The Affective Affordances of Victorian Women: Experiential Criticism and Nell Stevens's *The Victorian and the Romantic*

Lana Dalley
(California State University, Fullerton, California, USA)

Abstract:
There has been a recent turn towards the personal voice and creative memoir in Victorian Studies; works like Nell Stevens's *The Victorian and the Romantic: A Memoir, a Love Story, and a Friendship Across Time* (2018) and Annette R. Federico's edited volume *My Victorian Novel: Critical Essays in the Personal Voice* (2020) explore and dramatise personal engagements with Victorian literature. Such texts make explicit what often remains invisible in literary criticism: scholars' personal, affective relationships with historical texts and the imagined lives of authors, and how such relationships shape their scholarly and pedagogical pursuits. In so doing, such texts challenge the established idea that rigorous scholarly work necessarily precludes the inclusion of personal experience. In this essay, I situate *The Victorian and the Romantic* within the genre of new experiential literary criticism to demonstrate how affective engagement with literary texts can expand – rather than contract – interpretive possibilities and give readers insight into women's writerly lives.

Key words: affect, creative memoir, Elizabeth Gaskell, experiential criticism, feminist literary criticism, personal voice, recognition, Nell Stevens, *The Victorian and the Romantic*, women writers.

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> "These days, when reading critically, the fashion is to remain aloof from the human experiences of novelists." (Smith 2009: 32)
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> "Why – even as we extol multiplicity, difference, hybridity – is the affective range of criticism so limited? Why are we so hyperarticulate about our adversaries and so excruciatingly tongue-tied about our loves?" (Felski 2015: 13)

In my first months of graduate school, I kept a diary documenting my experiences as a newbie in academia. Blame it on the starry-eyed innocence of a twenty-two-year-old living in a big city (Seattle) for the first time and

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dipping her toes into the rather deep pool of a research university (University of Washington), but I was sort of embarrassingly optimistic about my new life as a 'VICTORIANIST'. The vicissitudes of the academic job market and the demands of graduate-level work had not yet sunk in, and I spent most of my time emotionally engaging with the novels I was reading for graduate seminars and imagining an idyllic future wherein I would teach these moving novels to students of my own. One lengthy entry describes exhaustion and exhilaration after staying up all night to finish *Jane Eyre* (1847), and another tearfully laments the death of Maggie Tulliver, decrying the gender norms that destroy women and fervently declaring my commitment to feminism (alongside a commitment to name my first born child Maggie – a commitment I almost made good on, until my first born was a son and not a daughter). Around the eight-month mark of being in graduate school, the diary entries begin to wane; I began to write less frequently and with less passion, my observations became more nuanced and detached. And, eventually, I just stopped writing in the diary altogether.

One explanation, of course, is that I grew busier with graduate school and with academic writing, and my diary entries were a casualty of my schedule. Graduate school has a terrific reputation as a hobby killer, and so it is easy to imagine that my diary writing simply stalled like my other hobbies and good habits (exercise, sleep, healthy eating, etc.). A more compelling – and I think more honest – explanation is that as I trained to be a literary scholar I became increasingly self-conscious and embarrassed (perhaps even a bit ashamed?) about my emotional engagement with literature. Or, to use Rita Felski's terms, I moved towards a hermeneutics of suspicion and away from a hermeneutics of recognition (see Felski 2008: 3). I became focused on "critical reading," on the exigencies of "problematizing, interrogating, and subverting" literature, and resisted – or at least sublimated – its aesthetic pleasures (Felski 2008: 4). Put differently, as per my second epigraph taken from Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015), I became more "tongue-tied" about the "affective range" (Felski 2015: 13) of my critical writing.

My story is not unusual or remarkable; in fact, I would argue that this turn marks a sort of rite of passage for graduate students within literary studies. Felski has recently shown how the rise of critical theory in the 1980s initiated a similar turn in literary studies:

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> the idea of critique contains varying hues and shades of meaning, but its key elements include the following: a spirit of skeptical questioning or outright condemnation, an emphasis on its precarious position vis-à-vis overbearing and oppressive social forces, the claim to be engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work, and the assumption that whatever is *not* critical must therefore be *un*critical. (Felski 2015: 2, original emphasis)

Such critical readings skew negative, focusing on an "antinormative normativity: skepticism as dogma" (Felski 2015: 9). Such scepticism, my other epigraph from Zadie Smith's *Changing My Mind* (2009) makes clear, results in an attempted or prescribed intellectual aloofness resistant to immersion in "the human experiences" (Smith 2009: 32) described by writers, repressing the affective dimension that arguably dominates most non-academic readers' experience of fiction as well as fiction writers' writing process.

This essay takes as its subject an emerging genre of writing that emphasises affective connections between contemporary writers and writers of the past, more specifically between twenty-first century women writers and their nineteenth-century counterparts. I will focus on Nell Stevens's *The Victorian and the Romantic: A Memoir, a Love Story, and a Friendship Across Time* (2018), arguing that it is part of a critical trend within Victorian Studies that returns focus to the reader's aesthetic and emotional engagements with texts. In her narrative about Elizabeth Gaskell, Stevens turns away from the scepticism identified by Felski and, instead, pursues what might be thought of as an optimistic recognition, wherein the Victorian writer becomes the site of latent self-exploration and the quotidian takes on historical significance. Such writing draws upon both neo-Victorian and biofictional forms, as contemporary writers attempt to write about a past that is never entirely knowable (the inner life of a Victorian writer) while also self-consciously interpreting that past *through* the life of the contemporary writer, thus drawing attention to the process of reconstructing historical knowledge and to the supposition that historical texts and figures are dynamic living entities and not merely historical artifacts. Thus, experiential criticism draws upon the neo-Victorian desire to better understand the realities of the Victorian period and the biofictional desire to better understand the lives of

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historical figures; it also moves beyond those forms by denying that the texts and writers are best interpreted within historical contexts and by introducing an explicit critique of dominant forms of literary criticism. Stevens adopts a feminist orientation toward historical and biographical construction, revising existing narratives and enacting a feminist practice rooted in shared feeling. In so doing, she resists a teleological historical model that insists upon seeing the present moment in progressive relation to the past. Instead, she draws syncretic connections between the past and the present "for the purpose of drawing out the possibilities of both" (Psomiades 2019: 456) – and for the purpose of confirming the value of women's stories and their inner lives.

In generating these possibilities, *The Victorian and the Romantic* draws attention to the feminist and affective affordances of Victorian literature and literary biographies – as do similar texts like Rebecca Mead's *My Life in Middlemarch* (2014), discussed by Georges Letissier in this special issue, and Annette R. Federico's *My Victorian Novel: Critical Essays in the Personal Voice* (2020). Felski defines the term 'affordance' as

> neither subjective nor objective but aris[ing] out of the interaction between beings and things […]. Like buildings, literary works 'make available' certain options for moving through them, and yet these possibilities are also taken up in wildly varying ways by empirical readers. (Felski 2015: 165).

Rather than emphasising the ways that nineteenth-century writers and texts reinscribe anti-feminist positions (a critical stance that consistently reads the period as the site of women's subjection rather than their liberation), *The Victorian and the Romantic* emphasises transhistorical/transtemporal connection and identification as a twenty-first century woman writer comes to understand her own life as she moves through the life and literature of a nineteenth-century woman writer, specifically Elizabeth Gaskell. Rather than presenting Victorian texts and writers as historical artifacts that provide a static picture of women's subjection and struggle, this experiential criticism presents Victorian texts and writers as dynamic, unstable, and relevant.

1. Biofiction, Neo-Victorianism, and the New Experiential Criticism

In her recent conclusion to a special journal issue on the subject of 'Victorian Literature in the Age of #MeToo', Marlene Tromp urges Victorianists to grow

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more comfortable with drawing upon personal experience in their critical work. Building upon Michel Foucault's call to "engage in the 'analysis of actual experience' as part of discourse analysis", Tromp argues that scholars "must not, however, continue to marginalize or exclude 'experience' if we mean to produce work in our field that applies the full power of our intellectual and critical framework to the scope of culture" (Tromp 2020: n.p.). Tracing how literary criticism has long demanded that scholars "eject [personal] experience" in the name of rigour and objectivity, Tromp argues that "[e]jecting experience from our work […] prevents us from deploying the powerful tools our theories and deep understanding as Victorianists lend us to examine the present we inhabit" (Tromp 2020: n.p.). Such work entails professional and critical risks, certainly, but Tromp suggests that it also holds great possibility:

> In defying the prohibition on 'actual experience' in academic writing, we can not only shift the terms of our scholarship and the profession, we can help our colleagues and the broader world outside of academe understand how our work as humanists is powerfully relevant to the moment we are navigating now. Our case for the humanities, in other words, can be elevated by our willingness to help those outside of our field understand the powerful relevance of a Victorianist's work to our current moment and to real human experience situated in that moment—something research shows that we already believe about ourselves. (Tromp 2020: n.p.)

It is no coincidence that Tromp's call to action comes at the end of a special journal issue centring on feminist theory; in its emphasis on the quotidian details of women's lives, experiential criticism is well suited to achieving some of the aims of feminist theory, namely identifying and analysing gender inequality in specific contexts, recovering/reappraising women writers, and thinking about their current and contemporary reception. Experiential criticism provides readers with a front row view of the *pas de deux* between reader and text, ultimately positioning reading as both an affective intimate act and a critical one. In her foreword to *My Victorian Novel: Critical Essays in the Personal Voice* (2020)*,* Jane Tompkins notes how

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> [i]t was only with institutionalized ways of talking about literature in the twentieth century that it became off limits to think about what readers felt as they read—rather ironically, since it was seeing personal experience as having value that called the novel into being. (Tompkins 2020: ix)

Among other things, experiential criticism can help scholars reflect upon why readers continue to be interested in Victorian literature and culture.

It may seem curious that in an age of women's presumed liberation – a time when women can supposedly 'have it all' – twenty-first-century women writers would look back to Victorian women to better understand their own lives. In *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction*, Jeannette King asks a timely question addressing this conundrum:

> Why, in the last decades of the twentieth century, should so many women novelists have looked back a hundred years for the subjects of their fiction? Why should the Victorians hold so much interest for the age of superwomen and ladettes? (King 2005: 1)

For King, neo-Victorian fiction resolves this paradox, since "[b]y making female experience central to their narratives, such novels g[i]ve women back their place in history, not just as victims but as agents" (King 2005: 3). According to Dana Shiller, neo-Victorian novels are "motivated by an essentially revisionist impulse to reconstruct the past by questioning the certitude of our historical knowledge", but at the same time, since they "emphasize events that are usually left out of histories, they nonetheless manage to preserve and celebrate the Victorian past" (Shiller 1997: 541), including the often disregarded minutiae of women's lives.

Biofiction offers one mode of exploring the limits of historical knowledge and the ends such knowledge serves. As Laura Savu Walker explains,

> [i]n all its various forms, biofiction too promises both a revelation of something not yet known about its subject's life and a more intimate sense of connectivity with the reimagined other […]. Arguably, the focus of biofiction is never solely on

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> achieving a truthful, or at least plausible, representation of historical subjects, but also on capturing something of the common human condition, in which all such subjects, including writers and readers, participate. (Savu Walker 2020: 15-16)

In effect, Savu Walker asserts an affective transhistorical connectivity between past biofictional and present-day extradiegetic subjects. Experiential criticism and biofiction both aspire to create a kind of intimacy between the reader and a historical figure, suggesting that idiosyncrasies of the subject's life are unique enough to be interesting and universal enough to be relevant.[1] Experiential criticism draws upon the revisionist impulses of the neo-Victorian genre, while also keeping its emphasis on something peripheral to the Victorian: the contemporary writer herself.

Ultimately, experiential criticism moves beyond the neo-Victorian and biofiction genres because it is less concerned with the *context* of the text and more concerned with the reader's affective engagement; it also openly offers itself as an alternative to dominant critical modes. In texts like *The Victorian and the Romantic,* historical context is fertile ground for transtemporal recognition. Felski defines recognition as "the widespread belief that we learn something about ourselves in the act of reading […] simultaneously reassuring and unnerving, it brings together likeness and difference in one fell swoop" (Felski 2008: 12). And yet, she explains:

> [f]or theorists weaned on the language of alterity and difference, the mere mention of recognition is likely to inspire raised eyebrows. To recognize is not just to trivialize but also to colonize; it is a sign of narcissistic self-duplication, a scandalous solipsism, an imperious expansion of a subjectivity that seeks to appropriate otherness by turning everything into a version of itself. (Felski 2008: 27)

In spite of the "raised eyebrows" within critical circles, the body of new scholarly work that performs this act of recognition suggests a deep interest in this approach. Recognition has frequently been dismissed by critics because it is slippery and hard to define; anyone who has asked a classroom full of students to explain why they like or dislike a particular novel knows

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that it is often very difficult for readers to describe their affective engagements with texts. *The Victorian and the Romantic* performs recognition for readers by positioning the author (Nell Stevens) and subject (Elizabeth Gaskell) as similar women who develop a friendship across time and space. This alliance can be interpreted within a feminist framework that emphasises shared experience and solidarity, rather than historical difference and objectification.

Historicism has long presented an interesting paradox within feminist theory. As historicism gained ground in the 1980s and 1990s, it was increasingly viewed as an antidote to feminist recovery efforts and what many viewed as the uncritical adoration of women writers of the past (see Fleissner 2002: 45); in historicism's wake, the recovery of lesser-known women writers and then-dominant feminist modes of analysis (psychoanalysis, deconstruction, etc.) came to be regarded with suspicion. Within nineteenth-century studies, Jennifer Fleissner explains, one critique of feminism was that "the feminists [. . .] had indulged in a kind of 'presentism' by treating these nineteenth-century women as mirror images of themselves" (Fleissner 2002: 47). The alternative to this perceived sanctification of women writers was to "historicize" them and regard them with a detached, critical suspicion – a critical move that often resulted in "repudiating everything that feminists once found worthwhile about [women writers]" (Fleissner 2002: 47). As Fleissner compellingly elucidates, such critical approaches and attention to the specific historical formations that "possess[] a negative valence for all concerned—colonialism, racial privilege" are undeniably important and yet need not always result in an "anxious distancing" from particular women writers (Fleissner 2002: 52). In the case of someone like Sarah Orne Jewett, for instance,

> [t]he question, as the concerned feminists ask, is why the acknowledgment that a writer like Jewett is not in fact an idealized icon seems to necessitate casting her as the embodiment of all we presently find reprehensible, so that any earlier claims made by a sympathetic feminism simply become null and void. (Fleissner 2002: 51)

White feminist academics who were eager to repudiate the cultural and historical formations that most scholars now find repugnant (sexism, racism,

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homophobia, xenophobia), Fleissner suggests, established their personal distance from such formations through anxious reading. Recognition and admiration were risky endeavours as they could be interpreted as signalling complicity. What emerges is a methodology of feminist historicism that positions women writers of the past as necessarily less advanced than contemporary critics, as occupying positions and viewpoints that scholars have now moved beyond.

The recent move towards strategic presentism within Victorian Studies challenges this methodology and makes room for different and more expansive modes of critical engagement. In their Manifesto, the V21 collective suggests that:

> [o]ne outcome of post-historicist interpretation may be a new openness to *presentism*: an awareness that our interest in the period is motivated by certain features of our own moment. In finance, resource mining, globalization, imperialism, liberalism, and many other vectors, we *are* Victorian, inhabiting, advancing, and resisting the world they made. ('Manifesto of the V21 Collective', n.p., original emphasis)

Strategic presentism offers scholars the opportunity to look anew at the nineteenth century and to think about the way historical periods, figures and texts are theorised and about their relationship to the present moment. Not least, as Felski notes,

> [t]he import of a text is not exhausted by what it reveals or conceals about the social conditions that surround it. Rather, it is also a matter of what it sets alight in the reader – what kind of emotions it elicits, what changes of perception it prompts, what bonds and attachments it calls into being. (Felski 2015: 179)

Within *The Victorian and the Romantic*, Stevens eschews dominant critical paradigms and, instead, gives emphasis to the emotional "bonds and attachments" that she forms with the subject of her study.

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2. *The Victorian and the Romantic*

The Victorian and the Romantic tells the interweaved stories of Nell Stevens, a first-year Ph.D. student living in London in the twenty-first century and falling in love with an American named Max, and Elizabeth Gaskell, a newly published novelist living with her husband and children in the nineteenth century and falling in love with an American named Charles. The narrative shifts between past and present, as Stevens and Gaskell both navigate their professional commitments, personal responsibilities, and incipient desires. Throughout the narrative, Stevens is struggling to get her sea legs in graduate school and Gaskell is struggling to first write *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) and then accept the negative reactions to it. Stevens's position as an uncertain doctoral student working on a dissertation about Elizabeth Gaskell (specifically "imaginary Americas" in the works of nineteenth-century British writers) parallels Gaskell's position as an apprehensive woman writer just beginning to make a name for herself (Stevens 2018: 31). Of course, consistent with Victorian norms, by the time Gaskell begins publishing her work, she is already a wife and mother, having married the Reverend William Gaskell at the age of twenty-two; in its intimate exploration of Gaskell's personal life, *The Victorian and the Romantic* is far more interested in her later attachment to her young American friend, Charles Eliot Norton, than her relationship with her husband. Gaskell's friendship with Norton begins after the commencement of her writing career, a near parallel to Stevens's own life, in which career precedes love.

The Victorian and the Romantic is divided into three parts: Part One: 'Body Study'; Part Two, 'Saliva Study'; and Part Three: 'Sleep Study'; individual chapters begin with date headings, which serve as visual time stamps for readers who are moving rapidly between events in the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. Marking chapters this way – with dates and not names (i.e. Gaskell and Stevens) – creates a temporal continuity between Stevens and Gaskell that emphasises similarity between the two writers. In other words, the structure of the book replicates the affective recognition performed in its narrative by asking readers to think about the two women's lives as unified and plotted along a single timeline.

Early in *The Victorian and the Romantic*, Stevens offers a critique of literary criticism and academia that helps establish the text as a kind of scholarly counterproject: one that privileges a hermeneutics of recognition over suspicion, and that places value on affective readerly response. In a

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chapter titled '"I Never Get Over to You": Unreachable Americas and the Idea of Home in the Letters and Fiction of Elizabeth Gaskell', Stevens recalls her first scholarly presentation as a doctoral student, as part of a doctoral seminar series in her program at Kings College, London. The chapter's title, also the title of her presentation, stands out as stodgy and somewhat comical when compared to the other chapter titles in the book, which are generally just one or two words ('Rue D'Aboukir' is the chapter that precedes it; 'Goldfinch' the chapter that follows it). This stodginess permeates the chapter, which begins with Stevens reading from her presentation: a paragraph about Gaskell's relationship to America, as evidenced within her letters. It is worthwhile to note that the reader only discovers that the paragraph is from Stevens's presentation when they begin reading the second paragraph, which begins: "I have a distinct sense, as I speak, that I am losing the room" (Stevens 2018: 29). At first glance, it is easy to mistake the opening paragraph as the beginning of a biofictional chapter on Gaskell until the reader looks more closely and notices that Gaskell is referred to using the third-person pronoun 'she' rather than the second-person pronoun 'you' that is used in the biofictional chapters. This is the reader's first clue that the chapter deploys a different hermeneutic approach: shifting from Stevens's affective biofictional engagement with Gaskell to a staid literary criticism that Stevens mocks for its detachment and predictability.

This position is exemplified in the subject matter of other doctoral seminars, including 'The Role of the Doorstep in the Fiction of Charles Dickens' and 'Katherine Mansfield, the Form of the Short Story and the Tyrannies of Female Fashion' (Stevens 2018: 31). Reading female fashion as 'tyrannical' is certainly evocative of a "negative aesthetics of suspicion" (Felski 2008: 22), and fixating on doorsteps in Dickens offers a sharp riposte to a detached banal historicism that promises to bore rather than engage its readers. This point is further emphasised when Stevens allays her anxieties about the question-and-answer session of the seminar by predicting what questions her fellow students will ask her because, as a genre,

> the Q&A has rarely been focused enough to expose anyone or anything. Rather, it has been an excuse for other people to ask why the presenter has not considered the thing that they themselves have decided to research, which is obviously the

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> most important angle to be taken on any writer, any subject, anything, always. (Stevens 2018: 32)

Like Felski, Stevens here critiques the hermeneutic contraction of graduate students and academics as they approach literary texts with a repetitiveness and predictability that blunts the texts' insight and appeal.

The placement of this chapter so early in *The Victorian and the Romantic* signals to readers that Stevens is not only poking fun at the dominant modes of literary interpretation which she, as a graduate student, is learning to perform, but also that she proposes something different in its stead. Near the end of her presentation, Stevens mentions that the audience is losing interest, noting that when she put the presentation together the day before "it all seemed quite moving" and she "thought that people would be instantly touched, as I am all the time, by the words and stories of Mrs. Gaskell" (Stevens 2018: 30). But, alas, they are not. It is unclear whether her audience is simply unmoved by Mrs. Gaskell, or, what seems more likely, that the academic format of the doctoral seminar series does not allow for affective engagement with the material. Instead, the attendees are engaged in the "critical reading" practices that have "become the holy grail of literary studies" (Felski 2008: 3). In other words, feeling is out and doorsteps are in, an approach which Stevens represents as staid and uninspired. Her fellow scholars seem reluctant, if not flat-out unwilling, "to be able to reflect with intellectual curiosity and emotional wonder on the reading experience" that Annette Federico suggests "may be the most important qualification for a literary critic. And encouraging a similar habit of reflection in others may be the most essential thing we do as teachers of literature" (Federico 2020: 23). This early chapter serves as a foundation for the remainder of the book, which focuses on Stevens's affective engagement with Gaskell, as the women form what the book's subtitle calls "*a Friendship Across Time*". Explicitly, Stevens offers the text as not simply biofiction, but an alternative form of experiential literary criticism.

In the final paragraphs of this same chapter, Stevens learns that the textual foundation of her presentation is inaccurate. The chapter begins with Stevens quoting a line from a letter Gaskell wrote to Charles Eliot Norton in 1860: "Sometimes I dream I am in America, but it always looks like home, which I know it is not" (Gaskell qtd. in Stevens 2018: 29). After successfully fielding questions during the Q&A and declaring that "[p]erhaps I really do

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know what I am talking about", Stevens is called out by a professor in the audience who tells her she is reading the letter wrong (Stevens 2018: 33). The exchange runs as follows:

> "The quote you gave, in which Gaskell dreams of America and finds that it looks like *home*."
>
> Yes?" I have the impression the professor is enjoying dragging this out.
>
> "I think, if you look carefully, you'll realize that it does not in fact say 'home' in that letter. It says 'Rome.' It says, 'Sometimes I dream I am in America, but it always looks like *Rome*.'"
>
> I scribble in my notebook furiously. "Oh, that's really interesting," I say. "Thank you. I'll look into that." (Stevens 2018: 34, original emphasis)

Here, again, Stevens offers a critique of the staid tools of academic criticism; her response "Oh, that's really interesting […] Thank you. I'll look into that" is stock material for academic Q&A sections, a signal to the reader that Stevens understands the rules of engagement and is not, in fact, planning to "look into that" particular textual inaccuracy. By concluding the chapter with the line, it acts as a springboard for the remainder of the book where Stevens does, indeed, look into Gaskell's life but refuses to be hemmed in by historical veracity.

Stevens's refusal to meaningfully respond to the professor's correction implies that she decides the misinterpretation just does not matter, instead suggesting that the reader's experience is more important than the presumed veracity of the text or of historical knowledge. This presupposition manifests in Stevens's use of the second person 'you' to refer to Gaskell throughout the narrative, a point of view that has the effect of suggesting that Stevens knows Gaskell better than Gaskell knows herself. For example, when Gaskell first meets the young Norton she is tongue-tied and Stevens writes: "You were never really shy, Mrs. Gaskell, except for in this moment" (Stevens 2018: 36). Throughout the narrative, Stevens "[v]iolat[es] the ontological boundaries between the real and the fictional" by refusing to concede the professor's point about historical and textual veracity; instead, she allows herself "the freedom to fantasise freely about her subject, to construct alternate narratives

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or to add new layers to the old ones" (Savu Walker 2020: 150). By opening her narrative with a sardonic account of the reading practices encouraged in her doctoral program, Stevens positions *The Victorian and the Romantic* as a repudiation of those practices and an offering of something new.

3. Women Writing/Writing Women

While Elizabeth Gaskell is certainly well known among Victorian scholars, she is not a household name in the way that some other nineteenth-century writers, like Charles Dickens or Jane Austen, are. Interestingly, though, *The Victorian and the Romantic* either takes for granted the reader's familiarity with Gaskell, or decides that it is simply not that important; the text offers no introduction to Gaskell's character, instead opting to jump right into the middle of her life, a move that, in itself, challenges the teleological paradigm favoured by biography. In an effort to establish a metanarrative about Gaskell's historical significance, the span of her life is not fully represented. Instead, the text is fragmentary and selective, and refuses to feign historical veracity. Indeed, the text begins with a disclaimer, which states,

> I have no people I want to libel. I have changed names, scenes, details, motivations and personalities. Every word has been filtered through the distortions of my memory, bias and efforts to tell a story. This is as true of the historical material as it is of the sections about my own life: studies, letters and texts excerpted here are not always faithfully quoted. This is a work of imagination. (Stevens 2018: 1)

The Victorian and the Romantic is a performance of readerly engagement, of readerly practices like selective focus, misremembering, and recognition; such practices emphasise, at the outset, the limits of historical knowledge and, by including her own memories and personal documents in the disclaimer, Stevens questions the historical veracity of memory itself. The text asks, then, not only how well readers can really know Elizabeth Gaskell, but how well Stevens can really know herself. Stevens thus resists invoking the bifurcated readership that Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn describe as central to the neo-Victorian genre, where the "'ordinary' reader" and the "'knowledgeable' critical reader" experience the text differently because of "the games-playing of the novels themselves" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 18).

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The Victorian and the Romantic suggests another, more specific reader: the twenty-first-century feminist reader looking to her feminist predecessors in order to better understand her own life, a reader interested in the articulation of women's experience. I use the term 'feminist' (rather than 'proto-feminist') intentionally here to indicate a continuum of ideas about women's rights and gender equality; although the term 'feminist' was not in use during Gaskell's lifetime – thus, technically making it anachronistic – the term 'proto-feminist' invokes a historical teleology (from 'primitive' to 'advanced') that *The Victorian and the Romantic* (like this essay) resists. Rather than critiquing Victorian feminism as a less evolved predecessor of twenty-first century feminism, Stevens places both on a continuum defined by one central tension: a woman's ability to 'have it all', to balance career and love.

Admittedly, this takes a narrow view of feminism and focuses on a concern that certainly did not dominate nineteenth-century feminist debate, which was far more concerned with expanding career opportunities for unmarried women than seeking to create a balance between career and love for married women. Building upon Catherine Rottenberg's analysis in *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, though, I would argue that the balance between career and love *is* the dominant narrative of popular feminism in the particular cultural moment Stevens occupies. As Rottenberg argues, "The neoliberal feminist subject is thus mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair" by focusing on "crafting a felicitous work-family balance" (Rottenberg 2018: 55). I mention this here not to critique Stevens's text for its neoliberal feminist leanings (although I suppose one certainly could), but rather to make the argument that Stevens's preoccupation with the "felicitous work-family balance" reads, in the twenty-first century, as a decidedly feminist concern. Structuring her biofictional reconstruction of Elizabeth Gaskell's mid-life around this bifurcation establishes a continuity between the struggles of the nineteenth-century married woman writer and the twenty-first century unmarried woman writer searching for love. Savu Walker identifies a genre of biofiction centred on the "cult of the female literary genius" that has relevance here:

> These texts foster an appreciation of their subjects' personal experiences, artistry, and enduring cultural significance, while also allowing us to understand how contemporary women

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> writers establish a cultural lineage for themselves by appropriating, resisting, and creating a multiplicity of meanings about their predecessors' lives and identities. (Savu Walker 2020: 135)

Stevens establishes this cultural lineage by imagining that she and Gaskell felt a similar tension between their careers and their private lives.

The first chapter of *The Victorian and the Romantic* begins in a church, with Elizabeth Gaskell begrudgingly listening to her husband's sermons. The chapter is divided into five sections and, tellingly, the first section is titled 'A Husband' and the second is titled 'A Career', a bifurcation that permeates the text and its author's quest for the ever-elusive balance of 'having it all' in the twenty-first century. While the majority of the text uses first-person narration when describing the events of Stevens's life, and second-person narration when describing the events of Gaskell's life, Stevens here shifts from the use of a possessive determiner ('*Your* Husband' and '*Your* Career') to an indefinite article ('*A* Husband' and '*A* Career') (Stevens 2018: 3-4, added emphasis). The use of an indefinite article is of great consequence and speaks to the text's overarching themes and the presumed relatability of its concerns; it projects a universality to the pursuit of husband and career, shifting attention away from the particularity of Gaskell's case and towards Stevens and the reader. 'A Husband' and 'A Career' become taxonomies of feminist identification, for both Stevens and her readers; the plot of the memoir is driven by the search for satisfaction of both aims.

When discussing Gaskell's work as a writer, Stevens's use of the term 'career' feels intentionally anachronistic: "[*Mary Barton* (1848)] became the sort of book that people bought and reviewed and talked about, and all of a sudden you had a career. This thing you had now, this career, was all your own. It was a portal" (Stevens 2018: 5). Victorian gender norms – which Gaskell often fastidiously upheld (let us not forget that she published her novels as 'Mrs. Gaskell') – would have certainly prevented Gaskell from perceiving her writing as a 'career' in the modern sense of the word, allowing the phrase to read here like a refraction of Stevens's own desires, her own career pursuits. The anachronism is intentional and draws our attention to how readers and scholars project their own lives onto the lives of the historical authors they study. As Stevens moves through her doctoral program, she is beset with bouts of anxiety, insecurity, low motivation and, above all,

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romance-inspired distraction from her work; as her love affair with her American, Max, heats up, her scholarly focus wanes and she finds herself applying for conferences and fellowships not because they offer opportunities for professional development, but because they bring her into greater proximity to Max. In the book, Gaskell's career focus follows a similar pattern as she adjusts to her burgeoning fame as a writer. She becomes friends with Florence Nightingale and Charlotte Brontë and excitedly recalls that "*Charles Dickens has read my book. Charles Dickens has read my book. Charles Dickens*" (Stevens 2018: 5, original italics), while struggling to write Brontë's biography: "*The Life of Charlotte Brontë* was no fun to write, and everybody was angry about it, even before it was published" (Stevens 2018: 9). Concurrently, Gaskell cares for her daughters and husband – "You had many versions of yourself, competing for attention and dominance: wife, mother, philanthropist, gossip, and writer" (Stevens 2018: 16-17) – and falls in love with her American, Charles.

The violation of the "ontological boundaries between the real and the fictional" is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Stevens's creative account of Gaskell's relationship with Charles Eliot Norton, whose "charming face" she sees on her first day in Rome (Stevens 2018: 21). Biographers have long denied that Gaskell had romantic feelings for Norton; Jenny Uglow, for example, states definitively that "[i]t would be too strong to say that Elizabeth fell in love with Charles. He was part of her Italian romance and she fell in love with the whole experience" (Uglow 1993: 418). Uglow offers details of Gaskell's deep friendship with Norton – "He certainly flattered Elizabeth, but his admiration was genuine" (Uglow 1993: 419) – but does not find sufficient evidence that their friendship was ever anything more than that. The Gaskell chapters in Stevens's book, on the other hand, are preoccupied with imagining that Gaskell did, indeed, have romantic feelings for Charles, and flirt with the idea that she contemplated acting on those feelings. Recounting Charles's overnight visit to the Gaskell home, Stevens muses,

> [b]ut that night, sitting alone in the room beneath the bed where he was sleeping, you surely wondered about other outcomes, other versions of the story. He was only a few feet away. You could have padded, silently, upstairs. You could have opened his door. (Stevens 2018: 166)

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The narrative stops short of imagining any lascivious details, but the reader is surely led to imagine what would have come after Gaskell opened the door. This is certainly an unorthodox picture of Gaskell, whom scholars have read as decidedly uncontroversial, a committed Victorian wife and mother who wrote in pursuit of greater social goods. The freedom with which Stevens conjures up Gaskell's extramarital desires is not based on historical 'evidence', but rather on the supposition that Gaskell may have felt a romantic passion akin to what Stevens feels now. Reading Gaskell's letters, Stevens crafts a subjective biography of Gaskell's life: reading between the lines and piecing together clues to try and construct a cohesive affective narrative. She is also, the text makes clear, infusing that narrative with her own anxieties and longings. Stevens interprets Gaskell through the lens of her own life experiences, and the shared lineage she crafts is rooted in a presumption of mutual feeling and a desire to represent women's rich inner lives, their yearnings and desires, some of which may remain unspoken.

These desires manifest not only in Stevens's reconstruction of Gaskell's life, but in Gaskell's writing of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, with which the Victorian writer is occupied throughout most of *The Victorian and the Romantic*. In her initial ruminations on the Brontë biography, Stevens imagines Gaskell drawing upon her own and Brontë's shared experiences:

> People wrote outraged nonsense about your books, too. You knew what it was to be a woman with a career, to be a woman who wrote about everything in life, even the unpleasant things. You knew, too, the use of a husband, of children, to persuade your critics that while your books might be wild and alarming, you yourself were well-mannered, dutiful and tame. And so you had clucked and mothered her, as you did everyone, and for her protection and her happiness you had done your best to drag her onto the terra firma of domestic life [...]. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* took two years to write and more pain and worry than you could possibly have anticipated [...]. And everyone, all the time, was offended. If you suggested the story was one way, someone would write and correct you [...]. You owed it to your dead friend to tell the truth, but the truth was evasive and slippery and fought back tooth and nail from the page. (Stevens 2018: 8-9)

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In this description, the distinction between author and subject becomes blurred, as does the distinction between fact and fiction. The description functions meta-discursively to draw attention to Stevens's own project, a point that is underscored by the parallel of Gaskell and Brontë's friendship with Stevens's and Gaskell's 'friendship', which unpacks like a set of nesting dolls.

Later in the narrative, as Gaskell recounts the negative reviews, accusations of inaccuracy, and threats of lawsuits that result from the publication of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, the reader begins to see how complicated it is to write women's stories and how often readers are unwilling to accept difficult truths about women's lives.

> When you had come home from Rome to discover the solicitor's notice in the paper, to see your name mentioned alongside words like "regret" and "rushed" and "slander," you had experienced a pure, vibrant kind of anger [...]. "I *did so try* to *tell the truth,* & I believe *now* as I hit as near the truth as anyone *could* do. And I weighed every line with all my whole power & heart." Your whole power and heart were ebbing and sad and furious by turn. You wrote to your publisher, suggesting a new forword [*sic*]: "If anybody is displeased with any statement or words in the following pages I beg leave to withdraw it, and to express my deep regret for having offered so expensive an article as truth to the public. It is very clever is it not?" (Stevens 2018: 132, original emphasis)

Gaskell's affective engagement with Brontë – she garnered the truth of her life "with all [her] power & heart" – offers a meta-commentary on Stevens's affective engagement with Gaskell and suggests that emotional engagement with authors and texts can yield powerful critical insight.

Throughout *The Victorian and the Romantic*, Stevens frames her self-aware exploration of the similarities between her own life and Elizabeth Gaskell's as the forging of "*a Friendship Across Time*" – an affective relationship built upon the shared experiences and struggles of what, in the twenty-first century, we would identify as a feminist struggle to balance work and love, career and family. The invocation of 'friendship' to describe Stevens's relationship with a deceased author is an explicit rejection of the

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anxious reading that repudiates recognition.[2] Drawing upon a feminist politics of affect, Stevens's engagement with Gaskell articulates and assigns meaning to women's experience through transtemporal and transhistorical modes of readerly recognition and, like Federico, implicitly argues that the "most important qualification for a literary critic" is the ability to "reflect with intellectual curiosity and emotional wonder" on the experience of being a reader (Federico 2020: 23). *The Victorian and the Romantic* ultimately demonstrates how experiential engagement can open up – rather than foreclose – interpretive possibilities and help readers to better understand women's writerly lives.

4. Conclusion: Personal Voice

I am aware of the irony of writing critically about a genre and a text that refutes dominant critical paradigms. So, to conclude, I want to pursue a moment of experiential criticism myself and discuss my experience of reading Stevens's book. Like Stevens, I was drawn to Elizabeth Gaskell in graduate school; I loved her novels and, even more than that, I loved the *idea* that she balanced a successful writing career with a rich family life. As a young graduate student, I drew inspiration from Gaskell's life, poring over Jenny Uglow's biography and reading Gaskell's entire corpus. I wrote my Master's thesis on *North and South* (1854) and a PhD thesis chapter on *Mary Barton* (1848). At the campus visit for my current position, I proposed a new graduate seminar on Elizabeth Gaskell, arguing that such a course had value because students would read multiple genres of Victorian literature (industrial fiction, domestic realism, biography) and learn about Victorian proto-feminism by studying an author who embodied its central concerns about autonomy and morality. When I became a mother myself, I read Gaskell's letters to her daughters with great pleasure and curiosity, eager to see how she mothered her own children and hoping I might learn a thing or two. Like Stevens, I have always felt an affinity to Gaskell, a sense that if we could meet, we would be great friends.

And so, I read *The Victorian and the Romantic* with great relish; it offered insight into Gaskell's life and, perhaps more importantly, offered a reminder of the pleasures of reading and the ripeness of readerly entanglements. I imagined inserting myself into Stevens's and Gaskell's (and Brontë's) friendship, the outer shell of the series of dolls nested within. It reminded me of my graduate school diary and those early experiences of

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reading literature before I learned to eschew my humanistic engagement with the text for more objective and critical reading practices. My life, like the lives of so many, has been fundamentally shaped by reading fiction. As Tompkins so powerfully explains, "[w]hen coming to know oneself is entwined with the reading of great fiction, it deepens our appreciation of the novels themselves and lets us see how they help their readers to understand the world, and their own lives" (Tompkins 2020: x). Experiential criticism offers this possibility and asserts that affective engagements with texts have interpretive value, for the field of literary studies and for individual readers.

Notes

1. Marie-Luise Kohlke explains that "[c]elebrity biofiction speculates about the inner lives, secret desires, traumas, and illicit pursuits of high-profile public figures, most often writers, poets, and artists, that may have been left out of surviving records, including subjects' own self-representations, for example in letters, diaries, or memoirs", further noting that "[b]iofiction reflects a comparable ambivalence as to which texts perform legitimate memory work and which engage in falsifying cultural and/or popular memory of once-living person" (Kohlke 2013: 7, 4). Michael Lackey clarifies that biofiction is not an outgrowth of the historical novel, but a reaction against it, specifically in its frequent disregard of historical veracity; accordingly, he argues that biofiction must be recognised as its own unique aesthetic form, with its unique attendant demands (see Lackey 2021: 10).
2. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that this 'friendship' is only possible because of the conventional forms of criticism that Stevens critiques in *The Victorian and the Romantic*. Stevens's ability to 'know' Gaskell is dependent upon the literary scholars who brought Gaskell's life and works to the fore in the twentieth century. One might argue that, for Stevens, the hermeneutics of recognition is symbiotically linked to the hermeneutics of suspicion that established Gaskell as an important Victorian writer in the first place.

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