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Edited by Edwin M. Eigner and George J. Worth

Excerpt

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Introductory essay

It has become usual to begin such discussions as this by contesting the traditional view that there was no valuable theoretical criticism of British fiction before Henry James. Both commonplaces, the usual *and* the traditional, are valid. Throughout the nineteenth century there was a great deal of novel criticism published in Britain, and a fair amount of it was written by highly intelligent reviewers and essayists, who were well paid for their efforts and were passionate about their subject. It is also true, however, that most of these critics rather prided themselves on the non-theoretical character of their intellects. For example, only a year before the celebrated James–Stevenson debate on the art of fiction, a less brilliant but more representative critic, Henry Norman, could write with Podsnappian complacency, ‘The truth is that theory in such matters is alien to the English mind, and that to find it we must pass to other nations whose authors are always critical, even to the sacrifice of their creative powers’ (*Fortnightly Review*, 1883). From such a point of view, of course, since James was himself a foreigner whose creative powers were frequently understood to suffer because of his penchant for theories, there were, as Edith Simcox had written in *Academy* in 1871, ‘no general principles of criticism recognized at once in the production and the appreciation of works of fiction’, and no nineteenth-century theory of English fiction at all.

Obviously we do not agree with this view; although we do concede that because of the national prejudice against abstract thinking, especially in regard to so down-to-earth an item as a story, it is necessary frequently to read between the lines and to find English theory almost reluctantly put forth in arguments whose avowed purpose was to protect the English novel from theoretical foreigners and their misguided native disciples. Thus the ideas which informed English realism at the beginning of the Victorian period developed out of the defense against the theorists of German and French romantic fiction, and at the end of the century what the romancer Hall Caine was to call ‘The New Watchwords of Fiction’ (*Contemporary Review*, 1890) were spoken in opposition to the realistic manifestos of Zola and Howells. Indeed, the title of Stevenson’s response to James,

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‘A Humble Remonstrance’, could serve ironically for an entire history of Victorian criticism of prose fiction.

The period began, if we take 1832 as a starting point, with the death of Walter Scott, who had transformed the novel into the most profitable art form in England and who was perhaps the first Briton since Shakespeare who had achieved both popularity and distinction throughout Europe. It was also the year of Goethe’s death, and British Germanophiles did not hesitate to compare the two masters, concluding usually that mass popularity was not enough. ‘Literature *has* other aims than that of harmlessly amusing indolent, languid men’, Carlyle wrote in his review of Lockhart’s *Life of Scott*, ‘or if literature have them not, then literature is a very poor affair; and something else must have them, and must accomplish them, with thanks or without thanks’ (*London and Westminster Review*, 1838). Bulwer Lytton, who was never willing to admit that literature, and especially the writing of fiction, was or could be anything less than man’s highest calling, is similarly hard on Scott, but what both critics were really challenging was the whole tradition of the English novel which Scott represented, with its emphasis on the description of external reality and manners. Bulwer Lytton especially professed himself unable to see how a genre which consciously divorced itself from philosophical interests and made virtues of its languid lack of aesthetic principles and its *ad hoc* mode of construction could fulfil the traditional functions of a leading art form.

Thackeray and some of the more doctrinaire realists responded at first simply by ridiculing Bulwer Lytton’s pretensions, but gradually main-line critics forged a coherent, if not a systematic aesthetic of realism. Not that domestic realism ever felt itself seriously threatened. ‘The only semblance of a principle which presided at the birth of the British novel’, according to Edith Simcox, once again, ‘was the principle of realistic probability’, and the genre was well-enough entrenched in the nineteenth century easily to outlast the Newgate Novel of the 1830s, with its criminal heroes, and to survive the Brontës, Dickens, the vogue of the sensational novel, and even the aesthetic movement. Moreover, the great majority of the criticism published during the first half of the period seemed to call for realism of the most simple sort – mere verisimilitude and historical accuracy. As late as 1901 Arnold Bennett could say, with the complacency of a Dr Johnson kicking the stone, ‘By the term “realistic novel” I simply mean, of course, one whose aim is to be *real*, regardless of any conventions which would involve a divergence from life itself’ (*Fame and Fiction*). Nevertheless, the undercurrent of romantic criticism,

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represented in this volume by the contributions of Bulwer Lytton, George Moir, and Archibald Alison, provoked a majority rationale, put forth by thoughtful realists like G. H. Lewes and George Eliot and Henry James, who wished also to argue the case for fiction as a fully serious art form.

A critic writing in 1843 in *Fraser's Magazine*, the early bastion of realism, based the propensities of the English novel on principles derived from Baconian induction, whereas the French novel, he argued, grew out of theory and fancy. 'From the moment Frenchmen become candidates for literary popularity, they abandon themselves to visions and ecstasies, and renounce realities.' An important *Athenaeum* review of Mrs Trollope's *Charles Chesterfield* maintained in 1841 that the novel, as opposed to the romance, which 'addresses itself to the imagination alone', was in keeping with the spirit of the present age because it 'appeals to the observant and reasoning faculties also'. And R. H. Hutton wrote that 'the empire of the novel . . . is really based on the desire of a self-conscious race to look at itself in the glass, and to see itself, as it were, under analysis, – to study itself either clothed, as with [Anthony] Trollope; or nude, as with Thackeray; or under the anatomist's knife, as with the author of *Romola*' (*Spectator*, 1869).

Lewes himself always maintained that fiction, if it is to have any value, must be based on experiential reality and that it should present a convincing picture of life, yet his is always an intelligent modification of the position held by the more doctrinaire realists, one which takes seriously into account many of the points the apologists for romance had been making. Art, he felt, should present 'a selection of typical elements from life', rather than a transcript or a mirror reflection (*Leader*, 1853). He ranked Jane Austen as the greatest craftsman among English novelists and called her his favourite; yet he worried that her work might not be significant or deep or passionate enough to warrant the highest praise. 'Her place is among great artists, but it is not high among them' (*Blackwood's*, 1859). Lewes's admiration for Goethe was so great that, rather than reject his novels, he dismissed the usual distinction between realism and idealism in favour of a contrast between realism and falsism, thus rendering meaningless the novel-versus-romance controversy that the former set of terms had traditionally informed. With this change of language, even Raphael, who had symbolized the idealizing artist in almost all nineteenth-century discussions of aesthetics, but who was another favourite of Lewes, could be claimed as a realist. But by the same token, realism became a genre capable of bearing a considerable intellectual burden.

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And, of course, Lewes's was the criticism which, to a large extent, informed and enabled the fiction of George Eliot.

In one respect, however, Lewes refused to modify the realist position in response to the theorists of romance criticism. He maintained that unity in a novel is no different from unity in the drama (*Blackwood's*, 1860). This was in contrast to William Henry Smith, whose important article 'The Novel and the Drama', which had appeared in *Blackwood's* fifteen years earlier, argued for a clear distinction between the two genres. So had William Godwin in the 'Preface' to *Cloudesley* (1830), and so, indeed, had Bulwer Lytton in 'On the Different Kinds of Prose Fiction' (1835). Smith, Godwin, and Bulwer were trying to define fiction as a genre with rules particular to itself. James Philip Runzo, who is the best historian of early Victorian criticism of fiction, writes that 'The most striking feature . . . between 1830 and 1850 is the explicit recognition and valuation of the novel as a genre distinct from other forms, particularly the drama.'¹ To establish this distinction some romance critics were specifically trying to establish unity of theme rather than unity of action as appropriate to those art forms, a position Bulwer Lytton would amplify in still another *Blackwood's* article (May 1863). The basis for this preference is to be found in the romancers' primary and immediate interest in the philosophy they had all along been insisting fiction must express. Unity of action, dramatic unity, it was felt, swept the reader off his intellectual feet and made him captive to induced passions rather than master of encouraged thought. Thus George Moir complains about Dick Turpin's exciting ride in Ainsworth's *Rookwood* because it is so effective: 'the truth is, the reader is never allowed to pause for an instant to think at all' (*Edinburgh Review*, 1837), and R. H. Hutton was somewhat dubious about Trollope because his imagination did not seem ever

to brood long over visions that task its full power . . . There is nothing, apparently, of the agony of meditated travail about his mind . . . In short, Mr Trollope does not give us so much the impression of conceiving his own conceptions, as of very accurately observing them as they pass along the screen of some interior faculty. In this respect he differs from almost all his greater brother artists. (*Spectator*, 1862)

Critics hospitable to realism were sometimes keenly aware of this problem of the apparent non-intellectuality of the genre. We have already noted Lewes's reservations about Jane Austen, the most dramatic and least meditative of important novelists to that date. W. C. Roscoe in his article on Defoe (*National Review*, 1856) was concerned that the realist's essential interest in the external nature of things and events might be at the expense of his powers of analysis.

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Roscoe could be stern about Bulwer Lytton's claims to be a philosopher (*National Review*, 1859); yet, when he turned his attention to the realist Thackeray, he regretted 'the absence from his books of what we are accustomed to call ideas', and he suggested in a troubled manner that Thackeray might just be 'the better observer of manners *because* he never cares to penetrate below them' (*National Review*, 1856. Our emphasis). Like Roscoe, Leslie Stephen was concerned that Defoe's technique of photographic realism, which more or less dictated a go-ahead dramatic mode of narration, worked against authorial interpretation (*Hours in a Library*, vol. 1). He also wished there might have been more theme and more thought in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* so that the hero, Paul Emanuel, whom Stephen greatly admired as a realistic portrait, might have been seen also from 'an intellectual point of view, placed in his due relation to the great currents of thought and feeling of the time' (*Hours in a Library*, vol. 3). And in his essay on Hawthorne (*Cornhill Magazine*, 1872), Stephen posited that 'some central truth should be embodied in every work of fiction, which cannot be compressed into a definite formula, but which acts as the animating and informing principle, determining the main lines of the structure and affecting even its most trivial details'.

As this last quotation indicates, a concern for unity was common to critics of all stripes. It is apparent even in the formats of the book reviews, which beginning in the late 1840s were becoming self-conscious about the time-honoured practice of filling out the bulk of the articles with passages extracted from the novels under discussion. By the late 1850s most reviewers had enough respect for the integrity of a work of fiction to resist representing it through snippets. This respect is also apparent in the very frequent objections one hears about the novel's serial mode of publication, a method 'unprincipled in the artistic sense', according to Harriet Martineau (*Autobiography*, vol. 1, p. 416) and, as another critic pointed out, 'destructive of the regular development of the tale [because it] subordinates the natural march of events to the necessity of producing a *coup de théâtre* for each distinct issue' (*Athenaeum*, 1841). Moreover, critics throughout the period complained bitterly about the arbitrary three-volume structure, imposed on the novel by the marketing needs of the circulating library.

Lewes, who criticized even *Tom Jones* for its want of unity, was also aware of this current of Victorian criticism of the novel. 'The object of construction', he wrote, 'is to free the story from all superfluity' (*Blackwood's*, 1869). But Lewes's objection, in so far as the question of unity was concerned, had to do with episodic digressions from the

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central *action* rather than with the absence of a controlling *thought*. Indeed, although the novel was being taken more and more seriously in these years as a vehicle for the expression of significant ideas, the concept of a theme controlling its action was in some ways adverse to the developing aesthetic of realism. One of the most underrated of the critics of the earlier part of the period, Thomas Lister, had argued that ‘although the “purpose” of the novel – the evaluation of the materials – is implicit in the work, it must seem “casual”, [because] the reader demands the illusion that the novel generates itself’ (*Edinburgh Review*, 1839). Even earlier, Lister had anticipated Henry James by recommending a point of view – he actually uses the term – as a means of producing this illusion of self-generation. Some novelists fail, he wrote, ‘because they present to us objects as they are, rather than as they appear . . . Others, though they in part describe objects as they appear to the spectator, yet mix them confusedly with circumstances of which the eye could not have taken cognisance at all, – or could not have seen from the same point of view’ (*Edinburgh Review*, 1832). In the same year, Lockhart had explained how it was possible simultaneously to achieve both unity and real self-generation, rather than merely the illusion of it, simply by focusing dramatically on a given character and permitting the action to develop naturally out of his nature and the circumstances surrounding him. The key to this technique was to avoid introducing anything arbitrary, such as a moral position or a controlling thought (*Blackwood’s*). A writer for the *North British Review* (1856) argued that when a novelist tries to prove a point, he loses the chance of showing how the destinies of his characters are ‘influenced by one another and by circumstances in accordance with the natural course of events as presented to us by experience . . . By aiming at the two incompatible objects’, the review concludes, ‘the author does not succeed in either.’

This insistence on dramatic as opposed to thematic unity was of course intended as much as a defence against the demands of the moralists as of the philosophical romancers, and, indeed, sometimes it is difficult to keep the two schools of critics apart. Presumably the romancers wanted to elevate fiction to the status of philosophy, and the only way some of them believed this could be done was to make the story illustrative of a preconceived intellectual position. The moralists insisted that fiction should induce good behaviour in the reader and provide him with healthy models to emulate, or at the very least not seduce him to evil actions by glorifying sick thoughts and wicked characters. All of these aims also required considerable pre-conception. When Carlyle is taking Scott to task it is hard to decide

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whether he thinks the Waverley Novels fall short of greatness because their author is too little like Goethe or not enough like John Knox, or whether Carlyle really sees a significant difference between the two:

In the nineteenth century, our highest literary man, who immeasurably beyond all others commanded the world's ear, had, as it were, no message whatever to deliver to the world; wished not the world to elevate itself, to amend itself, to do this or to do that, except simply pay him for the books he kept writing.

(*London and Westminster Review*, 1838)

One difference between the romancers and the moralists was that the latter certainly did not represent only an undercurrent in the flow of criticism. The demand that a novel be moral was at least as frequently made as the requirement that it be real, and even though the majority of the better critics were against direct exhortation, morally improving fiction was popular throughout the period. As Havelock Ellis wrote as late as 1896, 'whereas children can only take their powders in jam, the strenuous British public cannot be induced to devour their jam unless convinced that it contains some strange and nauseous powder' (*Savoy*).

This demand for didactic fiction worked against the romancers, especially in the 1830s and the 1870s when romance writers were interested in exploring the criminal psyche. A review of one of Bulwer Lytton's criminal novels admired the 'eloquence, natural and fervent feeling, and vigorous delineation of human character in this work', and yet 'sincerely' wished that he 'had left it unwritten. We think the principle on which it is constructed is unnatural. Genius can do much, but not all: she cannot, with propriety, clothe a treacherous murderer in the garments of beauty' (*Athenaeum*, 1832). Thomas Cleghorn wrote that since the main interest of *Oliver Twist* 'is made to depend on the most debased and villainous agents . . . the work had done much towards creating in the public a morbid interest in such heroes and their mode of life, [and] a relish for such writing', he warned ominously, 'soon becomes a craving' (*North British Review*, 1845). Dickens had already expressed himself as having no respect for the 'opinion, good or bad of people of so refined and delicate a nature that they cannot bear the contemplation of these horrors' (Preface to the 1841 edition of *Oliver Twist*), and Bulwer Lytton, after his novel *Lucretia* (1846) had been almost universally condemned as a wicked book, replied in a pamphlet that 'Crime, in fact, is the essential material of Tragic Drama' (*A Word to the Public*, 1847). 'If so,' replied one moral critic who refused to be put off, 'we should be disposed to assert that the decline of the drama, as far as tragedy is concerned, is not a subject for lamentation; and the fact that many tragedies

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formerly popular, and still considered classic, have been driven from the stage, we trace to the tendencies of a growing civilisation' (*Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review*, 1847).

But the realistic novel of ordinary life was certainly not exempt from the strictures of these same critics. Indeed, Clara Reeve in *The Progress of Romance* (1785) had argued that the realistic novel (she had *Tom Jones* especially in mind) was unfit as a vehicle for moral instruction because it was bound to reality and compelled, as the romance was not, to present men as they really are. In the nineteenth century some critics felt that the fallible protagonist of the everyday novel was even more dangerous than the pernicious hero of glamorous romance because the ordinary reader would find it the easier to identify with him. According to some moralists it was spiritually unprofitable for the reader to empathize even with morally good characters for, as Elizabeth Jay has recently written, evangelicals believed that this exercise would 'dissipate love for one's fellow creatures upon imaginary figures'.²

It was this last charge that George Eliot may have been responding to in the famous digression in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*. There she argues that the reader's identification with a character, at least when the latter is of the sort the reader must encounter in his own life, exercises and builds an empathic muscle, so to speak, making it possible for the reader to identify with his real neighbours and to feel charitably towards them. Some of the other objections of the moralists could also be dealt with. Although attorneys from the 1840s to the present have found it at least worth a try in the defence of obviously guilty clients, critics were becoming less and less impressed with the argument that readers imitate the wicked or illegal behaviour of fictional characters. 'It will take many Aurora Floyds [bigamist title character of M. E. Braddon's novel, 1863] to make one interesting bigamist', a writer for the *Saturday Review* remarked in 1866. The same critic warned, it is true, that novels might work more subtly on the reader, inculcating in them an 'epicurism' and an 'absolute indifference to all that appertains to the higher life of a rational being'. Moreover, Leslie Stephen insisted that 'cynicism, prurience, and voluptuous delight in cruelty' are abominable, and 'he who keeps them alive is doing harm, and more harm if he has the talent of a Shakespeare, a Mozart, or a Raphael' (*Cornhill Magazine*, 1875). But such concerns, serious though they were, did not require preconception on the part of the author. All that was needed was that, unlike such writers as Laurence Sterne, as Thackeray and Stephen saw him, and unlike most French novelists, the author be of a healthy and sensibly moral character and that, following

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the model of Scott, he permit his basic decency to shine through and become naturally embodied in the work. This sort of thing could be overdone, as Thackeray thought was the case with L.E.L.'s *Ethel Churchill* – 'she has no idea of a dramatic character; and it is Miss Landon who speaks and feels throughout' (*Fraser's*, 1838) – but it could certainly be managed by a skilful artist, as it was to be managed by Thackeray himself, by Trollope, and by others, both with and without intrusive narrators.

What could not be so easily accommodated within the growing aesthetic of the realistic novel were the demands by moralists that the novel improve the world in some very specific way. The curate novel of the 1840s, one critic recalled nostalgically,

produced, on the whole, a very healthy excitement in the female bosom. It developed the missionary zeal which is strong in women. It stimulated young ladies to unprecedented feats of parochial activity. They lectured the poor, they visited the sick, they taught in schools, they carved poppy-heads, they worked altar-clothes, they scrubbed brasses, they even went so far as to dabble in theology, and could speak fluently of the points of difference between Romish and Anglican communities.

(*Saturday Review*, 1866)

A novel intended to move the pious reader to such exertions needed careful planning. Dickens, who would have found little to admire and much to satirize in such activities, was frequently praised for the moral aims of his novels. His works, wrote Richard Ford in his review of *Oliver Twist*, 'like good sermons, contribute to our moral health' (*Quarterly Review*, 1839). And, of course, novels which sought to improve social conditions, as written by Dickens, Kingsley, Reade and others, absolutely required considerable preconception.

This last topic brings up an interesting side question which bears ultimately, as do all these considerations, on the problem of unity. In his review of Disraeli's *Sybil*, Thackeray criticized the very practice of airing social problems in fiction. 'You can't have a question fairly debated in this way. You can't allow an author to invent incidents, motives, and characters, in order that he may attack them subsequently. How many Puseyite novels, Evangelical novels, Roman Catholic novels have we had, and how absurd and unsatisfactory are they' (*Morning Chronicle*, 1845). This was precisely the position James Fitzjames Stephen was to take in his several anonymous *Spectator* and *Edinburgh Review* articles on *Little Dorrit*, especially regarding Dickens's invention in that novel of the Circumlocution Office, which Stephen read as a veiled attack on his own father. A novelist, Stephen complained, could simply make up any evidence he pleased and use it to lead his readers to false conclusions which might

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have serious consequences in the real world. Dickens's response, 'A Curious Misprint in the *Edinburgh Review*' (*Household Words*, 1857), showed clearly that essayists, Stephen in particular, could also falsify evidence for their own purposes, but the problem was not so easily disposed of. Dickens's article discredited Stephen's because an essay is required to be accurate in its facts. Veracity is essential to the discipline of persuasive writing. But, as the exasperated Stephen points out, no one ever desires the novel, where fiction and invention are the names of the game, to be factual. There is no accountability because, presumably, there is no discipline. The novelist can do just as he pleases, and honest men, like Stephen's father, are at his mercy.

What infuriated Dickens more than the charge of inaccuracy was the implication, not only in Stephen, but more frequently in Thackeray, that imaginative literature of whatever sort ought not to attempt to provide its readers with anything beyond simple amusement. Neither of them professed a high opinion of the social or moral value of fiction, and poets, for them, were certainly not the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Thackeray, indeed, liked to compare his own writing to pastry-making. Theirs was very much a minority position in the middle of the nineteenth century, but the two critics suggest perhaps a more interesting question than they may have intended, albeit a question as old as Socrates: Since poets do not seem, as judged from their behaviour, to be the wisest of men outside their poetry, what can be the authority for their wisdom within it? In the nineteenth century, and especially in the nineteenth-century novel, the muse is seldom invoked. Is fiction writing, therefore, anything better than soft journalism, or does it have a discipline unsuspected by Thackeray and Stephen, and even an epistemology?

The realists continued to regard as anathema the philosophical novel, where, as William Henry Smith described it, 'some theory or some dogma is expressly taught, where a vein of scholastic, or political, or ethical matter alternated with a vein of narrative and fictitious matter' (*Blackwood's*, 1845). But the same critic allows that 'every work of art of a high order will, in one sense of the word be philosophical'. How is this possible? The answer which the English realists seemed to be approaching was that a discipline could be found in fiction and new knowledge actually generated in the novel if the writer was prepared to trust his material absolutely, to recognize, as Lewes did, that 'the primary object' in fiction 'is character' (*The Life of Goethe*, 1855), and to be willing to get out of the way, so to speak, of the character's development; to be content simply and modestly to follow it as it unfolds. Such an aesthetic was related to