Introduction: the practice of paradise

"The gate to paradise remains sealed by the term risk."

Niklas Luhmann, *Risk*

". . . theirs is the hunger for paradise."

H. D., "The Flowering of the Rod"

This book is about a massive, disorganized and highly successful Victorian cultural enterprise: the textual construction of a safe England in a dangerous world between 1832 and 1897. Beginning in the 1830s, a diverse group of writers labored to help the first victims and beneficiaries of industrialization imagine that danger could be banished from the domestic scene and relocated in the world outside British borders. Careful representations of the precise locations of safety and danger – in such diverse texts as statistical analyses of the British empire, handbooks of hospital reform, memoirs of balloon aeronauts, travelogues of Alpine mountaineers, and ethnographic studies of Africa – suggested that risk could be either avoided altogether (in England) or engaged voluntarily in the dangerous world beyond it. The attempt to resolve risk geographically ignores the most salient feature of risk: that it is by definition a temporal problem; it exists only and always as a possibility, a future contingency.[1] A geographical solution obscures the impossibility of banishing risk. This form of risk management thus involves the colonization of time: danger would seem to be plucked out of its hiding place in the invisible reaches of the future and brought into the present, to be experienced, survived and thus eradicated. The idea that risk could be written into, and out of, specific places provided powerful consolation, I will argue, for the inhabitants of the tumultuous Victorian moment of modernity.

Two key claims – one theoretical, one textual – motivate my discussion of Victorian risk. I make my first claim against the grain of many contemporary theorists to whom I am greatly indebted, including Anthony

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Giddens, Niklas Luhmann and Marshall Berman, who hold that modernity is characterized by an unprecedented acceptance of the permanence of risk. I argue that the "modern" attitude to risk is distinguished from past attitudes more by its strategies of containment than by a new acceptance of the inevitability of risk. I call these strategies "modern cosmologies" because they proffer large-scale consolation and reassurance. Traditional cosmologies are usually theological in their origins; they are enduring and their focus is as large as the universe itself. Modern cosmologies, on the other hand, I define as structures of containment that attempt to offer totalizing explanations of a part of the world. The modern cosmologies I discuss in this book include, in the first chapter, early Victorian *laissez-faire* economics and in the second, mid-Victorian anticontagionist theories of disease transmission. In the third chapter, balloon aeronauts find a place of predictable serenity in the unlikely venue of the "upper air." These frequent fliers represent the possibility that a dangerous circumstance might also be a pleasurable and indeed a tranquil one and a cosmology is born of the surprising security these travelers repeatedly recount. Similarly mountaineers, whose memoirs are the focus of the fourth chapter, intimate that scaling potentially fatal peaks provides an extraordinary sense of safety: climbers seem to inoculate themselves against the contingencies of the future by engaging danger voluntarily in the present. Finally, Victorian explorers of Africa delineate danger in precisely mapped locations in their narratives; they also find places and peoples who offer them unprecedented experiences of safety and serenity. The immemorially dangerous continent is "opened up" in such mixed representations: travel and trade, for example, become increasingly feasible. The dangerous world is paradoxically rendered safer in the precise definitions of danger offered by these writers.

As a consequence of these representations, I came to analyze the implications and consequences of what I see as misunderstandings of modernity: the idea that modernity is characterized by an acceptance of the inevitability of risk denies the endurance and flexibility of cosmological thinking within it. If cosmologies go unremarked in modernity, as they typically have, then so do their frequently dire consequences, particularly for those people and places onto which the burden of being dangerous is displaced. Africa, the Alps and Ireland have all suffered this fate for centuries now, with profound political, economic and ecological consequences.

The textual claim I make has to do with the value of ephemera in literary, cultural and historical study. Modern cosmologies find their home

in ephemeral texts because these cosmologies must be so tightly focused and highly disposable. Like the ephemeral texts that house them, modern cosmologies are always ready to give up their cultural place to new and more useful cosmologies, which are in turn doomed to rapid supercession. Because of their disposability, the conflicts of the political unconscious can be symbolized with particular *éclat* in these texts. In Jameson's description, the political unconscious is revealed when a work "insistently direct[s] us to the informing power of forces or contradictions which the text seeks in vain to wholly control or master . . ."[2] The texts of this study, by economists, sanitarians, balloonists, mountaineers, and explorers, tend to have the "forces and contradictions" that they seek to master very close to the surface. They lack the stuff of "greatness": they are topical, unashamedly prescriptive, and their ideological efforts often place them on the verge of breaking into a serious rhetorical sweat. I argue that ephemeral texts work like short-acting drugs in that they take effect quickly but also wear off quickly – both in terms of the effect they have on their individual readers and in their historical reach. Thus their endurance is brief and their assigned value negligible. But the cultural work these texts perform is neither brief nor negligible. Ephemeral texts circulate modern cosmologies at the margins of culture, telling stories and mapping risks in ways that paradoxically and powerfully contradict and complement dominant ideologies, giving them a flexibility and agility they would not otherwise enjoy.

The short-acting text provides immediate relief for the problems it raises: J. R. McCulloch, for example, underwrites the unregulated, industrialized market with statistics that suggest that England is possessed of inexhaustible supplies of resources. His work thus stands in significant (although entirely unacknowledged) opposition to the theories of Malthus and Ricardo. McCulloch's work provided a necessary relief from the substantial gloom imposed by the enduring economic writings of the century. Edwin Chadwick and Florence Nightingale promised that national cleanliness would eradicate disease, dissent and disorder: their conclusions were delightful to a reading public living in terror of cholera, typhoid, typhus, and smallpox as well as reform and revolution. Eventually the contagionist theories Chadwick and Nightingale opposed (and which were particularly terrifying in their implications for an increasingly urban nation participating in an increasingly global economy) did win the day and the nostrums of these two self-styled experts faded quickly. The relief offered by McCulloch, Chadwick and Nightingale was fleeting because it was not rooted either

in reality, or in the representations of it that received, and continue to receive, the imprimatur of the "realistic" – in the literary, scientific and political senses of the term. All senses of the term evict (again and again) the utopian impulse, the hunger for paradise that haunts modernity and perhaps also guarantees its survival.

The brief consolations of short-acting texts are powerful, but they must be supplemented by the longer-acting effects of those works – literary, economic, historical, and so on – that have endured and become the canonical texts of various disciplines and specialties. "Longer-acting" texts, like Ricardo's economic writings or the novels of Dickens, for example, produce a more enduring relief of cultural anxiety – both in the psyches of their original readers and historically, in the collective psyche of a few centuries of readers around the world. Their long psychic and cultural shelf life is related to the ability of these texts to slowly assuage anxiety at the time of their publication, and to continue to assuage it, even as anxieties shift and change, for subsequent readers in later periods. Oddly enough, these more canonical writers raise substantial anxiety. They then give their readers time, in the form of many dense pages, to learn how to tolerate this heightened anxiety, and then provide for the incomplete – what we have come to think of as the "realistic" – resolution of the conflicts they address.

Ricardo, for example, admits that machinery is indeed bad for the laboring class in that it causes unemployment, but he insists that such unemployment must be tolerated if Britain is to remain competitive in world markets. In novel after novel, Dickens criticizes the dehumanizing effects of industrialization in a fiercely negative dialectic, offering his readers little in the way of consolation. Characters from Dombey to Little Dorrit to Pip to John Harmon must lose much before they can gain, and their gains are hauntingly attenuated, both by their belatedness and by their relative scantiness. Paradoxically, the remainders of unease and even of conflict in these works make for more effective, and enduring, anxiety relief because such remainders conform to literary and social conventions that came, in the nineteenth century, to govern our sense of what is realistic about the "real." The Victorian sense of the real, like Hegel's idea of history, comes to be identified with that which hurts;[3] its pains cannot be fully resolved outside the realm of fantasy or utopia. At the same time, the practice of paradise must be preserved in the culture of realism lest the human condition prescribed therein become entirely unbearable.

In *The Afterlife of Property*, Jeff Nunokawa describes Dickens and Eliot

as having created in their fictions "threats and pleasures that . . . are as much our own as they are the Victorians' who prepared them for us, and us for them."[4] The enduring texts of the nineteenth century created and continue to create their readers: they form us through their forms, through their very length, in the difficulty of their sentences, in the convolutions of their plots. The enduring text makes its readers endure its exigencies, and rewards the labor of steadfast readers with a sense that their effort has earned them a portion of serenity. The reader has witnessed and indeed participated in the representation of a world that would seem to have grown hopelessly complex and beyond the scope of human understanding. These works enact some necessary drama by virtue of their very existence. They reveal to us, in all of their difficulty and density, no matter how painfully or alarmingly, that there are writers who can actually understand and then re-present for us how some part of the world works and, as importantly, how parts of it don't work at all.

The consolation is in the very fact of representation; it is in the ability of the economist or novelist to apprehend and then capture the mechanics of the real between the covers of a book. Whether or not all readers can understand these works is also secondary: few readers could fully understand Ricardo's descriptions of rents and taxes, and many readers (and not a few authors) probably lost at least some of the threads of huge novels that were serialized over a year or more. The point is that "realistic" works, just by being there, as it were, console their readers and non-readers alike with the very fact that such massive representation could be accomplished.

Enduring and ephemeral works exist not in discrete and lasting categorical slots, but along a fluctuating continuum. In the middle of a Victorian continuum of such works we might place the industrial or social problem novels. The texts that I focus on in this study are more decisively non-literary than is this intermediate group of works. This group of texts, Josephine Guy points out, has been read by critics – from Louis Cazamian in *The Social Novel in England* of 1903 to Catherine Gallagher in *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* of 1985 – as "in some way flawed . . . they are marked by incoherence and contradiction and . . . they possess fundamental weaknesses of plot and characterization."[5] These novels fail in what Chris Baldick has identified as the Arnoldian project of replacing "dogmatic and explicit forms of ideological experience with the implicit and intuitive forms of literary sensibility."[6] Industrial novels typically treat the market as an evil for which individual relationships and the comforts of the private sphere are

proffered – however problematically – as a palliative or a cure.[7] Unlike the more ephemeral works of McCulloch and Martineau that deal with similar issues, the public sphere in these novels is hopelessly and even tragically troubled. Although deeply topical and political, these novels still struggle to find literary solutions, often causing various sub-genres of the novel to clash and crowd one another in a formal jostling that results in acute literary failure.

In more canonical works, the problems of the public sphere – of the market, of business, of empire – are represented with considerably less specificity. Guy contends that "[w]here *Hard Times* differs from, say, *Our Mutual Friend* or *Little Dorrit* is that an obsession with commerce is used to trope not archetypal themes of greed and corruption, but a specific dissatisfaction with contemporary ways of thinking about social life."[8] Kathleen Tillotson, in her classic study of the industrial novel, has pointed out a formal difference between the highly topical, specific, and therefore "flawed" nature of industrial novels in comparison to a more "literary" novel like *Dombey and Son*:

> The social criticism of *Dombey and Son* cannot be abstracted from the novel, and even such disengaging as is attempted here perhaps distorts it. It is pervasive, unformulated; not documentary in its origin or usefulness; no purposeful journeys or reading of newspaper reports lie behind it, and it is not a convenient source for social historians. Partly for this reason, that it is inseparable, it assists instead of disturbing the firm unity of the design.[9]

Social criticism cannot be formulated with any specificity in *Dombey and Son*: such documentation would generically disrupt the literariness of the novel – what Tillotson describes as "the firm unity of the design." "Great" literature is about the human condition generally; indeed I would argue that it invents that condition for us so that we can understand and acquiesce to the limitations imposed on us by it. Ephemeral works provide relief from the permanence and inscrutability of this condition. They keep the possibility of paradise alive by refusing the formal, emotional, and intellectual constraints imposed by the Victorian redefinition of the "literary." The disciplinary reach of this "reformation," including the invention and policing of specific desires achieved by the novel, has been brilliantly described in the work of Catherine Gallagher, D. A. Miller and Nancy Armstrong.[10] This does not mean that I find in these texts the possibility of subversion; indeed, it seems that paradise is the term that secretly indemnifies bourgeois culture. We imagine and re-imagine it, writing and reading about it as if, like the fateful combination that wins the lottery, we might get it just right and

therefore make it just real enough to happen. Official culture dismisses
and denies the importance of the practice of paradise in modern cos-
mological construction. This book tries to bring the Victorian practice
of paradise into dialogue with the more enduring projects of that
culture, a culture that continues to inhabit us, especially where we are
most blind to our inheritance of it.

J. R. McCulloch, in his *Statistical Account of the British Empire* (1837), and
Harriet Martineau, in her *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832–1834), use
charts, tables, numbers and narratives to reassure their readers that
England is in the safe keeping of both a deity who is providing abundant
natural resources, and the invisible hand of the market, which is always
working toward an equilibrium of "natural" prices and wages. *Laissez-
faire* capitalism becomes a cosmology in their works, a structure of laws
that guarantees the stability of the future. The utopian, and uneasy,
over-reaching of these widely read works may have produced rapid
relief, but such relief could not last because it was so obviously not rooted
in the social realities these texts were attempting to explain to their
apprehensive readers. Indeed, the ways in which these texts rush to reas-
sure their readers suggests the complexity and the depth of the eco-
nomic anxieties they sought to relieve.

In contrast, texts of sanitary reform like Edwin Chadwick's *Report on
the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1842) and
Florence Nightingale's *Notes on Hospitals* (1860) and *Notes on Nursing* (1859)
foreground, rather than deny, serious problems within England. Filth in
all of its forms is the principal evil facing England: the nation must clean
itself up. The passive rhetoric of the invisible hand is replaced with the
active rhetoric of many highly visible hands. These works offer straight-
forward and immediate solutions to the problems they describe, thus
containing the threats they acknowledge. The laws of anticontagionism
replace those of *laissez faire* as a cosmology, one that promises individual
and national health, of both a physical and political kind.

When anxiety is not assuaged, it can also be exported in large quan-
tities to the world above and outside England. In Victorian ballooning
memoirs, including James Glaisher's *Travels in the Air* (1871) and Henry
Coxwell's *My Life and Balloon Experiences* (1887), the aeronaut exemplifies
the liberal idea of the individual as one who can reject at will the limits
and limitations of the group. While the combined effects of cosmology-
and bureaucracy-building in this period threatened to homogenize
English subjects and rationalize the structure of society too tidily, the

combination of jaunty lightheartedness and serious risk in an activity
like ballooning helped to preserve the precious and necessary idea of the
liberal, liberated individual. This individual departs from the collective,
but in so doing enriches it with his or her exploits, enacting the model of
innovation necessary to the growth and development of industrial,
imperial economies. The scandal of ballooning memoirs is that the risks
of flight turn out to be so pleasurable that they threaten to undermine
the risk–reward ratio of *laissez faire*: balloon travelers reveal the possibil-
ity that risk may be its own reward.

The mountaineering memoirs I discuss, including those of Edward
Whymper, Amelia Edwards and Leslie Stephen, chronicle the physical
and mental toughness required to survive climbing, and falling, in the
Alps. Both mountain climbing and the act of reading about it represent
an enactment of what I call cultural masochism, a way of colonizing the
future. Future threats (risks) are brought into the present in the form of
the discomfort and danger of climbing and, ideally, they are survived,
and thus neutralized. Mountain climbers, as well as the many readers of
their memoirs, could experience – at first or second hand – the survival
of risk and thus feel as though they had participated in the removal of a
quantum of danger from the world.

David Livingstone's *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (1857)
and Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa* (1897) locate safety in an
unlikely place. Although both authors dutifully terrify their readers with
thrilling tales of the "Dark Continent," at the same time they disturb
Victorian stereotypes of Africa as a place of Conradian "horror,"
recounting peaceful and enjoyable encounters with the peoples and the
landscape of Africa. (I have chosen Africa as the superlatively danger-
ous imperial locale: by the mid-nineteenth century, the Caribbean,
Australia and the Indian subcontinent were, although still viewed as
dangerous, at least partly domesticated through long colonization.)
Their sense of comfort in Africa is problematically related to Victorian
racial theories, which provided both writers with a newfound sense of
superiority. Livingstone rose above the stigma of his laboring class
origins and Kingsley escaped the constraints of gender through ideas of
racial superiority that gave both writers a sense of authority not avail-
able to them in Britain. In spite of this problematic sense of their own
power, their memoirs nonetheless rewrite "Africa" in important ways
and they disturb many commonsense ideas about the provenance of
feelings of safety and danger.

The ability of Britons to face and to survive danger – from the scaling

of the Matterhorn to the sailing of the Niger – became part of a new British self-conception based on a complex moralizing of the profits of industry and empire. Risk, as described by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, becomes, in bourgeois economics, "a moral excuse for profit." In Weber's description, a "fortunate person is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate. Beyond this, he needs to know that he has a *right* to his good fortune . . . Good fortune thus wants to be 'legitimate' fortune."[11] For risk to succeed in its role as a legitimator of profit or fortune, it must be represented in contradictory but finally complementary ways: risks of various kinds must be encouraged as pleasurable and profitable activities or else economic and imperial expansion would stagnate; at the same time, risk must be represented as painful so that its rewards can be morally justified. Risk was continually constructed and reconstructed to evoke a usefully mutating array of attitudes. The necessary complications of a concept like risk must be worked out at many locations within culture, from the center where canonical texts reside to the margins where texts circulate briefly but powerfully.

The scheme of a safe England in a dangerous world also falters continually. The consolations of this geography of risk are precariously predicated on the stability of dominant Victorian definitions of people and places: women, men, the laboring and middle classes, the English and the Irish, the Alps and Alpine peasants, Africa and Africans – each has an assigned identity to which they must hold if dominant ideologies are to remain coherent. When identities shift and boundaries fail, danger and safety begin to appear in all the wrong places. At such moments, these texts threaten to expose how cultural deployments of risk are used to moralize and naturalize the economic and political institutions of industrial, imperial culture. They also reveal how acutely Britain needs the outside world – for resources, markets, as well as for physical and psychological space – and so at least parts of the world outside British borders must eventually be represented as safe. Similarly, the idyll of a safe England is contaminated by the very data used to construct it by apologists and reformers: the unprecedented dissemination of information that began in the 1830s provided British readers with distressing as well as reassuring information about the state of the nation.

But these texts finally do more than disturb the neat geographical logic they initially supply. Perceptions of safety and danger are revealed, again and again – in representations of factories, of Alpine crevasses, of the upper air, of the slums and sewers of towns great and small, of the

Kalahari Desert and the swamps of the Cameroons – to be irredeemably subjective, idiosyncratic and difficult to predict or explain. A collective and reliable sense of security is far more difficult to achieve than was assumed by such early risk analysts as William Farr, the first secretary to the General Registrar's Office and a major Victorian statistician, who believed that "knowledge would banish panic."[12] Farr accordingly encouraged the publication and distribution of the masses of facts his office so enthusiastically collected.[13] But it becomes clear that knowledge does not always banish panic: the writings discussed in this study and current work on risk-perception both suggest that *knowledge* of safety is not necessarily connected to *feelings* of safety. Balloon travelers, for example, routinely report feeling the most safe once they leave the solidity of the earth; in a recent study two risk analysts assert that "knowledge and perceptual accuracy bear only weak (that is statistically insignificant) relations to . . . perceived risks."[14] Danger cannot be located and quarantined in reassuringly predictable circumstances and knowledge cannot reliably produce psychic security.

Nonetheless, the project of locating and thereby containing risk continues, and indeed flourishes, in the early twenty-first century. Sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, anthropologists, epidemiologists, policy and business analysts, actuaries, physicians and attorneys have produced a voluminous literature on risk management, perception, assessment and reduction. As these specialists labor to analyze and neutralize risk, new risk-takers continuously arrive on the scene, to participate in nineteenth-century practices such as mountain climbing and ballooning, as well as in new modes of apparently profitless risk taking, from the bungee-jumping of the 1980s to the extreme sports of the present. Feats of daring continue to command attention and admiration, as well as to offer their audiences obscure but apparently powerful consolations for the dangers of a world in which humanly made risks have outpaced and outsized those of the nineteenth century many times over. Much work might be done on the perils of such diverse sources of risk as nuclear power plants, unsafe sex, recombinant DNA technology, air traffic control procedures, drug trafficking, and on the ways in which these activities – and their various representations – frighten and console their audiences in the precise ratios that make for the formation of modern cosmologies.

There are also contemporary works on risk that seem to refuse to be cosmological: they insist on the inevitable persistence of risk. A recent study of perceptions of risk in technology, for example, emphasizes the