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978-1-107-04422-7 - The Victorian Novel and the Space of Art: Fictional Form on Display

Dehn Gilmore

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction**Seeing how the Victorians saw***Glimpses**

In an 1855 review of *Little Dorrit*, a writer for *The Athenaeum* noted that the novel added more stock to “the broad gallery of humorous characters set before us by Mr. Dickens.”<sup>1</sup> In the middle of Thackeray’s *Henry Esmond* (1852), the eponymous hero looks at the post-illness face of his benefactress to find that “[i]t was as if a coarse hand rubbed off the delicate tints of that sweet picture, and brought it, as one has seen unskillful painting-cleaners do, to the dead colour.”<sup>2</sup> In Wilkie Collins’s inaugural sensation novel *Basil* (1852), the omnibus ridden by the hero becomes a “perambulatory exhibition-room of the eccentricities of human nature.”<sup>3</sup> In Thomas Hardy’s late-century work *The Return of the Native* (1878), the narrator muses on whether there “should . . . be a classic period to art hereafter,” and on what some “future Phidias” might create.<sup>4</sup>

**A closer look**

In many respects, the foregoing moments from the annals of Victorian fiction all wear a highly familiar aspect. Indeed, in encountering any one of them, we might reasonably suffer from a sense of *déjà vu* – sure not only that we could have expected such an encounter, but also that we have seen its central object analyzed before, by some member of the growing class of scholars interested in the nineteenth-century novel’s relation to art. In recent decades, the larger investment of literary studies in historicism has produced many reflections on the overlap between the Victorians’ literature and their visual culture, and the “picture” generated of this relationship has become broad of canvas indeed. In a series of studies linking literary and artistic worlds, scholars have shown that the two spheres shared a powerful commitment to realism, and that the novel could often work in an *ekphrastic* or a “painterly” idiom as part of its own efforts to be realistic.<sup>5</sup> They have

shown that there was a highly important relationship between text and image in the nineteenth century's illustrated novels.<sup>6</sup> They have demonstrated persuasively that Victorian novelists wrote what Jonah Siegel has called a larger "culture of art" into their fiction, and that novelists depicted artists, showed characters visiting artistic spaces, and alluded frequently to the pictures hanging therein – for the Victorian novel's invocations of the art world are the subject of countless articles and chapters, not to mention the stuff of many colorful anecdotes in cultural histories of the period.<sup>7</sup> If after all of this, any among the opening passages does remain un- or under-studied, we could expect a direction for swift remedy along any of the above lines, or, by posing questions about what the Victorians saw, and painted by whom, which Victorians saw what (questions of authorial biography), and finally, how these matters related to realism and its practice.<sup>8</sup>

In *The Victorian Novel and the Space of Art*, however, I propose a new question and area of attention for scholars of the novel, and this concerns not *what*, but rather *how* the Victorians saw.<sup>9</sup> For though the opening passages may not seem unusual, I will suggest that under our usual purview of attention they must necessarily go under-explored, and this is because instead of constituting a record of artistic objects the Victorians looked at (something critics have amply attended to), they constitute a record of new experiences the Victorians were having in *looking* (something they have not). None of the opening moments are as much about what Daniel Sherman and Irit Rogoff have called "exhibited culture, what museums and others put on display," as they are about "exhibition culture": "the ideas, values and symbols that pervade and shape the practice of exhibiting."<sup>10</sup> None of them are as much about verisimilitude, the practice of realism, or a prospective hierarchy of the "sister arts," as they are about what could be called issues of artistic consumption and assimilation.<sup>11</sup> They have reference not to artistic practice, but to art's reception and its audience. And as we recognize that as *topoi*, exhibiting and consuming have not received nearly the study that they might by literary scholars interested in the novel's artistic intersections, we come up against the need for a new examination and a new set of recognitions. Conceiving and adopting these, I will come to suggest, has much larger ramifications for our understanding of nineteenth-century literary culture.

Indeed, this book investigates changes in the institutional and rhetorical conditions that mediated how the Victorians looked at art, and it argues that to recover authors' relationships to new forms of sight and new kinds of viewers, is to discover them inhabiting a highly self-conscious position in relation to their readers as they experimented with different shapes for the novel. In their manifest attention to the subject of looking, the opening

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passages will be shown to couch also a reference to the practice of reading, and if it has long been accepted that to illuminate what the Victorians looked at is to better understand what filled Victorian novels' pages, *The Victorian Novel and the Space of Art* shows that to understand *how* they looked – and their concerns about looking – is to understand much more fully how Victorian authors construed their audience. It is also to understand more fully how they adapted their workings to it: first, as they developed and interrogated different forms and genres of the novel, and ultimately, as they thought about the novel as a genre and form itself.

It is something of a truth universally acknowledged that in the mid to late nineteenth century, the worlds of literary and visual culture were united by a shared investment in certain representational modes, subjects, and values. The starting point of this book, however, is two perhaps less familiar recognitions about the experience of the nineteenth-century audience for literary and visual art. The first recognition is that in the Victorian period, the literary world's novel culture and the art world's galleries, museums, and exhibitions, were bound not just by common features of artistic praxis, but also by a common experience of expansion – increases in how many people were encountering art, and in how much art there was to encounter. Victorian exhibition culture was marked by the democratization of artistic collection, the rise of the public museum, the innovation of the grand-scale exhibition, and a surge of critical writing on art – much of it written for a mass audience. The literary world witnessed a proliferation of periodicals, a dramatic uptick in the number of published novels, an explosion in literacy, and a swelling tide of circulating libraries. The second recognition stems from and pertains to these expansions. It is that if all of these developments were exciting, they were also often confusing – even threatening. They had the potential to erode traditional valuations, and to cast traditional arbiters and experts as supplicants and speculators. Consequently, the literary world and the sites of exhibition culture shared very similar uncertainties about their relationship with the public, and uncertainties, too, about the values and experiences that its members would endorse.

At a time when new populations and new multiplications put pressure on long-held ideas about value and authority, authors looked to exhibition culture for help in framing their own confusions and considerations. There they found a set of familiar problems, but also a new lexicon and conceptual apparatus for these problems' articulation, contemplation, and potential redress. They discovered a novel way of thinking through the shifting desires and transforming agency of their swelling public. And they folded their findings into their fiction, both on a level of language, and on a plane

of conception, as they imagined (and then re-imagined) different forms of the novel for a changing class of readers.

### Literary expansions

The radical increases throughout the Victorian period in how many, and how many different kinds of people read, and in how many books there were to read, has long been a phenomenon of familiarity to literary scholars, and a quantified one certainly since the time of Richard Altick's work in *The English Common Reader*.<sup>12</sup> Thanks to improvements in literacy, and a redistribution of leisure time, the potential audience for the novel grew prodigiously throughout Victoria's reign, and as early as the late 1850s, Trollope could pronounce that "Novels are in the hands of us all; from the Prime Minister down to the last-appointed scullery-maid."<sup>13</sup> In direct relation to this increase – and as a result of developments like the steam press in 1814, the rise of the circulating library in the early 1840s, the (relative) fall of book prices in the early 1850s, and the innovation of serialized publication (thanks especially to Dickens) – the growing class of readers encountered an unprecedented number of volumes to borrow, books to choose among, and serial runs potentially to follow. The number of titles issued annually grew tenfold from upwards of 300 to more than 3,000 between the beginning of the century and 1842, and this figure would go on to nearly triple by the century's end. At the same time, the percentage of published books that were secular – or indeed, that were novels – grew impressively (not to mention, in inverse proportion to the decline of religious titles) and by 1901, works of fiction comprised over 30 percent of published works.<sup>14</sup>

Such directly quantifiable leaps were accompanied by increases of a more aesthetic, dynamic, and text-centered kind – increases involving both particular forms of the novel and readers' responses to them – and these growths also operated on a dramatic scale. On the first score, when it comes to the kind of serialized and often multi-plotted fiction that will feature prominently in Chapter 1, we need no Jamesian diagnosis of the "loose baggy monster" to remind us that the mandated lengths of the triple-decker or the serial run tended to produce a dramatic profusion of plots, characters, and pages in individual works. The Victorians themselves were already well aware of this tendency in their fiction; and speaking about a mid-career Dickens, an 1855 piece in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* reflected back on the innovation that the serialization of *The Pickwick Papers* had effected: "this boldness of fiction, stepping forth alone in tantalizing monthly visits, was new to the time." Then it diagnosed a heterogeneous and multiplicitous

production as the result: “a discursive rambling narrative, running aside into constant digressions, and indeed, in so doing, *fulfilling its purpose*, which is not to evolve one clear dramatic course of events, but to display a store of humorous characters, of odd incidents, and of unvisited corners of the world” (*italics mine*).<sup>15</sup> The reviewer means this as high compliment; what we can see too is an emphasis on spatial unfurling (“running aside”; “unvisited corners”) and volume (“constant digressions”; “a store”). These are emphases we have long shared in our own critical assessments, where we have also long noted the Victorian novel’s proliferation of material details, and its volume of sheer information, its perfection of the Barthesian “reality effect.”

The generic forms that I take up in the middle of this book – the Victorians’ mid-century historical novels and their sensation fiction – are themselves famous for sometimes pushing such volume to its limits, to the point of problem, even. And as far as many Victorian readers were concerned, the historical novel post-Scott was notable for its perhaps excessive investment in “research”: its parade of facts, its tendency to seem, as John Bowen writes of Bulwer-Lytton’s efforts, bound “hand and footnote”; indeed, such a tendency helped to bring the form to the brink of the crisis we will find it amidst in Chapter 2.<sup>16</sup> The sensation novel was at least as well known for trying on excesses of a different kind, not those that stultified but those that “shocked” the nerves. And if we think about the fact that a novel like Charles Reade’s *Hard Cash* could jam into 500 pages pirate attacks, depraved sexual predators, lunatics, corpses that come back to life, blackmail, violent bludgeonings, a near-suicide, a kidnapping, and blood-inked letters, we have grounds for recalling why many contemporaries found sensation fiction to be a class of novel that too much “abound[ed] in incident,” as Henry Mansell wrote in a widely reproduced takedown of the genre.<sup>17</sup>

The ways in which the novel, in its various forms, seemed to strain at the seams as it grew in length and surged with information, tied directly, often causally, to increasing fluctuations that appeared to authors to inhere on the level of reader response. And as given genres expanded, evolved, and emerged, so grew also the number and kind of valuations they might receive – and a sense for authors of readers’ increasing unpredictability. Indeed, though Franco Moretti has recently demonstrated that there might not have been an increasing number of co-existent literary genres within the Victorian period, there were to be sure still increasingly many groups of readers, and this development impacted how different forms of the novel were conceived, considered, and received by authors and readers alike.<sup>18</sup> Genres like the historical novel that had started the Victorian period in high

estate (in its case, thanks especially to Scott) might tumble to be “not worth a damn” in the memorable (and commercially minded) words of Anthony Trollope’s publisher, increasingly of interest only to a smaller, more elite segment of the population.<sup>19</sup> But, as Jonathan Rose has noted, “[e]ven books that were read by everyone might be read very differently in different social strata.”<sup>20</sup> The sensation novel united “the lady of the manor to the lowest scullery maid” over a common reading object, for example, but it didn’t consistently produce a common assessment of the merits of that experience – for some its shocks were simply too much.<sup>21</sup>

Then, looking beyond class, there could still be divisions. As Leah Price has suggested, an impulse towards “[s]kipping (or anthologizing) and skimming (or abridging)” was common to most Victorian readers, and especially so following the rise of the multi-plot novel.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, an individual reader might opt to elevate a minor character into a major remembrance of a given novel (a tendency that amused Collins, as we will see in Chapter 3, when it meant the promotion of Mr. Fairlie in *The Woman in White*). Or a reader could follow some plots assiduously and merely gloss over others; the Victorian reviewers who famously derided the inclusion of the “Jewish” plot in *Daniel Deronda* exemplified one tendency in this direction; a critic of Dickens who suggested that “the whole Dedlock set might be eliminated” from *Bleak House* exemplified another.<sup>23</sup> Such choices, but especially the ability to choose, could bring readers great pleasure. Their contemplation, just as surely, could be maddening for authors. A new mass audience stood newly poised to make authors highly self-conscious about questions of reception as they wrote; self-conscious authors manifestly came to be, in both their critical writings and in their fiction.

### Literary uncertainty

Indeed, authors frequently seem to have had an eye on the different possibilities for readerly agency and adjudication when they worked. And recent scholarly efforts to formulate a new approach to Victorian reading – what Rachel Ablow has called “an approach to Victorian reading that is neither paranoid nor reparative, but instead attuned to . . . what nineteenth century readers and writers *thought* they were doing” – have only made us all the more aware of the kinds of pressures that the increases described above could put on the novel’s authors as they took on different types of novelistic projects.<sup>24</sup> Already potentially exhausted from defending the novel against long-toothed charges of immorality and corruptibility, writers began the Victorian period immersed in what Garrett Stewart has called “a cultural contestation about

the role of fiction,” and one they were “forced” to address.<sup>25</sup> Yet with more points of contact between themselves and their readership than ever before, authors confronted and responded to a whole new set of contestations as the Victorian period continued, and their addresses of it could take a variety of proactive and reactive forms.

Anticipatorily, authors might attempt to direct their audience first to consider, and then how to consider the types of books they wrote. And, as we will see, whether it was a case of Dickens telling his readers to ready themselves for myriad “little pictures of life and manners as they really are” in his polyglot, multi-part fiction, Thackeray alerting his audience to the genre of *Henry Esmond* by dressing up the original print copies with old typescript and aged leather, or Collins asking his readers to prepare to collect and curate the “hundreds of little ‘connecting links’” of his sensation novels, authors could seek to effect some obvious proactive controls over their readers’ responses. They could try to actively prepare readers to have the “right” response to particular kinds of fiction.

At the same time, authors could also be reactive, and in the face of an increasingly vociferous audience, and an increasingly large body of dedicated literary critics, they fretted over which genres to work in (should Thackeray take on history after the historical novel had fallen from commercial favor?), whether to incorporate readers’ criticisms into their generic productions (should Wilkie Collins respond to “particular” readers disdainful of his sensational fiction?), and generally how or whether to meet the public’s heterogeneous taste, especially if it was influenced by what Collins variously called “the outlying mass of average readers,” or the “unknown public.”<sup>26</sup> By the end of the century, as we will observe, Hardy had become obsessed with the public’s predilections, and he castigated these, evinced vague hope about them, and ignored them by turns, as the generic category whose status he worried about was the larger one of the novel itself. Throughout the period we will watch authors overtly responding to the judgments and evaluations of their readers, and we will see that their attempts at management seem often anxious and ineffectual, rather than confident, proleptic, or productive of the intended effect.

What *The Victorian Novel and the Space of Art* will also advance, however, is a view of more subtle authorial maneuvers and interrogations around the subject of readerly response, and it locates these at sites where the literary turns to art and issues surrounding artistic reception – and exemplarily, in moments like the ones with which I began. For, when we find a literary critic invoking the “gallery” to describe a multi-plot, multi-character novel, we find a critic borrowing terms of art to describe a



unique readerly experience – a certain inability to pick a single element or “picture” for regard. What we can perceive in Collins’s recourse to the “perambulatory exhibition-room” is an awareness that one’s person and aesthetic choices may, in modern life, be always on display. What we can notice about musing like Hardy’s, in *The Return of the Native*, about whether there will “be a classic period to art hereafter,” is an interest in creative durability and future taste that must be shared by linked artistic spheres. And what we discover in all of these moments is a metonymy for a much wider set of references. We find writers who are investigating problems of visual form, value, and judgment, with what should be seen as an importantly self-reflective impact. We see writers staging questions about consumption and audience via a recourse to artistic language: writers holding up a mirror to the uncertainties their world’s expansions had engendered by taking a look at the exhibition culture of their sister sphere.

### Artistic expansions

For, like their literary world, the exhibitionary landscape of the Victorians witnessed two forms of growth in the Victorian period. And if one such form happened in more audience-directed and institutional terms (more people came to have access to art; there were ever more sites where art could be accessed), while the other form of growth happened more in terms of aesthetic experience (more pictures hung on a given wall or in a given gallery; more items called the attention at an exhibition), both kinds of expansion were resonant for, and of evident interest to, authors. In the larger sense that I have just been discussing, and that I will continue to focus on throughout this book, authors looked to an expanding exhibition culture as they considered their own changing relationship with their readers; in this sense, we will see how writers’ records of exhibition culture’s increases could often couch deeper and more self-reflective meanings. But even taken for a moment more casually, the literary world’s testament to exhibition culture’s changes is quite striking, and was double-faceted. On the surface of their texts, authors recorded both kinds or trends of increase in their sister sphere, and they recorded these sometimes with a seeming sense of certainty, and sometimes with an air of the hanging question mark.

The growth in the size and diversity of the audience for art, and the increased number of places where this audience could experience artistic works, were the subject of more implicit documentation by authors. When Dickens alluded to the Royal Academy in his serialized and multi-plot fiction (as we will see him do in the first chapter); when Thackeray drew on debates



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centered around the nation's museums in his historical fiction (the second chapter); when Wilkie Collins referred again and again to the Crystal Palace in his sensation novels (the third); or when, in his later novels, Hardy sent characters touring round all of the just-listed spaces (the fourth); all of these authors worked under what had quickly become a safe assumption: the assumption that the audience for their mass-marketed novels had enough familiarity with spaces of fine art that they could make sense of references to them. Their assumption highlights a trend of diffusion and popularization that was extraordinary in its scope and scale. The Victorians' was a contemporary art world where the Royal Academy exhibition went from hosting 90,000 visitors in 1848, to hosting close to 400,000 by the end of the 1870s; where the development of institutions like the Art Union clubs meant that the "the British art-buying public . . . for the first time included people of limited means"; where the new large-scale exhibitions had become newly welcoming to what the *Illustrated London News* described as everyone between "the wealthier classes and their dependents"; where thirteen publications devoted to the arts in 1840 could turn into fifty-seven by 1890; and where the number of public museums soared, even as the nation's most famous museums – the National Gallery and the British Museum – swelled their visitor rolls tenfold in mere ten-year periods (the Gallery's numbers climbed from 60,321 visitors in 1830 to 503,011 in 1840, and the British Museum's attendance figures shot from around 80,000 in the late 1820s to over a million in 1851).<sup>27</sup> This is the record of a remarkable kind of expansion – and one whose quantitative shape and relative significance cultural historians have been thinking about since at least the 1970s.<sup>28</sup> Further, though many of these developments were centered in London, the 1845 passage of an act designed to enable local authorities to undertake cultural projects, the mere fact of the Manchester Exhibition, and then certainly the work of diffusion done by media like engravings, directs us to remember that all of this was part of a larger, nationwide spread – a spread, that is to say, that was notable geographically and not just in terms of class.

At the same time, literary authors also marked a second kind of growth that they (and their readers) were coming to be all too familiar with – a growth that struck viewers on a more immediate, experiential level. And when those from the literary world delighted in the expanding "gallery" of Dickens's character portraits, when they looked at a restored picture and saw too, a memory of a darker, pre-conservation canvas, when they recorded how they might get "used up" by a trip to see the Great Exhibition's surfeit, or when they imagined a future teeming with new works and new styles, they recorded an increase that took place in the visual field. Literary

practitioners captured an exhibitionary landscape overlapping with their own in which gallery walls seemingly hung ever more works, reproductions circulated freely and diffusely, museum collections quintupled in a period of twenty years, and an exhibition like the Crystal Palace that spanned nineteen acres and that displayed over 100,000 artifacts could be dramatically surpassed in volume just ten years on – wrote *Temple Bar* of the 1862 International show: “the total amount exhibited is far greater than in 1851 . . . The present exhibitors are to the former about in proportion of 24 to 13 and the articles exhibited maintain very nearly the same relation.”<sup>29</sup> They described a new kind of aesthetic proliferation: a new set of multiplying choices about what to attend to, what to valorize, and what to ignore. At the site of the contemporary gallery, the museum, and the exhibition, as in the literary world, these were the choices for a newly broad class of people to make. At the site of the contemporary gallery, the museum, and the exhibition, as in the literary world, such choices could be unsettling to established norms of value and expertise.

### Artistic uncertainty

The changes encompassed by the just-described expansions notwithstanding, those in the business of post-Foucauldian literary scholarship may be rather predisposed to anticipate a version of Victorian exhibition culture that accords with Bourdieu’s well-known formulation (framed in regard to a modern public) about the limits of public access to art. Even in a society that “offers to all the *pure possibility* of taking advantage of the works on display in museums,” writes Bourdieu, “it remains the case that only some have the *real possibility* of doing so”; in other words, only those with sufficient education might be expected to find art accessible or evaluable.<sup>30</sup> If this is true of modern-day (French) society, it is easy to anticipate that it might have been at least as true in Victorian England, with democratization only a nascent (and often suspicious, or even deplored) trend. Yet actually, when it came to the Victorian exhibitionary landscape, limitations of the kind Bourdieu describes were not nearly so firm in their instantiation, nor were they so consistently felt, and it was precisely this shakiness that helped to draw the literary gaze. Writing about the National Gallery, Carol Duncan has observed that its founding

did not change the distribution of real political power – it did not give more people the vote – but it did remove a portion of prestigious symbolism from the exclusive control of the elite class and give it to the nation as a whole. An