

# The Victorian Newsletter

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\*Paper delivered English X Section of MLA, Chicago, 1985.

Cover: Portrait of Robert Louis Stevenson by Percy F. S. Spence  
On the centennial of the publication of  
*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Kidnapped*

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# The Novel as Risk and Compromise, Poetry as Safe Haven: Hardy and the Victorian Reading Public, 1863-1901

William W. Morgan

"Public Opinion is of the nature of a woman."  
(Thomas Hardy's diaries, April 1865)

From the mid-1890's onward to the end of his life, Thomas Hardy took the position that the novels of his own time, perhaps especially the novels from his own pen, had been produced under conditions that made great literary art impossible, conditions that bound the novel to a limited public taste and that forced the writer into complicity with that taste. Poetry, on the other hand, he thought of as standing beyond the reach of the corrupting powers held by the cultural situation in which it was produced, an art form surrounded and protected by a tradition of autonomy, situating its practitioners amidst the constraints and possibilities of a timeless tradition instead of those of crass Victorian culture. Not surprisingly, the process by which those opinions came to be formed is more interesting and instructive than the opinions themselves. The story of Hardy's movement from poetry to the novel and back again is rich with guidance about how to read his work in both genres, since each of his choices about genre-affiliation points both inward to his own emotional needs as man and writer and outward toward his vision of the ideological positions occupied by the novel and poetry in the mid-to-late Victorian period. The decisive moments of change in his genre-loyalties, therefore, are moments when the ineffably personal intersects with the public and historical, moments with the potential to expose and clarify the troubled axis of communication that both connects him to and separates him from the public for whom he writes.

The moments of decision I am talking about, however – his initial choice of poetry in the 1860's, his first (and unsuccessful) entry into fiction in 1867-8, his second move into fiction in the 1870's, his shift towards the novel of high tragedy in the mid-1880's, and his return to poetry in the mid-1890's – usually happen offstage, leaving us with only what preceded and followed them as evidence that they happened at all. We can't know, for example, why Hardy made poetry his first choice in the early 1860's; we can only infer his likely reasons from the poems that followed from that choice. Nor can we know why, in 1867-8, having met with no success in trying to publish his poems, he decided to give the novel a try and wrote *The Poor Man and the Lady*, or why, having got little encouragement for this effort, he set it aside for a fresh start on another kind of novel altogether. And we can't reliably account for either the remarkable difference between the disaffected stance of the early poems (and of *The Poor Man and the Lady*, from all accounts) and the confident self-assertion of the narrators who preside over the novels from *Desperate Remedies* (1871) through *Two on a Tower* (1882) – or the equally remarkable return to alienation as a narrative stance that begins with *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1885) and carries all the way through to *Jude the Obscure* (1896). Hardy's autobiographical *The Life*

and *Work of Thomas Hardy* suggests that these important points of decision mark changes in his sense of the writer's relationship to audience, but their very private, "offstage" character suggests to me that something more is at stake, something perhaps invisible to Hardy himself. My proposal is that the unarticulated fourth term in the *writer-genre-audience* model that Hardy implies is his own sense of gender identity as man. In this view, Hardy's major decisions about genre-affiliation appear as choices not only about relationship to reader but also about relationship to self.

As my epigraph indicates, Hardy's vision of the world outside his own psyche was already sexually divided by 1865; the public world, being "of the nature of a woman" (*LWTH* 50), was to him amorphous but powerful, fickle and dangerous. But there is little evidence to suggest that he saw the novel as tainted by associations with femaleness or novel-writing as "women's work." Instead, he seems to have thought of novelists of either gender as bound to public favor – paying court, as it were, to the fickle public. The position of poet, however, he seems to have associated with traditionally masculine qualities such as learnedness, formal control, and cultural transcendence – in short, with authoritativeness and self-possession. The surviving poems from 1862-7 afford striking evidence of Hardy's intention to associate himself with traditional poetic authority and with a courageous contemporaneity that, instead of courting the public, called them to account. He aligned himself with the great tradition in point of form, producing numbers of fixed-form, strophic poems, especially sonnets, and he made plain his loyalty to Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne, Wordsworth, Keats, and other masters of the forms he had chosen. In point of theme, however, he associated himself with a select group of older contemporaries: Robert Browning, Swinburne, and Meredith – the not-quite-respectable literary "bad-boys" of the period. The result is an extraordinarily multi-vocal body of early poetry, made up of formal and technical exercises (like "Amabel" and a dozen or so sonnets, self-consciously *irregular* in form), painful analyses of the alienated consciousness (like "Neutral Tones"), and sophisticated satires (like "The Ruined Maid") – all of it scrupulously correct and reliably rebellious at once. The core ideas in these poems – social comment, the psychic trauma of their narrators, and indirect commentary on poetic form and poetic tradition – are controlled by the silent voice of Hardy the technician, exercising an almost manic degree of formal control and technical firmness. And such is especially the case in poems featuring narrators groping after some kind of psychic wholeness and certainty – poems like "Hap," "Her Confession," and the "She, to Him" sonnets. Such poems both endorse the human significance of conflicted desire and, in their moves to contain and control it, register their distrust of its power. In their ambiguity, they seem to allow Hardy to entertain feelings of incompleteness while assuring himself that those feelings cannot take over, engulfing

and overwhelming poet and reader alike.

But he could not get them published. In 1866-7 he sent various poems off to magazines, only to have them rejected or ignored, and this first contact with the publishing world clearly angered him: the editors, he later said huffily, "probably did not know good poetry from bad" (LWTH 51). In his early London years, Hardy seems to have concluded that Victorian society was immersed in compromised self-ignorance, and the editors probably stood in his mind as straw figures for the reading public – too stuffy and humorless to appreciate his satires, too timid and unfeeling to accept his analyses of the pain of modern lovers, and too ignorant and conventional to understand his complex verse craftsmanship. His first novel, never published and now lost, seems from the various readers' reactions and Hardy's own description, to have been a transposition of the same themes and stances into fiction – perhaps an effort to bring his vision to the public in *their* favorite form. But Alexander Macmillan, John Morley, and George Meredith – all of whom read the work in manuscript – balked at the novel's tone and advised the young writer to take a different tack.<sup>1</sup> Hardy professed himself surprised to find that "in the opinion of such experienced critics, he had written so aggressive and even dangerous a work . . . almost without knowing it" (LWTH 64) and attributed his naivete to the fact that he had given his attention exclusively to "poetry and other forms of pure literature" (LWTH 64) in the years preceding. The comment seems to suggest that he wrote his first novel as he had written his poetry – under the assumption that artistic expression was an emotional "free zone" in which the most powerful feelings were benign when their force was controlled by art. His advisors, then, confirmed his worst suspicions about the novel and the reading public when they told him, in effect, that novelists had to work within a distinctly public zone already crowded with cultural and political forces, vested interests, and audience expectations. Hardy's decisive, private response seems to have been to re-define fiction as a lower form of literature, unable to bear the weight of feeling and self-revelation he had been accustomed to placing on his poetry. For the rest of his life he seems to have thought of the novel as an art form which demanded deference and compromise, which could not promise aesthetic safety for personal feelings, and which put its writer in a fair way of being trivialized by the public who bought and read his work. Throughout his years as a novelist, he mythologized poetry as the safe haven out of which he had been driven by an ignorant and unfeeling public, and he resented his audience for leaving him with powerful feelings and no good place to put them.

Sometime around 1870, Hardy seems to have made another off-stage, private decision, for when he did begin to make his mark as a novelist – in *Desperate Remedies* (1871), *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), and *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874) – it was with a new strategy. The narrators of his first four published novels, while quite different from one another, all seem to be variations on the least risky of his early poetic voices, that of the sophisticate. Having learned from the reception of *The Poor Man and the*

*Lady* that the public required special handling, Hardy seems to have looked through his repertoire of voices and selected something like the one he had used in "The Ruined Maid" (1866) and "Gallant's Song" (1868) – a sort of men's club voice that relies on *knowingness* to win him a hearing – as the one most nearly appropriate for handling the demands of a third – person novel: a voice the audience would perceive as *adequate*, able to lead them through the issues raised and to point them towards some resolution of the feelings stirred by the narrative. And it worked. By 1874, he was a commercial success and was creating narrator after narrator whose competence and knowledge assure novel readers that they will come to no harm in the process of reading. A strikingly pure instance of this narrative voice makes an appearance in the first chapter of *Far From the Madding Crowd* and will perhaps make my point for me. Gabriel has been observing as Bathsheba's driver argues with the turnpike gate-keeper over the fee, and, thinking the dispute not worth the fuss and delay, he chooses to pay the additional tuppence at issue so that Bathsheba can pass. The narrator then comments that she could not bring herself to thank him, "for, in gaining her a passage, he had lost her point, and *we know* how women take a favour of that kind" (45 – italics mine). That minimal clause, "we know," makes enormous but vaguely comforting claims on readers' assent: it is on just such a claim to the status of insider that Hardy's novels to 1882 depend for their reassurances to the reader.

If I am right in tracing this narrative manner to the self-presentation of the London sophisticate poems, then Hardy must have seen his early novels as marred by the suppression of truths he had explored in, for example, the "She, to Him" sonnets and "Neutral Tones" – truths which all had to do with *doubt* about the stability of the self. The sophisticate must *know*: while he may make self-doubt a theme or an issue for his characters, he may not leave anxiety about the self as the final artistic or moral condition for the audience. And if the novelist, in deference to the public, must become some version of the sophisticate, then he is doomed to genteel lying. To put it simply, Hardy may well have come to see fiction as requiring a mask of confidence and clarity at the expense of doubt, wonder, and uncertainty. It is not a far step from that position to one in which he would find himself gratifying the very same mental and spiritual conditions he had named as hateful in mid-Victorian culture at large – self-confidence founded on self-ignorance and confidence about the natural and social orders founded on suppression of evidence. Writing novels, Hardy may have come to think, required that he sustain an incomplete version of himself, someone like the witty young architect who could amuse his office-mates with good stories and then go home and write proto-tragic poems of loss and pain.

Another point of decision seems to have occurred around the mid 1880's, when Hardy's narrators begin to move away from authoritativeness and, as it were, join the characters in a world without certainty, themselves as vulnerable and alone as the figures whose stories they tell. Beginning with *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1885), Hardy moves firmly and clearly to high tragedy daring comparison with Shakespeare and the

1. For the story of the composition and later disposition of this novel, see Hardy's own account (LWTH 57-66) and Michael Millgate's reconstruction

of its history (107-115).

Greeks, and at the same time, his narrative voice becomes less and less assured, and more and more self-involved. Certainty and resolution, qualities that for fifteen years had been located in the voices of his narrators, are in these late novels moved out to a horizon line where they are registered in the classic graph of tragic action. When the narrator, lamenting over the young Jude's frustration with Latin and Greek grammar, says "Somebody might have come along that way who would have asked him his trouble, and might have cheered him. . . . But nobody did come, *because nobody does*" (50 – Italics mine), we are in a world where narrator, character, and audience are equally at risk and where the only certainty is that of tragic closure.

During his novel-writing years, Hardy's poetry continued to develop along lines implied by his work in the 1860's. Poems such as "The Minute Before Meeting" (1871), "He Abjures Love" (1883), and "He Wonders About Himself" (1893) continue his formally-controlled self-examination, and satires like "She, At His Funeral" (187-), "The Levelled Churchyard" (1882), and "The Young Glass-Stainer" (1893) continue probing the complacency he had challenged in "The Ruined Maid." And alongside these familiar classes of poems there appears a group presenting specimens of human oddity and variety – "Valenciennes" (1878/97) and "The Slow Nature" (1894) are examples – in which the poet seems implicitly to ask the public, "Can your consensus account for *this* kind of humanness?" Away from the watchful eye of the public and its threatening values, Hardy could say what he liked, could attend to the subtleties of craft that he loved, and could pursue his work without worrying about any audience other than a sort of imaginary colloquy of dead poets, watching and listening as he wrote. But around the mid-1890's, in "The Dead Man Walking," the extraordinary "In Tenebris" poems, and, pre-eminently in "Wessex Heights" (all 1896), his poetry begins to move towards a meeting with the narrative voice of *Tess* and *Jude*. The crisis had come: the novelist had wearied of being ever-resourceful, and the poet could no longer block out the hateful public. Hardy wrote in his diary on October 17, 1896:

Poetry. Perhaps I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion – hard as a rock – which the vast body of men have vested interests in supporting. To cry out in a passionate poem that (for instance) the Supreme Mover or Movers, the Prime Force or Forces, must be either limited in power, unknowing, or cruel – which is obvious enough, and has been for centuries – will cause them merely a shake of the head; but to put it in argumentative prose will make them sneer, or foam, and set all the literary contortionists jumping upon me, a harmless agnostic, as if I were a clamorous atheist, which in their crass illiteracy they seem to think is the same thing. . . . If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved, the Inquisition might have let him alone.

(LWTH 302)

This famous entry is of course Hardy's farewell to the novel, but it is equally a farewell to a particular model of writer-engagement with the world – a *contiguous* relationship of writer and reader – which Hardy is clearly ready to exchange for one with a buffer of uncontested psychological space separating the parties – an *insulated* relationship, requiring an active choice by reader, writer, or both if contact is to happen. The latter

kind of relationship he had associated from his earliest days with poetry, since in poetry he believed he could be free to talk to himself on his own terms and about his own issues – and the readers could eavesdrop at their own risk. And if over the course of the next thirty-two years of his life as poet he never learned to forgive the public or to leave them alone, he had at least convinced himself that, by choosing to return to verse, he had re-entered the "free zone" of uncompromised artistic expression where he could be whole with himself.

In this last decision – as in all the previous moments of genre-decision for Hardy – the issues are complicated by gender associations, not all of which he is willing or able to articulate, but since his thinking does not follow clear lines of gender-genre alignment, his decisions are not resolvable to terms of poetry = masculine, novel = feminine. Hardy seems to be willing to use "feminine" as a temporary and rhetorical place-holder to signify his vision of the public, but his most consistent conflict seems to be internal, between masculine and *not*-masculine, instead of external, between masculine and feminine. Throughout his career he struggled to preserve a place for what he sensed to be missing from masculine authoritativeness while simultaneously deploying that authoritativeness in his texts as a strategy for placating the public *and* for controlling his own psychic conflicts. The conflict that he has presented as inter-psychic, a battle between himself and an amorphous, feminized public, has all along been intra-psychic as well, a battle with himself, and that internal struggle has been about his ambiguous relationship to authoritativeness. In the novels of the 70's to mid-80's, the knowing narrators had maintained the public front while the wounded and doubting self growled in private in his verse; in the great tragic novels of the 80's and 90's, he had tried to come before the public in the novel as he had earlier tried to come before them in poetry, offering his personal voice with its doubts and hesitations mediated by the tradition of high tragedy (as his first poems had been mediated by the traditions of classic poetic form). But by the mid-1890's the strain of maintaining allegiance to all the terms of his conflict had become too great, and, in a strategic retreat calculated to save himself from the threats of contiguity with the public, he withdrew into the insulated space of poetry. Hardy's last decision about genre-loyalty acts out at once his need to reject the feminine-identified public and his need to protect his own fragile gender-identity. A serious study of that complex gender-identity, as its doubts are opened and re-opened, denied and diffused, and resolved again and again into authoritative forms over the course of his long career, might finally tell us more about how to read Hardy's work than all our questions and speculations about genre.

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## Bard and Lady Novelist: Swinburne and the Novel of (Mrs.) Manners

David G. Riede

Swinburne's is not exactly the first name that comes up in discussions of Victorian novelists, or even of Victorian poet-novelists. His two novels, *A Year's Letters* and *Lesbia Brandon* are rarely read, and still more rarely discussed. They certainly deserve more attention, both for their intrinsic merit and because they demonstrate the unfairness of the common complaint that Swinburne's thematic and stylistic ranges are too narrow. In fact, in the early 1860's Swinburne was producing splendid work in a host of different genres – various lyric forms, of course, but also variants on Jacobean drama in *Chastelard* and Greek drama in *Atalanta in Calydon*, literary criticism in his pioneering study of Blake, literary hoaxes and burlesques, and two distinctly different novel forms. *A Year's Letters* is an epistolary novel of manners, described by Swinburne as an "analytical novel," a study "of life and character in our own day," while *Lesbia Brandon* is an experimental effort to assimilate the novel to poetry and to the shocking themes of *Poems and Ballads*. *Lesbia Brandon* was, as Swinburne described it, "a sort of étude à la Balzac plus the poetry – which I flatter myself will be more offensive and objectionable to Britannia than anything I have yet done (*Letters* 1:224). Part of the reason for the general neglect of these novelistic experiments, no doubt, is their publication history. Since it was unfinished, *Lesbia Brandon* was, of course, never published in Swinburne's lifetime, and did not appear in print until Randolph Hughes' unwieldy, grotesquely feisty, and thoroughly bizarre edition of 1952.<sup>1</sup> *A Year's Letters* was finished in the early 1860's, but not published until 1877, when it was serialized, under the pseudonym of Mrs. Horace Manners in a short-lived and all but unnoticed magazine. It was not published under Swinburne's own name until an unauthorized American edition of only 500 copies was brought out in 1901, and was not made widely available until Chatto & Windus brought it out in 1905, under the new title *Love's Cross-Currents: A Year's Letters*. It appeared at the perfect time to share in the general backlash against Swinburne and all things Victorian. Still, there has been plenty of time subsequently for *A Year's Letters* to attract attention, and from time to time someone has stepped forward to call it a neglected masterpiece. Edmund Wilson, the book's most conspicuous champion, used the infallibly accurate scale of hard cash value to measure the neglect – in 1962 you could still buy a first edition for a dollar.<sup>2</sup> Today it might cost ten dollars – the book is still not a blue-chipper.

The neglect of these novels, however, is not hard to understand, and is not likely to end. The fragments of *Lesbia Brandon* (which I plan to neglect from this point) do not form a coherent whole, and *A Year's Letters*, a seemingly belated epistolary novel, is far enough outside the tradition to seem a mere curiosity. It does not easily fit into the usual Victorian novel course – how to relate these precious letters of aristocratic family

gossip to the bold and vast works of Dickens, of Thackeray, of George Eliot? Well, as counterpoint, I think, or as a road not generally taken. But to see why it was not taken, I would like to consider why Swinburne took it, why he chose this peculiar form. What could he do that he could not do in either lyric poetry or the conventional novel? Critics have generally not concerned themselves much with the form, contenting themselves with the quite true observation that at times the themes are those of Swinburne's poetry, though done up with somewhat greater precision in prose. But what I would like to consider is why Swinburne chose to write novels at all, and why in this form.

He was well aware that the epistolary form was not likely to be popular, that in fact no one had succeeded with it since Richardson in England and his own model, Laclos, in France. He was aware, at least by 1905, that the epistolary novel "demands more attention than a flowing narrative, and bores the reader of our days unless he cares to think while reading – a little" (*Letters* 6:193-94). Further, for a worshipper of the great Romantic poets, and a perfervid Romantic in his own right, he justified his choice of the form in a surprising way: "Do you know," he asked, "that all the novels approved and admired by Dr. Johnson were cast in that form?" And he spoke of the "mere novel of manners," as he called it, with some contempt, contrasting it with the poetic works of genius of, for example, the Brontës (*A Note on Charlotte Brontë in Works* 14:13). I suspect, in fact, that his use of a pseudonym for *A Year's Letters* reflects a degree of embarrassment at writing in such a form, though other reasons have been set forth. But it seems unlikely that the pseudonym was to protect him from the moral outrage of the public (something he revelled in), or that it was to protect him from too much of a self-revelation (it is less revealing than his poetry), or even that it was to protect family secrets (the cast of characters does not match up well with Swinburne's family). Rather, I suspect, Swinburne adopted a pseudonym, and a woman's name at that, because he considered himself working in a lesser art form – in fact, as he saw it, in a feminine rather than a masculine art form.

In his own way Swinburne was a victim of the Victorian (and rather persistent) cult of masculinity – despite his admiration of the Brontës and his idolatry of Sappho, he constantly speaks of masculine, manly, virile art: "the office of adult art," he insisted, "is neither puerile nor feminine, but virile" ("Notes on Poems and Reviews" in *Swinburne Replies* 32). My purpose is certainly not to return Swinburne once again to the psychoanalytic couch or to debate his sexuality, but only to point to his characteristically Victorian distinction between the noble and masculine on the one hand, and the relatively trivial and feminine on the other. The same widely accepted distinction, of course, obliged the Brontës and George Eliot to take

1. Hughes' edition devotes substantially more space to abuse of other critics of Swinburne, or irrelevant targets such as Ezra Pound, and of various and sundry innocent bystanders. For a long list of the errors in Hughes' text, see Lang 716.

2. Wilson 23. For the publishing history, see Sypher's introduction to his excellent edition of *A Year's Letters*. My quotations from the novel are taken from this edition.

male pseudonyms and so avoid the fate of Jane Austen, who was patronizingly praised as a "lady novelist," as when Fitzgerald acknowledged that "She is capital as far as she goes: but she never goes out of the parlour" (260). Swinburne did not, evidently, see his epistolary novel of manners as fitting his definition of high poetry: "noble and chaste in the wider masculine sense, not truncated and curtailed, but outspoken and fullgrown; . . . pure by instinct and fruitful by nature, [without] forced growth of unhealthy heat and unnatural air" ("Notes on Poems and Reviews" 32), and without baseness and triviality. As Swinburne's own description of the plot indicates, the novel is very much a hothouse affair, a matter of internecine intrigues and subterranean gossip, of hidden passions and things unsaid: "the leading idea of the tragicomic catastrophe," he said, is that "the young and inconsiderate 'hero' incautiously casts himself out of a title and estate to which he is presumptive by the simple and natural process of imprudently begetting a child on the wife of his hitherto childless kinsman – which, of course on said kinsman's decease brings matters to a general deadlock, as nobody *can* stand forward and say what everybody knows or suspects as to the parentage of this fatal baby – a posthumous child, too, in all appearance" (*Letters* 3:251).

Swinburne was acting on the still widely held assumption that the novel in general – not just those by that singular anomaly, the lady novelist – was a lesser form than poetry. Poetry was food for a man's palate; novels for the more pallid tastes of women and children. And to an extent this was indeed necessarily so, at least for such poetry as Swinburne wrote – and the issue is not one of bringing a blush to an innocent cheek, but of intelligibility. Swinburne's poetry (like most Victorian poetry) is often classical in form, always replete with classical allusions, and often dependent upon understanding of the Greek or Latin origins of English words. It demanded, in short, a classically educated audience – in other words, a male audience.<sup>3</sup> And Swinburne, perhaps more than anyone else in his age, believed passionately in the exalted nature of the poet, the inspired bard, the priest of Apollo. He believed in the great tradition, and this meant sticking close to the universal and timeless themes. It is not that he had contempt for the novel, but that he felt the novelist at his best was a poet – he loved Dickens, but not on "the literary and sentimental side of his work" where he was "but a type of his generation and his class," and he greatly admired *Wuthering Heights*, but as a "tragic poem."<sup>4</sup> Even when written by women, the great novels must have the noble and manly element of poetic genius. Swinburne did not confine the "poetic" to verse: it might also be found in the impassioned prose of an imaginative novel. But it would hardly be found in a parlour, or a novel of manners – that is, in the work of a lady novelist. If he was going to write in the manner of a lady novelist, Swinburne would satirically distance himself from the work behind the mask of Mrs.

Horace Manners.

But, then, back to the original question – why write in such a dubious form at all? This novel was not merely, like the hoaxes, undertaken as a lark-it was painstakingly designed and carefully polished. Presumably Swinburne wrote it because his critical acuity and creative nature demanded a less exclusively *manly* form of expression, demanded, in fact, a form that would bring the excesses of his usual artistic assumptions and procedures under scrutiny. With his great gifts for delicately satiric prose, for subtle critical distinctions, for psychological insight, Swinburne may well have felt limited within even the vast confines of his Romantic art. But the eighteenth-century form approved by Dr. Johnson offers a perspective on Romantic excess, and the trivial, supposedly "feminine" issues of manners and gossip offer an interesting antidote to the strutting egotism of "masculine" abstractions about noble causes and grand passions. And of course the epistolary form imposed a style utterly different from Swinburne's usually bardic one, forced him to attend to minute details rather than large effects, to use a more precisely designative language rather than poetically charged emotive terms, forced him down to the sordid (and of course, feminine) earth and away from the masculine sky-god, Apollo. In fact, this distinction between the cynically critical and precise feminine style and the idealistic but vague masculine style is evident in the letters of *Love's Cross-Currents*. The leading male characters are both in love, and write prose in the idiom of Swinburne's love poetry. Redgie Harewood, a very obvious surrogate of Algie Swinburne, sounds just like his creator when he writes to his cousin about his sister's hair and his own passion:

A woman should keep to the deep sweet dark with such a noble silence of colour in the depth of it, rich reserved hair with a shadow and a sense of its own, that wants no gilt setting of sunbeams to throw out the secret beauty in it. I should like to see yours painted; that would beat the best of them. Promise I shall have sight of it again soon. I want you as a beggar wants bread to eat; I have the sort of desire after your face that wounded men must have after water. I wish there were some mark of you carved on me that I might look at it. Now this is come to me I wonder all day long at all the world. Nobody else has this; but they live in a sort of way.  
(147)

Vague indeed – the object of the rhapsodist's affections could be any woman, and in fact the book demonstrates that he is not exactly seeing the object as in itself it really is. In Swinburne's poetry this sort of stuff would be elevated to a genuine grand passion, but here it is allowed to be seen as puerile twaddle. Redgie's cousin has been described elsewhere, by the sharp-tongued but usually dependable Lady Midhurst: she is "enough to turn any man's hair grey; I assure you, my dear child, she makes my three hairs stand on end. Her style is something too awful; like the most detestable sort of young

3. Jane Austen considered herself incapable of rendering certain kinds of masculine discourse partly because some male conversation must be "occasionally abundant in quotations and allusions which a woman who, like me, knows only her own mother tongue. . . would be totally without the power of giving." Without a "classical education, or at any rate a very extensive acquaintance with English literature, ancient and modern" certain

kinds of speech and writing are outside of a woman's range (2:443). For a discussion of the exclusionary role of a "father tongue," or education in the classics, see Ong 25.

4. "Charles Dickens," in *Works*, 14:60. Swinburne affirms that *Wuthering Heights* is "essentially and definitely a poem in the most positive sense of the term" ("Emily Brontë," *Works* 14:47).

man" (40). My point is partly that Redgie is simply wrong and his elevated, noble passion is consequently a little ridiculous, but partly also that the language of Lady Midhurst, a critical language in every sense of the word, is more precise and to the point than Redgie's. The contrast between the best writing in *A Year's Letters* and Swinburne's poetry is not simply between prose and verse, but between an elevated, bardic, Romantic language and a critical language that punctures inflated declamations with a neoclassical satiric wit.

The whole structure of the book, in fact – and this I think is what makes the choice of an epistolary style a stroke of genius – is designed to call into question all of Swinburne's idols of the heart, and indeed, to call into question everything that is touched on. A major reason why bardic poetry was increasingly difficult to write in the nineteenth century was that it required an authoritative voice speaking from a fixed point of view, yet it was an age when nothing seemed certain, nothing fixed – a multitudinous age, as Arnold put it. In his attempt to speak authoritatively in poetry Swinburne cut out all uncertainties, and so cut out much of the life and complexity of his age. But he swung to the opposite extreme in *A Year's Letters*. It is not just that Redgie's certainties are undercut by Lady Midhurst, but that Lady Midhurst's moral authority is undercut by various other letter writers. The book offers no central authority or standard, but only a satiric introduction and thirty letters by six different authors to various correspondents – and each writer develops a different strategically designed style for each different correspondent and circumstance. The reader is forced to suspend judgment indefinitely as each letter is played off against every other one. Without an omniscient narrator, without even an unreliable narrator or a trustworthy letter-writer, the novel becomes a brilliant exercise in a totally de-centered form. Meaning is elusive and partial, a function of one's limited and biased perspective. The epistolary style, moreover, enables Swinburne to deal with the multitudinousness of his age in much the way that his fellow poets did in their verse. Like Tennyson's *In Memoriam* or Meredith's *Modern Love* the novel is broken down into discrete units, each offering a different point of view. Indeed perhaps the closest analogue to Swinburne's novel in the Victorian age is the work of a poet particularly plagued by multitudinousness – Clough's epistolary poem, *Amours de Voyage*. But the different letters by different writers to different characters also call to mind Browning's (or Tennyson's, or Swinburne's own) dramatic monologues. Oscar Wilde, of course, called Meredith a prose Browning, and Browning a prose Browning too, for that matter – and Swinburne, in *A Year's Letters*, is just such another.

Indeed, the letters, to be understood as written and carefully planned rather than spoken and spontaneous, out-Browning Browning in the intricacy of their stratagems, and the depths they reveal about the tacit relations between characters. Lady Midhurst, for example, writes a brilliant blackmail letter to Clara Radworth in which the overt message is simply one of praise for her good behavior. Yet she not only gets the message across, but takes an evident pleasure in torturing her victim with numerous shades of devious but unspoken insult. Further, the letters, written by reserved and cautious aristocrats, are understated, subtle, full of innuendo and implication – they

force the reader to be a close reader, a critic. Most of the characters, in this sense, are critics also – letter number one, for example, is written by Lady Midhurst to Mrs. Radworth, so letter number two consists in part of Mrs. Radworth's close reading of Lady Midhurst's style and purpose. In writing these letters Swinburne displayed a capacity for psychological insight and analysis that never appears in his poetry, and a corresponding ability to write with minute precision and subtle nuance that is hardly characteristic of "Dolores" or "Faustine" or even of such masterpieces as "The Triumph of Time" and "Ave atque Vale."

This last point is most especially clear in the character of Lady Midhurst, obviously the dominant character in the novel. She is a quondam Regency beauty with a taste for scandal (outside her own family); she has a cutting and cruel satiric wit, a manipulative and dominating personality, and yet a loving heart. Remarkably, her most cherished beliefs, the ideals she believes in and consoles others by, are those of Swinburne's poetry – disdain for the false hopes and consolations of Christianity, stoicism, a love of liberty. Yet she is no mass of contradictions, but a coherent and complex personality whose utterances are always entirely faithful to her extraordinary character. Edmund Wilson, praising the "psychological subtlety" of the book, points out that Swinburne's rare psychological penetration here makes Lady Midhurst "by far his most successful incarnation of the dominating merciless woman. Poor old Adah Menken, as Dolores, has a flavor of almost burlesque vulgarity beside this polished and astute old spider" (35). But she is not in fact merciless, and she is different not in degree but in kind from the cruel women of Swinburne's poetry. They are mythic and monolithic; she is human and complex.

The difference between Lady Midhurst and Dolores returns us to the distinction between the manly and authoritative art of poetry and the effeminate, gossipy domain of the novel of manners. Dolores is not a real human being, nor was meant to be. She is a mythic figure or a monumental symbol, but not a woman. Though the poem was called dirty, it is not of the earth, earthy – it is discourse of a wholly generalized, abstract sort. Indeed, it is ironic that one of Swinburne's great themes is that human beings are born of the dust to return to the dust, that "dead men rise up never," that we must not fear to stay close to the earth-but his elevated notion of poetry obliged him to sustain a poetic discourse that rarely touches the ground. The problem can be understood, I think, in terms of the Swinburnean, and to some extent generally Victorian, idea of the manly art of poetry. Great poetry concerns itself with vast and universal ideas, and this is the province of the male mind. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Romney Leigh tells his cousin Aurora, women are quick to feel, but not to think. Women may, for example, respond to an individual's suffering, but they "generalize/Oh, nothing, – not even grief!" (2:182-192). In his themes, Swinburne generally sided with what he saw as the feminine, chthonic, earthy forces, but in his view of poetry, and in his style, he was on the side of the manly Apollo, a sky god, so his poetry reaches for the clouds and sometimes ends up with the vapors.

I would not be misunderstood – I think Swinburne is a very

great and still very much under-rated poet. But I also think that his conception of the grandeur of poetry compelled him always to seek an authoritative, bardic and, yes, manly voice, with the result that his univocal poetry tends to cut out the complexities of the multitudinous age. Consequently the poetry cannot catch the varied and complex strains of an age and a society that Swinburne shows he could analyze admirably in the novel *A Year's Letters*, a triumph of the "dialogic imagination." It is a society and a novel in which passions are ultimately stifled, in which the great virtues are a stiff upper lip and a sense of decorum. English life ought never to supply the stuff of a realistic French novel: "We must be content," Lady Midhurst writes, "never to make a story, and may instead reflect with pride what a far better thing it is to live in the light of English feeling and under the rule of English habit" (157). Obviously this cannot supply the stuff of poetry in the grand manner, though it does very well for the novel of manners. Indeed, Lady Midhurst had previously advised Redgie's sister how to play her part in this "bit of social comedy": "act as well as you can, and in the style now received on the English boards" (64). And this, it would seem, is the province of the lady novelist, of Mrs. Horace Manners. But observe that it is Lady Midhurst who lays down the law, as it is Lady Midhurst who controls all the other characters in the novel, who sees to it that passions are stifled, decorum observed. She is, in fact, a brilliant demonstration of the absurdity of the cult of masculinity, the idea of manly control. She is not a cruel goddess, but a refined and intelligent woman who sees to it that the men do not get into trouble with their preposterous idealizing of women. Though Swinburne with his gallery of ghastly goddesses perpetuated what Nina Auerbach rightly sees as a central Victorian myth of the powerful demonic woman, Mrs. Horace Manners was able subtly to analyze the real but hidden power of women to enforce Victorian cultural values. And in the process she provides what Victorian fiction all too often lacks, an entirely convincing female character.

In closing I would like to suggest what I hope I have already implied – that Swinburne might have been a very great novelist if his own and his age's prejudices had not inhibited him. His age's sense of how sex ought to be treated in novels obstructed the publication of this very mildly naughty work and so discouraged him, and his own sense of the relative inferiority

of the novel of manners gave him no strong incentive to forge on. I doubt, however, that Swinburne ever saw how fully the feminine, eighteenth-century rationalism of Mrs. Manners undermined his usual Romanticism – and sexism. Because he saw it as a minor form, he was able to neglect the implications of his own brilliant novel. My point is not that he should have stopped writing poetry and written only novels, but that by splitting a masculine from a feminine form, he narrowed his range in both genres. He might have been a great novelist if he had learned to value the form more highly; he might have been a still greater poet had he learned to incorporate his supposedly feminine powers of detailed observation and acute psychological penetration into his poems. And perhaps he saw this – perhaps *Lesbia Brandon*, designed as a hybrid of poetry and prose, was an attempt to unify his divided sensibility. If so, the fact that Swinburne cherished it for forty years without finishing it may well suggest that the feat was not possible. But that is matter for another discussion.

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## Genre and Gender in *Aurora Leigh*

Dorothy Mermin

Elizabeth Barrett Browning devoured novels voraciously and indiscriminately, especially French ones of a kind that a respectable Englishwoman could hardly admit to knowing. In novels she found some of the experience of life that her sex and seclusion had denied her, and that she felt she needed to give color and reality both to her life and to her art. She was thinking of prose fiction in these terms in 1845 when she described the project that was to issue twelve years later as *Aurora Leigh*. "My chief intention just now," she said, "is the writing of a

sort of novel-poem. . . running into the midst of our conventions, & rushing into drawing-rooms & the like, 'where angels fear to tread'; & so, meeting face to face & without mask the Humanity of the age, & speaking the truth as I conceive of it, out plainly" (*Letters*, ed. Kintner, 1:31).

Of all the important Victorian long poems, *Aurora Leigh* is the only "novel-poem," or novel in verse. Arthur Hugh Clough in exuberant youth and Robert Browning late in his career wrote what might be called long short stories – *The Bothie of*



*Tober-na-Vuolich, Red-Cotton Night-Cap Country, The Inn Album* – but these are not really much like novels. Unlike other long Victorian poems, *Aurora Leigh* is a continuous story told retrospectively by a single speaker, with a contemporary setting and a thoroughly novelistic plot – that of the *bildungsroman*, or more specifically the *kunstlerroman* – much of which in fact is borrowed from other novels. Like a Victorian novel, it is deeply attentive to characterization and to the development of character and of relationships through time; it is analytic and satirical in its presentation of society, rushing not only into drawing-rooms but into slums and brothels as well, and running more fearlessly than an angel into immediate questions of political philosophy and social reform with which contemporary novelists were also very much concerned. But its heightened feeling and language, especially its elaborate metaphors and ostentatious epic similes, are deeply and often obtrusively “poetical.”

Aurora herself insists that genre – or form – does not matter:

What form is best for poems? Let me think  
Of forms less, and the external. Trust the spirit,  
As sovran nature does, to make the form;  
For otherwise we only imprison spirit  
And not embody. Inward evermore  
To outward, – so in life, and so in art  
Which still is life. (V. 223-229)

A play, she says, should have as many acts as it needs – fifteen, perhaps, or ten, or seven (V.229-239). She would not think the work in which she herself appears disqualified for epic status by having only nine books. Such disdain for genre rules was common in the nineteenth century: the Victorians wrote poems in all sorts of strange and nameless forms without worrying about how to define them. Generically, *Aurora Leigh* was only one anomaly among many, but it was a peculiarly bold one.

Early readers of *Aurora Leigh*, like many later ones, were deeply struck and also, often, profoundly disturbed by its transgressions, in particular by its apparent violations of *two* boundaries: between poetry and fiction, and between masculine and feminine – the boundaries, that is, of genre, and of gender. Reviewers distinguished between poetic and novelistic aspects, regardless of whether or not they approved of the mixture or of which parts they preferred; some admired the intensely poetical sections which others found strained and excessive, while some liked the pathos, or the social satire. Many found large parts of it beneath the dignity of verse. *The Athenaeum* sympathetically recognized it as something difficult to assess, because unprecedented: “we have no experience of such a mingling of what is precious with what is mean – of the voice of clarion and the lyric cadence of harp with the cracked school-room spinet – of tears and small-talk – of eloquent apostrophe and adust speculation – of the grandeur of passion and the pettiness of modes and manners – as we find in these nine books of blank verse. Milton’s organ is put by Mrs. Browning to play polkas in May-Fair drawing-rooms” (1425).

Milton’s organ (by which expressive phrase the reviewer means, of course, that exclusively male form the epic) in a lady’s drawing-room – transgressions of genre and gender go

together, as Tennyson showed when he symbolized the relations of men and women in *The Princess* by the juxtaposition of narrative and lyric. (In *The Princess*, however, the two elements meet but do not mingle.) The blurring of sexual boundaries in *Aurora Leigh* was remarked by reviewers with varying degrees of pleasure or distress. It was a matter not just of plot or setting or character, but of the gender characteristics of the poem as a whole. Leigh Hunt saw a wonderful mixture of “masculine power and feminine tenderness” in it (739), and George Eliot made the same point more fully: Mrs. Browning, she said, “is, perhaps, the first woman who has produced a work which exhibits all the peculiar powers without the negations of her sex; which superadds to masculine vigour, breadth, and culture, feminine subtlety of perception, feminine quickness of sensibility, and feminine tenderness” (306). Others, however, while equally excited, were less pleased. A reviewer for the *Westminster Review* complained that the poet tried to “prove her manhood” by the coarseness of her language and an “ostentation of strength” (401, 400). Several thought Aurora herself disagreeably unwomanly. They found transgressions of other boundaries, too: between the “universal element” and “the peculiarities of our time,” and between the beautiful and the repulsive (Everett 441, 423) as well as in mixed metaphors, in lines written by a woman not fit for women to read, and, in general, in sins against taste and decorum that crossed the boundary between literature and parts of life that could not be written about. (There are others, too: the fact that Aurora’s name after marriage to Romney Leigh will still be Aurora Leigh, for instance, eradicates the line between daughter and wife; Marian is sexually violated and yet remains pure, mother and maid at once; and Virginia Woolf heard the author’s voice too clearly in the poem and found, as one might with many poets of mid-century, that her life impinges too much on her art (222).

Transgressions of genre and of gender in *Aurora Leigh*, along with the lesser transgressions that these subsume, are linked as interrelated parts of Barrett Browning’s attempt to remake the structures she had inherited from male predecessors in order to create a place for herself. Victorian women poets tended to use narrative or a narrative frame whenever they wanted to express feelings, ideas, or relationships that did not fit the conventions and implied narrative contexts of poetic tradition. Emily Brontë’s strange and violent lyrics spring from the Gondal story and are often inexplicable without it. Christina Rossetti seems in her religious and amatory short lyrics to be expressing only the kinds of experience – yearning, resignation, renunciation, self-repression, and so on in that dreary litany of sorrow – appropriate to female figures in nineteenth-century poetry; she put her rebellious or radically unconventional feelings about sexuality and the relations between the sexes into narratives like “Goblin Market” and “The Prince’s Progress,” which give quite unexpected contexts and meanings to the feelings expressed in the lyrics. Barrett Browning’s early explorations of woman’s lot and of her own unconscious feelings come mostly in the form of ballads or strange, dream-like narratives: lyric would not accommodate them. She expresses a mother’s murderous ambivalence towards her baby, for instance, not in lyric – simply as lyric, it would have been

incomprehensible and shocking, and therefore inexpressible - but in a long dramatic monologue that justifies the feeling with a narrative context of slavery, rape, and racial difference. By turning not just to narrative but to the novel, furthermore, she could escape the dominance of male forerunners and place herself in a powerful female tradition. Once she had said of the English poets, "I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none" (*Letters*, ed. Kenyon, 1: 232): but the family resemblances between Aurora Leigh and Corinne, Consuelo, and Jane Eyre, or between Marian Erle and Mrs. Gaskell's Ruth - aunts and cousins at least, if not grandmothers - suggests similar relationships among their authors, even if Barrett Browning herself did not care to acknowledge them.

The contemporary life in which the poem is set, furthermore, offered Barrett Browning a world that seemed uniquely rich in opportunities for a woman poet. Her male contemporaries, oppressed by a sense of belatedness, did not find it so. Arthur Hallam, for instance, thought the nineteenth century a late and tired time for poetry - the nation was hostile to "the poetic impulse," he said, and so poets were inevitably melancholy and withdrawn (189, 190). Matthew Arnold exhorted his friend Clough to reflect on "how deeply *unpoetical* the age and all one's surroundings are. Not unprofound, not ungrand, not unmoving: - but *unpoetical*" (99). Dante Gabriel Rossetti told William Morris that it was better to paint pictures than write poems, because the poetry "has all been said and written" (Mackail 1: 110). Romney Leigh (whose function is to represent the male viewpoint, although not a poet's) speaks in a similar vein of "the world we've come to late," "swollen hard / With generations perished of their sins" (II.160, 263). *The Idylls of the King* and *The Ring and the Book* are set far in the past, well away from Victorian England. *Maud*, *Modern Love* and *Amours de Voyage* uneasily test out poetic attitudes in contemporary, novelistic settings which make them look ineffectual and silly - unlike *Aurora Leigh*, in which juxtapositions of lyric intensity and modern daily life are not *intended* (whatever their effect may be) to play off against or diminish each other. But for women poets there was no lost heroic age to be regretted, no female tradition that could make a modern woman's poetry look inadequate or out of place. On the contrary: when Elizabeth Barrett was a child she intended to become (as she put it later) "the feminine of Homer" (*The Brownings' Correspondence* 1: 361), the first and greatest of women poets - and although she soon learned to moderate this ambition, it seemed to many people even before *Aurora Leigh* was published, and still more afterwards, that she had achieved it. Aurora herself sets out to prove that women can be poets (II.1181-1187), and before the poem ends she has done so. She is Aurora, the *dawn* of a new era.

Elizabeth Barrett's problem from the very beginning had been to find an epic subject that would accommodate a female hero, and this too led her to value her own times. While male poets were finding heroes, if at all, in the past (Thackeray wrote his great novel of nineteenth-century England explicitly without one), Elizabeth Barrett had looked backwards and seen no more female heroes than poetic grandmothers. *The Battle of Marathon*, published when she was fourteen, is an Homeric epic about male warriors, with no women in it except goddesses

and a few Athenian "matrons" who only get in the way of the action and are quickly disposed of. Her next long poem, *The Seraphim*, evades the issue by having no human characters at all, dramatizing the crucifixion through the conversation of a couple of angels. *A Drama of Exile* does find a heroine, but only by going through and beyond Milton all the way back to the first woman and presenting the fall and its aftermath from the point of view of Eve - who can be heroic, unfortunately, only through her repentance and her ability to suffer. Barrett Browning also wrote ballad-narratives, but Aurora Leigh scornfully describes women in the ballad world as "half chattel and half queen" (as they are in her author's ballads and also, we might add, in the poems by Tennyson and Browning that are set in a similar world: despite Browning's poetical woman-worship and exemplary behavior to his wife, or Tennyson's somewhat feminized heroes, their poems - even *The Princess*, in the end - rigidly adhere to conventional gender roles for women; imagine a female knight in Tennyson's Camelot, where "work" is represented only as fighting battles, or a Pompilia who can write). There are no happy endings for women - no attainment of power, work, or even love - in Barrett Browning's narratives until "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," when she finally arrives (and she was almost forty years old by then) in modern times.

Male poets resisted with varying degrees of firmness critics' frequent injunctions to write on modern subjects. Matthew Arnold in sheer perverseness went so far as to compose a shamelessly ersatz Greek tragedy. Browning wrote two long narratives with contemporary settings, *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* and *The Inn Album*, but they show a world in which all attempts at heroism turn out to be foolish, useless, and perverse. But Aurora Leigh joyfully declares that poetry is still possible, that even Homer's heroes were only men, that all men (by which word, as usual, she means women) are possible heroes, and that every age can be heroic (V.146-153). Poets'

sole work is to represent the age,  
Their age, not Charlemagne's, - this live, throbbing age,  
That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,  
And spends more passion, more heroic heat,  
Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,  
Than Roland with his knights at Roncesvalles. (V.202-207)

In drawing rooms, of course, there are women. *Aurora Leigh* is the "unscrupulously epic" (in Aurora's words [V.214] - "unscrupulous" because it does not respect prescribed boundaries) culmination of Barrett Browning's epic ambitions.

The novelistic form did more than replace the epic structures that had excluded women. It offered a way to explore a woman poet's place both in the world and - a more subtle, interesting, and important matter - in poems. As poet, Aurora is conceived by herself and others in various discrepant ways: as the Muse (III.363; V.796) and antithetically as Danae impregnated by Jove, as the mother of works which have died in embryo (III.247-248) or been killed like Niobe's children. But muses don't write, and mothers as nineteenth-century women poets see them don't either. In a gloomy moment she thinks of herself as Niobe (in contradistinction to Pygmalion): her poems are not separate creations like Pygmalion's Galatea but are born

like a woman's children from her own flesh – her children, parts of herself – and unlike Pygmalion she cannot satisfy with art her need for love. Often she is thought of (in the common Victorian habit, railed at by some poets, practiced by almost all) as herself a work of art: a book that others “dog-ear” (V.1054) or refuse to read. She both speaks and *is* the poem whose name is also her own, and she spends a lot of time trying to distinguish between her poems and herself.

Barrett Browning works out the question of a woman poet's place *within* poems, however – as informing intelligence and speaking subject rather than object and other – mostly in terms of Aurora's relations with the kinds of female figures who normally appear in nineteenth-century poems by men but could not themselves be poets or epic protagonists. There is no natural place in a poem for a woman like Aurora unless she chooses either to exist simply as the object of male desire, essentially speechless (which is what Romney proposes early on), or – if she wants to speak – to speak only her unapparently unrequited love. She refuses to take those places: she sends Romney away and doesn't acknowledge her love – that is, doesn't speak it except by indirection – until nearly the end of the story. Her predecessors come from novels, not poems; they are Corinne and Jane Eyre. And yet she is in a poem, not in a novel, and like her creator she is a poet. What, then, is her relation to the kind of women who *do* inhabit poems, appearing in them as erotic object, or mysterious Other? This is perhaps the central problem that the poem has to work out, and her relations to women are therefore exceptionally intense.

Are they possible selves, since she's a woman too? Or objects of desire, since she's the poet? She experiences men as belonging to the world of what Myra Jehlen calls exteriority (596, 598) and describes them coolly, usually satirically – even her father, even Romney; but the female characters have an almost mythic depth and intensity and arouse her strongest, most complex feelings. Aurora is looking for a mother in relation to whom she might find her place and her identity: in the tradition of women's *bildungsromanen*, the poem traces the heroine's attempt to return to the pre-Oedipal maternal world figured by nature. Of her own dead mother she has only the recollection of a few words spoken to her – “Hush, hush – here's too much noise” (I.17) a legacy that would preclude for a girl who wants to write any simple possibility of identification with her mother); and a deeply ambiguous portrait in which she appears as the composite of woman in her various roles as literary object, “Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite” (I.154), Lamia and Our Lady of the Passion, a portrait onto which Aurora projects her fantasies and her experiences of women in literature. This is woman as mysterious Other; Aurora can neither become her – for then she would cease to be the speaking subject, nor – because she is a woman herself – establish a relationship with her.

And so the image splits into two somewhat more realistic, novelized figures: virtuous Marian Erle and wicked Lady Waldemar, the victimized innocent and the predatory sophisticate, the good mother and the bad. They bear in their names, however, the traces of the mythicized female figures of the preternatural and of nature from whom they spring: *Marian Erle*, virgin mother and fairy, *Lady Waldemar* (wald-e-mar) of the

forest and the sea. The original image also spills over onto other figures that are female for male poets, turning what is safely metaphorical in men's writings into something disturbingly literal. The Romantic poets' maternal Nature turns into the explicitly breast-like hills of Italy; and the image of the “Mother-Age,” which is almost inert when Tennyson uses it in “Locksley Hall,” has the power to shock even now in Barrett Browning's version. “Hide me from my deep emotion, O thou wondrous Mother-Age,” Tennyson's hero innocuously cries (line 108); but Aurora Leigh, astonishingly, says:

Never flinch,  
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch  
Upon the burning lava of a song  
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:  
That, when the next shall come, the men of that  
May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say  
“Behold, – behold the paps we all have sucked!  
This bosom seems to beat still. . . . (V. 213-220)

What Aurora learns from her intense relations with these various figures, who together represent the normal female population of poetry, is first, that she isn't one of them; and second, that she doesn't, after all, have to define herself as a poet in terms of her relation to them. That is, she is neither the female object of a male poem, nor the male subject for whom these figures are objects of desire. This is figured in her detachment at last from Lady Waldemar and Marian, in her changing relation to Romney, and in the diminishing of her uncomfortable awareness of herself as a physical object, something to be seen. The first effect of Romney's declaration of love is that everybody seems to be looking at her all the time – even the servants, even the dog; her aunt dies, in effect, as a result of such looking: as soon as Aurora wishes that her aunt would “‘sleep, / And spare [her] yet the burden of [her] eyes’ ” (II.909-910), she discovers that the offending eyes are sightless in death. She accepts Romney's love only when he too is blind, his blindness signaling the crucial reversal of roles and power between them. His arrival at the end of the story is heralded by her image of him as her “sea-king” – a male version of the mysterious, half natural half human erotic Other that men have figured as a mermaid. When she rejected his love, early in the story, she spoke of his heart as a book that she would not read any more (II.836-837); now, accepting his place as text or object rather than beholder, he describes himself as a book that she has “dog-eared” (VIII.77) and asks her to reopen it. She can look, with or without desire, as she pleases, at him, but he can't look at her. She is no longer the object; she has defined a new space for a woman: as epic protagonist, as speaking subject.

But this is not simply a matter of reversing roles, which can only be done in very limited ways, at least in nineteenth-century poems. Barrett Browning retains the identification of woman with the inner, spiritual, emotional, and subjective sphere that she found everywhere, in poetry, in fiction, and in the fictions of life itself, which identifies women with poems. She doesn't switch gender roles; instead, she switches the locus of power within them. She asserts that power resides only in the inner life: in poetry, that is, and in women, and so in the woman

poet most of all. Romney is forced to acknowledge that social change will be brought about not by politicians, philosophers, or philanthropists, but by poets. In the story's final and decisive transgression of the lines of gender, Romney asserts that when they marry, Aurora will "work for two" – real "work" having been defined as writing poems – and he "for two, shall love" (IX.911-912). The novelistic story concludes, that is, with an assertion of the primacy of poetry's world and values over the novel's, and of women over men.

Perhaps the oddest thing of all about *Aurora Leigh* is the thoroughly happy ending – happy for the heroine, at any rate, if not for her disempowered and humiliated lover. *The Idylls of the King*, *The Ring and Book*, *Empedocles on Etna*, *Modern Love*, *Amours de Voyage* – all the great long Victorian poems end in failure or loss (except, perhaps, *In Memoriam*, which begins there). Heroines of novels don't do much better: even *Jane Eyre* has no real independence, no vocation comparable to Brontë's or Barrett Browning's. Maggie Tulliver dies, and Dorothea Brooke exerts a quiet and unacknowledged influence as the wife of a political reformer, settling into precisely the sort of life that Aurora indignantly rejects when Romney offers it to her. It has often been remarked that women novelists do not imagine lives for their heroines that are as successful, in terms of achievement or scope for achievement, as their own (see Heilbrun 71-92). But in her strange mix of genres, Barrett Browning did what women novelists had not done, and perhaps could not do. Alone among heroines of *bildungsromanen* in the nineteenth century, Aurora follows the central part of the male pattern of development as Jerome Hamilton Buckley describes it: she leaves the provinces, goes to the city, and has (in effect) two love-affairs, one debasing and one ennobling (Lady Waldemar, that is, and Marian Erle [17-18]).<sup>1</sup> The novelistic context and elaboration of plot allows Aurora to work her way out of the passive position of erotic object to which women in *poems* had been relegated; and at the same time the poetry establishes a context in which freedom and the heroic triumph of the spirit feel not only appropriate but possible and which (if the poem is successful for us) proves, in the very texture of the work, its energy, zest, and self-confidence, the heroine's vocation. By transgressing the boundaries of genre – by appealing not from literature to life, but from one genre to another, and back again – *Aurora Leigh* goes farther than any other poem or novel of the Victorian period towards transcending the limits imposed on literature by gender.

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1. The pattern of the female *bildungsroman*, which differs notably from the male version, is analyzed by Abel, Hirsch, and Langland. *Aurora Leigh* has many of the characteristics of both kinds.

## Walter Pater: The Critic and the Irrational

Robert Keefe

In *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, Richard Ellmann prints a wonderful manuscript passage in which the poet talks of Pater's influence on Wilde and on himself:

In London [Wilde] took to the aesthetic movement, in verse to the style of Rossetti, and in prose to that of Pater, and the slow-moving elegance – born of toil and sedentary – became all the more marvelous in his eyes, because it was not his natural expression. He was fascinated by it, as I was fascinated when as a boy of fourteen I stood motionless on the street wondering if it were possible to ask my way in what would be recognized at once as fine prose. It was hard to believe, after I had heard somebody read out let us say Pater's description of the Mona Lisa, that "Can you direct me to St. Peter's Square Hammersmith" was under the circumstances the best possible prose.<sup>1</sup>

Yeats always distanced himself like that from Pater. But Harold Bloom has taught us to treat such distancing mechanisms with a certain amount of skepticism; aware of the anxiety which may be boiling behind the humor.<sup>2</sup> And indeed, for reasons which I hope to make clear, Pater was much more to Yeats, and to Lawrence, Joyce, Strachey, Woolf, and a good many others as well, than simply a fussy old gentleman with a seductive, but slow-moving and artificial prose style which they had to outgrow. They may have left his style behind, but the style was only part of the man, and not the most important part. Intellectually, he was their father, and his influence was to be built on, not simply outgrown.<sup>3</sup>

We see that group of writers as revolutionaries, quite rightly. But they were part of a revolt in English letters which Pater, as much as anyone else, had initiated. The pace of change would accelerate profoundly around the time of the First World War, but the movement had been gathering momentum for decades, since the 1860's, really. And if we agree that two of the hallmarks of a literary revolution are a significant shift in the way the self is viewed, and a radical reevaluation of the myths which organize a society's sense of reality, then we can begin to see Pater, in the period from the late 1860's through the 1870's, as the timid but profound revolutionary that he really was. Nearly twenty years before Nietzsche was read in England,<sup>4</sup> Pater had begun to construct a radically new view of the self and the world around it, and in the process set the stage not only for Oscar Wilde and Arthur Symonds, but for the later modernists who came after them, as well.

Pater's shift in the sense of self should be fairly evident to anyone who has read the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*. The English did not have to be shocked, by Charcot and Janet in the 1880's, and Freud in the 1890's, into an awareness of the discontinuities of the self, because Pater had already pointed

out to them, in 1873, the inability of consciousness to build a psychic edifice which cannot be torn apart by time. Identity in the Conclusion is problematic, artificial, no more than "a strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of [the self]."<sup>5</sup> The only thing we can be sure of is consciousness itself, the mind surrounded by a thick wall, "through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without" (*The Renaissance* 236).

That sense of self, tenuous, artistic, Penelopean rather than Odyssean, was startlingly new, and wildly influential (the pun is intended). Autobiography would become a much more problematic task after Pater. But it was not simply the personal past which Pater destabilized. At the same time, he began to transvalue the mythic values of his society, to undermine, through a revisionist reading of classical mythology, the Victorian sense of the nature of history and thus of the developmental, civilized self, the product of history.

Obviously, the nineteenth century shied away from the sheer lubricity of the Greek gods. The American Thomas Bulfinch, prefacing his enormously popular *The Age of Fable* (1855), can speak for his age: "Such stories and parts of stories as are offensive to pure taste and good morals are not given. But such stories are not often referred to, and if they occasionally should be, the English reader need feel no mortification in confessing his ignorance of them" (v). The Victorian public – and the Victorian intelligentsia until the generation of Pater and Swinburne and Meredith – bowdlerized their consciousness of the myths in order to retain a comforting feeling of the dignity and morality of that normative body of folklore.

But something bothered the Victorians even more than immorality, and that something was the myths' fascination with chaos. For all its liberalism, Victorian England had a passion for order to an almost military degree, and most of its intellectuals feared the sheer tumult of the myths. They winnowed that tumult out of their reading of the myths to the extent that they could.

They concentrated their gaze particularly on Apollo, the bringer of light, the guardian of progress. He became, above all his rivals, the tutelary deity of the mid-nineteenth century. This is Matthew Arnold, writing about the fact that Ionian Athens became greater than the Ionian cities of Asia Minor:

It was because Athens had felt the Delphic discipline. For Apollo was not only the nourisher of genius, he was also the author of every higher moral effort. . . . Thus the graver view of life, and the thoughts which deepen men's consciousness, became connected with Delphi; and there the Athenians imbibed influences of character and *hals* which for a long time balanced in the happiest way their native vivacity and mobility, and blended with it. (270-71)

1. Yeats's ms. notes for *Four Years* are quoted from the Dutton Paperback edition of Ellmann's book (136).

2. I refer, of course, to the theory developed in Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*. In that book, Pater serves as one of the anxiety-producing literary fathers.

3. One of the accomplishments of Pater scholarship during the 1970's and '80's has been a series of intelligent discussions of Pater's influence on

the literature of the past century. The best is found in the chapter entitled "Pater and the Modern Temper," in Monsman, *Walter Pater*.

4. Nietzsche's fame was a product of the 1890's. His books were never even reviewed in the German-speaking world until 1888. See Hollingdale (232ff).

5. (236) Except where otherwise noted, quotations from *The Renaissance* will be taken from the *New Library Edition of the Works of Walter Pater*.

It is this comforting Apollonianism, this reassuring sense of the dignity of the foundational myths of European culture, which Pater in England, like Nietzsche in Germany, sets out to undermine. And although Pater lacks a good deal of the brilliance, and most of the manic audacity, of the German, and although he does not dare to break his ultimately fatal ties with academia, as Nietzsche did, for a time, in the early 1870's, the two men shared the seriousness of their sense of purpose.

Pater undercuts the older generation's position most provocatively, I think, in *The Renaissance*. He does so by creating his own ecumenical myth of culture, a myth which, as the title of the book shyly implies, has to do with seasonal fruition, and death, and cyclical recurrence.

In an obvious sense, Pater's book can be seen as a continuation of the Arnoldian project of reconciling Hellenism and Hebraism. There was nothing subversive about that. But when you look closer at the book, you glimpse what must have shocked Hopkins, and fascinated Wilde and Yeats and Lawrence about *The Renaissance*. Because in Pater's creative vision, that marriage of Hebraism and Hellenism becomes a sexual coupling, a fertility rite of cultural renewal in which the protagonists are the gods themselves. In his hands, history becomes a ritual dance, and historiography moves beyond the mere historical to become a form of myth-making.<sup>6</sup> It is a shift which would open up a new world for two succeeding generations of British writers.

Without trying to trace the entire seasonal cycle throughout the book, we can examine the creative core of the myth which controls *The Renaissance* by taking a look at the book's three central essays: the Botticelli, the Michelangelo, and the Leonardo.<sup>7</sup>

Pater finds the bridegroom for his fertility rite of Hebraism and Hellenism in Botticelli's religious art. In his rendering of the Botticelli madonnas, Mary is frightened by the sheer otherness of the infant in her lap:

Her trouble is in the very caress of the mysterious child, whose gaze is always far from her, and who has already that sweet look of devotion which men have never been able altogether to love, and which still makes the born saint an object almost of suspicion to his earthly brethren. Once, indeed, he guides her hand to transcribe in a book the words of her exaltation, the *Ave*, the *Magnificat*, and the *Gaude Maria*. . . . But the pen almost drops from her hand, and the high cold words have no meaning for her, and her true children are those others, among whom, in her rude home, the intolerable honour came to her. . . . (*The Renaissance* 57)

The Madonnas of the Botticelli essay have taken on neither knowledge nor power from their contact with divinity; mere vessels of divine conception, they are left with a postpartum feeling that they have somehow been used. They do not understand what has happened to them. Like the subsequent gods of Yeats and of Lawrence, Pater's Jesus is seen from a perplexed, uncomprehending human viewpoint. Like the Greek gods, he is more remarkable for power and potency than for

any of the softer attributes.

And this enigmatic, infant god of Christianity is matched, in the other great set piece of the Botticelli essay, with a new-born Venus, already disturbingly aware of her duties as goddess of love:

The light is indeed cold – mere sunless dawn; . . . . Men go forth to their labours until the evening; but she is awake before them, and you might think that the sorrow in her face was at the thought of the whole long day of love yet to come. (*The Renaissance* 59)

It is Venus, not Apollo, who is for Pater, at this point in his career, the central deity of Greek myth, and he makes no attempt to disguise the nature of her function. She appears in different guises throughout the various stages of *The Renaissance* – reluctant courtesan, mature temptress, jaded whore – but she is always connected with sexual pleasure and fecundity, or, in the autumnal essays of the second half of the book, contrasted to the human lack of fecundity. Apollo hardly even appears on stage. Greece in this book is crucial for the modern world not because of its Apollonian drive toward order, but because of the sheer fertility of its imagination, a fertility which for Pater is alluring, venereal, feminine. Arnold's Hellenic sweetness and light have become the attractions of a naked goddess of love. And the power which Arnold imputes to Hebraism has been transformed into the virility of a mysterious, potent, rather frightening Hebrew god. Luckily for Matthew Arnold's peace of mind, he does not seem to have noticed what his young admirer was doing with his concept.

The protagonists of Pater's fertility rite are on stage, then, during the Botticelli essay. But Botticelli cannot bring about their union. For all the latent power of his myth, Botticelli is a reluctant myth maker. The highest reaches of creativity can only be attained, in Pater's myth of culture, by the artist who dares to achieve androgyny, who can bring about a harmony of the masculine and feminine, the Hebraic and Hellenic, in his own nature.

Michelangelo is that artist, the high priest in Pater's fertility ritual, the artist in whose powerfully androgynous hands fruition can take place. He is thus in Pater's eyes an artist of nearly divine creativity: "With [Michelangelo] the very rocks seem to have life; they have but to cast away the dust and scurf that they may rise and stand on their feet" (*The Renaissance* 76). Or, put this time with the stress on subject matter: "This creation of life. . . is in various ways the motive of all his work. . ." (*The Renaissance* 76).

The luxuriant summer toward which the Quattrocento strained has arrived; the world has proved fertile again. Michelangelo's favorite classical subject is for Pater the emblem of his accomplishment: "the legend of Leda, the delight of the world breaking from the egg of a bird" (*The Renaissance* 76).

But birth connotes death in this transient, seasonal world; the regenerative ritual of a warming earth is, after all, meaning-

aesthetic interpretation of life, which stands at the threshold of and points toward distinctly modernist concerns" (205).

7. The book is studied at length in the nearly completed *Walter Pater and the Gods of Disorder*, by Robert and Janice Keefe.

6. In *The Victorian Critic and the Idea of History* Peter Allen Dale claims that in Pater's work a new conjunction in intellectual history is visible, "between, on the one hand, the tendency toward a complete historicism, which is but the logical outcome of the century's preoccupation with the meaning of history, and, on the other, the rise of a predominantly

less without the other, sinister phase of the cycle. The essay on Michelangelo celebrates life, but it mourns it, as well. The last pages of the essay are devoted to perhaps the most powerful expression of mortality that Pater ever wrote. The ritual bridegroom is dead, and the possibility of resurrection seems impossibly remote:

*Pietà*, pity, the pity of the Virgin Mother over the dead body of Christ, expanded into the pity of all mothers over all dead sons, the entombment, with its cruel "hard stones" —: this is the subject of [Michelangelo's] predilection. He has left it in many forms, sketches, half-finished designs, finished and unfinished groups of sculpture; but always as a hopeless, rayless, almost heathen sorrow — no divine sorrow, but mere pity and awe at the stiff limbs and colourless lips. (*The Renaissance* 94)

With the death of the bridegroom, the Renaissance spirit begins to fragment. In the studies which follow "The Poetry of Michelangelo," Pater's Jesus has entered the grave, and the world has begun to turn cold again. Michelangelo's mind had been a primal garden of connectedness, in which all elements worked in creative harmony. But Leonardo da Vinci's equally powerful mind is a labyrinth of conflicting impulses.

Thus, where Michelangelo had instinctively looked back toward the morning of the world's creation, Leonardo gazes steadily into dusk. He is a visionary artist in Pater's rendering of him, but his vision brings no consolation to the world. His analytical mind strips the life from what he sees, revealing the skeletal reality beneath. Even a simple court painting becomes in his hands a dark prophecy in which he "seems to have caught some presentiment of early death, painting [Beatrice d'Este] precise and grave, full of the refinement of the dead, in sad earth-coloured raiment, set with pale stones" (*The Renaissance* 112).

Leonardo's position in *The Renaissance* is analogous to that of the grail seekers in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*: his disdain for a merely natural beauty, his obsessive search for an impossible perfection, mar his own work and are evidence that the zenith of Pater's historical cycle has passed. The gods have gone underground. Fertility has receded from this autumnal world, leaving behind a wasteland tracked by a lonely, introspective wanderer. The decayed painting of the Last Supper is prophetic of the death of an entire religion: the figures are "ghosts through which you see the wall, faint as the shadows of the leaves upon the wall on autumn afternoons. This figure [of Jesus] is but the faintest, most spectral of them all."<sup>8</sup>

If Leonardo's Jesus is dead, his Mona Lisa is very nearly an antitype of Venus, aligned with death, a cruel parody of fecundity: "She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave. . ." (*The Renaissance* 125). The very rocks had sprung to life under the creative impress of

Michelangelo. Leonardo's most famous creation sits beside the rocks, and is older than they, and nearly as lifeless. She is merely undead.

*The Renaissance*, then, is about the pulse of creativity, and about humankind's defiance, through art, of death. The underlying myth is cyclical, but the book itself is conceived as an expression of tragic joy, a struggle between eros and thanatos in which the last word is held, as it must be, by death.

Fortunately for Pater, his Oxford peers failed to understand the book, but they grasped enough to know they did not like it. Their vocal, strident criticism seems to have dissipated Pater's need to shock his audience, and to have driven him back into the grey dignity of academic reticence.<sup>9</sup> It is unfortunate that it happened so early, because he followed up *The Renaissance* with a series of essays on Greek mythology which were in their own way as shocking and potentially as important as anything in his first book. But he never shaped the material into a book. *Greek Studies*, the volume in which the essays occur, is a posthumous collection edited by his friend, C.L. Shadwell.

Thus the book is something of a miscellany, but it contains two long examinations of myth — a study of Demeter and Persephone, and two essays on Dionysus — which are central to our purposes. Written and published in the *Fortnightly Review* in the mid 1870's, these essays constitute a profound attack on the view of classicism maintained by the line of Winckelmann, Goethe, Heine, and Arnold.

Pater's shyly subversive aims are visible in this statement about the relationship of Dionysus and Apollo: "Even at Delphi, the centre of the religion of Apollo, Dionysus's claim always maintained itself; and signs are not wanting that Apollo was but a late comer there" (*Greek Studies* 11-12). For Pater as for Nietzsche, there lies beneath the placid surface of Hellenic dignity an older, more disconcerting truth about the human mind. The Greeks were not mellow classicists. They were like us — modern, romantic. Whatever Apollonian sanity they attained was a tenuous harmony wrested with difficulty from the wild dissonance of Dionysian song.<sup>10</sup>

The gnostic gods of *Greek Studies* mirror that struggle. Demeter and Persephone, on the one hand, and Dionysus, on the other, represent for Pater an older, more instinctive, more purely "folk" religion than the Olympian latecomers that Victorian mythographers had concentrated on. All three nature deities have strikingly split personalities. And it is this ambiguity itself which makes them so crucial, as far as Pater is concerned, for understanding the Greek, and beyond the Greek, the human mind. Demeter was, on the one hand, "Black Demeter," the goddess of dark caves and shadowy places, monstrous in form, an enemy to man, and on the other, the beautiful, solemn goddess of the countryside. Persephone, likewise, was both Kore, goddess of summertime and flowers, and Perse-

8. Quoted from the 2nd edition of *The Renaissance* (1877) (125), rather than from the softened version which appears on p. 120 of the *Library Edition*. In that version, "ghosts" had been changed to "hosts."

9. For an examination of the adverse Oxford reaction, see Levey (142-144). It should be noted, however, that, as Donald L. Hill points out in his indispensable edition of *The Renaissance* (284-289), most of the contemporary reviews were highly favorable.

10. Gerald Monsman's otherwise excellent discussion of the relationship of Apollo and Dionysus (in the "Gods of Art" section of *Pater's Portraits* [16-29]) is weakened by his insistence on overstressing Pater's early Apollonianism. Apollo is simply not important in Pater's work until the 1880's. The central deities of *The Renaissance* are Jesus and Venus, not Apollo and Dionysus, and although there are correlations between the cultural values of the two pairs, to confuse them is to miss the significance of Pater's challenge to High Victorianism.

phone, wholly terrible, goddess of night and sleep, destruction and death.

It is that same essential duality which fascinates Pater about Dionysus. Perhaps even more than Demeter and Persephone, Dionysus becomes for Pater a mirror of the schizoid nature of the human mind. The idea seems to bother him profoundly. For most of "A Study of Dionysus," he attempts to skirt around the more sinister aspects of that duality. He treats Dionysus as a complex but not terribly threatening figure, a bohemian manic-depressive, an esthete opposed to the bourgeois deities of Olympus. But near the end of the essay, the conception turns much darker, as the author leaves the civilized Dionysus behind and shifts to the Thracian image of the god. The northern tribes, he points out, envisioned a more frightening deity – Dionysus Zagreus, "the hunter," – a brooding, mad, devouring god. And it is precisely this apparition, he complains, this eater of human flesh, who has been ignored by nineteenth-century critics in their attempt to keep hold of a comforting illusion of Hellenic order and sanity.

But that darker side of the god was essential, Pater recognizes, "not as a late after-thought but as a tradition really primitive, and harmonious with the original state of Dionysus" (*Greek Studies* 43). He makes a profound observation about Euripides' *The Bacchae*:

All through it, the true, though partly suppressed relation of the chorus to the Bacchanals is this, that the women of the chorus, staid and temperate for the moment, following Dionysus in his alternations, are but the paler sisters of his more wild and gloomy votaries – the true followers of the mystical Dionysus – the real chorus of Zagreus; the idea that their violent proceedings are the result of madness only, sent on them as a punishment for their original rejection of the god, being, . . . when seen from the deeper motives of the myth, only a "sophism" of Euripides – a piece of rationalism of which he avails himself for the purpose of softening down the tradition of which he has undertaken to be the poet. (*Greek Studies* 78)

Euripides had to use that sophism, because he was writing for a civilized audience, and Dionysus was the devourer of those constructs which constitute civilization. In Pater's symbolism, Dionysus Zagreus becomes not merely the subverter of Apollonianism, of rationality, of progress, but the void itself – "Like Hades himself, he is hollow and devouring – sarcophagus – the grave" (*Greek Studies* 39) – a figure who threatens to destroy even the tragic joy which Pater had celebrated in *The Renaissance*. For a brief moment in Pater's work, both the epithalamion and the elegy of *The Renaissance* threaten to become meaningless, swallowed up into the ferocity of the Bacchanalia. Pater turns away very quickly from that vision.

If we pause for a moment and examine the broad curve of the first half of Pater's career, we can see that Pater dethrones the Victorian Apollo in favor of Venus, creating in the process a much more sensuous, erotic underpinning for art than his immediate precursors had been willing to admit. But in the years following *The Renaissance*, Pater's art begins to darken; Venus, too, moves from the center of the stage, replaced by the dualistic gnostic deities, deities whose dark side represents not simply intoxication, but insane, destructive rage, deities

who ultimately seem to represent for the civilized Oxford don the void which threatens everything he believes in.

It is no wonder, then, that Pater never gathered the Dionysus and his other Greek essays into book form. Perhaps his insight was too pessimistic to be retained for long. Or perhaps he was too afraid of what his peers would say. They had condemned him for the ultimately milder, if equally shocking, *The Renaissance*, after all.

At any rate, for the rest of his career, through the 1880's and the first half of the 1890's, until his death, Pater closed his ears to the song of the Bacchae. In fact, as he grew older, he retreated into a strangely militant Apollonianism. *Plato and Platonism*, his last book, holds the place in Pater's career that *Frederick the Great* holds for Carlyle – it is a refutation of his earlier complexity, a shrill call for order in a world which seems to the author to be in disarray.

The Hegelian opposites whose mergings and Sunderings had provided the pulse of history in his earlier works threaten to calcify into eternally fixed poles in *Plato and Platonism*. As long as he remains in the realm of philosophical values, Pater can maintain his sense of fluidity, mediating between Heraclitean flux and Parmenidean stasis, finding a *via media* in Pythagorean harmony. But when, in the "Lacedaemon" chapter, he approaches the world of political beliefs, he stiffens into the stance of an angry schoolmaster, and his categories begin to harden. On the one hand, there is Athenian democracy, with its cant, its factionalism, its welter of ideas – the very embodiment of Ionian frivolity. And on the other, there is Spartan oligarchy, the rigorous, ascetic slave state, the champion of Dorian order.

And there can be no doubt whose side Pater is on. He is no longer a liberal now, as he had been. He talks simply as an educated member of a privileged class, afraid for the future of his caste. He delivers an encomium to Sparta's "noble slavery." He praises to the skies Sparta's system of ritual punishment, seeing it through the perhaps not unapt filter of the British public school system.

And the prime religious manifestation of Sparta's Dorian rigor is, for Pater, Apollo, the bringer of light and of order. He writes:

Kosmos; order, delightful order; is a word that became very dear, as we know, to the Greek soul, to what was perhaps most essentially Greek in it, to the Dorian element there. Apollo, the Dorian god, was its visible consecration. (*Greek Studies* 36)

Pater has retreated a long way from his earlier praise of the fecundity of Venus, of the psychological complexity of Dionysus and Demeter and Persephone. He will brook no more chaos; he would have the world henceforth stand at moral attention. One remark is particularly revealing: "[In 'Lacedaemon'], in truth all deities put on a martial habit – Aphrodite, the muses, Eros himself" (*Plato and Platonism* 213). Softness and suppleness are gone from his view of the gods now, the feminine principle is safely encased in armor. Abandoning the creative androgyny of his earlier work, he has constructed an entirely "masculine" citadel of culture, and he can say of the Spartans:



Yes! The beauty of these most beautiful of all people was a male beauty, far remote from feminine tenderness; had the expression of a certain *ascesis* in it; was like unsweetened wine. In comparison with it, beauty of another type might seem to be wanting in edge or accent. (*Plato and Platonism* 222)

It is culture cut in half, all hope of fertility gone. The Sparta which Pater constructs in the book is an embarrassment, an unconscious parody of a civilization, a state which surely would have had no room for a timid, academic, rather effeminate admirer of Newman and Arnold. It is the creation of a man desperately afraid of the disorder which seems to threaten him, a man who has grown old prematurely. There could be no sadder stopping place for so fine a writer.

Twenty years earlier, with his customary brilliant insight, Nietzsche had characterized Dorianism in this fashion:

The only way I am able to view Doric art and the Doric state is as a perpetual military encampment of the Apollonian forces. An art so defiantly austere, so ringed about with fortifications – an education so military and exacting – a polity so ruthlessly cruel – could endure only in a continual state of resistance against the titanic and barbaric menace of Dionysus. (*The Birth of Tragedy* 35)

He could as easily be describing Pater's final book.

Both the prose style and the ideas of *Plato and Platonism* are brittle, so hard that they attain a state of unintended fragility. Yet it is well to keep in mind that it is the book of a man who in his youth had listened to the songs of the gods and goddesses of disorder, who had stepped well outside the fortress of Victorian culture, and remained there for a long period. *Plato and Platonism* was praised for its sanity by Benjamin Jowett and

the other Oxford dons. But it was Pater's earlier work which bore fruit. In those earlier writings, he had shown the educated readers of the English-speaking world a new, a more seductive and exciting reality. And the Victorians never did manage to get the drawbridge of their Apollonian fortress up and locked again.

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## He Stoops to Conquer: Redeeming the Fallen Woman in the Fiction of Dickens, Gaskell and Their Contemporaries

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By the middle of the nineteenth century, with the flowering of the social problem novel in Dickens, Gaskell and their contemporaries, the fallen woman and her redemption had become compelling literary subjects.<sup>1</sup> Even Anthony Trollope, not noted for a reformer's interest in women, wrote:

a poor creature may fall, – as we call it – and yet be worth redeeming . . . the 'fallen' daughter is too often regarded as an outcast for whom no hope can be entertained. (*Letters* 1:525)

Dinah Mulock Craik, whose fiction was as popular as that of Mudie's Circulating Library luminary George Eliot, urged that the unwed mother be allowed to return to society, "judged, as, indeed, human wisdom alone has a right to judge, in all cases – solely by what she is now, and not by what she has been."<sup>2</sup> Dickens, through his stewardship of the reform home Urania Cottage, and Mrs. Gaskell, through her attempts to find help for some former prostitutes, affirmed their belief in redemption

1. See Trudgill 288; Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel*, passim. In the recently published *The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* George Watt argues that the fallen women in Dickens, Gaskell, Trollope, Collins and other major Victorian novelists represented their creators' attempts to reverse the stereotypes of the impure woman by demonstrating her essential purity and goodness. While there is not space here adequately to assess Watt's argument, my study assumes that the above

writers wished to redeem fallen women, in literature and in life, but also were convinced that these women had sinned.

2. On Eliot's popularity, see Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel*, 66; on Craik's, see "The Author of *John Halifax: The Nature of Her Works*." *British Quarterly Review* 44 (July 1866): 33 and Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik*, 105. Craik, *A Woman's Thoughts about Women*, 312-13, discusses redemption.

(*Letters of Charles Dickens* 5:passim; *Letters of Mrs. Gaskell* 111-13; Basch 207-209, 245).

These writers joined Wilkie Collins and Matilda Houston, popular writers termed "sensation novelists" who had also caught what one period reviewer called the "Magdalen fever" (quoted in Trudgill 268), in dramatizing the fallen woman's return to respectability. Dickens' *David Copperfield* (1850), Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853), Craik's *A Life for a Life* (1859), Houston's *Recommended to Mercy* (1862), Trollope's *The Vicar of Bullhampton* (1870), and Collins' *The New Magdalen* (1873) and *The Fallen Leaves* (1879) all concern the successful reformation of women of various degrees of "depravity," from the relatively blameless country girls of Dickens, Gaskell and Craik to the more hardened women of Houston, Trollope and Collins.<sup>3</sup> Yet unlike much other "fallen woman" fiction of the time, these novels for the most part avoided traditional stereotypes of harsh atonement such as the death of the illegitimate child, the river suicide, or the saintly renunciation of the world.<sup>4</sup> Instead the novels reflected the period's growing interest in more realistic ways of "saving the fallen."

In the two decades between the publication of *David Copperfield* and *The Fallen Leaves*, philanthropic concern with prostitutes and unwed mothers fostered an increasing number of evangelically inspired rescue societies; by 1860 there were about two dozen in London alone. Such organizations often relied on and were run by voluntary female workers, a practice which generated almost as much controversy as the efficacy of rescue itself (Bristow 56, 66, 70; Harrison 360; Prochaska). "I don't like to see women discuss the matter at all," one irate physician wrote. W.R. Greg felt that it was "discreditable to a [respectable] woman even to be supposed to know" of the fallen, much less minister to them. The eminent Dr. Acton, author of a study of prostitution and the medical text *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive System*, favored male-run Lock Hospitals but opposed rescue societies in which women figured. He argued that the "very tenderness" of women's natures would stand in the way of their helping the fallen, for "true pity often requires a mixture of severity."<sup>5</sup> Dickens apparently concurred, for he undertook to direct the rescue activities of Angela Burdett-Coutts, the richest woman in England, his Mark System for conduct (which she opposed) curbing her feminine tendency toward leniency (Bristow 68, Philip Collins 94-110, Vicinus xii).

Those who believed that organized charity was not only the province of men countered the traditionalists by arguing that the work was better suited to women, "natural helpers" whose instinctive sympathy for the downtrodden could convert where male harshness might alienate (Basch 114, Thomson 17, Vicinus xi). To one advocate, it was only women who would "be true" to women (Kaye 338). Mrs. Gaskell, writing to describe her good fortune in booking passage for a young prostitute who wished to emigrate and begin a new life, was impressed by women rescuers. She marveled in a letter to a friend: "I have found out a whole *nest* of good ladies in London, who

say they will at any time help me" (113). Later in the century crusader Josephine Butler argued more strongly that it was time to end the way men forbade "the one class of women entrance into the presence of the other. . ." (quoted in *Strong-Minded Women* 436-7). Noted reformer Lady Mary Jeune concurred: "The work is essentially a woman's work. . . . It is for women to hold out the hand of fellowship, and lead the fallen again to a pure life" (681, see also Steer 149-60).

I propose to consider whether this debate about rescue was replicated in Dickens, Gaskell and their contemporaries, some of enduring reputation, some forgotten. In the novels mentioned above, all of them popular with the Victorian reading public, what was the role of women in the rescue process? Was there a difference in male and female writers' presentation of redemption? Finally, were the female writers more responsive than the males to rescue plans that excluded marriage and emphasized economic self-sufficiency?

In the Gospel according to John (8:1), Jesus urges merciful treatment for the adulteress: "He who is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone at her." Raising up the prostrate woman, he raises her up symbolically as well: "Neither do I condemn thee; go thy way, and from henceforth sin no more." Jesus then lets the woman go, presumably to practice her repentance. Dickens, though adhering to the scenario of the Jesus figure lifting up the female sinner, is not so trusting of her ability to reform on her own. He alters the biblical scene by emphasizing that without the continued presence of the male overseer the fallen woman is exposed to the dangers of the world, including her own weak will. Indeed in the tale of Little Em'ly in *David Copperfield* one is struck by Em'ly's inability to help herself after she is abandoned by Steerforth. From the time her Uncle Peggotty resolves to find her (and either rescue her from or marry her to Steerforth – it is not clear which), to his unsuccessful attempts to persuade Mrs. Steerforth to permit her son to marry and thus redeem Em'ly, to the last glimpse of her clinging to her savior uncle, Dickens suggests that the man who rescues Em'ly must remain with her forever.

The necessity for this kind of male rescue is underscored by the conduct of the "respectable" women. Em'ly is viciously judged by Mrs. Steerforth, who sees her son's abandonment of the girl as admirable, and by Rosa Dartle, who lashes out that she would "have her whipped." In their only meeting, Miss Dartle completely humiliates Em'ly, reducing her to say, "dear lady, think what I have suffered, and how I am fallen!" (715). In a sense Em'ly must flee England to avoid the wrath of these women; forgiving angels like Agnes Wickfield have no power to offset the hatred of the well-to-do. At most, Agnes is an apparition glimpsed by David when he sees Peggotty and the Micawbers off to Australia:

I thought I saw sitting by an open port . . . a figure like Em'ly's; it first attracted my attention by another figure parting from it with a kiss, and as it glided away . . . [reminded] me of – Agnes! (806)

3. On the popularity of these writers see Cruse.

4. See Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel*, 69, on such stereotypes. Also see, for instance, Jebb, Frances Trollope and Tonna. Ruth, it is true, does die, but this is years after she had "fallen." See also Watt 7.

5. The irate doctor is quoted in Sigsworth and Wyke 97. Greg is quoted in Bristow 62. Dr. William Acton's texts were published in 1857; his remarks on the homes are in "Female Penitentiaries" 374-75.

Yet Agnes' aid to Em'ly is more mirage than reality here. The wounded victim, who had "kneeled down" at Peggotty's feet when first he found her, "humbled," begging forgiveness, can be rescued only by the strength of male love.

Basch and Slater have voiced the familiar argument that Dickens stereotyped his fallen women, their inevitable misery and pathetic yearning for a lost hearth.<sup>6</sup> Yet few critics have remarked the way in which the approval of the paternal figure helps restore a measure of human contact and renewed hope. Thus Peggotty, who knew the now half-crazed prostitute Martha when she was a younger girl, acts the compassionate father to her. Associated with the refuse of the Thames, Martha is groveling with shame as she cries out to Peggotty in a scene biblical in diction and theme:

"Throw me away, as all the world does. Kill me for being what I am. . . ."

He looked upon her, while she made this supplication. . . and, when she was silent, gently raised her. "Martha," said Mr. Peggotty, "God forbid as I should judge you. . . ."

His influence upon her was complete. (680)

It is interesting in this regard that the doomed Nancy of *Oliver Twist* (1838), although softened by little Oliver's appeal and inspired to fervent love for Rose Maylie, is not redeemed by either of them, in part because she is too hardened a criminal but also because there is no Jesus figure to counter her attachment to the brutal Sykes, no Gladstone to take her home to tea.<sup>7</sup> Placing her faith in the demons Fagan and Sykes rather than in a Christ-like deliverer, she is lost.

Despite the numerous differences which separate them and the twenty years between the publication of *David Copperfield* and *The Vicar of Bullhampton*, Dickens and Trollope combine a protective attitude toward women, including immoral ones, with the conviction that "pure" women cannot help the Nancys and Carry Brattles of the world. Trollope's kindhearted Reverend Fenwick, the vicar of Bullhampton, dutifully reports to his wife on his attempts to reform the prostitute Carry, but never envisions any contact between the two women. Abandoned by the criminal who had been supporting and living with her, the miserable Carry is torn between the desire to find comfort in a kind male (she feels no decent woman will help, and in that she proves right) and the shameful conviction of her unworthiness. Trollope dramatizes Carry's meeting with the vicar:

"Carry, I am so glad that I have found you;" – and then he put out his hand to her.

"Oh, Mr. Fenwick, I ain't fit for the likes of you to touch," she said. (156)

Like Uncle Peggotty, Trollope's redeemer persists: "But as his hand was still stretched out she put her own into it. . . ." Thus begins the saving of Carry, who "looked up into the face of the clergyman with a gentle, tamed, beseeching gaze." Re-

sponding to Mr. Fenwick's argument that she can "begin again," she moves to more respectable lodgings while the vicar persuades her family to take her back. He finds her sewing work, which Trollope presents as something for her to do with her time until her father relents, not as a possible means of income even though Carry is impoverished. When, after harsh words, her father takes her back, there is no further mention of her supporting herself; the family will provide.

Although at first Carry's father refuses to forgive – "there is nothing so vile as a harlot" (348) – he relents and protects her from being called to testify against her thieving companions. It is women like Carry's sister-in-law who are the uncharitable ones. Trollope criticizes this woman for refusing to aid Carry by juxtaposing the sister-in-law's view with the vicar's:

"She's been and brought a slur upon us, the vile thing! If you ask me, Mr. Fenwick, there ain't nothing too bad for her."

Fenwick, on the other hand, thought that there could hardly be anything too good for his poor penitent. . . . What was the great virtue of this fat, well-fed, selfish, ignorant woman before him, that she should turn up her nose at a sister who had been unfortunate?" (262)

Trollope's criticism of the woman seems inconsistent with his emphasis on the need for a male redeemer. Yet, as Halperin notes, Trollope's "tenderness for dependent women" was equalled by his dislike of female "hardness" (184), especially when women tried to take over the decision-making role. Here Trollope is more the critic of the shrewish wife, who neglects her duty (her husband, another potential comforter, would have taken Carry in) than an advocate of the female rescuer. Finally, although Trudgill feels Trollope is criticizing the womanish sentimentality of Mr. Fenwick in such scenes (302), it is the vicar who is the moral conscience of the novel and who successfully returns Carry to her family. Given the "unnatural" manliness of Carry's unforgiving sister-in-law, Mr. Fenwick's compassion signals the reader that he possesses the natural manliness of the gentleman and the redeemer.

Some final examples of the male rescuer and his providential effect on the fallen woman occur in Wilkie Collins. *The Fallen Leaves* was written by a man who was especially sensitive to the problems of women who lived outside of society; Collins had two children by one of his mistresses (Robinson 121-25). The novel dramatizes a Gladstonian encounter between the aptly named idealist Amelius Goldenheart and Simple Sally, a street prostitute. He so pities this teenage waif that he takes her home until he can decide where to place her. His kindness has the same immediate effect observable in Dickens and Trollope. After one meeting with him, Sally, inspired to lead a good life, pleads to be permitted to

"black your boots and brush your clothes, and keep your room tidy – and . . . try hard to learn, if you will have me taught. . . ." (278, 279)

Admiring Goldenheart for his goodness and his belief in her

6. Basch 22, Slater 346-48. See also Collins, *Dickens and Crime*, 113-115. Elsewhere in the novel, Peggotty does, however, compare Em'ly and Martha to tainted women, a reflection of Dickens' own ambivalence about redemption.

7. On Gladstone's activities see Magnus 105-110, Bristow 63. Watt 14 has an interesting reference to the "male-engendered" corruption in the novel.

ability to reform, Sally wishes to live with him. Quite an opposite reaction is provoked by Mrs. Payson and her female-run refuge home. Although Mrs. Payson is characterized as benevolent and well-intentioned, Sally runs away from The Home for Friendless Women, an act which, Collins demonstrates, helps convince Amelius that he must marry Sally and "be all that the kindest mother and father could have been . . ." (440).

In an earlier novel, *The New Magdalen*, though its heroine Mercy Merrick is as strong and self-assured as Sally is weak and insecure, Mercy attributes her redemption to a minister who once visited her in a House of Refuge:

"[Julian Gray] touched my heart as no man has touched it before or since. The hard despair melted in me at the sound of his voice. . . . From that time I have accepted my hard lot." (208)

Collins reasserts the idea of the mysterious power of male reformers when, in the coincidences he and his friend Dickens so favored, Mercy takes on the identity of a well-connected young woman and, in her new guise, meets this man again: "her guilty conscience owned and feared its master. . ." (277).

In light of her fear of Julian Gray, it is significant that Mercy has no respect for the female who forgives. Lady Janet Roy, whom Mercy duped and who pardons her and pleads for her return, is rebuffed. When Mercy seeks anonymity in a House of Refuge, it is Lady Janet who follows her but Julian Gray whose pardon Mercy seeks. As in *The Fallen Leaves*, the penitent's reward is wedlock: Gray forgives and marries Mercy.

In addition to the obvious Cinderella quality of these transformations, it is striking that Collins' fallen women can reform without having to take responsibility for themselves. It is as if he is saying that they have suffered enough and deserve the care that loving, generous husbands can provide. Certainly their periods of atonement are brief and fairly painless. The women are protected from the moment their men fall in love with them and nothing that society can do – and each affair raises eyebrows – in any way affects their security and prospects. Collins was criticized for his "moral anarchy" by an enraged reviewer of the period (*British Quarterly Review*, 44 [1866]: 34); to modern commentators, it is "moral relativism" (Hughes 154) and the creation of "counterworlds" (Knoepfmacher 363). Certainly the redemptive marriages are events in worlds where ordinary norms do not obtain. On another level, however, they solve the problem of the Magdalen's social survival.

Because Dickens, Trollope and Collins perceived men as the proper ones to concern themselves with social issues (witness the satires on the officious Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House*, the abrasive Wallachia Petrie in *He Knew He Was Right* and Drusilla Clack in *The Moonstone*), they naturally created characters like Peggotty, who declaim "she and me shall live . . . where no one can't reproach her," or the more polished but equally fervent Julian Gray:

"She may long to make atonement, and may not know where to begin. . . . Is such a woman . . . all wicked, all vile? I deny it!" (389)

Apart from their reluctance to permit contact between pure and

impure women lest the tainted one corrupt the innocent (note how Dickens keeps Agnes from Mrs. Strong, even though the woman is only suspected of adultery), these writers dramatized a perhaps less conscious motive. If the pure woman was the object of what a recent study of Victorian sexual ideology in Dickens, Trollope and Collins termed "sentimentalized erotic desire" (Barickman et al 17), what sexual feeling must the Magdalen have evoked? That is, if rescue meant defusing the *femme fatale*, it was a way for men to sublimate their own sexuality, the sexual feelings she aroused in them. Vanquishing and purging the sexual impulse meant triumphing over the temptation the sexual woman, penitent or not, provided. As Cominos has remarked in his analysis of Victorian sexuality, "Habitual resistance to temptation . . . strengthened character and facilitated control" (162). Certainly Gladstone's diary, with its symbols of tiny whips representing self-punishment after evangelical meetings with prostitutes, testify to the self-imposed trial of the flesh such "conversions" exacted from him (3: passim).

Yet such motives were not always conscious. Indeed, if conversion necessitated male rescuers, the conscious motive was that the woman, however unhappy, was too weak to effect it herself. "Are you sure of your resolution?" Julian Gray asks Mercy Merrick. "I am certain of it," she replies, "as long as you don't leave me by myself" (473). In such a world, the penitent's change of heart (it is difficult to call it a change in character) is not the result of what Mitchell in her analysis of Ruth terms "individual development through her own choice" (*The Fallen Angel* 35). In contrast, in three novels by women authors who were familiar to the Victorian reader – *Ruth*, *A Life for a Life*, and *Recommended to Mercy* – quite another approach to redemption is envisioned. There is little solitary male attempt at conversion, no father figure with mystical powers effecting an overnight transformation. The penitent's growth is slow, her acceptance hard-won.

Of all the novels about unchaste women in the mid-Victorian period, Gaskell's *Ruth* was one of the few in which the repentant protagonist earned her place in society by her own efforts.<sup>8</sup> Ruth's road to self-reliance, however, is a long one. A naive seamstress sent to the perplexing and exploitative city, she has a "deplorable lack of reasoning ability," as Bick remarks, which, with her passivity and submissiveness, makes her easy prey for the unscrupulous Mr. Bellingham. In contrast to the outcast women in novels by men, Ruth, when left by her seducer, is befriended by both a man and a woman, the Dissenting minister Mr. Benson and his unmarried sister. Basch sees Mr. Benson as the redeemer of Ruth, arguing that he sacrifices his standing in the parish to shield her (248). Yet from the very first Gaskell emphasizes the need for Miss Benson to help rescue Ruth. When the semi-invalid minister, meeting the forlorn Ruth in a remote Welsh town, tries to comfort her, she runs from him in shame. He follows her, falls, and calls for her help. Although on one level the scene suggests that even saviors need assistance at times, it is significant that the male alone cannot provide safety for Ruth, which Mr. Benson recognizes by sending for his sister.

8. Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel*, 174 terms it the only one, but her argument can be extended to include writers like Houston and Craik.

It is Miss Benson, though condemnatory at first, who decides to take Ruth home with them. Mr. Benson has little contact with Ruth after he summons his sister. He speaks to God on Ruth's behalf ("Oh, Father! listen to my prayer, that her redemption may date from this time" [120]), but it is Miss Benson who speaks to Ruth. In a crucial scene she convinces Ruth to return to the world, though with a new identity. The scene establishes something that Mr. Benson, with his plea for God to forgive Ruth, cannot: the sisterly relationship, even between a woman who will never marry and one expecting an illegitimate child.

"Thank you for thinking of [my child]. . . . Indeed . . . I don't know how to thank you for all you are doing. . . ."

"Then I may get you a black gown? – and we may call you Mrs. Hilton?"

"No, not Mrs. Hilton," said Ruth, hastily.

"Why not?" asked [Miss Benson]. . . .

"It was my mother's name," said Ruth, in a low voice. "I had better not be called by it."

"Then let us call you by my mother's name," said Miss Benson, tenderly. (129)

The Bensons take Ruth to Eccleston, house her, help her acquire an education and a position as a day-governess, and care for her son while she is at work. In a few years Ruth is mistress of herself. When her past is discovered she does not hide from the world or cling to the Bensons; she finds work as a nurse instead. At the close of the novel it is ironic that, having rejected Mr. Bellingham's condescending offer of marriage, she sacrifices her life to him, dying of a fever contracted nursing him back to health. Men seem to mean suffering here, not redemption.

Unlike the reformed women in the novels of Dickens, Trollope and Collins, Ruth is condemned by the patriarchal figure, in this case Mr. Bradshaw, who is scandalized that his children's governess had been an unwed mother.

"If there be one sin I hate . . . it is wantonness."

"I was so young."

"The more depraved, the more disgusting, you," Mr. Bradshaw exclaimed, almost glad that the woman, unresisting so long, should now begin to resist. (334)

Bradshaw banishes Ruth from his house and employ and directs his family to have nothing more to do with her. Nor is Ruth's loathsome suitor Mr. Bellingham any more interested in her vindication. He offers marriage as a way to annex a woman now perceived as marriageable.

These men will never permit Ruth to forget what she once was. In the terms of the novel, her only atonement is death. Thus, although her purity of mind was so singular it seemed impossible to the novel's detractors,<sup>9</sup> Gaskell has Ruth die even after this fallen angel has been redeemed. A similar pattern of men thwarting redemption occurred in the Gaskell story "Lizzie Leigh," published a few years before *Ruth*, in which, after the seduced Lizzie disappears in shame, her brother tries

to prevent her mother and his fiancée from finding her. Only the women's combined efforts prevail, but Lizzie's penance is a solitary life. Thus whether she saves or sacrifices the reformed woman, Gaskell demonstrates that the woman cannot return to society without male approval.

Dinah Mulock Craik's *A Life for a Life* was highly praised in its day for its moral seriousness. On the surface the novel bears out Craik's reputation as a traditionalist who, as a *British Quarterly Review* critic applauded, "stands invariably on the side of truth and goodness,"<sup>10</sup> and, he might have added, the celebration of woman's role. Superficially there is nothing in the novel to question male dominance. Although one critic chides the heroine Dora Johnston for her vow to remain faithful to her lover Max Urquhart even though her father had forbidden her to marry him, Dora is not a defiant woman and, like the other "good" women of the novel, leads a life of domesticity and obedience. Similarly the novel's theme, the need to be morally accountable for grave past mistakes, is conventional enough. Max Urquhart had in his youth accidentally killed a man and vowed to atone for the rest of his life. Yet the theme is also explored in a subplot critics did not remark, the story of the reformation of Lydia Cartwright.

Indeed the novel is so optimistic about the reclamation of this wayward seamstress that it belies Craik's reputation as a conservative. Whether contemporary reviewers realized it or not, *A Life for a Life* is unconventional enough to dramatize the way the Johnston sisters befriend the lower-class woman seduced and deserted by Charteris, the fiancé of one of the sisters, Penelope. It is interesting to compare Penelope, who ultimately helps Lydia marry Charteris, with the jealous and hate-filled Rosa Dartle, who blames the seduced Em'ly for Steerforth's excesses. In contrast Craik suggests (in however utopian a way) that Penelope's interest in Lydia has enabled both women to forego jealousy and hatred and become better women.

Certainly the Johnston sisters help Lydia conquer the dependency which is so great that, when they first visit her, although Lydia is fainting with hunger, "the first word that came to the wretched girl's lips" was Charteris's (2:144). What Lydia must be saved from is her need for a male protector, especially one as unreliable as Charteris. After a few months of work on her own as an instructor to female prisoners, work which the Johnston sisters had found for her, Lydia is no longer passive, weak, self-pitying. When she eventually marries Charteris, who rather improbably has undergone a change for the better himself (again through the benevolence of the sisters), it is Lydia who is the stronger. Even if the marriage is a reward for her moral development – "former things shall never be remembered against her" – Craik acknowledges that "in some things, poor loving soul!" she is "a better wife than he deserves" (3:221).

If in a sense Gaskell bows to convention by killing off her heroine, Craik too is in the period tradition by marrying Lydia off to her former seducer after having proved that feminine survival depended on the ability to earn a living rather than

9. W.R. Greg, for example, quoted in "Introduction," *Ruth*, ed. Dr. A.W. Ward, xvii. See also Rubenius 208.

10. *British Quarterly Review* 44 (July 1866): 33 mentions Craik's "truth and goodness"; on Craik as conservative, see Showalter 16. Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik*, Ch. 7, presents the counter-argument.

ensnare a husband. Yet unlike most of the other authors in this subgenre, Gaskell and Craik focus less on the agony of contrition than the penitent's development, whatever her fate. In this they join a final novel, Mrs. Houston's *Recommended to Mercy*, which details the life of a woman after her decision to atone. The novel, a "library favorite" (Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel*, 108; see also *London Times* 3 Sept. 1862, 5, and "Sensation Novels"), tells of Helen Langton, who runs off with the married Phillip Thornleigh and repents of it for three volumes. Her long road to redemption, which includes arduous and unappreciated charitable work, determined attempts to be free of Thornleigh, and shabby treatment by the well-bred, culminates in her work with prostitutes and her endowment of a Refuge Home.

Helen has two roles in the novel, fallen woman redeemed by her own strength of will and redeemer of others. In her latter role, she visits a sick woman:

Rhoda Mason was one among the many sinful ones sought out by Helen in their need; for between the 'good' world and the bad she was as a connecting link, and some - sick, neglected, and remorseful, called her blessed! (2:29)

*Recommended to Mercy*, even more than the Gaskell and Craik novels, is addressed to women. Helen reflects early in her affair with Thornleigh:

it was not the force of overpowering passion for him which led me from what is called the 'path of duty,' but rather the thorns strewn by women in that path, and which made it so hard to tread . . . women are women's worst enemies. (1: 108-109)

In the world of this novel, women are the arbiters of virtuous conduct. Helen suffers because, as Thornleigh's mistress, she is a pariah. As a penitent, she suffers just as much: she is a woman with a past, and most "decent" women recoil. Yet she journeys toward self-respect partly because she meets other women who are willing to treat her with kindness. Not telling of her past, Helen meets a clergyman's wife of whom she says: "It was the constant sight of her goodness and purity that first fully awakened me to a sense of my own guilt" (2:37). The woman as potential savior appears again somewhat later in the novel in one of the few abasement scenes in fiction by women. Rather than focus on Helen's contrition, as a male novelist might, Houston makes the occasion one for preaching to women. Helen, self-abasing but angry at women in general, thanks Thornleigh's sister-in-law for receiving her:

God bless you! for you, a pure, good woman have not scorned the touch of the poor sinner's hand. And ah! believe me when I say that did the world contain more of charity such as yours, there would be in it fewer such as I am. (2:150)

The novel argues, rather ingeniously, that women like Helen would not fall if society did not encourage such feminine competitiveness for men. A woman who paid more attention to developing herself and less to the marriage market would be far less swayed by male attention and more equipped to with-

stand assaults on her virtue. On a similar note, Helen laments that the young women of the lower classes derive so little sense of satisfaction from their ill-paid, tiring work that they too are easy prey, yet, like Craik, she draws the line at married women working if they are not hard-pressed. In any event, concern for more and better avenues of employment for young women is a footnote to the novel's main idea, that "Women have . . . harder hearts than men" and will never admit "even the most repentant of Magdalens" into their company (2:77). But though Houston criticizes feminine indifference to the fallen whereas Gaskell and Craik have no such complaint, she joins them in viewing redemption as the province of women dedicated to helping the fallen back on their feet again.

The reality of rescue in Victorian England was far from the world envisioned in novels, whether the authors were male or female. The Magdalen Home regime was harsh, the experience an institutional one whether a woman entered a large hospital or a small house of refuge. The "reward" for a year or two of such voluntary exile was often only an exploitative domestic job. Recidivism, despite disclaimers by rescue organizations, was extremely high (Harrison *passim*, Basch 207-209, Hall and Howes 26). Whether supervised by man or woman, the penitents received little of the sympathy and comfort described in fiction. While proponents extolled the "friendly surveillance" of the Magdalen Hospital and similar institutions, others deplored the required prayer, colorless uniforms, and punitive atmosphere, "all the wretched little stringent rules."<sup>11</sup> Modern historians for the most part agree with Victorian critics of the homes that the rescue movement, at least on the institutional level, was a failure (Acton, *Medical Times* 169-70; Bloch 219; Bristow Ch. 3).

Yet those who, like prostitutes' rights crusader Josephine Butler (who had read and been impressed by *Ruth*), criticized the reform methods of the time, may have found in fiction by women writers an idea absent in the work of men, that sororal rather than paternal treatment encouraged women who wished to reform to be self-sufficient as well. Dinah Craik urged women to befriend other women but made it equally clear that "no human power . . . [could] keep . . . [a fallen woman] in degradation unless by her will" (*A Woman's Thoughts about Women* 2:114). Of course, given the Victorian belief in marriage as vocation for women, the dual emphasis on feminine friendship and individual choice as agents of reform was tempered by the idea of marriage as the symbol of the outcast's return to society. Yet in contrast to the way Dickens, Trollope and Collins, more liberal than most in characterizing the fallen woman, depicted her as forever guided, protected, and governed by men, novelists like Gaskell, Craik and Houston presented a moral transformation effected at least in part by the penitent herself.

The fallen woman fiction discussed here bears out the truth of John Reed's assertion: "Through[out] the century, women were seeking to establish a new image of themselves, while men in their literature . . . and art were attempting to fix them in suitable types (77). The female version of the redemption novel was thus consistent with the pattern Elizabeth Abel has

11. The phrase "friendly atmosphere" is in "Penitents and Saints" 9; Harrison 369 describes the regimen; the objection to rules is in Skene 10.

found central to all female *Bildungsromane*, that of the "evolution of a coherent . . . self through apprenticeship or awakening" (*The Voyage In Fictions of Female Development* 13, 11). While men were concerned with the Magdalen's salvation through obedience, women emphasized her self-discovery. Indeed Gaskell, Craik and Houstoun replaced submission to authority with the self-reliance a pure life could bring. However little these women saw themselves as feminists,<sup>12</sup> they were unconventional enough to argue for what Josephine Butler called the "feminine form of philanthropy" (82). To them, the fallen woman, once reclaimed, could do better than cling to the man who had stooped to redeem her.

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12. On Gaskell, see Houghton 275; on reformers as non-feminists, see Schupf 315.

## Trollope's Ground of Meaning: *The Macdermots of Ballycloran*

Sarah Gilead

The Anthony Trollope that has emerged in the literary criticism of recent years has more and more taken aspects of doubleness, paradox, and elusiveness. James Kincaid formulates Trollopien doubleness in terms of tension between dramatic modes; between closed, Augustan, comedy-of-manners traditionalism and open, fluid, interrogative modernism (4). Peter Garrett analyzes the importance of multiple narrative in Trollope as "the absence of a strong controlling center and the 'weak' relations of both plot and theme which open up the structure of his novels and permit more play of differences than we find in his contemporaries" (for example, the blurring of thematic categories seemingly established in the novel's narrative structure) (181). For Walter M. Kendrick, Trollopien realism is a profoundly paradoxical enterprise in which writing seeks to efface itself before reality in order to express and define reality, but must simultaneously retain its difference from reality even as it purports to be continuous with it (6-7). Bill Overton discerns "two separate and distinct kinds of consciousness" in Trollope, the Trollope who speaks in his own voice or as conventional narrative and commentator, and the Trollope who emerges from the structure of his fictions; thus, Trollope displays "a striking dissociation between what he could imagine and what he could formulate and discuss (1-2). Much of Trollope's increasing power to generate, year after year, a fresh spate of critical and biographical metatexts seems indeed to derive from the intriguing discords in his fiction between narrator (often solidly conservative and categorical) and narrative (based on subtle characterizations and examinations of intricate moral/social nuances of meaning); between plot and sub or counterplot; between on the one hand pellucid style, bourgeois familiarity of setting and scene, vividly realistic dialogue, and linear chronology; and on the other hand evaluative/interpretive ambiguities, relativisms, inconclusiveness.

Yet Trollope's first novel, *The Macdermots of Ballycloran* offers a vision of human experience that seems resolutely monolithic, and, in furtherance of that vision, features unity of mood, theme, plot, characterization, style, and meaning. Paradox and ambiguity, dialectic and multivalent meanings are not generated. It is a novel which is at once easy to understand and hard to discuss. It has in the history of Trollope criticism been a meager generator of critical responses perhaps because it seems to call mainly for acknowledgment of its bleak worldview rather than for interpretive play on questions of theme or structure. As R.C. Terry notes, "Nowhere in Trollope is there more assured harmony of public and personal themes . . . . In *The Macdermots* the unity is absolute" (74). Geoffrey Harvey describes the tone of the novel as "overwhelmingly tragic" (15), and indeed the novel's Irish-humor and local-color episodes, with their palpable undercurrents of impending disaster, only heighten the melodramatic effects. The novel's overall structure, its portrait of Ireland, and the individual histories

of families and characters are defined by a grinding, unmitigated inevitability of narrative, eschewing suspense, reversal of expectations, shifts in tone, characterization, plot, and point of view. Narrative events, developments, and conclusions are predictable, indeed are repetitive, all variations of the same essential story, with the same basic meaning. Characters' moral, psychological, social, and political differences are eventually revealed as irrelevant in the face of overwhelming arrays of determining forces, so that the characters, despite surface distinctions, turn out to be doubles of one another. The relentless repetition of a single plot has the paradoxical effect of effacing it. Everywhere it goes, it finds only itself in another guise, redundancy of meaning producing not excess or richness, but dearth.

The plot is itself determined by the image of a ruined house whose history the narrator recounts. The house is a "picture of misery, of useless expenditure, unfinished pretense, and premature decay" (ch. 1), a description which in fact echoes throughout the novel, being aptly and succinctly descriptive of many of the characters, families, and institutions depicted in the novel, most of which seek at best stasis and achieve instead slow rot. Since the plot accounts for the ruin of the house, it can only end where it began, like a straight line which only doubles back on itself, to return to its starting point, and just as Thady Macdermot after fleeing to Aughacashel, finds that he really has no place to go but back home. *The Macdermots* does end essentially where it began. A world that in the beginning of the novel is already gripped by misery and near chaos is at the end of the novel perhaps a step closer to chaos. Situations which at first seemed nearly hopeless simply become completely so; characters burdened by trouble plunge into greater trouble, then despair, then death.

Singleness of purpose defines character and theme as well as structure of the novel. Fanatic, single-criterion, obsessive behavior is typical: the bitter political partisanship, Feemy's love for the despicable Ussher, Thady's desperately ruthless collecting of rent, the judge's harsh application of criminal law to Thady, old Larry Macdermot's alcoholism, Ussher's unreasonably persistent seduction of Feemy.

Captain Miles Ussher, Protestant sub-inspector in the revenue police, becomes enslaved to his own desire partly because of his character and partly as a consequence of social/moral anarchy. Embodiment, perpetrator, and victim of "lawless law," a motif pervasive in the novel, Ussher hounds the poor who have turned to illegal distilling in order to survive. Along with other police, landlords, judges, and lawyers, Ussher oppresses the starving in the name of the law, and preys economically and sexually on those too weak to fight back. He exploits the poverty, ignorance, and lack of paternal authority in the Macdermot family, and exploits also his own professional prestige, to seduce Feemy. But despite his wily, practiced pursuit of his desire, he dooms himself when his appetite for sex predominates over his appetite for more money and power. Ussher simply cannot resist his physical attraction to Feemy, even though he thereby jeopardizes his career and ultimately forfeits his life. His cruel selfishness is that of the conventional villainous seducer, but has a distinctively irrational aspect as a kind of mindless voracity, almost an instinctive reflex. Ussher can-



not help grasping at every possible means of self-gratification, and he cannot assess rationally the risk involved. Like everyone else in the novel, he becomes caught up in ever-tightening nets of circumstance and accident. His desire dictates his actions on the night of his abortive flight with Feemy; circumstances (Feemy's fainting, the darkness, Thady's presence, his own haste) conspire to bring about his death. His own reasoning ability, his hypocritical advocacy of social order and law, the sensible warnings of others, like Denis McGovery, are powerless against this combination of the forces of desire and chance.

Feemy is a victim, indirectly, of all of those forces that compelled Ussher's actions and his destruction. But she herself, like Ussher, is victim of a fatal combination of historical and socio-economic circumstances, of her class and family history, her character, and her own set of accidents and circumstances. Feemy's lack of awareness of her situation and her helplessness to control or alter it are symbolized in the single motif of disorder pervading every aspect of her life, from her down-at-heels grooming to the absence of parental control in her family. Her father and brother cannot or do not know how to exercise authority over her, and neither they nor any other source has enabled her to internalize precepts of self-control or norms of behavior. Her ignorance of social forms and standards, her natural deficiency in strategic and analytical thinking, bad luck in the attractive presence of Ussher, and indeed in her own physical attractiveness, the boredom arising from a socially, intellectually, and economically impoverished existence – all conspire to make her prey to unrealizable dreams of bliss with Ussher. As in Ussher's case, her stubborn insistence on clinging to her desire is a form of self-harming obsessiveness; she is deaf to the wise councils of Father John, the cruder but equally accurate warnings of her brother Thady and the common sense of Mrs. McKeon. And, like Ussher, her attempts to improve her lot – in her case, to extricate herself from a narrow and lonely life – merely set in motion the machinery of events that eventually destroys her, Ussher, her unborn child, and Thady. She cannot escape her family legacy of improvidence, violent emotion, proud stubbornness, ignorance, or her own sexuality. Her very willingness to endure physical pain rather than face public shame (she tightly binds her growing belly) exemplifies how in the novel an individual's potential strengths – in her case, a kind of stoic pride – do not save her but only hasten destruction.

Thady is, relative to his family and general surroundings, of rather fine grain, serious, sensitive, intelligent. But such qualities, in his circumstances, merely exacerbate his sufferings by making him the more painfully aware of "the degradation of his position" and of his helplessness. His family pride, another potential strength, is both a cruel irony (his family at present consisting of a senile and alcoholic father and a "fallen" sister, neither of whom evince the slightest affection for or even interest in him) and an important cause of his murder of the man who was dishonoring his sister and his family. A final irony is that his family pride helps to turn the last survivor of the family (himself) into a criminal hanged on the gallows. Similar ironies are evident in his social position. As *de facto* master of Ballycloran, Thady tries to preserve an almost feudal communal hierarchy and cohesiveness; he has genuine affection

for his tenants, and a powerful sense of duty towards them. However, extreme poverty has forced this would-be feudal system to degenerate at all points. Thady is compelled to squeeze his tenants for rent; Pat Brady, the trusted link between master and men, is deceitful and treacherous. The feudal ideal, theoretically a guarantor of communal order, harmony, justice, and stability, does appear in perverse and parodic form among the Ribbonmen, where it manifests itself as compacts in vengeance. Says Joe Reynolds, enunciating a creed of terrorist solidarity, "if he [Thady] wants the boys to stick to him, let him stick to them" (ch. 4). Thady's entanglement in this counter-community of desperate men despite his firm decision to avoid them reiterates the theme of failure of individual moral will, and instigates what promises to be a new cycle of vengeance and counter-vengeance: Thady, hanged for the murder of Ussher, is regarded by many not as a victim of circumstance or even as a simple criminal but as a political martyr.

The above-illustrated repetitiveness of circumstance, situation, and story is symbolized in Thady's repeated encounters with his double. Like the plot of the novel as a whole, Thady initially, medially, and ultimately finds only versions of himself, all repulsive and deadly images representing his own helplessness and ever-narrowing possibilities, his subjection to chance, circumstance, and time. The first such image is the figure of his own father, old Larry Macdermot, who haunts Thady as, simultaneously, sign of the inescapable failure and burden of the Macdermot and Irish past, as proof of the constricted present, and as threat of a disastrous future. Unable to control his life, his family fortunes, or even his own body, Larry is Thady in exaggerated (but only temporarily exaggerated) form. In his senility, Larry "had become almost like the tables and chairs in the parlour, only much less useful and more difficult to move" (ch. 6). When not described as an object, Larry appears as a simple organism capable only of the most elementary needs and fears, his addiction to alcohol expressing single-mindedness in its most reductive sense. His drinking is "a slow, desperate, solitary kind of suction"; "he looked as if he were degenerating into the grub even before he died."

Thady, panic-stricken after committing murder, and finding no comprehension or protection at home, flees to Aughacashel only to encounter there the same image, and its frightening relevance to himself has become even more apparent: the zombie-like Andy McEvoy subsists in a wasteland beyond the bounds of civilization. Like Thady in his life in general as well as his brief sojourn at Aughacashel, Andy lives a tedious, miserable, minimal existence; like Larry (the names Thady Macdermot, Larry Macdermot, Andy McEvoy surely echo one another) Andy seems "lifeless but yet breathing," a scarcely human mechanism for eating, without thought or will or hope, like "a dead body or a ghost" (ch. 23). Precisely such spiritual and physical decay becomes Thady's own lot when he is tried, condemned, imprisoned, and executed for murder. The horrible image of utter passivity, of motionless existence in a narrow, sealed enclosure appears in the spectacle and the thoughts of the imprisoned Thady, in his gloomily precise meditations on his present state and future prospects; and then at last in death, when he becomes "a hideous, foul and dislocated corpse."

In *The Macdermots of Ballycloran* human experience is terrible in its hypostasis. Diverse processes, forces and domains both natural and cultural turn out to be unified in their unstoppable and degenerative effects on individuals and societies; all narrative movement tends downward, with an almost gravitational force, towards the elemental, immobile finality of death. Like the train that crushes the life out of Ferdinand Lopez (*The Prime Minister*, 1876), processes, forces, domains merge in a single and irreversible narrative track bearing down on Ussher, Feemy, Thady. The same meaning is always present. But the content of that meaning is that no meaning exists. Just as the characters' stubborn, obsessive, or fanatic pursuit of their desire inevitably robs them of any possibility of satisfying it, so the diverse but finally monolithic determinisms that structure human reality in *The Macdermots of Ballycloran* negate human ability to select and ascribe meanings to that reality.

Like Thady, Trollope had intimate knowledge of such imprisoning situational structures, in which meanings created by culture, crumble to formlessness or emptiness. The early chapters of Trollope's *An Autobiography* repeatedly image disorder, isolation, suicide, madness, and death. Indeed, Trollope's father bears some resemblance to Thady's, and Trollope, like Thady, lived in a house (actually a succession of houses) whose ruin he was unable to prevent, though he was able, ultimately, to prevent his own. The young Trollope too was unable to cope with a world all of whose aspects seemed inimical to him, and whose lack of social and moral authority was symbolized by a withdrawn, impotent, obsessive, mysteriously doomed father. The infant Trollope "was carried down" to Harrow, where his father "in an evil hour" had leased a farm which became "the grave of all my father's hopes, ambitions, and prosperity, the cause of my mother's sufferings, and of those of her children, and perhaps the director of her destiny and of ours" (ch. 1). Another accursed structure associated with the father is his Chancery chambers, so dingy as to be perpetually "almost suicidal" in atmosphere, and "on one melancholy occasion" literally so, providing the scene of the suicide of a pupil of Trollope's father (Trollope too was a "pupil" of his father). A second farm that his father unreasonably and unaccountably took, Trollope calls "the last step preparatory to his final ruin," and describes as seeming "always to be in danger of falling down into the neighboring horse-pond." His father, far from providing a useable role-model or creating a familial structure within which personal identity could flourish, failed to provide even economic or physical protection for his son. Trollope felt himself condemned to a kind of hell whose recurring images are excremental, as if to convey both the universal smell of mortality and an individual fate that sticks to one like a noxious, shameful substance that will not wash off. Trollope at this "worst period of my life" walked twelve miles daily through filthy lanes, "a wretched farmer's boy, reeking from a dunghill," despised by masters and schoolmates. His father's farm "crept downwards from house to stables, from stables to barns, from barns to cowshed, and from cowsheds to dung-heaps, one could hardly tell where one began and the other ended!" His father seems to have ignored Trollope's existence, instead working obsessively on a Casaubon-like task, an "Encyclopedia Ecclesiastica" whose

three (out of eight) published volumes after his death became "buried in the midst of that huge pile of futile literature" – yet another mound of excrement. Describing himself as dirty, ill-fed, awkward, and ugly, ignored by his family and despised by his schoolfellows, it is hardly surprising that the child Trollope considered leaping off the college tower.

After twenty-six "years of suffering, disgrace, and inward remorse," (ch. 14) years of feeling himself regarded as "an evil, an encumbrance, a useless thing," Trollope in Ireland found success as a postal official, in marriage, in the joys of hunting, and with a novelist's career. All lives are multi-leveled, but Trollope's several careers, avocations, and ambitions (including postal official, writer, editor, sportsman, Parliamentary candidate) were pursued with indefatigable persistence, as if he feared that only constant labor at producing structures of meaning created by and demonstrating his own will could prevent his life from sagging into shapelessness, from collapsing into anarchy. At the close of the *Autobiography*, Trollope gloats miser-like over the sheer mass of his literary products, and further comforts himself with the thought that he is still living and thus "may add to the pile" (ch. 20). His "pile" is a reminder of the excremental horror of meaninglessness, void, and death, but is also their opposite, that which establishes worth and meaning, fills the void, defers death.

In *The Macdermots of Ballycloran*, Trollope faces the void, the nothingness and no-meaning of death, and of the failure, the weakness, the fictionality of the cultural structures that seek to assert meaning. In the face of this fictionality, all that is left is the single inescapable fact of human subjection to entropic processes which drain away energy and life. But the writing of fiction created for Trollope worth, pleasure, and wealth – not only a life, but a life laden with value. Starting with *The Macdermots*, Trollope went on to write forty-seven novels, constantly staving off the threats of silence and ending, by triumphant outpourings of words, many of which (including the *Autobiography*) were published posthumously, in defiance of physical mortality itself. Trollope at his most characteristic and Victorian is the Trollope of the interminable "baggy-monster" novels which, in the Barchester and Palliser series, defer ending even in the capacious triple-decker single-novel form. Trollope's novels, with their multiple plots, contradictory perspectives and ideologies, and shifts (both internal and comparative) of dramatic mode, offer the reader a generous array of interpretive possibilities.

James Kincaid asks, "why did Trollope begin his career with a novel which calls into question the very values he was later to propound?" (61). Perhaps by ways of raising a kind of null-hypothesis. To create the possibility of meaning and of the aggressive, risky delights of interpretive play, the realm of no-meaning must first be traversed. Traditionally, rites of passage which both establish and celebrate social order and categories, as well as human creative potentiality in general, incorporate through drama and symbol the very opposite, chaos and failure of will. If *The Macdermots* marks Trollope's transformation into novelist, then it appropriately if paradoxically portrays a world whose necessary fictions have failed and which therefore, inversely, demonstrates the need for those fictions.

In the face of death, the only intractable reality, art, ritual, and culture itself are fictions; but they are fictions with the power to clothe the ultimate nakedness of the human condition with human-spun webs, texts, textures of significance. All cultural enterprise constitutes itself against an awareness of contingency and mortality, and, in those enterprises which reflect upon themselves, such as ritual and art, that awareness is partly made overt and partly submerged. In *The Macdermots of Ballycloran*, Trollope constitutes himself as novelist by dramatizing, in oblique fashion, the ground of his own contribution to that enterprise.

## Byron and Disraeli

Peter W. Graham

My subject is Byron's influence on Benjamin Disraeli. At first, one might not be likely to associate one of the preeminent Victorians, and a Tory Prime Minister at that, with the quintessential English Romantic, a life-long Whig and anti-imperialist. But Disraeli's whole generation grew up in Byron's shadow, and in Disraeli this cultural influence combined with personal affinities and some tenuous, indirect social ties to produce a full-scale and feverish case of Byronism – infatuation with both the image and the reality of Byron. A number of Disraeli's biographers – especially W.F. Monypenny and G.E. Buckle in *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli*, B.R. Jerman in *The Young Disraeli*, and Robert Blake in *Disraeli*, to all of whom I am indebted – take account of this obsession. My purpose here is to appraise its literary symptoms and to speculate on how and why Disraeli the writer outgrew it.

Disraeli's background was in a number of ways similar to and in rather more ways different from Byron's. Conscious, as Byron was, of an ancient name and lineage, Disraeli unlike the poet found contemporary society not particularly inclined to pay his pedigree notice. The quite way of life provided by his prosperous middle-class family did not accord with a romantic and ambitious youth's sense of destiny. Still, the Disraeli name did offer a link with the Great World – and through Byron himself, who shared a relationship of cordial and mutual respect with Disraeli's father, Isaac. Byron and the elder Disraeli also shared a publisher and friend in John Murray, whose literary dinners in Albemarle Street offered the precocious Benjamin his first glimpse of the fascinating West End where his novels would be set and, over time, gave him a wealth of intimate information about Byron. Disraeli recorded one such enlightening conversation, in which his father and Thomas Moore were the principals, after a dinner Murray held in 1822. The dialogue reappears practically word for word in Disraeli's first novel, *Vivian Grey* (1826):

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D. – Pray is Lord Byron much altered?

M. – Yes, his facing has swelled out and he is getting fat; his hair is gray and his countenance has lost that "spiritual expression" which he so eminently had. His teeth are getting bad, and when I saw him he said that if ever he came to England it would be to consult Wayte about them.

B.D. – Who is since dead, and therefore he certainly won't come.

M. – I certainly was very much struck with an alteration for the worse. Besides he dresses very extraordinarily.

D. – Slovenly?

M. – Oh, no! no! He's very dandified, and yet not an English dandy. When I saw him he was dressed in a curious foreign cap, a frogged great coat, and had a gold chain round his neck and pushed into his waistcoat pocket. I asked him if he wore a glass and took it out, when I found fixed to it a set of trinkets. He also had another gold chain tight round his neck, something like a collar. He had then a plan of buying a tract of land and living in South America. (Quoted in Monypenny and Buckle, 1:41-42)

This sort of wholesale appropriation – one hesitates to call it either reportage or plagiarism, so completely does the imitator seem to have subsumed the Byronic detail – pervades Disraeli's early life and literary works. For example, following spiritually and literally in Byron's footsteps, Disraeli made a pilgrimage to the East, accompanied part of the time by Byron's chasseur Tita, whom he then took back as a human souvenir to Bradenham. His early letters are packed with phrases and attitudes out of Byron. "Description is an acknowledged bore," he scribbles from the East, "therefore I say nothing of Constantinople save that in this as in all other instances you can form no idea of the object in question but by sight" (Disraeli to Sara Austen 19 Jan. 1831, *Letters* 1:181). When he seeks money from his long-suffering patron Austen, he flatters the older man as "a friend often tried and never found wanting" – the exact words Byron applied to Hobhouse.<sup>1</sup> Veiled and unveiled likenesses of Byron appear throughout the early fiction. The most detailed such portrait is Plantagenet, Lord Cadurcis in *Venetia*, but the gallery ranges from Aubrey Bohun, the mysterious, charismatic, wicked Eastern traveller of *A Year at Hartlebury* to the contour-conscious Apollo, "whose love of

1. Disraeli to Benjamin Austen, 30 Nov. 1833. *Letters*, 1: 379. The phrase comes from the dedication to the Fourth Canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

fame was equalled only by his fear of getting fat," of *Ixion in Heaven* (Popanilla 73). But Byron's poetry is as important as are his prose and personage in Disraeli's early works. In fact *Vivian Grey* is Byronic to its somewhat rickety bones. Its weaknesses, slipshod plot and gaudy glibness, are Disraeli's recurrent ones but also those of Byron's least successful efforts; its shrewd social analysis, ingenious improvisations, and engaging *mobilité* are the strengths – very often the borrowed strengths – of *Don Juan*.

This resemblance is noted in the *New Monthly Magazine*, owned by Colburn, the publisher of *Vivian Grey*. In that periodical the puffer calls Disraeli's novel "a *Don Juan* in prose" and having said this goes on to observe, with a measure of self-contradiction,

The style in which it is written is, we understand, perfectly original and spirited, and nearly all the individuals at present figuring in fashionable society are made to flourish, with different degrees of honor, in the pages of this new work. It has been whispered that it is the intention of the author to resume the history of his hero (after the manner of Lord Byron's celebrated work) from time to time, to carry him into every scene of modern life, and to make him intimately acquainted with every fashionable and political character of the day (18 [1 Apr. 1826]: 173)

The comparison to *Don Juan* is just, though Byronic satire and iconoclasm are more prominent in the first edition of *Vivian Grey* than in the 1853 revision made by Disraeli for a Victorian audience and generally read today. In certain ways, though, *Vivian Grey* resembles Byron's romantic poems. Disraeli, like the poet of *Childe Harold*, relies heavily on his own travels for copy: the descriptions derive from a six weeks' continental jaunt that Disraeli, his father, and William Meredith shared in 1824. Although *Vivian Grey*'s adventures in diverse social circles remind us of *Don Juan*'s experiences, his lonely wanderings and the heavy cargo of guilt and sorrow he bears call to mind such outcasts as Manfred, Lara, and Cain. Like Juan, *Vivian* begins his career with a little sin. The Englishman's, however, is cerebral rather than sensual: he dabbles in back-room politics. Consequently, like Juan, *Vivian* find himself involved in a duel, though unlike the Spaniard he kills his man. *Vivian*'s ensuing fate proves far darker than does the checkered fortune of Juan. *Vivian*'s first love dies in his arms; the imperatives of state tear his second love from him; he tragically loses a trusted friend and, worse, a first-rate horse in an Alpine storm. Such punishment, so obviously out of scale with any crime committed, seems to put *Vivian* in the mysterious realm of the damned Byronic hero rather than in the cheerily amoral, circumstance-ruled world of *Don Juan*.

Generally, though, *Vivian Grey*'s author follows the ironic rather than the romantic Byron. Sharing a belief in travel as a corrective for abstruse, impractical education, Byron and Disraeli dispatch their protagonists in opposite directions. Juan ends up in the English world his author knows best; *Vivian* starts in Disraeli's own middle-class milieu and moves into increasingly unfamiliar territory, from the country houses of

English aristocrats to a fashionable German spa to the court of a mediatised German prince. Neither protagonist completes his journey, for neither author properly concludes his work. Byron, a few stanzas into Canto XVII, sets *Don Juan* aside for the Greek cause and does not live to resume the poem. Disraeli, apparently impatient with *Vivian*'s picaresque progress through central Europe, contrives a catastrophe mingling storm, flood, earthquake, and avalanche to obliterate characters and setting alike, though when asked in later years if *Vivian* had weathered this *débâcle* he evasively replied, "There was no inquest, it is believed that he survives" (quoted in Monypenny and Buckle 4: 1444, in Jerman 70).

Moral ambiguity pervades both *Don Juan* and *Vivian Grey*; indeed each author contradicts himself when he speaks of the morality of his work. Here the Byronic narrator calls his poem a "moral model" among epics; there he warns the reader, "now I'm going to be immoral" (*Don Juan* 5:2 and 12:40). Here he speaks of *Don Juan* as edification above all; there he dismisses the poem as a vehicle for idle pleasantries. *Vivian Grey*'s moral weight remains similarly undetermined, for Disraeli speaks on both sides of the question. Defending the work from critics, he adopts the stance of pedagogue and describes *Vivian*'s story as a moral fable for the age: "I conceived the character of a youth of great talents, whose mind had been corrupted, as the minds of many of our youth have been, by the artificial age in which he lived" (quoted in Monypenny and Buckle 1:92). When he confesses to his diary, Disraeli views the novel another way. Borrowing a phrase from Byron, he speaks of the story as spiritual therapy and wish fulfillment: "Poetry is the safety valve of my passions, but I wish to *act* what I *write*. My works are the embodiment of my feelings. In *Vivian Grey* I have portrayed my active and real ambition" (Monypenny and Buckle 1: 92).

Such earnest justification is absent and the Byronicism more widely present in *The Young Duke* (1831), for in the years between these publications, Disraeli has mastered the Byronic trick of masking his self-consciousness. The novel has never gained much critical notice, and for several reasons Disraeli himself was not proud of it. The first edition's luxurious detail and egoizing digressions came to trouble him later in life – but from the outset, even before the book's conception, it was fated to be an embarrassment on intellectual grounds. For *The Young Duke* belongs to a hardy perennial category of popular fiction then called the "silver fork novel" now marketed as the "Regency romance." Disraeli wrote the book for Colburn because he needed money, and while composing he referred to the project as a stint of literary prostitution: "It is a series of scenes, every one of which would make the fortune of a fashionable novel: I am confident of its success, and that it will complete the corruption of the public taste" (Monypenny and Buckle 1: 127). In the advertisement to the expurgated 1853 edition, he resorts to Victorian rationalization: "Though its pages attempt to portray the fleeting manners of a somewhat frivolous age, it is hoped that they convey a moral of a deeper and a more permanent character."<sup>2</sup> Disraeli's 1870 General

2. *The Young Duke* 1. Unless otherwise specified, subsequent citations will refer to this edition based on Disraeli's 1853 expurgated text, the one generally accessible to readers.

Preface to his novels does not mention this literary child of his wanton youth.

Nowhere, however, does he admit what any Byronist notices directly – that the novel's best bits, whole suites of its literary furnishings, are second hand. As Jerman has pointed out, *The Young Duke* is what *Vivian Grey* was called: "Don Juan in prose" (95-96). But this lack of originality makes *The Young Duke*, in my view, the best "silver fork" novel after Bulwer's *Pelham*. At this point in his life, Disraeli was a clever, imaginative, immature outside observer of the Great World. *Don Juan* gives him experience and a more seasoned eloquence to draw upon. The result: a witty book, a gorgeous book, a disarming book – one that makes myth of the Regency, which Byron and Disraeli both saw as at once a golden and a gilded age.

The young Duke's title, St. James, makes him lord of fashionable London; his first name, George, links him with the three men (George IV, Byron, Brummell) who had done the most to set the style of the age. After a twenty-years' minority, the young duke takes possession of his holdings – estates in the north and west of England, a whole Irish province, a square and several streets in London, two palaces, three castles, four halls, a rent roll of two hundred thousand pounds, and half a million in the funds – and assumes his position at the top of the worldly pyramid. His mind and spirit are the sort that might gain him a corresponding position in the hierarchy of merit. But society, perfectly willing to spend his money, fatten at his banquets, and sell periodicals devoted to his exploits, fawns uncritically. Only a few disinterested friends want him to be more than a silly, selfish worldling. And so the young duke, a titled Everyman, journeys through a pre-Reform Vanity Fair, one party of advisors encouraging him to remain amid pleasures, another contingent urging him on toward the spiritual counterpart of his noble birth.

In the 1820s and 30s, accurately rendered fashions, a pinch of politics, elegant lovers with traits drawn from recognizable real-life models, and a matrimonial conclusion sufficed to sell a "silver fork" novel. What sets *The Young Duke* above such books and above Disraeli's own *Vivian Grey* is the chatty, digressive narrator through whom the story is filtered and whose presence makes the book a sustained if not fully acknowledged homage to Byron. The teller of the tale is by no means identical with but not entirely distinct from Byron – not to be equated with or detached from Disraeli. Perhaps we can best envision him as in a situation rather like that of Lord George Hell in *The Happy Hypocrite* – Disraeli wearing a Byronic mask which fits so neatly that his countenance comes to resemble it.

Many of the narrator's asides proved too bawdy or self-centered to survive the book's Victorian revision, but they give the first edition, from sense to syntax, a Byronic coloring that first appears in the epigraph from *Don Juan* ("A moral tale, though gay") and persists until the obligatory pastel *denouement*. Several of the Byronic narrator's characteristic mannerisms crop up in the speech of Disraeli's narrator, who for

instance sprinkles his digressions with many a "but to our tale" or "but this is dull." The narrator of *The Young Duke* also adopts Byron's witty habit of using two objects to give one verb a double meaning: "some consulted a book, some their ease."<sup>3</sup> Disraeli's narrator is, like Byron's, a Southey-baiter: "Southey, that virtuous man, whom Wisdom calls her own, somewhere thanks God that he was not born to a great estate. We quite agree with the seer of Keswick; it is a bore" (247). Disclaiming poetic laurels, the narrator echoes *Don Juan*'s nonchalance and skepticism: "I wash my hands of any participations in this contest. What am I, I know not, nor do I care." Other details are from the Byronic legend rather than from the pages of *Don Juan*. The narrator observes more than once that "A canter is a cure for every evil" and remarks that the Duke "hated your feeding women" and considered lobster salad the one dish suitable for ladies to consume in public.

Byronic borrowings enrich the Disraelian narrator's considered opinions as well as his casual observations. His comments on the Great World's homogeneity take Byron's image of the "polished horde" for a point of departure: "There is no doubt that that great pumice-stone, Society, smooths down the edges of your thoughts and manners" (241). Byron tells us that this uniform patina makes the aristocracy uninteresting.<sup>4</sup> But Disraeli, continuing the passage cited above, offers an explanation for the "noble numbness" Byron deplors: "But this is not peculiar to what is called fashionable life, it is peculiar to civilization, which gives the passions less to work upon. Mankind are not more heartless because they are clothed in ermine, it is that their costume attracts us to their characters, and we stare because we find the prince or the peeress neither a conqueror nor a heroine" (241).

The ground rules *Don Juan* lays down for the game of love continue in effect as *The Young Duke*'s intrigues commence. Lady Aphrodite Grafton's affair with the duke begins with the same platonic delusion that tricks Julia, Adeline, and the ladies of the oda: "Ah! would that she had such a brother to warn, to guide, to love!" (28). When the liaison engages Lady Aphrodite's emotions more deeply than it does the duke's, Disraeli again conforms to Byronic convention. The restriction of alternative routes speeds woman along the one path that lies open to her: "Love, and first love, with her, as with all women, was everything; he, and all men, at the worst, had a thousand resources. He might plunge into politics, he might game, he might fight, he might ruin himself in innumerable ways, but she could only ruin herself in one" (189).<sup>5</sup>

When Lady Aphrodite's affair ends not with flight to the duke or reconciliation to her husband but with elopement in the company of yet another man, the narrator's explanation is *Don Juan* with a twist. "But love is a dangerous habit," begins the digression. The narrator sets up the familiar Byronic contrast between the fiery ladies of "torrid climes" and England's "cold coquettes." He then pursues the matter one ironic step further. The Latin lady disappointed in love frequently enters the convent before her passions have subsided. Such was the fate of

3. Cf., for instance, *Don Juan* 2: 201: "Some mind their household, others dissipation."

4. Cf. *Don Juan* 14: 15: "There is a sameness in its gems and ermine, / A dull and family likeness through all ages, / Of no great promise for poetic

pages."

5. Cf. *Don Juan* 2: 199-201, the digression beginning "Alas! the love of women!"

Juan's Julia. In contrast, the more calculating Englishwoman recovers her composure in time to enlist a substitute cavalier: "In Protestant regions she has time to cool, and that's the deuce; so, instead of taking the veil, she takes a new lover" (298). In the matter of love, then, Disraeli's apotheosis of Regency society does not merely adopt Byron's ideas, it refines on them.

In George IV's London, where the reputation of a gentleman's club or lady's *soirées* could stand or fall according to the talents presiding over the kitchen, and in *Don Juan*'s English Cantos, where bored aristocrats listen with what intensity they can muster for "the tocsin of the soul – the dinner bell" (5: 49), food assumes an almost sacramental significance. The delights of the table prove equally important to Disraeli's narrator, a gourmand who find foretastes of heaven in a well-prepared dish: "All Paradise opens! Let me die eating ortolans to the sound of soft music!" (36). The ecstasy cuisine offers can be profane as well as sacred, one of Disraeli's expurgated digressions tells us in words almost identical to Byron's: "Oysters and eggs, they say, are amatory food. Ceres and Bacchus have the reputation of being the favourite companions of Venus. The morality of the age must be ascribed, then, to its temperance or its indigestion."<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, Disraeli mischievously uses a dinnertime description to turn a favorite Byronic device, the satiric deflation of exalted sentiments, against the poet himself. Disraeli's burlesque, beginning with a reference to *Don Juan*'s well-known "Ave Maria" stanzas (2: 104-108) unromantically notes that the hour of prayer and love is also the time for a more prosaic pursuit: "'Tis dinner! hour that I have loved as loves the bard the twilight; but no more those visions rise before me that once were wont to spring in my quick fancy" (95). Disraeli compounds the humor by proceeding to parody one of Byron's most heartfelt lamentations for the lost innocence of youth:<sup>7</sup>

No more, no more! Oh! never more to me, that hour shall bring  
its rapture and its bliss! No more, no more! oh! never more for  
me, shall Flavour sit upon her thousand thrones, and, like a syren  
with a sunny smile, win to renewed excesses, each more sweet! (95)

The blank verse rhythm these gluttonous sentiments fall into heightens the comic effect of the passage.

The speaker of these lines, *The Young Duke*'s narrator, generally proves a philosophical, extroverted mediator between the author and his story, the story and its reader, but occasionally lapses into a confessional state of mind in which he vents self-doubts and blue devils – what Byron called "the lava of the emotions." Although the narrator's situation sometimes parallels Disraeli's, he is more often cloaked in Byronic circumstance. The passage in which he speaks most explicitly about himself is replete with conventional Byronisms. His presence among Roman ruins, his expatriate interest in England, his references to star, storm, and ocean, and his linking of ambition and madness all conjure up Byron long before the narrator actually mentions that poetic brooder "bending o'er his shattered lyre, with inspiration in his very rage." The facile, overwrought sentences of this passage either bespeak their au-

thor's immature infatuation or, if we credit the young Disraeli with more art and insight (the gifts that permitted Thomas Love Peacock to present Byron as the magnificent Mr. Cypress in *Nightmare Abbey*), carry off myth into the realm of burlesque:

Amid the ruins of eternal Rome I scribble pages lighter than the  
wind, and feed with fancies volumes which will be forgotten ere I  
can hear that they are even published. Yet am I not one insensible  
to the magic of my memorable abode, and I could pour my passion  
o'er the land; but I repress my thoughts, and beat their tide back  
to their hollow caves!

The ocean of my mind is calm, but dim, and ominous of storms  
that may arise. A cloud hangs heavy o'er the horizon's verge, and  
veils the future. Even now a star appears, steals into light, and now  
again 'tis gone! I hear the proud swell of the growing waters; I  
hear the whispering of the waking winds; but Reason lays her  
trident on the cresting waves, and all again is hushed.

For I am one, though young, yet old enough to know Ambition  
is a demon; and I fly from what I fear. (88)

Fortunately, Disraeli incorporates the spirit of Byron rather than the trappings of Byronism into other digressions. These passages, permeated with the engaging sincerity of *Don Juan*, let us look past the myth and the myth-maker to see glimpses of a man. Disraeli omitted one such disarmingly candid confession from the later editions of *The Young Duke*: "I sometimes think I write a pretty style, though spoiled by that confounded puppyism; but, then, mine is the puppy age, and that will wear off" (Monypenny and Buckle 1:136-37).

And the puppy age did wear off. Byron's next major appearance in Disraeli's fiction is in *Venetia* (1837), where as Lord Cadurcis he is held at arm's length, not blended with Disraeli. The last novel written before the fallow years preceding the Young England trilogy, *Venetia* is one of Disraeli's potboilers; though it holds great interest for students of Byron and Shelley on account of the biographical details Disraeli appropriates for Cadurcis and Marmion Herbert respectively. One could easily belabor the Byronic resonances; here are but a few of many. Lord Cadurcis, succeeding to his title as a child, inherits a romantically ruinous abbey. He lives with his widowed mother, a woman of some temper. On her death, the bereaved boy says, "God has given me only one friend, and there she lies" – close enough to Byron's epitaph for his Newfoundland dog Boatswain.<sup>8</sup> Cadurcis grows up poetical and political. He shines in Whig society, in large part because of his moody contempt for it. He has a sea captain cousin named George for his heir, a dissipated friend called Scrope, and a volatile married mistress with Caroline Lamb's social position and penchant for playing at pageboy. Having been involved in a scandal, he hurls a versified farewell at his native shores and goes to live abroad, which in this novel consists chiefly of such Byron-hallowed spots as the Mendele monastery in Greece, the Armenian San Lazzaro at Venice, and a villa with a view near Spezzia.

Though *Venetia* generally offers straightforward Byronic details, there are some strategic alterations and omissions. As Muriel Masfield has noted, Disraeli tactfully passes over the famous limp and gives no reason for Cadurcis's extreme self-

6. Quoted in Jerman 101. Cf. *Don Juan* 2: 169-170.

7. Cf. *Don Juan* 1: 214: "No more – no more – oh never more on me / The freshness of the heart can fall like dew . . ."

8. Cf. "Inscription on the Monument of a Newfoundland Dog," 11. 25-26: "To mark a friend's remains these stones arise, / I never knew but one, and here he lies." Byron, *Complete Poetical Works*, 1: 355.

consciousness (107). He shifts Byron's marital problems to Herbert, the Shelley character, whose wife Lady Annabel, a learned woman of high moral tone quarantining an only daughter from the "nefarious" but magnetic father, resembles Annabella Milbanke. Most striking of all the changes, Disraeli drowns Cadurcis, strong swimmer though he is reported to be, in a boating accident that in its other particulars is almost exactly patterned on the one fatal to Shelley and Edward Williams. The symbolic significance of this departure from fact hardly needs comment. It clearly states the point suggested by the shift from Byron as model and spokesman to Byron as subject matter – Disraeli could finally bury his hero. Having grown up as a man and a writer, he could rely on his own potential and attempt to shine without the reflected light.

Even with the youthful infatuation behind him, though, Disraeli continued to live a life reminiscent of Byron's in odd ways. I think that one can see their two existences, determined in part by chance and in part by choice, as parallel lines proceeding in opposite directions. Byron, to the Abbey born, went

forth and gained new distinction for himself as a revolutionary in the East. Disraeli, a child of the Levant, climbed by dint of talent and persistence to the top of the ruling class on which Byron had turned his back. And having so exalted himself, Lord Beaconsfield died on the 19th of April, as had Lord Byron.

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## Wilde's Autobiographical Signature in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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In our post-Freudian age, one encounters little critical resistance to Henry James's remark that the "artist is present in every page of every book from which he sought so assiduously to eliminate himself" (Edel 140). Indeed, many writers have expended so little energy in attempting to "eliminate" themselves from their works that self-advertisement is the inevitable result. Of late Victorian writers, Wilde is a notable example of how a writer, aware that socially unacceptable sexual transgressions must be conducted in secret, nevertheless reveals his impulses with startling clarity, an indication of how defenses fail when forbidden impulses are compulsive. A critical commonplace asserts that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reveals the author's open secret concerning the "terrible pleasure of a double life" (Wilde, *Letters* 175).

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the painter Basil Hallward declares that "every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter" (5), a view that, despite witty paradoxes, Wilde himself shared. In a letter written in 1894, he revealed that the novel "contains much of me in it: Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be--in other ages, perhaps" (*Letters* 352). Despite Wilde's dismissal, Lord Henry is also an embodiment of the author in his insistent pseudo-Paterian urging that Dorian pursue new and strange sensations.

In order to reinforce the autobiographical nature of the novel, Wilde employs a device that has been curiously overlooked by

critics. In sixteen of the twenty chapters in the second revised and augmented edition, which appeared in 1891, he uses the adjective *wild* (appearing twenty-seven times), the comparative form *wilder* (appearing twice), and the adverb *wildly* (appearing five times). Since these words are common enough, one would expect their random appearance in virtually any sensational novel, but given the number of appearances in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, one must give pause, for Wilde was an extraordinarily careful and self-conscious writer. It is highly unlikely that his use of *wild*, *wilder*, and *wildly* would have escaped his calculated sense of irony and his wry smile as he penned them--perhaps at first casually, then deliberately and increasingly in almost every chapter.

Such a device no doubt gratified his narcissistic urges, for the appearance of his name, shorn of the *e*, in a mirror image before him (like Dorian and his portrait), suggests a symbolic form of self-mutilation consistent with his own masochistic impulses, as we know from his self-destructive path that led to the dock in the Old Bailey and eventually to Reading Gaol.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, symbolic self-mutilation, both moral and physical, is the major theme and plot device of the novel, as it was in Wilde's life. The use of his name in the novel as autobiographical signature (not unknown, we recall, in other writers, such as the suggestive "will" in Shakespeare's sonnets and "done" in Donne's verse) reinforces our awareness that Wilde playfully uses his name to underline the subtextual nature of his novel--

1. For a discussion of the relationship of narcissism to masochism in Wilde, see my "Oscar Wilde and the Masks of Narcissus," *Psychoanalytic Study of Society* 10 (1984): 249-67.

that is, as a mirror image of his own "soul," a term central to the work.

Significantly, *wild*, *wilder*, and *wildly* are associated with the major characters as though to suggest their autobiographical import and to introduce a magical presence that Wilde assigned to language. The power of words used by Lord Henry so affects Dorian that he muses (or, rather, Wilde does) on them:

Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them! They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things, and to have a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute. Mere words! Was there anything so real as words? (19)

And indeed for an artist as self-exploitive as Wilde, are not "words" his mirror image, as potent and self-revealing as Dorian's portrait?

To be sure, in several instances, Wilde employs his name in seemingly gratuitous fashion (though perhaps with symbolic reverberations), as in Lord Henry's remark to Hallward that because "Genius lasts longer than Beauty," we over-educate ourselves: "In the wild struggle for existence, we want to have something that endures. . . ." (12), and in the account of Dorian's mother, who risked everything for "a few wild weeks of happiness" (35). However, the more revealing instances of Wilde's autobiographical signature occur in contexts that leave little doubt that consciously or unconsciously Wilde yielded to his need for confession. For example, when Dorian tells Lord Henry, "You filled me with a wild desire to know everything about life," (47) the desire is also Wilde's in courting new sensations among London's male prostitutes. In a low quarter of the city, Dorian recalls Lord Henry's advice to "cure the soul by means of the senses": "From cell to cell of his brain crept the one thought; and the wild desire to live, most terrible of all man's appetites, quickened into force each trembling nerve and fibre" (186).

Furthermore, after Sybil Vane's suicide, Dorian muses on its significance and on its effect on his portrait:

He felt that the time had really come for making his choice. Or had his choice already been made? Yes, life had decided that for him--life, and his own infinite curiosity about life. Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins--he was to have all these things. (105)

The "wild joys" and "wilder sins" (a moral comparative), with its secret pleasures, are confessional as narcissistic reflections of Wilde himself.

As the novel progresses, Wilde uses his name in evermore revealing fashion. In Chapter IX, when Hallward asks Dorian whether he had ever noticed "something curious" in the portrait--an allusion to Hallward's homosexual attraction to Dorian--the young man, aware that indeed there is something curious in it because it now reflects his moral corruption, exclaims: "'Basil!' . . . clutching the arms of his chair with trembling hands, and gazing at him with wild startled eyes" (114). By the end of that chapter, with its focus on concealed and revealed secrets, Hallward confesses to his "worship" of

Dorian, who muses when his friend leaves: ". . . how strange it was that, instead of having been forced to reveal his own secret, he had succeeded, almost by chance, in wresting a secret from his friend! How much that strange confession explained to him! The painter's absurd fits of jealousy, his wild devotion. . ." (117). Clearly, "wild devotion" is homosexual. Long before the prosecution for the Crown attempted to wrest the secret from Wilde, it had been revealed playfully in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and during Wilde's trial, passages were read from the novel to suggest its morally subversive nature.

In describing Lord Henry's "new Hedonism," Wilde reflects on how the pursuit of pleasure (associated with the darkness of night) might transform the Victorian world (with its daylight of restrictive morality), which reasserts itself with each new dawn:

Out of the unreal shadows of the night comes back the real life that we had known. We have to resume it where we had left off, and there steals over us a terrible sense of the necessity for the continuance of energy in the same wearisome round of stereotyped habits, or a wild longing, it may be, that our eyelids might open some morning upon a world that had been refashioned anew in the darkness for our pleasure. . . . (131)

The "wild longing" is here obvious as Wilde's, less obvious as Dorian's.

When Dorian tells Hallward that he will show him his "soul," the painter is seized by "a wild feeling of pity" (153), and after showing him the portrait, Dorian tells him: "Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him, Basil," cried Dorian, with a wild gesture of despair" (157). He means of course, potentialities, not actualities, and the despair that he feels is related to what was undoubtedly Wilde's own sense of inevitable fate because of his increasing sexual abandon, even in 1891. In his prison letter to Lord Alfred, he points to "the note of Doom that like a purple thread runs through the gold cloth of *Dorian Gray*" (*Letters* 475). After Sybil's death, Dorian, pursued by her brother (another embodiment of conscience), sees his face in the window of his country house; at the dinner table, Dorian's manner has "a wild recklessness of gaiety" (199), but on the following day, he is "sick with a wild terror of dying, and yet indifferent to life itself. The consciousness of being hunted, snared, tracked down, had begun to dominate him" (199).

In the final chapter, Dorian, reviewing his life, asks:

Was it really true that one could never change? He felt a wild longing for the unstained purity of his boyhood--his rose-white boyhood, as Lord Henry had once called it. He knew that he had tarnished himself, filled his mind with corruption and given horror to his fancy; that he had been an evil influence to others, and had experienced a terrible joy in being so. (219)

This "wild longing" sounds the depths of Wilde's moral nature. Indeed, in defending the novel against critics who sensed its prurient implications, Wilde insisted, in a letter to the *Daily Chronicle*, that "the real moral of the story is that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment. . . ." (*Letters* 263).



In despair, Dorian recalls the "curiously-carved" mirror that Lord Henry had given him and into which he had looked "with wild tear-dimmed eyes" (220) when he discovered the first alteration in his portrait. Before he plunges the knife into his portrait, Dorian is convinced that it was his "duty to confess, to suffer public shame, and to make public atonement" (222). Symbolically, through the device of the autobiographical signature, the novel does that for Wilde. It remained for him to approximate this self-fulfilling prophecy in the mid-nineties, though his "atonement" was private and conciliatory in his

prison letter to Lord Alfred, an indication of his refusal to relinquish what he regarded as essential to his nature.

Works Cited

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Wilde, Oscar. *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Rupert Hart-Davis. New York: Harcourt, 1962.  
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## Books Received

- Baker, William. *Some George Eliot Notebooks: An Edition of the Carl H. Pforzheimer Library's George Eliot Holograph Notebooks, MSS 707, 708, 709, 710, 711*. Vol. 2—Ms 708. Salzburg Studies in English Literature 46. Salzburg: Institut Für Anglistik Und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1984. Dist. by Humanities Press. Pp. viii + 203. \$25.00 paper. "Materials in MS 708 have relevance to *Romola*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda*. There is one appendix to this volume: a list of George Eliot's reading as cited in Pforzheimer MS 708"
- Browning, Robert. *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*. Ed. Roma A. King, Jr., Vol. 7. Athens, OH: Ohio UP; Waco, TX: Baylor U, 1985. Pp. xxiv + 322. \$48.00. Vol. 7 includes the first four books of *The Ring and the Book*.
- Coggins, Paul E. *Egoism versus Altruism in Browning's Dramas*. Studies in Language and Literature. Troy, MI: International Book Publishers, 1985. Pp. xiii + 130. \$14.00 paper. Platitudinous; it is hard to imagine what audience this book is written for.
- Dave, Jagdish Chandra. *The Human Predicament in Hardy's Novels*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1985. Pp. xii + 216. \$29.00 "The purpose of this book is to systematize Hardy's thought as it issues from the novels, not to consider how it gradually developed and what influences contributed to its making. All biographical interest is, therefore, held irrelevant, and excluded" (xii).
- Dickens, Charles. *Selected Letters of Charles Dickens*. Ed. and arranged by David Paroissien. Boston: Twayne, 1985. Pp. xxx + 377. \$35.00 cloth, \$12.95 paper. Divided into "Personal Letters," "Social and Political Letters," and "Professional Letters," it includes a 14 page "Biographical Table" and introductions to the three parts. More than 200 letters or parts of letters, "this selection is based on the three volumes of letters that were published in 1938 under the direction of Walter Dexter" (ix) in the Nonesuch Edition of Dickens. A useful collection.
- Downes, David Anthony. *Hopkins' Sanctifying Imagination*. Lanham, New York & London: University Press of America, 1985. Pp. 129. \$19.75 cloth, \$8.75 paper. Downes starts "first with a brief recapitulation of the 'higher' tradition of the English Romantics which was Hopkins' artistic heritage. This summary is followed by a tracing out of Hopkins' adaptations of this tradition through the theological mediations of John Henry Newman and the philosophic spirit of John Duns Scotus. Finally [he turns his] attentions to some of the esthetic and religious patterns of the sanctifying imagination revealed in Hopkins' mature poetry" (2).
- Harden, Edgar F. *Thackeray's "English Humorists" and "Four Georges"*. Newark, DE: U of Delaware P, 1985. Pp. 278. \$34.50. Not an edition of these lecture-essays, but a commentary on them: "I try to read these works in the light of their composition, and their use of sources, when that is particularly distinctive or otherwise calls for comment, but especially in terms of their achieved nature as works of art" (34).
- Hardy, Thomas. *Jude the Obscure*. Intro and notes by James Gibson. London & Melbourne: Dent, 1985. Pp. xxx + 418. \$2.95 paper. Uses as its text the Macmillan 1920 reprint of the 1912 Wessex edition.
- Pinion, F.B. *A Hardy Companion: A Guide to the Works of Thomas Hardy and their Background*. London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984. Dist. by Humanities Press. Pp. xviii + 558. \$45.00. A reprint of the 1976 edition, originally published in 1968. A very useful compendium of miscellaneous information.
- Szladits, Lola L. *Brothers: The Origins of the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library*. New York: New York Public Library, 1985. Pp. 60. \$10.00.
- Vogeler, Martha S. *Frederic Harrison: The Vocations of a Positivist*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. Pp. xvii + 493. \$49.95. Harrison "is perhaps the most important Victorian personality lacking a modern critical biography" (5). Vogeler rectifies that omission with this nicely written work.

# Victorian Group News

## A. Announcements

The thirteenth annual Carolinas Symposium on British Studies will be held at Appalachian State University on October 18-19, 1986. The Symposium provides an annual forum for the delivery of scholarly presentations and the exchange of ideas relating to all aspects of British Studies, including history, literature, art, government, architecture, and music. While the Symposium is regionally based in the Southeast, participants are welcome from all parts of the country. The program committee invites proposals for individual papers, full sessions, and panel discussions. A \$100 prize will be awarded for the best paper from among those read at the Symposium and submitted to the evaluation committee by the following May. Proposals should be sent by April 15, 1986, to Professor Colin F. Baxter, Department of History, Box 22,660A, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee 37614. All who submit proposals will be notified of the decision of the program committee by early June.

The Annual Meeting of *The Victorians Institute* will be held Saturday, October 18, 1986 at the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA. The host committee of the meeting seeks papers of about 20 minutes that fit into the broad theme of "Religion and Literature in Victorian England." There are no further restrictions on subject or approach. Given the interdisciplinary interests of the Institute, papers from a variety of disciplines or combinations of disciplines will be particularly welcomed.

Please submit manuscripts for consideration no later than June 1, 1986. Notification will be made soon thereafter. Submissions may be made to Professor Terry L. Meyers, English Department, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA 23185.

The Department of English at the University of Kansas will hold a conference on the theme VICTORIA'S JUBILEES, 1887 AND 1897: A CENTENNIAL RECONSIDERATION from 26 March to 28 March 1987. Papers relevant to the period, to take twenty minutes each for delivery, are solicited from persons in English literature and such related disciplines as history, art history, music history, history of science, Irish studies, women's studies, intellectual history, social history, and popular culture. Send 500-word abstracts by 1 September 1986 to Professor Harold Orel, Department of English, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-2115, U.S.A.

## B. Project: Request for Aid

Evelyn J. Harden would be grateful for information concerning the location of the archives of the *London Literary Gazette*. Please write to: Professor Evelyn J. Harden, Dept. of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C. Canada V5A 1S6

Back issues of VN, at a cost of \$4.00 per copy, are available in limited quantities for the following numbers: 8, 20, 23, 30, 31, 32, 35, 36, 37, 38, 40, 41, 43, 45, 47, 49, 51, 52, 53, 54, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68