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Book Review: Virginia Zimmerman. *Excavating Victorians*

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Virginia Zimmerman. *Excavating Victorians*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2008. Pp. 231. \$65.00 (cloth).

John Glendening

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as unedifying as that leading to his defeat ten years earlier. As Jones observes, Pattison regarded the post as a sinecure and was inactive as head of the college.

The headship of Lincoln, however, enabled him at age forty-eight to marry. The marriage to Emma Francis Strong, twenty-seven years his junior, ended badly and has been taken by many readers to have been the model for the union of Casaubon and Dorothea in *Middlemarch*—an unfeeling, older dryasdust crushing the spirit of an ardent and idealistic young woman. Jones argues—not entirely persuasively, in my judgment—that George Eliot did not mean for her readers to identify Casaubon and Dorothea with Pattison and Francis. In fact, he says, Pattison and Francis had a companionate marriage for more than a decade, and that in this case art shaped life: *Middlemarch* did not reflect the relations of the real-life couple but actually taught Francis how to understand her marriage and thus led to its sad breakup.

In the second part of the book, Jones analyzes the content of Pattison's ideas, which mainly revolved around the concept of the academic profession and the practice of intellectual history, in both of which Pattison was a pioneer. Pattison's idea of the academic profession drew on Tractarianism as well as the model of German scholarship and centered around "the pursuit of self-improvement through study" (145). He believed this life of disinterested learning necessitated self-denial and separation from the world; yet he held a notion of teaching as training the character as well as the intellect. Jones thus sees a consistency between Pattison's advocacy of professional careers for tutors in the 1850s and his leadership in the movement for the endowment of research in the 1870s (which for Pattison actually meant endowment of learning).

Pattison took up the history of ideas because of his fascination with the life of the mind. He believed that ideas shape the world, but also that people necessarily form their ideas in the context of inherited intellectual traditions. To understand a person's thought, past or present, one must understand that person's heritage of ideas. Moreover, Pattison believed that to solve current intellectual problems, one must first address the history of ideas. These beliefs explain Pattison's lifelong interest in autobiographies and memoirs and why his contribution to the famous statement of liberal Anglicanism, *Essays and Reviews* (1860), took the form of a learned essay on the prevalence of rationalism in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English religious thought.

Jones makes a very good case for the importance of Mark Pattison and the coherence of his ideas. His two-part organization involves some repetition, but Jones succeeds in showing how Pattison's adoption of an identity for himself—self-culture through disciplined study—led to his distinctive idea of university life at a time when universities were being transformed into professional research institutions. Jones might have discussed the different elements in the coalition for the endowment of research because the reforms that were adopted were not by any means identical with Pattison's vision. Original research, not simply learned study; busyness, not retired contemplation; and research productivity for practical ends, not study for its own sake, have prevailed. It would be an interesting end to this fine book to suggest why.

Thomas William Heyck, Northwestern University

VIRGINIA ZIMMERMAN. *Excavating Victorians*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2008. Pp. 231. \$65.00 (cloth).

Virginia Zimmerman's *Excavating Victorians* deploys the idea of the "trace"—a concept she derives particularly from the theorizing of Paul Ricoeur—to excavate, or reveal traces of, nineteenth-century geological and archaeological thought and practice as expressed in

Victorian literature. Zimmerman's perspective entails interpreting the interpretations, in effect "excavating" the intellectual and imaginative "excavations" of nineteenth-century writers who formulated or responded to the new scientific and imaginative paradigm based on geological or "deep" time. For Zimmerman, a trace is a complex negotiation between past and present-time understandings of past—"past" as both the time when artifacts originate and the time elapsed since then. A trace is "a relic from the past . . . an object in the present . . . a marker of time's passage . . . the point where time and space come together . . . the paradoxical evidence of the subjectivity of objects as interpretations shift . . . over time" (177). A touchstone for Zimmerman's project is *Darwin's Plots* (1983), Gillian Beer's influential analysis of how narrative strategies shape scientific understanding as well as the poetry and fiction it influences.

In particular, *Excavating Victorians* registers the intimidating impact of uniformitarian geology. Propagated by James Hutton and Charles Lyell, uniformitarianism posited that small, gradual geological changes, reflecting always the same processes that exist today, produce great changes over expanses of time. As Zimmerman amply demonstrates, this idea, especially when coupled with a fossil record replete with evidence of species extinction, overwhelmed the constricted creationist time scale and left many Victorians feeling small and vulnerable. Furthermore, she asserts that in various ways scientists and writers pushed back by assuming the agency of interpreters. Of course, these are not entirely new ideas. For example, in their quests for reassuring certainties, even for a form of immortality, authors generally strive to create order out of chaos, wholeness out of pieces, and thereby assert their significance. What Zimmerman adds is how extensively the attitudes, activities, and discourses of the excavating sciences informed such recuperative efforts by establishing authority over physical and intellectual historical traces. Zimmerman notes this process in regard to both geology and archaeology, demonstrating that the latter, originally conceived as a branch of the former, was from the first imprinted with a geological understanding of time.

While *Excavating Victorians* does not reject the truth-value of scientific knowledge, its constructionist orientation toward novels, poems, scientific writings, fossils, geological strata, archaeological sites, and disinterred cultural objects—all serving as texts—allows great latitude for critical reconstruction, and the book ranges widely. On the most basic level, *Excavating Victorians* provides an engaging overview of nineteenth-century geology and archaeology. But as Zimmerman states, hers is not a history of science; rather, its "focus is on the literature inspired by advances in geology" (6). She models her approach upon Beer's "by attending to the literary discourse that arises out of the science of geology. This body of literature contains works by scientists . . . Lyell and Gideon Mantell [especially] . . . and more traditional literary figures, such as Tennyson and Dickens." Concerning the remains of Londinium and Pompeii, she also "examine[s] writings . . . in the popular press, travel literature, and the reports of . . . archeologists" (6).

The introduction establishes the general background and theoretical premises of *Excavating Victorians*, but it also, like the entire work, engages many literary and nonliterary, canonical and noncanonical, publications, some of them as entertaining as they are obscure—for example, Mary Kendall's 1887 "Lay of the Trilobite" (15–16). Chapter 2 discusses nineteenth-century geological texts that promulgated evidence for an ancient Earth while augmenting the authority and prestige of the geologist. The chapter picks up on Zimmerman's master plot by asserting that, along with other geologists, "Lyell and Mantell ascribed the geologist with the authority to report Earth history," in effect replacing God in this capacity (30). She shows Lyell's effectiveness in rhetorically crafting uniformitarian ideas for public consumption and maximum effect, especially by evading religious issues, and describes Gideon Mantell's influential textual construction of the heroic geologist who assumes "unequivocal authority" (45). Along the way she illustrates the Victorian passion for fossil collecting and display.

The centerpiece of chapter 3 is Tennyson's *The Princess*, which again illustrates "efforts to rescue the individual from insignificance" (65), efforts Zimmerman connects to the assertion and undermining of female significance (her book also applies geological interpretation to class structure and imperialism). Chapter 4 concerns archaeology, using parallels that Victorians perceived between the ruins of ancient London and those of Pompeii, which were excavated and interpreted along similar geology-influenced lines. Employing the archaeological model, chapter 5 examines two novels by Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend*, whose characters "must stare down geologic and cultural pasts" and "assert themselves into the present urban landscape" while joining "fragments into whole narratives" (143). Chapter 6, a brief conclusion, is entitled "Final Fragments," perhaps acknowledging the imperfection that necessarily arises from trying to gather together so many and varied types of evidence into one volume. In all of the chapters the protean idea of trace comes and goes, operating in various ways in different contexts, but always focusing on the complicity of time and interpretation.

An exercise in cultural studies and historical epistemology, *Excavating Victorians* perhaps is more successful in displaying, somewhat like the museum collections it discusses, evidence for the broad impact of geological thinking, including some interesting literary curiosities, than it is in opening up strikingly new critical readings of major texts. Occasionally Zimmerman's interpretations of individual passages, building upon the prevalence of geology-like phenomena in everyday environments and language—rocks, wearing away, metaphorical references to digging and uncovering, and so forth—seem like stretches. Overall, however, *Excavating Victorians* effectively works to alter readers' readings of the Victorian cultural landscape. I learned much from it and recommend it to anyone wishing to delve into this terrain.

John Glendening, University of Montana

LAURENCE TALAIRACH-VIELMAS. *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels*. Burlington, VT, and Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007. Pp. 188. \$99.95 (cloth).

Students of sensation fiction are unaccustomed to seeing these scandalous "newspaper novels" linked to the fairy tales and fantasies for children that were also a prominent feature of the mid-nineteenth-century literary marketplace. This book, unusually, seeks to demonstrate the similarities in the ways in which these antirealistic genres represented femininity and responded to modernity. It is precisely the clash between fantasy and reality in these hyperrealistic narratives, this book argues, that enabled them to interrogate the real and to deconstruct and reconstruct normative conceptions of femininity.

This is hardly new, nor is the book's examination of the role of medical and scientific discourse in mid-nineteenth-century constructions of femininity. However, the author is much more interested in the shaping role of women's economic position and of their complex position in consumer culture. Among the many recent cultural histories of the nineteenth century that are cited in this study, Thomas Richards's *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990) and Lori Anne Loeb's *Consuming Angels: Advertising and Victorian Women* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) have been most influential in shaping its argument.

Central to this argument is the contention that the wordplay and nonsense of the fairy tales and fantasies "recall the way in which Victorian advertising used language to transform the real into 'a fantastic realm in which things think, act, speak, fall, fly, evolve'" (7, quoting