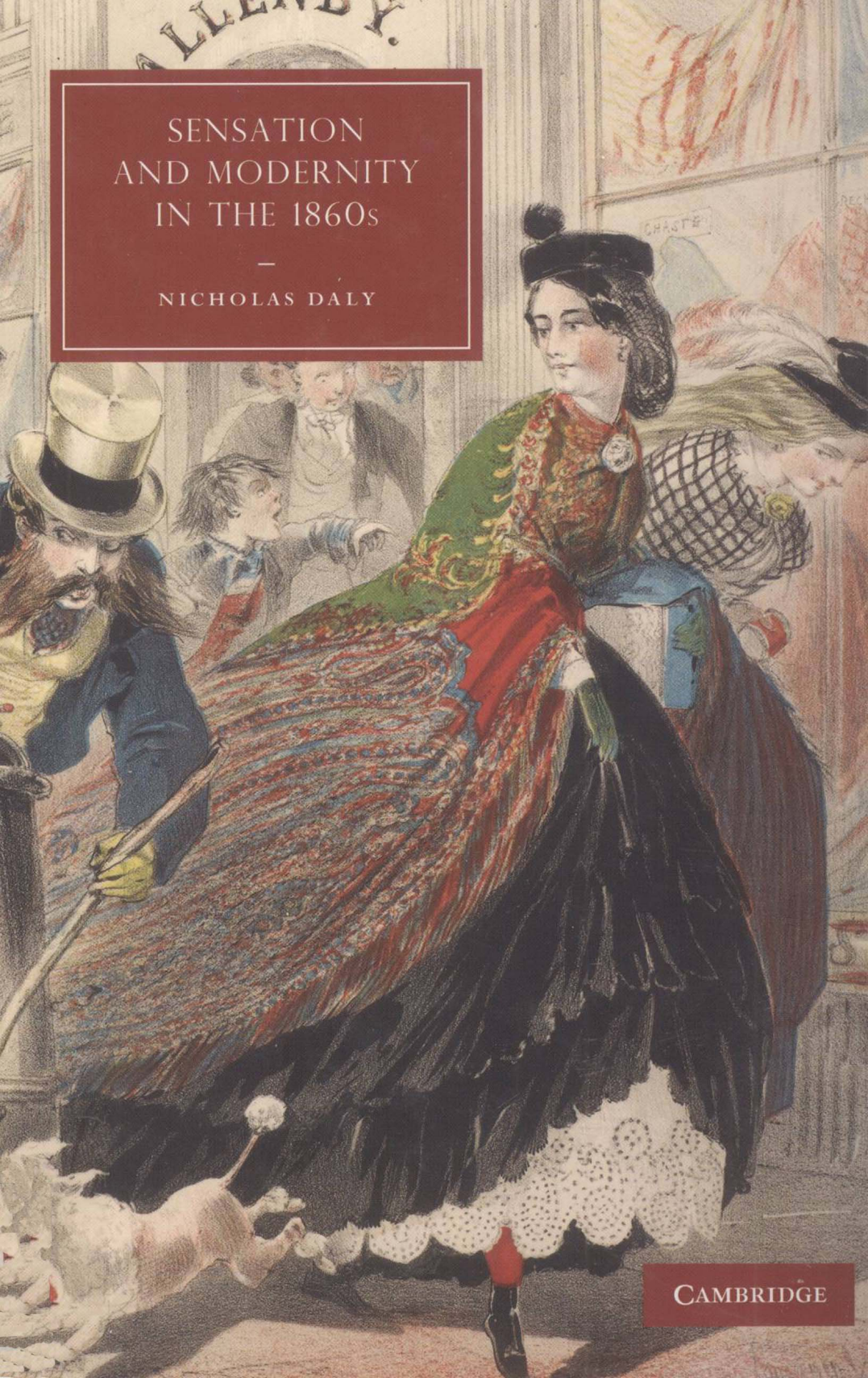
SENSATION AND MODERNITY IN THE 1860s

NICHOLAS DALY



CAMBRIDGE

SENSATION AND MODERNITY IN THE 1860s

NICHOLAS DALY

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521760225

First published 2009

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Daly, Nicholas.
Sensation and modernity in the 1860s / Nicholas Daly.
p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in nineteenth-century literature and culture ; 70)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-521-76022-5 (hardback)
1. English literature–19th century–History and criticism. 2. Sensationalism in literature.
3. Social change–Great Britain–History–19th century. 4. Literature and society–Great
Britain–History–19th century. 5. Art and society–Great Britain–History–19th century.
6. Great Britain–Intellectual life–19th century. 7. Modernism (Literature)–Great Britain.
8. Modernism (Art)–Great Britain. I. Title.
PR468.S61D36 2009
820.9'355–dc22 2009028521

ISBN 978-0-521-76022-5 Hardback

For Stephanie

Acknowledgements

This book has changed career a number of times: beginning as a study of women in white, it became for a period a broad and even survey of culture in the 1860s, before assuming its current shape as an account of elite and popular cultural forms in the run-up to the 1867 Reform Act. This final version has been influenced by the thoughtful comments of a number of audiences who listened to excerpts and early avatars of various chapters: at the British Association of Victorian Studies conferences at Keele in 2004 and in Liverpool in 2006; the MLA in Washington, DC, in 2005; the Locating Subjects conference at the University of Calabria in Cosenza in 2005; the Research Seminar for Victorian Literature at Oxford University in 2006; the North American Victorian Studies Association/ Victorian Studies Association of Western Canada Conference at Victoria, BC, in 2007 and at Yale in 2008; the Research Seminar series at NUI Maynooth in 2008; and the Performing the Material Text Symposium at Florida State University in 2008, as well as at the Research Seminar Series in the UCD School of English, Drama and Film, where my colleagues have listened tolerantly to versions of at least two chapters. Participants in my 'Feeling Modern' MA seminar at UCD also deserve thanks for being the guinea pigs for some of these ideas.

Among the individuals to whom I am indebted for suggestions, support, hospitality, criticisms or literary and historical truffles are Nancy Armstrong and Len Tennenhouse, Claire Connolly, Fintan Cullen, Fionnuala Dillane, Tracy Davis, David Glover, Virginia Jackson, Darryl Jones, Meegan Kennedy, Margaret Kelleher, Ivan Kreilkamp, Chris Morash, Katy Mullin, Deaglán ó Donghaile, Francis O'Gorman, Marilena Parlati, Paige Reynolds, Lyn Pykett, Caroline Reitz and Lisa Surridge. My thanks to Lawrence Rainey, who gave me a chance to air an early version of Chapter 3 in *Modernism/Modernity*. The anonymous readers for the *Journal of Victorian Culture* offered sound advice on an earlier version of Chapter 2, and the anonymous readers at Cambridge University Press

made many helpful suggestions about the original manuscript. Also at Cambridge, thanks to Ray Ryan, and to Linda Bree and her colleagues for their help, and thanks to Wendy Toole for her meticulous copy-editing.

The modern research university is often subject to the same time compression as the rest of the late capitalist economy, and is thus not always an easy place in which to do research. This book would have taken much longer to finish without a number of breaks from everyday teaching and administration. In 2003 I spent three months in Hanover, New Hampshire, as part of the academic exchange between Trinity College Dublin and Dartmouth College. My time there, and the excellent resources of the Olin Library, allowed me to write an early draft of what is now Chapter 2. My thanks to the Dartmouth English Department, and to Peter Cosgrove, Tom Luxon and Ivy Schweitzer, Brenda Silver and Paul Tobias, and Peter Travis for the hospitality I enjoyed. Much of the writing of the other chapters was enabled by the award of a year-long Senior Fellowship from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences: at a time when research funding is increasingly aimed at trans-institutional networks and collaborative projects, they are to be commended for continuing to fund the single-authored book project.

I am grateful to a number of libraries and librarians: the libraries and librarians of UCD, TCD and Dartmouth College; Sue Crabtree, Special Collections Librarian, and Angela Groth-Seary at the Templeman, University of Kent, Canterbury, for their help with the Boucicault materials; and Fiona Barnard, Rare Books Librarian at the University of Reading, for her assistance with the Spellman Collection of Victorian Sheet Music Covers. The British Library also helped with rare sheet music covers, as did Joe Tooley and David Paramor. My thanks to the National Gallery in Washington, DC, for permission to reproduce James McNeill Whistler's *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl*; and to the Musée d'Orsay for permission to use an image of Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*.

There are networks other than those based on research, and I am, as always, grateful to my friends outside the academy for a range of encouragement and scepticism. Among a larger cast, particular thanks to Peter and Nicola Byrne, Mike Darcy, Madeleine Darcy and Andrew Lane, Peter Heffernan and Joan Hickson, Moggs Kelleher and Michael Vallely, Margaret Kelleher and John Tarpey, Catherine Kirwan, Brian Murphy and Miriam O'Brien, Fintan and Irene Murphy, and Paul O'Donovan.

Pride of place goes to my family in Cork, the Dalys, and my family in Dublin: Stephanie and Pola.

Contents

Illustrations

Images 2, 14, 16, 17, 19, 21 and 25 appear courtesy of the British Library. Shelfmarks H.1460.M(1.), H.1561.(11.), H.1258.(14.), H.1258.(5.), H.1258.(10.), H.1258.(7.) and H.2931.(1.).
Image 4 appears courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.
Image 9 appears courtesy of the Musée D'Orsay.

Introduction: White Years

This is a book about culture in an age of crowds, specifically the culture – popular and elite – of Britain in the 1860s, which is marked by a recurring interest in crowds and how their attention might be solicited, held and managed. Such an interest can be related to the general forces of modernization at work in Britain in those years, but it can also be tied directly to the political transformations that saw their formal expression in the 1867 Reform Bill, which transferred a significant measure of power to the urban working class. This was the so-called 'Leap in the Dark' that some political commentators saw as tantamount to giving power to that allotrope of the crowd, the mob. I will be arguing that there is a connection between this political modernization and the cultural phenomenon of 'sensation', which runs through the 1860s. London, that other capital of the nineteenth century, is the focus for much of the discussion, though a number of the figures we will consider – popular playwright Dion Boucicault and fine artist James McNeill Whistler, for example – had transnational careers, and many of the cultural phenomena, from sensation melodrama to blackface minstrelsy, escape the borders of any one national culture.[1]

This is also in part a book about a recurring image, the woman in white, a vulnerable, even ethereal figure who yet has the power to spellbind the crowd, which is rarely represented as either vulnerable or ethereal. The first such Woman in White appears not in Britain, but in France. On 11 February 1858, a fourteen-year-old French girl, Bernadette Soubirous, her sister, Toinette, and a neighbour's child, Jeanne Abadie, went out to gather firewood. They wandered out of the Pyrenean town where they lived until they came to the Massabielle Grotto, by the river Gave. Here, the other two crossed the river, but when Bernadette began to remove her stockings to cross, she went into a trance-like state, and saw something out of this world. In early accounts she seems to have described this entity simply as 'quelo', the Occitan word for 'that' (Bernadette did not learn standard French until some years later), or as 'dama' or 'demaisela', a White

Lady or fairy queen of the kind that appears in the folklore of the region. Questioned afterwards by a local priest, she described her vision as of 'something white, which had the appearance of a lady'.[2] Later she would describe it as a figure in white, carrying a rosary and wearing a blue sash, all part of the traditional iconography of the Virgin Mary.

There would be further visions. By 1 March, groups of 1,500 or so people were coming with her to the cave, and the authorities decided to fence off the site to control the crowds. People came in the belief that the entranced Bernadette was seeing Mary, the mother of Jesus, or, as she reportedly styled herself to the visionary, the Immaculate Conception.[3] The London *Times* soon picked up the story, not least, perhaps, because it was pleased to observe that for all the splendour of Napoleon III's Paris, France still laboured under a 'strange mixture of irreligion and superstition'.[4]

The Times greeted the reports from Lourdes with something close to contempt, but in the decade following Bernadette's experience a number of similar apparitions manifested themselves throughout the city. 'Pepper's Ghost', the vitreous spectre that was all the rage as a theatrical special effect in 1862–3 is, perhaps, the best known of these secular spirits. At the Royal Polytechnic Institution, the Adelphi Theatre and a number of the music halls, this optical illusion created for the audience

> the impression of a person clearly visible and capable of appearing as one of a party, but wholly impervious to the sense of touch. The manner in which the figure suddenly vanishes, literally seeming to go nowhere, is most startling; still more surprising is its disappearance, when it gradually melts away, assuming a more filmy look, till it has attained absolute nonentity.[5]

The less commercially inclined 'Woburn Square Ghost' was to emerge in 1867. According to the 1860s memoirs of Alfred Rosling Bennett:

> It was reported that the figure of a woman in white was appearing nightly amongst the trees at the northeast corner of the enclosed garden in Woburn Square, and had been seen of many. The Press noticed the matter, with the result that crowds invaded the Square after nightfall, blocked the thoroughfare and refused to be moved on. But the ghost became coy under such conditions, and although some declared they saw her plainly, the majority – including myself – were not so fortunate, and some felt considerably aggrieved. The sensation persisted for a week or two and then died away. What the true facts were never transpired, but the evidence in favour of some sort of apparition was very strong ... Our Lady of Woburn Square had a good and lively (for a ghost at least) innings.[6]

But there were also more subtle aftershocks of the events at Lourdes in the literature, drama and fine art of the 1860s. In *The Woman in White*, Wilkie Collins's seminal 'sensation novel' of 1859–60, drawing master Walter

Hartright becomes embroiled in a complicated plot by villains Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco to steal a young woman's identity. The first of many narrative jolts comes in the form of his chance moonlit encounter on the road to London with a mysterious young woman, clad from head to toe in ghostly white. This 'extraordinary apparition' seems 'as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven'.[7] The success of the novel when published in serial form in *All the Year Round* (Dickens's tuppenny weekly magazine) reached beyond the usual middle-class novel-reading public, though it may have only touched upon that more heterogeneous 'Unknown Public' that Collins uneasily describes in an essay of 1858 in *Household Words*, 'a public to be counted by millions; the mysterious, the unfathomable, the universal public of the penny-novel-Journals'.[8]

The first of the 1860s 'sensation plays', special-effects-driven melodramas, was Dion Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), in which the son of the manor wants to extricate himself from a secret marriage to a poor young woman, Eily O'Connor. The crowds came to see the great 'sensation scene', in which Eily is saved from drowning in a moonlit water cave, a secular grotto in which the play's hero, Myles, also distils illegal spirits. Boucicault borrowed most of his plot from Gerald Griffin's novel *The Colleen Bawn* (1829), the title of which phonetically reproduces the Irish *cailín bán*, sometimes translated 'darling girl', but literally meaning white or fair girl. Myles makes his famous 'header' to save Eily when he sees 'something white' in the water. Like *The Woman in White*, Boucicault's *Colleen Bawn* was a great popular success, and inspired a wide range of spin-offs, including an opera, *The Lily of Killarney*, whose title continues the white theme. (This floral title suggests how the immaculate apparition of Lourdes shades into the more generic, secularized figures of purity and virtue in distress that are at the heart of most nineteenth-century melodrama: these heroines are delicate blossoms, orphans of the storm that is modernity, or angels cast out of the house into a cold world.[9])

Women in white were also popping up in the fine art galleries, notably the Berners Street Gallery, off Oxford Street, where a large painting by James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *The Woman in White*, was exhibited in the summer of 1862 to a rather mixed reception. Better known now as *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl*, or simply *The White Girl*, it represents a woman in white against a white background. The first of his attempts at a new type of 'painterly' painting, an art that would eschew narrative content for pure form, it boldly advertises its own materiality as paint on canvas. Refused by the Royal Academy, *The Woman in White* was to become a *succès de scandale* when it appeared the following year at the *Salon des Refusés*, the famous

alternative exhibition ordered by Napoleon III to accommodate the many works that had been excluded from that year's official Salon, including a number of paintings that were to become icons of Impressionism. Fernand Desnoyers, in his pamphlet on the Salon, described Whistler as 'le plus spirite des peintres' and the painting as a portrait of a spirit, a medium.[10] Gustave Courbet, it was reported, was also struck by the work's spiritual quality: '[He] calls your picture an apparition, with a spiritual content (this annoys him); he says it's good.'[11] With the benefit of hindsight we can recognize Whistler's painting as a foundational work of what would become aestheticism, the movement that rejected the moral mission of Victorian art and literature for a commitment to the pursuit of form, dusting off an earlier French slogan (attributed to Théophile Gautier), *l'art pour l'art*: art for art's sake. As developed in the writings of Walter Pater from the late 1860s, this emphasis on beauty and autonomous sensuous experience would come to be one of the dominant notes of late Victorian cultural discourse. To court new impressions would be one's duty to oneself; and the question to ask of a book or painting would be: 'What effect does it really produce on me?' Whistler's aesthetic apparition would help to train a select audience in this new way of seeing.

What links these disparate cultural artefacts, other than their resonance with Lourdes, is that at the time they were all seen to be part of the new phenomenon of 'sensation'. Pepper's Ghost and the Woburn Square apparition were popular sensations; *The Woman in White* was read as a sensation novel; *The Colleen Bawn* was regarded as a sensation play; and Whistler's *Woman in White* was viewed as a daring sensation picture. I will return to a more detailed discussion of what 'sensation' means in the chapters that follow, which look at the popular and high culture of the 1860s. For now it might be helpful to think of sensation as the cultural dominant of the 1860s; it was a way of describing cultural artefacts that deployed a variety of shock and suspense effects, but more generally its use seems to mark a perceived shift in the cultural market, a disruption of culture consumption stratified by class.[12]

For some commentators, the novels, plays and paintings of the age of sensation seemed to appeal too much to the crowd, providing a series of shocks and frissons rather than any more elevating aesthetic experience. 'Sensation' is a term that denotes a physiologically based theory of reader/viewer response, and it appears in counterpoint to the growth of the mass market as a component of the spread of social modernity. But political modernity is also relevant here: as Jonathan Loesberg pointed out some twenty years ago, it is not a coincidence that the decade that witnesses

the appearance of sensation is also marked by debates about the Reform Act that for the first time enfranchised large numbers of working-class men.[13] It will be my contention here that the years of women in white, and indeed of sensation more generally in the cultural realm, are the same years in which the crowd comes to be seen as usurping social and political authority. In an earlier study, *Literature, Technology, and Modernity* (2004), I suggested that sensation novels and sensation drama produced a sort of 'training' in modernity, acclimatizing people to the pace of industrial, urban life through homeopathic doses of shock and suspense. Here I want to argue that such training was not a politically neutral phenomenon. The novels and plays of the 1860s cannot be seen in any straightforward way as simply disciplinary apparatuses in the Foucauldian sense, but I would argue that their use of sensation to capture and hold the attention of heterogeneous audiences can be linked to largely reactionary fantasies about the crowd in the years of Reform. That these novels and plays also often seem to suggest the impossibility of holding the self or the crowd together complicates this connection, but it does not cancel it.

We often reserve the term the 'age of crowds' to describe the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the period that is marked by the publication of Gustave Le Bon's *La Psychologie des Foules* (1895), Gabriel Tarde's *L'Opinion et la Foule* (1901) and Gerald Stanley Lee's *Crowds: A Moving Picture of Democracy* (1913), as well as by Frederick Winslow Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911).[14] However, it is possible to bring the age of crowds forward, anchoring it instead to, say, Edgar Allan Poe's prescient 'Man of the Crowd' (1840), Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) and Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1868) in the cultural realm; the Great Exhibition of 1851 in the economic; and the 1867 Reform Bill in the political. Closely bound up with the interest in crowds is the issue of consumption. In this period we see the further consolidation of the mass consumerism that had been signalled by the commodity-driven phantasmagoria of the Great Exhibition of 1851, and its many sequels, that saw people embark on secular pilgrimages, 'on the move to look at merchandise', as Hippolyte Taine put it.[15] This shift in Britain from self-definition in terms of production to self-definition in terms of consumption makes leisure a problem as well as a pleasure for the middle classes. As Peter Bailey describes, from mid-century there appears a new concern with the issue of leisure, in part because the middle classes simply had more of it, but also because it was an area of social life that presented new problems of distinction. Bailey cites the comments of journalist Matthew Browne, who wrote that 'social boundary lines are not so

sharply drawn as they used to be ... the old cordon sanitaires have snapped under the pressure of the multitudes and we have not succeeded in twisting new ones'.[16] If the countryside still represented a relatively transparent social world, in which such leisure activities as fox-hunting allowed for participation according to rank, the leisure sphere in the cities, towns and seaside-resorts was socially opaque (we might see the enormous popularity of hunting yarns and hunting prints as symptoms of nostalgia for a more stable world of organic hierarchy). The lifting of the 'taxes on knowledge' as well as improvements in printing technology meant that cheaper newspapers and literature were part of this new landscape of leisure.

The coming of the mass market involves, by definition, a blurring of the lines of stratified consumption – it becomes difficult to label things as 'middle-class goods', or for that matter 'working-class goods', and this applies to cultural commodities as much as it does to more tangible ones. When access to entertainment is by purchase – of an excursion ticket, or theatre ticket, say, or of a book or mass-reproduced image – it is much harder to police participation. Pricing, of course, provided one attempt to regulate such consumption, but it was not by any means a reliable method. In this light the growth of a professionalized leisure industry, providing a wider and more variegated range of entertainments, is an important factor. But if the leisure sphere becomes a more contested area, and one in which commentators are increasingly concerned about who is watching, reading or listening to what, this is also complexly related to developments in the political realm, where older class certainties were facing collapse. At the beginning of the 1860s there was no interest among the Tories in extending the franchise, and even one of the most prominent Whigs, Lord John Russell, was known as 'finality John' because of his view that the 1832 Reform Act was the last word on the subject: the more prosperous echelons of the middle class had political power to match their economic might, and this was quite enough for even the liberals in the political establishment, with a few notable exceptions. And yet Reform was very much in the air, and by the end of the decade radical changes were to take place: the 1867 Act for the first time gives the vote to substantial sections of the working class. From the point of view of the ruling classes, it looked as if the masses were taking over.

When we recognize that democracy was the spectre haunting Britain in the late 1850s and 1860s, it becomes easier to understand not just the politics of culture in the period, but also more general political dispositions. In the sphere of culture, some of the more heated rhetoric around 'sensation' can be recognized as part of a war of position around Reform. The

shrill response in some quarters to sensation drama, sensation novels, sensation songs, sensation paintings, and so on, encoded fears that at a time when political power appeared to be shifting towards the working class, the sphere of culture was not functioning to secure class distinction, as West End audiences and middle-class readers yielded to the pleasures of vulgar transpontine effects (viz. those associated with the working-class theatres of Westminster and beyond). As Andrew Maunder notes, among the recurring attitudes in the reviews of the period is that sensation novels 'were the offspring of the debilitating influence of modern commercial culture, and working-class culture'.[17] One of the most famous contemporary reviews, that of H. L. Mansel, sees the highly coloured publications of the penny and halfpenny press (i.e. 'penny dreadfuls') as 'the original germ, the primitive monad, to which all the varieties of sensational literature may be referred, as to their source'.[18] In July 1866 the *Westminster Review* saw sensation as a contagion spreading 'in all directions from the penny journal to the shilling magazine, and from the shilling magazine to the 30-shilling volume'.[19] Cartoons that show servants taking a keen interest in sensation fiction embody similar views, and such assumptions persist after Reform: for example, the *Saturday Review* in 1878 confidently declares that sensation provides 'toys for the class lowest in the social scale as well as in mental capacity'.[20] But of course the tricky thing was that these 'toys' strongly appealed to other classes too, making taste a very inaccurate index of social position.

The spectre of democracy in these years helps to explain attitudes to domestic cultural consumption, but it also helps us to understand British opinion on overseas events. The American Civil War dominates the headlines for much of the decade, and Britain's sympathy for the South has often been noted, alongside the misery created by the 'Cotton Famine' in Lancashire. But the hostility in many quarters to the North and sympathy for the South may have had less to do with cotton, or economics more generally (the North was protectionist), than with the perception that the Northern States of the Union represented democracy run riot. The North was perceived as a brash place in which power had been allowed to fall into the hands of immigrants and the half-educated – was not even the President a bumptious country lawyer who had once worked with his hands? By contrast, the South could be seen to represent a traditional, hierarchical, organic society, with the plantation as an image of paternalistic pastoral order, enlivened by comic or sentimental song. In this context, the slave revolt, or 'servile insurrection', that many in Britain prophesied in the South as a consequence of the war can be seen not only as a fantasy

about race but as a displacement of fears of an analogous revolt at home among the urban working class; the vogue of blackface minstrelsy, with its celebration of orderly plantation life, can at least in part be seen as the corollary of such fantasies and fears.

If the popular and high culture of this period introduces a number of secular avatars of the Lourdes apparition, that is, I will argue, because events at Lourdes offered a suggestive scenario for those who were trying to re-imagine the place of culture in relation to an age of crowds. The trance-like state of Bernadette provides a version of the states of reverie that, as Jonathan Crary has shown, are the flipside of a modernity increasingly concerned with attention, punctuality and disciplined subjectivity. But, more importantly, perhaps, Lourdes offered a paradigm of how the distracted crowd might be kept spellbound: the crowds that came to see Bernadette seeing the Virgin Mary, and later just to stare at the Cave of Apparitions, indicated that the attention of the masses could be seized if only a powerful enough substitute for religious spectacle could be found. Attention, in other words, could be engineered.[21] If one aspect of 'sensation culture' is a preoccupation with the tide of crowd-pulling novelties and spectacular entertainments that threatened to overwhelm the lines of good taste, the other is an interest in just how the wandering gaze of a mass subject might be held. In the chapters that follow I want to look at the way in which a number of cultural artefacts of the 1860s – novels, plays and paintings, as well as other more ephemeral forms – took up the issue of attraction, or how attention might be solicited in an age of crowds. The imagination of alternative versions of community was also important as we will see, many of these artefacts incorporate heterotopian fantasies of a non-modern, non-urban, pastoral world, whether that of the ante-bellum South or of rural Ireland.

* * *

That the 1860s are years of social and political transformation is a fact registered not just in the popular and high culture of the period, but in the solidly middlebrow political novels of the period. Equidistant from sensation and aestheticism alike, the realist novels of Anthony Trollope clearly document the seismic shifts that were under way. In the Palliser novel sequence, Trollope's Irish hero, Phineas Finn, begins his political career in *Phineas Finn* (1869) by standing for a pocket borough in rural Ireland, Loughshane, a seat very much in the gift of his father's friend, the Earl of Tulla. His second seat, Loughton, is also more or less handed to him on a plate by the aristocracy, this time by the father of his friend