CHAPTER 1

Narrative annexes: altered spaces, altered modes

INTRODUCTION

This study of the Victorian novel identifies a technique employed across its various kinds – in social fictions, fictional autobiographies, Bildungsromanen, Condition of England novels, romances, and realistic novels – to renovate the nineteenth-century house of fiction. Narrative annexes, as I name them, allow unexpected characters, impermissible subjects, and plot-altering events to appear, in a bounded way, within fictional worlds that might be expected to exclude them. Like other Victorian renovations, narrative annexes may appear to disfigure the structure they alter, but they at the same time reveal Victorian novelists’ creative responses to the capacities and limitations of their form. Annexes are initiated by a combined shift in genre and setting that changes the fictional world of the novel, and they work by interrupting the norms of a story’s world, temporarily replacing those norms, and carrying the reader, the perceiving and reporting characters, and the plot-line across a boundary and through an altered, particular, and briefly realized zone of difference. In small spaces and few pages, narrative annexes challenge both cultural and literary norms to form imaginative worlds more variously, in sometimes distracting or dissonant interludes. Yet annexes never stop the plot, but serve the story by modifying the story-world. As alternatives to the techniques of fantasy or multiplied plot lines, Victorian annexes simultaneously anticipate the fragmentation associated with modern fiction, and resemble the flexible worldmaking of prose fiction before the novel. Extending and qualifying the boundaries of representation, narrative annexes draw attention and contribute to the generic diversity of the Victorian novel, complicating the traditional opposition of realism and romance. Narrative annexes are sites of Victorian novelists’ negotiation with the conventional, and as such they reveal not only the effort to employ alterna-
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tive representational strategies, but also the subjects that instigate that effort.

All narrative annexes possess a shift to a previously unrepresented place and a simultaneous alteration in narrative language that sends signals of adjusted genre. All narrative annexes make a change within the primary level of a fictional world without departing it entirely, as an embedded text or an interpolated story does. The connection of the setting and the consistency of the narrative situation permit the perceiving (and, in the case of the first person, narrating) character to journey through the annex, by crossing a boundary line or border region, marked with signs of generic and spatial difference.

A constitutive feature of annexes, these boundaries or border regions indicate the commitment of Victorian novelists to the representation of spatially coherent fictional worlds, and at the same time allude to the contemporary critical discourse on the proper “realm” of the novel. When, at the end of the century in “The Death of the Lion” (1894), Henry James’ characters refer to the new practice of representing in fiction all-too-recently forbidden subjects as “the permissibility of the larger latitude,” the journalists and literary lion self-consciously retail a cliché of the book reviewers. If by the 1890s the “larger latitude” had been opened up for exploration by naturalist novelists who took readers into regions previously unrepresented, and by sensationalist writers who dared, if not actual frankness, forays into the risqué, the new permissibility suggested an older set of prohibitions, copiously attested to in sixty years of book reviews. The “larger latitude” replaces a “narrower sphere.” Metaphors of place, zone, realm, and boundary-line proved indispensable to the Victorian reviewers who attempted to define and redefine the role of the novel. The novelists responsible for both continuing and challenging the traditions of representation in fiction shared with the critics a moral vocabulary that expressed possibilities and impossibilities in geographical terms (“latitude,” “over the line”), but they also had close at hand a rich array of literary models for the radical alteration of fictional worlds. For from Shakespeare’s drama, The Faerie Queene, Don Quixote, and romantic poetry, among other sources, Victorian novelists inherited an image of boundary-crossing – into the green world, into the houses of Pride or Holiness, into the cave of Montesinos, into the underworld, through spots of time. Critics’ protests against the episodic and the improbable notwithstanding, the place- and genre-shifting strategy I describe in this book as “narrative annexing” belonged in the tool-box of techniques Victorian novelists inherited from
earlier narrative artists. Since boundaries, borders, and lines of demarcation evoke not only the long tradition of traversing an ever-altering imaginary terrain, but also the censorious language of the Victorian cultural watchdog, or the formal purist (often but not always the same person), they become a vital element of novelists' manipulation of spatial difference and dramatic generic admixture to challenge representational norms.

For instance, Thomas Hardy simultaneously alters the generic signals and the location of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) when he conveys Michael Henchard through a border-region that becomes a forbidding barrier around the abode of the weather prophet: “The turnpike became a lane, the lane a cart-track, the cart-track a bridle-path, the bridle-path a foot-way, the foot-way overgrown. The solitary walker slipped here and there, and stumbled over the natural springes formed by the brambles, till at length he reached the house, which, with its garden, was surrounded with a high, dense hedge.” This hedge marks the boundary between the ordinary world of Casterbridge and the weather-prophet’s house, but the incantatory language and the difficult journey have already combined to suggest an annex, an alternative realm outside Casterbridge where magical forecasts rather than up-to-date technology and practical knowledge might work. Passing through the door in the hedge, Henchard pays for bad advice from Mr. Fall. This action, insulated from the main setting of the novel, makes an essential contribution to the plot, as it precipitates Henchard's financial ruin. The bounded realm of the annex serves the downward turning of Henchard's plot-line, contains the unprecedented action of Henchard’s reliance on another’s guesswork, and results in Jopp’s alienation from his employer, which in turn leads to the work of the novel’s later narrative annex (discussed in chapter 4).

This brief example points to a fourth feature present, with changed genre, altered setting, and a crossed boundary, in all annexes (the four markers do vary in prominence). The events contained in narrative annexes, while insulated from the primary fictional world by the passage through the annexes’ boundary, are always consequential for the plot. Here Seymour Chatman’s distinction between “kernel” and “satellite” plot events helps us to see the tricky narrative work an annex performs. Unlike a satellite event, which can be omitted from a plot summary without misrepresentation of the story, a kernel event contributes in an indispensable way to the story’s development and outcome. The combination in narrative annexes of an appearance of digressiveness, differ-
ence, even marginality, and essential kernel plot events with real consequences for the temporarily departed primary fictional world results in odd deformations of mainly verisimilar Victorian fictional worlds. It is therefore not surprising to discover that the very episodes I call annexes were often singled out by critics and contemporary readers as especially unlikely or peculiar. While for practical reasons this last phenomenon cannot be used as an infallible test of an annex, I trace in the chapters that follow the critical reaction to narrative annexes in order to recapitulate this part of the conversation about representational and formal norms among Victorian novelists, critics, and readers.

Though the career of Thomas Hardy provides perhaps the most well-known example of the consequences of contesting social norms for representation, I do not attempt in this book to retell a story of causes and effects. Instead, my focus on the Victorian strategy of annexing, and my attention to the prescriptive theory of the novel emerging in the same period, recovers to view one of the fundamental techniques novelists used to negotiate the “latitude” of the novel. That they did so to a chorus of “Unlikely!” “Improbable!” and graver cries of disapproval from contemporaries means not that critical strictures ultimately confined them, but that their attempt to broaden the representational range and generic flexibility of narrative fiction attracted notice. The spatial metaphors for social norms so often employed by Victorian critics can be observed at work both literally and figuratively in the novels, calling attention to the shared vocabulary of this decades-long negotiation. The “permissibility” of the 1890s and subsequent years, and some of the most significant formal innovations of early twentieth-century fiction, in fact build upon the testing of limitations observable in annexes of the earlier Victorian decades.

My goal in this study is not to contest the importance of French, Russian, and American narrative technique for the development of modern form, but to focus on an aspect of the English novelistic tradition that shows us Victorians thinking through, and sometimes working their way past, the representational barriers associated with nineteenth-century fiction. Hedges or hedgerows, for instance, often appear in annexes as particularly English figures for the boundary between the likely and the unlikely, the possible and the improbable. The character who traverses the changing terrain of the annex may doubt the powers of the alternative realm (Henchard says that he does not “altogether believe in forecasts” [260]), or she may desire the impossible thing that lies in the other place. In the annex in George
Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859), Hetty Sorrel seeks a hidden pool in which to drown herself, to “get among the flat green fields with the high hedges round them, where nobody could see her or know her; and there, perhaps, when there was nothing else she could do, she should get courage to drown herself in some pond.” Eliot’s rendering of Hetty’s fear sets the social world of the novel against a private, hidden place where she considers but does not accomplish suicide. When Hetty realizes that her out-of-wedlock pregnancy will result in the public humiliation of going to the parish, or in the necessity of seeking help from strangers, her fantasy of self-sufficiency creates an imaginary realm into which she will escape the “far-off hideous region of intolerable shame that [she] had all her life thought it impossible she could ever come near” (424–3). The generic register of the novel swerves away from domestic realism and the familiar stopping place of picaresque [the inn], into sensation and melodrama as it follows Hetty’s path off the road. Eliot allows Hetty to enter her annex on the other side of the “bushy tree-studded hedgerows” (429), but exposes the insufficiency of the solitary zone and hidden pool in preventing Hetty from finding herself in the nearer-than-imagined “hideous region of intolerable shame.” As her later confession to Dinah reiterates, Hetty cannot drown herself, no more than she can fathom that a rescuer might ignore her exposed baby’s cries. The privacy of the annex not only fails Hetty’s purpose, but also allows her capital crime, infanticide.

In contrast, the radical isolation and privation of the annex in Charles Dickens’ *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–4) makes possible Martin’s awareness of his selfishness. To reach an appropriate landscape for killing self-love, Dickens conveys his American travelers in chapter 29 to the fatal locale of “New Eden.” This American dead-end owes as much to the imaginary terrain of English Renaissance romance and Goliardic horror as it does to Dickens’ actual travels. The Spenserian features of the landscape animate generic as well as physical alterations in the novel’s fictional world:

As they proceeded further on their track, and came more and more towards their journey’s end, the monotonous desolation of the scene increased to the degree, that for any redeeming feature it presented to their eyes, they might have entered, in the body, on the grim domains of the Giant Despair. A flat morass, bestrewn with fallen timber; a marsh on which the good growth of the earth seemed to have been wrecked and cast away, that from its decomposing ashes vile and ugly things might rise; where the very trees took the aspect of huge weeds, begotten of the slime from which they sprang, by the hot sun that
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burnt them up; where fatal maladies, seeking whom they might infect, came forth at night in misty shapes, and creeping out upon the water, hunted them like spectres until day; where even the blessed sun, shining down on festering elements of corruption and disease, became a horror; this was the realm of Hope through which they moved.5

In an elaborate mutation, the corrupting water of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and the threatening domains of the Giant Despair turn America into an isolating, abandoned, and fantastically lethal swamp, from an over-crowded zone of social comedy. Martin and Mark Tapley may have reached their dead-end physically, but the increased figurative power of the narrative annex’s language and location drives a psychological transformation that comes straight out of Book 1 of The Faerie Queene.

Changes in setting alone, unaccompanied by a shift in generic register and a vividly realized boundary-crossing, cannot be considered narrative annexes, for the term would then dissolve into more mundane or merely pragmatic place-changes, of which there are copious examples in Victorian fiction. The “New Eden” annex of Martin Chuzzlewit provides a helpful contrast between the unsettling and complicated alterations of fictional worlds in narrative annexes and simple shifts in setting. The journey to America, for instance, certainly alters the scene of one of Martin Chuzzlewit’s plot strands, but, except for the striking “New Eden” annex, the American episodes maintain a consistent generic backdrop for scenes of social satire. By way of contrast with Dickens’ “New Eden,” in William Thackeray’s Vanity Fair (1847–8) virtually the entire cast of the novel removes to the Low Countries without disrupting the prevailing modes of social comedy and satire. Thackeray’s narrator underlines the continuity of the world of home and the world of tourists accompanying the Duke of Wellington’s army: “In the meanwhile the business of life and living, and the pursuits of pleasure, especially, went on as if no end were to be expected to them, and no enemy in front.”6 Thackeray represents the war itself, when it arrives, in the most general terms, deferring to his contemporary readers’ knowledge of the events; the single paragraph reporting the battle of Waterloo contains the corpse of the one character whose perspective might have lent an alternative view to the novel. Instead of sharing George Osbourne’s experience, we carry away the indelible impression of Jos Sedley’s life-endangering faux uniform. Though Thackeray changes the setting, and the war literally challenges real boundaries, an annex has not been deployed here, for the genre has remained ironically consistent.
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When a change in place in a novel is accompanied by a shift in time, most often the device employed by the novelist is not an annex, but a flashback (or analepsis). Anachrony, or the disordering of story events in their presentation, may be a complicating factor in an annex, but a flashback rarely exhibits all of the traits of an annex. When George Eliot’s narrator relates the background of Dr. Lydgate, she moves the reader of Middlemarch (1871–2) to the Continent and back in time. The additional shift in genre to the melodrama of Lydgate’s infatuation with the actress Laure makes it tempting to consider this episode a narrative annex, but most annexes, like most Victorian novels, unfold without disrupting the consecutive time of the narration. In this instance, the representation of a boundary-crossing is missing, and the narrative content, though it illuminates Lydgate’s character, does not make up a kernel plot event. To take an even more extreme example of a flashback that shares some but not all of the traits of a narrative annex, when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle abruptly transports his readers from Sherlock Holmes’ London to the Great Alkali Plain in A Study in Scarlet (1887), the place and time both change drastically, and kernel events are related, but the narrative of murder, detection, and revenge possesses strong generic continuities with the London episodes. The analepsis provides not an alternative world, but a prior world in which the original crime sought by Holmes occurs. Similarly, the gap-filling depictions of the multiple narrators in Wilkie Collins’ The Moonstone (1868) make up the very fabric of the fictional world.

While detective fiction relies for its resolution on the reconstruction (by confession, discovered document, or investigator’s brainwork) of the criminal scene in the past, other sub-genres of the novel depend upon changes in location to instigate their whole action. This, too, differs from the briefer, shorter, and norm-challenging narrative annex. In Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897), for instance, gothic conventions demand a departure from the normal, rational world, and Jonathan Harker’s journal immediately notes “I read that every known superstition in the world is gathered into the horseshoe of the Carpathians, as if it were the centre of some sort of imaginative whirlpool.” That whirlpool becomes the fictional world of the entire novel, not a narrative annex with its short-lived variances from predominant fictional norms.

Many novels achieve an effect of temporary difference by means of interpolation or embedding, in which a frame contains multiple, contrasting voices (The Moonstone); or a secondary narrator tells a tale; or a document makes available information presented in contrasting dis-
course. These alterations in narrative level\(^8\) work differently than narrative annexes. Embedded tales such as the stories in Charles Dickens’ *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–7) create a subsidiary level of narrative distinct from the primary world of episodic narration. Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) is enriched by significant interpolations, such as Margaret Legh’s song, “The Oldham Weaver”; and the same character’s anec-
dote of the reanimation of the dormant scorpion (like John Barton, the insect appears harmless, but turns dangerous when he gets heated up); and the narrator’s allusions to Dives and Lazarus. Because they add subsidiary layers (stories within the story) to the primary fictional world, however, these interpolations do not constitute narrative annexes. Nor do the “criminal nightworld”\(^9\) of Manchester, the crime scene, and the squalid basements of the most wretched inhabitants of the city make annexes just because one rarely finds such places in earlier fiction. These settings together make up the primary world of *Mary Barton*.\(^10\)

If there is a narrative annex in *Mary Barton*, it occurs when the title character leaves Manchester and dry land in a race to exonerate her falsely accused beloved. Place could not be more strikingly altered, for here is Mary, hazarding Liverpool, the docks, and the sailors in a “new world of sight and sound” (342), pursuing the witness who can clear Jemm’s name, “rocking and tossing in a boat for the first time in her life, alone with two rough, hard-looking men” (345). Genre changes, too, as Mary and her rough guides leave the shore. Though Gaskell ad-
morishes her readers that we cannot “read the lot of those who daily pass [us] by in the street,” nor “know the wild romances of their lives” (70), here she breaks from *Mary Barton’s* predominant mode of anxiety-producing delay, of dread, anticipation of the worst, of misunderstanding, missing information, and waiting, to produce an anomalous episode of pure romance chase starring an action heroine. The stressful, strange world of the Liverpool annex brings Mary Barton to an almost catatonic state, but not before she accomplishes the task that brings her out on the water, and not before she learns to use her voice (“a loud, harsh whisper”) in the service of an “errand of life and death” (348).

One of the most important tasks of a narrative annex, as in Mary Barton’s race, is to provide a space for the accomplishment of an action or event that otherwise could not occur in the novel. George Meredith’s *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859) suggests that Victorian novelists sometimes see the construction of an alternative world within a world in terms of an opposition between romance and novel that can free characters not for marvellous experiences, but for perfectly ordinary
actions forbidden by social prescriptions. In The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, Meredith introduces annexes to carve out a place where the eponymous hero can conduct the love affair that cannot happen anywhere within reach of his father’s rigid educational “System.”

Meredith advertises the shift from the primary fictional world to the annexes, and emphasizes their incompatibility, by periodically renaming the river bank after Prospero’s island, and by allowing “Ferdinand” and “Miranda” to act out their love story in terms governed by an outmoded, but still potent, genre: Shakespearian romance (117–27). Narrative annexes thus employ the resources of changed genre and place to serve both plot and the representation of “out of place” behavior.

This brief catalog of examples of narrative annexes, and of techniques that resemble but differ from annexes, suggests that the Victorian novel is replete with peculiar episodes. To sort out all the narrative annexes from all the flashbacks, or interpolations, or from all of the odd places represented in Victorian fiction is not the task of this book, though I have found that every time I describe narrative annexes to a fellow novel-reader, I come away with more examples of the technique in use. Studying these examples has convinced me that while I cannot account for each narrative annex in a book of reasonable length, I can suggest why Victorian novelists broke with the norms of their carefully wrought fictional worlds to employ narrative annexes. The heart of this study lies in the explanation of how Victorian novelists use narrative annexes both to solve problems of plotting and characterization, and to address cultural anxieties, particularly those preoccupations kept out of the novel by the limits of generic conventions, by the prohibitions of contemporary critics, or by shared ideas about the boundaries of representation. In demarking zones in which Victorian novelists struggle to represent improbable, awkward, unsuitable, embarrassing, or downright threatening ideas, characters, actions, and social problems, narrative annexes reveal a great variety of cultural preoccupations. Annexes occur in the novels of great writers, and in the work of contributors to the fascinating “minor” canon of Victorian fiction. Novelists male and female create them, and use them for diverse purposes in novels of various kinds. Because this study can no more hope to encompass all the topics suggested by the contents of annexes than it can interpret every Victorian novel possessing one, I train my attention on the prominent themes of gender, sexuality, and social class (intertwined as they are with religion, politics, and race), to take up the central contestation of the limits of representation made by narrative annexes.
Both product and mirror of the periods from 1832 through the early years of the twentieth century, the Victorian novel has often been described as being bound by conventions that transfer the restrictions and assumptions of the social to representational norms. To take an influential example, George Levine writes, “In a world whose reality is defined . . . according to inherited traditions of social order, no ‘inhuman’ landscape can occupy much space. Victorian realism’s attempt to exclude extremes extends not only to heroism, psychic intensity, or violent behavior, but to geography as well.”13 (Levine is of course interested in the exceptions to the norm he describes.) I demonstrate in the following chapters that, in tandem with narrative annexes’ exceptional depictions of place, the generic alternatives proffered by annexes complicate the fictional worlds of the Victorian novel in a way that challenges orderly representation. The attempt to exclude extremes, while standard, is matched by narrative annexes’ exceptional inclusions, which controvert both literary and social norms. The strategy of annexing represents one way Victorian novelists struggle with the “inherited traditions of social order,” a way as Victorian as the articulation of limits and the drawing of boundaries. My intention is not to discover, again, the presence of romance in the closet of the realistic house of fiction, nor to contest the relationship of social and fictional norms. Instead, in this study I describe a technique of worldmaking employed, at one time or another, by almost every Victorian novelist to construct a space for alternatives. In order to demonstrate the flexibility and diverse uses of this hitherto unrecognized technique, my inquiry extends beyond realism to treat narrative annexes discovered in the kinds (a term I use throughout in the technical sense of a subgenre differing from other kinds in both how and what it represents) of Victorian fiction. The terms and norms of representation established in the novelistic kinds in which narrative annexes occur vary widely, so I deliberately examine an apparently eclectic group of novels, written over more than half a century by major and minor writers. What Alton Locke (1859), Castle Richmond (1866), Comingsby (1844), The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886), and Villette (1853) – to name only some of the novels I discuss – have in common is the use of narrative annexes to carry on narration in alternative zones within their primary fictional worlds.

I use the term “fictional world” to denote the assemblage, perceived by the reader, of imagined materials deployed by the author in the