

Just a Moment

SUE ZEMKA, *Time and the Moment in Victorian Literature and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), pp. 300, cloth, \$95.00.

In Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, the industrialist Bounderby blusters to the horse riders Childers and Kidderminster that "we are the kind of people who know the value of time, and you are the kind of people who don't know the value of time." Bounderby's statement is both inaccurate and revealing. It is inaccurate because in this novel, as the striking workers suggest, social class does not play a major role in determining one's awareness of the value of time. What Bounderby's statement reveals is an increasing reliance on time as an important—if not *the* important—lever in the negotiations between capitalist and laborer in the nineteenth century. According to Bounderby, the working classes cannot know the value of time because it requires the expertise of the capitalist to interpret. Sue Zemka's insightful study, *Time and the Moment in Victorian Literature and Society*, allows us to better understand this contest by showing how Victorian writers used the moment—small units of time that range from minutes to instants—as a figure for theorizing time. She argues that the trend toward temporal precision across Victorian culture places increasing importance on the moment, which takes on multiple and sometimes overlapping roles as the nineteenth century progresses. By doing so, Zemka draws attention to a problematic tendency toward privileging the moment in our own critical practices.

Zemka sets the stage by providing some familiar context: the nineteenth century was an age of innovations that radically altered the way people experienced time. Railways standardized time across vast stretches of England, factories regimented and accelerated human productivity, and periodical literature synchronized a once disparate reading public. The result of industrialization was to make time precise and shared, attentive to the small units of what Zemka calls "abstract time" (2). As moments become increasingly important across Victorian culture, Zemka observes a "shift in literary uses of the moment from an affective to a symbolic register" (10). The physical shocks and sensations produced by the abrupt rhythms of new technology give way to a new understanding of time: where in the early nineteenth century the objective of "artistically shaping time is to evoke emotion," by the turn of the century time takes on new meaning by providing "a vision into hidden things, into deep structures of meaning" (10). The moment loses significance as a conduit of bodily experience and feeling and takes on a hermeneutic function that provides access to the symbolic. As the moment becomes more pervasive, it also becomes smaller and more inscrutable, a unit of experience that is linked to the bewildering pace of modernity and the growing necessity of interpretation in order to understand its mysteries.

Though Zemka's argument covers wide swaths of Victorian literature and society, her central claims revolve around the novel, a genre that allows her to explore the moment's significance by placing it in relation to the durational time of reading. The most provocative insights in this book arise from Zemka's sensitivity to the novelistic friction between length and brevity: "[T]he form, which is long, is at odds with the content, which compresses significance in short bursts" (202). The novel serves as the hinge whereby the tension between affect and interpretation intersects with the formal concerns of duration and the moment.

Where in the novels of Charles Dickens moments are significant insofar as they maximize “affective impact,” George Eliot’s novels are more skeptical of the moment’s affiliation with modernity, exemplified in her novel *Daniel Deronda* by the fracturing of the narrative into the “long time” of Deronda’s Jewish heritage and the “momentarian plot” of Gwendolen’s traumatic experience of Grandcourt’s death (218–19). The privileging of moments tends to leave behind duration as a relic of the past; and yet it does not simply disappear. Zemka argues that duration “goes underground, and finds a home in the novelistic unconscious, that is to say, in reading time itself” (218). Even in modernist works in which symbolic significance is channeled into epiphanic encounters, the act of reading serves as “a mental reprogramming *away* from momentariness” that exhausts its own hermeneutics (221). As such, *Time and the Moment* provides an important addition to a growing literature—spearheaded by critics like Nicholas Dames and Amanpal Garcha—that attempts to shed light onto what has been overshadowed by the spectacular moment: the “slow or uneventful time” of duration (11).

In the first chapter, “A Brief History of the Moment,” Zemka traces her topic across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, engaging with an array of contexts that reach across generic and national traditions. Beginning with an overview of association psychology, the chapter moves on to discuss the dramatic situation (where actors momentarily suspend action), the religious epiphany of Methodism, the instant and eternity in Kierkegaard, eighteenth-century aesthetics, photography, and flash poetry. The chapter is broken into clusters that represent the tension between “embodied experience and abstract time” that motivates the book as a whole (15). In her discussion of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, for example, Zemka shows how the eighteenth-century debates about movement in art had less to do with the object’s symbolic value than with “the careful manipulation of the audience’s possible range of emotional responses” (56). Lessing is not concerned with providing an interpretation of the statue of Laocoön but with using it to determine the proper moment of representation to provoke compassionate feeling in the viewer. The next section shifts to the instantaneous photography of the late nineteenth century. The photographs of human and animal motion by Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge reveal a reality that requires the intervention of technology to be perceptible. By showing that “surface appearances conceal an order of the real hidden from . . . view,” the photograph raises the profile of moments to the level of “modernized harbingers of secrets held within an invisible structure of meaning” (58, 60). While this is an extraordinarily rich and essential chapter for Zemka’s argument, its scope prevents the different clusters from gelling. The sections on Lessing and photography follow a series on Methodism and Kierkegaard, and while both pattern a trend toward the symbolic, they are linked merely by the promise of mutual illumination. Such leaps—from religious to aesthetic feeling, or from associationism to drama to John Wesley’s Methodism—are not illogical so much as disorienting. A by-product of a “brief” history of the moment is that it takes on the adumbrated and condensed qualities of the moment that it attempts to explain.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the importance of the moment to labor practices by analyzing socialist economics, the writing of factory workers, and working-class fiction. In chapter 2, Zemka shows that as wealth is linked to the temporal efficiency of workers, the workers make their case for reform based on the length of the working day. The result is a contest over small increments of time that is waged through the multiple channels of culture—

from medical discourse to parliamentary reports—that helped constitute “rational discourse about work” (80). In the third chapter, Zemka reads Thomas Peckett Prest’s *String of Pearls* as a horrific literalization of the desire of socialist economics to establish a connection between the consumer and the producer of the commodity. In this novel, where delicious pies are made from the flesh of the workers who produce them, the moments of pleasure spent eating the pies take on a symbolic meaning as the consumption of the labor time spent making them (the bodies of the workers): “Time is divided between hidden durations of labor and exquisite moments of pleasure. Hidden durations of labor produce pies composed of corpses” (94). The sensational moments of Prest’s novel, like the pies he represents, depend upon an economic world in which appearances are deceiving, thus requiring interpretation in order to make sense. While the moment of consumption separates the consumer from the duration of labor time that went into producing the commodity, it also provides the hermeneutic distance necessary to recognize duration’s value.

Like Prest, Charles Dickens’s novels are concerned with intersubjective experiences in urban spaces; yet, unlike Prest, Dickens privileges an “affective-sensory aesthetic” over hermeneutic effort (115). The fourth chapter places Dickens’s use of moments in the realm of sensation, setting up highly charged encounters that fail to “deliver answers to the questions set in motion by his stories” (103). Alexander Bain’s model of novel reading as pursuit serves as the theoretical backdrop for Dickens’s representation of street encounters and his peripatetic style. For Zemka, Dickens’s aesthetic of “walking, storytelling, and timing” is connected to his belief that art is most powerful when it is not shot through with explanation (105). Yet his reluctance to dwell on the many street encounters in his fiction—and explain them to us—reveals an anxiety about the growing need for narrative to trade the pleasures of pacing for the knowledge of hidden meanings. Walking is so important to Dickens because it is his way out of lingering at those moments of obscure significance that, once explained, would devalue the intensity of the feeling involved.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on Eliot and provide readings of the novels that bookend her career. In chapter 5, *Adam Bede* is read as devaluing the sensational moments that Dickens prized in his fiction. At the core of this novel is a temporal tension between Dinah’s Methodism, which privileges moments of religious feeling, and Adam’s Wordsworthian ethos, which mitigates moments of passionate intensity through reflection. It is Adam’s view that achieves the incomplete victory in this novel, where “the full meaning of powerful events is proleptic, postponed to future recollection” and where the reader herself moves through important moments “in a mood of nostalgia” (132, 137). This chapter runs into difficulties when it takes on a more ambitious argument about the sympathy that is generated for Hetty. As the magnitude of Hetty’s crime threatens to cut off sympathy for her character, Zemka suggests that Eliot lifts Hetty outside the moral realism of her novel, thus enabling an inexhaustible sympathy for her character: “Unconditional, permanent sympathy for Hetty exists in the alternative time of reading; specifically, it exists in an alternative time to reading time, where characters exist as hypotheticals of their own fictional constructs” (144). This is a provocative and complex claim that generalizes—perhaps overly much—from Eliot’s bizarrely tensed remark that “my heart bleeds for her as I see her toiling along” to the sympathetic expectations of a reader who imagines the absent and suffering Hetty.

Chapter 6 follows a similar structure by holding up two characters from *Daniel Deronda* as representative of Eliot’s temporal dialectics. Like Adam Bede, Daniel trades living in the

present moment for a longer view of time. But in this novel, reflection has been replaced by a “tranhistorical immanence” that problematizes the role of human agency (150). When Daniel makes a decision it does not arise from his “conscious will” so much as from “ancestral life”: change only appears as change on the surface; in reality, it is a return of forces that have been in play for an extended period of time (162). On the other hand, Gwendolen’s paralyzed response to Grandcourt’s drowning serves as a test case in which the necessity of action in the moment is overcome by the reflection that characterizes Daniel’s behavior. *Daniel Deronda* thus reveals a “bifurcated temporal order” “where the sacred time of the Jewish plot moves at a luxurious pace of deliberation and deferral, while the secular time of Gwendolen’s story is calibrated to fast-paced exigencies” (172). Dinah Morris’s moments of religious feeling in *Adam Bede* have been replaced by a more modern and sinister temporal order—“the cruelty of the instantaneous time limit”—from which Gwendolen cannot escape (171).

Chapter 7 continues the pattern of holding up two characters as representative of a temporal tension. In this case, Zemka provides an intricate account of the moment in Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim* by showing how Jim and Marlow suffer from panic at different levels. The panic experienced by Jim, which takes the form of his paralysis and abandonment of the ship, results from the overwhelming amount of sensation that he experiences in the moments of the Patna’s wreck. Marlow’s panic is the narrative double of Jim’s. Marlow privileges portentous moments overloaded with meaning only to “retreat in fear or lapse into confusion” (175). For Jim, the problem is a subjective one that is cured when he moves to Patusan and interiorizes the slower temporality of the place: the panic he once felt in crisis situations is replaced by an animal-like ability to dilate the moment. The racial component of Jim’s transformation—the nostalgia for a simpler and slower alternative to technological modernity—is not lost on Zemka, who uses this as a springboard for her account of Marlow and the problem of intersubjectivity and national identity. Representative of European culture more generally, Marlow’s desire to find deep connection between persons in sudden encounters fails because it “withdraws into solipsism and Eurocentrism” (177). Yet, despite this failure, or perhaps because of it, *Lord Jim*’s “valorization of symbolic moments” persists as a prejudice that influences the practice of contemporary literary criticism (177).

This last point is a crucial one that Zemka herself identifies as raising the stakes of her project as a whole (13). As she constructs a narrative of the moment’s changing value in the nineteenth century, Zemka traces the legacy of the hermeneutic turn in contemporary literary criticism. She is skeptical of Karl Heinz Bohrer’s claim that “‘suddenness’ is a formalist element that escapes ideological determination,” siding instead with Jameson’s view that putting the moment in a purely aesthetic context “obscures a history of violence” (12–13). Whether acknowledged or not, Bohrer’s bias toward the moment persists in “our critical investment in moments of rupture,” which “connects our critical practices to precisely those historical forces that are often objects of critical suspicion—technological shock, economic commodification, and sacralized violence” (14). In the conclusion, Zemka argues that critics tend to imagine social and political change by relying on the figure of rupture, a move that arises out of an envy of the effectiveness of “violent technologies” for enabling transformation or revolution (226). For the most part, the reader is left to infer how the examples from the book contribute to this provocative argument, and most of the examples of guilty critics

rush by in a footnote (with the exception of a reading of Elizabeth Grosz's *The Nick of Time*). If this final claim does not feel entirely borne out by the end of *Time and the Moment*, this does not detract from the merits of the book, which lie in its sensitivity to the intellectual and affective significance that attaches to temporality as well as its timely call to reflect on how we practice literary criticism today.

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