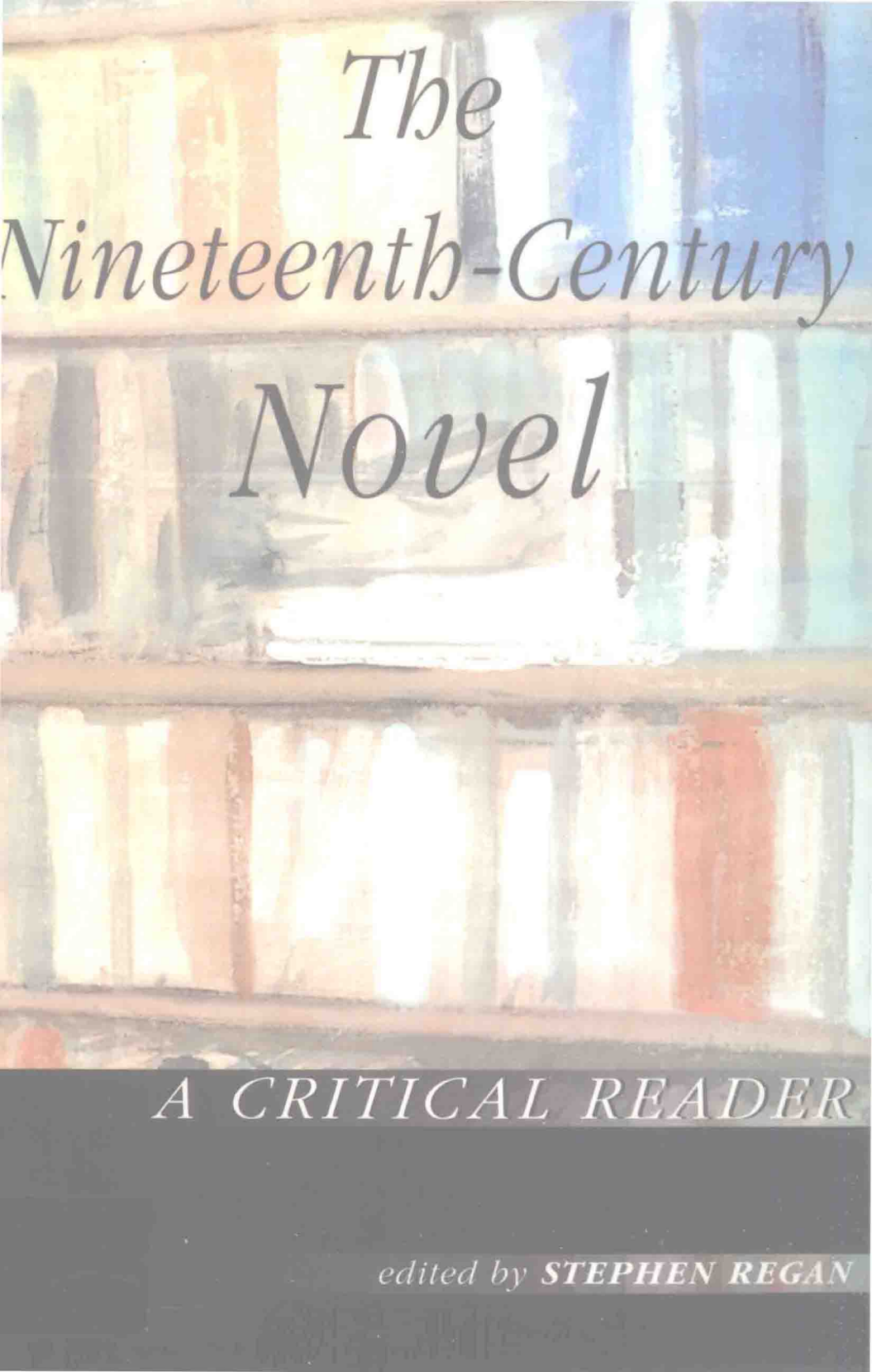
The
Nineteenth-Century
Novel
A CRITICAL READER
edited by STEPHEN REGAN

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PREFACE

This *Critical Reader* has a venerable predecessor: an anthology of writings on the nineteenth-century novel, edited by Arnold Kettle in 1972 and reprinted several times over the decade that followed. Like *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: Critical Essays and Documents*, this volume has been designed with an Open University course in mind. It is worth repeating the prefatory remark of that earlier book: that all anthologies involve a good deal of arbitrariness, but there is something to be said for one in which the selection of items has at least some logic, or even some built-in limitation to it. The current Open University course, 'The Nineteenth-Century Novel,' concentrates on twelve novels published between 1818 and 1902: *Northanger Abbey*, *Jane Eyre*, *Dombey and Son*, *Middlemarch*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *Germinal*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Woman in White*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Dracula*, *The Awakening* and *Heart of Darkness*.

The aim of this anthology is to make available to Open University students supporting material which is referred to and discussed in the teaching material provided for the course. Other readers of nineteenth-century novels will, I am sure, find much of interest and value in this particular selection of critical readings. An important consideration was to present to readers a variety of critical perspectives, combining some prominent and influential essays from the nineteenth century with some of the most incisive, original and accessible essays from the past few decades, mainly from the 1980s and 1990s. The volume is wide-ranging and eclectic in its selection of theoretical approaches to nineteenth-century fiction, and students will find here representative examples of formalism, Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, reader-response criticism, genre criticism and post-colonial theory.

Most Open University course books are the product of sustained collaborative effort, and this one is no exception. I should like to thank my colleagues on 'The Nineteenth-Century Novel' course team for their thoughtful contributions to the book. I owe a great debt of thanks to Julie Dickens, who has worked closely with me on every aspect of the book's production. I am also

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Stephen Regan

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INTRODUCTION

To read a selection of nineteenth-century essays on fiction alongside the critical opinions of a later century is to realise at once the vast and strangely troubling distance between two worlds of intellectual endeavour. Beyond this dramatic and immediate realisation of difference, however, we can begin to discern some surprising continuities and persistent concerns about the nature and purpose of novel writing. It is not just a matter of establishing a marker between 'then' and 'now'. The practice of criticism is so evidently a process: ideas about literature and its social significance are continually being shaped and reshaped, and are always open to debate. Nor is it a matter of observing some simple teleology of criticism, in which the best and most enlightened ideas endure while others wither away. Living in the early years of a new century is no guarantee of wisdom, but it does provide a convenient perspective from which to consider the long and complex reception history of nineteenth-century fiction, and to challenge any easy or settled distinction between 'Victorian' and 'modern' criticism.

The earliest extract in this Reader, from Clara Reeve's *Progress of Romance*, was written in the 1780s. To read it now is to return to a time when 'the novel' still had an air of novelty about it, and when 'realism' was only just beginning to acquire a set of conventions and descriptions. Reeve's series of 'evening conversations' about the practice of writing are largely preoccupied with defining literary forms such as the epic and the romance, and with distinguishing between these kinds of writing and the fictional enterprise that had only recently been termed 'the novel'. If romance is a type of 'heroic fable', the novel is 'a picture of real life and manners; and of the times in which it is written' (p. 14). This definition imparts a now familiar suggestion that the novel is capable of conveying a plausible image of social behaviour and historical events. What constitutes 'a picture', how that picture is composed, and with what degrees of accuracy or invention it 'represents' the world, will continue to be matters of debate. Reeve's interest in typology and genre, in plausibility and representation, and also in questions of morality and censorship, are not simply

superseded by later criticism. If later critics acquired a new and more extensive vocabulary for investigating the nature of fiction, they did not altogether abandon the claims and enquiries of their predecessors.

Sir Walter Scott carefully distinguishes between the romance, 'the interests of which turn upon marvellous and uncommon incidents', and the novel, in which 'events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events, and the modern state of society'. His caveat that there are, of course, 'compositions which it is difficult to assign precisely or exclusively to the one class or the other' (p. 22) seems entirely reasonable according to modern critical standards. Indeed, much of the later critical discussion in this volume, focusing on novels such as *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Eyre and *The Portrait of a Lady*, is concerned precisely with the blending and blurring of fictional modes, and with the persistence of romantic and Gothic elements in nineteenth-century fiction. Very few, if any, of the novels represented here might be said to neglect those essential constituents – the marvellous and the uncommon – which Scott sees as characteristic of romance.

Several essays in Part I of the Reader are concerned with particular novels and novelists, rather than with general statements and definitions. We can see the critical reputations of certain books and authors in the making, with Dickens providing an excellent example. Even though we might now read *Dombey and Son* with purportedly new insights – to do with gender or colonial expansion, for instance – there is nevertheless a sense of freshness and abiding relevance in what critics such as Hippolyte Taine have to say about the elements of grotesquerie, extravagance and pathos in the works of Dickens. We can turn to Henry James, a novelist testing his own critical assumptions in reviews of novels by his contemporaries, and we can find there a set of attitudes and ideas that have persisted in novel criticism for over a century. What James has to say about *Middlemarch* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* continues to exert enormous influence in critical assessment of the work of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy.

Nineteenth-century novel criticism was never narrowly preoccupied with authors and texts. If novels dealt with 'the modern state of society' as Scott claimed, then it followed that criticism, too, had a duty to reflect on social and political realities, and on the adequacy of fictional representations of 'real life'. What emerges very valuably from the essays included here is the extent to which early novel criticism was coterminous with other modes of cultural and political criticism. Nineteenth-century literary criticism is clearly in dialogue with contemporary writings on science, religion, sociology, philosophy and politics, and the range and diversity of its interests are immense. This large intellectual ambit is nowhere better seen than in George Eliot's remarkable essay, 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856). Eliot, like many later critics, gives considerable emphasis to the importance of social class in works of fiction: 'our

social novels profess to represent the people as they are, and the unreality of their representations is a grave evil' (p. 29). Her essay argues that art and social policy alike require a special study of 'the people as they are', but this radical conviction is muted by her otherwise conservative, organicist view of social change. The roots of social order must 'remain undisturbed while the process of development is going on' (p. 34). Eliot nevertheless provides a salutary reminder that the sociology of art and literature was not the sinister invention of Marxist critics at Essex University in the 1970s.

George Henry Lewes, with whom Eliot lived for nearly twenty-five years, shows a similar concern for the truthful representation of 'the people': 'Either give us true peasants, or leave them untouched . . . either keep your people silent, or make them speak the idiom of their class' (p. 38). Lewes offers a series of subtle discriminations between Art and Reality, Realism and Idealism, insisting all along that 'Art is a representation of reality' which 'must necessarily be limited by the nature of its medium' (p. 37). His shrewd and discerning remarks about the nature of fiction ought to dispel any casual supposition that nineteenth-century notions of realism were in any sense naive or limited. By 1860, the status of the novel as the dominant literary form of its time was assured, and criticism of the novel had also achieved widespread recognition and popularity. David Masson's *British Novelists and their Styles* (1859) can be regarded as an indication of these trends, being the first full-length critical appraisal of British fiction. At the same time, this growing self-confidence concealed the doubts and uncertainties that continued to trouble writers and critics of fiction alike, especially where the function of realism was concerned. As George Levine argues, nineteenth-century realism was not 'a solidly self-satisfied vision based on a misguided objectivity and faith in representation', but a highly self-conscious attempt to render experiences and events in words (Levine, 1981, p. 20).

While it is clearly important to emphasise some degree of congruence between nineteenth-century and twentieth-century critical opinions, including sophisticated doubts about the very nature of realism, we also need to register some of the seismic shifts that rocked Victorian society in its middle years and profoundly affected its cultural and artistic life. Criticism in the 1860s, especially, shows the powerful impact of new models of scientific enquiry. Darwinian notions of evolution have begun to permeate social and cultural theory, unfixing settled habits of belief, and transformations in philosophy, especially epistemology, have brought about a sharply sceptical spirit in criticism. Walter Pater's ruminations on the modern mind in his 1866 essay on Samuel Taylor Coleridge provide a startling instance of this radically altered disposition: 'To the modern spirit nothing is, or can be rightly known, except relatively and under conditions . . . Hard and abstract moralities are yielding to a more exact estimate of the subtlety and complexity of our life' (p. 49). Pater speaks for so

many nineteenth-century novelists – Eliot, Hardy, James and Conrad among them – when he acknowledges 'a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions, shifting intricately as we ourselves change' (p. 49).

What Pater recognises as the relative spirit is evident, too, in Friedrich Nietzsche's provocative essay of the same year, 'On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense'. Here, truth is but a figure of speech, an illusion we are so accustomed to living with that we have forgotten it is *only* an illusion. Since realism is a convention that changes according to the way in which each culture defines 'reality' and 'truth', it is hardly surprising that the 1860s should have witnessed a severe crisis of representation, and that new, potentially disturbing fictional types, such as the novel of sensation, should have exerted such a strong appeal. The popularity of the novel of sensation (as well as the fear and distrust it prompted) is clearly evinced in the essays by Margaret Oliphant and Henry Mansel, both published in 1862. Oliphant explicitly links the novel of sensation with ideas and values in 'a changed world' (p. 39), though her explanation of its advent has more to do with her fears of democracy (especially in France and America) than with any philosophical scruples. Her recoil from 'shock' and 'violence' in the novel of sensation needs to be understood in relation to the revolutionary tremors throughout Europe in 1848. Pater's relative spirit finds a political corollary in Oliphant's fearful perception that 'everything is legitimate, natural and possible' (p. 42).

E.S. Dallas acknowledges the emergence of the novel of sensation in *The Gay Science* (1866), defining it as a form in which considerations of plot take precedence over those of character, but his main interest is clearly in the mysterious workings of human psychology, in what he calls 'the hidden soul' (p. 55). His stirring account of 'that region of the mind that stretches out of consciousness' (p. 55) provides a fascinating anticipation of Freud. While sharing some of Pater's epistemological concerns, Dallas draws a sharp distinction between the unconscious realm of art and the conscious domain of scientific knowledge.

Dallas is one of the earliest critics to write about 'the art of fiction' (p. 60), a term that is taken up and used repeatedly in the debate initiated by Walter Besant and Henry James in the 1880s. Although disagreements are rife, the terms in which 'the art of fiction' is discussed at this time suggest a growing consensus about the status and prestige of the novel among the other 'fine arts'. Joseph Conrad's vivid account of 'the shape and ring of sentences' (p. 119) is an eloquent testimony to this growing emphasis on the formal properties of fiction. James politely eschews the call from Besant for rules and regulations to govern the art of fiction, yet his own critical practice (including the essays printed here, on Eliot, Hardy and Flaubert) repeatedly draws attention to the primacy of form. Much of the debate in the 1880s and early 1890s is generated by the impact of French naturalism, and the essays by Robert Louis Stevenson and Thomas Hardy in this volume both take a stance against the

allegedly excessive attention to detail in the writings of Émile Zola and his associates. Hardy's 1891 essay, 'The Science of Fiction' (an essay that deserves to be better known), is one of the strongest statements against mere 'copyism' in nineteenth-century fiction. Its sentiments appear at times to be firmly anti-realist, though (as Peter Widdowson has pointed out), Hardy's views about the transfiguring potential of art resemble those of Guy de Maupassant: 'The realist, if he is an artist, will seek to give us not a banal photographic representation of life, but a vision that is fuller, more vivid and more compellingly truthful than even reality itself' (quoted in Allott, 1959, pp. 29–30; Widdowson, 1997, p. 420).

The great value of these essays by Conrad, James, Stevenson and Hardy is that they confirm (should we ever need such confirmation) that nineteenth-century novelists were highly self-conscious practitioners, acutely aware of the artificiality of their own stylistic devices and narrative conventions. Well before the impact of modern critical theory, these writers identified and articulated 'the problem of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates' (Watt, 1957, p. 11). As Barbara Hardy points out in her essay in Part II, there are good reasons for considering Henry James as the founder of modern criticism of the novel. James provides us with further proof of how difficult it is to distinguish with any certitude between 'late Victorian' and 'early modern' thinking about the art of fiction.

In that difficult transition between the death of the old century and the birth of the new, another formidable and fertile thinker has equal claim on our attention. Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, by his own admission the great foundational work of his career, was itself a strange transitional phenomenon, first printed in 1899, though dated 1900 by its publisher. It became the biggest non-fiction bestseller of the twentieth century. The book's enduring popularity and fascination have much to do with the fundamental desire to discover meaning in dreams, to give some semblance of narrative coherence to the mind's assorted driftings. As John Forrester has recently suggested, the book retained its appeal, despite attacks on the scientific reputation of psychoanalysis, largely because Freud 'was always an artist . . . mistakenly though calculatingly dressed up as a scientist' (Forrester, 2000, p. 11). *The Interpretation of Dreams* coincided with a widespread critical investigation into the processes of creation. As well as providing a plausible link between dreams and imagination, the book also prompted new thematic and structural developments in literature, painting and film. As Forrester remarks, 'Freud's exploration of the dream-work and its relation to the persistence, vivacity and poignancy of our scattered memories from childhood has been the model for countless artists this century' (Forrester, 2000, p. 12).

Several essays in Part II demonstrate how powerful and persistent Freud's influence has been. Richard C. Carpenter's essay on *Far from the Madding*

Crowd is a good starting-place for readers interested in the application of Freudian psychoanalysis to literary texts. At a rudimentary level, it draws attention to the emotional disturbances caused by repressed desire, and it emphasises the prevalent use of phallic imagery in Hardy's novel. Judith Bryant Wittenberg also turns to psychoanalysis as a way of understanding desire and sexual awakening in Hardy's novel, but she supplements her Freudian reading with an extended analysis of 'the male gaze', drawing resourcefully on a popular dimension of feminist criticism in the 1980s. Freud is powerfully at play in the two essays on *Madame Bovary* by Tony Tanner and Elisabeth Bronfen. Tanner finds significant parallels between Freud's diagnosis of fetishism and Karl Marx's theory of commodification, while Bronfen extends a basic Freudian analysis of repression with the help of the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan. Psychoanalysis also features prominently in an essay on *Dombey and Son* by Catherine Waters, and it provides the basis for Phyllis Roth's discussion of vampirism in her essay on *Dracula*.

For ease of reference, the essays in Part II are organised according to the twelve novels under discussion. There are, however, alternative ways of approaching these essays. As we have seen, particular groups of essays serve to illustrate some of the major theoretical interests in modern criticism of the nineteenth-century novel, including feminism and psychoanalysis. The essays are diverse and eclectic in their methods of analysis and interpretation. Some are staunchly formalist and confine their investigations to issues of style and technique, while others draw extensively on Marxist historicism and cultural materialism, structural linguistics, reader-response criticism and post-colonial theory. Another way of using this volume is to approach the essays chronologically, observing in this particular selection of materials a highly compressed but nevertheless revealing history of novel criticism.

The earliest essays in the second half are the two pieces on Zola by George Lukács, written in 1936 and 1940. While other Marxist critics were turning their attention to the progressive elements in modernist experimentation, Lukács retained a firm belief in the efficacy of social realism and its capacity for rendering a comprehensive vision of social and historical change. For Lukács, the naturalist writer became a passive spectator, too remote from the great struggles of the age and ultimately lacking insight and conviction. The distrust and hostility with which Lukács writes about the naturalist method resurfaces in his later critique of modernist experiment in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1963). Raymond Williams, writing on Dickens and Hardy in 1970, sedulously avoids that earlier Marxist insistence on social realism and its apprehension of the 'totality' of social relations. Even so, Williams finds in nineteenth-century fiction the unmistakable signs of social upheaval, manifest in new forms of consciousness and experience that novels are capable of registering. At this stage in his career, Williams had not fully formulated the ideas and methods