THE EARLY AND MID-VICTORIAN NOVEL

Edited by
DAVID SKILTON

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Introduction

To the Victorians, theirs was the age of the novel, just as the Elizabethan and Jacobean period had been the age of drama: '[T]he novel has displaced the stage. The theatre hardly exists, as an intellectual influence. And this perhaps may be accepted as proof that what was once the strongest current of our literature has been diverted to another channel.'[1] According to one critic of the 1860s:

> within the space of thirty-six days, not long ago, no less than forty-six novels were offered for subscription in Paternoster Row – that is, nine every week for five successive weeks. The number seems to be prodigious, but in truth it gives no adequate idea of the quantity of fiction which is written and printed, published and read, year by year in this country. Not only are there heaps of stories, great and small, produced in single, in double, and in treble volumes, each one by itself, but let it be remembered that there are an infinity of periodicals, weekly and monthly, varying in price from a halfpenny to half-a-crown, which have, with scarcely an exception, each a story on foot, and some of them two.[2]

Thackeray reported an 'appetite for novels extending to the end of the world', and imagined 'far away in the frozen deep, the sailors reading them to one another during the endless night'.[3] For Leigh Hunt the survival of fantastic fiction, like the *Arabian Nights*, into the age of utilitarianism represented a victory for the human imagination:

> Well may the lovers of fiction triumph over the prophecy, that was to see an end put to all poetry and romance by the progress of science;- to care for nothing but what the chemist could analyse, and the manufacturer realize; and take no further delight in nymphs and gnomes, because Sir Humphrey Davy had made a lamp; nor in the story of Iris because, as Peter Parley[4] has it, the public was learning to know 'all about rainbows'.[5]

For others the phenomenon spelt cultural decline: 'There has never been anything like it before. To the literary historian it is an unparalleled phænomenon, and brings to mind the remark of Lord Lytton, that the literature of Greece began to exist in poetical literature and expired in prose fiction.'[6] The greatest of the nineteenth-century prophets, Thomas Carlyle, had mocked the fashionable novelist in an influential article of 1832:

> Of no given Book, not even of a Fashionable Novel, can you predicate with certainty that its vacuity is absolute; that there are not other vacuities which shall partially replenish themselves therefrom, and esteem it a *plenum*. How knowest thou, may the distressed Novelwright exclaim, that I, here where I sit, am the Foolishest of existing mortals; that this my Long-ear of a Fictitious Biography shall not find one and the other, into whose still longer ears it may be the means, under Providence, of instilling somewhat? We answer, None knows, none can certainly know: therefore, write on, worthy Brother, even as thou canst, even as it has been given thee.[7]

Although his attack is specifically on fashionable fiction, many later writers, including two successful novelists of modern life, took it as a general remark on the novel. Thackeray draws the novelist in 'Vanity Fair' as a long-eared clown, addressing long-eared listeners, while over forty years after Carlyle's attack, Trollope still takes the trouble to reply to it when he is writing his *Autobiography* (see 2.6). On the other hand Sir Walter Scott was always exempt from this kind of criticism throughout the period, and remained for succeeding generations a stable point of reference when the quality or morality of fiction was under discussion.

Critics clearly saw the importance of prose fiction, and being generally unable to grant to later historical novels the high status they accorded Scott's, they looked for ways to explain the interest they took in the novel of contemporary life. Even the negative aspects of the 'fictitious Biography' Carlyle professed to despise could be turned to advantage:

> Our interest in the private life of our fellow-men has been developed into a system, and there is nothing in the way of study which people seem now to desire so much as to peep into the house of a neighbour, to watch his ways, and to calculate the ups and downs of fortunes. . . . Here is a gossipping propensity in human nature which any man of sense can keep within bounds,

> but which none of us can eradicate. To this gossipping sense the novelist appeals. A novel may be described as gossip etherealized, family talk generalized. In the pages of a novel we can pry without shame into the secrets of our neighbour's soul, we can rifle his desk, we can read his love letters, we are present when he first kisses the maiden of his heart, we see that little maiden at her toilet preparing for the interview, we go with her to buy her simple ribands and to choose her bonnet. To transport us into new villages which we have never known, to lodge us in strange houses which we have never dreamt of, to make us at home among new circles of our fellow-creatures, to teach us to sympathize in all their little pursuits, to love their trifling gauds, to partake of their filmy hopes and fears, to be one of them and to join in the petty fluctuations of contracted lives – this may not be a lofty occupation, nor need great genius for its perfect exercise; nevertheless, it is good healthy work, and I know not who in this generation is better employed than he who – even if he cannot boast of genius, yet with tact and clearness – widens through fiction the range of our sympathies, and teaches us not less to care for the narrow aims of small people than for the vast schemes of the great and mighty. We read the village gossip with as much concern as if the fate of the nation depended on it, and we take as much interest in a lawyer's poor daughter as if she were a peeress in her own right. Oh, happy art of fiction which can thus adjust the balance of fortune, raising the humble and weak to an equality in our hearts with the proud and the great![8]

Chapter 1 of this anthology shows early and mid-Victorian critics discussing the significance of the dominant literary form of the day, and at their best and their worst displaying a concern for the well-being of literature as reflecting and perpetuating a healthy or a sick state of society. From a safe distance it is possible to mock their worries, assuming that they are merely another manifestation of the stifling moralism of the Victorian period. But the concern for the education and mental development of the population was real, and the fears of corrupting or weakening influences were no more absurd than those of a later century, when television, not the novel, has been the object of anxiety. (The discussion of 1880 in 3.8 was repeated with variations in 1980.)

Most of the major novelists of the period are referred to in the following chapters, but it is worth remembering that they do not represent the novelistic output of the time: vastly more novels were

then published than have since survived changes in taste and fashion. James Payn, himself a novelist, pointed to the existence of a literary 'underclass' of readers:

> It is now nearly a quarter of a century ago since a popular novelist[9] revealed to the world in a well-known periodical the existence of the 'Unknown Public;' and a very curious revelation it was. He showed us that the few thousands of persons who had hitherto imagined themselves to be the public – so far, at least, as their being the arbiters of popularity in respect to writers of fiction was concerned – were in fact nothing of the kind; that the subscription to the circulating libraries, the numbers of book clubs, the purchasers of magazines and railways novels, might indeed have their favourites, but that these last were 'nowhere,' as respected the number of their backers, in comparison with novelists whose names and works appear in penny journals and nowhere else.[10]

Some of these more popular novelists are named in 1.6. Because this collection contains a preponderance of criticism written for that 'few thousand' Payn mentions who 'imagined themselves to be the public', it may underestimate the sociological importance of the mass of cheap, popular fiction which is now known only to bibliographers and scholars. Many Victorians, however, were seriously concerned by the phenomenon, and Matthew Arnold for example discussed it in his essay on Copyright in 1880 (quoted in 3.8), where he doubts whether 'the consumption of the bad and the middling in literature does, of itself, necessarily engender a taste for the good'.

Of course the question of what constituted 'the good' in literature occupied much of Arnold's attention throughout his life, and he rarely seems to have included novels in the category. On the other hand many writers did devote a great deal of trouble to discriminations between different kinds and qualities of fiction, and this collection gives samples of this kind of effort from the work of some of the most significant critics of the period. Most of them are from book reviews, since very little criticism of the novel appeared in the form of books, and the academic study of the novel had scarcely yet begun. (David Masson's book, *British Novelists and Their Styles*, was unique in this respect – see 1.4 and 4.9.) Sensing that a lack of aesthetic respect for prose fiction arose from a lack of 'rules' governing the art form, writers such as Anthony Trollope, George Henry Lewes and Walter Besant concentrated on guiding the tyro novelist, and left it for a later age to produce a systematic terminology in which to express the

critical assessment of technical matters. Many later readers have therefore erroneously supposed that no thought was given to questions of fictional technique. Nothing could be further from the truth. A study of the novelistic experiments of Thackeray, Dickens, the Brontës, Collins and Trollope, for example, proves that these matters received sustained attention. Both novelists and critics, however, had other urgent things to write about. It was a great achievement of Henry James and his disciples to make analysis of 'the art of the novel' an intellectually and even academically respectable activity. But much was lost as well as gained.

It must be admitted that not all Victorian criticism reaches the level of intellectual respectability: and in this the period resembles any other. Yet when we look at the huge numbers of reviews that were published, the surprise is not that there was so much mediocrity, but that so much was good. Quite often reviews which appeared within a few days of the book concerned remain useful to this day. The longer, retrospective treatment of a novelist's whole career to date – prompted by a death, a collected edition or a biography or autobiography – is often comparatively ponderous. On the whole, the shorter, hastier reviews contain much of the best work, while the longer, more sober, considered articles are less lively and less provocative; but the overall quality of reviews in the non-specialist press was at least as good as at any time since, and the range of material noticed was equally impressive. There was a considerable body of 'men of letters' (there seems to have been no corresponding term for women writers), producing millions of words in essays, informative articles and criticism. Although the authorship of much of this criticism was known in literary circles, most of it was published anonymously, and anonymity was elevated to an ethical principle. We find Mowbray Morris, the manager of *The Times* rebuking E.S. Dallas for revealing that he had written the review of Tennyson's *Maud*, for example. Then, when Dallas asked to be allowed to use some of his reviews from the paper in a book, Morris replied in terms which reveal that anonymity enjoyed the heightened, irrational prestige of a fetish: 'The only objection that occurs to me against your unacknowledged quotation of what has appeared in the Times is, that if some clever critic should detect & expose the plagiarism, you would have to submit to the charge without explanation.'[11] Certain critics used pseudonyms, or signed their articles with some device like Charles Lamb's pointing hand, while a few periodicals, such as the *Fortnightly Review*, stood out against anonymity in reviewing.

Although it is impossible to make confident attributions in all cases

– five of the pieces printed here are unattributable – it is hoped that the reader of this collection will develop a respect for many of the writers represented here, such as Bagehot, Brimley, Dallas, Forster, Hutton, Lewes, Morley, Roscoe or Simcox, or at very least a healthy awe of the range of the individual achievement of some of them across what later come to be regarded as different and distant disciplines. Hutton, Lewes, Morley and Simcox, for example, were polymaths, as was Marian Evans ('George Eliot'), one of the outstanding intellectuals of the century.[12] The achievement of these people indicates a sincere belief that all areas of intellectual enquiry were interconnected. Not for them a doctrine of 'two cultures', the humane and the scientific, each fortified against the other. Keats's belief that 'Philosophy will clip an angel's wing'[13] is rarely echoed by Victorian writers, few of whom would have understood such a shyness of science.

Although this anthology contains over fifty extracts, there remain many good critics, such as Leslie Stephen, who are not even mentioned, let alone represented. On the other hand a number of the many novelists who wrote on the novel are included: Collins, George Eliot, Gaskell, Bulwer Lytton and Trollope. No particular effort has been made to include specially famous pieces of criticism, and Rigby's attack on *Jane Eyre* and Ruskin's on *Mill on the Floss* are perhaps the only periodical articles extracted here whose existence is known to a large number of readers. The purpose of this volume is rather to bring a sample of early and mid-Victorian writing about the novel back into circulation, and to demonstrate that it is worthy of various kinds of serious attention. The object is not the assessment or evaluation of Victorian critical achievement by the academic standards current in a later age; and certainly it is not the criticism of critics. In 1831 Carlyle warned against such introverted literary activity, which he saw as indicative of a great peril: that book-reviewing might replace literature in the public mind:

> [I]s not the diseased self-conscious state of Literature disclosed in this one fact, which lies so near us here, the prevalence of Reviewing! . . . now your Reviewer is a mere *taster*; who tastes, and says, by the evidence of such palate, such tongue, as he has got, It is good, It is bad. Was it thus that the French carried out certain inferior creatures on their Algerine Expedition, to taste the wells for them, and try whether they were poisoned? Far be it from us to disparage our own craft, whereby we have our living! Only we note these things: that Reviewing spreads with

> strange vigour; that such a man as Byron reckons the Reviewer and the Poet equal;[14] that at the last Leipzig Fair, there was advertised a Review of Reviews. By the by it will be found that all Literature has become one boundless self-devouring Review; and, as in London routs, we have to *do* nothing, but only to *see* others do nothing. Thus does Literature also, like a sick thing, superabundantly 'listen to itself.'[15]

If this seemed to be a danger in 1831, it must have appeared doubly so by the middle of Queen Victoria's reign. Daily and weekly newspapers, magazines and reviews multiplied breathtakingly, and a checklist of Victorian periodicals contains some thousands of titles. Throughout the period as much of the best criticism appeared in *The Times*, the *Spectator* and the *Saturday Review* as in specialist literary papers such as the *Athenaeum*, and there were dozens of other important dailies, weeklies, monthlies and quarterlies carrying notices of fiction besides.

The fact is that literature, including the novel, *mattered* in a direct way to the educated Victorian public to a degree which is now forgotten. Even though ours is an age in which far more people receive a higher education involving the study of literature as a subject, we do not inevitably connect that study to other current subjects of interest. Carlyle's vision of 'one boundless self-devouring Review' is a negative construction placed on a fundamentally healthy state of affairs. All kinds of what we call 'literature', including the novel, had indissoluble social, political, religious and philosophical connections: there was no absolute division between 'literary' and other discourse. Novelists not only wrote novels which through their subject-matter, social settings or fables, dealt explicitly with matters of topical or 'eternal' concern – from the fashions and the politics of the moment, to the prospects of eternal life – but they also felt able to descant in quasi-authorial 'asides' on the whole of human (and supernatural) life as they saw it. Reviewers in their turn responded by tackling all these subjects as they arose in the works under scrutiny. In addition, on a more or less conversational level, a novelist who published frequently, like Trollope, could actually become engaged in a sort of dialogue with some of the reviewers, as can be seen from the example of 7.5, or from the cross-references between the text of *Framley Parsonage* and Thackeray's 'Roundabout Papers' while they were both appearing in the *Cornhill Magazine*, which Thackeray edited. Serial fiction was intertwined with other periodical discourse in yet other ways. As editor of *All the Year Round*, Dickens would

sometimes surround a novel with informative articles to help his readers understand unfamiliar things such as current Italian politics, which arose in Wilkie Collins's *Woman in White* (1859–60) for example. The link could also be less direct, as when Trollope's novels referred – by design or by coincidence – to matters that were the subject of articles in the very magazines in which his novels appeared.

The literary system was held together by social links too. The male novelists and critics had generally had a common classical education, and habitually used their shared intellectual heritage to maintain the cultural influence of the classically educated élite. (Dickens is, of course, a notable exception to this generalisation.) There was also a high degree of personal interaction between writers of novels and writers about novels in the period. Just as in a later century, the same person often filled both roles, though George Meredith's anonymous and not altogether favourable notice of his own *Farina* in the *Westminster Review* is an extreme case.[16] And just as now, many writers and critics moved in the same limited social circles in London, such as the Garrick Club. They were often friends. To Trollope's disgust, Dickens presented E.S. Dallas with the bound manuscript of *Our Mutual Friend* in recognition of a favourable review.[17] Trollope persuaded his friend G.H. Lewes to take the editorship of the new *Fortnightly Review*, and found his kind of fiction vigorously defended in the pages of that journal, in a series of articles which were later reprinted under the title *The Principles of Success in Literature*. Trollope had in any case deliberately written a book on 'realistic' principles (*The Belton Estate*) as the first novel for the *Fortnightly* on its launch in 1865.[18]

G.H. Lewes provides a good example of the range of interest of these 'men of letters'. He wrote novels, plays, theatre criticism, literary reviews, philosophical works, and books and articles popularising science. A mere list of some of his non-fictional titles is impressive: *A Biographical History of Philosophy* (1845), *Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences* (1853), *The Life and Works of Goethe* (1855), *The Physiology of Common Life* (1859), *Studies in Animal Life* (1862), *Problems of Life and Mind* (1873–9) and *Actors and the Art of Acting* (1875). His book on Goethe received the singular honour of translation into German. Other writers were equally gifted. Richard Holt Hutton, who (like Lewes) was educated in Germany, studied classics, theology and law, prepared for the Unitarian ministry, worked as assistant editor of the *Economist*, joint editor of the *National Review* and literary editor of the *Spectator*, and held the post of Professor of Mathematics at Bedford College, London, from

1856 to 1865. When Hegelian philosophy became fashionable in Britain after about 1869, he was one of very few Englishmen who moved confidently among the new ideas because of an early acquaintance with them at German universities.[19] He was also one of the founders of the Metaphysical Society, which attracted many of the greatest thinkers of the age as members, and which aimed to bridge the gap between religious and scientific thought. Any of his knowledge might at any moment be brought into play in his reviews of *belles-lettres*, with the result that critics of a later age, with new ideas of the 'purity' of literary criticism, accused him of debasing criticism with 'political, or religious, or philosophical, or anthropological, or pantopragmatic adulteration'.[20] This particular polemical attack was published shortly after his death, but from a safer distance we might envy the sheer intellectual variety of the Huttons, Leweses, Evanses, Morleys, Simcoxes and others.

The low esteem in which critics of the 1890s and later held early and mid-Victorian criticism of prose fiction accompanies a turning away from social and political aspects of the novel, such as the social origins of fiction, the expansion of the reading public, and speculation about the determination of fictional form and content by social and economic factors. Such concerns were supplanted for some later critics by technical questions of structure and narrative point of view, and by theories of art as the production of a creator standing apart from society as a gifted individual, and pursuing art purely for the sake of art. The slogan *l'art pour l'art*, which was derived from an earlier anti-utilitarian movement of the 1830s in France, was readily adaptable to a late-century British revolt against the dominant utilitarian ideology of Victorian Britain, and nothing could less resemble the early and mid-Victorian assumption that literature was inevitably involved in debate on all subjects of general public concern. This earlier form of critical interest in fiction can aptly be called 'sociological' (although the word was not current until the mid-1860s), and plenty of examples of it are to be found in this collection, including the *Economist*'s analysis of Dickens's *Christmas Books* in relation to political economy (2.2), and H.L. Mansel's socio-economic explanation of the origin and effect of sensational fiction (3.6). Unfortunately for the later reputation of the critics represented here there was involved in all these strands of thought a strong thread of moral judgement and social and moral control, which has tended ever since to discredit the work of even the best critics of the period. Yet something of real richness was lost when these habits of thought were

discarded in the desire to break with the moral imperatives of mid-Victorian cultural life.

Since few critics erected any barrier between 'literary' and 'non-literary' considerations in writing about the novel, it has not seemed appropriate to narrow the selection of extracts in the present collection to coincide with what any particular critics of later periods regarded as appropriate to literary criticism. Extracts are therefore reprinted which cover a considerable diversity of subjects, with the aim of showing what early and mid-Victorian literary people themselves regarded as the important issues of the day in prose fiction. As a result, alongside the discussion of texts, this volume contains examples of the nineteenth-century debate about the office and social standing of the novelist (chapter 7), and even an instance of advice to parents on the attractiveness of writing as a career (7.2). Similarly, the analysis of plot is not left to professional critics, but the founding father of British empirical psychology, Alexander Bain, is also quoted on the workings of 'the literature of plot-interest' (5.3). In this the editor is following the example of his Victorian forebears, who entrusted criticism of *belles-lettres* to soldiers, philosophers and lawyers. (5.1 and 3.6 show examples of the first two, while from its inception the *Saturday Review* employed numbers of young barristers.) The purpose of this choice is not only to demonstrate that there was ample challenging criticism, and at least as much competent reviewing as in the following century, but to argue for the study of Victorian fiction in an appropriate critical setting, in the belief that we do considerable violence to the great Victorian novelists if we ignore the intellectual framework in which their work was originally set, and take the persuasive but misleading word of Henry James's disciples for what should be regarded as the proper subjects for critical examination.

The theoretical motivation behind this selection is not new, of course. A great deal of the most stimulating work on Victorian fiction in the later twentieth century has concerned interconnections: between the fiction and socio-economic aspects of the systems of publication and distribution; between the narratives of fiction and the narratives of science; between the theory and practice of realism; and – most expansively – between women authors and their world, and novels by women and readings by men. This collection will have served its purpose if it reminds students or general readers of the importance of such specialist studies, and enables them to read these in a larger context of intellectual and aesthetic history. The point is that 'background' studies, however well done – and there are some