

A History of Victorian Literature

James Eli Adams

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A signal work of literary historiography: broad and sound in its fabric, detail richly textured in its detail. Along the tensed warp of Victorian culture that emerged in a daze from Romantic premisses and plunged at last into a twentieth century it had inadvertently invented, Adams weaves through overlapping historical nodes – industrial-domestic, pious-scientific, democratic-imperial, class-blent and gender-bent – a steady weft of agile, expert readings of essays, poems, biographies, dramas, and especially novels. Shuttling among genres lets him season a diet of judiciously received readings with fresh discoveries about, say, the concurrent maturation of new kinds of prose fiction and long poem toward 1850, or the ideologically laden recourse to life-writing in the 1870s and 1880s. The sheer quantity of this comprehensive history is matched by the genial quality of the historian who comprehends it, and whose infectiously self-renewing enthusiasm makes great learning look like great fun. It has been many decades, and several major reorientations in critical scholarship, since we last saw a literary-historical synopsis on this scale. Rejoicing to imagine this book representing our generation's Victorianism to posterity, we must admit that to have Adams as our spokesman feels a little like boasting.

Herbert F. Tucker, University of Virginia

Preface

This is a narrative history addressed to students and general readers wishing to learn more about the world of Victorian literature. It naturally presumes an interest whetted by encounters with that body of writing, but it does not presume close prior acquaintance with particular authors or genres. The narrative is informed by a good deal of contemporary scholarship and criticism, but I offer little explicit engagement with academic criticism (although I have done my best to acknowledge general as well as specific forms of scholarly indebtedness). Instead, I have devoted the confining space to gathering in a broader range of texts and careers than otherwise would have been possible. I've tried to balance the claims of category and chronology, hoping to steer between chronicle ("The following works were published in 1843") and the "guide," organized around genre or critical theme. The volume has a strong chronological thrust, and hence the introduction will be a more rewarding point of entry than the index. At the same time, the history necessarily depends on analyses of particular episodes or developments whose significance can be elicited only through departures (sometimes extensive) from strict chronology. My aim is to sketch a complex, changing field of literary production and reception without surrendering the rich particularity of individual works and authors.

One emphasis to this end is a great deal of attention to Victorian reviews of major writers. The most obvious value of contemporary reception is its capacity to crystallize what seems distinctive, sometimes

strange, in Victorian structures of feeling (in Raymond Williams's useful phrase). Reviewing also offers a means of decomposing, as it were, our existing conceptions of major authors and genres, and thereby revivifying them. We can see literary careers less as unbroken, fixed expanses and more as ongoing, changing constructions, within which Victorian readers confronted phenomena very different from what we encounter in our Penguins. From this vantage we're reminded, for example, that Dickens's career in the 1830s is not that of a novelist, but of an increasingly prolific and popular writer of magazine sketches, whose writing changes the very form of the novel. Reviews also remind us of how complexly literary form and value are bound up with a broad range of social norms – most obviously, the force of gender and class. Particularly in the early stages of a writer's career, a review can seem an exercise much like the sizing up of strangers that is such an important experience in Victorian novels. As they try to place new or emergent authors, reviewers are especially likely to reveal their tacit norms and expectations, and thus to give us a sense of the audiences that the author is trying to reach. In the process, they offer unusually suggestive responses to a central question in any literary history: what was "literature"? How did one recognize it, what was it for, and how did one measure its success or failure? Reviews, finally, also remind us that Victorian engagements with these questions need not be narrowly historical or parochial; they often reveal writers of extraordinary intelligence, wit, erudition, self-awareness, and passion – minds that should rebuke any inclination to patronize the past.

A glance at the 1,400 double-columned, densely printed pages of the *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* of 1800–1900 will underscore, if it should need emphasis, how much a history of this kind necessarily omits. (I particularly regret not having more space for journalism, the economics of publishing, history, literature by working-class authors, science writing, and writing from and about imperial dominions.) Carlyle pointedly summed up a more subtle, equally insoluble problem confronting historians: "Narrative is *linear*, action is *solid*." Even had we space enough and time, no history could interweave adequately the countless lines of character and event that constitute the "action" of Victorian literature. We can never reach consensus as to the shape of that world and its meanings. But I hope that this inevitably partial account not only is stimulating as a narrative in its own right, but also will suggest new significance in familiar texts (and in the world from which they emerged) while at the same time

prompting readers to seek out the unfamiliar at first hand. I predictably have lingered over major figures such as Tennyson, Dickens, George Eliot, and Oscar Wilde, largely to explain why they have figured so centrally in our understandings of Victorian literature. But I also have tried to give sustained attention to lesser-known authors and forms – most obviously, sensation fiction and the “new woman” novel – not only because they change our understanding of more familiar landmarks, but because they offer neglected intrinsic pleasures. The analysis and description throughout is partly an exercise in enticement, hoping to allure readers into pursuing a closer knowledge of the works and figures mentioned here. Conrad in one of his critical prefaces urges that his “task” as a writer is “above all, to make you see.” I would be very happy above all to make you read more Victorian literature.

A project of this sort brings home the extraordinary scope and richness of Victorian literature not only as a body of writing but also as a field of study. In concluding it, I am tempted to thank everyone who has ever taught or written about or discussed it. But I must confine myself to some particularly crucial sources of support and guidance. Andrew McNeillie first beguiled me into undertaking this work, and since then a number of editors at Blackwell – in particular, Al Bertrand and Emma Bennett – have been encouraging and (above all) patient: thanks to all of them. I owe a manifold debt to Cornell University and the Cornell Department of English: for extraordinary library resources, generous leave time, and financial support for our gifted graduate students, who not only have helped with research but have sustained many lively, stimulating conversations. Thanks in particular to Zubair Amir, Karen Bourrier, David Coombs, Katy Croghan-Alarcon, Meghan Freeman, Sarah Heidt, Esther Hu, Michael Klotz, Seph Murtagh, Andrea Rehn, Danielle St. Hilaire, Kim Snyder-Manganelli, and Robin Sowards. I benefited from the generosity and insight of Joseph Bizup, Andrew Miller, and Jonah Siegel, three very fine and very busy scholars who took the time to offer sympathetic readings of a large portion of the project at a particularly difficult juncture; I’m only sorry they could not save me from more lapses. Throughout this project I’ve been inspired by the example of Herbert F. Tucker, no stranger to large undertakings, with whom I’ve enjoyed ongoing discussion about the forms and possibilities of literary history, while enduring ongoing envy of his brilliant work. Among the many debts recorded in the citations, the scholarship of Michael Booth, Donald Gray, Dorothy Mermin, and John Sutherland was especially helpful in lifting the burdens of my

ignorance. I also would like to thank the intellectual communities in which I have been fortunate to participate: the Victorian Division of the Modern Language Association; the Northeast Victorian Studies Association; the North American Victorian Studies Association; the Dickens Project at the University of California at Santa Cruz; the VICTORIA listserv (presided over by the redoubtable Patrick Leary); and *Victorian Studies*.

This work is dedicated to the two remarkable women with whom I share my life, Michele Moody-Adams and Katherine Claire Moody Adams. Both of them will be very glad that it is done, but it could never have been finished without them.

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Introduction: Locating Victorian Literature

Byron is Dead

In 1824, a 14-year-old boy in Lincolnshire carved on a stone the words, “Byron is dead.” For the young Alfred Tennyson, something rare and wonderful had vanished from the world. His sense of loss was echoed by innumerable contemporaries throughout Europe; it has shaped literary history ever since. But Byron’s vivid afterlife also reflects a powerful cultural ambivalence in nineteenth-century Britain, which lies at the heart of what became Victorian literature.

Byron’s death seemed and seems to mark the end of an era, which relegates the subsequent years before the ascent of Victoria – or at least before 1832, the date of the First Reform Bill – into an eerie twilight, mentioned largely as an interregnum, an awkward gap between the “Romantic” and “Victorian” epochs. That twilight obscures the many continuities between those two worlds. Thomas Carlyle, the single most influential “Victorian sage,” may seem to belong to a world very different from that of John Keats, yet the two men were born only a month apart. Throughout the shaping of Victorian literature, moreover, the figure of Byron remained very much alive. He was an inescapable and many-faceted icon – of poetry, of imagination, of excess, of daring, of dissolution, of rebellion, the emblem of an old order, the herald of a new. When Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* (1831–3) struggled to imagine a new era of belief, he exhorted, “Close thy Byron, open thy Goethe.”

Of course, the familiar divisions of literary history are largely flags of convenience, and “Victorian” more than most derives its authority from an accident of political history and royal biology: the 64-year reign of the young woman who came to the throne in 1837 and presided over decades of unparalleled economic, social, and political transformation. Even before Victoria was crowned, however, a wide range of contemporaries echoed Carlyle’s announcement of a new epoch, and shared his sense that “the times are unexampled.” Whether with joy or foreboding – or, most often, a mixture of the two – 1830 witnessed a crescendo of agreement that Britain stood on the brink of a radical break with established institutions, habits, and ways of life. That sense of rupture was defined preeminently along class lines. John Stuart Mill put it trenchantly: “the spirit of the age” had confirmed the bankruptcy of government by a hereditary aristocracy. “The superior capacity of the higher ranks for the exercise of worldly power is now a broken spell” (Mill 1963–91: xxii.315). The remainder of the century would see not only a persistent expansion of middle-class political power, but also the corresponding ascendancy of a distinctly middle-class ethos, which was built around self-discipline, earnest struggle, and the hallowing of domestic life. Yet the enchantment of aristocracy would linger through much of the century – not only in persistent political influence, but in subtly pervasive norms of value, identity, and conduct. Even as the rising middle classes defined themselves against the aristocracy, their images of human fulfillment remained widely in thrall to aristocratic modes of style and possibility. This is the tension encapsulated in the afterlife of Byron, which was shaped by the history leading up to the coronation of Victoria.

Cultural Contexts

In the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, which ended in 1815, British political energies were redirected towards domestic issues. Although the reach of its empire was unparalleled and growing, empire had not become the focus of public attention that it would become in the latter half of the century. National chauvinism found its readiest expression in the victory over France and the growing economic might of British commerce and industry. The growth of industrialization, however, also exacerbated political unrest, repressed during the war years. Industrialization offered new opportunities for workers, but it also

created new stresses. As traditional “cottage industries” such as handloom weaving were displaced by steam power, increasing numbers of workers lost their jobs, and their protests stirred fear among the propertied classes. Displaced laborers migrated to expanding industrial towns, where explosive growth opened up new forms of employment, but also subjected workers to newly volatile economic cycles, while frequent bouts of unemployment strained traditional (meager) resources of poor relief. Meanwhile, the so-called “Corn Laws,” instituted following the Napoleonic Wars to protect agricultural interests, increased the pinch of hunger by subsidizing the price of grain at artificially high levels, thus creating a division of class interests that became a flash point of early Victorian politics.

Resentment over the Corn Laws helped to shape the political identity of an increasingly affluent middle class, which chafed at the exorbitant political influence of wealthy landowners. The growing economic leverage of middle-class citizens, many of whom remained disenfranchised by religion or lack of landed property, gradually was felt in politics. In 1829, Parliament ratified “Catholic Emancipation,” which removed many of the long-standing restrictions on the political rights of Catholics. The repeal of statutes dating back to Henry VIII – and sustained in many quarters by virulent antipathy to “Popery” – struck many as a threat to the core of British identity, because it eroded the religious foundations of the state. The following year, the death of George IV aroused little sorrow but great anxiety; a month after the June 1830 prorogation of Parliament, revolution broke out in France, and subsequently elsewhere on the continent. Against these events, a proposed extension of the franchise in Britain – what would become known as the “Reform Bill” – quickly became the central topic of parliamentary election debate, fanned by widespread reports of industrial unrest. When cholera broke out in 1829, more than a few commentators read in it a sign of divine wrath: when a little-known Scotsman named Thomas Carlyle published an essay on the upheaval in 1829, he gave it a portentous biblical title: “Signs of the Times.”

The early 1830s thus nurtured an unusual sense of historical self-consciousness, which centered on challenges to the traditional political order. In the midst of these events, John Stuart Mill claimed in a newspaper article that “the conviction is already not far from universal, that the times are pregnant with change; and that the nineteenth century will be known to posterity as the era of one of the greatest revolutions of which history has preserved the remembrance, in the human mind,

and in the whole constitution of human society” (Mill 1963–91: xxii.228–9). The singularity of the moment was underscored in Mill’s title, “The Spirit of the Age.” The phrase, he noted, “is in some measure a novel expression. I do not believe it to be met with in any work exceeding fifty years in antiquity. The idea of comparing one’s own age with former ages, or with our notion of those which are yet to come, had occurred to philosophers; but it never before was itself the dominant idea of any age” (228). The fiercely logical Mill envisioned the idea of aristocratic government as “a broken spell,” but he did not appreciate the lingering enchantment of aristocratic life.

In 1830 Byron embodied aristocratic luxury and privilege at its most alluring, and most dangerous. That allure was writ large in contemporary fiction, which was largely divided between the towering presence of Sir Walter Scott and a new genre of “silver-fork” novels, so called because of their preoccupation with the (often imaginary) particulars of aristocratic opulence. A central figure in these works was the dandy, a figure vividly embodied in Edward Bulwer’s *Pelham* (1828), the most popular novel of the later decade. The dandy incarnates a sardonic, detached elegance loosely derived from the model of Byron by way of “Beau” Brummel, whose energies were divided between dress and a withering disdain for the world. Byron’s own memoirs were deemed too scandalous for publication, and were infamously burnt by his own publisher, John Murray (who stood to make a fortune by them, but feared the irreparable loss of both Byron’s reputation and his own). When Thomas Moore’s sympathetic *Life of Byron* was published in 1830, it occasioned widespread attacks on Byron’s poetry and personal character, which frequently were generalized into sweeping claims about aristocratic excess, inanity, and disdain for common morality – attacks which in turn gathered in *Pelham* and much of the silver-fork school. In the midst of the debate, Carlyle was seized with the idea of “the dandiacal body” and the “satanic school” of poetry as leitmotifs in a satire of aristocratic self-absorption. What began as a squib grew into *Sartor Resartus*, one of the most influential celebrations of those virtues that we have come to think of as distinctly “Victorian”: duty, faith, self-denial, earnestness, and “the gospel of work.” Repudiation of the dandy thus helped to shape the Victorian sage.

Middle-class attacks on an aristocracy deemed unworthy of its power were focused in two broad, outwardly antithetical developments of late eighteenth-century thought that reached their zenith in the reign of Victoria. The first was Benthamism, or utilitarianism, of which John

Stuart Mill became the most influential exponent. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), “the father of English innovation,” as Mill called him,” the “great subversive” thinker of his age (Mill 1963–91: x.78), argued that the morality of an action was to be gauged, not by some intrinsic quality in the action or the agent, but by its consequences: its usefulness or utility, understood in the elemental terms of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. This outwardly simple conception organized a corrosively skeptical analysis of established legal, political, and social orders, which were grounded (Bentham pointed out) in accumulations of tradition predominantly shaped by the interests of a small elite. Bentham’s analytic model helped to direct the reformist impulses of Victorian England, which gathered in a host of institutions, from Parliament to urban sanitation, and were chronicled in voluminous reports that form an important subgenre of Victorian literature. Many critics would attack the rationalistic emphasis of Benthamism as a highly brittle understanding of human psychology. Yet even his most vehement critics betray his influence: Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854) is the most famous literary attack on Bentham’s alleged antipathy to imagination, yet *Hard Times* is bookended by two other novels, *Bleak House* (1851–3) and *Little Dorrit* (1856), that obsessively attack government incompetence and neglect of human needs.

A very different reformist emphasis derived from the broad, epochal religious movement loosely known as Evangelicalism. On its surface, the movement seemed antithetical to Benthamism. Bentham was an atheist of a consummately Enlightenment habit of mind, confident that the road to progress and happiness lay through unfettered human inquiry. evangelicals, by contrast, chastised such presumption, and insisted on the need for divine salvation that could be attained only through strenuous piety. Bentham located pleasure at the heart of his ethics, even formulating a “hedonic calculus”; evangelicals were notoriously suspicious of pleasure. As Leslie Stephen (Virginia Woolf’s father) recalled of his father, “He once smoked a cigar, and found it so delicious that he never smoked again” (Houghton 1957: 236). Yet Evangelicalism also made its impact in large part through criticism of the aristocracy, in and out of government. Through the leadership of William Wilberforce (himself a wealthy landowner), Evangelicals within the Church of England from roughly the 1780s held up for the privileged classes the momentous example of John Wesley’s preaching earlier in the century, which had led to the formation of Methodism. Wilberforce and his colleagues sought to reinvigorate Christian piety

among the affluent, envisioning human life as an arena of constant moral struggle, resisting temptation and mastering desire. These imperatives had a profound impact on legislation – evangelicals spearheaded the abolition of the English slave trade and laws governing factory conditions – and more generally on the texture of both public and private life, as its deep suspicion of desire gave rise to an austerity often offended even by the reading of novels.

Such norms pointedly contested the example of the notoriously dissolute English Court during the Regency (1810–20) and subsequent reign of George IV (1820–30). And that contrast in turn reflected a crucial worldliness in Evangelical influence. Though Wilberforce's piety was unquestionably sincere, one major impetus for the spread of Evangelicalism was the horrific cautionary tale unfolding across the Channel in 1789. The specter of the French Revolution would haunt the privileged classes of Britain for much of the nineteenth century. (In 1872 the former Prime Minister, Earl Russell, on his deathbed heard the sound of breaking glass, and cried, "The Revolution has begun.") For Wilberforce, the revolution embodied the prospect not merely of working-class insurrection in pursuit of greater political power, but the still more unsettling anxiety that the aristocracy might indeed have forfeited its moral claim to that power. Ideals of moral, and particularly sexual, discipline thus became central forms of symbolic capital in Victorian political and social debate. While Wilberforce wanted to reform aristocratic governance, not overturn it, evangelical piety was in theory (if not always in practice) egalitarian. It offered a powerful symbolic weapon to subordinate classes, who could argue that aristocratic profligacy showed their unfitness to rule. Britain, they urged, would best be led by those who could best govern themselves.

Self-discipline thus became a crucial engine of social progress and individual stature. Conservative commentators had long explained the social order as a providential arrangement, in which every individual was born to a "place" or "station" ultimately sanctioned by God. Schemes of economic and political progress threatened this order, and provoked numerous countering appeals to older models of faith and value – most notably an imagined medieval world of harmonious social hierarchy. But a static hierarchy of rank could not withstand the dynamism of an industrial economy. Beginning with the development of steam power in the latter half of the eighteenth century, forms of mechanized production would transform not only the rhythms of daily life but also the very sense of human possibility. Steam, remarks a character

in *Mill on the Floss* (1860), “drives on every wheel double pace and the wheel of Fortune along with ‘em.” The new economy offered unrivalled potential for amassing (and losing) wealth, as well as unprecedented opportunities to shape and fashion one’s identity. As never before, “rags to riches” could seem more than a fairy-tale fantasy. At the same time, however, such dynamism encouraged a host of anxieties about identity and self-determination, memorably encapsulated in Pip’s abrupt transformation in *Great Expectations*. “I was a blacksmith’s boy but yesterday; I am – but what shall I say I am – today?” (Dickens 1996: 248). “Constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse,” in the words of *Middlemarch* (Eliot 1995c: 95), such mobility made encounters with strangers and strange places an increasingly common but unsettling challenge. “Nothing being really fixed in our society,” Edward Bulwer argued in 1833 (at least by comparison to nations on the continent), the English developed as defenses an increasingly guarded attitude that startled European visitors (Bulwer 1833). Much of the elaborate etiquette that we think of as distinctly Victorian – rituals of introduction, calling cards, the chaperoning of unmarried women, intricate decorums of dress – is at root a strategy for coping with social mobility, by affirming one’s own claims to recognition while at the same time maintaining a distance that allows one to “place” new acquaintances (Davidoff 1973). The Victorian novel developed into a form uniquely suited to represent these dynamics, capturing the textures of social interaction, aspiration, and anxiety, within which social hierarchy could seem both a stimulus and a barrier to personal achievement.

The rise of industrial capitalism transformed the social fabric in a yet more profound way. The nascent science of political economy decreed that economic life was an incessant pursuit of self-interest, which led individuals to see themselves locked into conflict with those who occupied different or competing roles in the dynamics of production. Whereas apologists for a pre-industrial order could presume that social hierarchy was harmonized by bonds of reciprocal moral obligation, under industrial capitalism such bonds were increasingly subsumed by mere contract, within which every individual presumably sought to maximize his own interests. The seeming resolution of all human attachment into “the cash nexus” became an obsessive preoccupation of early Victorian critics. “We call it a Society,” Carlyle wrote in 1843, “and go about professing openly the total separation, isolation. Our life is not a mutual helpfulness ... it is a mutual hostility” (Carlyle 1977: 148).

One powerful response to such strains was the Victorian cult of domesticity. This was another outgrowth of Evangelicalism, which enshrined the decorous, loving home as the emblem of a pious and well-ordered life. But, as the new century unfolded, the ideal developed into an increasingly insistent division of “separate spheres” rationalized primarily in terms of the burdens faced by men. Their perpetual struggle for “worldly aggrandizement,” as Sarah Stickney Ellis put it, was “constantly misleading their steps, closing their ears against the voice of conscience, and beguiling them with the promise of peace, where peace was never found” (Chase and Levenson 2000: 45). Poised against the coarsening effect of this “warfare,” the domestic woman – “woman in her highest moral capacity” – acted as both guidance and balm, a source of value outside the world of exchange. This led to the idea of a woman being associated with an instinctive, well-nigh angelic devotion to the needs of others, and thus a moral “influence” which elevated and refined those around her. So complete was her selflessness that some commentators were troubled by the very idea of feminine sexual desire. Thus it was that the home became, in one of the more delirious celebrations of the ideal, what John Ruskin in *Sesame and Lilies* called “the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division” (Ruskin 1903: xviii, 122).

Of course, “separate spheres” is profoundly misleading: not only is it impossible to seal off the two realms from one another, but also the attempt is logically incoherent. In Victorian celebrations of private life the home became an emphatically public place, called on to demonstrate varieties of moral and civic probity. (A similar dynamic has been reconstituted today under the slogan of “family values,” in which a political candidate’s ostensibly private life is blazoned on election posters.) Gender in this context became a powerful arena for articulating political conflict, which is one reason why domestic life became such a resonant preoccupation of Victorian literature. The celebration of selflessness and devotion as the keynotes of feminine character implicitly attacked an aristocratic model, under which women derived their value from beauty, kinship, and money. And masculinity was subjected to corresponding revision, particularly in pointed debates over the ideal of the gentleman. Revising a traditional norm founded on independent wealth – a gentleman never sullied his hands with “trade” – there emerged a more egalitarian model, which gave new stress to self-discipline, earnestness, and piety, along with older virtues of honesty, courage, and power.

Women who aspired to something more than domesticity naturally chafed at their exclusion from more direct participation in public affairs. Harriet Martineau, one of the most prominent liberal social critics of the first half of the period, rejected with contempt those who resisted civil rights for women on the grounds of “the virtual influence of woman; her swaying the judgment and will of man through the heart; and so forth.” In arguing with such notions, she rejoined, “One might as well try to dissect the morning mist” (Martineau 1962: 152–3). From roughly the early 1840s, an increasingly vocal and diverse feminism would join Martineau in contesting these views. Yet versions of the domestic ideal held ground among women as well as men – in part because it offered women a dignity long denied them. Traditionally demeaned as daughters of Eve, creatures of undisciplined desire who lured men into temptation, women now were exalted as paragons of restraint, while men became the embodiment of sexual license. But the celebration of female purity also underwrote a host of stark and constricting dichotomies, which allowed little middle ground between angel and whore. The trappings of “fallen” sexuality – the prostitute and the seduction plot – thus became central features of Victorian narrative, in and out of novels. Related suspicions would come to shadow the careers of many women writers, who made their own claims to publicity and self-assertion. In 1837, Robert Southey, the Poet Laureate, famously rebuked the writerly aspirations of an unknown Charlotte Brontë: “Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be.” A decade later, a male character in Geraldine Jewsbury’s *The Half-Sisters* (1848) points up a suspicion widely attached to women writers: “A woman who makes her mind public in any way, or exhibits herself in any way, no matter how it may be dignified by the title of art, seems to me little better than a woman of a particular class” (Mermin 1993: 15, 17).

Poor women were always more readily exposed to sexual suspicion, for they lacked the forms of shelter – both literal and figurative – that domesticity provided the affluent. In theory egalitarian, the domestic ideal naturally was informed by economic power: the more comfortable one’s surroundings and the more secure one’s income, the more readily home could be imagined as a refuge from the world at large. Indeed, the very concept of “separate spheres” answers to a profound transformation in social geography. Pre-industrial labor and trade typically took place in or near one’s residence – “above the shop” or “across the yard.” The rise of machine power and factories, as well as

broader networks of distribution, required more elaborate facilities separate from the home, and, as they created a great deal of noise and dirt, they also created a desire for more distant residence. The urban working classes, meanwhile, remained locked into frequently abysmal housing conditions, particularly in the burgeoning industrial towns of the north. By the middle of the century, the living conditions of the poor would become an urgent preoccupation of both novelists and “urban investigators,” forerunners of modern sociologists and ethnographers, who voyaged into the slums of London as if into the lairs of alien tribes.

As the growing separation between home and business nurtured an imaginative topography in which “separate spheres” could flourish, it enforced an unprecedented segregation, both geographic and psychic, of rich and poor. Reviewers for the major journals – most of them middle class – frequently marveled at the cultural abyss separating affluence and poverty across mere blocks of central London, a gulf brought into view more often by literature than by direct observation. Thackeray in an 1838 review pointed to a burgeoning world of working-class literature largely unknown to the “respectable” classes. Ignorance was exacerbated by the frictions of economic life. The “mutual hostility” of contract crystallized in workers a growing class-consciousness, most obviously in efforts to organize trades unions, which were greeted by capitalists and most middle-class commentators as knots of conspiracy and violence. The gradual erosion of traditional forms of deference – though meager indeed by comparison with modern British life – exacerbated subtle frictions in daily encounters, and reinforced among the propertied classes the association of the poor with violence and danger.

In most Victorian literature – where most authors were of broadly middle-class standing – representations of the poor are tinged with exoticism, as well as a vague fear of beings so outwardly remote. In large part, novels addressed such anxieties by externalizing them, thereby transforming danger into something strangely fascinating. In the “Newgate” novel of criminal life and so-called “industrial” fiction dealing with working-class characters, the fascination takes on a quasi-ethnographic cast, as if charting the workings of a dangerous alien world. The anxiety is more subtly registered in the insistent celebration of sympathy in literature. Though sympathy became a byword of novel criticism in particular, an index of the novelist’s insight into human character, the quality derived much of its urgency from the sense

that it might overcome, or at least disarm, social tensions. Sympathy encouraged belief in the fundamental harmony of rich and poor, typically grounded in the Wordsworthian faith that “we have all of us one human heart.” Praise of sympathy above other literary virtues reminds us of how powerfully Victorian literature is bound up with Victorian society.

The Literary Field

The technological revolutions of nineteenth-century life naturally had a profound effect on literature – not merely its availability, but the range of its forms and its changing audiences. At the outset of the century, the high cost of paper and printing, and the inflationary pressures of the Napoleonic Wars, made print an expensive commodity. The romantic popularity of poetry was in part a result of its relative brevity, and hence affordability. By 1820, the development of machine-made paper and the rotary steam press had begun to dramatically reduce the cost of printing, and monthly journals began to proliferate, the most notable before 1832 being *Blackwood's*, *The London Review*, *The Westminster Review*, *Colburn's New Monthly Magazine*, and *Fraser's*. As focal points of intellectual and political debate and a source of assured income from authorship (a rare security), periodical writing in the later 1820s commanded an authority that it has rarely enjoyed before or since (Marshall 1996). In 1825, the bravura style of an article on Milton in the *Edinburgh Review* caused a small sensation, and launched the momentous political and literary career of its 25-year-old author, Thomas Macaulay.

The literary field was further affected by a bank crisis of 1825, which led to the failure of several major publishing firms – most notably Constable, the publisher of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and Sir Walter Scott – and left those who weathered the storm much less willing to take risks on new authors, particularly poets. John Murray, who had published Byron, gave up on nearly everything but travel writing and biography – and the *Quarterly Review*, which became his economic bedrock. Like its great Whig rival, the *Edinburgh*, the Tory *Quarterly* was founded at the beginning of the century principally as a party organ (priced accordingly, affordable primarily to the small number of Englishmen who possessed the right to vote). Although the older quarterlies took in a broad swath of contemporary intellectual life, and

remained a cultural landmark for much of the century, they gradually were displaced by monthlies, which eventually combined essays and reviews with fiction published in serial installments.

With the increased affordability of print, reading became politically charged as never before. Various schemes of progress and reform became united under the banner of the “march of mind” grounded in the distribution of reading matter to an ever-wider audience. Radical journalists pressing for greater working-class political rights caused deep concern in the government. In an effort to regulate their writings, Parliament in 1820 passed the Seditious Publications Act, which imposed a tax of 4d on any publication that could be interpreted as news – the so-called “tax on knowledge” that became a rallying cry, and nurtured the slogan “Knowledge is Power.” Working-class politics found another outlet, and another source of solidarity, in pirated printings of poetry aligned with radicalism, such as Shelley’s *Queen Mab* and Byron’s *Don Juan*. Partly in an effort to defuse this agitation, Henry Brougham spearheaded the founding of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (1826), which subsidized a host of publications designed to convey practical, “improving” education to the working classes. (Radicals complained that “Broughamism” also inculcated docility by deflecting attention from the sufferings of the poor.) Meanwhile, religious groups apprehensive of this emphasis on secular knowledge countered with their own organizations, most notably the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, which had been founded in 1698 but took advantage of new technology (and subsidies from wealthy patrons) to distribute tracts by the tens, even hundreds, of thousands. (A single tract, *The Dairyman’s Daughter* by the Rev. Leigh Richmond, is believed to have sold some 2,000,000 copies in the 1830s and 1840s [L James 1963: 121].) New cheap serials also emerged to address and nurture this burgeoning market. Chambers’ *Edinburgh Journal* (1831) within a few years reached a circulation of 80,000. In 1832 the SDUK supported the founding of the *Penny Magazine*, published by Charles Knight, which called on recent technology to incorporate newly efficient reproductions of wood engraving, which would come to be a staple of Victorian novels. The *Penny Magazine*, which quickly attained a circulation of more than 100,000, was soon joined by the SPCK’s *Saturday Magazine*, whose circulation reached 80,000.

Scholars have debated how much of this circulation actually reached the intended working-class reader. What is clear is that these “improving”

publications could not crowd aside a vigorous market of more demotic reading, which was solidified by increasing concentration of the poor in large towns and cities. Well into the Victorian period, the primary literature of the literate poor consisted of traditional chapbooks, ballads, broadsheets, and “penny dreadfuls” – cheaply printed narratives of violence and crime, often in a broadly gothic vein. A representative serial devoted to the form was *The Calendar of Horrors: A Series of Romantic Legends, Terrific Tales, Awful Narrations, and Supernatural Adventures* (1835–6). This was the market that Thackeray described in his 1838 *Fraser’s* review, but it persisted well beyond his bemused condescension and other more forceful attacks. Surveys in 1840 recorded some 80 cheap magazines circulating in London – none costing more than twopenny, most of them a penny or less. Only four of them were primarily political; nine were scientific (in the vein of the *Penny Magazine*), five were “licentious” (at least quasi-pornographic), four were devoted to drama, 16 to biographies and memoirs, and 22 exclusively to fiction. That proportion would increase markedly during the 1840s, when G. W. M. Reynolds scored a huge success with his long-running serials in the “dreadful” mode in the *London Journal* and subsequently *Reynolds’s Miscellany* – one of which, *The Mysteries of the Court of London*, contains over 4 millions words (L. James 1963: 27).

This history can register only a tiny sampling of this flood of print, which swelled over the course of the century, as an expanding reading public and a gradual removal of the so-called knowledge taxes created ever-new markets for enterprising publishers, much to the consternation of the guardians of literary morality. In 1830, “literature” as we think of it today – forms of “imaginative” writing typically confined to fiction, poetry, and drama, with some allowance for memoir and critical writing – remained a far more indeterminate category, which was difficult to disentangle from journalism, and in which not only political writing, but also history, science, and religion figured prominently. Indeed, religious titles remained for much of the period the single largest category of publication. Of some 45,000 books announced in the London Catalogue between 1816 and 1851, fully one-fourth were works of divinity (Dodds 1952: 23).

A further distortion of the literary field is bound up with the very idea of a national literature. Over the course of the century, even as American literature began to assume its own separate identity, the Atlantic Ocean became a less imposing barrier to literary exchange, and increasingly the two countries came to resemble a single transatlantic

market for literature in the English language. In part this stemmed from the lack of international copyright until 1891, which allowed American publishers to pirate English bestsellers in huge quantities. But the exchange was two-way. It has been argued that the American Longfellow was the single most popular Victorian poet (St. Clair 2004: 391), and later Walt Whitman would have a powerful, if more narrowly circumscribed, influence. The most popular novels increasingly were international bestsellers. The most famous was Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which sold some one and a half million copies in the 1850s. At the outset of the period, Fenimore Cooper's frontier tales were extremely popular, and helped to shape the late-Victorian adventure vogue, as did Melville's more sexually daring early tales of South Sea life. In the latter half of the century, Henry James built much of his career around the probing of cultural boundaries, analyzing putatively distinctive qualities of the American character from his base in London, where he also figured centrally in debate over the novel as a form, and helped to shape "modernism" as a markedly Anglo-American movement. A similarly complex exchange emerged early in the period when Ralph Waldo Emerson arranged for the American publication of Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (its first appearance in book form), which initiated a lifelong correspondence, in which "transcendentalism" took shape as a transatlantic phenomenon. When Emerson came to England in 1848, his lectures were eagerly attended by writers who found his individualism a heady, sometimes dangerous, contribution to contemporary religious skepticism, while Emerson in turn memorialized the visit in *England and the English* – one of many hundreds of travel volumes over the course of the century devoted to analyzing what in the next century would become known as the "special relationship."

An Age of Prose

Amid the great debates prompted by Catholic Emancipation and the prospect of a Reform Bill, many commentators in 1830 noted that political commentary in journals and newspapers had displaced nearly every other form of literary exchange. Even by 1828, John Stuart Mill (himself a vigorous participant in the debates) expressed a widely echoed worry that the predominance of periodicals was contributing to the "degradation" of literature generally (Mill 1963–91: 12–13). Thought, it seemed, was being transformed into a commodity.

This concern points to a momentous logic in developing literary institutions. Over against a view of literature as one more product generated by market demand, Mill and other critics would shape an ideal of literature – poetry in particular – as a locus of value beyond exchange, a deeply personal form of expression and responsiveness to the world that elicited intimate forms of understanding between author and reader. This notion developed into an ideal of “culture,” a source of value nurtured primarily through aesthetic experience, which could be set against utilitarianism and other schemes that would reduce all forms of value to material interests. This development gave unusual prominence to periodical writing and other literary forms that have survived their original context under the awkward academic rubric, “non-fiction prose.”

In the romantic era the prose essay (particularly in the hands of Lamb, Hazlitt, and DeQuincey) became an unusually supple vehicle for varieties of introspection as well as social and literary comment. The dislocations of the early Victorian decades created an audience eager for writing that addressed new social prospects and perplexities. These worries were focused most pointedly in religious doubt, but in a world of greatly expanding literacy, where, to adapt Marx’s phrase, all that is solid seemed to be melting into air, the craving for new sources of value was unusually pervasive. This hunger is registered in the expanding popularity of lectures and public readings, along with the remarkable tolerance among Victorian audiences for sometimes excoriating attacks on their character and values. As many commentators have noted, Victorian social critics often seem rivals of the preacher or prophet, “elegant Jeremiahs,” to adopt a tag bestowed on Matthew Arnold. Drawing on rhetorical traditions of sermon and prophecy as well as earlier traditions of essayistic writing, authors such as Carlyle, Ruskin, and Arnold developed highly distinctive styles, which endeavor not merely to convince but also, more fundamentally, to jolt to attention readers lulled by fatigue, complacency, or a superabundance of print. Many readers in pursuit of new social and intellectual possibility were bewildered by the new vistas, and were glad to embrace writers as guides to the perplexed. Hence the increasing association of great literature with the wisdom of a sage – a title first and most influentially attached to Carlyle, “the sage of Chelsea.” *Sartor Resartus* (1831) was a harbinger of the extraordinary generic innovation associated with Victorian prose. This well-nigh unclassifiable work clearly draws on traditional religious exhortation, but combines it with elements of

biography, German romance, prose satire, philosophy, and social polemic, stirring up a heady concoction whose influence readers were still celebrating a half-century later.

For Carlyle, as for many Victorians, biography was a particularly satisfying form. Though its popularity gave rise to many dreary monuments of familial piety (heavily redacted *Lives and Letters* became an object of scorn later in the century), biography figured centrally as a model of moral struggle, of figures who triumphed over – or, occasionally, were paralyzed by – the distinctive social and spiritual challenges of the age. Life writing was an especially resonant vehicle for probing relations between individuals and the social order; Samuel Smiles's best-selling *Self-Help* (1859), which helped to inaugurate a genre still popular today, is in essence a series of brief lives. In Victorian religious debate, lives of the saints, or of renowned dissenters, or of Jesus himself (as in Strauss's scandalous *Das Leben Jesu*, translated by George Eliot) frequently were enlisted as crucial exhibits. Autobiography and memoir had a similar power, but it was a somewhat more unsettling genre, bound up as it was with what struck many Victorian as overweening self-regard and erosion of privacy. Yet the genre became increasingly central to cultural debate in the latter half of the century. Works such as Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Mill's *Autobiography*, and Froude's *Life of Carlyle* captured not only the shapes of particular lives but also the formation of distinctive modes of belief. Carlyle's entire career was an extended engagement with biography, pivoting as it did on the idea of heroism, from his early accounts of German literature, in which Goethe was the central exemplar, through the parodic biographical dimensions of *Sartor Resartus*, his lectures on *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, and his increasingly eccentric preoccupation with multi-volume chronicles of Cromwell and Frederick the Great. The biographical impulse also found its way into the novel, with the rise of the *Bildungsroman* or "novel of development," from *Jane Eyre* to *Great Expectations*. It also was an important force in poetry, not merely in the lyric, but in long poems such as Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. More subtly, biography informed the rise of the dramatic monologue, in which distinctive historical epochs or intellectual movements were frequently condensed in the evocation of a single and singular speaker.

In focusing on "representative men," in Emerson's phrase, biography was bound up with the newly acute awareness of history reflected

in the notion of a “spirit of the age.” Over the course of the century, this perception would develop into a thoroughgoing historicism, which presumed that forms of belief and value could be fully understood only in terms of the historical context that shaped them – a point of view that would prove particularly unsettling to traditional religious beliefs. In the early part of the period, however, history frequently was invoked to rationalize present courses of action. Macaulay’s *History of England* (1849–59) became the prime exemplar of a “Whig view of history” as a chronicle of unending progress driven by political and economic liberalism, while religious conservatives, most influentially the Tractarians, looked to history to recover forms of contact and continuity with the early Christian epoch. Newman would develop an unusually sophisticated theory of religious development that allowed for historical continuity amid doctrinal change, while more skeptical scholars such as W. E. H. Lecky (*History of the Rise and Spirit of Rationalism* [1865]) and H. T. Buckle (*The History of Civilization in England* [1857–61]) found in history a fitful but triumphal advance of reason over superstition. Over the course of the century, however, writers became increasingly engaged by the sheer strangeness of the past. The sense of the past as “a foreign country,” as the twentieth-century novelist L. P. Hartley put it, recognizes an aestheticizing power in historical distance, and a capacity to unsettle or disarm moral preconceptions. This effect is registered in literary forms as varied as the historical novel, the dramatic monologue, and a wide range of late-Victorian criticism. At the same time, the past could be felt at work in the present as a means of explaining otherwise baffling forms of thought – as in the pioneering anthropologist E. B. Tylor’s theory of cultural “survivals.”

Preoccupation with history created an environment well-equipped to grasp the momentous significance of Darwin, whose work was in turn nurtured by it. T. H. Huxley in “Science and Culture” pointed out a striking congruence between the two realms of thought. “When a biologist meets with an anomaly, he instinctively turns to the study of development to clear it up. The rationale of contradictory opinions may with equal confidence be sought in history” (Huxley 1905: 128). “Development” gathered in speculations across a wide range of science, from geology to embryology to natural history to astrophysical speculations on the origins of the cosmos, and from these realms it also spread into emergent discourses of anthropology and sociology. The great divide that we have come to call “the two cultures” of

science and the humanities only began to make itself felt in the latter half of the period. Well into the 1870s, science generally – and natural science in particular – engaged the attention of a broadly literate public, whose interests are reflected in the enormous popularity of both natural history and authors such as Tennyson, whose *In Memoriam* ponders the impact of proto-evolutionary speculation a decade before *The Origin of Species* was published. Stunning advances in a wide range of technology offered an especially fitting theme for triumphalist history, crowning the Baconian dream of mastery over the natural world. Samuel Smiles's *The Lives of the Engineers* found in its subjects the stuff of romantic heroism. Biology and engineering joined hands in a host of Victorian reformist impulses, such as public health campaigns addressing epidemic disease and the lack of adequate sanitation and housing. Those campaigns in turn generated a literature of their own, from parliamentary “blue books” to the “social problem” novel to polemical social criticism to a broad array of journalism.

As it opened up new avenues of transport and communication – most notably, railways from the early 1830s and, soon after, the telegraph – technological innovation also opened new literary frontiers. Foreign travel, in particular, which had been a bastion of privilege epitomized in the continental “Grand Tour,” became accessible to an increasingly broad public, which in turn formed a market for a burgeoning literature describing distant lands. The reach of the British Empire added special allure to Asia, Africa, South America, and the Middle East, while North America offered particularly resonant comparisons to Britain and its institutions. Readier access to France, Italy, and Greece made possible a newly vivid and extensive acquaintance with the history of Western art and architecture – a development reinforced at home by the expansion of public collections (the National Gallery was funded in 1824) and increased access to the treasures of great estates. The new prominence of the visual arts in English life called out new forms of critical writing, in which aesthetic concerns were increasingly linked to social diagnoses, most notably in the hugely influential writing of John Ruskin. With the large-scale rebuilding and expansion of urban England, architecture became an especially fierce arena of debate. As the choice of style came to seem an index of national character (typically fought out in relation to a similarly moralized account of architectural traditions) once again an outwardly minor literary form took on great social resonance.

The Situation of Poetry

For many commentators in 1830, poetry seemed in a desperate state, despite its cultural cachet. The extraordinary popularity of their immediate predecessors – Byron and Scott, above all, although pirated editions of Shelley were popular among working-class readers – indicated that poetry retained its long-standing centrality in English culture. Throughout the early decades of the era, many readers still composed verse to commemorate public or private events of special moment, suggesting that poetry retained a distinctly elevating and solemnizing force. In the 1830s and 1840s, critics frequently measured aspiring poets against a demand not only for emotional engagement but also for moral vision, and slapped down pretenders with a correspondingly fierce condescension. The combativeness, typically captured in archly gendered terms, reflected the eminence of the office – which admitted women and working-class men only on special suffrage. The most enduringly popular volume of the latter half of the 1820s was John Keble’s *The Christian Year* (1827), which owed much of its prominence to its immersion in Anglican worship and belief.

At the same time, the achievement of the great Romantics – a daunting act to follow under any circumstances – was countered by a new impatience associated with the rise of utilitarianism and the “march of mind,” which increasingly relegated poetry to the realm of the trivial or childish. Bentham famously averred that when it came to giving pleasure, poetry amounted to no more than pushpin. Even Macaulay in his essay on Milton declared that poetry was an achievement that civilization simply would outgrow. Macaulay loved poetry – his *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842) would be one of the best-selling poetry volumes of the age – but he loved his progress more.

More immediately disabling for aspiring poets, however, was the financial crisis of 1825, which left publishers feeling that poetry from unfamiliar writers was too risky a speculation. As a rule, unknown poets could be published in volume form only if they underwrote the costs, which naturally narrowed the social spectrum of potential authors. Some of the slack was taken up by the literary annuals, expensive and elaborately illustrated volumes akin to ladies’ keepsake albums, designed principally as holiday gifts, in which poems typically were paired with finely wrought steel engravings. From the founding of *Forget Me Not*

in 1823, annuals quickly came to dominate the poetry market over the next decade. The major annuals – *Forget Me Not* was joined by *The Literary Souvenir* and *The Keepsake* – cost 12 shillings apiece versus five for a typical volume of poetry, but they sold in the thousands (as compared to the typical edition of 200 for a new volume of poetry), through an adroit marketing that in turn allowed editors to pay exorbitant fees to well-known contributors. Male poets in particular disparaged the genre – “There is no other reading. They haunt me. I die of Albo-phobia,” Charles Lamb wrote in 1827 – but nearly all succumbed to the fees on offer (Adburgham 1983). The form allowed unusual prominence to women poets, most notably Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon (or L. E. L.), who in 1830 were two of the most prominent voices in English poetry.

Unsurprisingly, the affiliation of poetry with the feminized world of the annuals further exasperated critical frustration at the dearth of new poetry generally. “The reign of poesy is over, at least for half a century,” declared the hero of Disraeli’s *Vivian Grey* (1827). That verdict proved premature, but poets – particularly male poets – would be increasingly fearful that cultural authority had passed to other literary forms. “Poetry having ceased to be read, or published, or written,” Carlyle remarked in 1832, “how can it continue to be reviewed?” In fact, however, poetry reviews capture some of the epoch’s most provocative and far-reaching reflection on the cultural contexts and moral burdens of art generally. The reception of Tennyson’s *Poems* of 1830 encapsulates a host of conflicting demands that would confront the poet through much of the century: a cult of intimate expression clashed with demands for a poetry of public life and wisdom; the seeming tension between fidelity to beauty and moral obligation; the place of religious faith in a poetry attentive to the particulars of daily experience. These concerns recur throughout major critical debates of the age – the challenge of the novel as an epic of modern life; the rise of aestheticism and the “fleshly” school; the poetry of decadence – and they invigorate the major formal innovations of the era, the dramatic monologue and the so-called “novel-in-verse.” But even after Swinburne’s outrages on popular taste in the 1860s, the cultural situation of poetry remained precarious, responsive to a dilemma articulated in the earliest Victorian criticism. Does poetry have a function beyond that of emotional anodyne, of therapy for jangled nerves and intellectual confusion? Is the poet destined to become, as William Morris put it, “the idle singer of an empty day”?

Victorian Theater

While the institutions of poetry were under pressure in 1830, the decline of the drama had become a cliché. “Everywhere throughout Europe,” Bulwer wrote in *England and the English* (1833), “the glory of the theater is beginning to grow dim,” its former blaze certain to “die off in silence and darkness, like an extinct volcano” (Bulwer 1833: 135). There was similar consensus about the cause of the decline, in Britain at least: lack of financial reward even for successful playwrights, and the theater-going public’s pleasure in elaborate spectacle. Before the 1860s, playwrights were paid at a flat rate, which was unaffected by the length of a run. One of the great successes of the 1860s, *Our American Cousin*, netted the manager of the Haymarket Theatre the fabulous sum of 20,000 pounds (the annual income of Britain’s wealthiest nobility); its author, Tom Taylor, received 150 pounds. In the 1830s the standard fee for a first-run drama at minor theaters was between 50 and 70 pounds – which put great pressure on dramatists to be prolific (and to borrow heavily from foreign sources) but made it almost impossible for them to live comfortably through playwriting alone.

Meanwhile, playwrights confronted an audience accustomed to increasingly spectacular staging, a development nourished by the peculiar history of the British stage. In a backhanded tribute to the political power of the theater, the Licensing Act of 1737 had granted a monopoly on “legitimate” drama to only two London theaters, Covent Garden and Drury Lane. “At present the English, instead of finding politics on the stage, find their stage in politics,” quipped Bulwer (Bulwer 1833: 237). Unlicensed theaters were barred from staging productions with speaking parts; hence they resorted to forms of mime, dumbshow, and musical accompaniment, along with increasingly elaborate stage technology, nurturing a taste for spectacle that spread in turn to the legitimate theaters. As R. H. Horne put it, in his *New Spirit of the Age* (1844), the stature of playwrights has declined “because the public taste has been perverted, and cannot improve of itself, and because managers, without a single exception, persist in pandering to that perversion, viz., addressing gaudy and expensive shows to the external senses.” (Horne 1844: ii.93). Even after the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 abolished the patent theater privileges, these trends persisted, creating the enduring image of the Victorian playhouse as an immense space in which performers were dwarfed by their surroundings, and the

primary mode of engagement was visual, with actors warring against their backdrops by means of elaborately stylized movement and speech delivered in hectoring, stentorian register. The conditions nurtured a particular conception of the actor as virtuoso – even if it also tended to coarsen the spectacle into histrionics accessible to thousands of spectators. Only gradually did actresses come more into the foreground, and begin to slip free of the taint that associated their profession with prostitution. Indeed, not until the 1890s, with the “new drama” of Ibsen and Shaw – or so the traditional history runs – did the stage become a central locus of cultural innovation and debate.

But these verdicts say as much about an elitist hierarchy of dramatic forms as they do of the power of drama. Drama has always been an arena for battles over the puritanism of British culture. In 1830, when many dissenters and evangelicals shuddered at the idea of setting foot in a playhouse (a thrilling transgression memorably recorded in the best-selling *John Halifax, Gentleman* [1856]) a visitor to London might have been struck more than anything by the sheer variety of theatrical forms on exhibit: farce, pantomime, burlesque, melodrama, opera, drawing-room comedy, Shakespeare. This is the age, moreover, in which “private theatricals” took a central place in affluent domestic life. In the major theaters, tragedy gradually turned into “drama,” an amalgam of intrigue, sensation, idealism, and domestic sentiment that would endure throughout the remainder of the century, and on into the next in different media, notably cinema and television (Booth 1991). The dominant form was melodrama, which was mainly popular and proletarian in theme and sentiment, frequently preoccupied with the exploitation of the poor by aristocratic or wealthy villains (many of the theaters devoted to melodrama were in working-class neighborhoods). More generally, its representation of stark moral conflict and highly wrought emotion also made it a compelling vehicle for dramatizing contemporary social problems, which remained largely absent in other literary forms. By the end of the century, comic melodrama had fused with burlesque in the world of the music hall, which became the central cultural arena for testing the emergent boundaries of “high” and “low”, mass and elite cultural distinctions.

The Novel After Scott

The most profound impact of early Victorian drama arguably came in another genre altogether, the novel, where it helped to shape the single

most important literary career of the Victorian era, that of Dickens. The novel in 1830 was the youngest and least established of the major genres, still widely suspect as at best a shallow amusement or distraction, frequently indistinguishable from “romance,” and thus for many conservative religious readers a dangerous indulgence in daydreams and lying. Yet the stature of the form had been transfigured by the career of a single writer, Sir Walter Scott. Scott’s Waverly novels, which began to appear anonymously in 1812, were hugely popular, not least because the traditional domestic interests of the form were developed within richly detailed accounts of British history, particularly the relations between England and Scotland, from medieval times to the present. In effect, Scott rescued romance from its feminine associations, and pointed towards the subsequent development of the novel as the dominant literary form of the century. From the moment that Scott’s novels began to claim the public’s interest, the *Athenaeum* proclaimed in 1828, “we think we can trace a decline of the interest which was taken in poetry” (Chittick 1990: 22).

Scott’s career reshaped the fortunes of the novel in a further manner, which again reflects the financial upheavals of the mid-1820s. In the wake of Constable’s bankruptcy, Scott himself was financially ruined, but he and the publisher both labored to honorably repay their debts. In the process, Scott probably hastened his death in 1832, but Constable’s enterprising partner Cassell evolved a new format for publishing novels. The success of Scott’s fiction had established a standard format and price for a novel – three volumes sold for a price of 31s 6d – that persisted until the 1890s. This largely arbitrary figure priced new fiction beyond the reach of even many middle-class readers – it represented more than a week’s income for most working-class families – but its resilience reflects its economic benefits to those who published and distributed fiction (to an audience that in the late 1820s was probably no more than 50,000 [Sutherland 1976: 17]). The price gave an effective monopoly to circulating libraries, which purchased new novels in large numbers from publishers and then rented them, thereby gaining great influence over the content of fiction. The system thus allowed publishers to see much of an edition sold even before publication, and enabled them to turn a profit on small press runs (Sutherland 1976: 13–17). *Constable’s Miscellany*, however, initiated the reprinting of novels in a one-volume edition for the price of 10 shillings. The gesture was of a piece with many other schemes of the period for distributing literature to wider audiences, all of them in keeping with the

growing cultural democratization and the celebration of “useful knowledge.” But the reprinting of novels not only reinforced Scott’s popularity; it also put back into circulation older works, thereby reinforcing the prominence and popularity of the form. More broadly, Scott’s popularity underwrote a new conception of the author. He had published anonymously, because gentlemen did not wish to be engaged in trade, but by his death he had become the exemplar of professional authorship, which developed in close relationship with the ongoing expansion of publishing and audiences.

The novel was especially well adapted to explore and even to define central aspects of Victorian experience and belief. Formally, it developed as an interplay of romance and realism, of fantasy both shaped and obstructed by the imperatives of social and material life. The very construction of realistic “character” is grounded in forms of alienation; it presupposes minds able to withdraw into a psychic space free from, or at least resistant to, social determination. Of course, that same withdrawal may come to seem imprisoning, and nurture a yearning for fuller sense of contact with other (similarly withdrawn) minds; the illusion of such contact is an experience that novelistic representation – particularly through what becomes known as “free indirect discourse” – is uniquely able to offer. As this emphasis on interiority also might encourage a faith in personal autonomy, more recent critics have seen in the work of the Victorian novel a “discipline” that buttressed the premises of classical liberalism. The Victorians themselves saw that regimen less as a gesture of political freedom than as a submission to higher powers, whether duty or God. Thus Thomas Arnold suggests how powerfully introspection was part of the legacy of evangelicalism: “What I feel daily more and more to need,” he confided to a friend, “is to have intercourse with those who take life in earnest. It is very painful to be to be always on the surface of things ... I want a sign, which one catches by a sort of masonry, that a man knows what he is about in life ...” (Stanley 1844: 275). Here is a longing for communion that might well be gratified by the rich sense of interiority developed in realistic characterization. Certainly the experience of novel-reading reinforced Victorian structures of private life, not only in its thematic content but as the experience of reading organized that life. This effect became especially marked with the explosive growth of serial publishing ushered in by the early success of Dickens, within which the reception of the latest installment might be a highlight of weekly or monthly domestic routine.