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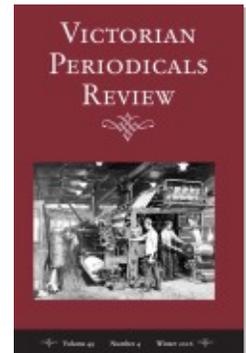
## Reading in Review: The Victorian Book Review in the New Media Moment

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# Reading in Review: The Victorian Book Review in the New Media Moment

ELIZABETH CAROLYN MILLER

This article revisits the nineteenth-century book review as a genre that naturalized new reading practices for a new media moment. As Lisa Gitelman has influentially argued, “New media are less points of epistemic rupture than they are socially embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning,” and indeed, while print was not historically “new” in the nineteenth century, it was nevertheless experiencing a new media moment.<sup>1</sup> With the acutely steep rise of published periodicals in this period, not to mention concomitant rises in the number of published newspapers and books, the nearly incalculable volume of new print material made for a qualitative, not just quantitative, shift in the identity of print as a medium.<sup>2</sup> The book review, as a genre, demonstrates with particular clarity how the print medium was changing, and it suggests how nineteenth-century reading practices were adapting in conjunction with the medium. Aimed at audiences that could never hope to encounter the sublimity of new print material directly, the book review emerged as a meta-genre for nineteenth-century print, one that reflected the changing identity of the book within a broader print culture. The very term “*re-view*” suggests how this journalistic genre was a kind of reconsideration, a second look occurring at a level of temporal distance and spatial summary. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term “review” meant the “action of looking (again) over something” almost a hundred years earlier than it meant an “account or critical appraisal of a book.”<sup>3</sup> Embedded in the term “review” is the idea of reviewing as a form of selective processing that happens at a level above or apart from that which it describes.

Given the plenitude of nineteenth-century periodicals and the depth and breadth of the archive that this plenitude sustains—ranging from specialist to non-specialist publications, from cheap papers to expensive reviews, and from general-audience weeklies to niche-audience trade magazines—it

would be impossible to offer a fully comprehensive overview of the Victorian book review in an article of this scope. Similarly, given the variety of books that were reviewed—which included fiction and non-fiction and ranged in topic from poetry to science to religion—I cannot hope to offer an across-the-board account of the world of Victorian reviewing practices. What I seek to do instead is to propose a new theory of the role of the book review within an expanding print culture. Drawing on literary reviews from general-interest periodicals as my primary dataset, I want to show how the impulse toward information management emerges as a key objective of the review, to situate this impulse within Victorian periodical culture, and to suggest the ways in which such an impulse bears on our own critical practices today.

Conceptualizing the Victorian review as a form of information management is relevant at our present new media moment in Victorian studies, as we face a newly sublime archive of digitized and electronically accessible material that is transforming our critical practices. As Natalie Houston has observed, “The digitization of nineteenth-century printed materials has dramatically increased our access to the range and diversity of Victorian print culture. The ease with which one can now search for and within digitized texts can obscure the scale of the work behind that search interface,” a scale that “vastly exceed[s] that of all previous periods.”<sup>4</sup> Houston’s comment on the invisibility of labor that inheres in digitization may immediately remind us of the invisible identities of the underpaid, anonymous literary reviewers who filled the pages of Victorian periodicals and contributed to the development of the genre. I will have more to say about these reviewers later, but it is worth noting here the role that hidden toil has played in forming the bedrock of reading practices in print as well as digital environments. The major shift in our archive that this kind of digital labor has produced in recent years has also, of course, provoked questions about the nature of these same reading practices. Franco Moretti, to take the most obvious example, has argued that since there may have been twenty or thirty thousand novels published in nineteenth-century Britain, close reading will not enable us to understand this mass of print as anything more than just “individual cases.”<sup>5</sup>

Within this new archival environment, the problem of selectivity is one of the thorniest quandaries we now face. Search protocols raise one set of issues related to selectivity, since the various digital databases on which we rely are often not transparent about their selection processes or about the frequency with which errors occur in those processes. As James Mussell writes in *The Nineteenth-Century Press in the Digital Age*, “Despite the rhetoric, digital resources are not simply portals, providing access to content in unmediated ways. Indeed, the power of digital resources depends

upon the extent to which they change the properties of the source material, allowing it to act in new ways.”<sup>6</sup> Then, too, the whole question of which materials are digitized in the first place is also a problem of selectivity, one that I tried to highlight in the opening pages of my book on the late Victorian radical press.<sup>7</sup>

Curiously, nineteenth-century debates about reviewing practices grapple with these same issues and thus emerge as an unexpected site for identifying continuities between the new media moment of the nineteenth century and the new media moment that we find ourselves in today. Literary reviewing emerged in the Victorian era in part as a means of rendering a massive, sublimely ungraspable print culture into something more human-scaled. Anthony Trollope’s *Autobiography*, for example, describes the “chief work of many modern critics or reviewers” as a “compressing of the much into a very little.”<sup>8</sup> The review, as a genre, was born within the pages of the periodical; it was, as James Wald and others have claimed, part of the “shift from ‘intensive’ to ‘extensive’ reading: from repeated and extensive rumination over a few traditional texts, to quicker consumption of a wider range of changing titles.”<sup>9</sup> Reviewing required extensive reading but more importantly what we might call “reductive” reading—reading aimed at reducing a large output of print into a few columns or pages. The balance that literary reviewers struck between summary and evaluation did change as the century wore on, but the impulse toward information management persisted even as the reviewer’s task was evolving. Indeed, the strategies reviewers used to read their assigned texts and to summarize and evaluate them for readers parallel, in surprising ways, our debates about methodologies in nineteenth-century periodicals research today. This parallel illuminates recurrent questions about authorship, archive, and scale that are endemic to new media moments both past and present.

Nineteenth-century book reviews, like digital databases today, transformed the literary archive. Just as Victorian books lived or died by their notice, or lack of notice, in the press, today a nineteenth-century periodical might be much cited or rarely cited depending on its digital availability. Also like digital databases today, the role of book reviews in shaping the literary archive was subject to suspicion, given the commercial interests at stake in the question of which books were noticed in the press. (Commercial stakes are also apparent today, of course, in subscription-based digital databases such as those created by Gale and ProQuest.) Looking back at nineteenth-century controversies over reviewing from our present situation, we can see that debates over reviewing and debates about digital archiving often rest on a fantasy of a pre-existing body of literature in a state of organic wholeness prior to its processing at a secondary, meta-level—through the review, let us say, or through digitization. In fact, the

conception of such a pre-existing body is belied by the sheer magnitude of the archive, a magnitude that must be effaced or otherwise managed through the methodology of the reviewer or researcher.

The massive unwieldiness of nineteenth-century literature was, in short, a burden also faced by nineteenth-century readers, and the book review emerged as a means of navigating this sublimity of print material through selective processing. It was not the only way of navigating the print log-jam, of course; specialist periodicals and other print innovations of the period might likewise be read as technologies for information management. But the literary review clearly spoke to a fantasy of rendering nineteenth-century literature in its totality at the limited scale of the individual reader. Large-scale digital databases emerge from a similar desire and provoke many of the same questions about reading that we find in Victorian discussions of reviewing. To make this point, I will begin with some background on the history of the book review, keeping in mind that the genre itself is not coterminous with literary criticism but can be defined more specifically as a short form of notice that appeared in the pages of periodicals and was focused on current literature.<sup>10</sup> While the review as a genre predates the nineteenth century, it became ubiquitous with the explosion of print production during the early Victorian era. Soon it was impossible for review organs to cover all published books; thus, the principle of selective processing was at the heart of nineteenth-century literary reviewing, not only in that book reviews summarized and contracted the contents of books but also in that they selected which books to include at all. Review columns were devoted to an increasingly small percentage of the total number of new books. This led to new discussions about literary merit and which books should be included, and it also led to widespread distrust of the review as a covert form of marketing that was actually productive, not merely reflective, of the period's literature. The review was thus a crucial forum for discussions of aesthetic and economic value in the literary sphere.

Britain's first literary review was the *Monthly Review*, launched in May 1749 by Ralph Griffiths, and this highly successful publication inaugurated reviewing as a journalistic profession. Griffiths was a bookseller; thus, a commercial intent was in some sense built into the genre of the literary review from the beginning. According to Derek Roper, a few years after the review's launch, its circulation grew, and "Griffiths found it worthwhile to give up other bookselling and publishing activities and devote all his time to the Review."<sup>11</sup> As its title page states, the journal offered a summary of all new works: "A candid Account, with Abstracts of, or Extracts from, the NEW BOOKS and PAMPHLETS, published in *Great-Britain* and *Ireland*, as they come out."<sup>12</sup> Summary is itself a selective process, of course, but

the publication's stated goal was to convey the full, comprehensive range of print production in contracted form.

By the early nineteenth century, however, this was no longer a feasible strategy, and the first issue of the *Edinburgh Review* in October 1802 would famously declare in its opening advertisement that "it forms no part of [the editors'] object to take notice of every production that issues from the Press."<sup>13</sup> Instead, the editors anticipate that their review will "be distinguished, rather for the selection, than for the number, of its articles" and therefore will "decline any attempt at exhibiting a complete view of modern literature."<sup>14</sup> Coverage was now necessarily selective as well as contracted. This "decisive break with the tradition of comprehensive reviewing" was, as Derek Roper puts it, a "virtue [that] was firmly based on necessity" due to the expanding output of new books.<sup>15</sup> Yet selectivity came to be seen as the "prime advantage" of the *Edinburgh Review*.<sup>16</sup>

By the time we reach the rapidly expanding book market of the second half of the nineteenth century, covering all new books was in no way possible even were it considered desirable. Book reviews were crowded into newspapers and magazines, often in tiny print, and skepticism about reviewing was almost as widespread as reviewing itself. Writers often reflected on whether book reviewing was just a form of advertising for the book trade. An 1840 article in the *Dublin University Magazine*, titled "The Way We Do Things: On Book Reviewing," argues that "reviewing is the foundation of all periodical writing. Reviewing is the grand substratum, on which we build our popularity and renown," yet "modern authors are very commonly their own reviewers. . . . They have only to tear off from each puff the most exquisite fragment of eulogy, and hang them to the advertisements."<sup>17</sup> An 1891 satirical piece in the *Bookman* likewise begins, "Reviewing made easy: 'Read the preface and transcribe what the author himself says of the object and plan of the book. Then run through the contents . . . cast a rapid glance here and there. . . . By this means you will be able easily to criticise two books an hour.'"<sup>18</sup> The joke of the piece is that the quotation was originally written in 1762, suggesting that reviewers' efforts to cut corners predated the nineteenth century. *The Bookman* adds, however, that "only the modest aim at 'two books an hour' savours of an earlier date than this graceless year of 1891."<sup>19</sup>

Within journalism, book reviewing was typically associated with low status and low pay. As Trollope complains in his *Autobiography*, "Books are criticised without being read—are criticised by favour,—and are trusted by editors to the criticism of the incompetent."<sup>20</sup> Under such conditions, one could not expect much from reviews, Trollope suggested, and his 1875 novel *The Way We Live Now*—which would certainly be a candidate for the definitive novelistic treatment of the Victorian book review—is very

much in this vein. On the opening page, Lady Carbury writes to the editor of a “daily newspaper of high character,” the *Morning Breakfast Table*, “I have taken care that you shall have the early sheets of my two new volumes to-morrow . . . so that you may, if so minded, give a poor struggler like myself a lift in your next week’s paper. Do give a poor struggler a lift.”<sup>21</sup> She makes a similar request of another editor, the allegorically named Mr. Booker of the *Literary Chronicle*, whom the narrator describes as one who “knew well how to review such a book as Lady Carbury’s . . . without bestowing much trouble on the reading. He could almost do it without cutting the book, so that its value for purposes of after sale might not be injured.”<sup>22</sup> Mr. Booker was a bibliographic materialist before bibliographic materialism had a name.

Published in what the *Bookman* termed “this graceless year of 1891,” George Gissing’s *New Grub Street*—another candidate for the definitive novelistic treatment of the Victorian book review—cast reviewing in the same light. Here Jasper Milvain, styling himself the “literary man of 1882,” describes his workday: “I got up at 7.30, and while I breakfasted I read through a volume I had to review. By 10.30 the review was written—three-quarters of a column of the *Evening Budget*. . . . It’s the easiest thing . . . to write laudation; only an inexperienced grumbler would declare it was easier to find fault. The book was Billington’s ‘Vagaries’; pompous idiocy, of course, but he lives in a big house and gives dinners.”<sup>23</sup> Later, after charitably reviewing his friend Biffen’s novel (an instance of “log-rolling” that is presented in the novel as a rare act of decency on his part), Milvain rationalizes, “A really good book will more likely than not receive fair treatment from two or three reviewers; yes, but also more likely than not it will be swamped in the flood of literature that pours forth week after week. . . . The struggle for existence among books is nowadays as severe as among men.”<sup>24</sup> The Darwinian terminology employed by Milvain suggests how reading and writing are changing within the new media ecology of the late nineteenth century—changes that correspond with the process of selection inherent to a review-centered book market.

Reviewing was often a task for young, struggling writers like Milvain who were trying to break into journalism. George Bernard Shaw, to cite one example, began his writing career in the early 1880s by reviewing bad novels for low pay.<sup>25</sup> Looking back decades later, in a symposium titled “Reviewing Reviewed,” published in the *Author*, Shaw recalled such reviewing as a “dreadful trade”: “I earned my first regular money in literature as reviewer on the old *Pall Mall Gazette* . . . paid £2 per thousand words.”<sup>26</sup> Shaw’s early anonymous reviews were distinguished by a humorous, often satirical tone that soon made “his name notorious in the trade,” according to Michael Holroyd.<sup>27</sup> Although Shaw could not sign

his own reviews, his signature style became a proxy form of signature, one that vented his frustration with his material through humor, as in this 1886 review of a novel that he found particularly irrelevant to most readers' lives: "Which of us is married to a bigamous Frenchwoman, madly fond of us, and given to showing it by daggering? Not one in fifty, let us hope: perhaps even a smaller proportion."<sup>28</sup>

Debates about signature had proliferated in the British press at least since 1859.<sup>29</sup> Initially, the bulk of these debates concerned other areas of journalism besides reviewing, but by the time Shaw was writing, the tradition of anonymous reviews was under attack. *The Fortnightly Review*, launched in 1865, and the *Nineteenth Century*, launched in 1877, were two of the first major periodicals to employ signed book notices, and the *Nineteenth Century* eventually became known as a forerunner of the "star system" of reviewing—where a few celebrity reviewers, such as Andrew Lang, emerged as powerful wielders of journalistic judgment which could make or break a book's success.<sup>30</sup> Aside from these trailblazers, however, most journals continued to publish reviews anonymously until the 1890s. *The Saturday Review*, for example, did not feature signed reviews until Shaw began writing drama criticism for them under the byline "G. B. S." in 1895.<sup>31</sup> In so doing, Shaw contributed to a growing assembly of critics who were undermining the convention of the anonymous review by depicting it as underhanded, secretive, and even unmanly. As early as 1861, Thomas Hughes's article "Anonymous Journalism" in *Macmillan's Magazine* laid out the case for signature by arguing, "The habit of open dealing in all matters has been always acknowledged and revered as a manly—one may almost say, *the* manly—virtue, ever since there was a man on the earth."<sup>32</sup> Hughes went on to make the perhaps more convincing point that signature would provide "serious discouragement . . . to all the puffing and jobbery which goes on behind the shield of the mighty 'we.'"<sup>33</sup> "Puffing" and "log-rolling," contemporary terms for overweening, fulsome praise and praiseful reviewing of one's friends' books, were thought to have been endemic to eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century book reviewing, and while these disreputable reviewing practices never completely went away, Victorian critics had inculcated a disinterested, impersonal voice to ward off doubts about critical impartiality.

We have seen how digital periodical databases today are similar to the reams of anonymous reviews that appeared in Victorian periodicals in that both of these information networks rely on obscure or invisible labor, yet they are also similar in the tone of impersonal neutrality that they adopt. Reviewers rely on the "mighty 'we,'" while databases rely on the mighty machine.<sup>34</sup> While this neutral tone is a general rhetorical tendency among digital platforms and is not limited to particular databases, I would, as an

example, point to the promotional copy on Gale's website for the *19th-Century UK Periodicals, Part I: New Readerships: Women's, Children's, Humor and Leisure/Sport* database, which asserts that the "series acts as a barometer of literacy and social mobility in the 1800s."<sup>35</sup> To compare the database to a "barometer" is to deny the human labor and human judgments that went into its creation; it is to instrumentalize the database as an objective gauge of nineteenth-century culture rather than an interpretation of it. Just how much it *is* an interpretation can be gleaned from the website's promotional language, which provides a justification for the particular selection of periodicals covered in the database by inviting readers to "study society in Victorian-era Britain through the advent of commercial lifestyle publishing."<sup>36</sup> The database, it claims, "covers British life in the Victorian age and the events, lifestyles, values, and ideas that shaped the world during this milestone period. This collection marks the advent of commercial lifestyle publishing in Britain and charts the rapid rise of modern magazine culture."<sup>37</sup> Gale's copy uses the word "lifestyle" three times, yet the word did not exist in English prior to the twentieth century, suggesting the extent to which contemporary terms, concerns, categories, and discourses have shaped the database's representation of the period.

In Victorian review culture, anonymity provided a similar means of projecting a disinterested voice of impartiality that papered over the human judgments inherent in reviewing, but anonymity was also a way of controlling labor costs, for it was easier to underpay an unnamed writer than a named one. Under these circumstances, anonymous reviewers coped with the avalanche of books and low remuneration by developing a particularly superficial version of what we might today call "surface reading."<sup>38</sup> Leah Price has asked whether it is possible that the history of books and the history of reading might actually be "distinct and even competing projects," and certainly, if we view book history through Victorian reviews, we see that the book is often conceived of as first and foremost an object, possessed, in reviewers' terms, of volume, heft, and contents.<sup>39</sup> An 1873 review of *Middlemarch* in the *Edinburgh Review*, for example, begins by discussing its form of publication, asking "whether the appearance of the volumes at stated intervals may not have modified the structure and character of the work."<sup>40</sup> Likewise, we can better comprehend the *Literary World* reviewer's frustration with the length and difficulty of *Middlemarch* when we consider the low pay and ceaseless pace of labor. The reviewer protests that *Middlemarch* is "far too long": "One can read a thousand pages of Dickens and Scott with unflagging interest, because they exact no intellectual assistance of their readers. But George Eliot . . . requires of [her readers] a steady and severe intellectual effort . . . a discipline which is painful if too prolonged."<sup>41</sup> The reviewer goes on to complain—in shock-

ingly utilitarian terms—that it will take “at least eighteen hours” to read the novel’s “nine hundred and twenty solid pages.”<sup>42</sup> Clearly, part of what is at stake here is the construction of a hierarchy of reading, where some readers—those capable of “steady and severe intellectual effort”—will make their way through *Middlemarch* and others will not. The lengths to which the reviewer goes to emphasize the time commitment required by the novel, however, also suggest a culture of reading and reviewing that emerged out of an ecosystem of superabundant print.

The impulse toward enumeration that we see in this review reveals how the book review functioned as a form of selective encapsulation for a print culture that had outgrown the individual reader’s capacities. Even Henry James—to whom many critics trace the rise of a more “artistic” and “scientific” form of criticism in book reviewing, according to Laurel Brake—displays this impulse toward enumeration in his unsigned 1874 review of Thomas Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd*.<sup>43</sup> Complaining that the novel has been “distended” and “stretched” to three volumes, he claims that “almost all novels are greatly too long” and enumerates a series of calculated rules to countermand excessive print production.<sup>44</sup> “No ‘tale’ should exceed fifty pages and no novel two hundred,” he writes, “no description of an inanimate object, should consist of more than a fixed number of lines,” and so on.<sup>45</sup> An 1872 reviewer of Trollope’s *The Eustace Diamonds* in the *Literary World* agrees: “We need hardly say that the story, like most of its predecessors, is too long. . . . The privilege of ‘skipping’ must ever be esteemed by the readers of Trollope’s novels among the greatest blessings of life.”<sup>46</sup> This calls to mind Leah Price’s claim that the “sheer bulk of many Victorian genres . . . require[d] their consumers to skip and to skim, to tune in and zone out.”<sup>47</sup> There is no question that this was the way reviewers read.

Even the most spun out of long, baggy novels had relatively short titles, however, and Victorian book reviews often spent a lot of time discussing the title of the work as part of their arsenal of reductive reading tactics. An 1873 review of Thomas Hardy’s *Under the Greenwood Tree* begins by praising the novel’s title as a “very good description of its contents,” while an 1875 review of *The Way We Live Now* insists, “We must begin by quarreling with the incivility of Mr. Trollope’s title. ‘The way *we* live!’ We will not retort by requesting the author to speak for himself.”<sup>48</sup> This focus on the significance of titles anticipates, remarkably, Franco Moretti’s recent article “Style, Inc.: Reflections on Seven Thousand Titles,” the conclusions of which are based on computational analyses of the titles of novels published from 1740 to 1850. “Titles,” Moretti writes, “are still the best way to go beyond the 1 percent of novels that make up the canon, and catch a glimpse of the literary field as a whole.”<sup>49</sup> As we see in Victorian book

reviews, here the title emerges as the detachable component by which the “literary field” might be grasped as a coherent, if difficult to visualize, “whole.” Moretti continues, “Half sign, half ad, the title is where the novel as language meets the novel as commodity, and their encounter can be extremely illuminating.”<sup>50</sup>

To conceive of the book or magazine as an object—or in Moretti’s analysis, a commodity—makes for a hospitable approach in the reduction-oriented methodologies of reading that we find in the Victorian book review as well as in some recent “big data” approaches to literary studies. Of course, many genres of Victorian literature lend themselves quite readily to this conception of the book as an object. Critics of sensation novels, for example, have often noted that contemporary reviewers used highly materialist language in their discussions of these works. I would suggest, however, that this materialist language is related to the more general tendency of Victorian reviewers toward bibliographic materialism.<sup>51</sup> Alongside calculations of the number of hours it will take to pass your eyes over every word in *Middlemarch*, it is perhaps less surprising to find sensation and mystery novels described as objects of elaborate material assembly, as they often were by their contemporary reviewers. A review of Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* in the *London Review*, for example, praises the “arrangement of the materials” while criticizing the “unsatisfactory foundation upon which the whole superstructure is based.”<sup>52</sup> Likewise, the *Spectator*’s review of *The Moonstone* recommends the novel for “readers [who] like a book *containing* little besides a plot, and that plot *constructed* solely to set them guessing.”<sup>53</sup>

This tendency to conceive of the book as an object was born not only from the lower status of the sensation genre but more fundamentally from the reading conditions of the reviewer: confronted with an inundation of print, the materiality of that print became all the more evident and all the more obtrusive. Tasked with rendering the insuperable into the comprehensible, nineteenth-century review culture was premised on contraction, even as the number of organs producing reviews was expanding wildly. This kind of chiasmic contraction and expansion was, indeed, a dominant feature of nineteenth-century print culture. Toward the end of the century, journals like *Tit-Bits*, founded in 1881, and the *Review of Reviews*, founded in 1890, took bits and pieces, summaries and selections from a wide-ranging, increasingly massive body of English-language periodicals. Editor W. T. Stead’s “Programme” in the inaugural issue of the *Review of Reviews* made the case for expansion in the name of contraction:

Of the making of magazines there is no end. There are already more periodicals than any one can find time to read. That is why I have to-day added

another to the list. For the new comer is not a rival, but rather an index and a guide to all those already in existence. In the mighty maze of modern periodical literature, the busy man wanders confused, not knowing exactly where to find the precise article that he requires, and often, after losing all his scanty time in the search, he departs unsatisfied. It is the object of the *Review of Reviews* to supply a clue to that maze in the shape of a readable compendium.<sup>54</sup>

Offering a review of the reviews, Stead's new publication promised readers a sense of having read more widely than any one reader had time to do.

In part, and at an even larger scale, this is what digital databases offer us today. Stead anticipates the search mechanisms of twentieth-century information technology, offering a "readable compendium" so that the reader will not lose "scanty time" searching for the "precise article he requires." The journal's opening gambit presents reviewing as a form of information management, not unrelated, for example, to the emergence of clipping services at the end of the nineteenth century. An 1895 advertisement for Romeike and Curtice Press Cutting and Information Agency boasts "over one hundred hands reading thousands of Newspapers, Periodicals, Magazines, and Reviews, and extracting from them each week over 100,000 cuttings."<sup>55</sup> The formulation here—"over one hundred *hands* reading"—shows how notions of what it meant to read were changing, as a surfeit of print led to new engagements with the limitations of the individual human reading capacity. Reading, in this case, is defined by handling, and the book again takes on an overwhelmingly material cast.

Stead's annual indexes of periodical literature, published from 1891 to 1903 and coedited by Elizabeth Hetherington, likewise exemplify this chiasmic push to simultaneously produce periodical literature while also condensing it, managing it, and making it easier to search through. In his preface to the first volume of the index, Stead presents the project as a response to the "welcome the *Review of Reviews* received from the great public, which [felt] gratitude for any guide through the periodical chaos."<sup>56</sup> The index, Stead writes, would serve as a "clue to the mighty maze in which are hidden the choicest treasures of contemporary thought" and as the "indispensable key which opens the storehouse of knowledge."<sup>57</sup> His metaphorical references to "treasures" and "storehouse" suggest, again, the extent to which this project of organizing and managing the profusion of print relied on a fantasy of that print as a pre-existing store, a body of thought, when in fact the unity is created through indexes and summaries.

Stead's indexes and the *Review of Reviews*, along with late-century clipping services and Victorian reviewing culture itself, thus mirror key aspects of digital databases today in terms of their production as well as their transformation of the reading experience. We can see in the *Review of Reviews*, for example, a preview of the great substructure of invisible labor

on which digital databases today depend. Stead promises readers a curated compendium, and the conceit of the magazine clearly rests upon Stead as the well-known guarantor of the brand, but in fact it would be an illusion to presume that Stead is responsible for assembling all of the content, particularly as the magazine expanded globally to include several different national editions. Likewise, we might say that clipping services—and the entire culture of reviewing that produced the emergence of such services—are akin to digital databases today that have changed our reading and research experience. The many “hands” behind the clipping service cut the periodical up into tiny, searchable pieces and extract individual articles in isolation from context.

Anticipating the emergence of such cutting services and anticipating the eventual advent of digital search processes, the book review served as a meta-genre within the exploding print market of the nineteenth century, generating selective reading practices that acknowledged the necessarily partial grasp of print culture that any individual could hope to achieve. In this way, nineteenth-century discussions of reviewing resonate with debates about our own critical reading practices, debates that have emerged in the face of a dauntingly vast new digital archive. Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, for example, in their much-cited introduction to “Surface Reading,” describe the “recent turn toward computers, databases, and other forms of machine intelligence” as a development that “seeks to occupy a paradoxical space of minimal critical agency.”<sup>58</sup> Digital methods, they suggest, hold out the promise that the critic might “correct for her critical subjectivity, by using machines to bypass it.”<sup>59</sup> Just as the prospect of a newly insurmountable print archive produced a discourse of critical limitedness among Victorian reviewers, a newly insurmountable digital archive seems to have produced a discourse of critical limitedness among Victorian scholars today. If surface reading represents for some critics a humbler hermeneutic, a chance, as Nathan Hensley puts it, “to replot the melodrama in which critics had cast themselves as heroes,” Victorian reviewers at the end of the nineteenth century also describe something akin to a turn against a hermeneutic of suspicion.<sup>60</sup> In a piece subtitled “The Reflections of a Book Reviewer,” G. K. Chesterton describes the “old critical notions” as “founded on the idea that . . . the exposure of a fault was . . . proof that the critic had gone below the surface. . . . The old critic and the old moralist dug for sins like gold.”<sup>61</sup> In what Chesterton calls the “new criticism,” such digging will be replaced with a more “sympathetic” approach to authors and texts.<sup>62</sup>

Chesterton is, however, writing in 1902 in the context of a review culture that had decisively shifted toward the signed review. And in many ways, we can say that the Victorian debate about reviewing resolved itself by embracing critical subjectivity, as is evident in the shift from anonymity

to signature in late-century reviewing practices. The move toward signature was, in part, an acknowledgment of the reviewer's necessarily partial reading capacity, in contradistinction to the aura of comprehensiveness that attended anonymous reviews.<sup>63</sup> George Henry Lewes, editor of the *Fortnightly Review* and an early advocate of signature, argued, for example, that "reviewing is a hasty process, which has its necessities and its inherent defects. . . . [This] might be remedied by a franker attitude on the reviewer's part, in which he would relinquish the authoritative position of a judge putting forth absolute verdicts."<sup>64</sup>

Reading Victorian book reviews today forces us to recognize the ways in which our own new media moment mirrors the new media moment of the Victorians: in both eras, debates about selectivity, authorship, objectivity, and the ontology of the book have accompanied a shift in social practices that makes for a new media moment. If reading Victorian reviews reveals the extent to which nineteenth-century literary texts circulated in an incomprehensibly vast print marketplace, it also demonstrates the ways in which reviewers sought to produce a manageable meta-literature through the medium of the review. Changing reading practices today mirror aspects of the reading practices that accompanied the rise of the review, and debates about reviews and digital research—surprisingly—engage with many of the same questions.

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## NOTES

1. Gitelman, *Always Already New*, 6.
2. We may never have a precise calculation of the number of periodicals, newspapers, or books published in this era, but for figures and data detailing this steep rise, see Altick, *English Common Reader*; Eliot, *Some Patterns and Trends in British Publishing*; and Vann and Van Arsdel, *Victorian Periodicals*.
3. "Review, n.," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <http://www.oed.com>.
4. Houston, "Toward a Computational Analysis," 498.
5. Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, 4.
6. Mussell, *Nineteenth-Century Press in the Digital Age*, 31.
7. Miller, *Slow Print*.
8. Trollope, *Autobiography*, 262.
9. Wald, "Periodicals and Periodicity," 423.
10. Michael Gavin has argued that a new scholarly turn toward the history of criticism has brought about a new recognition that criticism was "far more central to the development of print culture" than was previously imagined. Gavin, "Writing Print Cultures Past," 29.

11. Roper, *Reviewing before the Edinburgh*, 20.
12. Title page, i.
13. Advertisement, n.p.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Roper, *Reviewing before the Edinburgh*, 40.
16. *Ibid.*
17. "Way We Do Things," 66.
18. "Reviewing Made Easy," 55.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Trollope, *Autobiography*, 192.
21. Trollope, *Way We Live Now*, 3.
22. *Ibid.*, 8.
23. Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 207.
24. *Ibid.*, 444.
25. For more on Shaw's early career in reviewing, see Tyson, "Shaw's Early Journalism" and *Bernard Shaw's Book Reviews*.
26. Shaw, "Reviewing Reviewed," 71–72.
27. Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw*, 120.
28. [Shaw], "Romance by Mr. Richard Dowling," 179.
29. For well-known contributions to this debate, see Hughes, "Anonymous Journalism"; Morley, "Anonymous Journalism"; and Hopkins, "Anonymity?"
30. Maurer, "Anonymity and Signature," 5–6.
31. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
32. Hughes, "Anonymous Journalism," 166. As Hughes's gendered language suggests, anonymous reviewing, for all its faults, had long provided a means by which women writers could break into the profession; for more on this topic, see Waters, *British Women Writers*.
33. Hughes, "Anonymous Journalism," 167.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Introduction, *19<sup>th</sup> Century UK Periodicals, Part I*, Gale Cengage Learning, <http://www.gale.com/19th-century-uk-periodicals-series-1>.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. See Marcus and Best, "Surface Reading."
39. Price, *How to Do Things with Books*, 131.
40. Review of *Middlemarch*, *Edinburgh Review*, 246.
41. Review of *Middlemarch*, *Literary World*, 131.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Brake, "Literary Criticism and the Victorian Periodicals," 116.
44. [James], Review, 38.
45. *Ibid.*, 38–39.
46. Review of *The Eustace Diamonds*, 86.

47. Price, "Reader's Block," 233.
48. Review of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, 430; review of *The Way We Live Now*, 88.
49. Moretti, "Style, Inc.," 134.
50. *Ibid.*, 135.
51. Perhaps the most famous example of this, often cited in criticism on the sensation novel, is from a review essay by H. L. Mansel: "A commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop. The public want novels, and novels must be made—so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern, to be ready by the beginning of the season." Mansel, "Sensation Novels," 483.
52. Review of *The Moonstone*, *London Review*, 115.
53. Review of *The Moonstone*, *Spectator*, 881; my emphasis.
54. Stead, "Programme," 14.
55. Edwards, *Labour Annual*, 92.
56. Stead, "Preface," iii.
57. *Ibid.*, iv.
58. Marcus and Best, "Surface Reading," 17.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Hensley, "Curatorial Reading," 62.
61. Chesterton, "Conspiracy of Journalism," 260.
62. *Ibid.*
63. Other factors, of course, mattered in this transition: signature was also a means of establishing intellectual property and securing the reviewer's paid labor.
64. Lewes, "Robert Buchanan," 444.

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