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DEIRDRE DAVID



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# I

KATE FLINT

## The Victorian novel and its readers

When the emancipated slave, William Wells Brown, visited England in 1850, he made a short visit to the “far-famed city of Oxford . . . one of the principal seats of learning in the world.” Here, he admired the architectural beauties of the university, and, when night fell, walked around the colleges which back onto Christ Church meadow:

I could here and there see the reflection of light from the window of some student, who was busy at his studies, or throwing away his time over some trashy novel, too many of which find their way into the trunks or carpet-bags of the young men on setting out for college. As I looked upon the walls of these buildings I thought, as the rough stone is taken from the quarry to the finisher, there to be made into an ornament, so was the young mind brought here to be cultivated and developed.<sup>1</sup>

Brown’s focus of interest is salutary. Reading provoked a good deal of anxiety during the Victorian period. At the centre of this anxiety about what constituted suitable reading material and ways of reading lay concerns about class, and concerns about gender. In both cases, fiction was regarded as particularly suspect: likely to influence adversely, to stimulate inappropriate ambitions and desires, to corrupt. But in the case of Brown, a man who is painfully aware of the value of education, and of the advantages which privilege bestows, we see someone who is less troubled by the thought that this young man might be learning dangerous lessons from his novel, than someone who cares that he is frittering away his time, wasting those opportunities for learning from which others could gain so much. He seizes the chance to regret how “few of our own race can find a place within their walls,” and to emphasize the need, among black people, to turn their attention seriously to self-education.

So much Victorian commentary on reading is written from a dominant social position, one which brings with it an assumption of inbuilt superiority, that it is well to be reminded that debates about the consumption of fiction were not confined to those who held strong views about the material

consumed by the working classes, the volumes devoured by women. And yet, the assumption that novels were a particularly influential form of communication meant that their effects, or presumed effects, on these groups of readers were repeatedly put under scrutiny. Examining the contents and tone of reading material became, too, an apparently simple way of practising social investigation. The prevailing assumption – one hard to contradict – was that most people read without much system, “to gratify natural taste,” as William Alexander put it, “or an easy curiosity.” He went on to draw what was, for him, an easy conclusion: that their reading material must therefore form “a true and reliable index to both their moral and mental habits and condition.”<sup>2</sup> Yet even if casual, indiscriminate readers, especially those who consumed only popular fiction in its various forms, were thought of as being particularly vulnerable to having their ideas and actions moulded by texts, they were not the only ones to be affected. As George Eliot wrote in an early letter, men and women are “imitative beings. We cannot, at least those who ever read to any purpose at all . . . help being modified by the ideas that pass through our minds.”<sup>3</sup> It was this belief, or rather the fear that, for some people, accompanied it, that lay behind the complete prohibition on fiction reading in some quarters – especially in the early decades of the Victorian period – and the extreme caution with which the genre was approached in others. The distrust was strongest among Dissenters. The journalist, William T. Stead, son of a Congregationalist minister in Yorkshire, looked back on how he was born and brought up in a home where life was “regarded as the vestibule of Eternity, and where everything that tended to waste time, which is life in instalments, was regarded as an evil thing.” Theatre and cards were regarded, respectively, as the Devil’s chapel and the Devil’s prayerbook, and the novel was considered “a kind of Devil’s Bible, whose meretricious attractions waged an unholy competition against the reading of God’s word.”<sup>4</sup> In a few extreme cases, this absolute prohibition endured past the early decades of the century. Thus Edmund Gosse’s parents, members of the Plymouth Brethren, refused, in the 1850s, to have fiction of any kind in their house. He learned about missionaries, he tells us in his autobiography, *Father and Son* (1907), but never about pirates. To tell stories was a sin. This prohibition made him hungry for narrative. He recounts how, when a boy, he found sheets from a sensation novel glued to the lid of a trunk in the garret, and the fact that the story came to an abrupt halt “in the middle of one of its most thrilling sentences, wound me up almost to a disorder of wonder and romance.”<sup>5</sup> His father and mother “desired to make me truthful; the tendency was to make me positive and sceptical,” rejecting, relatively rapidly, their religious teaching (*Father and*

*Son*, 17). But in general, strict evangelical censorship had softened by the mid-century. As Anthony Trollope recorded in his *Autobiography* (1883), fifty years prior to the time of writing, “The families in which an unrestricted permission was given for the reading of novels were very few, and from many they were altogether banished.” However, there is, at the time of writing, “no such embargo.” Rather, “Novels are read right and left, above stairs and below, in town houses and in country parsonages, by young countesses and by farmers’ daughters, by old lawyers and by young students.”<sup>6</sup>

Why did the novel come to be such a dominant literary form in the Victorian period? Who read novels, and what motivated them? And where did they obtain their fiction? These questions are, of course, interlinked. In purely numerical terms, the audience for novels grew enormously during the nineteenth century. In part, this was due to economic factors: the growth of cities, which provided concentrated markets; the development of overseas readerships in the colonies; cheaper production costs when it came to both paper and printing processes; better distribution networks, and the advertising and promotion of books. It is hard to be confident about literacy figures – methods used to measure the ability to read and write are notoriously unreliable. If, in 1840, 67 percent of men and 51 percent of women could sign the marriage register, this tells us nothing about the nature and extent of their engagement of the written word – and nor do the literacy figures from the 1851 census: 69.3 percent for men, 54.8 percent for women. The 1870 Education Act certainly made education easier to obtain, and by 1900 the percentage of literates was 97.2 men, and 96.8 women. On the one hand, there exists, despite the statistics, plenty of discursive evidence throughout the century which laments the faltering quality of the reading, and the tendency for the faculty to decay once someone left school. On the other, a growing number of jobs demanded at least some ability to read, and an increasing number of cheap texts, aimed at those with unsophisticated reading abilities and targeted at their tastes, made printed material attractive: material which reached a still wider audience when, as was frequently the case, it was shared through reading aloud. Fiction was preeminent in this print culture; above all, the stories of crime and violence, and the exaggeratedly impossible romances which so disturbed those who commented on the reading of the working classes.

Among the middle classes, patterns of employment, with the increasing separation of home and working environment, and the rise of commuting, together with the consolidation of the assumption that a male head of a household should be able to provide for the female members of his family, without them having to take paid work, contributed to the establishment of

clearly demarcated leisure time and space for both women and men. “A novel’s a splendid thing after a hard day’s work, a sharp practical tussle with the real world,” remarks one of the characters in Mary Braddon’s *The Doctor’s Wife* (1864).<sup>7</sup> Reading fiction was a way of winding down; a mental space from the complicated business of running a home; a means of filling hours that for otherwise under-employed women were figured as “empty.” As “those about to write a novel” were advised in the *Saturday Review* of 1887, the average reader of novels is not a critical person, cares little for art for art’s sake, and has no fixed ideas about the duties and responsibilities of an author: “all he asks is that he may be amused and interested without taxing his own brains.”<sup>8</sup> Increasingly, a distinction developed between intellectually, psychologically and aesthetically demanding fiction, and that which primarily served the needs of escapism and relaxation. This was a distinction which novelists, as well as critics, wrote about, both within their fiction and outside it: Egremont, in George Gissing’s *Thyrza* (1887), sneers: “If one goes on the assumption that the ill word of the mob is equivalent to high praise, one will not, as a rule, be far wrong, in matters of literature”;<sup>9</sup> Henry James’s “The Figure in the Carpet” mocks both critic and reader who wish to reduce the essence of elusive, suggestive fiction to a nameable quality. When, in 1897, James sent Joseph Conrad a complimentary copy of *The Spoils of Poynton*, the latter, whilst warmly admiring of the style, writes with awkward condescension of how he imagines “with pain the man in the street trying to read it! And my common humanity revolts at the evoked image of his suffering. One could almost see the globular lobes of his brain painfully revolving and crushing, mangling the delicate thing. As to his exasperation it is a thing impossible to imagine and too horrid to contemplate.”<sup>10</sup> A rhetorically absolute division between the intellectuals and the masses was emerging during the final decades of Victoria’s reign.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, despite the desire of certain critics and novelists to distinguish their standards from those of “the man in the street,” autobiographies, letters and journals demonstrate eclecticism and unpredictability on the part of readers. Reading serves different needs on different occasions: the important thing to note is that there was an ever-widening and increasingly cheap range of fiction with which to satisfy these varied needs.

Until the end of the century, the majority of Victorians did not purchase their “serious” fiction – the kind of fiction that could be assured reviews in the major weeklies – brand-new when it came out in volume form, but borrowed it from circulating libraries. New fiction was expensive. For most of the period, a novel cost thirty-one shillings and sixpence. Publishers were reluctant to risk their capital on bringing out cheaper original editions:



Richard Bentley's brief and far from extensive experiment in that respect in 1854 foundered when the Crimean War caused a slump in book sales, a reminder of the volatile nature of the market. Chief among the circulating library proprietors was Charles Edward Mudie. Having loaned books in a small way for ten years, he set up his New Oxford Street headquarters in 1852, charged a guinea a year subscription for the right to borrow a volume at a time (as opposed to his competitors' two, although more lavish deals were available from Mudie), and distributed books by van in London, by railway to the provinces, and in tin trunks overseas. This practice of accounting per volume, rather than per title, was the chief factor in maintaining the dominance of the three-decker novel until nearly the end of the century. At the height of his dominance of the borrowing scene, Mudie was taking more than £40,000 a year in subscriptions. When he died, in 1890, his library had about 25,000 subscribers. He entered into deals with the major publishing houses, securing pre-publication orders, and they looked to him for a substantial slice of their sales. Bentley sold 3,864 novels by subscription in 1864, for example, and 1,962 of these were to Mudie. Mudie prided himself on the moral tone of the books he stocked. Whilst his choice of the word "select" to describe his library hinted, too, at a class exclusiveness, the boast in his advertising that to his library "the *best* Works of Fiction are . . . freely admitted" suggests the careful vetting of their quality, a process in which he himself took an active part.

Other circulating libraries, notably (from the early 1860s) W. H. Smith and Son, as well as those run by countless local shops, also prospered. By comparison with Mudie's, W. H. Smith had 15,000 subscribers in 1894: in both cases, these figures very probably represented a substantial decline from the figures of the 1860s. The Ewart Act, which provided for free public libraries in England, was passed in 1850, although the spread of such libraries was initially relatively slow, until the rapid development of the 1890s. Their emphasis tended to fall on usefulness and education – their users were frequently, though not invariably, from the working classes, and a philanthropic attitude towards them prevailed – and although many librarians could see the advantages in fostering a taste for reading in any form, others were very chary about the type of fiction they admitted. Some went so far as to ban modern novels entirely: that of Newcastle upon Tyne feared that if they were to allow them on their shelves, "their library would be flooded with unmitigated trash."<sup>12</sup> No such censoring mechanisms operated among those who stocked railway bookstalls. Whilst book-selling, outside major urban centres, was not a profitable trade during the Victorian period, these particular conjunctions of text and modernity were a major outlet for reprints of contemporary fiction (customarily priced at

6s. or 7s. when brought out by the original publisher, and at 1s. or 2s. when appearing in “railway editions”) and for the increasing number of series which produced cheap (and often badly printed and flimsy) reprints of English classics, together with translations and abridgements. The interval before serious novels were reprinted in popular, 6s. form varied considerably, from a year or so, in the case of George Eliot and Trollope, to between three to five years, when it came to Thackeray, and even longer for the perennially financially cautious Dickens. Bookstalls sold even cheaper fiction, too. Agnes Repplier noted, in 1893, how

The clerks and artisans, shopgirls, dressmakers, and milliners, who pour into London every morning by the early trains, have, each and every one, a choice specimen of penny fiction with which to beguile the short journey, and perhaps the few spare minutes of a busy day. The workingman who slouches up and down the platform, waiting for the moment of departure, is absorbed in some crumpled bit of pink-covered romance. The girl who lounges opposite to us in the carriage, and who would be a very pretty girl in any other conceivable hat, sucks mysterious sticky lozenges, and reads a story called “Mariage à la Mode, or Getting into Society”<sup>13</sup>

The easy availability of popular fiction was one of the factors which, towards the end of the century, put pressure on publishers to change their pricing system. “The three-shilling book is our great want,” demanded Matthew Arnold in 1880, not “a cheap literature, hideous and ignoble of aspect, like the tawdry novels which flare in the bookshelves of our railway-stations, and which seem designed, as so much else that is produced for the use of our middle-class seems designed, for people with a low standard of life.”<sup>14</sup> The publication of George Moore’s *A Mummer’s Wife* in 1885 at 6s. inaugurated the appearance of new fiction at affordable prices. By nine years later, both Mudie’s and Smith’s told publishers that they would pay no more than 4s. a volume. Cheaper libraries multiplied, and sales of first editions to private individuals escalated rapidly.

Not all novels appeared first in volume form: some initially emerged as serials. The self-publishing Dickens brought out most of his fictions in monthly parts, famously creating an urgent demand for each new number. This appeal crossed classes. G. H. Lewes noted of *Pickwick Papers* (1836–37) that “even the common people, both in town and country, are equally intense in their admiration. Frequently, have we seen the butcher-boy, with his tray on his shoulder, reading with the greatest avidity the last ‘Pickwick’; the footman (whose fopperies are so inimitably laid bare), the maidservant, the chimney sweep, all classes, in fact, read ‘Boz’.”<sup>15</sup> In its turn, this expressed the effectiveness of Dickens’s maxim that “a story-teller and a story-reader should establish a mutual understanding as soon as

possible,”<sup>16</sup> and his own skill in doing just this. Although Trollope occasionally employed it, this practice of bringing out fiction in parts was not widely imitated, and had virtually died out by 1880. But Dickens was symptomatic as a fiction publisher in another way. Editing two magazines – *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* – in which he published not just *Hard Times* (1854), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), and *Great Expectations* (1860–61), but works by Elizabeth Gaskell, Wilkie Collins, and others, Dickens facilitated a mode of publication which implicitly encouraged the reading of novels alongside other forms of writing. Thus *Hard Times* could be brought into ready dialogue with pieces on the evils of failing to fence in factory machinery; his novel of the French Revolution with discussions of the Italian Risorgimento in the late 1850s; *Great Expectations* with the debates which surrounded the appearance of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859). And his magazines were but two among a large number which brought out novels in part form: the *Cornhill*, *Temple Bar*, *Belgravia*, *Once a Week* and, later in the century, *Blackwood’s*, the *Strand*, and *Tit-bits* were among those prepared to pay considerable sums of money, sometimes running into thousands of pounds, for fiction.

These different modes of publication exerted particular pressures on novelists, extending their stories in order to fill three volumes; cutting and compressing in order to meet the space constraints of a magazine column; concocting the regularly spaced moments of suspense which paced serial publication and encouraged the purchase of a subsequent issue; never allowing characters to fade too long from sight. “The writer,” as Trollope showed himself to be very aware, “cannot afford to have many pages skipped out of the few which are to meet the reader’s eye at the same time.”<sup>17</sup> The traces of the original form of production remain, creating hiatuses which structure the reading of the text even once it has been reprinted in a single volume. Thus *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), for example, which is divided into three parts, concludes volume one with the young Tom and Maggie returning from Tom’s school at the news of their father’s loss of property and physical collapse, ending on the words: “They had entered the thorny wilderness, and the golden gates of their childhood had for ever closed behind them.”<sup>18</sup> Volume two terminates with Mr. Tulliver’s death, and the brother and sister turning to one another. Maggie speaks: “‘Tom, forgive me – let us always love each other,’ and they clung and wept together” (*The Mill on the Floss*, 316). With this build-up, it is an inevitability that the novel as a whole will conclude with Tom and Maggie joined in a way that will dramatize their instinctual need for one another. This need has been determined not just psychologically, but by the work’s material structure.

Reading on trains signified modernity, and hence was a convenient trope on which commentators about current trends could seize. Apart from anything else, it was a mode of consumption in which the reader was visible, public, available for scrutiny – and yet frequently withdrawn from contact with anything outside the text, immersed in a private imaginative world, and hence a vulnerable figure onto which to project ideas about quite what the effects of their reading material on them might prove to be. But in general, reading fiction was associated, above all, with the domestic environment. The fact that reading was a common sociable family activity within the middle-class home, members taking it in turn to read aloud from the current volume, set up a demand that nothing should appear in print which was not suitable for every potential listener. “The censorship of prudery,” as Thomas Hardy termed it in an angry article of 1890, ensured that realistic depictions of “the relations of the sexes” – “the crash of broken commandments” that formed the necessary accompaniment to the catastrophe of a tragedy – had, right through the century, to be glossed over, if not completely concealed.<sup>19</sup> When this concealment was only partial, as in the case of sensation fiction, or the realist fiction of the 1880s and 1890s by such writers as George Moore (who produced his own polemic against the tyranny of circulating libraries in *Literature At Nurse, Or Circulating Morals*, 1885), or, indeed, of some of Hardy’s own later works, such as *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), concern about the potential corrosive effect on the reader’s – especially the young reader’s – moral standards was ritualistically trotted out. As Hardy commented in a letter to Edmund Gosse, thanking him for his discriminating review of *Jude* and contrasting it to some of the other responses which the novel had provoked, “one cannot choose one’s readers.”<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, authors entered into various types of dialogue with their readers, attending to their desires in various ways, and, effectively, trying to ensure that their potential purchasers chose *them*. Sometimes this involved acting on the responses of readers in their intimate circle, seeking to please both them, and the wider audience whose reactions they could be seen as anticipating. Thus Patrick Brontë was anxious that his daughter Charlotte’s *Villette* (1853) “should end well,” as he disliked novels which left a melancholy impression on the mind; and he requested her to make her hero and heroine (like the heroes and heroines in fairy tales) “marry, and live very happily ever after.”<sup>21</sup> She was only prepared to compromise up to a point, producing enough uncertainty over Paul Emanuel’s fate to “leave sunny imaginations hope,”<sup>22</sup> and thereby drawing a distinction between her own imaginative integrity and the wishes of those who demanded that

fiction provided the consolatory, neat happy endings which life fails to deliver. Dickens had originally intended Walter Gay, in *Dombey and Son* (1848) to trail away gradually “into negligence, idleness, dissipation, dishonesty and ruin,”<sup>23</sup> but his close friend Forster, probably with an eye to sales, dissuaded him. Similarly Bulwer Lytton protested against the original conclusion to *Great Expectations* as too downbeat, leading Dickens to substitute one in which the eventual reunion of Pip with Estella is, at the very least, a possibility.

The demand for a happy ending, particularly one which was based on romance, endured throughout the nineteenth century. Ella Hepworth Dixon, writing in the 1890s, shaped her own writing skills to the market, producing short stories, humorous articles, art reviews, and a novel which both participated in the current vogue for “New Woman” fiction and showed quite what its practitioners had to contend with when it came to getting their works published – at least until they found themselves, for a few years, fashionably marketable. In *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), Mary, the heroine, proposes a realist novel to her publisher, but he maintains that something in the style of French and Russian writers would only displeas the British public, who wanted a ball in the first volume of their three-decker; a picnic and a parting in the second, and an opportune death in the third: best of all would be “a thoroughly breezy book with a wedding at the end.”<sup>24</sup> This is not a very dissimilar set of clichés to those against which George Eliot had protested forty years earlier in her 1856 *Westminster Review* article, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.” In what she characterises as the “*mind-and-millinery* species,” “the heroine is usually an heiress, probably a peeress in her own right, with perhaps a vicious baronet, an amiable duke, and an irresistible younger son of a marquis as lovers in the foreground, a clergyman and a poet sighing for her in the middle distance, and a crowd of undefined adorers dimly indicated beyond.”<sup>25</sup> Such a heroine is intelligent, witty, eloquent, beautiful, and with an undefinable but surefire capacity of bewitching men.

For all this, she as often as not marries the wrong person to begin with, and she suffers terribly from the plots and intrigues of the vicious baronet; but even death has a soft place in his heart for such a paragon, and remedies all mistakes for her just at the right moment. The vicious baronet is sure to be killed in a duel, and the tedious husband dies in his bed, requesting his wife, as a particular favour to him, to marry the man she loves best, and having already dispatched a note to the lover informing him of the comfortable arrangement.<sup>26</sup>

Increasingly, Eliot’s own novels were structured to refuse her readers the kind of satisfaction promised by the works she attacks here. In *Middle-*

*march* (1872), she rewrites the scenario she outlined earlier. Casaubon, the tedious husband, shows no post-mortem generosity, but rather does all he can to make it difficult for Dorothea to marry Will after his death. Moreover, when Eliot finally brings the pair together, and Dorothea becomes the wife of this “ardent public man,” we are told that “Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother.”<sup>27</sup> These “many who knew her” are curiously unspecified. They cannot plausibly be located among the socially conservative characters we have already encountered in provincial Middlemarch. Rather, they belong to a new metropolitan circle – or, we might say, they are ventriloquizing what readers themselves might feel. A romance plot that serves the protagonist’s happiness may not, Eliot hints, satisfy the sophisticated reader – or rather, such a reader needs to curb their own desire for fiction to supply the exceptional, and learn, rather, of the importance of the typical, the ordinary, of the power of “unhistoric acts” to contribute to the future shaping of society (*Middlemarch*, 825).

The debates which recurrently circled around romance plots, with their capacity to attract readers and their limitations, show the degree to which both novelists and critics recognized a range of needs among their readers: needs which could be fulfilled by the protean forms of fiction. Romances have a long history of providing escapism, and not just for women, despite the conventional assumption that they formed the genre’s primary audience, and that they set into train a particular set of unpragmatic desires. “The best romance,” wrote John Ruskin in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), “becomes dangerous, if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of life uninteresting, and increases the morbid thirst for useless acquaintance with scenes in which we shall never be called upon to act.”<sup>28</sup> George Gissing, in *The Odd Women* (1893) has the feminist Rhoda Nunn complain of a woman who had become a married man’s mistress that she had been corrupted by reading novels: “Love – love – love; a sickening sameness of vulgarity. What is more vulgar than the ideal of novelists? . . . This Miss Royston – when she rushed off to perdition, ten to one she had in mind some idiot heroine of a book.”<sup>29</sup> But against this we can set Beth’s husband in Sarah Grand’s *The Beth Book* (1897), who sends her off to the library to borrow three-decker novels which she reads aloud to him in an endless succession as he smokes and drinks his whiskies-and-sodas. She becomes unspeakably weary of golden-haired paragons of perfection, determining, when she writes herself, not to “make a pivot of the everlasting love-story, which seems to me to show such a want of balance in an author, such an absence of any true sense of proportion, as if there was

nothing else of interest in life but our sexual relations.”<sup>30</sup> The stereotype of the woman who gorged herself on romances as though they were boxes of sugar-plums, at first deliciously palatable but increasingly inducing an unhealthy, sickly saturation was a familiar one in advice works which sought to encourage women to take more substantial mental sustenance, or to read something more spiritually or socially improving. It was not a stereotype based on fantasy: reviews of fiction in, say, the *Saturday Review*, the *Spectator*, and the *Athenaeum*, weekly journals which provide invaluable sources for uncovering the plots and themes which were aimed at the middle-class readership, confirm quite how frequently novelists employed the formula of a woman placed in adverse social or emotional conditions, finally having her qualities, her forbearance, her attractiveness rewarded by marriage to a suitably sensitive yet manly husband. Once a particular model worked successfully, imitators could be readily anticipated.<sup>31</sup> Yet the stereotype also served those writers who wanted to challenge broader assumptions about women’s tastes: their heroine’s dissatisfaction with romance fiction’s limitations standing for their wider repudiation of easy pigeonholing of women’s roles as well as cultural preferences.

The thought that a novel might lead a woman to become dissatisfied with her mundane domestic duties was one of the accusations most commonly levelled against the sensation fiction which became so popular in the 1860s. Fussily moralistic was the *Christian Remembrancer*, fretting that the genre of writing practiced by Mary Braddon, by Ellen Wood, and Wilkie Collins could, for the woman reader, “open out a picture of life free from all the perhaps irksome checks that confine their own existence.”<sup>32</sup> Here and elsewhere, romance – in the sense of heterosexual paradigms of desire and fulfillment, predicated on protestations of love, with sexual promptings alluded to with varying degrees of explicitness – was not the only type of escapism that fiction could offer. Other types of fiction developed which offered very different possibilities for readers to project themselves into a life more exciting than that which they actually inhabited. Throughout the period, there was a strong market for adventure fiction ostensibly aimed at a boys’ market (if very often read by girls, as well). The very promotion of such fiction, by publishers such as Blackie’s, was itself symptomatic of a commercial exploitation of a presumed diversification of readership. The imperialist exuberance of writers like G. A. Henty, W. H. G. Kingston, and R. M. Ballantyne was related, too, to the late-century fashion for what Patrick Brantlinger has influentially termed the “imperial Gothic,” in which adventure stories blend with Gothic elements, and Western rationalism is disrupted by superstitions and the supernatural.<sup>33</sup> Readers are simultaneously offered thrills predicated on

dangerous, exotic locations and on far less tangible threats of atavistic degeneration, and yet the *fin-de-siècle* anxieties exploited by writers like Rider Haggard and Bram Stoker are invariably kept in check by their neat plot conclusions.

Nor were readers only offered possibilities for overseas, exotic exploration. The industrial fictions of Elizabeth Gaskell, for example, contain strong internal suggestions that here is a narrator familiar with the northern urban context which it is her task to present to the uninitiated. In *North and South* (1855) she makes a Southerner's learning experience particularly easy by tracing the reactions of Margaret as she comes from a background shaped both by the life of a vicar's daughter in a pastoral village and an acquaintance with fashionable London society, gradually encountering, and becoming more understanding of, the conditions and tensions of northern industrial life. Later in the century, the subject matter of such fiction writers as George Gissing, Arthur Morrison, and – in his earlier work – George Moore not just borrowed from the naturalist premises of French novelists such as Zola, but shared much in common with social investigators such as Charles Booth and George Sims.

A reverse fascination may be seen, although without the didactic underpinning, and certainly without the strict care for verisimilitude, in what one commentator called “the natural craving of the uneducated for exaggerated representations of ‘high life’,” a craving fed by penny novelettes which fancifully showed lords visiting workshops and mills to pick out a wife, laden with jewels and gold to bestow on the object of their choice, and ladies choosing their maids for their most intimate confidences.<sup>34</sup> But fiction, particularly for those who led lives of relative material comfort, also offered possibilities for identification which lay in similarity rather than difference. Lillian Faithfull acknowledged the pull of wholesome romance to be found in Charlotte M. Yonge's fiction in the mid-century, and also the appeal of ecclesiasticism to a girl in her teens going through a period of religious doubt and difficulty which she regarded with immense seriousness. What rendered them especially effective was the sense that the characters comprised a kind of extended family: “people of like passions, emotions, hopes and fears, and we were as intimate with every detail of their lives described in volume after volume as with the lives of our sisters, cousins and aunts.”<sup>35</sup> She – unlike some who looked back queasily at Yonge – does not seem to have been put off by the heavy Christian didacticism and the strongly enforced dose of domesticity.

Novels could certainly provide guidance, wisdom, consolation, patterns to follow which were not necessarily the pernicious ones mocked by Gissing's Rhoda Nunn. Some commentators encouraged precisely this



mode of reading, suggesting that one should be continually matching oneself against fictional models: “Am *I* like this or that? Do *I* cultivate this virtue or yield to this propensity?”<sup>36</sup> Fiction itself, however, was frequently the medium for mocking those who took its premises too seriously, a disingenuous way of asserting its status as truth whilst apparently deriding the genre’s capacity to absorb the reader into its viewpoints. Thus at the opening of *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866) Margaret Oliphant’s heroine, Lucilla, is away at school when she hears the news of her invalid mother’s death. “All the way home she revolved the situation in her mind, which was considerably enlightened by novels and popular philosophy” and she constructs an idealized role for herself in which, between bouts of tears, she will sacrifice her own feelings, and “make a cheerful home for her papa.”<sup>37</sup> Fiction, as Janice Radway has noted in the context of twentieth-century romantic novels, can encourage forms of identification which are empowering, especially to women: allowing them to feel at the centre of their own lives. Oliphant captures the moment at which this enablement slides over into an equation of the fictional and the real worlds. Others confront the inadequacy of fiction when it comes to providing a model through which to lead one’s life more directly. In *Felix Holt* (1866), Eliot shows her heroine, Esther, living away from home at Transome Hall, and despite the ready availability of a library, she “found it impossible to read in these days; her life was a book which she seemed herself to be constructing – trying to make character clear before her, and looking into the ways of destiny.”<sup>38</sup> In *Daniel Deronda* (1876), Gwendolen Harleth draws many of her expectations from romances, and – one presumes – sensation fiction. But these prove utterly inadequate when she is confronted by the presence of the mistress, and children, of the man who wishes to marry her: “Gwendolen’s uncontrolled reading, though consisting chiefly in what are called pictures of life, had somehow not prepared her for this encounter with reality.”<sup>39</sup> These novels anticipate a readership sophisticated enough to recognize, and enjoy, the slippage between fictional conventions and their own lives. At the same time, they tacitly suggest a major reason why fiction and life can blur into one another: both are concerned with making sense of experience through the formulation of narratives, themselves containing patterns, or presumed patterns, of cause and effect.

The desire for reading material which reinforces moral norms was most frequently noted in fiction written for the working classes. An article of 1866 in *Macmillan’s Magazine* on “Penny Novels” – those which appeared in such popular publications as the *London Journal* and the *Family Herald* – remarked that whereas fifteen or so years earlier, an enormous amount of anxiety was being stirred up by the fact that “our lower classes were being

entertained with tales of seduction, adultery, forgery, and murder,” now a “strong moral tone” pervades the writing: one which exactly replicates the sentiments expressed in the answers to correspondents to be found elsewhere in the magazine. It would appear that the “heart of the *plebs* in this country is not to be reached but in gushes of moral wisdom.”<sup>40</sup> But twenty years later, the sanctimoniousness at one time found in “love-and-murder concoctions” was perceived to have evaporated, and the stories in the *London Journal* and in penny novelettes may all, according to Edward Salmon – himself not free from ready moralizing – “be characterised as cheap and nasty . . . utterly contemptible in literary execution; they thrive on the wicked baronet or nobleman and the faithless but handsome peeress, and find their chief supporters among shop-girls, seamstresses, and domestic servants.”<sup>41</sup>

This taste for moral certitude can be traced across much Victorian fiction, even if it is not always as blatantly expressed as in the works targeted at a working-class or lower-working-class readership. It should be seen in tandem with the convoluted yet largely resolved plots that one encounters in Dickens and in Thackeray, in Wilkie Collins and other sensation novelists, in Hardy and Mrs. Humphry Ward. Although not every thread is invariably tied up, and although the sense of completion may be accompanied with feelings of depletion and loss, a particular type of satisfaction is promised to the reader by the long Victorian novel. Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City*, writes eloquently of how most novels are, in some sense, “knowable communities.” He explores the structure of Dickens’s works, paralleling one’s initial impression of seemingly random characters passing each other, as though in a crowded street. But below this surface, as his plots gradually reveal, there is a vast network (or web, as the Darwin-influenced George Eliot or Thomas Hardy might have it) of interconnections, and gradually, “as the action develops, unknown and unacknowledged relationships, profound and decisive connections, the necessary recognitions and avowals are as it were forced into consciousness.”<sup>42</sup> The promise of underlying order and coherence, of knowability, is held out by fiction, or, as Robert Louis Stevenson put it: “Life is monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt and poignant; a work of art, in comparison, is neat, finite, self-contained, rational . . .”<sup>43</sup>

Reading is a curious activity. It is simultaneously a shared experience, and a highly private one. Whilst Victorians might discuss their reading with family or friends, join a reading circle based on the ideal of self-improvement, read literature according to syllabi prescribed by schools or, by the end of the century, by universities, what happened between them and the words on the page, as they entered into other lives and experiences, or as

they condemned or praised the sentiments expressed, or as they puzzled with George Meredith's or Henry James's prose, is very hard to recover, except through hypothesis. It is, of course, possible to retrieve evidence of *what* people read. Although their reliability is on occasion questionable, publishers' archives, lists published in trade journals like the *Publisher's Circular* (founded 1837) and *The Bookseller* (founded 1854), and the records kept by some public and private libraries give one an idea of what was bought, what was borrowed. Dickens's novels, as has already been remarked, were enormously successful: the first number of *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838) sold 50,000 copies; Part 1 of *Our Mutual Friend* (1864) sold 30,000 copies in three days. G. W. M. Reynolds's melodramatic adventure tales – sold in penny or halfpenny numbers, with a largely working-class readership – were even more popular. The first two numbers of *The Soldier's Wife* (1852), retailing at 1d., each sold 60,000 on the day of publication; two years later, the equivalent figures for *The Bronze Soldier*, at  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. a number, were 100,000. The most notable sales in the mid-century were achieved by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Since ten different transatlantic editions of this were produced within two weeks, and forty within a year, it is hard to be exact about figures, but, including colonial sales, around 1,500,000 copies were sold to the British market. Providing an example of quite how dramatic an effect was produced by the dropping of the price of new novels was the publication, in 1897, of Hall Caine's *The Christian* – a story of love, religion, the London slums, and apocalyptic fervor – which sold 50,000 copies in a month.

To read and discuss those works of fiction which were runaway bestsellers (the term itself seems to have been coined in Kansas in 1889) went beyond the demonstration that one possessed what Pierre Bourdieu has termed “cultural capital,” views about culture which demonstrated one's status in society, although the ability to converse about current literature was a component of educated middle- and upper-class life. Rather, becoming excited by these fictions was a means of asserting one's claim to be modern, to be in the know. “Novels,” John Sutherland has reminded us, in the context of the gamble publishers undertook each time they invested money in a new work of fiction, “are things of a season and do not have the stamina of, say, text-books.”<sup>44</sup> “Have you *Red Pottage*?” was the punning question in relation to Mary Cholmondeley's novel of that name which, appearing in 1899, combines highly contemporary debate about the role of women with an improbably sensational plot. At its most extreme, the excitement over new works spilled over into a commodification of the original conception which spread far beyond the

book's covers. Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, and others had their novels dramatized. Wilkie Collins's 1860 novel prompted sales of "Woman in White" shawls and "The Woman in White" waltz. George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894) was greeted somewhat indifferently when it first appeared in Britain, but was a runaway success in the United States: it circulated in about 200,000 copies of *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, and an American illustrated edition sold more than 100,000 copies. Returning to London as a stage dramatization, its popularity exploded. Lapel pins were sold in the shape of Trilby's beautiful foot; there were Trilby sausages and Trilby ice-cream molds as well as the Trilby hat.<sup>45</sup> The example of du Maurier's work, moreover, shows how fiction created communities of readers which spanned continents.

The issue of taste and consumption, which necessarily is suggested by sales figures, was discussed in more depth in magazine articles. Successive authors seized on the topic of working-class readership with the air of those exploring the faintly exotic: Thackeray, in 1838; Wilkie Collins, in 1858; James Payn, in 1881. "The luxuriance" of the growth of this unsuspected mass of readers, Payn remarks, "has become tropical."<sup>46</sup> Later pieces, bearing titles like "What English people read," "The reading of the working classes," "What do the masses read?," "The reading of the colonial girl," "What boys read," and "What girls read," relied, in some cases, not just on subjective impressions but on reader surveys. These were conducted, in fact, throughout the period. A couple of the earliest surveys published by the London Statistical Society looked at book ownership and readership among the working classes. Dickens and Scott came high on people's lists of preferences throughout the century, spanning classes, genders, and occupations. In a 1906 survey of the first large cohort of Labour Party members of parliament, 16 percent claimed that Dickens was the author or work which had influenced them the most strongly, a percentage point behind Ruskin, but two in front of the Bible.<sup>47</sup> Yet although he might represent a constant, journalists were fascinated by the phenomenon of changing preferences. Florence Low, writing in 1906 with what seems nostalgia for her own favorites when younger, laments that the "muscular Christian heroes" of Charles Kingsley are no longer popular; that the "wholesome and cheering" heroines of Louisa Alcott are now little known.<sup>48</sup> Reading material, once again, is unproblematically taken as apparently offering some kind of index to the general social and moral climate. A shift towards racy popularists like Marie Corelli, or L. T. Meade's formulaic, highly accessible stories about intense friendships and rivalries between adolescent girls, seemed particularly alarming, to a commentator like Low, in the context of the increased social freedoms and

opportunities available to, and demanded by, women at the end of the century.

But *how* did people read fiction? What of the patterns of identification and resistance that were set up between individual readers and novels? What actual desires were invested and fulfilled? Here, it is far harder to be certain, however much one might hypothesize about the psychological desires which were invested. Reviews summarize the responses of those who turned leisure activity into paid work, and were invariably written with an eye to their *own* potential readership. They succumbed to a desire to sound morally upright, often in a way more likely to stimulate a reader's curiosity than to deter them, one might think (*Madame Bovary* [1857] "is not a work which we can recommend any man, far less any woman, to read").<sup>49</sup> The evidence provided in autobiographies, even letters and journals, must also be examined with caution, since it, too, is never innocent of self-construction and of an appeal to an audience, even if that audience is no broader than one's own ideal self. Those who hold particular religious or political or social beliefs are anxious to bear witness to the texts which fired the compassion or conscience which informed their subsequent activities, recycling the didacticism. And one must bear in mind the fact that those who write autobiographies are frequently likely to be exceptional, in some way, in the first place.

It is in autobiography, nonetheless, that we find some of the most eloquent testimonies to the ways in which certain texts might move their readers, or indeed, in which the actual practice of reading is described. This can range from the candor with which Trollope describes his encounter with Eliot's increasingly obscure fictional prose, as manifested in *Daniel Deronda* – "there are sentences which I have found myself compelled to read three times before I have been able to take home to myself all that the writer has intended,"<sup>50</sup> through the evidence in the working-class testimonies recorded by David Vincent in *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*,<sup>51</sup> to the mass transformation recollected by Annabel Grant-Duff Jackson. She tells how a fellow pupil at Cheltenham Ladies' College smuggled in a copy of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883): "the whole sky seemed aflame and many of us became violent feminists."<sup>52</sup> The statistics for the sales of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* spring to life when, for example, one reads Lady Frances Balfour describe how "It did its work! A woman's pen, under Divine inspiration touched the iron fetters, the rivets fell apart and 'the slave where'er he cowers' went free."<sup>53</sup> The human and political liberation which Stowe describes seems to find its correlative in the awakening stimulated in Balfour's own mind.

Writing about the power that fiction can have over the reader, Robert

Louis Stevenson considers its capacity to make us let go of our conscious selves:

In anything fit to be called by the name of reading, the process itself should be absorbing and voluptuous; we should gloat over a book; be rapt clean out of ourselves, and rise from the perusal, our mind filled with the busiest, kaleidoscopic dance of images, incapable of sleep or continuous thought. The words, if the book be eloquent, should run thenceforward in our ears like the noise of breakers, and the story . . . repeat itself in a thousand coloured pictures to the eye.<sup>54</sup>

This rhetoric of rapture hardly covers the cerebral challenges laid down by George Meredith's fiction, nor the psychological discrimination encouraged by Henry James's prose, nor the degree to which novels may be read as a means of acquiring factual information. But Stevenson's stress on the transformative power of fiction goes to the heart of the Victorian concern with novel reading. It was a practice which could consolidate one's sense of belonging to a particular sector of society, which could reinforce religious or gender norms: which could, in other words, confirm one's belief in the security, rightness, and communality of the life one led. On the other hand, it provided a space for exploring the self, trying out new thoughts, new possibilities, in private. Reading fiction, an activity which combined flexing the imagination with anticipating and reacting to the dynamics of a range of narratives, was a vicarious means of inhabiting other lives, and, potentially, changing one's own. Elizabeth Gaskell said that when she was reading, she was herself, "and nobody else, and [could not] be bound by another's rules."<sup>55</sup> Here, in the opportunity for the assertion of selfhood, lay both the perceived danger, and the very real power, of reading novels.

## NOTES

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