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The Gospel of Work

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LAST MODIFIED: 25 SEPTEMBER 2018

DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780199799558-0145

Introduction

In 1843, Thomas Carlyle proclaimed a new “Gospel” for modern England: “Work, and therein have wellbeing.” Inspired by Carlyle’s vision, writers such as George Eliot, Joseph Conrad, Friedrich Engels, and others subsequently developed their own version of his spiritualized conception of work, reimagining the relationship between work, the self, and society. Indeed, the centrality of work is one of the primary characteristics of Victorian thought: as Walter Houghton remarks in an oft-quoted line, “after ‘God,’ the most popular word in Victorian England was ‘work.’” Certainly, the emphasis on work appeared across Victorian culture, appearing in Victorian painting, self-help manuals, and even board games. Yet Carlyle and the Victorians were also influenced by a longer tradition: the gradual investment of worldly professions with religious energy inherent in the idea of a secular “vocation.” The fundamentally philosophical nature of the “Gospel of Work,” and of the idea of a secular vocation more generally, appears in its basic form in Carlyle’s argument for it. When one sets to work, he contends, a sort of moral transformation occurs: agents forget the searching questions of religious skepticism and the distractions of incidental desires and remake or realize themselves. Moreover, a society of such workers would no longer be founded on the cash “nexus”; in other words, social relationships would no longer be determined by economic structures. In that sense, meaningful work is essential for the healthy person and the healthy society. But when taken seriously and applied broadly, this seemingly straightforward philosophical claim encountered a number of philosophical difficulties and ideological tensions. Most obviously, it was not clear whether the sort of industrial labor actually available to most people could have the effects Carlyle and others imagined. Correspondingly, to advocate for the importance of the Gospel of Work under industrialism began to seem politically suspect, especially after versions of the Gospel of Work served to justify imperialist expansion. Then, too, it gradually became apparent how thoroughly the Gospel of Work was interlaced with elaborate assumptions about gender. Finally, the vexed status of the productions of writers and artists pushed at perhaps the hardest question in the Gospel of Work: what, after all, is “work,” and how is it different from other human activities? This research has been supported by the Danish National Research Foundation, grant number DNRF127.

General Overviews

The most commonly cited and probably still the best survey of the Gospel of Work is Houghton 1957. For Houghton, the Victorian emphasis on work was a symptom of growing religious skepticism: one could avoid the despair that comes with questioning God by losing oneself in one’s work. Briggs 1990 is more narrowly focused on Samuel Smiles, but it connects Smiles’s analysis of self-help to the broader emphasis in the middle of the 19th century on success through work self-improvement. Mintz 1978 turns in its later chapters to an emphasis on George Eliot, but the opening of the book surveys the idea of a “vocation” and includes in particular an analysis of the way the idea of a vocation structured Victorian biography and autobiography—the story of one’s life is the story of the discovery of one’s work. Danon 1986 purports to be the first monograph devoted to work in the English novel: it is primarily interested in tracing what the author calls the “myth of vocation.” Bradshaw and Ozment 2000 is an anthology that brings together a number of primary sources regarding work in the Victorian era. Dawson 2005 is from a journal of adult education, but it has a brief, clear, and well-researched summary of the history of the idea of a “vocation.” Dupré and Gagnier 1996 is similarly brief, introducing the hard problem of defining “work” and surveying several definitions. Breton 2005 is perhaps the most extensive early-21st-century study devoted to the Gospel of Work, and continues the critique of its ideological function one finds in Danon’s book, arguing that the actual social conditions of Victorian labor give the lie to the philosophical virtues attributed to work. But see also Lesjak 2006, which uses a survey of Victorian literature to interrogate the distinction between work and leisure.

Bradshaw, David, and Susan Ozment, eds. *The Voice of Toil: Nineteenth-Century British Writings about Work.* **Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000.**

This anthology has multiple sections, the first of which contains many of the quintessential expressions of the Gospel of Work. The final two sections include essays that question the Victorian emphasis on work: "Work as Oppression" includes writings that question whether work is really a form of self-fulfillment, while "Separate Spheres of Work" brings together pieces that consider why the injunction to work is so different for men and women.

Breton, Rob. *Gospels and Grit: Work and Labour in Carlyle, Conrad, and Orwell.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005.

In readings of Thomas Carlyle, Joseph Conrad, and George Orwell, Breton argues that the context in which writers advocated the Gospel of Work undermines its philosophical credibility. When the only labor available is alienated factory labor, advocating that one work for work's own sake is not politically neutral.

Briggs, Asa. "Samuel Smiles and the Gospel of Work." In *Victorian People: A Reassessment of Persons and Themes, 1851–1867.* By Asa Briggs, 116–139. New York: Penguin, 1990.

First published in 1954, Briggs's book is—with Houghton 1957—part of the development of Victorian studies as an academic field. The chapter on Samuel Smiles is primarily interested in Smiles's relationship to politics and economics. Briggs argues that Smiles's emphasis on the Gospel of Work grows out of his dissatisfaction with attempts at social reform, as he came to think genuine improvement required individuals to develop themselves.

Danon, Ruth. *Work in the English Novel: The Myth of Vocation.* London: Croom Helm, 1986.

Danon discusses the rise of the idea of work as a vocation in *Robinson Crusoe* then suggests the same idea comes under critique in *Great Expectations*. *Jude the Obscure* shows the impossibility of integrating meaningful work with social acceptance, while at the same time stressing the importance of work to life.

Dawson, Jane. "A History of Vocation: Tracing a Keyword of Work, Meaning, and Moral Purpose." *Adult Education Quarterly* 55.3 (2005): 220–231.

The middle section of the article—"Historical Meanings of Vocation"—briefly traces the term from its early use in Catholic monasticism through the Protestant Reformation to its analysis in Marx and Weber.

Dupré, John, and Regenia Gagnier. "A Brief History of Work." *Journal of Economic Issues* 30.2 (1996): 553–559.

One of several essays Dupré and Gagnier wrote on the nature of work, this essay contrasts varying definitions of work, emphasizing their incompatibility—work as a commodity, for instance, contrasts sharply with the view of work as self-fulfillment.

Houghton, Walter. "Work." In *The Victorian Frame of Mind.* By Walter Houghton, 242–262. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957.

Houghton's treatment of the Gospel of Work occurs as part of his analysis of Victorian earnestness. His survey highlights many of the components of the Gospel of Work—its stress on self-denial, its assumption that work leads to happiness more reliably than idleness does—that later critics would emphasize. But his primary argument contends that the injunction to work was really a response to rising religious skepticism.

Lesjak, Carolyn. *Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

Early-21st-century entry in a substantial body of scholarship on the Victorian "industrial" or "social-problem" novel, admirably annotated in the Oxford Bibliographies in Victorian Literature article "Social-Problem Novel" by Bethan Carney. The text argues for the category of the "labor novel," of fictions interested in the distinction between labor and pleasure; if we in the early 21st century tend to think of pleasure as an inherently private activity while labor is inherently public, Lesjak argues that many Victorian novelists did not see things this way.

Mintz, Alan. *George Eliot and the Novel of Vocation.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.

Mintz draws on the biographical and autobiographical writings of Thomas Carlyle, Charles Darwin, John Henry Cardinal Newman, and John Stuart Mill to suggest a distinctively Victorian genre of autobiography: the story of a “vocation.” Mintz argues that these works demonstrate a sense that the life of the individual is structured around a calling. A person undergoes a search culminating in the discovery of his work and spends his life in the expression of that project.

Primary Sources

Past and Present—Carlyle 2005—is the classic expression of the Gospel of Work. On the basis of a contrast between an ancient monastery and a contemporaneous factory, Carlyle emphasizes the difference between those who work selflessly, with an eye toward their religious duties, and those who work selfishly, with an eye only for maximizing profit. This emphasis on selfless work took a horrifying and reactionary turn in Carlyle 1849, in which he defended slavery as beneficial for the enslaved person. Ruskin 1882 similarly distinguishes between those who work for money and those who work because a given task “ought to be done.” Samuel Smiles wrote to a more popular audience; his 1859 text *Self-Help* immediately sold thousands of copies and turned him into a Victorian celebrity. Smiles 1889 dwells on the habits of the great writers of the past, arguing that their work in other occupations did not distract them from their writing but in fact prepared them for it—business leading to the “union of energy and thoughtfulness.” Newman 1906 is more overtly religious, emphasizing the importance of recognizing that God has created each person with “a mission,” with “a work.” Although it was not published until the 20th century, Marx 1959 was written in 1844 and has been of significant interest to early-21st-century scholars. Here, Marx suggests that ideally work is a form of self-realization, as the worker sees himself in the product of his labor. However, capitalism has altered this relationship: since the worker no longer owns what he produces, he has been estranged from himself and from others. Morris 2009 represents the growing influence of the Marxist/socialist account of work in Victorian thought; the author distinguishes between “useful” work, which the worker undertakes out of his own sense of the value of the product and which affords the opportunities for rest and variety, and “useless” toil, which the growing regime of capital imposes on the vast majority of workers. Nightingale 2008 argues that social constraints prevent women from exercising their intellect and passion in meaningful work: women are prevented from undertaking any “great work” because they are expected to care for their children and their husbands.

Carlyle, Thomas. “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question.” *Fraser’s Magazine* 40 (February 1849).

The most infamous expression of Carlyle’s views, in which his insistence on the Gospel of Work led him to claim that forced labor and slavery are not necessarily evil. It elicited a famous response from John Stuart Mill and connected to mid-Victorian debates about the role of moral improvement in justifying British imperial expansion.

Carlyle, Thomas. *Past and Present.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Carlyle’s mammoth philosophical-political work first appeared in 1843. His attack on the “Gospel of Mammonism” combines ethical and political critiques: the motive of wealth is both a personal moral failure and an unhealthy base for society. Despite Carlyle’s generally conservative outlook, this social critique led Friedrich Engels to praise the book as, among the books published in 1843 for the education of society, “the only one worth reading.”

Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844.* Translated by Martin Mulligan. Moscow: Progress, 1959.

First written in 1844. First published in 1932. These manuscripts, first fully published in German in 1932 in Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: Historical-Critical Edition), were the rough draft of what Marx planned as a book. More philosophical than his later work in economics, they show how Marx’s conception of labor grows out of his reaction to his predecessors in German philosophy.

Morris, William. *Useful Work versus Useless Toil.* New York: Penguin, 2009.

Available online. First published in 1884, this book demonstrates the influence of Marxist thought on Victorian analyses of work. Morris is particularly interested in what capitalism has done to art and art objects: while workers used to add decorations to their products out of their own inclinations and whimsy, now they are compelled to do so. Decorations are thus no longer an expression of freedom, but an expression of the force of the market.

Newman, John Henry. "God's Will the End of Life." In Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations. By John Henry Newman, 104–123. New York: Longmans, Green, 1906.

Available online. This sermon, first published in 1849, opens with a surprising existentialist question. "Why," Newman imagines us asking, "am I here?" His answer is that we do not merely find ourselves here on Earth, with no better goal than pleasing ourselves, but are instead sent here with a specific mission by God.

Nightingale, Florence. "Cassandra." In Collected Works of Florence Nightingale. Vol. 11. Edited by Lynn McDonald, 547–592. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008.

Written in 1852, this essay/story was not published during Nightingale's lifetime but circulated privately among friends, including John Stuart Mill. Nightingale's polemic attacks the norms that prevent women from finding meaningful work, including the belief that it's acceptable and normal for a woman (but not for a man) to sit around all day doing nothing but sewing, and the belief that whatever a woman may be doing, it cannot be very important, so it is not rude to interrupt her.

Ruskin, John. "Work." In The Crown of Wild Olive: Four Lectures on Industry and War. By John Ruskin, 17–44. Kent, UK: Allen, 1882.

First published in 1866. Available online. Ruskin's speech to the Working Men's Institute at Chamberwell centers on an account of "wise" work. He borrows from the Gospel of Mark the idea that adults ought to be like children: in the same way that children are humble and cheerful, so the worker ought to approach his task with modesty about himself, taking pleasure in the task at hand.

Smiles, Samuel. Character. St. Paul, MN: Pioneer, 1889.

First published in 1871. Available online. As with much of Smiles's work, this text consists primarily of hagiography—in particular, laudatory biographies of great writers who, Smiles shows, found their artistic work enhanced by the self-discipline they developed in the course of professional life in other business.

Carlyle and the Gospel of Work

Many of the more systematic studies of Carlyle's views on work are from earlier generations of scholarship. Roe 1921, Neff 1926, and Harrold 1934 all situate Carlyle in his intellectual context: Roe connects Carlyle's theory of work to his theories of aristocracy and heroism, Neff emphasizes his disagreements with John Stuart Mill, and Harrold emphasizes his use of German idealism. Much more recently, Jordan 2013 emphasizes Carlyle's use of Saint-Simonian thought. Treadwell 1998 argues that the complex mix of author figures in Sartor Resartus is necessary to capture the peculiarities that stem from viewing writing as a form of work. Jones 2008 explains the link between Carlyle's justification of work as a new form of spiritual power and his account of revolutionary violence. Levy and Peart 2001 offers a readable and easily accessible account of the role Carlyle's thinking about work played in his justifications of slavery, as well as Mill's subsequent objections to Carlyle's theory of work. For a more systematic review of the literature on Carlyle, see the Oxford Bibliographies in Victorian Literature article "Thomas Carlyle" by David Sorensen and Brett Kinser.

Harrold, Charles F. Carlyle and German Thought (1819–1834). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1934.

As Kinser and Sorensen note, this is still a canonical work in studies of Carlyle's intellectual history. Harrold links the Gospel of Work in particular to Carlyle's reading of Goethe.

Jones, Gareth Stedman. "The Redemptive Power of Violence: Carlyle, Marx, and Dickens." History Workshop Journal 65 (2008): 1–22.

For Jones, the Gospel of Work arose from Carlyle's search for an answer to the problem of religious need and the disappearance of heroes. But this came part and parcel with a view of the public as unable to articulate its real problems: thus, paradoxically, the violence

of the crowd was always rational, since thinkers could always look past the unclear reasons cited in mob violence to real problems underneath.

Jordan, Alexander. “From Industrie to the Gospel of Work: The Saint-Simonians and Thomas Carlyle.” Paper presented at a conference held at Stanford University, Stanford, CA, 1–2 November 2013.

This is a brief and introductory but nevertheless clear and easily accessible essay that links Carlyle’s views to the political vocabulary and conceptual framework of the French Saint-Simonian thinkers.

Levy, David M., and Sandra J. Peart. “Secret History of the Dismal Science.” Library of Economics and Liberty, March 2001.

Peart and Levy lay out briefly but clearly Carlyle’s use of the Gospel of Work in a defense of slavery and Mill’s attack on the Gospel of Work in his response. They go on to argue, however, that Mill’s response was also a challenge to Carlyle’s economic theory.

Neff, Emery. *Carlyle and Mill: An Introduction to Victorian Thought.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1926.

Another canonical study, this text uses the tension between Mill and Carlyle as a means of introducing Victorian intellectual history more generally.

Roe, F. W. *Social Philosophy of Carlyle and Ruskin.* New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1921.

A laudatory but clear review of Carlyle’s thought and an analysis of Ruskin as his intellectual heir. His chapter on the Gospel of Work, “The New Chivalry of Labor,” emphasizes the heroic worker as a corrective force to the problems of industrialism and democracy.

Treadwell, James. “Sartor Resartus and the Work of Writing.” *Essays in Criticism* 48.3 (1998): 224–243.

Treadwell’s essay is an entry in a debate about how to understand the many figures responsible for “writing” Sartor Resartus—Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, the Editor, and of course Carlyle himself. For Treadwell, the complexity is made necessary by Carlyle’s view of writing as a kind of work. In order to signify the work that went into it, writing must resist direct expression—symbolizing the work of writing, in other words, by refusing to directly signify meaning.

Major Text: Ford Madox Brown’s Work

Perhaps the most famous cultural expression of the Victorian Gospel of Work is Ford Madox Brown’s painting *Work*, completed in 1865. As Macleod 1996 argues, its celebration of hard-working British laborers, with admiring intellectuals and marginalized aristocrats looking on, demonstrates the influence of Carlyle’s thinking about the role of work in society—a fact made obvious by Brown’s inclusion of Carlyle as a figure in the painting. Curtis 1992 agrees, emphasizing the extent to which the specific task depicted in the poem—the digging of a water pipe—expressed mid-Victorian commitments about valuable public labor. Brown’s endorsement of the Gospel of Work has led a number of critics to use it as a touchstone for criticism: thus Barringer 2005 contends that the painting leaves out the fact of alienated industrial labor in the same way the Gospel of Work itself does. Similarly, Danahay 2005 contends that the painting can introduce the fact of female work only by turning women into objects of sexual observation. At the same time, critics attentive to the somewhat chaotic nature of the painting have asked whether Brown’s endorsement of the Gospel of Work is really so unequivocal, or whether he is in fact depicting some of the problems with the Gospel of Work that he has been accused of dismissing. Dart 1999 questions in this light the tension between the straightforwardness of Brown’s descriptive catalogue for the painting and the tensions and ambiguities in the painting itself. Barlow 2014 contends that the painting in fact calls the clichés it uses into question by setting them into a structure that reveals their tensions.

Barlow, Paul. “Ordering and Disordering of Work.” *Visual Culture in Britain* 15.3 (2014): 258–276.

Barlow summarizes a critical tradition that insists on faulting the painting for not depicting social dynamics to which the critics themselves are attentive, and subsequently goes on to say the painting’s combination of ordered and chaotic spaces stems from an

attempt to deal with the social totality.

Barringer, Tim. *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain.* **New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005.**

Barringer's study offers a broader history of the representations of work in Victorian art, including a discussion of F. D. Maurice, who is the founder of Christian socialism and another figure in Brown's painting.

Curtis, Gerard. "Ford Madox Brown's Work: An Iconographic Analysis." *Art Bulletin* 74.4 (1992): 623–636.

Curtis traces a series of allusions and references in the painting, emphasizing in particular references to problems with London's urban water supply.

Danahay, Martin. *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art, and Masculinity.* **London: Ashgate, 2005.**

For Danahay, the painting has a vexed attitude toward gender, at once admitting the fact of female domestic labor but simultaneously subordinating it to traditional male labor while exposing its female figures to male objectification.

Dart, Gregory. "The Reworking of Work." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27.1 (1999): 69–96.

Dart compares the lengthy catalogue Madox wrote to accompany the painting to the painting itself, and argues that the catalogue is straightforward and simple in a way that does not acknowledge the painting's complexities and tensions—a fact that stems, Dart argues, from the fact that Brown spent thirteen years working on the painting.

Macleod, Diane Sachko. *Art and the Victorian Middle Class.* **Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996.**

Macleod's is a massive study that argues the middle class became an important base for art patronage in the Victorian era.

Major Text: The David Copperfield Debate

Perhaps the central question about Victorian conceptions of work in scholarship since the late 20th century regards how it functioned ideologically. Scholars have disagreed sharply about particular expressions of the Gospel of Work—disputing whether particular authors are unreflectively perpetuating Victorian ideology, or reflectively engaging and analyzing it—and no text has received more attention in this regard than Dickens's *David Copperfield*. Poovey 1988 famously called David's purported motives in becoming a writer into question, arguing that while he seems to be working disinterestedly, in fact he must hide his selfish, market-driven behavior behind Agnes's selflessness. Miller 1988, although it touches only briefly on the question of work, is commonly cited alongside Poovey's essay. For Miller, David's self-discipline at the end of the novel reflects his internalization and self-imposition of the forms of power he resisted at the beginning of the story, culminating in his acceptance of socially useful work. Cordery 1998 extends this line of interpretation; for Cordery, there is a line of disciplinary control that begins with the *Murdstones*, extends through Aunt Betsey Trotwood, and ends with David disciplining himself to become a worker. Ablow 2007 varies on this argument, accepting the basic idea that David's potentially selfish motivations for earning money are disguised by his selfless love for his wife, but arguing that the novel calls the reader not to identify with David but instead to develop a similar kind of loving relationship with the novel and novelist themselves. Titolo 2003 qualifies the readings of Poovey and Miller: while the author agrees with Poovey that the villain Uriah Heep doubles David Copperfield, he argues that Dickens is aware of this duplication and its ramifications, thus himself questioning the ideology David represents through a slightly varied incarnation in Heep. Louttit 2009 similarly qualifies Poovey's reading: the author portrays Dickens as aware of and subtly marking the warping of agency a culturally enforced selflessness imposes on women like Agnes. Ruth 2006 openly and extensively disputes Poovey's thesis; in Ruth's reading of *David Copperfield*, Dickens does not try to hide David's relationship to the market. Instead, by emphasizing the work and time required to become a writer over and above the necessary "mental capital," Dickens links the ideal of disinterested work to industrial capitalism as opposed to finance capitalism. Salmon 2007 extends Ruth's reading; for Salmon, Dickens tries to sail a course between the Scylla of completely alienated labor and the Charybdis of disinterested and skilled professionalism.

Ablow, Rachel. *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot.* **Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007.**

Ablow is interested in sympathy as a political, social, and legal formation, and in particular how one kind of sympathy—the meeting of minds in a marriage—both enabled and erased female agency.

Cordery, Gareth. “Foucault, Dickens, and David Copperfield.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* **26.1 (1998): 71–85.**

Cordery extends the famous readings in Miller 1988 and Poovey 1988 by tracing the ways in which the disciplinary techniques used by the Murdstones are duplicated within the Trotwood house—despite the novel’s repudiation of this comparison—and then finally duplicated within David himself.

Louttit, Christopher. *Dickens’s Secular Gospel: Work, Gender, and Personality.* **New York: Routledge, 2009.**

Louttit is particularly interested in resisting the link between Carlyle and Dickens, which tends to end in the conclusion that work for Dickens is a good thing. Louttit’s Dickens is more equivocal, marking the ways work can harm the self as well as express it.

Miller, D. A. *The Novel and the Police.* **Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.**

A landmark work in Victorian studies, Miller’s work draws on Michel Foucault’s analysis of “discipline” to trace the ways the Victorian novel functioned as a kind of social discourse, one that developed habits of self-control in otherwise unruly readers.

Poovey, Mary. *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England.* **Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.**

Another landmark work. Poovey is interested in gender not merely as a kind of ideological control, but as a site for political struggle. In the chapter on Charles Dickens, she argues that Dickens himself demonstrated the same ideological mystification she finds in David Copperfield; Dickens’s argument that England needed international copyright agreements to better serve the natural interest hid his real interest in the matter—namely, compensation for the copies of his books being sold abroad.

Ruth, Jennifer. *Novel Professions: Interested Disinterest and the Making of the Professional in the Victorian Novel.* **Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006.**

Ruth’s book disputes the critique of disinterested labor as ideology, arguing that the advocates of this kind of labor were conscious of the worry and sought to develop models of professionalism that addressed it. The clearest example of her approach is her analysis of Anthony Trollope’s *Three Clerks*: as she argues, what determines for Trollope whether a clerk succeeds is not whether he is disinterested, but whether he hides his interest or whether he is open about it.

Salmon, Richard. “Professions of Labour: David Copperfield and the ‘Dignity of Literature.’” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* **29.1 (March 2007): 35–52.**

In this essay, reprinted in a later monograph, Salmon reads David Copperfield against the background of the “Dignity of Literature debate” incited by Thackeray’s *Pendennis*. Responding to the argument in *Pendennis* that modern authorship is essentially the same as paid wage labor, David Copperfield is torn: on the one hand, Dickens accepts that writing is a form of labor like any other; on the other hand, he is attracted to the idea of authorship as a form of professional autonomy.

Titolo, Joseph. “The Clerks’ Tale: Liberalism, Accountability, and Mimesis in David Copperfield.” *ELH: English Literary History* **70.1 (Spring 2003): 171–195.**

Titolo is interested in countering the critical strategy in Poovey and Miller, which he sees as representative of a common approach to 19th-century literary realism. Using David Copperfield as the primary example, he argues that the 19th-century novel is aware of and engaged in thinking about many of the theoretical problems contemporary critics accuse it of hiding.

The Gospel of Work and Professionalism

Properly speaking, the idea of a “professional” is distinct from the Gospel of Work. A professional requires training in a way someone called to a vocation theoretically would not, and the Gospel of Work is inflected with religious concepts in a way the professional ideal—particularly in later iterations—is not. Nevertheless there are important continuities and similarities between the two, and perhaps the most significant is the idea of disinterested labor. Indeed, as Perkin 2002 argues, one may see the professional ideal as growing out of the Gospel of Work, and in particular as the attempt of the growing professional class to appropriate for itself the moral sanction and social approval associated with the Gospel of Work. While the nature of the “professional” in the Victorian era and since has received much more study since the 1990s than can be quickly reviewed, this section can at least introduce the field. Ruth 2013 usefully summarizes much of the early-21st-century research before turning to *A Tale of Two Cities* as exemplifying the conditions that made the rise of the professional possible. Perkin 2002 is commonly cited; it traces the progression of the professional ideal from its birth in the late Victorian era through the 20th century and its fundamental role in the welfare state. But this is the sequel to Perkin 1991, which contends that there were competing visions of the social good in mid-Victorian England, with an “aristocratic” ideal in competition both with an “entrepreneurial” ideal and a “labor” ideal. Ironically, each of the ideals tended to be expressed by a particular kind of person, a middle-class writer whose own self-conception eventually contributed to the victory of the “professional” ideal. Robbins 1993 is not directly concerned with the history of the Victorian era, but rather with the profession of literary criticism; however, the central tension in the idea of a profession—the combination of disinterested work with self-interested motivations—is a key theme, and later writers often cite it. Robbins 1990 more directly addresses the Victorians, claiming that Dickens’s *Bleak House* is torn about the value of impersonal professionalism. Murtagh 2009 directly responds to Robbins; it traces a dynamic in Victorian fiction where agents with a fulfilling vocation are frustrated by the limits of their eventual profession. Cohen 1998 contends that Victorian writers sought increasingly to comprehend the value of women’s work by understanding female domestic labor as a kind of profession and indeed a vocation. Schaffer 2016 is the most recent contribution to the debate, arguing that the sensation novel in general and East Lynne in particular offer a critique of the professional ethos.

Cohen, Monica F. *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Cohen seeks to undermine the binary between “work” and “home” in criticism of Victorian fiction, arguing that many writers saw women’s work in the home as a kind of professionalism.

Murtagh, Joseph Cannon. “Career Fictions: The Representation of the Career in Victorian Fiction.” PhD diss., Cornell University, 2009.

Drawing on several influential pieces of criticism, including Robbins 1993, Robbins 1990, and Dames 2003 (the last cited under the Gospel of Work and Individual Authors), Murtagh argues that Victorian narratives of careers have a particular structure: individuals have a liberating “vocation,” in which they find self-expression, and then suffer from the constraints of a specific social profession.

Perkin, Harold. *Origins of Modern English Society.* New York: Routledge, 1991.

First published in 1969, Perkin’s work is a central text in the history of the Industrial Revolution. In his view, the Gospel of Work is most commonly associated with one particular group—the rising “entrepreneurial” class—which found its champion in Samuel Smiles’s account of the “self-made” man. As the entrepreneurs contested on the one hand with the aristocratic class and on the other hand with the working classes, the ideal almost without noticing metamorphosed into a new ideal, “professionalism.”

Perkin, Harold. *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880.* New York: Routledge, 2002.

First published in 1989, this book picks up where the previous book ended: if Perkin’s first study ended with the formation and initial rise of the professional class, this book seeks to understand how that class came to dominate, and in particular contends that the egalitarian ideal implicit in the professional ethos is central to the rise of the welfare state.

Robbins, Bruce. “Telescopic Philanthropy: Professionalism and Responsibility in *Bleak House*.” In *Nation and Narration.* Edited by Homi K. Bhabha, 213–230. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Robbins sees a complex analysis in *Bleak House*: on the one hand, Dickens mocks those who insist on humanist assumptions about agency over the effects of systems, revealing the confusion of those people who attribute responsibility to persons for effects that are really the products of extra-personal factors. Yet at the same time Dickens is troubled by the way this recognition evacuates individual agency and moral responsibility.

Robbins, Bruce. *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture.* New York: Verso, 1993.

In a famous and commonly cited study, Robbins considers a series of 20th-century literary critics, in particular seeking to understand whether and how a genuinely oppositional politics is possible in the face of the constraints of professionalism. He is particularly interested in the sources of vocational calling and suggests the multiplication of sites of authority creates possibilities for resistance.

Ruth, Jennifer. "The Victorian Novel and the Professions." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel.* Edited by Lisa Rodensky, 397–412. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

A useful summary of early-21st-century research on the professions, Ruth emphasizes Robbins's work in particular. The close reading that ends the essay sees Sidney Carton's moral development as a transition from dissolute domesticity to self-disciplined professionalism, with his final act of self-sacrifice as embodying the disinterested stance of the true professional.

Schaffer, Talia. "The Sensational Story of *West Lynne*: The Problem with Professionalism." *Women's Writing* 23.1 (2016): 1–18.

For Schaffer, it is striking that the virtues that make for a good professional—"attentiveness, concentration, focus"—are precisely the characteristics that lead Carlyle to have such an unpleasant home life: his emotional discipline is restricting, rather than enabling, once he returns home. This dimension of the plot for Schaffer suggests a larger critique of professionalism, one that registers the kinds of affection it cuts off.

The Gospel of Work and Class

One might see the central political problem stemming from the Gospel of Work as the inescapable recognition of how few people actually had access to the sort of meaningful, autonomous labor that writers such as Carlyle and Ruskin considered so important. In an era of rapidly increasing industrialization, most work involved not the exertion of full human agency, but instead the use of workers as essentially extensions of factory machines. In that sense, there was a significant gap between what Victorian writers thought work could and should be and what it actually was for most of the working population. This gap is central to Rob Breton's research: in Breton 2002 and Breton 2005, he traces one writer who at least recognized the gap and several more who didn't. Joyce 1991 is a historical study of factory culture; it is particularly interested in showing the imbrication of economic and social structures. Danahay 2005 analyzes images of digging as embodying Victorian fascination with manual labor, while noting the significant gap between those who thought manual labor important for the character and actual manual laborers. Lesjak 2006 turns to class particularly in its analysis of Chartism, contending that actual physical labor is unrepresented but present in the industrial novel, a sort of unconscious in novels such as Mary Barton.

Breton, Rob. "WorkPerfect: William Morris and the Gospel of Work." *Utopian Studies* 13.1 (2002): 43–56.

This essay usefully supplements Breton 2005. If the primary advocates of the Gospel of Work tended to ignore actual economic conditions, Breton finds in William Morris an author who believes in the value of work yet acknowledges the problems with current incarnations of it.

Breton, Rob. *Gospels and Grit: Work and Labour in Carlyle, Conrad, and Orwell.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005.

In readings of Thomas Carlyle, Joseph Conrad, and George Orwell, Breton argues that the context in which writers advocated the Gospel of Work undermines its philosophical credibility. When the only labor available is alienated factory labor, as was the case for most Victorian workers, advocating that one work for work's own sake is not politically neutral.

Danahay, Martin. *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art, and Masculinity.* London: Ashgate, 2005.

Although Danahay is primarily interested in gender, he turns directly to class in a chapter on John Ruskin and his insistence that his students participate in the digging of a road. Although Ruskin recognizes the way mechanization dehumanizes work, his recommendation of a return to physical craftsmanship as a political solution misses the complicity of such labor in the capitalist system that created mechanization in the first place.

Joyce, Patrick. *Work, Society, and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England.* Aldershot, UK: Gregg Revivals, 1991.

First published in 1980, this is the first of several books by Joyce on work in the Victorian era. The text resists a strain of Marxist history that separates an ideological superstructure from an economic base, arguing for the close relationship between social and economic structures.

Lesjak, Carolyn. *Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

In her analysis of the industrial novel, Lesjak is interested in the way actual industrial labor is literally absent but structurally present: although workers in factories go unrepresented, their labor creates a sort of shadow whose existence is marked by the way it disrupts the text.

The Gospel of Work and Gender

The Gospel of Work was inextricably caught up with varying conceptions of gender: the belief in work pursued for its own sake and without regard to material interest depended in various ways on both the distinction between the home and the office and on the distinction between masculinity as the epitome of self-discipline and femininity as the expression of natural sentiment. For this reason, Victorian writing about gender was often a site of ideological conflict for questions about work. No text has done as much to ignite the study of this issue as Poovey 1988, which devotes a series of chapters to various sites where assumptions about gender and work produced ideological tensions. Cohen 1998 extends the argument in Poovey's work, arguing that representations of domestic spaces appropriated the language of professionalism to emphasize the agency of women's work in the home. Barrett 1989 is more narrowly focused on George Eliot but takes in some sense the opposite track from Cohen, arguing that it is the lack of the opportunity for vocation for women—a "negative space" in Eliot's fiction—that drives Eliot's social critique and thus her feminism. Bond-Stockton 1994 explicitly diverges from Barrett, arguing that women's labor can be a way of expressing same-sex desire, and that the vocation more generally can be a matrix enabling otherwise foreclosed relationships between women. Schaffer 2011 is interested in the way women's handicraft work represented an alternate aesthetics and an alternate relation to the market, one ultimately marginalized by the professionalization of craftsmanship. Adams 1995 is interested in alternate practices of masculinity, including the professional, who disdains self-interest. Danahay 2005 continues the interest in masculinity, tracing the ideological tensions that saw writing and intellectual labor as potentially "feminine" work in contrast to masculine "body" work.

Adams, James Eli. *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995.

Adams is interested in tracing the asceticism inherent in the various styles offered as paradigms for Victorian men, and what those styles foreclosed or denied. In particular, he stresses that the ascetic ethos of Newman remained central to Kingsley's muscular Christianity, despite his best attempts to avoid it. Further, he contends that the ascetic hovered close to the figure of the dandy, with the dandy ironically more honest about the degree of performance involved in masculine self-fashioning.

Barrett, Dorothea. *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines.* New York: Routledge, 1989.

Barrett's study of George Eliot's fiction is interested in uncovering her feminism, seeing the "negative spaces" created by the lack of vocations for Eliot's heroines as enabling a powerful social critique and recognition of the limitations placed on female agency.

Bond-Stockton, Kathryn. *God between Their Lips: Desire between Women in Irigaray, Brontë, and Eliot.* **Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994.**

Bond-Stockton is interested in the way religious discourse and the idea of a vocation can become a way of experiencing and indeed acting upon lesbian desire, and thus a disruptive counter to capitalist work. A clear example of what she has in mind comes at the end of *Middlemarch*, when Dorothea Casaubon's ostensibly disinterested visit to Rosamund Vincy ends in her embrace of Rosamund in a moment of spiritually and sexually charged communion.

Cohen, Monica F. *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel.* **New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.**

Cohen seeks to undermine the binary between "work" and "home" in criticism of Victorian fiction, arguing that many writers saw women's work in the home as a kind of professionalism and as a space for vocation.

Danahay, Martin. *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art, and Masculinity.* **London: Ashgate, 2005.**

Danahay traces a history of work in the Victorian hero that sees it as vexed by its attitude toward women. If work is physical exertion, then any man who does not do physical work may not be a man—and thus, forms of intellectual labor require ideological elaboration. Correspondingly, there is no space for men to express physical desire, since to do this is to betray the capacity to labor selflessly.

Poovey, Mary. *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England.* **Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.**

Perhaps the most influential chapter with regard to gender from this landmark text has been Poovey's famous analysis of Florence Nightingale. Victorian professional ideology held that women should not be paid for their work, because this would involve them too crassly in the market. But Nightingale managed to overcome this limitation, in Poovey's analysis, by presenting her labor not as a choice but as a calling.

Schaffer, Talia. *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction.* **Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.**

Schaffer takes Victorian handicraft to represent a set of aesthetic assumptions no longer readily available to us in the early 21st century: for instance, she emphasizes the fact that the handicrafts were not sold on the open market but traded at special bazaars, which permitted the women participating to develop alternative economies. This paradigm, she argues, underwent a series of shifts in the Victorian era culminating in its rejection, particularly through the rise of the Arts and Crafts movement and its emphasis on "connoisseurship."

The Gospel of Work and the Writer

One of Carlyle's famous examples of an embodiment of the Gospel of Work was the "Man-of-Letters." But the question of intellectual labor as work was a difficult one, since it was never quite clear what sort of labor the intellectual was doing. Poovey 1988, and in particular its famous chapter on David Copperfield as the "Man-of-Letters Hero," is exemplary in this light: Poovey uncovers how Dickens's attempt to represent his own labor as disinterested covered his own real market motivations. Salmon 2013 extends this argument, tracing the development of the literary profession in the middle of the 19th century. Freedman 1990 links the development of aestheticism as a philosophical movement to the development of literary professionalism in a reading of Henry James. Pfau 1997 represents one of several studies that situate the development of the writer as a professional earlier in the 19th century, during the Romantic era. Peterson 2009 emphasizes the distinctive experience of women, and the way the development of a specifically female authorial identity developed alongside the development of the profession of the author as such. Siskin 1999 emphasizes the role of technological shifts in creating the possibility for the professional writer.

Freedman, Jonathan. *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture.* **Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990.**

In a reading of James's fiction, Freedman offers a brief history of the aesthetic movement and the way it became commodified, enabling literary professionalism.

Peterson, Linda. *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.

Peterson traces the way a series of female authors constructed their own professional identity in relation to the broader discourse of authorship. For instance, Harriet Martineau began her career writing traditional feminine literature but used the Carlylean notion of the man-of-letters hero to reinvent herself as a public intellectual.

Pfau, Thomas. *Wordsworth's Profession: Form, Class, and the Logic of Early Romantic Cultural Production.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.

Pfau's complex argument defies easy summary, but he is in part interested in shifting the birth of professionalism earlier, to the Romantic era, and in seeing the idea of a distinctive aesthetic realm which the poet engages as a kind of professionalism.

Poovey, Mary. *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

A landmark work. Poovey is interested in part in uncovering the self-interested motives underneath the profession of disinterested labor. In the chapter on Charles Dickens, she considers Dickens's argument that England needed international copyright agreements to better serve the natural interest hid and suggests that his real interest in the matter is more personal—namely, compensation for the copies of his books being sold abroad.

Salmon, Richard. *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Salmon starts from the fact that the 19th century saw the invention of the author as an actual living person, as opposed to a dead figure known only through texts. He then traces a process of disenchantment with earlier Romantic conceptions of authorship, a process he contends is central to the invention of a literary profession.

Siskin, Clifford. *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700–1830.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Siskin argues that new technologies of writing—with much more writing being produced in the 18th and early 19th centuries than ever before—are central to understanding the rise of professionalism, both the professionalism of the writer and correspondingly other professionals.

The Gospel of Work and Individual Authors

Of course, there has been a variety of work that does not fit neatly into any of the categories mentioned in previous sections, but which tends to concentrate on an analysis of the Gospel of Work in an individual author. Perhaps the most influential in this light is Dames 2003, which argues that the Weberian notion of a “calling” does not quite fit the depiction of work in Trollope, but that another Weberian notion—the “career”—does. Van Dam 2009 sympathizes with this approach to Trollope, though the author sees a founding contradiction: the career must be launched by a vocational desire, but that desire can never be satisfied; once it is, the career is over. Welsh 1986 is a classic study of Dickens, whose chapter on work addresses a famous tension in the criticism—Humphrey House's contention that in Dickens one must “settle to a profession and make good,” and George Orwell's opposing argument that Dickens has no “ideal of work.” Jamieson 2009 links Victorian conceptions of work to the ideology of the British Empire, showing how some writers argued for a reinvigoration of masculine identity structured around work as necessary to create individuals capable of ruling the empire. Toker 2004—reprinted in a later monograph—sees Daniel Deronda as in search of a vocation that will balance his desire to be part of a larger whole without erasing himself. Fessenbecker 2018 also addresses George Eliot, arguing that the role of sympathy in Eliot's ethics cannot be understood without recognizing its interaction with the principles generated by vocations. Spencer 2009 is not literary

criticism—this work is on economic history—but the author’s discussions of four 19th-century writers give a clear introduction to some of the most important Victorian advocates of the Gospel of Work.

Dames, Nicholas. “Trollope and the Career: Vocational Trajectories and the Management of Ambition.” *Victorian Studies* **45.2** (2003): 247–278.

Dames is interested in the difference between a “vocation” and a “career” and suggests that mid-Victorian work culture used the latter to discipline the potentially wayward energies of individuals in pursuit of a vocation. While one might be tempted to see the inability to express a vocation as a tragedy—society not permitting one to realize oneself—in fact in Trollope’s novels this is not a tragedy at all: the career itself offers a rewarding organization of subjectivity.

Fessenbecker, Patrick. “Sympathy, Vocation, and Moral Deliberation in George Eliot.” *ELH: English Literary History* **85.2** (Summer 2018): 501–532.

Fessenbecker takes his departure from a recurring phrase in Eliot’s fiction—that sympathy should “check” the use of principles in moral deliberation. Comparing this model to Immanuel Kant’s account of the categorical imperative, he argues that Eliot sees vocations as an essential element in the development of moral agency, and that ideal moral deliberation involves a constant back and forth between vocation and sympathy.

Jamieson, Theresa. “Working for the Empire: Professions of Masculinity in H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* and R. L. Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.” *Victorian Network* **1.1** (2009): 72–91.

Jamieson traces the sense of cultural “devolution” at the end of the Victorian era, as writers saw a decline in the work ethic and the growth of lassitude. This sense functioned in two ways: if writers such as Wells and Stevenson argued for a return to forms of masculinity structured around work, they also saw the lack of a work ethic in subject populations as part of the justification for the British Empire.

Spencer, David A. “Work in Utopia: Pro-work Sentiments in the Writings of Four Critics of Classical Economics.” *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* **16.1** (2009): 97–122.

Spencer opens with the assumption in classical economics that work is a burden, and something rational actors will try to avoid as much as possible. He argues that many 19th-century writers—in particular, Charles Fourier, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, and William Morris—rejected this thesis, seeing work as an activity one might enjoy and voluntarily pursue.

Toker, Leona. “Vocation and Sympathy in Daniel Deronda: The Self and the Larger Whole.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* **32.2** (2004): 565–574.

Toker’s essay sees Daniel Deronda as exemplifying one element of Bakhtin’s “carnavalesque,” as the boundaries between individuals are blurred and an individual’s culturally specific vocation gives way to the transmission of affect.

Van Dam, Frederik. “Character and the Career: Anthony Trollope’s Phineas Finn and the Rhetoric of the Victorian State.” *English Text Construction* **2.1** (2009): 91–110.

Van Dam extends Dames’s reading by suggesting that a career can never really escape the idea of a vocation: it requires a desire to set one off. Yet it thus depends on a contradiction, since the satisfaction of the desire means the end of the career.

Welsh, Alexander. *The City of Dickens*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.

First published in 1971, this classic study contains an influential analysis of “work” in Dickens. Starting from the interpretive tension between House and Orwell, Welsh explains that the disagreement stems from the fact that while Dickens often praises work as an idea, he does not depict its concrete experience, and thus the praise can seem empty. Welsh concludes it reflects the deeper tension in Protestant Christianity between faith and works.

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