

The Victorian Novel

Edited by Francis O’Gorman

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The Victorian Novel

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Edited by Francis O’Gorman

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For Jane, with love

I speak therefore of good novels only;
and our modern literature is particularly rich in
types of such.

John Ruskin (1864)

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Francis O'Gorman

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Introduction

Renaissance drama, Romantic period verse, and Victorian fiction: the three undisputed forms of literary greatness in English literature. These were genres of comparable stature, but differently popular in their own day. The original audience for Renaissance drama was small; for Romantic period verse, it was larger though not vast. But the original readers of the Victorian novel formed a sizeable portion of the middle class in a massively enlarged population with ever-increasing levels of literacy. The market for fiction in the nineteenth century became huge. In it, fortunes could be made, literary fame of a new, modern sort obtained. Dickens's lionization was an early form of the celebrity status that features prominently – and sometimes with similarly disastrous consequences – in our own cultural life. George Eliot courted a different, intellectual image. Henry James satirized literary adulation.¹ But each was a public figure, a novelist who achieved renown in his or her own lifetime through writing fiction. The Victorian novel, sustained by an enormous number of practitioners, some with an international fame, blossomed as a literary genre. It was a key medium for word art in a way not previously seen in English literature. The period was, and is, for many, the *age* of the novel.

But, paradoxically, it was not an age that universally approved of fiction. Even Anthony Trollope, a prolific contributor to the genre, once remarked: 'Fond as most of us are of novels, it has to be confessed that they have had a bad name among us.'² Many anxious critics agreed. Some of the debates about the ethics of novel reading were trenchant and included claims about the deleterious affects of fiction that were cognate with contemporary anxieties about the consequences of television and movie images in our own culture. This concern is clearly visible in the early works of criticism surveyed in the first chapter here. Such anxiety, looked at from a positive angle, indicated something of the importance the Victorian novel had, its capacity to generate comment and debate, as it proliferated in middle-class culture. Fiction was a live subject.

2 Introduction

THE RANGE OF
VICTORIAN
FICTION

Such diversity of view is partly due to the fact that the category 'Victorian novel' covers so much literary writing. Beneath its ample mantle is work by authors from William Harrison Ainsworth (1805–82) to Israel Zangwill (1864–1926), from the provincial to the metropolitan, from the most judiciously moral to the daringly *risqué*, from the 1830s to the *fin de siècle*, from the enduring to the transitory, from realism to fantasy, from the runaway success to the unfortunately stillborn. Its practitioners are at once household names to us – Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy – and, at the other end, deeply obscure, lost in the oubliette of literary history and familiar only to those whose professional scholarly work concerns the fiction of the Victorians. How many readers know W. G. Collingwood's *Thorstein of the Mere: A Saga of the Northmen in Lakeland* (1895) or Richard St John Tyrwhitt's *Hugh Heron, Ch. Ch.* (1880)? To be a serious student of the 'Victorian novel' is to set before oneself a diverse and uncontainable multitude of literary work. It is a plurality that exhilarates – and overwhelms.

DIFFICULTIES
OF THE TERM
'VICTORIAN
NOVEL'

The range of the novel in this period, its irreducible and energetic variety, has led critics to declare that the 'Victorian novel' is too general a term to be useful. Kathleen Tillotson's *Novels of the Eighteen-forties* (1954) made this point early on: she argued that 'It is now, I think, too late to talk about "Victorian novels"; their range is too vast and vague to lead to any useful generalization.'³ Tillotson was right, and, now more than ever, in these days of academic specialism, only the foolhardy would venture general statements across the spectrum of nearly seventy years' worth of fiction. This *Guide* is not about to commit such folly. The 'Victorian novel' in my title is a limited category. As it is used in this book, it refers principally to the acknowledged great names of Victorian fiction – Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Thomas Hardy, Henry James, William Makepeace Thackeray and Anthony Trollope – who have been and continue to be admired and continuously read, to be the subject of academic criticism, the focus of university and school courses, and consistently present in new editions on publishers' lists. It is with the critical history of this remarkable corpus of writing (and cognate, less well-known writers) that I am concerned in this survey of a hundred years of fertile critical investigation. That critical history is immense, and, squeezed with shrieks of protest into the pages of a single book, it reveals the changing face of our understanding of the major works of Victorian fiction, our altering areas of interest, and shifting sense of the nineteenth century itself across one hundred years.

DEFINITION
USED IN THIS
BOOK

THE
CHANGING
FACE OF
CRITICISM

It also reveals the changing face of English literary criticism. Here is a large slice of the development of literary studies in the Anglo-American academy from the literary history of the beginning of the twentieth century to the liberal humanism of the mid-years, to the radical political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the post-structuralism of the 1970s and 1980s, the New

Historicism of the 1980s and 1990s, and the postcolonialism and feminist revisionism of the last years of the century. The rise of interdisciplinarity is visible here, including the emergence of visual studies in the 1990s; the shift from universalist postures in the early years to the interest in marginalized subjectivities in the later is apparent too; so is the change in the language and implied audience of criticism from the general reader of the Edwardian period to the highly educated specialist of the present, able to comprehend complex formulations of a now significantly professionalized subject area; the pressure of modern identity politics is evident as well as the increasing self-consciousness among critics in the twentieth century about the political commitments of their criticism. Visible across this slice of writing is the changing expectation of where meaning is located in literature, from the assumption that meaning is recognized or disinterred by the critic to the more contemporary assumption that it is produced by the reader. The shifting understanding of literature's relationship with history can also be seen here, the different answers to the question of how literature relates to its cultural context, and the developing ideas of literature's relation to ideology.

This last subject is, like all of them, a complex area. But it is one particularly prominent in this book's coverage. Put crudely, there is a pattern visible in this *Guide* of increasing sophistication from the beginning of the century to the end. Literary historians in the first decades were usually uninterested in fiction's relationship with ideas, history and society: the New Criticism that took over in the middle period ruled out literature's connection with its context as a matter of principle. In the 1960s, radical critics, beginning with Raymond Williams, upturned this assumption and investigated how literature engaged with its ideological environment. Fiction was often described from this point and into the following decades, in a reversal of the previous position, as a mode through which ideology was propagated. In recent years, however, critics have dissolved the binary and attended to ways fiction both upheld and subverted ruling ideologies. This is particularly evident in recent developments in feminist and postcolonial criticism.

Other patterns emerge in this survey of the elaborate texture of literary criticism's transformations over one hundred years. But mapping these transformations is only the secondary task of this book. Its primary interest is in Victorian fiction, how it has been and is read. Nineteenth-century fiction was popular in its own day and now sponsors an enormous range of criticism as diverse in character as itself. The first object of this *Guide* is to provide examples of the significant themes of that criticism, contextualized in an historical narrative, and placed in relation to continuing debates in the field. The first two chapters deal with historical movements necessary for understanding modern developments; the next seven are concerned with the themes that continue to occupy critics' attention today. From these seven, collectively,

4 Introduction

a general overview of where Victorian novel criticism is, at the present moment, should be clear. Reading these chapters should be like looking down from a tower on the contemporary critical terrain. This is not, of course, to say that the coverage is complete. Some things have disappeared beyond the horizon. A number of important critics are, for reasons of space, omitted, or merely referenced in the Further Reading sections, and some productive themes are passed by. I hardly, for instance, touch on the multifarious debates about Victorian fiction and religion (see the Further Reading section at the end of this Introduction) in my narratives. And these narratives, naturally, tidy up a diverse and non-linear history of criticism into an orderly progression, a shaped account, which readers who want to go further in the study of Victorian fiction will problematize and supplement. But, none the less, a picture of the principal features of the landscape does, I hope, emerge, a view from the bridge, an account of how it strikes a contemporary. Constructing such a reliable view of the recent and current critical debates as a starting-point for serious, informed reading of the Victorian novel is the principal aim of this *Guide*.

OUTLINE OF CHAPTER 1

A fuller outline is as follows. Chapter 1 considers criticism written at the beginning of the twentieth century, as the Victorian period was given its first *post hoc* definitions, its first posthumous assessments, and at a time when the novel was not held in high regard. This initial interest is compared to the academic study of the Victorian novel, such that it was, in the universities of the early twentieth century. The dominant critical mode of the time was literary history and its historical and appreciative purposes are analysed. Literary history's rupturing by E. M. Forster – author of, among other novels, *A Room with a View* (1908) and *Howards End* (1910) – in his popular *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) is also considered. The conclusion discusses the influential, genial criticism of Lord David Cecil, who taught several generations of undergraduates at Oxford, many of whom are still in teaching careers today. Cecil's views of the Victorian novel, its incoherent form and its avoidance of sexuality, remained peculiarly tenacious despite the work of subsequent critics and historians who upturned them.

OUTLINE OF CHAPTER 2

Like Cecil's, F. R. Leavis's work endured and continued to be a force in the academy into the 1970s. But Leavis's strongly held views on literary criticism and literary greatness came under attack in the 1970s and 1980s from those hostile to liberal humanism, especially Marxists, deconstructionists and feminists. Leavis became the *bête noire* of the intellectual Left and his work never fully recovered. None the less, at a greater distance from the 1970s, it is possible to re-evaluate his contribution to the study of Victorian fiction and to admire his insistence on the cultural and moral importance of literary criticism and his belief in the novel as a serious form of word art. Chapter 2 discusses Leavis's contribution and considers *The Great Tradition* (1948) in particular.

Leavis's influence continued into the 1970s, but, elsewhere, the woman's movement, as it had defined itself in the 1960s, had a considerable influence on the shape of intellectual projects across a range of disciplines in universities, polytechnics and institutes of higher education. Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (1977), Sheila Robotham's *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (1977), Patricia Caplan's and Janet M. Bujra's collection *Women United, Women Divided: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Female Solidarity* (1978), and Mary Daly's *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1979) were just some of the important interventions in different disciplines, including the literary, which helped spread the radical feminist agenda across the academy's critical enterprise. For readers of Victorian fiction, the most significant works to have been written at this time, both from the United States, were Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977) and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination* (1979). These are discussed and their relation to their cultural moment evaluated in chapter 3.

OUTLINE OF
CHAPTER 3

Chapter 4 is dedicated to a subject that has prompted controversy since the Victorian novelists themselves: nineteenth-century fiction's understanding of 'realism'.⁴ This contentious area, on which George Eliot and Henry James wrote directly, has involved widely differing views about nineteenth-century knowledge and faith, and stirred arguments over the epistemological and political assumptions of the classic novels of Victorian England. Discussions of realism in the 1970s and 1980s were strongly influenced by post-structuralist theory, especially the work of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, and those years saw a reaction against practices of language that appeared to assume a naïve relationship with the real. The history of criticism of the Victorian novel reveals the marks of this reaction as well as the subsequent recuperations of the realist project by feminism in the 1990s, and the current interest in historicizing the real by New Historicists.

OUTLINE OF
CHAPTER 4

As with the question of realism, there has been a remarkable divergence of approach and range of critical and theoretical models in reading Victorian social-problem fiction. These form the topic of chapter 5. Together, chapters 4 and 5 survey the most contentious territory in this book. The genre or subgenre of Victorian social-problem fiction, including novels by Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli, Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Kingsley, interested critics working with a politicized critical methodology, especially Marxism, and has recently seen important interpretations by New Historicists and feminists. The debates about social-problem fiction involved discussion of the more widely applicable questions of the relationship of fiction to gender, politics and history. More particularly, the subject of Victorian

OUTLINE OF
CHAPTER 5

6 Introduction

social-problem fiction has recently become an arena for testing New Historicism's claims about fiction and social discourse.

OUTLINE OF CHAPTER 6

Feminist scholarship added to the debate about social-problem fiction and also contributed to the study of the language of Victorian fiction. Chapter 6 considers recent work on literary language, including language and gender, and on form. It includes an examination of the impact of Bakhtinian models of fictional discourse on the study of the Victorian multi-plot novel. Henry James's impatient description of capacious nineteenth-century novels as 'large loose baggy monsters' provides the starting-point, as a range of critics across the twentieth century argued against it and thought more creatively about the ways in which the Victorian novel signified at a formal level.

OUTLINE OF CHAPTER 7

The novel's relationship with the New Science, emerging to prominence in the middle of the nineteenth century, is the subject of chapter 7. Although the relationship between literary writing and Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory had been explored at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth, the 1980s saw a flourishing of interest in the topic. This criticism, from historicist and interdisciplinary perspectives, climaxed in the 1980s in Gillian Beer's study *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-century Fiction* (1983, 2nd edn 2000). Where Victorian life sciences intrigued writers in the 1980s, the 1990s saw an engagement with the mind sciences and medicine. Pathology in different forms was in the foreground of the critical debate here. These developments are all discussed.

OUTLINE OF CHAPTER 8

In chapter 8, examples of critical writing on Victorian fiction are presented from one of the increasingly prominent fields in the current academy, the History of the Book. This, too, is a wide area, but I have given a flavour of its range. I include well-received discussions of the material conditions of publication and the circulation of the Victorian novel, Marxist re-readings of this topic, and some feminist revisions of earlier views of publishing history. The chapter also discusses feminist reconsideration of common assumptions about the role of women in the literary marketplace and about the use of male (and female) pseudonyms in the period.

FICTION AND THE LAW

Correspondences between literary writing and science comprise the most active area of contextual research in Victorian fiction. But the study of fiction and the law, the relationship between novelistic writing and legal discourse, may gain future prominence. This would be highly appropriate: Victorian fiction frequently deals with matters of law or involves legal characters or settings, and around one in five Victorian novelists worked as lawyers or were legally connected at some time in their lives. There are signs that this subject is rising in importance in contemporary criticism though there is not yet enough to justify a separate chapter in this *Guide*. Randall Craig's study of the legal debates about the promise to marry, *Promising Language: Betrothal in*

Victorian Law and Fiction (2000), is an example. Craig examined how a range of classic Victorian texts, including Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Anthony Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* and Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*, explored the implications of a broken engagement to marry, and how this related to the changing practices of law courts in actual cases. Connections between law, fiction and theology were pursued in Jan-Melissa Schramm's *Testimony and Advocacy in Victorian Law, Literature, and Theology* (2000), a book that related examples of Victorian fiction to the consequences of legislation in 1836 allowing barristers to address the jury on behalf of prisoners. Schramm argued that novelists fashioned a style of advocacy for fictional speakers that at once imitated, but also contested, the procedures increasingly prominent at the Bar. Kieran Dolin's *Fiction and the Law: Legal Discourse in Victorian and Modernist Literature* (1999) claimed ambitiously that part of the cultural authority of the Victorian novel was attributable to its critical engagement with the transforming practices of the law. Connections between law and nineteenth-century fiction, two cultural practices particularly concerned with the possibilities of language, its truthfulness or fictivity, its capacity to bear witness and persuade, look as if they may prove a new area of significance for scholars examining the historical situatedness of the Victorian novel.

The final chapter surveys responses to the nineteenth-century novel from critics working in postcolonialism, the field that has provided the most recent addition to the coverage and theoretical scope of English Literature as an academic discipline. While postcolonialism's literary focus has tended to be on the new literatures of postcolonial cultures, a number of significant new readings of Victorian fiction have appeared. These have characteristically explored the relation of novelistic discourse to ideologies of empire and colonialism understood to be circulating, even if covertly, in Victorian culture. I give instances of critical readings that have emphasized the complicity of Victorian fiction with these discourses, including an argument that the form of the nineteenth-century novel was saturated by the logic of imperialism. Once again, this chapter concludes by showing how feminism in the 1990s rethought previous critical positions and, here, offered a more complicated idea of the Victorian novel's transactions with ideologies of empire.

Feminism, as will be clear, appears in many chapters. Chapter 3 is solely dedicated to a powerful manifestation of feminist literary criticism, but feminist readings of realism, social-problem fiction, language, the History of the Book, and postcolonialism are each considered. With its multiplicity of theoretical and political positions, feminism is no longer a discrete category in the Anglo-American academy and it would be misleading to imply that it remained a separable discourse, the developments of which could be plotted without reference to other areas of activity. As George Henry Lewes said of

OUTLINE OF
CHAPTER 9

FEMINISM
AND THE
CON-
TEMPORARY
ACADEMY

modern empirical science in the Victorian period, feminism has now penetrated everywhere: it informs all branches of critical investigation. The present book reflects this condition of the modern academy as there is no single, separate chapter surveying the multiple presence of feminism in the Victorian fiction studies today, beyond the 1970s. The whole *Guide* testifies to the ubiquity of its contemporary voices.

MASCULINITY
STUDIES

But feminism is not everything in gender studies. It is true that issues of gender in literary criticism are still often assumed to refer exclusively to the female or to feminism. Higher education examination questions in Victorian literature that invite answers on 'gender and . . .' normally precipitate answers on representations of women or the work of female writers. But masculinities, which have already attracted the attention of other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and classics, grew as a topic of interest in nineteenth-century literary studies in the 1990s and there is every sign that this subject will further enrich understandings of gender in the Victorian period. Answers to examination questions on gender that focus on masculinity may soon be a small but significant indication of the extent to which this new intellectual engagement has established itself in the academy.

On male desire, an early, ground-making book was Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), which had a chapter on Charles Dickens's *Edwin Drood* and the homophobia of empire. For other texts on Victorian homosexuality, see the Further Reading section at the end of this Introduction. In the 1990s, Annette Federico considered the representation of male characters and what they revealed about cultural gender politics in *Masculine Identity in Hardy and Gissing* (1991). She adopted four stereotypes to investigate changes in male identity at the end of the century: the virile man; the chaste man (or the seducer and the saint); the idealist, the 'romantic fantasizer who seeks the woman of his dreams'; and the realist, 'who recognizes the presence of the New Woman and must try to deal with her as practically he can'.⁵ Other work in the decade included Herbert Sussman's *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (1995), and James Eli Adams's *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (1995). Adams's study aimed to 'underscore the importance of masculinity as a central problematic in literary and cultural change',⁶ and it is a key work in the field. Looking specifically at fiction, Karen Volland Waters's *The Perfect Gentleman: Masculine Control in Victorian Men's Fiction 1870–1901* (1997) considered a subject tackled by Robin Gilmour (see Further Reading) and investigated the idea of the gentleman and its role in the dynamics of Victorian gender politics. Waters concentrated on fiction by Kipling, Gissing, Collins and Stevenson. There have also been some individual studies of Victorian novels and manliness in essay form, including Simon Petch's 'Robert Audley's Profession' in *Studies in the*

Novel (2000), which examined masculinity and the representation of the idle lawyer in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). (For more on masculinity and social-problem fiction, see pp. 165–7 below.) The area of Victorian masculinity studies is beginning to grow, and future surveys of Victorian fiction criticism will be able to plot its development more extensively.

Where Victorian masculinity does not yet have a substantial critical heritage, other areas of fiction criticism that do are none the less unrepresented in this book. One subject that has seen a major contribution from feminist scholars, from Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* onwards, is, because of the parameters of my project, hardly discussed here. Canon revision has been a widespread feature of modern literary studies, and the Victorian period is no exception. The present book concentrates on the classic fiction of the Victorians, and does not stray significantly beyond this boundary. But work in the past two decades in nineteenth-century fiction has recuperated and celebrated substantial areas of novel writing that have been occluded by the classic canon, hidden by the roll of 'great literature' (now in scare quotes). Feminism has been the biggest influence on this, but revisionary pressure has also come from the growing interest in the body, pathologies, the culturally marginalized, popular fiction, popular culture, and from the New Historicists' emphasis on the relevance of all cultural documents to reading literature (for an outline of New Historicism, see p. 162). Collectively, these forces have led to the increasing study of: sensation fiction, Gothic fiction, New Woman fiction, detective fiction, working-class writing, and popular fiction in general. The canon of the Victorian novel is strikingly different even from twenty years ago.

Feminist critics have been active in work on sensation fiction, a popular form of literature in the mid-Victorian period, and have explored the ways in which Victorian women novelists used the conventions of sensation to debate feminist themes that were less easy for a woman (or a man) to confront in the realist mode. Sensation fiction has emerged as a significant literary form in which women critiqued aspects of Victorian gender politics. Examples of recent criticism on sensation fiction include Winifred Hughes's *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (1980), Lyn Pykett's *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (1992), Jenny Bourne Taylor's *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth Century Psychology* (1998), and Barbara Leckie's *Culture and Adultery: The Novel, the Newspaper, and the Law, 1857–1914* (1999), which includes a chapter on some less well-known novels such as Caroline Norton's *Lost and Saved* (1863) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* (1864). (For Leckie's interest in the law, see Further Reading.) These critics, proposing feminist modes for reading sensation fiction and

CANON
REVISION IN
RECENT
VICTORIAN
FICTION
STUDIES

SENSATION
FICTION

comprehending its cultural significance, have all contributed to arguments about canon revision and helped to ensure that the genre is now widely represented on courses on the Victorian novel in higher education.

GOthic
FICTION

Connected with sensation fiction is Gothic fiction which has also seen a rise in critical interest. The turn against realism in the 1980s propelled Gothic into the centre of fiction studies (see pp. 133–5 below), and the 1990s continued to investigate it. Marie Mulvey-Roberts's *The Handbook to Gothic Literature* (1998) brought together eminent critics in a survey of the mode across all periods, while recent monographs on Victorian Gothic include Kelly Hurley's *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (1996), which grew partly from the 1980s' and 1990s' interest in how ideology was written on the body. Hurley accounted for the resurgence of the Gothic during the *fin de siècle* and examined a key scenario that haunted Gothic fiction: the loss of a unified, stable human identity, and the emergence of a chaotic and transformative 'abhuman' identity in its place. Robert Mighall's *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (1999) offered a new, contextual way of thinking about the Gothic, 'an historicist alternative to the psychological, ontological, and "symbolic" approaches which dominate criticism of [it]'.⁷

NEW WOMAN
FICTION

Feminism brought the study of 'New Woman' novels to prominence as well as sensation fiction, urging a different form of canon revision by changing the conventional perception of literature in the *fin de siècle*. New Woman writing comprises a diverse group (some dispute the usefulness of gathering it under a general heading at all) from the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. It includes work in drama, fiction and non-fictional prose by Grant Allen, Mona Caird, George Egerton, George Gissing, Sarah Grand, Thomas Hardy, Henrik Ibsen, Olive Schreiner, G. B. Shaw and Rebecca West. New Woman writing challenged, or explored challenges to, oppressive understandings of female behaviour, sexuality and domestic responsibility. Recent critical work on the area of New Woman fiction includes Gail Cunningham's *The New Woman in the Victorian Novel* (1978), which contextualized the fiction and indicated its main radical ideas; Elaine Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (1991); and Sally Ledger's accessible survey *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (1997).⁸

POPULAR
FICTION

Popular fiction has received recent critical attention too (though it had not been without investigation earlier in the century),⁹ and this is also likely to develop as the study of popular culture gains in academic status. R. C. Terry's *Victorian Popular Fiction, 1860–1880* (1983) investigated middle-class popular fiction, including novels by the 'Queen of Popular Fiction', as he called her, Margaret Oliphant, whose reputation has significantly revived in the past few years.¹⁰ More recent work, which has opened up an area of writing hitherto

excluded from serious academic consideration, includes Pamela K. Gilbert's *Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels* (1997) and Laurie Langbauer's *Novels of Everyday Life: The Series in English Fiction, 1850–1930* (1999). Juliet John's *Dickens' Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (2001) merged the canonical with the non-canonical by situating Dickens in the context of popular culture, especially the tradition and conventions of stage melodrama. John argued for an acknowledgement of Dickens's political commitment to the principle of cultural inclusivity, and her strategy of considering the relationship between canonical fiction and forms of popular culture was a distinctive contribution to Victorian literary studies.¹¹

In addition to the question of canonicity and the changing understandings of what the Victorian novel is, a further point needs to be made about the organization of this book. I have considered criticism that addresses the Victorian novel. But not individual Victorian novelists. This has had a significant consequence on the overall shape of this study, and the way it should be read. It is true that tracing the critical histories of, say, George Eliot, Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy, would give a sample of the development of criticism of Victorian fiction more generally. But such a procedure would hardly be helpful to readers of Charles Kingsley or Anthony Trollope. So the critical texts discussed in this book are almost always studies of aspects of Victorian fiction, as I have defined it, in general. Only on a small number of occasions have I included criticism that concentrates on a single fictional text because it best exemplifies a particular critical trend: I have, periodically, assumed the reader's knowledge of the plot of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–2) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Although other texts are, of course, constantly referenced, no other single novel emerges as privileged.

This book offers an introduction to the critical history of the Victorian novel over the past one hundred years, and a survey of the main fields of debate in contemporary criticism. It also provides a sample of how and in what pattern the discourses of English literary criticism have developed during that time. It works, in these respects, on several levels of generality. The *Guide* also has one other general ambition. Despite the valuable work of theory, there is still often, in my view, an insufficient recognition in student writing of the situatedness of criticism. Criticism speaks from its cultural moment and is as embedded in the terms of its own intellectual and social location as the literature it seeks to explicate. It matters whether the author is pre-war or post-war, 1970s or 1980s, David Cecil or Catherine Belsey. And yet criticism is often read as an innocent discourse, as a peculiar mode of authoritative utterance outside the logic of the culture from which it emerged and not susceptible to the same kind of critical analysis as a literary text. I have tried to problematize this mode of reading by discussing, throughout this book, aspects of the embeddedness of the voices anthologized. Much more of

'THE
VICTORIAN
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'VICTORIAN
NOVELISTS'

THE
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NESS OF
CRITICISM

this could have been done than space permitted, but it is an important feature of the text. The *Guide* may thus appear to be involved in a sort of Platonic distancing from the original: it deals not with the original forms (the classic Victorian novels themselves), but with the criticism of them, and, at a third remove, it critiques the discourses of that criticism. The fiction itself, like Plato's Ideal forms, may seem a long way off. But I hope the material surveyed here, the historical development of novel criticism and the raft of contemporary concerns, will send readers, as it has sent me, back to that fiction, back to the origin and occasion of all this explicatory and analytical work, with renewed vitality. An enthusiasm for reading the Victorian novel is where criticism of it should start.

Chapter Notes

- 1 A well-received recent discussion of Henry James and literary fame is Richard Salmon, *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- 2 Anthony Trollope, quoted in John Charles Olmsted, ed., *A Victorian Art of Fiction: Essays on the Novel in British Periodicals 1870–1900*, 3 vols (New York: Garland, 1979), iii. 113.
- 3 Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-forties* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954), 1.
- 4 I use the term 'nineteenth century' throughout this book to refer to the 'Victorian period' unless it is clear from the context that I mean otherwise. Although this is not ideal, it provides a different way of referring to 'Victorian fiction' or the 'Victorian novel', terms that need to be varied for the sake of euphony.
- 5 Annette Federico, *Masculine Identity in Hardy and Gissing* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1991), 16.
- 6 James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 3.
- 7 Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), xix.
- 8 A recent dimension to criticism of late-Victorian literature and the representation of the actress was offered by Gail Marshall in *Actresses on the Victorian Stage: Feminine Performance and the Galatea Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 9 See Margaret Dalziel, *Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago: An Unexplored Tract of Literary History* (London: Cohen and West, 1957) which includes discussion of 'Penny Dreadfuls'.
- 10 A revival partly due to the work of Elisabeth Jay; see Jay, ed., *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant: The Complete Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); *Mrs Oliphant: 'A Fiction to Herself': A Literary Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), and *Women's Writing: Margaret Oliphant Special Edition*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1999), ed. Elisabeth Jay and Francis O'Gorman.

- 11 For a recent and fresh example of the recuperation of popular forms of narrative, see Brian Maidment, 'Re-arranging the Year: The Almanac, the Day Book and the Year Book as Popular Literary Forms, 1789–1860', in Juliet John and Alice Jenkins, eds, *Rethinking Victorian Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 91–113.

Further Reading

Books on the Victorian novel generally:

- David Amigoni**, *The English Novel and Prose Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000): stimulating introduction to methodological issues in studying fiction which traces critical debates about the relation of the Victorian novel to biography, autobiography and ideas of 'self-culture'; also considers the formal innovations of Victorian fiction.
- Deirdre David**, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): emphasis on North American approaches; an accessible overview by leading scholars on the state of modern criticism of the Victorian novel; some problems of accuracy.
- Barbara Dennis**, *The Victorian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): a brief introductory survey for beginners in the Cambridge Contexts in Literature series.
- Robin Gilmour**, *The Novel in the Victorian Age: A Modern Introduction* (London: Arnold, 1986): discusses middle-class fiction, its composite form, and links the novel with the transformations of British society. 'The story of the Victorian novel is the story of the novelists' attempts to interpret their changing world, and to hold on to a hopeful vision of the future until the pressure of pessimistic insight at the end of the period could no longer be contained within the reconciling mixed form.'
- Jeremy Hawthorn**, ed., *The Nineteenth-century British Novel* (London: Arnold, 1986): a collection of essays with an emphasis on theory, including one on 'Dickens and the New Historicism'.
- Alan Horsman**, *The Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990): in the Oxford History of English Literature series, a solid, unrepentantly old-fashioned survey of major novelists with a glance at minor ones: no acknowledgement of modern critical developments. Includes an individual chapter on Meredith.
- Alice Jenkins and Juliet John**, eds, *Rereading Victorian Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000): a stimulating and well-received collection of essays by eminent scholars.
- Kathleen Tillotson**, *Novels of the Eighteen-forties* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954): important in its scholarship and focus on detail; a new stage in the professionalization of the study of Victorian fiction.
- Michael Wheeler**, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period, 1830–1890*, 2nd edn (London: Longman, 1994): includes excellent bibliographical material. Wheeler argues that the 'movement of Victorian fiction' is 'away from the mediation of social reality through the consciousness of a hero or heroine, whose fate is ultimately

secure in the hands of a God-like author–narrator’ towards ‘tragic schemes in which the universe is either neutral or hostile’; this reflects ‘a decline in both individualism and the possibility of social salvation’.

Nineteenth-century views of, or documents relating to, the novel:

Edwin M. Eigner and George J. Worth, eds, *Victorian Criticism of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985): useful resource of contemporary statements about the novel.

Josephine M. Guy, *The Victorian Age: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (London: Routledge, 1998): multifarious collection of documents covering ethics, economics and politics, science and religion, art and culture, sex and gender. It provides a context for ‘some of the contemporary intellectual issues which inform [Victorian literature]’.

Ann Heilmann, ed., *The Late-Victorian Marriage Question: A Collection of Key New Woman Texts*, 5 vols (London: Routledge/Thoemmes, 1998): vol. 1 Marriage and Motherhood; vol. 2 The New Woman and Female Independence; vol. 3 New Woman Fiction I: Marriage, Motherhood and Work; vol. 4 New Woman Fiction II: Gender and Sexuality; vol. 5 Literary Degenerates.

John Charles Olmsted, ed., *A Victorian Art of Fiction: Essays on the Novel in British Periodicals 1870–1900*, 3 vols (New York: Garland, 1979): invaluable resource for Victorian comments on the novel.

Stephen Regan, ed., *The Nineteenth-century Novel: A Critical Reader* (London: Routledge, 2001): contains critical responses to a wide variety of nineteenth-century fiction and a good selection of Victorian documents relevant to the art of the novel, including ones by George Eliot, Nietzsche, R. L. Stevenson, and Zola. Designed for the Open University.

Reference book:

John Sutherland, *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction* (London: Longman, 1988): indispensable on individual novels and novelists, and all aspects of the fiction industry.

More on masculinity:

Diana Barsham, *Arthur Conan Doyle and the Meaning of Masculinity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000): ‘Doyle was committed to finding solutions to some of the most difficult cultural problematics of late Victorian masculinity. As novelist, war correspondent, historian, legal campaigner, propagandist and religious leader, he used his fame as the creator of Sherlock Holmes to refigure the spirit of British Imperialism.’

Joseph Bristow, *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing after 1885* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995).

Joseph Bristow, *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man’s World* (London: HarperCollins Academic, 1991): on late Victorian adventure fiction for boys and its relationship with empire and masculinity.

Andrew Dowling, *Manliness and the Male Novelist in Victorian Literature* (Aldershot and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2001).

Robin Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981): especially on Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope, with an emphasis on the eighteenth-century context of gentlemanliness.

Simon Petch, 'Robert Audley's Profession', *Studies in the Novel*, 32 (2000), 1–13.

Dianne F. Sadoff, *Monsters of Affection: Dickens, Eliot and Brontë on Fatherhood* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1982): Freudian reading of the primal scene, seduction, and castration as they apply to Dickens, Eliot, and Charlotte Brontë respectively.

More on expanding areas of the canon:

Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer, ed., *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction* (New York and London: Garland, 1996): includes essays on Anne Brontë, Geraldine Jewsbury, Collins, Reade, Oliphant, Le Fanu, Stoker, Eliza Linton, Walter Besant, George Moore, Gissing, Sarah Grand, George Egerton, Mrs Humphry Ward, Flora Annie Steel.

K. D. M. Snell, ed., *The Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland, 1800–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): interdisciplinary study that considers this much neglected area, though most of the authors studied are canonical (in the Victorian period, they are Gaskell and Manchester; Hardy and Wessex; Kingsley and Cornwall).

On law:

Barbara Leckie, *Culture and Adultery: The Novel, the Newspaper, and the Law, 1857–1914* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999): highly theoretical investigation interested in 'the role that the novel and the institution of the novel plays in shaping what counts as taboo and in negotiating a social and political field in which certain subjects, like adultery, are targeted as transgressive and, therefore, outside the boundary of permissible literary representation'. See also p. 9 above.

Jeff Nunokawa, *The Afterlife of Property: Domestic Security and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994): considers the loss of property in Dickens and Eliot, and the acknowledgement in the fiction that the origin of such losses are in the market, not in the will or weakness of individuals.

Marlene Tromp, *The Private Rod: Marital Violence, Sensation, and the Law in Victorian Britain* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000): feminist investigation of literary and legal negotiations of marital violence in Dickens, Eliot and sensation writing.

On religion and the novel:

Valentine Cunningham, *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975): prickly but learned study of dissent, valuing its sympathetic treatment.

Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-century Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979): widely read investigation of fiction and Evangelical movements; good on theological context.

Michael Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): richly researched account of heaven, hell and the Victorian novel.