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### Victorianists And Their Reading

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## VICTORIANISTS AND THEIR READING

*Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan*

In the early 1930s, Amy Cruse sat down to write about “that side of the history of literature which tells of the readers rather than of the writers of books” (7). In *The Victorians and Their Reading* (1935), she investigated “what books, good and bad, were actually read by the Victorians in the first fifty years of the Queen’s reign, what they thought of them, and how their reactions influenced the future output” (7). To reconstruct what and how everyday Victorians read, Cruse turned to the usual diaries and letters—and to fictional representations of readers within Victorian realist novels. Cruse not only mined Victorian novels for sociological data, she also borrowed the practices of realist fiction to recreate her lost public. In her opening chapter, she creates a composite image of the ordinary reading public with a fictionalized scene of an upper-middle-class household in 1837. Here, in a “solidly furnished drawing room, under the blaze of an ornate chandelier” sit papa, mama, daughter Caroline, and Caroline’s fiancé, Edward (16). As the women take up their worsted-work and their tatting, Edward is “reading aloud an instructive article on The New Steam Plough, from *Chambers’s Journal*” (16). Pious mama would have “preferred that Edward should read something from the *Christian Observer* or from Pollok’s *Course of Time*, both of which lay on the polished centre table” while Papa—who enjoyed Byron’s *Lara* (1814) and *Don Juan* (1819) in his youth and abhors “Methodist ranting” now—waits impatiently with a copy of the *Pickwick Papers* (1837) on his lap (16, 17). Caroline listens happily as Edward moves on to a poem by Felicia Hemans, “The Adopted Child” (1828). Overlooking this domestic scene of evening reading sits a bookshelf containing beautifully bound but untouched copies of the canonical “Shakespeare and Milton and *Pilgrim’s Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe*” (17). Cruse’s composite picture of a Victorian family feels realist in its texture, but the range of reading interests she ascribes to her fictional family strains credulity. In fact, as we turn to the later chapters of the book, we realize that her family’s reading of dissenting fiction and silver-fork novels, useful knowledge and *Pickwick*, moral and Romantic poetry works as a fairly comprehensive table of contents to the types of reading that will occupy each of her book’s subsequent chapters.

Despite the groundbreaking nature of her work, Cruse has not been a very important reference for the surge of recent scholarly work on nineteenth-century reading. The absence of citations in her work, as Patrick Buckridge notes, likely explains why the book never became an important citation reference for others in the field; along with her use of methods borrowed from novels, her submerging of her sources conflicted with the developing sense of a scholarly profession for which practices of scholarly citation were an essential glue (273). Richard Altick’s 1957 *English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900*, published more than two decades after Cruse’s book, is more commonly cited as a central or founding work in Victorianist studies of reading.

Yet it is precisely because of her distance from traditional scholarly methods that Cruse seems like a congenial figure for today's Victorianists, and particularly for those who are interested in questions of method. For many of these recent methodologically minded critics, as for Cruse, the nineteenth century has come to seem like a bottomless resource not just for new objects of study, but for new and transformative methods of reading. And Cruse's recentering of nineteenth-century literary history as the history of books that are popular rather than great, and readers who are ordinary rather than literary luminaries, also speaks across a century to current critics whose contemporary distant and computational reading projects likewise aim to revolutionize—or at least shake up—literary-critical reading method. Distant reading, surface reading, curatorial reading, reparative reading, referential reading, literal reading, affective reading: these apparently very different interventions in literary scholarship's method in recent decades all have in common, as we see when we look back to Cruse, their attraction to the nineteenth century not just as an object of study, but as an inspiration for method. In what follows we will consider the contexts for these recent method debates before surveying the current methodological scene and considering the role the nineteenth century has played as both specimen and muse in these new forms of literary and cultural interpretation.

### 1. Shifting Attention

Our collective affinity with Cruse may relate to the fact that we seem to be coming out the other side of the professional consolidation and institutional expansion that characterized the decades immediately following her own 1930s moment. Adjunctification and other labor models that offer highly differential rewards for the same forms and amounts of labor have accompanied the dwindling of resources for research-based scholarship in the humanities (and indeed for work in the social and pure natural sciences). Shifts in publishing and scholarly communication have also played a key role. The privatization and platformization of the academic publishing industry has amplified inequality in access to publishing and research opportunities across the academy. Meanwhile institutions' expanding reliance on bibliometric performance measures of scholarly productivity produced by these same often proprietary systems prompts more and more output in more and more specialist publications. All the while, the inequalities created and perpetuated by peer review are becoming more and more visible (Wellmon and Piper). Scholars continue to read and write and publish even as the jobs that support and reward scholarship are vanishing [on the current state of the academy, see Denisoff's introduction].

At the same time, and perhaps partly in response, scholars of literature are shifting their attention at least in part to publications aimed at new and imaginatively wider audiences. Turning away from journals, methods, and arguments that are directed at historical-specialist scholars, and toward those that speak to scholars across an array of fields, promises to turn the same old crowd into a new and larger audience who share a broad interest in literature rather than a field-divided interest in early-modern drama or modernist novels. This impulse to turn away from the very practices of field-specific scholarly writing that enabled the profession to form a coherent identity and create scholarly conversations seems like a resistance to the new conditions of academic labor; it feels like a way scholars might resist the increasing institutional desire to capture scholarly labor in ever more granular detail. At many—probably most—institutions, nonspecialist writing for broad audiences has at best a small place in the tenure file. It circulates instead as a currency with value within the profession but without value for the particular institution, since as of now institutions do not capture non-peer-reviewed writing in h-index measures (a single number that combines productivity with citation numbers) and annual reviews as they do traditional scholarship. Of course, some scholars legitimately point out that writing for less specialist audiences *should* be credited as scholarly labor by universities; nevertheless, in the reorientation of audience, as well as the disconnection from traditional peer review and the systems of institutional evaluation which rely upon peer review, public writing remains a form of resistance to the institution.

This shift in attention from field-specific to broader audiences matches the shift away from historical periods that has also begun to reshape majors and course schedules. As Ted Underwood points out, large-scale changes in the general cultural imagination about the centrality of capitalism are exerting pressure on literary studies' organizing principle of contrasting historical periods (14). His 2013 guess that the discipline may well move away from period-based fields (and thus away from hiring in period-based fields) seems increasingly prescient. University administrators who assume that no alternatives to capitalism exist have also instituted material changes to higher education that have had a major impact. Declining enrollments in English departments mean that, at many institutions, period-based fields can no longer sustainably structure undergraduate education. While period courses and surveys remain standard, new curricular revisions tend to focus on categories that seem more flexible or more legible to students—types of writing, for example, genres, or broad topics. So whereas in the past a Romanticist and a Victorianist may have felt they belonged to different scholarly worlds, today they find themselves allied in their attempt to keep the Brit Lit II survey on the books.

Literary studies has responded to this moment of change by soul-searching. The past decade of literary studies has seen an explosion of critical manifestos, methodological interventions, journal issues focused on modes of reading, and a new wave of disciplinary-historical writing. Starting perhaps with the *MLQ* special issue on "Reading for Form" in March 2000, this tide has carried numerous essays, collections, and special issues, including the 2009 *Representations* special issue on "The Way We Read Now" (edited by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus), a 2014 *Representations* special issue on reading "Denotatively, Technically, Literally" (edited by Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt), a 2017 *PMLA* cluster on "Distant Reading" (responding to both Franco Moretti's book of that title and the collection of methods the title designates), and a 2018–2019 *PMLA* double special issue on *Cultures of Reading* (coordinated by Evelyne Ender and Deidre Shauna Lynch), as well as a 2016 cluster in *Victorian Studies* on "Strategic Presentism" (edited by David Sweeney Coombs and Danielle Coriale). Method debates have also clustered around discussion of computational and quantitative methods, appearing in manifestos, special issues, method-specific journals (such as *Cultural Analytics* and *DHQ*) and serial books (such as *Debates in the Digital Humanities*). These forms of professional soul-searching tend to be forward-looking and ask method to do the work of better suiting us to our circumstances, healing divides, and getting us back on our feet.

## 2. Back to the Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth century has played a starring role in these method debates. Victorianists and Victorian scholarship have incubated methods that transcend their scholarly circles and have captured the wider attention of the discipline in general. As we argued in our essay "Interpretation, 1980 and 1880," many of the key critical works that have shaped the current methodological landscape had their origins in nineteenth-century scholarship. Witness, for example, how Sharon Marcus's conception of "just reading" in *Between Women*, along with Stephen Best's work on nineteenth-century slavery and the limits of historicist critique, helped them describe the critical trend of what they named "surface reading." Moretti's work on literary form in the long nineteenth century led to *Distant Reading*. And Eve Sedgwick's courses on Victorian Textures and her essays on nineteenth-century literature in *Tendencies* gave way to the "reparative reading" of *Touching Feeling*. Meanwhile, Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* argues for a new formalist approach to the interpretation of social life in a book that has its roots in Victorian literature, and gestures to a broader application of her method in her introduction and final chapter. Elaine Freedgood's metonymic reading of the "things" of Victorian realism (*The Ideas in Things*) and Cannon Schmitt's work on the literal in Victorian fiction ("Tidal Conrad") find more general expression in the introduction to the *Representations* special issue "Denotatively, Technically, Literally." And Jacques Rancière's theoretical realignment of the politics of aesthetics proceeds from his years of archival work on nineteenth-century workers' writings.

All of these very different forms of professional soul-searching have widely varying relations to the larger field- and profession-specific scholarly projects in which they are rooted and to which they contribute; their nineteenth-centric orientations are neither determinative of their contributions nor of their reception. It is worth pointing out, as well, that those critics who turn to the nineteenth century as a model for meditating on method do not constitute an exhaustive survey of method study in Victorian studies, nor even of the significant and exciting work on nineteenth-century reading practices that has appeared in recent years. In surveying the centrality of the nineteenth century to current method debates in literary studies broadly, we do not seek to suspiciously uncover and interpret a dependence on Victorian practices hidden from these critics but known to us. Nor, on the other hand, do we mean to celebrate a return to a Victorian moment that these critics imagine as particularly various—a world of pre- or proto-professional readers, a model of more general and less segmented or fragmented public audiences, a more referential world to be known.

Rather, we simply want to point out that the consistent orientation of the discipline-level method debates that both emerge out of nineteenth-century studies and take the nineteenth century as an inspiration does seem to capture a significant moment of grappling with our collective professional present and past. When we see the nineteenth century as a source of both new objects of study and new reading methods, we are reckoning with the century's ambiguous status as both a proto- and pre-professional moment for literary studies. It is true that, as Andrew Miller points out, the nineteenth century may no longer stand as a specially consolidating moment in the arrival of capitalist modernity, as it was for decades assumed to be by the field of Victorian studies; citing the work of the historian James Vernon, he notes that in losing this distinction the field lost some of its coherence (125–6). Yet as the location of our early professional formation and our object of study, the nineteenth century still holds out a double attraction to nineteenth-centuryists. As Jesse Cordes Selbin argues, we are impelled toward nineteenth-century reading practices in part because “excavating a lapsed culture of reading built around the social value of the endeavor stands not only to enrich contemporary research methods, but to help forge neglected links between specialized disciplinary tools and strategies for broader public engagement”; it promises a “means of recovering lost skills and cultivating contemporary strategies” of interpretation (827, 828).

In the first decade of this recent methodological foment, it seemed as though we were in for simply another swing of the generational pendulum. During much of the early 2000s, work on method explicitly introduced itself as a turn away from modes of symptomatic or new historicist criticism prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s. New formalism, for example, marked a self-conscious return to form after two decades of what its practitioners saw as 20 years' worth of criticism that either ignored literary forms or unconsciously depended upon them while claiming otherwise (Levinson) [an aesthetic formalism, see Greiner's chapter]. “Surface reading,” meanwhile, aimed itself explicitly against symptomatic reading in the vein of Louis Althusser and Frederic Jameson. Likewise, thing theory (introduced by a 2001 special issue of *Critical Inquiry*) reacted against new historicism's tendency to read the world as a text or treat the archive as a discourse, searching for its patterns and codes rather than reading for its content. Much of this work seemed like the usual but crucial turning over of the soil so that the same field can be planted anew, a move that disciplines require every so often. These interventions, in other words, seemed designed to incite new interpretations of old classics. One might “surface read” a noncanonical text or an archival document, for example, but the power of such a method seems more valuable on better-trodden ground. A surface reading method makes most sense for opening new ideas instead of piling on top of prior readings of particular passages and aspects of a well-known work.

But what seemed at first like a generational shift has ended in a broader self-consciousness about the longer history of literary criticism and its role in shaping our conceptions not just of the nineteenth century and its literature, but of the novel, of realism, and of literariness itself. This broader consciousness of the legacy of literary criticism works in two directions: a new interest in the longer

history of the discipline, on one hand, and an attempt to imagine or affiliate with a nineteenth-century readership unschooled by its protocols, on the other. This new wave seeks to jettison not only recent forms of contextualist criticism, but an entire century's worth of work that seems now to have made interpretation synonymous with reading (Price, 231–2). We would also place here Nathan Hensley's "curatorial reading," which aims to "retain critical activity while keeping faith with our objects of study—remain paranoid about Victorian history while reading its objects with reparative care" (66). We should also consider recent work that takes supposedly undisciplined reading practices as the inspiration for critical and scholarly work: David Kurnick's novel reader who lingers with the middles of marriage plots rather than their ends; Nicholas Dames's nineteenth-century critics and readers who read but do not interpret excerpts from novels; Elizabeth Miller's slow readers; Gage McWeeney and Emily Steinlight's collective readers of sociological forms; Elaine Auyoung's work on how fiction feels real and her attention to those "processes involved in merely comprehending a text" rather than those involved in the more lauded process of developing "an interpretive reading" (2–3). And in her introduction to the 2010 collection *The Feeling of Reading: Affective Experience & Victorian Literature*, Rachel Ablow notes the new interest of scholars of reading not in interpreting reading practices or representations of reading, but in excavating the experience of reading; these scholars seek to discover "what nineteenth-century readers and writers thought they were doing" by asking questions like "How did nineteenth-century readers and writers think about the experience of reading? What did they regard as its pleasures and dangers?" (3–4). These critics, she notes, turn to the nineteenth century with a double vision, "asking how we can reconstruct the alien historical circumstances of Victorian reading *and* how those distant reading experiences are restaged in attentive acts of reading in the present" (4).

Critics today, in other words, have turned back to the Victorian era to query its readers rather than its writers; in this same vein, many contemporary critics consider the nineteenth century as the century of print rather than literature. Mary Poovey, for example, has asked contemporary critics to return to the mid-nineteenth century as a moment before the full development of twentieth-century conventions made a distinction between literary and nonliterary forms of writing. In 2006 Leah Price pointed out that the study of the material form of literature was a small corner of a much wider world of scholarship on print; a decade later, it seems that some scholars of literature have reimagined the entire world of print as an object of study. Price's later work returns us to a nineteenth-century world of books rather than texts; her Victorians are hardly even readers at all. If it had ever seen the light of day, Ian Watt's little-known mid-century declaration that "all print is literary" in his unpublished book "Printed Man" would stand as the lost reconciliation of New Critical formalism and print historicism that makes the exact opposite argument as this recent turn away from the specifically literary to the generally printed in Victorian studies (Watt). Others read this wider world of print as it appears in contiguity with published literary work as itself possessing literary form. Simon Reader turns to the notebooks Victorian readers kept to study the aesthetics of their note-taking practices rather than the finished literary works to which those practices contributed, and Anna Gibson's work on Dickens's notebooks imagines them not just as sources contributing to Dickens's published novels, but as documents of literary (and of course also of historical and editorial) interest in their own right [on book history, see Stauffer].

### 3. Distant Reading's Nineteenthcentricity

Distant reading, too, has gravitated toward the nineteenth century as both privileged object and inspiration for method. There are some quite material reasons the nineteenth century has exerted a gravitational pull on recent quantitative work. Publication radically expanded over the course of the century, offering the kinds of large corpora best suited for distant reading. For most of the century in many contexts, words were printed with machine methods and typographical standards that made

them relatively uniform and thus easier (than in the eighteenth century or earlier) to automatically transform into machine-readable text suitable for computational text analysis. And copyright on the majority of the century's books has expired in most countries, making corpora built from these texts easy to use and share relative to the twentieth century. The accessibility of the nineteenth century is, of course, relative, given the challenges corpus construction almost always presents; as Mark Algee-Hewitt and his co-authors conclude in *Canon/Archive. Large-scale Dynamics in the Literary Field*, a study of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, "Clearly, the idea that digitization has made everything available and cheap—let alone "free"—is a myth" (3) [on the digital humanities, see Bourrier's chapter].

The material conditions that make the century so appealing to distant readers, however, are also a clue to the deep affinity between the century's informational attitude toward literature and those of recent critics interested in literary texts' informational forms. Serial installments of novels and the volumes beloved by circulating libraries remind us of the uniform (but somewhat arbitrarily sized) segments into which we chunk corpora. The uniform running titles that are so annoying to distant readers and require removal in most corpus pre-processing nonetheless echo the standardized file-naming conventions of the machine-readable collection of documents in a corpus. And the tabular forms in which we often represent corpus-derived data became central in the nineteenth century (Seltzer). Not merely convenient because of the length of its texts and the size of its archive, the nineteenth century seems hospitable to distant readers because of the informational forms and practices they share. It is worth pointing out, of course, that despite widespread impressions, these kinds of methods are anything but new. While "distant reading" is a neologism, and the rhetoric around the kind of quantitative text analysis that goes by this name often emphasizes its newness, in fact scholars of literature have long used numbers in their work, from bibliometrics as evidence in the history of reading to wordcounts as crucial evidence of materials out of which poets create works; throughout the course of the twentieth century literary scholars have turned to quantitative methods to help them make arguments about literature and culture (Buurma and Heffernan, "Search and Replace").

Despite this long history, however, until recently literary scholars have primarily drawn on statistical descriptions of corpora rather than statistical models of them, and the recent turn to using statistical models to understand literary corpora and literary history has opened new possibilities for literary study. And it is this method, rather than material or informational form, or an interest in literature's numbers, that may be the strongest attractor of contemporary distant reading to the nineteenth century. The statistical models increasingly central to distant reading have a special affinity with the Victorian period, as the practice of fitting models to collections of individual data points bears more than a passing resemblance to the Victorian novel's own practices of representing many potential examples by way of individual characters. Of course, the modeling of a textual corpus has more immediate affinities to the larger category of humanistic inquiry into which it falls. As Julia Flanders and Fotis Jannidis point out in their editorial introduction to *The Shape of Data in Digital Humanities: Modeling Texts and Text-based Resources*, humanities scholarship has a "long and rich tradition of gathering and modeling information as part of humanities research practice" (3), and Mark Algee-Hewitt notes that the practices of abstraction that reduce texts "to the features they have in common" to allow for comparison "across scales" are common to qualitative and quantitative literary scholarship (751). Theorists of the Victorian novel's fictionality often conceive of the novel as existing in the realm of the probable; the characters, settings, and events in Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers* (1857) or George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72) are like those of at least some readers' referential worlds—but they cannot be reliably identified with any actual particular person, place, or thing. Instead, they stand in for an indeterminate number of possible people, places, and things in an indeterminate number of real worlds, against which they are often measured, tested, and compared by everyday readers and scholarly researchers alike.

In this quality of abstraction, they are akin to the abstraction of a statistical model. It is exactly this quality, we imagine, that made Cruse turn to fiction as such a compelling method for representing the results of her own research on reading. In “All Models Are Wrong,” Richard Jean So explains that scientists use models of data to “think about the social or natural worlds and to represent those worlds in a simplified manner”; they abstract a limited set of quantifiable characteristics out of a natural or social world, look for consistent correlations between characteristics, and ask whether these trends are weak or strong. The way distant readers are thinking about novels also chimes with the ways scholars of reading have been turning back to the Victorian era for new models of attention, audience, and collectivity. As Andrew Piper writes, statistical models offer not just new views of literary history and literary texts but, because they are iterative, sharable, and necessarily never perfectly fitted they “open the door to new kinds of critical sociability” (657). Other critics are also thinking about ways that quantitative work offers new forms of critical sociality in ways that implicitly or explicitly hark back to Victorian modes of reading. Sarah Allison’s concept of “reductive reading,” for example, shows us how quantitative work foregrounds the reductions that are actually a necessary part of making any claims about texts that can be debated and discussed by groups of people. And Allison Booth’s “mid-range reading” emphasizes the slow, collective work that groups of scholars must engage in to prepare the kind of data that could offer us a useful view of a Victorian social network; in her example, mid-range reading responds to the “morphology of female biography” in the nineteenth century in part by analyzing the networks formed by the collocation of types of life narratives in collective biographies of women (621). While neither Allison nor Booth explicitly model their respective forms of quantitatively inflected reading on Victorian ones, both are working with nineteenth-century texts and both are studying the way quantitative work might capture how nineteenth-century social life formed around literature.

#### **4. Turning Back, Reaching Out**

These method debates range widely, but in their response to our moment of professional and institutional crisis they have at least one thing in common—a tendency to reach beyond our profession, with its perhaps too-familiar methods and audiences, in order to seek new interlocutors and borrow new methods. This searching turns not just to other disciplines (computer science, anthropology, psychology, sociology, statistics), but even toward readers altogether outside academia’s walls; it seeks a reinvigorated set of approaches in the reading practices and affective and aesthetic responses of those extra-disciplinary readers. In part because of the decline of a shared imaginative form of professional labor and career trajectory that has vanished along with tenure-track jobs, and along with the field-specific forms of research and publication that accompanied them, the profession has started to imagine itself instead as a more unified audience, one that shares forms of attention and method. As Ender and Lynch note, “[T]he divisions between amateurs and professionals, common readers and academics . . . no longer seem as firm as they once did” (1077). In reaching beyond the profession to the methods of other publics and other disciplines, and in their more modest reconfiguration of the dimensions of an actual professional audience that knits a specialized field-identified audience back into a general audience of literary scholars, they all reach backward toward the nineteenth century.

#### **Key Critical Works**

Rachel Ablow, ed. *The Feeling of Reading: Affective Experience and Victorian Literature*.

Richard Altick. *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900*.

Stephen Best, and Sharon Marcus, eds. “The Way We Read Now” special issue of *Representations*.

Amy Cruse. *The Victorians and Their Reading*.

Evelyne Ender, and Deidre Shauna Lynch, eds. “Culture of Reading” special issue of *PMLA*.



Elaine Freedgood, and Cannon Schmitt, editors. "Denotatively, Technically, Literally" special issue of *Representations* Leah Price. "Reading and Literary Criticism."

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