

Editor's Column

Historicism, Presentism, Futurism

STRATEGIC PRESENTISM. THE TITLE OF THE PANEL AT THE 2018 MLA convention caught my attention right away. I looked up the panelists: a graduate student (Abigail Droge), three junior faculty members (Cynthia Nazarian, Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, and Jeffrey Wilson), and the veterans Michael Clune, Anna Kornbluh, and Caroline Levine, who presided. Eight-thirty Saturday morning wasn't my favorite time, but I wasn't going to miss this particular forum on this particular subject.

Presentism has long been a *bête noire* in the academy—condemned openly by historians (above all, Lynn Hunt, in her 2002 presidential address to the American Historical Association), and more quietly but no less reflexively by literary scholars. Morally complacent and methodologically suspect, *presentism* names a fallacy that deforms the past in our own image. To be a “presentist” is to allow the concerns of the moment to color all our perceptions. It is to be blithely unaware of historical specificities, to project our values onto past periods without any regard for the different norms then operative. Such narcissism erases the historicity of texts, their conditions of production and reception, offering instead “records of our present needs and anxieties” (Kastan 17).

Here is a term of opprobrium to claim at one's peril. The MLA panel seemed to have done so on full alert. “Strategic Presentism”—a riff on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's celebrated coinage “strategic essentialism”—recalls her argument that problematic concepts could work for the marginalized within situational limits. Just as in the 1980s a cautiously adopted essentialism allowed minority groups to bracket the nontrivial differences among themselves and act as a purposeful entity under adverse conditions, so too in 2018 a cautiously adopted presentism might allow humanists to bracket the nontrivial differences

among historical periods and act as a cumulative force under conditions no less adverse.¹

Refusing to accept the past as a foregone conclusion, presentism refuses to accept the present as inevitable. In this radical view of history as still in progress, the past is “something other than an object of knowledge that is sealed off, separated from the present by the onrush of sequential time,” David Sweeney Coombs and Danielle Coriale write in their introduction to a forum on strategic presentism appearing in *Victorian Studies* in autumn 2016 (87). Engaging that past purposefully, “as a strategy rather than a mistake,” opens up questions that are “unapologetically large,” Kornbluh and Benjamin Morgan argue in their introduction to *Presentism, Form, and the Future of History*, a special issue of *B2O: An Online Journal*, also published that fall. These include long-running and still-evolving questions embedded in

the ways the past is at work in the exigencies of the present, from the recursive afterlives of British imperialism in our own era of war to the long arc of ongoing processes of dispossession under capitalism; from the economies of consciousness as a so-called global workspace to the anthropocene as an epoch whose hallmark, paradoxically, is the radical compression of the *longue durée* of geological change. . . . Far from fostering complacency, presentism might offer us new ways to engage in the urgent task of asking how the Victorian era might help us imagine alternative futures to the various mass extinctions that loom just over the horizon of the present.

(Coombs and Coriale 88)

Both forums were organized by V21: Victorian Studies for the Twenty-First Century, a scholarly network with a mission, spearheaded by Kornbluh and Morgan and including many junior faculty members and graduate students. Launched in the spring of

2015, it burst upon the critical scene with a fiery manifesto:

Victorian Studies has fallen prey to *positivist historicism*: a mode of inquiry that aims to do little more than exhaustively describe, preserve, and display the past. Among its symptoms are a fetishization of the archival; an aspiration to definitively map the DNA of the period; an attempt to reconstruct the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*; an endless accumulation of mere information. (“Manifesto”)

A historicism such as this can only be a shrinking enterprise. “Victorianists are our own and only interlocutors,” with nothing to say to the general public and nothing to say even to other “scholars who do not care about Victorians as Victorians.” Against this self-destructive insularity, the V21 Collective turns to presentism as a point of reentry into the world. Contemporary problems such as “income inequality, global warming, and neoliberalism” can all be traced to the nineteenth century, which suggests that Victorian studies ought to be redefined as a field extending through the twenty-first century and beyond, intersecting with other disciplines and in dialogue with current events.

Since 2015, V21 has indeed grown into an “argumentative, porous, and ambitious” entity, as Kornbluh and Morgan had hoped (“Manifesto”), with many participants weighing in, blogging, initiating debates, and responding to provocations. The MLA panel was created as a complement to these online outpourings. The composition of the panel reflected the multigenerational demographics of V21. True to its aspiration to reach beyond Victorianists, a postcolonial theorist (Srinivasan) and a scholar working in the French, Italian, and English Renaissances (Nazarian) were included. And, honoring the “argumentative” in practice as much as in theory, the panel showcased viewpoints largely at odds with the V21 manifesto.

Wilson was more interested in creating a taxonomy of presentisms than in vouching for any particular one. Clune, unconvinced that academic work could ever reach a nonacademic audience, had no problem with Victorianists being “our own and only interlocutors.” For him, what is written for the academy should be kept strictly separate from what is written for the public. Nazarian, meanwhile, an OpEd Project Public Voices Fellow who had just published her first essay (on male friendship) in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, took the opposite view. She reaffirmed historicism as a path to the present, arguing that it is the “remoteness in time and mores” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that gives early modern scholars salient “vantage points for commenting on issues of public interest” in the here and now. Instead of minimizing the distance between past and present, we might want to maximize that distance strategically, the better to create time-lapsed “arenas in which to explore thorny issues.”

Droge, also a historicist in the activist sense, was more emphatic still in her dissent. “While I admire V21 for raising important questions,” she said, “I find their abstract models to be dangerously misguided.” In particular, “V21’s criticism of the ‘fetishization of the archival’ is a fundamental misreading of what archival research has done in past scholarship and what it can do now.” In her teaching as in her research, Droge relies on the nineteenth-century print archives in the Stanford Special Collections; through these magazines and pamphlets—“including 1830s editions of the *Penny Magazine*, which claimed to provide useful knowledge to newly-enfranchised low-income readers and thus make them responsible voters”—activists today can gain some perspective on the class politics of literacy projects, community organization, and voter registration. Historical archives are “a living, political thing,” Droge said, integral to any presentism seri-

ously engaged with the present. She went on, “Caroline Levine has a great moment in *Forms* where she critiques the New Critics for not being formalist enough—I think we could actually level a similar critique at V21 and say that they are not being *presentist* enough. We need action, not abstraction.”

Many participating in the V21 debates would not disagree. Devin Griffiths, a contributor to the *B2O* special issue, was on record from the first dissenting from the critique of historicism as “an endless accumulation of mere information.” For Griffiths, as for Nazarian and Droge, historicism is a situated practice and therefore motivationally presentist, underwriting Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2000) no less than Karl Popper’s rejection of the “Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny” in *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957).² A key figure in this heady genealogy is Nietzsche, especially the Nietzsche of “The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” the second of the four essays in *Untimely Meditations*. This Nietzsche, critical of teleological narratives, looks to ancient Greece for an “untimely” alternative, a “comparative historicism” nurturing life and action by linking a contrapuntal past to a contrapuntal present (Griffiths, “Untimely Historicism”). “I do not know,” Nietzsche writes in that essay, “what meaning classical studies could have for our time if they were not *untimely*—that is to say, acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come” (qtd. in Griffiths, “Untimely Historicism”).

Still, even this capacious, contrapuntal historicism might not be enough when the enormity of a calamitous present requires the closeness rather than distance of the past—requires it, most of all, if we are to think about the future. “I’ve resisted the phrase ‘strategic presentism,’” Griffiths wrote on the V21 Web site, “but in the wake of the election, I needed [it] to feel more immediate. I needed to feel the presence” of nineteenth-century authors

“in the classroom and see what they had to say. I also wanted to make space for our fear of the future, to use literature to create room, as Donna Haraway has recently put it, to ‘stay with the trouble’ and see what might happen” (“Remaking”). Instead of teaching the two scheduled texts on the syllabus, he taught Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” in both his classes, connecting the poem to Barack Obama’s reluctant admission that, contrary to his oft-stated belief that “the arc of history bends toward justice,” it could be that “the path that this country has taken has never been a straight line. We zig and zag, and sometimes we move in ways that some people think is forward and others think is moving back” (qtd. in Griffiths, “Remaking”).

Griffiths revisited that 9 November post with his students at the end of the semester, adding, “I’ve been moved to think differently and to try and operate in new ways by all of the reactions I’ve read in the days since” (“Remaking”). The V21 community had been crucial:

In light of Ronjaunee Chatterjee and Amy Wong’s post on teaching to this “survivalist moment” in Victorian studies, I regret that our discussion of “Dover Beach” did little to address the politics of marginalization or the “monolithic” formation of Victorianism in the popular conscience. And reading how Roger Whitson developed his upcoming and unabashedly presentist course on the nineteenth-century Transatlantic, it strikes me just how much more aware I might be in designing a future-oriented syllabus from the ground up.

If Griffiths’s change of mind is any indication, presentism and historicism need not be opposed. Morgan points out that the two might be complementary—alternate names for the same felt “urgency of thinking outside of our usual slices of literary-historical time” (109). “Presentism may be a form of historical consciousness rather than, as historians sometimes understand it, the destruction of historical consciousness,” he argues (111).

Unlike mainstream historicism, however, presentism turns to the past not as a discrete object of knowledge but as a relational process, interactively generated through the connectivity as much as the gulf between two poles of analysis. Capturing this two-way traffic requires concepts such as resonance, elasticity of scale, and alternating tenses. Going forward by looking back, such a presentism frees itself from its own oppressive moment by “being in touch with the temporally distant past or future” (110).

An orientation toward the future—an answerability to and a reparative impulse toward what is anyone’s guess—might turn out to be the mediating ground on which presentism and historicism could meet, just as it might be the mediating ground on which different subfields of literary studies could be purposefully gathered. Jesse Oak Taylor, writing about the London fog in British fiction from Charles Dickens to Virginia Woolf, and seeing in that evolving phenomenon both the future and present of our climate crisis, makes just that point. Tracing the “emergence of anthropogenic climate change in the cultural artifacts of the past almost inevitably opens one to charges of presentism,” he says (9). Those charges can be met head-on, however, within a temporal perspective that includes the future as a heuristic node, for it is “only by modeling the aggregation of discrete atmospheric events into a broader totality of long-term global patterns” that the fate of the planet can be gauged (10). In that long-term projection, “we twenty-first-century humans, our descendants, the Victorians, and the modernists are all in this together.”

Srinivasan, on the MLA panel, makes this mediating future a necessary horizon for literary studies. Noting that postcolonial studies has always been forward-looking in this sense, oriented “not only toward historical preconditions” but equally toward “the futurity that is always already immanent in the world of the present,” she argues that this

not-yet-realized dimension of the world is our best bet for achieving a common ground. Injecting an open variable into the existing work on heterotemporality, peripheral modernisms, and vernacular life worlds, this emphasis on the future also brings into focus the twin genealogies of the Anthropocene and what Srinivasan calls the “Anglophone.” These two, jointly producing our current global inequalities, now jointly impress on us the urgent need for a different shape of time, a different pathway to what lies ahead.

Much of postcolonial studies already sees the Anglophone and the Anthropocene as entwined, Srinivasan points out, for

there is no global Anglophone without the history of the British empire, and there is no Anthropocene without the imperial history of capital. The Anglophone and the Anthropocene both indicate profoundly uneven global landscapes, in which some face *extinction*, whether of mother tongue or species, while others worry about *pollution*, whether of rotten Englishes or industrial waste.

Seeing the Anglophone and the Anthropocene as the interlocking past of our current world order clarifies “what it means to exercise agency specifically through the refusal of the present.” That refusal involves thinking ahead as well as looking back; it attunes us to the past so that we can better “write our way into a future.” This back-and-forth movement is crucial, for presentism, Srinivasan argues,

must be more than an awareness of how the present motors certain engagements with the past. Strategic presentism demands awareness of how the anticipated future inflects our conceptualizations of the history of the present. [It] requires developing a literary studies that is not only post-historicist but also always rigorously futurist—our goal being not only a historical literary studies for and in the present, but a future literary studies, and a future *for* literary studies, in unfolding history.

How many subfields of literary studies are likely to experiment with some form of strategic presentism, joining the three already discussed—postcolonial studies, Victorian studies, and modernism? Asian American studies is an obvious candidate. This issue’s Theories and Methodologies essays on Viet Thanh Nguyen are a reckoning with the future as much as an “ethical remembrance” of the presence of the past, to borrow the phrase Ben Tran uses in his essay in this issue. Another candidate is African American studies, increasingly anchored by Afrofuturism in its recuperative and reparative engagement with slavery, a past whose afterlives are everywhere observable. Beginning with Alondra Nelson’s seminal essay on “future texts,” in 2002, and Saidiya Hartman’s invocation of an “Afrotopia,” in 2007, Afrofuturism has been at the center of an explosive scholarly conversation.³ In popular culture—in music, art, and film (exemplified most recently by the film *Black Panther*)—this not-yet-realized future mediates past and present by making headline news (Ryzik; Staples), a force in the here and now rivaled only by Shakespeare.

Shakespeare brings to mind Renaissance studies, the birthplace of new historicism, also a field in which archival work has produced some of the most impressive results. Presentism has always coexisted with historicism in this field. Perhaps this has to do with what Terence Hawkes calls the “performance function” of drama (5)—there’s no looking away from the present-day genesis of contemporary productions and what Diana Henderson calls cross-time “collaborations with the past.” Hawkes made an emphatic case for presentism as early as 2002. Citing Benedetto Croce’s 1941 aphorism—that “all history is contemporary history”—he argued that presentism is no more than an up-front acknowledgment of our “situatedness,” our condition of being “alive and active in our own world.” Paying a “degree of respect” to this inveterate condition is the least we can do (3), for being

creatures of the twenty-first century we would “aim, in the end, to talk to the living” (4).

More recently, with the rise of ecocriticism in Renaissance studies, several vocal and unapologetic Shakespeareans—including Dan Brayton, Lynne Bruckner, Gabriel Egan, and Sharon O’Dair—have made presentism their rallying cry. “Ecocriticism must be a presentist endeavor,” Egan writes, both in turning “its readings to account in improving our understanding of our twenty-first-century world” and in a new willingness to explore what it means for our understanding to “be scientific” (43). Recalling C. P. Snow’s reproach of humanists “for their lack of basic knowledge of science,” Egan notes that this “criticism remains true in the early twenty-first century, and the consequences of widespread scientific illiteracy are even more dangerous” (160).

Most eco-Shakespeareans would probably agree with Egan that science literacy is a necessary component of presentism. As a field continually shaped by developments likely to affect “the greatest number of the Earth’s human inhabitants” (21), ecocriticism has a special responsibility to remain current in its knowledge of the world, the better to engage in a live conversation with the living. Teaching is front and center for these Renaissance scholars, as it is for V21 Victorianists. *Ecocritical Shakespeare* (2011), coedited by Bruckner and Brayton, devotes one third of its pages to “presentism and pedagogy” (193–237).

Bruckner’s essay “Teaching Shakespeare in the Ecotone” chronicles a class taught in two different ways: with a “strongly historicist” syllabus, in 2006 (228), and by bringing historical questions “into dialogue with contemporary ecological concerns,” in 2008 (229). In both versions of this class, students learned that “there was significant deforestation in the early modern period,” that “in 1627 the fumes from the Alum Factory at St. Katherine’s by the Tower were poisoning the inhabitants of London and the waste matter was killing the

fish,” and that “intermittent legislation” had been enacted since then “against pollution of the Thames” (229). Such information enabled students to understand “not only the long history of pollution and ecological exploitation, but how our current crisis far outweighs early modern concerns” (230). Highlighting the need to understand the present through the past, Bruckner insists that historicism is integral to the “urgency of now,” for it is only by “letting the archival and the presentist collide” that our own moment can be elucidated. And “in ecological terms it is now that counts” (236), the now of the twenty-first century and, we hope, the now of centuries to come—a future for the planet and for literary studies.

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NOTES

Participants in the panel Strategic Presentism e-mailed me electronic versions of the papers they presented there. All quotations from their remarks at the panel refer to these versions.

1. Spivak has since disavowed the concept, troubled by its association with nationalistic movements (260). Hensley has highlighted this concern, arguing that strategic presentism should be abandoned for similar reasons.

2. *The Poverty of Historicism* was dedicated to “the countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victim to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny” (front matter).

3. See Carrington; Chude-Sokei; Iton; Kilgore; Jackson and Moody-Freeman; Saunders; Womack.

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