

Conservative

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THE conservative has fared poorly in literary studies of the Victorian period in contrast to its perceived binary opposite, the liberal.¹ The reasons for this are manifold, but they certainly have little to do with the political and social tenor of the Victorian period; in parliamentary terms Conservative governments were in office for almost as long as Whigs/Liberals, and the social politics of the period very often evince all the stereotypically conservative qualities: overt nationalism, aversion to radical change, a veneration of the past and tradition, a dislike of state interference. While many of the canonical writers of the period were liberal, or at least hostile to the Tories (Eliot, Trollope, Dickens, Tennyson, and the Brownings all fit that mold), a great many held conservative or reactionary positions regarding social politics. The paucity of the term “conservative” in twenty-first-century Victorian studies says far more about our age, and the anxieties of the contemporary academy, than about theirs. But to develop a more rounded sense of the Victorian, we need to place the conservative front and center, both as a political and philosophical tradition, and as a literary-aesthetic practice.

The word “conservative” does not, and in the nineteenth century did not, necessarily indicate a political ideology aligned with the Tory or Conservative Party. The first definition in the *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (1888) is: “Characterized by a tendency to keep intact or unchanged; preservative.”² As a neutral description it can characterize any number of political and philosophical traditions that do not coalesce around what we would now call the political right. John Ruskin, for instance, would declare in *Praeterita* (1885): “I am, and my father was before me, a violent Tory of the old school;—Walter Scott’s school, that is to say, and Homer’s.”³ Ruskin’s politics are generally aligned with forms of socialism, or at least in *Unto This Last* (1862), with a trenchant critique of political economy that influenced the formation of the Labour Party in Britain. In so much of his philosophical and aesthetic

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writings, Ruskin was first and foremost a critic of modernization and industrialization, a position he shared with many Tories of the old school. His position was not dissimilar from William Morris, whose socialism was founded on a hostility to modernity. As H. G. Wells would lament in 1916, “our peculiar bad luck has been to get a sort of revolutionary who is a Tory mandarin too. Ruskin and Morris, for example, were as reactionary and anti-scientific as the dukes and the bishops.”⁴ The desire to conserve the past, or more specifically to mine it for alternatives to the (capitalist) present, has been an intrinsic feature of the British radical tradition since its inception.

Yet the term “conservative” was more often than not used to describe the intellectual tradition that was the foundation for the Conservative Party. That tradition goes back to Richard Hooker, but its modern incarnation is (almost) universally agreed to have received its most profound articulation in the work of the great Whig orator, politician, and philosopher Edmund Burke. Yet for all its veneration of the past, political and philosophical conservatism is in a state of constant transformation, and never more so than in the Victorian period when Benjamin Disraeli, in the lead-up to the 1874 election, articulated what became known as “Tory democracy.” The three central planks of Disraelian conservatism were the preservation of the institutions protecting liberty, order, law, and religion; upholding and celebrating the empire; and “the elevation of the condition of the people.”⁵ It was this final principle that was to signal a fundamental shift in conservatism as it attempted to broaden its appeal as voting reforms expanded the electorate. Yet, at the same time, changes in the nature of liberalism produced a historic realignment of British political ideology. As Herbert Spencer famously lamented in 1884, the Whigs/Liberals had performed a volte-face, and the party that had done so much to promote individual liberty and to dismantle coercion at the hands of the state was now responsible, through its reforming zeal, for interfering with personal freedom to such an extent that “what is now called Liberalism is a new form of Toryism.”⁶ By the end of the century there was a clear strand of conservative ideology that had turned its back on tradition and the belief in social hierarchies and was advocating libertarianism and individualism as its central values.

The conservative—as both a philosophy and a political ideology—was radically unstable in the Victorian period, then, and so too were its manifestations in the literary sphere. While Disraeli’s *Condition of England* novels, in particular *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845), were transparent in their articulation of his One Nation Toryism, and Arthur

Balfour's philosophical writings are grounded in his conservative critique of scientific materialism, a more nebulous and diverse conservative disposition is manifest across Victorian letters. From Edward Bulwer Lytton to W. H. Mallock, Eliza Lynn Linton, Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper), George Gissing, Algernon Charles Swinburne (in his dotage), John Davidson, among many others, the conservative in Victorian literature takes many forms. It ranges from classic Toryism to the New Imperialism, queer elitism, Nietzschean individualism, and quietist retreats from the modern world, and formally runs the gamut from popular romance, to cutting satire, refined aestheticism, and prosodic innovation. The conservative was one of the keynotes of Victorian politics, life, and literature.

Simon During, in one of the most important explorations of the antidemocratic in literary aesthetics, argues that turning to the conservative and counterdemocratic tendencies of nineteenth-century literature can help us imagine and articulate alternatives to global democratic state capitalism.⁷ Our antipathy to twenty-first-century conservative populisms should not blind us from seeking their potential panacea in the conservative values of the past. Perhaps more importantly, we should train ourselves to read for the conservative alongside the liberal, to see how conservative aesthetics shape writers and texts in myriad ways.

NOTES

1. Recent works on (Victorian) liberalism are many, with some of the more noteworthy being Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Sebastian Lecourt, *Cultivating Belief: Victorian Anthropology, Liberal Aesthetics, and the Secular Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2018); Kevin A. Morrison, *Victorian Liberalism and Material Culture: Synergies of Thought and Place* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018). There have been no significant studies of Victorian literature and conservative aesthetics this century. My new monograph addresses fin de siècle conservatism: Alex Murray, *Decadent Conservatism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
2. "Conservative, adj.," *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1888), 2:855.
3. John Ruskin, *Praeterita*, edited by Francis O'Gorman (1885; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7. As O'Gorman notes, these

sentiments were first aired years earlier in *Fors Clavigera* of October 1871 (O’Gorman, “Introduction,” xvi).

4. H. G. Wells, *Mr Britling Sees It Through* (London: Cassell, 1916), 16.
5. Benjamin Disraeli, “Conservative and Liberal Principles: Speech at Crystal Palace, June 24 1872,” in *Selected Speeches of the Late Right Honourable Earl of Beaconsfield in Two Volumes*, edited by T. E. Kebbel (London: Longmans, Green, 1882), 2:525.
6. Herbert Spencer, “The New Toryism,” *Contemporary Review* (Feb. 1884): 167.
7. Simon During, *Against Democracy: Literary Experience in the Era of Emancipations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

