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Introduction

> Novels are in the hands of us all; from the Prime Minister down to the last-appointed scullery maid. We have them in our library, our drawing-rooms, our bed-rooms, our kitchens – and in our nurseries.
> Anthony Trollope, 1870[1]

How was it that the Victorian novel appeared to be in the hands of all social classes in 1870, even if not everyone was reading the same novel? What brought the Prime Minister and his servant together was the sheer pleasure of reading exhilarating fiction, despite the fact that William Gladstone was probably devoting himself to the two hefty volumes of Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right* (1869) and his scullery maid was snatching a few pages of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's latest piece of popular fiction. Like most readers of the Victorian novel, they immersed themselves in a world teeming with vital characters jostling through different social landscapes; they encountered people from town and country, from the outposts of empire, and from across the Atlantic; they read about London high life, the Yorkshire moors, and African adventure. And in addition to being moved to tears by the death of characters such as Paul Dombey in Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1848) and terrorized by ghosts and villains in sensation novels such as Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), readers of Victorian fiction also received an education in such matters as intellectual debate about scientific discovery, the possibility and consequence of a loss of religious faith, and the urgent need for parliamentary political reform.

Victoria's coronation in 1837 signals the official inception of the genre we now designate the Victorian novel, just as her death in 1901 marks its official demise. However, for at least a century before the start of the period in literary history termed "Victorian," the British novel had enjoyed cultural visibility and weathered critical scrutiny, so in a sense there was nothing momentously new about the novel in 1837. But critical discussion generated by the genre's increasing popularity acquired a distinctive fervor as authors and literary intellectuals initiated an almost century-long discussion about the moral and aesthetic nature of the novel.[2] In this second edition of the *Companion*, a new essay, James Eli Adams's "A history of criticism of the Victorian novel," provides essential coverage of the central concerns

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of this discussion: among other matters, critics debated the moral dimensions of the novel, the relation of the novel to history, and the nature of realism. They asked whether novels should retain their racy affiliations with romance, teach uplifting moral lessons, educate curious readers about a rapidly changing society, or aim for a narrative singularity that would provide aesthetic correlation for the domestic realism that ruled the form for most of the period.

By the end of the nineteenth century, novel reading itself was sometimes associated with many attitudes now popularly identified as "Victorian": sexual repression, stultifying middle-class family life, and cramped vistas for women's lives. In George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893), for example, the feminist character Rhoda Nunn traces the defection from women's causes on the part of a Miss Royston to novel reading; she asks contemptuously, "What is more vulgar than the ideal of novelists?"[3] Soon after, Leslie Stephen included novels in his lofty dismissal of all things Victorian when he announced "however far the rage for revivalism may be pushed, nobody will ever want to revive the nineteenth century,"[4] and in 1911, H. G. Wells echoed Stephen by wondering whether anyone, a century later, would "consent to live in the houses the Victorians built, travel by their roads or railways, value the furnishings they made to live among, or esteem, except for curious or historical reasons, their prevalent art and the clipped and limited literature that satisfied their souls?"[5]

History would seem to have proved Stephens and Wells off the mark. In the field of mass entertainment, the novel that "clipped and limited literature" became the source of many popular Hollywood films in the twentieth century (one thinks of W. C. Fields as Wilkins Micawber, Laurence Olivier as Heathcliff, Joan Fontaine as Jane Eyre); and through BBC serializations millions of viewers have become familiar with the foggy London of *Bleak House* (1853), the 1832 provincial politics of *Middlemarch* (1872), and the Dorset countryside of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), even if they have not read the source of the serializations. Moreover, since the 1960s the Victorian novel has gained increasing visibility in the curricula of Anglo-American schools and universities to the extent that virtually every middle-class eighteen-year-old has read *Great Expectations* (1861) or, if not that, has been instructed to do so. Rather than Anglo-American culture having rejected Victorian literature, it has embraced it, popularized it, enshrined it in an imaginative construction of nineteenth-century life.

This collection of essays (most retained with significant revision from the first edition of the *Companion* and others freshly written to register important changes in critical perspectives from the late 1990s), as it explains the cultural dominance of the Victorian novel in its own time, also elucidates

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the appeal of a literature that continues to attract readers. As we come to understand the ways the Victorian novel contributed to the making of individual and national identity, as we begin to see how it assisted in the proliferation of powerful ideas about gender, sexuality, and race, and also how it engaged actively in debates about the value of reading, the proper aesthetic rules for fiction, the appropriate integration of changing ideas about religion into the national life, we also recognize once more its generous, expansive, and deeply entertaining nature.

Perhaps the most famous of late Victorian jibes directed at the novel, part of his sharp intervention in the discussion of realism and elegant form, is that delivered by Henry James. Writing about *The Newcomes*, *The Three Musketeers*, and *War and Peace*, he asks, "What do such large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically *mean*?"[6] When considering James's question, one needs first to recall that even as he lamented an absence of unifying aesthetic form, he also advocated – and superbly displayed in his own work – the essential presence of an "air of reality" in the novel. He defined this "air of reality" as "solidity of specification" and declared that it was for him "the supreme virtue of a novel – the merit in which all its other merits … helplessly and submissively depend. If it be not there, they are all as nothing, and if these be there, they owe their effect to the success with which the author has produced the illusion of life."[7] In a memorable articulation of the weighty responsibility entailed in producing an "illusion of life," George Eliot's narrator in *Adam Bede* (1859) vows to give "a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind … I feel as much bound to tell you, as precisely as I can, what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box, narrating my experience on oath."[8] In addition to James and Eliot, many other novelists and critics in the Victorian period explored the pervasive "air of reality" in fiction. Caroline Levine's fresh essay on this topic, "Victorian realism," investigates comprehensively its multiple meanings and elusive definability.

In general, the Victorian novel is notably ambitious. Showing its familiarity with everything and everyone from probate law to dolls' dressmaking, from cosmopolitan financier to working-class river dredger, its pervasive omniscience has led J. Hillis Miller to speculate that a Victorian reading public dislodged from religious certainty by scientific discovery found consolation in a novelistic power that both resembled divine omniscience and accepted responsibility for creation.[9] Novels such as Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857), and Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872) guide us skillfully through the domestic scene, on to the battlefields of Waterloo, across the Alps and down to Venice, through the farms, vicarages,

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and country houses of Warwickshire, and then to Rome. They take us into Mayfair drawing rooms, the Marshalsea debtors' prison, the studies of an ambitious country doctor and a disappointed clerical intellectual, the minds of an embittered, middle-aged son (Arthur Clennam in *Little Dorrit*) and an intelligent farmer's daughter (Mary Garth in *Middlemarch*). They take us everywhere. Moreover, the cast of characters in each of these three novels is enormous and the challenge posed to Victorian readers in keeping track, say, of Jos Sedley, Flora Finching, Rosanna Spearman, and Peter Featherstone was considerable, even allowing for such mnemonic devices as the endowing of minor characters with the idiosyncratic visual or verbal gestures to be found in Dickens's fiction. Victorian novels demanded a lot from the reader, and delivered a lot in return. And they are often monstrous, if not always in the way Henry James had in mind.

By "monstrous" James meant something imperfect, irregular, de-formed from an ideal shape or pattern. In all likelihood, while we might concur that there *is* something unmanageably large about many Victorian novels, we tend to locate the monstrous more in thematic content than in undisciplined form, and the monstrous is more likely to be discovered in deformities different from those James imagined. Inhumane working conditions disclosed by the social problem fiction of the 1840s are a deformation from ideal bourgeois governance; the domestic cruelty practiced by an unfeeling father in *Dombey and Son* (1848), the rapacious use of a woman's body in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), the manipulation by male villains of female frailty as delineated in much sensation fiction – all these are deformations from decent human behavior. A telling instance of how we might read the monstrous somewhat differently from Henry James is to be found in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), flawed for many critics by virtue of its divided, but overlapping, narrative structure. Roughly half the novel recounts the life of a shallow, upper-middle-class girl, Gwendolen Harleth, neurotically fearful of men yet forced to enter the marriage market after a failure of family fortunes, and the other half records the quest for origins and identity of an upper-class Englishman, Daniel Deronda, who by the novel's end discovers that he is the son of an Italian Jewish actress and singer. What appears monstrous to many readers, indeed a deformation from the decent, is the psychological misery inflicted upon Gwendolen Harleth by her husband. Henleigh Grandcourt is a superbly realized sadist, practiced in a domestic tyranny instantly recognizable by Victorian and twenty-first-century adult readers alike.

In sum, even if we differ from Henry James in defining the monstrous, we are likely to agree that the Victorian novel lacks a certain economy, even if we know that in many cases its seemingly unmanageable structure was

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carefully plotted in advance (as is the case with Dickens's *Bleak House*). We tend to think Victorian novels are often out of control because they are about so many things: provincial politics, ecclesiastical infighting, city squalor, repressed sexuality, making money, losing money, imperial adventure, angels in the house, frightening New Women, scientific challenges to established religious beliefs, the value and function of the aesthetic life in a materialistic society (to name a few). To be sure, the postmodern novel is thematically promiscuous, but for the moment we need to consider what might be unique about the Victorian novel. Most critics agree that well-known and well-documented historical transformations from 1837 to 1901 have a great deal to do with its thematic range.

The population of England grew enormously during the nineteenth century, from 8.9 to 32.5 million.[10] This increase was accompanied by profound alterations in where and how people lived. As many social historians have demonstrated, in great numbers people left agrarian employment for work in the city, mostly in the new northern and midlands centers of industrialization. Rather than walking, riding, or taking coaches, they got from one place to another by railway, and concomitantly with these alterations in habitat and employment, the working class began to lobby for unionization and universal male suffrage, most notably in the latter case through membership in the Chartist movement. Chartism, combined with serious economic depressions in the 1830s and 1840s and middle-class fears that continental revolution might cross the Channel, led to national debate about what Thomas Carlyle termed the "Condition of England" question. Contributing to this debate were novels such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) that alerted middle-class readers to wretched living and working conditions in the industrial cities: Joseph Childers's essay "Social class and the Victorian novel" dissects the extraordinary transformations in Victorian life brought about by industrialization and the amassing of wealth by the middle class. Victorians also witnessed the passing of two tremendously important Parliamentary Reform bills, the first in 1832 and the second in 1867, and they faced daunting challenges to religious faith with the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 and Huxley's "On the Physical Basis of Life" in 1868. As Walter Houghton observes, Victorian literature is a virtual catalogue of imaginative responses "to a constant succession of shattering developments."[11]

By the middle of the century, with the emergence of an improved economy and a diminishment of industrial unrest, Britain felt herself to have come through: busy factories, bustling shipyards, active financial markets – all this testified to the national rewards of following a Gospel of Work. This wealth and well-being, now fed by the rapidly expanding growth of a profitable

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empire, was celebrated at the Great Exhibition of 1851. Held at the shimmering Crystal Palace and brought into dazzling existence under the direction of an enthusiastic Prince Albert, it was praised by one of the organizers for having been "carried out by its own private means," for being "self-supporting and independent of taxes and employment of slaves, which great works had exacted in ancient days." Most importantly, the Great Exhibition had been visualized and managed by the queen's husband, a man of "pre-eminent wisdom, of philosophic mind, sagacity, with a power of generalship and great practical ability."[12]

This hymn to a coupling of royal sagacity and commercial initiative celebrates an alliance between a social group solidifying its political power and a royal family perceived in the popular imagination as a model of high bourgeois happiness. Unaided by government money, a monument to imperial governance far superior to that of "ancient days" by virtue of its moral devotion to creating "civilized" colonies rather than gutting them of resources, and developed under the paternal direction of Prince Albert, the Great Exhibition was a grand national booster. The Crystal Palace was extraordinary to behold. A huge glass conservatory designed by a former head gardener at Kew, it was 1,848 feet long, 404 feet broad, and 66 feet high with transepts reaching to 108 feet to accommodate live elm trees. All the girders and columns were identical, and this shimmering palace was divided into four areas displaying raw materials, machinery, manufacturing, and fine arts. In a sense, the Great Exhibition provided visual and textual knowledge about how the world worked, in much the same way that the social problem novels of the 1840s provided knowledge about industrialization, Anthony Trollope's Palliser novels provided knowledge about parliamentary politics, and, at the end of the century, the Anglo-Indian novels provided information about running the empire. This is not to reduce Victorian fiction to a kind of information machine, but rather to point to *one* of the ways in which people read novels during the period. Novels allowed you to learn something about things, places, and people, formerly unknown. By the middle of the Victorian period, the novel was established as the literary form of the age.

To demonstrate one aspect of the significant transformation in Victorian fiction that occurred from 1830 until the moment when Henry James deemed the novel both "clipped" and "baggy," I'd like to put Dickens's *Oliver Twist,* serialized in irregular parts and at uneven intervals in *Bentley's Magazine* from February 1837 to April 1839, alongside Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*, published as a serial in T. P.'s *Weekly* in 1904. This alignment is not intended to serve as a definitive analysis of the Victorian novel in 1837, nor as a comprehensive assessment of what it had become a few years after the end

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of Victoria's reign; and neither should it be read as the simple elevation in moral and aesthetic terms of one novel over the other. My intention is to point to historically grounded difference. Sentimentalism, unambiguous narrative voice, and straightforward narrative structure did not end with *Oliver Twist,* and neither did nihilism, narrative complexity, and political interest in a world outside Great Britain begin with *Nostromo*. I want to suggest that although sentimental novels continued to appear in the early twentieth century and narrative experimentation was practiced throughout the Victorian period, the differences between *Oliver Twist* and *Nostromo* usefully frame general transformations in fiction during the period and in a reading public that had become larger and more intellectually curious by the end of the century. Moreover, in terms of the critical debate about the moral and aesthetic nature of the novel that was conducted between the publications of these two works, Dickens's novel registers a sincere commitment to fiction as a morally transforming force and a palpable belief that its form emerges naturally from its moral imperatives, whereas Conrad's novel expresses an authorial self-awareness that suggests the painful struggle to create appropriate aesthetic form for a dense and complicated narrative.

When Dickens began *Oliver Twist* he was a newly minted celebrity, the young, confident author of the wildly successful *Pickwick Papers* (1837). Having already spent some eight years of his active working life as a journalist, he sensed that his reading public would respond to a novel dealing with the controversial new Poor Law that had been introduced in 1834, and he was correct. Dickens aimed to shock his audience with the corrupt horror of the workhouse and the perverse allegiance of boy criminals to their monstrous surrogate father, Fagin. He succeeded so well that the Lord Chamberlain's office banned theatrical adaptations on the grounds of the novel's imputed depravity.[13] Defending himself in the 1841 Preface to *Oliver Twist,* Dickens declared he saw "no reason … why the dregs of life … should not serve the purpose of a moral"; his artistic aim was to draw criminal characters as they "really did exist … to show them as they really were," and all of this, he claimed, was in the service of attempting "something which was needed, and which would be a service to society."[14] In notable contrast, the cosmopolitan subject of *Nostromo* is the internecine battles of a fictional South American republic that bears some resemblance to Venezuela. What's more, Conrad's stated purpose for writing differs from the moral indignation that motivated Dickens.

Conrad averred that he had only one task before him in writing novels: "by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel … to make you see"; writing is a desperate, perilous enterprise, mandating for the novelist an attempt to "snatch in a moment of courage, from the remorseless

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rush of time, a passing phase of life … The task approached in tenderness and faith is to hold up unquestioningly, without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes in the light of a sincere mood."[15] What we hear in this Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897) is the voice of a novelist aware of himself *as* novelist, painfully conscious of the virtually impossible task of "rescuing" from experience a fragment that can be placed before the reader's senses, after having been fashioned through the medium of art itself. Writing *Nostromo* became imaginatively dangerous activity, entailing a loss of self in the world imagined, and he likened its demanding labor to "venturing on a distant and toilsome journey into a land full of intrigues and revolutions," a place full of dangerous attractions where one might lose oneself "in the ever-enlarging vistas."[16] When it first appeared in serial form, *Nostromo* was greeted with puzzled dismissal. Readers were both disappointed and indignant since it lacked the simple pleasures of adventurous derring-do associated with Conrad's sea stories, and he recalled that they "wrote many letters complaining of so much space being taken by utterly unreadable stuff."[17]

In terms of transformations in novelistic subject matter and setting that occurred during the Victorian period, it is significant that in 1837 Dickens turns his satiric indignation upon domestic problems, the resolution of which is found also in the domestic sphere (a common trope in his fiction), while in 1904 Conrad's cool gaze is turned upon imperial politics and the forming of a nation from the material interests of Anglo-American capitalism and the idealistic ambition of an Englishman. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Victorian novel had gone global. The world of *Oliver Twist* is the back alleys of criminal London and the secluded pastoralism of its emerging suburbs, that of *Nostromo* bougainvillea-filled patios and the sprawling campo. *Oliver Twist* is peopled by an angelic English boy, assorted low-lifes from the East End, and good-hearted upper-middle-class ladies and gentleman with no interest in national politics; *Nostromo* is inhabited by Europeans and South Americans, the formation of their subjectivity explicitly connected with the volatile formation of a nation. These differences point to the enlarged geographical scope of the Victorian novel, to a moving outward from the metropolis to the India of Rudyard Kipling, the South Africa of Olive Schreiner, and the South Sea Islands of Robert Louis Stevenson. To be sure, as Patrick Brantlinger demonstrates his analysis of racial stereotypes in his essay, "Race and the Victorian novel," from the time of Walter Scott the British novel had left England, whether aboard one of Captain Marryat's adventuring vessels or on horseback with Disraeli and the Crusaders to the East in *Tancred* (1847). In addition, foreign places had long served as a means of characterization or plot advancement; one

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thinks of the West Indies in *Jane Eyre* (1847) and the somber Brussels of *Villette* (1853), the German gaming tables across which Daniel Deronda first sets eyes on Gwendolen Harleth, Thackeray's chapters in *Vanity Fair* dealing with Waterloo and its aftermath. But it is only toward the end of the nineteenth century that nations other than Britain become full subjects of representation.

To *Oliver Twist*, Dickens brings his boyhood reading in eighteenth-century picaresque narrative, his thrill in following the adventures of Smollett's Roderick Random and Henry Fielding's Tom Jones. A picaresque boy-hero purged of the guile and wit that define such characters, Oliver is immune to the polluted social environment in which he is placed by virtue of his picaresque journey. Next, Dickens's evocation of criminal London and menacing Fagin derives in part from conventions of the gothic, from a nineteenth-century fascination with the shrouded, the ghostly, and the vampiric that Lyn Pykett explores fully in her essay, "Sensation and the fantastic in the Victorian novel": Fagin feeds, after all, on the extracted wealth purloined by his boys from the wealthy classes. And, lastly, Dickens's novel is intensely melodramatic as it stages, say, Bill Sikes's death by hanging from the chimney pots. The literary inheritance for Conrad is larger than that enjoyed by Dickens, in part because of his own deep reading in French nineteenth-century literature, and, most obviously, because of all that came after *Oliver Twist*: an enlargement of the novel in political subject matter and in the development of psychological realism. The finely calibrated nuances of *Nostromo*'s characters, for instance, owe something to George Eliot's acute explorations of human psychology as disclosed, say, in Dorothea Brooke and Edward Casaubon in *Middlemarch*.

It is notable that the eponymous hero of *Oliver Twist* is an emblematic character, the embodiment of an absolute goodness inherited from a wronged and saintly mother that defeats an absolute evil embodied in his half-brother Monks, whereas the eponymous hero of Conrad's novel is a psychologically complex Italian immigrant to Central America. Oliver is untransmutable by virtue of his birth, Nostromo alters from flamboyant captain of the stevedores to secretive possessor of stolen treasure, and he is but one figure in Conrad's panoramic unfolding of Central American politics. In sum, the characters in *Oliver Twist* lean to the one-dimensional and inspire in the reader uncomplicated release in tears or laughter; they receive the sentimental education that is perceptively analyzed by Rachel Ablow in her essay, "Victorian feelings." Conrad's characters reveal the complex formation of individual subjectivity by social and psychological experience, constructed as they are by ambition, idealism, and in some instances a nihilistic skepticism that renders them intellectually and politically passive. They

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prompt in the reader ambivalent responses and invite little of the affective release described by Ablow in her essay.

Finally, a narrative directness that matches the straightforward familiarity with which Dickens's narrator addresses the reader parallels the nature of Oliver's experiences. He is born in the workhouse, travels his unhappy way to familial contentment, and watches his tormenters receive gruesome justice. A coolly ironic narrative voice absorbed in the aesthetic difficulties of creating James's "illusion of reality," together with a narrative intricateness, match the political and psychological complexity of Conrad's novel. Conrad offers no moral alliance with the reader and *Nostromo* moves around in time, confounding all narrative certainty, dislodging the reader from a stable, secure interpretive position from which to get a grip on events. This narrative disallowing of forward movement matches both the intricate interweaving of political events that are the subject of the novel, and also the intricate workings of the minds of individual characters. We can see that Conrad's 1904 text registers an epistemological inquiry into questions of national identity and individual subjectivity that had become increasingly visible in the second half of the Victorian period. Its ambiguous interrogation of a global imperialism weaving across South America is a long way from Dickens's ferocious attack on the workhouse.

The foregoing brief discussion of *Oliver Twist* and *Nostromo* has suggested, in passing, some of the readerly desires that were gratified by Victorian novels. In one way or another, as they ground themselves in a number of important critical perspectives that have emerged over the last decade, all of the essays that follow explore and explain in detail the cultural power and pleasures of the Victorian novel in its own time. They also prompt us to consider the enduring appeal of Victorian fiction. Discovering how Victorians obtained their novels, what was considered suitable reading for different social classes, and for men and for women, leads us to think about how we obtain our books now, whether assigned in college courses or recommended by reviewers. In her essay, "The Victorian novel and its readers," Kate Flint offers a capacious analysis of Victorian reading habits and demonstrates how social class, gender, and religious affiliation influenced individual reading choices, both at home and abroad. Simon Eliot, in "The business of Victorian publishing," outlines the material conditions leading to widespread availability of novels, whether obtained from circulating libraries or from railway station bookstalls and whether provided by male or female editors or directed by publishers at male or female readers. As we learn about the social regulation of sexuality and gender from Nancy Armstrong's essay, "When gender meets sexuality in the Victorian novel," we see how the novel situates itself within larger discourses such as Malthus's *Essay on*

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