

Cambridge University Press

0521471338 - *Novels behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative*

Andrew H. Miller

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

By the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value, the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions, among which the one we are conscious of, the artistic function, later may be recognized as incidental. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 225

In the mid-1830s, new glass-making technology was introduced into England, technology which allowed the mass production of glass sheets of unprecedented size. With the repeal of the excise tax in the forties, the market for these glass sheets expanded considerably, and by the early fifties panes of up to four feet in length were being made fairly regularly. Health-reformers and construction firms encouraged the use of the new sheets in domestic architecture, but the most immediate and visible beneficiaries of these technological developments were retailers who used the glass for their display windows. These windows radically transfigured the experience of walking through commercial sections of London, fashioning the streets into gas-lit spaces of utopian splendor. "When we arrive at St. Paul's Churchyard," wrote one observer in 1851, "we come to a very world of show. Here we find a shop whose front presents an uninterrupted mass of glass from the ceiling to the ground."¹ This "world of show" became the occasion for elaborate fantasies of consumption, sensuous experiences of imagined acquisition, and almost immediately these sheets of glass and the fantasies they encouraged were used as evidence displaying the material progress of the nation and its capitol, uniting observers in admiration:

¹ George Dodd, "London Shops and Bazaars," in Charles Knight, ed., *London* (London, Henry G. Bohn, 1851), p. 392.

Cambridge University Press

0521471338 - *Novels behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative*

Andrew H. Miller

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Novels behind glass*

By what steps the shops of the metropolis have arrived at their present positions – how the heavy shapeless window yielded to the light bow window, and the latter to the modern flat window; how small squares of glass have given way to later ones, crown glass to plate glass, clumsy wooden sash-bars to light brass ones, how the once lowly shop has reared its head so as to include even the next higher floor within its compass – must have been noticed by all who are familiar with the huge metropolis.²

In this passage, as elsewhere, the windows themselves cease to be transparent media for display and become items of display themselves, worthy of study and admiration. “Twenty years ago,” George Dodd writes, “most of the bakers’ shops had small flat windows, and were very modestly lighted in the evening by a lamp or two ... But now the window displays its large squares of plate-glass, its brightly-blazing gas-jets, and its long array of neat trays filled with biscuits.”³ The window “displays” its glass and gas-jets along with its biscuits, the glass of as much interest as the goods it frames. This wonder and pride in the technologies of display indicate a larger movement towards the pleasures of consuming spectacles. Dodd’s essay, written on “London Shops and Bazaars,” spends little time lingering on the goods available for sale in these shops, on their uses, histories, production, or aesthetic qualities. Instead we are simply told what the shops and particularly their windows look like; we are sedentary flaneurs, invited to consume the commercial exhibits of the city.⁴

In 1857, six years after Dodd’s essay was published, Charles Manby Smith wrote that the old gloomy streets of London, “in which a few blinking oil-lamps just sufficed to render the dark-

2 Dodd, “London Shops,” p. 389.

3 Dodd, “London Shops,” p. 391.

4 A writer for *Sharpe’s London Magazine* similarly attends to the display value of windows rather than the goods behind them when, in the course of an article on the subject, he or she remarks that some shops “exhibit walls of plate glass,” 4 (17 July 1847) p. 188. Thomas Richards’ *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (Stanford University Press, 1990) provides the most incisive history of Victorian commodity culture and its dependence on spectacles and advertisement; in *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement, and Social Reading* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1988), Jennifer Wicke has studied Victorian advertisements as a mass literature the emergence of which was dialectically related to that of the modern novel. On Victorian material culture more generally, see Asa Briggs’ *Victorian Things* (University of Chicago Press, 1989).

Cambridge University Press

0521471338 - *Novels behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative*

Andrew H. Miller

Excerpt

[More information](#)

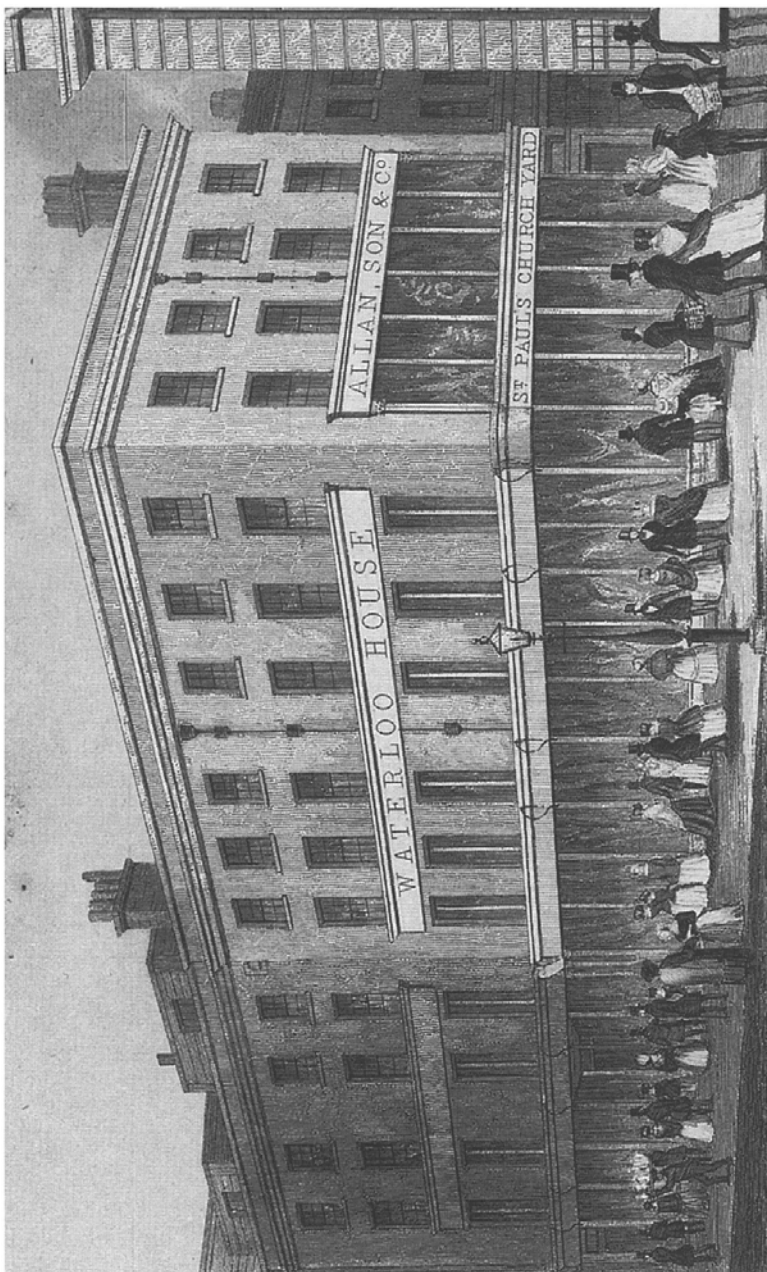


Plate 1. "The World of Show" in St. Paul's Churchyard, 1847: Allan and Son Drapers

Cambridge University Press

0521471338 - *Novels behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative*

Andrew H. Miller

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Novels behind glass*

ness visible" and in which goods were displayed in "the narrow shop-window, with its panes of bulging glass, twenty inches by twelve, lighted by a couple of tallow candles or an argand-lamp," had been banished.

Now, the departure of the day is the herald of a light such as the sun never darts into the nooks and crannies of traffic: broad streams of gas flash like meteors into every corner of the wealth-crammed mart – from which it may be but one invisible wall of solid crystal separates the passenger, who might easily walk through it but for the burnished metal guard which meets him breast high.⁵

This nocturnal world of show, illuminated by newly available, relatively safe gas lights, improving on the natural but mundane experience of daytime life, presents the commodity fetish in all its glory, easily available to the admiring eye if not to the acquisitive hand. "Behind these crystal walls," writes Smith, stand men "whose sole purpose in life it is to gratify ... wishes."⁶

As Richard Sennett has written, however, plate glass is a "material which lets [one] see everything inaccessible to desire."⁷ Restrained by the invisible wall of crystal, if not by the burnished metal guard, you can look but you cannot touch, desire but not possess. Making goods "look better than they really are," windows simultaneously confer upon them an aura of shining inaccessibility.⁸ From this vantage Victorians like Smith saw the windows of pawnshops as paradigmatic, displaying the inaccessibility of commodities with particular clarity:

In dim, yet dazzling confusion, the inharmonious collection floats before the vision, and will not be disembarassed of the living forms and faces with which imagination connects each single item in the endless catalogue. Let us invite from the mass one or two forlorn specimens, and listen to their oracular voices. They will speak nothing but the truth now, though they may have helped to spread many a delusion in days that are gone. May we be the wiser for the revelations they impart.⁹

5 Charles Manby Smith, *The Little World Of London* (London, Arthur Hall, Virtue, and Co., 1857), pp. 324–5.

6 Smith, *Little World*, p. 325.

7 Richard Sennett, "Plate Glass," *Raritan* 6: 4 (1987), p. 1.

8 Georg Hirth, quoted in Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Light: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988), p. 147.

9 Smith, *Little World*, p. 332.

Cambridge University Press

0521471338 - *Novels behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative*

Andrew H. Miller

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

Although these goods are unavailable to those who once possessed them, the relationship of owner and object nonetheless can be recuperated through the imaginative labors of fiction. Having created tales for several of the hocked goods, Smith tells us that each of the other items “of itself might yield the groundwork of a romance, all the more touching and instructive in that the details are drawn from the reality of our social life.”¹⁰ The “truth” of the commodity stands out from the falsehood which normally shrouds it and is spoken, in oracular tones, through poignant, instructive narratives.

While transforming the experience of walking through London streets, the technological development of plate-glass windows in shops of all kinds also came to be an emblem of the increasing pretensions, impersonality and mobility of social and commercial life. Writing three years after Smith imagined his utopian space of gratification, George Eliot recalled that her fictional town of St. Ogg’s had

no plate-glass in shop windows ... The shop windows were small and unpretending; for the farmers’ wives and daughters who came to do their shopping on market days were not to be withdrawn from their regular, well-known shops; and the tradesmen had no wares intended for customers who would go on their way and be seen no more.¹¹

In Eliot’s nostalgic vision the shops of St. Ogg’s provide a social space not for “passengers” but for familiar figures, women in particular, who know each other and the shopkeepers who regularly sell them their goods. Distancing consumers from the goods they desire while simultaneously heightening that desire, the invisible wall of solid crystal was also seen to encourage an increasing distance between people.

The display windows in this nation of shopkeepers thus served as emblems of an economic dynamic which was also and simultaneously libidinal (producing desire and disenchantment), epistemological (concerning the representation of falsehood and truth), and social (marking individual isolation and the possibilities of communal relations). Organizing my reflections on these dynamics and their implications in the following pages will be

¹⁰ Smith, *Little World*, p. 338.

¹¹ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 117–18.

Cambridge University Press

0521471338 - *Novels behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative*

Andrew H. Miller

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Novels behind glass*

the specifically aesthetic development of the “exhibition value” of goods. Also marked by the wide-spread installation of plate-glass windows, this aesthetic development is most commonly associated with the emergence of new visual technologies, photography and film most particularly.¹² And we will see, in Chapter 2 below, that these new plates of glass were important elements of a comprehensive institutional change, part of a complex of developments in museums, department stores, exhibitions and galleries. What follows, however, will attend most fully to impact of this increased exhibition value on the realistic novel; read in isolation away from the crowd, dependant on signs more linguistic than visual, novels too slipped behind the “barrier of glass.”¹³

II

The idea that propels the following book can be stated in a deceptively simple fashion: among the dominant concerns motivating mid-Victorian novelists was a penetrating anxiety, most graphically displayed in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, that their social and moral world was being reduced to a warehouse of goods and commodities, a display window in which people, their actions, and their convictions were exhibited for the economic appetites of others. While this fear was stated both by novelists and by contemporary cultural critics, the lines of tension which it sends through novels, the narrative difficulties and affective ambivalences it produces, have not been exactly or thoroughly traced. From the gendering of subjectivity and the vagaries of desire to the atomization and rationalization of social life, from the endurance of memory and the power of nostalgia to anxieties concerning legacies left to the future, from the trajectories of public careers to the cyclical routines of the household, from the

12 See Walter Benjamin’s comments on the ability of photography to create new objects for economic display in “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York, Schocken, 1986), pp. 146–62, as well as his more extended remarks in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, Schocken, 1969), pp. 217–52.

13 Dodd, “London Shops,” p. 386.

Cambridge University Press

0521471338 - *Novels behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative*

Andrew H. Miller

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

enjoyment of particular pleasures to the frustrations of mortality, from the metaphoric and conceptual power of “ownership” to the consequences of theft and loss, the ambivalences generated by commodity culture organize the thematic concerns of these novels and the society they represent. Following Marx in this regard, each of the following chapters will take the commodity as its point of departure; considered together, the chapters will suggest that the Victorian novel provides us with the most graphic and enduring images of the power of commodities to affect the varied activities and attitudes of individual and social experience.¹⁴

In tracing out each of these concerns and others, the following pages will analyze the implicit and explicit attitudes writers adopt towards the commodification of their own literary products; indeed, I will argue that it is in these attitudes that the effects of Victorian commodity culture are most profoundly present. Adopting a moral stance against the commodification of the world, novelists simultaneously understood that literary work itself was increasingly commodified; they were, as a result, required to negotiate between their moral condemnation and their implication in what they opposed. In order to study this complex and awkward negotiation, I take up the formal characteristics of, as well as the representation of commodities within, a range of novels. In the narrative form of these texts one can see most clearly the complicated set of attitudes, conscious and unconscious, entertained by writers about the process of commodification – and one can also see most clearly the fundamental significance of those attitudes for our understanding of the Victorian novel.

All the texts I consider closely – *Vanity Fair*, *Cranford*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *The Eustace Diamonds*, and *Middlemarch* – were written during the triumphant moment of free-market capitalism, the quarter-century that saw, in addition to the repeal of the glass-tax (1845), the repeal of the Corn Law (1846) and

14 Jeff Nunokowa makes a similar claim in his recent study, *The Afterlife of Property: Domestic Security and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 4. Reading that book while correcting the final manuscript of this one, I am pleased to see the degree to which our varied arguments complement each other.

Cambridge University Press

0521471338 - *Novels behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative*

Andrew H. Miller

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Novels behind glass*

the Navigation Acts (1849 and 1854), the elimination of duties on sugar (1854) and of taxes on soap (1853) and paper (1861), the legal acceptance of the limited liability corporation (1855 and 1856).¹⁵ In literary production itself, the most basic index of free-trade ideology was found in what N. N. Feltes has designated the “commodity-text.” Emerging with the early novels of Dickens, the “commodity-text” was associated with serial publication and was opposed to the petty-commodity form of the dominant three-volume novel, what Feltes calls the “commodity-book”:

the “beliefs,” the ideology of the consumer of the borrowed, three-volume commodity book, were distinct from those of the consumer of the serialized or part-issue commodity-text. For whereas the commodity-text interpellated generally the individual bourgeois subject, the commodity-book was part of an apparatus which interpellated the ‘middle- or upper-middle class’ subscriber to Mudie’s.¹⁶

While the commodity-text “interpellates the assumed ‘normality’ or classlessness of the individual bourgeois subject/reader,” the commodity-book “interpellates in general the sense of an exclusive collectivity, as is implied by the ‘prestige’ and ‘grandeur’ associated with the three-decker.”¹⁷ Isolating and addressing the individual reader, the commodity-text similarly isolates the individual writer. The emergence of the serialized commodity-text, Feltes argues, marked the emergence of new professional authors who retained a greater degree of control over their work (most importantly, by controlling copyright) while, simultaneously and consequently, being more vulnerable to economic loss. George Eliot’s regret, Feltes writes, “at having sold the copyright to *Adam Bede*, a petty-commodity production relation, is directly related to her desire – when she inferred that John

15 For the emergence of the limited liability corporation, see H. A. Shannon, “The Coming of General Limited Liability,” in E. M. Carus-Wilson, ed., *Essays in Economic History*, 3 vols. (London, E. Arnold, 1954), vol. 1, pp. 358–79, and my “Subjectivity Ltd.: The Discourse of Liability in the Joint-Stock Companies Act of 1856 and Gaskell’s *Cranford*,” *ELH* 61 (1994), pp. 139–57; in *The Afterlife of Property*, Nunokowa similarly locates his study of Dickens and Eliot within this high moment of “the age of capital.”

16 N. N. Feltes, *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 27.

17 Feltes, *Modes of Production*, p. 27.

Cambridge University Press

0521471338 - Novels behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative

Andrew H. Miller

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

Blackwood saw her next book as 'a speculation attended with risk' – to change the relations of production by contracting only for the first edition of *The Mill*: 'I prefer incurring that risk myself.'¹⁸ This controlling yet uncertain position, adopted in various ways by each of the writers I consider, locates them as producers within a fully capitalist mode of production and makes them especially attentive to the consequences of commodity production and exchange within their novels.

Considered together, the first two chapters, on William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and on the Great Exhibition of 1851, introduce many of the critical themes concerning these consequences; these two "fairs" also allow me to establish much of the theoretical architecture for the succeeding pages. More than any other Victorian novel, Thackeray's book imagines the fetishistic reduction of the material environment to commodities, to a world simultaneously brilliant and tedious, in which value is produced without reference either to the needs or to the hopelessly utopian desires of characters. While Thackeray decries this reduction, his own engagement with material culture leaves him deeply invested in the processes that produce the multifarious commodities surrounding him. His desire for these goods and his expectations of utopian satisfaction to be gained from their possession fully implicate him in his economic system. This continually unsatisfied desire is frustrating, but it also allows Thackeray to sustain an image of himself as a deserving, if unrewarded subject; never attaining his desires, he never loses them either. At the largest level, Thackeray's ambivalence shapes the attitude he takes towards his own novel: like the other social products he describes, *Vanity Fair* is an inadequate vehicle for the value he wants it to carry and, as a result, Thackeray stands estranged from the product of his own labor.

Thackeray exhibits his circulating, dispiriting objects in an oddly depthless space; the physical contiguity of objects within relations of perspectival realism is rendered insignificant by the insistence with which those objects refer to unattainable levels

¹⁸ Feltes, *Modes of Production*, pp. 46–7. Discussing the effects of the 1842 Copyright Amendment Act, David Saunders similarly notes that it "encouraged authors not to alienate their copyright entirely or for ever." *Authorship and Copyright* (London, Routledge, 1992), p. 141.

Cambridge University Press

0521471338 - *Novels behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative*

Andrew H. Miller

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Novels behind glass*

of abstract meaning. In a similar fashion, the objects displayed at the Great Exhibition gained their significance not by their contiguity in the Crystal Palace but by their participation in a series of codes constructed through them: the congeries of goods on display was arranged by and understood through a range of relational and contingent discursive patterns concerning class, gender, and nationality. Taking up these patterns allows us to see the ways in which the formal concerns described in literary texts operate at a larger social level; the Exhibition developed the allegorical form of *Vanity Fair* into a relentlessly positive vision of utopian possibilities. But, while Thackeray's failures allowed him to maintain a satisfying, if impoverished, understanding of himself, the fetishistic structure that underlay the optimistic Exhibition inversely imports the depressing possibility of failure and frustration even as it declared its own success. A celebration of Victorian industrial strength, the Exhibition also revealed middle-class fears about that strength and the workers who were gathered to view the products of their labor at the Palace. Similarly, the Exhibition inspired several male observers to imagine the display of British women under glass, an act of sexual objectification and an attempt to manage the unsettling desires which the Exhibition inspired in the women who admired its wares. Imagining the Exhibition as a display of British technological superiority, commentators necessarily imagined it as a display with an audience – but the foreign visitors to the Palace, the women, and the workers, aroused intense anxieties about the management of the appetites that circle around the display and consumption of goods.

Together, *Vanity Fair* and the Exhibition starkly illustrate two versions of one dynamic of desire and disenchantment, a dynamic the consequences of which the novelists studied in the remaining chapters of this book attempted to escape. The resistance of these writers to the suasion of fetishized commodities took several forms, both obvious and elusive. Most obvious, perhaps, was the definition of domestic enclaves, the organization of household spaces free from the force of commodification. Chapters 3 and 4, on Gaskell's *Cranford* and Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, explore the development of such enclaves and the association of writing with them. Gaskell writes out of and about the routines of domestic everyday life, and the quotidian inflects