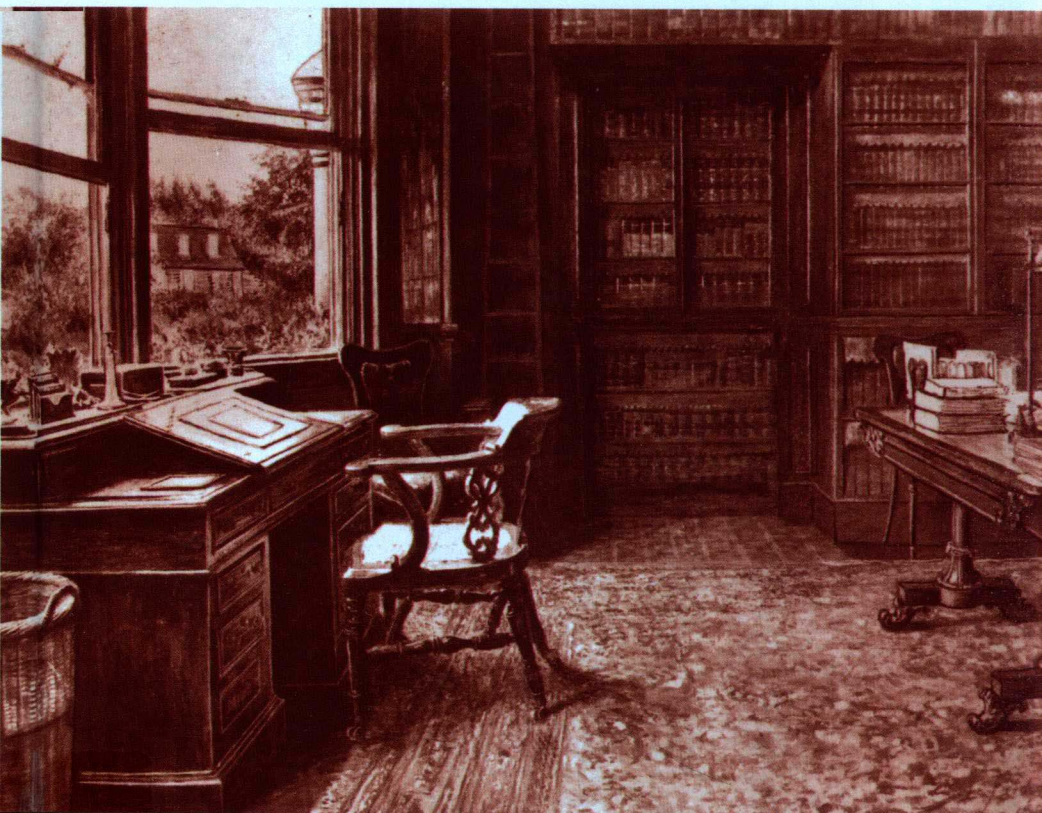
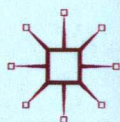


Victorian Unfinished Novels

The Imperfect Page



Saverio Tomaiuolo



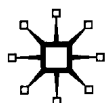
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The Imperfect Page

Saverio Tomaiuolo



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Introduction: The Sense of Unending. Closing Charlotte Brontë's 'Emma'

Sometimes silences can speak more than words. Either as deliberate omissions, gaps, and moments of reticence, or as empty pages or incomplete written statements, they can raise and generate expectations, hopes, fears, doubts, certainties, anguish or misunderstandings. Silences can replace words that cannot be said, or that are too strong, explicit, tragic, dangerous, or compromising to be said. In this sense, we may refer to a letter written by Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey on 19 January 1855 as an emblematic lesson in reticence. Not many months had passed since that quiet June morning of the previous year, when Charlotte – wearing a simple and plain white muslin dress with delicate green embroidery and a white bonnet trimmed with lace – married Arthur Bell Nicholls after a few hesitations, and after the initial stern opposition of her old father Patrick. Their marriage was followed by a honeymoon in Ireland (where Nicholls's family and relatives lived), during which Charlotte was almost certainly initiated into the surprises, discoveries, pleasures and eventual consequences, of sexual intercourse. In her letter to 'dear Nell' written in Haworth Parsonage (which had been readjusted to welcome the newlyweds), Charlotte describes the peculiar 'sickness' she has been suffering from lately:

My health has been really very good ever since my return from Ireland till about ten days ago, when the stomach seemed quite suddenly to lose its tones – indigestion and continual faint sickness have been my portion ever since. *Don't conjecture – dear Nell – for it is too soon yet – though I certainly never before felt as I have done lately.* But keep the matter wholly to yourself – for I can come to no decided opinion at present.¹

Charlotte's reticence on 'the matter' speaks more than words, and although she asks Nell not to 'conjecture', her symptoms may be associated with the early stages of pregnancy. On 30 January 1855, Dr William MacTurk visited her and ascribed her sickness to 'natural causes', telling her family not to be too alarmed. Then Charlotte was left under the care of Dr Amos Ingham, the local doctor, and to his young colleague, Dr Crashaw Dugdale. Whereas it is impossible to speculate on Charlotte's emotions at the time, she probably welcomed the arrival of a baby as a ray of light, after the successive deaths of her siblings had darkened the atmosphere of the Parsonage. But life is unpredictable, and for Charlotte this happy news soon turned into a testing experience. In late February she confessed to Amelie Taylor that her sufferings were becoming 'very great', her nights 'indescribable', and that she strained until what she vomited was 'mixed with blood'. Her condition was worsening so rapidly that, on 17 February, she had already decided to make her will. Early on the morning of Sunday 31 March 1855, just a few weeks before her 39th birthday, Charlotte Brontë died. The death certificate was signed by Dr Ingham, who gave the cause of death as 'phthisis', a wasting disease associated with tuberculosis. From then on, her silence has generated voices and words, debates and discussions.

The first of these debates concerned the real causes of her death. According to most biographers (including Lyndall Gordon and Juliet Barker), Charlotte died in consequence of her pregnancy. In 'A Medical Appraisal of the Brontës', Dr Philip Rhodes supports a more specific diagnosis, and attributes her death to a fatal form of *hyperemesis gravidarum* (excessive nausea in early pregnancy). For Rhodes, this disorder 'only seems to become excessive in those who display neuroticism [...]. Some doctors have suggested that hyperemesis gravidarum is an unconscious rejection of the baby on the part of the woman, and this might have been so in Charlotte's case.'² This approach has supported a certain (mis)reading of Charlotte's unfortunate destiny as a woman writer surrounded by a romantically sad moorland landscape, first championed by Elizabeth Gaskell in her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). Since Charlotte's death, the Brontë Parsonage at Haworth has attracted millions of tourists, curious gazers and scholars who have – each in his or her own way – continued to resuscitate and reanimate, alternatively, the myth behind the woman, and the woman behind the myth. Charlotte Brontë's writings, along with many biographies, uncountable stage and movie versions based upon her novels, and dubious mass-market products (ranging from Brontë soaps to Brontë butter biscuits) have implemented the proliferation of various narrative layers

accumulating over the life, death and afterlife of the Brontë siblings, and in particular over the last of them. In investigating the creation of the 'Brontë Myth', Lucasta Miller states that Charlotte's first mythologiser was none other than Charlotte Brontë herself, who invented 'two distinct and conflicting myths'. The first 'was the positive myth of female self-creation' embodied by the heroines of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. The other, which inspired 'the saintly heroine' of Elizabeth Gaskell's biography, 'was a quiet and trembling creature, reared in total seclusion' who was 'a martyr to duty and a model of Victorian femininity'.³ In his controversial monograph, entitled *Charlotte Brontë's World of Death*, Robert Keffe not only shares Dr Rhodes's 'neuroticist' reading of Charlotte's fatal disease, but comes to the point of asserting that the most influential event in her life was the death of her mother Maria Branwell on 15 September 1820 (who, in Dr Rhodes's opinion, succumbed to a cardiac failure due to a chronic pelvis sepsis or a chronic inversion of the uterus). According to Keffe, Charlotte's 'world of death' – which pervaded all of her literary works – was the product of a mixture of sorrow, tangled feelings, and a pathological sense of guilt. John Maynard's *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality* confutes both Dr Rhodes's medical diagnosis and Robert Keffe's critical approach, stating that Charlotte's *oeuvre* is focused on her sexual 'awakening' to maturity, rather than on a Freudian death drive. He also includes a new diagnosis by Dr Gerson Weiss, who suggests that Charlotte's deadly illness cannot be related necessarily to pregnancy. Weiss concludes that she probably died of a severe wasting disease of some sort that can also account for her nausea and the presumed cessation of menses.⁴

These interpretations of Charlotte Brontë's death – and in retrospect of her life and writings – justify the great number of voices sprung out of her silences and reticence. They find in Alfred Tennyson's poem 'To –, After Reading a Life and Letters' (1849) an ironic counterpart and comment:

For now the Poet cannot die
Nor leave his music as of oft
But round him ere he scarce be cold
Begins the scandal and the cry.⁵

Whereas Tennyson seems to blame indiscriminately those readers and critics who investigate the life and works of any writer, he also implicitly emphasises the unceasing survival and afterlife of art. In Charlotte Brontë's case, she did not only leave her life 'unfinished' at a turning

point, since she had just married a serious and reliable man, she had found a companion after years of solitude and she (probably) expected a baby. What was more, she left an unfinished novel in the form of a fragment entitled 'Emma', whose story, nature and meaning would raise further debate and discussion. The silenced voice of 'Emma' created something that amounted and still amounts to a loud roar. After having completed her contractual obligations to Smith, Elder & Co. with the publication of *Villette*, Charlotte was free to ponder her next work of fiction at ease with no editorial pressures. Nevertheless, in May–June 1853 she began writing a composite fragment known as 'The Story of Willie Ellin' (which reintroduced the theme of the opposing brothers presented in the subplot of the still unpublished *The Professor*), followed at the end of November by the more ambitious 'Emma', which probably represented the first seeds of her future novel. For Charlotte the first months of 1854 were full of novelties, culminating in her marriage to Arthur Bell Nicholls on 29 June. As far as we know, she probably did not write anything more, apart from a few letters.⁶

From the moment of Charlotte's death, the 'Brontë myth' began to take shape, and the discovery of unpublished manuscripts contributed to create what may be defined as a real sensation. There arose a growing interest in her first novel *The Professor*, and in particular in the two chapters of 'Emma', which Elizabeth Gaskell wished to include as an appendix to her cheap edition of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Gaskell's relationship with Arthur Bell Nicholls – who owned the royalties on his wife's literary works – was problematic, and it was characterised by mutual dislike. In a letter to George Smith, Gaskell describes her difficult negotiations with Arthur and his discouraging attitudes towards Charlotte's job as a professional writer. As for 'the fragment of a tale [Charlotte] left', in Gaskell's view 'Mr. Nicholls always *groaned literally* when she talked of continuing it'.⁷ In order to have access to Charlotte Brontë's precious and forbidden manuscripts, Gaskell visited Haworth with the 'unscrupulous' Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth on 23 July 1856. Thanks to his help, Gaskell was able to leave the Parsonage with the manuscripts of *The Professor* and 'Emma' (which were successively given back to Nicholls). The unromantic myth of the 'groaning' curate thus began to run parallel to Charlotte's romantic depiction. This negative opinion on Rev Nicholls – described as a prosaic husband who frustrated his wife's literary aspirations – was shared by many post-Gaskellian biographers and literary critics, who directly or indirectly attributed Charlotte's leaving an unfinished novel to her (unwilling) submission to her duties as the wife of a busy local curate.⁸ The fragment of her unfinished novel

'Emma' was presumably composed in November 1853, when Charlotte was secretly corresponding with Nicholls, during an awkward period in her life. In fact, she had to mediate between her father's scornful refusal of Arthur Bell Nicholls's courtship and her increasing feelings of tenderness for him. Soon after her marriage, Charlotte showed the manuscript she had left aside to her husband, who narrates the event in a letter, dated 11 October 1859, addressed to George Smith:

One evening at the close of 1854 as we sat by the fire listening to the howling of the wind around the house my poor wife suddenly said, 'If you had not been with me I must have been writing now' – She then ran upstairs, brought down & read aloud the beginning of her New Tale – When she had finished I remarked, 'The critics will accuse you of repetition, as you have again introduced a school.' She replied, 'O I shall alter that – I always begin two or three times before I can please myself' – But it was not to be.⁹

This letter occasioned a great deal of discussion in favour of (or against) Nicholls, the only result of which was to complicate the so-called 'Brontë myth'. What can be asserted is Charlotte's intention to develop and correct her fragment, given that she chose to write it in pencil (as she usually did when she began a manuscript that she later intended to revise). After Charlotte's death, Arthur Bell Nicholls copied 'Emma', amending its idiosyncrasies (mostly different surnames attributed to the same characters) and sent it, along with the original manuscript, to George Smith, in order to have it published as a posthumous piece in the April 1860 number of *The Cornhill*. The introduction to what was subtitled 'The Last Sketch' was written by W. M. Thackeray, who had enjoyed a complex relationship with the author. Charlotte considered *Vanity Fair* a great novel, and Thackeray, in turn, immediately recognised her as a living genius after having received a complimentary copy of *Jane Eyre* by Smith, Elder & Co.¹⁰ However, the uneasiest moment in their ambivalent friendship was represented by the unexpected consequences of Charlotte Brontë's decision to pay Thackeray a solemn tribute in the preface to the Second Edition of *Jane Eyre* (dated 22 January 1848). Charlotte's dedication of the novel to him seemed to confirm the rumours that it had been written by a former governess in Thackeray's household, who had also become his mistress. Thackeray did not feel elated by this dedication but was instead embarrassed. Moreover, during social meetings and public gatherings, Thackeray's attitudes were at odds with Charlotte Brontë's more reserved

behaviour. Alternately defined by her as 'the legitimate High Priest of Truth' (letter to S. W. Williams, 14 August 1848) and as the emblem of London's much despised literary and 'gentlemanly' society (in a letter to Patrick Brontë dated 5 December 1849 she describes his speeches as 'cynical, harsh and contradictory'), Thackeray was her model and anti-model, an example of literary sagacity to be imitated and a patronising literary lion to be criticised. Ironically, Thackeray was to die only a few years after Charlotte, leaving an unfinished novel (entitled *Denis Duval*) which was to be regarded – to use his own words in his introduction to 'Emma' published in *The Cornhill* – 'with a mournful interest and regard and curiosity' by future generations of readers.¹¹

'Emma' re-presents many of the themes that Charlotte Brontë had already included in her previous novels – a boarding school for ladies, an abandoned child and a mystery located in the past (partly justifying Arthur Bell Nicholls's comment on her 'repetition') – although Charlotte's more mature style is also evident here. Mrs Chalfont, a widow, is the narrator of the two chapters left by Charlotte Brontë. The fragment of this story is mainly set in Fuchsia Lodge, a local school for ladies run by the Misses Wilcox, located in a small provincial town. A year after the opening of the school, a mysterious but well-dressed little girl arrives, accompanied by Mr Conway Fitzgibbon, Squire at May Park, Midland County. Matilda Fitzgibbon is a very silent and reserved girl (she looks 'consummately unhappy', in Miss Mabel Wilcox's words), and is mistakenly considered as spoilt by all other inmates, except a girl named Diana. The Misses Wilcox give a special attention to her, and forgive many of the girl's eccentricities (including her sleepwalking), because her family looks wealthy. The second chapter introduces Mr Ellin, a curious gentleman who had already appeared in 'The Story of Willie Ellin' (a fragmented tale that would have been presumably incorporated in Charlotte's final tale if 'Emma' had been completed).¹² After having sent a letter to the address left by Matilda Fitzgibbon's presumed father just before the approaching Christmas holidays, the Misses Wilcox discover – to their dismay – that there is no such thing as 'May Park', 'Midland County' or even 'Mr Fitzgibbon.' Basically, Matilda's family does not exist, and neither does Matilda, socially speaking. The girl's fees have to be paid none the less, and therefore the Misses Wilcox ask Mr Ellin to investigate. Miss Mabel Wilcox's narrow vision (she is only interested in regaining what her institution has lost in economic terms) is subtly compared by Charlotte Brontë with Mr Ellin's more sensible nature. But Mr Ellin's hopeful investigations yield no results, and Matilda refuses to answer Mabel Wilcox's pressing

requests. Charlotte's last tale closes at this point of the narration, leaving the reader with a series of mysteries related to Matilda's real identity, to the role Mrs Chalfont (and Mr Ellin) would play in her story and, last but not least, to the very title of her unfinished novel. Is, in fact, 'Emma' the real name of Matilda Fitzgibbon?

In an ironic self-description at the beginning of 'Emma', the narrator of the tale (Mrs Chalfont) admits that she is neither young, 'nor yet old', that her hair is not striped by silver threads, but that its 'yellow lustre' is gone; on her face 'wrinkles are yet to come', but she has 'almost forgotten the days when it wore any bloom'. Finally, she confesses that she married when she was very young, and that she lived 'for fifteen years a life which, whatever its trials, could not be called stagnant' (98). The opening of this unfinished novel is probably one of Charlotte Brontë's most impressive achievements. Here Mrs Chalfont looks retrospectively at her dreams and hopes with a mixture of melancholy and serenity:

We all seek an ideal in life. A pleasant fancy began to visit me in a certain year, that perhaps the number of human beings is few who do not find their quest at some era of life for some space more or less brief. I had certainly not found mine in youth, though the strong belief I held of its existence sufficed through all my brightest and freshest time to keep me hopeful. I had not found it in maturity. I was become resigned never to find it. I had lived certain years entirely tranquil and unexpectant. And now I was not sure but something was hovering around my hearth which pleased me wonderfully.

Look at it, reader. Come into my parlour and judge for yourself whether I do right to care for this thing. First you may scan me, if you please. (98)

It is quite natural to find a similitude between Charlotte Brontë's poetics and Mrs Chalfont's dispassionate confession, in particular when the narrator gives so much importance to the events that she is going to tell 'hovering around [her] hearth', that is, to her (unfinished) story. The 'ideal in life' that Charlotte advocates – suspended between the need to assert one's independence and the limits imposed by social conventions – may be seen as an all-compassing formula for all of her novels, from the Byronic dreams of heroism cultivated in her youthful Angrian tales to her search for intellectual and emotional communion in *Villette*. In Sally Shuttleworth's words, '[throughout] Charlotte Brontë's fiction, her heroines relentlessly pursue their quest for self-determination and

identity. Although they invoke a rhetoric of freedom, their language and categories of thought are nonetheless inevitably caught up within the contradictions of Victorian discourses on femininity.¹³ Most importantly, in 'Emma' Charlotte Brontë employs a double narrative and thematic register that she had already introduced in her previous works: on the one hand the events are filtered by a middle-aged cultivated woman who reflects upon her life, on the other hand the story includes a mystery set in the past related to a blooming girl of an obscure origin. Finally, the setting (a school for ladies) is recognisably Brontëan.

'Emma' closes, as it were, with a scene depicting the police-like interrogation of Miss Wilcox (the narrator comments that she was 'neither cruel nor violent; but she was coarse, because insensible'), and with Mr Ellin's protective attitude to Matilda, who is described '[reposing] her head against him' and gradually becoming 'reassured'. In the final part of the manuscript – which was erased by Charlotte, but which Arthur Bell Nicholls decided to publish in *The Cornhill* – Mr Ellin carries Matilda to bed, and talks to Miss Wilcox in the following terms:

'Say no more to her. Beware, or you will do more mischief than you wish or think. That kind of nature is very different from yours. It is not possible that you should like it; but let it alone. We will talk more on the subject to-morrow. Let me question her.' (113)

In this brief paragraph Charlotte condenses a series of important issues that recur in her *oeuvre*, such as the relationship between adults and children, the condition of Victorian women ('That kind of nature is very different from yours') and the sometimes-tragic consequences of the use of power ('you will do more mischief than you wish or think'). Unfortunately, there will be no more talk 'on the subject to-morrow', and Mr Ellin's questions will remain unanswered. Mrs Chalfont's search for an 'ideal in life' will be forever left to an infinite number of narrative possibilities.

One of the most striking things regarding 'Emma' is that this very short fragment of a novel-to-be inspired two continuations, and a radio drama. In a way, its destiny may be compared with Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* or R. L. Stevenson's *St. Ives* (concluded by other writers), or to Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, adapted into a successful BBC1 TV drama.¹⁴ However, whereas Dickens's and Stevenson's unfinished novels were half-written, and Gaskell's last work was almost complete,

'Emma' is composed of only two chapters. The first of these Brontëan completions, published in 1980, was entitled *Emma* and was written by 'Charlotte Brontë and Another Lady'. At first, the novel was attributed to Elizabeth Goudge, but its actual writer was Constance Savery, who was the author, among other works, of *Forbidden Doors* (1929) and of a successful book for older children entitled *Green Emeralds for the King: Story of the Civil Wars* (1938). In Savery's *Emma*, Matilda reveals that her real name is Martina, and that she hates (and fears) a person named Emma; in turn, Mrs Chalfont confesses that she has a stepdaughter of the same name. Mrs Chalfont is at the centre of this story, which is an enjoyable nineteenth-century pastiche. Savery's book was followed by a radio drama written by Charlotte Cory and inspired by Charlotte Brontë's unfinished manuscript. Broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 5 July 2002, 'The Day I Finished Off Charlotte Brontë' is an enquiry into the mysteries surrounding 'Emma'. Cory hypothesises a mutual sentimental understanding between Charlotte Brontë and James Taylor, a Scot who worked for her publisher and who had asked her to marry him (and to accompany him to Bombay), but who was turned down before Charlotte accepted the proposal from Arthur Bell Nicholls. To date, Clare Boylan's *Emma Brown*, published in 2003, is the most successful and engaging continuation to 'Emma'. Biographers Lyndall Gordon and Juliet Barker, who suggested Boylan look at the unfinished manuscript (whose existence she ignored), inspired the writing of *Emma Brown*, which Irish writer Boylan pursued with enthusiasm and literary competence in her retro-Victorian novel.¹⁵ Boylan's novel not only continues Charlotte's initial two chapters, but also includes the fragment entitled 'The Story of Willie Ellin' and many allusions to Charlotte Brontë's letters, which are silently incorporated into her text. Its real novelty is represented by the fact that Boylan gives Charlotte's unfinished novel a darker turn that sometimes reminds the reader of Dickens's late novels, and introduces the theme of child prostitution (Emma Brown, Matilda's real name, was 'sold' by her mother to Mr Fitzgibbon). In particular, Boylan – who also draws inspiration from Henry Mayhem's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) – focuses on social issues such as the squalid conditions of the London poor and the criminal underworld, which were a matter of great interest for Charlotte Brontë (who visited the prisons of Newgate, the Foundling Hospital, and Bethlehem Hospital in 1853). Charlotte's decision to write and publish a social novel such as *Shirley* (1849) seems to support Boylan's approach. Besides some explicit sexual references which would have made Victorian readers blush, *Emma Brown* tries to convey the feeling of what it was like to

live in London in the mid-1850s, and repeatedly includes synaesthetic asides on the colours, noises and smells of the big city:

As she stepped onto the platform the first thing to strike her was the smell. It was of oil and iron, a drab stench of unhygienic humanity, a surprising savoury aroma of cooking. She was still considering how to manage her breathing in such an atmosphere when she was assailed by the noise; the grid and whistle of the trains, the cries of porters met with farther-off trumpeting of vendors and the high-pitched whine of beggars. The station itself surprised her with its grandeur.¹⁶

In this respect, the life, death and afterlives of Charlotte Brontë's 'Emma' may be approached as a paradigmatic example of the issues raised by other unfinished literary works. From Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1400) to Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queen* (1596), from Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* (1598) to George Byron's *Don Juan* (1824) and Jane Austen's *Sanditon* (1817), to mention just the most notable ones in English literature, those books that have not been completed by their authors have always had a deep fascination for the reading public and scholars. In some cases, these incomplete writings have been approached as lacking poetic and narrative units, and have prevented many from studying them as serious completed pieces, according to a traditional notion of the work of art, and of novels in particular, as closed textual entities. In other cases, the creativity of those readers who have legitimately used their imagination to fill in the missing pieces has sometimes outclassed serious critical attempts to meditate on their status as unfinished texts. Nevertheless, in the last decades Poststructuralists and Deconstructivists such as Roland Barthes, Jonathan Culler, Paul De Man, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault have revised and put to the test previous ideas on the textual, narrative and ideological 'stability' of art, and of closure as a necessary prerequisite. Literary works have consequently been studied as editorially and semantically 'unstable' textual units, and closures as a functional necessity but a narrative impossibility. As D. A. Miller argues in *Narrative and Its Discontents*, the 'narratable' is determined by what he defines as 'the drift of desire' and 'the drift of the sign' (that is, the differing and differential quality of verbal signs), and 'inherently lacks finality'. In his view, closure remains an 'impossibility on principle, even as it urgently takes place'.¹⁷ These reflections are particularly relevant in the case of Victorian novels, which are characterised by a profound and

self-conscious structural organisation. Mid-to-late nineteenth century novels conveyed a specific worldview that offered a surrogate idea of order against the social, cultural, religious and ideological disorder menacing Victorian certainties, in consequence of the traumatic implications of Darwinism and evolutionism, and of the social struggles which were spreading all over Europe. The gradual disappearance of God corresponded to the appearance of narrative plots that aimed to reassure readers of the coherence and harmony of life. In Georg Lukács's famous definition, the novel represents 'the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God'. For this reason, it is an inherently 'ironic' representation of reality, whose existence (in contrasts with other genres like, say, the epic, that tend to be constructed as finished forms) 'appears as something in the process of becoming'.¹⁸ The question of origin posed by geologists like Charles Lyell (who pre-dated the Biblical genesis of the world) or by Charles Darwin (who discussed these problems in a wider biological and anthropological perspective) entailed, as a consequence, a reflection on ending and conclusion. As far as social questions were concerned, an ordered vision of society implied a coherent relationship between cause and effect, between beginning and ending. Abrupt interruptions or alterations of a well-defined balance between different social levels were regarded as catastrophic occurrences. In the narrative field, these scientific and social issues were turned into specific formal questions related to narrative openings, plot construction and, of course, epilogues.

Peter Brooks writes that '[the] enormous narrative production of the nineteenth century may suggest an anxiety at the loss of providential plots: the plotting of the individual or social or institutional life story takes on more urgency when one no longer can look to a sacred masterplot that organises and explains the world'.¹⁹ An indispensable constituent of what Peter Brooks calls 'plotting' was represented by the presence of recognisable narrative closure. Narrative endings reassured readers of the existence of a teleologically (and implicitly theologically) oriented plan in life. Moreover, the great success of serialised novels in the Victorian age may be only partially explained by the low price at which readers could have the opportunity to read them. Rather than offering a story as a whole massive 'block', as in the case of single-volume or three-volume novels, the very form of weekly or monthly serials seemed in fact to imitate everyday rhythms and the time span of daily existence. Readers therefore enjoyed these surrogate existential 'pieces' as if they were isolated (but interrelated) chapters in life. In this way, readers gradually made the fictive acquaintance of an individual