

5. For valuable state-of-the-field essays, see Helen Brocklehurst and Robert Phillips, eds., *History, Nationhood and the Question of Britain* (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2004).
6. G. Bruce, "The Battle of Tel-el-Kebir," reprinted in *The Poets of the People's Journal*, ed. Kirstie Blair (Glasgow: ASLS, 2016), 182–83.
7. Graeme Morton, *Unionist Nationalism: Governing Urban Scotland, 1830–1860* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1999).
8. Robert Booth, "Boris Johnson caught on camera reciting Kipling in Myanmar temple," *Guardian*, September 29, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/sep/30/boris-johnson-caught-on-camera-reciting-kipling-in-myanmar-temple>.
9. "Leave rally in Newport, Wales," *Guardian* June 24, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2016/jun/24/eu-referendum-brexite-live-europe-leave-remain-britain?page=with:block-576d3bc6e4b0be24d34f5ede>.
10. "Nicola Sturgeon speech marking 20 years since Scotland's devolution referendum," Scottish National Party, September 11, 2017, [https://www.snp.org/nicola\\_sturgeon\\_speech\\_20\\_years\\_since\\_scotlands\\_devolution\\_referendum](https://www.snp.org/nicola_sturgeon_speech_20_years_since_scotlands_devolution_referendum).
11. Cited in Morton, *Unionist Nationalism*, 142.



## Canon

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“THE great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad,” wrote F. R. Leavis in 1948, initiating the Great Tradition.<sup>1</sup> Great works, Leavis argued, were timeless, universal, “vital” (to use a favorite term). Seventy years later, however, we tend to see literary texts as historically enmeshed, we are skeptical of claims of literary quality, and we consider ourselves entitled to discuss any text that intrigues us. How did such a radical change occur?

The turning point came a generation after Leavis, in the canon wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Led by Allan Bloom (*The Closing of the American Mind*), Roger Kimball (*Tenured Radicals*), Harold Bloom (*The Western Canon*), and Dinesh D’Souza (*Illiberal Education*), these writers

argued that the purpose of literary study was to learn the great works of the masters, who happened to be white and male. They depicted women and people of color as barbarians invading the sacred academy, dragging their own unsatisfactory texts behind them. The National Association of Scholars was founded in 1987 to challenge what it regarded as political correctness in the academy and to commit to the great works of Western civilization.<sup>2</sup> By 1995, English curricula had become so controversial that the *New York Times* covered Georgetown's alteration to required courses for the English major as national news, evidence of a nationwide decline in standards.<sup>3</sup>

Progressive scholars fought back. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Contingencies of Value* (1991) took on the notion of "the timeless virtues of a fixed object" by asserting that a text might "perform certain desired/able functions quite well for some set of subjects," and that those functions shifted over time, accommodating different subjects' needs, according to an evolutionary logic.<sup>4</sup> Gerald Graff's *Beyond the Culture Wars* (1993) framed the argument itself as the point; a vibrant, diverse battlefield of ideas could give students a rejuvenating intellectual experience. In *Cultural Capital* (1995), John Guillory argued that the canon wars were not a debate over democratic pluralism but rather a fight over who was allowed to assert that certain texts deserved cultural capital.

Graff, Guillory, and Herrnstein Smith were the generals, but the canon wars were won by the foot soldiers. The vast mass of English professors and their students marched steadily towards inclusivity, for several reasons. One is that given the choice between working on a lot of things and working on very few, most people will prefer the former. Victorianists enjoyed expanding their work, not only into new authors but also into new areas: advertising, periodicals, culinary work, fashion, domestic interiors. Second, the growing work in African diaspora, Caribbean, Latino, queer studies, and women's studies (to pick just a few examples) became its own argument. Over time these works became enshrined as worthy, accruing the kind of scholarly apparatus that marks canonical status, and scholars trained in such methods began to look at familiar Victorian texts with fresh eyes, generating new readings.

A generation after the canon wars, digital technologies offer a particularly powerful anticanonical tool. The perception of limitless availability overrides the actual patchiness of online access, and reading texts on personal devices cradled in the palms of our hands makes them feel cozily familiar. Moreover, digitized texts can feel neutral.

When a database calls up *Jane Eyre* and a temperance tract with equal facility and in identical formats, that powerfully suggests equivalent interest. Digitization makes all texts into data, and no data is more ‘vital’ (to use Leavis’s term) than any other.

At the same time, we have become far more aware of the complex ways that people read, as we know about camp reclamation, reading against the grain, symptomatic reading, and reader reception theory. We also recognize how much economic and material factors shape the reception of a text. Did a publisher keep a book in print at a key time? Was an author able to participate in lucrative publishing networks? Did a biography appear at the right moment to interest a new generation?<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the plenitude of Victorian work allows us to adopt a different metric from quality: popularity. John Sutherland has estimated there may have been 60,000 works of Victorian fiction, double if one counts tracts and short stories—to say nothing of drama or poetry.<sup>6</sup> We have canons consisting of popular writing (sensation, Gothic, etc).

Recently, the Stanford Literary Lab brought these movements together by analyzing popularity interacting with prestige, “the market and the school,” to conclude that the canon is merely “the contingent outcome of the encounter between opposite forces.”<sup>7</sup> The Literary Lab’s quantitative interplay of “forces” is a long way from Leavis’s autocratic assertion. To “prestige” and “popularity” we might add a third key canonical factor: historical and conceptual interest, or what we might call “pertinence.” What texts (nonfictional, fictional, dramatic, and poetic) reveal Victorian constructs of race and gender, define liberalism, generate scientific or environmental visions, imagine empire or industrialism? If traditional canonicity stressed a mythic timelessness, Victorianists today prize its opposite, the way in which a text is embedded in a highly particular historical nexus. Rather than a narrative of transcendent continuity, we often look for alterity, a different mode of thought.

Today Victorianists have virtually no limits on what we can read, and that lifting of canonical policing has made new fields possible: ecocriticism, science studies, studies of religion, periodical studies, studies of imperial culture, travel narratives, thing theory, not to mention expanding previous fields like women’s writing and children’s literature. Yet elements of canon-wars discourse survive today, although directed at how we read rather than what we read. Those 1990s assumptions resurface, specifically, in articles attacking digital humanities. These critics regard literary study as a zero-sum game where adding new elements displaces others; idealize older methods as disinterested truth; resent newcomers’

institutional support and funding.<sup>8</sup> Today Victorianists argue over surface reading, symptomatic reading, distant reading, historicist reading, and affective reading. In the generation since the canon wars, Victorianists have come to embrace all the texts we can get. The next generation of Victorianists may have a different task: to accommodate all the methodologies we can use. The canon wars may have given way to the reading wars.

## NOTES

1. F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, (1948; New York: New York University Press, 1963), 1.
2. "History of NAS," *National Association of Scholars*, <https://www.nas.org/about/history>.
3. "Shakespeare, Milton, Chaucer, Get Demoted at Georgetown," *New York Times*, December 20, 1995, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/20/us/shakespeare-milton-chaucer-get-demoted-at-georgetown.html>.
4. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 47.
5. See Heather Jackson, *Those Who Write for Immortality: Romantic Reputations and the Dream of Lasting Fame* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
6. John Sutherland, *The Stanford Companion to Victorian Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 1.
7. Mark Algee-Hewitt, et al., "Pamphlet 11, Canon/archive," *Stanford Literary Lab*, <https://litlab.stanford.edu/LiteraryLabPamphlet11>.
8. See for instance Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette, David Golumbia. "Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 1, 2016; Timothy Brennan, "The Digital-Humanities Bust," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 15, 2017.

