Reading Panel

Technical Estimate

versus

the Candour of Fault:

Legitimizing Victorian Popular Fiction

in 2015

Senate House, London

June 13th 2015
M~

The sibilant French syllables hiss

her, and seem better fitted to

in the familiar English she has

his shoulders as he goes out into

thing about a “beautiful devil,”

as he had gone out, o
to the door between the

used it, and with the handle of

and looked at Robert Audley:

my grave, Mr. Audley,” she

lower basely and cruelly, and

ught just to others and merciful

“I should have been a traitor

remain at liberty after—after

fires and the fire at the Castle

ich had contrasted so exquisitely with

her eyes. She hated herself and her beauty.

“I would laugh at you and defy you if I dared!” she cried;

“I would defy you, and kill myself if I dared! But I am a

poor pitiful coward, and have been so from the first; afraid of

my mother’s horrible inheritance; afraid of poverty; afraid of

George Talboys; afraid of you.”

She was silent for a little while, but she still held her place

by the door, as if determined to detain Robert as long as it

was her pleasure to do so.

“Do you know what I am thinking of?” she said, presently,

“Do you know what I am thinking of, as I look at you in the

dim light of this room? I am thinking of the day upon which

George Talboys—disappeared.”

Robert started as she mentioned the name of his lost friend;

his face turned pale in the dusky light, and his breathing grew

quicker and louder.

“He was standing opposite me as you are standing now,”

continued my lady. “You said that you would raze the old

33"
Lady Audley's Secret.

house to the ground; that you would root up every tree in the gardens to find your dead friend. You would have had no need to do so much. The body of George Talboys lies at the bottom of the old well, in the shrubbery beyond the lime-walk."

Robert Audley flung up his hands and clasped them above his head with one loud cry of horror.

"Oh, my God!" he said, after a dreadful pause, "have all the ghastly things that I have thought prepared me so little for the ghastly truth, that it should come upon me like this at last?"

"He came to me in the lime-walk," resumed my lady, in the same hard, dogged tone as that in which she had confessed the wicked story of her life. "I knew that he would come, and I had prepared myself, as well as I could, to meet him. I was determined to bribe him, to cajole him; to do anything sooner than abandon the wealth and the position I had won, and go back to my old life. He came, and he reproached me for the conspiracy at Ventnor. He declared that so long as he lived he would never forgive me for the lie that had broken his heart: He told me that I had plucked his heart out of his breast and trampled upon it; and that he would have forgiven me any wrong upon earth, except the one deliberate and passionless wrong which I had done him. He said this and a great deal more, and he told me that no power on earth should turn him from his... me... mad. He goaded me as you have goaded me; he was as merciless as you have been merciless. We were in the shrubbery at the end of the lime-walk. I was seated upon the broken masonry at the mouth of the well. George Talboys was leaning upon the disused windlass, in which the rusty iron spindle rattled loosely whenever he shifted his position. I rose at last, and turned upon him to defy him, as I had determined to... him at the worst. I told him that if he denounced me to Sir Michael, I would declare him to be a madman or a liar, and I defied him to convince the man who loved me—blindly as I told him—that he had any claim to me. I was going to leave him after having told him this, when he caught me by the wrist and detainted me by force. You saw the bruises that his fingers made upon my wrist, and you did not believe the account I gave of them. I could see that, Mr. Robert Audley, and I saw that you were a person I should have to fear."

She paused, as if she had expected Robert to speak; but he stood silent and motionless waiting for the end.

"George Talboys treated me as you treated me," she said, presently. "He swore that if there was but one witness of my identity, and that witness was removed from Audley Court by the width of the whole earth, he would bring him there to swear to my identity, and to denounce me. It was then that I was mad. It was then that I drew the loose iron spindle from the shrunked wood, and saw my first husband sink with one horrible cry into the black mouth of the well. There is a legend of its enormous depth. I do not know how deep it is. It is dry, I suppose; for I heard no splash; only a dull thud. I knelt down and listened, but the cry was not repeated, though I waited for nearly a quarter of an hour—God knows how long it seemed to me—by the mouth of the well."

Robert Audley uttered no word of horror when the story was finished. He moved a little nearer towards the door against which Helen Talboys stood. Had there been any other means of exit from the room, he would gladly have availed himself of it. He shrank from even a momentary contact with this creature.

"Let me pass you, if you please," he said, in an icy voice.

"You see I do not fear to make my confession to you," said Helen Talboys, "for two reasons. The first is, that you dare not use it against me, because you know it would kill your uncle to see me in a...-long imprisonment in a mad-house. I do not thank you for your mercy, Mr. Robert Audley, for I know exactly what it is worth."

She moved away from the door, and Robert passed her, without a word, without a look.

Half an hour afterwards he was in one of the principal hotels at Villebrumeuse, sitting at a neatly-ordered supper-table, with no power to eat; with no power to distract his mind, even for a moment, from the image of that lost friend who had been treacherously murdered in the thicket at Audley Court.
Let me out,' said Sikes. 'Don't speak to me; it's not safe. Let me out, I say.'

'Hear me speak a word,' rejoined the Jew, laying his hand upon the lock. 'You won't be—'

'Well,' replied the other.

'You won't be—too—violent, Bill!' whined the Jew.

The day was breaking, and there was light enough for the men to see each other's faces. They exchanged one brief glance; there was a fire in the eyes of both, which could not be mistaken.

'I mean,' said Fagin, showing that he felt all disguise was now useless, 'not too violent for safety. Be crafty, Bill, and not too bold.'

Sikes made no reply; but, pulling open the door, of which the Jew had turned the lock, dashed into the silent streets.

Without one pause, or moment's consideration; without once turning his head to the right, or left, raising his eyes to the sky, or lowering them to the ground, but looking straight before him with savage resolution: his teeth so tightly compressed that the strained jaw seemed starting through his skin; the robber held on his head-long course, nor muttered a word, nor relaxed a muscle, until he reached his own door. He opened it softly, with a key; strolled lightly up the stairs; and entering his own room, double-locked the door, and lifting a heavy table against it, drew back the curtain of the bed.

The girl was lying, half-dressed, upon it. He had roused her from her sleep, for she raised herself with a hurried and startled look.

'Get up!' said the man.

'It is you, Bill!' said the girl, with an expression of pleasure at his return.

'It is,' was the reply. 'Get up.'

There was a candle burning, but the man hastily drew it from the candlestick, and hurled it under the grate. Seeing the faint light of early day, without, the girl rose to undraw the curtain.

'Let it be,' said Sikes, thrusting his hand before her. 'There's light enough for what I've got to do.'

'Bill,' said the girl, in the low voice of alarm, 'why do you look like that at me?'

The robber sat regarding her, for a few seconds, with dilated nostrils and heaving breast; and then, grasping her by the head and throat, dragged her into the middle of the room, and looking once towards the door, placed his heavy hand upon her mouth.

'Bill, Bill!' gasped the girl, wrestling with the strength of mortal fear,—'I—I won't scream or cry—not once—hear me—speak to me—tell me what I have done!'

'You know, you devil!' returned the robber, suppressing his breath. 'You were watched to-night; every word you said was heard.'

'Then spare my life for the love of Heaven, as I spared yours,' rejoined the girl, clinging to him. 'Bill, dear Bill, you cannot have the heart to kill me. Oh! think of all I have given up, only this one night, you. You shall have time to think, and save yourself this crime; I will not lose my hold, you cannot throw me off. Bill, Bill, for dear God's sake, for your own, for mine, stop before you spill my blood! I have been true to you, upon my guilty soul I have!'

The man struggled, violently, to release his arms; but those of the girl were clasped round his, and tear her as he would, he could not tear them away.

'Bill,' cried the girl, striving to lay her head upon his breast, 'the gentleman, and that dear lady, told me to-night of a home in some foreign country where I could end my days in solitude and peace. Let me see them again, and beg them, on my knees, to shew the same mercy and goodness to you; and let us both save this dreadful place, and far apart lead better lives, and forget how we have lived, except in prayers, and never see each other more. It is never too late to repent. They told me so—I feel it now—but we must have time—a little, little time!'

The housebreaker freed one arm, and grasped his pistol. The certainty of immediate detection if he fired, flashed across his mind even in the midst of his fury; and he beat it twice with all the force he could summon, upon the upturned face that almost touched his own.

She staggered and fell: nearly blinded with the blood that rained down from a deep gash in her forehead; but raising herself, with difficulty, on her knees, drew from her bosom a white handkerchief—Rose Maylie's own—and holding it up, in her folded hands, as high towards Heaven as her feeble strength would allow, breathed one prayer for mercy to her Maker.

It was a ghastly figure to look upon. The murderer staggering backward to the wall, and shutting out the sight with his hand, seized a heavy club and struck her down.*
CHAPTER XLVIII
THE FLIGHT OF SIKES

Of all bad deeds that, under cover of the darkness, had been committed within wide London's bounds since night hung over it, that was the worst. Of all the horrors that rose with an ill scent upon the morning air, that was the foulest and most cruel.

The sun,—the bright sun, that brings back, not light alone, but new life, and hope, and freshness to man,—burst upon the crowded city in clear and radiant glory. Through costly-coloured glass and paper-mended window, through cathedral dome and rotten crevice, it shed its equal ray. It lighted up the room where the murdered woman lay. It did. He tried to shut it out, but it would stream in. If the sight had been a ghastly one in the dull morning, what was it, now, in all that brilliant light!

He had not moved; he had been afraid to stir. There had been a moan and motion of the hand; and, with terror added to hate, he had struck and struck again. Once he threw a rug over it; but it was worse to fancy the eyes, and imagine them moving towards him, than to see them glaring upward, as if watching the reflection of the pool of gore that quivered and danced in the sunlight on the ceiling. He had plucked it off again. And there was the body—mere flesh and blood, no more—but such flesh, and so much blood!

He struck a light, kindled a fire, and thrust the club into it. There was hair upon the end, which blazed and shrunk into a light cinder, and, caught by the air, whirled up the chimney. Even that frightened him, sturdier as he was; but he held the weapon till it broke, and then piled it on the coals to burn away, and smoulder into ashes. He washed himself, and rubbed his clothes; there were spots that would not be removed, but he cut the pieces out, and burnt them. How those stains were dispersed about the room! The very feet of the dog were bloody.

All this time he had, never once, turned his back upon the corpse; no, not for a moment. Such preparations completed, he moved backward, towards the door: dragging the dog with him, lest he should soil his feet anew and carry out new evidences of the crime into the streets. He shut the door softly, locked it, took the key, and left the house.

He crossed over, and glanced up at the window, to be sure that nothing was visible from the outside. There was the curtain still drawn, which she would have opened to admit the light she never saw again. It lay nearly under there. He knew that. God, how the sun poured down upon the very spot!

The glance was instantaneous. It was a relief to have got free of the room. He whistled on the dog, and walked rapidly away.*

He went through Islington; strode up the hill at Highgate on which stands the stone in honour of Whittington,* turned down to Highgate Hill, unsteady of purpose, and uncertain where to go; struck off to the right again, almost as soon as he began to descend it; and taking the foot-path across the fields, skirted Caen Wood, and so came out on Hampstead Heath. Traversing the hollow by the Vale of Health, he mounted the opposite bank, and crossing the road which joins the villages of Hampstead and Highgate, made along the remaining portion of the heath to the fields at North End, in one of which he laid himself down under a hedge, and slept.

Soon he was up again, and away,—not far into the country, but back towards London by the high-road,—then back again,—then over another part of the same ground as he already traversed,—then wandering up and down in fields, and lying on ditches' brinks to rest, and starting up to make for some other spot, and do the same, and ramble on again.

Where could he go, that was near and not too public, to get some meat and drink? Hendon. That was a good place, not far off, and out of most people's way. Thither he directed his steps,—running sometimes, and sometimes, with a strange perversity, loitering at a snail's pace, or stopping altogether and idly breaking the hedges with his stick. But when he got there, all the people he met,—the very children at the doors—seemed to view him with suspicion. Back he turned again, without the courage to purchase bit or drop, though he had tasted no food for many hours; and once more he lingered on the Heath, uncertain where to go.

He wandered over miles and miles of ground, and still came back to the old place. Morning and noon had passed, and the day was on the wane, and still he rambled to and fro, and up and down, and round and round, and still lingered about the same spot. At last he got away, and shaped his course for Hatfield.

It was nine o'clock at night, when the man, quite tired out, and the...
CHAPTER XIX.

MORNING.

The orgie lasted throughout the night in the "boozing-ken." There were plenty of kind guests who, being drunk with money, treated those that had none; and thus Tom the Cracksman, Dick Flairer, and Bill Bolter, were enabled to indulge, to their heart's content, in the adulterated liquors sold at the establishment.

The cold raw November morning was ushered in with a fine mistling rain. The gas-lights were extinguished in the parlour; and the dawn of day fell upon countenances inflamed with debauchery, and rendered hideous by dirt and dark bristling beards.

That was a busy hour for the landlord and landlady of the "boozing-ken." The neighbours who "used the house," came in, one after another—male and female, to take their "morning." This signified their first dram.

Then it was that the "all sorts" was in great demand. Old clothesmen, sweeps, dustmen, knackers, crimps, and women of the town, crowded round the bar, lambing the strange but potent compound. Even young boys and girls of tender age seemed as a matter of course to require the morning stimulant ere they commenced the avocations or business of the day. Matted hair, blur-eyes, sallow faces, peaked noses, and hollow cheeks, combined with rags and tatters, were the characteristics of the wretches that thronged about the bar of that lowest of low drinking dens.

Nothing is more revolting to the eye than the unwashed aspect of dissipation by the dingy light of the early dawn. The women had evidently jumped from their beds, and huddled on their miserable attire without the slightest regard to decency, in order to lose no time in obtaining their morning dram. The men appeared as if they had slept in their clothes all night; and the pieces of straw in the coarse matted hair of many of them, plainly denoted of what materials their beds were made.

They all entered shivering, cold, depressed, and sunk. The dram instantly produced an extraordinary change in each. Artificial gaiety—a gaiety which developed itself in ribald jokes, profane oaths, and obscene talk—was diffused around. Those who could afford it indulged in a second and a third glass; and some tossed for pots of beer. The men lighted their pipes; and the place was Impregnated with the narcotic fumes of the strongest and worst tobacco—that bastard opium of the poor.

Presently the policeman "upon that best" lounged in, and was complimented by the landlady with a glass of her "best cordial gin." He seemed well acquainted with many of the individuals there, and laughed heartily at the jokes uttered in his presence. When he was gone, the inmates of the "boozing-ken" all declared, with one accord, "that he was the most nimbles blue-bottle in the entire force."

In the parlour there were several men occupied in warming beer, toasting herrings, and frying sausages. The tables were smeared over with a rag as black as a hat, by a dirty slip-shod drab of a girl; and with the same cloth she dusted the frame of wire-work which protected the dingy face of the huge Dutch clock. Totally regardless of her presence, the men continued their obscene and filthy discourse; and she proceeded with her work as coolly as if nothing offensive met her ears.

*Gentlemanly—agreeable.*

There are, thank God! thousands of British women who constitute the glory of their sex—chaste, virtuous, delicate-minded, and pure in thought and action,—beings who are but one remove from angels now, but who will be angels hereafter when they succeed to their inheritance of immortality. It must be to such as these that the eyes of the poet are turned when he eulogizes, in glowing and impassioned language, the entire sex comprehended under the witching name of Woman! For, oh! how would his mind be shocked, were he to wander for a few hours amidst those haunts of vice and sinks of depravity which we have just described;—his spirit, towering on eagle-wing up into the sunny skies of poetry, would flutter back again to the earth, at the aspect of those foul and loathsome wretches, who, in the female shape, are found in the dwelling-places of poverty and crime!

But to continue.

Bill Bolter took leave of his companions at about eight o'clock in the morning, after a night of boisterous revelry; and rapidly retraced his steps homewards.

Field Lane was now swarming with life. The miserable little shops were all open; and their proprietors were busy in displaying their commodities to the best advantage. Here Jewsesses were occupied in suspending innumerable silk handkerchiefs to wires and poles over their doors: there the "translators" of old shoes were employed in spreading their stock upon shelves that filled the place, where the windows ought to have been. In one or two dark shops women were engaged in arranging herrings, stockfish, and dried haddock: in another, coals, vegetables, and oysters were exposed for sale; and not a few were hung with "old clothes as good as new."

To this we may add that in the centre of the great metropolis of the mightiest empire in the world,—in a city possessing a police which annually costs the nation thousands of pounds—and in a country whose laws are revered as being adapted to reach and baffle all degrees of crime,—numbers of receivers of stolen goods were boldiy, safely, and tranquilly exposing for sale the articles which their agents had "picked up" during the preceding night.

There was, however, nothing in the aspect of Field Lane at all new to the eyes of Bill Bolter. Indeed he merely went down that Jew's bazaar, in his way homewards, because he was anxious to purchase certain luxuries in the shape of red-herrings for his breakfast, he having borrowed a trifle of a friend at the "boozing-ken" to supply his immediate necessities.

When he arrived at his lodgings in Lower Union Court, he was assailed with a storm of reproaches, menaces, and curses, on the part of his wife, for having stayed all night at the "boozing ken." At first that cruel and remorseless man trembled—actually turned pale and trembled in the presence of the virago who thus attacked him. But at length his passion was aroused by her taunts and threats; and, after bandying some horrible abuse and foul epithets with the infuriate woman, he was provoked to blows. With one stroke of his enormous fist, he felled her to the ground, and then brutally kicked her as she lay almost senseless at his feet.

He then coolly sat down by the fire to cook his own breakfast, without paying the least attention to the two poor children, who were crying bitterly in that corner of the room where they had slept.

In a few minutes the woman rose painfully from
the floor. Her features were distorted and her lips were livid with rage. She dared not, however, attempt to irritate her furious husband any farther: still her passion required a vent. She looked round, and seemed to reflect for a moment.

Then, in the next instance, all her concentrated rage burst upon the heads of her unhappy offspring.

With a horrible curse at their squalling, the woman leapt, like a tiger-cat, upon the poor little boy and girl. Harry, as usual, covered his sister with his own thin and emaciated form as well as he could; and a torrent of blows rained down upon his naked flesh. The punishment which that maddened wretch then inflicted upon him, was horrible in the extreme.

A thousand times before that day had Polly Bolter treated her children with demoniac cruelty; and her husband had not attempted to interfere. On the present occasion, however, he took it into his head to meddle in the matter—for the simple reason that, having quarreled with his wife, he hated her at the moment, and greedily availed himself of any opportunity to thwart or oppose her.

Starting from his chair, he exclaimed, “Come, now—I say, leave those children alone. They haven't done nothing to you.”

“Your mind your own business,” returned the woman, desisting for an instant from her attack upon the boy, and casting a look of mingled defiance and contempt at her husband.

That woman’s countenance, naturally ugly and revolting, was now absolutely frightful.

“I say, leave them children alone,” cried Bill.

“If you touch ‘em again, I’ll drop down on you.”

“Oh, you coward! to hit a woman! I wish I was a man, I’d pay you off for this: and if I was, you wouldn’t dare think of it.”

“Mind what you say, Poll; I’m in no humour to be teased this morning. Keep your mealy-eyes off the kids, or I’m blessed if I don’t do for you.”

“Ugh—coward! This is the way I dare you;” and she dealt a tremendous blow upon her boy’s shoulder.

The poor lad screamed pitiously: the hand of his mother had fallen with the weight of a sledge hammer upon his naked flesh.

But that ferocious blow was echoed by another, at scarcely a moment’s interval. The latter was dealt by the fist of Bill Bolter, and fell upon the back part of the ruthless mother’s head with stunning force.

The woman fell forward, and struck her face violently against the corner of the deal table.

Her left eye came in contact with the angle of the board, and was literally crushed in its socket—an awful retribution upon her who only a few hours before was planning how to plunge her innocent and helpless daughter into the eternal night of blindness.

She fell upon the floor, and a low moan escaped her lips. She endeavored to carry her right hand to her now sightless eye; but her strength failed her, and her arm fell lifeless by her side. She was dying.

The man was now alarmed, and hastened to raise her up. The children were struck dumb with unknown fears, and clasped each other in their little arms.

The woman recovered sufficient consciousness, during the two or three seconds which preceded the exhibition of her last breath, to glance with her remaining eye up into her husband’s face. She could not, however, utter an articulate sound—not even another moan.

But no pen could depict, and no words describe, the deadly—the malignant—the fiendish hatred which animated her countenance as she thus met her husband’s gaze.

The tigeress, enveloped in the folds of the bosom-constrictor, never darted such a glance of impotent but profound and concentrated rage upon the serpent that held it powerless in its fatal grasp.

She expired with her features still distorted by that horrible expression of vindictive spite.

A few moments elapsed before the man was aware that his wife was dead—that he had murdered her!

He supported her mechanically, as it were; for he was dismayed and appalled by the savage aspect which her countenance had assumed—that countenance which was rendered the more hideous by the bleeding eye-ball crushed in its socket.

At length he perceived that she was no more; and, with a terrible oath, he let her head drop upon the floor.

For a minute he stood and contemplated the corpse:—a whirlwind was in his brain.

The voices of his children aroused him from his reverie.

“Father, what’s the matter with mother?” asked the boy, in a timid and subdued tone.

“Mother’s hurt herself,” said Fanny: “poor mother!”

“Look at mother’s eye, father,” added the boy: “do look at it! I’m sure something dreadful is the matter.”

“Damnation!” ejaculated the murderer: and, after another minute’s hesitation, he hurried to the door.

“O, father, father, don’t leave us—don’t go away from us!” cried the little boy, bursting into an agony of tears: “pray don’t go away, father! I think mother’s dead,” added he with a glance of horror and apprehension towards the corpse: “so don’t leave us, father—and I and Fanny will go out and beg, and do anything you like; only pray don’t leave us; don’t, don’t, leave us!”

With profound anguish in his heart, the little fellow clung to his father’s knees, and proffered his prayer in a manner the most ingenuous—the most touching.

The man paused, as if he knew not what to do.

His hesitation lasted but a moment. Disengaging himself from the arms of his child, he said in as kind a tone as he could assume—and that tone was kinder than any he had ever used before—“Don’t be foolish, boy; I shall be back directly. I’m only going to fetch a doctor—Ishan’t be a minute.”

“Oh, pray don’t be long, father!” returned the boy, clasping his little hands imploringly together.

In another moment the two children were alone with the corpse of their mother; while the murderer was rapidly descending the stairs to escape from the contemplation of that scene of horror.

CHAPTER XX.

THE VILLA.

Again the scene changes. Our readers must accompany us once more to the villa in the neighbourhood of Upper Clapton.

It was the eve of the day on which was perpetrated the dreadful deed related in the preceding chapter. The curtains were drawn over the dining-room windows; a cheerful fire burned in the grate; and a lamp, placed in the middle of the table, diffused a pleasant and mellowed light around. An
And this brings me to the noticeable fact that there probably never was a writer of so vast a popularity whose genius was so little appreciated by the critics. The very splendour of his successes so deepened the shadow of his failures that to many eyes the shadows supplanted the splendour. Fastidious readers were loath to admit that a writer could be justly called great whose defects were so glaring. They admitted, because it was indisputable, that Dickens delighted thousands, that his admirers were found in all classes, and in all countries; that he stirred the sympathy of masses not easily reached through Literature, and always stirred healthy, generous emotions; that he impressed a new direction on popular writing, and modified the Literature of his age, in its spirit no less than in its form; but they nevertheless insisted on his defects as if those outweighed all positive qualities; and spoke of him either with condescending patronage, or with sneering irritation. Surely this is a fact worthy of investigation? Were the critics wrong, and if so, in what consisted their error? How are we to reconcile this immense popularity with this critical contempt? The private readers and the public critics who were eager to take up each successive number of his works as it appeared, whose very talk was seasoned with quotations from and allusions to these works, who, to my knowledge, were wont to lay aside books of which they could only speak in terms of eulogy, in order to bury themselves in the "new number" when the well-known green cover made its appearance—were nevertheless at this very time niggard in their praise, and lavish in their scorn of the popular humorist. It is not long since I heard a very distinguished man express measureless contempt for Dickens, and a few minutes afterwards, in reply to some representations on the other side, admit that Dickens had "entered into his life."

Dickens has proved his power by a popularity almost unexampled, embracing all classes. Surely it is a task for criticism to exhibit the sources of that power? If everything that has ever been alleged against the works be admitted, there still remains an immense success to be accounted for. It was not by their defects that these works were carried over Europe and America. It was not their defects which made them the delight of grey heads on the bench, and the study of youngsters in the counting-house and school-room. Other writers have been exaggerated, untrue, fantastic, and melodramatic; but they have gained so little notice that no one thinks of pointing out their defects. It is clear, therefore, that Dickens had powers which enabled him to triumph in spite of the weaknesses which clogged them; and it is worth inquiring what those powers were, and their relation to his undeniable defects.

I am not about to attempt such an inquiry, but simply to indicate
fluctuating spontaneity. Place one of these brainless frogs on his back and he will at once recover the sitting posture; draw a leg from under him, and he will draw it back again; tickle or prick him and he will push away the object, or take one hop out of the way; stroke his back, and he will utter one croak. All these things resemble the actions of the unmitigated frog, but they differ in being isolated actions, and always the same: they are as uniform and calculable as the movements of a machine. The uninjured frog may or may not croak, may or may not hop away; the result is never calculable, and is rarely a single croak or a single hop. It is this complexity of the organism which Dickens wholly fails to conceive; his characters have nothing fluctuating and incalculable in them, even when they embody true observations; and very often they are creations so fantastic that one is at a loss to understand how he could, without hallucination, believe them to be like reality. There are dialogues bearing the traces of straining effort at effect, which in their incongruity painfully resemble the absurd and eager expositions which insane patients pour into the listener's ear when detailing their wrongs, or their schemes. Dickens once declared to me that every word said by his characters was distinctly heard by him; I was at first not a little puzzled to account for the fact that he could hear language so utterly unlike the language of real feeling, and not be aware of its preposterousness; but the surprise vanished when I thought of the phenomena of hallucination. And here it may be needful to remark in passing that it is not because the characters are badly drawn and their language unreal, that they are to be classed among the excesses of imagination; otherwise all the bad novelists and dramatists would be credited with that which they especially want—powerful imagination. His peculiarity is not the incorrectness of the drawing, but the vividness of the imagination which while rendering that incorrectness insensible to him, also renders it potent with multitudes of his fellowmen. For although his weakness comes from excess in one direction, the force which is in excess must not be overlooked; and it is overlooked or undervalued by critics who, with what I have called the bias of opposition, insist only on the weakness.

This leads me to the second point, the bias of technical estimate. The main purpose of Art is delight. Whatever influences may radiate from that centre,—and however it may elevate or modify,—the one primary condition of influence is stirred emotion. No Art can teach which does not move; no Art can move without teaching. Criticism has to consider Art under two aspects, that of emotional pleasure, and that of technical pleasure. We all—public and critics—are susceptible of the former, are capable of being moved, and are delighted with what stirs the emotions, filling the mind with images having emotional influence; but only the critics are much affected
by technical skill; and the pleasure it creates. What is done, what is suggested, constitutes the first aspect; how it is done the second. We all delight in imitation, and in the skill which represents one object in another medium; but the refinements of skill can only be appreciated by study. To a savage there is so little suggestion of a human face and form in a painted portrait that it is not even recognised as the representation of a man; whereas the same savage would delight in a waxwork figure, or a wooden Scotchman at the door of a tobaccoist. The educated eye sees exquisite skill in the portrait, a skill which gives exquisite delight; but this eye which traces and estimates the subtle effects of colour and distribution of light and shade in the portrait, turns with disgust from the wax figure, or the wooden Highlander. In the course of time the pleasure derived from the perception of difficulty overcome, leads to such a preponderance of the technical estimate, that the sweep of the brush, or the composition of lines, becomes of supreme importance, and the connoisseur no longer asks, What is painted? but How is it painted? The what may be a patch of meadow, the bend of a river, or a street boy munching bread and cheese, and yet give greater delight by its how, than another picture which represented the Andes, Niagara, or a Madonna and Child. When the critic observes technical skill in a picture, he pronounces the painter to be admirable, and is quite unmoved by any great subject badly painted. In like manner a great poet is estimated by the greatness of his execution of great conceptions, not by the greatness of his intention.

How easily the critic falls into the mistake of overvaluing technical skill, and not allowing for the primary condition, how easily he misjudges works by applying to them technical rules derived from the works of others, need not here be dwelt on. What I wish to indicate is the bias of technical estimate which, acting with that bias of opposition just noted, has caused the critics to overlook in Dickens the great artistic powers which are proved by his immense success; and to dwell only on those great artistic deficiencies which exclude him from the class of exquisite writers. He worked in delf, not in porcelain. But his prodigal imagination created in delf forms which delighted thousands. He only touched common life, but he touched it to "fine issues;" and since we are all susceptible of being moved by pictures of children in droll and pathetic situations, and by pictures of common suffering and common joy, any writer who can paint such pictures with sufficient skill to awaken these emotions is powerful in proportion to the emotion stirred. That Dickens had this skill is undisputed; and if critical reflection shows that the means he employs are not such as will satisfy the technical estimate, and consequently that the pictures will not move the cultivated mind, nor give it the deep content which perfect Art continues to create, making the work a "joy for ever,"
an article which is already too long, and we will therefore here close our slight sketch of a book which has been written in English ecclesiastical literature by saying that, after an interval of 150 years, it still remains very nearly the greatest of them all.

MR. BRADDON’S FIRST NOVEL.

The conditions of Miss Braddon’s prose altogether deserve criticism. The circumstances under which she finally confoundly first book to have been written were too obviously unfavourable to allow of any of those sensations, or even any of those special and distinctive faults, which it is the business of criticism to discover and to examine. In the solitude of the Southey was written to discover and to examine. It was “always predictably produced.” One may wonder how anybody with any sense of literary self-respect could think it worth while to go to the trouble of composing in such a medium. But at all events there is something honourable in this outspoken warning to the reader to what he has to expect. It is more than likely that the book is written much more. What does it rely upon for its subsequent reputation? To make readers appreciate at its true value. It is a great pity that people should produce novels recklessly, but the best atonement they can make for their offence is to refrain from giving themselves away at any airs about art or moral purposes. It is true that, in the present instance, we are only told what nobody could have failed to find out. The sign of that constant base and occasional delusions to which the prefix refers are too abundant to escape the most compulsive of Miss Braddon’s admirers. The blank page is, but the presence of an impatient printer’s boy could explain the unprecedented number of murders and suicides which are sprinkled upon the pages of this most blood-stained novel. A novelist prized for manuscript, and conscious that each instalment of her work must end in such a way as to provide an irresistible desire for the next instalment and for many others after that, may well allow corpses right and left. There is nothing like bloodshed for kindling the sensations of the reader’s mind. So many points are raised in the reader’s mind. Was the man murdered, or will he turn up again later on? Who did the deed do? Will he be brought to justice or will he escape? Will the author see the end of the third volume? or will he die a prosperous and universally respected villain? The coincidence in this sort of fiction loves to follow the dictates of the plot of justice, and the more justice the better. In Miss Braddon’s understanding this perfectly and justice under her guidance took care to follow the criminal too swiftly for the interests of the periodical in which her story made its appearance. A good murder is such an easy thing to manage, before the most impatient printer’s boy in London could have time to grow ecstatic, Miss Braddon whisks a character off into eternity, and finishes the instalment. It is recklessly, but she admits it; but after all, if murder is entertaining, why should an author have any delicacy or compunction about giving the public as much of it as space permits? In The Trial of the Southey two ups as full of horrors as may be. There are nearly as many murders or suicides as there are characters or chapters. They are all intended to survive at the end of the book by just way of keeping up the old tradition of marrying and living happy ever after. But the catalogue of victims to the urgency of this sort of fiction is quite unprecedented. The villain is a villain of the very first order, working his way up by a series of splendid crimes from the lowly position of a country usher to the highest rank in the profession of untold wealth. Nobody is either too high or too ignoble to be worthy of his attentions. Every living creature who stands in his way, from a schoolboy up to a marquis, is removed with equal promptitude. We get a very little way indeed in the story before he has poisoned a small boy, and he turns up a few months later, apparently unhurt, his own brother, committed forgery, caused a young woman to commit suicide and a young man to be shut up for life in a barren asylum, and finally has it generally supposed that he himself is dead and buried, though in truth he is nothing of the sort. This is the root of the difficulty. It is the origin of his career, and it is the source of his delight to him what he achieved when he had got his hand fairly in, and his genius had reached its zenith. That is the primary and the secondary part of the performance. All these horrors are placed in a setting of fun. It may be presumed that this story was written at a time when the style of Mr. Southey had infected the whole body of novel-readers, with the notion that funniness is the very salt of life and literature. The book was never half as much enjoyed as when it was surrounded by an atmosphere of light and elegant facetiousness of the street-boy stamp. Miss Brad­ don’s later stories are quite free from this extraordinary quality. She has fallen in with the newer taste which does not allow us to take our murders flippantly. A gentle fable of sentiment has replaced the mudsuit of fun which used encircle the chief criminal of the popular novel. This, no doubt, has much to do with the removal of crime as the staple of amusement from the New Cut to Belgravia and Bloomsbury. In the drawn over the water the funny man is as essential as the black ruffian. But Western tastes are different. The old institution of Mr. Dickens over a mob of writers has decayed, and people have learnt that, after all, it is a mistake to hang every object under the sun, from a criminal up to a cathedral, to peg to hang a mass of sanny figures upon. But when Miss Braddon wrote The Trial of the Serpent the tone of her style was in the ascendant. So she very naturally fell into the prevailing fashion. The first line of the book discloses that if any principles it is composed. “I don’t suppose,” says the author, “it mixed harder in the good town of Slipperon-on-the-Street than it raised anywhere. The name of the town also tells the reader that he is in the presence of a story of the style of Miss Braddon. What follows is precisely the same manner. But it did rain. There was scarcely any rain, but she was able to hold its own against the rain that came pouring down that November afternoon between the hours of four and five. In East Street, High Street, Slipperon; every gutter in Broad Street (which was, of course, the narrowest street); in New Street (which, by the same rule, was the oldest street); in East Street, West Street, Blue Dragon Street, and Windmill Street; every gutter in every one of those thoroughfares was a little Nigger, with a mudslope at the corner, down which such small craft as boats of cannon-pot, old boots and shoes, &c. &c. Then we are told of the villain of the book that he was found in a Slipperon river by a Slipperon bargeman, rescued by a Slipperon society, and taken by the Slipperon bridge to the Slipperon workhouse; he therefore belonged to Slipperone and a case of morals rather difficult to draw off. The worst thing, therefore, for Slipperon is to do was to put the best face possible on it. Nothing can be more thoroughly like Mr. Dickens’ worst style. And in the next page we have an imitation of Mr. Dickens’ worst style in one—woe upon the author! For instance, “there are many natures (God-created though they be) so black and vile a tendency as to be scarred and embittered by housewifely treatment.” This is a little of the same sort to the former style, and is told how the bad November day surged into a bad November night; dark night and icy wind, when candles few and far between flickered in Dr. Tappendon’s school-room, and long rows of half-pint mugs—splendid instru­ments for little boys to warn their habits at, being full of a boiling and semi-spumous liquid, par excellence milk and water—occupied the school-room table; darker still when the half-pint mugs have been collected, and the good brown ale, cold, delicious, claret, and knuckles picked out in purple; when all traces of the evening meal are removed; when the little boys, the regular boys, shut themselves with their breakfast books down to Virgil, for whom they entertain a deadly hatred, feeling convinced that he wrote with a special view to their being flung from inability to construe him.” It is a great comfort when, after so much writing of this sort, the printer’s boy cuts, and the author hastily writes her next chapter with a brief account of the villagers’ efforts to perpetrate his first piece of bloodshed. The chapter is a fair sample of the whole book—a dreary wilderness of fun with some scents of murder and suicide. As an imitation of the most glaring and objectionable characteristics of Mr. Dickens’ writing and conception of characters at their very worst, nothing could be more complete. There are the medical students, and the publicans, and the detective officers, and all the other sublimaciously dramatic persons of whom the author of Pickwick and Bleak House is so fond. Mr. Dickens’ style is exactly the same after the pattern. “He’ll be a great man, sir, if he lives,” says a detective of a little boy. “For his people is as he is, as is his in profession.” Would you believe it, sir, that child bellowed for three mortal nights because his father committed suicide and disappointed the boy of seven? That’s what I call love of business, and no mistake. One can imagine how the audience of the Victoria Theatre would relish b Homer of this stamp, and yet it is very poor and forced for all that. The authorship is no doubt quite sincere when she declares that “she can never again feel the exquisite emotion produced by the first proof-sheet of this story as it was presented to her—very badly printed on very bad paper, and embroidered with an old envelope which demanded no small effort of imagination on the part of the beholder to accept as an illustration.” But if her later proof-sheets had contained the same kind of matter she would have never raised to her present immense popularity.

Most young novelists start as imitators of some leading writer of their day, and most of them fall into the neglect that always attends imitators. It is no small testimony to Miss Braddon’s mental vigour that she should have been able to throw off a style which at one time must have so strongly attracted her. There is very little in common between her old style and the new, and the resurrection of a specimen of the old does not seem a wise proceeding, unless she has really wished to express something of the almost incredible results which can be achieved by perseverance. Still charity begins at home, and therefore a little good will to intending novelists to set up on such a terrific beacon as The Trial of the Serpent for their admonition, and by way of convincing them from the very beginning such an exigency may flow.

GALLIES.

THERE are several points connected with the life and labours of Gallies which neither the biographers of that philosopher on the one hand, nor the historians of science on the other, have...
I know how hard it is. One needs something to make one's mood deep and sincere. There are so many little frets that prevent our coming at the real naked essence of our vision. It sounds bossy, doesn't it? I often think one ought to be able to pray, before one works — and then leave it to the Lord. Isn't it hard, hard work to come to real grips with one's imagination — throw everything overboard. I always feel as if I stood naked for the fire of Almighty God to go through me — and it's rather an awful feeling. One has to be so terribly religious, to be an artist. I often think of my dear Saint Lawrence on his gridiron, when he said, 'Turn me over, brothers, I am done enough on this side.'

To Ernest Collings, 24 February 1913

The Letters of D. H. Lawrence

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CHAPTER I

THE GREAT TRADITION

... not dogmatically but deliberately ...

JOHNSON: Preface to Shakespeare

The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad — to stop for the moment at that comparatively safe point in history. Since Jane Austen, for special reasons, needs to be studied at considerable length, I confine myself in this book to the last three. Critics have found me narrow, and I have no doubt that my opening proposition, whatever I may say to explain and justify it, will be adduced in reinforcement of their strictures. It passes as fact (in spite of the printed evidence) that I pronounce Milton negligible, dismiss 'the Romantics', and hold that, since Donne, there is no poet we need bother about except Hopkins and Eliot. The view, I suppose, will be as confidently attributed to me that, except Jane Austen, George Eliot, James, and Conrad, there are no novelists in English worth reading.

The only way to escape misrepresentation is never to commit oneself to any critical judgement that makes an impact — that is, never to say anything. I still, however, think that the best way to promote profitable discussion is to be as clear as possible with oneself about what one sees and judges, to try and establish the essential discriminations in the given field of interest, and to state them as clearly as one can (for disagreement, if necessary). And it seems to me that in the field of fiction some challenging discriminations are very much called for; the field is so large and offers such insidious temptations to complacent confusions of judgement and to critical indolence. It is of the field of fiction belonging to Literature that I am thinking, and I am thinking in particular of the present vogue of the Victorian age. Trollope, Charlotte Yonge, Mrs Gaskell, Wilkie Collins, Charles Reade,
Charles and Henry Kingsley, Marryat, Shorthouse— one after another the minor novelists of that period are being commended to our attention, written up, and publicized by broadcast, and there is a marked tendency to suggest that they not only have various kinds of interest to offer but that they are living classics. (Are not they all in the literary histories?) There are Jane Austen, Mrs Gaskell, Scott, 'the Brontës', Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Trollope, and so on, all, one gathers, classical novelists.

It is necessary to insist, then, that there are important distinctions to be made, and that far from all of the names in the literary histories really belong to the realm of significant creative achievement. And as a recall to a due sense of differences it is well to start by distinguishing the few really great—the major novelists who count in the same way as the major poets, in the sense that they not only change the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, but that they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life.

1. The novelist who has not been revived is Disraeli. Yet, though he is not one of the great novelists, he is so alive and intelligent as to deserve permanent currency, at any rate in the trilogy Coningsby, Sybil, and Tancred: his own interests as expressed in these books—the interests of a supremely intelligent politician who has a sociologist's understanding of civilization and its movement in his time—are so mature.

2. See note 'The Brontës', page 39 below.

3. Characteristic of the confusion I am contending against is the fashion (for which the responsibility seems to go back to Virginia Woolf and Mr E. M. Forster) of talking of Moll Flanders as a 'great novel'. Defoe was a remarkable writer, but that need be said about him as a novelist was said by Leslie Stephen in Hours in a Library (First Series). He made no pretension to practising the novelist's art, and matters little as an influence. In fact, the only influence that need be noted is that represented by the use made of him in the nineteen-twenties by the practitioners of the fantastic conte (or pseudo-moral fable) with its empty pretence of significance.

Associated with this use of Defoe is the use that was made in much the same milieu of Sterne, in whose irresponsible (and nasty) trifling, regarded as in some way extraordinarily significant and mature, was found a sanction for attributing value to other trifling.

The use of Bunyan by T. F. Powys is quite another matter. It is a mark of the genuine nature of Mr Powys's creative gift (his work seems to me not to have had due recognition) that he has been able to achieve a kind of traditional relation to Bunyan—especially, of course, in Mr Weston's Good Wine. Otherwise there is little that can be said with confidence about Bunyan as an influence. And yet we know him to have been for two centuries one of the most frequent of all classics, and in such a way that he counts immeasurably in the English-speaking consciousness. It is, perhaps, worth saying that his influence would tend strongly to reinforce the un-Flaubertian quality of the line of English classical fiction (Bunyan, Lord David Cecil might point out—see page 17 below—was a Puritan), as well as to cooperate with the Jonsonian tradition of morally significant typicality in characters.
THE BEGINNINGS OF A NEW TYPE OF POPULAR FICTION:

PLAGIARISMS OF DICKENS

There are formidable problems facing anyone who tries to evaluate popular literature. The intentions of the writers and the attitudes of the audience are so different to those involved in 'classical' literature that one cannot condemn it for not coming up to the usual literary standards of plot, character, narrative, and the communication of experience. One cannot condemn Elvis Presley for not being like Gigli. On the other hand it is not enough to judge it by its own standards of keeping the interest of the reader, and using the limited conventions of character and plot to provide maximum enjoyment. One can study pornography by its own standards, but one has always to make it clear what one means by 'good' pornography. A valid approach must constantly keep a double vision—does this work succeed in its intentions and function in a particular time and for a particular range of readers, and also what is the place of this fiction within the total framework of literary achievement?

Criticism must also arrive at some moral judgement. This is because one of the most important aspects of popular literature is its function in society. It is therefore particularly relevant to ask whether it accepts antisocial values of sexual and physical licence, whether it holds out false ideals, and, if it attempts to portray the actual life of its readers, whether and how it distorts the reality. But also—and I think this is an aspect not sufficiently stressed by literary critics holding a moral viewpoint—esthetic and moral standards are so interfused as to be inseparable, the moral attitudes of a book are an important part of its very tone and 'weight' as an artistic creation.

Considerations of the moral attitudes in popular fiction overlaps with the work of sociologists, who, assuming such literature reflects the opinions of those who read them, use popular fiction as a means to investigating society. Two recent studies along these lines have
taken for their subject the long-running American serial cartoon 'Little Orphan Annie', deducing that sentiments expressed in this —'love of animals', 'respect for wealth', and so on—are those of the American public. This approach clearly could not be used with more sophisticated reading, for you will probably read a good deal that is contrary to your own opinions. Even with literature consistently chosen by a mass audience for casual reading, however, while the results will show mental attitudes, it is important not to take the implications of these too far, for ideals accepted in reading are not necessarily those accepted in real life. I sympathized entirely with the hero of C. E. Vulliamy's Don among the Dead Men, who painlessly kills off public nuisances—when reading the book; in real life I would have gone for the police.

With this reservation, this approach is a valid one in situations where the writer can be established as seeking popularity through expressing popular sentiments. This was certainly the situation with the early penny-issue novels, as the publishers felt their way into the new market. Even Edward Lloyd, who had grown up in the slums of Drury Lane, educating himself in a Mechanics' Institute, did not trust his own judgement in these matters. His manager explained to Thomas Frost:

Our publications circulate among a class so different in education and social position from the readers of three-volume novels, that we sometimes distrust our judgement and place the manuscript in the hands of an illiterate person—a servant, or machine boy, for instance. If they pronounce favourably upon it, we think it will do.

Lloyd began by publishing plagiarisms, which are particularly interesting in that we can compare the altered version with the middle-class work. Plagiarisms were first made in order to avoid prosecution. By the 1809 Copyright Act, an author's works were protected for twenty-eight years. Lower-class periodicals such as Cleaves Penny Gazette carried long quotations, in particular from Dickens and Ainsworth, but in this they followed the practice of upper-class magazines; it was even encouraged by the publishers as a means of advertisement. When Henry Hetherington published thirty-two complete 'Sketches by "Boz"', in The Odd Fellow, he was stopped from further piracy by the threat of legal action, and had to publish an apology.

The author, however, had little redress against plagiarism. In June 1838 Vice-Chancellor Knight Bruce refused to give Chapman and Hall an injunction restraining Lloyd's Penny Pickwick, al-

1 Frost: Forty Years' Recollections (1880), p. 90.
2 Odd Fellow, I (1839), p. 204.

The Beginnings of a New Type of Popular Fiction

though he admitted the cheaper work's origin in Dickens's novel, on the grounds that no one would have confused the two books. 'A Christmas Ghost Story', an adaptation of A Christmas Carol in Parley's Penny Library (6 January 1844), was much closer to Dickens's work, and Knight Bruce issued an injunction restraining the second issue from being published. Dickens was awarded costs and, jubilant, proceeded to file five chancery suits against the publishers and booksellers. Egan Lee and John Haddock, publishers, pressed for costs and £1,000 damages, declared themselves insolvent and dissolved their partnership; this was little consolation to Dickens, who had to pay some £300 costs. The booksellers, William Strange, George Berger, W. M. Clarke, and John Cleave tried every evasion, and even threatened Dickens with a beating; finally they paid their costs, no more. Refusing to prosecute another plagiarism in 1844, Dickens wrote to Forster, 'I shall not easily forget the expense, and anxiety and horrible injustice of the Carol case, wherein, in asserting the plainest right upon earth, I was really treated as the robber instead of the robbed.'

Dickens's The Pickwick Papers (1836–7) suffered more plagiarism than any other book of its time. This novel started off with the poor circulation of only 400 copies; then, with the appearance of Sam Weller in the fourth number, caught the public imagination. By the fifteenth number it was selling 40,000 copies a week. One met Pickwick everywhere—one rode in 'Boz' cabs, wore Pickwick coats and hats and smoked Pickwick cigars.

Even the common people, both in town and country, are equally intense in their admiration [wrote G. H. Lewes in The National Magazine]. Frequently, have we seen the butcher-boy, with his tray on his shoulder, reading with the greatest avidity the last 'Pickwick'; the footman, (whose goppers are so inimitably laid bare,) the maidservant, the chimney sweep, all classes, in fact, read 'Boz'.

The Pickwick Papers, however, was something more to the lower-class mind than a particularly popular serial. The cultivated reader sees a character within the framework of a particular story, and is suspicious, generally rightly, of a further regeneration; the return of Pickwick and the Wellers in Master Humphrey's Clock was not successful. The popular imagination, however, is interested in character conceived on a simple, well-defined plane, which exists independent of a complex literary form. All the popular heroes have been subjects of prolonged story cycles, whether Odysseus,
are doing here and now. Since certain works continue to be read, the desire spontaneously arises of showing that they are ‘contemporary’, and thus of emphasizing what allows them to be wrenched out of the hard earth of the past and laid in our lap. This be-
tokens a relationship with texts whose distant roots lie in Greek, and above all in Christian allegorical exegesis. It is based on the belief, however banalized nowadays, that there are mes-
ages in the past that not only concern us but which in a sense were written for us and us alone, and whose meaning will be fully revealed only in the light of our exegesis. An agreeable super-
tition indeed and a highly useful one ‘for life’: but for precisely this reason it concerns the student of the contemporary mentality, not the historian. The latter – unless desirous of turning into that legendary figure whose only pleasure lay in contemplating his own reflection – must concentrate on the dissimilarities and ruptures: on what has been lost and become irretrievably unfamiliar, and which we can ‘re-familiarize’ only by doing such violence to it that we distort the objective, material consistency of every work which it is the task of scientific knowledge to reconstruct and ‘salvage’.

The improper and distorting centrality that contemporary ‘taste’ has won at the expense of historical criticism brings us to the second question. At the end of the nineteenth century hundreds of ghost stories were written, but The Turn of the Screw is something else. Agreed; or rather, it is something else ‘for us’, the tiny minority that acts in each case as the depository of prevailing taste. But is the task of the historian of culture always and only to ask what, in the past or the present, makes possible the ‘separation’ of an elite from the mass of the public? Is it not rather to deal with the mass conventions, the great ideological agreements by which each age is distinguished from others? But – it might be objected – the average production of a given genre is unreadable and boring now. I do not doubt it. But it is precisely this unbearable ‘uncontem-
poraneity’ that the historian must seek out. (We might reflect in passing that if everyone behaved like literary critics who only study what they ‘like’, doctors might restrict themselves to studying only healthy bodies and economists the standard of living of the well-
off.) And then, are we so sure that we know those ‘other’ ghost stories, the ‘conventional’ ones? Have these conventions really been studied, or do we not rather confine ourselves to evoking them hurriedly for the sole purpose of adding lustre to their ‘de-
stroyer’? If one wants to keep the couple convention-innovation, and give the latter term the full historical and formal weight it deserves, it is all the more important to realize that the first term of the pair has not yet become an ‘object of knowledge’ in a true sense for literary criticism. The idea of ‘normal literature’ – to paraphrase another Annales expression – has no place in criticism. The result is that, at present, our knowledge of literary history closely resembles the maps of Africa of a century and a half ago: the coastal strips are familiar but an entire continent is unknown. Dazzled by the great estuaries of mythical rivers, when it comes to pinpointing the source we still trust too often to bizarre hypotheses or even to legends.

Faced with an unknown continent, one does not of course know beforehand whether it is going to be worth exploring. I can only say that each time I have studied ‘low’ genres, ‘mass literature’ (and despite having done it in a way I no longer find satisfactory: looking for their laws of operation in a single work I thought was exemplary – Dracula, The Paul Street Boys, the Sherlock Holmes cycle – and not in a broader and more systematic corpus of ‘middle-
range’ products) I have always ended up finding meanings that were in no sense ‘predictable’ or ‘banal’. Very often, in fact, they were different or even antithetical to what one generally supposes at first sight.

Mass literature is not the undifferentiated and meaningless expanse most critics – still – say it is. It holds many surprises, and not just because of the meanings within it, but also because of the light it sheds on works of a different kind. The rhetoric of the detective story enables us to understand better the formal and cultural problematic on which the narrative solutions of Joseph Conrad (which are opposed to those of the detective story) depend. Reading Baudelaire in the light of Bram Stoker, one finds that the function of the oxymoron takes on unexpected connota-
tions. In the essays on mass literature collected here, unfortunately, this aspect of the question is insufficiently developed. Only a few years ago, to write about Dracula meant being taken for an eccentric loafer, and one’s main worry was to prove that one’s
work was legitimate: 'You see: Dracula is part of literary history too'. To wonder whether the study of Stoker might contribute towards changing the contours of 'great' literature was really going a bit too far. But I am convinced now that this is a path to pursue, and that it will perhaps allow us to reconstruct the literary system of the past with great theoretical precision and **historical fidelity**.

A 'slower' literary history; and a more 'discontinuous' one. At present, criticism relies on too many and too varied criteria in order to slice up the continuum of history: the individual author's life, 'style-period' concepts like mannerism or naturalism, the ruptures occurring in other areas of history, the explicit or implicit recourse to an all-pervasive 'Spirit of the age' – as well as, naturally, the concept of genre itself. The end result is in most cases a large and sticky web where historical breaks lose all clarity. If the concept of literary genre can be elaborated pertinently and systematically, it might contribute towards hardening the edges of historical research, since a history redrawn according to strictly formal principles will also be a more rigid, more interrupted history. Not only (as is already partly the case) on the diachronic plane, but also and perhaps above all on the synchronic: in every age, different and even mutually conflicting symbolic forms co-exist, each one endowed with a different diffusion and historical duration. The history of literature must aim to represent its own object as a kind of magnetic field whose overall equilibrium or disequilibrium is only the resultant of the individual forces acting within it.

It is even possible that the distinctive features of the artistic or literary 'periods' themselves will emerge profoundly modified from this re-examination, but this is to raise questions that I cannot tackle here. Instead it should be noted that, if one wants to arrive at a historical reordering of any interest and validity, the concept of 'genre' will have to be elaborated in a much more pertinent way than it is now. At present, in fact, it mixes more or less at random references to content (detective story, picaresque novel), to effects (terror, humour), and to a number of formal features (stories 'with happy endings', 'documentary' novels). Such a loose classification cannot make much of a contribution towards simplifying and specifying a field of research. Perhaps the solution will be to con-centrate on certain major rhetorical 'dominants' and reorganize the system of the different genres on the basis of these. I have a specific example in mind, which to me seems the most successful attempt to found a 'rhetorical' historiography: Erwin Panofsky's 'Perspective as a “Symbolic Form”'.

Reading this essay one understands first of all how 'strong' historical hypotheses contribute to rhetorical research ('iconological' research in Panofsky's case), not only by fortifying it but also by offering it preliminary structural hypotheses. In other words one understands the unity of historical and rhetorical study. But one also grasps the distinction between them: those preliminary hypotheses are in fact only corroborated after a long and arduous march through highly specialized territories, where the analysis is carried out (and offers itself for refutation) on the basis of principles which can no longer be deduced from the extra-artistic historical knowledges. This is the necessarily 'tortuous' way in which criticism contributes to overall historical knowledge, and I shall return to this shortly. Let us dwell for the moment on another aspect of 'Perspective' that may turn out to be essential for a renewal of historical methodology. As is well known, Panofsky believes that pictorial perspective emerges in relation to a new concept of space and of the 'ordering' function the human subject comes to assume within it. This concept originated in experimental physics and was given its definitive codification in Kantian philosophy. Thus an artistic procedure takes on its fullest significance in the light of other artistic phenomena but of the products of scientific and philosophical thought. In fact it is in correlation with the latter that its 'form' becomes comprehensible and reveals its own cultural function. But in that case, a history of rhetorical forms carried through to its logical conclusion will very probably lead to the dismemberment of the aesthetic field. And this dismemberment will no longer take the historicist form of bracketing off the technical peculiarities of works so as to fuse them into a generic 'Spirit of the Age'. Rather, it is precisely from the materiality of their form that criticism will derive the theoretical need to 'unfix' the histories of art and of literature, and rewrite them as merely a component of a history of values, of the structures of thought in which these values are organized and of the institutions designed to promote them.
Questions to think about:

- Why do we, as scholars, believe that the field of Victorian popular fiction has a right to legitimacy?

- At what point are we in the legitimization process? Is the field already legitimate? If not, where do we go now?

- How far have we moved from Lewes and Leavis? Around what parameters do we construct our own categories of “worthy” and “unworthy” fiction?

- To what extent do the “artificial” representations of events in popular fiction, versus a “realistic” representation, undermine their status as legitimate literature?