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## Early Criticism of the Victorian Novel from James Oliphant to David Cecil

*James Oliphant – George Saintsbury – E. M. Forster – David Cecil*

Criticism of the Victorian novel in the last decades of the twentieth century was unimarginably different from the critical practices of its first years. In form, consideration of literature's relationship with history, understanding of the canon, conception of the authority of the literary critic, in principles of evaluation, and perception of what characterized the Victorian period, early twentieth-century critics spoke a language different from today. Seeing the Victorian novel now though their eyes requires a strenuous task of imaginative sympathy. But, none the less, readers need to know their most important characteristics because the late twentieth-century understanding of Victorian fiction grew through negotiations and challenges to their critical assumptions. Many writers discussed in this book were arguing with their grandparents. This chapter discusses the criticism of the most significant of early twentieth-century writers on the Victorian novel, including E. M. Forster and *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). Forster, though he did not focus on the Victorian period, assumed universalist truths about fiction that provided the context for much debate about the Victorian novel and history in the later twentieth century.

I begin by considering the first writers on Victorian fiction at the beginning of the 1900s. The context for their criticism, the low status of the novel, the cultural anxieties about popular fiction, and the slowness of the universities to consider Victorian fiction as an appropriate subject in a degree in English Literature are outlined. I then discuss the importance of canon formation for the early critics and examine the principles of literary history and the literary survey with its prioritization of 'appreciation' and the idea of tradition. Forster's *Aspects* repudiated the historical assumptions of the survey and resisted the form of authority assumed by its authors; this, and Forster's consequential

OUTLINE  
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convictions about the novel and history are examined. Bloomsbury and Modernism in the 1920s urged a rejection of the Victorian, and the next major critic of Victorian fiction, David Cecil, wrote in a climate unsympathetic to the nineteenth century. I conclude by considering Cecil's evaluative approach to fiction before George Eliot, his views on historicization, and his provocative conclusions about the imperfect form of early Victorian novels.

THE STATE OF  
THE NOVEL IN  
1900

Looking around him in 1899, James Oliphant thought the British regard for art was low. 'There is very little idea in this country as yet', he said, 'that the pursuit of art in any form, unless as a means of livelihood, may be a serious occupation of one's time.'<sup>1</sup> Just before the beginning of a new century, it was a gloomy diagnosis of the nation's artistic health. One of the forms of art whose practitioners were most liable to criticism, Oliphant continued, was the novel, the literary genre that had developed and expanded most during the preceding period. It is, he said solemnly, 'depressed even below the other arts in the public esteem'.<sup>2</sup> Attending concerts or visiting art galleries was respectable enough; poetry was acceptable as far as any literary art was. But reading a novel shared with theatre-going the same response from the pragmatic and level-headed British public: it incurred 'the suspicion of levity'.<sup>3</sup> Prestigious journals agreed. The *Saturday Review* remarked in 1887 that the novel was certainly not for the serious-minded. All a reader of fiction requires, it declared, is 'that he may be amused and interested without taxing his own brains'.<sup>4</sup>

Reading novels had been regarded as a suspect or dispensable activity since the genre began. James Oliphant was not describing a phenomenon unique to the end of the nineteenth century, although controversies over the literature of the Aesthetic Movement and the decadence of the *fin de siècle* gave additional impetus to those concerned about the healthiness of pursuing art, in Oliphant's words, as a 'serious occupation of one's time'. This state of fiction was an issue with which late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century literary critics of the Victorian novel had to negotiate. Accordingly, they defended the claims of the novel for serious readers before they discussed the texts. Their writing exuded awareness of the contested ground on which they were treading. Oliphant called the first chapter of his *Victorian Novelists* (1899) 'The Novel as an Art-form', and he assumed this would be a polemical statement. The novel, he said, making as modest a claim as he could, was unable to compete with the highest of the arts, music, which was the 'most ethereal of all', for it did not have the same spiritual power: it struck no 'mysterious chords in the soul'.<sup>5</sup> But it did have a wider if less profound role to play as literature of realism. It was the form of art that could 'reflect the significant elements of life with peculiar fullness and fidelity', and it was the genre addressed most amply to our daily experience: it corresponded with our

knowledge of life as we lived it, speaking 'a universal language [...] because it rest[ed] on a basis of experience which is in some degree common to all'.<sup>6</sup>

The notion that the novel expressed a universal language and spoke of and to the human condition was a tenacious one in the history of novel criticism in the twentieth century, not least because of E. M. Forster's critical work, discussed below (pp. 29–31). It remained a force with which critics engaged in complex ways for years, and this *Guide* illustrates the querying, unpacking and multiple dissolution of the assumption that the novel spoke with peculiar authority about the human condition, to and on behalf of a generalized human subject. In this, the history of the criticism of the Victorian novel shares in the broader narrative of the history of English literary criticism over the past one hundred years, with its movement away from universalist postures. But it does so with a special force because the Victorian realist novel was constructed for a long time in English criticism as *the* universalist genre of the modern period, the form that most amply illustrated what human life was like.

Early in the twentieth century, some who were positive about the nature of the novel thought that it could even take the place of religion in teaching men and women about life. Ramsden Balmforth said this in his moralizing study *The Ethical and Religious Values of the Novel* (1912), when he argued, transforming a claim made for poetry by Matthew Arnold, that:

It is the function of the novelist, by the portrayal of a multitude of experiences working on character or personality, to give definite shape and direction to [human beings'] blind and almost unconscious emotional forces, to widen and deepen feeling, to link us to the large life of humanity and of the universe, and so give a definite meaning and purpose to our life.<sup>7</sup>

Fiction at its best was a discourse of general humanity and acted like a religion in instructing readers about their proper development, making them aware of the condition of humanity at large.<sup>8</sup>

But Balmforth's confidence in fiction was not common among critics at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. Part of the problem for those doubtful of the merits of fiction was the large number of novels on the market that did not seem to have any literary value. For the art and social critic, John Ruskin, in his only work of literary criticism, *Fiction, Fair and Foul* (1880–1), the content of most modern novels was so unwholesome that he thought they must be woven out of cobwebs.<sup>9</sup> Others felt the same about the popular fiction that many ordinary men and women were reading with relish. William Watson, speaking of H. Rider Haggard's fiction, declared in 1888 that it was incredible that so many readers could be found to read such rubbish. How could they, he asked, intemperately, but with a real concern about the moral health of the population, 'besot themselves with a

thick, raw concoction, destitute of fragrance, destitute of sparkle, destitute of everything but the power to induce a crude inebriety of mind and a morbid state of the intellectual peptics[?]<sup>10</sup> Other intellectuals greeted the expanding market for popular fiction with dismay. Arthur Quiller-Couch, in his inaugural lecture as King Edward VII Professor of English Literature at Cambridge University in January 1913, looked on the popular novel's rise to prominence as a regrettable cultural problem, admitting reluctantly that it was now the favoured reading matter of ordinary men and women and that intellectuals had to accept this 'whether [they] like it or not'.<sup>11</sup>

UNIVERSITY  
STUDY OF  
VICTORIAN  
LITERATURE

Rarely accepted into the fold of good literature as the nineteenth century became the twentieth, the novel was in an uncertain state. Correspondingly, in the academy, the nineteenth-century novel took some time to become a subject for formal study, a topic for examination for any part of an undergraduate degree in the new university discipline of English Literature. So, although critics, a number of them based in university English departments, were writing on the Victorian novel in the first years of the new century, the university curriculum did not to reflect this. The Victorian novel was not a component of a twentieth-century degree course in English at the ancient universities until well into the second decade. The Oxford University Faculty of English, founded in 1895, set terms for many subsequent assumptions in the teaching of English Literature. It stopped on its English Literature syllabus at Sir Walter Scott until after the beginning of the Great War.<sup>12</sup> Walter Raleigh, the first Oxford Professor of English Literature, published a book on *The English Novel* in 1894 before he took up the Oxford chair. But its coverage appropriately coincided with the first range of the Oxford course, as its subtitle indicated: *A Short Sketch of its History from the Earliest Times to the Appearance of [Sir Walter Scott's] 'Waverley'*. Oxford University introduced the formal study of the Victorian period (joined with the Romantic period in a paper called the 'History of English Literature, 1784–1901') only in the academic year 1915–16 (and it was later abolished). And in that course, which aimed to cover two major periods of literary creativity in a single paper, the Victorian novel did not feature prominently.

On the examination paper of 1916 for the 1784–1901 period, there was only one question specifically on a novelist ('Examine the attempt of Dickens to employ the novel as an instrument for effecting social reform'), and one other that could have been answered with material on fiction ('To what extent has the development of science influenced English nineteenth-century literature?').<sup>13</sup> The special paper corresponding to the Victorian part of the period, 'Tennyson and Browning', was on poetry. With regards to generic specialization in the period, verse was clearly being declared the prestigious form of nineteenth-century English letters by the architects of the first curriculum at Oxford.

Criticism of the Victorian novel was being written, nevertheless. Not everyone stopped where Walter Raleigh stopped, and James Oliphant was not a solitary pioneer, though an important one. By the time the Victorian novel made it on to the examination papers of the Oxford Faculty of English Language and Literature, there was a growing corpus of criticism. The word 'criticism', however, is problematic, for its meaning in 1910 was different from today. In fact, the criticism of the first few years of the century did not call itself such, using the title literary history (as in the Oxford University examination paper). This was not a practice of critical writing that proposed interpretation, nor, *a fortiori*, introduced new perspectives on fiction and fresh ways of looking at texts. It was not based on research that recovered lost contexts or offered new material that changed readers' understanding. It was criticism that assumed that the meaning of the novels was clear and it was predicated, at this level, on consensus. Literary history, assuming familiarity with the primary texts, surveyed instead how novelists related to each other topically, generically and stylistically, and encouraged literary appreciation.

There was an encyclopaedic dimension to these books on the Victorian novel. Leslie Stephen's *Dictionary of National Biography* (1882–1900) aimed to include entries on all the great men and women of British history. It was a panoramic survey of British history and national character, a kind of textual version of a similar project in British commemoration, the National Portrait Gallery, founded in 1856. This desire to embrace the fullness of achievement, to offer the reader an overview of literary history, was true of the first critics of the Victorian novel as they surveyed the range of British novelists they believed worthy of inclusion, writers whom they took to be valuable. Like other critics in the early part of the twentieth century, indeed, they were engaged in canon formation, in selecting, on grounds of quality, worthwhile authors for the general reader.

### **The Survey: George Saintsbury (1845–1933)**

The major figure of English literary history to write on the Victorian novel was George Saintsbury. His work exemplified the elements outlined above and included other important features of early twentieth-century critical practice. Saintsbury began his professional life as a schoolteacher in Guernsey. After a period as a journalist in London, he became, with an ease of migration between professions more readily accomplished then than now, Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature at the University of Edinburgh, where he remained for some twenty years. He wrote prolifically, and his publications included *A History of Nineteenth Century Literature, 1780–1895* (1896) and *The English Novel* (1913). These were long appreciations and essays in

historical placing. Their guiding motto was breadth over depth, a general culture over a specialist learning.

In the chapters on the Victorian novel in *The English Novel*, Saintsbury offered an account of the literary traditions that connected the nineteenth-century novelists, and brisk, evaluative summaries of the characteristics of each writer in a panoramic overview of a period marked by 'a very remarkable wind of refreshment and new endeavour' (he did not explain at length what he saw as the cause of this).<sup>14</sup> He did not dwell on specific novels, and barely quoted at all (the New Criticism with its emphasis on close textual reading eclipsed Saintsbury's method in the mid-century). His manner was patrician, writing with the confidence of a man assured that his readers would accept his judgement. He assumed that the typical member of his audience was the interested, non-specialist reader seeking guidance from an authoritative figure. He wrote accessibly and the language of his literary history, like most criticism of the first half of the century, eschewed the complexities of conceptualization, terminology and syntax that Samuel Taylor Coleridge had memorably introduced into literary criticism with *Biographia Literaria* (1817) and which became a prominent and sometimes intrusive feature of later twentieth-century critical debate.

THE  
APPROACH OF  
GEORGE  
SAINTSBURY

Saintsbury's approach to the Victorian novel was to defuse its political or social force (see also Cecil, below, pp. 32–3): he was not interested in the novel of ideas and he did not consider that Victorian novels intervened in contemporary debates in and about society. The novel, he said in 1887, 'has nothing to do with any beliefs, with any convictions, with any thoughts in the strict sense, except as mere garnishings. Its substance must always be life.'<sup>15</sup> By this he meant that readers should approach fiction as if it were descriptive of universalized personal experience but did not relate to local historical or political circumstances. Saintsbury read Victorian fiction as separate from more or less all contexts except literary tradition and as a genre that described 'life' recognizable to all right-feeling readers.

Saintsbury was also concerned with canon formation, telling his readers what Victorian fiction was the best. His canon was based on quality judgement and his criticism was highly evaluative (in the extract given below, *Vanity Fair* is a 'supreme work', *Pendennis* a work of 'genius', Lever's *Charles O'Malley* is 'a distinctly delectable composition'). And a persistent feature of this critical practice was assertion over argument. If Saintsbury's work was predicated on a consensus about the meaning of the novels – everyone knows what they mean, or will when they have read them – it was also consensual in its assumption that readers would share Saintsbury's value judgements. Or, certainly, that they would accept his statements without needing explanation because of a general acknowledgement of his authority as a professional critic to make such judgements. Saintsbury was confident in the public role of the university

intellectual as an arbiter of aesthetic taste. As far as knowledge was concerned, however, there were problems. Saintsbury did not always provide factually reliable information (this is evident in the extract that follows), and reviewers of his books thought that this undid part of his claim to authority as a trustworthy guide.<sup>16</sup>

The major factor controlling Saintsbury's depiction of the terrain of Victorian fiction in the following extract is the identification of literary connections, descendencies and influences in the relations between novels and novelists. Saintsbury offered a map of literary history that privileged, in an aristocratic manner, the notion of inheritance, the idea of traditions and influences, and proposed how different nineteenth-century novelists – major and minor – related to each other generically. In this extract, the influence of Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott, exponents of the domestic novel and the romance respectively, help Saintsbury organize his history. He sees the work of the Brontë sisters as the product of a cross between the traditions of Austen and Scott, and imagines Charlotte Brontë's writing in terms of her (formulaically expressed) relation to Thackeray and Dickens. Thackeray is placed in another tradition, with his roots in the eighteenth century. *Pendennis* is neither a 'press' novel about journalism nor a university novel, but a distinctive combination of both, a creative handling of traditional elements in a new form. Thackeray's mixture of domestic incident and drama (exemplified in *Vanity Fair*) strikes Saintsbury as the chief element of yet another generic strand of Victorian fiction: a tradition of novels that aspired to the 'domestic-dramatic' fusion. Networks of influences, links between forms of writing, are privileged in Saintsbury's depiction of Victorian novels, emphasizing that the most significant influence on the shape of Victorian fiction was fiction itself. The idea of a tradition became the central element, though differently understood, in F. R. Leavis's mapping of the history of the Victorian novel (see pp. 46–64 for Leavis and tradition; for a feminist approach, see pp. 187–8).

**Extract from George Saintsbury, *The English Novel* (London: Dent, 1913), 237–44.**

At about the very middle of the nineteenth century – say from 1845 to 1855 in each direction, but almost increasingly towards the actual dividing line of 1850 – there came upon the English novel a very remarkable wind of refreshment and new endeavour. Thackeray and Dickens themselves are examples of it, with Lever and others, before this dividing line: many others yet come to join them. A list of books written out just as they

occur to the memory, and without any attempt to marshal them in strict chronological order, would show this beyond all reasonable possibility of gainsaying. Thackeray's own best accomplished work from *Vanity Fair* (1846)<sup>1</sup> itself through *Pendennis* (1849)<sup>2</sup> and *Esmond* (1852) to *The Newcomes* (1854);<sup>3</sup> the brilliant centre of Dickens's work in *David Copperfield* (1850)<sup>4</sup> – stand at the head and have been already noticed by anticipation or implication, while Lever had almost completed the first division of his work, which began with *Harry Lorrequer* as early as the year of *Pickwick*. But such books as *Yeast* (1848), *Westward Ho!* (1855); as *The Warden* (1855); as *Jane Eyre* (1847) and its too few successors; as *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857); as *Mary Barton* (1848) and the novels which followed it, with others which it is perhaps almost unfair to leave out even in this allusive summary by sample, betokened a stirring of the waters, a rattling among the bones, such as is not common in literature. Death removed Thackeray early and Dickens somewhat less prematurely, but after a period rather barren in direct novel work. The others continued and were constantly reinforced: nor was it till well on in the seventies that any distinct drop from first- to second-growth quality could be observed in the general vintage of English fiction.

One is not quite driven, on this occasion, to the pusillanimous explanation that this remarkable variety and number of good novels was simply due to the simultaneous existence of an equally remarkable number of good novelists. The fact is that, by this time, the great example of Scott and Miss Austen – the great wave of progress which exemplified itself first and most eminently in these two writers – had had time to work upon and permeate another generation of practitioners. The novelists who have just been cited were as a rule born in the second decade of the century, just before, about, or after the time at which Scott and Miss Austen began to publish. They had therefore – as their elders, even though they may have had time to read the pair, had not – time to assimilate thoroughly and early the results which that pair had produced or which they had first expressed. And they had even greater advantages than this. They had had time to assimilate, likewise, the results of all the rest of that great literary generation of which Scott and Miss Austen were themselves but members. They profited by thirty years more of constant historical exploration and realising of former days. One need not say, for it is question-begging, that they also *profited* by, but they could at least avail themselves of, the immense change of manners and society which made 1850 differ more from 1800 than 1800 had differed, not merely from 1750 but from 1700. They had, even though all of them may not have been sufficiently grateful for it, the stimulus of that premier position in Europe which the country had



gained in the Napoleonic wars, and which she had not yet wholly lost or even begun to lose. They had wider travel, more extended occupations and interests, many other new things to draw upon. And, lastly, they had some important special incidents and movements – the new arrangement of political parties, the Oxford awakening,<sup>5</sup> and others – to give suggestion and impetus to novels of the specialist kind. Nay, they had not only the great writers, in other kinds, of the immediate past, but those of the present, Carlyle, Tennyson, latterly Ruskin, and others still to complete their education and the machinery of its development.

The most remarkable feature of this *renouveau*,<sup>6</sup> as has been both directly and indirectly observed before, is the resumption, the immense extension, and the extraordinary improvement of the domestic novel. Not that this had not been practised during the thirty years since Miss Austen's death. But the external advantages just enumerated had failed it: and it had enlisted none of the chief talents which were at the service of fiction generally. A little more gift and a good deal more taste might have enabled Mrs Trollope to do really great things in it: but she left them for her son to accomplish. Attempts and 'tries' at it had been made constantly, and the goal had been very nearly reached, especially, perhaps, in that now much forgotten but remarkable *Emilia Wyndham* (1846) by Anne Caldwell (Mrs Marsh), which was wickedly described by a sister novelist as the 'book where the woman breaks her desk open with her head', but which has real power and exercised real influence for no short time.

This new domestic novel followed Miss Austen in that it did not necessarily avail itself of anything but perfectly ordinary life, and relied chiefly on artistic presentment – on treatment rather than on subject. It departed from her in that it admitted a much wider range and variety of subject itself; and by no means excluded the passions and emotions which, though she had not been so prudish as to ignore their results, she had never chosen to represent in much actual exercise, or to make the mainsprings of her books.

The first supreme work of the kind was perhaps in *Vanity Fair* and *Pendennis*, the former admitting exceptional and irregular developments as an integral part of its plot and general appeal, the latter doing for the most part without them. But *Pendennis* exhibited in itself, and taught to other novelists, if not an absolutely new, a hitherto little worked, and clumsily worked, source of novel interest. We have seen how, as early as Head or Kirkman, the possibility of making such a source out of the ways of special trades, professions, employments, and vocations had been partly seen and utilised. Defoe did it more; Smollett more still; and since the great war there had been naval and military novels in abundance, as well as novels political, clerical, sporting, and what not.

But these special interests had been as a rule drawn upon too onesidedly. The eighteenth century found its mistaken fondness for episodes, inset stories, and the like, particularly convenient here: the naval, military, sporting, and other novels of the nineteenth were apt to rely too exclusively on these differences. Such things as the Oxbridge scenes and the journalism scenes of *Pendennis* – both among the most effective and popular, perhaps *the* most effective and popular, parts of the book – were almost, if not entirely, new. There had been before, and have since been, plenty of university novels, and their record has been a record of almost uninterrupted failure; there have since, if not before, *Pendennis* been several ‘press’ novels, and their record has certainly not been a record of unbroken success. But the employment here, by genius, of such subjects for substantial *parts* of a novel was a success pure and unmixed. So, in the earlier book, the same author had shown how the most humdrum incident and the minutest painting of ordinary character could be combined with historic tragedy like that furnished by Waterloo, with domestic *drame* of the most exciting kind like the discovery of Lord Steyne’s relations with Becky, or the at least suggested later crime of that ingenious and rather hardly treated little person.

Most of the writers mentioned and glanced at above took – not of course always, often, or perhaps ever in conscious following of Thackeray, but in consequence of the same ‘skiey influences’ which worked on him – to this mixed domestic-dramatic line. And what is still more interesting, men who had already made their mark for years, in styles quite different, turned to it and adopted it. We have seen this of Bulwer, and the evidences of the change in him which are given by the ‘Caxton’ novels. We have not yet directly dealt with another instance of almost as great interest and distinction, Charles Lever, though we have named him and glanced at his work.

Lever, who was born as early as 1806, had, it has been said, begun to write novels as early as his junior, Dickens, and had at once developed, in *Harry Lorrequer*, a pretty distinct style of his own. This style was a kind of humour-novel with abundant incident, generally with a somewhat ‘promiscuous’ plot and with lively but externally drawn characters – the humours being furnished partly by Lever’s native country, Ireland, and partly by the traditions of the great war of which he had collected a store in his capacity of physician to the Embassy at Brussels. He had kept up this style, the capital example of which is *Charles O’Malley* (1840), with unabated *verve* and with great popular success for a dozen years before 1850. But about that time, or rather earlier, the general ‘suck’ of the current towards a different kind (assisted no doubt by the feeling that the public might be getting tired of the other style) made

him change it into studies of a less specialised kind – of foreign travel, home life, and the like – sketches which, in his later days still, he brought even closer to actuality. It is true that in the long run his popularity has depended, and will probably always depend, on the early ‘rollicking’ adventure books: not only because of their natural appeal, but because there is plenty of the other thing elsewhere, and hardly any of this particular thing anywhere. To almost anybody, for instance, except a very great milksop or a pedant of construction, *Charles O’Malley* with its love-making and its fighting, its horsemanship and its horse-play, its ‘devilled kidneys’\* and its devil-may-care-ness, is a distinctly delectable composition; and if a reasonable interval be allowed between the readings, may be read over and over again, at all times of life, with satisfaction. But the fact of the author’s change remains not the less historically and symptomatically important, in connection with the larger change of which we are now taking notice, and with the similar phenomena observable in the work of Bulwer.

At the same time it has been pointed out that the following of Miss Austen by no means excluded the following of Scott: and that the new development included ‘crosses’ of novel and romance, sometimes of the historical kind, sometimes not, which are of the highest, or all but the highest, interest. Early and good examples of these may be found in the work of the Brontës, Charlotte and Emily (the third sister Anne is but a pale reflection of her elders), and of Charles Kingsley. Charlotte (*b.* 1816) and Charles (*b.* 1819) were separated in their birth by but three years, Emily (*b.* 1818) and Kingsley by but one.

The curious story of the struggles of the Brontë girls to get published hardly concerns us, and Emily’s work, *Wuthering Heights*,<sup>†</sup> is one of those isolated books which, whatever their merit, are rather ornaments than essential parts in novel history. But this is not the case with *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849), *Villette* (1852), and *The Professor* (1857) (but written much earlier). These are all examples of the determination to base novels on actual life and experience. Few novelists have ever kept so close to their own part in these as Charlotte Brontë did, though she accompanied, permeated, and to a certain extent transformed her autobiography and observation by a strong romantic and fantastic imaginative element. Deprive Thackeray and Dickens of nearly all their humour and geniality, take a portion only of the remaining genius of each in the ratio of about 2 *Th.* to 1 *D.*, add a certain dash of the old terror-novel and the

\* Edgar Poe has a perfectly serious and very characteristic explosion at the prominence of these agreeable viands in the book.

† Some will have it that this was really Charlotte’s: but not with much probability.

German fantastic tale, moisten with feminine spirit and water, and mix thoroughly: and you have something very like Charlotte Brontë. But it is necessary to add further, and it is her great glory, the perfume and atmosphere of the Yorkshire moors, which she had in not quite such perfection as her sister Emily, but in combination with more general novel-gift. Her actual course of writing was short, and it could probably in no case have been long; she wanted wider and, perhaps, happier experience, more literature, more man- and-woman-of-the-worldliness, perhaps a sweeter and more genial temper. But the English novel would have been incomplete without her and her sister; they are, as wholes, unlike anybody else, and if they are not exactly great they have the quality of greatness. Above all, they kept novel and romance together – a deed which is great without any qualification or drawback. [...]

## Notes

- 1 Saintsbury's use of dates is to be treated cautiously. I correct a number here as an example. *Vanity Fair's* serialization began in 1847.
- 2 *Pendennis*, 1848–50.
- 3 *The Newcomes*, 1853–5.
- 4 *David Copperfield*, 1849–50.
- 5 The Oxford Movement, begun in 1833, aimed to reconnect the Church of England to its Catholic inheritance. The defection of John Henry Newman to the Roman Catholic church in 1845 dealt the movement a serious blow, but it continued (and continues) to have an influence on the Church of England.
- 6 Renewal.

The survey, with its key aspects of evaluation and the description of traditions, was paralleled in miniature by James Oliphant's book to which I have already referred (he presented a canon consisting of Scott, Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Meredith, Stevenson, Kipling, and Israel Zangwill<sup>17</sup>), and by many others. It was the chief mode of writing on the Victorian novel for some thirty years. The prolific novelist Margaret Oliphant (not related to James) had, with F. R. Oliphant (her son), published a two-volume guide called *The Victorian Age of English Literature* (1892), in which she attempted, while aware of the considerable difficulties, to 'determine the final place in literature of contemporary writers'.<sup>18</sup> Her task was explicitly the construction of a canon of worthwhile authors. William James Dawson, in *The Makers of English Fiction* (1905), inflected his approach to tradition in his survey with Darwinian notions of evolutionary development, seeing novelists linked in an organically developing tradition given conceptual legitimacy by

modern scientific thought. The French critic Louis Cazamian confined his attention to what he called the 'social novel', the *roman social*, in his *Le Roman Social en Angleterre (1830–1850)* (1903). He offered a major review of what are now referred to as social-problem novels, chiefly works by Dickens, Disraeli, Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Kingsley (for more on his criticism of social-problem fiction, see chapter 5, pp. 151–2 below). Cazamian's understanding of the relationship between literary writing and its historical and political context was a significant effort, distinct from Saintsbury's assumptions, to historicize literature as an object for criticism (see also pp. 149–95 below).

The survey mode continued well into the twentieth century. Louis Cazamian joined Pierre Legouis to complete an account of the whole of English literature from the Anglo-Saxon period to modern times, published in two volumes in 1926 and 1927 respectively, and then in a single volume as *A History of English Literature* (1930). It was reprinted in an updated edition (discussing literature up to 1950) as late as 1971. Oliver Elton, Professor of English at the University of Liverpool, published his *A Survey of English Literature 1830–1880* in two volumes in 1920. The survey format reached two peaks in the first part of the twentieth century: in general literature, in the *Cambridge History of English Literature* (15 volumes, 1907–27), and, on the novel specifically, the exhaustive work of Ernest A. Baker, whose *The History of the English Novel* was published in ten volumes between 1924 and 1939.

### Edwin Morgan Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927)

The book that stoutly contested the assumptions of the survey was not exclusively about the Victorian novel. But it had much to say of consequence for the fiction of the nineteenth century. It deserves consideration in this *Guide* because of this, and also because it took Saintsbury's view of the novel further to affirm an ahistorical approach to fiction as a universalist humanist discourse separate from its historical environment. E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* comprised the Clark lectures at the University of Cambridge, January to March 1927, and promoted a conception of fiction as a practice of writing set apart from history, both literary and non-literary. Forster's confident ahistoricity, his belief in literature's timeless values, was a prominent articulation of the principles critiqued by Marxists, feminists, post-structuralists, New Historicists, queer theorists, and postcolonialists in the last four decades of the twentieth century, who argued that literature was always embedded in the ideologies of its culture.

E. M. Forster contested the kind of authority Saintsbury had assumed. Where Saintsbury considered his authority conferred on him by his university position, Edwin Morgan Forster claimed that most men in academic

employment in universities were really 'pseudo-scholars'.<sup>19</sup> These were men who paid the tribute of ignorance to learning, and who were 'pernicious' as literary critics because they 'follow[ed] the method of the true scholar without having his equipment':<sup>20</sup> they catalogued books without having read them. Forster, repositioning the centre of authority in literary criticism, deposed most of the university intellectuals (he allowed for the existence of some real scholars) from the seat of power and made a claim for a different sort of criticism, predicated on common sense and the ordinary affections of the general reader. He approached the novel simply, 'with the human heart [...]'. The final test of a novel will be our affection for it, as it is the test of our friends, and of anything else which we cannot define.<sup>21</sup> He declared criticism's guiding force was nothing more unusual than the right thinking and right feeling human heart, a notion that assumed humanity's common moral identity and collective values. This view of a tension between academic critics and non-academic readers, incidentally, continued to be a theme through the century and reached a polemical climax in a study of Modernist writing by John Carey, both professional literary critic and journalist, entitled *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880-1939* (1992). Ironically enough, this criticized Forster's intellectual elitism.<sup>22</sup>

E. M.  
FORSTER AND  
CRITIQUING  
LITERARY  
HISTORY

Forster, in opposition to literary history, had no patience with criticism that imposed taxonomies, dividing books up into categories, especially categories of chronology. The development hypothesis, moreover, the notion that literature evolved or progressed, was entirely false, he said. Great novelists and great novels always transcended local temporality, the limits of their own culture, and the specifics of their moment in literary history. 'History develops', Forster said, with an aphorism such as those he used as motto truths in his own novels, 'Art stands still':

Time, all the way through, is to be our enemy. We are to visualize the English novelists not as floating down that stream which bears all its sons away unless they are careful, but as seated together in a room, a circular room, a sort of British Museum reading-room – all writing their novels simultaneously. They do not, as they sit there, think: 'I live under Queen Victoria, I under Anne, I carry on the tradition of Trollope, I am reacting against Aldous Huxley'. The fact that their pens are in their hands is far more vivid to them.<sup>23</sup>

Forster's approach to fiction was to extract it from time and to imagine that it lived independently from its circumstances and history, rising above the particular conditions of its own day and its moment in the literary tradition. When great, it expressed values and truths that were immutable. This assurance was increasingly entrenched in the English education system in the 1920s and 1930s. Great literature was presented in educational rhetoric as a crucible of human values, and reading imagined as a civilizing force that could

teach men and women, boys and girls, what it meant to be properly human. A similar conviction – it is usually assumed to have its roots in the work of Matthew Arnold in the middle of the Victorian period – had been officially enshrined in the Newbolt Report on *The Teaching of English in England* (1921), a government document from the Board of Education, published only a few years before Forster's *Aspects* (for more on the civilizing mission of English literary criticism, see pp. 46–50 below).

### Lord David Cecil and *Early Victorian Novelists* (1934)

Where Forster extracted the Victorian novel from history, the next significant figure in the history of the criticism of Victorian literature saw nineteenth-century fiction's connection with its own times as a drawback. When Lord David Cecil delivered his lectures on the Victorian novel, not, like E. M. Forster, to the University of Cambridge, but to the University of Oxford, the intellectual climate was inhospitable to Victorian literature and society. Cecil was fully aware of this disapproval. His lectures, published in 1934 with his intention declared in his subtitle, as *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation*, took as an *a priori* truth the fact that Victorian novels were languishing on shelves, 'sallow with exposure to dust and daylight' (see p. 34 below).

Cecil's view of the state of the Victorian novel and Victorian society was widely held in the 1920s and 1930s. Bloomsbury and the Modernists, encouraging a rejection of the Victorian, heavily influenced this lack of enthusiasm as the *avant garde* writers and theorists of the inter-war years distinguished themselves from their predecessors. Deep though the division between the Modernist and the Victorian was, however, it was never straightforward: Victorian fiction has often suffered from the misleading assumption – promoted by Modernists themselves – that Modernism simply rejected it out of hand and absorbed nothing from the nineteenth century. But the relationship was more complex, and Modernism reconfigured and transformed a substantial part of its Victorian inheritance. As Giovanni Cianci and Peter Nicholls said in 2001, 'while Modernism defines itself in terms of a definitive break with the nineteenth-century past, it habitually reworks and reinvents the legacy from which it recoils.'<sup>24</sup> This more involved relationship is only now beginning to be explored.

But it was true in the 1920s and 1930s that an enthusiasm for Modernist fiction tended to go hand in hand among younger readers with a dislike of the conventions of Victorian fictional prose. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (1863–1944), while Professor of English at Cambridge, considered the situation unfortunate. He told his undergraduate audience in a lecture published in *Studies in Literature: Second Series* (1922) that the Victorian period was

THE  
MODERNIST  
CONSTRUC-  
TION OF  
VICTORIAN  
FICTION

indeed, as many people were saying, one of 'many oddities and certain glaring sins', but it was not therefore to be 'despised'. There should be no 'sneering at the Victorian age', he said: objective and compassionate thinking and reading would uncover literature of stature and substance.<sup>25</sup> Quiller-Couch's acknowledgement that nineteenth-century literature did not suite the taste of the generation who were newly enthusiastic for the writing of the Moderns was identical to Cecil's.

DAVID  
CECIL'S VIEW  
OF VICTORIAN  
NOVELS AND  
CULTURE

Cecil had no doubt that the Victorians were not being read with enjoyment. The fate of the Victorian novel was on a knife edge, he thought, though there was a glimmer of hope for the revival of Victorian literature in a returned enthusiasm for Tennyson. Cecil's lecture course was intended to give an objective evaluation of whether Victorian fiction was worth reading or not. Like Margaret Oliphant, Saintsbury and Forster, Cecil was preoccupied with evaluation (for F. R. Leavis and the principles of evaluation, see pp. 46–63, below). Edward Christian David Gascoyne Cecil (1902–86), whose career as an Oxford academic culminated in his long tenure of the Goldsmith's Chair of English Literature at the university from 1948 to 1969, disseminated ideas about literature and critical practice to generations of English graduates, many of whom continued to transmit versions of them as teachers themselves. Like F. R. Leavis at Cambridge, his evaluative principles permeated widely. More specifically, some of his ideas about the form of early Victorian fiction, its representations of sexuality, its comic nature, lack of political critique, and the evangelical nature of early Victorian society became critical commonplaces. They have been dislodged only with difficulty, and some remain clinging, to the regret of many modern scholars.

Evaluations, predicated on an ahistorical sense of what features were necessary to make a good novel, dominated Cecil's approach. Like Saintsbury, he relied on his position as a university don to give authority to his judgements: his mode privileged assertion over argument, pronouncement over debate. He assumed agreement about his aesthetic claims, so that when he declared Dickens's plots to be bad (see below p. 35) because they lacked organic connections, he took for granted his readers' agreement that organic plots were a *sine qua non* of good fiction through all time. He certainly did not accept the historically contingent nature of taste. When he read 'sentiment' in Dickens, he assumed everyone would agree it must be 'false', and when melodrama, he assumed it 'flashy' (contemporary criticism on the role of melodrama in Dickens's creative imagination is referenced on p. 11 above).

Cecil's manner was neither polemical nor iconoclastic but always urbane and civilized. Literary criticism was envisaged as a pursuit of a refined pleasure, a superior enjoyment. F. R. Leavis would upturn this gentlemanly conception of the critic's task with his belief in the moral importance of literary criticism. And refinement, for Cecil, was socially specific. The books



that he described at the beginning of this lecture were not only situated in space (in a bookcase) but in a classed and gendered space (a gentleman's library). The critic's voice emerged from the male upper classes (literally from the aristocracy)<sup>26</sup> and resonated with a sense of owning the literature, of literature as a possession of the gentleman, and as a subject for discussion in cultured society. Reading English Literature as a university subject was inextricably connected with the preservation of the *status quo*, and its study constructed as a politically conservative activity. Radical or subversive elements of the critic's business were inconceivable.

Although Cecil's aesthetic principles were ahistorical, he did not read Victorian fiction as separate from its culture. He historicized matters of content and authorial attitudes, but only to find grounds for more evaluation. Early Victorian fiction suffered, he claimed, from the fact that the society from which it emerged was evangelical and parochial and that the period was one of sexual repression. This view of the society as Philistine, narrow-minded and sexually repressive still persists in popular conceptions of the period and its fiction (see the Further Reading section for re-evaluations of the relation of the novel to sexuality). Cecil thought that the limits of society restricted even its best novels, arguing that early Victorian novelists were partial in their presentation of human life because silent on matters of sexuality and 'the animal side of human nature'. Cecil's approach to early Victorian fiction was also characterized by the firm belief that fiction before George Eliot could be regarded in general terms as a whole, as 'very definitely one school'. He thought that the early Victorian novel was a taxonomical group in literary history about which generalizations could be made, proposing chiefly that their plots were more or less identical: 'The main outline of their novels is the same.' Early Victorian fiction was characterized by an absence of organic plotting, he said, a lack of formal coherence: 'their books are aggregations of brilliant passages rather than coherent wholes.' The incoherence of the plots of the Victorian novel became a topic of sustained literary debate through the rest of the twentieth century to the present and Cecil's view was radically revised (see pp. 213–29 below for more discussion of the form of Victorian fiction).

**Extract from Lord David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation* (London: Constable, 1934), 3–23.**

They crowd the shelves of every gentleman's library. *Editions de luxe*, heavy with gilding and the best rag paper, standard reprints clothed in

an honourable and linen simplicity, dim behind glass doors, or sallow with exposure to dust and daylight, the serried lines confront one, Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, George Eliot, lawful and undisputed monarchs of literature. At least so they were; else how should they have attained their majestic position on the shelves, rubbing shoulders on equal terms, as it were, with Milton and Gibbon and Boswell's *Life of Johnson*? But no author's reputation is certain for fifty years at least after his death. Will these novelists keep their high place? The experience of the last few years might lead one to doubt it.

For one thing people do not read most of them as they used. As often as not when one tries to open the glass book-case the lock sticks, stiff with disuse. And those that have read them have not all done it in a respectful spirit. The learned and Olympian kind of critic speaks of them less often than of French or Russian novelists; while the bright young people of the literary world, if they mention them at all, do so with boredom and contempt and disgust.

[...] Let us unlock the glass doors and pull down the books and see what they look like.

Well, they do not look at all the same as they used. The first thing that strikes one is that there is no Victorian Novel in the sense of a school with common conventions and traditions conterminous with the reign of Queen Victoria. There is one sort of novel before George Eliot and another after her.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand the earlier sort is not peculiar to the Victorian age. Our grandfathers, naturally enough, were chiefly struck by the differences between their own contemporaries and the writers preceding them. And, of course, there is a large difference in moral point of view and some smaller differences in subject: for every great writer in his turn extended the range of subject matter. But from the literary point of view, the point of view of form, the differences are much less than the likenesses. Between 1750 and 1860 the broad conception of what a novel should be did not change. *Tom Jones*, *Roderick Random*, *Waverley*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, are constructed on the same lines, composed within the same convention.

For, and this is the second feature that strikes us as we turn afresh the dusty pages, up till George Eliot the English novel is very definitely one school. Not a conscious school, with consciously common style and subject matter, like the fifteenth-century Italian painters, or the Elizabethan lyrical poets. The novel, the expression of the individual's view of the world, is always predominantly individualistic: the English, the wilful, eccentric, self-confident English, are the most individualistic of mankind: and the nineteenth century is the most individualistic of periods. *Laissez faire*<sup>2</sup> ruled the roost as triumphantly in the realm of art

as in those of economics. No generalisation that one makes about these writers will be equally true of all. But of all, except Emily Brontë, certain generalisations are true. The main outline of their novels is the same. Their stories consist of a large variety of character and incident clustering round the figure of a hero, bound together loosely or less loosely by an intrigue and ending with wedding bells. Compared with the French, for instance, or the Russians, they seem an independent national growth with its own conventions, its own idiosyncrasies; strong in the same way, in the same way weak.

And here we come to the third outstanding fact about them. They are an extraordinary mixture of strength and weakness. There is no denying that the greatest English novelists are often downright bad; and in their greatest novels. At any moment and without a word of warning the reader may fall like a stone from a high flight of inspiration into a bog of ineptitude. There is hardly a book of Dickens which is not deformed by false sentiment, flashy melodrama, wooden characters; as often as not the hero is one of them; Thackeray's heroes are not much better; while whole passages of Charlotte Brontë could be incorporated without any effect of incongruity of style or sentiment in any penny novelette about pure maidens and purple passions.

Their faults of form are as bad as the faults of matter. It is very rare for a Victorian novelist before George Eliot to conceive the story as an organic whole of which every incident and character forms a contributory and integral part. Dickens chooses a conventional plot, generally a highly unlikely one, and then crams it as by physical violence on to a setting and character with which it has no organic connection; so that the main interest of the book lies in characters and scenes irrelevant to the story. In *Shirley* Charlotte Brontë suddenly changes the centre of the interest from Caroline to Shirley herself, half-way through the book. Thackeray had more idea of maintaining unity of interest; but his grasp on the development of the plot is very slack; in *Pendennis* and *The Newcomes* it drifts along in a succession of episodes to be cut short or extended as the author's caprice dictates. And both he and Trollope think nothing of having two or three plots devoid of any essential connection, flowing on in happy parallel independence at the same time.

But over and above the actual faults of these books one is struck by their limitations. They miss out so much of life, and so much of the important parts of it. They avoid – have we not heard it from the infuriated lips of a hundred earnest young students – any detailed treatment of the animal side of human nature. To those whose austere task it is to study the masterpieces of contemporary fiction this may seem a recommendation: and it is true that aesthetically it is not nearly

so disastrous an inhibition as that which modern novelists seem to feel against the pathetic and heroic emotions. But a picture of human life which gives us hardly anything of its primary passion, or of those classes and types of people whose chief concern it is, must be a scrappy affair. The male novelists – the women seem more robust about emotion – shrink from passion even in its respectable manifestations. It is often a major motive in their plots as it has been in all plots since stories first began; but they pat the beast gingerly with fingers protected by a thick glove of sentimental reverence, and then hastily pass on.

But sex is not the only important omission from their books. We find little about the broader, more impersonal objects that occupy mankind; his relation to thought, to art, to public affairs. And though Dickens and Thackeray like to sprinkle their emotional scenes with a few drops of undenominational piety, to play a little soft music on the organ, as it were, to give solemnity to a death-bed, religion is never the chief preoccupation of their characters as it is that of Alyosha Karamazov.<sup>3</sup> This limitation of subject matter limits in its turn their range of characters. Their most successful creations, Mr Micawber, Becky Sharp, Mrs Proudie, Madam Beck, are all what actors call ‘character parts’, marked individual types whose interest lies in their comic or picturesque idiosyncrasy of speech and manner rather than in their relation to any general problems or interests of human nature. They are of the family of the Aguecheeks and Dame Quickly; there are no Hamlets among them; no intellectuals, statesmen, or artists. For those deeper issues of human life which are the main interests of such characters do not form any part of the Victorian subject matter.

And as a result they hardly ever stir those profounder feelings to which the very greatest art appeals. The great Russians were to make the novel rouse the same emotions as tragedy or epic. Except for Emily Brontë, the Victorian novelists did not. And her emotional quality, for all its splendour, is too remote from the normal experience of mankind to bring her into the circle of great tragedians. Anna Karenina is a tragic figure as Othello is a tragic figure; Heathcliff is rather the demon lover of a border ballad.

And yet in spite of all these sins of omission and commission, to re-read these books is not to be disappointed. For their defects are more than counterbalanced by their extraordinary merits, merits all the more dazzling to us from the fact that they are so noticeably absent from the novels of our contemporaries. Apart from anything else, they tell the story so well. And though this may not be the highest merit of the novelist, it is, in some sort, the first: for it satisfies the primary object for which novels were first written. Mankind, like a child, wanted to be told a story. It is

noticeable that people still give Dickens and Thackeray to children; and this is not, as some critics seem to suggest, because they are infantile, but because they make the story immediately and easily interesting. Improbable though the plot may be, it keeps one on tenterhooks so that one cannot put down the book at the end of a chapter, but must look over the next leaf to see what is going to happen. The most ardent admirer has never turned the next leaf of *Ulysses*<sup>4</sup> in order to see what was going to happen. Nor, even from a higher point of view, is the power to tell a story unimportant. For unless his interest is thoroughly engaged, how can a reader warm to that heightened, softened, acceptant condition of mind in which alone he is receptive of aesthetic impression? We turn once more to *Ulysses*, and repeat, how indeed!

And though from one aspect these novelists' range is limited, from another it is very large; much larger than that of most writers to-day. *Vanity Fair*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, are not, like most modern novels, concentrated wholly on the fortunes of that handful of individuals who are its chief characters: they are also panoramas of whole societies. Now, as we read their pages, we are rubbing shoulders with kings and statesmen at Waterloo or Brussels, now huddling in an emigrant ship across the Atlantic, listening now to sharpers exchanging their plans across the sordid table of a gin palace, to schoolboys stridently teasing, to the genteel malice of a provincial drawing-room, to footmen relaxing over their beer; now we share the murmured confidences of two girls as the candle burns blue on the dressing-table and the ball-dress rustles from smooth shoulders to the floor. A hundred different types and classes, persons and nationalities, jostle each other across the shadow screen of our imagination. The Victorian novelists may miss the heights and depths, but they cast their net very wide. [ . . . ]

Now the great Victorian novels are all pictures. Sometimes they are fanciful and romantic, connected with reality only by a frail thread: more often they, too, stick close to the facts of actual existence. But these facts are never merely reproduced, they are always fired and coloured by a new and electric individuality. The act of creation is always performed. A street in London described by Dickens is very like a street in London; but it is still more like a street in Dickens. For Dickens has used the real world to create his own world, to add a country to the geography of the imagination. And so have Trollope and Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë and the rest of them. To read a paragraph of any of their books is to feel blowing into one's mental lungs unmistakably and invigoratingly a new and living air, the air of Dickensland, Thackerayland, Brontëland. For these authors possess in a supreme degree the quality of creative imagination.

It shows itself in the setting of their stories. Each has his characteristic, unforgettable scenery: Dickens' London, hazed with fog, livid with gaslight, with its shabby, clamorous, cheerful streets, its cosy and its squalid interiors, its stagnant waterside: and the different London of Thackeray: the west end of London on a summer afternoon, with its clubs and parks and pot-houses, mellow, modish and a little dusty, full of bustle and idleness: and Mrs Gaskell's countryside, so pastoral and sequestered and domesticated: and the elemental moorland of the Brontës.

It shows itself in their actual conception of incident. Mr Lockwood's first haunted night in the little room in *Wuthering Heights*, Lucy Snowe's drugged roaming through midnight Villette, garish with carnival, Bill Sykes, trapped in that sordid island by the river, Esmond come home after ten years' absence to the cathedral where Lady Castlewood's face gleams pale in the candlelight and the handful of worshippers mutter the weekly evensong: these stir the heart and stick in the memory, not because they are especially true to life, nor because of the characters – the picture remains in our minds when the very names involved in it are long forgotten – but because in themselves they are dramatic and picturesque. As a picture is an 'invention' of line and colour, so are these, brilliant 'inventions' of scene and action.

Imagination shows itself still more in their humour. Indeed the very fact that they have humour shows that they are creative; for humour is not a record of facts but a comment on them. To make a joke of something means, by definition, to make something new of it; not just to leave it where it is. The masterpieces of contemporary fiction, one may note, have little humour: there are few jokes in *Sons and Lovers*, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. But in *Vanity Fair* and *David Copperfield* and *Barchester Towers* there are hundreds. All the great Victorian novelists are humorists. And humorists each in a style of his own. Mr Micawber, Captain Costigan, Mrs Proudie, Miss Matty Jenkins, Paul Emanuel, are all comic in different ways.

But, of course, the most important expression of the creative imagination lies in the most important part of any novel, in the characters. The Victorians are all able to make their characters live. They do not always do it, they are as unequal about this as they are about everything else. And even when they do the result is often, from the realist's point of view, preposterous. What real human being ever acted like Mr Rochester or talked like Mr F.'s aunt? But Mr Rochester and Mr F.'s aunt are none the less alive for that. We should recognise them if they came into the room, we could imagine how they would behave if we were not there to see; their words and gestures and tricks of speech are their own

and no one else's. Nor are the normal average characters, Johnny Eames or Molly Gibson, less individual. They are not types. If they do something characteristic one's first feeling is not 'How like a girl, how like a young man!' but 'How like Molly Gibson, how like Johnny Eames!' Within the limits the Victorians' range of character might seem inexhaustible. Their books linger in the memory, not as stories or theses, but as crowds; crowds of breathing, crying, laughing, living people. As long as they live, the books that house them will never die.

This extraordinary mixture of strength and weakness, then, is the second startling characteristic of the English novel. It is the striking characteristic of most English literature. The Elizabethan dramatists, the Caroline lyric poets, are as sensationally bad at one time as they are sensationally good at another. But in the Victorian novel a natural predisposition was intensified by two circumstances. For one thing the form was so new. We have seen that the broad conception of the novel form held by Dickens and Thackeray was still the same as that held by Fielding and Smollett, the creators of the novel; so that the Victorian novel is still the novel in its first stage. Nor had it yet achieved its present lofty position in the hierarchy of letters. [...]

[The Victorians] were remarkable people – how else indeed could they have done what they did? – with their insatiable appetite for life, their huge capacity for laughter and tears, their passionate conviction on every subject under heaven, full of inspiration and enterprise and eccentricity and determination. At the same time they were conceited, didactic and obstinate. And, like all people who have had to make their own way in the world, they had no traditions of taste and thought and conduct; if their achievements were sometimes cosmic, their outlook was often parochial. They were not men of the world; they did not value the things of the mind for themselves: they were the great English Philistines. Nor were they broadened by the fact that the predominant religious temper of their day was set by the narrow creed and relentless morality of the Evangelicals.

These circumstances inevitably accentuated any tendency to inequality in the novel. Because it was in its first stage, it was bound to be technically faulty. It had not yet evolved its own laws; it was still bound to the conventions of the comic stage and heroic romance from which it took its origin, with their artificial intrigues and stock situations and forced happy endings. Because it was looked on as light reading its readers did not expect a high standard of craft, nor mind if it had occasional lapses; especially as they themselves had no traditions of taste by which to estimate it. On the other hand they strongly objected to spending their hours of light reading on themes that were distressing

or an intellectual strain. They did not read a novel for the same reason that they read *Hamlet*, they did not want it to be like *Hamlet*. While their moral views made any frank or detailed treatment of the physical side of life simply and finally impossible.

It is to be noted that here the Victorians show a definite decline from earlier novelists. The growing strength of the middle classes made them less cultivated and more puritanical than their predecessors. Technically, for instance, Scott is as defective as any of them, but he looked at life from the standpoint of a far more civilised tradition. He understands a man of another period like Dryden as triumphantly as Thackeray fails to understand a man of another period like Swift; he can write on France with the educated appreciation of a man of the world, while Dickens writes on Italy with the disapproving self-complacency of a provincial schoolmaster. And though Scott was a man of orthodox moral views, with a strong natural distaste to speaking of what he felt to be indelicate, if he has to, he does it straightforwardly and without fuss. Effie Deans<sup>5</sup> lapse from virtue is referred to without any of that atmosphere of drawing the blinds and lowering the voice and getting out the pocket-handkerchief, in which Dickens has seen fit to enshroud the similar fate of little Em'ly. Moreover, Effie is ultimately permitted to marry a baronet and live out the remainder of her life in comparative peace; while poor Em'ly is shipped off to Australia to spend her remaining days there, single and in low spirits. For a crime so heinous as hers, poetic justice could with decency demand no lesser punishment.

But if the peculiar circumstances of their age encouraged the Victorians' peculiar faults, they are equally responsible for most of their peculiar merits. It was because the novelist had to entertain that he learnt to tell the story so well. If it did not engage the reader's attention he would not trouble to finish it; and because he had to entertain, not a literary coterie but the general reading public, the novelist learnt to cover a wide range of subject and mood; a range further extended by the fact that the public, though not seriously interested in art, were seriously interested in life and held strongly moral views about it. He had to be Mr Galsworthy, Mr Huxley, Mrs Woolf, Mrs Christie and Mr Wodehouse in one, for his readers would not have been satisfied with so narrow a field of experience as each of these authors separately appeals to. [...]

What, then, is our final impression of these novels? We have opened the glass book-cases and dragged the books down and read them. Shall we return them to their honourable places, tested and worthy peers of Milton and Boswell; are they the undisputed masterpieces of fiction that their contemporaries thought them? Not altogether. I have com-



pared them to the Elizabethan drama.\* And with intention. For they have a great deal in common; each the first, irresistible outcome of a new and major channel of literary expression, vital and imaginative in the highest degree, but inevitably stained by immaturity and inefficiency and ignorance. So that with a few wonderful exceptions, *Vanity Fair* and *Wuthering Heights*, their books are aggregations of brilliant passages rather than coherent wholes. And for this reason they are not among the very greatest novels, they do not attain that minute, final circle of the paradise of fiction, the circle of *War and Peace* and *Fathers and Children* and *Emma*.<sup>6</sup>

But though they are not the very greatest, they are great. For their merits are of so superlative a kind, forged in the central heat of the creative imagination, rich in the essential precious stuff from which the art of the novel is made. Here again they are like the Elizabethans; and to be truly appreciated must be approached in the same spirit. One must make up one's mind to their imperfections; to condemn them for improbable plots or conventional endings is as foolish as to condemn *Dr Faustus* or *The Duchess of Malfi*<sup>7</sup> for the same reason. On the other hand one must accustom one's eye to discern and concentrate on their splendid merits. [...]

## Notes

- 1 For a criticism of this assumption, see p. 50 below.
- 2 *Laisser faire* = non-intervention.
- 3 In Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).
- 4 James Joyce's *Ulysses* was serialized from 1918, and published as a book in 1922.
- 5 A character in Sir Walter Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818)
- 6 Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (1863–9); Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons* (1862); Jane Austen, *Emma* (1816).
- 7 Christopher Marlowe, *Dr Faustus* (1604); John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623).

## Chapter Notes

- 1 James Oliphant, *Victorian Novelists* (London: Blackie, 1899), [1].
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.

\* Of course, I do not mean Shakespeare; alas, the nineteenth century produced no supreme genius to organise the splendid chaos of the novel into a richer order.

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- 4 Quoted in Kate Flint, 'The Victorian Novel and its Readers', in Deirdre David, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 20.
- 5 Oliphant, *Victorian Novelists*, 5.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ramsden Balmforth, *The Ethical and Religious Value of the Novel* (London: Allen, 1912), xi–xii. Balmforth's principal subjects are Eliot, Eliza Lynn Linton, Dickens, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Mrs Humphry Ward.
- 8 Leslie Stephen had given the argument about the novel's universal appeal and scope in a lecture in 1880. His view was already a familiar one, and would become more so in the next few decades. The novelist, he said, 'tries to show us, as clearly as his powers allow, the real moving forces in the great tragic-comedy of human life'; John Charles Olmsted, ed., *A Victorian Art of Fiction: Essays on the Novel in British Periodicals 1870–1900* (New York: Garland, 1979), iii. 172.
- 9 *The Library Edition of the Complete Works of John Ruskin*, eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: Allen, 1903–12), xxxiv. 284.
- 10 Olmsted, *Victorian Art of Fiction*, iii. 461.
- 11 Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, *On the Art of Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 15.
- 12 It was not possible to take a degree in English alone at the University of Cambridge until 1926.
- 13 Quoted from the Oxford University examination paper in English Language and Literature, 1916.
- 14 See extract from Saintsbury, *The English Novel* on p. 23 of this *Guide*.
- 15 Olmsted, *Victorian Art of Fiction*, iii. 397.
- 16 Consider, for instance, the response of the *Saturday Review* to Saintsbury's *A History of Nineteenth Century Literature, 1780–1895* (1896). The reviewer remarked that it contained much that 'is offensive' (p. 423) and that it was full of errors. 'There is scarcely a chapter in it', the reviewer declared, 'which does not teem with blunders and misrepresentations, some having their origin in simple carelessness, many indicating that Professor Saintsbury is very imperfectly equipped in point of information for the task he has undertaken'; *Saturday Review*, 81 (1896), 424.
- 17 Israel Zangwill (1864–1926) was a writer on Jewish matters whose novel *Children of the Ghetto* (1892) was a searching portrayal of poor Jews in London.
- 18 Mrs [Margaret] Oliphant and F. R. Oliphant, *The Victorian Age of English Literature*, 2 vols (London: Percival, 1892), i. [v].
- 19 E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 28.
- 20 Ibid., 29.
- 21 Ibid., 38.
- 22 See John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880–1939* (London: Faber, 1992), 18–19.
- 23 Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 27.
- 24 Giovanni Cianci and Peter Nicholls, eds, *Ruskin and Modernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), xvii.

- 25 Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, *Studies in Literature: Second Series* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 288.
- 26 See David Cecil, *The Cecils of Hatfield House* (London: Constable, 1973).

## Further Reading

*Discussions of early twentieth-century criticism:*

- Chris Baldick**, *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848–1932* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983): useful, measured critique of the arguments about literary criticism and morals from Arnold to Leavis.
- Franklin E. Court**, *Institutionalizing English Literature: The Culture and Politics of Literary Study, 1750–1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).
- Franklin E. Court**, ‘The Social and Historical Significance of the First English Literature Professorship in England’, *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, 103 (1988): 796–807: about the appointment of Thomas Dale to the first professorship of English Literature at London University and the desire to ‘democratize literature and encourage national literacy by popularising and legitimising the “reading habit”’ this appointment represented.
- Terry Eagleton**, *The Function of Criticism: From The Spectator to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso, 1984): Habermas-influenced Marxist approach to the role of criticism from the eighteenth century onwards during the decline of the ‘public sphere’; chapter 3 considers criticism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
- John Gross**, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters: Aspects of English Literary Life since 1800* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973): treats the belletrists of the nineteenth century rather derogatorily.
- Noel King**, “‘Teacher Must Exist Before the Pupil’: The Newbolt Report on *The Teaching of English in England, 1921*”, *Literature and History*, 13 (1987): 14–37: argues that class is central to the Newbolt Report and that it outlines a means for monitoring the conduct of a life.
- Harold Orel**, *Victorian Literary Critics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984): includes an account of Saintsbury (pp. 151–76) which is mostly summary with little critique; concentrates on Saintsbury’s massive *A History of Criticism* (1901–4).
- D. J. Palmer**, *The Rise of English Studies: An Account of the Study of English Language and Literature from its Origins to the Making of the Oxford English School* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965): includes an historical account of the formation and principles of the Oxford English Faculty and its wider implications for the university teaching of English Literature.
- René Wellek**, *The Rise of English Literary History* (London: McGraw-Hill, [1966]): gives some background to the idea of literary history and comprises a history of English literary history, including Thomas Warton’s *History of English Poetry* (1774–81); Wellek said his book ‘not only satisfy[ies] the instructive desire of men to commemorate the achievements of their predecessors, but [...] help[s] to show by what ways the present vantage-point, or *impasse*, of literary studies has been reached’.

**Peter Widdowson**, *Literature* (London: Routledge, 1999): in The New Critical Idiom Series, includes accessible first chapter (pp. 36–59) covering early twentieth-century definitions of literature and the function of literary criticism.

*Reading practices in the nineteenth century:*

**Richard D. Altick**, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800–1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957): an important account of literacy and reading habits in the period (see p. 264 below for more on Altick).

**Patrick Brantlinger**, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-century British Fiction* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1998): useful if unoriginal survey of anxieties about the novel at the end of the century.

*Books on or by individual critics discussed:*

**Lord David Cecil**, *Hardy the Novelist: An Essay in Criticism* (London: Constable, 1954): another example of Cecil's evaluative approach to a major Victorian novelist.

**Hannah Cranbourne**, ed., *David Cecil: A Portrait* (Wimborne: Dovecote, 1990): affectionate and non-critical account of Cecil by many who knew him; useful for acquiring a sense of Cecil's milieu and his approach as a tutor.

**Dorothy Richardson Jones**, *'King of Critics': George Saintsbury, 1845–1933, Critic, Journalist, Historian, Professor* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992): sympathetic biography of this private man and revealing account of the prevalence of literary history in education between the wars. Jones also asks why students should go back to read Saintsbury: because 'he may help them cultivate appreciation, develop an ear and a sensitivity to feeling and mood. He will give them access to and encourage them to sample the vast range of European literature and its pleasures, especially French.'

*Challenges to Cecil's view of Victorian sexuality:*

**Dennis W. Allen**, *Sexuality in Victorian Fiction* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993): 'This study was generated by some of the implications of Michel Foucault's rejection of the "repressive hypothesis," namely, the notion that the Victorians simply and unilaterally refused to consider the sexual. On the contrary, Foucault argues, the proliferation of scientific and social discourses on sex and sexuality during the Victorian era demonstrates a vast enterprise designed to articulate – in effect to produce – the "truth" of the sexual. Although Foucault argues that we can no longer consider the Victorians as "Victorian," as impossibly prudish in the popular sense of the term, he does not claim that public discourse on sexuality in the nineteenth century was as explicit as in our own time. Foucault's analysis thus radically complicates our understanding of the representation of sex and sexuality in Victorian fiction. Erotically discreet, the Victorian novel nonetheless subtly constructs the sexual. As such, the erotic discretion of Victorian fiction cannot be seen simply as an unproblematic instance of sexual prudery'. Concentrates on *Cranford*, *Bleak House* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

**Michel Foucault**, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990, translation): the nineteenth century saw an explosion in discourses about sexuality.

*Other surveys:*

**G. K. Chesterton**, *The Victorian Age in Literature* (London: Williams and Norgate, n.d.): typically lively effort to determine the characteristics of Victorian fiction, including its humour, and to justify the claim that ‘The novel of the nineteenth century was female.’

**Oliver Elton**, *A Survey of English Literature 1830–1880*, 2 vols (London: Arnold, 1920): another influential and popular survey.

**Frederic Harrison**, *Studies in Early Victorian Literature* (London: Edward Arnold, 1895): Positivist Harrison argues that the defining characteristic of nineteenth-century fiction was ‘the dominant influence of Sociology, – enthusiasm for social truths as an instrument of social reform’. Separate chapters on Disraeli, Thackeray, Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Kingsley, Trollope, and George Eliot.

**Mrs [Margaret] Oliphant and F. R. Oliphant**, *The Victorian Age of English Literature*, 2 vols (London: Percival, 1892): see above, p. 00.

**Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch**, *Charles Dickens and Other Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925): defends the greatness of Dickens though deplores his ‘singular poverty of invention’ [!]; claims a greater status for Trollope than Quiller-Couch’s contemporaries recognized.

**Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch**, *Studies in Literature: Second Series* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922): contains the lecture on “The ‘Victorian Age’”.