

# Why Victorian Literature Still Matters

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*Why Victorian Literature  
Still Matters*

Philip Davis

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To all those associated with  
*The Reader* and Get Into Reading



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# *Introduction:*

## *The Victorian Bump and Where to Find It*

Do not mention the “V” word. Don’t talk about “the Victorians” en masse and their alleged views concerning Women or Society or the Lower Classes. Don’t tell me what you are told they thought about Patriotism, The Family, Self-Help, Religion, or Morality – or, for that matter, anything else with a capital letter. Forget the ready-made categories that box-in experience. The great Victorians would point to areas, not names. “We lack, yet cannot fix upon the lack,” wrote Christina Rossetti in “Later Life”: “Not this, nor that; yet *somewhat*, certainly.” “*The thing*” was palpably something there for Carlyle – the disturbance in the social world, whatever the name given it : “a matter in regard to which if something be not done, something will *do* itself one day.”<sup>1</sup> These were felt realities, absent or present, without clear names.

Do not read as if what you read is merely past: it only distances you. Victoria’s is the longest reign in English history, with accelerated change and burgeoning variety: 1830 is as different from 1880 as most so-called “ages” are from one another. So, do not even try to think historically as soon as you open a Victorian novel: it will become an all-too-knowing substitute for the experience of actual reading.

Don’t speak of the Victorians’ sentimentality – or of their emotional repression instead. Don’t tell yourself that the book is merely pious or plain hypocritical.

Don’t, don’t, don’t has the sound of hectoring prohibition, but really it is meant to be the language for a struggling freedom. These

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repetitions are a way only of saying what *not* to do, because people must not (and cannot really) be told, in advance, what they *should* do. You throw away the crutches offered by a semi-education – to find that you can walk after all. For all his own long-acquired learning, John Ruskin once planned to write an essay in defense of Ignorance.

With my friend and colleague Brian Nellist, I set up a part-time MA in Victorian literature long ago now in 1986 because we wanted a brave alternative community to that conventionally offered within a university institution. Over the years we attracted a large number of so-called mature students (meaning: enthusiastic and serious readers) from the ages of 22 to 72, of a variety of backgrounds, some of them without a first degree in English, a few without a first degree at all. They included secretaries, engineers, lawyers, social workers, teachers, librarians, midwives, retired booksellers, mothers at home with just enough time for themselves now that the children were at school. In those days it was the first part-time MA in arts and humanities in the North of England.

From the first, the “V” word was banned as a form of explanation. And that was because “Victorian” was not to be something to be anxiously learnt, a reassuring body of knowledge to be known, inertly, as context and background. Literature is not just a branch of social history; it is more (and more personal) than a receptacle of cultural and historical meaning. “Victorian” was rather something one *did*: it was a way of thinking and feeling. We could have denied, rightly of course, that “the Victorian” was simply one homogeneous thing: look at the variety of responses and points of view, consider the historical changes over 65 years. But what we were really interested in was that the individuals on the course should find their own instinctive and implicit sense of what Victorian literature meant for them. I have written a work that tries to give a balanced, relatively impersonal account of all that went on in literature between 1830 and 1880.<sup>2</sup> But this present little book is my version of what Victorian literature has meant for me not as an academic subject but as a form of being. My own equivalent to what I asked for from my students, it is the autobiography, if you like, of a neo-Victorian in which I break my own rule: I do use the V word and say, with partiality, what it means to me.

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But I do stick to what was the only real rule on our MA: find what you positively *like* in a book. Tell me boldly what moves you, said Ruskin, and I will tell you who you are. Don't start people off, he said, telling them where to begin and what to begin with: find out, instead, where your people already start from.<sup>3</sup>

So we said to our students: think of something very specific, a little passage from a big book, that moves you – perhaps for a reason you cannot immediately give. Go for a walk without the book, as though it no longer existed in the world: what, after the initial blankness, are the fragments that come back to you? Those, involuntarily, are your chosen places, your good things, what Matthew Arnold called “touchstones.”

Thinking of the book, without the book, in order then to return to it, is a wonderful thought-experiment, in order to find the real place of literature within a life. It is to do with losing the literal, and also with giving up on that equivocal privilege of simply taking the cultural for granted. In just that way, a teacher on a remote island gathers together the impoverished children after the soldiers have come from the mainland and cruelly burned their books. He announces a special rescue task – to retrieve *Great Expectations*. “Let's see if we can remember it,” he said:

We did not have to remember the story in any order or even as it really happened, but as it came to us. “You won't always remember at a convenient moment,” he warned us. “It might come to you in the night. If so, you must hang onto that fragment until we meet in class. There, you can share it, and add it to the others. When we have gathered all the fragments we will put together the story. It will be as good as new.”

What a responsibility we have, says that teacher, “to make sure that Dickens's great novel is not lost forever.” One little girl in particular knows that responsibility as she struggles to hold onto her little recovered piece: “I was so terrified I would forget it. I didn't allow myself to be spoken to. I turned my head away from the other kids rather than risk my fragment make room for other thoughts and conversations.” The teacher prefers it if the children can recall the exact words Dickens uses; otherwise he will settle for what he calls the “gist.”

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The little girl remembers Pip leaving his native village at dawn for his new life in the great city of London. He had been glad to go, moving onward and upward in the world. Then suddenly as he departed, he became tearful. No longer so sure about decisively going forward with his life, he almost turns around. But then he realizes he cannot go back. She remembers, simply and accurately: "It was now too late and too far to go back, so I went on."<sup>4</sup> Not quite choosing our own way, recalling too late what we have left behind, thus we go on toward adulthood. Later, this girl herself will leave this island.

But my MA people were not children on some remote South Pacific island. They were rather, for the most part, the ordinary adult inheritors of the great Victorian rise of the English middle class. However they had started out, they had arrived at some place of relative security, in the second stage of a life. This is perhaps *the* Victorian story, historically as well as personally, even as the turbulence of the 1830s and 1840s gave way to what has been called the age of equipoise in the third quarter of the century. In this story of establishment, you become middle-class, middle-aged, relatively comfortable and civilized: you become a sort of norm of the modernized world, with just sufficient freedom from immediately pressing necessities to make the questions of life askable if not answerable. "Normal" and "normality" are themselves Victorian words (though it is remarkable that Edgar Allan Poe, master of the uncanny, was one of the first deployers). In a normal world, the problems that concern you are not so much dramatic or romantic as continuous and probably unsolvable, because they are part of what is involved in accepting what Freud called the reality principle. "I loved my wife dearly, and I was happy," as one protagonist put it, entering life's second stage, "but the happiness I had vaguely anticipated, once, was not the happiness I enjoyed, and there was always something wanting." What is more, for him there had always been this lack – the old unhappy feeling "as undefined as ever." He cannot speak to his own wife about this, but writes his baffled honesty in secret, to himself:

In fulfilment of the compact I have made with myself, to reflect my mind on this paper, I again examine it, closely, and bring its secrets to

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the light. What I missed, I still regarded – I always regarded – as something that had been a dream of my youthful fancy; that was incapable of realization; that I was now discovering to be so, with some natural pain, as all men did. But that it would have been better for me if my wife could have helped me more, and shared the many thoughts in which I had no partner; and that this might have been; I knew.

Between these two irreconcilable conclusions: the one, that what I felt was general and unavoidable; the other, that it was particular to me, and might have been different: I balanced curiously, with no distinct sense of their opposition to each other. (Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (1850), ch. 48)

It is not an heroic black-and-white issue, it is a gray area that we are talking about here – not very bad, but not good enough either. And you live in that arena: that sad delayed verb “I knew” is what unavailingly you live with, even as you carry on with your lot. For it is a middle or middling life, at once defined from outside as that of the normal married man and yet still left unsatisfied, unsettled, and undefined within. It is a life uneasily placed in between the dreams of Romantic youth and the realities of Victorian adulthood; compromised between what all men must naturally relinquish and what nonetheless might have been different for me; and in the very midst of things, confused as to what is general and what particular in life, and baffled by how those two relate together. That is why the novel exists, when human beings are unsure of how life itself fits together. David Copperfield’s is, he fears, the world of the sanely second best, still haunted by what seems both primary and yet impossible, and struggling as to how to take responsibility for itself. It is the world of realism inhabited by such as Tolstoy’s Levin in *Anna Karenina*, living a sort of everyman’s life distinguished only by the earnestness, honesty, and questioning bafflement with which he finds himself leading it. In the first days of his marriage (part 5, ch. 14), Levin feels like one who, after admiring safely from the shore the smooth, happy motion of a little boat upon the water, had now himself to get into the vessel. Whatever the ideas held beforehand, or the names given from outside, it is different inside – the golden rule of nineteenth-century

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experiential realism. Something strange is going on within something ostensibly familiar, something uncertain within something apparently safe, something personally big within something conventionally small.

That is how what is big keeps coming back again, within whatever forms it can find room for itself. There are powerful mythic stories of the time that seek to banish the great primary figures of instinct, tamed or sacrificed to the necessity of nineteenth-century civilization: Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is one, Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) another. The sensation novels of Wilkie Collins or Mary Elizabeth Braddon, with the murders and adulteries and disguises that appeal so much to postmodern critics in love with "the transgressive," are no less and no more than a thrilling, haunting sub-genre in reaction against that taming. But Heathcliff cries to the dying Catherine, "What *right* had you to leave me?" from a level of passional rights far deeper and earlier than that of altruistic considerateness (ch. 15). Whether it is Heathcliff with Linton or Henchard with Farfrae, the ancient figure could almost kill his smaller modern rival. But Henchard lets Farfrae go, finds he doesn't want to kill him only at the very moment when his hand is round the man's throat, when he suddenly remembers their past affection. A few hours later he goes after Farfrae again, not this time as murderer but as sudden make-shift messenger, to tell him that his wife (Henchard's former mistress) has unexpectedly become ill. But Farfrae, with his own view as to what is consistency, sees in Henchard only the would-be murderer again. "Henchard could almost feel this view of things in course of passage through Farfrae's mind." He asks himself: "Why had he not, before this, thought of what was only too obvious?" (ch. 40). These are figures who do not think "before this": they are from an earlier time, at once innocent and dangerous. Their fall is connected with the cutting down of the father-figure, the great patriarch, in so many Victorian stories from Dickens's *Dombey and Father Dorrit* to Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) and Arnold Bennett's *Clayhanger* (1910) in all the mixture of anger and pity that results. The nineteenth century, said John Henry Newman,<sup>5</sup> was heaven for small men but a purgatory for great ones. Why, for the sake of the social ordering, these primal disruptive beings must die – and with

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what mixture of loss and gain – is the story of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* (1887) and Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) – both of them, like Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1877) or Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), texts vital to the wider European context and meaning of the Victorian period.

But in such ways it is not merely a period; it stands for something deeper within the configuration of our psyches. “All public facts are to be individualized,” said Emerson in his essay on “History,” “all private facts are to be generalized”: it works both ways, but always with the individual realization as crucial. The Victorians were interested in phrenology, the pseudo-science of studying bumps on the head, supposedly figuring certain localized areas and functions of the brain, such as a predominance to Benevolence or Destructiveness. Like ourselves, they wanted to map the brain, to try to see from outside what was happening within, and then use such external knowledge to modify the interrelations of the varying inner parts. I am saying here that there is, so to speak, a Victorian bump, a place in the mind that makes the experience of Victorian literature always matter.

And it is an in-between place: a place psychologically as well as historically in transition, moving back and forth ambivalently between the old and the new, the primal and the civilized, amidst a sense of gain and a fear of loss, and with the big questions constantly re-emerging and mutating within specific individual circumstances. In the last chapter of this book I will try to show the presence of “the Victorian bump” in works from or around the present. But if, before that, you want names, then the chapter that immediately follows from this introduction is about Morality and Toughness and the next, which goes with it, is about Religious Faith.<sup>6</sup> Yet really they are about the way Victorian literature *does* these things.

That “doing” is the subject of chapters 3, 4, and 5, on fictional prose, on poetry, and on non-fictional prose respectively and the presence of Victorian realism in all three. It is realism that is the great Victorian characteristic for me; realism that for so long in my life as a reluctantly so-called “academic” has been so unfashionable. Yet in the Victorian age there was a flowering of realism in literature as great as that in art in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and itself

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crucial to a crisis in the Western conscience as to the very purposes of existence. There is much to be said about “realism,” of course, and much that has been said often in complex theoretical writings – as to whether it is even possible or just another fictional illusion; as to how it relates to what is material and economic, and to what is physical and external; as to how it is involved in the implementation of ideals in practice. But I am interested above all in its relationship to ordinary life outside the world of writing; to problems of living life in a world of increasing secularization; and to questions about the existence of an external reality, or a higher truth, even if inside its structures I will never quite know or see it. Yet I simply start from just this, from within the period itself – George Henry Lewes in defense of realism in the *Fortnightly Review* (May–November 1865): “Fairies and demons, remote as they are from experience, are *not* created by a more vigorous effort of imagination than milkmaids and poachers.” The imaginative power of a work, Lewes concluded, has been “too frequently estimated according to the extent of its *departure* from ordinary experience”: realism meant high literature need not depart from ordinary experience but could find a base within it.

There are plenty of examples given in each chapter throughout this book for the reader to sample. Please don’t read it just looking for the argument and skipping these examples, or thinking the consideration of them can be dismissed as academic “close reading.” Everything important is lodged in the literary detail, the in-depth literary thinking, in tiny movements that are the necessary guise or disguise for big things passing too quickly under pressure of time and the limits of human realization. That is why this book is dedicated to the magazine and the outreach program that celebrate reading.<sup>7</sup>



# 1

## *Victorian Hard Wiring*

Feeling for the Victorian “bump,” we would often begin the part-time MA by reading early on, for example, Mrs Gaskell’s *Ruth* (published in 1853). It is ostensibly the usual old Victorian story. Pretty young girl from the lower classes, seduced by young “gentleman,” is left abandoned and pregnant. Just when she is on the point of drowning herself, however, a brother and sister take her in, and help her through the birth and the subsequent years of rearing her baby boy, passing her off as a young widow for the sake of social appearances. But of course, one day the so-called truth comes out, and suddenly Ruth finds that, before he hears it from the unkind lips of others, she has to tell her son Leonard, still no more than a boy, the one thing from which she had always shrunk as a parent – the true story of her sexual past. Here is the confession of mother to son that one person in the MA group, herself a single parent, naturally chose:

Up they went into her own room. She drew him in, and bolted the door; and then, sitting down, she placed him (she had never let go of him) before her, holding him with her hands on each of his shoulders, and gazing into his face with a woeful look of the agony that could not find vent in words. At last she tried to speak; she tried with strong bodily effort, almost amounting to convulsion. But the words would not come; it was not till she saw the absolute terror depicted on his face that she found utterance; and then the sight of that terror changed the words from what she meant them to have been. She drew him to her, and laid her head upon his shoulder; hiding her face even there. (*Ruth*, ch. 27)

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It is that rebounding sight of the boy's *absolute* terror that leaves her no room for her own fearful feelings. Collecting herself, she no longer hides her face but almost visibly takes on the responsibility – that forbidding Victorian word (responsibility!) suddenly made human:

“Leonard!” said she at length, holding him away from her, and nerving herself up to tell him all by one spasmodic effort, “Listen to me.”

Then she tells him that when she was very young she did very wrong. God, she believes, will judge her more tenderly than men. But still, she says, it was wrong in a way that Leonard will not understand yet. And even as she says it, “she saw the red flush come into his cheek, and it stung her as the first token of that shame which was to be his portion through life.” People will call her the hardest names ever thrown at women:

“and, my child, you must bear it patiently, because they will be partly right. Never get confused, by your love for me, into thinking that what I did was right ...

“And Leonard,” continued she, “this is not all. The punishment of punishments lies awaiting me still. It is to see you suffer for my wrongdoing. Yes, darling! they will speak shameful things of you, poor innocent child, as well as of me, who am guilty. They will throw it in your teeth through life, that your mother was never married – was not married when you were born –”

The punishment of punishments is for a parent to know that the mistakes of her youth – the very mistakes that made her a mother – have damaged the life of her child almost before it began, in a way that as a protective mother she herself would never have wanted or allowed. And that she has now to explain to the boy. It turns life back to front. You don't have to be a Victorian in that particular circumstance to have the imaginative emotion.

But think of “the Victorians” when you read this, and you may well think how characteristically unjust it is – in ways that the literature