



Realism's Reach: The Transnational Form of Nineteenth-Century Fiction

[*The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience*](#). Lauren M. E. Goodlad. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 364 pp.

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<1>What was the impact of globalisation on nineteenth-century fiction? How did the realist novel not only represent the new spaces and experiences of transnationalism, but also assimilate its impact into its aesthetic modes? And what might such critical enquiries tell us about our own present moment?

<2>Such are the questions to which Lauren M. E. Goodlad's engaging study responds, in an argument that persuasively rethinks the relationship between globality and aesthetic form as it emerges within and throughout the nineteenth century. In a work that carefully attends to the intricacies of nineteenth-century geopolitics, Goodlad moves through discussions of Anthony Trollope, Wilkie Collins, George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, and E. M. Forster, to enrich the ways in which we read realist fiction's development in confluence with the spatial and temporal structures of globalisation, as well as opening up indicative questions about contemporary critical practice and the ways in which we read and historicize now.

<3>Goodlad's work responds to the increasing globality of Victorian studies that has taken shape over the last twenty years or so, in which critical attention has focused upon understanding the transnational structures of capitalist globalisation, and developing and

interrogating a critical terminology around such concepts as cosmopolitanism, liberalism, sovereignty, and imperialism. Amid the growing attention to such themes across Victorian studies more broadly Goodlad identifies that, while literary scholars have not been altogether inattentive to these discussions, there has been insufficient attention to the impact upon and implications for the aesthetic and formal concerns of nineteenth-century fiction. It is this that Goodlad seeks to address by constructing a critically robust theory of 'the geopolitical aesthetic' that takes its departure from Frederic Jameson's formulation, extending from the postmodern concern into nineteenth-century contexts, and shifting the aesthetic focus from world cinema to the structures of realist fiction. While rooted in an indebtedness to Jameson, the theoretical advances of the work are by no means narrowly construed; on the contrary, Goodlad's overarching argument is ambitious in its critical aim, calling for a critical practice that integrates the materialism of historicism with an ethical critique that is attentive to the period's intellectual enquiries, and which grasps the intricacies of particular historical moments while accounting for the overarching structures of globalisation's *longue durée*. As Goodlad poses, 'can a single critical practice achieve all of these ends, combining ethical critique with a formally nuanced, structurally acute, and synchronic as well as diachronic theory of the Victorian geopolitical aesthetic?' (21). The answer to this question emerges with confident persuasion through an invigorating reading of the spatial and temporal dynamics of realism across the nineteenth century, presenting renewed understanding of realism's reach and provoking fresh critical debate around concepts of cosmopolitanism, liberalism, and imperial sovereignty.

<4>The readings through which this argument unfolds achieve an impressive plurality of dialogue across multiple discursive constructs, while not losing sight of the fictional texts at the centre of discussion. Taking a chronological move across the era, in the early chapters debates around imperial sovereignty come to the fore: first in a chapter devoted to the intellectual critique of liberalism and imperialism in the works of mid-nineteenth century writers; and then in discussion of the narratives of Anthony Trollope and Wilkie Collins, fictions that operate as 'an enlightening geopolitical aesthetic' in the way that they create "memorable formal experiments that do not simply reproduce or reify material realities but, rather, capture their dynamics across time and space' (66). In a chapter on Trollope's writing, an argument about the dialogue across spatial realities emerges fluently in a discussion that identifies an asymmetrical play between a rooted Englishness in novels such as *The Warden* (1855), as contrasted with the globality of his travel writings on the West Indies, America, Australia and South Africa. This 'two-part foreign policy' (67), as Goodlad terms it, not only demonstrates the ambivalent global engagement of a nation without a coherent centre, but also helps us understand the aesthetics of Trollope's work as enacting the structures and ethical concerns of cosmopolitanism. This develops in a further chapter on *The Eustace Diamonds* (1872-73), which attempts to redefine Trollope away from the popular idea of his works as formally unimaginative and instead posits that he offers a 'sociological realism' that engages deeply in debates over governance and liberal imperialism.

<5>These arguments provide a sound groundwork for Wilkie Collins's fiction in which the temporal dynamics of the geopolitical aesthetic come more strongly to the fore in readings of *Armada* (1864-66) and *The Moonstone* (1868). While Collins's work is readily considered as both more transnationally engaged and formally innovative than Trollope's, the discussion here is nonetheless illuminating in its contribution, first on the transatlantic dynamics of *Armada* as constructing an 'archaeological aesthetic' (114) rooted in engagements with slavery, race, and the space of the Atlantic, and then in the suggestion of a phenomenological approach to questions of imperial sovereignty in *The Moonstone*. Both, Goodlad suggests, 'negotiate a crisis of experience often associated with modernism' (111), offering an intriguing extension to arguments about the modernist anticipations of sensation fiction's engagement with the shock of the new.

<6>In the latter chapters attention shifts to reading the emergence of capitalist globalisation in confluence with literary handlings of gender and sexuality. In a reading of George Eliot Goodlad approaches *Romola* (1862-63) via *Madame Bovary* (1856) to argue for 'an expression of an *adulterous geopolitical aesthetic*' (164) that centralises the relationship between adultery, aesthetic form, and the frameworks of transnational connections. Through this she posits a more fluid connection between French and British literary aesthetics at this moment in the century than is typically understood, a reading that usefully that builds upon and extends recent positionings of Eliot as a European novelist and that is suggestive in the avenues it opens up for considering the sexual politics of her works anew. The engagement with sexuality develops further through a reading of E. M. Forster's 'queer internationalism', exploring the twin legacies of the attraction of the transnational and of queer desire as intersecting forces which create a geopolitical aesthetic that is powerfully embodied in Forster's works. Posited as a powerful manifestation of the Edwardian era's move into a new engagement with liberal ethics, it is here that the overarching structure of Goodlad's work comes into view, neatly arcing from the earlier chapters' consideration of liberalism in the mid-nineteenth century, as well as thoroughly integrating ethical critique into the material structures of globalization.

<7>The diachronic ambition of the book to detail capitalism's *longue durée* culminates in a final chapter on the TV series *Mad Men* (2007-15), neatly elucidating connections between the globalised contexts of the nineteenth century and the present day via the 1960s America portrayed in the series. Readings that attempt to connect the aesthetic form of contemporary TV serials with the serialised publication of nineteenth century realist fiction have often suffered from a lack of nuanced engagement with either form, but the undertaking here is more successful for enriching its handling of seriality with a reading of the TV show's central character Don Draper in the tradition of the marginalised Jew. Read via Jewish characters from Eliot and Trollope, Draper is positioned as a figure who assimilates the impacts of capitalist globalisation, and who becomes the cornerstone of the geopolitical aesthetic extending into the present moment. Such a reading is astute in its critical observations on the series, and while perhaps less indicative about the contemporary context than it might be, forms the basis for a final discussion on the present critical moment and 'the way we historicize now' (268). In

this, Goodlad opens up a timely dialogue about the role and construct of critical practice within literary studies and its relationship to historical practice, as well as the state of the field of Victorian studies more broadly. It is refreshing that this emerges from an embeddedness within and commitment to literary form as a mode of understanding wider geo-historical forces, and one that moves the perception of literary fiction as merely representing historical contexts but as also integrating geo-historical forces within the formal aesthetic structures of literature. The implications and critical insights extend further than the literary field, however, posing an invitation to reflect upon deeper disciplinary debates around the methods and role of Victorian studies. Goodlad's call for a 'critical enterprise which strives to illuminate the concrete conditions from which our aspirations spring' (293) is compelling and ultimately persuasive, offering means to think about the way in which we do Victorian studies now, and in which the meanings of the past can extend productively into the future.