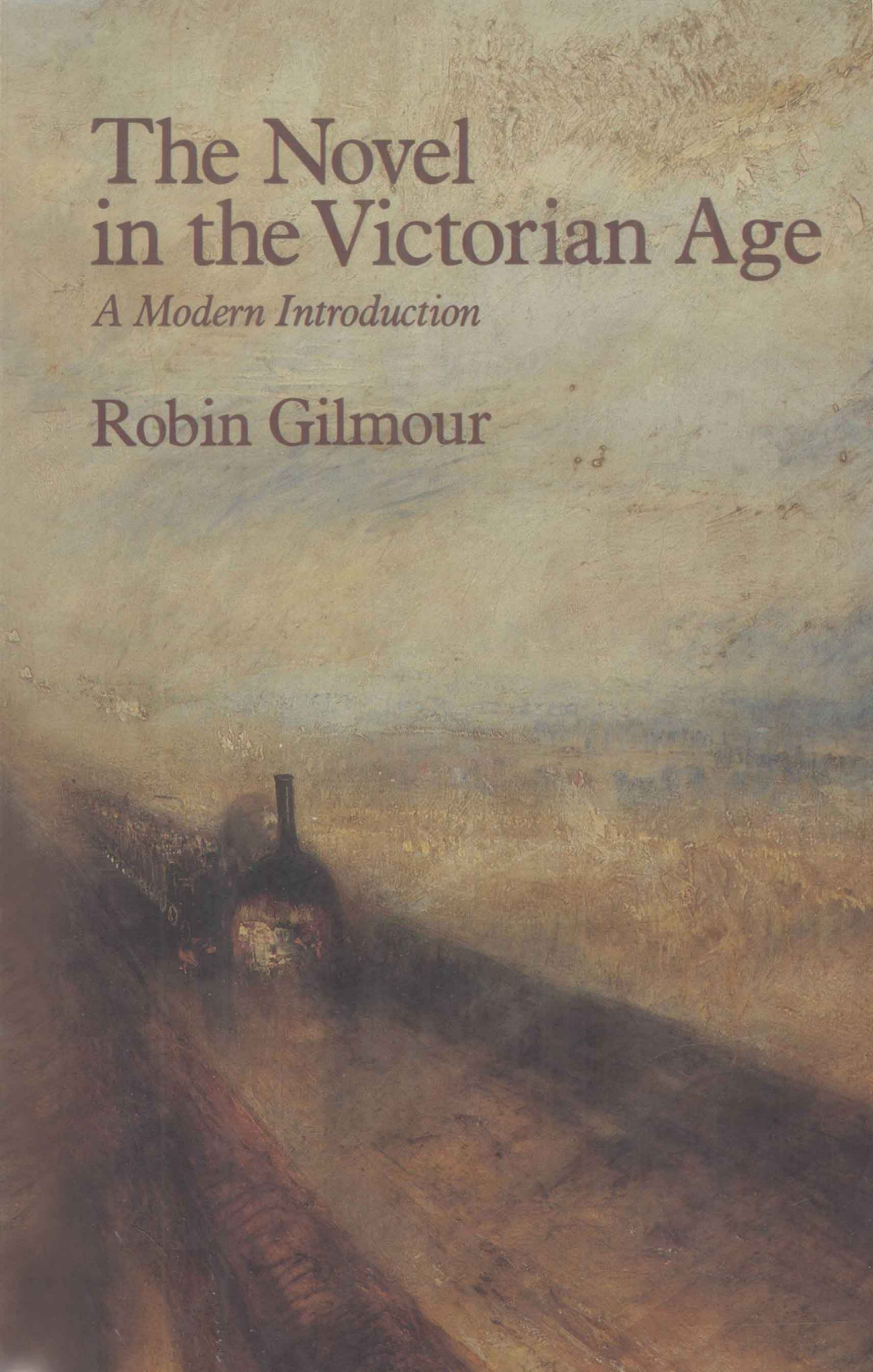# The Novel
in the Victorian Age

A Modern Introduction

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Preface

This book aims to be something more than a study of a few selected Victorian novels, and something less than a comprehensive history or survey of Victorian fiction. As the title suggests, I have attempted to provide an introduction to the work of the major and some minor Victorian novelists that is both critical and contextual; a study which will help the student and general reader find his or her way around a huge field, but which will also suggest some of the ways in which the novelists responded to, and were in turn influenced by, the social and cultural pressures of the age. For this reason the book has been organized mainly in groups of individual authors, focused around themes and issues set out at the start of each chapter. The exception is Dickens, who as the greatest of the Victorian novelists and the one who created the largest and most varied fictional world, has a chapter to himself.

If it is not to degenerate in a welter of names, dates, titles and plot summaries, a study of English fiction from 1837 to 1901 needs to be clear about its boundaries. Since my subject is the novel and the age, I have given less space than I would have wished to the Victorian historical novel, although this decision can perhaps be justified on the grounds that the genre is a relatively discrete one, which has been studied elsewhere (see Select Bibliography for chapter 3); it also reflects my view, argued at some length here, that the true achievements of the historical are to be found in the great mainstream Victorian novels rather than in the historical novel as such – in *Vanity Fair* rather than *The Virginians*, and in *Middlemarch* rather than *Romola*. In the matter of another large subgenre, the novel on religious themes, I have with some regret made a fairly ruthless distinction between those novels which seem to me now of narrowly doctrinal or period interest, and those of more lasting value. At the end of the period, I have interpreted my brief rather strictly to exclude the stories of Kipling and the novels of Conrad (the bulk of whose work falls in the Edwardian period); and in the case of Henry James to confine myself to his novels on English themes, and in that category to those which pre-date his later experimental phase. In this way it is hoped to preserve the shape and coherence of the book, and prevent the kind of diffuse conclusion that

tends to result when the policing is lax on that disputed border area between Victorian and Modern.

Finally, this is a study of the English Victorian novel, in its English rather than British context. As a Scot myself I am more than usually aware of the ways in which 'English' tends to appropriate 'British' in cultural (and other) matters, but to have written a history of the British Victorian novel would have made for a much longer and essentially different kind of book. Scottish literature had a profound impact on Victorian fiction through the novels of Sir Walter Scott, but the Scottish novel and the English novel remain in the end different animals, and are best approached – at least initially – in their separate habitats.

Acknowledgments

A book of this kind, ranging widely over a large field, is inevitably the product of many years of reading Victorian novels, and reading, thinking and talking about them. It would be impossible to acknowledge, or even perhaps fully to know, all the intellectual debts one has incurred over these years, but such as I have been aware of in the course of writing this study I have tried to acknowledge, either in the text itself or, more usually, since readability has been a chief consideration, in the footnotes and Select Bibliography. This is also the appropriate place to acknowledge some debts to myself: in chapter 5 I have drawn upon some material from my Introductions to the Penguin English Library editions of *The Warden* and *Barchester Towers*; in chapter 4 from an article on 'Memory in *David Copperfield*', published in *The Dickensian* in 1975; and in chapter 3 from an article on 'Scott and the Victorian Novel', in *Scott and His Influence*, ed. J.H. Alexander and D.S. Hewitt (Aberdeen, Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1983). I am grateful to the Editors concerned for permission to use this material.

I should like to thank the many friends and colleagues – too many to name individually here – from whose conversations on Victorian and other matters I have profited, and perhaps especially those students, in Aberdeen and Northern Ireland, who chose to take options I have offered in the area covered by this book. Their friendly participation helped me to focus and debate many of the ideas and issues discussed here.

Finally, I should like to thank the staff of the Queen Mother Library in Aberdeen for their friendliness, efficiency and helpfulness.

Note on Texts and References

References in the text are by chapter number, or by book or volume and chapter number, to editions of the novels specified in the *Texts* section which introduces the footnotes to each chapter of this study.

Contents

Introduction: The Novel and the Age

The supreme literary achievement of the Victorian age is in its prose fiction. However much we may value the Victorian achievement in poetry, it is in the novels of Dickens and George Eliot, Thackeray and Trollope, Charlotte and Emily Brontë and Hardy, that the creative strengths of the period are most powerfully concentrated. The greatness of these writers is inseparable from the fact that they were working in a great popular form in its heyday. 'We have become a novel-reading people', Trollope wrote in 1870. 'Novels are in the hands of us all; from the Prime Minister down to the last-appointed scullery-maid. We have them in our library, our drawing-rooms, our bed-rooms, our kitchens – and in our nurseries.'[1] In retrospect this seems an enviable situation: produced in huge quantities (it has been estimated that some 40,000 separate titles were published between 1837 and 1901), and consumed with that half-guilty compulsiveness which is surely the frame of mind every novelist would want in his reader, the novel had a directness of relation to the life of Victorian society that poetry on the whole lacked. Trollope observed in his *Autobiography* that people read novels more readily than poetry, 'but they read them, – as men eat pastry after dinner, – not without some inward conviction that the taste is vain if not vicious. I take upon myself to say that it is neither vicious nor vain' (12).

The significance of this popularity was not lost on perceptive contemporary observers. The poet Arthur Hugh Clough, for example, taking issue with the austere classicism espoused by his friend Matthew Arnold, asked why it was that people preferred reading *Vanity Fair* or *Bleak House* to reading modern poetry:

> Is it. . .that to be widely popular, to gain the ear of multitudes, to shake the hearts of men, poetry should deal more than at present it usually does, with general wants, ordinary feelings, the obvious rather than the rare facts of human nature?. . .The modern novel is preferred to the modern poem, because we do here feel an attempt to include these indispensable latest

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[1]'On English Prose Fiction as a Rational Amusement', in *Anthony Trollope: Four Lectures*, ed. M.L. Parrish (Constable, 1938), p. 108.

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addenda – those phenomena which, if we forget on Sunday, we must remember on Monday – those positive matters of fact, which people, who are not verse-writers, are obliged to have to do with. . .The novelist does try to build us a real house to be lived in; and this common builder, with no notion of the orders, is more to our purpose than the student of ancient art who proposes to lodge us under an Ionic portico.[2]

Poetry is dignified, fiction parvenu and opportunistic, concerned less with the 'orders' than with life. It would be wrong to slight the aesthetic properties of pre-Jamesian fiction, but at the outset it is worth stressing the other side of the coin: the informality and inclusiveness of much Victorian fiction, the easy, unembarrassed way the great novelists brought the crowded stuff of the world into their work, and by interpreting and humanizing it made the novel in fact, what the other literary forms at the time failed to be, the unofficial *magister vitae* of the age.

And yet 'the Victorian novel' is not readily grasped as an entity, however indispensable the phrase may be to literary historians and theorists. It is hard to find a definition that will encompass all the different fictional modes and formal changes occurring between the first numbers of *Pickwick Papers* in 1836 and the publication of *The Wings of the Dove* in 1902, and the difficulty of generalizing about the Victorian novel is similar to the difficulty of generalizing about the period itself. There can be no simple labels for a reign which begins, as one historian has put it, 'with bishops in cauliflower wigs and the great ones of the world driving in coaches with footmen behind, [and] ends with expensive people driving in motor cars and a leader of the House of Commons who rode a bicycle'.[3] The only key to this period of unprecedented change is the fact of change itself, and the Victorians' consciousness of it: they were the first people to prove on their pulses the knowledge that change – social, cultural, intellectual, religious – was not an interruption of an otherwise stable and predictable existence, but the inescapable condition of life in the modern world. Never before, Walter Houghton observes, 'had men thought of their own time as an era of change *from* the past *to* the future'.[4] Several factors combined to thrust this awareness on the first Victorians. There was, as a background to everything else, the unprecedented increase of population. The 1851 census revealed that the population of England and Wales had doubled since the start of the century, from 8.9 to 17.9 million; it was virtually to double again by 1901, to 32.5 million. (In the same period the population of the United Kingdom, which of course included Ireland, rose from 15.9 million in 1801, to 27.4 in 1851 and to 41.5 million

[2]*Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry 1830–1870*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (Athlone Press, 1972), pp. 154–6.
[3]G. Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England* (Methuen, 1962), p. 30.
[4]*The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830–1870* (New Haven, Yale, 1957), p. 1.

in 1901).[5] The same census revealed that in 1851 more than half the population of England and Wales was living in an urban environment, and while the definition of 'urban' in this context is a matter for debate, it remains a startling statistic – especially when one considers, as Geoffrey Best points out, that 'no other country in the world approached such a condition until after 1900'.[6] Such rapid urbanization was the result of industrialization, and the spectacular growth of the industrial city, especially in the north of England, was a contemporary wonder and a pressing social problem well before Victoria came to the throne. The first decade of her reign saw the virtual establishment of a national railway network, again a dramatically rapid (and haphazard) development which changed not only the landscape but age-old notions of time and distance.

If the railway engine and the industrial city were the most striking symbols of a new age, witnesses to the awesome power of human technology, then someone born at the start of the century – and Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontës, Trollope, Gaskell and George Eliot were all born in its second decade – would have lived through social, political and religious changes which in retrospect seem scarcely less profound. They would have seen their society make rapid advances in the civilization of everyday life, overhauling the old brutal criminal code with its savage punishment for slight offences, proscribing such cruel practices as the pillory (abolished in 1837) and the baiting of animals, establishing a Metropolitan Police Force in 1829 and extending it to the towns and country in the 1830s.[7] They would have lived in a climate of almost continual debate about parliamentary reform, and through a steady succession of 'blue books', the reports of the various parliamentary commissions appointed to look into almost every area of national life, which laid the groundwork for the great Victorian achievements in reforming legislation. They would have witnessed a series of religious upheavals brought on, initially, by the movement for reform in the relations of Church and State: Catholic Emancipation in the late 1820s, the Oxford Movement in the 1830s, the impact of geology and the 'Higher Criticism' in the 1840s, the public controversy following the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859. Matthew Arnold was not exaggerating when he wrote in 'The Study of Poetry' (1880): 'There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve.'

Although this consciousness of change runs throughout the period, it was probably most acutely felt during the years which, if we accept the

[5]Figures from Donald Read, *England 1868-1914* (Longman, 1979) pp. 6, 214.

[6]*Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-75* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), p. 6.

[7]There is a useful discussion of these reforms in Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England*, pp. 59–62.

tripartite division of the period used by most social historians, we may call the early Victorian era. This phase is bounded by the Reform Bill debates of 1831–2 at one end and by the 1851 Great Exhibition at the other, an event which symbolized the material self-confidence of a people emerging from recent upheavals into the new dawn of Free Trade and industrial supremacy. The first ten years of Victoria's reign, in particular, were a time of acutely felt change and crisis: the years of the coming of the railways, of the rise and decline of Chartism, of the successful activities of the Anti-Corn Law League – a period marked by a great social disaster, the Irish potato famine, and by a great, symbolic legislative decision, the repeal of the corn laws in 1846. The mid-Victorian era can also be seen as a stretch of two decades, from 1851 to the start of the so-called 'Great Depression' in the middle 1870s, a time when the hopes of the Free Traders who had fought for repeal seemed to be realized in a rising prosperity born of Britain's world dominance in commerce and manufacturing industry. In these decades the conflicts of the 1830s and 40s seemed to be settling into a state of balance, and this, to many middle-class observers at any rate, was a sign of the strength and flexibility of Britain's political institutions, and the healthy naturalness of a widely shared moral code based on work, duty, earnestness and the sanctity of the domestic affections. This period of 20 or so years is the high noon of Victorian optimism, and has been called the Age of Equipoise – the title of an influential study by the historian W.L. Burn. The balance starts to go in the later Victorian period, when a number of developments – the challenge to Britain's industrial supremacy and imperial expansion from Germany, political unrest, the fracturing of the mid-Victorian cultural consensus under the impact of new ideas – contribute to a mood of anxiety and slipping confidence. There were important continuities as well, of course, but the sense of a society in transition to less hopeful destinations is marked towards the end of the century.

The development of the novel is not so easily demarcated into early, mid- and late-Victorian phases, because it is dependent on the careers of the major figures and these, inevitably, cut across the historical boundaries. But a tripartite division of the period, flexibly applied, can help us to understand Victorian fiction also, and this is reflected in the shape of the present study. Again, the 1840s are a crucial decade. One has only to think of some of the novels published then – *Vanity Fair*, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Dombey and Son* – to realize what an astonishing period of creative innovation this was. The relations between the novel and society are particularly close and fascinating here: nearly every major novel of the decade can be seen as a response, direct or indirect, to the upheaval of the time. This is true not only of the descriptions of railway construction and travel in *Dombey and Son*, and of novels like *Sybil, Mary Barton* and *Alton Locke* which attempt to explore what Carlyle called the

'Condition-of-England question', but also of the rise of the fictional auto-biography or *bildungsroman* in *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield*. The two impulses go together at this time. The search for coherence and stability in the self, for the continuities of personal memory, becomes an urgent task when the individual is confronted with discontinuities in the world out-side. The sense of the present and the sense of the self – the titles of chapters 2 and 3 of this study – need to be seen as complementarities and not opposites, if the character of early Victorian fiction is to be properly understood.

But by the 1850s the mood has changed. Some of the tension, the sense of crisis, has gone. Not from Dickens's fiction, which moves in the 50s and 60s from the buoyancy of *Copperfield* to something like apocalyptic pessi-mism in *Our Mutual Friend*. But in the case of Thackeray, who turns to historical fiction (*Esmond, The Virginians*) and family saga (*The Newcomes*), and in that of Elizabeth Gaskell, who turns to the middle-class experience of social change (*Cranford, North and South*), there is a move-ment towards more relaxed and 'domestic' fictions. By the late 1850s it becomes possible to talk of an 'equipoise' phase in the Victorian novel, extending from the publication of Trollope's *Barchester Towers* in 1857 and George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* in 1858, to *Middlemarch* in 1871–2. This is the great age of domestic realism, a time of relative stability when novelists could settle to the leisurely depiction of everyday middle-class life; an era of spacious narratives, prolific in sub-plots and running into series, such as Trollope's 'Chronicles of Barsetshire' (1855–67) and Mrs Margaret Oliphant's 'Chronicles of Carlingford' (1863–76). It is a time when an awareness of regional difference, sharpened by recent change and in particular the coming of the railways, inspired the novel of English provincial life, contemporary in Trollope, remembered from childhood and youth in Gaskell's Cranford and Hollingford, George Eliot's St Oggs and Middlemarch. It also sees the rise of another dis-tinctively Victorian genre, the so-called 'sensation novel' associated with Wilkie Collins – the lurid antitype of the domestic novel, dealing melo-dramatically with a hidden world of middle-class nightmare.

The later Victorian period presents a more diffuse picture as novelists like Meredith, James and Hardy grow from Victorian roots into more modern forms of consciousness. Hardy in particular moves within the space of 20 years from the pictureque pastoralism of *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), subtitled 'A Rural Painting of the Dutch School', to the tragic rural painting of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), where the seduction of a dairymaid can call Providence into question, and the subtitle – 'A Pure Woman' – issues a direct ethical challenge to the Victorian reader. By 1890, too, a perceptible movement inwards has occurred in English fic-tion, away from the crowded canvas of the mid-Victorians towards a more private, psychological kind of novel. If any single work can be said to mark

the transition from mid- to late-Victorian, it is *Daniel Deronda* (1876). George Eliot's only novel of near-contemporary life, it makes a break not only with her usual world of memory but also with history and with realism, combining the visionary romance of Deronda's discovery of race and destiny with a pioneering analysis of marital unhappiness and disturbed psychology in the heroine, Gwendolen Harleth. Gwendolen's sisters, in varying degrees spirited, nervous and independent, and trapped in claustrophobic marriages or engagements, are at the heart of the most 'modern' novels of the time: Meredith's Clara Middleton in *The Egoist* and Diana in *Diana of the Crossways*, James's Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Hardy's Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure*, Laura Fountain in Mrs Humphry Ward's *Helbeck of Bannisdale*, and many others. Nothing, Henry James wrote in 1899, 'is more salient in English life today, to fresh eyes, than the revolution taking place in the position and outlook of women – and taking place much more deeply in the quiet than even the noise on the surface demonstrates'.[8]

The foregoing is a snapshot view of the main lines of development in Victorian fiction. But what of the readers of these novels? Who were they, in what forms did they receive their fiction, and what expectations did they bring to their reading? In the first place, the readership for the novels discussed in this study was predominantly middle-class. Economic factors, and the general level of literacy in England before the 1870 Education Act, ensured that most readers for new fiction would come from the middle classes – a greatly expanded social category in the Victorian age, but still not wide enough to take in many of the poor, for whom other kinds of fiction catered. To Wilkie Collins in 1858 the poor were the 'Unknown Public', a vast potential readership of the future, but at that time reached only by Dickens, and even then less by the monthly instalments of his novels (which at a shilling each were expensive for a working-man) than by his weekly magazines at twopence, and perhaps especially by such admirable ventures as the publication in penny-halfpenny weekly parts of the 'Cheap Edition' of his works.[9] Otherwise most Victorian novelists were conscious of writing for a middle-class and predominantly family audience, increasingly accustomed to the practice of reading aloud in the family circle.

There were three principal outlets available to the aspiring novelist: publication in book form, usually in three volumes, serialization in a magazine or periodical, and serialization in monthly parts. To take serialization first, it was usual throughout the period for magazines like

[8]'The Future of the Novel', in *The House of Fiction*, ed. L. Edel (Hart-Davis, 1957), p. 57.

[9]See R.D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1957), and Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man* (OUP, 1963; Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973). Wilkie Collins's article on 'The Unknown Public' appeared in *Household Words* XVIII (1858), pp. 217-24.

Fraser's and *Blackwood's* to carry a certain amount of short fiction and the occasional novel. *Bentley's Miscellany* serialized *Oliver Twist,* and Dickens's *Household Words* carried *Hard Times* and *North and South.* Its successor *All the Year Round,* founded in 1859, contained rather more fiction: *A Tale of Two Cities, The Woman in White* and *Great Expectations* were all serialized in its first two years. But the breakthrough in magazine serialization really came with George Smith's decision to set up the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1860 under the editorship of Thackeray. The phenomenal success of this venture in its early years was to spell the end of the other great serial form of the period, the monthly number. This previously 'low' form of popular publication – Deborah Jenkyns in *Cranford,* it may be recalled, considered it ' "vulgar, and below the dignity of literature, to publish in numbers" ' (1) – was revived and greatly expanded by Dickens in *Pickwick Papers,* which established a form which he and Thackeray were to use for many of their novels: that is, 20 monthly instalments published as 19, the last being a double number, each containing 32 pages of text and two or more illustrations, and selling at one shilling. The reader could thus purchase a novel which was significantly longer than the three-decker for two-thirds of the price: 20 shillings against an exorbitant 31/6d. The monthly part helped to create a unique intimacy between the author and his readers, who were used to living with his creations over a long period of time and could influence their development – sometimes dramatically, as Mrs Seymour Hill did when she objected to her incarnation as Miss Mowcher in *David Copperfield* and threatened to sue,[10] or more usually through fluctuating sales, which would lead a novelist to develop a popular character, or initiate a change in direction: Sam Weller in *Pickwick Papers* is an instance of the one, and the American chapters in *Martin Chuzzlewit* of the other, introduced to boost that novel's flagging fortunes. Structurally, the novel in numbers encouraged thematic parallelism as a means of orchestrating a large cast of characters and achieving the necessary effect of the whole moving through the part; and in Dickens's case it probably encouraged his tendency to signal character through a few striking phrases or mannerisms, which make his people immediately memorable and therefore easier to carry across the gap between instalments.

Popular as the monthly number was in the hands of a Dickens, his sales at their best – and they fluctuated greatly[11] – were half that achieved by the early issues of the *Cornhill Magazine.* Carrying two lead serials, Thackeray's *Lovel the Widower* and Trollope's *Framley Parsonage,* plus illustrations, it was selling 100,000 copies at a shilling each. New areas of middle-class readership for quality fiction seemed to have been tapped. The *Bookseller* commented: '*The Cornhill Magazine* has opened our eyes to the great fact of their being a very large, and hitherto overlooked mass of

[10]See J. Butt and K. Tillotson, *Dickens at Work* (Methuen, 1968), pp. 141–2.
[11]See Robert L. Patten, *Charles Dickens and His Publishers* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1978).

readers for literature of high class. Whoever believed that a hundred thousand buyers could be found, month after month, for that serial?'[12] The other big publishing-houses followed the *Cornhill*'s lead, with the result that the magazine soon replaced the monthly part as the chief serial outlet for quality fiction. The standard was high. The *Cornhill* published the last novels of Thackeray, Trollope's *Framley Parsonage* and *The Small House at Allington*, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, some of Henry James's early stories, and two novels by Hardy. Profits were high, too, at least in the early years, and a price in censorship was exacted for this new route to the family reading market. Thackeray was notoriously squeamish about what he would accept, and even Leslie Stephen, when he became editor in 1871, felt compelled by the magazine's reputation to reject *The Return of the Native*, although he had previously published *Far From the Madding Crowd*.

Important as these different forms of serialization are to an understanding of the relationship between the Victorian novelists and their readers, the majority of Victorian novels made their first appearance in three volumes, and were not purchased but borrowed, from the circulating libraries of the time. Chief among these was the Victorian institution known as Mudie's, the lending library started by Edward Mudie from a shop in Bloomsbury in 1842, and which in ten years expanded to dominate the market. A man of evangelical sympathies and keen business sense, Mudie made two decisive innovations in the sleepy world of the lending library as he found it: he cut the annual subscription rate to one guinea per exchangeable volume, or two guineas for four, and he advertised his library as 'Select', thereby announcing the proprietorial control he was prepared to exercise over the books he stocked. The Victorian paterfamilias soon came to know that nothing his wife or daughters borrowed from Mudie's would bring a blush to their cheeks or be considered unseemly on the drawing-room table. Value for money and fitness for family readership, boosted by advertising and efficient distribution throughout the country and overseas, made Mudie's pre-eminent for almost 50 years; and with pre-eminence came the large purchases of new literature (at considerable discount) which gave Mudie his great influence over the fiction market. Other libraries continued to function, but the only serious rival to Mudie's was W.H. Smith, who started their railway bookstalls in 1848 and added lending sections a decade later.

The usual progress for a successful Victorian novel was publication in three volumes, or serialization followed by such publication, adoption by the circulating library – preferably Mudie's – and the consequent large purchase, and then after a year's library circulation, a single-volume reprint, usually at 6/-, followed by a second, cheaper reprint, and possibly

[12]Quoted by John Sutherland in *Victorian Novelists and Publishers* (Athlone Press, 1976), p. 43.

a 2/- 'yellowback' for railway bookstalls. The very high price of a guinea-and-a-half for the original inhibited purchase, but of course suited the libraries, which could circulate a single novel to three different subscribers. Success at Mudie's influenced publishers in their decisions on whether to reprint a novel or not, and rejection was usually fatal, except for those who could command a readership through the magazines. Contemporary estimates of the numbers of Mudie's subscribers range from 50,000 at the mid-Victorian peak to half that by 1890, figures that need to be multiplied several times to arrive at the actual readership, when the size of Victorian families and the habit of reading aloud in the family circle are taken into account. The system had obvious disadvantages which critics throughout the period were increasingly to deplore: chiefly, censorship in sexual matters, the straitjacket of the three-decker, and its excessive cost to those who might want to purchase rather than borrow their fiction. There is, however, something to be said on the other side. The circulating library provided a ready and relatively steady market for a large number of novelists, many of them minor writers who would not have survived without the modest returns they could rely on from a Mudie purchase. The censorship exerted on behalf of the young person was no doubt restrictively and, as George Moore was to argue, arbitrarily and hypocritically applied, but the blushing cheek could be forestalled by skilful writing, and the corollary was that Mudie did help to create and sustain a family readership for fiction, which in turn helped to establish the respectability of the novel as a form and its claim to a morally educative role in contemporary society. Even the three-decker form, while it forced the reluctant novelist into prolixity and inhibited the development of shorter fiction, encouraged the spaciousness of narrative description and commentary which gives the great Victorian novels their sweep and moral grandeur.

What expectations did the Victorians have of their fiction? We may be sure that many of them read novels – as most people read novels – for escape and diversion. Charles Darwin was such a reader. He found novels a 'wonderful relief and pleasure' to him in later life, and wrote: 'I like all if moderately good, and if they do not end unhappily – against which a law ought to be passed. A novel, according to my taste, does not come into the first class, unless it contains some person whom one can thoroughly love, and if it be a pretty woman all the better'.[13] This predilection for the happy ending and the loveable character is more deeply rooted in Victorian taste than perhaps we like to think today, and it was potentially in conflict with another assumption of the period, that art should take its material from ordinary life and deal with it in an appropriate manner. The tension between 'idealism' and 'realism', between (to simplify) the happy ending which consoles and the unhappy ending which is true to life, is present in

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[13]*Autobiography*, ed. G. de Beer (OUP, 1974), p. 83.

much Victorian fiction and reviewing. The realist impulse led novelists like Thackeray and George Eliot to emphasize the unheroic character of most human behaviour, the determining power of environment, the probability of failure; but it remains just that, an impulse, a tendency, peaking at certain times and in certain classic novels – with *Vanity Fair* (1847–8), *Adam Bede* (1859), *Esther Waters* (1894) – but always existing against the background of other possibilities which the major novelists, for various reasons, were unwilling to relinquish. For convenience, and because the Victorians themselves used the terms, we can class these other possibilities under the heading Romance, and employ Henry James's useful distinction between the 'real' as 'the things we cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later', and the 'romantic' for 'the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and desire' (Preface to *The American*). Most of the great Victorian novelists acknowledged the 'real' but were not imprisoned by it; they kept the door open to the transforming energies of romance, with its 'subterfuge' promise that life might be shaped to the heart's desire. So Dickens can say in the Preface to *Bleak House* that he has 'purposely dwelt on the romantic side of familiar things' – an art of the real transfigured by poetry. Romance in its various guises is never very far away, never routed by the periodic onslaughts on its falsifications made by the realist novel. *Vanity Fair* is such a novel, but it was published in the same years as *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, classics of romantic fiction. Trollope aspires to write a fiction 'shorn. . .of all romance',[14] but he does so at a time when gothic romance was all the rage, in the shape of the sensation novel. The 1880s and 90s see a move towards Naturalism, but also a counter-move in the vogue for Meredith and the Stevensonian novel of adventure. Even in ostensibly 'realistic' writers the romantic mode is never banished. Thackeray wrote *The Rose and the Ring* as well as *Vanity Fair*; George Eliot *Silas Marner*, a fable of secular providence, as well as the deterministic *Middlemarch*.

The label 'realistic', then, cannot be applied to the great Victorian novelists without many and continuing qualifications. But there is one sense in which they can be called realists. They may have differed over the modes of their fiction, but they all believed that fiction was an art of the real, that novels could tell the truth about reality, and in doing so exhort, persuade and even change their readers. The modern notion of the novelist as magician or trickster was essentially alien to them. Although Dickens was a brilliant manipulator of his reader, like Nabokov, he could never have written as Nabokov did that 'To call a story a true story is an insult to both art and truth. Every great writer is a great deceiver, but so is that arch-cheat Nature.'[15] All Dickens's statements about his art reveal his

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[14] *The Letters of Anthony Trollope*, ed. N. John Hall (2 vols., Stanford, Stanford UP 1983) I, p. 238; letter of 18 October 1863.
[15] *Lectures on Literature* (Picador, 1983), p. 5.