The Routledge Concise History of Nineteenth-Century Literature, by Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small; pp. vi + 275. London and New York: Routledge, 2011, £65.00, £15.99 paper, $110.00, $28.95 paper.

The Routledge Concise History of Nineteenth-Century Literature turns out to be more distinctive and venturesome than its bland title suggests. Given its "useful, student-friendly features such as explanatory text boxes, chapter summaries, a detailed glossary and suggestions for further reading," as the jacket puts it, one might expect a narrative or thematic history of a fairly conventional kind. Instead, the volume offers extensive meta-historical reflection on the methodological challenges of literary history. In the words of the introduction, "readers of this volume will be given neither *the* history of nineteenth-century literature, nor *a* history," but rather "different sorts of narrative of

the period," with attention to "the theoretical assumptions which underpin the narratives" (9). The upshot is a stimulating experiment in literary historiography, which provokes lively reflection on that enterprise in the midst of its recent renaissance (largely driven by publishers pursuing a lucrative student market). It seems less likely to address the needs of students looking for a (let alone *the*) history of nineteenth-century literature.

In their introduction, "What is Nineteenth-Century Literature?" Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small nicely capture the challenges of that question: the problems of boundaries, of the nature of the phenomena under scrutiny, and of the forms of explanation a history might provide. Left unaddressed, however, is the glaring parochialism of the question, which here as throughout the volume assumes that nineteenth-century literature is self-evidently that of the British Isles. To be fair, this seems less an inadvertence than an unacknowledged byproduct of the project's framing: taking on the entire century obviates the more familiar, more specific appeal to Romantic and Victorian, while any national label (British? English?) might well prompt robust debate on the theoretical assumptions underpinning it. But the lacuna bears addressing, as one glimpse of a potential abyss of metacritical reflection. Which premises does one choose to interrogate, which to leave unexamined?

The volume is organized more like a handbook or companion than a conventional history, and as the authors promise, it is markedly disjunctive. The first chapter, "The Contexts of Nineteenth-Century Literature," provides a deftly woven overview of economics, technology, intellectual and political life, and print culture, organized around the contrasting social orders portrayed in *Middlemarch* (1871–72) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), respectively. Curiously, however, nearly half the chapter is given over to "Nineteenth-Century Literary Genres" and "Themes in Nineteenth-Century Literature"—which hardly seem literary "contexts" of the same order as "technology." Genre, moreover, figures centrally in the subsequent chapter, "Form, Style and Genre in Nineteenth-Century Literature," which returns to methodological questions. Asking "how and why histories of style were written in the first place" (56), the authors suggestively elicit conflicting understandings of formal innovation in late-Victorian poetry derived from the competing vantages of modernist retrospect and early-Victorian prospect. Such understandings have been complicated further, they note, by the recovery of neglected achievements—particularly as that recovery tends to emphasize description of styles and genres rather than explanation of relationships between them. Their overview of fiction is largely organized by twentieth-century debates over the nature of realism, a concept they understand as authorizing "value judgments" that create a more manageable literary field or a "route-map" through the field—albeit one that, as with poetry, must accommodate a variety of eccentric achievements (15).

The historian's challenges are thrown into especially stark relief by what Guy and Small take to be a powerfully totalizing aim in literary history. For historians of nineteenth-century poetry, they urge, the task of recovery and expansion of the canon is less pressing than the effort "to account for the *totality* of nineteenth-century poetic production." On this view, the proliferation of multiple narratives "not easily compatible with each other" is a problem: "is Yeats an Irish, Decadent, or symbolist poet?" (79). I would take this to be a narrowly rhetorical question—surely W. B. Yeats is all of these things?—were it not that the emphasis on "totality" (echoed elsewhere in pressures to

"assimilate" works to a larger narrative [74]) seems to reinstate the pursuit of a curiously unambiguous taxonomy. But any sort of master narrative is clearly surrendered in the subsequent chapter, "Nineteenth-Century Literary Movements," the most eccentric in the volume. The authors can find only four, beginning with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. That clearly has standing as a movement, but the remaining three, "Aestheticism," "Symbolism," and "Decadence," are notoriously difficult to demarcate; indeed, Small and Guy end up folding the last two into a single section, where they note the challenges of distinguishing the two allegiances (if they are that). As one possible history of nineteenth-century literature this is egregiously partial, and it could readily have been absorbed into "Form, Style and Genre." The chapter does, however, occasion the volume's most sustained treatment of any single author, roughly three pages devoted to Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

"Nineteenth-Century Literature and History," perhaps the most rewarding chapter, foregrounds a sustained preoccupation of the volume, the power of historical contextualization to transform literary meaning and significance, an effect that Guy and Small examine in three case studies: "Romanticism," the "Social-Problem Novel," and "Society Comedy." The power of context is further developed in the subsequent chapter, "Nineteenth-Century Literature and the Politics of Sex and Nationalism." These are of course further aspects of historical context, but Guy and Small obscure the continuity by treating them as "two other broad areas of theoretical enquiry" in order to introduce a helpful survey of critical developments in feminism, queer theory, and postcolonial critique (170). The seventh and final chapter more explicitly returns to the force of context by sketching a history of nineteenth-century literature focused on "the Social Production of Texts," which includes not only the economics of publishing and the literary marketplace but also editorial theory.

For advanced students and scholars pondering the challenges of writing nineteenth-century literary history, this iconoclastic approach offers a wealth of critical provocation and distills a good deal of erudition from two distinguished scholars. (There are the inescapable slips: the New Poor Law was 1834, not 1843 [18]; Thomas Macaulay's *Historical Essays* were collected in the 1850s, not 1828 [19]; it was the "Conclusion," not the "Preface" to Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* (1873), that first appeared in a review of William Morris's poetry [128]; Mary Augusta Ward was the niece, not the granddaughter, of Matthew Arnold [177]; *Wuthering Heights* (1847) appeared over "Ellis" and not "Acton" Bell [220].) But the multiple narratives and case studies are necessarily disjunctive and glancing in their address, and undergraduates looking for a fuller sense of nineteenth-century literature (and uncertain of the meaning of "neologism" [69]) are liable to be lost in a shower of details that presumes familiarity with a very wide range of literature. At its most trying, the effect is akin to a Borgesian encyclopedia, in which (for example) we learn of *Dombey and Son* (1846–48) only that it "has as a central character the head of a shipping line" (14), and, much later, that it depicts the impact of the railway. There is no hint of its significance within Charles Dickens's career or among Victorian novels, or even its date. Indeed, the only writer whose career receives more than a few sentences of sustained treatment is Rossetti, who commands far more attention than William Wordsworth and Alfred Tennyson combined. We are given a helpful overview of the peculiar challenges of editing Thomas Hardy's novels, but among them only *Jude the Obscure* (1895) and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) receive more than a single passing mention.

As a response to the task of producing a history of nineteenth-century literature in little more than two hundred pages, this is an imaginative and resourceful work. But the students it serves must be working at a fairly advanced level, and thus better able to appreciate the exorbitance of the challenge that Guy and Small have undertaken.

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