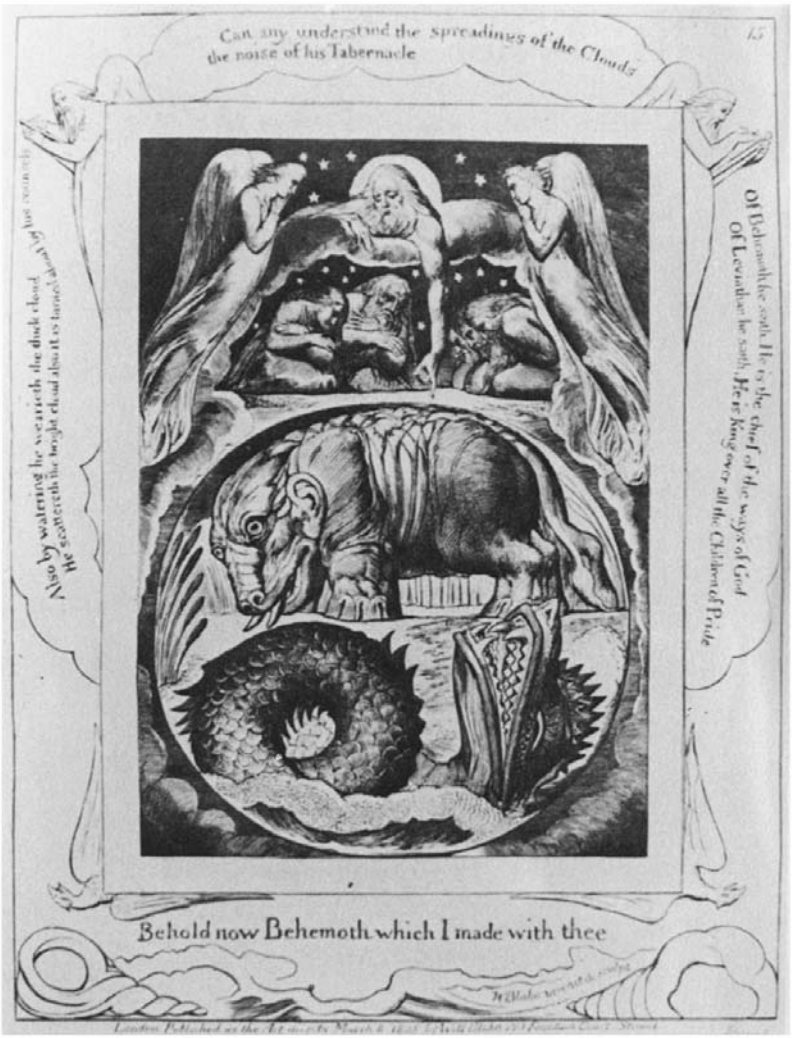
The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction



The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction

The novel as book of life

Barry V. Qualls

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To
Jamima D. Qualls
and
Margaret B. Faverty

In Memoriam
Frederic E. Faverty

So dark and abstruse, without lamp or authentic finger-post, is the course of pious genius towards the Eternal Kingdoms grown. No fixed highway more; the old spiritual highways and recognized paths to the Eternal, now all torn up and flung in heaps . . . surely a tragic pilgrimage for all mortals; Darkness, and the mere shadow of Death, enveloping all things from pole to pole; and in the raging gulf-currents, offering us will-o'-wisps for load-stars, – intimating that there are no stars, nor ever were, except certain Old-Jew ones which have now gone out.

(Carlyle, *Life of Sterling*)

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Preface

In 1833 Carlyle wrote to James Fraser that his Clothes-Volume was "put together in the fashion of a kind of Didactic Novel," with an Editor for "the main Actor in the business."[1] That Editor's task in *Sartor Resartus* is the task of the novelists – and of their narrators – who are my concern in the following pages. This concern focuses on the "double plot" which Bulwer Lytton found "a striking characteristic of the art of our century." This "duality of purpose" he defined as the combining of "an interior symbolical signification with an obvious popular interest in character and incident."[2] This "moral signification" has its sources in the religious tradition that created the nineteenth-century English Sunday: in the old emblem books and in *Pilgrim's Progress*, in the intense typological reading of scripture, and in the work of the spiritual biographers and autobiographers. Bunyan and the emblem writers saw "symbolical signification" in every natural fact, for the Bible revealed that everything declared the glory of God.

The status of the Word as the place of revelation was not, of course, so certain or so certainly secure in the nineteenth century. But Victorian novelists, who took their responsibilities as artists very seriously indeed, were determined that their words could still lead "Christian" of the latter day to the Celestial City – even as they and their readers wondered, as did Little Nell, if *Pilgrim's Progress* "was true in every word, and where those distant countries with the curious names might be." The novelists had always before them the work of the Romantics, German and English, who had stressed the prophetic visionary role of the artist; had redefined God, man, and nature; and had transmuted the spiritual biography into the *Bildungsroman*.

I take the seventeenth-century religious writings, popularly represented by Bunyan and Francis Quarles, and the Romantic revisionings of those inherited ideas and forms as the significant context in which Carlyle and the novelists of this study – and indeed most Victorian writers – worked. Next to these religious and Romantic representations of a world elsewhere I have set Carlyle.

Neither Puritan nor Romantic – but, like Blake, simply biblical – he is the nexus where the inherited religious tradition at once challenges and is incorporated into Romanticism. I use his work, especially *Sartor Resartus* and the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, as a source for a language to describe and define Victorian fiction as the Victorians wrote it and their readers read it. *Sartor* offers that pattern of experience which Victorian novelists adopted or developed on their own for expressing "religious" possibilities in a secular age. The *Pamphlets* provide a "realistic" picture of a world without any religious or romance suggestion of "rescue," and without any notion that words might recall the unseen as well as the easily visible. I do not claim that the novelists were necessarily influenced by Carlyle: Dickens clearly was; Charlotte Brontë read nothing until after *Jane Eyre*; George Eliot reviewed his work (and George Henry Lewes dedicated his biography of Goethe to him). But Carlyle provides a clear emblematic picture for the struggles with traditions and with language which mark the careers of these popular novelists. Carlyle's "progress" is an emblem itself for the pilgrimage of the Victorian mind – and so it is used in the following pages.

In the chapters devoted to the individual novelists, Carlyle joins Bunyan and Quarles as contextual material. To focus the novelists' preoccupations – and mine – I have selected from the religious tradition emblems which the Romantics also found essential: the mirror, the prison, the labyrinth, the dunghill, the rescue of the shipwrecked pilgrim, and the conception of life as an embattled progress. And I have charted the responses of the novelists to the issues these emblems raise – about the self and about language – in a secular world. Each of these novelists felt that the focus of the Victorian Everyman must be on the world of "human interest and business," of ordinary life. Each, no matter how strong the pull of the "realistic" impulse, necessarily had recourse to the "double plot" of Bulwer's description – a plot where romance might also become Romance. Carlyle insisted in 1837 that "Romance exists . . . in Reality alone." And Bulwer added in 1842 that in literature a romance was "a truth for those who can comprehend it, and an extravagance for those who cannot."[3] To experience this Romance within reality, to know that the supernatural was in the natural, required only the "gift of seeing through other organs than the eyes."[4] This gift Caryle and the novelists were determined to give.

My focus is thus on the biblical romances, the "secular scriptures," these novelists wrote – those "little imitation[s]" of "the ways of Providence" (Dickens' definition of art) which they offered as at once novels and guidebooks for their readers. And these readers constituted for them an inextricable part of their texts – as had readers also for Bunyan. The "moral consequences of the activities of reading and writing"[5] and the moral nature of language itself were preoccupying concerns for authors and readers who would have their texts be more than mere entertainments.

I have chosen novelists we all know well because I want to establish a context for seeing anew what is familiar. I want the reader to experience these novels as the Victorians experienced them: as representations of and visionary responses to life as it was – as both novels and books of life. My aim has never been to be all-inclusive. I wanted to examine English writers dealing with the changing conditions of language and noting the effects of this change on English life. I have tended to give special attention to the beginning and end of a career so as to chart how these writers dealt with the increasing secularization of their world and the increasing despiritualization of language. Thus I omit *Romola*; and I give little attention to Dickens' obvious *Bildungsromane*, *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, because my emphasis is on his continuing exploration of this form within the context of wider English social concerns. And I do not treat Thackeray with the emphasis *Vanity Fair* would seem, for my purposes, to demand. Thackeray's emblematic language calls attention to itself as "mere *words*" (the phrase is Carlyle's); his fiction announces its fictionality and the fictionality of all myths which his characters – and his readers – would use to order their lives. He can not sustain, he will not try to sustain, the impulse towards "secular scripture" that characterizes the other novelists.

Victorian novelists wrote and readers read with the "double plot" a part of their spiritual heritage. Readers and writers and protagonists saw in "each man's life a strange emblem of every man's" (as Carlyle said of Sterling). They found in *words* new, and sometimes old, revelations. "Bunyan takes it for granted," William Hale White wrote,

> that the life of a man who is redeemed by the grace of God is a pilgrimage to a better world. This, of course, is the leading thought in his book, and it is one which we find most difficult to make our own. We can follow him through all the incidents of his journey; we know the Valley of Humiliation,

the Valley of the Shadow, and Doubting Castle, but we are not sure, as he was sure, that the wayfarer will reach a celestial home at last. Upon this subject most of us hesitate to speak. We may hope and we may even believe, but an unmistakable instinct warns us to be silent. Perhaps, however, without disobeying it, we may be permitted to say almost in a whisper, that a man who has passed from youth to age cannot naturally rest in the sad conviction that what he has learned is to go for nothing, and that in no sense is there any continuance for him. Our faith may have no demonstrable foundation, and yet it may be a refuge for us. Our lives are shaped by so-called dreams.[6]

And these "so-called dreams," founded in the Bible and Bunyan, redefined by the Romantics, and then transmuted by Carlyle, shaped the Victorian novel into a new *scola cordis*.

This book had its origins in my childhood hearing of the Bible and Dickens and Arthurian legends; in my ninth-grade excitement about Tennyson and *Vanity Fair* – thank you, Rozale Smith; in my reading in graduate school of George Levine; and in the teaching there of Frederic E. Faverty – the most gentle and urgent of teaching voices. William Keach, Sheila Emerson, Thomas Van Laan, John Clubbe, Janet Larson, and especially Daniel Howard have given these pages careful scrutiny and have asked telling, and not always welcome, questions. Even more has been done by John M. Warner, whose attention to argument and loathing of Carlylese have served as continual calls to reflection (though he shares no responsibility for Carlylean convulsions that remain). I cannot imagine this book without his guidance, nor without the guidance of two colleagues at Rutgers: Bridget Lyons helped me to see the significance of emblems in Victorian literature; George Levine's continuing studies of the novelists gave stimulus and encouragement – as did his talk. The Rutgers Research Council and the Rutgers College Faculty Academic Study Program provided leaves that allowed time to shape this study. The Editors of *Studies in the Novel* kindly granted permission to use, in revised form, an article on *Our Mutual Friend* that originally appeared there. Mary Rueshoff and Linda Kozusko assisted with enthusiasm in the preparation of the manuscript. Larry Qualls offered suggestive readings of these pages and provided the photographs. And Dr Andrew Brown of Cambridge University Press gave help that made me wish I had enjoyed his learning and counsel at the outset of the writing.

Finally I acknowledge with gratitude those whose provisions ("part of the meaning, part of the mind") have for the past decade

kept me mostly out of Gehenna: Bridget Gellert Lyons and Robert B. Lyons, William Keach and Sheila Emerson, John M. Warner – and the voice of Eleanor Steber.

Note on texts and abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used within the text for works to which frequent reference is made; abbreviations indicate edition, volume and, in the case of the novelists, volume or book, chapter, and page numbers.

Carlyle

C	*The Works of Thomas Carlyle*. Ed. H. D. Traill. Centenary Edition. 30 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896–1901.
FR	*The French Revolution*. Vols. II, III, IV of *Works*.
H	*On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. Vol. 5 of *Works*.
LDP	*Latter-Day Pamphlets*. Vol. XX of *Works*.
PP	*Past and Present*. Ed. Richard D. Altick. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.
SR	*Sartor Resartus*. Ed. Charles Frederick Harrold. New York: Odyssey, 1937.

Charlotte Brontë

JE	*Jane Eyre*. Ed. Jane Jack and Margaret Smith. Oxford: Clarendon, 1969.
P	*The Professor*. Everyman's Library. London: Dent, 1969.
S	*Shirley*. Ed. Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith. Oxford: Clarendon, 1979.
V	*Villette*. Ed. Mark Lilly. Penguin, 1979.

Charles Dickens

BH	*Bleak House*. Ed. George Ford and Sylvere Monod. New York: Norton, 1977.
DS	*Dombey and Son*. Ed. Alan Horsman. Oxford: Clarendon, 1974.

Note on texts and abbreviations

GE	*Great Expectations*. Ed. Angus Calder. Penguin, 1965.
LD	*Little Dorrit*. Ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith. Oxford: Clarendon, 1979.
MC	*Martin Chuzzlewit*. Ed. P. N. Furbank. Penguin, 1968.
OCS	*The Old Curiosity Shop*. Ed. Angus Easson. Penguin, 1972.
OMF	*Our Mutual Friend*. Ed. Stephen Gill. Penguin, 1971.

George Eliot

AB	*Adam Bede*. Ed. John Paterson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968.
DD	*Daniel Deronda*. Ed. Barbara Hardy. Penguin, 1967.
FH	*Felix Holt, the Radical*. Ed. Fred C. Thomson. Oxford: Clarendon, 1980.
GEL	*The George Eliot Letters*. Ed. Gordon S. Haight. 9 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954–78.
Mid	*Middlemarch*. Ed. Gordon S. Haight. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956.
MF	*The Mill on the Floss*. Ed. Gordon S. Haight. Oxford: Clarendon, 1980.
Scenes	*Scenes of Clerical Life*. Ed. David Lodge. Penguin, 1973.
SM	*Silas Marner*. Ed. Q. D. Leavis. Penguin, 1967.

John Bunyan

B	*Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Ed. Roger Sharrock. London: Oxford, 1966.

Francis Quarles

Quarles	*Emblems, Divine and Moral*. London: William Tegg, 1866.