

NOVELS OF THE
EIGHTEEN-FORTIES



KATHLEEN TILLOTSON

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PREFACE

THE plan of this book ought to explain itself, the whole of the first part being introductory; but some of my principles of selection need to be made clear at the outset. My book is not what is sometimes called a 'decade-study'; I do not refer to all the main preoccupations of the time, but only to those that seem especially relevant to the novels. And, though I hope I am never careless of chronology, I do not proceed through the decade year by year, but risk generalizations, some of which are perhaps more applicable to the late eighteen-forties. I have sometimes gone to other decades, especially the fifties, for illustrative material, but my general policy has been to reserve this for the footnotes. I have not attempted a survey of all the novels of the forties, but rather of those kinds of novels and contemporary views about novels (assumed or expressed) which contribute to our fuller understanding of the great novels of the period. The four novels chosen for detailed study are some of those which I believe stand to gain most from such an exploration of 'background'; they are novels which are essentially 'of' the forties as well as 'for all time'. With that intention, I was precluded from choosing the novel which on other counts demands full-length treatment—*Wuthering Heights*. This novel, which speaks so clearly to our generation, hardly spoke at all to its own. Then, since the forties produced no historical novel of any distinction, I say the less about that

kind of novel; and I give only a partial account of the 'novels of fashionable life', which could not be adequately treated without taking in the eighteenth-thirties. They may have as much merit as the minor religious novels, of which I say more; but in this particular decade they are farther from the centre. I have not mentioned all the novels that I have read, but they have contributed something to my general conclusions.

The introductory section is intended to set the four chosen novels in a firmer relation to their time; in the second part, that relation is deliberately less emphasized. There, the four novels are placed in an order not chronological, but I think logical. Each of them called for a slightly different approach, but in all I have wished to make clear the main centres of interest and also the quality of the art which created them. For unlike some modern critics I believe these novelists were artists, true and not 'spoilt'.

The ground plan of this book and the choice of the novels in the second part survive from a course of inter-collegiate lectures delivered in the University of London in 1949. The draft of the lectures has been much enlarged and almost entirely rewritten; and I have tried to take account of new material published up to 1952. To the numerous biographical and less numerous critical studies of the novelists which have appeared in the last twenty years, many of which I regard with respect, I have found little occasion to refer; I was concerned to ask different questions. My approach naturally led me rather to

nineteenth-century biographies and memoirs, and to nineteenth-century criticism, especially as it appears in the periodicals of the time, still too much neglected.

To modern editions of the novels my indebtedness is limited to a mere gratitude for their existence. We have virtually no edited texts of Victorian novelists, and no means, short of doing the work ourselves, of discovering how (and why) the original edition differed from the text we read. A small but not trivial example is the chapter-titles of *Mary Barton*; they affect the reader's response and one would like to think them Mrs. Gaskell's; but they appeared in no edition published in her lifetime, and I have found no evidence of their origin.

My specific obligations to published works are duly recorded in footnotes; but to some I owe the kind of stimulus that cannot thus be acknowledged adequately. Among these are Mr. Michael Sadleir's writings on Victorian fiction; Professor Gordon Ray's annotation of Thackeray's letters; Professor J. W. Dodds's book on Thackeray; several articles on Dickens's methods by Professor John Butt (supplemented by his correspondence and conversation); Mr. G. M. Young's *Portrait of an Age*, and his unpublished Clark lectures delivered at Cambridge in 1940. Less definable, but not less gratefully remembered, are my obligations to the interest (and sometimes the ignorance) of many undergraduate students, and to the encouragement of several colleagues. Of the latter I wish especially to thank Dr. William E. Buckler, of the University of Illinois, who attended the original lectures and kindly com-

mented on my first attempts to revise them; and Miss Mary Lascelles, who read a draft of the fifteenth section in Part I and encouraged me, generally and at particular points, to develop my argument further. My colleague and husband Geoffrey Tillotson heard and read my work at various stages and preserved me both from particular errors and from general despair. I am also indebted to his writings on the nineteenth century, published and unpublished—but not (to my loss) to his forthcoming book on Thackeray, which was written later than mine.

Thanks to the staff of the British Museum Library are customarily general and formal, but my gratitude includes many well-remembered particulars—as also to the libraries of the University of London and of Bedford College. But indispensable as libraries are, the possession of books is equally so, and here I have been especially assisted by my husband's infallible eye for the likely second-hand catalogue or bookshop. And it was thanks to my father, Eric Constable, that I grew up among the classics of the last century. He read part of this book, and I hope recognized that it was essentially dedicated to him; as it now is to his memory.

K. T.

BEDFORD COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

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PART I

INTRODUCTORY



§ I

IT is now, I think, too late to talk about 'Victorian novels'; their range is too vast and vague to lead to any useful generalization. So vague, indeed, that the common reader's picture of the Victorian novels is a phantasmagoria of stage-coaches, Barsetshire, women in white, and Hugh Thomson illustrations; and a class of undergraduate students, invited to expose their knowledge of the field, will begin by happily hazarding Jane Austen and *Jane Eyre*. The secrets of chronology are well guarded by some popular critics and some modern reprints, which also commonly deprive the novels of their preliminaries and even their full titles. These instances may be extreme; the wanting information can be found; but there remains, at any level, the insuperable difficulty of doing critical justice to the novels of sixty-three years in a single book. (No one would attempt it for the fifty-three years of our own century.) The time has surely come to break up 'the Victorian novel' into manageable segments; not by novelists, or categories, or phases, but simply by concentrating upon a decade or so at a time. Replaced in their original context of time and opinion, the novels may be found to make

better sense, to take on values new to us, which modify or substantiate the old. At the same time, in attempting to recover something of the contemporary eye, the perspective of distance need not be rejected. My ultimate purpose has been to learn more about particular novels and their time, and about the novel as a 'kind', by looking rather more closely than has been customary at the novels of an early decade, the eighteen-forties.

§ 2

I shall begin by briefly indicating some of the available material, proceeding from the more to the less known; to say 'novels of the eighteen-forties' is not automatically to call up the names of the works even of major novelists, or their place in those novelists' careers; and still less the threads that unite them, threads often running through long-forgotten novels but contributing to the whole design. But I am, of course, reminding rather than informing; for this is a decade in which the reader of Victorian novels can easily be made to feel at home.

The novelists whose complete work chances to fall within the pale of this single decade are few; but the work of the Brontës very nearly does so, with *The Professor* (written by 1846), *Wuthering Heights*, *Agnes Grey*, and *Jane Eyre* (1847), *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), and *Shirley* (1849).

Dickens, writing from 1833 to 1870, is represented by five novels: *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1), *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4), *Dombey and Son* (1846-8), and *David Copperfield*

(1849-50); besides two travel-books and five Christmas stories. Thackeray is seen nearer the beginning of his shorter career, with *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* (1844), *Vanity Fair* (1847-8), and *Pendennis* (1849-50), besides many sketches and stories. Of other considerable and still-famous novels the forties give us Mrs. Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton* (1848); Kingsley's first novel, *Yeast* (1848); Disraeli's three middle and most famous novels—*Coningsby* (1844), *Sybil* (1845), and *Tancred* (1847). These remind us that the *roman à thèse* is already establishing itself; and to them may be added two out of many novels on the religious problems of the day: Froude's *Nemesis of Faith* (1849) and Newman's *Loss and Gain* (1848). Other now-famous names are absent, or appear faintly: only the first two and least characteristic of Trollope's fifty or so novels belong to the forties: *The Macdermots of Ballycloran* (1847) and *The Kellys and the O'Kellys* (1848). The Trollope who was famous in the forties was Anthony's mother, Frances, nineteen of whose hundred novels fell in these years. Wilkie Collins did not begin to publish until 1850: Charles Reade and George Meredith a few years later. And as yet there was no such person as 'George Eliot': by 1849 Mary Ann Evans was just beginning to hope for a literary career as journalist, critic, and translator; she had published only her translation of Strauss's *Leben Jesu*, and had abandoned her one attempt at fiction after a single chapter.¹ She was already a critical reader of con-

¹ Cross, ch. iii (Mrs. Bray to Miss Hennell, 25 September 1846), and ch. vii ('How I came to write Fiction').

temporary novels¹ (notably of *Jane Eyre*) and was soon to be a critical writer. For her, as for Thackeray, an important stimulus came from impatience with the follies and stereotypes of the modern novels she read: nearly coincident with her beginnings as a novelist is her anonymous essay in the *Westminster Review* of 1856. It was called—in that less polite age—‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’; and it supplies more than one text for the forties. Of that decade, the most popular ‘lady novelist’ was Mrs. Gore, who published twenty-four novels—a fertility excelled only by the ‘solitary horseman’ novelist G. P. R. James, whose score is twenty-eight. Yet even of these two the importance is attested by the parodies provided by Thackeray in *Punch’s Prize Novelists*—with which most readers now may be content, and fairly so, for they are as accurate as absurd. Others deserve, for a variety of reasons, more serious attention: the diverse talents of, for example, Samuel Warren, Mrs. Marsh, Geraldine Jewsbury, Lady Georgiana Fullerton, and Marmion Savage, were limited, but estimable as well as marketable.² Minor popular novels have much to tell us of the nature (and size) of the contemporary novel-reading public; they show what expectations had been built up in the minds of readers and hence how far the great novelists could afford to defeat those expectations. The crime novels of Ainsworth and Lytton are a

¹ She had reviewed one novel, Froude’s *Nemesis of Faith*, for Bray’s *Coventry Herald* in March 1849 (Cross, ch. iii).

² This may seem a random choice, but I have selected those authors whose books are most prominent in advertisements and reviews, and which I myself have read.

necessary part of the context of *Oliver Twist*, *Catherine*, and *Barry Lyndon*; the high-life or 'silver fork' novels increase our understanding of those who react against them, especially of Thackeray. And when, for example, a prolific and popular minor novelist changes his groove, as Lytton did with *The Caxtons* in 1849, he testifies to the establishment of a major change in subject matter: from extravagant romance to domesticity, from the extremes of high and low life to the middle class.

One other kind of novel popular in the eighteen-forties is still being read today (or was yesterday); but most modern readers will have been unaware that they were reading minor novels of the eighteen-forties when they read, for example, *The Tower of London*, *Old St. Paul's*, *The Last of the Barons*, *Masterman Ready*, *Children of the New Forest*, and *The Pathfinder*. While some books descend from the library to the schoolroom, others ascend, perhaps even to the confines of the British Museum Reading-Room. Many works intended primarily for the young of the eighteen-forties are now read only by the closer students of the period—such as the five earliest stories of Charlotte Yonge, *Abbeychurch*, *Langley School*, *Scenes and Characters*, *Henrietta's Wish*, and *Kenneth*; Harriet Martineau's admirable *The Crofton Boys*; the earlier tales of Elizabeth Sewell; and that neglected minor masterpiece Harriett Mozley's *The Fairy Bower*, with its sequel *The Lost Brooch*. Such examples are enough to remind us that the line between tales for the young and novels is a wavering one; it was indeed felt to be specially so in the forties,

and all these books rightfully belong to the history of the novel.

§ 3

My subject is English novels—not American novels, nor other European novels. The exclusion of American novels is at this date defensible. It is perhaps the last decade in which this is so: for though the earliest novels of Herman Melville, *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *Redburn* were published in the late forties I have no evidence that they were yet read in England; and Hawthorne—the earliest American novelist to be taken seriously by contemporary English critics—published his first novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, in 1850. Perhaps typical is a patronizing, even contemptuous article on contemporary American literature in *Blackwood's*; Poe's tales and Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse* are alone commended.¹ The great invasion of the English public by the American novel begins a few years later with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Wide, Wide World*.² In the eighteen-forties, with the single exception of Fenimore Cooper (widely read, and by men as well as boys) the direct relevance of America to a survey of the novel in England is limited to piracies (in both directions), arguments about copyright, and Dickens's pictures of American society in *American Notes* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (which Carlyle said set 'all Yankee-doodle-dom blazing up like one universal soda-water bottle').³ But

¹ November 1847.

² See Nassau Senior's *Essays on Fiction* (1864), p. 450.

³ Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, *Conversations with Carlyle* (1892), p. 245.

there are signs of things to come. In 1844 Henry James paid his first visit to Europe: at that time he was only a year old, but before the forties were out, I am sure, he was reading English novels; visiting England in 1870 he was reminded by the English countryside of 'the opening chapters of half-remembered novels, devoured in infancy';¹ and those early impressions put him on firmer ground when in the eighteen-sixties he became a reviewer of English novels, including *Our Mutual Friend* and *Wives and Daughters*.

A more comprehensive study would need to include the influence of French upon English novels at this period. French novels were much read in England at this time by men and independent women—one shop in the Burlington Arcade, Jeffs's (the shop where Miss Evans first met Mr. Lewes) sold nothing else²—and their influence on the English novels is not negligible: 'George-Sandism' is a recognized label. Contemporary critics draw comparisons not only between Charlotte Brontë and George Sand, but between Thackeray and Balzac; they review recent French novels;³ they also discuss the vexed question of the 'limitations' of novelists in the two countries. These last tend to be rather wistful in tone: as for instance this from a review in *Fraser's*:

If we are to make a choice between prosy decent books and

¹ *Letters*, ed. Percy Lubbock (1920), i. 28.

² [G. H. Lewes], 'Recent novels; French and English', *Fraser's* (April 1849).

³ Sometimes with reprobation; see *Athenaeum* (1847), pp. 543-4, 809. *Blackwood's* in November 1849 announced that it would not continue to review French novels 'until a manifest improvement takes place' (p. 619). Like *Fraser's*, it had hitherto reviewed them regularly.

vicious books that are written with sprightliness and skill, we are, of course, bound to prefer the former. There is no room or excuse for hesitation. But we cannot help regretting . . . that our English novelists . . . should not be able to make [morality] a little more amusing.¹

But the conscious insularity of which Matthew Arnold was later to complain was growing stronger,² especially after 1848, the year of revolution. An early philistine is Tennyson's 'Tory member's eldest son' in *The Princess* who exclaims:

God bless the narrow seas!
I wish they were a whole Atlantic broad.

He is the ancestor of Mr. Podsnap, who considered other countries a mistake, and of their manners and customs would conclusively observe 'Not English!', and presto they were swept away.³

But it would be absurd to confuse Dickens with his creature; by the date of *Our Mutual Friend*, he liked living in France, was conversant with the French theatre, and anticipated one of Taine's criticisms by pointing out the hypocrisy of those readers who contrasted Scott's 'uninteresting' heroes with those of French novelists; the former, like his own, 'must be presented to you in that unnatural aspect by reason of your morality'.⁴ Thackeray, who had lived in Paris

¹ October 1851, p. 375.

² Mrs. Gore in her preface to *Cecil . . . a Coxcomb* (1841) complains of those 'Tartuffes' who 'every now and then raise a cry of infection, as for the plague or cholera, and establish a *cordon sanitaire* as in the instance of the modern French novelists'.

³ *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), ch. ix.

⁴ Forster, vi. 3; vii. 5; ix. 1. The letter quoted was written 15 August 1856.

in the thirties, knew contemporary French literature well; he reviewed French novels,¹ translated part of a novel of Sue's, had some tenderness for Dumas and was perhaps directly influenced by Balzac. Charlotte Brontë borrowed a 'bale of French books . . . upwards of 40 volumes' from the Taylors in 1840, and found them 'clever wicked sophistical and immoral'.² In 1849 Mary Ann Evans was finding 'the psychological anatomy . . . of early married life' in George Sand's *Jaques* 'quite preternaturally true'.³ There was little 'Podsnappery' among English novelists and novel-readers of the forties.

§ 4

My subject is English novels—not English novelists. This is partly dictated by the chronological limits; the work of none of the novelists I treat, save of Emily and Anne Brontë, was confined to the eighteen-forties, and three out of the four novels selected for closer study were, in some sense, first novels. Although I suggest the relation of novels to the novelist's whole career, I do not survey that career; and although I have often drawn on biographical material, my approach is not primarily

¹ 'On Some French Fashionable Novels', in the *Paris Sketch Book* (1840). See also 'Jérôme Paturôt' (*Fraser's*, September 1843; *Works*, vi) and reviews in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* (1842-4). Thackeray's attitude towards the French is well summarized in J. W. Dodds, *Thackeray* (1941), pp. 47-54.

² *S.H.B.*, i. 215. Their titles are unknown; they did not include Balzac, whom she did not begin to read until 1850, and thought inferior to George Sand (iii. 172).

³ Cross, ch. iii (letter of 9 February 1849).

biographical. Such an approach, except in very skilled hands (Johnson's, or Forster's), is apt to side-track criticism; it has certain dangers, especially for this period with its deceptively full documentation, and especially at our distance of three generations when families have begun warily to release skeletons from cupboards. The margins of Victorian novels may easily be filled with 'chatter about Harriet'—about Ellen Ternan, Mrs. Brookfield, M. Héger; but this is surely an evasion of the critic's responsibility. Where biography may legitimately help us is in the closer defining of the social and literary tradition in which the writer worked, the class from which he sprang, the books which he read and admired. At particular points where the novelist draws more directly than usual on his personal experience, it may help to explain what seems to interrupt his usual detachment; but even there it should be the last and not the first resort. Again, when a novelist begins to write novels only in middle age we may look to 'biography' for an explanation. It is obvious that for particular novels, such as *David Copperfield* and *Pennennis*, biography may have even more relevance. In more general ways a knowledge of an author's life can help us to define qualities which we perceive independently in the novels: for instance, the instability of Dickens's childhood, his years of experience as a Parliamentary reporter, his life-long passion for the theatre. The circumstances of Thackeray's life may possibly help to account for the gradual invasion of the satirist by the moralist—for the shift from 'Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society' to 'Vanity