Work

JOSHUA GOOCH

IF any word is central to the Victorian frame of mind, it is work. After all, Carlyle's gospel of work, what Walter Houghton rightly frames more broadly as the Victorian "religion of work," permeates the era.[1] If Victorianists have come to think differently about work in the twenty-first century, this shift reflects changes in the social, political, and economic positions of Victorianists as such. Scholarship in late capitalism exists within a world that has denatured work's Carlylean delineation as useful and masculine physical and intellectual activity and revealed it to include manifold ways of doing gendered, managerial, clerical, domestic, and, perhaps above all, emotional labor. Victorianists are likely to feel closer to the digging navvies, the dingy plantseller, and the female pamphleteer in Ford Madox Brown's painting than to the idly posed Carlyle and Maurice, able to watch and theorize work at a safe remove.[2]

The naked political economic turn of the twenty-first century forces Victorianists to confront in new and stark forms the ways in which work enacts power relations, how disparate discourses and practices articulate the demand to work, and the ways in which workers are not merely shaped by this demand but may, through their resistances, reshape the particularities of those demands. Such an alteration brings to the fore the ways in which contemporary political economic conditions echo Victorian asymmetries.[3] The postindustrial turn of the late twentieth century witnessed the collapse of manufacturing jobs, the rise of finance, and the proletarianization of professional work, shifts that resonate with the nineteenth-century rise of the invisible industries, expansion of the service sector around the urban core, and expansion of clerical labor in the century's final decades.[4] The so-called feminization of labor in the twenty-first century echoes the same kind of fears that animated reactions to the New Woman and fears of instrumentalized social relations.[5] One needn't press far into economic histories to infer the ways in which technological disruptions similarly connect the past and present. The constant threat of machine automation that nineteenth-century workers confronted now confronts all forms of work, including service workers, intellectual work, and even artistic production, and raises fundamental existential questions about our social, political, and economic structures.[6] To confront these resonances of economic precarity in the present is to reevaluate their effects in the past, to feel the ways

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in which economic insecurity shot through even the so-called age of equipoise.

Yet for transhistorical research, the crucial differences that questions of work raise are as much political as economic, from the weak responses of reform-minded liberals across the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries to the radically different histories of the successes and failures of labor organizing, mass action, and responses to imperial war. Questions about work's organizational forms, then, become increasingly important as they uncover how coalitions may come into being (or not), and how they may operate (or fail to do so). Research about the role of work can uncover cultural and social fracture lines through which pressures may operate within and upon the work-relation, or within and upon relations implicated in but outside the wage, most especially reproductive work and the position of dependents. To rethink work for the Victorian era is thus to rethink the ways in which race and gender articulate class relations, and to bring forward both reactionary responses as well as the persistent but varied resistances made to the demand to work.[7]

Notes

1. Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 251.
2. On masculinity and work, see Tim Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labor in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).
3. See especially V21-inspired transhistorical work such as Anna Kornbluh, *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); and Nathan K. Hensley, *Forms of Empire: The Poetics of Victorian Sovereignty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
4. On gentlemanly capitalism and invisible industries, see P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism* (London: Routledge, 2002), 135–50, and John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System 1830–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 23–63. On the rise of services around the urban core, see C. H. Lee, "Regional Growth and Structural Change in Victorian

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Britain," *Economic History Review* 34, no. 3 (1981): 438–52. On clerical labor, see Gregory Anderson, *Victorian Clerks* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976); David Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker: A Case Study in Class Consciousness,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Jonathan Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880–1939* (New York: Palgrave, 2006). On the experiences of work in literature, see Joshua Gooch, *The Victorian Novel, Service Work, and the Nineteenth-Century Economy* (New York: Palgrave, 2015); Jennifer Ruth, *Novel Professions: Interested Disinterest and the Making of the Professional in the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006); Carolyn Lesjak, *Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Susan E. Colón, *The Professional Ideal in the Victorian Novel* (New York: Palgrave, 2007); Lauren M. E. Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2001); Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

5. On the feminization of labor in the twenty-first century, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 132–36. On work and women in the Victorian era, see Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain Since 1840* (London: Routledge, 2005); Kathryn Gleadle, *British Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Sylvia Walby, *Patriarchy at Work: Patriarchal Capitalist Relations in Employment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
6. See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966), and Adam Greenfield, *Radical Technologies* (London: Verso, 2017).
7. See Satnam Virdee, *Race, Class, and the Racialized Outsider* (New York: Palgrave, 2014).

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