THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

The Limits of Self-Critique

OLIVIA LINGYI XU

For some time now, Victorian studies as a field has been engaged in a sustained project of self-critique, attending to histories of structural and epistemic violence embedded in the various constituencies of the self—from what and how we study to who we are. Beyond the field, such self-critique forms part of what David Kurnick calls "the burgeoning tradition of disciplinary self-scrutiny" (350). The efflorescence of self-scrutiny in Victorian studies is carefully delineated in the two essays by Emily Steinlight and Jacob Romanow, both of which offer a measured reassessment of the limits not only of such field-specific self-critique but also of self-critique as a metacritical genre.

Steinlight's essay reminds us that self-critique can overextend the internal homogeneity and historical coherence of the self, even when the goal is to better critique it. By historicizing the "Americanness" of a Britain-centered Victorian studies, Steinlight reveals how the methodological emphases of some of the most influential field interventions, from interdisciplinarity to "strategic presentism" and critical race studies, should be contextualized within the successive yet differentiated operation of what we might call, appropriating Ernst Kantorowicz, the queen's two bodies of Victorian studies: the body natural of nineteenth-century Britain and the body politic of the postwar US academy. For Romanow, self-critique within Victorian studies risks "universalizing" the term *Victorian* precisely when it seeks to overcome the term's narrowness and exclusionism. In other words, an overinflated and undifferentiated notion of the self may be an unexpected byproduct of self-critique.

One lesson I take from these two essays is that the self is continually produced and reproduced through the very act of self-critique, instead

OLIVIA LINGYI XU is postdoctoral associate in the English department at Yale University, where she will begin as assistant professor in fall 2026. She is working on a book project that traces a translational history of the novel amid the tectonic shifts of two world-language regimes in the long nineteenth century: the rise of global English and the decline of Literary Sinitic as a literary lingua franca in East Asia.

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Modern Language Association of America
PMLA 141·2 (2026), doi:10.1632/S0030812926101849

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of existing prior to it. Taking up one claim of the V21 Collective's manifesto, that "in finance, resource mining, globalization, imperialism, liberalism, and many other vectors, we *are* Victorian," Steinlight asks, "But who—and where—are 'we'?" Romanow points out the field's worrying self-referential tendency in the face of a rapidly globalized collection of objects, in which "the unifying referent of Victorian scholarship has become, increasingly, simply us: the Victorianists." While the two essays apply pressure on the collective addresses of "we" from seemingly contrasting points of departure, the United States and the global, it is only by attending to these two contexts together that we may see how a US-inflected global vision and a globalized set of US academic priorities have (re)produced the different versions of Victorianists we are, and the different forms of self-critique we make.

In "Undoing NAVSA in Asia," Hyungji Park, Seohyon Jung, Haejoo Kim, Hee Eun Lee, and Sungmey Lee anticipate and address the question of who—and where—"we" are as Victorianists trained in the United States and based in South Korea. In the essay, Jung and Kim reflect on their experiences organizing a "Korean panel" at the 2022 North American Victorian Studies Association conference in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in the wake of calls to undiscipline Victorian studies:

> All identifying as Korean scholars, the panelists shared the feeling that the field wanted them to do something Korea-related, if not explicitly soliciting them to write on nineteenth-century Korea. Being native Korean speakers, they were eager to make use of their linguistic skill set—hitherto considered rather irrelevant to their academic expertise—for the collective efforts to diversify the field. . . . In Bethlehem, PA, they looked like native informants; they felt like native informants. After all, they were the "Korean panel" in an international conference held by a North American academic institution.
>
> (Park et al. 127–28)

As an audience member of this panel and someone who also hails from East Asia, a geopolitical and institutional context that conditions much of my discussion below, I resonate deeply with, among many other things, the conflicted affective response of feeling simultaneously interpellated by and eager for the field's invitation to self-critique.

My observation is that disciplinary self-critique—especially when it proceeds from diagnoses of exclusion—often leaves those traditionally excluded uncertain, or even uneasy, about how they are meant to relate to such critique. In his recent essay "On 'Mesearch,'" Travis Chi Wing Lau asks, "In the face of so many calls to 'decolonize' the academy, what ethical responsibilities do marginalized scholars have to do 'mesearch' as opposed to pursuing their interest regardless of their alignments with their respective identities?" (305). If the rise of self-critique has brought about the collateral expectation of "mesearch," two manifestations of an increasingly self-interrogating and self-differentiating discipline, they are often associated, respectively, with the psychological states of masochism and narcissism that in operation are more coconstitutive than oppositional. In "Memoirs of an Old Victorianist," George Levine laments, "Who would escape whipping? What has been hardest for me in the new work of expansive, racially, sexually, open criticism is coming to terms with the implicit and often quite explicit condemnation of the great Victorian writers" (621). For Levine, the field has recently engaged in significant self-prosecution, turning against "the great Victorian writers" to whom we owe our intellectual formation and professional status. Yet the masochistic undertone of Levine's metaphor of whipping also prompts one to ask to what extent narcissism is implicated in the act of self-flagellation, a dynamic that indulges an extended preoccupation with the self rather than a movement beyond it.

While self-critique has become a dominant mode for imploding the cultural and institutional infrastructure of Victorian studies within US academe, "mesearch"—"the pervasive identitarian correspondence of scholar-subject and studied object"—is often encouraged for scholars who enter the field from "elsewhere," bringing with them linguistic expertise and lived knowledge from other area studies to globalize the field (Srinivasan 1). Paradoxically, it is sometimes those considered best equipped to diversify the discipline—almost simply

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

by being themselves—who feel the most ambivalent about doing so, owing to what Lau calls the perceived "narcissism inherent to marginalized scholars who cannot help but study themselves" (303). This fear of being read as a narcissist who cuts corners by studying oneself is only intensified when one's admission into US academia depends on how thoroughly such narcissism has been purged. As Shu-mei Shih observes from her own experience as a scholar of (and from) East Asia with a BA in English, "It is no secret that various humanities departments, when reviewing applicants from East Asia, look for some background in English and American literature: for linguistic proficiency, but also for conceptual frameworks that are compatible with those in the United States" (x). In other words, disciplinarity in "English and American literature" functions as a narcissism check for East Asian scholars formed outside colonial English educational structures: a "neocolonial" assimilation test "glossed over in the name of cosmopolitanism or academic rigor" (Shih x). How, then, do they—or rather we—reclaim a healthy dose of narcissism that we have been trained to renounce so masochistically?

The question of who gets to perform self-critique pertains not only to the positionality of individual scholars but also to the global disparities of Victorian studies as a field of knowledge. As recent field interventions emerge from what Steinlight rightly identifies as a "predominantly US context," they also leave the so-called rest of the world to grapple with their legacy. For those of us who regularly engage with scholarship in languages other than English, it is not unusual to observe how the nonanglophone academy, situated at the absolute periphery of a field like Victorian studies, has taken up the decolonizing initiatives hesitantly, even reluctantly, despite being cast as one of the potential beneficiaries of such initiatives. While writing this piece, I reviewed the most recent issues of 外国文学评论 (*Waiguo wenxue pinglun*; *Foreign Literature Review*), a leading Chinese-language literary studies journal that aims to "发表我国在外国文学研究领域中的最新成果,反映外国文学理论、思潮和创作中的新动向" ("publish our country's latest research in the field of foreign literary studies and reflect the new developments in the theories, trends, and creative writing of foreign literature"; *Foreign Literature Review*).[1] Notably, scholarship on Victorian literature is featured prominently even within the journal's expansive remit. Yet, in contrast to their peers in the anglophone academy who have embraced the undisciplining call, these scholars are producing work on Victorian studies that is more recognizably disciplinary, with an overwhelming focus on canonical British authors and literary texts.

Such choices of topic, as should be immediately clear, have less to do with critical sensibility than with the institutional infrastructure under which these scholars operate, such as publishing preferences, hiring priorities, and funding landscapes. These globally (read marginally) positioned scholars must perform "the impossible balancing act" of "navigating between different forms of academic authority" (Park et al. 132), such as managing the "duality" of "defending English within [their] institutions," often a minor discipline whose legitimacy heavily depends on the cultural capital of the canon, "while engaging with the global trend of 'undisciplining' the field" (135). As revealed in the citational politics of these essays in *Foreign Literature Review*, where authors cite anglophone scholarship extensively with little hope of reciprocity, such disciplinary conformity can be read as an "eager" act of cruel optimism, seeking a bond with, if not pledging loyalty to, a field that has never meaningfully recognized them as part of the discipline. While the prevalence of self-critique in the US academe signals a "global trend" in theory that scholars in the non-West must keep up with, it remains a privileged members-only exercise rarely available to academic peripheries. As Gao Fengfeng recently warned from the perspective of a scholar of Western literature trained in the United States and based in China, "西方的自我批判和自我校正,实际上是西方学术界和思想界为了应对西方自身的焦虑和麻烦而生发出来的" ("The self-critique and self-correction in the West are in fact generated by Western academics and intellectuals to address their own anxieties and problems"; 03:32:12–22).[2] For Gao, Western self-critique serves a self-directed

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

agenda, one no less Western-centric than its counterpart in self-affirmation.

While self-critique can be a litmus test that reifies and reproduces the fine-grained constituency of the self, it is equally capable of collapsing the meaningful distinction between the self and its opposite. In what follows, I turn to the fascinating yet ultimately tragic career of the Chinese Victorianist Wu Mi 吴宓 (1894–1978), whose lifelong commitment to an Arnoldian humanism was shaped by an education made possible through US imperial policies and who defended the value of Victorian literature across two pivotal cultural movements in modern Chinese history, each deeply invested in the practice of self-critique. I offer Wu as an example not only because his career anticipates and refracts many of the contemporary concerns of Victorian studies noted by Steinlight and Romanow, but also because his intellectual commitments expose the fraught affordances of self-critique as a conceptual and ethical project. While this context is primarily that of modern China, Rey Chow's observation remains enduringly relevant: "The ways in which modern Chinese history is inscribed in our current theoretical and political discourses, often without our knowing about them, are quite remarkable" (18).

Wu is best remembered today as one of the founding figures of academic English and comparative literary studies in China. In 1917, the twenty-three-year-old Wu sailed from Shanghai to America to study literature at the University of Virginia. This trip was funded by the American remission of the notorious Boxer Indemnity, a restitution program established after the US government had collected far more than its actual military expenditures in suppressing the Boxer Rebellion in Beijing in 1900. Long regarded in the United States as an early instance of Pax Americana benevolence, the remission was earmarked exclusively for the education of Chinese students in the United States, a program that turned out to be "arguably the most consequential and successful in the entire foreign-study movement of twentieth-century China" (Ye 10). After a year at Virginia, Wu transferred to Harvard College in 1918 to study with Irving Babbitt, the leading figure of the New Humanism movement in the Arnoldian tradition. During his time at Harvard, Wu took a wide range of courses in European and especially English literary traditions with a notable concentration in the nineteenth century, as demonstrated in coursework essays such as "A Report on Shelley's Views of Poetic Art," "Criticism of Tennyson's Locksley Hall," and "Criticism of George Eliot's Middlemarch" (Wu, *Wu Mi Zibian Nianpu* 181, 181, 197). His enthusiasm for the Victorian novel, and particularly for William Makepeace Thackeray, was cultivated in one of Harvard's most popular courses, The English Novel, taught by Gustavus Howard Maynadier. With a rare combination of expertise in both Western and Chinese literatures, Wu nonetheless felt ambivalent about becoming a comparatist studying his "own" literature. In a letter to Babbitt on 20 January 1920, he requested permission to change the title of his course thesis to "Some Accounts of Chinese Literary Tradition" (Wu, *Wu Mi Shuxinji* 2). Already anticipating a suspicion of "mesearch"—"for a Chinese student writing on things Chinese, the motive is apt to be laziness and the bad intention to save his own labor"—Wu hastened to add, with marked deference, that he was also willing to continue with his original topic, "Rousseau and Robespierre" (4). When Wu was later appointed chair of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Tsinghua University, an institution founded with the remitted Indemnity fund, his colleague the expatriate academic I. A. Richards described him in a letter to T. S. Eliot: "He is young, naïve, simple as a Huron, very scholarly in the old style. . . . He also lectures on Romantic Poetry! at Tsing Hua University. (Heaven knows what he says about it!)" (57).

Before his return to China in 1921, Wu was already actively involved in a radical moment of self-critique among the Chinese intelligentsia both at home and abroad in the late 1910s. The New Culture Movement was at its height: everything associated with traditional China, from Confucianism to Classical Chinese, was subject to attack, while Western knowledge was often celebrated unconditionally. With an American education in European humanistic traditions, Wu could not

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

have been better positioned to help lead this collective project of self-critique. In *Changing Referents*, Leigh K. Jenco argues that the West's contemporary efforts at self-critique have much to learn from late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals, who were "deeply concerned" with "their own received modes of knowing the world" (4). Instead of following Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to provincialize Europe, Jenco asks how China might be universalized in the sense that "alternative Chinese perspectives" can be mobilized to "effect more radical displacement" of the West's "disciplinary ethnocentrism" (6). China's self-critique a century ago, Jenco suggests, can serve not as a "historical" but as a "theoretical" model for the West's self-critique (6).

This wholesale self-critique, however, is precisely what Wu refused to partake in, a refusal that led to his long-standing reputation as a cultural conservative, the infamous antagonist of the New Culture Movement. In his 1922 essay "论新文化运动" ("Lun xinwenhua yundong"; "On the New Culture Movement"), Wu invokes Matthew Arnold's definition of culture as "the best of what has been thought and said in the world" to critique the movement's mode of self-critique (*Wu Mi Wenji* 1: 14). For Wu, proponents of the New Culture falsely assume an undifferentiated notion of the self—traditional Chinese culture—as a universal target that must be demolished in its entirety by appealing to an equally undifferentiated notion of the other (the West) as its remedy. The resulting self-critique, while obsessed with the West, is ironically made possible by a lack of substantive and nuanced engagement with it, and is therefore narcissistic in the sense of what Chow calls the "*narcissistic value-production within*—rather than in negligence of—the larger context of the legacy of *cultural imperialism*" (9). Wu illustrates this point in his vehement opposition to the key agenda of the New Culture Movement, the abolition of Classical Chinese, by drawing on literary resources from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English poetry. As he writes, "Pope、Byron、Tennyson 同用一种英文, 而其诗乃大别异。故不变文字之体制, 而文章之格调,本可自由变化, 操纵如意, 自出心裁。此在作者之自为之耳" ("Pope, Byron, and Tennyson all use the same English language, yet their poetry is markedly distinct. Without altering the system of language, the style of literary writing can change freely in the hands of the author according to his own design"; *Wu Mi Wenji* 1: 11). By deploying English literature as a contrastive, as well as a comparable, lineage that the New Culture Movement habitually cites yet rarely scrutinizes, Wu reveals how its iconoclastic self-critique can hardly do justice to the other that it so readily summons.

While Wu was deeply skeptical of the stark opposition between China and the West that animated the New Culture Movement's project of self-critique, he would later find that very opposition dissolved when he himself became the target of a new regime of critique. In a diary entry from 21 October 1964, shortly before the full onset of the Cultural Revolution, Wu recorded a meeting in which intellectuals like him were no longer critics of the nation but subjects of national critique as apostles of Western, capitalist, and reactionary ideologies, and thus required to "自我改造, 对自己开刀" ("transform the self by turning the scalpel on oneself"; *Wu Mi Riji xubian* 380–81). Nine days later, he was placed before a collective criticism meeting held by his department at Southwest Normal College, where one of the charges leveled against him was related to his teaching of Victorian literature: "夫狄更斯专主人道主义, 此岂可宣扬者耶" ("Dickens is devoted to humanism—how could ideas like this ever be propagated?"; 424).

What Wu was subjected to here was the well-known practice of "criticism and self-criticism," a Marxist-Leninist method adapted by Mao Zedong within the Chinese Communist Party as a central mechanism of self-scrutiny. The Maoist model of self-critique subsequently became an influential Chinese methodological export across the world, especially in the United States. Scholars such as Colleen Lye and Cynthia Yuan Gao have shown the broad theoretical appeal of criticism and self-criticism to the US New Left in the 1960s and 1970s, when "Maoist theories were read, adapted, and reinterpreted in the liberation movements—women's

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

liberation, gay liberation, US Third Worldism—and even beyond formal political groups, from radical psychoanalysts to theater groups" (C. Gao). Wu's self-critique was thus not an exclusively Chinese phenomenon and should be situated alongside broader global Maoist practices. In a 1952 essay tellingly titled "改造思想, 站稳立场, 勉为人民教师" ("Gaizao sixiang, zhanwen lichang, mianwei renmin jiaoshi"; "Reform Thinking, Hold Fast the Line, and Strive to Be a Teacher of the People"), Wu pleads guilty to having subscribed to an Arnold-Babbitt critical tradition through a US-sponsored education:

> 我所受的教育, 是欧美资产阶级的教育. . . . 清华是用美国退还的庚子赔款所办, 而间接受美国人管理的学校. . . . 我在留学时期所吸收来的, 是西洋的保守的反动的资产阶级思想, 是现代欧美资产阶级维持他们的残酷的剥削与统治所凭藉的学说, 亦即是帝国主义实行侵略所利用的文化宣传资料。 (*Wu Mi Wenji* 3: 2028)

> The education I received was that of the Euro-American bourgeoisie. . . . Tsinghua was founded by the American remission of the Boxer Indemnity and thus indirectly managed by Americans. . . . What I absorbed from my study abroad was the conservative, reactionary bourgeois thoughts of the West, the doctrine on which modern Euro-American bourgeoisie maintain their brutal exploitation and domination, the cultural propagandist materials through which imperialism carries out its aggression.

Wu's self-critique, produced under the pressure of the Thought Reform Campaign launched in 1951, anticipates in uncannily similar wording the contemporary West's self-critique. That the same ideological critique can be mobilized and manipulated to serve radically divergent political projects should be a sobering reminder that its claim to universal truth is itself historically contingent and politically instrumental.

While Wu's Westernness was the object of self-critique in this context, Wu was also faulted for failing to join China's collective self-critique decades earlier during the New Culture Movement, a reactionary stance that demonstrates, in his own words, that "我曾挂着中西合璧、新旧兼营的招牌, 在制造着、贩卖着双料加工的思想毒素" ("I carried the special brand of combining both Chinese and Western ideas, mixing the old and the new, therefore producing and peddling a double-processed ideological toxin"; *Wu Mi Wenji* 3: 2029). By admitting that the source of his ideological corruption is Western, Chinese, and any combination of the two, Wu's self-incrimination is a blanket attack on the self, an ultimate form of masochism. His self-critique is therefore both personally tragic—Wu would not recover from this incrimination in his lifetime—and yet conceptually vacuous: it is difficult to take this critique seriously because its performative masochism is intended to function as a mode of virtue signaling. It fails as critique insofar as it substitutes totalizing self-implication for exacting self-scrutiny. Wu's tragedy is then an example of what Nan Z. Da terms the tragedy of disambiguation, a critical project of "distinction-making" that "becomes tragic when it is rendered useless or when it leads to outcomes that are inhumane." The firsthand experiences Wu had with self-critique's twin impulses toward narcissism and masochism further help clarify the potential ethical and conceptual limits of the genre: autoconsolidating in its other-conjuring gesture, self-indulgent in its self-prosecuting orientation, and critically inane in its overzealous performance of critique. If these instances of self-critique might at first seem like model practices, let them be cautionary tales as well.

Notes

I am grateful to Nathan Hensley, Meghna Sapui, Xuesong Shao, and Asa Chen Zhang for their invaluable feedback on an early version of this essay, and above all for their friendship.

1. All translations are my own.
2. By "Western academics," Gao refers to academics either from the West or based in the West, including non-Western scholars who received their education and began their academic careers in the West (03:26:02–32).

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Works Cited

Chow, Rey. *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*. Indiana UP, 1993.

Da, Nan Z. "Disambiguation, a Tragedy." *N+1*, no. 38, fall 2020, www.nplusonemag.com/issue-38/essays/disambiguation-a-tragedy/.

Foreign Literature Review. www.wgwxplzz.cn/. Accessed 16 May 2026.

Gao, Cynthia Yuan. "'Don't Wave It, Use It!': Maoist Criticism/Self-Criticism and the US New Left." *Positions Politics*, Jan. 2024, positionspolitics.org/dont-wave-it-use-it-maoist-criticism-self-criticism-and-the-us-new-left/.

Gao Fengfeng, panelist. "三联学术论坛: 从哪里来,到哪里去? 中国人文学科四十年" ["Sanlian xueshu luntan: Cong nali lai, dao nali qu? Zhongguo renwenxueke sishinian"]. *Bilibili*, 28 Sept. 2025, www.bilibili.com/video/BV1VRnZzWE1z/.

Jenco, Leigh K. *Changing Referents: Learning across Space and Time in China and the West*. Oxford UP, 2015.

Kurnick, David. "A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Our Method Melodramas." *ELH*, vol. 87, no. 2, 2020, pp. 349–74.

Lau, Travis Chi Wing. "On 'Mesearch.'" *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2025, pp. 302–13.

Levine, George. "Memoirs of an Old Victorianist." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2020, pp. 601–22.

Lye, Colleen. "Identity Politics, Criticism, and Self-Criticism." *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 119, no. 4, 2020, pp. 701–14.

Park, Hyungji, et al. "Undoing NAVSA in Asia." *Victoriographies*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2025, pp. 125–37.

Richards, I. A. *Selected Letters of I. A. Richards*. Edited by John Constable, Oxford UP, 1990.

Shih, Shu-mei. Preface. *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937*, U of California P, 2001, pp. vii–xiii.

Srinivasan, Ragini Tharoor. *Overdetermined: How Indian English Literature Becomes Ethnic, Postcolonial, and Anglophone*. Columbia UP, 2025.

Wu Mi. 吴宓日记续编: 1963–1964 [*Wu Mi Riji xubian: 1963–1964*]. Edited by Wu Xuezhao, Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi sanlian shudian, 2006.

Wu Mi. 吴宓书信集 [*Wu Mi Shuxinji*]. Edited by Wu Xuezhao, Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi sanlian shudian, 2011.

Wu Mi. 吴宓文集 [*Wu Mi Wenji*]. Edited by Wu Xuezhao, Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2024. 3 vols.

Wu Mi. 吴宓自编年谱: 1894–1925 [*Wu Mi Zibian Nianpu: 1894–1925*]. Edited by Wu Xuezhao, Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi sanlian shudian, 1995.

Ye, Weili. *Seeking Modernity in China's Name: Chinese Students in the United States, 1900–1927*. Stanford UP, 2001.

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101849 Published online by Cambridge University Press