CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

How the Victorian Novel Became Realistic (in a French Way), Reactionary, and Great

FOR A LONG time, many Victorian novels were not all that great. From Victorian critics like G. H. Lewes and Monckton Milnes in the 1850s, '60s, and '70s, to novel scholars like Dorothy Van Ghent and Barbara Hardy in the 1950s and '60s, Victorian fiction often fails to find a suitable form: it is too long, too much engaged in telling and not enough in showing, and too avoidant of the tragic in its denouements. In short, Victorian fiction is too narrative (diegetic) and not dramatic (mimetic) enough. Then, in the twenty years between 1960 and 1980, forms seemingly "native" to Victorian "realistic" fiction are found with more and more success, and the very big novel as a form lifts off, making it a naturalized effort thereafter. A new genre is born, or "read" into being in the sense that Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins have suggested that lyric is read into being in the mid-nineteenth century and then projected backward as a long-standing poetic

form, with a long-standing theoretical tradition (with Aristotle as an imagined early contributor).[1]

A newly realistic novel is born, and the novel finally gains serious prestige in the academy in the 1970s and '80s. But some of the forms we now routinely "find" in nineteenth-century fiction hinder us from taking into account a conflicted critical history in which for over a century the French and German nineteenth-century novel passed muster with British critics, but the Victorian novel was often seen as deficient, awkward, mawkish, and variously defective in form and structure. During this antidiegetic century, the demands on the novel were strictly mimetic, and Aristotelian standards reigned as if the novel were supposed to be a play in only a slightly different form and format. It was not until strong theories of narration and of realism came across the Atlantic that the Victorian novel could be assimilated to realism and achieve greatness.[2] Ironically, it is through the binary of the modernist/realist text, in which realism is the less prized kind of writing, that Victorian novels gain stature.[3] Roland Barthes's consequential idea of the referential illusion turned the novel into a discourse that had slipped its bonds to

1. See Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, "General Introduction," in *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 1–8; and Gérard Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

2. Kent Puckett argues that it might make sense to "see narrative theory as both a powerful analytic tool and a limited expression of a historically specific and ideological world view" (*Narrative Theory: A Critical Introduction* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016], 13).

3. D. N. Rodowick has argued that "theory" as such is "[t]utored overall by a broad binary system that opposed realism to modernism, or the classical text to the modernist écriture. . . . [Realism produces] an illusory 'reality-effect' that transparently communicates the dominant ideology in contradistinction to avant-garde practice, which working at the level of form or of the 'signifier' will reflexively interrupt this transmission. . . . [T]he presumed knowledge effect is a making visible of the ideology-effect" (*Elegy for Theory* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014], 217).

any referent, and functioned, like Saussurean language, through its own system of differences.[4] Flaubert does not hunker down in central Rouen to hone his description of the place; he works on his descriptions as a problem of language—the language of realism. Genette's theory of narrative discourse involves a largely implicit presumption of the existence of diegetic consistency: although most novels break through diegetic levels, the illusion of a novelistic world is most compelling when such breakage is kept to a minimum. These structuralist "truths" about the nineteenth-century novel, as opposed to its modernist counterpart, made these novels ideological and therefore powerful, formally consistent, and great. Realism, as D. N. Rodowick writes, "communicates the dominant ideology," and it does so without letting us know that this is what it is doing.[5] Thus, realism gains formal features, wields ideological power, and is assimilated to the most "impersonal" nineteenth-century novels—those of Flaubert. The nineteenth-century novel, like other realist works (the mainstream film, realist painting), must be closed before they can be opened. Realism's formal ruse is to ignore the formal ruse, and to turn its back, to paraphrase Michael Fried on Courbet, on its audience—leaving us to "overhear" or eavesdrop on its artless world.[6] This lack of theatricality can only be thoroughly valued (or "accounted for," in the phrase of Barthes in "The Reality Effect,"[7]) in the wake of structuralism, when the minute and even boring representation of everyday life can be interpreted as significant in its very minutiae and its lack of apparent interest and value.[8]

4. Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

5. Rodowick, *Elegy for Theory*, 217.

6. See Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 86.

7. Barthes, "The Reality Effect," 231.

8. See Franco Moretti, "Fillers," in *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (London: Verso, 2013), 74–78.

The Drama of the Novel

Aristotle's "indivisible" or "organic" whole was revived (and misremembered) by German Romanticism in the late eighteenth century and transmitted to the Anglophone tradition by Samuel Coleridge (sometimes literally in the form of serial plagiarisms): "the fairest part of the most beautiful body will appear deformed and monstrous, if dissevered from its place in the organic Whole."[9] Compare this with Aristotle: "a beautiful object, whether an animal or anything else with a structure of parts [must give us a sense of] unity and wholeness."[10] The dramatic origins of this idea have been obscured for many of us by either Coleridge or New Criticism (or both), which has made it seem that the idea of organic wholeness derives from the analysis of lyric, and lyric alone. Mary Poovey claims that the trope of organic unity derives from eighteenth-century natural history, that "the professionalization of [literary] criticism depended upon critics' adoption of one genre in particular: the romantic lyric"; she also concurs with the standard claim that Henry James was the first critic of the novel to consider literary form.[11] But as George Kenneth Graham points out, Henry James's claims about the organic form of the novel in the 1880s would not have been news to his readers: "the Master was not really alone in the wilderness."[12] The long history of critics demanding that the novel achieve a dramatic form has been obscured by the presumed dominance of lyric in criticism and then what

9. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria: Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. James Engel and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 234.

10. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 55.

11. Mary Poovey, "The Model System of Contemporary Literary Criticism," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 3 (Spring 2001): 422.

12. George Kenneth Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865–1900* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 113.

now seems like the rather belated struggle for the invention of a narrative form for the novel.

Novel criticism's inheritance of an Aristotelian vocabulary meant that critics had to find unity where they could, and Victorian critics very often did not find it in British novels: "the aggregate of 24 monthly pamphlets must always be disjointed and languid," opines a critic in the *Saturday Review* in 1859.[13] "[T]he whole question of unity in the novel was much debated in the 1850s and 1860s," Richard Stang writes in his study of Victorian theory of the novel. "One group of critics called for works with extremely tight structures, a limited simple plot, and a small cast of characters."[14] (In other words, a play.) Graham agrees: "the deliberate application of the principle of organic unity is one of the most remarkable and unexpected features of the whole age's criticism of fiction."[15] The French novel was often pointed to as a model: writers could stick to "'single volumes, of modest pretensions as to size. . . . You never find a walking [walk-on?] character introduced for the sake of typifying a particular class, or an eccentric hanging loose upon the story.'"[16] *Wilhelm Meister* was another model in the view of Thomas Arnold, who ardently wished that the British novel of the mid-nineteenth century could find "the structure, the internal proportions, the various themes, yet the unity of idea, which distinguish the greatest novel that literature can show."[17] And this unity, this wholeness is specifically dramatic: even an ardent admirer of George Eliot, one who places her in "the foremost rank among contemporary

13. Qtd. in Richard Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850–1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 119.

14. Ibid., 115.

15. Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865–1900*, 113.

16. Anonymous, "The Art of Story Telling," *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* 53 (January 1856): 727–31; qtd. in Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850–1870*, 115.

17. Thomas Arnold, "Recent Novel Writing in England," *MacMillan's Magazine*, January 1, 1886, 202–9.

authors," could note in 1860 that there is a "carelessness of dramatic unity" in her work.[18] Monckton Milnes writes in a review of *Middlemarch*, "Strictly speaking, the writer should be as little seen in person in a novel as he would in a modern drama."[19]

Seriousness and depth are also often found wanting: W. C. Roscoe "found Thackeray's novels marked by 'thinness and superficiality.'"[20] Walter Bagehot finds Scott's characters superficial. R. H. Hutton chastises Trollope for not having "the heart (shall we say the nerve?) to ruin Lady Glencora" and give *Can You Forgive Her?* "a genuinely tragic interest."[21] He is finally satisfied with *He Knew He Was Right*, calling it "a tale of truly tragic jealousy."[22] When Eliot is praised unconditionally, it is because her "novels are not novels in the ordinary sense of the term—they are really dramas: as the word is understood when applied to *Hamlet* or the *Agamemnon*."[23]

Henry James is still too often imagined as the first theorist of the novel, bursting on to the scene with his essay "The Art of Fiction," which appears in *Longman's* in 1884 as a riposte to a not very coherent, or typical, essay by Walter Besant of the same name.[24] James makes a set of moves that will become

18. Anonymous, "George Eliot's Novels," in *The Rambler* (London: Burns and Lambert, 1861), 4:80, 99.

19. See Monckton Milnes's review in *Edinburgh Review* 137 (January 1873): 126–35, 134. Leslie Stephen is one of the few fans of authorial intrusion: "One main advantage of the novel . . . is precisely that it leaves room for a freedom in such matters which is incompatible with the requirements of dramatic writing. . . . I like to read about Tom Jones and Colonel Newcome; but I am very glad when Fielding or Thackeray puts his puppets aside for the moment and talks to me" (qtd. in Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865–1900*, 123).

20. Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850–1870*, 52.

21. Richard Holt Hutton, "*Can You Forgive Her?*," *Spectator*, September 2, 1865, 979; qtd. in Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850–1870*, 57.

22. Richard Holt Hutton, "*He Knew He Was Right?*," *Spectator*, June 12, 1869, 707; qtd. in Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850–1870*, 58.

23. "Felix Holt—The Radical," *Westminster Review*, October 1866, 200; qtd. in Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850–1870*, 47.

24. See Mark Spilka, "Henry James and Walter Besant: 'The Art of Fiction' Controversy," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1973): 101–19.

familiar in criticism for the next century: he condescends to the Victorian novel as having no theory or consciousness of itself, he ignores the existence of Victorian criticism, he damns the intrusive Victorian author, and he argues that morality, which Besant admittedly only mentions in passing, is too much of an issue in Anglo-American letters: the timidity of the English novel is its "moral" problem. This combination of assertions and omissions sets the modernist critical stage in a very particular way: the Victorian novel does not take itself seriously enough. Trollope's self-effacing intrusive narrator is metonymic of this problem:

> He took a suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story he was telling was only, after all, a make-believe. He habitually referred to the work in hand (in the course of that work) as a novel, and to himself as a novelist, and was fond of letting the reader know that this novelist could direct the course of events according to his pleasure.[25]

There is no critical past with which to grapple—the English novel has not yet become what James describes as "*discoutable*"—despite a tradition of literary criticism of fiction stretching back to the Romantics; the problem with discussing literature in general is, unsurprisingly, Victorian prudishness.[26]

Ever since James, Victorian criticism has been repeatedly forgettable. And yet James's criticism of the novel was part of a well-established dramatic lineage in British novel criticism in the Victorian period. His dislike of Trollope's authorial intrusions is precisely in the vein of this tradition, in which such intrusions are seen as constituting a break in the dramatic unity of the novel. The relationship of the Victorian novel to drama has been wonderfully adumbrated in David Kurnick's analysis

25. Henry James, *Theory of Fiction*, ed. James E. Miller Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 175.

26. As excellent a critic as Kevin Ohi has recently followed this line of thinking almost verbatim. See "'The Novel Is Older and So Are the Young': On the Queerness of Style," *Henry James Review* 27, no. 2 (2006): 140–55.

of Thackeray, Eliot, and James as novelists haunted by their failure as dramatists. Kurnick brilliantly observes that many of the devices we see as native to the novel and as the nuts and bolts of its vaunted representation of "interiority" are instead, or perhaps also, dramatic: "interior monologue, free indirect discourse, and the careful restriction of point of view" are all ways of dramatizing the self even as they may be ways for exploring its depths.[27] For Kurnick, "these devices smuggle the memory (or more properly the fantasy) of the crowded theatrical space into the psychic interior."[28] I think they also work to answer the demands of critics who wanted drama—as we have seen—quite literally, in the novel. Novels were to be watched, not listened to, imagined as performed, not thought of as narrated. Victorian novel theory is antidiegetic: it is profoundly, unapologetically, self-consciously mimetic, in classical terms. The "naive" realism of the nineteenth century was never that: it was Aristotelian, and dramatic, and James was part of a lineage—somewhere in the middle of it, rather than at the beginning of it. Marcie Frank, in *The Novel and the Repertory*, makes a detailed case for the strong and transitive relationship between the theater and fiction from the Restoration through the eighteenth century, in which the drama and the novel were constantly learning from one another: "The status of letters in novels affects the ways letters are used on the stage in the eighteenth century; likewise the demise of the soliloquy and the increased frequency of the aside can be explained in terms of the widening sphere of the novel's influence."[29] It is curious that in nineteenth-century criticism, the traffic seems to be all in one direction: from tragedy to novel, or from a previous theatrical practice and theory that the novel takes over.

27. David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 11.

28. Ibid.

29. Marcie Frank, *The Novel and the Repertory 1680–1814* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, forthcoming).

Mid-Century Forms: Tragedy and Henry James

Many mid-twentieth-century critics struggle to find a form for Victorian fiction that tries to move beyond but cannot quite free itself of the heritage of dramatic theory. The critics I discuss here—Dorothy Van Ghent and Barbara Hardy—are central to this struggle and bracing in their admissions of failure, or their accusations of failure on the part of Victorian novels. The focus of their titles on form—Van Ghent's *The English Novel: Form and Function* (1953), Hardy's *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form* (1959), and *The Appropriate Form: An Essay on the Novel* (1964)—seems to announce a program that must be urgently accomplished, a kind of Marshall New Critical Plan for the novel, which is indeed a popular object of study for the many new and "untraditional" (i.e., older and less affluent) college and university students in attendance in the post–World War II period.[30] The works themselves often concede that many nineteenth-century novels are a tough fit for various formal demands on the novel: tragic and Jamesian ones, chiefly.

Van Ghent hews closely to dramatic tenets: the novel "can use all sorts of discursive methods that the drama cannot use. But it employs dramatic method most liberally, for it represents human beings *as if* in tangible space and time, that is 'scenically' placed and related."[31] Unafraid to evaluate, or part of a culture of criticism in which evaluation is still part of the job, Van Ghent dismisses many of the novels she discusses as failures or partial failures usually because they avoid the imperatives of tragedy: *Clarissa*, *The Heart of Midlothian*, and *The Egoist*, for example, all fail to make the cut. Van Ghent asserts that "the

30. See the preface to Homer Obed Brown, *Institutions of the English Novel from Defoe to Scott* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

31. Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 3; emphasis in original.

genius of tragedy is the same as the genius of comedy. It is what Cervantes knew, whose great comic hero, Quixote, walks in the same shades with Orestes and Oedipus, Hamlet and Lear. It is what Moliere knew. Even Jane Austen knew it."[32] Van Ghent adeptly subsumes all kinds of novels under the rubric of tragedy, including ones that have been thought of as comic. Indeed, in her readings, every successful novel shows us something absolutely terrible about the world, including *Pride and Prejudice*, in which Austen, "ambushed by imbecility," demonstrates how characters must work out their lives in a language based on a "savage theology of 'property.'"[33]

Perhaps Van Ghent's clearest connection to the dramatic method is her abhorrence of the "omniscient author convention" (note the word "author," a Victorian holdover).[34] Thackeray's "technique of omniscient authorship can allow a relaxed garrulity and what James called 'the terrible fluidity of self-revelation.'"[35] For Van Ghent, his comments in *Vanity Fair* are "inane and distracting" and make for "two orders of reality . . . clumsily getting in each other's way: the order of imaginative reality, where Becky lives, and the order of historical reality, where William Makepeace Thackeray lives."[36] This "sound track," as Van Ghent describes it, tears the novel apart ontologically, breaking up its form, and distracting the reader from the "world" of the novel, where world "is the nearest similitude for a novel."[37] George Eliot in *Adam Bede* does the same thing. In the questions for study and discussion that make up the second

32. Ibid., 237.

33. Ibid., 111.

34. Ibid., 143.

35. Ibid., 139. Henry James comments on Victorian intrusive omniscience many times; in Trollope he calls it "little slaps" at the illusion of reality and then "suicidal." Henry James, "Little Slaps at Credulity," in *Theory of Fiction*, 175; "Anthony Trollope," in *Partial Portraits* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 116.

36. Van Ghent, *The English Novel*, 139.

37. Ibid., 6.

half of the book, Van Ghent asks, or comments with a question mark, "Do you feel that the convention of the 'omniscient author' is actually the right one for this book, or do you feel that is the only one adequate for the materials, but that George Eliot has allowed it too much license?"[38]

It is important to note here that there are, historically, two very different forms of omniscience, and Wayne Booth famously described and deconstructed them in *A Rhetoric of Fiction* (see "Rehabilitating Omniscience" below). The Victorian novel is, at a certain point, annexed to a structuralist idea of French realism, which is imagined as free of intrusive narration. These combined critical moves regularize the Victorian novel into something less interesting and less problematic than what it had been for previous generations of more skeptical critics, or critics for whom that novel was not yet great.

Great Expectations and *Wuthering Heights* achieve greatness for Van Ghent because they do not indulge us: Dickens gives us a world "where human encounter is mere collision," and Brontë gives us one in which we find a "nakedness from the web of familiar morality and manners."[39] Both are redeemed by form: plot in *Great Expectations*, and first-person (dramatic) narrative framing in *Wuthering Heights*. The ultimate value of the novel, Van Ghent writes, in what seems like the kind of bland phrase we might (unfairly) associate with 1953, is "its ability to make us more aware of the meaning of our lives."[40] But this is not bland in Van Ghentian practice. Van Ghent asks us to understand Moll Flanders as the "progenetrix of the wasteland, sower of our harvests of technological skills, bombs, gadgets, and the platitudes and stereotypes and absurdities of a morality suitable to a wasteland world."[41] She tells us that the "heir" of Dickens's " 'century of progress' is the twentieth-century concentration camp, which

38. Ibid., 402.
39. Ibid., 189.
40. Ibid., 7.
41. Ibid., 43.

makes no bones about people being 'things.'"[42] Her demand for tragedy is an ethical one; she reads novels as histories of the horrific present.

Barbara Hardy's attempt to explain the form of Eliot's fiction is an understandably tortured effort to make a case for "her power of form, a striking but relatively disregarded aspect of her work as a novelist."[43] Hardy's touchstone for form is, unsurprisingly, tragedy: "it is true," she writes, "that in the nineteenth century, the novel becomes the medium of tragedy."[44] Tragedy is the subject of four out of eleven chapters of *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form*.[45] It is enough to show that a novel is a tragedy or has tragic elements to prove that it has a form. Hardy admits that it might be argued that "Eliot always evades the tragic conclusion" (Van Ghent would say so), and Hardy, to her credit, doesn't fully resolve this problem, except to argue that "the heroines" are tragic figures. This is part of Hardy's characteristic impatience with the idea that perfect or consistent form is a value in itself. Indeed, she associates strict form with drama and with a perversely dramatic use of the novel: the "'organic' forms [of Henry James] lack the graduation of the natural organism, for he is . . . luxuriating in difficulties which arise necessarily in the drama but which are a more gratuitous discipline in the novel."[46]

Hardy begins to think about the problematic "omniscient author convention" and to understand and recuperate it in various ways, the most interesting being the idea that "Eliot is a social reformer who places her sympathetic plea outside her characters, showing them realistically as too dumb to plead or

42. Ibid., 128.

43. Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 1.

44. Ibid., 32.

45. "The Unheroic Tragedy"; "The Tragic Process: *Adam Bede*"; "The Tragic Process: The Heroines"; "The Tragic Process: The Egoists."

46. Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot*, 30.

too charmless to attract."[47] Thus the need for the talkative narrator (author), who steps in to explain people who cannot explain themselves. Hardy also tries to render the drama novelistic instead of asking the novel to be dramatic:

> Eliot's scenic method is as varied as her other means of presenting character and developing action. The scene can serve the double purpose of narrative and theme, often providing a visual resting-place. Her scenes are of course not all scenes of crisis, though it is the status of the scene as symbol which I am concerned with here. In most of the novels there are a large number of scenes which are not even essential to the development of plot, but which familiarize us with the character before that character is set in tragic action.[48]

Hardy makes a case here for narration itself as a literary form deserving of attention and approbation, rather than as a defect of presentation: to defend scenes that are not "essential to the development of the plot" is still a fairly controversial gesture when Hardy is writing. The idea of the "visual resting-place" suggests a novelistic theater in which we can pause and listen to the narrator, imagining a scene in our heads, as Victorian narrators so often ask us to do.

In *The Appropriate Form: An Essay on the Novel*, Hardy gets quite energetic about batting away the dramatic requirements foisted on the novel by the tradition of Jamesian criticism, and more actively and less defensively makes a case for the "expansive novel":

> We still use . . . Jamesian formal standards with little qualification in our own analysis. We insist that the large loose baggy monster has unity, has symbolic concentration, has patterns of imagery and a thematic construction of character, and in the result the baggy monster is processed by our New

47. Ibid., 17.
48. Ibid., 185.

> Criticism into something strikingly like the original Jamesian streamlined beast.[49]

Hardy goes on to make a strong case for everything that is *not* unified, concentrated, and patterned: "Economy can be mean and waste generous."[50] In her reading of *Middlemarch*, Hardy cheerfully and aggressively argues that "its realism and its unity are flawed."[51] It is for Hardy a sexually dysfunctional novel, in fact. The narrator is explicit about Casaubon's impotence, she argues, but does not give us, in Ladislaw, a structural opposite in potency, or general sexiness. The reticence of the novel about sex is out of kilter with its lack of reticence about everything else, and even the reticence about sex is restricted to Ladislaw, in whom "sensibility acts as a surrogate for sensuality."[52] This imbalance destroys unity, or James's " 'law' that the antithesis [between characters] should be direct and complete."[53] But the final line of the chapter puts paid to Henry James and his strict structural requirements: "Who would exchange the flawed *Middlemarch* with its omissions made conspicuous by its suggestive reticence, for a novel where truth were reduced and mere aesthetic balance retained?"[54] And I would ask, who now would call *Middlemarch* "flawed"? Although we imagine that we don't engage in such evaluation any longer, perhaps we should understand the places where we evaluate without using specifically laudatory or deprecatory language. Perhaps evaluation now resides in the celebration of form, as if writers have achieved something we know in a more perfect state. It might be exciting to seek, from a different vantage critically and historically than that of Hardy, the "flaws" of novels we now treat as nearly

49. Barbara Hardy, *The Appropriate Form: An Essay on the Novel* (London: Athlone Press, 1964), 7.

50. Ibid., 39.

51. Ibid., 108.

52. Ibid., 125.

53. Ibid., 121.

54. Ibid., 131.

perfect structures, if only to admit how random our canonical inclusions and exclusions are, and how many works we exclude from the greatness list are excluded for faults that the included works suffer (or benefit) from quite widely.[55]

Rehabilitating Omniscience

In 1961, Wayne Booth disrupts the dramatic lineage of novel criticism by asserting that showing is always telling and that telling is a kind of showing: "the author can never choose to disappear."[56] Shockingly, but in a telling move about showing, in the very first paragraph of the preface to *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Flaubert becomes a kind of Trollopian author who is unfavorably compared to James:

> Is there any defense that can be offered, on aesthetic grounds, for an art full of rhetorical appeals? What kind of art is it that will allow Flaubert to barge into his action to describe Emma as "unaware that now she was eager to yield to the very thing that had her so indignant," and as "totally unconscious that she was prostituting herself"? Whatever their answers, critics have often been troubled by this kind of overt, distinguishable rhetoric.[57]

55. An interesting example is Masao Myoshi discussing Ōgai's novel *The Wild Goose*: "The narrative structure . . . is a bit awkward, a frequent problem with Japanese novels. The narrator, Okada's friend, begins by reminiscing on past events, but soon disappears from the tale, almost making it a third-person story. He returns in Chapter 18 when it becomes increasingly clumsy to present events which the narrator cannot have been in a position to know" (*Accomplices of Silence: The Modern Japanese Novel* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974], 48; qtd. in J. Keith Vincent, *Two-Timing Modernity: Homosocial Narrative in Modern Japanese Fiction* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012], 56). This is very much like the narrative structure of *Madame Bovary*, which begins with a first-person and then morphs into a third-person narrator, and then changes back into a first-person narrator at the novel's end.

56. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 20.

57. Ibid., xiii.

Booth immediately points out that James's dramatic presentation is also "rhetorical." It may be "disguised," but there is always a narrator at work and always a rhetoric of narration in a novel. Indeed, the "rhetoric of fiction" is, largely, narration. Taking on James, and what "Jamesians have made of James," Booth goes on to argue, famously, that telling produces a stable, and good, irony, while showing produces an unstable and bad irony. This defense of telling is perhaps what has made *The Rhetoric of Fiction* both a monument in novel studies and less influential than it might otherwise have been: it renders a clumsy judgment on narrative technique (about which it is otherwise hugely subtle). Perhaps what is more important is that Booth maintains the historical distinction between the intrusive *author* and the "objective" narrator, even though both seemed to be subsumed under the "implied author."[58] Booth tries to keep two kinds of omniscience in play. This is one of the major oddities of the Victorian novels that must be extinguished for the Victorian novel, and realism at large, to become great.

J. Hillis Miller deals a direct and lasting blow to the dramatic tradition in his well-known pronouncements on omniscient narration, which, he calmly tells us, is not omniscient and not exactly narration. It is "not an anonymous storyteller . . . but the role of the collective mind."[59] Miller makes the intrusive, busybody, antidramatic narrator the "determining convention" of Victorian fiction instead of its major blight.[60] The narrator is indeed in the world of the story: "immanent rather than transcendent."[61] We move from having an author who is an actual historical person, or, less bodily, an "implied narrator," as

58. See the section on "Reliable Narrators as Dramatized Spokesmen for the Implied Author" in ibid., 211–14.

59. J. Hillis Miller, *The Form of Victorian Fiction: Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot, Meredith, Hardy* (1968; repr., Cleveland: Arete Press, 1979), 63.

60. Ibid., 63.

61. J. Hillis Miller, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), 14.

Booth would have it, within the diegesis to having a narrator who is a misty collective mind floating about invisibly—it is a big leap; existential subtleties replace ruptured worlds:

> There are few places where the narrator explicitly confesses that the novel is a novel, though many aspects of the narrative language may implicitly recognize this. For the most part, the narrators of Victorian novels talk as if they were confronting directly or in historical retrospect a world independent of their knowledge of it, but a world over which they happen to have extraordinary powers.[62]

Miller describes a very particular Victorian narrator: this is not an eighteenth-century self-reflexive narrator, or a postmodern wisecracking narrator, or a modernist godlike narrator, paring her fingernails. The Victorian narrator might be implicitly metafictional, but in general it is objective about reporting on an intact world that it did not make, a world that is really "there" somewhere, and this not-quite-solid collective mind is in it. There is a mystical feeling to much of what Miller writes about the Victorian novel and how it works: this narrator, who has become so important to us, is particularly wispy.[63]

Less quoted than Miller's formal remarks about omniscient narration are the "reasons" for it. The first nine pages of his chapter on narration, "Narrator as General Consciousness," chart the isolation, loneliness, and social failure of Dickens, Eliot, Trollope, Hardy, and Meredith. "To be an outsider looking in, however, is not yet to be a novelist. . . . The transformation which makes a man [*sic*] a novelist is his decision to adopt the role of the narrator who tells the story."[64] But not any kind of narrator. "The characteristic work of each of these novelists comes into existence when he chooses to play the role not of

62. Ibid., 65.

63. A JSTOR search for "Hillis Miller" AND "omniscience" turns up 160 hits, including 14 since 2010, suggesting the ongoing prestige of his formulations.

64. Miller, *The Form of Victorian Fiction*, 62.

a first person narrator who is an actor in the drama, and not even the role of an anonymous storyteller who may be identified with an individual consciousness, but the role of a collective mind."[65] Dramatic representation is highly individual; the form of Victorian fiction is collective, or is about trying to be part of a collective. It is about loneliness transformed into incorporation. Miller is specifically antidramatic *and* antilyrical in his brief for the omniscient narrator as a legitimate literary figure/form: the Victorian novel is about relations, and characters realize themselves in relation to other characters and not in "contemplation of rocks, trees, and daffodils."[66] The difficulty here is the one cited earlier: Miller does not account for the chattiness and intrusiveness of the Victorian omniscient author. Collective minds do not say "I" and interrupt the action to muse on their ideas about narrative, or to dream, or to judge a character, or to tell you what they are leaving out of the story. This is very much an individual, a "personal" voice in J. Hillis Miller, a position that will be ironically reinforced by D. A. Miller's very serious modification, in this case citing Austen as the impersonal narrator par excellence (ignoring, apparently, her startlingly intrusive conclusions, in which the narrator says "I" and washes her hands of her annoying characters):

> Nowhere else in nineteenth-century English narration have the claims of the "person," its ideology, been more completely denied. Hence, the staring paradox of Austen's narration: it is at once utterly exempt from the social necessities that govern the narrated world, and intimately acquainted with them down to their more subtle effects on character. It does not itself experience what it nonetheless knows with all the authority of experience.[67]

65. Ibid., 63.

66. Ibid., 5.

67. D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen and the Secret of Style* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 32.

D. A. Miller insists on a more radical impersonality than does J. Hillis Miller, making the nineteenth-century narrator yet more omniscient and extradiegetic.

But J. Hillis Miller's imagining of the Victorian narrator as collective and continuous allows Victorian fiction to be realistic in a French sense (also a critical invention)—which is to say, "objective," and Miller is a key figure in this transformation, although he is decidedly not a structuralist. In the chapter called "The Ontological Basis of Form," Miller asserts that there are three key questions for the interpretation of Victorian fiction: realism, intersubjectivity, and time. And yet, Miller does not make us think or feel that the Victorian novel is realistic, especially not *Our Mutual Friend*, which he takes (perhaps ill-advisedly) as one of his major texts in this chapter. He reads in detail the following passage from the second chapter of the novel in which "the great looking-glass" becomes an agent of representation and "reflects the table and company. Reflects the new Veneering crest, in gold and eke in silver. . . . Reflects Veneering, forty, wavy-haired, dark, tending to corpulence, sly, mysterious, filmy."[68] Miller writes,

> Each adjective in the sentence is like a magic formula bringing miraculously into existence in the reader the quality it names. As each is added to the last Veneering gradually manifests himself like an ectoplasmic vision at a séance, hovering in the space behind the mirror, a space which is both the imaginary space of the novel and the inner space of the reader's mind. The mirror mirrors nothing, but generates its own images out of that nothing.[69]

Characters become embodied as spirits do at seances, which is to say not at all. We are watching something that is nothing.

68. Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. Adrian Poole (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 21.

69. Miller, *The Form of Victorian Fiction*, 40–41.

We are behind the mirror; we are in our minds and in the space of the novel. The geography and ontology here make me long for a medium (or an intrusive narrator) to guide me through the seance, and to create some signage for the spaces that are of the novel and of my mind. Indeed, *Our Mutual Friend* sounds very much as if it could have been written by Virginia Woolf in Miller's account, suggesting that the form of Victorian fiction may not be as period-specific as we would all like it to be.

"Form" is finally relation, in Miller's account. Miller finds in novel endings a great pathos for himself as a reader cut adrift from all the relations about which he has read, finally shut out from a world he can never quite reach, turned back to the reality from "the other side of the looking glass":

> The silence after the last word of the novel, like the silence after the last note of a piece of music, is by no means the silence of triumphantly perfected form. It is rather a stillness in which the reader experiences a poignant sense of loss, the vanishing of the formative energy of the work. This secret source of form was never reached while the novel continued, but was held open as a possibility toward which each page separately reached. . . . When the novel is over the sense of that possibility is lost, and this generates a feeling of nostalgia, of regret for having lost the last glimpse of a marvelous country which can be seen afar not when . . . the novel is over, but only while it is going on in its continuous failure to be perfect or perfectible.[70]

The form of Victorian fiction is a possibility, a continuous failure, a desire, an almost, an other country. It could be likened to a performance in a theater, but a performance of music and not of a play (because it is narrated, but not by an embodied actor). But still, the curtain comes down, the lights come up, and the spectator is no longer part of the collective, until he starts to

70. Ibid., 48.

turn the pages of another novel, again filled with hope, again ending in grief.

Narration Theory

To briefly recapitulate the argument thus far: for Victorian critics through Van Ghent and Hardy, the Victorian novel is a problem. It isn't great yet. The intrusive omniscient narrator, the lack of unity, and the swerve away from tragedy make it difficult to defend on ethical and aesthetic grounds. Wayne Booth tries to rehabilitate the intrusive omniscient narrator by making all narrators intrusive authors, giving us the "implied author," a concept that has little in the way of staying power precisely because this narrator is going to be disappeared by criticism. J. Hillis Miller, in 1968, ignores the critical legacy (and many women critics of considerable stature) and invents a new Victorian novel (literally! see the notes to the book: he cites none of the critics of Victorian fiction that have come before him). He doesn't do this alone, of course. He's part of a movement and moment (the advent of "French" theory, in Miller's case, phenomenology) in which the novel (along with pyschonalytic and Marxist criticism) is gaining ground in terms of its prestige. But he is a key figure in transforming Victorian omniscience into something more in keeping with modern omniscience, and in ignoring the difficult critical history surrounding this turn. At the same moment, a transhistorical narrative theory develops, and we then have one kind of omniscient narration, rather than the idea of "intrusive" versus "objective" variants of this style that are peculiar to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. This allowed for the development of a smoother, more formally impressive "realism." In the following case studies, I would like to experiment with undoing this realism and reading Victorian fiction as formally ragged. It is remarkable that until the 1960s, the Victorian novel was not great in the sense that it is now. And it did not have a theory of its own most important feature: narration.

It takes a strong theory of narration and a strong theory of realism to make the Victorian novel great and realistic. I am going to discuss a highly selective list of what I call narration theorists, including Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, D. A. Miller, and Fredric Jameson, who I think are the main figures in the diegetic turn, although many others could be adduced. I am then going to try to account for the present moment in theories of Victorian reading (both reading as performed by Victorians in novels and readings by us of these Victorians) in the work of Leah Price, Nicholas Dames, and John Plotz.

The most important aspect of the arrival of narrative theory is the arrival of a theory of narration, which means the rehabilitation of diegesis from a few thousand years of the domination of mimesis. Genette's ideas are more often used than cited: they have become so "true" and "obvious" in narrative theory that they are almost naturalized aspects of the form: it would be like citing Lukács every time nineteenth-cenutry realism were mentioned. The diffusion of Genettian diegesis naturalizes terms that have since been widely deployed to create or discover the critical fiction of the realistic novel as a foil for Proustian modernism.[71]

71. In a characteristic effort to keep the tangled ontology of realism apparently seamless, the narrative theorist Monika Fludernik cites a passage from *Narrative Discourse* concerning metalepsis in Balzac's *La Vielle Fille* and asserts that what Genette (and many others) would regard as rupture between narrative levels—when Balzac's narrator in *La Vielle Fille* enters (with the reader) the home of the widow Cormon—leaves the characters in the scene "to attend to their business elsewhere" (Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980], 134). Fludernik argues that Balzac's narrator adds to the "realistic illusion of story-world representation . . . aiding the narratee's . . . imaginative immersion into the story rather than foregrounding the metafictional and transgressive" (Monika Fludernik,"Scene Shift, Metalepsis and the Metaleptic Mode," *Style* 37, no. 4 [Winter 2003]: 383). Fludernik does not justify this claim: her opinion seems to rest on the idea that Balzac is a realistic writer, and therefore this entrance of the reader and narrator into the diegesis is not metalepsis but immersion. This is a common reading of metalepsis in "realistic" fiction: the text is closed,

Genette is not responsible for this: he does recognize metalepsis in several nineteenth-century novels, and it may indeed be later critics who—implicitly or explicitly—periodized a kind of stability of diegetic levels in the nineteenth century.

Genette borrowed a new idea of diegesis from the filmologist Étienne Souriau and remediated it for literary narrative in the 1960s. For Souriau, diegesis is "all that belongs by inference to the narrated story, the world proposed or supposed by the film's fiction."[72] (Christian Metz will say it is the "denotated world of the film.")[73] Genette repurposes this term for fiction: for him, the diegesis

> is indeed a universe rather than a train of events (a story) (here he distinguishes his term—a different word in French than the one Plato used—from Plato's, in which diegesis is narrating in one's own character versus mimesis, which is story-telling in a dramatic mode); the diegesis is therefore not the story but the universe in which the story takes place—universe in the somewhat limited (and wholly relative) sense in which we say that Stendhal is not in the same universe as Fabrice.[74]

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enclosed by the idea of diegesis—an idea thoroughly naturalized in narrative theory. Fludernik uses what is now a popular term in narratology: "storyworld," extending the "world" of earlier critics and also creating a kind of membrane around realistic fiction: diegesis is thus reified (383). Following Barthes's dissolution of the "referential illusion," we might remove the diegetic illusion: the idea that there is a storyworld at all may prevent us from perceiving various kinds of metalepsis—not only the intrusions of narrators and readers into the narrative, but also a kind of indexical aspiration that haunted many eighteenth-century writers, and may be resurgent in the paratexts that we treat so gingerly in the nonreflexive "realist" novel.

72. Étienne Souriau, *L'univers filmique* (Paris: Flamarrion, 1953), 7; qtd. in Claudia Grobman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 21.

73. Christian Metz and Michael Taylor, *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 98.

74. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 17–18.

Genette makes diegesis not only about space rather than process or person (i.e., who tells the story and in what persona), but about levels or layers: diegetic levels are key to his narrative theory: universes can nest within universes in his "relative" definition.

The second idea is that realism, via Barthes, is a discourse and not a rough or brilliant or too-detailed or fantastic transcription of a readily available social reality. In *Writing Degree Zero*, perhaps the first high-impact work of French Structuralism on Anglo-American novel criticism, Barthes points out the power of the past tense, that is, of narration:

> The world is not unexplained since it is told like a story; each one of its accidents is but a circumstance, and the preterite is precisely this operative sign whereby the narrator reduces the exploded reality to a slim and pure logos . . . finally the preterite is the expression of order, and consequently of a euphoria. Thanks to it, reality is neither mysterious nor absurd; it is clear, almost familiar, repeatedly gathered up and constrained in the hand of a creator. . . . For all the great storytellers of the nineteenth century, the world may be full of pathos but it is not derelict, since it is a grouping of coherent relations.[75]

Realism—through telling, that is, through narration—organizes the social world rhetorically, making what would otherwise be mysterious into something "coherent," at least temporarily. Narration is a kind of ideological cement, producing both euphoria and a well-organized pathos. Steven Marcus, a very "early adapter" of *Writing Degree Zero*, points out that

> reality within this system of consciousness tends to be represented as recollection; it is remarkably stable, and its laws of both expression and development appear to arise

75. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 36–37.

> immanently, and once again, "naturally," out of the material it selects as its content rather than out of the consciousness that selects the material. . . . It offers assurance to its society of readers because the world it represents has already been defined and in some sense closed off; things in it . . . *have already happened*. And in this respect one of its central purposes is the purpose of control.[76]

The closed-off, already over world of the British novel might be usefully compared to what Mary Mullen terms "anachronism" in a group of nineteenth-century Irish novels, which have hardly achieved the ability to control the past, and thereby can only indicate the future with an unnerving but liberating uncertainty:

> Mobilizing relationships between past and present, aesthetics and history, Unionist and anti-imperial politics, history in Edgeworth's Irish writing exceeds the forms through which she attempts to organize it. In the process, her writing questions the impulse towards a useful history, showing that particulars—aesthetic experience, the contingencies of timing, the peculiarities of an Irish context—help imagine political possibilities that work against the assumed future that a useful history presupposes and literary history often secures.[77]

In my argument, British writing can no more control the "contingencies of timing" than can Irish writing, but we accept the anomalous in Irish writing simply because it's Irish and unable to claim control of "European form."

D. A. Miller and Fredric Jameson enhance the power of "European" narrative techniques in their work, increasing the

76. Steven Marcus, "Human Nature, Social Orders, and 19th Century Systems of Explanation: Starting In with George Eliot," *Salmugundi* 28 (Winter 1975): 25.

77. Mary Mullen, "Anachronistic Aesthetics: Maria Edgeworth and the 'Uses' of History," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 26, vol. 2 (Winter 2013–14): 236.

prestige of narration once more. In one of what seems like Miller's most personal essays—on David Copperfield—he raises the idea that "David might be any David"—even David Miller.[78] This seemingly random and purely subjective thought takes on steam as the chapter progresses: David might be any David because there is no one home subjectively in the novel. In trying to hide themselves from the violence of the social order, even first-person narrators are evacuated of content and become pure forms, available shells to be inhabited at will. First-person narration cannot solve the problems of omniscience because it is always already the third person: it is always "doing the police." The ideological success of the nineteenth-century narrator lies in its detachment from subjectivity—even when that narrator speaks in the first person. David Copperfield, D. A. Miller argues, has no face, no identity, no status as the "hero" of his own story. Character and narrator split apart, leaving subjectivity distributed socially—a condition from which the reader hopes she can exclude herself because she suffers neither the condition of character-hood nor that of being narrated: this indeed is the point of being extradiegetic.

In Jameson's work, narrative can almost engage the Lacanian Real, which hides just out of sight but not outside of the allegorization of social conflict novels produce. Narrative dreams of solutions (as did the face paintings of the Caduveo analyzed by Lévi-Strauss that we cannot accomplish outside the novel).[79] But they remain powerfully available for the utopian imagination. This process is perhaps most pronounced for Jameson in science fiction, in which the novel imagines new worlds: they present us with "archaeologies of the future" that offer us various scenarios that we might now still have the power to choose from,

78. D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 192.

79. See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 77. See also Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966).

a power or agency that is always receding as the future comes to greet us with flood and fire.[80] But fictional narrative—the narration of the imagined past or imagined future—is powerful because it gives us potential access to both the unconscious and to the Real, otherwise inaccessible realms. Thus narration is not only powerful in Jameson; like David Copperfield and his fellow Dickens characters, it is empty of subjectivity and filled with a collective unconscious that knows more than any of us can know individually, or in the extradiegetic reality of everyday life. It is notable that, unlike Mullen and many scholars of the non-European novel, Jameson can only find truly utopian possibilities in a largely American, entirely male catalogue of sci-fi writers.

The nineteenth-century narrator is reimagined by these critics, transformed from the realistic-world-shattering chatterbox derided by Henry James and Dorothy Van Ghent: the narrator of Miller and Jameson is almost ideology itself, an ideological state apparatus by many other names, who doesn't barge in, but rather whispers in a mixed language of character and world, leaving us suspended between power and abjection, yet in what can still seem like a strikingly solid social place. The ideology of form, to borrow Jameson's storied phrase, creates forms in which to think and live, many of which threaten a kind of existential incarceration in the plots of the past.[81]

In recent work on the nineteenth-century novel, critics readily notice the disruptions I am writing about in this book. However, they tend to write about them as thematizations of reading or narrating, rather than as problems of writing or disruptions of the formal coherence of these novels. Indeed, we might say they pick up the dramatic tradition of novel criticism in different

80. See Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), esp. chap. 5, "The Great Schism."

81. See Jameson's "On Interpretation: Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act," chap. 1 in *The Political Unconscious*.

terms: readers and their props—books—become the subject of attention, as if we are largely, in reading novels, observing the fictional uses of books. Over a decade ago, Leah Price wondered if it were not "too crude to hypothesize a shift from 'reading' as a noun used to describe the product of the speaker's own ruminations . . . to 'readings' as an activity delegated to others by a critic who describes it from a safe historical distance."[82] If it was too crude then, it certainly isn't now: we have a veritable raft of work in both book history and affect theory in which the activity of reading is the critic's chief concern.[83]

Price should perhaps be credited with inaugurating this shift. She has debunked, in two books and several articles, many of our more cherished ideas about the virtues and consistencies of Victorian reading habits. The anthology, for example, "trained readers to pace themselves through an unmanageable bulk of print by sensing when to skip and where to linger."[84] Novels were read by Victorians in a "culture of the excerpt."[85] More recently, in *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*, Price points out that books are often as absorbent as

82. Leah Price, "Reader's Block: Response," *Victorian Studies* 46, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 231–42.

83. See, for example, Stephen Arata, "On Not Paying Attention," *Victorian Studies* 46, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 193–205; Andrew Elfenbein, *The Gist of Reading* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018); Debra Gettelman, "The Victorian Novel and Its Readers," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel*, ed. Lisa Rodensky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 111–28, as well as her articles on George Eliot ("Reading Ahead in George Eliot," in "Victorian Structures of Feeling," special issue, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 39, no. 1 [Fall 2005]: 25–47) and *Jane Eyre* ("'Making Out' *Jane Eyre*," *ELH* 74, no. 3 [Fall 2007]: 557–81); Kelly Hager, "Estranging *David Copperfield*: Reading the Novel of Divorce," *ELH* 63, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 989–1019; and "Jasper Packlemerton, Victorian Freak," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34, no. 1 (2006): 209–32; and Elisha Cohn, *Still Life: Suspended Development in the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

84. Leah Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5.

85. Ibid.

they are absorbing (as sandwich-wrappers, for example). More seriously, Price argues,

> What once took place on the level of discourse now migrates to the level of story. Instead of an editor's paratextual jokes breaking into the narrative as in *Tristram Shandy*, now a book throw by one character breaks into the text read by another. The violence of book throwing at the level of story replaces the violence of frame breaking at the level of discourse. Replaces, or at least supplements: for every time a novel reminds us of the sensory attributes of the object we're holding—and by extension, reminds us of our own eyes and our own hands—it shatters our concentration as violently as John Reed or Miss Murdstone breaches David's or Jane's. John aims the book to avoid breaking windows, but book throwing still ruptures the transparency of mimesis.[86]

Price both maintains the canonical view of the realist novel—that it is not ruptured—and simultaneously admits, vividly and boldly, that it most certainly is. Throwing books makes them material, and pulls us from text back to book, from story world, to a world that includes both readers of and in books.

Nicholas Dames makes a very similar argument, with the help of what he refers to as "neural science," calling attention to the way that Victorian writers of various kinds call attention to the oscillating attention and inattention of readers.[87] Thackeray, for example, "deflates the scene"[88] of Amelia's parting from Sedley with the intrusion of an extradiegetic fictional reader JONES, "who reads this book at his Club, will pronounce to be excessively foolish, trivial, twaddling, and ultra-sentimental.

86. Leah Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 77.

87. Nicholas Dames, *Physiology of the Novel: Reading Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 77.

88. Ibid., 75.

Yes; I can see Jones at this minute . . . taking out his pencil and scoring under the words 'foolish, twaddling,' etc., and adding to them his own remark of '*quite true*.'"[89] This is an especially striking case of a narrator disturbing the reader's absorption: a finicky fictional reader residing in another fictional space reads what Thackeray writes him thinking and then underlines his own thoughts—as written by Thackeray. What could be more distracting than such a multileveled ontology in which agency is distributed across diegetic layers and free indirect discourse becomes literal. JONES underlines his own thoughts because he agrees with them; their origin is in the narrator's invention of JONES and his cantankerous consciousness.

John Plotz has offered the term "semi-detachment" for the kind of mental state the British provincial novel induces, allowing readers to be both at home and in a larger world as they read.[90] His example, from *The Mill on the Floss*, suggests how the novel induces this state. For now, I want to note that this novel has a first-person omniscient narrator who seems, like Pip or Jane Eyre, to be telling the story of her own life, but of course cannot be, since Maggie Tulliver does not survive the novel. But this is someone who knows the literal place of the novel, the banks of the Floss River near the tributary called the Ripple, or it is someone who used to know this place: "I remember those large dipping willows. I remember the stone bridge."[91] A new paragraph, the second of the novel, begins:

> And this is Dorlcote Mill. I must stand a minute or two here on the bridge and look at it, though the clouds are threatening, and it is far on in the afternoon. Even in this leafless time of departing February it is pleasant to look at—perhaps the

89. William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 12.

90. John Plotz, *Semi-Detached: The Aesthetics of Virtual Experience since Dickens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

91. George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7.

(continued...)

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A NOTE ON THE TYPE

THIS BOOK has been composed in Miller, a Scotch Roman typeface designed by Matthew Carter and first released by Font Bureau in 1997. It resembles Monticello, the typeface developed for The Papers of Thomas Jefferson in the 1940s by C. H. Griffith and P. J. Conkwright and reinterpreted in digital form by Carter in 2003.

Pleasant Jefferson ("P. J.") Conkwright (1905–1986) was Typographer at Princeton University Press from 1939 to 1970. He was an acclaimed book designer and AIGA Medalist.

The ornament used throughout this book was designed by Pierre Simon Fournier (1712–1768) and was a favorite of Conkwright's, used in his design of the *Princeton University Library Chronicle.*