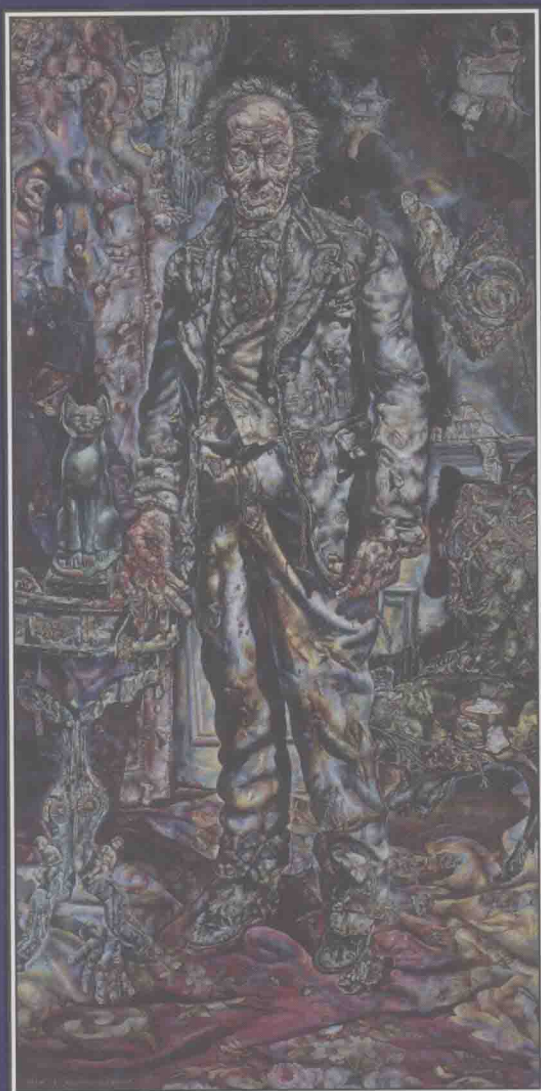


Victorian Vulgarities

Taste in Verbal and Visual Culture

Edited by

SUSAN DAVID BERNSTEIN and ELSIE B. MICHIE



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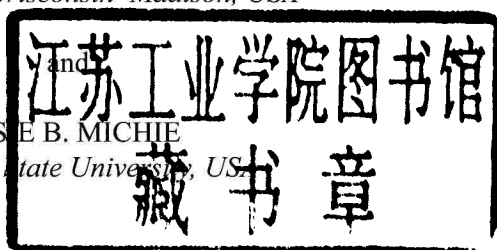
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Victorian Vulgarities grew out of three conference sessions on the topic organized by Elsie B. Michie, the first at the Narrative Conference at Rice University in 2001, the second at the MLA in New Orleans in 2001, and the third at the first NAVSA (North American Victorian Studies Association) Conference at Indiana University in 2003. The enthusiastic response of the audiences at those sessions convinced Susan David Bernstein that vulgarity was a topic worthy of an anthology of essays. It is due to her perseverance that the current volume was completed. Both editors are grateful to the panelists from those early sessions – Beth Newman, Ellen Rosenman, and Ron Thomas – who faithfully continued their support of this project by not publishing their vulgarity essays elsewhere. Beyond these initial contributors, we have been extremely fortunate to work with a wonderful group of scholars who were excited by thinking about vulgarity in a variety of different contexts and who have received our editorial suggestions graciously and judiciously. We are particularly grateful to John Kucich, who read the entire manuscript in its completed form and responded to it with thoroughness, acumen, and critical honesty. For efficient and sharp-eyed assistance on preparing the manuscript for submission, we thank Rebecca Soares. We also appreciate our anonymous reader whose positive response to both the topic as a whole and to individual essays within the volume was enormously encouraging. And finally our gratitude to Ann Donahue, Ashgate's supreme acquisitions editor, who has facilitated into print so many excellent collections on Victorian studies; we are pleased to be in this cohort.

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Introduction

Varieties of Vulgarity

Elsie B. Michie and Susan David Bernstein

Let not any attempt be made at a definition of vulgarity. I never saw a successful one . . . We all know the thing when we see it. And some of us unhappily see a good deal of it.

—A.K.H. Boyd, “Of Vulgarity in Opinion” (1877)

Can we, from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, understand vulgarity, “the thing” Victorians knew when they saw it? Was it a natural drive that needed to be covered over, repressed, or subdued by refined behavior? Or was the desire to hide such impulses itself a sign of the vulgar pretension that Ruskin identified as over-scrupulousness? Was vulgarity a presence or an absence? Was it an excess or a deficiency? Did it mark, as many nineteenth-century essays suggest, egoism and upstart social tendencies? Or was it true that “all vulgarity simply results from a want of self-confidence” (Helps 146)? Such questions recurred insistently over the course of the nineteenth century. William Morris’s 1896 avowal that he became a socialist because of “the eyeless vulgarity which has destroyed art, the one solace of labour” (13) echoes the social critiques of earlier aesthetic critics like Hazlitt, Ruskin, and Arnold as well as the discussions of vulgarity that circulated in diverse nineteenth-century venues including dictionaries, conduct books, grammars, fiction, reviews of art, and newspaper columns. The essays in *Victorian Vulgarity: Taste in Verbal and Visual Culture* explore an array of texts in order to map out some of the myriad meanings vulgarity assumed as it came to prominence as a term of critical opprobrium. Our contributors chart the twists and turns of Victorian prose as it attempted both to acknowledge and suppress, to see and remain blind to, the vulgarity writers feared was inextricably interwoven into the roots of nineteenth-century English culture.

When Gilbert Osmond tells Caspar Goodwood in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), “I don’t find vulgarity, at all, before the present century. You see a faint menace of it here and there in the last, but today the air has grown so dense that delicate things are literally not recognized” (308), he evokes vulgarity as a fog that thickened over the course of the century until its ubiquity blanketed the distinctions that had previously marked a variety of social differences. The history of the word “vulgarity” reflects a similar intensification in its usage. From the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries it was typically employed as a descriptor; “vulgar” simply meant “the common or usual language of a country; the vernacular” and “persons belonging to the ordinary or common class in the community” (“vulgar,” *n.* 1.

Online OED). This definition began to acquire an emotional charge from the mid-seventeenth century onwards, when “vulgar” took on the pejorative slant of “having a common and offensively mean character, coarsely commonplace; lacking in refinement or good taste; uncultured; ill bred” (“vulgar,” *a. 13. Online OED*). This usage became particularly notable in the liberal culture of the nineteenth century, as “the vulgarized results of reform bills and education” (Dowling 92) opened doors to the working classes and the rising commercial middle classes, as well as to Dissenters and Catholics, to Jews, and to women. “Vulgarity” first indicated the possession of wealth or “material things” in the early nineteenth century, with the 1804 use of “vulgarian” as “a vulgar person; frequently, a well-to-do or rich person of vulgar manners” (“vulgarian,” *n. 2. Online OED*).

As this genealogy of definitions suggests, “vulgarity” and its cognates were “strong, difficult, and persuasive words in everyday usage” (Williams 14), whose meanings shifted dramatically over time. This is Raymond Williams’s description of what he calls keywords, “significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretations; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought. Certain uses bound together certain ways of seeing culture and society . . . Certain other uses seemed . . . to open up issues and problems” (15). As a derogatory term, “vulgarity” can bind social groups and ideas together as powerfully as positive terms like “art” and “culture.” It can elicit what Sianne Ngai characterizes as ugly feelings, the “dysphoric affects [that] often seem to be the psychic fuel on which capitalist society runs” (3). Social interactions can “be organized by trajectories of repulsion rather than attraction, by phobic strivings ‘away from’ rather than philic strivings ‘toward’” (Ngai 11). The notion of vulgarity links individuals by allowing certain forms of behavior – whether associated with class, religion, race, gender, or occupation – to be excluded. It tells the person deemed “vulgar” that he or she is not part of the group, not, in the famous words of *Lord Jim* (1900), “one of us.” Clearly, “vulgarity” had become so powerful by the mid-Victorian period that as the narrator exclaims in *The Prime Minister* (1876), “There was no word in the language so hard to bear as that” (I. 177). Yet in “A Dialogue on Vulgarity” (1896), Theodosia Chapman offers a different observation: “I have often pondered upon the stigma of vulgarity. No one likes it – everyone who suspects that he or she lies under it is anxious to escape it – or at least that his children should. But where is its sting?” (625). Alluding to the line from Corinthians, “O death where is thy sting?” this passage makes evident that “vulgarity” by the century’s end was beginning to lose its bite.

Nonetheless, Meredith Townsend’s condemnation of Trollope’s novel for depicting vulgarity “of the pushing, perspiring kind” (Smalley 421–2) reveals how fully, by 1876, vulgarity had become identified with social mobility and the possession of wealth. For Victorians, vulgarity signified aggressive social aspirations behind material accumulation. As Chapman explains, “[t]here is more pushing and struggling for money and ‘position’ in the middle class than elsewhere in English society; and so that ill product of modern life, vulgarity, or self-assertion in things social tends more and more to oust whatever lingers of the

old ideal” (632). In the same year that saw the publication of Trollope’s novel, Albany De Fonblanque defined vulgarity for *Temple Bar* through anecdotes of two women seeking to force their way into public spaces of rank: a greengrocer’s wife expecting free tickets for a box at the theater in exchange for advertising performances in her shop, and a nouveau riche lady wishing to enter an enclosure where the upper classes watch the arrival of a foreign dignitary. Though the poorer woman succeeded where the richer failed, the latter was deemed more vulgar than her lower-class counterpart: “According to the common law of manners, all pushing – physical or other is vulgar. Pushing for an invitation to Lady Roquet’s garden party is as vulgar as pushing for a place in an Islington ‘bus” (541). Here the act of intrusiveness constitutes vulgarity rather than the social position of the intruder. This anecdote suggests that vulgarity was increasingly invested not in particular individuals or behaviors but in the improper relation between groups of persons. As Ruskin argued, “The deepest stain of vulgarity” derives from social interactions committed “without understanding the impression which is really produced, nor the relation of importance between oneself and others” (270).

Vulgarity became less a matter of *what* one said or did than *how* one did it and in what context. This switch in emphasis meant that it was associated less with the possession of specific objects, such as garish furnishings and ostentatious dress, than with the way one thought about those objects. Early in the century Friedrich Schiller insisted that “the vulgar is everything which does not speak to the mind, and which raises merely a sensuous interest” (170), thereby associating it with the physical or material as opposed to the mental or intellectual. But by 1875, Sir Arthur Helps could insist that even thinking is vulgar: “[t]here is, I say, a vulgarity of mind which takes a vulgar view of everything presented to it” (149). Once employed to define language use and class position, “vulgarity” ballooned over the course of the century, taking on widening social implications as it began to be associated with behavior and the possession of wealth, with different religions and races, with sexuality, with modern ideas of gender, with objects on display in homes, with clothing, with ways of thinking and feeling. In other words, vulgarity became a matter of style, taste, and comportment, a form of behavior whose definition shifted with fluctuating social boundaries and with the changing and unspoken rules of its obverse, refinement. As vulgarity became more an abstract quality than a tangible item, its meanings and usages multiplied. The essays collected in *Victorian Vulgarity* track the diverse ramifications of vulgarity in four arenas where the term was most often invoked or inferred: in relation to language, to changing social spaces, to the emerging middle classes, and to visual art.

Section I: Vulgar Words

Spoken language is the leading focus in nineteenth-century definitions and discussions of vulgarity, evident in the opening of an 1864 *Punch* satire: “It is a Vulgar Error, a very Vulgar Error, to omit or introduce improperly the letter

H in conversation" ("Vulgar Errors" 201). When the 1876 *Temple Bar* essay "Vulgarity" provides a list of behaviors that constitute *vulgaritas in re*, the leading example is "things in our speech" (De Fonblanque 539). Ruskin likewise observes that "vulgarity is indicated by the coarseness of language" (270). The first set of essays in *Victorian Vulgarity* addresses sociolectal aspects of British English, or language behavior suggesting the social background of its users. Examining fiction, lexicons, conduct books, and sociological investigations of urban poverty, these contributions capture the linguistic vitality and notoriety of Victorian vulgarity. Beth Newman's "The Vulgarity of Elegance: Social Mobility, Middle-Class Diction, and the Victorian Novel" sets the stage for the essays that follow by identifying the nineteenth century with the rise of social anxiety about proper language use. Charting the uneasiness in etiquette manuals and philological writings, Newman investigates four novels: George Meredith's *Beauchamp's Career*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, and George Gissing's *New Grub Street*, in which particular types of language are deemed vulgar. Exploring the complex criteria around language usage that shaped assumptions about social position, Newman indicates that vulgarity became linked to excessive euphemism and Latinate diction. Given this diction's association with the language of commerce and merchandising, Newman shows how the standards of taste we continue to enforce in student writing were established in the nineteenth century as the middle class sought to assert its own refinement. Of particular importance is a double valence in the term 'vulgar' that marks, in Newman's words, "the efforts of the upwardly mobile to distinguish themselves" from those just beneath them, or "the counter-reactions of those above them who sought in turn to distinguish themselves from those perceived as social climbers or *arrivistes*" (18–19).

The next two essays in this section consider the mixed attraction and repulsion middle-class characters and writers feel toward those below them in the social hierarchy. Describing Charles Dickens as the consummate Victorian *arriviste*, James Buzard locates the extraordinary energy of *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) in the encounters between its virtuous middle-class hero and a series of lower-class figures that exemplify the Rabelaisian pleasures of the mob through: unselfconscious language use, inordinate bodily appetite, and the rootlessness of the vagabond. In Dickens's novel, vulgarity, as embodied in the figures of Mr. Jingle, the Wellers, and Bob Sawyer, concomitantly threatens and promises to blur the boundaries that separate middle-class principle from its lower-class obverse. "Vulgarity and Vitality: On Making a Spectacle of Oneself in *Pickwick*" explores the novel's gradual shift from presenting "vulgarity in its adversarial guise" to conceiving "a spectacle far more radical in its implications: the vulgar man as secret sharer" (45). *Pickwick* obtains the apparent happiness of its middle-class ending in the context of its hero's strong identification with a character whose vulgarity that bourgeois lifestyle seems to disavow. The novel derives the pleasurable play with language that Stephen Marcus long ago noted as characteristic of it from *Pickwick's* encounters with Jingle, whom Buzard reads as an incarnation of the

vulgar authorial energies Dickens himself harnessed to write his first full-length novel.

Ellen Bayuk Rosenman's essay envisions Victorian journalist Thomas Mayhew as this "secret sharer" of working-class vulgarity. In "Rudeness, Slang, and Obscenity: Working-Class Politics in *London Labour and the London Poor*," Rosenman argues that Mayhew's subjects wield bad manners and vulgar language, including obscene speech and dialect, as "an oblique protest against the would-be hegemony of bourgeois standards and a defense of their own territories, customs, and traditions" (55). Rosenman theorizes these challenges through Mary Louise Pratt's concept of a "contact zone" in which working-class informants grapple with their middle-class interlocutor. Arguing that Mayhew's subjects at times appear to be more aware of the complex social dynamics of the interview process than Mayhew himself, Rosenman notes that these poor Londoners use vulgar speech in order to assert themselves outrageously in the presence of the social investigator who seeks to confine them through the category of vulgarity. Rosenman's interest in the power of slang resonates with Buzard's insistence that the energy of Jingle's language also fuels Dickens's linguistic exuberance. Where Newman demonstrates how euphemisms and pedantic diction become indices of inferior social status, Rosenman and Buzard show how street lingo is transformed into literary language.

Section II: Common Places

If vulgarity can "reveal secret affinities" (Hazlitt 157), it also marks social exclusions. The four essays in the next section of *Victorian Vulgarity* examine the cultural and emotional backlash that can occur when liberal reforms widen access to public spaces and institutions. Elsie B. Michie's "Vulgar Christianity" focuses on effects of the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts (1828), legislation that allowed Dissenters to hold political office without requiring them to take communion. This act was quickly followed by Catholic Emancipation (1829) and the first Reform Bill (1832). Michie understands the "vulgar" consequences of this reform in two registers. As part of the nineteenth-century trend of a tolerant democracy, this repeal opened political institutions to a wide range of Protestant practices. At the same time, essays and fiction in the wake of this reform complain that Christianity in England becomes more materialistic, visibly linked to political advancement. Such grievances are articulated with particular clarity in essays by the Reverend Edward Irving and Thomas Carlyle, texts echoed, Michie argues, in Frances Trollope's 1837 novel *The Vicar of Wrexhill*. Describing the incursions of an Evangelical or Low Church vicar into a traditional English village, that novel registers the social panic felt in the wake of these radical reforms. "Vulgar Christianity" charts the complex emotional meanings that clustered around the early cultural history of Victorian vulgarity, a term used imaginatively to limit

the impact of non-Anglican Protestants in the social and political process of democratizing religion.

Turning to the other end of the century, the balance of essays in this division of the volume demonstrates that greater access to civil liberties including education, professions, and associated institutions occasioned an enhanced sensitivity to vulgarity and its manifestations. In "Culture, Breeding, and Vulgarity: George Gissing and the Lower Middle Class," Rosemary Jann reads Gissing's vexed views on higher education in light of Ruskin's attempts to redefine the concept of the gentleman in his essay "Of Vulgarity." Wrenching "gentlemanliness" from its traditional connection with aristocratic heritage and redefining it instead as a matter of behavior and values, Ruskin nevertheless returns to biological readings of the gentleman in his references to bloodlines and breeding. The contradictions of Ruskin's argument anticipate the late nineteenth-century rift between the liberal dream of upward mobility for a wider range of individuals and the new science of eugenics that found some inherently more capable of advancement than others. Jann argues that Gissing and his characters are caught up in this dilemma. In representing the so-called vulgarity of the working classes, Gissing suggests that refinement could only be achieved with leisure and economic security despite the democratizing promise of formal education. Yet, in depicting the higher classes, Gissing uses a biological conception of "breeding" to essentialize the refinement of those who enjoy material advantages and superior education of their class. The crosscurrents that eddy through Gissing's narratives of upward mobility reflect tendencies that, as Jann argues, operate "more widely in late Victorian discourse to justify and to protect elite cultural and social power against an insurgent lower middle class seeking to use educational credentials to advance its own claims to status" (85).

Dealing with the same era as Jann's essay, Susan David Bernstein's "Too Common Readers at the British Museum" explores constructions of the liberal public space of the national reading room in London as middle-class women pursued university studies and writing careers in journalism and literature. Evident in the spate of magazine articles complaining about the vulgar habits of common readers in the British Museum, male scholars perceived themselves in the minority as "new" women increasingly entered the public sphere. Women readers, hack writers, and paid journalists, some of them social activists and political radicals, were transforming the rarified domed space of the British Museum Reading Room, a locale which marked a tension between the vulgar populace and traditionally elite male readers affiliated with Oxbridge dons. Using Foucault's theory of modern space and heterotopia along with the notion of spatial liberalism, Bernstein considers this Bloomsbury circular room as an instance where intellectual refinement and embodied vulgarity collide. Canvassing a number of literary sources, Bernstein investigates Amy Levy's short fiction, "The Recent Telepathic Occurrence at the British Museum" published in Oscar Wilde's magazine *The Woman's World*, and analyzes three novels about late-nineteenth century London journalism: Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891), *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894) by Ella Hepworth

Dixon, and *A Writer of Books* (1898) by George Paston. Bernstein argues that, while Gissing construes the material and intellectual conditions of hack writing as irremediably vulgar, Dixon and Paston complicate this stigma tied to popular print culture by showing that it provided a venue in which women could earn a living by writing not in a Woolfian “room of one’s own,” but rather in and about urban public spaces.

Meri-Jane Rochelson’s essay, “‘A Religion of Pots and Pans’: Jewish Materialism and Spiritual Materiality in Israel Zangwill’s *Children of the Ghetto*,” centers on another marginalized social group whose increased participation in English political life in the latter half of the nineteenth century also provoked accusations of vulgarity. Although the affiliation of Jewishness with vulgarity was a well-established trope in English literature and culture before mid-century, this association intensified in the 1860s and 1870s in novels by Dickens, Eliot, and Trollope, and then in the 1880s in novels by Anglo-Jewish writers Julia Frankau and Amy Levy. Rochelson’s essay contends that Zangwill radically reorients the discourse of Jewish vulgarity with his surprising shift from the ostentatious materialism of West End Jews to religious practice itself, most notably by East End Jewish immigrants. Where Zangwill’s characters in *Children of the Ghetto* (1892) debate Judaism as “the spiritualization of the material” and the “materialization of the spiritual” (Zangwill 343–4), Rochelson shows how Zangwill effectively recasts Jewish vulgarity by framing it through daily religious observances that certify a vital link between body and spirit. Rather than a sign of uncouth, excessive embodiment, Jewish materialism becomes part of dedicated religious engagement. Zangwill’s authentically spiritual characters, the East End immigrant Jews, are also the most “vulgar,” the most absorbed in everyday rituals of eating and dressing, and in scraping money together to support these customs. While Michie investigates the uses of vulgarity as a reaction to the democratization of Christianity at the start of the Victorian era, Rochelson analyzes the multiple meanings of Jewish vulgarity at the century’s end.

Section III: Vulgar Middles

The third section of *Victorian Vulgarly* shifts from public institutions and spaces to the family and home, as mid-century novelists deploy vulgarity to indicate distinctions within the broadening social category of middle-classness. In an article published in England in 1841, Friedrich Schiller cautioned that “we must distinguish the Mean in sentiment from the Mean in rank and condition” (173). It is in novels that we find the fullest exploration of the affective valences of vulgarity associated with the idea of sentiment. As the essays in this section demonstrate by exploring the works of Anthony Trollope and George Eliot, fiction is particularly interested in evoking the disgust that was inherent in the term vulgarity, or the desire to turn up one’s nose in distaste. In “Gross Vulgarly and the Domestic Ideal: Anthony Trollope’s *The Small House at Allington*,” Carolyn Dever dissects the