urban poverty. These include Henry Mayhew, Hector Gavin, James Greenwood, Walter Besant, Richard Jeffries, H. G. Wells, Margaret Harkness, Beatrice Webb, Charles Masterman, and many others. Henkle and Bivona make the case that the British, bourgeois “imaginary” was significantly shaped and empowered by its interest in, writing about, and various “reformist” and “social work” attempts to cope with the urban underclass or “residuum.” Class formation or identification takes place through a process of othering, of differentiation; and it also takes place hegemonically—that is, through getting the “public” of a given society to consent to or acquiesce in always unequal power relations, including class hierarchies based in large measure on wealth and poverty, the possession of private property and dispossession.

As Henkle and Bivona point out, the subject of urban poverty was central not just to middle class identity formation, but more specifically to several types of masculinity, from the flâneur, or explorer of the slums and “lower depths” of London, to the social reformers, journalists, and increasingly professional sociologists such as Mayhew, Greenwood, and Charles Booth. They argue that “the interests of a predominantly male professional class, which was in the process of formation throughout the nineteenth century, strongly influenced, indeed determined, the ways in which the Victorians represented poverty in the city of London.” Depictions of “the abyss” were also a staple of fictional realism, from Dickens to Gissing, Morrison, Jack London, and beyond. As well as any previous study, The Imagination of Class demonstrates the crucial nature of the cultural or ideological work that focusing on “the lower depths” performed in late-Victorian Britain. The authors stress that the “representations of urban poverty” they analyze are not necessarily inaccurate, ideological distortions of social reality. And yet these “representations may tell us more about what it meant to
be male and middle class in the nineteenth century than they tell us about what it meant to be poor."

Henkle and Bivona’s analyses of works by such writers as Mayhew, Greenwood, Gissing, and Morrison are careful, cogent, and persuasive. If there needed to be a further compelling reason to read this study, it might well be the reason that it also should send readers back, repeatedly, to Roger’s Comedy and Culture. More humorously and persuasively than most, that book makes the case for both comedy and culture as central to the study of nineteenth-century British history. Humor, and indeed laughter, may not seem to accord well with the abject, often tragic subject of poverty. But Dickens set a tone and a model, combining laughter with deep concern for social justice, that Roger Henkle exemplified throughout his career as a teacher and scholar.

In her tribute to Roger in the memorial issue of NOVEL, Diane Elam, also one of his former students, writes: “I remember the open vibrancy of his laughter as he made some remark, and I remember laughing out loud. It’s his laughter that I’ll always hear and the risks that I’ll always remember to take that were Roger’s real gifts to me” (327). Elam also says: “Simple dogma was never good enough for him, because he always believed in the possibility of a social justice which could not be the product of quiet acceptance” (326). In the rest of the commentaries in that memorial issue, other colleagues and students stress Roger’s generosity, his sense of humor, his irreverence for the solemnities of academia, and—most memorably—his laughter. “What I remember is the effect of Roger’s laughter,” writes another former student, Christina Crosby; while serving as editor of NOVEL, “he humanized the whole business of scholarly production” (322) and made it fun.

I, too, remember Roger Henkle’s laughter and “his rich appreciation for the sublime and the ridiculous in all parts of the profession,” as Caroline McCracken-Flesher, still another former student of his, writes (321). During several of my visits to New England, I experienced Roger’s hospitality—and his laughter. Perhaps, then, it is fitting to end this foreword to a book on middle-class Victorian representations of urban poverty by recalling how on one of those occasions Roger drove me around Providence in a car from an outfit called “Rent-a-Wreck.” His wife, Carol, needed their own car to commute to work. I think the “wreck” was held together, barely, by rubber bands. I remember the window on the passenger’s side was stuck open, and I’m pretty sure the door on the driver’s side was permanently locked. But Roger was just as proud of it as if it had been a Rolls Royce, in part because, in his
Dickensian way, he could make it the subject of endless jokes and laughter, mostly about himself and his own bad taste in rented jalopies.

In the editorial that leads off the memorial issue of NOVEL, Mark Spilka declared: “It seems fitting that Roger should be widely known for his protégés and disciples. His devotion to them was legendary, as was and is their return devotion” (232). Of those many successful “protégés and disciples,” none has returned Roger’s “devotion” more fully and appropriately than Dan Bivona by becoming the coauthor of this book. Thanks to him, The Imagination of Class is not just at long last completed, but is also a major new contribution to studies of Victorian literature, its interest in social justice, and its reciprocal influence on social class formation. It’s a Festschrift and then some to the memory of a great friend and teacher.