

REALISM, ETHICS AND SECULARISM

George Levine is one of the world's leading scholars of Victorian literature and culture. This collection of his essays extends and develops the key themes on which his work has centered throughout his career: the intersection of nineteenth-century British literature, culture and science and the relation of knowledge and truth to ethics. The essays offer new perspectives on George Eliot, Thackeray, the Positivists, and the Scientific Naturalists, and reassess the complex relationship between Ruskin and Darwin. In readings of Lawrence and Coetzee, Levine addresses Victorian and modern efforts to push beyond the limits of realist art by testing its aesthetic and epistemological limits in engagement with the self and the other. Some of Levine's most important contributions to the field are reprinted, in revised and updated form, alongside previously unpublished material. Together, these essays cohere into an exploration both of Victorian literature and culture and of ethical, epistemological, and aesthetic problems fundamental to our own times.

GEORGE LEVINE is Professor Emeritus at Rutgers University and Distinguished Scholar in Residence at New York University. He is the author of many books on Victorian literature and culture, and has taught at universities in the USA, UK, and Italy.

REALISM, ETHICS
AND SECULARISM

*Essays on Victorian
Literature and Science*

GEORGE LEVINE



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
 978-0-521-88526-3 — Realism, Ethics and Secularism
 George Levine
 Frontmatter
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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
 a department of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521885263

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First published 2008
 First paperback edition 2011

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data
 Levine, George Lewis.

Realism, ethics and secularism : essays on Victorian literature and science / George Levine.
 p. cm.
 Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-521-88526-3 (hardback)

1. English literature—19th century—History and criticism. 2. Literature and science—Great Britain—
 History—19th century. 3. Great Britain—Intellectual life—19th century. 4. Ethics—Great Britain—
 History—19th century. 5. Knowledge, Theory of, in literature. 6. Science in literature. 7. Realism in
 literature. 8. Secularism in literature. I. Title.

PR468.S34L48 2008

820.9'356—dc22 2008018926

ISBN 978-0-521-88526-3 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-34949-9 Paperback

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Preface

Goodness is truth, truth goodness. It is a very Victorian notion, and it runs deep. But it also runs into trouble very quickly. Looking at the Victorians from the perspective of this idea turns out to have been my life's work, although I wasn't always aware of it. And it did so, I now realize, because the idea resonates into our own moment and reverberates quite personally for many of us. The essays gathered here spin with what I now recognize as relentless tenacity around the problems related to this fundamental idea. Approaching it first with my eye primarily on the art of the Victorians, it has taken me into the dry depths of epistemology, into the study of Darwin and considerations of evolutionary biology, into that inescapable turmoil over religion that marked so much of Victorian discourse and that muddies our own intellectual waters at the start of the twenty-first century, and back again into the very heart of the Victorian ideal of art – the “realism” of its fiction, the ethical tensions of its romantic poetry, and the various and brilliant rhetorics of its prose.

I bring together in this book many of the essays with which I have explored these problems, in various forms. They were written separately, for diverse occasions at different times, and it is only recently that I realized that they might be taken for chapters of a single book. Only after many years did I come to understand how doggedly preoccupied with questions of epistemology and ethics, of selfhood and otherness, of realism and objectivity I have almost always been. Although the essays do not quite form a progressive sequence of argument, they develop into a set of closely related explorations of aspects of a single argument, always connected historically because of my continuing passion for the literature of the Victorians, most particularly its “realism,” and hence for the study of Victorian culture, particularly in the light of the way these have been besieged by our contemporary criticism, and re-evaluated in the light of contemporary history. Put crudely, that argument is that questions about the possibility of knowing, epistemological questions, were for the

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Victorians urgent ones, particularly so because they were always also ethical questions, and that literature takes us where philosophy cannot, answers the questions differently (if perhaps inconsistently). Both approaches among the Victorians, however, reveal a culture committed to the possibility and necessity of knowing the “real,” and both approaches reveal the Victorians’ remarkably creative and troubled recognition of the elusiveness of both the true and the good. Their literature, their philosophy, and their social criticism is all marked by the struggle to get it right because getting it right seemed a condition for ethics itself.

My preoccupation with the problem of “objectivity,” which manifests itself repeatedly in these essays, is obviously an epistemological concern, but it takes me directly into the subject of science, the area of thought that most explicitly and demandingly seemed (and seems) to require “objectivity.” And these questions take me to the heart of many of the most intense and pervasive Victorian culture wars, which were fought over questions of belief, of ethics, and of value. How might one affirm ethical norms with the “objective,” merely descriptive, and “naturalistic” explanations of the world provided by science? As scientists struggled for professional (and ethical and intellectual) authority, they, particularly the scientific naturalists, set up arms against established religion. But for most Victorians religion was the sanction for morality; take religion away and they were threatened by moral anarchy and despair. These wars were fought everywhere – and the literature is largely characterized by the struggle.

Although these essays consider large cultural and sometimes philosophical issues, they tend to do so in the field of literature, or of literature in relation to science, or of science as literature. Dickens and George Eliot and Ruskin, yes, but also G. H. Lewes, and Charles Darwin, and T. H. Huxley, and Charles Lyell, and John Tyndall. All of these brilliant scientists and cultural critics and novelists (and the poets as well) were engaged in an intense and sustained debate about where the culture should be going, about what really counted, and implicitly of course, about where authority lay. In one way or other, they were obsessed with questions of knowledge and truth, and thus, while the word is normally now applied to a literary movement, “realism” was for them an overriding concern.

At the heart of this literary study, then, is my continuing concern with this “realism,” primarily as it manifested itself in the Victorian novel, yet implicitly and explicitly as the questions related to it were manifest in science and in the cultural and even religious criticism of writers like

Matthew Arnold and John Henry Newman. I take realism as the literary counterpart of the epistemological/ethical question that drives so many of these essays. Realism aspires, above all, to truth-telling. But realism is also connected to the movement toward secularization that became so prominent among the Victorians despite the broad, almost culture-wide burst of religious activity at the time. Because realist literature puts to the test of narrative the possible cultural responses to the epistemological and ethical problems, it pushes – my argument is – willy-nilly toward a secular, naturalistic understanding of the world, even when the authors themselves are overtly religious and their narratives attempt to reaffirm religion. Once again, then, in the pages of the most popular fictions, the battle over moral possibility, which in these essays I focus on the epistemological/ethical question, gets fought out.

The connection of the epistemological question of “objectivity” to the work of realism is affirmed in part because of a fundamental moral/aesthetic drive to find a way to move beyond the narrow limits of individual consciousness into a sympathetic and empathic relation to others, to the not-self. Victorian narratives are in part an answer to the question raised by so many worried Victorians as to whether it is possible to sustain the moral life without religion. Realists explore the consciousnesses and natures of a broad variety of selves, more or less strange, more or less familiar; they thrust the reader into an intimacy with possibilities well beyond the limits of the self who reads. They push the boundaries of non-self, and, as the last two essays are most concerned to emphasize, even to a recognition of the perhaps ultimate unknowability of others. And, as with all Victorian efforts at knowing, there comes the ethical concomitant, the deepest respect and reverence for that otherness.

On these matters, the ten separately conceived essays become ten chapters of one book. And while the subjects of these essays are almost all Victorians, the issues and the arguments are designed to address our contemporary conditions, for the issues with which the Victorians struggled are very much alive in current cultural debate. Obviously, the old philosophical dualism between “is” and “ought” is still alive and evoking complicated and intense debate. Obviously, the insistence that morality is and must be based upon a religious foundation is also alive and well, and the strenuous effort of secularists to insist that morality can be sustained as forcefully (or more so) in an entirely secular cultural order continues with perhaps more seriousness and, one would hope, more success than the Victorian Positivists achieved. These essays engage with contemporary critical theory, implicitly always, and from time to time

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explicitly; they are particularly engaged with those aspects of contemporary literary and critical theory that, by and large, reject the idea of objectivity and the possibility that the literature of Victorian realism was something other than a capitulation to the dominant ideologies of the time. I am, throughout this book, more or less unabashedly committed to representing Victorian views literally, and sympathetically, and committed as well to addressing contemporary implications of these great Victorian issues for secularism, for the idea of objectivity, for our sense of the ideological complicity of literature, and for the way our culture thinks about science and religion. If the accusation that these essays are a bit Victorian themselves is made, I won't object.

These essays are only slightly revised since their original publication. I have tried to reduce the inevitable repetition that comes in such a collection of occasional essays, to make connections when the opportunity arose, and to include a few references to more recent work (although most were written in this last decade, the first of these essays was published thirty years ago). It would have been disingenuous for me to try to disguise their original independence, but I hope that readers will be struck (as I was, to my great surprise) by the coherence that emerges from their juxtaposition. In important ways, this book has always been in my mind and ideally forms part of one long argument with historical, critical and contemporary relevance. I hope it will be clear that the essays constitute a set of related explorations, driven by the irresistible attraction for me of the moral energy and intellectual and aesthetic power that mark Victorian realism and literature.

Place and date of original publication of these chapters, which appeared under their same titles:

Chapter 1: *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 25 (June, 1980): 1-28

Chapter 2: previously unpublished, written in 2006

Chapter 3: *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 35 (Spring, 2008):

Chapter 4: *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief*, ed., Richard J. Hofstadter and Bernard Lightman (London: MacMillan, 1990), pp. 225-261

Chapter 5: previously unpublished, 2002

Chapter 6: *Annals of Scholarship*, 8 (1991): 365-389

Chapter 7: *Adventures in Realism*, ed., Matthew Beaumont (Malden: Blackwells, 2007), 13-32

Chapter 8: *Dickens, Secularism and Agency*, ed. Eileen Gilooley and Deirdre David (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), pp. 13-34

Chapter 9: *Raritan*, 28 (Summer, 2008), 117-139

Chapter 10: Previously unpublished, 2006