

1 | Aesthetic Liberalism

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The great pleasure of conversation and society, besides, arises from a certain correspondence of sentiments and opinions, from a certain harmony of minds, which like so many musical instruments coincide and keep time with one another. But this most delightful harmony cannot be obtained unless there is a free communication of sentiments and opinions.

Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759)

Music has long figured in liberal thought, whether as a metaphor for communicative reason or moral sentiment; as a model for sympathetic social relations or international cooperation, offering a supposedly ‘universal’ language; or as a mode of self-cultivation. In the Victorian context, music’s prominent role in public life – on the streets, in public parks, in national ceremonies, in state-funded schools and other public institutions – together with its purportedly elevating properties in private reflection all suggest the potential for alignment with a liberal ethos. Yet the full extent to which music figured in the development of liberal thought, and the nature of the relationship between music and liberalism in nineteenth-century Britain has remained largely unexplored.

One of the challenges to construing this relationship comes from the apparently derisive treatment of music by liberal thinkers and those who influenced them. Jeremy Bentham cast the experience of music as comparable to the pleasure derived from a game of ‘push-pin’, and ventured that the latter might in fact be more valuable if it provided greater pleasure than music;¹ John Stuart Mill classed musical performance as ‘unproductive labour’.² Yet both men recorded a sustained and profound personal

¹ Jeremy Bentham, from *The Rationale of Reward* [1825], excerpted and reprinted in John Troyer (ed.), *The Classical Utilitarians: Bentham and Mill* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 94.
² See John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume II – The Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy (Books I–II)* [1848], ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), especially chapter 3.

engagement with music throughout their lives, and a closer examination of the implications of their understanding of ‘utility’, ‘pleasure’ and ‘labour’ (unproductive or otherwise) reveals the non-pejorative nature of their comments. Even so, there has been a temptation to misread these types of comment as part of a broader process of aligning liberalism with the rhetoric of national character: a rhetoric that emphasised action over thought, exchange value over aesthetic value, and product over process. Such tropes were emblemised by Adam Smith’s famous portrayal of England as a ‘nation of shopkeepers’ in his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), and by Mill’s observation in 1835 that the ‘celebrity of England rest[ed] on her docks, her canals, and her railroads’.³ While highlighting the merits of practical action linked a core feature of liberal thinking – freedom conceived as individual agency and self-reliance – with a perceived characteristic of British national temperament, this association has rendered hidden the significant role of the aesthetic in Victorian liberalism.

A similar problem shaped the reputations of Benthamism, political economy and liberal utilitarianism, which were variously cast in the nineteenth century as hard, dogmatic, calculating, unselfcritical, unfeeling or unimaginative. These types of characterisation were further engrained by influential forms of political theory, philosophy and literary criticism that equated liberalism with market capitalism, and in turn with veiled forms of social control. Victorian writers cautioned against the dangers of worshipping capital in the industrial age. F. R. Leavis and his followers fashioned a genteel distance from the sordid business interests of the entrepreneurial middle classes and the unthinking impulses of mass opinion. Marxist theorists such as Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton courted an affinity with Romantic anti-capitalist values. And of course Michel Foucault’s casting of Bentham’s Panopticon as a symbol of practices of social control associated with liberal ideology continues to influence scholarly perceptions of Victorian liberalism today.⁴ These manoeuvres have made certain moral and economic ideas associated

³ John Stuart Mill, ‘Professor Sedgwick’s Discourse on the Studies of the University of Cambridge’ in *Dissertations and Discussions*, 4 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1875), i, 95–159, 96, qtd. in Walter E. Houghton, ‘Victorian Anti-Intellectualism’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 13.3 (1952): 291–313, 292.

⁴ For a concise account of the history of these tendencies see Kathleen Blake, *Pleasures of Benthamism: Victorian Literature, Utility, Political Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 26–27.

with the liberal tradition seem as though they were inherently at odds with aesthetic preoccupations.⁵

The perceived separation between the aesthetic, the ineffable and the humane on the one hand, and the economic, the rational and the procedural on the other, has come under increasing pressure in recent years and with it, the notion that liberal thought has routinely devalued the aesthetic. There is a degree of disciplinary self-interest in this process of revision – one that many of the scholars involved readily admit. The value of our own scholarship seems to rely to some degree on claiming the special nature of the aesthetic as an element of culture that should be protected and valued beyond the logic of exchange value or labour value – ‘We were the Kantians (or Coleridgeans), they were the Benthamites, and we lacked John Stuart Mill’s reasons for attempting a dialectical synthesis’.⁶ Yet interrogating the status of the aesthetic within liberal thought also has a range of broader implications.

This volume draws from these recent revisions, as we shall see, but seeks to extend them beyond literary to specifically musical concerns, asking how liberalism and related traditions of thought confronted the special challenges posed by an aesthetic medium whose widespread affective power seemed entirely disproportionate to its limited communicative function. For some, music’s capacity to move the emotions without overt representational or conceptual content could easily have been viewed as at odds with liberalism’s focus on language, communication and reasoned argument. In another sense though, it was in its very abstractness that music seemed to offer the possibility of cultivating just the kind of non-transcendental and non-doctrinal system of values among all levels of society that many liberals so ardently advocated. In what follows I will introduce some of the key tensions at play concerning the function of the aesthetic within Victorian liberal thought, and begin to map – by reference to the studies presented in the subsequent

⁵ This tendency has also been recognized by Regenia Gagnier in *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), among others.

⁶ Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1. This acknowledgement is often accompanied by an interest in extending upon (and sometimes working against) the prevailing influence of Foucault over Victorian studies. Also see Blake, *Pleasures of Benthamism*; Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy*; Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); and Lauren M. E. Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

chapters – themes and questions that arise from considering the position of music within these discussions.

Technologies of Liberalism: Government of the Self and Others

Revisionist studies of aesthetics and liberalism in Victorian Britain share a number of common features. Often they seek to trace preoccupations and ‘habits of thought’ across economic, moral and aesthetic modes of writing to reveal common underlying discursive processes. They also tend to favour an intellectual history approach that moves differently from ideology critique, focusing on practices, attitudinal stances, frames of mind, styles of thinking or ways of attributing value, rather than on theories, systems, ideas or principles in abstraction. This shift in approach has allowed scholars such as Amanda Anderson to discern what she has called the ‘liberal aesthetic’, characterised as a sense of moral aspiration that is tempered by an acknowledgment of irreconcilable sociological obstacles – a stance that receives its affective expression as a sense of ‘bleak’ optimism, or doubtful hope.⁷

This affective feature of liberal discourse might be viewed as an ongoing struggle with what Linda Dowling called the ‘paradox’ of late-Victorian liberalism. Namely, in order to create a body of public opinion and a public sphere committed to pursuing rational argument (which is required in order to lend authority and legitimacy to popular sovereignty), the individual members of the polity must be prepared to pursue certain cognitive practices enabling them to engage in rational argument. These practices, Dowling suggests, are now typically viewed as having been determined on the basis of an ‘aristocratic sensibility unrecognised as such’ – a sensibility that was made to seem natural and universal, leading to accusations that liberal systems were simply designed to preserve the power of an intellectual and political elite under the guise of increased political participation.⁸ In addition, historical efforts to temper the aridity of an abstract life of reason have been criticized not only for being bourgeois but also overtly masculine and imperial, and implicated in occluding forms of power that rely on self-regulation.⁹

⁷ Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism*.

⁸ Linda Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1996), xii.

⁹ This link between the liberal project and British imperialism has been contested by Andrew Satori in a review article criticising the assumptions of Uday Singh Mehta’s book *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). See Andrew Satori, ‘The British Empire and Its Liberal Mission’, *Journal of Modern History*, 78.3 (2006): 623–642.

Lauren Goodlad has sought to address this paradox in the context of Victorian literary studies with the view to undermining the pervasive influence of Foucault's early scepticism toward panoptic surveillance techniques. She argues that Foucault's analysis is less applicable to the Victorian context than to that of the continent, given the ingrained tradition of voluntarism in Britain during the nineteenth century, the local impact of Protestantism and the prevalence of religious dissidence. Goodlad proposes an alternative focus on Foucault's later work on 'governmentality' as being more suited to the analysis of Victorian cultural and social forms because it links liberalism and forms of agency with a desire to secure a rational means of social and spiritual cohesion without the need to defer to an external, centralised authority.¹⁰ In essence, she argues that the development of the apparatus of the state in Britain differed from that of continental nations in a way that enabled literature to serve as a forum for debate about different modes of self-rule. This claim may be even stronger in the case of Victorian musical culture, which was in many ways less formalised institutionally than were its continental counterparts: its most distinctive expression beyond the purview of the concert hall was in the form of choir festivals, amateur music making, ballads and bawdy songs, domestic music making and chamber music, music in national ceremonies, music in theatres and music hall. These more widely accessible spheres of musical culture were also shaped by the perceived features of national temperament mentioned above, including those related to the tradition of voluntarism and de-centralised forms of social organisation, such as the character attribute of 'self-reliance'.

The subtitle of the present volume – *Composing the Liberal Subject* – plays on this conflict between older, sceptical readings of liberal practices of self-rule (construed as occluding the structures of power and domination that underpin them) and the recent turn toward a more affirmative view of non-coercive practices that preserve individual agency. The idea of 'composing', apart from its obvious musical significance, might call to mind an authoritarian figure bent on organising materials into a coherent whole according to their own will or for their own pleasure; but it can also suggest a personal practice performed in the face of frustration or adversity – one 'composes' oneself by stepping back from an instinctual response and taking distance in order to better assess the situation or to gather one's

¹⁰ Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State*, 87. See also Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

thoughts to furnish a more coherent argument. The word invites us to ask: Who is doing the composing? To what ends? And with what means?¹¹ The answers to these questions also impact the meaning of the word ‘subject’ in the title: the term can imply either a degree of personal agency (the human ‘subject’, a contested notion posited by humanistic traditions) or a position of subservience to a higher authority (e.g. the Queen’s ‘subject’), implying some level of subjugation or acquiescence, and perhaps also protection.

These alternative meanings evoke another problematic issue at the heart of liberal thought, one that has served a generative function within the history of liberal traditions. This is a conflict between, on the one hand, the view that individual freedom is constitutive of our humanity, and on the other, the acknowledgment that humans are by nature social animals. The question for a liberal then becomes how to secure individual freedom for all without compromising some level of social cohesion. As we shall see, recovering strains of the aesthetic in liberal thinking has begun to reveal how, far from being blind to the paternalistic implications of its practices, some liberal traditions might in fact be characterised by their awareness of the futility of attempting to reconcile these competing aims.

Matthew Arnold addressed this issue when he described liberal subjects as individuals who foster their own ‘best self’ – a self achieved through formalised cognitive practices that allow thought beyond narrow class designation and immediate interests, to take account of those interests of the broader community.¹² The formulation of this notion of liberal individualism was no doubt a response to the expansion of the franchise and the reality of a broader political constituency in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, and the widespread concern among liberal thinkers and conservatives alike that broadening the franchise would make the political process vulnerable to a category of person who, by dint of their social condition and limited education, might be easily swayed by transient agendas and populist rhetoric.

This concern was also what had driven Mill in *On Liberty* (1859) to describe a type of ideal liberal citizen who cultivated his or her own ‘tastes and pursuits’ but also the habits of mind that allowed them to see those tastes debated in a dispassionate manner – a simultaneously interested and

¹¹ David Wayne Thomas asks a similar question in his book *Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), where he considers whether Victorians should ‘be seen as heroic self-fashioning subjects, or as unwitting objects, of cultivation’ (5).

¹² See Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 67.

disinterested figure who was able to know their own mind firmly and express reasoned opinions, yet remain open to the idea that debate would uncover broader meanings. The need to temper rational disinterestedness with the more intuitive sensibilities of the imagination was an insight that arose from Mill's famous personal breakdown in the winter of 1826–1827, when he found that the strictures of his father's 'utilitarian orthodoxy' had left him with an absence of feeling and emotional commitment. Later, in his autobiography, Mill associated this absence with the tendency to equate imagination with illusion, as in the 'narrow Benthamism' of his one-time ally Roebuck.¹³ Mill 'never indeed varied in the conviction that happiness is the test of all rules of conduct, and the end of life'.

But I now thought that this end was only to be attained by not making it the direct aim. Those only are happy (I thought) who have their attention fixed on something other than their own happiness: on the happiness of others, either individually or collectively; on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or favourite pursuit followed not as a means but as an ideal end.¹⁴

Mill's insight from this period was the idea that one must pay attention to internal culturing. 'Passive susceptibilities' should be cultivated as well as the capacity for action; they needed to be 'nourished and enriched as well as guided', to achieve a balance between analysis on the one hand, and feelings and sympathy, on the other.

The paradox latent in the idea of being 'guided' towards this type of sympathetic personal autonomy is the focus of Part I of the present volume, where we see it shaping a wide range of debates about working class access to culture: debates in which the idea of music as both a means of individual self-expression and a tool of cultivation and control played a prominent part. Erin Johnson-Williams' chapter on musical drills in working class schools, Simon McVeigh's chapter on campaigns to allow public musical performances on Sundays, and Rosemary Golding's chapter on music in Victorian public institutions (including prisons and pauper lunatic asylums) all take instances of what would normally be seen as

¹³ Mill wrote that 'It was in vain I urged on him that the imaginative emotion which an idea when vividly conceived excites in us, is not an illusion but a fact, as real as any of the other qualities of objects; and far from implying anything erroneous and delusive in our mental apprehension of the object, is quite consistent with the most accurate knowledge and practical recognition of all its physical and intellectual laws and relations' (John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Vol I – Autobiography and Literary Essays* [1824], ed. J. M. Robson and Jack Stillinger [Toronto: University of Toronto Press; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981], 157).

¹⁴ Mill, *Autobiography*, 145–146.

simply paternalistic behaviour and complicate the matter with reference to the dynamics of different strains of liberal thought as they relate to the idea of music. The democratic possibilities of John Curwen's Tonic Sol-fa system (a simpler alternative to staff notation for reading music, and one that was steeped in theistic and cooperative notions of sympathy) are also explored in a number of the chapters that follow. In these studies, music appears as a 'technology' of liberalism, but one that eschews any easy characterisation as either a tool of emancipation or one of control.

Aesthetic Liberalism

Returning for a moment to Mill, it is important to note for our purposes that it was not just any type of aesthetic experience that restored him after his personal crisis. It was a particular form of poetic sentiment: the 'tranquil contemplation' of Wordsworth, rather than the intensity of Byron or the words of more profound poets. Mill wrote of Byron's effect on him at this moment of crisis:

The poet's state of mind was too like my own. His was the lament of a man who had worn out all pleasures and who seemed to think that life to all who possessed the good things of it, must necessarily be the vapid uninteresting thing which I found it [...] yet] What made Wordsworth's poems medicine for my state of mind was that they expressed, not outward beauty but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty. They seemed to be the very culture of the feelings which I was in quest of. By their means I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings.¹⁵

Mill's insight from this experience was that individual pleasures were not to be shunned as vulgar self-interest but were in fact a means of revealing the essence of human nature, and promoting sympathy between humans on that basis. According to this thinking, the individual who pursued personal pleasures could be better equipped to participate in enhancing communal pleasure, suggesting that the aesthetic provides the basis of social relations in a way that rational debate cannot.

David Russell has described this idea as 'aesthetic liberalism', and has shown how Mill's early attempt to bridge the perceived gap between politics and poetry represented an attempt to draw together two different

¹⁵ Mill, *Autobiography*, 149–152.

modes of liberalism – the political/argumentative ‘liberalism of method’ and the aesthetic/essayistic ‘liberalism of aesthetic experience’.¹⁶ The conjunction of these two modes reflects an attempt to account for the lived aspects of liberalism in the same way that the aesthetic was viewed as a way of anchoring or tempering the abstraction of liberal ideals. Philip Bullock, in the present volume, makes a similar connection by playing on the dual meaning of the term ‘liberal’ as a means to construe the political-aesthetic imperative of aestheticism, focusing on the link between the critical style and mode of living of music critic Rosa Newmarch. In a different way, Katherine Fry demonstrates in her chapter that while late-Victorian aestheticism was rooted in a transcendental view of music influenced by Wagner’s writings, the development of this line of thinking was in fact shaped by material conditions of a far less transcendental and more commercial nature related to Wagner’s conducting activities as a musician in exile in London earlier in the century.

The claim that aesthetics served a liberal outlook on the basis of its sympathetic and relational aspects leaves open a special place for music – a medium traditionally associated with both characteristics, as described by Bennett Zon and Phyllis Weliver in their respective chapters. This view of liberal agency as an openness or sympathy towards different forms of life emphasises liberalism’s affective registers and the possibility of experiential notions of individuality and freedom. The use of the term ‘liberal’ as a mode of living rather than a form of politics, from the 1820s onwards, reflected this convergence.

Kate Bowan traces this change in Mill’s work to his interaction with a composer from within his intellectual group, Eliza Flower, and his exposure to her practices of lifestyle experimentation at the time when he was writing his essays on poetry. Mill was also influenced by Coleridge’s work at this time, especially Coleridge’s view that rational understanding was not only about propositional accuracy but about emotional commitment, issuing from the embeddedness of ideas in experience (indeed David Wayne Thomas has described liberalism as an ‘expressivist’ tradition for this reason).¹⁷ For Mill, following Coleridge, liberty was about just that type of freedom of expression and experience – the freedom to be the

¹⁶ David Russell, ‘Aesthetic Liberalism: John Stuart Mill as Essayist’, *Victorian Studies*, 56.1 (2013): 7–30. See also his book *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

¹⁷ He also attributes the ‘expressivist’ tradition to Wittgenstein, Hegel and Spinoza (Thomas, *Cultivating Victorians*, 45–46).

creator of one's own form of being, to attempt to 'weave the precepts of proceduralism into the fabric of a more conscientious life'.¹⁸

Russell argues that the aesthetic mode of liberalism has been marginalised in favour of the political mode. Consequently, liberal political institutions tend to consider reasoned argument, rationality and consensus to be the best methods for drawing disparate groups together in a community of diversity, whereas 'an aesthetic liberalism of apprehension, on the other hand, is more interested in encouraging *vitalities of mediated relation* than in framing arguments or transmitting knowledge'.¹⁹ In this sense 'aesthetic liberalism' may be seen as a critical mode on the basis of its ability to eschew determinate outcomes and call open possibility and contingency – a process that Russell sees in essayism (indeed, Russell's alternative name for aesthetic liberalism is 'essayistic liberalism'). So we have here the suggestion of a critical mode based on relation and sympathy, with J. S. Mill's early work being cast as 'essays in the art of relationality, seeking to provide alternative structures and spaces of communication between people'.²⁰

The importance allotted to emotional commitment and the cultivation of non-normative identities within the types of liberal discourse discussed here does not simply license an individual to hold unfounded assumptions and promote them doggedly, but rather to foster the ability to practice styles of thinking and living free of convention or habit – this being the more 'liberal' mode of life, as described in Bullock's chapter and elsewhere. These modes of life may be eccentric, conflicting and subversive, but they must not simply substitute one form of convention or prejudice with another. In other words, they must be adaptable to rational debate. There are of course a number of latent tensions in this liberal requirement. For example, the requirement for rational debate curtails the types of individual experience that can be pursued. Also, the idea that public debate progresses knowledge means that varieties of experience will necessarily decrease and eventually reach a very un-individual uniformity (and indeed Mill later demoted aesthetic experience in his thinking to an additional flourish in life for this reason, among others). And finally, the privileging of reason is itself a prescriptive and potentially coercive requirement.²¹

¹⁸ Russell, 'Aesthetic Liberalism', 17.

¹⁹ Russell, 'Aesthetic Liberalism', 9. Emphasis added.

²⁰ Russell, 'Aesthetic Liberalism', 10.

²¹ These types of criticism have been mounted against Anderson's argument (see Bruce Robbins, 'On Amanda Anderson's The Way We Argue Now', *Criticism*, 48.2 (2006): 265–271; and Elspeth Probyn, 'Critical Attachment: At Home in the In-between', *Criticism*, 48.2 (2006): 273–279). See also Amanda Anderson, 'Reply to My Critic(s)', *Criticism*, 48.2 (2006): 281–290.