



# “The Times are Unexampled”: Literature in the Age of Machinery, 1830–1850

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## Constructing the Man of Letters

“The whole world here is doing a Tarantula Dance of Political Reform, and has no ear left for literature.” So Carlyle complained to Goethe in August of 1831 (Carlyle 1970–2006: v.327). He was not alone: the great stir surrounding prospects for electoral reform seemed for the moment to crowd aside all other literary interests. The agitation, however, helped to shape a model of critical reflection that gave new weight to literature. The sense of historical rupture announced on all sides was on this view fundamentally a crisis of belief – what a later generation would call an ideological crisis. Traditional forms of faith that undergirded both the English state and personal selfhood were giving way; the times required not merely new political arrangements, but new grounds of identity and belief. Of course, that very designation reflected a skeptical cast of mind. New myths, it seemed, could no longer be found in sacred texts and revelations. They would be derived from secular writings and experience – something that came to be called “literature” in our modern sense of the term. And the best guide to that trove of possibility would be a figure known as “the man of letters.”

The most resonant versions of this story were honed through an unlikely literary exchange. In 1831 Carlyle (1795–1881), struggling to eke out a living as an author in the remote Scottish hamlet of Craigenputtoch, came upon “The Spirit of the Age,” a series of articles

in the London *Examiner* by John Stuart Mill (1806–73). Carlyle wrote to Mill, praising his analysis (in mocking echo of Voltaire’s *Pangloss*) as “the first ... which he had ever seen in a newspaper, hinting that the age was not the best of all possible ages” (Mill 1963–91: xii. 241). Both men understood the political crisis in historical terms, but Carlyle recognized in Mill’s analysis of the situation more psychological complexity than the young Mill himself was yet able to appreciate. The present age, Mill pronounced, was above all “an age of transition. Mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones” (Mill 1963–91: xxii. 230). But Mill’s analysis allows for little sense of ambivalence or self-division: “Mankind are then divided into those who are still what they were, and those who have changed: into the men of the present age, and the men of the past” (xxii.228). Such was Mill’s faith in the irresistible logic of reform – “The superior capacity of the higher ranks for the exercise of worldly power is now a broken spell” (xxii. 231) – that he overlooked a third category in his partition of mankind: those men at home in neither the present nor the past, who are themselves in a state of transition.

Carlyle’s diagnosis emphasized precisely this middle state. “The Old has passed away,” he wrote in “Characteristics” (1831), “but alas, the new appears not in its stead; the time is still in pangs of travail with the New” (Carlyle 1869: ii.373). This burden of baffled self-consciousness and suspended allegiance – “wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born” as Matthew Arnold put it a generation later (“Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse”) – would echo throughout the period. Mill’s faith in the power of logic afforded him a relatively secure ground of value, but Carlyle understood the moment as a more inchoate crisis of belief. Benthamism and its affiliated ideologies – most notably, laissez-faire economics – offered no source of value outside the self, save the various forms of “machinery” designed to further competing self-interests. In pressing this point, Carlyle launched a searching critique of liberal individualism, and ultimately of Enlightenment rationality. The goal was an ethical ground apart from material rewards, a source of value beyond contract and exchange, which Carlyle associated with deeply personal, intuitive modes of understanding. In this emphasis Carlyle is an heir to Burke and Coleridge, and aligned in important respects with more conventional religious thinkers. His position would be echoed by, among others, the theologian John Henry Newman, who in a riposte to secular schemes of progress (“The Tamworth Reading Room”) attacked their spiritual

impoverishment: “Wonder is not religion, or we should be worshipping our railroads” (Newman 1965: 106). But whereas Newman resisted “liberalism” by urging the reassertion of clerical power and a return to a purer, more primitive Christianity, Carlyle was convinced that traditional modes of faith had lost their hold.

Carlyle’s personal history made him better prepared than Mill to appreciate the struggle for new belief, which became the focus of his greatest work. Mill was born into a radical, free-thinking, middle-class intellectual community in London, and from his father he secured comfortable employment at the East India Company, a position that provided him a steady income and abundant time for writing. Carlyle, the son of a stonemason, had to struggle for nearly two decades to make a living by his writing, and to hammer out a faith to replace the strenuous Calvinism of his parents, who had hoped he would become a minister in the Scottish Kirk. The barbed irony so distinctive of his mature writings emerged in his early letters, largely as mockery of his own sense of failure, which led him to see the very fact of self-consciousness as an index of corrosive doubt. Even after his lapse from orthodox belief, Carlyle envied the preacher’s authority, both spiritual and social, and he aspired to endow the author’s career with its own “sacredness”: “Authors are martyrs – witnesses for truth, – or else nothing. Money cannot make or unmake them” (Froude 1882: ii.264). Yet his own circumstances made this an unusually strenuous demand. “We have no Men of Letters now, but only Literary Gentlemen,” he complained (Carlyle 1869: iii.104). Unlike literary gentlemen, however, men of letters had to live by their writing.

This burden had been a recurrent theme of Samuel Johnson (on whom Carlyle wrote an early, admiring essay), but Johnson at least possessed a firm Christian faith. Carlyle in his years of struggle came to envision himself as a latter-day prophet of a new dispensation, straddling Jewish and Christian Testaments. At once Jeremiah and John the Baptist, he excoriated the failings of England and foretold its imminent collapse, while at the same time heralding “a new mythus” that would rescue the country from its bewilderment – although the form of that redeeming faith remained elusive. Hence the appeal of figures of radical alienation: St John the Baptist, Ahab, Ishmael. Yet Carlyle’s growing audience ultimately embraced such estrangement as a warrant of integrity. As his admiring biographer J. A. Froude put it, “He called himself a Bedouin, and a Bedouin he was, owing no allegiance save to his Maker and his own conscience” (Froude 1882: ii.402). The “free-lance”

writer, in other contexts vilified as an unprincipled hack, became a model of detachment from party, tradition, and unreflective “allegiance” of all kinds. Here was the realm of the man of letters – a space that would come to be associated with the work of “culture” and criticism generally. In the meantime, Carlyle’s prophetic mantle offered a consolation to many over the century who shared his large ambitions: the prophet is always unappreciated in his own country.

The struggle towards new forms of belief could best be understood within an emblematic personal history. Carlyle derived this insight from Goethe, whose work he translated and would influentially celebrate. In 1831 Carlyle undertook a work of his own in the broad vein of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, a central example of the German *Bildungsroman*, or novel of development. But that was not quite how Carlyle put it: “I am writing nonsense,” he wrote in his notebook; “a book about clothes” (Carlyle 1970–2006: 5.174). The book began as an attack on the dandy, the icon of an enervated aristocracy oblivious to the suffering around it. But Carlyle also saw in the trope of clothing and fashion a figure for the force of history, in particular, the incessant transformation of human beliefs and institutions. Humankind is always struggling to find adequate vesture, in Carlyle’s terms, for its beliefs – vesture which culminates in their conception of divinity. “The thing Visible, nay the thing Imagined, the thing in any way conceived as Visible, what is it but a Garment, a Clothing of the higher, celestial Invisible?” (Carlyle 1908: 49). The trope has a long literary history – witness *King Lear* – but it took on added topicality through the revolutionary *sans-culottes* in France, a precedent still haunting England in 1832. Here was a radical questioning of the existing fabric of belief gone horribly wrong. How could present-day England envision a new set of clothing nobler, more truly spiritual, than that of the dandy? Hence the enigmatic title of Carlyle’s volume: *Sartor Resartus*, the tailor retailored.

*Sartor Resartus* is a rare amalgam of genres: sentimental romance, autobiography, sermon, *Bildungsroman*, theological treatise, all subjected to withering parody yet cohering into a deeply felt, multi-layered narrative of spiritual crisis and resolution. The struggle for belief is refracted through two embedded narratives, whose depictions of intellectual life still can sting. The peripatetic career of the late Diogenes Teufelsdröckh (“God-born Devils’-dung”), Professor of Things in General at the University of Weissnichtwo (“Who knows where?”), is being reconstructed from random scraps of writing, contained in a

dozen large bags bequeathed to the bewildered editor, Sauerteig. The interplay of these two narratives generates dizzying ironic play captured in the radical dualisms of Carlyle's language (God and Devil, spirit and dung): "The grand unparalleled peculiarity of Teufelsdröckh is, that with all this Descendentalism, he combines a Transcendentalism, no less superlative; whereby if on the one hand he degrades man below most animals ... he, on the other, exalts him beyond the visible Heavens" (Carlyle 1908: 48). As Carlyle sends up both Goethe's *The Sorrows of Werther* and his own early efforts as a reverent biographer of Goethe, he also locates in Teufelsdröckh an archetypal struggle for belief. The most frequently excerpted section of the book is a conversion narrative – or "Baphometric Fire-baptism," in Teufelsdröckh's eccentric idiom (128) – in which Teufelsdröckh moves from "The Everlasting Nay" through "The Center of Indifference" to "The Everlasting Yea." He must overcome an "unbelief" epitomized in utilitarianism, which for Carlyle exemplifies the reduction of human experience to mere appetite, a notion that he mocks incessantly: "what, in these dull unimaginative days, are the terrors of Conscience to the diseases of the Liver! Not on Morality, but on Cookery, let us build our stronghold: there brandishing our frying-pan, as censer" (123). Only by rediscovering the "higher, celestial Invisible" can Teufelsdröckh recognize that the universe is not a godless mechanism but a divine organism, within which he can realize a genuinely moral existence.

The result was too much even for the wits at *Fraser's Magazine*, where *Sartor* was first published in installments in 1833–4. Mill was puzzled; even Ralph Waldo Emerson, who came to know Carlyle through the work and arranged for its American publication as a book, complained of the willfully obscure style (Carlyle 1970–2006: 5.196, 8.135). It was published as a book in England only after the success of Carlyle's next major work, *The French Revolution*, in 1837. Yet, within a generation, *Sartor Resartus* had become something like a guide to the perplexed. In keeping with its skeptical historicist treatment of religious doctrine, the book shies away from a specifically religious credo. But its special appeal lay in a consoling vagueness. As T. H. Huxley put it in a letter some 30 years later, "*Sartor Resartus* taught me that a fervent belief is compatible with an entire absence of theology" (Irvine 1972: 131). In effect, Carlyle conjured up a divinity shorn of doctrinal specifics, a sense of indwelling spiritual presence evoked most suggestively in what he called "Natural Supernaturalism." Over against what Max Weber would later call "the disenchantment of the world," Carlyle

struggled to evoke a world of all-encompassing mystery, and a correspondent awe and reverence in the beholder who can recognize this as the index of a spiritual dimension in mankind. Carlyle thus offered a sanctification of the everyday, in which sheer self-denying devotion to one's labor became a form of worship – and a means of putting down the gnawing pangs of doubt. “Doubt of any sort cannot be removed except by Action” (Carlyle 1908: 147). Hence Carlyle transforms the Platonic injunction, “Know thyself” into the more palpable, “Know what thou canst work at,” and proceeds to generalize the imperative from John 9:4: “Work while it is called Today; for the Night cometh, wherein no man can work” (149). The “gospel of work,” as it became known, was perhaps Carlyle's most influential contribution to Victorian thought – along with his celebration of those heroic individuals who most fully embody it. In this way *Sartor* pays symphonic tribute to the power of sublimation: one escapes from the burdens of doubt, even self-consciousness, through utter immersion in duty. The nature of that duty remained vague, as innumerable commentators pointed out and, when conjoined with the deification of heroic will, Carlyle's exhortations opened the way to a cult of great men. But for at least a generation this hint of authoritarianism was obscured by the hunger for authority itself.

Mill and Carlyle would later part company in bitter political disagreement, but Mill took to heart the example of *Sartor*. When in the 1850s Mill believed he was dying, he felt impelled – much against the instincts of his own reticence – to set down the development of his thought in the form of an autobiography. Within that volume (published posthumously in 1874) the pivot of Mill's narrative became “A Crisis in My Mental History,” an event he located in the late 1820s. The analytic habit of mind inculcated by the example of Bentham and his father's rigorous training (Mill began learning Greek at the age of three) had eroded his capacity to feel – so much that he could not find pleasure even in the imagined triumph of Benthamite reflection. In effect, he had come to Carlyle's conclusion that Logic is always saying No. His emergence from the depression, Mill recalls, gave him a new appreciation for what he calls Carlyle's “anti-self-consciousness theory”: “Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so. The only chance is to treat, not happiness, but some end external to it, as the purpose of life” (Mill 1963–92: i.145–7). Mill drew from this ordeal a new appreciation for “the internal culture of the individual,” which Bentham had failed to recognize. Later in the 1830s, Mill would

incorporate his new attention to emotional life in a revisionist view of Benthamism, which he most fully developed in pendant essays on Bentham and Coleridge. What had seemed a sharp antagonism became a more subtly modulated dialectic, pointing to a synthesis that Mill would pursue in his own writings. Stereotyped as a model of unfeeling rationality, Mill in fact would provide especially resonant understandings of anxiety and emotional need. And he paid fulsome tribute to the influence of Carlyle, “the mystic,” in guiding him towards a newly exacting analysis of human feeling and education.

### The Burdens of Poetry

Mill’s mental crisis led him to an unusually suggestive account of the situation of poetry in 1830. Poetry tended to be disparaged by both evangelicals and Benthamites; the former as part of a more inclusive suspicion of imagination; the latter as a source of pleasure no more exalted than pushpin, in Bentham’s dismissive phrase. Mill, however, had discovered during his mental crisis “a medicine for my state of mind” in reading Wordsworth. His poetry “seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of” (Mill 1963–92: 1:151). In rethinking his utilitarian inheritance, Mill came to emphasize the imagination that Bentham had neglected, “the power by which one human being enters into the mind and circumstances of another” (Mill 1963–92: x.92). For much of the century, the power to arouse sympathetic understanding was the special virtue of literature generally, and of poetry in particular. And critics came to define the work of culture along the lines of Mill’s “culture of the feelings,” as a force which guided and constrained instrumental reason, the logic of means and ends, the mental “machinery” associated with an increasingly mechanized world.

When Mill described the work of poetry, however, it seemed at once terribly fragile and deeply anti-social. In an essay of 1833, he defined poetry in sharp contrast to eloquence: “both alike the expression or utterance of feeling,” but “eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*.” Poetry is distinguished above all by “utter unconsciousness of a listener”: in true poetry, there will be “no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us” (Mill 1960–93: i.348–9). In this ideal of pure effusion, awareness of an audience necessarily subverts the integrity of feeling. This striking antagonism (reminiscent of Carlyle’s wrestling

with self-consciousness) suggests a deep anxiety about selfhood and subjectivity. True poetry is not merely a warrant of emotional authenticity, it also suggests that such integrity can exist only in resistance or oblivion to society at large. Mill's individualism made this fear of social mediation an unusually vexing issue, one that he would engage most fully in *On Liberty*. But the tension resonates throughout early Victorian poetry, in which the poet's relation to an audience becomes a standing problem. Inherent in this emphasis, moreover, is the possibility that poetry will be reduced to an emotional balm, and will lose its purchase on a wider world of thought and value that had traditionally been the burden of the epic. This became a recurrent burden in Victorian quarrels with romanticism, such as Henry Taylor's Preface to his historical drama *Philip van Artevelde* (1834), which complains that "the popular poetry of the times" (Byron, in particular) valued feeling and "external embellishments" at the expense of reflection and understanding, the poet's obligation of "seeing all things, to infer and to instruct" (Taylor 1894: xi). Carlyle offered a more radical criticism: the age was devoid of wisdom for the poet to express. "All art is but a reminiscence now," he wrote in 1833, "for us in these days *Prophecy* (well understood) not Poetry is the thing wanted; how can we *sing* and *paint* when we do not yet *believe* and *see*?" (Carlyle 1970–2006: vii.9).

Such impatience reflected in part the increasing association of poetry with women and femininity. Literary histories typically date Victorian poetry from the appearance of Tennyson's *Poems* in 1830. But when Tennyson made his debut, the two most popular contemporary poets (beyond the elderly Scott) were Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon (who wrote under the initials L. E. L.). Hemans (1790–1835) passed most of her adult life in a small Welsh village, yet she became one of the most popular English poets of the nineteenth century, above all during the years between 1830 and 1850. One of the rare women able to support a family through her writing, by 1831 Hemans was earning two guineas per page for her poetry from *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, more than even Scott commanded (Feldman 1999: 72–4). The keynote of her lyrics – and of her popularity – is an outwardly unlikely conjunction of domestic affections and patriotic fervor.

Hemans was the most prominent voice in the marked domestication of English verse that developed in the wake of Byron's death in 1824. Over against Byron's deracinated exiles, for whom domestic happiness



was at best a memory, at worst a delusion, Hemans's poetry dwelt insistently on the spaces – physical and psychic – of home. Most often, the emotional texture of home (particularly maternal devotion) is evoked through loss; death shadows nearly all of her lyrics, whether her ostensible subject be a troubadour, a conqueror, or, as one title has it, “The forsaken Hearth”: “The Hearth, the Hearth is desolate, the fire is quench'd and gone /That into happy children's eyes once brightly laughing shone” (ll. 1–2; Hemans 2002).

“Home” readily extended beyond the hearth, however, to embrace England itself, whose distinction could be evoked in turn through juxtaposition with a much wider world, not merely as a space of difference, but as a realm increasingly under English dominion. In this light, home in Hemans's poetry could be more than the cozy nest of so much later Victorian fantasy; it was a realm within which the obscure, seemingly self-abnegating lives of women – their love, their devotion, and the grief that underscored those – resonated with larger political struggles. Thus “The Homes of England” (1827) is prefaced with an epigraph from Scott's *Marmion*, “Where's the coward who would not dare /To fight for such a land?,” and moves from “gladsome looks of household love” to a concluding exhortation,

The free, fair homes of England!  
 Long, long in hut and hall,  
 May hearts of native proof be rear'd  
 To guard each hallow'd wall!  
 And green for ever be the groves,  
 And bright the flowery sod,  
 Where first the child's glad spirit loves  
 Its country and its God!

(ll. 33–40; Hemans 2002)

In such lyrics, patriotism and familial affection are fused in a single, all-encompassing devotion. (As those virtues came to seem less compelling, so did Hemans's lyrics.) The effect is notable even in Hemans's most famous poem, “Casabianca” of 1829 (“The boy stood on the burning deck ...”), which would remain a staple of school recitation more than a century after her death. The setting is far removed from domesticity, yet the heroism it celebrates is not that of a traditional warrior. It is the unflinching loyalty of “a young faithful heart,” who refuses to abandon his dying father even as their ship is consumed by

fire. In this apotheosis of devotion (“wreathing fires ...wrapped the ship in splendour wild” [ll. 28–9]; Hemans 2002) Hemans discovers heroism in traditionally feminine virtues – to such an extent that the self-immolation seems eerily akin to suttee. But that echo, unsettling as it may be, hints at some of the stresses increasingly associated with the demands facing Victorian woman, who were likewise expected to wait on voices that might never reply.

This plangent note was widely observed, and meant much to Letitia Landon or “L. E. L.” (1802–38). “No emotion is more truly, or more often pictured in her song, than that craving for affection ... which answers not unto the call” (Landon 1997: 177), she wrote in a tribute after Hemans’s death in 1835. L. E. L.’s lyrics rehearsed similar dramas of thwarted affection, but in a manner more extravagant and unguarded, in a career as meteoric as Hemans’s was withdrawn. Whereas Hemans remained securely removed from the London literary scene, the “Mrs.” a warrant of respectable domesticity (ironically, her husband had abandoned her when she was pregnant with their fifth child), Landon almost from her first publication, when she was just out of her teens, plunged into literary society, and walked a moral tightrope before a public alternately enraptured and punishing. Her poems quickly became objects of curiosity as well as admiration. Bulwer Lytton, in a review of L. E. L.’s 1831 novel, *Romance and Reality*, recalled during his Cambridge days “a rush every Saturday afternoon for ‘The Literary Gazette’” in pursuit of “the three magical letters of ‘L. E. L.’ “And all of us praised the verse, and all of us guessed at the author. We soon learned it was a female, and our admiration was doubled, and our conjectures tripled. Was she young? Was she pretty? And ... was she rich?” (Landon 1997: 331). With her growing visibility in the literary world, particularly after the success of *The Improvisatrice* in 1824, such speculation soon spilled into gossip that dogged her for the remaining decade of her brief life – a wounding version of the suspicions aroused by women bold enough to lay claim to public notice. (Only a century and a half after her death did it become known that Hemans in fact gave birth to several children fathered by her most vocal advocate, the editor William Jerdan [Leary 2005: 72].)

In her poetry, meanwhile, the tears of unrequited love (a preoccupation that wearied even her admirers) mingled with dismay at the alienation experienced by literary women. As she wrote in her eulogy of Hemans, “Genius places a woman in an unnatural position; notoriety frightens away affection; and superiority has for its attendant fear, not

love” (Landon 1997: 183) – a sentiment she discovered in the ending of Hemans’s “Corinne at the Capitol”:

Happier, happier far than thou  
 With the laurel on thy brow,  
 She that makes the humblest hearth  
 Lovely but to one on earth.

(Landon 1997: 184)

The tangled relations of love and laurel frequently perplexed her own poetry. From early works largely content to rehearse the paradoxical pleasures of grief, L. E. L. moved to more complex meditations on poetry and feeling. In “Memory” (1837), one of her last poems, love disrupts a life in which “to dream and to create has been my fate, / Alone, apart from life’s more busy scheming,” and prompts the memory of an earlier day in which the depiction of love had not been complicated by experience:

Oh! Give me back the past that took no part  
 In the existence it was but surveying:  
 That knew not then of the awaken’d heart  
 Amid the life of other lives delaying.

Why should such be mine own? I sought it not:  
 More than content to live apart and lonely,  
 The feverish tumult of a loving lot,  
 Is what I wish’d and thought to picture only.  
 (ll. 21–8; Landon 1997)

Such expressions could seem meretricious, merely “pictured,” and thus well suited to the illustrated annuals to which L. E. L. devoted so large an amount of her time (her main source of income after 1831 was editing and producing much of the copy for *Fisher’s Drawing Room Scrap Book*). But it may also suggest that her poems found so large an audience through focusing on the sheer power of feeling – enacting the very response they aimed to arouse in their readers.

Unrequited longing figured centrally in the reception of another poet a few years younger than Landon. When *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, by A. Tennyson, was published in 1830, nearly all reviewers praised a lyric entitled “Mariana.” Inspired by a brief allusion in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* to the neglected fiancée of Angelo – “There, at

the moated grange, resides this dejected Mariana,” (III.1) – the young Tennyson evoked a world of haunting abandonment:

With blackest moss the flower-pots  
 Were thickly crusted, one and all;  
 The rusted nails fell from the knots  
 That held the pear to the gable-wall.  
 The broken sheds look'd sad and strange:  
 Unlifted was the clinking latch;  
 Weeded and worn the ancient thatch  
 Upon the lonely moated grange.  
 She only said, “My life is dreary,  
 He cometh not, she said;  
 She said, “I am aweary, aweary,  
 I would that I were dead!”

(ll. 1–12; Tennyson 1969)

Prolonged over seven stanzas, each with a variation of the opening refrain (“I am aweary, aweary ...”), the poem elaborates a sense of desolation unrivaled even in Hemans: domesticity is emptied of all solace. In this baffled longing, as in its markedly pictorial cast, this is a poem deeply indebted to the much-derided annuals. But critics found it mesmerizing: “Words surely never excited a more vivid feeling of physical and spiritual dreariness,” Mill commented, and he went on to praise Tennyson’s capacity for “scene-painting ... the power of creating scenery, in keeping with some state of human feeling; so fitted as to be the embodied subject of it, and to summon up the state of feeling itself, with a force not to be surpassed by anything but reality.” W. J. Fox in the *Westminster* similarly applauded the sympathetic power, marveling that “our author has the secret of the transmigration of the soul. He can cast his spirit into any living thing, real or imaginary” (Jump 1971: 87, 27).

The reception of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* has to some degree overshadowed the poems themselves. The work gained unusual notice for a first volume of lyrics, largely because the poet had won the Chancellor’s medal for English verse at Cambridge in 1827 for a poem entitled “Timbuctoo,” which was widely applauded by Tennyson’s well-connected friends (even those who confessed they found this Shelleyan dream-vision profoundly obscure). But supporters felt obliged to defend *Poems* by distinguishing it from the poetry of the annuals. Women poets evoking such bereavement were liable to be chastised for

unreflective self-absorption; Tennyson was praised for his powers of sympathy. An array of lyrics celebrating women – or at least their names: Oriana, Claribel, Lilian, Isabel, Madeline, Adeline – called forth similar enthusiasm, even from critics who recognized their affinities to the portrait galleries of the annuals. “A considerable number of the poems are amatory,” W. J. Fox rather guardedly acknowledged; but “they are the expression not of heartless sensuality, nor of a sickly refinement, nor of fantastic devotion, but of manly love; and they illustrate the philosophy of the passion while they exhibit the various phases of its existence, and embody its power” (Jump 1971: 29). The defensive undercurrent – not heartless and sickly but “manly,” not mere passion but “the philosophy of the passion” – was a preemptive strike against a suspicion that would dog much of Tennyson’s early career, and eventually would come to shadow poetry itself.

The romantic celebration of fidelity to personal experience readily clashed with a demand for collective and public forms of moral affirmation, such as the “Prophecy” Carlyle sought. “Mariana,” offering no scope for action or change, was perfectly suited to provoke Carlyle: “If Alfred Tennyson could only make that long wail, like the winter wind, about Mariana in the Moated Grange, and could not get her to throw herself into the ditch, or could not bring her another man to relieve her ennui, he had much better have left her alone altogether” (Tennyson 1969: 49). The tension between public enlightenment and private, sometimes hermetic, introspection is inscribed within Tennyson’s 1830 volume in the pendant poems, “The Poet” and “The Poet’s Mind.” The former, with its concluding personification of Freedom: “No sword /Of wrath her right arm whirl’d, /But one poor poet’s scroll, and with *his* word /She shook the world” (ll.53–6; Tennyson 1969) – is a Shelleyan tribute to the poet as unacknowledged legislator. But “The Poet’s Mind” locates poetry in an isolated sanctuary, a “holy ground” of beautiful song secure from intrusions of “the sophist,” who could never fathom the poet’s mind (ll. 8–9).

This conflict became the focal point of a review of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* by Tennyson’s close friend A. H. Hallam, which would prove a landmark in nineteenth-century understandings of poetry. With all the confidence of his 21 years, Hallam urged that people who failed to appreciate Tennyson were expecting the wrong kind of poetry. They were looking for poetry of reflection, which Hallam associated preeminently with Wordsworth, and they presumed that profound thoughts make for beautiful poetry. But the predominant motive of great poetry,

he rejoined, must be “the desire of beauty”; otherwise, “the result is false in art.” Tennyson, like Shelley and Keats before him, is a poet of sensation; theirs is a life “of immediate sympathy with the external universe” rather than a disposition to “purely intellectual contemplation.” Hallam’s sympathies are clear enough – and he gave them added edge with his claim that “the cockney school ... contained more genuine inspiration, and adhered more speedily to that portion of the truth which it embraced, than any *form* of art that has existed in this country since the day of Milton.” This gauntlet (“the Cockney School” attacks on Keats and Hunt were little more than a decade old) raised a further dilemma. If the poetry of sensation emanates from an innate poetic *constitution* different from that of other beings, if such poets “constantly felt, sentiments of exquisite pleasure or pain, which most men were not permitted to experience,” then their appreciation requires special effort from readers, a patient attentiveness that most don’t bother to exert (Jump 1969: 35–8).

Here was the dilemma that Wordsworth had discovered a generation earlier, when his optimistic pronouncements in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* gave way to the view, in the “Essay Supplementary” (1815), that a poet must create the taste by which he is to be enjoyed. This view was a harbinger of the avant-garde, but Hallam, like Wordsworth before him, had to explain this neglect by falling back on a theory of cultural decline. Whereas “[i]n youthful periods of any literature there is an expansive and communicative tendency in mind, which produces unreservedness of communion, and reciprocity of vigour between different orders of intelligence,” since the time of Shakespeare “we have undergone a period of degradation” which has given rise to “that return of the mind upon itself, and the habit of seeking relief in idiosyncrasies rather than community of interest” (Jump 1969: 41). This diagnosis of a disabling self-consciousness, which undermines poetry’s power as a vehicle of general sympathy, would echo throughout Victorian reflection on poetry – indeed, it points forward to T. S. Eliot’s pronouncement a century later that literary history had witnessed a “dissociation of sensibility” after the Renaissance, “from which we have never recovered” (Eliot 1932: 288). Even those who celebrate poetry are shadowed by a sense of its decline.

Hallam’s most inflammatory gesture, however, was his invocation of Keats and Shelley. This incited a series of critical reactions that underscores the fiercely political character of early Victorian reviewing.

The radical associations of the *Westminster*, where Fox's encomiums had appeared, and Hallam's cheeky praise of the cockney school brought out from John Wilson (writing as "Christopher North" in *Blackwood's*) an echo of the fierce attacks on Keats. Fox's praise in the *Westminster*, North pronounced, is "a perfect specimen of the super-hyperbolical ultra-extravagance of outrageous Cockney eulogistic foolishness ... the purest mere matter of moonshine ever mouthed by an idiot-lunatic, slaving in the palsied dotage of the extremest super-annuation ever inflicted on a being." As in the attacks on Keats, failed poetic pretensions are nothing less than a failure of manhood (against which Fox had so carefully defended him): "Mr. Tennyson should speak of the sea so as to rouse the souls of sailors, rather than the soles of tailors ... Unfortunately, he seems never to have seen a ship" (Jump 1969: 54–6). For the remainder of the century Tennyson's admirers would defend him against such suspicions – in the process effacing the profound continuities between his early work and that of his female contemporaries.

North's invective had little impact on Tennyson's next volume, which was largely written, and would be published just a few months later. But it did sting him into responding (against the advice of Hallam) with a squib of his own against "crusty Christopher," and this misguided gesture set none other than J. W. Croker, author of the famous attacks on Keats, to sharpening his critical knives: "I undertake Tennyson," he wrote to the son of John Murray, publisher of the *Quarterly*, "and hope to make another Keats of him" (Jump 1969: 2). The subsequent review became one of the most infamous hatchet jobs of the nineteenth century, an exercise in heavy, unremitting sarcasm that attempted to demolish Tennyson's poetic pretensions. The review clearly was a great blow to a man easily stung – bafflingly so to his friends – by hostile criticism. Indeed, it was long read as a turning point in Tennyson's career, which shocked him into what would become known as the "ten years' silence." But the major redirection of Tennyson's early work had already begun in the 1832 volume, which contained the first versions of half a dozen of Tennyson's best-known lyrics.

The emotional focus of the 1832 *Poems* is narrower than that of the earlier volume. With remarkable, even obsessive tenacity, Tennyson returns to images of a feminine or feminized being longing for release from isolation or abandonment: "The Lady of Shalott," "Oenone," "The Palace of Art," "The Lotos-Eaters." Yet, in each of these works,

the same longing is chastened through some form of distancing, which ironically or dramatically frames the expression of desire – and the lyric impulse itself. Thus the predicament of the central figure, caught between her desires and a world that thwarts or discredits them, comes to resemble the situation of the poet himself. This structure is most emphatic, even schematic, in “The Palace of Art” – an elaborate response to suspicions that Tennyson wished, as a Cambridge contemporary objected, to “live in art” (Tennyson 1969: 400). The poet’s feminine soul inhabits “a lordly pleasure-house” (l. 1), contemplating in solitude the world and its artistic treasures as a many-faceted aesthetic spectacle. Likened to Lucretius’s Epicurean gods – a favorite early-Victorian emblem of indifference to human struggle – this hubristic soul is clearly set up for a fall. But her ordeal does not begin until 54 of 74 stanzas have passed in the evocation of aesthetic pleasure – a disproportion that suggests Tennyson’s own deep attraction to that “God-like isolation” (l. 197). Once thrown down from her loftiness, moreover, the soul experiences no reconciliation with a wider world; instead she remains “Shut up as in a crumbling tomb, girt round / With blackness as a solid wall” (ll. 273–4), rather as if Mariana were imprisoned in the British Museum, wistfully looking forward to a return to her treasures “when I have purged my guilt” (l. 296; Tennyson 1969).

“The Palace of Art” captures a preoccupation with the morality of art that leads from Keats’s “Eve of St. Agnes” to Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by way of the monologues of Browning, the art criticism of Ruskin, and the rise of aestheticism. As visual art became available to an ever larger public, the pleasures of beauty were more widely celebrated, but its power seemed to many observers something disturbing, even tyrannical, confounding moral restraint. Art itself could thus seem a form of temptation, to be resisted or indulged, but rarely to be contemplated with the serenity that so many Victorians would locate in classical Greece. Already in Tennyson’s poetry art seems the mastery of contradictory allegiances. This predicament is most vividly rendered in another evocation of feminine solitude, “The Lady of Shalott” – a poem that would captivate generations of Victorian artists. The image of a woman in a tower, working on a tapestry that cannot fully embody her desires, caught between the demands of her weaving and the wider world she glimpses from her window, has long seemed a self-reflexive evocation of Tennyson’s own sense of vocation. The “curse” under which the Lady labors also seems to capture tensions



inherent in the very institution of poetry, as critics simultaneously demand both fidelity to inner life and insight into a more impersonal world of action.

Poets increasingly responded to this tension not only thematically, but through formal innovation, particularly the dramatic framing of lyric. This tactic allows Tennyson to enrich the sense of interiority in the speaker's voice even as it disavows identification with it. Of course the very titling of "Mariana" effects a version of this; the effusion is placed as the utterance of a character other than the poet, and thereby in turn solicits not merely identification with the feeling, but analysis of it as a revelation of character. The device is greatly enriched in "Oenone," the first of Tennyson's brilliant lyric appropriations of Greek mythology. Here the character's situation echoes that of Mariana, with Oenone – the deserted wife of Paris – recounting her sufferings to "mother Ida," but the poem is entirely given to the lament, which builds out a far more elaborate narrative and far more resonant emotions captured in a newly supple blank verse. It concludes:

I will rise and go  
Down into Troy, and ere the stars come forth  
Talk with the wild Cassandra, for she says  
A fire dances before her, and a sound  
Rings ever in her ears of armed men.  
What this may be I know not, but I know  
That, whereso'er I am by night or day,  
All earth and air seem only burning fire.

(ll. 257–64; Tennyson 1969)

The reader's awareness of what Oenone does not comprehend – that Cassandra's prophecy foretells the imminent Trojan Wars – creates an ironic frame that underscores her bewilderment, which in turn appeals to the reader's sympathy.

Elsewhere, Tennyson uses a similar allusive frame to chasten sympathy, and to create the peculiar forms of cognitive dissonance that would come to characterize the dramatic monologue. His procedure in "The Lotos-Eaters" is formally that of "Oenone": he finds a moment of baffled longing, and thus the lyrical impulse, at the margins of Greek epic – in this instance, imagining Odysseus's crew clinging to the island of the Lotos as a respite from their years of voyaging. Once again, an evocative landscape introduces the lyrical utterance proper. But the overall

effect is to underscore the ironic discrepancy between the mariners' desires and the burdens of duty – not to mention the fate known to the reader, that their longing to remain on the island is doomed to be frustrated. In many respects the poem recalls “The Palace of Art,” most obviously as the mariners also long for the detachment of Epicurean gods. But here the tension is pressed to a radical ambivalence – against the lure of the island, captured in hypnotic, trance-like verse, comes a recognition of the exorbitance of the mariners' desire:

All things have rest: why should we toil alone,  
We only toil, who are the first of things,  
And make perpetual moan,  
Still from one sorrow to another thrown ...

(ll. 60–3; Tennyson 1969)

Their longing for “dreamful ease” is ultimately a yearning for oblivion: “death is the end of life,” they sing (l. 86) – not only its cessation but its goal. Indeed, the longing for death is so powerful that Tennyson himself introduced cautionary revisions in subsequent editions, in an effort (again recalling “The Palace of Art”) to underscore the failure of discipline. But the lure of annihilation clearly answers to a central impulse of his imagination – which makes Tennyson's subsequent eminence in Victorian literature all the more striking. This culture fabled for its dedication to earnest struggle was enraptured by laments of the abandoned or bereft, figures who can imagine satisfaction only as a release from their agony, often in death.

Tennyson's early poetry underscores a radically anti-social dimension in lyric desire – all the more evident when the expression of longing is framed (as in “The Lotos Eaters”) by the social imperatives it resists. In this regard, it seems to reinforce Mill's contrast between poetry and oratory. But Mill's formulation was confounded by the development of a new genre foreshadowed by “The Lotos Eaters.” The dramatic monologue is built on the interplay of voice and an implied audience; it is a genre in which identity is not merely social but is quite insistently a rhetorical effect. There are many precedents for the form – perhaps most notably the feminine figure of “the Improvisatrice” that Landon had derived from the example of Mme. de Staël's novel *Corinne* (1807). But in Landon's usage the dramatic framing is less markedly ironic; even when the “I” of the poem is located in a character other than the poet, the poem does not evoke an

irony of moral distance. The contrast, critics have suggested, reflects the insistent gendering of poetry; women poets “could not afford irony, since their first work was to show their right to a place in poetry, not their discordance with it” (Mermin 1993: 65).

Robert Browning, the greatest virtuoso of the dramatic monologue, did not begin to develop the form until later in the decade. His poetic debut was famously inauspicious. *Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession* appeared in March of 1833 (its costs underwritten by the poet’s father) and not a single copy was sold. Reviews were in fact mixed: although the wags at *Fraser’s* professed to believe it the work of a madman, or the current Whig ministry, others praised it and predicted great success for the anonymous author. But this divided response was overshadowed by one review – which was never published, but which found its way back to Browning in a closely annotated copy, with a summary judgment on the flyleaf:

With considerable poetic powers, the writer seems to me possessed with a more intense and morbid self-consciousness than I ever knew in any sane human being. I should think it a sincere confession ... if the “Pauline” were not evidently a mere phantasm. All about her is full of inconsistency – he neither loves her nor fancies he loves her, yet he insists upon *talking* love to her. If she existed and loved him, he treats her most ungenerously. (Irvine and Honan 1974: 40)

Thus John Stuart Mill, who with characteristic acuity lays open a tension that would shape much of Browning’s career. *Pauline* is nominally dramatic, an impassioned outpouring to a loved one whose physical presence is evoked in the opening lines: “Pauline, mine own, bend o’er me – thy soft breast / Shall pant to mine – bend o’er me ...” (ll. 1–2; Browning 1970). Yet in the more than one thousand lines of blank verse that follow, this interlocutor fades into a colossal self-absorption as the speaker rehearses his poetic aspirations and anxieties. The true beloved is the poet Shelley, the “Sun-treader” who by the poem’s conclusion has entirely displaced Pauline as both guide and protector:

Thou must be ever with me, most in gloom  
 If such must come, but chiefly when I die,  
 For I seem, dying, as one going in the dark  
 To fight a giant; but live thou for ever  
 And be to all what thou hast been to me!

(ll. 1024–8)

Browning recorded in the same copy his bitterness at Mill's verdict. But he shaped a more enduring response in the following year. Invited on a trip to St Petersburg, Browning during the journey produced "Porphyria's Lover," a poem that in 60 lines achieves a drama alien to *Pauline*, and does so precisely by ironizing the lyricism of another self-absorbed speaker. What opens as the recollection of a romantic tryst in a cottage, abruptly veers into pathology:

That moment she was mine, mine, fair,  
                   Perfectly pure and good: I found  
 A thing to do, and all her hair  
                   In one long yellow string I wound  
                   Three times her little throat around  
 And strangled her.

(ll. 36–41; Browning 1970)

With this jarring revelation, an identification with the speaker's passion is checked by bewilderment at the enormity of his act. Sympathy is abruptly alienated – far more thoroughly than in Tennyson's monologues, where (as in "The Lotos Eaters") the seductive lyricism so often overwhelms the implied interdictions.

Browning's mastery of this dissonance is epitomized in "My Last Duchess," where the seemingly effortless urbanity of the Duke of Ferrara gradually discloses a monomaniacal, ultimately murderous obsession with his own authority. Even his young wife's innocent heart, "too soon made glad, / Too easily impressed" (ll. 22–3; Browning 1970) is a challenge to his supremacy that must be punished by death:

Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,  
 Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without  
 Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;  
 Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands  
 As if alive.

(ll. 42–7)

In his deranged connoisseurship, the Duke conflates morality and aesthetics, judging human beings as objects designed to give him pleasure. The logic is clinched by the painting of his late wife that he proudly points out in the opening line of the poem: only thus, reduced to an artifact, can "my last duchess" be fully possessed. Yet the work of the

painting is radically ambiguous: it captures her in the sense that it imprisons her, and yet it also is faithful to her. In an important sense she lives on in that image (as in the Duke's own self-betraying words), in "the depth and passion of its earnest glance" (l. 8). This powerfully equivocal view of art – a gesture of fidelity to the world, but also a means to shape the world to one's desires – will be a recurrent preoccupation not only of Browning's monologues but of Victorian critical reflection.

It is a self-reflexive theme, of course, which bears on Browning's representation of voice, and the sometimes tense interplay between his own sense of authorial mastery and a genuine delight in the varieties of the human psyche. Browning's monologues rarely stage a problem in order to resolve it; "My Last Duchess" evokes a sense of the speaker's mind as a world unto itself, creating a striking illusion of psychic depth. At the same time, the form prompts us to recognize that the illusion of a perfect self-absorption depends on an audience. The Duke's presence is emphatically histrionic, a performance for an implied listener; his psychology is inescapably social. Over against Mill and other celebrants of the perfectly autonomous poetic self, Browning evokes selves anxiously, utterly dependent on the regard of other eyes and ears, selves (it seems) that are fundamentally rhetorical performances. And virtuoso performances they are; the greatest wonder of Browning's own pieces may be the illusion of such an array of disparate voices. From the interplay of Browning's largely contemporary idiom and the barest of historical context we conjure up the speech of an Italian Renaissance noble, whose language seems so powerfully colloquial that first-time readers almost never notice that he speaks in rhymed couplets.

It would be some time before Browning would sound all these possibilities; he remained smitten with the theater, and turned his attention to a more conventional form, the verse-drama. *Paracelsus*, published in 1835, is very much in the tradition of the romantic "closet drama," its hero a Shelleyan quester in the image of Prometheus – or Frankenstein. Though the poem captures Browning's perennial interest in the forms of ambition and the fine line between visionary and crank, the treatment is for the most part sympathetic – perhaps because the protagonist's aspirations and anxieties are very much those of a young poet envisioning his own pursuit of "sacred knowledge" (l.786) and not averse to being acknowledged as "one /Of higher order, under other laws /Than bind us" (ll.696–8; Browning 1970). (This antinomian streak – a sure sign of vaulting ambition – characterizes a host of

Browning's speakers.) Indeed, the very idea of a "career" – its possible trajectories and informing values – is a recurrent theme of the poem. John Forster in *The Examiner* obligingly predicted "a brilliant career," and in another review conjoined him "without the slightest hesitation" with "Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth" (Litzinger and Smalley 1970: 41, 45). But Browning would remember mostly the detractors. He continued to envision success – like so many of his contemporaries – in the theater.

### Theater in the 1830s

The persistent lure of theatrical glory in the 1830s is perplexing. The decline of the stage was one of the sturdiest clichés of the era. The cavernous surroundings and the machinery of spectacle created a physical environment hostile to psychological nuance, and as a result aspiring playwrights (with ample precedent among the romantics) often produced dramatic verse that made no pretensions to being fitted for staging. Certainly performance conditions hastened the long decline of English classical tragedy. A rare success in this vein was *Ion* by Thomas Talfourd (better known today for his subsequent advocacy of international copyright), which debuted at Covent Garden in May of 1836. Though to modern ears its blank verse is cold and inert, and its moral conflicts a clash of Christian ethos with a "principle of inexorable fate" more appropriate to its classical Greek setting (Horne 1844: 254–6), it became one of the most widely admired tragedies of the time. Some of this may be a by-product of the self-conscious austerity of the verse and construction, which chimes with the recommendations of Taylor's Preface to *Philip van Artevelde*. More likely it reflected a virtuoso performance by William Macready, the renowned actor-manager of Covent Garden. Browning jumped at the chance to make his formal debut as a playwright with Macready in the starring role of *Strafford*, a drama of the English Civil War that opened at Covent Garden later in the same year. But not even Macready's talents could secure a warm reception.

Despite Talfourd's success, critics increasingly complained of a debilitating self-consciousness in efforts to imitate an older dramatic form. The most successful dramatists of the day, G. W. Lewes would argue in 1850, were "precisely those who do *not* imitate the Elizabethan form" (Booth 1991: 149). One compromise was a vogue for historical drama,

such as *Strafford*, which clung to some traditional decorums of classical theater while affording greater romantic intrigue, whose often predictable structure might be submerged in exotic settings and characters. Fanny Kemble, the leading actress of the age, testified to the vogue with two verse dramas, *Francis the First* (1832) and *The Star of Seville* (1837). The greatest successes in this line came from Edward Bulwer (later Bulwer-Lytton, 1803–73) who along with Sheridan Knowles was the most successful dramatist of the 1830s, and the most versatile and visible English writer of the decade. *The Lady of Lyons* (1838) and *Richelieu; or The Conspiracy* (1839) were both staged by Macready at Covent Garden, and remained in repertory for the rest of the century; the title role in the latter offered an especially appealing part for virtuosos actors such as Edwin Booth and Irving. Bulwer has been called “the only example in nineteenth-century England of an established man of letters turning successfully to the stage” (Booth 1969–76: i.239) – a verdict that suggests the peculiar demands facing Victorian playwrights. (Knowles, in telling contrast, by 1846 was a bankrupt.)

Far and away the leading force in the transformation of Victorian theater was melodrama, whose presence in Victorian culture it is hard to overstate. Unlike historical drama, melodrama was mainly popular and proletarian in theme and sentiment, its preoccupation with stark moral conflict easily adapted to staging the exploitation of the poor by aristocratic or wealthy villains (many of the theaters devoted to melodrama were in working-class neighborhoods). Through such materials melodrama frequently engaged, however crudely, contemporary social problems markedly absent in the likes of *Ion*. One popular strand of the genre, the nautical melodrama, emerged in the 1820s out of earlier patriotic entertainments about British naval victories in the French wars. Douglas Jerrold’s *Black-Eyed Susan*, first produced in 1829, was an especially popular and durable example of the form, which nurtured one of the most enduring Victorian stereotypes, the rough yet loyal and fearless British “tar,” paragon of unpretentious patriotism, whose vogue endured long enough to be parodied by Gilbert and Sullivan.

Increasingly, however, in the drama as in the lyric, the sea yielded to more domestic preoccupations. Sheridan Knowles, Horne argued, personifies the age in his “truly domestic feeling. The age is domestic, and so is he. Comfort – not passionate imaginings, – is the aim of every body” (Horne 1844: ii.86). Melodrama gathered in an increasingly wide swath of everyday working-class life, and was ahead of the novel

in representing the poor as figures of sympathy, not just comic material. Jerrold's *The Rent Day* (1832) is exemplary of melodrama dealing with rural settings, which presumably appealed in part to a newly urbanized population that within memory had emigrated from the countryside. The many versions of Sweeney Todd, "the demon barber of Fleet Street," reflect a widespread preoccupation with urban danger and squalor, as do a host of related crime melodramas, such as Dibdin Pitt's *Simon Lee* (1839) and *Susan Hopley* (1841), as well as clusters of works devoted to gambling, drink, and other vices. New forms of social conflict were registered with special force in factory melodramas, a by-product of "the factory question," fierce debates about the working conditions of emergent industrial labor, which anticipate the preoccupations of the so-called "industrial novel" that emerged in the 1840s. *The Factory Lad* by the otherwise obscure John Walker, which premiered at the Surrey in October of 1832, presses the social engagement of the genre to unusual extremes, foregoing both comic relief and the usually obligatory happy ending.

### Fiction in the Early 1830s

If melodrama looks forward to the world of silent film, a medium strikingly akin to the early Victorian stage, it also became a shaping presence in the Victorian novel, where it helped to shape the single most important literary career of the Victorian era. In 1830, however, novelists tended to be divided between two often discordant forms of writing: the historical fiction associated with Scott and the "silver-fork" novel of contemporary life. The onslaught against Byron orchestrated by *Fraser's* in 1830 also gathered in much of the silver-fork school, particularly Bulwer, who had scored a huge success with his 1828 novel *Pelham*. *Pelham* is a consummate example of the silver-fork school, but it draws its hero away from the rarefied precincts of the *bon ton* into the criminal underworld, as Pelham struggles to solve the murder of an acquaintance. The novel points to the sociological investments of the genre, offering its broadly middle-class readership vantages into opposite extremes of English society, neither of which they were ever likely to experience in person. But Bulwer, unlike most writers in this genre, also fancied himself a philosophical radical, and his treatment of the poor is energized by political as well as novelistic interests. As in Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), the gothic device of obsessive pursuit



exposes the harrowing of innocence by unjust power (Mary Shelley had worked a unique variation on this structure in *Frankenstein*).

Unsympathetic readers, however, saw no moral design in *Pelham*. They were repelled by what seemed a self-indulgent dandyism, expressed alike in lavish evocations of “the best circles” and their world of glittering mirrors, and in a seemingly indiscriminate delight in low company, where morality was submerged in slumming. This criticism (naturally inflamed by the success of the novel) was heightened by Bulwer’s further triumph in 1830 with *Paul Clifford*, a novel wholly given over to the world of eighteenth-century highwaymen, and relying extensively on the “flash” criminal slang that became popular with novelists throughout the thirties. With the 1832 publication of *Eugene Aram*, which recounted the career of a historical murderer, Bulwer provoked *Fraser’s* into one of the most aggressive literary vendettas of the age, which continued over nearly 15 years. (As if this were not enough, when Bulwer separated from his wife Rosina a few years later, she turned her considerable talents to writing a series of scabrous *romans-à-clefs* such as *Cleveland* [1839].)

Envy aside, the ferocity of these attacks reflects broader social dynamics that influenced the subject matter of the novel, the course of individual careers, and the general prestige of the genre. The attack on dandyism was first and foremost an attack on social presumption. Though the dandy may seem an aristocratic figure, the pursuit of an elegant, refined detachment was most often the paradoxical badge of a young man on the make. The dandy’s fastidiousness ostensibly set him apart from society at large, but it also solicited the collective attention it seemed to disdain. This dynamic shaped the early social careers of a striking number of important novelists in the 1830s – not merely Bulwer, but also Disraeli, Ainsworth, and Dickens, all of whom were widely characterized as dandies. (Dickens, perhaps in expiation, filled the pages of his later novels with dandies grown old.) The early career of Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81) closely paralleled Bulwer’s. A sequence of novels, from *Vivian Grey* (1826), which was puffed as “a sort of *Don Juan* in prose,” through *Venetia* (1837), all were deeply responsive to the silver-fork mode (in some respects Disraeli never outgrew it), and many observers mocked him for confusing himself with his protagonists. “That egregious young coxcomb Disraeli was there, too,” wrote Lady Morgan in 1833, “outraging the privilege a young man has of being absurd” (Adburgham 1983: 195). As the label of “dandy” or “coxcomb” chastened the pretensions of young men of letters, it also

pointed to the increasing preoccupation of novelists with precisely such dynamics of social mobility and resistance. But the fervor of attacks on dandyism also reflected the increasing social and cultural authority of the novel as a genre. As Horne put it in 1844, “Prose fiction has acquired a more respectable status within the last half century than it held at any previous period in English literature ...the novel itself has undergone a complete revolution. It is no longer a mere fantasy of the imagination .... but a sensible book, insinuating in an exceedingly agreeable form ... a great deal of useful knowledge, historical, social, and moral” (Horne 1844: i.215). This growing dignity and influence in turn would become an increasingly self-reflexive element of the novelist’s craft. The attacks on Bulwer thus suggest how readily the dandy could figure a standing challenge to decorums extending well beyond fashion. As in early attacks on Tennyson, literary and social polemics were complexly intertwined.

Such a twofold attack is enshrined in the very phrase “the silver-fork novel.” In Hazlitt’s withering 1827 review (of a forgotten work by Theodore Hook), the fixation on affluence betrays children with their faces at the candy-shop window, writers fantasizing about a world from which they remain excluded. The author, as Hazlitt put it, “informs you that the quality eat fish with silver forks.” The novelists themselves naturally resisted this characterization. Catherine Gore, who was the most popular and prolific writer of the school, announced in her preface to *Pin Money* (1831) that she aimed to bring “the familiar narrative of Miss Austen to a higher sphere of society.” Other readers, however, recognized in Gore’s work (as in the genre generally) a preoccupation with “trade” markedly different from that of Austen’s novels: “A novel like *Pin Money*,” the *Westminster Review* remarked, “is, in fact, a sort of London Directory ... it has sometimes occurred to us, that the persons who are really at the bottom of these singular productions [novels of fashionable life], are no other than a certain set of dealers in articles of luxury, who know the value of getting notoriety” (Adburgham 1983: 211). The reviewer’s gibe glances at the silver-fork novel as itself a merchandising phenomenon. Henry Colburn, the leading publisher of the school, was notoriously adept at arranging favorable advance reviews, or “puffs,” of his authors. Gore, ironically, would veil her own prolific output in anonymity, lest she seem to be debasing her currency: two of her novels, *Greville* and *Cecil*, were published in the same week in 1841. The reviewer also captured a more far-reaching social logic, by which pretensions to higher status are reflected in unusually

conspicuous consumption (a concept Theodore Veblen formulated only 60 years later). As silver-fork novels set this dynamic into sharp relief, they call attention to a central impulse of realism in the Victorian novel, whereby fictional authority is established through closely detailed rendering of everyday life – “the presence of the present” (Altick 1991). In this regard the silver-fork school is at one with Bulwer’s pursuit of “flash” language: the social antithesis veils a shared aim to document a particular milieu, in a manner that points to the emergence of something akin to anthropological observation.

Bulwer himself followed out this logic with *Paul Clifford*, which created a sensation. Though best known today for its often-parodied opening sentence, “It was a dark and stormy night,” it was said to have the largest first printing of any English novel to that time, which nonetheless sold out on publication day. Like *Pelham*, the novel straddles elite and outcast worlds, but with more overt satiric and political design. The eponymous hero’s dual life as highwayman and West End dandy undermines any moral hierarchy between the two, and Bulwer’s characteristic attacks on abuses of power (Paul is drawn into criminality through unjust imprisonment) gain further edge from the thinly disguised portraits of contemporary politicians as Fieldingesque thieves (the Duke of Wellington, for example, appears as “Fighting Attie”). This is the work that established Bulwer as the leading novelist of the early 1830s. Though its satiric humor largely disarmed criticism of sometimes slack prose – beyond attacks in *Fraser’s*, that is, whose editor Maginn was lampooned in the character of MacGrawler – many readers were unsettled by a highwayman hero. This reservation blew into a firestorm with the publication of *Eugene Aram* in 1832, which took as its protagonist not merely a criminal but a historical murderer, and presented him in a manner largely free of moralism. Aram in Bulwer’s treatment is the victim less of injustice than of his own mind: he is a romantic quester, something akin to Browning’s Paracelsus in Newgate, likewise brought down by an intellectual pride that shades into antinomian faith in his immunity to ordinary laws. As the Preface puts it, Bulwer aimed “to impart to this Romance something of the nature of Tragedy.” But many critics, led by *Fraser’s*, found only indulgence. Maginn accused Bulwer of “awakening sympathy with interesting criminals, and wasting sensibilities on the scaffold and the gaol” (Hollingsworth 1963: 93).

Though the fascination of the criminal-hero persisted throughout the 1830s, the “Newgate School” did not acquire its label until the

end of the decade, in the wake of *Oliver Twist* (1838) and William Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* (1839). Earlier in the decade, social outcasts was associated more with historical fiction – a further extension of fictional frontiers identified with Scott, whose Waverley novels were launched by imagining a middle-class hero plunged into an alien, sometimes bewildering, outlaw world. Thus Ainsworth's *Rookwood* (1834), which recounted the life of Dick Turpin, hanged in 1739, prompted many comparisons to Scott – the height of praise for a novelist in the early 1830s – and Ainsworth (1805–82) would become the most popular historical novelist of the nineteenth century after Scott (Sutherland 1989: 13). From 1836–45, he collaborated with the great illustrator Cruickshank, which both reflected and reinforced his stature. Ainsworth's prolific career was shadowed by the still more abundant historical romances of G. P. R. James (1799?–1860), which have eluded attempts even to catalogue them. James's career began in 1829 with *Richelieu*, a novel clearly modeled on Scott's *Quentin Durward* (Scott returned the compliment by praising the novel), and continued with unflagging productivity. Long before the career ended, however, James would be derided for his “irresistible tendency to pile up circumstantial particulars,” a quality which Horne called “fatal to those forms of art which demand intensity of passion” (Horne 1844: 1.231). Such criticism, along with Thackeray's devastating 1847 *Punch* parody, “Barbazure,” suggests an emergent standard of novelistic craft that would undermine the stature of many earlier Victorian novelists.

A further popular novelist of proletarian life was Frederick Marryat (1792–1848), a distinguished naval veteran, usually styled “Captain,” who took up novel-writing after resigning his commission in 1828. His first novel, *Frank Mildmay*, appeared in 1829, and he scored his first large success with *Peter Simple* in 1834. For *Mr Midshipman Easy* (1836) he received 1,000 pounds, inaugurating an income that would make him “one of the consistently best-paid novelists of the nineteenth century” (Sutherland 1989: 414). Marryat had the good luck to coincide with a vogue for melodramatic and ballad renderings of sailing life, which flourished as Trafalgar and other epic Napoleonic battles were beginning to recede in memory. As novelists further contributed to the romance of the British “tar,” their attention to the often-brutal character of life at sea – whether in the Navy or among merchant sailors – chimed with the contemporary popularity of novels of low life. (Marryat's *Jacob Faithful* [1834] shares many preoccupations with Ainsworth's *Rookwood*, published in the same year.) Rather quickly,

however, the nautical novels – in common with the adventure tale generally, which gathered in much of Scott’s work – came to be associated with juvenile readers. Marryat’s *Masterman Ready* (1842) was an especially momentous stage in the development of what would come to be called “boys’ adventure.”

In the early 1830s Bulwer seemed the major successor to Scott. Born into a wealthy, aristocratic family, educated at Cambridge (where he won the Chancellor’s Medal in 1825, two years before Tennyson), Bulwer moved with distinctive ease between the silver-fork genre and historical romances. His first historical novel, *Devereux* (1829), was not a success (although the 1,500 pounds he received from Colburn for the copyright testifies to the popularity of *Pelham*). But his return to the form, with *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) and *Rienzi* (1835), produced two further best-sellers. *Rienzi* offers a more serious and substantial analysis of history, focusing as it does on the hero’s rise to power within political conflict in fourteenth-century Italy – a treatment that anticipated Carlyle’s understanding of history as largely the biography of great men. *The Last Days* lacks any sustained analysis of historical forces – it relies heavily on the foreboding and sensation inherent in its title, a backdrop against which Bulwer focused on the “ordinary incidents of life,” in a self-conscious swerve away from the more elevated themes that might be expected of its historical setting. The novel also draws liberally on stage melodrama, as when the exposure of Apaecides’s murderer coincides with the eruption of Vesuvius. It has been repeatedly adopted for stage and screen – filmed as early as 1898 – and remains Bulwer’s most popular novel.

### Dickens and the Genres of Fiction

The single work that more than any other shaped the Victorian novel as a literary form was one that early readers found hard to classify. One reviewer in 1836 called it “a magazine consisting of only one article”; six months later it was “a series of monthly pamphlets,” “a monthly produced of popular entertainments” (Chittick 1990: 65, 75). The new work hardly seemed a novel, since it was emerging in monthly parts, a format only rarely used for anything but cheap reprints – which led another reviewer to remark on “a plan ... so altogether anomalous, that it is no easy matter to determine in what class of composition to place them” (P. Collins 1971: 57). But all agreed, in the words of the

*Quarterly Review* in October 1837, that “the popularity of this writer is one of the most remarkable literary phenomena of recent times” (Chittick 1990: 88). The writer, as the English-speaking world quickly learned, was a 24-year-old court reporter named Charles Dickens (1812–70).

*The Pickwick Papers*, as the work soon became known, was not Dickens’s literary debut. In 1833, the 21-year-old reporter enlarged his journalistic profile by submitting a sketch to the *Morning Chronicle* entitled “A Dinner at Poplar Walk,” an anonymous publication that earned him only the pleasure of seeing it in print. It was little more than a competent beginning in a well-established form, the urban sketch, a more anecdotal and picturesque (and less insistently moralized) offshoot of the eighteenth-century periodical essay. But Dickens’s piece was soon reprinted, the young author produced more, and in August of 1834 he took up the pseudonym Boz, a gesture that suggests a new authorial self-consciousness, the record of a distinctive sensibility rather than the transcriptions of a mere reporter. Reviewers began to single out the attentiveness of the observation, and that distinction was confirmed when *Sketches by Boz* was published in volume form on February 7, 1836 – the author’s twenty-fourth birthday. Three days later, an enterprising publisher, eager to cash in on the vogue of sporting comedy popularized by the fiction of Robert Surtees in his *New Sporting Magazine* (1831), approached Boz to provide text for a series of comic illustrations depicting a “Nimrod Club” of cockney sportsmen. The young author rather presumptuously resisted the rural sporting format, and asked for more balance between text and plates. By the time William Hall had left Dickens’s flat, he had agreed to publish monthly parts of about 12,000 words each, a total of 20 issues selling for a shilling apiece. And then, as Dickens would famously recall, “I thought of Mr. Pickwick.” Dickens became the dominant partner in the venture after the suicide of the illustrator, Robert Seymour, just a few months later, but the first several numbers of the series sold only about 400 copies apiece. The great stir began with the appearance of the September number introducing Sam Weller, a cockney groom who became Mr. Pickwick’s servant. With his comic soliloquies frequently reprinted, sales swelled, until they reached 40,000 per number, and reviewers everywhere began commenting on Dickens’s dizzying rise to fame.

Why such success? Critics typically pointed to cultural geography. Dickens, most agreed, captured a part of London unknown to many of

his readers, who at the outset were relatively affluent. Thus the *Quarterly* commended “his felicity in working up the genuine mother-wit and unadulterated vernacular idioms of the lower classes of London – for he grows comparatively common-place and tame the moment his foot is off the stones, and betrays infallible symptoms of Cockneyism in all his aspirations at rurality” (P. Collins 1971: 60). At times such response passed into the idiom of scientific discovery: “the regions about Saffron Hill are less known to our great world than the Oxford Tracts, the inhabitants are still less; they are as human, at least to all appearances, as are the Esquimaux or the Russians, and probably (though the Zoological society will not vouch for it) endowed with souls” (P. Collins 1971: 81). Here is the quasi-ethnographic pleasure of contact with exotic worlds that a middle-class audience also enjoyed in both the silver-fork and the criminal novel (as well as, half a century later, *National Geographic* magazine). But Dickens did not provoke the hostility aroused by those other forms. To be sure, “Cockneydom” was a niche at once literary and social, and unsympathetic readers throughout his career would decry Dickens’s eccentric style and lapses into vulgarity (a preoccupation that Dickens himself would frequently satirize). At the same time, however, Dickens’s early novels – unlike *Pelham* or *Paul Clifford* – represent social division without making it threatening.

Dickens himself had encouraged this benign view from his earliest sketches, which were in large part a demotic counterpart of “silver-fork” writing, often seizing upon “groups of people,” as the narrator of “Seven Dials” puts it, “whose appearance and dwellings would fill any mind but a regular Londoner’s with astonishment” (92). The phrasing captures the distinctive vantage of Dickens’s narration: a “regular Londoner” is one well-versed in the arcane passageways of the city – frequently likened to a maze – yet able to evoke its scenes with a stranger’s detachment. This is a decidedly liminal perspective, straddling boundaries of social membership, of inside and outside, in a manner that anticipates (like so much of Victorian urban writing) the stance of the anthropological “participant observer,” as well as journalistic “feature” writing. This structure notably distinguishes *Sketches by Boz* from earlier urban sketches like Pierce Egan’s best-selling *Life in London* (1820), which relies consistently on the comic perspective of a tourist.

“Astonishment,” however, is a limiting response to urban life, and Dickens’s great success was in leavening it with sympathy, whether of

comedy or pathos. Both derive from an insistent nostalgia. In a world where, as he mockingly puts it in “The Last Cab-Driver,” “‘Improvement’ has penetrated to the very innermost recesses of our omnibuses” (*Sketches*; Dickens 1995: 181), Dickens is drawn to scenes of loss and dispossession, or to the vulnerable beings teetering on the verge. Sometimes the pattern is one of large-scale cultural displacement wrought by slum clearance and related “Improvement”; elsewhere he is drawn to arcs of individual decline, as in the host of lives that converge in “The Pawnbroker’s Shop.” This sketch culminates in the image of a prostitute with a “sunken face, where a daub of rouge serves only as an index to the ravages of squandered health never to be regained, and lost happiness never to be restored.” Yet even this degraded creature remains susceptible to sympathy, in which the heart vibrates “to some slight circumstance apparently trivial in itself, but connected by some undefined and indistinct association, with past days that can never be recalled” (Dickens 1995: 228). Humanity is redeemed by the integrity of memory. Here Dickens is clearly drawing on – perhaps helping to form – a nostalgic cultural imaginary that would echo through Victorian literature, as in Tennysonian melancholy, likewise preoccupied by “the days that are no more.”

Such encounters are not far removed from those of Baudelaire’s Paris, where modernity is experienced as the insistent shock of the new. But Dickens’s appeal to sympathy softens the experience of change, recalling in this regard Charles Lamb’s *Essays of Elia*, a model that Dickens developed into a more crowded canvas, with greater topicality and more intricate social detail. The tug of sympathy is especially strong in what would become Dickens’s special *métier*, the world of “shabby-genteel people,” as a sketch of that title puts it: “that depressed face, and timorous air of conscious poverty ... will make your heart ache – always supposing that you are neither a philosopher, nor a political economist”; “the miserable poor man ... who feels his poverty and vainly tries to conceal it, is one of the most pitiable objects in human nature” (Dickens 1995: 305–7). The pathos derives from these characters’ consciousness of their own degradation – which also signals a kind of redemption. This complex of feeling lies at the heart of melodrama, but Dickens put it into especially influential circulation. It is unmistakable, for example, in Victorian preoccupation with “fallen” women, who are most threatening precisely when they lack this sense of shame. Yet Dickens also discovers in even the most marginal lives the sustaining power of fantasy. His delight in public and private theatricals



extends to a keen eye for the theatricality of everyday life, the highly elaborated vanities in which self-dramatization may be at once comic and deeply pathetic, a delirium of self-importance, a pitiable retreat from reality, or simply a necessary psychic crutch. Throughout the early fiction, melodramatic theatricality may be alternately a damning stigma and a life force.

Domestic comedy may be as old as Aristophanes, but it takes on new energy among Dickens's shabby-genteel, where the mundane decorums of "respectability" become surprisingly complex and anxious claims to social recognition. The central concerns of *The Pickwick Papers* are securely in place as early as "The Boarding House" of 1834 – the second part of which was the first sketch published over the name "Boz." The humor shows unsteadiness in its over-emphasis: "Money isn't no object whatsoever to me," said the *lady*, 'so much as living in a state of retirement and obtrusion'" (*Sketches* 341; Dickens's italics). But *The Pickwick Papers* often creates the illusion of transpiring in a single enormous boarding-house – or in an England that seems very small indeed, a country in which Pickwick and his cronies seem unable to escape from familiar faces. The coziness of this world is of a piece with the extravagantly loose narrative structure: "If you leave me to suggest our destination," Pickwick remarks at one point, "I say Bath. I think none of us has ever been there" (Dickens 1987: 578). While this waywardness enables a good deal of topical improvisation – the satire of the Eatandswill election campaign was a special favorite of early audiences – it is threaded by a preoccupation with domestic intrigue, which in turn calls out a well-nigh obsessive delight in storytelling. Pickwick envisions himself as a natural historian, "an observer of human nature, sir," but the objects of his scrutiny are compulsive informants, delighting in narration of all kinds, from hastily improvised falsehoods to somber recountings of family decline. The characters' performances are most insistently directed to romance, where the resilience of human vanity, and Dickens's virtuoso manipulation of the conventions for narrating desire, sustain the comedy. Thus domestic melodrama is skewered in Mr. Jingle's effort to thwart his rival Tupman's pursuit of Miss Wardle:

"Stay, Mr Jingle!" said the spinster aunt emphatically. "You have made an allusion to Mr Tupman – explain it!"

"Never!" exclaimed Jingle, with a professional (i.e. theatrical) air. "Never!" And, by way of showing that he had no desire to be questioned further, he drew a chair close to that of the spinster aunt and sat down.

“Mr. Jingle,” said the aunt, “I entreat – I implore you, if there is any dreadful mystery connected with Mr. Tupman, reveal it.”

“Can I,” said Mr. Jingle, “can I see – lovely creature – sacrificed at the shrine – heartless avarice!” He appeared to be struggling with various conflicting sensations for a few seconds, then said in a low deep voice –

“Tupman only wants your money.”

“The wretch!” exclaimed the spinster, with energetic indignation. (Mr. Jingle’s doubts were resolved. She *had* money.) (Dickens 1987: 182–3)

As Jingle’s ostensible fervor is punctured by his venality, so Tupman’s declarations of affection jostle with petty calculations of income. Yet the entire episode is diffused with desire, which crystallizes grotesquely in “the fat boy,” who shadows the lovers amid “the quiet seclusion of Dingley Dell,” and discloses their tryst to the spinster aunt with the leering preface, “I wants to make your flesh creep” (180).

This comic evocation of desire again suggests the force of melodrama, which resists the forms of “deep” selfhood that will become associated with novelistic realism (including Dickens’s own) later in the century. Throughout early Dickens, psychic depths are the province of villainous or inept schemers – epitomized by Sergeant Buzfuz in his delirious interrogation of Mr. Pickwick’s shopping lists to his landlady: “‘Chops and Tomata sauce. Yours, Pickwick’ [...] Gentlemen, is the happiness of a sensitive and confiding female to be trifled away by such shallow artifices as these?” (562–3). The comedy conjures up a deep design pointedly absent in Pickwick’s character. At the same time, the travesty is the harbinger of a mode of suspicious reading that will become increasingly prominent over the course of the century, particularly in the arena of sexuality. It is this aspect of Dickens’s genius that begins to suggest why he was deeply admired by Kafka – and why, in turn, Kafka’s own bleak works could provoke uproarious laughter among his inner circle. The widow Bardell’s delusory pursuit of Pickwick (which is sustained over virtually the entire series) often takes us to the brink of paranoia, or an imagined world of radically abridged freedom. “Is it not a wonderful circumstance,” Pickwick remarks at another episode of jealous delusion, “that we seem destined to enter no man’s house without involving him in some degree of trouble?” (324). Such fantasies lead to the threshold of a dream world, of submission to psychic forces that overwhelm waking rationality. Yet the

possibility is almost invariably defused. “It’s like a dream ... a hideous dream,” Pickwick remarks early on, “the idea of a man’s walking around all day, with a horse he can’t get rid of” (137). The comic deflation of the “hideous” captures the fundamentally benign tenor of the action. There is little place for nightmare in the world of Pickwick.

Sam Weller is an especially important agent in disarming aggression, in part by making it comically explicit. Initially exempt from the domestic intrigue, Weller offers a running choric commentary on the violent energies informing it. “He’s the wictim of connubiality, as Blue Beard’s domestic chaplain said” (353) – a wisdom clearly derived from his jaded father. “If ever you gets to up’ards o’ fifty, and feels disposed to go a marryin’ anybody – no matter who – jist set yourself up in your own room, if you’ve got one, and pison yourself off hand. Hangin’s wulgar, so don’t you have nothin’ to say to that. Pison yourself, Samivel, my boy, pison yourself, and you’ll be glad on it arterwards” (398). Reviewers give little hint of the violence energizing such comedy, and instead turned the Wellers into homespun philosophers. But this softening may reflect the emblematic force attached to Sam and his father as servants. In a world in which human relations seemed increasingly reduced to what Carlyle was soon to call “the cash nexus,” the master-servant relationship could evoke an older order, in which social hierarchy might be imagined in terms of reciprocal obligation and dependence. In this regard, the novel’s comedy seemed to harmonize disparate classes. “The tendency of his writings,” in the words of T. H. Lister (himself a minor novelist of the silver-fork school), “is to make us practically benevolent – to excite our sympathy on behalf of the aggrieved and suffering in all classes; and especially in those who are most removed from observation” (P. Collins 1971: 71). Literature served to defuse middle-class anxieties about the poor – anxieties that became increasingly pressing in the late thirties. Such praise also suggests how readily the reader’s experience of “sympathy” could come to displace and defer more concrete responses to human suffering.

The avoidance of class frictions in *Pickwick Papers* was thrown into sharp relief by Dickens’s next work. As the conservative *Quarterly Review* put it, “Boz so rarely mixes up in politics, or panders to vulgar prejudices about serious things, we regret to see him joining an outcry which is partly factious, partly sentimental, partly interested” (P. Collins 1971: 84). *Oliver Twist, or the Parish Boy’s Progress* centrally engaged the “serious things” of contemporary politics; it began life as a satire

aimed at the New Poor Law. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, a central mechanism of the sweeping “improvement” that Dickens regarded so skeptically, transformed a system of charity dating back to the reign of Elizabeth. For local parish relief it substituted a centralized administration designed to guarantee uniform relief, but also remolded that relief into a harsh deterrent. Able-bodied paupers were required to live in workhouses, under a regimen of subsistence diet, numbing labor, and separation from other family members – an existence designed to make relief a last resort for the utterly desperate.

The New Poor Law was a shock to traditional humanitarian sentiments, but a boon to the novelist. In its concern with abstract, deracinated “individuals,” the law provoked a countervailing appeal to concrete persons inhabiting particular communities, which were bound together by personal attachment, shared history, and common needs, rather than systematizing rationality. Here was a realm of expertise that the novel could claim as its own. As early as 1836, Dickens prefaced “A Visit to Newgate” with the words, “We have only to premise, that we do not intend to fatigue the reader with any statistical accounts of the prison; they will be found at length in numerous reports of various committees ... We saw the prison, and saw the prisoners; and what we did see, and what we thought, we will tell at once in our own way” (Dickens 1995: 235). “Our own way” – a particularized appeal to sympathy – resists the universalizing claims of statistics or “system,” and thereby stakes out what will become a central impulse of the Victorian novel generally. Young Oliver’s famous request, “More, please,” asks not merely for nourishment but for fuller recognition of his humanity.

Against the self-absorbed bureaucracy lampooned in the figure of Bumble, familial bonds of love and mutual concern are reaffirmed by appeals to melodrama. This feature of *Oliver Twist* has made the novel immensely popular in theatrical representation since its first appearance. It also offends the expectations that we have come to associate with the Victorian novel. An account of perfect, unwavering innocence triumphing over a world of ravaging evil: what could be less *realistic*? But a novelistic realism that depends on the evocation of private psychology necessarily emphasizes forms of alienation, weakening the social and moral bonds on which Dickens wishes to insist. In melodrama, by contrast, moral order is manifested through the performance of clear-cut public identities, in shared communal structures – a world in which everyone is related socially, but in a public sphere that doesn’t accommodate “deep” self-consciousness. In its very form,

then, as well as its theme, the novel laments a lost social order. Within melodrama, psychic depth becomes a mark of criminality, a sign that someone has something to hide. The alienation bound up in psychological realism is reserved for criminals and other threats to moral order. The form thus adds a peculiar imaginative torque to a familiar moral conundrum of storytelling: the aesthetic appeal of complex character works against the association of virtue with transparency. The dramatic monologue, especially in Robert Browning's work, is built on this tension. Dickens's early novels, however, are more keenly concerned with locating a secure moral lodestar, which is liable to make virtue seem insipid.

These tensions became even more palpable in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9), which Dickens took up while he was still in the midst of writing *Oliver Twist*, and before he had even completed *Pickwick*. Like *Oliver Twist*, the novel is centrally concerned with persecuted virtue, but here evil is identified with more familiar villains: figures of wealth and power set against a stainless hero defending the innocence of both his sister and young Smyke, an abused orphan whom Nicholas has rescued from a horrific boys' school in remote Yorkshire. *Nicholas Nickleby* is the most melodramatic of all Dickens's novels, and fulsome in wry tributes to the form, most notably through an extensive plot line taking Nicholas into the theatrical troupe of Mr. Crummles, where he triumphs as both an actor and an adapter of plays. At the same time, theatricality is tainted by association with villains who depend on a disjunction between surface and substance. Even the more comic (because relatively inept) parasites, such as Squeers the one-eyed schoolmaster and the profligate Mantalini, are stigmatized by their performances. As a foil to such scheming, the well-nigh defining attribute of integrity – and feminine virtue in particular – is resistance to theatricality. Hence Kate Nickleby's vigorous repudiation of "show," with her "guileless thoughts" set against her uncle Ralph's "wily plots and calculations" (Dickens 1978: 182). Yet these pressures tend in turn to make the hero something of a cipher. Over against the predatory aristocrats of the novel, led by Sir Mulberry Hawk, Nicholas is distinguished above all by chivalric concern for the weak. His virtues embody an ideal of the gentleman as a moral standing, rather than (as in Hawk's view) a matter of social rank. Melodrama in this light is clearly linked to an emergent middle-class self-assertion. But this contrast brings to light the limits of melodrama in the representation of both psychic and social complexity. Nicholas in effect performs his own

virtue, but his melodramatic selfhood does not allow for change – only the revelation of an essential being.

In *Oliver Twist*, the one character who breaks free of melodrama is Fagin. Though inflected by a long tradition of anti-Semitic stereotyping, he develops into a complex, at moments charismatic power, whose captivating displays of avuncular kindness veil a ruthless pursuit of gain, which ultimately crumbles into terror at his own helplessness. The startling ferocity of Dickens's moral rhetoric – as when Fagin is likened to a reptile in offal (Dickens 1982: 116) – also insinuates a coy paradox: Fagin, ostensible enemy of the established order, only amplifies the principles energizing the New Poor Law. He is a much more formidable threat than the inane officialdom epitomized by Bumble, precisely because he is so much better at looking out for “number one” (275) – a self-interest that aligns the criminal underworld with utilitarian reformers devoted to Bentham's “hedonic calculus.” Yet Fagin's powers are facilitated by his capacity for an alluring tenderness – as in the moment when his deft handkerchief tricks elicit from young Oliver (almost for the first time) a self-forgetful delight. So prominent is this feature of Fagin's character, and so fragile does he seem after his final capture, that his ultimate fate seems exorbitant retribution for his crimes as a fence. But the more damning, unstated indictment is Fagin's corruption of youth. His criminal alliances contain a powerful sexual undercurrent that surfaces most clearly in the recriminations of Nancy, who insinuates that Fagin had procured her for Sikes, and is more subtly suggested in Fagin's dealings with his boys (246). It is his association with illicit sexuality that more than anything damns Fagin.

The power to discipline that sexuality is a further dimension of the allure of melodrama. Nancy herself may be an utterly implausible character – Thackeray wrote an entire novel, *Catherine*, mocking the stereotype of the virtuous whore – but Nancy is crucial to the novel as more than a plot device; she embodies the social death that Oliver escapes. She also affirms the resilient humanity that she outwardly has forfeited. The novel never explains why Oliver is not more brutalized by his experience – why, when he is “in a fair way of being reduced, for life, to a state of brutal stupidity and sullenness by the ill-usage he had received” (Dickens 1982: 23), he remains untainted by the surrounding depravity. But his enduring purity is that of melodrama: he is a pawn, a focus of contention between two worlds, the criminal gang and middle-class respectability, which for much of the novel literally

fight for possession of him. “[L]et him feel that he is one of us,” Fagin exhorts Sikes (120), as if he were adopting Oliver into a surrogate family. As so often in Dickens, the virtues of domesticity are markedly defensive in impetus – as if the heaven that is the drawing room of young Rose Maylie (“earth seemed not her element” [180]) crystallized in response to its diabolical counterparts lingering out of doors. One of the novel’s most haunting moments comes when Oliver awakens from sleep to the dream-like apparition of Fagin at the window of that sanctuary (217). Even Nancy will reproduce a version of Rose’s unwavering and self-forgetful affection in her fidelity to Sikes, whom she refuses to give up even when she knows herself in mortal danger. At the same time, the sense of threat associated with her sexuality is never quite expelled. Years later, Nancy’s death became a centerpiece of Dickens’s public readings, which he performed with a ferocity that probably hastened his own death, as if in obscure responsiveness to the very energies he was casting out: “There is a passion *for hunting something* deeply implanted in the human breast” (61; Dickens’s emphasis). All of which may suggest how important melodrama was to the shaping of Victorian domesticity, and to coping with desires that unsettle that ideal.

Dickens’s spectacular early success revolutionized the very form of the novel, and with it the dynamics of both publishing and reading. The high fixed costs of serial publication made it suited to a relatively small number of popular novelists. But the price of a shilling per monthly number brought new novels within the means of the middle class; the serial format encouraged more reviews, and thus more sales, enlarging the profits of both authors and publishers. The format also provided a ready vehicle for advertising, which knitted the novel itself more tightly to a burgeoning commodity culture. The expansion of printing formats and profits created the need for newly intricate legal arrangements between author and publisher (Patten 55–60). Serial publication also made novel-reading a more emphatically social experience. Dickens’s novels were richly suited to public reading, which enabled them to reach even an illiterate audience, but beyond this the regular anticipation and discussion of each new number enriched the sense of an emphatically communal experience, which was readily woven into other forms of daily life. In a manifold sense, Dickens was the first novelist truly *to belong* to the English people (Patten 1978: 60). To a remarkable extent, he also shaped their sense of themselves as a people.

### Poetry after the Annuals

Dickens's rise to fame coincided with a marked decline in the popularity of the poetry annuals – a development encouraged by a chorus of parody. Thackeray in 1837 bemoaned their preoccupation with “water-lily, chilly, stilly, shivering beside a streamlet, plight, blighted, love-benighted, falsehood sharper than a gimlet.” (Thackeray n.d.: 19). Mrs. Leo Hunter in *Pickwick Papers* chimed in with “Ode to an Expiring Frog”:

Can I view thee panting, lying  
On thy stomach, without sighing;  
Can I unmoved see thee dying  
  On a log  
  Expiring frog!  
  (Dickens 1987: 275)

A potent sense of rivalry animates such mockery, which responds to criticism of Dickens's own art as a demotic, uncouth form: his early novels repeatedly deflate pompous arbiters of taste, for whom drama and poetry remained the summit of literary decorum. (In *The Old Curiosity Shop* Mrs. Jarley finds her model of the “calm and classical” in a waxwork [Dickens 1998: 207].) More broadly, however, one can see in such barbs a battle for cultural ascendancy that would play out across the century. By the 1850s many critics were claiming that the novel had displaced poetry as the preeminent modern literary form, and well into the 1870s a novelistic character given to citing poetry often thereby types himself (or more often, herself) as a self-absorbed dreamer, at odds with the more worldly ethos of the novel.

In 1838, the decline of the annuals was punctuated by the untimely death of L. E. L., which struck more than a few readers as the end of an era in poetry – recalling the dramatic curtailment of an earlier generation:

We have not forgotten the electric shock which the death of Byron, falling in his prime and in a noble cause, sent through Europe: nor the more expected, but not less solemn and strongly expected departure of Sir Walter Scott; but neither of these exceeded that with which the news was received of the sudden decease of this still young and popular poetess. (Landon 1997: 346)

The mysterious circumstances of her death – she died in Africa, just four months after her marriage to the English governor of the Cape



Coast Castle (in contemporary Ghana), with an empty bottle of prussic acid in her hand – were weirdly in keeping with the mystique that had surrounded her career. Even after death L. E. L. remained an object of mesmerizing, scandalous fascination. “What is poetry, and what is a poetical career?” she had asked three years earlier. “The first is to have an organization of extreme susceptibility, which the second exposes bare-headed to the rudest weather. The original impulse is irresistible ... But never can success repay its costs” (Landon 1997: 184).

Ironically, L. E. L. had applied these comments to another poet to whom they seemed far less apt. They appeared in “On the Character of Mrs. Hemans’ Writings,” published shortly after Hemans’s death in 1835 – a death which, like her poetic career, was far more decorous. Despite their differences, L. E. L.’s “Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans” found common cause not only in their womanhood, but also in what she had identified as the dominant emotion of Hemans’s poetry, “that craving for affection which answers not unto the call”:

Wound to a pitch too exquisite  
The souls’ fine chords are wrung;  
With misery and melody  
They are too highly strung.  
The heart is made too sensitive  
Life’s daily pain to bear;  
It beats in music, but it beats  
Beneath a deep despair.

(ll. 57–64; Landon 1997)

A third poet, however, offered a tribute to Hemans that rather brusquely quarreled with L. E. L.’s emphasis on suffering. “Felicia Hemans (To L. E. L., Referring to her Monody on that Poetess)” by Elizabeth Barrett (1806–61) rejected L. E. L.’s exhortation to bring flowers, urging a more austere tribute:

But bring not near her solemn corse, the type of human seeming!  
Lay only dust’s stern verity upon her dust undreaming.

Nor mourn, O living One, because her part in life was mourning.  
Would she have lost the poet’s fire, for anguish of the burning ...

Perhaps she shuddered, while the world’s cold hand her brow was  
wreathing.

But never wronged that mystic breath, which breathed in all her breathing;

Which drew from rocky earth and man, abstractions high and moving –  
Beauty, if not the beautiful, and love, if not the loving.

(ll. 15–24)

This richly equivocal elegy applauds Hemans's discovery of solace in the midst of suffering, but also hints at the limitations of "abstractions" set against a concrete sense of lived experience. It chimes with Barrett's sense that Hemans was finally "a lady rather than a woman" (a note of rivalry that would be echoed in Charlotte Brontë's view of Jane Austen).

Certainly Barrett's own poetry aimed to express more of the woman. In this regard, L. E. L. was the more formidable model, who had captivated Barrett's attention from her first reading of Landon in the mid-1820s. But Barrett recoiled from L. E. L.'s exposure to gossip and scandal, and from the narrowly insistent refrain of frustrated desire, which ultimately seemed a form of narcissism. This was the subtle burden of Barrett's elegy for L. E. L., which appeared three weeks after news of her death, and responds to a poem by L. E. L. published about the same time, "Night at Sea," written on the voyage to Africa, with a refrain, "My friends, my absent friends! Do you think of me as I think of you?" "It seemed not much to ask," Barrett answers, but ultimately it is presumptuous: the pathos of the unanswered question blends "with ocean's sound, /Which dashed its mocking infinite around /One thirsty for a little love" (ll. 37–9). "Not much, and yet too much," the poet concludes, and turns instead to imagine the same question being posed by God. Barrett's *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838), the first volume published over her name, was centrally concerned with religious faith, but joined this to another source of comfort, Wordsworthian romanticism. Still, Barrett was more engaged by the romantic poet's sense of estrangement from childhood than by the forms of redemption his poetry evokes. Romantic nature remained a dubious consolation for Barrett, as redolent of Byronic subjectivism and a pantheism alien to her evangelical upbringing, but also because it was so insistently shaped by masculine desire – as in Wordsworth's credo in "Tintern Abbey," "Nature never did betray the heart that loved her."

Wordsworth in November of 1835 composed his own moving tribute to the passing of an age. After reading of the death of James Hogg, "the Ettrick Shepherd," he composed an "extempore effusion," which also noted the deaths in the previous year of his old friends Coleridge and

Charles Lamb and of Sir Walter Scott two years before; when reprinted for his 1837 collection, he added a stanza alluding to Hemans. The litany of deaths not only underscored Wordsworth's own survival, it ushered in an unprecedented appreciation of his poetry. Though he had long abandoned his early radicalism (when *The Prelude* was published posthumously in 1850 Macaulay was startled to discover it "to the last degree Jacobitical" [Gill 1998: 29]), Wordsworth had remained something of a coterie poet, stigmatized by early attacks on "the Lake school." But *Yarrow Revisted, and Other Poems*, published in 1835, was the first of his volumes to sell widely (new editions followed in 1836 and 1839) and in 1837 Moxon paid him 1,000 pounds for the right to publish his complete works – which was more than Wordsworth had earned in his entire career (Marshall 2002: 348). Six years later he would be rewarded with the Laureateship, on the death of Robert Southey. Increasingly, readers extracted even from Wordsworth's early poetry a humanitarianism divorced from politics, which offered consoling images of reconciliation in the midst of social turmoil. Much like the early Dickens, Wordsworth was praised for removing barriers between rich and poor, and insisting "we have all of us one human heart" – a sentiment that was to feel increasingly urgent in the "hungry forties." Even Wordsworth's solitude in the Lake District, once seen as a mark of eccentricity, became a warrant of contemplative power and emotional integrity that transcended political conflict – something of the therapeutic effect which Mill recalled deriving from Wordsworth in the late 1820s. The political radical turned apostate was enshrined as a version of the Victorian sage.

Wordsworth's growing popularity also reflected in part, however, the dearth of younger poets claiming anything like the popularity of Byron and Scott. On the basis of sales and circulation, "Victorian poetry" in the 1830s is primarily Romantic poetry. The most popular volume to appear in the latter part of the decade was Martin Tupper's *Proverbial Philosophy*, the first series of which appeared in 1838. It became a stunning success, which prompted Tupper to compose three more volumes under the same title, the last in 1876; the first volume alone would go through more than 50 editions in the next 50 years, and the group of titles sold more than 250,000 copies in England alone (Gray 1976: 386). Nearly bereft of formal distinction, the volume's popularity suggests the pleasure Victorian readers derived from a confident didacticism:

By culture man may do all things, short of the miracle, – Creation:  
Here is the limit of thy power, – here let thy pride be stayed:

The soil may be rich, and the mind may be active, but neither yield  
 unsown  
 The eye cannot make light, nor the mind make spirit:  
 Therefore it is wise in man to name all novelty invention:  
 For it is to find out things that are, not to create the unexisting:  
 It is to cling to contiguities, to be keen in catching likeness,  
 And with energetic elasticity to leap the gulfs of contrast.  
 (ll. 31–8; Gray 1976)

With the deaths of L. E. L. and Hemans, Browning still obscure, and Tennyson silent since his 1832 volume, the scene for poetry in 1838 was not a hopeful one. Amid a growing sense of political unrest, readers increasingly turned to other genres.

### Literature of Travel

The rapid development of transportation technology over the course of the nineteenth century – most notably the railway and steam-powered shipping – made travel accessible to a much wider range of the public than ever before, and brought a corresponding expansion of the literature of travel. Much of this writing held an interest akin to that of romance, the representation of unusual people and customs in exotic settings, but the pleasures of anecdote and vivid description were bound up with (more or less self-conscious) forms of national self-definition. Travel literature insists on the construction of difference: to mark a place or a people as distinctive necessarily implies a culture or national character different from one's own. To declare that something is peculiarly French entails something about what it means to be English. In this regard, travel writing participates in an impulse central to the Victorian novel, which scholars have come to call "autoethnography": in discovering a distinctive coherence or identity in an alien culture, one is implicitly delineating the contours of one's own (Buzard 2005).

In the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, the French were the most powerful cultural "other" in the British imagination, and over the course of the century they would remain a crucial foil in defining varieties of Englishness, whether in celebration or lament. In the early 1830s, however, America became a newly compelling destination, despite the manifold difficulties of travel to and within the young republic. Part of the allure was of course the cultural proximity, but

the shared language and heritage grounded a sense that America was the future – one version of it, anyway, which was crucially divided from Europe by the rise of democracy. That prospect, which had taken on new urgency with the passage of the Reform Bill, was complicated by the discordant, disturbing persistence of slavery. It was the novel phenomenon of democratic society that drew Alexis DeTocqueville to America in the 1830s; English engagements rarely aimed at such system or sweep as his *Democracy in America* (1836), but even the most anecdotal sense of daily life tended to be animated by a spirit of rivalry, in which the relative superiority of two ways of life hangs in the balance.

The literary appeal of American travel was first brought home by Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), which caused a great stir on both sides of the Atlantic, and started Trollope on her writing career. Trollope (1779–1863) had emigrated to America in 1829 and settled in Cincinnati, on the Ohio River, at that point the westernmost major city in the country, intending to set up as a shop-keeper. When the business failed, Trollope thought to recoup some of her losses with her pen, recording a journey from New Orleans up the Mississippi and the Ohio rivers, and then on by coach across the Alleghenies to the East Coast. Trollope inflamed American sentiments, and stoked the self-satisfaction of her readers at home, by insistently pointing up “the want of refinement” in daily American life. She was particularly incensed by what would become a leitmotif of travel narratives, the American habit of profuse spitting, and was bemused by the lack of class hierarchy in everyday encounters, smiling at being “introduced in form to a milliner” (Trollope 1949: 13). (Trollope was writing barely 15 years after Austen had recorded the blunders of Mr. Collins addressing himself to Darcy.) The title emphasis on “domestic manners” disclaims any interest in large political questions – the conservative Trollope adopted a conventionally feminine posture in this regard – but her observations point to the growing importance of domesticity as an ideal that perplexed the boundaries of public and private. If domestic conditions reflected a disorder in “the moral and religious conditions of the people,” then they spoke to a fundamental flaw in the state.

A more concerted reflection on American social structures came from *Society in America* (1837) by Harriet Martineau (1802–76), an economic radical who rose to fame in the early 1830s with her *Illustrations of Political Economy*, fictional tales designed to bring home

the imperatives of laissez-faire economics to a broad readership. Martineau, a fearless commentator on social issues (Barrett Browning called her “the most manlike woman in the three kingdoms” [Mermin 1989: 100]), emphatically rejected the self-imposed constraints of Trollope, and offered a sweeping analysis of the social dynamics of both American and Britain. While pointing out the moral evasions of slaveholders (which failed to trouble Trollope), Martineau also saw in the American devotion to industry grounds for a critique of the British aristocracy, in which she notes a disdain for labor that Carlyle soon would lampoon as the “Gospel of Dilettantism.” She also offered a particularly searching account of the American cult of domestic womanhood, anticipating a growing feminist chorus that the ostensible worship of femininity actually constrains and enfeebles the lives of women by denying them a wider sphere of education and activity.

A host of other writers during the thirties contributed to establishing a regular American itinerary, which in addition to Niagara Falls – a destination prompting almost unflinching raptures over its sublimity – included travels to the major American cities from Boston as far south as Baltimore and Washington, and frequently a journey out to the frontier of the Ohio. Many travelers visited a round of sights that spoke to reformist energies in both America and England: prisons – schools for the poor, factories, asylums – and nearly all grappled with that disturbing phenomenon of encountering a slave, which called out frequently baffled and contradictory responses. The journey that aroused the most comment was that of Charles Dickens in 1843. The 30-year-old Dickens, already famous in America, was eagerly awaited and rapturously greeted. Dickens for his part was animated partly by the quest for international copyright, since wholesale American piracy of his work was costing him dearly, but he also was deeply drawn to the egalitarianism of American life, and applauded much that he found in institutions of public health and education. Yet he was quickly shocked by the sheer vehemence of his reception, and by the unflagging demands for his time and attention, above all by the aggressive newspapermen. The first-hand encounter with slavery further appalled him, and he incorporated in his finished volume, *American Notes* (1842), a withering critique of the institution borrowed from Theodore Weld, who had printed a collection of reward advertisements for escaped slaves, frequently identified by scars from whips, knives, or gunshots – a standing catalogue of the violence that slaveholders typically claimed had no place in their benign governance. The Americans, Dickens

claimed, were a people resistant to criticism, and response to the book bore that out. It was some while before the wounds healed.

British travel to Europe naturally was more frequent, and offered more immediate pleasures – warmer climes, beautiful cities, elegant goods, and (for some) sexual license. The expansion of cross-Channel travel after the Napoleonic Wars nurtured an entirely new genre, travel handbooks, most famously those of Baedeker in Germany and John Murray in London (the phrase itself was coined by John Murray II in 1834). In these books, one can see the eighteenth-century Grand Tour, a leisurely survey of major capitals and historical sites designed to burnish the worldliness of young aristocrats, metamorphosing into a more egalitarian pursuit. Over the course of the century European travel for many would be closely bound up with an ideal of “culture,” at once a body of experience and a state of mind increasingly associated with responsiveness to great art, above all in Italy. But the sheer proliferation of travel nurtured increasingly varied subgenres of travel literature. On the one hand, the prototype of Byron’s *Childe Harold* had a continued allure for single young gentlemen of means, who with increasing frequency bemoaned the crowds of tourists, and over the course of the century would seek out ever more remote and solitary destinations, first in the Middle East, and subsequently in Africa, where travel was increasingly drawn into the orbit of empire. The increasing affordability of tourism for the middle class also nourished what has been called the “tourist abroad” plot, often in the vein of Trollope in America, in which the glories of St. Peter’s in Rome jostled with laments over Italian manners, beggars, and bedding: Dickens’s *Travels in Italy* is in this regard characteristic. At the same time, travel abroad could encourage more concerted self-reflection, prompting a newly sustained grappling with personal and national identity: thus Brontë’s Lucy Snowe in Brussels, Eliot’s Dorothea Brooke in Rome, Henry James’s Americans across Europe. In all of these writers, the knowingness associated with extensive travel becomes a claim to authority closely akin to that of the novelist.

## History and Heroism

In early Victorian historiography, the past remained preeminently a moral mirror in which to contemplate the present, whether in Macaulay’s triumphalist schemes of progress or (less often) in answering

laments of national decline. Only later in the century does history come to seem a truly estranging force, a source and embodiment of more radical clashes of value, which frequently exerts a powerfully aestheticizing power – as, for example, in the monologues of Browning. For early Victorians, the bearing of the past on the present seemed most urgent in its accounts of recent working-class uprisings, fear of which reached a new pitch in 1839.

Hard on the heels of the final installment of *Oliver Twist* in April there appeared another novel of criminal life whose popularity outstripped even that of *Twist*. William Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* became one of the sensations of the era; by the autumn of 1839, eight different theatrical versions were being staged in London. *Sheppard* pushed the moral boundaries farther than anything in “respectable” fiction. Not only did the novel celebrate criminal life (rather than an innocent's rescue from it) but it gave more explicit attention to sexuality than Dickens had risked. Its dubious celebrity was sealed in 1840, when the valet of Sir William Russell slit his employer's throat, and later claimed to have been inspired by *Jack Sheppard*. In the ensuing controversy, critics condemned the subject matter by calling the work a “Newgate novel,” and extended the label retroactively to *Twist*. Dickens angrily rejected the association, insisting in his 1841 Preface that the novel had a strenuous moral design, including an effort “to banish from the lips of the lowest character I introduced, any expression that could by possibility offend” (Dickens 1982: xxvii). But the label stuck.

The “Newgate novel” controversy, like most attacks on immoral literature, registered a larger social unease. The eager reception of *Pickwick* was shaped by insistent reference to the gulf between rich and poor, which Dickens was praised for rendering so benignly. Even as *Pickwick* was appearing, however, the rise of Chartism was challenging the harmonies Dickens evoked. The First Reform Bill, ironically, had exacerbated long-standing working-class discontent over their disenfranchisement. Although it excluded wage-earners from suffrage – and more clearly than any previous legislation vested political rights in property – Reform initially encouraged working-class optimism. It was (in theory) the death-knell of patronage and corruption, the herald of a new age of more egalitarian politics. Yet the propertied classes were predictably reluctant to dilute their own privilege, and even writers sympathetic to workers tended to urge upon them an uneasy blend of “improvement” and self-denial. The publications of the SDUK and SPCK were at one in celebrating self-discipline and self-restraint, virtues



eminently suited to an emergent industrial capitalism and the material progress it promised. But while political economy promised energetic strivers the reward of palpable social advance, workers often were struggling for mere sustenance, and they were exposed to increasingly volatile economic cycles that threatened destitution.

The working poor confronting such hardships found the New Poor Law of 1834 an especially egregious affront. Moreover, working-class efforts to enhance their economic leverage were blocked by legislation and fierce capitalist resistance. Few early Victorian social bodies were more demonized than trades unions, which typically were represented as diabolical conspiracies against social and political order. It was within this context that the propertied classes were haunted by the threat of civil insurrection. And those fears took especially palpable form with the rise of Chartism. Though its name derived from a specific political program, a six-point “Charter” of demands made to Parliament in a formal mass petition, the term quickly came to stand for a more inchoate, and thus more threatening, body of resentment among the poor and disenfranchised. “Chartism means the bitter discontent grown fierce and mad,” as Carlyle put it in his lengthy 1839 pamphlet on the movement (Carlyle 1971: 151).

Against this backdrop, the French Revolution of 1789 (with aftershocks in numerous continental revolutions in 1830) loomed large in the minds of the propertied classes. Within early Victorian social polemic, it bodied forth a nightmare of absolute rupture with the past – a leveling of social hierarchy that brought cataclysmic violence and suffering in its wake. As the ultimate cautionary tale against a rush to democracy, the revolution seemed an event in domestic as well as French history. “A revolt of the oppressed lower classes against the oppressing or neglecting upper classes,” Carlyle wrote in *Chartism*, was “not a French event only; no, a European one; full of stern monition to all countries of Europe.” “These Chartisms, Radicalism, Reform Bill, Tithe Bill ... are our French Revolution” (Carlyle 1971: 181). Even amid the appalling disorder of the Terror, however, Carlyle discovered a struggle, however groping and destructive, toward some form of spiritual renewal. The *sans-culottes* had been a powerful emblem for the author of *Sartor Resartus*, who was captivated by the vision of an entire nation freed of “old garnitures and social vestures” living for a time in an emblematic nakedness, a social state of pure possibility. Once *Sartor* was completed, and sank nearly without a trace, Carlyle turned to history to press home this larger significance.

When Carlyle's *French Revolution* appeared in 1837, stunned reviewers evoked loftier genres. John Stuart Mill likened it to an epic poem, recalling Aristotle's tribute to poetry as a narrative more philosophical than history because less bound by probability. J. A. Froude rejoined, "It is rather an Aeschylean drama, composed of facts literally true, in which the Furies are once more walking on the prosaic earth and shaking their serpent hair" (Froude 1904: i.76). Froude's assessment hints at what most impressed contemporaries in the work of this still-obscure writer: the dazzling style. Carlyle himself called it "a wild savage Book, itself a kind of French Revolution" (Carlyle 1970–2006: ix.115), and for some readers that savagery underscores an aestheticizing impulse in Carlyle's history, in which the revolution as spectacle displaces reflection on its causes. But Carlyle's language is of a piece with his analysis in pressing to the very thresholds of reason.

What a Paris, when the darkness fell! A European metropolitan City hurled suddenly forth from its old combinations and arrangements; to crash tumultuously together, seeking new ... Seven hundred thousand individuals, on the sudden, find all their old paths, old ways of thinking and acting, vanish from under their feet. And so there go they, with clangour and terror, they know not as yet whether running, swimming or flying, – headlong into the New Era. (Carlyle 1989: i.187)

As Carlyle summons up elemental fury – one chapter is entitled "the gods are athirst" – he turns most often to the female figures of Greek mythology that struck Froude: "they lie always, those subterranean Eumenides (fabulous and yet so true), in the dullest existence of man" (i.186). Figures of maenadic frenzy would have a curiously potent afterlife in Victorian England, where no violence seemed more fearful than that of women possessed by murderous rage. "Alas then, is man's civilization only a wrappage, through which the savage nature of him can still burst, infernal as ever!" (ii.370). The bewildering effects of such "savage nature" are reinforced by Carlyle's canny manipulation of perspective, which develops out of his long meditation on the peculiar narrative challenges history poses. "Narrative is *linear*, action is *solid*," he had declared in an early essay, "On History" (Carlyle 1971: 55). Thus the narrative shifts abruptly between various points of view – the French Revolution took place in the heart of every participant, he urges at one point – and between highly particular description and reflection on the difficulty of making sense of the confusion. At moments Carlyle seems to throw up his hands: History cannot fully

explain the turmoil, but can only “*look* honestly at it, and name what she can of it!” (Carlyle 1989: ii.333). Even that challenge is amplified by shifts between past tense and historical present, which pursue a dramatic effect that would thrust the reader into the midst of the action, and frequently create something akin to cinematic jump-cutting between simultaneous events. As that technique would influence the later novels of Dickens, it would reverberate even in the rise of twentieth-century film, in the work of such admirers of Victorian narrative as Sergei Eisenstein.

A few individuals stand out from this sea of anonymity, appearing (for a time at least) to redirect the current by intimating the basis of new social order. Mirabeau is the first of Carlyle’s political heroes, a prime exemplar of the antinomian defiance that fascinated Carlyle even more than it did Browning. “Moralities not a few must shriek condemningly over this Mirabeau; the Morality by which he could be judged has not yet got uttered in the speech of men. We will say this of him again: That he is a Reality and no Simulacrum; a living son of Nature our general Mother; not a hollow Artifice, and mechanism of Conventionalities, son of nothing, *brother* to nothing” (i.451–2). Carlyle’s view of history focused on the lives of great men, the solitary heroes who, in their power to rally the devotion of others less gifted, also manifested a divine order at work in the world. Increasingly, this was the only mark of divinity that could command Carlyle’s own faith. In 1840, he gave a series of public lectures entitled *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, in which he startled his (generally appreciative) audience by devoting a chapter to Mohammed, his example of “the Hero as Prophet.” Compared to “Benthamee Utility, virtue by Profit and Loss; reducing this God’s-world to a dead brute Steam-engine,” Mohammed’s faith, grounded in earnest struggle and stern recognition of “the Infinite Nature of Duty,” seemed much the nobler view of life (Carlyle 1908: 309–10). Carlyle’s celebration of the hero became an object of deep suspicion in the twentieth century, and some have argued that it was one current in the rise of modern totalitarianism. But the view of history as an archive of individual greatness was a central Victorian axiom, which vindicated the power of human agency itself – a concern that would gradually come to figure centrally in the novel as well. History, Carlyle insisted, is “an infinite conjugation of the verb *to do*”; in an era when action had given way to inertia, history became “the grand Poem of our Time” (Carlyle 1970–2006: vi.466).

Carlylean heroism thus responded to growing worry that modern life undermined individual freedom, whether through social conformism, technology, sheer numbers, or the constraints of one's own psychology. The tension animates Carlyle's figure of the critic as prophet, who must keep society at a distance to maintain his integrity, but thereby courts his own neglect. The writer of a book, Carlyle claims, "is an accident in society. He wanders like a wild Ishmaelite, in a world in which he is as the spiritual light." This self-conception propels the rhetorical high-wire act that bewildered so many readers: a prophet readily understood was suspect of "quackery," as Carlyle put it, yet fidelity to a truth that was ultimately ineffable was liable to reduce him to mere silence. The insistence that his own writing is "wild," "savage," "uncouth," is one means of declaring a sincerity that confounds all decorum.

Victorian audiences ultimately embraced Carlyle, and largely on his own terms, as "the sage of Chelsea," whose stern iconoclasm was the best warrant of his integrity. It is hard to over-state Carlyle's influence on the intellectual generation that came of age in the 1840s. With the publication of his *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* in 1840, he became (as Eliza Lynn Linton would recall a generation later) "the yeast plant, fermenting the whole literary brew" (Ray 1955: 224), and virtually every writer of the next two decades left testimony to his impact. Much of the allure stemmed from the fact that he seemed, as one commentator put it, a "sect of one." Whereas his intellectual rivals – Mill and Macaulay, preeminently – could easily be affiliated with "sects" both religious and political, Carlyle seemed to confound categorization. And yet he seemed to incarnate a distinctive and charismatic form of belief, and as such ministered to the intellectual anxiety that a broad readership came to experience as a crisis of faith.

Another influential, if narrower, circle of devoted followers gathered around Carlyle's exact contemporary, Thomas Arnold. Arnold's achievements were impressive – he was an influential liberal historian of Ancient Rome, a theologian in the movement dubbed "Broad Church" (urging a more inclusive interpretation of Anglican doctrine), and the reforming headmaster of Rugby School – but this was not the stuff of traditional heroism. After his early death in 1842, however, Arnold was enshrined in a biography by his pupil A. P. Stanley, *Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold, D.D.* (1844), which became one of the best-selling biographies ever published in Britain. Biography, both historical and fictional, gained popularity in concert with the search for

heroism; the form summoned up especially vivid moral exemplars. Stanley managed to capture for a large audience the extraordinary devotion that Arnold commanded among his students. Although Rugby – like all the most prestigious Victorian public schools – was profoundly elitist (Arnold refused to admit sons of “tradesmen,” since they were not gentlemen), and Arnold himself was suspect in many circles for his liberal politics, Stanley presented him as a moral exemplar who transcended politics and class. Stanley’s Arnold was a consummate model of earnestness, fervent and rigorous yet humble in his piety and devoted to the intellectual and spiritual welfare of his young charges. His image loomed so large that he became one of the four “eminent Victorians” that Lytton Strachey tried to cut down to size in 1918.

The hunger for guidance from heroes fastened onto yet another figure coming to national prominence at the same time. Like Carlyle, John Henry Newman (1801–90) derided hymns to secular “improvement,” which, as he saw it, “does not contemplate raising man above himself,” and whose rationalistic psychology was deeply impoverished in its understanding of human value and motivation. “First shoot round corners, and you may not despair of converting by a syllogism,” as Newman put it in a lengthy attack on secular education, “The Tamworth Reading Room,” first published in a series of letters to *The Times* in 1840. “After all, man is not a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal” (Newman 1965: 101–2). This view chimes with Carlyle’s celebration of heroism, and even has a more muted echo in Mill’s contemporaneous rethinking of Benthamism as a stance that too little accommodated the power of feeling. The search for values beyond self-interest and calculation would resonate throughout the critique of industrial society made on behalf of “culture.” But Newman wrote out of fierce devotion to, and from the innermost bastion of, the Christianity that both Mill and Carlyle had abandoned. He was an Anglican clergyman and tutor at Oxford, where he had gained widespread attention for his role in a religious movement called Tractarianism – so much so that his admirers soon became known as “Newmanites.”

The Tractarian movement derived its name from a series of “Tracts for the Times,” which began in September of 1833, prompted by John Keble’s sermon a few months earlier on “National Apostasy.” Unlike the vast majority of Victorian religious tracts, these were addressed not to the poor, or even to parishioners generally, but to the clergy

themselves, “brothers in Christ,” arguing that the integrity of the Church of England was being compromised by increasing state control. It urged renewed recognition of the authority of the clergy as a priesthood, whose powers were derived by “apostolical succession” from St. Peter, “the Vicar of Christ.” In this broad sense, the Tracts chimed with numerous conservative attacks on “the spirit of the age” as a rupture with fundamental British traditions. But the Tracts had a special force because they emanated from Oxford, and they evolved into a social formation deeply unsettling to Protestant Britain. The appeal to tradition and the ineffable power of personal influence was especially alluring at Oxford, which was still something of an Anglican seminary: all degree candidates were required to formally subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England, and all tutors were Anglican clergymen, who understood their teaching roles to be closely bound up with pastoral guidance. Newman, a brilliant rhetorician and a charismatic personal presence, became rector of the University Church, St. Mary’s, in 1837, and exerted a mesmerizing influence over many students. The fascination he aroused would be conjured up in numerous personal memoirs, such as that of Matthew Arnold, who decades later evoked Newman preaching in St. Mary’s, undeterred by the fact that he never witnessed it. Newman’s later writings on the history of Christian doctrine would have a large impact on historical reflection generally. Those who resisted Newman’s appeal, however, denounced the “Puseyites,” as they also were known (after the influential and well-connected E. B. Pusey), as a standing danger to the Church of England. In appealing to apostolic succession and unbroken connection with the early Church, Newman and his allies were urging what seemed like a return to Roman Catholicism – a drift reinforced by association with vows of celibacy and more formal liturgy. Thomas Arnold leveled the charge in especially pointed manner, in an 1836 *Edinburgh Review* article, “The Oxford Malignants.”

The sense of intellectual daring was part of Newman’s appeal to the many young men who experienced it. Despite the marked divergence in their beliefs, both Newman and Carlyle epitomized the outsider punished for his integrity, alienated from the establishment by his stern truth-telling. Newman, speaking for a collective priesthood in frequently anonymous address, and seemingly at the opposite end of the theological spectrum from Carlyle – the cloistered monk versus the ascetic prophet – would by the early 1840s become another charismatic solitary, and a spiritual icon whose authority rivaled that of

Carlyle. By the mid-1840s Carlyle, Newman, and Arnold almost seemed to lead distinct political parties at Oxford and Cambridge, where earnest undergraduates were characterized by their divergent loyalties – a sense of mingled rivalry and emulation that figures centrally in novels and memoirs of the period.

### Social Crisis and the Novel

Newman's threatening affiliation with Catholicism led popular caricatures to link Tractarianism to Chartism and the threat of working-class insurrection. The vividness of Catholicism in the Victorian imagination far exceeded its actual social prominence and power, but like Chartism and trades unions, Roman clergy in Britain (formally disestablished for nearly three centuries) could be seen as a secret society bent on overthrowing the social order – and closely aligned with the restive, disenfranchised Irish. Growing controversy over the substance of the Tracts fueled a conspiratorial imagination already boiling in 1839, in the wake of the "Newport Uprising" and other portents (so it seemed) of working-class revolt.

Those anxieties were inflamed by yet another literary work that polemically engaged recent social debate. Throughout the 1830s, "the factory question" had been a locus of intense debate in literary journals and on the floor of Parliament, which was debating the "Ten Hours Bill," an act that (among other things) would ban the employment of children under 12 in factories and mines for more than 10 hours a day, six days a week. These debates underscored both the novelty and the momentousness of industrial labor, which would seem to make it an obvious subject for novelists. But though Douglas Jerrold had addressed factory labor in his 1829 melodrama, *Black-Eyed Susan*, throughout the thirties novelistic interest was overwhelmed by polemical fervor. Harriet Martineau's *Principles of Political Economy* in 1834 offered a fictional account of factory labor, "A Manchester Strike," but the narrative was a straightforward didactic tale enforcing the lessons of political economy by warning against the follies of trades unions and strikes. Only in 1839 did Frances Trollope show how well Dickensian romance could represent the child laborer as a victim of political economy.

The hero of Trollope's *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, The Factory Boy* is an *Oliver Twist* deported to the industrial north of England. Unleavened by Dickens's humor, however, and in many ways

bolder in its representation of working-class desperation (one episode, with accompanying illustration, describes small boys competing with pigs for scraps of food), Armstrong's novel aroused even more antipathy from reviewers when it began appearing in monthly parts in March of 1839. The *Athenaeum* accused her of "scattering firebrands among the people" and implored her to remember "that the most probable immediate effect of her pennings and her pencillings will be the burning of factories ... [and] the plunder of property of all kinds"; a reviewer in Bolton accordingly urged that she receive the same jail sentences passed on radical agitators for using "violent language against the 'monster cotton-mills.'" "I don't think anyone cares much for Michael Armstrong," the staunchly Tory novelist remarked, "except the Chartists. A new kind of patrons for me!" (Heineman 1979: 184, 171).

Throughout the late thirties, novels were lightning rods for political anxiety. The *Athenaeum* review of Trollope on 16 October 1839 linked political incendiarism and debased literary appetite; the *Examiner* of 3 November 1839 declared that the Newgate novels and silver-fork were "complementary aspects of a society's continued cringing to St James"; the *Monthly Review* of February 1840 declared, "The times are out of joint, and Chartism rages while Jack Sheppard *reads*" (Chittick 1990: 158). Such responses also reflect the increasing cultural authority of the novel. As Mary Mitford wrote to Elizabeth Barrett, "What things these are – the Jack Sheppards, and Squeers, and Oliver Twists, and Michael Armstrongs – All the worse because of their power to move men's souls" (Heineman 1979: 171).

Novelists, however, would not develop a more sustained engagement with industrialism and class division until the mid-1840s. (Charlotte Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood* [1841] is a partial exception, but it primarily exhorts factory workers to embrace Christianity in order to save themselves from the moral dangers of their workplace.) Some of this silence may represent a shrinking from the hostility Trollope aroused. But it also seems to reflect the disorienting novelty of large-scale factory labor, which at this stage remained a phenomenon of the north, above all of Yorkshire and Lancashire, where Manchester was dubbed "the workshop of the world." When Dickens visited Manchester in 1838 and 1839, conducted on the latter visit by the evangelical social reformer, Lord Ashley, he vowed "to strike the heaviest blow in my power for these unfortunate creatures," but it would be 15 years before he took up the topic more directly (Johnson 1952: 225). In a passage in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Dickens 1998: 329–43), written



soon after his visit to Manchester, Nell and her grandfather on their journey approach an industrial landscape whose smoke and glare seem nightmarish – but they tellingly skirt direct contact with it, as would Dickens himself until 1854, when he set to work on *Hard Times*.

Novelists like Dickens who drew their subjects from London or rural settings – which in the late 1830s meant nearly all novelists – were depicting a very different social order. There was ample precedent in eighteenth-century fiction for the social dynamics of Dickens's early fiction, but an industrial order, to adapt Carlyle's phrase, was "unexampled." Nonetheless, Dickens by the end of the decade was growing restive with his own achievement. When *Nickleby* began appearing in April 1838, reviewers were still identifying Dickens not as a novelist, but as a writer of "entertainments." The benchmark for serious novel-writing continued to be Scott, whose achievement took on renewed authority with the appearance of a massive *Life of Scott* by his son-in-law John Lockhart, which appeared in a series of seven volumes between March 1837 and March 1838 (dwarfing in size Boswell's *Life of Johnson*). Dickens tacitly conceded the distance between himself and the master in a letter of January 1839, envisioning a work to be published "as a Novel, and not in portions" (Chittick 1990: 130). This was the long-deferred *Barnaby Rudge*, a historical novel set in London in the 1780s, and centered on the anti-Catholic "Gordon riots." Having envisioned the work in Scott's traditional three-volume format, however, Dickens soon was blocked; already the serial form was providing an energizing sense of contact with an audience (and regular deadlines) that seemed a necessary spur. Having stepped down from editing *Bentley's Magazine*, he undertook a new weekly series for Chapman and Hall entitled *Master Humphrey's Clock*, for which he produced *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841).

*The Old Curiosity Shop* would turn out to be Dickens's greatest success to date, owing partly to the weekly format, partly to its relentless presentation of persecuted virtue – virtue not only enduring, but positively flowering under neglect. Stories of crowds gathering on the docks in New York to await the latest installment may be exaggerated, but they reflect the gripping appeal of the mysteriously ailing heroine, Little Nell, who would outlive the book as a paragon of Victorian sentimentality. Even Ruskin's disdainful opinion more than 40 years later (in "Fiction Fair and Foul"), that Dickens had butchered Nell like a lamb for the market, suggests the bitterness of a frustrated lover. It is difficult to explain this hold, in which the redemptive force of

innocence – associated with both domesticity and the countryside – blurs into the ritual purgation offered by a scapegoat. Nell’s decline is set against a London bleaker than in any of Dickens’s previous works, full of danger and foreboding mystery, centered around the demonic figure of Quilp – the most volatile to date in Dickens’s gallery of villains lusting for absolute domination, a well of energy on which he would draw throughout his career. The elemental contraries of the book’s moral typology are at war with both plot and character development. “With gradually failing strength and heightening resolution, there had sprung up a purified and altered mind” in Nell, the narrator remarks (Dickens 1998: 391) – but it is hard for a reader to see any impurities requiring alteration in the first place.

### The Domestic Ideal

In *Barnaby Rudge* (1842), Dickens’s long-standing fascination with motiveless malignity found a resonant embodiment in mob violence – a motif that clearly registered contemporary political insecurity. Yet the historical setting also enabled Dickens to frame a newly insistent celebration of domesticity as a distinctly middle-class virtue. The energies of the novel remain powerfully melodramatic, with yet another aristocratic rake harrowing a vulnerable young woman, Dolly Varden. But the main villain, John Chester, is arraigned for more subtle corruption. Modeled on Chesterfield, whose *Letters to his Son* would become a favorite butt of Victorian earnestness, Chester is most dangerous not in his brutishness, but in a social ethos that values elegance and calculated self-interest over selfless devotion. A Victorian ideal of domesticity is solidified through his suave disdain for it: “Marriage is a civil contract,” he chastens his ardent son, “people marry to better their worldly condition and improve appearances; it is an affair of house and furniture, of liveries, servants, equipage, and so forth” (Dickens 1997: 309). Chester’s contempt for the heart seems a graver threat to social order than the riots fomented by Lord George Gordon, who is a mere cipher.

A series of events in the late 1830s gave new prominence to an ideal of domestic life centered on feminine influence. First among them, of course, was the ascension in 1837 of a young female monarch, who placed the division of public and private realms into newly urgent, and sometimes perplexing, prominence. In that same year, public attention was riveted by a marriage gone horribly wrong, after George Norton

accused the Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne, of an adulterous affair with his wife, Caroline Norton – a famous beauty, granddaughter of the Irish dramatist Sheridan, and a poet of some note. The lawsuit inspired Dickens’s travesty in “Bardell vs. Pickwick,” but it had more somber ramifications for Caroline Norton: although her husband’s suit was thrown out and Melbourne continued in his post, she was turned into a pariah barred from contact with her own children, who under English law were entirely subject to the will of their father. When the sympathetic MP Thomas Talfourd introduced an “Infant Custody Bill” that would offer women greater rights, Norton published a series of supporting pamphlets and articles – which excited new excoriations of her character, in part because the sheer exposure of her private misery seemed scandalous. Against such abuse, often insinuating that Norton wished to license female profligacy, she insisted on the chastening example of feminine devotion: “Did this author never see that very usual and customary sight, a modest and affectionate wife? Did he never see a woman watching the cradle of her sick child? Did he never see a mother teaching her little one to pray?” (Chase and Levenson 2000: 43).

Female tenderness and modesty thus became an emphatically political issue, and a rebuke to men who would presume less of women. The power of those virtues assumed even greater scope in the polemics of Sarah Stickney Ellis, who in 1839 launched a series of publications that perhaps more than any other codified the notion of “separate spheres” for men and women. In *The Women of England*, *The Wives of England*, *The Daughters of England* – the titles themselves suggest the single-mindedness of her commitment – Ellis insisted on the crucial importance of women confining themselves to home and family life, where their influence created an essential refuge from and counterweight to the increasingly combative and coarsening public realm. The notoriety of these writings as monuments to sexual inequality has overshadowed much of their cutting political critique, under which the sustaining and purifying influence of women is necessary to counteract the brutality of *homo economicus*:

There is no union in the great field of action in which he is engaged; but envy, and hatred, and opposition, to the close of day – every man’s hand against his brother, and each struggling to exalt himself, not merely by trampling upon the fallen foe, but by usurping the place of his weaker brother, who faints by his side. (Chase and Levenson 2000: 78)

In opposition to this struggle, Ellis invested women with extraordinary power, but power that could be exerted only by embracing a perpetual confinement to domestic affairs, and to the needs of others. Woman, she wrote, “whose whole life, from the cradle to the grave, is one of feeling, rather than of action; whose highest duty is often to suffer and be still; whose deepest enjoyments are all nothing, and is nothing, of herself; whose experience, if unanticipated, is a total blank,” nonetheless possesses a “world of interest ... wide as the realm of humanity, boundless as the ocean of life, and enduring as eternity” (Chase and Levenson: 80). Woman embodied and conveyed the “poetry” of human nature, and without her distinctive “influence,” it seemed, human affairs would soon revert to savage aggression.

Such idealizing became a long-standing impediment to women’s rights, but it also would reinforce the association of art and aesthetic experience with femininity. Women’s influence, as Ellis describes it, is strikingly akin to that which critics increasingly assigned to literature and culture. In the meantime, however, the doctrine of separate spheres made representations of middle-class daily life seem a matter of great social urgency – and threats to it a kind of a desecration. Thus the narrator of *Barnaby Rudge* reflects on a ruined house:

The ashes of the commonest fire are melancholy things ... How much more sad the crumbled embers of a home: the casting down of that great altar, where the worst among us sometimes perform the worship of the heart; and where the best have offered up such sacrifices, and done such deeds of heroism, as, chronicled, would put the proudest temples of old Time, with all their vaunting annals, to the Blush! (Dickens 1997: 725)

The image subtly conflates domestic strife and social catastrophe: both forces tumble “that great altar” at which so many Victorians came to worship.

### From Silver-Fork to Farce

Middle-class domestic life rapidly came to the foreground of novels in the 1840s – a development widely remarked at the time. In 1837, Harriet Martineau recalled, John Murray refused her novel *Deerbrook* (1837) because its subject was drawn from “middle life”: “People liked high life in novels, and low life, and ancient life; and people of any rank

presented by Dickens, in his peculiar artistic light ... but it was not supposed that they would bear a presentment of the familiar life of every day” (Adburgham 1983: 294). By 1840 the situation seemed to be rapidly changing. In 1841 E. C. Grey would complain (in his novel *The Little Wife*), “Novel-writing has completely changed its character. From its high-flown, elaborate style, it is now fallen into its opposite extreme; from improbabilities, always impalpable, sometimes gross, now, in their place, we find nothing but the hum-drummeries of reality” (L. James 1963: 96). Although the prolific Catherine Gore scored successes with *Cecil, or The Adventures of a Coxcomb* (1841) and *The Banker’s Wife, Or Court and City* (1843), the “fashionable” vogue was greatly diminished, and *Jack Sheppard* was the zenith of the Newgate novel. Ainsworth himself was unsettled by the controversy he provoked, and increasingly withdrew into safer historical precincts, in works like *The Tower of London* (1840), *Old Saint Paul’s* (1841), and *Saint James’s* (1844). Bentley gave him 2,000 pounds for the first of these, but he descended to 100 pounds per title for the 25 novels that Ainsworth ground out between 1860 and his death in 1882. And by the end of the decade, an exasperated publisher would tell Anthony Trollope, “Your historical novel is not worth a damn” (Sutherland 1989: 298).

The turn to more modest forms of domesticity drew on both the popularity of Dickens and parody of the silver-fork mode (a recurrent feature of Dickens’s early fiction). Samuel Warren’s *Ten Thousand A-Year*, for example, began appearing in *Blackwood’s* in October of 1839, and on publication in volume form in 1841 became one of the best-selling comic novels of the century. It recounts the rags to riches story of a downtrodden young draper’s assistant, Tittlebat Titmouse, who unexpectedly inherits a magnificent fortune and estate through the legal forgeries of Quirk, Gammon, and Snap. The ironies surrounding the rapacious vulgarity of the hero are not subtle – “How the reptile propensities of his mean nature had thriven beneath the sudden sunshine of unexpected prosperity!” (Warren 1832: 23) – but the work offers rollicking satire of social ambition and conspicuous consumption, as well as an insider’s view of unscrupulous legal machinations (Warren [1807–77] was a successful barrister). As Warren’s novel deflates the pretensions of the silver-fork school, it also depicts a comic type increasingly prominent in novels at mid-century. Titmouse is a consummate example of “the gent” – a label that gained wide currency with the publication of Albert Smith’s *The Natural History of the Gent*

(1847). The gent is an awkward, callow young man of slender means and family standing who aspires to the gentleman's stature. Eager to distinguish himself from the working class by mimicking the address and behavior of his social superiors, the gent is comically inept in his struggles, typically reduced to comic externals: the over-formal yet shabby dress of the failed dandy, diminutive size and surname (Titmouse, Titmarsh, Tittlebat), which signal his lack of power, and his eager awkwardness, so pointedly at odds with the ease of the true gentleman.

The prominence of the gent owes much to contemporary social anxiety. As novelists increasingly turned their attention to middle-class life, a natural focus was the often elusive boundaries that delineated social membership and exclusion. One of the most acute students of these anxieties was William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–63), a prolific reviewer, sketch-writer, and illustrator who signed on as a regular contributor to *Fraser's* in 1837. Thackeray's first series of sketches, *The Yellowplush Papers* (1837–8), originated as the mocking review of a guide to "silver-fork" etiquette, seen through the eyes of one Charles James Yellowplush, a liveried footman: "to describ fashnabble life, ONE OF US must do the thing, to do it well" (Ray 1955: 198). At about the same time, he constructed for his art reviews the persona of Michael Angelo Titmarsh – a typical bit of self-ironization. Thackeray's next serial, *Catherine* (1839–40), was a more sustained parody of the "Newgate" genre based on the life of Catherine Hayes, who was burnt at Tyburn in 1726 for murdering her husband. From the outset, Thackeray's comedy drew on a more jaundiced view of class relations than Dickens's, derived in part from his own bitter sense of dispossession. Born into a wealthy Anglo-Indian family and educated at Charterhouse and Cambridge (among major Victorian novelists only Bulwer came from similar privilege, perhaps one reason for Thackeray's lifelong rivalry with him), Thackeray stood to inherit a comfortable fortune that was lost through bad investments, and he spent much of his life worrying over fine lines of class division and exposure to the waywardness of modern economic life. At this stage of his career, though a year older than Dickens, he remained very much a sketch-writer; *The Paris Sketch Book* (1840), his first published volume, appeared well after Dickens's rise to fame.

Sketch-writers gained an especially appealing venue with the founding of *Punch* in 1841, which recognized the growing audience for comic literature and topical humor, both literary and visual. Although the magazine did not publish extended fiction, it offered regular space

to a number of fiction writers. Thackeray would become its most famous contributor, particularly after the publication of *A Book of Snobs* (1847), but initially the leading figure on the journal (beyond its editor, Mark Lemon) was Douglas Jerrold, whose *Story of a Feather* (1843) and *Mrs. Caudle's Curtain Lectures* (1845) were great successes. *The Story of a Feather* is a “thing story,” a series of sketches linked by the device of an ostrich feather passed through a broad array of English society, in the process evoking connections between the most exalted and the most vulnerable, such as a poor featherdresser named Patty Butler. Even in this work Jerrold – known for his slashing political squibs and vigorous radicalism – anchored his comedy in a special sympathy for the poor. *Mrs. Caudle* offers a more traditional – but perhaps for that reason, ultimately more popular – series of domestic sketches, recounting the ordeals of the henpecked Job Caudle, a toy and doll merchant, who must endure his wife's nightly scoldings on quotidian topics.

The 1840s, like every decade of the period, were full of ephemeral comic fiction, such as *The Greatest Plague of Life* (1847), by Henry and Augustus Mayhew. Meanwhile, Robert Surtees (1805–64) produced a trilogy of popular but more durable comic novels featuring a character that he had first created for the *New Monthly Magazine* (and which became a central impetus behind *The Pickwick Papers*): Jorrocks, the rich, bloated huntsman who had earned his fortune as a Cockney grocer. In *Jorrocks's Jaunts and Jollities* (1838), *Handley Cross, Or the Spa Hunt* (1843) and *Hillingdon Hall, Or the Cockney Squire* (1845), Surtees spins variations on the seemingly inexhaustible comedy of class, as the vulgar, bacchanalian tradesman cuts a swath through the world of landed squires. Surtees himself belonged to the latter realm: he wrote as an amateur, and knew from the inside the world he chronicled in the likes of *Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour* (1853). Most of his novels were serialized by Bradbury and Evans, the publishers of *Punch*, and illustrated by John Leech, one of the magazine's most eminent contributors.

### Poetry in the Early 1840s

The future of English poetry, gloomy in 1838, hardly seemed brighter in 1842. In 1839 Philip James Bailey (1816–1902) had a success with *Festus*, which suggests the enduring appeal of Romantic closet drama,

notably Goethe's *Faust* and even Browning's *Paracelsus* – with which it shares an antinomian hero who takes as his subject the cosmos. But Bailey made Browning's poem seem positively austere; initially a poem of 8,000 lines, by its seventh and final edition *Festus* had expanded to 40,000 lines. These successes notwithstanding, Richard Hengist Horne (1803–84) in 1843 protested the modest sales of contemporary poetry by publishing his epic *Orion* at a farthing a copy. Whether owing to the price or the subject, a vaguely Keatsian treatment of Greek myth, the volume proved immensely popular, emboldening Horne to produce his *New Spirit of the Age* in the following year.

But 1842 would turn out to be one of the more momentous years for Victorian poetry. The most popular volume published that year was Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*, whose title suggests its debt to Scott's *Lays of the Last Minstrel*. Macaulay deftly appropriated Scott's ballad style to the treatment of classical themes, and the result was one of the best-selling poetry volumes of the age; it sold 18,000 copies over the next decade, and 100,000 by 1875. Its images of heroic fidelity (much like Hemans's "Casabianca") would become a staple of schoolroom declamation:

Then out spake brave Horatius  
 The Captain of the gate:  
 "To every man upon this earth  
 Death cometh soon or late.  
 And how can man die better  
 Than facing fearful odds,  
 For the ashes of his father  
 And the temple of his Gods."  
 ("Horatius" ll. 201–8; Gray 1976)

Less widely noted, but eagerly greeted by critics, was the two-volume *Poems* of Tennyson. It ended the poet's "Ten Year's Silence," a lapse that most commentators have attributed to the shock of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam's death at 21, in October of 1833. On this reading of his career, which Tennyson encouraged, the touchstone poem was "Ulysses," another of his brilliant monologues drawn from the margins of Homeric legend (refracted through Dante), which evokes the aged Ulysses setting out on new voyages after his disappointing return to life in Ithaca. As Tennyson described it, "The poem was written soon after Arthur Hallam's death, and it gives the feeling about the need of going forward and braving the struggle of life perhaps more



simply than anything in *In Memoriam*” (Tennyson 1969: 560). But the shock was embraced by an imagination already well versed in fantasies of surrender and desolation, so hauntingly evoked in the likes of “Mariana.” Even Ulysses’s affirmation of enduring struggle is a surprisingly enervated one:

My purpose holds  
 To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
 Of all the western stars, until I die.  
 It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:  
 It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles  
 And see the brave Achilles, whom we knew.  
 (ll. 59–64; Tennyson 1969)

This Ulysses would be more at home with his mariners on the island of the Lotos. Few 23-year-olds have written more eloquently of decrepitude and broken will.

Volume One of the new *Poems* largely reprinted the 1832 edition (with occasionally extensive revisions, notably of “The Lady of Shalott”), adding six new poems, most of them political poems written in 1833, expressing anxiety over the Reform Bill. Volume Two was entirely new work, which moved in two broad directions: more narrative poetry, much of it in blank verse (rare in 1832), and more venture-some experiments in the monologue, along the lines of “Ulysses.” The volume opens with six poems later categorized as “English Idyls,” largely derived from Greek pastoral, in settings mostly drawn from English country houses and their grounds, backdrop to the familiar clash between money and desire: “They wedded her to sixty thousand pounds / To lands in Kent and messuages in York” (“Edwin Morris,” ll. 126–7). In their evocations of romance, often through its frustration, the poems look forward to Tennyson’s greatest popular success, *Enoch Arden* (1864). The one exception is the haunting “Morte D’Arthur,” drawn from Thomas Malory’s fifteenth-century prose epic of the same title, which recounts the final collapse of Arthur’s “old order,” and his departure to an unknown world “Among new men, strange faces, other minds” (l. 238). In both setting and emotional resonance, “Morte” is strikingly at odds with the other Idyls (as well as with other poems in the volume in medieval dress), and owes its place in the “Idyls” to a characteristically self-mistrustful narrative frame. “The Epic” introduces the poem as the fragment of an aborted epic by one Everard Hall, who recites it for his friends as a Christmas Eve

entertainment, but only after disparaging it as a misguided effort to write about “heroic times”: “For Nature brings not back the Mastodon, / Nor we those times” (ll. 36–7). With this seemingly offhand gesture, Tennyson anticipated a heated debate a decade later over the subject matter of contemporary poetry. But not for another 15 years did he plunge into medieval legend in earnest.

Narrative and monologue, and the future direction of Tennyson’s career, were most suggestively evoked in “Locksley Hall.” This was the 1842 poem most widely cited by contemporaries, and has been a favorite ever since of historians looking for a banner of Victorian optimism:

Not in vain the distance beckons. Forward, forward let us range,  
Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change.  
(ll.181–2)

Yet this famous hymn to progress is typically wrenched from its context. It is uttered within a dramatic monologue, in which the speaker rages over a thwarted romance and indulges a fantasy of escaping from “this march of mind” into life on a tropical island:

There the passions cramped no longer shall have scope and breathing  
space;  
I will take some dusky woman, she shall rear my dusky race.  
(ll. 167–8)

This fantasy and its subsequent repudiation – “I, to herd with narrow foreheads, vacant of our glorious gains, / Like a beast with lower pleasures, like a beast with lower pains!” (ll. 175–6) – capture not only the racial hierarchies informing Victorian schemes of progress, but also the asceticism undergirding the “march of mind.” Progress is grounded in self-discipline, in the power to renounce. Within such austere regimens, tropic margins become an increasingly prominent realm of fantasy, as a space at the very edge of sovereignty, both political domination and self-control. (“It is all right,” Charles Kingsley murmured on his deathbed, “All under rule.”) Even as Britain was conquering such spaces, the victory rarely seemed unequivocal, for the tropics always beckoned as an escape from the work of self-conquest: like “The Lotos-Eaters,” “Locksley Hall” pivots on the dream of “going native.” As the poem also enacts a struggle against this fantasy, it was praised by Charles Kingsley in 1850 as “the poem which, as we think deservedly, has had

most influence on the minds of the young men of our day” (Kingsley 1890: 114). The monologue form itself here performs the work of discipline that Kingsley praises: the skittish disavowal of “The Epic” gives way to a structure that subdues fantasy through dramatized rehearsal and repudiation. Tennysonian speakers repeatedly enact versions of “that stern monodrama,” as Carlyle called it in *Sartor*, “*No Object and No Rest*” (Carlyle 1908: 93).

Robert Browning was developing the dramatic monologue along different lines, which crystallized in his own volume of 1842, *Dramatic Lyrics*. Although he had arrived at a prototype of the form in 1835, with “Porphyria’s Lover” and “Johannes Agricola in Meditation,” Browning in the interval had been devoting his main energies to the theater, with *Strafford* in 1837 followed by *King Victor and King Charles* (which failed to please Macready) and subsequently *A Blot in the Scutcheon*, which received three performances in 1843, and finally *Colombe’s Birthday*, the last play Browning wrote for the stage, which was published in 1844 but not performed until 1853. In March 1840 he published a work whose infamy has overshadowed the obscurity of his dramas, his long-pondered and heavily revised *Sordello*, which had occupied him through much of the decade (it had been advertised as “nearly ready” in 1837), a narrative in six books set amidst the conflict between Guelphs and Ghibellines in thirteenth-century Italy. The hero’s conflict of loyalty plays out a familiar tension between the claims of action and poetry, power and sympathy, yet the poem quickly became a byword for obscurity – Mrs. Carlyle remarked that she could not discover whether *Sordello* was a man, a city, or a book. It has been argued that Browning was working in a dramatic vein akin to that of Carlyle in *The French Revolution*, subordinating narrative structure to something like dramatic immediacy. But not even Carlyle’s prose approached Browning’s punishing syntax.

After this fiasco, Browning felt that he no longer could call on his father to subsidize his publications. In April 1841 the publisher Edward Moxon brought out a new work as the first of what would become eight inexpensive pamphlets, *Bells and Pomegranates*. *Pippa Passes* is a lyrical drama structured around a young mill girl’s passage through the town of Asolo. She picks out the four most prominent families in town and sets out to “see their happiness” (l. 204; Browning 1970), but as she passes by she only brings to light varieties of misery to which she remains oblivious, while her songs break in on these troubled lives as a prod to, if not their redemption, at least greater self-awareness. Though

critical response was still overshadowed by the reception of *Sordello*, most readers praised the work – although then as now they tended to separate lyric utterance from its dramatic context. The untroubled faith of Pippa’s famous refrain, “God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world” (ll. 228–9), has too often been identified as Browning’s own. Still, the impact of these snatches of lyric on the characters who overhear them clearly reflects a central ambition of Browning’s own more artful songs.

Browning’s greatest achievement to date appeared in November of 1842, when Moxon published *Dramatic Lyrics*, a slender pamphlet reprinting “Porphyria’s Lover” and “Johannes Agricola in Meditation” (still entitled “Madhouse Cells” I and II) and adding a dozen unpublished monologues. Some of the novelty of the volume may have been obscured by its organization: eight of the 14 poems appeared in pendant structure, which called attention to anecdotal interest and picturesque setting. Thus what we now know as “My Last Duchess” and “Count Gismond” appeared as “Italy and France,” and were followed by “Incident of the French Camp” and “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister.” But the opening Advertisement pointed to a more distinctive aspiration (less in pride than defensiveness, perhaps), calling the poems “though for the most part Lyric in expression, always Dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine” (Browning 1970: 365). Presumably few readers would have mistaken the poet for the Duke of Ferrara, but Browning’s uneasiness on the point suggests something of the rhetorical confusion that would dog reception of his work for another two decades. Browning’s monologues increasingly evoked “imaginary persons” through subtle resistance to an imagined audience, shaping individuality by confounding moral stereotype:

Our interest’s in the dangerous edge of things  
 The tender murderer, the honest thief  
 The superstitious atheist ...  
 We watch while these in equilibrium keep  
 The giddy line midway: one step aside,  
 They’re classed and done with.

(ll. 395–401; Browning 1970)

This oxymoronic catalogue from “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” (1855) holds for most of Browning’s best monologues, whose moral

“equilibrium” creates a psychological complexity unrivaled by the early Victorian novel.

Browning’s series of pamphlets found an especially enthusiastic reader in Elizabeth Barrett. In “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship,” the most popular poem of her 1844 *Poems*, the poet Bertram reads aloud from modern poets, including “from Browning some ‘Pomegranate,’ which, if cut deep down the middle, /Shows a heart within blood-tinctured, of a veined humanity” (ll. 163–4; E. B. B.). Her two-volume *Poems* enjoyed far greater success than Browning’s fruit, in part because it did not require such penetration to reveal its heart. She was especially successful with the ballads, which had much of the appeal of Macaulay’s *Lays*: they offered a narrative that captured relatively straightforward, impersonal appeal to familiar emotions. The most popular lyric of the collection, “Catarina to Camoens,” outwardly resembles Browning’s historical monologues. It imagines the deathbed reflections of a lady of the Portuguese court recalling the swashbuckling soldier-poet whose suit had been forbidden by her family, but whose poetry recorded both his love and her beauty – although not her words. But whereas Browning’s lyrics encourage a skeptical detachment from the speaker, Barrett invites an unwavering sympathy with Catarina’s wistful thought of her vanished beauty and the love it had evoked. “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship,” the final piece written for the two volumes (to balance out their length) returns to the ballad form, but with two innovations: it is set in modern life, recounting a poet’s love for a young aristocrat, and it has a happy ending, as the lady overcomes the barriers of rank to love not only the poem but the poet. In this regard, it is a telling contrast to “Locksley Hall,” which it recalls not only thematically but rhythmically: in Tennyson thwarted love conjures up the psychic fragility of the speaker, who finds solace only in strenuous sublimation.

### The Literature of Labor

“Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” evokes a world far removed from the economic volatility and recurrent famine of the 1840s – a decade that came to be known as “the Hungry Forties.” Carlyle’s impatient rebuke, “how can we *sing* and *paint* when we do not yet *believe* and *see*?” had rarely seemed more topical. But many of the most vivid responses to revelations about appalling working conditions in factories and mines came from poets. Song is especially suited to capture the sheer repetitiveness

of most human labor, whether manual or industrial – a feature that would bedevil the so-called “industrial novel,” which captures very little of industry itself. Lyric is also traditionally a vehicle of pathos, readily adapted to evoking sympathy with those who seemed most vulnerable and abused, women and children. Caroline Norton’s *A Voice from the Factories* (1836) took up the theme, although her Spenserian stanza, redolent of “Eve of St. Agnes” and “The Lotos Eaters,” was not ideal to conveying the sorrow “these little pent-up wretches feel” (l. 83; T. Collins 1999). Many writers were galvanized by the *First Report of the Commission for Inquiry into the Employment and Condition of Children in Mines and Manufactories*, released in May of 1842. The details chastened all but the most callous advocates of laissez-faire, and frequently beggared literary decorum. Poets rarely conjured up the particulars of seven-year-olds working 13-hour days in mines, crawling half-naked through dank, narrow shafts pulling coal in carts chained to their waists, as if they were draft animals. But Barrett’s lyric “The Cry of the Children,” published the following summer, conjured up the outrages in evocatively general terms, shining a beam of Victorian sentimentality on the subversion of a cherished ideal:

And well may the children weep before you  
 They are weary ere they run;  
 They have never seen the sunshine, nor the glory  
 Which is brighter than the sun.  
 They know the grief of man, without its wisdom;  
 They sink in man’s despair, without its calm;  
 Are slaves, without the liberty in Christendom,  
 Are martyrs, by the pang without the palm ...  
 (ll.125–32; E. B. B.)

The pointed reference to slavery in the land of the free – itself a legacy of the early labor movement – would echo throughout the decade.

The power of lyric repetition was turned to even more forceful social polemic in Thomas Hood’s “The Song of the Shirt,” published to great acclaim in *Punch* at Christmas of 1843:

With fingers weary and worn,  
 With eyelids heavy and red,  
 A woman sat in unwomanly rags,  
 Plying her needle and thread –  
 Stitch! Stitch! Stitch!

In poverty, hunger, and dirt,  
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch, –  
Would that its tone could reach the Rich! –  
She sang this “Song of the Shirt!”

(ll. 81–9; T. Collins 1999)

The plight of seamstresses was a recurrent subject of early Victorian literature, not only because of the grueling nature of ill-paid “close work” under bad lighting (which frequently led to premature blindness) but also because the situation was so clearly a travesty of Victorian platitudes about womanhood. As the more forceful critics pointed out – in the teeth of ongoing appeals to providential ordering – “womanhood” seemed to be reserved for women who could afford not to work.

Working-class writers had a special interest in the conditions of labor, yet they produced a relatively small amount of poetry addressing the topic – save for anonymous ballads and chants, which in their affiliation with a collective oral tradition are largely alien to modern notions of authorship. A six-day, 70-hour work week left little time or energy for literary composition – hence the dearth of novels by writers actually employed in factory or manual labor. Even laborers able to produce poetry in their fleeting spare time tended to address their work to a predominantly middle-class readership, which might experience pangs of sympathy at the thought of suffering children, but did not readily turn to lyric evocations of often brutal, demoralizing labor – or to the expression of radical politics. An exception was Ebenezer Elliott’s *Corn-Law Rhymes* (1831), which captivated Carlyle among others, but Elliott could afford to ignore middle-class tastes, since he had married into a family able to support him as the master of his own iron factory (Cross 1985: 148). Edwin Waugh, “the Lancashire Burns,” became famous for his dialect poetry, and Thomas Cooper gained wide notice as the most famous “Chartist poet,” particularly for *The Purgatory of Suicides* (1845). J. C. Prince gained some renown as a poet of Manchester life, but Prince’s career exemplifies a further challenge confronting working-class poets. Insofar as the poet continued to be thought of as a being of special refinement, those aspiring to that office tended to envision themselves as set apart from fellow laborers – or at least as poets first, workers second. They accordingly resisted working-class politics, instead expressing (like Prince) sentiments much dearer to middle-class sensibilities: progress would come, he exhorted, “Not from without, from Charters and Republics, but from within,

from the Spirit working in each, not by wrath and haste, but by patience, made perfect through suffering” (Cross 1985: 144). This quietistic stance would be echoed throughout the so-called “industrial novel” – an emphatically middle-class genre. It was further enforced by middle-class editors and publishers, who frequently reshaped both sentiment and diction to fit respectable tastes. Such mediation most famously bedeviled John Clare, but it continued into the much later career of Gerald Massey, whose first volume, *Voices of Freedom, Lyrics of Love* (1850) on republication in 1854 was re-titled *The Ballad of Babe Christabel, with other Lyrical Poems* (Cross 1985: 156).

Working-class poetry did give rise to a genre of broader readership, the working-man’s autobiography. Early in the period such poetry still was sufficiently novel that it typically was prefaced by a memoir of the poet, such as Southey’s “Introductory Essay on the Lives and Works of Our Uneducated Poets,” prefixed to *Attempts in Verse of John Jones* (1831). After Samuel Bamford’s *Passages in the Life of a Radical* appeared in 1844, it was followed by a host of other autobiographies, including James Carter’s *Memoirs of a Working Man* (1845), Alexander Somerville’s *Autobiography of a Working Man* (1848), and James Born’s *Autobiography of a Beggar Boy* (1855). Most distinctive was *Geoffrey Malvern* (1843) by Thomas Miller, the only novel of a working-class writer’s literary career, and a very rich guide to the London literary world of the 1830s (Cross 1985: 128, 138). The impact of these works would be felt not only in the industrial novel, but in the rise of the English *Bildungsroman*, most importantly Thackeray’s *Pendennis* and Dickens’s *David Copperfield*.

## Medievalism

For many writers working-class suffering was a symptom of more fundamental social disorder, and a remarkable variety of them shared, at least in broad outline, an alternative social vision. They looked to an imagined medieval order as a rebuke to the variety of evils they saw besetting the present: hunger, brutal working conditions, social division, lack of faith, the degradation of the physical world, a general coarsening of human behavior, a lack of confidence in individual action. Medievalism first took hold in the realm of architecture in the late eighteenth century, when a renewal of interest in Gothic soon was invigorated by the belief that architecture epitomized the society that



produced it. In this way, critics revitalized the understanding of aesthetic taste as an index of moral values and faith. The view received especially trenchant expression in an 1836 work by the architect Augustus Welby Pugin, *Contrasts: or, a Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages and the Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day; showing the Present Decay of Taste*. Pugin, who influenced the reconstruction of the Houses of Parliament in the Gothic style, offered 19 plates juxtaposing medieval and contemporary cities and towns, to underscore a “decay of taste” more encompassing than the phrase might suggest. In *Contrasts*, the submergence of Gothic (or “Christian,” as Pugin would have it) in broadly “classical” architecture was inseparable from a landscape increasingly given over to jails and workhouses. Pugin’s contrasts recast a clash articulated throughout debate over the Reform Bill, perhaps most sharply in Macaulay’s review of Robert Southey’s *Sir Thomas More; or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society* (1829). Southey, a voice of Romantic Toryism, repudiated reform by evoking an earlier, pastoral England in which the happiness and morality of the people were grounded in the wise governance of Christian rulers. Macaulay rejoined that religion was a treacherous foundation for civil government, and that human happiness was best secured “not by the omniscient and omnipotent State, but by the untrammelled prudence and energy of the people” (Macaulay 1873: ii.187). For Macaulay, echoing Mill and other Victorian liberals, the dramatic advances in human comfort and religious tolerance since the age of More pointed to a wholly secular ground of civilization. Macaulay would offer his own encapsulation of this progress in the third chapter of Volume One of his *History of England*, “England in 1685.” The historical re-framing of this clash would reverberate throughout the century – above all in the work of the art critic John Ruskin.

The emblematic juxtaposition of modern and medieval orders took on new immediacy in 1843, when Carlyle published a searing jeremiad, *Past and Present*, one of the great works of Victorian social criticism. Carlyle faced a rhetorical challenge grown all too familiar since: how does one prompt readers to feel outraged by suffering – poverty, homelessness, hunger – when it has come to seem part of a natural order? Carlyle unleashed all his rhetorical pyrotechnics, struggling to transfigure the spectacle of able-bodied, skilled men sitting idle or confined in workhouses. To political economists they were merely the by-product of stern economic laws. To Carlyle they were victims of the curse of Midas,

starving in the midst of plenty, in a world in which all moral bonds were dissolved in the worship of luxury and profit, and all human relations were reduced to the “cash nexus.” Bewildered workers seeking redress could find only the competing “gospels” of “dilettantism” and “mamonism” – Carlyle’s slogans for an idle aristocracy and rapacious manufacturing interests, which he personified in a host of grotesque, almost Dantean caricatures, from Quacks to “dead-sea apes” to “Bucaniers” to “Byronic meat-hooks” creaking in the wind. “We call it a Society; and go about professing openly the totalest separation, isolation. Our life is not a mutual helpfulness ... it is a mutual hostility” (Carlyle 1977: 148).

The diagnosis, if not the rhetoric, would become even more familiar with the rise of socialism: human beings cannot be left wholly at the mercy of economic exchange, their worth valued solely in terms of contract. But Carlyle’s solution is more of his time. The answer is not greater democracy – democracy, for Carlyle, is part of the problem, because it reinforces the reduction of human relations to political and legal formulas. Instead, Carlyle exhorts industrialists to transform their own self-conceptions and become “Captains of Industry,” inspiring and leading an army of loyal workers. Carlyle’s coinage, its figurative force long worn away, captures the paternalistic character of so much early Victorian social criticism. Victorian workers are less in need of freedom than of guidance and a sense of purpose. Men in battle do not fight for profit or a contractual obligation; they risk their lives out of brotherhood and loyalty to a cause. Workers can hardly find that inspiration in an ethos that grounds human worth and connection on the vacillations of the market.

At its core, then, Carlyle’s medievalism is a reconfiguration of chivalry, which would redeem contemporary society through a model of heroism. Similar appeals are widespread throughout the century (Girouard 1981). But Carlyle’s hero is a far cry from Chaucer’s “verry parfit knyghte.” Tellingly, there are no women in Carlyle’s medieval order, and his models of heroism pay little heed to the tenderness or concern for the weak that became a central component in Victorian ideals of the gentleman. What Carlyle does share with early-Victorian medievalism is an unabashed celebration of social hierarchy, an imaginary feudal order (largely derived from the novels of Scott) in which the rationalizing “march of mind” yields to romantic visions of tradition, and freedom matters less than the sense of deep and reciprocal moral obligation. *Past and Present* is organized around an emblematic contrast (recalling Pugin) between the St Ives workhouse and the

medieval abbey of St Edmundsbury, but the faith that most engages Carlyle is that which the monks invest in their Abbot Samson. Like most emblems of Victorian medievalism, Samson is at best nominally Catholic (Pugin was Catholic, but most Victorians envisioned the epoch through decidedly Protestant eyes). Samson is, however, a model of manhood, whose wise and decisive action secures unwavering loyalty and resolves all social conflicts. Carlyle's is a medievalism distinguished above all by charismatic masculinity.

Aristocratic interests in the early forties embraced more overtly self-serving versions of medievalism. At times the dream was difficult to distinguish from a fancy-dress ball, as in the laughable "Eglintoun tournament" of 1839, in which a re-enactment of jousting combat was foiled by torrential rains, and amused bystanders could enjoy the spectacle of knights in armor carrying umbrellas. Equally picturesque was "Young England," a faction within the Tory party whose title is further evidence of an emergent generational consciousness responsive to accelerating social change. Young England, however, was devoted mainly to reinvigorating aristocratic political dominance. Their early figurehead was Lord John Manners, the glamorous son of the Duke of Rutland, who in 1841 published a volume of verse, *England's Trust*, which unblushingly idealized a lost feudal order, an age in which

Each knew his place – king, peasant, peer or priest,  
The greatest owed connection with the least

Let wealth and commerce, laws and learning die  
But leave us still our old nobility!

(Girouard 1981: 83)

Carlyle certainly could appreciate this insistence on "connection," but not Manners's fatuous suggestion that the noblest cause was aristocracy itself.

### "The Two Nations"

"Young England" might have remained a footnote in political history were it not for another young Tory MP, who in 1841 was angling for a more influential role in the party. In May of 1844 Benjamin Disraeli published the first of three novels that would become known as the

“Young England” trilogy. *Coningsby; or The New Generation*, often called the first English political novel, is at one level a party manifesto in three volumes, intricately working out Disraeli’s view that the Whigs had transformed England into an oligarchy on the model of medieval Venice, and that only a rejuvenated Tory party could restore to England a proper balance of powers – which is to say, a more direct contact with its own medieval institutions. But the excitement aroused by the novel had less to do with its tendentious analyses than with its unmistakable allusions to contemporary political intrigue, which Disraeli encouraged by publishing a key linking dozens of characters to their historical counterparts. The silver-fork impulse lingers: imagination seems to count for less than the illusion of an insider’s perspective, which offers vicarious access to elite social circles.

Looking back, Disraeli would characterize the trilogy in highly schematic terms: *Coningsby* dealt with “the origin and condition of political parties,” and *Tancred; or The New Crusade* (1847) with “the duties of the Church as a main remedial agency in our present state” (Disraeli 1983: 15–16). But the most influential and enduringly popular of the trilogy, and of all Disraeli’s novels, was its central volume, *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845), which addressed “the condition of the people.” It was a topic of growing urgency in the midst of the hungry forties, even before the worst of the famine in Ireland. Just the previous year, a young German manufacturer visiting Manchester to study its achievement as “the workshop of the world” was so appalled by the physical environment that he penned an impassioned expose of *The Condition of the English Working Class* (1845). Like Friedrich Engels, Disraeli worked hard to capture the details of working-class hardship, relying on parliamentary reports into factory conditions. The focal point of the novel, however, became less the conditions of labor than a more inchoate “social problem”: the danger lurking in an “impassable gulf” between rich and poor, “the two nations” of the novel’s subtitle, which by 1845 in fact was a well-worn trope. In presenting the factory as a microcosm of class conflict – underscored by setting the novel within the rise of Chartism in the late 1830s – *Sybil* establishes many of the conventions of what would become known as “the industrial novel.” Dire social conditions – here focused in the slum of Wodgate, also known as “Hell-house Yard” – create an environment in which sincerely aggrieved laborers, who wish merely to support their families, are exploited by demonic “political agitators,” who whip resentment into mob violence that culminates in a frenzy of destruction (often out

of seeming pleasure in sheer anarchy). Meanwhile, the integrity of the disciplined worker is embodied in a single man – here the factory inspector Walter Gerard – who attempts to resist the mob, and suffers for his independence. Ultimately, however, the social conflicts are ascribed to simple ignorance, which allows them to be resolved not through any large social transformation, such as a change in the nature of factory labor, but through the enlargement of individual moral sympathies – above all through cross-class romance.

What makes Disraeli's engagement more distinctive – and what gave his novels their popularity then and now – was his conjunction of social sympathy with a fantasy of aristocratic glamor, which extends to the very style of the novel. The effect is something like a parliamentary Blue Book rewritten as the libretto of an Italian opera – a note struck in Disraeli's summary of his aims: "In an age of political infidelity, of mean passions and petty thoughts, I would have impressed upon the rising race not to despair, but to seek in a right understanding of the history of their country and in the energies of heroic youth – the elements of national welfare" (Disraeli 1980: 496). In addressing contemporary social conflict through the lens of history, the novel is clearly indebted to Carlyle, both as it evokes a falling away from an earlier paternalism, and as it envisions redress through the emergence of a hero who might, in *Sybil's* words, "protect the people" (210). It also shares with the Oxford movement (then at the very zenith of its notoriety, with Newman's imminent secession to Rome) a claim to spiritual authority through the restoration of historical continuity, a return to origins somehow lost sight of or betrayed. But neither Carlyle nor Newman conjured up so debonair a hero as Charles Egremont, the younger brother of the Earl of Marney, who breaks with his family to address the urgent social divisions they ignore. ("The people do not want employment," pronounces Egremont's brother, with coarse Malthusian logic, "all this employment is a stimulus to population" [161].) Like Disraeli's earliest novels, *Sybil* is raptly ambivalent towards the aristocracy, heaping disdain on its shallowness and self-absorption while at the same time reveling in its elegance. Much of Egremont's appeal lies precisely in his effortless urbanity, a distinctly English *sprezzatura*. In effect, the novel refracts aristocratic life through the lens of bourgeois values – celebrating domestic womanhood and, above all, earnestness – while at the same time largely erasing the middle classes, and conveying Disraeli's deep suspicion of an ethos that would choose Cabinet ministers on the basis of private virtue rather than public policy.

With the middle class confined largely to shabby political operatives, rich and poor are placed into insistent juxtaposition, parliamentary salons opening onto trade union meetings. Such contrasts, however, also elicit unexpected affinities, particularly in Disraeli's fascination with secrecy and the social dynamics of the coterie. Disraeli was keenly sensitive to dynamics of membership and exclusion: he was the son of Isaac D'Israeli, a distinguished man of letters and a Jew who had his children baptized and raised as Christians. The pervasive anti-Semitism of Victorian Britain nurtured in Disraeli a paranoid imagination that was brilliantly suited to the times. He divides his novelistic world into insiders and outsiders, for whom the fundamental event is "initiation" into secret knowledge, whether it be the identity of the next Prime Minister or the details of a Chartist conspiracy. (Disraeli readily acknowledges the comic parallels between parliamentary intrigue and the meetings of trade unions.) The most overt link between the two worlds, however, lies in romance, as the culminating marriage of Egremont and Sybil bridges the "gulf" between the two nations. The resolution also crowns the intrigue surrounding Sybil's own ancestry: the "daughter of the people" turns out to be the rightful Lady Marney, heiress to one of the oldest – and thus, in Disraeli's eyes, most legitimate – titles in England. Personal genealogy thereby reaffirms Disraeli's political designs, but it also hints at the persistence of the gulf: the Hon. Charles Egremont could hardly be expected to marry a seamstress.

A very different engagement with the lives of the working classes emerged in the mid-forties in the fiction of Elizabeth Gaskell. Unlike Disraeli, Gaskell had first-hand acquaintance with the lives of the poor, particularly in Manchester, of which she is as important a chronicler as Engels. Born Elizabeth Stevenson in London, she grew up in the small town of Knutsford, some 16 miles from Manchester, to which she moved after her marriage in 1832 to the Unitarian clergyman William Gaskell, whose position brought him into close contact with a broad section of Manchester life. She brought that knowledge to a series of magazine sketches throughout the 1840s, followed by the appearance of *Mary Barton* (anonymously) in October 1848. Like *Sybil*, the novel casts back to the events of the late 1830s, and Gaskell also focuses on a radical social division between rich and poor: "we are to live as separate as if we were in two worlds; ay as separate as Dives and Lazarus," says John Barton (Gaskell 1970: 45). But Gaskell's portrait offers a more substantive cultural geography. The subtitle, "A Tale of Manchester Life," suggests an understanding of Manchester as a

distinctive social order shaped by industrial labor. The heroine's father, John Barton, is "a through specimen of a Manchester man, born of factory workers, and himself bred up in youth, and living in manhood, among the mills" (41); when the heroine travels to the docks of Liverpool, sailors seem "a new race of men" (352). Like Mayhew and other "urban investigators" in London, Gaskell writes for an audience of outsiders, and her documentary impulse similarly functions as a kind of ethnography – particularly in her attention to local idiom (which is frequently glossed in footnotes). The novel incorporates a good deal of anonymous dialect poetry, such as "Th' Owdham Weaver," which typically circulated in broadsides or as oral tradition, capturing working-class travails in a form that middle-class readers would rarely encounter. Such details further a broadly Wordsworthian effort to imagine "the romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily" (37).

The main emphasis, however, falls on the sufferings – physical and psychological – of workers at the mercy of a newly volatile economy, which leaves them recurrently unemployed and desperately vulnerable to hunger and sickness. Inasmuch as it attempts to explain working-class unrest, this emphasis works to humanize a struggle that had been widely demonized among the affluent classes. What might seem an attack on the social fabric is at root, the novel suggests, a claim to common humanity. And yet Gaskell's sympathy for the working classes jostles uneasily with efforts to resolve their moral grievances into mere resentment, and thus to disarm them. The rhetorical balancing-act emerges early in the novel, when Gaskell vividly evokes the exasperation of the unemployed worker who witnesses untroubled luxury among the mill-owners:

The contrast is too great. Why should he alone suffer from bad times?

I know that this is not really the case: but what I wish to impress is what the workman thinks and feels. True, that with child-like improvidence, good times will often dissipate his grumbling, and make him forget all prudence and foresight.

But there are earnest men among these people, men who have endured wrongs without complaining, but without ever forgetting or forgiving those whom (they believe) have caused all the woe. (Gaskell 1970: 60)

With the second paragraph, the worker's experience is transformed into illusion, albeit one that should enlist our sympathy – at least when entertained by the honorable, "earnest" poor. Although Gaskell's preface disclaims any knowledge of political economy, her emphasis here is

in keeping with its tenets: if a free market is indeed self-regulating, then conflict can originate only in ignorance. Under the pressure of this individualism, trade unions and Chartists can only be a desperate, misguided threat to economic and social order, which feeds on “hoards of vengeance” (61) rather than principled resistance to the worker’s lack of power.

A subsequent allusion to *Frankenstein* reinforces the dilemma: “The actions of the uneducated man seem to me typified in those of Frankenstein, that monster of many human qualities ... Why have we made them what they are; a powerful monster, yet without inner means for peace and happiness?” (Gaskell 1970: 219–20). Shelley’s novel brings home the challenges of securing mutual recognition between master and “monster.” Ultimately, that recognition is brought about through another act of desperate working-class violence – the murder of a mill-owner’s son. The bridge achieved in *Sybil* through marriage is effected here through the reconciliation of the owner and the murderer, both consumed with the lust for revenge, yet ultimately brought to feel themselves “brothers in the deep suffering of the heart” (435). Once again, the social structure is displaced and transcended through the power of individual sympathy: “The mourner before him was no longer the employer, a being of another race ... no longer the enemy, the oppressor, but a very poor, and desolate old man” (435). Romance, meanwhile, functions primarily to chasten Mary Barton’s own social aspirations, as her affections are redirected from George Carson, the mill-owner’s son, to the worker whose status matches her own.

“The two nations” assumed importantly different forms, with social conflicts less amenable even to fictional resolution, in Anglo-Irish fiction. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Ireland itself represented a very small literary market, which naturally encouraged Irish writers to look to London. That focus was reinforced by the formal Union of Britain and Ireland in 1800 – “a union of the shark with its prey,” as Byron sardonically noted, passed in the wake of a 1798 uprising against British rule – which naturally encouraged English interest in a country ostensibly part of the “United Kingdom” yet so different in language, religion, and history. Catholic Emancipation in 1829, prompted largely by Irish protest, only fanned apprehension in England of a newly empowered alien presence so close at hand. Such tensions did not affect the huge success of Thomas Moore’s *Irish Melodies* (1808–34), which reinforced a long-standing association of Ireland with the harp and the bard. Although Moore’s celebration of Ireland’s



past glory hints at the stirring of nationalist sentiment, little in Moore's lyrics gave much hint of contemporary Irish life. Maria Edgeworth was the first influential novelist to treat that life in a broadly realistic (albeit comic) vein; her *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and *The Absentee* (1812) would have a large impact on the growth of regionalist fiction generally. But she abandoned Irish settings after 1817; as she explained to her brother in 1834, "it is impossible to draw Ireland as she now is in a book of fiction; realities are too strong, party passions are too violent, to bear to see, or to look at their faces in the looking-glass" (Hare 1894: ii.150).

The surge of interest in Irish subjects in the 1820s diverted attention from party passions, focusing instead on descriptions of the Irish peasantry and oral tradition, written or collected by both Irish and English writers. The travel writer Anna Maria Hall produced such volumes as *Sketches of Irish Character* (1829), while other Irish writers produced a host of first-hand accounts: Mary Leadbeater's *Collection of Lives of the Irish Peasantry* (1822), Michael James Whitty's *Tales of Irish Life* (1824), T. C. Croker's *Researches in the South of Ireland* (1824), Mrs. Samuel Carter's *Sketches of Irish Character* (1829), W. H. Maxwell's *Wild Sports in the West of Ireland* (1832) (Jeffares and van den Kemp 11). In such works, the grinding poverty of agrarian Ireland had little to do with politics; it was a mere fact of life typically leavened by the imaginative resourcefulness and resilience of the Irish peasantry. T. C. Croker's *Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (1825) inaugurated a number of similar collections, which variously navigated a dual audience: an English or conservative Anglo-Irish readership pleased to see a picturesque Irish peasantry given over to dreams and revelry, and an Irish audience that could look to such tales as a foundation of national identity – much as the Grimms collected their "Marchen" as ostensible repositories of a collective German *volk*.

Anglo-Irish literature thus became increasingly associated with varieties of comedy, epitomized in the creation of what later generations would attack as the "stage Irishman." That development emerges in the career of Samuel Lover (1797–1868). Lover began as a song-writer in the style of Moore, then entered into the vogue for folktale with *Legends and Stories of Ireland* (1831 and 1834), before turning to the novel, where his best-known work is *Handy Andy* (1842), an "Irish Tale" serialized in *Bentley's* with Lover's own illustrations, and thus competing for attention with the comic serials in *Punch*. The adventures of the hapless hero with a host of familiar types – most of them

bound up with drink – invite readers to laugh at the squalor of his mother and cousin in rags living off potatoes in a hovel shared with a pig, and to sympathize when Andy turns out to be the lost son of an aristocrat who is rescued from Ireland for proper society in London.

Even more successful as a comic writer was Charles Lever (1806–72), the best-selling Irish novelist of the century. Lever, educated at Trinity College Dublin and trained as a surgeon, took up writing for the *Dublin University Magazine*, the leading journal of the Tory Protestant establishment, which in 1839 serialized Lever's first novel, *The Confessions of Harry Lorrequer*. The headlong pace and general spirit of the work, a rollicking, disjointed picturesque tale of a young Irish soldier who finds himself drawn into adventures all over Europe, are summed up in its conclusion: "The next day I got married. The End" (Lever 1899: ii.285). The novel was a huge success, republished in both monthly serial and book form (with illustrations by Phiz, Dickens's illustrator). Lever followed it up with *Charles O'Malley, The Irish Dragoon* (1841), a more substantial and slightly more serious work in the same vein (its hero returns from the Peninsular Wars to life as a reforming landlord), which was just as successful. The novels (with a new one almost annually) brought Lever money, fame, an offer to edit the *Dublin University Magazine*, and friendship with many British literary lights (Thackeray paid fulsome tribute to Lever's conviviality, though he parodied his prose). But though Lever continued to produce novels, he quickly found himself ground down by political conflicts – inflamed by his editorship and his famously volatile temper (he was known as "Doctor Quicksilver") – and in 1845 he left Ireland, to spend the rest of his life principally in Florence and Trieste.

Lever's departure coincided with an event that forever changed Ireland and its literature, the Famine. In 1845 the failure of the potato crop – long the staple food of the Irish peasantry – inaugurated a series of disastrous harvests that led to massive hunger and death from starvation and disease, and that continued until 1851. Eyewitness accounts of the suffering are horrifying: the barely living surrounded by the bodies of their families, corpses devoured by starving dogs, even survivors reduced to living skeletons, "ghouls." Ireland, in 1845 the most densely populated country in Europe, over the next decade lost nearly half its population to death and emigration. The catastrophe – exacerbated by the reluctance of the British government to intervene – abruptly undermined the comedy of Handy Andy and his ilk. But it also nearly defied novelistic representation. One exception was the

work of William Carleton (1794–1869), who, unlike the middle-class Dublin Protestants Lover and Lever, was the son of a Catholic tenant farmer, the youngest of 14 children in a family whose mother spoke only Irish. Carleton's early career certainly participated in the work of stereotyping; he first came to notice with his *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1830 and 1833) which helped to popularize the image of the brawling, boozing Paddy. But Carleton wrote from much closer acquaintance with peasant life, and with less eye to the British public than Lover and Lever – the latter of whom he frequently attacked for his coziness with British interests. Beginning with *Fardorougha, The Miser* (1839), Carleton produced a series of works that earned him the label “the peasant's novelist.” The most harrowing of these is *The Black Prophet, A Tale of the Irish Famine* (1847), serialized in the *Dublin University Magazine* in the second year of the disaster but drawing on Carleton's experience of earlier famines in 1817 and 1822. Few other novelists could master the horrifying material, and the shadow of the Famine inhibited the production of Irish fiction for several decades, as the old comic types seemed abruptly desiccated and the staples of the romance plot insubstantial.

The gulf between rich and poor, which became the most encompassing “problem” of the early Victorian social novel, took on added resonance in 1848. With famine gripping Ireland, the continent was roiled by widespread insurrection and revolution, and fears of similar violence loomed large in England itself, especially in large rallies of Chartists exasperated by the failure of Parliament even to acknowledge their petitions. On the eve of a planned monster procession from Kennington Common to Westminster on April 10, anxiety reached such a pitch that military forces were mobilized under the elderly Duke of Wellington. In the event, the rally was dampened by both weather and the restraint of its organizers, and it turned out to mark the beginning of the end of Chartism. But it also marked the emergence of an important literary career. As a young clergyman in the rural parish of Eversley in Berkshire, Charles Kingsley (1819–75) had ventured to London to observe the rally; what he saw solidified his belief that the Church of England had to defuse the most radical political demands by answering at least some working-class economic grievances. That aim informed *The People's Friend; or Politics for the People*, a periodical in which Kingsley joined with the liberal theologian F. D. Maurice and others interested in working-class conciliation. Writing under the pseudonym “Parson Lot,” Kingsley helped to define what would become

known as “Christian Socialism,” proclaiming a fundamental Christian sympathy across classes, which might be turned to improving working-class lives.

Later in 1848 Kingsley began a serial novel, *Yeast: A Problem*, published in *Fraser’s*, which called attention to the sufferings of agricultural workers – an aim that proved too radical for the journal’s editors, who suspended the serial. In the following year he began a more substantial project. When Henry Mayhem’s series of articles in *The Morning Chronicle*, “London Labour and the London Poor,” called attention to (among other things) deplorable working conditions among clothes-makers in London, Kingsley responded with a pamphlet, “Cheap Clothes and Nasty,” denouncing the “sweating” system among London tailors, and urging the formation of independent associations among working men. “Why should we not work and live together in our own workshops, or our own houses, for our own profit?” he asked, adopting a fictive identification with the urban artisan (Kingsley 1902: vii.76). It seems a modest enough political program, but such organization of labor defied contemporary political economy (J. S. Mill’s two-volume treatise on the subject, which held the field for a quarter-century, was published in that same year). In the *Edinburgh Review*, W. R. Greg (a spokesman for “the Manchester school” of free-trade advocates) rejoined that Kingsley wished to cocoon men with “artificial environments which shall make subsistence certain, enterprise superfluous, and virtue easy, low-pitched, and monotonous” (Greg 1851: 17). The objection points up the crucial place of willpower and self-discipline in mid-Victorian representations of labor, and those figured centrally as Kingsley developed his pamphlet into a novel, *Alton Locke: Tailor and Poet* (1850).

*Alton Locke*, as its subtitle suggests, brings the divide of rich and poor into focus through the literary aspirations of a working man, who is largely based on Thomas Cooper (with whom Kingsley corresponded about the Kennington rally). The novel captures the exhausting working conditions that left so little time or energy for literary achievement, but it is more attentive to another theme of working-class memoirs, the effort to win middle-class recognition without surrendering one’s self-respect – more pointedly, to distinguish genuine respect from mere condescension. For Locke, the sense of thwarted intellectual possibility is sharpened by contact with an affluent cousin, in whose company he witnesses a series of glaring contrasts: between pastoral landscapes and London slums, between wealth and grinding poverty, between the

effortless grace of Lord Lynedale and Locke's own awkward, eager ambition. As Locke's poetry wins acknowledgment from young aristocrats, the novel becomes increasingly preoccupied with nuances of social rank – particularly the distinction between patronage and friendship, and whether, and in what ways, the working man can earn the status of a gentleman. Tellingly, romance figures here only in Locke's hopeless passion for an upper-class beauty, "a queen, rather to be feared than loved" (Kingsley 1902: vii.268): social divisions are negotiated almost entirely by reflections on the working man's conduct, particularly the attainment of physical vitality and self-discipline that distinguish the true gentleman (and would also restrain Locke's social ambition). When Locke, like so many protagonists of the industrial novel, is lured into a compromising affiliation with Chartism and unreflectively incites a riot, he places the blame on his "maddening desire of influence" (viii: 130). Once again, the industrial novel defines an arena for the regulation of desire, but here that struggle is inflected by Kingsley's own anxieties about class standing and manhood: the yearning to secure recognition as a gentleman was fundamentally a middle-class concern. By the middle of the century it would become an urgent theme for a host of novelists.

### "What's Money After All?"

The turn of the novel towards contemporary social issues was most notable in the work of Dickens. For a time, in the early 1840s, Dickens's own novels lagged behind more venturesome engagements with topical issues. Though *Oliver Twist* is sometimes categorized as a "social problem" novel, the focal point of its satire is not the disjunction between rich and poor, but the New Poor Law, and its representation of psychology remained predominantly melodramatic. Dickens's early fiction was generally praised for representing rich and poor in relative harmony, typically through pre-industrial economic relations (most notably master–servant), but after the immense success of *Old Curiosity Shop* the formula grew tired. After his foray into historical fiction with *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens had his first major disappointment with *Martin Chuzzlewit*. He signed a contract for it in 1841, but did not begin writing until the following autumn; in the meantime he visited America and produced *American Notes*, which would have an important impact on the new novel. *Chuzzlewit* contains some of Dickens's

most famous characters – most notably Pecksniff, the quintessence of hypocritical propriety (“‘the very sight of skittles,’ Mr Pecksniff eloquently pursued, ‘is far from being congenial to a delicate mind’” [Dickens 1999: 453]), and Sairey Gamp, the drunken private nurse who is one of Dickens’s most memorable figures of misrule: “Wishin’ you lots of sickness, my darling creetur,” she tells her fellow nurse, Betsy Prig (444). But their very prominence hints at the unusually loose construction of the book. The central action is a familiar wrangling over inheritance, with Martin Chuzzlewit the younger unjustly disowned by his grandfather Martin, and Pecksniff working to solidify the breach in order to secure his own profit. The oedipal energies informing this quarrel are a staple of Dickens’s early novels, as is the shabby-genteel milieu of Todgers’ lodging house, around which much of the action orbits. But the development is unsteady in tone and unusually static, and Dickens himself seems to have grown tired of it: a quarter of the way through serialization he abruptly shifted the setting to America, where Martin’s travels allow Dickens to rehearse some of his excoriating commentary from *American Notes*. When Martin returns to England and is restored to his rightful inheritance, old Martin sums up the action with the rather feeble maxim, “the curse of our house ... has been the love of self” (752).

The love of self became an increasingly somber preoccupation in Dickens’s works during the 1840s. On a visit to Manchester in 1843, he was especially moved by the so-called “ragged schools,” volunteer institutes giving free instruction to poor children otherwise bereft of formal education; when he returned to London he began a one-volume story describing the triumph of love over greed. *A Christmas Carol* (1843) became the first of Dickens’s annual “Christmas books,” an onslaught against *homo economicus* aimed at the lucrative holiday market, and fueled by the disappointing financial returns of *Chuzzlewit* (to maximize his profit, Dickens arranged for Chapman and Hall to publish the work on commission, with Dickens bearing all costs). As so often in Dickens, the relations between sympathy and self-interest took surprising turns, but his association of Christmas with the triumph of feeling captured a growing audience. In the following year, *The Chimes* took on the complacency of the London aldermen who would deny the reality of suffering. “There’s a certain amount of cant in vogue about starvation,” one remarks, “and I intend to put it down,” but the spirit of the holiday conquers even such callousness (Dickens 2006: 103).

In Dickens's next serial novel, love of self verges on the truly monstrous. More importantly, following the hints of the Christmas stories, it is something more than an individual failing, or even a family curse; it is a symptom of disorder in society at large. This emphasis has led many critics to see *Dombey and Son* as a watershed in Dickens's career, even the pivotal moment between "early" and "late" Dickens. But the newly acerbic social scrutiny was not what most impressed contemporaries. They were instead riveted by the pathos of another dying child, Paul Dombey, whose deathbed aroused a tumult equaled only by that of Little Nell. "Oh, my dear, dear Dickens!" wrote one reader, "what a no. 5 you have now given us! I have so cried and sobbed over it last night, and again this morning; and felt my heart purified by those tears, and blessed and loved you for making me shed them; and I never can bless and love you enough" (P. Collins 1971: 217). Few effusions so memorably capture the power of sentiment in Victorian culture. These were the words of Francis Jeffrey, the Lord Chancellor, a famously acerbic *Edinburgh* reviewer who had excoriated a host of romantic poets, memorably opening a review of Wordsworth's *Excursion* (1815) with the words, "This will never do." What had become of the hanging judge of Romantic reviewing?

With all allowance for the mellowing of age, Jeffrey's effusion captures a shift in emotional climate that helps to explain why Dickens was so cherished by early Victorians. His readers seem to have found in tears (whether of grief or joy) an obscure vindication of their very power to feel, and thus by extension a hope that the world at large might be capable of extending a like sympathy to others – including themselves. Tears, that is, seemed to confirm the presence of emotional warmth in an increasingly cold and dangerous world. They extended the domestic realm to a larger imagined community. No one rivaled Dickens in his power to arouse tears; as Thackeray memorably exclaimed of *Dombey* (while in the midst of composing *Vanity Fair*), "There's no writing against such power as this – one has no chance! Read that chapter describing young Paul's death; it is unsurpassed! – it is stupendous!" (P. Collins 1971: 219).

Such responses suggest the risk Dickens took when he juxtaposed pathos with jaundiced portraits of English institutions and their representatives, locating evil not merely in melodramatic villains, but in society itself. As Dickens's novels assumed an increasing burden of social criticism, they were liable to forfeit precisely that cathartic relief that Jeffrey and others cherished. And we see this disappointment in

the reception of *Dombey*. Audiences were moved by young Florence Dombey's unwavering affection for her father in the face of his chilling neglect; although some reviewers complained that her devotion was unbelievable, Macaulay, among others, wept as if his heart would break. But they were perplexed by the novel's interest in a countervailing world of emotional dearth and rigidity, centered on Dombey's second marriage, to the imperious Edith Granger, and the machinations of his suavely devious Manager, John Carker. For most readers today, Dickens's anatomy of Dombey's marriage represents the more ambitious portion of the book, in which the derangement of romance comes to embody a corrupt social order. When the young Paul asks, "What is money after all?" "I mean, Papa, what can it do?" his father responds, "Money, Paul, can do anything" (Dickens 1970: 152). Like Carlyle's invocation of Midas, the answer points to a growing idolatry in English life. Dombey's unyielding will and obsession with appearances summon up a world that sacrifices affection at the altar of power, while Edith's resistance brings home (as she insists) the predicament of a woman who is effectively bought and sold by the men who value her as a social ornament – a predicament daringly if awkwardly underscored by her affiliation with a prostitute, as well as her own quietly audacious conduct as a wife. The larger designs are further underscored by a newly sustained pursuit of unifying motifs such as the flowing river, whose prominence puzzled a number of reviewers, and above all the railroad, which was reshaping the material fabric of London, but also was reorienting the very experience of distance, mobility, and leisure – so much so that it became an emblem of modern life. Though we tend to imagine the railways primarily as a physical phenomenon, memorably evoked in the leveling of "Stagg's Gardens" to make space for a new terminal, Dickens also captures their economic allure, both as an avenue of mobility for working men (here young Tootles) and as they sparked a speculative stock boom that would resound through novels of the later 1840s and 1850s.

Most broadly, *Dombey* confirms the significance of domesticity as an arena of far-reaching social and political conflict. This was borne out by the greatest of all skeptical mid-Victorian representations of domestic life, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, which began serial publication as *Dombey* was appearing. The original title seemed to disclaim any large ambition: "Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society" suggests a direct extension of Thackeray's earlier career as a sketch-writer and humorist. But the novel quickly expanded beyond anything Dickens had



attempted to this point. Though “English Society” is that of the upper classes, Thackeray probes its reliance on extended networks of servants, dependants, and tradesmen, people whose livelihood hangs on the solvency of the affluent – and who (accordingly) are especially acute observers of financial affairs. The novel is particularly engaged by the interplay between old and new money, the landed gentry and the city merchant, the aristocratic disdain for “trade” screening an eager desire to marry into mercantile fortunes, the proud independence of the honest English merchant jostling with a groveling snobbery, which constantly solicits aristocratic regard and envisions nothing greater than raising one’s child to a title.

The two worlds are interwoven above all through the machinations of one of the great heroines of English literature, Becky Sharp, whose extraordinary skill as a social actress – she truly is the star of the Fair – is the focal point of a more penetrating, albeit more cynical, scrutiny of social mobility (both upward and downward) than Dickens would undertake until *Great Expectations*. The orphaned daughter of a penniless artist (memories of her childhood recall Thackeray’s bohemian days in the early thirties), Becky eventually climbs almost to the summit of English society, on her way making plain, and increasingly exploiting, the gaps between moral and social eminence. Becky’s economic leverage, Thackeray cuttingly points out, grows with each new compromise of her virtue. So long as tradesmen believe she is the mistress of Lord Steyne, they will continue to extend her credit; should that connection be ruptured, or should she turn out to be in reality virtuous, she would be financially ruined. In negotiating this play of appearances, Becky recalls the agility of Defoe’s Moll Flanders, but Thackeray’s novel more thoroughly undercuts faith in providential design. In the stunning close of chapter 32, for example, describing the aftermath of Waterloo, the ever-keen Ruskin recognized “blasphemy of the most fatal and subtle kind”: “Darkness came down on the field and city, and Amelia was praying for George, who was lying on his face, dead, with a bullet through his heart” (Thackeray 2001: 375). Both Moll and Becky incarnate the economic energies of their times – with the implication that everything (including themselves) is for sale – but Becky, along with her age, depends far more on the dangerous wonders of credit. Much of the suspense of the novel hangs on Thackeray’s manipulation of the pun in that term (from the Latin *credere*), whereby financial commitment depends on a more encompassing yet unsteady belief in appearances – a belief often rudely dispelled. “Living on nothing a

year,” in one of Thackeray’s memorable chapter titles, thus becomes a feat of extraordinary social dexterity and moral callousness, a life of ongoing performance in which social identity is resolved into theater. Therein lies what may be the most corrosive insight of Thackeray’s novel: in the world of obsessive concern with social appearance and “getting on,” almost no one is what she seems.

Bankruptcy thus resonates more profoundly in *Vanity Fair* than in *Dombey and Son*. Dombey’s fall is punishment for his pride, his deluded belief that “money can do anything,” but in Thackeray’s world bankruptcy hints at a more comprehensive moral derangement – bearing out Carlyle’s sardonic remark that “the Hell of the English” is “the terror of ‘Not succeeding’” (Carlyle 1977: 148). Thackeray’s example would influence a host of subsequent narratives in which financial catastrophe opens onto a more inclusive moral bankruptcy: Dickens’s *Little Dorritt* (1856) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), Tennyson’s *Maud* (1855), and Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* (1875), among many others. Yet admiration for the range and acuity of *Vanity Fair* was tempered by worry that its criticism was at base cynical. Certainly that suspicion was enhanced by Thackeray’s audacious narrator, a garrulous, thrusting presence whose shifting persona is most often that of a stage manager overseeing a street fair or puppet show, and who at nearly every turn intervenes to restrain, or even obstruct, sympathetic identification with the main characters. The contrast with Dickens was glaring: if the early Dickensian narrator seemed a benevolent neighbor, Thackeray’s is the acquaintance who raises awkward questions about one’s bank account. Readers, then as now, found it difficult to reconcile affection for two such different talents; they tended to praise one by contrast with the other. That division would shape discussion of the novel for nearly two decades.

### Romance and Religion

Two other works published in that remarkable year of 1847 would leave an even more enduring mark on the history of the English novel. They marked the emergence of the most famous literary family in British history – at first appearance the Bells: Acton, Currer, and Ellis, authors of *Anne Grey*, *The Professor*, and *Wuthering Heights*, respectively. The choice of pseudonyms reflected their anxiety to fend off stereotypes surrounding women novelists, and the forms of criticism

incited by Mrs. Trollope's choice of "unfeminine" topics – although such images have only been strengthened, ironically, by their enduring popularity. Particularly through film adaptation, the works of the Brontes (Anne, 1820–49; Charlotte, 1816–55; Emily, 1818–48) in their different ways have worn into archetypal expressions of women's romantic longing and fulfillment, an association that has often relegated them to the realm of adolescent fiction. This image makes it hard to understand their initial reception, which found them very much more daunting, even dangerous.

After declining *The Professor*, Smith and Elder brought out Currer Bell's other novel, *Jane Eyre*, to immediate success, which prompted eager speculation as to the author's identity. Although reviewers compared it to earlier works of domestic fiction, particularly those of Austen and Edgeworth, many presumed the author was indeed a man (George Smith was astonished when Currer and Anne Bell presented themselves at his London offices) – perhaps because, in a word many reviewers invoked, the book evinced such "power." That honorific joined two achievements, psychological acuity and emotional intensity, in which romantic passion was linked to an unusually fervent assertion of feminine dignity and independence. The passion was so forceful that it struck some readers as strident and threatening. In the most famous attack on the novel, in the *Quarterly* in 1848, Elizabeth Rigby (later Lady Eastlake) declared:

Altogether the autobiography of *Jane Eyre* is pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition. There is throughout it a murmuring against the comforts of the rich and against the privation of the poor, which, as far as each individual is concerned, is a murmuring against God's appointment ... We do not hesitate to say that the tone of the mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre*. (M. Allott 1974: 109–10)

Rigby's animus seems exorbitant, but it captures a central impulse of the novel. Jane's self-assertion is a standing challenge to the world that would relegate her to stereotyped insignificance, as, in her own words, "a Governess – disconnected, poor, and plain" (C. Bronte 1996: 183). Like Thackeray's heroine, Bronte's heroine exposes the prejudices of the upper-class world in which she comes to reside, but whereas Becky exploits prejudice to become a part of that world, Jane challenges it, thereby reaffirming a different social order.

In all of Victorian literature, *Jane Eyre* offers perhaps the most vivid example of the reconfiguring of social authority through gender – particularly through contrasting models of femininity. As a governess, Jane occupies a notoriously difficult, even paradoxical, social space, which reflects the burdens of domesticity for unmarried women lacking independent income. Although a governess had to be “respectable” – affluent families would not hire working-class women to oversee their children’s education – the governess was haunted by the stigma attached to wage labor: respectable women did not work for a living. This dilemma could be finessed by women writers, but a governess within the household frequently was isolated from family and servants alike. In underscoring this dilemma, Brontë takes aim at an aristocratic order contemptuous of Jane’s very existence, and thereby extends the early Victorian critique of aristocracy in works as diverse as *The Women of England* and *Barnaby Rudge*. Blanche Ingram, beautiful, elegant, theatrical, disdainful of all outside her sphere, incarnates aristocratic luxury and display in her very body, which is doubled in the more overt, and explicitly erotic, pathology of Bertha Rochester – who in effect brings the sexual license of empire and the tropics home to England. In the “Quakerish” Jane, by contrast, Blanche’s ornamental being is countered by an ideal of inner worth, of moral character located in earnestness, independence, and self-discipline. (Emblematically, Blanche delights in playing charades, whereas Jane has never heard of the activity.) The aristocrat and the madwoman thus become parallel foils to a fundamentally middle-class ethos – which ultimately is embraced by Rochester as well.

The transformation of gender necessarily affects men as well as women. Rochester’s eventual humbling places Jane in relation to two different models of masculinity, broadly parallel to those that Thackeray evokes in *Vanity Fair*. (Brontë dedicated the second edition of *Jane Eyre* to Thackeray.) Whereas George Osborne envisions himself as a throwback to the traditional, aristocratic gentleman, compounded of martial valor, dashing presence, and unlimited credit, William Dobbin incarnates a humbler ideal, more suited to an emergent middle class. He is physically awkward and self-effacing – it seems programmatic that Dobbin doesn’t dance – but he finds his fulfillment in duty (military and domestic) and kindness to the weak. Thackeray characteristically undercuts easy sympathy: Dobbin’s judgment is called into question by his devotion to George’s widow, Amelia Sedley, a paragon of domestic femininity reduced to helpless, inane passivity, oblivious to

Dobbin's attentions, absorbed in daydreams and a fiercely protective spoiling of her child. In *Jane Eyre*, by contrast, the humbling of Rochester represents a chastening of the Byronic hero, but Byronic energies are transferred to Jane herself, whose fierce independence is worlds removed from Amelia's parasitic existence. Virginia Woolf would complain that Bronte has no trace of "speculative curiosity"; "all her force, and it is the more tremendous for being constricted, goes into the assertion, 'I live,' 'I hate,' 'I feel'" (Woolf 1953: 161–2). Woolf exaggerates, but she points to the stress that Brontean passion exerts on the romance plot. The aspiration to a communion that transcends social identity – "it is my spirit that addresses your spirit," Jane tells Rochester, "just as if both had passed through the grave" (C. Bronte 1996: 284) – is felt not only in the elements of gothic convention (mysterious voices, ghostly presences in the attic) but also in the novel's conclusion. In a work so mistrustful of "the medium of custom, conventionalities," marriage itself tends to seem a brittle consolation.

The turbulence of *Jane Eyre* echoes in Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), which disturbed many readers with its vivid account of a woman trapped in marriage to an alcoholic. (The subject drew closely on the decline of the Brontes' dissolute brother, Bramwell, although it was also the recurrent theme of so-called temperance fiction.) But the violent emotional oscillation of *Jane Eyre*, its incessant movement between rebellion and self-repression – "I know no medium," Jane remarks, in dealing with antipathetic characters, "between absolute submission and determined revolt" (C. Bronte: 446) – is even more boldly rendered in *Wuthering Heights*. Emily Bronte's novel represents a world in which passion explodes the bounds of middle-class gentility, and presses against the very limits of realistic representation. Marriage is not the fulfillment of desire but the containment of a longing that can never be satisfied – and whose intensity vexes personal identity itself. "Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff," Catherine famously exclaims (E. Bronte 1995: 64). And Heathcliff's desire in turn is channeled into revenge against the family that had "rescued" him from his orphaned state. His mysterious disappearance and return in the midst of the novel as a man of fortune aligns economic success with thwarted erotic longing. Far from being vindicated by middle-class refinement, Heathcliff incarnates an image of ambition laying waste that ideal.

From its first publication, readers have found *Wuthering Heights* disturbing, sometimes bewildering, yet riveting – "a strange sort of book," declared one early reviewer, "baffling all regular criticism; yet, it is

impossible to begin and not to finish it.” “The general effect is inexpressibly painful” yet “the reality of unreality has never been so aptly illustrated.” As the young D. G. Rossetti wrote to a friend, “it is a fiend of a book, an incredible monster ... The action is laid in Hell, – only it seems places and people have English names there” (M. Allott 1974: 298, 300). Film adaptations of the book tend to efface its idiosyncratic narrative structure. The novel’s action is framed by the journal of one Lockwood, the new tenant of Thrushcross Grange, who gathers the history of its mysteriously savage owner, Heathcliff, through the recollections of the housekeeper, Nelly Dean, whose memories range back over a quarter of a century, to encompass two generations of the intertwined central families. The uncertain reliability of this narration creates a form of perspectivalism, underscored by the play of visual description throughout the novel, which emphasizes passing glimpses through windows or doors left ajar. The recurrent effect is of an unsettling voyeurism into a domestic realm that, far from being a refuge from struggle, papers over unfathomable reservoirs of longing and rage. Thackeray’s eavesdropping seems in comparison merely jaunty. The volcanic passion of Heathcliff draws on both gothic romance and Byronic drama: “I have lost the faculty of enjoying their destruction,” he laments at one point (E. Bronte 1995: 248), leading Nelly to wonder, “Is he a ghoul, or a vampire?” (250). And Yorkshire itself comes to seem a remote planet, alien to more civilized precincts (48) – an emphasis that would be taken up in Gaskell’s 1856 *Life of Charlotte Bronte*, the opening chapters of which evoke her Yorkshire environs less as an English county than as the site of an anthropological expedition.

The singular fury of *Wuthering Heights* underscores by contrast a more direct engagement with social and political conflict in many domestic novels of the decade. Throughout the forties, religious conflict was a central theme of the novel, particularly in the wake of the Oxford movement and a number of well-publicized conversions to Catholicism. Religious faith is a well-nigh inescapable dimension of Victorian experience, where even non-belief typically is felt as resistance to orthodoxy rather than its mere absence. But doctrinal conflicts were especially sharp in the forties and early fifties, when dramas of conversion expressed in outwardly small quarrels very large social tensions. Even for unsympathetic observers, these experiences were full of pathos: religious converts exposed themselves to widespread dismay and derision, which frequently strained or even sundered the most

intimate bonds of friendship and family. But the anxiety aroused by the likes of Newman, who “went over” to Rome in 1845, resonated widely in a social order that was still felt to rest on Protestant faith, and it could flare into deeply paranoid responses, particularly after the re-establishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Britain in 1850, a gesture quickly dubbed the “Papal Aggression.”

Even before that event, the revival of sisterhoods within the Anglican Church had conjured up fantasies of vulnerable young women deluded by scheming priests – a scenario straight from the pages of Radcliffe and other gothic novelists, whose work would be echoed in many mid-Victorian narratives. Catherine Sinclair’s *Beatrice* (1850) dwells on just this fantasy – “The object of Romanism is entirely to subjugate the will and the intellect” (Sinclair n.d.: xiv) – as does *Father Eustace* (1847) by Mrs. Trollope, always quick to seize on topical subjects. The subtitle of William Sewell’s *Hawkestone: A Tale of and for England* (1845) captures the sense of fanatical urgency in a host of anti-Catholic fictions. Sewell (1804–74) represents a Catholic “stranger” preying on the town of Hawkestone, fanning industrial revolt, kidnapping Anglican clergy, and murdering children – only to find his rightful fate when he is eaten alive by rats in the basement of Hawkestone Priory. This from an Anglican clergyman and Fellow of Exeter College, Oxford, who was himself a Tractarian, outraged by what he saw as Newman’s apostasy. Sewell’s sister Elizabeth (1815–1906), although also a High Church controversialist, had a more temperate but more durable career as a novelist, which focused on the role of faith in the lives of women, particularly the unmarried. *Margaret Perceval* (1847), for example, explores the protagonist’s wrestling with the rival claims of Anglican and Catholic faith, while *The Experience of Life* (1853), set before the rise of Tractarianism, focuses on the allure of Dissent.

Though Sewell might seem worlds removed from the Brontes in denying her heroines romantic fulfillment, her work in fact underscores a persistent concern in Charlotte’s fiction and many domestic novels of the time. Both writers explored the potential clash between faith and domestic fulfillment, under which love may come to seem, as Jane reflects of Rochester, a form of idolatry. “My future husband was becoming to me my own world; and more than the world: almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those days, see God for his creature” (C. Bronte 196: 307). Emily Bronte’s characters embrace this eclipse: “I have nearly attained my

heaven” (E. Bronte 1995: 233), Heathcliff breathes on his deathbed, and the novel does not dispute this. But Charlotte Bronte’s heroines typically struggle with a worry that romance is a falling-off from a higher calling. Not for nothing are the final words of *Jane Eyre* given over to the ascetic missionary, St John Rivers. Lady Georgiana Fullerton (1812–85) pursued a similar theme from a Catholic vantage, focusing on the burdens of piety in aristocratic life. In her first and most popular novel, *Ellen Middleton* (1844), the heroine spends much of her life agonizing over a fit of temper at the age of 15, which caused the death of a young cousin; tortured by both guilt and blackmail, Ellen escapes her ordeal only when she is able to confess the truth and die absolved. Fullerton’s next novel, *Grantley Manor* (1847), focuses on a romance agonizingly concealed and thwarted by religious differences – a tension “somewhat too remorselessly protracted,” as the *Athenaeum* reviewer complained (Sutherland 1989: 259).

Newman himself turned to the novel to explore his own controversial history in *Loss and Gain, The Story of a Convert* (1848), which recounts the religious doubts and subsequent conversion of an Oxford student named Charles Reding, and offers a vivid portrait of Oxford undergraduate life in the 1830s and 1840s. A more turbulent record, which has been called “the most notorious religious novel of the century” (Sutherland 1989: 458), was produced by one of Newman’s more embattled admirers, the Oxford don James Anthony Froude (1818–94), younger brother of one of Newman’s early allies (and later Carlyle’s biographer). Like the protagonist of *The Nemesis of Faith* (1849), Froude found that neither Newman’s charisma nor Carlyle’s quest for a new mythus could quell his youthful skepticism. In the figure of Markham Sutherland he imagined a young clergyman whose “honest doubt,” as Tennyson would put it, obliges him to surrender his religious offices and to drift in agonizing confusion to the brink of suicide, from which he is rescued only to die with his doubts still unresolved. Froude was scripting his own early career; his outraged superior at Exeter College, none other than William Sewell, publicly burned the novel, and Froude was forced to resign his fellowship.

These topical engagements brought distinctive formal challenges, inasmuch as they resisted the authority of the marriage plot. Newman’s *Loss and Gain* in this regard is not far removed from the world of *Jane Eyre*: each explores the potential dissonance between a sense of spiritual calling – whether the priesthood or a woman’s personal dignity – and



married life. To these concerns, religious experience offered alternative narratives of conflict, suspense, and closure – not merely conversion but martyrdom (which for many Victorians included the fate of the spinster). These possibilities blossomed in a host of domestic fiction indebted to Tractarianism, including Felicia Skene’s *Use and Abuse* (1849), a distinctive amalgam of gothic fantasy and Tractarian piety, and a broad swath of the work of the prolific Charlotte Yonge (1823–1901), most notably her 1853 best-seller *The Heir of Redclyffe*. Religious polemics even gave rise to a distinct subgenre of historical fiction set in the age of early Christianity, which seemed an especially vivid mirror of contemporary religious controversy. Kingsley’s *Hypatia* (1853) presented the Alexandrian philosopher of its title as a martyr to a religious fanaticism that sounds strangely like first-century Tractarianism (the subtitle, “Old Foes with New Faces,” gives the game away). Nicholas Wiseman, recently named Cardinal of Westminster, responded with *Fabiola* (1854), which dwells in sometimes excruciating detail on fourth-century martyrdom, and Newman himself pursued similar interests in *Callista* (1856), set in third-century North Africa. In every instance the setting licensed often gruesome violence, a feature of the subgenre that would persist at least until Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), and hints at the powerfully masochistic energies undergirding mid-Victorian religious discipline.

### The Novel of Development

In representing a struggle towards a more assured sense of identity grounded in new forms of belief, all of these narratives recall the model of *Sartor Resartus*, and, more distantly, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, the founding example of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of development or education. (Richard Monckton-Milnes saw in *The Nemesis of Faith* “a sort of religious anti-religious *Wilhelm Meister*” [Howe 1966: 234].) The form obviously draws on the energies of autobiography and the sense of individual distinction so crucial to romanticism, a view with which Rousseau memorably opened his *Confessions* (1770): “I may not be better than other men,” Rousseau averred, “but at least I am different: *au moins, je suis autre*” (Rousseau 1953: 17). In the *Bildungsroman*, the self-discovery and self-definition of the protagonist tend to be more emphatically social, conjured up in large part by new

prospects of social mobility, a world of possibility at once exhilarating and fearful. The challenge is memorably evoked in the bewilderment of Pip in *Great Expectations*, who undergoes something we've learned to call an identity crisis: "I was a blacksmith's boy but yesterday; I am – what shall I say I am – to-day?" (Dickens 1996: 248). The same interest in the fluidity of identity is registered by the sheer prominence of orphans in Victorian fiction. In a world where birth does not so predictably determine one's social prospects, identity itself is at once more malleable and less secure.

Of course, identity remained powerfully constrained by social class and, even more, by gender. The *Bildungsroman* has an inherent self-reflexivity that naturally appealed to novelists: the challenge of constructing a coherent narrative was the challenge of finding a satisfying shape and purpose in a life or career – which might well be one's own. But the shapes available to men and women remained profoundly different. For a male protagonist, the main line of fulfillment comes in the public sphere, and marriage and domestic life are important principally as they support or obstruct the hero's endeavors there. For heroines, the most consequential choice is invariably who, or whether, to marry. Thus *Jane Eyre*, the greatest female *Bildungsroman* in English, offers Jane the choice between religious service and a truly companionate marriage. We may hear in the background Carlyle's imperative, "know what thou canst work at," but that command typically pressures only those female characters who, through accident or choice, pursue a life outside of marriage.

For novelists, writing itself naturally had special resonance as a vocation, but to convey the allure of the writer's life one needed an audience willing to believe that it was a worthy calling, a career in which success or failure was a matter of some moment. The construction of "the man of letters" in the 1830s of course spoke to precisely this concern, and novels about the development of a novelist first appear in England in that decade, in conjunction with the consolidation of "literature" as a source of something more than amusement. Bulwer's *Ernest Maltravers* (1837) is the earliest example of the genre (with a pun on its hero's first name that would resonate for the rest of the century). G. H. Lewes's more earnest *Ranthorpe*, about the struggles of an aspiring poet, appeared in 1847, and along with Thomas Miller's *Geoffrey Malvern* (1843) seems to have influenced Kingsley's *Alton Locke*. But the *Bildungsroman* really came to prominence in England with the epochal pendant of Thackeray's *Pendennis* and Dickens's *David Copperfield*,

both published in 1850 (Thackeray's began appearing in serial form six months before Dickens's novel, in November 1848).

The fame of Dickens's "favorite child," as he called *David Copperfield*, has overshadowed Thackeray's exactly contemporary novel of a writer's life. For all their differences, both works locate the protagonist's central challenge less in writing itself – an activity that Dickens evokes only very obliquely – than in a moral struggle towards self-mastery. Pendennis's "greatest enemy," the novel announces, is himself; and David similarly diagnoses at the root of his unhappiness an "undisciplined heart." Both failings are elicited above all in relations with women, both doting mothers and prospective wives. But the imaginative foci of the two novels are otherwise crucially divergent in both social milieu and narrative arc, which were avidly explored in the many reviews that considered the two works together.

Most notably, Dickens's novel is an autobiographical fiction, written in the first person. "The Personal History and Experience of David Copperfield the Younger" dwells at great length on childhood trauma – tapping into personal reminiscence so intimate that Dickens was unable to confess to anyone save his close friend and biographer, John Forster, that David's humiliating time at Warren's blacking factory was drawn from his own life. Thackeray's third-person narration, by contrast, opens with Pendennis already 18, and being tempted by compromising infatuation with an actress 10 years his senior. Pen's first 16 years are passed over in a single chapter and a few subsequent retrospects, whereas it is not until the fourth number that the 10-year-old David begins his famous ordeal in the blacking factory, and his schooldays do not come to an end until the seventh. Pen's reminiscences are most energetic and voluminous – and, for many readers, most alluring – in recounting the bohemian life of literary London in the 1830s: as Andrew Lang later remembered, *Pendennis* made him want to "run away to literature" (Cross 1985: 110). In this socially marginal sphere, moral waywardness is measured, as so often in Thackeray, by the idea of the gentleman, here incarnated by Pen's bachelor uncle, Colonel Pendennis. All of this reflects the investments of Thackeray "the university man," a status that set him apart from most of his fellow novelists, and informed his famous complaint in the Preface that contemporary prudishness inhibited more open depictions of "what moves in the real world":

Since the author of Tom Jones was buried, no writer of fiction among us has been permitted to depict to his utmost power a MAN. We must

drape him, and give him a certain conventional simper. Society will not tolerate the Natural in our Art. (Thackeray 1991: xvi)

In Dickens, by contrast, the gentleman's urbanity is a suspect virtue, the norm itself more often travestied than realized, in keeping with a focus towards the shabby-genteel end of the social spectrum, which is epitomized by the hapless Micawber. The one prominent character of more distinguished descent, Steerforth, harks back to the aristocratic rakes of Dickens's early novels, though he is invested with a more substantial psychology, which anticipates a host of deracinated, cynical idlers that figure prominently in the later novels. Steerforth is a particularly seductive model to the younger Davy – or “Daisy,” as he calls him – whose lapse of discipline he doubles in more destructive fashion, and their homoerotically charged friendship echoes David's entanglement with the grasping Uriah Heep, a predator drawn from the lower rungs of the social ladder.

Thackeray's novel, in short, draws identity in more emphatically social terms, from the more pronounced influence of an extended family to the greater attention to nuances of social form. The Dickensian self depends on a more pronounced interiority, with sexuality in particular generating a more feverish sense of danger than in Thackeray, and with a corresponding sense of guilt more powerful than the shameful lapses of honorable conduct that afflict Pendennis. Reviews of the two works registered this different emphasis in formal as well as social terms. Dickens's greater range was that of an “ideal” art that readily lapsed into the “extravagant” or “grotesque,” Thackeray's was an art more devoted to “the real,” more attentive to outward form, but in its greater detachment more liable to cynicism. That distinction would be more broadly elaborated in the 1850s, with the rise of “realism” as a central concern in discussion of the novel generally. But the reception of these two works confirmed the new cultural stature that the novel had achieved over the course of the 1840s. David Masson, one of the most astute mid-Victorian critics, concluded his review by complaining of a lack of effort toward “artistic perfection” among contemporary novelists, who “candidly own that they write to make money and amuse people” (Tillotson and Hawes 1968: 126). This may seem a familiar refrain, but prior to the 1840s few critics would have envisioned the novel as anything but a popular amusement. The bar of “artistic perfection” suggests the new authority of the form.

### Art, Politics, and Faith

Poetry in the latter half of the 1840s reflected the currency of both domestic narrative and religious crisis. Browning in 1850 published a volume entitled *Christmas Eve and Easter-Day*, which contained two lengthy personal narratives meditating on contemporary challenges to Christian belief. But his more powerful engagements with the topic came in the monologue form, which offered an extremely supple vehicle for exploring psychologies of faith and doubt. “An Epistle of Karshish” (1855), for example, transposes to the first century CE a recognizably contemporary conflict between a scientific habit of mind and religious experience. Browning imagines an Arab doctor confronting in his travels the story of “a Nazarene physician” who allegedly revived a man from the dead – a story Karshish tries to dismiss as sheer delusion, but which leaves his skeptical materialism deeply shaken. He has been listening to the strangely riveting first-hand account of a man named Lazarus. “How can he give his neighbour the real ground / His own conviction?” the fascinated Karshish asks (ll. 216–17; Browning 1970). Browning’s monologues increasingly seek to evoke just such grounds, anchoring varieties of “conviction” – religious, aesthetic, moral, of more or less plausible content – in the evocation of a distinctive psychology, albeit a psychology unusually responsive to a skeptical implied audience. Much of the power lies in Browning’s ability to evoke a sense of unresolved ambivalence. Thus “Bishop Blougram’s Apology,” from his 1855 volume *Men and Women*, has left critics to this day debating how to respond to the Bishop’s reflections on his office and faith, an eminently suave, worldly, unruffled self-portrait from a character clearly modeled on the widely demonized bishops of the newly restored Roman Catholic hierarchy. The example of Browning’s monologues would be developed less equivocally in memoir and autobiography, supremely John Henry Newman’s *Apologia pro Vita Sua* of 1864, which takes up in dead earnest and at great length precisely the challenge that Karshish ponders: how can he give his neighbor the real ground of a faith and a life that so deeply affronts most Englishmen?

Victorian poetry also increasingly engaged the domestic interests central to the novel. The success of “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” planted in Elizabeth Barrett’s mind the idea of a long poem set in contemporary times, which eventually culminated in *Aurora Leigh* (1856).

More immediately, however, it provided an uncanny model for a strange turn of events in Barrett's highly sheltered life. In January of 1845 she received an extraordinary letter from the young poet whose work she had commended in her own poetry, but to whom she was otherwise a complete stranger: "I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett," wrote Robert Browning, "... into me it has gone, and part of me it has become, this great living poetry of yours ... I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart – and I love you too" (Browning and Barrett 1969: 3). The famous courtship would be enshrined in two literary memorials. The first was the continuation of a project already underway, which would draw its title from Robert's affection for "Catarina to Camoens." *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is a sequence of 44 Petrarchan sonnets recounting a courtship that culminates in a confident and enduring love. The conjunction of nakedly personal expression – Barrett Browning did not show it to Robert until they had been married for three years – and the sheer popularity of the poem (is there a love poem in English quoted more often than the penultimate sonnet, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways ..."?) has struck many critics as a hallmark of sentimentalism. Yet the poem inaugurated a mid-century revival of the love sonnet sequence, and (more broadly) helped to shape a major Victorian poetic innovation, the long poem telling a story through a lyrical sequence in a modern setting. The appearance of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* in 1850, a few months after *In Memoriam*, would soon be followed by Arnold's *Switzerland*, Clough's *Amours de Voyage*, Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, and Tennyson's *Maud*, and would continue to resonate into the 1890s.

The second great monument to the Brownings' courtship was their correspondence. Although it would not be published for nearly 50 years, it captures the extraordinary energies that mid-Victorian writers invested in letters, and the peculiar satisfactions that letter-writing afforded. Letters of course offered forms of contact across distances that remained difficult to travel. But even between neighbors they also enabled forms of intimacy that would have felt more awkward in face-to-face encounters, and sometimes offered a semblance of conversation by means of an extraordinary postal service that, following the introduction of the penny post in 1839, sometimes provided five deliveries per day. Letter-writing was particularly valuable to middle-class women, whose mobility and intellectual opportunity were in various ways circumscribed. The sheer volume of correspondence between the

two poets suggests that it must have been written with a good deal of spontaneity – albeit one that had been honed by years of practice. This exchange offers the further pleasure of unrivaled insight into the minds of two important English poets, each writing for an unusually sympathetic audience (something for which their poetic careers had taught them to be deeply grateful).

Such revelations were a source of increasing fascination across the century, which is reflected in the upsurge of memoirs and biographies of writers, which typically incorporated large swaths of correspondence, sometimes of unsettling frankness. (Richard Monckton-Milnes's *Life and Letters of John Keats* (1848) provoked considerable controversy for including Keats's passionate letters to his lover Fanny Brawne.) The Brownings, however, offer the fantasy of an epistolary courtship brought to life. It was a fairy tale – most obviously, an awakening of Sleeping Beauty. But that parallel ceded an unsettling amount of control to the male rescuer. Much of the emotional complexity of the letters derives from Barrett's discomfort, despite her powerful yearning to escape from her isolation, with Browning's eagerness to assume the role of chivalric hero rescuing the damsel in distress – or, in the particular form that haunted Browning's imagination, Perseus rescuing Andromeda from a monster, a role that Barrett's tyrannical father was born to play. The correspondence breaks off on September 17, 1846; the next day, Elizabeth Barrett left 50 Wimpole Street to be married. Her father, who had forbidden all of his children to marry, lived up to his threats: he never again communicated with his daughter.

After their marriage, the Brownings made their way to Italy, eventually settling in Florence, where they joined a sizeable community of British expatriates. Italy loomed large in the Victorian imagination – in part simply as a haven of warmth and sunlight, which had a special allure for Britons fleeing a harsh climate (particularly invalids like Barrett Browning). Long a central destination on the aristocratic “Grand Tour,” Italy also resonated for an expanding audience of travelers as a primary origin and site of culture, and thus for the forms of education and refinement associated above all with the experience of visual art. Historically a secondary presence in British culture, painting and sculpture assumed much greater public significance over the course of the nineteenth century through enhanced access to great collections, both through the founding of municipal galleries – the National Gallery in London was funded in 1824 – and the increasing hospitality of private collectors to public exhibition. Browning's monologues

frequently explore the mingled allure and unease aroused by closer contact with unfamiliar color and form, particularly that of religious painting, an art often boldly sensual in its representation of sacred history. Even by the early 1830s, in the fictional chronology of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, the great collections of the Vatican represent a new "language" that overwhelms Dorothea Casaubon, who thereby epitomizes the response of a puritanical culture newly exposed to the sometimes unsettling glories of Renaissance painting.

A large body of writing developed to address this challenge, ranging from travel guides, in which art galleries and collections occupied a large place, to more systematic treatments, typically organized thematically. The prolific writings of Anna Jameson (1794–1860) encompass the spectrum, ranging from exhibition reviews and a handbook to the public galleries of London (1845) to a series of book-length studies gathered as *Sacred and Legendary Art* (1857), as well as a host of memoirs of artists. (She also produced a number of works exploring the lives of women, including an early novel, *Diary of an Ennuyee*, a study of the Madonna in art, and collective biographies of famous queens, society women, and "loves of the poets.") The most influential Victorian guide to the world of visual art was John Ruskin (1819–1900), whose idiosyncratic childhood (memorably described in his unfinished autobiography, *Præterita*) encapsulated the larger tensions besetting much contemporary response to the arts. Ruskin was the only child of a wealthy and deeply conservative Scottish couple, who brought John up in highly protective isolation and strict piety (much of his childhood was passed in reading and re-reading aloud with his mother the entire Bible). His father, a sherry merchant, also was an art collector, who especially prized the works of J. M. W. Turner (whom the young Ruskin visited in his studio), and who took the family on extensive travel in Italy. From this experience Ruskin came to regard art and architecture not only as sources of ravishing pleasure, but as the crowning embodiments of human value – and human corruption. "To see clearly," he would declare, "is poetry, prophecy, and religion, all in one" (*Works* 5: 333) – a credo that suggests his deep indebtedness to Carlyle.

With such a foundation, art criticism became a criticism of life itself, a comprehensive engagement with human experience, and Ruskin's writing is among the most varied and voluminous of any Victorian writer. The sheer range of his interests is encapsulated (if that is the word) in *Modern Painters*, "Dedicated to the Landscape Artists of England,"



which appeared in five volumes published over 17 years. Ruskin began in 1843 with a defense of the painting of Turner against contemporary derision (“By a Graduate of Oxford” – the wealthy Ruskin still upheld a model of the author as an anonymous gentleman) and concluded in 1860 with two increasingly digressive volumes full of extravagantly fanciful allegorical readings of favorite images. Throughout the project an outwardly logical, synoptical structure – the work opens “I. Of General Principles. Of the Nature of the Ideas Conveyable by Art” – is at war with immersion in the sheer proliferation of beautiful particulars. While the early work concentrated on art’s fidelity to nature – answering criticism that Turner’s art was merely muddy – the later works expanded in their social engagement, in effect gathering in the lives of the figures in the landscape, and of the painters and the societies from which they emerged. Noticed initially for the sheer force of his descriptive power and his distinctive style, by turns clinically precise, slashing, lyrical, and hortatory (with a deeply biblical allusiveness), Ruskin was increasingly recognized as one of the most powerful and idiosyncratic of Victorian social critics, who perpetually confounded party labels (such as “Radical Tory”). At the outset of his career, English art criticism was largely confined to exhibit reviews. By 1860, Ruskin had so transfigured the genre that “art criticism” seemed inadequate to describe his work, which had become a thoroughgoing engagement with social and political history, and Ruskin in his ferocious self-confidence had become one of the most admired and reviled of Victorian sages.

Ruskin was drawn to Italy preeminently for its landscapes and its art; he spent much of the latter part of the 1840s in Venice, the city that most captivated him, working on *The Stones of Venice* (1851). To different travelers, Italy offered seductions beyond architecture. It was a locus of freedom, traditionally of the erotic pleasures that had so captivated Byron and other sexual adventurers, but more recently of movements for political liberty, as various Italian leaders struggled to consolidate an Italian nation freed from subjugation by foreign powers. Barrett Browning of course had been drawn to political engagement in her earlier lyrics, and the first poem she wrote in Italy was apparently “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” composed at the request of the Anti-Slavery Bazaar of Boston. She referred to it as a ballad, but it is a long dramatic monologue, motivated by a deeply personal sense of guilt: “I belong to a family of West Indian slaveholders,” she wrote to Ruskin ten years later, “and if I believed in curses, I should be afraid”

(Mermin 1989, 156–7). Her first long poem written in Italy was *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851), a poem built around the vexing contrast between Tuscany’s glorious cultural past and its dismal political present. The title refers to the view from the Brownings’ apartment, where Elizabeth in 1847 watched crowds who seemed to be heralding the Risorgimento, the “resurgence” and reunification of Italy under Grand Duke Leopold II, but later pondered the collapse of those hopes in the wake of revolutions across the continent in 1848. The poem, organized in two parts recording these separate responses, aroused little enthusiasm, in part because readers did not much care for poetry immersed in the intricacies of foreign politics – particularly when it came from a woman.

A more oblique response to a different political struggle (albeit one set in an indeterminate southern clime) came from Tennyson, who in *The Princess* (1847) managed to fuse his familiar bent for romantic frustration with attention to growing calls for women’s rights. An emergent feminism was a natural by-product of the importance attached to domestic womanhood, but much of Tennyson’s immediate impetus seems to have come from America. To be sure, British novelists were devoting increasing attention to women who resisted their standing as “relative creatures.” Before *Jane Eyre* appeared, Geraldine Jewsbury’s *Zoe* (1845), one of the earliest Victorian novels dealing with religious doubt, recounted the life of a highly educated woman in the later eighteenth century, who moves through literary society in London and France, undermines the vocation of a Jesuit priest, and (after the death of her elderly husband) becomes passionately involved with Mirabeau. “At last,” Bulwer-Lytton commented, “an honest woman speaks out, right or wrong, to the world” (Sutherland 1989: 689). But while Jewsbury was influenced by the example of George Sand in France, Tennyson was especially attentive to the emergence of an American social type. Although the Seneca Falls Convention would not take place until the following year, he evidently had absorbed from recent writings about radical thought and social experiments in America – even outwardly parodic treatments such as *Martin Chuzzlewit* – an image of the “strong-minded” woman. He recast this image in his title character, a woman who renounces marriage in order to found a university for women – to the predictable amazement and outrage of the men around her.

A poem about a women’s university might seem the very cutting-edge of topicality in 1847, but even Barrett Browning, who had heard

about it as “The University of Women,” remarked, “isn’t the world too old & fond of steam, for blank verse poems, in ever so many books, to be written on the fairies?” (Tennyson 1969: 741). The sheer iconoclasm of the topic helps to explain Tennyson’s characteristic recourse to defensive ironic framing (as in “The Epic”). The poem struck most readers as a bewildering amalgam of daring social speculation, Persian romance, and domestic farce, with male undergraduates cross-dressing in order to sneak into the women’s sanctuary. When Princess Ida rejects the nameless Prince, to whom she had been pledged in infancy, her affront to traditional femininity staggers the young man and arouses a chorus of male denunciation, in which the most vehement voice is the Prince’s father: “Man is the hunter; woman is his game” (l. 5.147; Tennyson 1969). Over against this hoary model of sexual domination, the Prince is allowed to seem deeply sympathetic to Ida’s aims, the herald of a new kind of masculinity: “Henceforth thou hast a helper, me, that knows /The woman’s cause is man’s” (ll. 7.242–3). But this declaration comes only after Ida has renounced her project as a selfish corruption of her “cause” and acknowledges instead the more pressing claims of the Prince’s love (brought out by his striking passivity through much of the poem, in which Ida’s resistance seems to have undermined any secure ground of action). The psychology is unusually brittle, and Tennyson hedged his bets from the outset. He titled the poem *The Princess: A Medley*, and framed the poem with a narrative in which Princess Ida is the collective fantasy of a group of undergraduates on a summer holiday, on the grounds of a country estate hosting a meeting of the local Mechanics’ Institute. Tennyson was evidently deeply captivated by the topic; he tinkered with the poem through seven editions, most notably adding a feature that until recently has been the only part of the poem frequently reprinted: a set of ravishing lyrics interpolated between the seven parts of the poem, including “The splendour fall on castle walls,” “Sweet and low, sweet and low,” and “Ask me no more.” Ultimately, however, he pronounced it “only a medley.”

“I gave up all hope of Tennyson after *The Princess*,” recalled his friend Edward Fitzgerald, but by the end of the decade Tennyson had become the benchmark against which young poets were measured. In November of 1848 appeared *The Bothie of Toper-na-Fuosich: A Long-Vacation Pastoral*, recounting the adventures of a “reading party” of Oxford undergraduates in the Scottish Highlands. Written in rough approximation of classical hexameters, the poem explores with a mostly deft comic touch the ironies announced in the title: that of a group of

university men encountering Highland society through the lens of Theocritus, and in the process coming to reconsider both Greek poetry and their own privilege. The poem rather gingerly broaches contemporary radical politics in the figure of Hewson, clearly the closest thing to an authorial surrogate:

Philip Hewson the poet,  
 Hewson, the radical hot, hating lords and scorning ladies,  
 Silent mostly, but often reviling in fire and fury  
 Feudal tenures, mercantile lords, competitions, and bishops ...  
 (ll. 1.131–4; Clough 1951)

The poem echoes many of the concerns of *The Princess* – Hewson also is hot against the constricting model of modern womanhood – but the romance is inflected with more assured irony and social realism than Tennyson’s poem. When Hewson meets in Elspie of the Highlands the girl of his dreams, he sees no future for them together except in emigration to New Zealand. The free-wheeling political discussion offended some reviewers, others sniffed at the poem as too much for “the initiated” (so *The Spectator* complained), while some fellow initiates paraded their erudition in objecting to false quantity in the hexameters. But many readers were delighted by the poem’s interweaving of evocative landscape and novelistic social portraiture: “It is a noble poem. Tennyson must look to his laurels” was the verdict of Emerson, in a letter to the author, Arthur Hugh Clough (Thorpe 1972: 33).

For the relatively few contemporaries acquainted with his poetry, Clough became the emblem of a debilitating struggle with religious doubt, and for some a paragon of failed genius, almost a Victorian Coleridge. At his early death in 1862 he was widely seen as never having lived up to his early promise. Born in England but raised in the United States, Clough enjoyed great success at Rugby School (where he became a close friend of the schoolmaster’s son, Matthew Arnold) and later at Oxford. But he resigned his fellowship at Oriel College soon after publication of the *Bothie*, because he felt unable to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, as required of all Oxford fellows. The strenuous moralism of Arnold’s Rugby nurtured a sometimes tormented religious scrupulosity, but also a keenly satiric observation of English society, both of which found their way into his poetry and discouraged him from publishing it. Little of the buoyancy in *The Bothie* informs Clough’s later work, save in a more

pointedly, sometimes savagely ironic vein. Clough's lyrics are largely divided between stern anatomies of his own skepticism (much influenced by the German biblical scholar Strauss, who also would have a large impact on George Eliot) and often fierce attacks on smug religiosity. "Qui Laborat, Orat" rehearses the tenuous consolations of Carlyle; in the more wrackingly skeptical "Easter Day," written in Naples in 1849, Clough evokes in an irregular ode (reminiscent of Wordsworth's "Intimations" Ode) a lacerating skepticism clinched by the refrain, "He is not risen." A much briefer (perhaps incomplete) second part seems to temper this with the refrain, "He is risen," but more arresting is the cancelled opening of this section:

So while the blear-eyed pimp beside me walked,  
And talked,  
For instance, of the beautiful danseuse,  
And 'Eccellenza sure must see, if he would choose'  
(Clough 1953: 479)

The sharp worldly observation – daring in both subject and idiom – characterizes Clough's greatest works, in which the aims of poetry clearly are converging with those of the novel, particularly French realists such as Balzac. "The Latest Decalogue" offers a withering evocation of English hypocrisy in a travesty of the Ten Commandments:

Though shalt have one God only; who  
Would be at the expense of two?  
No graven images may be  
Worshipped, except the currency ...  
Honour thy parents; that is, all  
From whom advancement may befall;  
Thou shalt not kill; but need'st not strive  
Officiously to keep alive ...  
(ll. 1–4, 11–14)

The affinities of poetry and the novel are even more striking in *Amours de Voyage*, a testament to the allure of Italy more equivocal than *Casa Guidi Windows*. A gently satiric narrative in epistolary form, following affluent English travelers in Rome during the revolutions of 1848, the poem conjoins keen social description with subtle mockery of its focal consciousness, a young man abroad and adrift, mulling over the possibility of heroic action while listening to the roar of nearby

cannon. Written in the early 1850s but published only in 1858 (in America), the poem sums up a good deal of Clough's own self-division in its central character, Claude: "So through the city I wander, unsatisfied ever, /Reverent so I accept, doubtful because I revere" (ll. 1.283–4; Clough 1953). More audacious still is "Dipsychus," which develops from an opening citation of "Easter Day" a series of 13 scenes loosely modeled on Goethe's *Faust* crossed with the satiric edge of late Byron (but with more formal variety). The protagonist, whose name ("Two-Souled") captures Clough's familiar vacillation, is another young man on the Grand Tour, this time in Venice, where he is attended by a raffish "Spirit" whose cynicism points up the struggles of the title character, earnestly wrestling with the worldly wisdom Clough so often satirized:

Where are the great, whom thou would'st wish to praise thee?  
 Where are the pure, whom thou would'st choose to love thee?  
 Where are the brave, to stand supreme above thee,  
 Whose high commands would rouse, whose chidings raise thee?  
 (iv.122–5)

This introspection is answered by the Spirit:

As I sat at the café, I said to myself,  
 They may talk all they please about what they call pelf,  
 They may sneer as they like about eating and drinking,  
 But help it I cannot, I cannot help thinking.  
 How pleasant it is to have money, heigh ho!  
 How pleasant it is to have money.  
 (iv.130–5)

The ironic verve of *Dipsychus* has led many to regard it as Clough's greatest achievement, but the satire was too difficult to disentangle from cynicism, and the poem was never published in his lifetime.

As he dramatized a young poet's self-doubt, Clough also raised provocative questions about the value and decorums of poetry. Who was it addressing, what purpose did it serve, what subjects were appropriate, did criteria of "dignity" still obtain? Those issues would grow increasingly explicit in critical debate over the next two decades, but they emerged in the reception of an 1849 volume entitled *The Strayed Reveller*, by Matthew Arnold. The keenest readers recognized a profound conflict at the heart of the slender volume, which was reflected

in the two longest poems. The title poem looked to Book X of the *Odyssey* to evoke a fundamentally romantic conception of poetry as a joy won at the cost of suffering: “such a price /The Gods exact for song: /To become what we sing” (ll. 232–4; Arnold 1979). Yet “Resignation” celebrates freedom as a conquest of emotion, an amalgam of Wordsworthian detachment and ancient stoicism yielding an insight “whose secret is not joy, but peace.” Critics generally praised the various figures of displacement or helplessness – the strayed reveler, a gipsy child by the seashore, “The Abandoned Merman,” “The Sick King in Bokhara” (“And what I would, I cannot do”) – in which the influence of Wordsworth and Tennyson is especially marked. But nearly all reviewers expressed some impatience with the recurrent appeal to classical forms and subject matter. In a generally favorable review, Kingsley put the objection with his usual bluntness: “What does the age want with fragments of an *Antigone*?” (Dawson 1973: 43). The subsequent career of the volume’s author, Matthew Arnold, might be thought of as a sustained meditation on just that question. Kingsley’s desire for a poetry engaging contemporary life may have been unusually vehement: “Life unrolling *before* him! As if it could unroll to purpose anywhere but in him; as if the poet, or any one else, could know aught of life except by living it, and that in bitter, painful earnest” (44). But many reviewers found the erudite melancholy remote and *recherché*, a kind of escapism. Their reactions hint at anxiety that poetry itself could come to seem ephemeral, a view that soon would be openly embraced in Morris’s “idle singer of an empty day.”

### *In Memoriam*

Events of 1850 dispelled such a worry, at least for the time being. On June 1, Moxon published a volume-length poem entitled *In Memoriam AHH Obit MDCCCXXXIII*. Praise for the work was immediate, widespread, fervent, and lasting, and it secured the unnamed author, Tennyson, not only the Laureateship but also consensus that the Laureate was (for once) truly the major poet of his time. When *The Prelude* was published a few months later, following Wordsworth’s death in April, the edition of 2,000 required a year to sell; *In Memoriam* went through five editions and roughly 25,000 copies in a year and a half. After Prince Albert’s death from cholera in 1861, Queen Victoria confided to Tennyson, “Next to the Bible, my comfort is *In Memoriam*.”

Later admirers have been more skeptical: in T. S. Eliot's influential account, "Its faith is a poor thing, but its doubt is a very intense experience" (Eliot 1932: 336). The power of Tennysonian doubt, however, may suggest why Victorians found its faith so consoling, and why it has remained a central document of Victorian culture.

*In Memoriam* is often called one of the three great English elegies, joining Milton's *Lycidas* and Shelley's *Adonais*. Unlike those poems, however, it only rarely evokes pastoral convention, and then principally to address an anxiety about both the design and the audience of the poem. In section 21, for example, "I sing to him that rests below," the trope of piping to his dead friend conjures up a profound unease about audience, as each passing "traveler" derides the poet. One complains that the poet "would make weakness weak," effeminizing himself and his hearers; another remarks, "He loves to make parade of pain," affirming his own sensibility more than any respect for the dead; yet another objects that "private sorrow's barren song" has no place in a world of momentous political struggle and scientific advance. The feebleness of the poet's response – "I do but sing because I must, / And pipe but as the linnets sing" – appeals to a Millian understanding of absolute emotional integrity, suggesting how powerfully Tennyson feels these objections – which are challenges, ultimately, to lyric poetry itself.

Tennyson not merely risks but to a degree incites such response through resolute commitment to the particulars of mourning. For most of the nearly 17 years of composition, Tennyson did not think of himself as writing a single poem. Not long before publication, he was still referring to a "book of elegies," a phrase that does justice not only to the separate integrity of each section, but also to the difficulty of reconciling the ragged grief with some larger design. The poem offers landmarks by which to chart a chronological progression, which unfolds over roughly three years: sections 28, 78, and 104 are set at Christmas, and sections 72 and 98 mark the anniversary of the death. But the narrative structure is tenuous, inasmuch as the large emotional arc – from numbing grief through moral questioning and rage through acquiescence into something like celebration – is not clearly tethered to anything like a plot. The sonnet sequence offers a formal precedent, and Shakespeare's sonnets clearly were especially resonant for Tennyson in their celebration of intense male friendship. Indeed, some early readers, including Hallam's father, were unsettled by this affiliation, which has been developed in recent criticism that



elicits the powerful homoeroticism in Tennyson's grief. But structurally the poem more closely resembles a private journal or diary. The diary typically is divided between ongoing chronology and fixation on certain recurrent themes, and the entries may seem highly disjunctive, moving without explanation to new attitudes or concerns. Much occurs in the interstices, as it were, whether through genuine resolution of conflict or sheer exhaustion, which may be registered in highly oblique fashion, through subtle shifts of attention or tone. A diary, moreover, raises questions of audience akin to those that trouble Tennyson. At times poetry feels a wholly private exercise, whose value may be anchored less in self-understanding than in sheer routine – “that sad mechanic exercise /Like dull narcotics, numbing pain” (5.7–8; Tennyson 1969)

At the same time, however, the design of the poem works to give a larger shape, and thus an emblematic force, to the central crisis. In this regard, it resembles the central episodes of *Sartor Resartus* and Mill's *Autobiography*. As in those works, the appeal is to something more particular than the universality of suffering. Tennyson struggles to articulate through personal grief a host of more topical anxieties, appealing to forms of awareness and perplexity that made his suffering seem distinctly modern, because it could be gathered into a theme of progress, both personal and collective. Unlike most autobiographies – but in keeping with Wordsworth's example – the body of the poem opens with its central crisis:

I held it truth, with him who sings  
     To one clear harp in diver tones  
     That men may rise on stepping-stones  
 Of their dead selves to higher things.

But who shall so forecast the years  
     And fine in loss a gain to match  
     Or reach a hand thro' time to catch  
 The far-off interest of tears?

(1.1–8)

The poet casts the rupture in his personal history in terms that evoke a host of grand Victorian narratives. His language conjures up “loss and gain” both personal and economic; one's “rise” in the world, or towards the more inclusive awareness charted in Goethean *Bildung* and other nineteenth-century narratives of personal development;

“progress” conceived in collective terms, as “the march of mind”; even – in some ways the most vivid figurative cluster of the poem – in terms of the development of humankind as a species moving towards “higher things.” Might all of these other narratives turn out to reflect groundless faiths, to be records more of rupture than continuity? Tennyson thus frames his dilemma in a manner that unites emotional, formal, and intellectual challenges. The recuperation of his dead friend Arthur Hallam – the sense that Hallam is not irrevocably lost, that his death was not senseless – may restore a larger faith that all is “toil cooperant to an end,” both in the world at large and in the structure of the poem.

Tennyson’s doubt is most sweepingly phrased in wrestling with modern science. Though Tennyson’s proto-evolutionary speculations notably antedate Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, he had been deeply impressed by Charles Lyell’s writings on geology and especially by Robert Wallace’s *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, which caused a sensation when it was published anonymously in 1844. Haunted by the findings of modern geology, so starkly at odds with the consoling image of “Mother Nature,” the poet contemplates in the fossils of extinct species an image of history as recurrent catastrophe. What evidence of a beneficent Being could one find in this record of continual, seemingly implacable destruction? And what of “Man, her last work,”

Who trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation’s final law –  
Tho’ Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shrieked against his creed ...

(56.13–16)

If Man, too, is destined to share the fate of “Dragons of the prime,” his life and hopes are “a dream, /A discord.” “Nature, red in tooth and claw” is a phrase that has drifted free of its context to sum up nothing less than modern evolutionary thought. For Tennyson, however, it speaks a far more intimate betrayal, rather like that afflicting the hero in *The Princess*: a man bereft of love cries for the attention of a maternal being, who answers his pleas with the peremptory “I care for nothing, all shall go” (56.4).

Tellingly, the poem offers no solution to this most harrowing of doubts. “Peace; come away” the next section opens, as if this perplexity

never can be laid to rest. It is relegated to a realm of mystery eased by more immediate forms of solace in the visible world, and in the growing, visceral sense that Hallam is not wholly absent. Tennysonian doubt is so powerful in part because even his most sweeping affirmations of faith give away so much to the worldview of modern science. The Prologue that introduces the poem with an address to “Strong Son of God, immortal Love,” already concedes that religion is a world beyond “knowledge”:

We have but faith; we cannot know,  
For knowledge is of things we see;  
And yet we trust it comes from thee,  
A beam in darkness: let it grow.

(Prologue 21–4)

As throughout the poem, the drama of absence and doubt is reinforced by the distinctive stanza form. The nested rhymes create a potent sense of enclosure and containment that underscores the balance or tension of opposing forces: here, for instance, it may seem that “let it grow” is resisted by “we cannot know.” By the same token, the breach of this closure creates striking effects, which suggest an abrupt expansion or acceleration of the argument – at times, a dizzying exhilaration, as in section 86, “Sweet after showers, ambrosial air ...” in which a single sentence unfolds across four stanzas and eleven enjambed lines to culminate in the imagination beckoning

From belt to belt of crimson seas  
On leagues of odor streaming far,  
To where in yonder orient star,  
A thousand spirits whisper ‘Peace.’

(86.13–16)

It is in some ways a microcosm of the latter half of the poem: the ebbing of grief is reflected in newly vivid responsiveness to the landscape, whose evocative power in turn evokes an increasing assurance that Hallam remains present to him, that like the evening star, “Sweet Hesper-Phosphor,”

Thou, like my present and my past,  
The place is changed, thou art the same.

(121.19–20)

Rupture is repaired, and harmony reaffirmed in an epithalamion, which forms the poem's Epilogue. Though the poet remains a mere witness of the marriage, the ceremony displays here its extraordinary power as an emblem not only of elemental desire but of the very fabric of civilization – and for Tennyson the warrant of an overarching progress of humankind toward higher forms of being.