The Moralist Critic and the Student Activist: A Reconsideration

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Abstract
A prominent right-wing truism holds that there is something 'Victorian' about the aesthetic judgment of rising generations of the left; that, in the words of Coddling of the American Mind *co-author Greg Lukianoff, campus activists echo 'the thinking of the old Victorian censors.' Without accepting these terms, I suggest that resistance to this discourse should spur Victorianists to reconsider certain habitual scholarly dismissals made on uncomfortably parallel grounds. For those of us who take seriously contemporary activists' critiques, what might it mean to take seriously the Victorian moral criticism to which those critiques are persistently compared? In a cultural moment of hyper-alertness to what's problematic about art, might we be able to better appreciate the conceptual work of certain much-maligned nineteenth-century strategies of aesthetic evaluation? Through presentist, methodologically-oriented readings of Lady Eastlake's 1848 infamous attack on* Jane Eyre *in the* Quarterly Review *and F.R. Leavis's* The Great Tradition*, I argue that a "moralist" method links nineteenth-century critics, scholarly Victorianists, and cultural activists, and that scholarly repression of this moralism opens the field up to right-wing cooptation and reactionary thought.*

A prominent right-wing truism of the twenty-first century culture wars holds that there is something *Victorian* about the alleged 'woke moralism', 'political correctness', and 'hypersensitivity' of rising generations of activists. The rhetorical move has become a commonplace, with headlines blaring that 'the Woke are the new Victorians' or that 'the office romance has fallen victim to a new Victorianism'; Bari Weiss proclaims in *The New York Times* that '"Believe women" only works as a rule of thumb when all women are good. That myth falls flat outside Victorian England.'[1] Victorianism, to these writers, connotes rigidity,

[1] Ed West, 'Why the Woke are the new Victorians', *Wrong Side of History*, 30 November 2021, https://edwest.substack.com/p/why-the-woke-are-the-new-victorians [accessed 13 March 2025]; Phoebe Maltz Bovy, 'The office romance has fallen victim to a new Victorianism', *The Globe and Mail*, 14 February 2023, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-the-office-romance-has-fallen-victim-to-a-new-victorianism/ [accessed 13 March 2025]; Bari Weiss, 'Asia Argento Proves, Once Again, That Women Are Human Beings', *The New*

prudishness, naïveté, and most of all a kind of hectoring, moralistic censoriousness. *Coddling of the American Mind* co-author Greg Lukianoff sums up the charge, purporting that campus activists 'are echoing, in rationale and substance, the thinking of the old Victorian censors [of] the nineteenth century.'[2] The substance of these charges, if not always their language, gets rehearsed well beyond the activist right, particularly around questions of art and aesthetics. So esteemed a commentator as Wesley Morris complains that 'culture is being evaluated for its moral correctness more than for its quality'; Marxist critic Ben Davis declares in the pages of *Jacobin* that leftist cultural analysis 'overcoded with moralism' has fostered the '"virtue signaling" critique' and rendered progressive aesthetics 'more and more hollowed out.'[3]

An understandable, but misguided, impulse for many academics is to respond to all this as though it were really about us. To 'well, actually' about what Victorians were 'really like' is to miss the point; to purvey bromides about when and how and to what extent so-called woke moralism is justified only muddies the intellectual waters further while corroborating the right-wing framing of the question. Tacitly or openly, scholars tend to validate the idea that moralism is prima facie dubious, even and especially when working to show that, despite their moralism, activists (or novels) are also doing something more valuable. Yet if, as Ian Buchanan proposes, moral criticism is simply 'a tendency' to 'judge literary works according to moral rather than formal principles,' such dismissals rely on a highly artificial circumscription of the category of the 'moral'.[4] Many scholars, anxious about students tossing old books onto the ash heap of history, have fallen into the right's trap by equating a variety of aesthetic judgment—moral criticism—with a rejection of literary study as an activity. The truth, it seems to me, is the reverse: students rejecting a canonical author on political grounds are

York Times, 21 August 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/opinion/ asia-argento-avital-ronell-weinstein.html [accessed 13 March 2025].

[2] Quoted in Elizabeth Nolan Brown, '4 Ways Neo-Victorianism Reared Its Ugly Head in 2014', *Reason*, 30 December 2014, https://reason.com/2014/12/30/neo-victorianism-in-2014/ [accessed 13 March 2025].

[3] Wesley Morris, 'The Morality Wars', *The New York Times Magazine*. 3 October 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/03/magazine/morality-social-justice-art-entertainment.html [accessed 13 March 2025]; Ben Koditschek, 'The Relationship Between Art and Politics is Shifting: An Interview with Ben Davis', *Jacobin*, 27 June, 2022, https://jacobin.com/2022/06/art-politics-nft-museum-worker-unions-cultural-appropriation [accessed 13 March 2025].

[4] Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 326.

participating in the very kind of humanistic inquiry that our shared enemies wish to dismantle.

Moreover, they are doing so in a fashion less distant from that of professional critics than some would like to admit. When critics point to a text's political potentiality, ways of imagining, promotion of ideology, extractive logics, and so forth, they are making a judgment of, in the strict sense, 'political correctness'—indeed, a moral judgment. Clearly, different conclusions can be drawn from such judgments, and one should neither expect nor desire a student activist and a scholar of literature to take identical lessons from the ideological rejection of a given text. But an overzealous conceptual distinction between critique and condemnation elides the real slippage between their respective implications. (The novel dropped from the syllabus, after all, is dropped whether you are expanding the canon or cancelling the classics.) Critical moralism should not be understood as a strictly delineated interpretive technique; rather, it is a 'tendency', a habit of assessing art in reference to its potential salutary or damaging effects on readers and culture. The prevalence of this style of analysis is obfuscated by the extent to which accusations of moralism tend to be applied only to ethical (or political) claims from which critics desire distance. As Sara Ahmed observes, 'The words "moralism" and "puritanism" are constantly being mobilized in anti-feminist writings […] because they allow a critique of power to be reframed (and dismissed) as an imposition of moral norms.'[5] Yet simultaneously, defences of the humanities persistently foreground moral claims about ethical engagement, improved citizenship, interpersonal insight, etc. Indeed, these claims themselves are highly aligned with mainstream Victorian defences of literature. We might, then, pose the question: why, given the prominence of moral claims in our own professional practices, does the reputation of moral criticism remain so poor?

Recent defences of critical judgment have tended to rigidly reject any whiff of moralism. Michael Clune, for example, explicitly contrasts 'the practice of literary judgment' with 'an equally venerable way of seeing literary study as a form of *moral* education', one that treats literature as a kind of ethical spoonful of sugar to help the medicine of 'positive moral attitudes' go down.[6] Clune objects, reasonably enough, to the idea that literature professors carry any

[5] Sara Ahmed, 'Against Students', *The New Inquiry*, 29 June 2015, https://thenewinquiry.com/against-students/ [accessed 13 March 2025].
[6] Michael Clune, *A Defense of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 186.

peculiar moral expertise credentialing such an exercise; he further asserts that such a project of moral education comes into conflict with 'the very openness to values that is a hallmark of expert aesthetic judgment'.[7] To the extent that the classroom is a laboratory of aesthetic judgment, Clune insists, it is perforce resistant to the possibility of externally-motivated censoriousness. Such a characterisation aligns with what John Guillory identifies as the 'moral/judicial' rationale for literary study, one that attributes to the literature classroom a kind of civilising mission, whether it be enacted through didactic modelling or suspicious unmasking of textual ideology. Guillory rightly identifies such a model as 'ubiquitous', whether in forms of demystifying ideological critique assessing 'the complicity of literary texts in social effects that can be adversely judged' or through a 'postcritical' emphasis on initial reader response that 'risks authorizing a regression to the baseline of readers' intuitive moral judgments'.[8] Without dismissing either of these methodological approaches out of hand, Guillory criticises their shared implicit conflation of 'the moral *contents* of a literary work with its moral *effects*'.[9]

This is not, however, the primary way moralist critics themselves have typically understood their methodological premises. And it isn't quite the procedure of most curricular activists either; I would suggest, instead, that they follow in a long line of interpreters whose implicit conflation works in the opposite direction. Moralist aesthetics do not presuppose that an immoral book, judged by some a priori standard, will inevitably have adverse social effects, but rather that the probable moral or social effects of a given work are an interpretive crux for evaluating textual morality. Rohan Maitzen has shown that Victorian critical moralism was not categorically prescriptive; rather, Victorians 'debated the merits of novels as if these books were part of their living world, not part of a separate aesthetic realm'.[10] Many of these critics, Maitzen explains, follow a protocol that is not really so distant from Clune's exhortation that 'artistic judgment requires that we place our existing values in suspension'.[11] It demands,

[7] Ibid, 187.
[8] John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), xv, 357, 358.
[9] Ibid, 358.
[10] Rohan Amanda Maitzen, '"The Soul of Art": Understanding Victorian Ethical Criticism', *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 31.2–3 (June/September 2005): 151–85, (157).
[11] Ibid, 182.

though, a subsequent step: a weighing of the accuracy, applicability, and implications of textual values vis a vis the moral world of the reader.

Contemporary curricular activism may be more 'Victorian' in Maitzen's sense than in Lukianoff's, but in either case, the analogy should be sufficient to raise a further question. For those of us who take seriously contemporary activists' critiques of canonical aesthetics, what might it mean today to take seriously the Victorian moral criticism to which those critiques are persistently compared? In a cultural moment of hyper-alertness to what's problematic about art, might we be able to better recognise the conceptual work of certain much-maligned nineteenth-century strategies of aesthetic evaluation? This essay will take up two infamous works of Victorian(ist) moral criticism, written a century apart: Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake's 1848 attack on *Jane Eyre* in the *Quarterly Review* and F.R. Leavis's 1948 polemic *The Great Tradition*. Each text has, in its own context, become a byword for a kind of aesthetic thick-headedness both elitist and moralising, what Aldous Huxley once characterised (in relation to Leavis) as 'one-track moralistic literarism'.[12] Revisiting these texts steeled against the instinct to equate moralism with aesthetic incompetence, new questions arise around political judgment, committed art, and the submerged family resemblance between earlier critical practices and our own. Literary studies has not sorted out its own sense of the relationship between activist judgment and aesthetic education.

One reason for this is our reluctance to engage with elements of moralist method that already link Victorian critics, contemporary Victorianists, and cultural activists. In the first part of this paper, I will read Rigby's discussion of *Jane Eyre* alongside twenty-first century treatments of that novel to suggest that our methods and Rigby's are not always as far apart as they seem and, indeed, that the discipline's often sneering rejection of Victorian moral criticism enables an obfuscation of the moralism of our own methodological practices. I will then discuss activist arguments about curriculum and canon in relation to Leavis, proposing that some scholarly discomfort with activist arguments reflects the distortive nature of prevalent denialism about our own procedures of textual selection, a denialism of which the general disavowal of Leavis is emblematic. One cost of repression is persistent unease: a collective posture of unease places us in a position of bad faith with regard to curricular activism. In other words—to stake my own political-moral claim here—scholarly repression of our own

[12] Aldous Huxley, *Literature and Science* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 1.

methodological moralism has opened the field up to right-wing cooptation and to reactionary patterns in our own thought.

I'll begin with Elizabeth Rigby's notorious 'Vanity Fair—and Jane Eyre', perhaps the most widely cited of all nineteenth-century 'wrong reviews'. Rigby's classism, conservativism, and rigid Christianity led her to a judgment of Brontë's novel that seems 'laughably extreme', 'vicious', and 'heterosexist'.[13] When modern scholars have defended Rigby as a critic, it has mostly been through an inversion of her politics: claiming that, like the Lukácsian Balzac, she was canny enough to recognise Jane's violation of codes of gender, or the novel's status as 'pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition', or Brontë's 'tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home', but erred in considering these negative features.[14] I don't dispute that Rigby's politics are in many ways noxious, including as they appear in the review, nor do I disagree that elements of Brontë's novel pose a radical challenge to those politics. But I think it's a mistake to reduce Rigby to either a punching bag or a symptomatic primary text, because her concerns about *Jane Eyre* (though not her conclusions) are very like our own.

Rigby convicts Brontë of 'chief and foremost that highest moral offence a novel writer can commit, that of making an unworthy character interesting in the eyes of the reader' (502). She continues: 'Mr. Rochester is a man who deliberately and secretly seeks to violate the laws of both God and man, and yet we will be bound half our lady readers are enchanted with him for a model of generosity and honour' (502–3). Rigby characterises Rochester's treatment of Jane as an abuse of power: 'he talks to her at one time imperiously as to a servant, and at another recklessly as to man' (501)…'Jane becomes attached to her

[13] Patsy Stoneman, *Jane Eyre on Stage, 1848–1898* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 16; John G. Peters, 'Inside and Outside: *Jane Eyre* and Marginalization Through Labeling', *Studies in the Novel* 28.1 (1996): 57–75, 69; Claire O'Callaghan, '"He is rather peculiar perhaps": Reading Mr Rochester's Coarseness Queerly', *Brontë Studies* 44.1 (2019): 123–135, 124.

[14] Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake [Anon.], 'Vanity Fair—and Jane Eyre', *Littell's Living Age* 17 (March 1849): 497–611, 506. Reprinted from *Quarterly Review*. Further references are cited parenthetically in the text. See, for respective examples of these critical responses, Kathleen Vejvoda, 'Idolatry in Jane Eyre', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31.1 (2003): 241–261; Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); and Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

"master", as Pamela-like she calls him' (502)…'it is easy to see that […] all concerning [Miss Ingram] is only a stratagem to try Jane's character and affection upon the most approved Griselda precedent' (502). She foregrounds his gaslighting—'He is captious and Turk-like—she is one day his confidant, another his unnoticed dependent' (501–2)—his maltreatment of Bertha Mason, 'whom now, in his self-constituted code of morality, he had thought it his right, and even his duty, to supersede by a more agreeable companion' (502), and his misconduct as an employer—'He pours into her ears disgraceful tales […] which any man with common respect for a woman, and that a mere girl of eighteen, would have spared her' (501).

This characterisation, mutatis mutandis, can be meaningfully aligned with both popular and scholarly critiques of *Jane Eyre* in the twenty-first century. When the feminist journalist Erin Blakemore describes Rochester as 'boorish and brutal[, engaging] his 18-year-old employee in work talk that is the 19th-century version of #METOO employment investigation fodder [by] conducting a master class in negging [and] mess[ing] with her mind by disguising himself as a Roma fortune teller', she echoes Rigby almost directly.[15] But it is the shared question, rather than shared conclusions, that I want to emphasise here. The interpretive crux of whether the novel's hero is morally acceptable, and the subsequent question of whether the novel itself shares in the reviewer's judgment, is taken for granted. This shared investment is one basis for the 'anti-woke' right's allegations of Victorianism, and a defence of the activist aesthetics of the contemporary left is undermined by the impulse to dismiss a critic like Rigby.

Indeed, contemporary scholarly treatments of *Jane Eyre* have often centred these same questions. Jessica Cox's analysis of Rochester through Jane Monckton-Smith's model of domestic abuse suggests that Brontë's narrative links readers with Jane as victims of a violent epistemological manipulation; so too does Talia Schaffer's more favourable feminist reading of the novel's conclusion, which links Rochester's 'constant sexual predation' to the 'reform' enabled by disability, humanising, but by no means dispensing with, a moral-critical framework of poetic justice.[16] Even in the case of Rigby's much-criticised

[15] Erin Blakemore, 'Sorry, but *Jane Eyre* Isn't the Romance You Want It to Be', *JSTOR Daily*. 27 February 2019 https://daily.jstor.org/sorry-but-jane-eyre-isnt-the-perfect-romance-you-want-it-to-be/ [accessed 13 March 2025].

[16] Jessica Cox, '"I'll try violence": Patterns of Domestic Abuse in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847)', *Women's Writing* 29.3 (2022): 323–45; Talia Schaffer, *Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33.

characterisation of Jane's own role within *Jane Eyre*'s dynamic of abuse, it is worth acknowledging that the problem of Jane's complicity has motivated much of the best recent writing on the novel. The questions Rigby's review takes most seriously from a methodological perspective—how much the novel wants readers to like certain characters, the kinds of responsibility they bear, and the possibility of identification with them—remain key problems of interpretation for the novel.

For example, Rigby complains that Jane 'is made one thing in the eyes of her imaginary companions, and another in that of the actual reader' (503); the 'great and crying mischief of the book' is its apparent celebration of 'an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit' whose 'principle and self-control' merely make her 'liable to dazzle the eye too much for it to observe the inefficient and unsound foundation on which it rests' (505). I want to juxtapose this argument with two recent critiques of the novel, one from a scholarly and the other from a popular venue. Andrea Kaston Tange writes that, though it may feel 'uncomfortable to like Jane somewhat less, especially if we have spent long years thinking of Jane as ourselves […] it is necessary,' because 'a feminist reading of *Jane Eyre* today must necessarily be a postcolonial one'.[17] Essayist and fiction writer Tyrese Coleman narrates a similar, though starker, disidentification from Jane: 'To call this book feminist is to forget about me, that I am a reader too, that I am a woman too. That according to Brontë, I am a savage […] I don't have to read a book like *Jane Eyre* that makes me feel shame for relating more to the demonic, nonwhite villain than the actual heroine.'[18] In the face of this salutary alignment between scholarly and activist judgments, the methodological dismissal of a writer like Rigby cannot be sustained. There are striking superficial similarities across the centuries: Rigby declares that 'a little more, and we should have flung the book aside' (504) much as Coleman 'want[s] to throw this book

[17] Andrea Kaston Tange, 'Identifying as a Reader: On *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë', in Jane Tompkins and Annette R. Federico, eds., *My Victorian Novel*, pp. 35–53 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2020), 47, 46. See also Doreen Thierauf, 'Cancel Jane? *Jane Eyre*, Romance, and the Lure of White Feminism', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 19.3 (Winter, 2023), which concludes that *Jane Eyre* might continue to be taught for reasons of cultural genealogy despite the insufficiency of its 'affective power' to 'countermand its vindication of white colonial liberalism' (20).

[18] Tyrese L. Coleman, 'Reading Jane Eyre While Black', *Literary Hub*, 28 August 2017. https://lithub.com/reading-jane-eyre-while-black/ [accessed 13 March 2025].

across the room'.[19] But it is the emphasis on the ethics of narrative valorisation and condemnation that is more significant here. Rigby's 'actual reader' must be the moral test of the novel's aesthetic merit: if 'making an unworthy character interesting' is one high offense, to devalue by attempting to dazzle real-world readers is another.

Moreover, Rigby's treatment of *Jane Eyre* joins both activists and (many) scholars in recognizing authorial identity as a significant credential in the evaluation of its characterisations. Joanne Wilkes has emphasised that Rigby, reviewing for the Tory *Quarterly,* lodges a *partisan* critique, attacking Brontë in part 'because of a perceived political tendency in [her] work'; Rigby's speculations on Currer Bell's personal and political identities are inextricable from her evaluation of the moral character of *Jane Eyre*.[20] For Wesley Morris, the difference between the political aesthetic of the 1990s and today is the 'blindingly monolithic' identitarian thrust of the latter, which assesses art based not only on its implicit textual politics but especially on the biographical identity of its creator. But Rigby, like many curricular activists, assumes a constitutive relationship between political and biographical identity. More English professors, I suspect, will be tempted by Morris's logic than by Lukianoff's, but few would contest that, say, Charlotte Brontë's whiteness is a relevant factor in estimating her characterisation of Bertha Mason. It is no retreat into authorial intention to situate textual circulation within a sociopolitical nexus. On the contrary, what should be emphasised here is the presumption of a (mild) standpoint epistemology that grounds *any* evaluative aesthetic.

Debates around the feminism of Brontë's novel, scholarly or popular, are certainly overdetermined by the fact of Brontë's gender. We ought, then, to see as suspect any categorical dismissal of Rigby's speculations about that fact. One can only imagine the effort scholars would undergo to determine it, in a counterfactual where Currer Bell had never been unmasked (consider the vigour of research into the identity of the author of the 1808 anonymous novel *The Woman of Colour*, for example). It is tempting to reject out of hand a claim from the anti-feminist Rigby that 'some of the most vigorous and forcible writing in the English language would lose all its charm with a woman's name pre-fixed to

[19] Kaston Tange is circuitously drawn to the same image, remembering being 'horrified by the dual abuse of books and Jane as [John Reed] threw the heavy *Bewick's* volume at her head' (38).

[20] Joanne Wilkes, 'Reviewing' in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Writing*, ed. Linda Peterson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 236–50, 238.

it'. Yet, for how many of us would *Jane Eyre* be compromised if it had been written by a man?[21] Neither Rigby's conclusion that the novel was so written nor her rationale therefor earns her much credit, but we should resist the assumption that the inquiry itself reflects a wrongheaded reading strategy.

On the contrary, Rigby's investment in evaluating authorial credibility is inextricable from the third, least-discussed part of her review: the discussion of the Governesses Benevolent Institution Report for 1847. For Rigby, Brontë's version of the 'governess plot' that links *Jane Eyre* with *Vanity Fair* is problematic most of all because 'this work must be far from beneficial to that class of ladies whose cause it affects to advocate' (507). Rigby's analysis of the governess question relies on a charity-based conception of activism, and her critique of governesses' mistreatment, as Mary Poovey has persuasively shown, is both reliant on a classist fantasy of female innocence and designed to obviate and sabotage any possibility of class solidarity.[22] For my purposes, however, the key point is Rigby's insistence on the real social effects of what she considers negative representation, negative not in the sense of unidealised—earlier in the review, Rigby praises the characterisation of Thackeray's Becky Sharp—but insofar as her narrative valorisation, when combined with her 'unladylike' qualities and implicit sexual knowingness, undermines the case for governesses as a kind of special class with 'no equals, and therefore [no] sympathy' (507). Becky Sharp simply represents a bad and wicked governess; Jane Eyre, for Rigby, misrepresents what a worthy governess looks like in ways that undercut the fundraising strategies of institutions like the Governesses' Benevolent Institution. This is a striking form of strategic presentism, as it were: a moralist aesthetic grounded in political consequentialism. This is not, in Morris's terms, the prioritisation of 'moral correctness over quality'; it is a qualitative aesthetic judgment rooted in moral criteria. Rigby's moral criteria are not ours, but her method is less distant from prevalent modern interpretive modes than many are ready to acknowledge.

The discursive coherency of the right's rather disparate critiques of activist 'Victorianism' relies, mostly implicitly but quite consistently, on its

[21] Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake, 'Lady Travellers', *Quarterly Review* 76 (1844): 98–136. On the thorny interplay between Rigby's anonymity and Brontë's, see Julie Sheldon, '"In her own *métier*": the *Quarterly* review of *Jane Eyre', Women's History Review* 18:5 (2009): 835–47.

[22] See Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

gendered subtext, and accusations of aesthetic illiteracy have long been part and parcel of gendered dismissals of activism. The figure of the 'social justice warrior', always implicitly female, lacks the aesthetic objectivity to assess art well, a failing that also accounts for her own aesthetic vulgarity and results, at bottom, from an oversensitivity to the threat of sexual violence: the 'hypersensitive feminist—fearful, disillusioned, and adamantly anti-male—bears a strong resemblance to the dainty, sheltered, chaste Victorian lady'.[23] This misogynistic critique of social activism, ironically, is itself a familiar Victorian trope: think of Henry James's 'dirty' Miss Birdseye, with her self-involved 'humanitary zeal', or of Dickens's Mrs. Jellyby, with her disgusting house and her laughable 'telescopic' philanthropy.[24] These characters, whom their authors present as culturally representative, are in essence condemned as 'Victorian' in something like Lukianoff's sense. Few scholars today would openly embrace these kinds of condemnations, but the field's readiness to embrace the allegation of moralistic vulgarity, even toward a conservative critic like Rigby, reflects an uncomfortable truth: even the most aesthetically minded models of contemporary literary criticism systematically traffic, openly or covertly, in longstanding modes of moral evaluation.

Curricular activism has revived debates around texts like *Jane Eyre* in a manner fundamentally aligned with Rigby's questions. Most scholars know better (or should) than to dismiss activist critiques as censorship or naïveté, but many continue to take them personally. Certainly, scholars and activists will not always agree, but the putative gap between the two is widened by the false sense that activist aesthetics and critical judgment minimally overlap. While I do not believe that all criticism is or should be moral in nature, I do want to suggest that the critical readiness to dismiss a figure like Rigby is grounded in widespread disciplinary denialism about the moralism of our own political and aesthetic

[23] The quotation is from publisher-provided copy for Rene Denfeld, *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order* (New York: Warner Books, 1999), Google Books Overview at https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_New_Victorians/g0xZenCvYcoC?hl=en&gbpv=0&kptab=overview [accessed on 18 August 2025].
On the physical implications of the SJW slur, see Adrienne L. Massanari and Shira Chess, 'Attack of the 50-foot social justice warrior: the discursive construction of SJW memes as the monstrous feminine', *Feminist Media Studies* 18.4 (2018): 525–42.

[24] Henry James, *The Bostonians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 24, 23; Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 53.

judgment. One consequence of this is a tendency to analyse activist calls for curricular change through reactionary framings like 'cancel culture', rather than as part of ongoing processes of canon formation. So, a declaration like Coleman's—'I don't have to read a book like *Jane Eyre*'—is falsely equated with a categorical claim that *Jane Eyre* should not be read. Indifference, even disgust, is not a call for a book ban. Rather, it reflects a coherent, if unsystematic, response to the dilemma elegantly sketched by Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon*: 'There is only so much time, and time must have a stop, while there is more to read than there ever was before' and so, 'we must choose'.[25]

Although most scholars today resist Bloom's sometimes tautological concepts of literary merit, aesthetic considerations (alongside others) continue to shape curricula and research programs. Activist critiques, meanwhile, are habitually characterised as indifferent to so-called literary quality. And if the scholarly mainstream rejects either pole of this supposed spectrum, the underlying premise that qualitative and ideological evaluations exist in tension remains quite routine. Thinking more carefully about moral criticism and its legacies in contemporary canon critique helps dismantle this premise, one that can box even personally left-leaning literary critics into a reactionary posture. To do so, I now turn to a text disclaimed by all camps: F.R. Leavis's infamous, influential opus *The Great Tradition*. 'Today there remain', writes Simon During, 'more or less, no active Leavisites', and if the democratising thrust of the concept of 'practical criticism' and the social-democratic value set out of which Leavis operated are recognised by historians of criticism, he remains, at any rate for most Anglo-American critics, an avatar of literary snobbery.[26]

With this dynamic in mind, I want to emphasise a basic fact about *The Great Tradition* that can feel discordant in today's ideological environment: that its elitism and its moralism, far from being in tension, are conceptually

[25] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 30–1.

[26] Simon During, 'When Literary Criticism Mattered', in *The Values of Literary Studies: Critical Institutions, Scholarly Agendas*, ed. Rónán McDonald, pp. 120–36 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 122. On the complexities of the practical politics of historical Leavisitism, see also Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017) and Paul Andrew Woolridge, 'Leavis and Trilling: A Common Pursuit', *Prose Studies* 41.3 (2020): 273–95. On the philosophical underpinnings of Leavis's textual elitism specifically, see Emily Steinlight, *Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

inextricable. Leavis is quite explicit that the great writers 'are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity'.[27] Without Jane Austen's 'intense moral preoccupation she wouldn't have been a great novelist' (7); George Eliot's 'moral seriousness […] qualified her for a kind of influence that neither Flaubert nor the admired Turgenev could have' (15); Henry James 'has a moral fineness so far beyond the perception of his critics that they can accuse him of the opposite' (157); Joseph Conrad's art is defined by 'the relation between moral idealism and "material interests"' (191). Writing about *Emma*, Leavis declares that 'it can be appreciated only in terms of the moral preoccupations that characterise the novelist's peculiar interest in life. Those who suppose it to be an "aesthetic matter", a beauty of "composition" that is combined, miraculously, with "truth to life", can give no adequate reason for the view that *Emma* is a great novel, and no intelligent account of its perfection of form' (8). Such a claim is at clear odds with Bloom's injunction that the purpose of canon is 'to set a standard of measurement that is anything but political or moral'; indeed, it is much closer to the views of Victorian moral critics like Eastlake or Margaret Oliphant.[28]

In this light, it is worth revisiting the *Great Tradition*'s notorious, bald opening sentence. 'The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad—to stop for the moment at that comparatively safe point in history' (1). The claim is most remarked today for the preposterous narrowness of Leavis's canon (and indeed, over the course of the book, he goes on to exclude large portions of the work of even these writers). And although the lingering influence of the list's aesthetic values should be fairly obvious, it can feel like a parody of the kinds of high canonicity that have come under decades of scrutiny. Fair enough—but at the same time, it is worth noticing something surprising about Leavis's list. To define the great English novelists in 1948 with two novelists who are women and two who are not originally English was by no means an obvious choice to make. Nor is it a coincidental one: Leavis emphasises repeatedly that the aesthetic force of these writers is connected to their ability 'to

[27] F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 9. Further references are cited parenthetically in the text.

[28] Bloom, 35. On Oliphant's critical moralism, see Barbara Onslow, '"Humble Comments for the Ignorant": Margaret Oliphant's Criticism of Art and Society', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 31.1 (Spring, 1998): 55–74. Q.D. Leavis's substantial effort to recover Oliphant's reputation can be productively understood in relation to this resemblance (and in contrast to her avowedly anti-elitist critique of Virginia Woolf).

see from the outside, and critically place, the life around [them]' (132). The connection Leavis draws between this authorial 'outsideness' (190) and moral force is familiar, but it is not an idea that remains strongly associated with defences of canonicity. It should be.

The moralism of Leavisite thought has provoked persistent criticism over the years, from Lionel Trilling's accusation that Leavis 'assimilat[es] a social antagonism into his general critical sensibility' to Guy Cook's more recent, explicitly curricular, argument that though Leavis's 'particular values may have waned, and in many quarters even been replaced with their opposites, yet his overriding idea remains never too far away, that only improving texts should be taught, and others dismissed out of hand.'[29] Setting aside whether these are entirely accurate characterisations of Leavis, notice the interpretive premise the two claims share: that the act of canon formation (at least for Leavis) operationalises political and moral values, rather than attempting to disguise or avoid them. Leavis's 'gambit', writes Elisa Tamarkin, is 'to keep certain works alive and in the game when there are too many contenders'.[30] It is appropriate, I think, to connect such a gambit to Tyrese Coleman's declaration of independence from *Jane Eyre*: 'I now have the privilege and option to choose books I don't have to try so hard to find myself in'.

Leavis, obviously, is not proposing that only his four 'great' authors are worthy of reading. Rather, his is a curricular incitement, a statement of priority rooted in a specific (socially antagonist!) conception of literary quality. 'Moral force' is not a litmus test for censorship, but an aesthetic criterion, and this basic methodological premise links Leavis backwards to the Victorian moralists and forward to today's left-wing curricular activists. Unsurprisingly, then, Leavis was often condemned, in familiar terms, as a 'sour Puritan'.[31] For Trilling, Leavis's moral judgments, like those of *The Quarterly Review*, thinly disguise a partisan agenda, declaring that 'the failure to be explicit about even the disproportionately small social issue of Bloomsbury […] works to distort his perception'.[32] But if

[29] Lionel Trilling, 'Dr. Leavis and the Moral Tradition' in *A Gathering of Fugitives*, pp. 101–106, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 106; Guy Cook, '#Ledatoo: The morality of *Leda and the Swan* in teaching stylistics', *Language and Literature* 30.2 (2021): 127–46, 140.

[30] Elisa Tamarkin, 'Critical Enough', *American Literary History* 34.1 (Spring, 2022): 342–53, 349.

[31] Tom Paulin, 'Faculty at War', *London Review of Books* 4.11, 17 June 1982. https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v04/n11/tom-paulin/faculty-at-war [accessed 13 March 2025].

[32] Trilling, 106.

we locate Leavis within a longer tradition of moralist aesthetics, this supposed disguise can be better understood as an epistemological judgment.

In this sense, we might say, contrary to During's bon mot, that we are all Leavisites now. **'**Expanding the canon' will always be a conceptual, rather than a practical, ambition without a corresponding expansion of the academic semester. Every text we assign as teachers, analyse as scholars, or publish as editors is at the expense of an infinity of possible alternatives. And the bases on which many of us make those choices are often overtly and even proudly politicised. Those politics can be rooted in goals of representation, or 'undisciplining', or of ideological exposure, or of legislative compliance, but they can also be rooted in aesthetic or historical judgments about what constitutes major or powerful literature. These judgments are not necessarily moral in nature—but, in a sometimes subterranean way, they are so far more often than is typically admitted.

The denial of this scholarly moralism creates an artificial but significant wedge that benefits right-wing attacks on higher education and on leftist activism alike. When a leading scholar like Rita Felski declares, however tongue-in-cheek, that 'the nay-saying critic all too easily brings to mind the finger-wagging moralist, the thin-lipped schoolmarm, the Victorian patriarch', she presupposes a difference in kind between her own 'positive vision for humanistic thought' grounded in 'social and ethical commitments' and the moralism she condemns.[33] This distinction is echoed by Matthew Carey Salyer in more openly politicised terms: 'uncovering the "problematic" is just Victorian moral criticism gussied up as progressive critique'.[34] The accusation that activist aesthetics are Victorian and moralistic is itself a reason to revisit Victorian moralism. But doing so requires a revaluation of moralism's role in literary study. Critical moralism is enormously widespread but almost invariably disavowed. This disavowal makes it too easy to insist, often on superficial grounds, that student activists are engaging with literature in ways that have nothing to do with our own. Language like that invoked by Felski reminds us that the rejection (and, often, the mere designation) of moralism is a stylistic preference as much as anything else.[35] When we do it,

[33] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 130, 186.
[34] Matthew Carey Salyer, 'Bye, "Delilah": The Welsh Rugby Union's Tom Jones Ban', *Forbes*. 17 February 2023, https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattsalyer/2023/02/17/bye-delilah-the-welsh-rugby-unions-tom-jones-ban/ [accessed 13 March 2025].
[35] It is worth noting that, despite the stereotype, the rejection of aesthetically disagreeable forms of 'overt didacticism' (165) was a defining position of Victorian moral criticism (Maitzen).

it's 'a positive vision for humanistic thought' or 'progressive critique'; when they do it, it's Victorian moralism. And when politicians declare that 'woke moralism' has turned our colleges and universities into indoctrination factories, they are taking advantage of this discursive schism. Too many of us have already granted the reactionary premise that the true scholar wags no fingers.

Conversely, one benefit of laying bare our scholarly moralism is the continuity it reveals between literary criticism and activist ideas around reading and teaching. Ahmed notes that 'when students are being critical of what we are doing, when they contest what is being taught, they can be treated and dismissed as acting like customers'. Such dismissals are harder to sustain if students' curricular demands are understood as a mode of participation in the process of collective moral and aesthetic judgment that forms both syllabus and canon. Recognising the shared nature of this process enables a more collaborative sense of each task. Most of this article was drafted before the 2023 surge in campus Gaza protests, and elements of my focus reflect an evidently earlier moment in the practice and perception of student activism. But the accusation that students framing moral demands are thereby circumventing scholarly inquiry has, clearly, taken on a yet greater urgency. I believe that acknowledging the moralism of presiding forms of scholarly inquiry should help us see that it is often precisely in those moral framings that students are acting most like scholars.

The relation between aesthetic and moral judgment is a central question of literary studies, and, as the case of *Jane Eyre* illuminates, it is a question that remains unanswered. Continuities between nineteenth- and twenty-first-century ways of asking the question, in academic and popular contexts alike, reveal an opportunity to revise our critical practices in response to our own activist commitments. But to take up this opportunity requires a dislodgment, perhaps a slightly embarrassing one, of certain entrenched narratives of methodological progress. The enunciated rejection of moralism has allowed scholars to frame our own moral claims as though they were something other than moral claims. The dismissal of figures like Rigby and Leavis has a whiff of scapegoating about it, a ritual purgation of a kind of critical method we don't like to acknowledge in ourselves. Perhaps it's time for a little self-love.

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