

CFP: NVSA 2017

The Question of Victorian Literature

Georgetown University

Washington, DC

April 21-23, 2017

The Northeast Victorian Studies Association
invites papers for its annual conference.

The topic this year is

The Question of Victorian Literature.

Our plenary panel this year will feature

Lauren M. E. Goodlad (Illinois)

Gauri Viswanathan (Columbia)

Carolyn Williams (Rutgers)



D. G. Rossetti, "The Sonnet" (1880)

Victorian? *Literature*? Where do the questions start? Where can they end?

"Victorian literature" is a concept as old as our field of study and yet never more provocative than today. We welcome papers that think creatively about this fraught pair of terms—the ways that they come together or fall apart—and on the historical, methodological, and theoretical questions that arise when we

try to define an object of study as capacious as "Victorian literature."

The subject allows the opportunity at once for a strong historical focus on the Victorians' own attitudes toward "literature," and a contemporary theoretical focus on our own period's relation to literature and to the "Victorian." What are the cultural implications of an overt valuing of "literature"? Is there a necessary relationship between the Victorians' elevating and professionalizing of the literary; our own modes of canon-formation; and the various forms of oppression associated with the period (classism, racism, sexism, homophobia)? Are form and periodization ever free from politics? What national boundaries and international networks are generated, reinforced, and blurred by the history of "Victorian literature" as a field of study, or by our own attempts to reconceptualize and reshape that field of study? How did Victorian culture orient its literature in relation to that of other European nations, the Americas, and the colonies, and how far can (or must) we stretch the category of Victorian literature in order to render its reach and complexity accurately?

We are particularly interested in papers addressing the relationship between period definition and the study of form. What were the edges or limits of literature in the Victorian period? What are they today? Do we share the Victorians' sense of the work that literature can and cannot do, and how does it relate to other forms of collective belonging, including religious practices and identities? (Arnold thought poetry would replace religion, after all.) Where does literature stand as a distinct mode of writing today—not

sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc., but “literature”? Does a sense of that field as distinct from other subjects exist for the Victorians, or for us? Is Victorian literature essentially poetic, or novelistic, or theatrical? What is the role today of the nonfiction prose that was so important to the Victorians: of the essays and treatises of Darwin, Eliot, Martineau, Arnold, Mill, or others that were at one time taken as fundamental to our understanding of the period and its literariness? What are the Victorian sources for high modernism's contempt for Victorian literature, and to what extent does this contempt inflect our current response to the Victorian period? Have we been and are we still apologists for the imperfections (aesthetic, ethical, political) of the literature we call Victorian?

What is the source of the appeal of the term “Victorian,” given the many problems with which the adjective has been associated, and even its anomalous place within the discipline? What might be gained by alternative ways of imagining the historical period from the perspective of the present? Is “strategic presentism,” a term from the V-21 Manifesto, a useful new orientation to our historical work? Would this orientation be one way of renewing our field? Thirty years ago various critical movements urged us to move beyond prior forms of categorization. What about New Historicism, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and other theoretical commitments and formations today? In what ways have they troubled the idea of “Victorian literature” as a coherent or self-sufficient category, and in what ways have they helped to maintain it?

More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. Science, I say, will appear incomplete without it.

—Matthew Arnold, “The Study of Poetry” (1880)

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

Literature about Literature

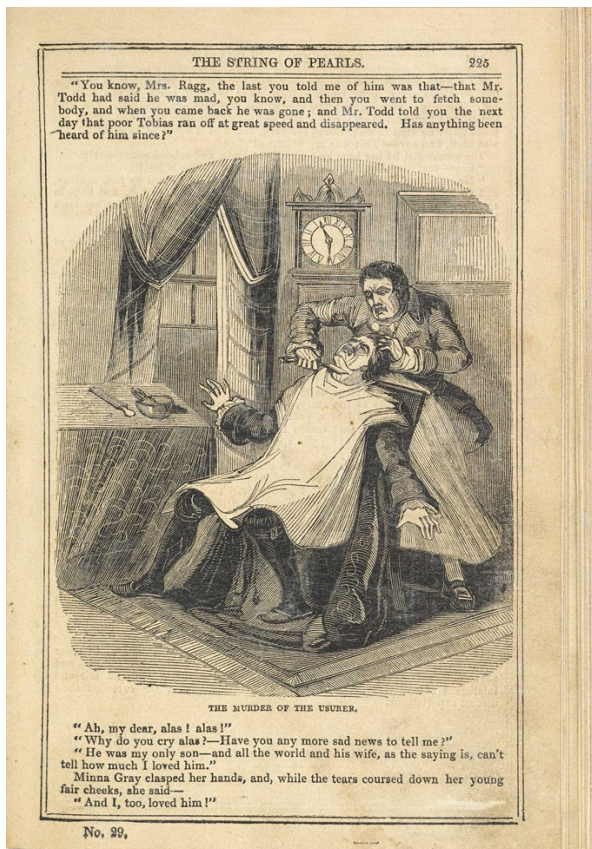
Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*
 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*
 Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *The Doctor's Wife*
 George Gissing, *New Grub Street*
 Henry James, “The Aspern Papers”
 W. M. Thackeray, *Pendennis*

The Quasi-Literary and the Para-Literary

The novel of ideas: *Sartor Resartus*, *Marius the Epicurean*, *The Story of an African Farm*, *Robert Elsmere*
 Cheap literature: yellowbacks, shilling shockers, penny dreadfuls, pornography
 “Private” literature: journals, diaries, notebooks, letters
 The illustrated novel, the illustrated poem
 The Sister Arts: poetry and painting, poetry *in* and *around* painting (D. G. Rossetti), the realist novel and Dutch painting, the realist novel and photography
 Folklore study, fairytales, myths
 Oral traditions
 Nonsense poems and light verse

The Locations of Literature

“Victorian literature” from outside Britain
 Victorian literature circulating outside Britain
 Foreign literature in Victorian Britain



The String of Pearls; or, the Barber of Fleet Street
(c. 1850)

Victorian Literary Criticism

Writer-critics: Eliot, Oliphant, Martineau, Arnold, Webster, Pater, James, Morris, Wilde

The development of professional literary criticism

Victorian literary societies: the Early English Text Society, the Brontë Society, Browning societies, Janeites

Form and criticism: plot vs. character, poetry vs. prose, the art of the novel, the epic

Victorian Shakespeare criticism

Victorian theories of the novel

Literature and the University

Colonial curricula

“The Idea of the University”: literature and the liberal arts (then and now)

The Victorian university and the emergence of modern literary studies / literary history

The Business of Literature

Circulating libraries and booksellers

Hack writing and the business of the periodical

The triple-decker and other formats

Plagiarism and copyright

Walter Besant’s Society of Authors

Bestsellers

And all these people about her, what aim had they save to make new books out of those already existing, that yet newer books might in turn be made out of theirs? This huge library, growing into unwieldiness, threatening to become a trackless desert of print—how intolerably it weighed upon the spirit!

—George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (1891)

What Counts as Literature?

What is style, and what is its Victorian history?

What constitutes literariness for Victorian culture?

Natural history

Science writing

Travel writing

Psychological case studies

Colburn and Bentley’s “Standard Novels,” libraries of standard texts

Anthologies and the curation of Victorian literature: Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*, Stedman’s *Victorian Anthology*

Contemporary Theorizations of “Victorian Literature”

Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians*

Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest:*

Literary Study and British Rule in India

Book-history approaches

Contemporary Theorizations cont'd

New Historicism: Catherine Gallagher, D. A.

Miller, Nancy Armstrong

Formalisms, old and new

Interdisciplinarity, cultural studies, and the
“extra-literary”

Distant reading and the digital humanities

Transatlantic studies

Historical Poetics

Victorianism and Romanticism

Victorianism and modernism

“Victorian” vs. “nineteenth-century”

World literature and comparative literature

Victorian literature in / of translation

Jacques Rancière on “literarity”

Strategic presentism: the V21 Manifesto and
its responses

In general, leave “Literature,” the thing called
“Literature” at present, to run through its
rapid fermentations (how more and more
rapid they are in these years!) and to fluff
itself off into Nothing, in its own way...;—it
won't be long.

—Thomas Carlyle,
“Shooting Niagara: and After?” (1867)

Proposals (no more than 500 words) by Oct.
15, 2016 (email submissions only, in Word
format), submitted to: Daniel Wright, Chair,
NVSA Program Committee:
daniel.wright@utoronto.ca

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

**Please include your name, institutional
and email addresses, and proposal title in
a cover letter.** Papers should take 15 minutes
(20 minutes maximum) so as to provide
ample time for discussion.

The Coral Lansbury Travel Grant (\$100.00)
and George Ford Travel Grant (\$100.00),
given in memory of key founding members of
NVSA, are awarded annually to the graduate
student, adjunct instructor, or independent
scholar who must travel the greatest distance
to give a paper at our conference. Apply by
indicating in your cover letter that you wish to
be considered. Please indicate from where
you will be traveling, and mention if you have
other sources of funding.

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membership for 2015-2016,** please visit our
website at nvsa.org and click on
“Membership.”

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