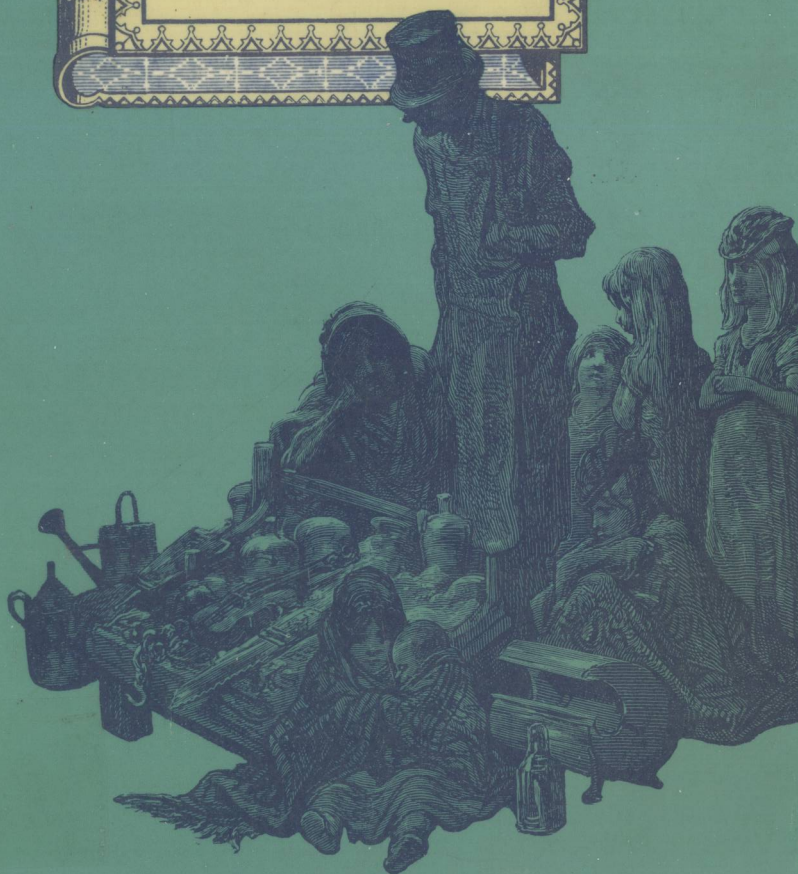


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The working classes in Victorian fiction

P.J. Keating



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To Connie

Preface

The main purpose of this book is to examine the presentation of the urban and industrial working classes in Victorian fiction. Although the period covered is from 1820 to 1900, I have paid especially close attention to the last two decades of the century with fiction published earlier than this (in particular the industrial novels of the 1840s and 50s, and the work of Dickens) being used to provide constant points of comparison. I have concentrated almost exclusively upon those writers who tried to describe working-class life in a realistic manner and have given less attention to those who wrote *about* working-class life. There is, consequently, more on Kipling than Carlyle, more on Arthur Morrison than William Morris. In order to follow as consistent a policy as possible I have omitted Utopian fiction from my discussion, as well as novels which are set in the historic past – novels, that is, in which the recreation of past social conditions is of central importance. This rule has, however, been necessarily relaxed in certain cases, most notably that of *Felix Holt*. I have also made no attempt to deal with the novel of Jewish life in the East End.

In order to avoid periphrasis, terms such as ‘working-class fiction’ and ‘working-class novelist’ have been used to refer solely to subject matter, and indicate either fiction about, or a novelist writing about, the working classes. Where an author’s class background has some special significance this has been emphasized in the text. I have also used the term ‘working class’ throughout in preference to ‘proletariat’ and the prefixes ‘urban’ and ‘industrial’

to indicate the two principal working-class groups studied here, as well as the different literary traditions to which they belong: further definitions and classifications are examined in the opening chapter. I have omitted entirely fiction about agricultural workers and (allowing for one or two special cases) domestic servants. *Jude the Obscure* is not included, partly because it needs to be considered (in some senses at least) in relation to other fiction about agricultural life, and partly because the working-class aspects of this remarkable novel seem to me to demand a kind of social and literary analysis very different from that which I have employed.

Fiction published after 1900 is not discussed in any detail and I have tried to resist the temptation to make frequent comparisons between Victorian and twentieth-century novels. There is some justification for adhering with reasonable rigidity to this upper time limit. Many of the late-Victorian novelists discussed here continued to publish well into the twentieth century, but by 1900 they had either stopped writing fiction centred upon working-class life, or their work had settled down into comfortable stereotypes. The various literary and social forces examined (especially the sociological investigation of the working classes, the discovery of the East End, and the initial impact of French naturalism) had also served their pioneering purposes by the close of the century. In addition, one of the most striking features of twentieth-century working-class fiction (beginning shortly after the year 1900) is that much of it is by authors who are themselves of, or from, the working classes. This fiction deserves serious study, but as one of my principal points of concern was the ways in which the Victorian working classes are presented by mainly middle- and upper-class writers, this was not the place for it.

During the course of my research I have been most fortunate in the advice and encouragement I have received. At the University of Sussex I would particularly like to thank Professor David Daiches and Professor Asa Briggs for guidance on matters extending far beyond the writing of this book, and Dr Patricia Thomson for originally supervising my research and for making countless criticisms and suggestions which were always valuable. At the University of Leicester I have been given every opportunity by the Victorian Studies Centre to discuss and revise my ideas, and I would like to thank all those who contributed to these discussions from which I have derived great benefit. I am especially grateful

to Professor Philip Collins and Dr H. J. Dyos for their constant encouragement and help. I am also indebted to the Trustees of the London Library for a generous grant towards the cost of membership which enabled me to use their excellent collection of nineteenth-century literature, and to the Research Board of the University of Leicester for financial aid in preparing the final manuscript of this book. To my friend Dr Richard Price, of the University of Northern Illinois, it is impossible even to specify my thanks. From first to last there is hardly an idea expressed here that did not grow out of, or benefit from, discussions with him.

I have taken the opportunity of this paperback edition to correct a number of small errors: no other corrections have been made to the text.

P. J. Keating

Acknowledgments

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1

The two traditions, 1820-80

I

‘If you look for the working classes in fiction,’ wrote George Orwell in 1940, ‘and especially English fiction, all you find is a hole.’ He goes on to qualify this statement:

For reasons that are easy enough to see, the agricultural labourer (in England a proletarian) gets a fairly good showing in fiction, and a great deal has been written about criminals, derelicts and, more recently, the working-class intelligentsia. But the ordinary town proletariat, the people who make the wheels go round, have always been ignored by novelists. When they do find their way between the covers of a book, it is nearly always as objects of pity or as comic relief.¹

It is important to distinguish between the quantitative and qualitative judgements being made by Orwell. On the one hand, it is simply untrue that the urban working classes (‘the people who make the wheels go round’) have always been ignored by novelists. There is, in fact, a considerable body of English fiction which deals with, or purports to deal with, not merely the exceptions acknowledged by Orwell but ‘the ordinary town proletariat’. In the Victorian period alone there were some hundreds of novels written on this very subject. On the other hand, Orwell’s objection to the presentation of the working classes ‘when they do find their way between the covers of a book’, while a slight exaggeration, is

more just. For there are few English novels which deal with working-class characters in a working-class environment in the same sense as there are novels about the middle or upper classes in their own recognizably real settings: in other words, novels which treat of the working class as being composed of ordinary human beings who experience the range of feelings and emotions, social aspirations and physical relationships, that it is the special province of the novelist to explore.

Most working-class novels are, in one way or another, propagandist. They are usually written by authors who are not working class, for an audience which is not working class, and character and environment are presented so as to contain, implicitly or explicitly, a class judgement. The author may wish to show, for instance, that the working classes are basically no different from other people, or that they are, in a spiritual sense at least, more fortunate than other social groups: or that they are not at heart violent and so long as their just complaints are listened to sympathetically the middle and upper classes have nothing to fear from them. Or even more directly, that they need help, that they shouldn't drink, that more schools, hospitals or workhouses – as the case may be – should be built for them. Put simply the most important single fact about the fictional working man is his class.

The historical reason for this is easy to see. During the nineteenth century there were two periods when a significant number of novelists seriously attempted to present the working classes in fiction. Both were times of social upheaval when real or imagined class fears compelled people to look afresh at the basic social, economic and political structure of society. In the 1840s and 50s the motivating force was the outcry over the condition of industrial workers, together with the middle-class panic engendered by Chartist politics: in the period 1880-1900 it was the problem of urban slum conditions and the widespread public debate on Socialism. The fictional response in both periods was almost entirely non-working class. For the novelist who wished to write about the working classes but was not himself from a working-class background, the publicity arising out of these moments of crisis enabled him to create a social framework for his fiction within which he could present a way of life in every respect alien to his own, and closed to him at moments of greater stability. In both

periods the fictional response trails behind political and social reform movements. The industrial novel develops only after the Blue Books and Chartism have paved the way, and the urban novel of the 1890s has a similar dependence on reform agitation of the previous decade. This is one reason for the narrow range of working-class experience presented in fiction, and it also explains why the fiction of each period is dominated and restricted by the single image of a Victorian city. In the earlier period Manchester is used to symbolize both the greatness and shame of Industrial England;² in the later period the East End of London serves the same dual function for Imperial England. In both cases novelists were following rather than anticipating the forces making for change. When the crisis declined the interest of novelists declined also.

In so far as it is possible to talk at all of a genuine working-class literary tradition in the Victorian age, it is to be found in certain regional poets (both dialect and non-dialect), in a considerable mass of Chartist verse and doggerel, and most interestingly in the memoirs of working men who rose to positions of eminence in public life. Apart from a few Chartist novels imaginative prose is non-existent.³ A critical search in Victorian literature for a working-class tradition leads inevitably to the pessimistic conclusion reached by William Empson: 'It is hard for an Englishman to talk definitely about proletarian art, because in England it has never been a genre with settled principles, and such as there is of it, that I have seen, is bad.'⁴

Theoretically, of course, it is not necessary to be of the working class to write an outstanding novel about the working class, as Émile Zola's great trilogy, *L'Assommoir* (1877), *Germinal* (1885) and *La Terre* (1887) indicates. Nor does it follow that a working-man turned novelist will be able to write a good novel about his own class. Thomas Wright and Robert Blatchford are perfect examples of working-class writers who produced important documentary studies of working-class life and very poor novels on the same subject. Nor again is it a matter of sympathy for or hostility towards the workers as a class. This is almost totally unimportant. The crucial point is whether the novelist is effectively committed to artistic principles or to an overt class viewpoint. Most Victorian novelists come into the second category, and their presentation of working-class characters can be seen to become more successful

4 THE TWO TRADITIONS, 1820-80

as they themselves retreat from a position of authorial didacticism. This was very much the point made by Engels in his famous letter to Margaret Harkness:

I am far from finding fault with your not having written a purely socialist novel, a *Tendenzroman*, as we Germans call it, to glorify the social and political views of the author. That is not at all what I mean. The more the author's views are concealed the better for the work of art. The realism I allude to may creep out even in spite of the author's views. Let me refer to an example.

Engels's example is Balzac, whose sense of realism was so intense that it compelled him 'to go against his own class sympathies and political prejudices'.⁵ What Engels is praising in Balzac is his analysis of social relationships, not his treatment of working-class characters – there are in fact no urban or industrial workers in the *Comédie humaine*. With the partial exception of Dickens, this sense of realism is not applicable to the English novelists, who usually present working-class characters in relation to a specific social issue, and are therefore pre-eminently concerned with a form of realism analogous to a sociological document or parliamentary report. In their work we do not feel the realism creeping through in spite of the author's personal views. Rather, the reverse is true – we are too often conscious that the author's concern with social antidotes has weakened the power of his documentary realism. The constant presence of social purpose in the working-class novel leads to a manipulation of the characters' actions, motives and speech, in order that they may be used finally to justify a class theory held by the author. However hard the novelist tries to suppress his sympathy, or hostility, his own class viewpoint becomes transparently clear, and the artistic value of the particular work suffers. This is obvious enough when applied, for instance, to a temperance reform tale, but it is also true, in varying degrees, of most working-class novels written in the nineteenth century. Too often individual working-class scenes in Victorian novels are praised for their historical accuracy, while the total pattern and effect of the novel is either ignored or excused. When we look more closely at how exactly working-class characters are treated in relation to characters of other classes, we find time and time again that the novelist has unconsciously set into motion a process

of avoidance which prevents him from dealing with his professed subject – the working classes.

This central weakness is most apparent in the imposition of unnatural values and attitudes upon working-class characters, allowing them free expression and a full life only in so far as this fits in with the author's preconceived, socially desirable image of them. William Empson's observation that 'proletarian literature usually has a suggestion of pastoral, a puzzling form which looks proletarian but isn't',⁶ is very relevant here. For although it is not my intention to use the phrase 'proletarian literature' in the sense that Empson uses it ('the propaganda of the factory-working class which feels its interests opposed to the factory owners'), his perceptive exploration of the ways that pastoral conventions may be subconsciously employed to hide latent radical or political ideas has a worth beyond the Marxist frame within which he places it. The technique, or to use Empson's terminology again, the 'trick' of pastoral, appears under many strange guises in Victorian working-class fiction, and just because a novelist will often vehemently defend his working-class scenes on the grounds of realism, this should not allow us to ignore the fact that what is carefully observed class reality to the author may well come over as pastoral to the reader.

Any attempt to show how the working classes are portrayed in Victorian fiction must return again and again to the apparent difficulties experienced by novelists in trying to establish a balance between commitment to a class viewpoint and artistic form. Prior to 1880 the problem is there but novelists seem barely conscious of it: after 1880 it becomes an issue of central importance and is most successfully resolved, I shall argue, in the short stories and ballads of Rudyard Kipling. Before looking in detail at the attempts by late-Victorian writers to solve this and other problems, it is necessary, if we are to be sure of what is new and what inherited in their work, to place them in a wider nineteenth-century setting.

II

The industrial novel of the 1840s and 50s is the only type of English working-class fiction to have received much attention

from literary and social historians. In comparison the novel of non-industrial urban working-class life has been totally ignored. Ever since Orwell's common-sense rejection of Dickens as a 'proletarian writer' (a critical approach which differed little from that of Gissing forty years earlier), it has generally been accepted that the 'people who make the wheels go round' hardly exist in fiction, and certainly cannot be said to constitute a viable literary tradition. It is only in recent years that the work of George Gissing and Rudyard Kipling has been treated with the respect it deserves and so far this revaluation has produced little that is new on their contributions to working-class fiction. The slum novelists of the nineties have received even less favourable treatment, and are usually dismissed by literary historians as inferior imitators of either Zola or Dickens, according to the historian's point of view.

This prejudice in favour of the industrial novel is particularly surprising because not only were there far more novels written during the Victorian period which deal with the urban rather than the industrial working class, but in qualitative terms there is little to choose between the two. The industrial novels have retained a lasting interest largely because of their unusual subject matter, but hitherto the same critical allowance has not been given to the urban novel. Yet the fiction produced by writers such as Augustus Mayhew, Gissing, Kipling, Arthur Morrison, Henry Nevinson or Somerset Maugham is as successful as anything in the industrial tradition with the possible exception of *Hard Times*, the first half of *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. And if this fiction is considered for its presentation of the working classes then *Hard Times* also disappears and we are left with Mrs Gaskell as the sole representative. One major reason for this discrimination is the difficulty of defining what exactly is meant by the two words 'working' and 'class'. This can be clarified by examining how the meanings differ when applied to two separate literary traditions – the industrial and the urban.

To talk of the industrial tradition is to mean a handful of novels written primarily in the fourth and fifth decades of the nineteenth century. The earliest is Harriet Martineau's *A Manchester Strike* (1832). This is followed by Mrs Trollope's *Michael Armstrong* (1839-40); *Helen Fleetwood* (1839-40) by 'Charlotte Elizabeth' [Mrs Tonna]; Disraeli's *Coningsby* (1844) and *Sybil* (1845); Mrs

Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855); and Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854). There the tradition virtually ends until the twentieth century. As has already been suggested, interest in industrialism as a subject for fiction was closely related to the rise and decline of Chartism, and once public concern with this particular form of conflict abated so did the novelist's ready-made frame of reference. In the 1860s and 70s the old framework was no longer valid, and novelists, lacking the kind of personal involvement that might have led them to write naturally of working-class life, simply waited until a new social framework was created for them. Then there was a resurgence of working-class fiction.

Of later industrial novels there is George Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866), the only important novel written in response to the agitation for working-class enfranchisement in the sixties, and more concerned with this than industrialism; Charles Reade's attack on Trade Union villainy, *Put Yourself in His Place* (1870); Gissing's *Demos* (1886), in which the workers are urban rather than industrial; and William Morris's dream utopia *News From Nowhere* (1891), in which no recognizably real worker of any kind appears. The only late-Victorian industrial novel which deserves a place beside those of Mrs Gaskell and Disraeli is W. E. Tirebuck's now totally forgotten *Miss Grace of All Souls* (1895), certain passages of which Tolstoy was reported to have described as among 'the best examples of modern English fiction'.⁷

There is no difficulty about defining the worker in these novels. He is part of a composite portrait called Labour and is shown to be in bitter conflict with a further composite portrait called Capital. The Oxford English Dictionary gives as a definition of 'working class': 'The grade or grades of society comprising those who are employed to work for wages in manual or industrial occupations'; and defines 'class' as: 'A number of individuals . . . possessing common attributes, and grouped together under a general or "class" name.' The industrial worker fits perfectly into both of these definitions. In each novel the workers share in common skills, occupations, wage levels, and most important of all, interests and attitudes. Each worker is part of the same instantly recognizable whole. This is not to say that all workers are presented as identical or interchangeable types. Indeed, it is a constant pre-occupation of the industrial novelist to show that within the working-class world there exist social hierarchies almost as rigid as those