

# Enduring Fictions

by Edward Alexander

Although the Victorian period officially ended with the queen's death in 1901, its political and artistic cultures continue to have an unrivaled immediacy for us. In recent years, conservative moralists have praised the Victorian orphanage and recommended the Victorian virtues of thrift, cleanliness, hard work, self-reliance, self-respect, and national pride as solutions to American woes. At the other end of the political spectrum, university offices of moral sanitation issue pamphlets warning young women of date rape that recall Victorian manuals exhorting young women to avoid "vulgar familiarity." John Stuart Mill's schemes for flouting the tyranny of the majority by plural voting have been resurrected (albeit with the typical American emphasis on race) by the ill-fated Lani Guinier. In 1995, a magnificent exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite paintings traversed the country, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington is now the site of a major exhibition of Victorian painters.

But most of all it is Victorian novelists who exercise over Americans an appeal unmatched by that of any other group of writers. In 1996, the Morgan Library organized a sumptuous exhibition of the Brontës' manuscripts and memorabilia. Television productions of the works of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Joseph Conrad (following a run of Anthony Trollope adaptations) pour forth abundantly, and films based on the novels of Emily and Charlotte Brontë and Thomas Hardy, though less abundant than those of the pre-Victorian Jane Austen, also proliferate. The Trollope Society, founded in 1987, boasts as a vice president the current British prime minister, John Major, and flourishes mightily: in the Seattle area, where I live, there are three separate branches. In the present euphoria, it came as little surprise to learn recently that Mary Thompson, who at 120 had become the oldest living American—she died in 1996 but did not make the *Guinness Book of Records* because, as the daughter of ex-slaves, she had no birth certificate—was reported by her son to have followed a strict regimen of reading Victorian novels every evening, and of having them read to her when she lost her sight.

The Victorians themselves would have found this strange; they believed the novel was the genre least likely to survive into the next generation, much less the next century. The essayist Thomas De Quincey, writing in 1848, shortly after the appearance of *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Dombey and Son*, declared the novel an inferior and ephemeral genre. "All novels whatever, the best equally with the worst, have faded almost within the generation that produced them. This is a curse written as a superscription above the

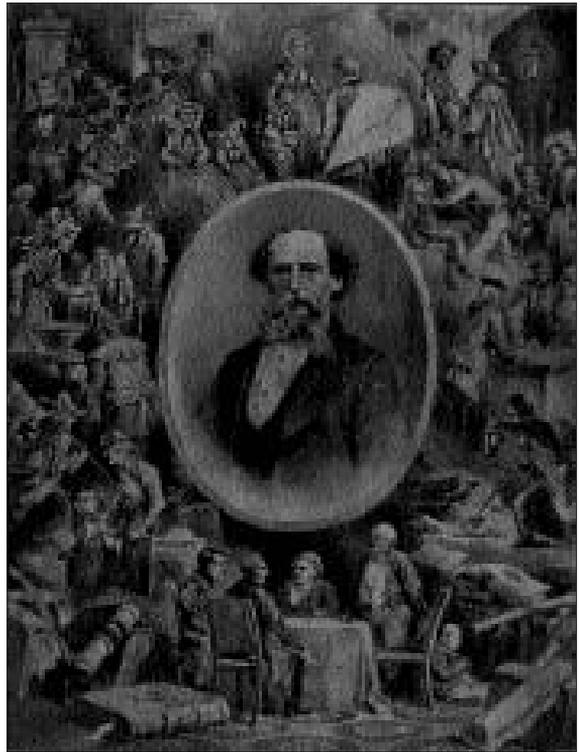
whole class. . . . It is only the grander passions of poetry, allying themselves with forms more abstract and permanent,” that, De Quincey said, could last. Mill deemed the novel an inferior genre because it could depict only outward things like manners and scenery, not the inner man: “The minds and hearts of greatest depth and elevation are commonly those which take greatest delight in poetry; the shallowest and emptiest . . . are . . . not those least addicted to novel-reading.” Matthew Arnold told Stephen Coleridge that he had been offered £10,000 to write a novel, but would not soil his hands by doing so because, as Coleridge’s famous ancestor Samuel had said, “Novel reading spares the reader the trouble of thinking . . . and establishes a habit of indolence.”

**N**or were disparaging opinions of this subpoetic genre limited to poets and essayists. “By the common consent of all mankind who have read, poetry takes the highest place in literature,” Trollope said. “In his own age, [the novelist] can have great effect for good or evil; but we know as yet of no prose novelist who has influenced after ages. . . . [T]he novelist can expect no centuries of popularity. But the poet adapts himself to all ages by the use of language and scenes which are not ephemeral.”

Novelists understood better than anyone else that their characters emerge, in part, out of historical awareness. Nevertheless, all of these clever people have turned out to be wrong; and George Bernard Shaw—who said that writers who write not for an age but for all time have their reward by going unread in all times—right.

Far from being time-bound, the Victorian novelists have demonstrated a staying power unequaled by their poetic contemporaries. Is this simply because of their intrinsic artistic merit? “Dickens,” said Leo Tolstoy, “is a genius born once in a hundred years.” William Makepeace Thackeray, according to Charlotte Brontë, was on a par with the Hebrew prophets.

Brontë’s sister Emily was, said Matthew Arnold, a writer “whose soul/Knew no fellow for might,/Passion, vehemence, grief,/Daring, since Byron died” (a reminder that it was the Victorian novelists, not the Victorian poets, who inherited the prophetic passion of the Romantics). George Eliot, whose fiction after *Adam Bede* (1859) was considered by Victorian critics the standard by



*Charles Dickens and his world*

which her contemporaries should be judged, was described by the luminaries who tried (unsuccessfully) to satisfy her wish to be buried in Westminster Abbey as “a woman whose achievements were without parallel in the previous history of womankind.” But surely all these qualities were as evident to both common and uncommon readers at the beginning of the 20th century, when the reputation of Dickens, for example, was at its nadir, to be revived only after World War II, and Trollope was alleged by critics to have “disappeared.”

Let me, cautiously, suggest (in ascending order of importance) four reasons for the enduring—and more especially the present—appeal of Victorian novelists.

First, unlike most serious modern novelists, they were content to think of themselves as popular entertainers cultivating a warm personal relationship with their readers yet also telling them what to do or think. (Until Virginia Woolf, no lengthy fiction was detached from its teller.) Who can resist the incessant direct addresses to their readers by Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë, as in the culminating one of the 30 in *Jane Eyre*: “Reader, I married him.” Dickens used the direct address less frequently but was equally concerned to make his readers familiar and comfortable with his voice. Tolstoy attributed this intimate relationship with readers to the Victorians’ affection for their characters: “The first condition of an author’s popularity, the prime means to make people like him, is the love with which he treats his characters. That is why Dickens’s characters are the friends of all mankind: they are a bond of union between man in America and man in Petersburg.” Thackeray, alluding to the serializations favored by him and Dickens, said that after his characters had been “boarding and lodging with me for 20 months,” he knew them thoroughly, even to the sound of their voices. Those of us who were brought up on the modernist writers, so notably lacking in a tone of tender inclusiveness, now find the accents of love in the Victorians irresistibly endearing. (One of these accents is the reticent treatment of sex, in contrast to the banal explicitness of many contemporary novelists.)

We are also attracted to the Victorians by a curious mixture of the exotic and the familiar, the time-bound and the prescient. If they do not offer us precisely, as Thackeray described the world of his youth, “stage-coaches . . . riding-horses, pack-horses, highway-men, knights in armour, Norman invaders, Roman legions, Druids, Ancient Britons painted blue,” they do give us plenty of fox hunting, dowry hunting, Puritanism, Irish peers, Knights of the Most Noble Order of the Garter, First Lords of the Powder Closet, and Grooms of the Back Stairs. We find in Victorian novels a depiction of variegated manners that our more democratic polity lacks, a class system with clearly demarcated, yet crossable, lines. We may rejoice in our freedom from the Victorian novelists’ obsession (especially powerful in

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Dickens and Trollope) with becoming a gentleman, and yet be entranced by the thickness of social context in which Pip and other aspirants to gentlemanliness pursue their quest. Henry James explained his own need, as a novelist, for the Victorian English ambience in his 1879 description of “the lightness of the diet to which [Hawthorne’s] observation was condemned.” Being a young American rather than a young English novelist, Hawthorne was confronted by a negative spectacle: “No state . . . barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court . . . no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, no parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow . . . no Epsom nor Ascot!”

A third reason for the Victorians’ appeal is our recognition that Victorian society, despite its differences from the contemporary world, confronted its novelists with problems that prefigure our own: how to reconcile democracy with traditional humanistic culture; how to create a humane existence in the welter of urban life; how to find secular equivalents for fading religious faith. Foreshadowings of our dilemmas abound in the Victorian novel. Lionel Trilling justified both Dickens’ alleged “exaggeration” and his interest in the mystery of evil

when he wrote: “We who have seen Hitler, Goering, and Goebbels put on the stage of history, and Pecksniffery institutionalized in the Kremlin, are in no position to suppose that Dickens ever exaggerated in the least the extravagance of madness, absurdity, and malevolence in the world.” Readers in search of early stirrings of feminism will find them in the passionate outbursts of Brontë’s heroine in *Jane Eyre* and Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure*, as well as in the intense yearnings of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*. Joseph Conrad’s depiction, in *Heart of Darkness*, of the deterioration of imperialist idealism into a

desire to “Exterminate all the brutes!” casts a lurid, prescient shadow on the ideologues of later final solutions; his portrait of the bomb-carrying “professor” in *The Secret Agent* prefigures our “guerrillas with tenure.” In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot probed so deeply into the roots of both Zionism and a



The Brontë sisters (l.–r.): Anne, Emily, and Charlotte

Toynbee-esque variety of intellectual anti-Semitism that a street is named after her in each of Israel's three major cities. In *The Warden*, Trollope created in Tom Towers the archetype of many a *New York Times* or *Washington Post* columnist, issuing infallible bulls from "the Vatican of England," and "studiously striving to look a man but knowing within his breast that he was a god." In *Jude the Obscure* Hardy depicted with tremendous sympathy the intellectual ambition of a self-educated worker to break into the closed circle of Oxford, an ambition akin to that of American minorities to redefine the "mainstream" of our intellectual life. If Pip's quest for gentlemanly status is alien to us, the snobbish contempt for his adoptive "father," Magwitch, that results from the very "refinements" that Magwitch has purchased for Pip is a very American story, familiar—alas!—to countless European and Asian immigrants.

No single formula can encompass Victorian novelistic imaginations. Dickens insisted that all novelists report their own conception of reality from their own perspective, for "we are all partly creators of the objects we perceive." But although perception is creative, commonality of purpose may exist. Charlotte Brontë wrote of herself and her novelist colleagues as if they belonged to a trade union of moral reformers, headed by Thackeray: "I regard him as the first social regenerator of the day—as the very master of that working corps who would restore to rectitude the warped system of things." In her insistence on the moral responsibility of novelists, their intense concern with conduct and its consequences, we recognize a stark contrast to the works of contemporary American novelists who subscribe to William Gass's dictum that "Life is not the subject of fiction" and believe that the novel is mainly about itself or about its language. It is above all a longing for what Arnold called Hebraism and a sense that faith abandoned remains a more compelling presence in literature than secular creeds adopted that draw us backward to the Victorians.

A contemporary, W. H. Mallock, spoke of George Eliot as "the first great godless writer of fiction that has appeared in England." What this godlessness meant, exactly, is suggested by F. W. H. Myers's description of his conversation with the novelist as they walked in the Fellows' Garden of Trinity College, Cambridge on a rainy evening in May 1873: "She, stirred somewhat beyond her wont, and taking as her text the three words which have been used so often as the inspiring trumpet-calls of men,—the words, *God*, *Immortality*, *Duty*—pronounced, with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the *first*, how unbelievable the *second*, and yet how peremptory and absolute the *third* . . . her grave, majestic countenance turned toward me like a sibyl's in the gloom; it was as though she withdrew from my grasp, one by one, the two scrolls of promise, and left me the third scroll only, awful with inevitable fates."

To some extent, this "withdrawal" of and from God and immortality was implicit in the genre Eliot was practicing. It has been argued that deism made the genre of the novel possible because it asserted that God started the world and then went to sleep, allowing its inhabitants to fend for themselves. In this way, it freed writers from puz-

zling over origins and opened the way for historical awareness and the uncontested rule of natural law. But the “godlessness,” however caused, led Eliot to search, through her novels, for worldly equivalents of values that she believed the religious tradition could no longer sustain. “I must tell you,” she wrote to a friend in 1868,

that I am always a little uneasy about my share in the talk when it has turned on religion. . . . My books are a form of utterance that dissatisfies me less [than talk], because they are deliberately, carefully constructed on a basis which even in my doubting mind is never shaken by a doubt [as to] the relative goodness and nobleness of human dispositions and motives. And the inspiring principle which alone gives me courage to write is, that of so presenting our human life as to help my readers in getting a clearer conception and a more active admiration of those vital elements which bind men together . . . and . . . help them in gradually dissociating those elements from the more transient forms on which an outworn teaching tends to make them dependent. . . . Since you have read my books, you must perceive that the bent of my mind is conservative rather than destructive. . . . We ought . . . not to sit down and wail, but to be heroic and constructive . . . like the strong souls who lived before . . . in other eras of religious decay.

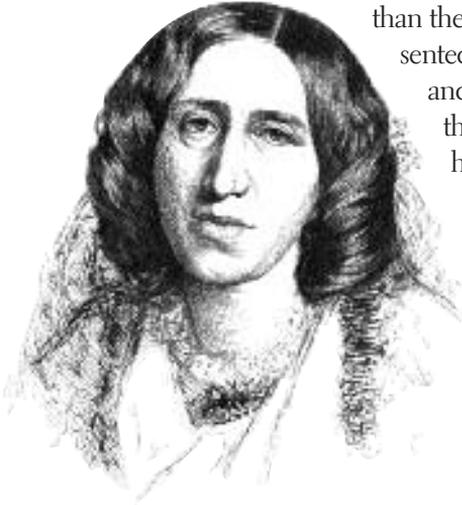
Religious decay”—a peculiar description, perhaps, of an era in which evangelical Christianity provided the still-firm moral cement of society; and yet the most consistently vilified characters in Victorian novels are evangelicals, ranging from Pitt Crawley in *Vanity Fair* to Mr. Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre* to Obadiah Slope in *Barchester Towers* and the Chadbands in *Bleak House*. (The evangelicals returned the favor, becoming the principal critics of novels as “instruments of abomination and ruin.” In the *Evangelical Magazine*, love of novels was ranked only slightly less heinous than drunkenness and adultery.) Like many of their contemporary admirers, the Victorian novelists, however dismissive of Christianity’s claim to truth, felt they were more suited to tend the sacred flame than ordained ministers who presided over “transient forms.” This may explain why Dostoevsky alluded reverentially to Dickens, who vehemently rejected such central Christian doctrines as original sin, as “the great Christian—Dickens.”

*Middlemarch* realized Eliot’s desire to be “conservative” of religious values in an era of religious decay. The book begins with reflections on the life of Saint Theresa, asking whether “later-born Therasas” will be able to find a “coherent social faith.” The novel’s main aspirant to Theresa status is Dorothea Brooke, whose stature, bearing, and dress, in the midst of provincial society, give her “the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible . . . in a paragraph of to-day’s newspaper.” It is left to Dorothea, who refuses to wear a cross and admits that she “hardly ever pray[s],” rather than to her clergyman husband or any other clerical figure in the novel, to uphold traditional religious values. When Will Ladislaw condescendingly refers to her social idealism as “a beautiful mysticism,” she replies sharply: “Please not to call it . . . Persian, or something else geographical. It is my life. I have found it out, and cannot part with it. . . . I have always been finding out my religion since I was a little girl.” This is a secular saintliness

on the part of a character who, though occasionally satirized for confusing doing good with feeling good about what she is doing, is a part of Eliot's grand design: finding secular equivalents for religious values. In her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot even suggested a Jewish version of this design. In the preface to *Middlemarch*, she had spoken of "human hearts . . . beating to a national idea"; in *Deronda* she names the idea and creates in the protagonist an early illustration of the saying that when a man can no longer be a Jew he becomes a Zionist.

George Eliot felt no regret that people should turn to the forms and ceremonies of religion if they found comfort in them, as she herself did; but she

had "faith in the working out of higher possibilities than the Catholic or any other Church has presented," and insisted that "the 'highest calling and election' is to *do without opium*." She therefore made the moral enlargement of human sympathies the purpose of her art: "the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures." The most daring exercise of this sympathetic imagination in *Middlemarch* comes when



George Eliot

the narrator asks us to identify with the repellent Casaubon solely because he faces death: "Here

was a man who now for the first time found himself looking into the eyes of death—who was passing through one of those rare moments of experience when we feel the truth of a commonplace . . . when . . . 'we must all die' transforms itself suddenly into the acute consciousness 'I must die—and soon.'" Stepping into the void left by religion, the "godless" writer recalls her readers—then and now—to a fundamental tenet of religious belief: that we are all, even this desiccated researcher into moldy futilities, equal in the face of death.

Eliot was by no means the only Victorian writer who thought that she could draw upon traditional faith and traditional feeling through the very act of withdrawing from them intellectually. Among the novelists, Hardy comes closest to her, as when he said of himself that "although invidious critics had cast slurs upon him as Nonconformist, Agnostic, Atheist, Infidel, Immoralist, Heretic, Pessimist . . . they had never thought of calling him what they might have called him much more plausibly—churchy; not in any intellectual sense, but insofar as instincts and emotions ruled." (This passage comes from the biography written by Hardy's second wife, but was actually dictated by Hardy himself.)

**R**arely do we hear in these novelists the sneer of the disbeliever or the icy indifference of the rationalist. In fact, they tended to sing the praises of Christianity: it was beautiful, it was historical, it was necessary to the preservation of morality, it was conducive to the

composition of great music and the construction of majestic buildings. The one thing they could not bring themselves to say was that it was true.

“I have been looking for God 50 years,” Hardy wrote with the painful regret of the lapsed Christian who wishes he could believe, “and I think that if he had existed I should have discovered him.” In his novels about the world of Anglican Christianity, the question that Trollope keeps asking about this ancient institution is not “Is it true?” but “What is the meaning of it?” Why has it been believed by thoughtful people, and received by generations of Englishmen? Trollope is critical of Dr. Grantly (in *The Warden*) for his theocratic defense of clerical privilege. Nevertheless, the tone of the archdeacon’s mind is inseparable from something venerable: “Who without remorse can batter down the dead branches of an old oak, now useless, but ah! still so beautiful, or drag out the fragments of the ancient forest without feeling that they sheltered the younger plants, to which they are now summoned to give way in a tone so peremptory and so harsh?”

**H**ow could one preserve the values of religion without subscribing to its “transient forms”? Arnold thought the only solution was literary: “There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything.”

In retrospect, however, it appears that it is not poetry but the novel, as practiced by the Victorians, that has come closest to fulfilling Arnold’s prediction that literature would one day take the place of religion. But how close can this be? John Henry Newman, the most powerful Victorian religious voice and a sometime novelist himself, credited the novels of Sir Walter Scott with turning men’s minds in the direction of the Middle Ages, and when he wanted an image of the disordered condition of the human race out of joint with the purposes of its creator, instinctively invoked the figure of the disinherited child named Oliver Twist.

Nevertheless, Newman’s final judgment on the imperial reach of Victorian literature was an admonition we might do well, in the midst of our current enthusiasm, to remember: “A literary religion is . . . little to be depended upon; it looks well in fair weather, but its doctrines are opinions, and, when called to suffer for them, it slips them between its folios, or burns them at its hearth.” To which one might add that admitting a devil’s advocate (as Newman is in this context) into the midst of your dearest, most sacred truths—apt to grow windy and worthless unless challenged—is also a Victorian virtue.