

"It is through its very incompleteness that Art becomes complete in beauty"

—Oscar Wilde

CFP: NVSA 2018
Unfinished Victorians
University of Pennsylvania
April 13-15, 2018

Featuring keynote panelists
Jonathan Grossman (UCLA)
Meredith Martin (Princeton)
Andrew Miller (Johns Hopkins)



The Northeast Victorian Studies Association calls for papers for its annual conference; the topic this year is *Unfinished Victorians*.

Jürgen Habermas famously claimed that modernity, despite its failings and contradictions, was an "unfinished project" in which we should still be optimistically engaged. This conference will consider ways in which we can also consider the Victorian period and its aesthetic products *unfinished*. What Victorian projects are we Victorians still advancing, or working against? And how did the Victorians see themselves, their society, and their creative works as unfinished?

Many of the thinkers and ideas we associate with the Victorian era were concerned with unfinished processes and where they might be headed: Darwin's evolutionary thought, Marx's historicism and related utopian and dystopian imaginings. We find this theme as well in the forms of the period. The seeming totality of the realist novel and the completion implied by acculturation and development, for instance, are accompanied by awareness of elements that art cannot capture.

The Victorian interest in acculturation – a process that develops and completes us – leads to the ideal of a finished, polished, subject, as opposed to an "unfinished" one. In what ways were Victorians themselves *unfinished*: coarse, tactless, or incomplete? How did Victorian notions of maturation draw from notions of an unfinished individual or society: still in process, still developing? These ideas of cultural finish inspired Victorian thought about the fine arts, and they continue to have traction today. How might a focus on the "unfinished" offer new insight on the aesthetic categories that we inherit from the nineteenth century?

Examining the "unfinished" encourages us to examine its opposites: the finished and the teleological. What would count as finishing or fruition for the Victorians? The other side of the unfinished might be the fulfillment of ideals, ambitions, or self-definitions. Which Victorians, if any, felt they had achieved this? Were any social processes truly imagined as completed or 'done'? Can they be?

Perhaps it is our expectation of completeness in artistic forms – finished paintings, rhyming stanzas, concluded novels – that has made it so difficult for us to interpret works of art, literature, or culture that nineteenth-century creators left uncompleted? Must we use methods distinct from those we use for "finished" texts?

*What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me*

—Robert Browning, "Rabbi Ben Ezra"

What reasons exist for a work being left unfinished? Do these reasons alter our interpretive conclusions and/or approaches? Should they?

As with any field delimited by time, geography, and focus, we should also consider the ways in which our work, as Victorianists, remains unfinished. Why do we stop when we do? What does our field look like when we expand our scrutiny into the early decades of the twentieth century, to literatures and cultural products outside Britain, or into other languages? And how do our generalizations about the forms and ideas of the period change when we look at more than a small fraction of the texts from the period – a project enabled and encouraged by digital methods? Is this a priority in Victorian Studies? Should it be?

Potential topics might include, but are in no way limited to, the following:

Unfinished Texts

The Mystery of Edwin Drood

Wives and Daughters

Denis Duval

Autobiographical fragments (Dickens, Darwin)

Augusta Webster, *Mother and Daughter*

Henry Mayhew's work

Altered and alternate endings of novels: *Great Expectations*, *His Natural Life*, etc.

Rewritings/reimaginings/adaptations of Victorian texts

Wide Sargasso Sea

The D Case and other "solutions" to *Drood*

Fan fiction and the Neo-Victorian

Why do certain works invite reimagining (e.g. Sherlock Holmes)?

Alternatives to the Unfinished

Victorian self-help books about procrastination
Victorian perfectionism and doctrines of human perfectibility

The sense of an ending in evolutionary texts

Completers and collectors

Full development or maturation

The Victorian polymath

Musical resolutions



Unfinished or Unfinishing Forms

Repetitive or recursive forms

Sonnet cycles; sonnet sequences

Recurring themes and tropes: e.g. Christmas in *In Memoriam A.H.H.*

One-sidedness of first-person forms (fictional autobiography, memoir, sonnet sequence, monodrama, dramatic monologue) in contrast to the "omniscient"

Theorizations of the fragment (as compared to the Romantic fragment)

The trope of "unfinishedness" or "the fragmentary" within works

Blurred lines, blank spaces, rough edges

Enjambments

Character as finished yet incomplete (Catherine Gallagher's "Rise of Fictionality")

Unpublished Texts and Artworks

Eliot's translation of Spinoza's *Ethics*

The Professor

Casaubon's unfinished work

Representations of the Unfinished

Visual representations of the unfinished
Representations of timelessness, paralysis, or stasis
Returns to a lost time
Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*

Critical Methodology and the Unfinished

What Victorian frameworks do we retain?
Questions of presentism and the contemporary
How do realist texts challenge their own totalizing impulses?
How much emphasis do we place on narrative conclusion?

The Uncultured

Perception of other cultures as uncouth
Critiques of coarse writing (e.g. in reviews of the Brontës)
Representations of the working class
The politics of taste
Cultural capital

Unfinished Business

Grudges and feuds
Interminable bureaucracy
Ghosts and hauntings
Spiritualism and mediums
Wills and intestate fortunes

Writer's Block and Procrastination

The Prelude
Mr. Dick's biography of King Charles I

The Canon as unfinished

Digital methods for completing our reading
Forgotten or ignored texts/artworks
Drafts
Archives

Proposals (no more than 500 words) by Oct. 15, 2017 (email submissions only, in Word format), submitted to: Jesse Rosenthal, Chair, NVSA Program Committee: jrosenthal@jhu.edu

Please note: all submissions to NVSA are evaluated anonymously. Successful proposals will stay within the 500-word limit and make a compelling case for the talk and its relation to the conference topic. Please do not send complete papers, and do not include your name on the proposal.

Please include your name, institution, email address, and proposal title in a cover letter.

Papers should take 15 minutes (20 minutes maximum) so as to provide ample time for discussion – a priority at NVSA events.

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Is it worth a tear, is it worth an hour,
To think of things that are well outworn?
Of fruitless husk and fugitive flower,
The dream foregone and the deed forborne?
—Swinburne, "The Triumph of Time"

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