THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

EDITED BY

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NOTES

3 *New Review* 2 (January 1890), 6–12.
5 Ibid., 18.
6 Ibid., 4.
9 One of the last novels to be published in this form was William Black's *Sunrise* (1880–81).
12 John Walter, the editor and owner of *The Times*, introduced two Koenig steam-driven presses on the night of November 28–29, 1814. These machines were each capable of producing 1,100 printed sides an hour as opposed to the 250 sides that an iron manual press, such as the Stanhope (first used around 1800), could print.
14 Ibid., 148.
15 Ibid., 105, 157.
18 Quoted in Griest, *Mudie's Circulating Library*, 168.
21 Ibid., 383.
22 Ibid., 385.

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The aesthetics of the Victorian novel: form, subjectivity, ideology

*Lord Jim* (1900) by Joseph Conrad and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë, published fifty-three years apart, ostensibly have little to do with each other aesthetically or ideologically. One is written by a man; one by a woman. One by an émigré and one by a native Briton. One is overtly a text of diasporic imperialism and the other a text of domestic colonizing. One is constructed leisurely in the impressionist-realist mode, with a fast-paced romantic, even gothic, finale; the other is a dramatically bifurcated text, a domestic hybrid of romance and realism. Conrad's is usually classified as modernist; Brontë's is classified as Victorian. While *Lord Jim* is considered aesthetically typical of its historical moment, *Wuthering Heights* is considered an aberration.

Yet these two novels, which may be said temporally to frame the Victorian novel despite its official beginning a decade before *Wuthering Heights* and despite the very real difference between them, can be connected through issues of form, subjectivity, and ideology. The topic for this chapter is, of course, large and even unwieldy. It reminds me, in its scope, of what the words "Victorian novel" usually summon up in our minds: huge casts of characters, complex plots, cliffhanger sections due to serialization, even three-decker novels. By using *Lord Jim* and *Wuthering Heights* as a window on aesthetic and ideological transformations in the era's fiction, I am concerned to trace permutations and innovations in the Victorian novel and to show how it both registers historic pressures and alters aesthetically under them.

The main subject matter of the Victorian novel is the relation between self and society, a topic that can be explored in many different ways. My interest lies in how, formally, the novel takes the emphasis on self and individualism that characterizes the Romantic period and shows it to be pressurized by increasingly powerful ideologies of capitalism. I will not pursue this idea thematically or historically, however, as has been done briefly some years ago by Terry Eagleton in *Criticism and Ideology*. Rather,
I am interested in the relation of aesthetics to hermeneutics and epistemology—how form establishes varying degrees of knowledge or doubt and how it alters in its demands of a reader whom it is ideologically shaping. Instead of dwelling on a heroine’s relation to her community, say, or even on the historical explanation of the rise of an ideology of capitalism, I am interested in noting how pressures of ideology begin to change radically the form of the Victorian novel. For, in the last decades of the century, the Victorian novel becomes aesthetically more impressionistic and more self-conscious with its inscriptions of artistic practice and issues of communication.

Let me start at the far end of my frame with Conrad’s novel. “I cannot say I had ever seen him distinctly—not even to this day, after I had my last view of him,” confides Marlow to his tiny and ever diminishing audience in Conrad’s haunting Lord Jim, “but it seemed to me that the less I understood the more I was bound to him in the name of that doubt which is the inseparable part of our knowledge. I did not know so much more about myself.” This striking passage could be a key to any novel, in the sense that the reader’s and narrator’s desire to move through mystery towards knowledge serves as the propelling, hermeneutic impulse of reading fiction. However, Marlow’s highly self-conscious emphasis on epistemology, through mystery, partial views, and doubt, as ties that bind audience members to each other, registers an important development in the aesthetic of fiction and in the ideology of the subject at the end of one century and at the beginning of the next. In a sense, Marlow’s statement is almost desperate. We as individuals have no sure grasp on truth and little binds us together in a community of readers except doubt and mystery.

Conrad’s Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus, published in 1897, elaborates on his aesthetic credo as it is practiced in his novels. His desire, primarily, is “to make you hear, to make you feel—it is above all to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything.” Yet, as Virginia Woolf and other high modernists would do later, Conrad goes on to isolate the temporal moment and impressionistic fragment as significantly impregnated with meaning: “The task approached in tenderness and faith is to hold up unquestioningly, without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes...it is to disclose its inspiring secret.” If one is fortunate, hopes Conrad, one can “awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity...which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world.” We should not, however, assume from this credo that Conrad believes in a simplistic theory of easily ascertainable meaning, as his equivalent statement in Heart of Darkness (1902) affirms. As the narrator explains, when describing how Marlow tells a sea yarn to his small audience on board ship: “to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.” Conrad recognizes reality, then, as multilayered and covered in moving mists; he understands character as unpredictable and unable to be fully known. Perhaps even more central, he finds partial visions just as important and more truthful than omniscience. Indeed a collection of partial views may offer more than a single view, which must itself always be partial, even if it believes itself to be whole. What other authors might have understood as utter fragmentation, Conrad views as a challenge. In his belief system, doubt serves to bind us all together.

Still, with such a treatment of vision, epistemology, mystery, and form, in the service of an encompassing solidarity, Lord Jim and other novels by Conrad, such as The Secret Agent (1907) or Heart of Darkness finely register a version of what has been called the crisis of nineteenth-century realism. As I will later suggest, realism, the dominant mode of representation and the dominant reading practice of the Victorian era, supposes a privileged epistemological point of view from which both knowledge and judgment can be truthfully and precisely issued to establish consensus among implied author, narrator, and reader. Yet in the last decades of the Victorian era, especially, an ideological break occurs which is mirrored in the novel’s aesthetic, particularly in areas of point of view, the representation of reality, the construction of character, and the relationship to the audience.

Illustrating less certainty about the accuracy of observation and thus revising the treatment of subject matter, Conrad’s fellow-novelists such as Thomas Hardy and even Rudyard Kipling, place a heavier reliance on impressions or possible views and on gaining truth from diverse vantage points, rather than relying on either one sure and ostensibly non-implicated point of view or on conventional ways of knowing. Responding to the changing nature of reality and to the increasing power of capitalist ideology to shape culture, novels take up as a subject the difficulties of accommodating the self to a world in which it no longer finds much security at all. Indeed sometimes, as in a novel such as Dracula (1897), the stable self is attacked both from within and without so forcefully that characters representing all the institutions of society must band together to defend that security. They become a corporation of selves in pursuit of a terrifying danger not only to the single self, but also to the nation.

Registering less certainty about any security selfhood might offer and
about the newly vexed relationship between experience and value, late-Victorian novels have a hard time issuing clear judgment through a narrator or implied author. Indeed, like Lord Jim, published in the first year of the new century, the novel in the last two decades of the nineteenth century is overtly concerned with the status of fact, truth, multiple point of view, and subjective impressions. Thus the later Victorian novel registers a more challenging relation to an audience, who can no longer be passive consumers, but must become more active.

Yet the passage from Lord Jim I quoted above reveals more. “The less I understood the more I was bound” indicates that the subject Jim becomes more “real” in this novel by remaining unpredictable and even largely unknown. It is as if Marlow’s act of attention, the claim of reality taken on faith, must be enough to convince us of Jim’s realness. The basis for this claim to reality substantively differs from the tenets of classic realism as practiced either by a Regency period author such as Jane Austen or even by Victorian successors in this mode, such as George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, or Margaret Oliphant. The ideological fracture of experience and value within the narrator and central character, transmitted to the reader-subject, as registered through Lord Jim and novels similar to it, appears unprecedented and yet it has an ancestry worth pursuing.

Although a similar heightened sense of mystery and uncertainty also permeates the aesthetic of Wuthering Heights, it is that of a puzzle to be solved or an experience of the supernatural and unconscious to be accepted, rather than as evidence of secular epistemological fracture, as in Lord Jim. The initial narrator of Bronte’s novel, Mr. Lockwood, finds himself in an awkward position: “1801 – I have just returned from a visit to my landlord – the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with.” Thus the visitor Lockwood opens the story of Wuthering Heights, a novel often considered distinctively different from most other Victorian novels. Critics have claimed it to be so different, in fact, that it has been described as closer to Elizabethan drama than to any fiction of its own time. It is a work of generic ambiguity. Yet it is this Bronte novel that provides in stark relief, I believe, the central paradigm of the Victorian novel.

With Lockwood, we are trying to enter a house, which resists the speaker, and yet he is the only guide we have into the structure. The structure is not only the building called “Wuthering Heights,” which Lockwood finally does enter, but it is also the verbal structure of the novel also called Wuthering Heights, which starts “1801,” as if it were a diary entry, a dateline, or a newspaper report. This house may be seen both as Bronte’s own strange house of fiction and as suggestive of the frequent strangeness of Victorian fiction in general. While it seems an uncomplicated and inviting house, it proves quite dramatically deceiving. Lockwood meets a closed gate, a chain barring his entrance, and an interlocutor whose invitation to enter emerges through clenched teeth. As we see from Lockwood’s many mistakes at interpretation and his inadequacies as both a rationalist and a man of feeling, the novel is already discrediting him as a narrator we can trust.

In terms of its relation to contemporary and complex realist conventions, Wuthering Heights is extreme in its presentation of threatening asocial energies and in showing up its narrator as highly limited. Lockwood’s confusion in fathoming an alien world reproduces well the responses of early readers of the book. For unlike most of the Victorian novels we still read and teach such as Thackeray’s Vanity Fair (1848), Dickens’s David Copperfield (1850), and Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss (1860), this one met confusion in its own day. It baffled Victorian readers and there were precious few who bothered to read it at all, until Emily’s sister Charlotte, famous for Jane Eyre in 1847, wrote her 1850 Preface to Wuthering Heights in order to persuade readers of its distinction.

What did its first readers expect, before Charlotte defended it to make it more socially acceptable? I would argue that they expected something more in the vein of a novel by Jane Austen or Sir Walter Scott, fiction based largely on classic realist literary conventions, whether domestic or historic realism. Through the presentation of an intelligible history, classic realism calls forth certain conventional reading practices, precisely because of the text’s aesthetic. Often a hierarchy of discourses, in which truth accrues to the implied author, the narrator, and the reader, it relies on third-person omniscient narration. This type of narration tends to efface its status as discourse and promotes a sense of organic, coherent form. Realism privileges a reading focusing on a central character or several central characters. It stresses a model of coherence or consistency not only in its form but also in the construction of characters. When the consistency or coherence of a character is challenged, through any number of disrupting desires or external events, the movement of the narrative usually reinstates order. The ending is normally that of marriage or death.

This form not only places the reader in a position of privileged knowing and moral judgment, thus shaping his/her subjectivity into middle-class Victorian norms, but often does so with the aim of creating conformity. The realist novel largely accepts middle-class ethics and mores. The emotionally complex hero or heroine is molded to the bourgeois ideal of the rational man or woman of virtue. Relying on a structure of psychological development, the classic realist novel allows lapses from a bourgeois code, but treats them as errors of judgment owing to immaturity. So, for
example, just as Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) learns to modify her prejudice and eventually marries Mr. Darcy, Jane Eyre monitors her potential lapse—loving a man she discovers to be married—and leaves Thornfield. Sometimes, as with Maggie Tulliver in Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, a moral lapse is but a preliminary to a tragic ending. Sometimes, as with Becky Sharpe in Thackeray’s heavily satiric *Vanity Fair*, characters discover more about human nature, but do not radically change themselves or move on a continuum of maturity. The paradigm of maturing or refining one’s relation to society to which I have been referring, however, explains why the novel of incremental self-knowledge is such a popular form during the Victorian period. Maturing correctly is a prerequisite for functioning well in Victorian bourgeois society.

Yet *Wuthering Heights* speaks what a realist novel knows, but does not usually tell so fully. It has a realist novel’s understanding of the dangers of asocial energies, yet it is also a romantic, even sometimes a gothic fiction, with a desiring individualism so violent and transgressive that it crosses the material world into the spiritual realm. This novel is formally bifurcated right down the middle, according to the narratives of two generations, so that the first half is considered the asocial romance and the second is considered the realist socialization. While it is formally split, however, and has been read by critics such as Leo Bersani as a socialization of desire that endorses an adult point of view, it remains, in my view, ideologically dialectical. It illustrates continuous tensions between such opposites as nature and culture, the Grange and the Heights, consciousness and unconsciousness, location and dislocation, Romantic individualism and socialization. These tensions are kept in play, forcing readers to acknowledge the separate and powerful claims of each side.

Thus, although *Wuthering Heights* seems expressly divorced from the concerns and aesthetics of *Lord Jim*, I take it as paradigmatic of a structure that appears throughout the entire Victorian period. Let me explain more fully. While its aesthetic can be read in realist and coherent terms, this novel also points to unresolvable ideological fissures; it forcefully illustrates the ideological split between Romantic individualism and social consensus that rests at the heart of the novel form, which later Victorian novels will be increasingly hard pressed to heal aesthetically. It also mingle residual, dominant, and emergent forms that will be recombined and altered as the novel develops through the Victorian era. The first half of Brontë’s novel (the residual) defends Romantic individualism through the intense relationship of Cathy I and Heathcliff; the second half of the novel (the dominant) defends realist socialization through the taming relationship of Cathy II and Hareton. The middle and the end of the novel do neither. The middle illustrates the strains of any ideological compromise between individualism and socialization through the very vexed relationship of Cathy II and Hareton. The finale, drawing out the emergent qualities of the text, ends with equal doubt and faith concerning the supernatural wanderings of Heathcliff and Cathy I.

To read this novel and most other novels of the period, then, one must set one perspective against another, rather than privileging one over another or collapsing them to an explanatory center. It is presumably this very hybridity and type of bifurcation to which Henry James so strenuously objected in his late-Victorian/early-modernist quest for a perfect organic form: “What do such large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically mean?” he asks about *The Newcomes, Les Trois Mousquetaires*, and *War and Peace*. The context of his remarks underscores his need for a “structural centre” in fiction and his “mortal horror of two stories, two pictures, in one.”6 Although the British, French, and Russian examples to which he refers are panoramic, historical novels, his question has been applied as a judgment against the aesthetic of the typically large, highly detailed, double or multi-plotted, singly or multiply-narrated English nineteenth-century novel.

James’s preference for a tight central coherence establishes a norm against which much Victorian fiction must seem inevitably to fall short or fail. If we were to judge the Victorian novel by James’s criteria or others like them (thematic unity, tonal unity, logical construction), we would, as Raymond Williams suggests, end up ranking a writer such as Trollope over Eliot or Dickens.6 Rather than follow James’s lead by regarding accident and arbitrariness or skewed structures as failures of some kind, we should attend carefully, as did Emily Brontë, to separate elements of the novel and to the reframing offered by such attention.

*Wuthering Heights* holds in tension, without resolving that tension, both the vital and enduring power of Romantic individualism and the necessity of socializing such energies. Its ending questions whether or not the claims of individualism can last anywhere—if not in the natural, real world, then perhaps in the supernatural world. The text does not know and does not tell. This same dilemma between individualism and desire versus socialization is one that the Victorian novel takes up in its many permutations. Moreover, subsequent novels work often within the same general ideology, one lacking a sustained or coherent world view. In short, the Victorian novel’s fractures, including the fractured subjectivities it records, demand as much of our attention as their ideological solutions. M. M. Bakhtin’s postulation of “dialogism” in the novel form can assist us in this regard.

Bakhtin understands dialogism as the characteristic epistemological
mode of a world in which there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning the others. Although the literary effect of coherent or unitary language or a single set of meanings is possible, such an effect is only possible relative to the fact of dialogism. Referring specifically to the heteroglossia of the novel form, Bakhtin argues that “The language of the novel is a system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other.” Peter Garrett notes that Bakhtin’s oppositions are always based on relations between or among individual consciousnesses, not between language systems, and that he rereads what he sees as a limitation in the work of Bakhtin by removing the notion of competing consciousnesses. In its place, he inserts the notion of competing structural principles. Victorian multiple narratives, Garrett proposes, develop dialogic tensions through diverging narrative lines, contrary narrative perspectives, conflicts within the narrative voice, and between characters and narrator. From this historical vantage point, we are able to add dialogic languages and ideologies to Garrett’s isolation of dialogic structural principles.

The Victorian novel comprises many sub-genres, as we learn from the different chapters in this volume, such as the historical novel, the domestic novel, the silver fork novel, the detective novel, the industrial novel, and the science fiction novel. Moreover, Victorian literary discourse intersects with many other important cultural discourses of the period, most prominently religion, science, and political economy. These discourses shape novel sub-genres even as they inform narrative texture and then enable us to place the Victorian novel in its historical context: some examples might include the novels taking up issues of racial difference, evolution and breeding, and labor unrest. Yet to historicize the aesthetic and political complexity of the Victorian novel – its critique of the very norms it also endorses, its complex relation to the reader as subject, and its departures from classic realism or structural centers – we should also, I think, make sure we place it in conversation, if briefly, with another key literary discourse of the period, poetry, which shares the ideological pressures felt by the Victorian novel.

We normally take up the novel and its aesthetic apart from the Victorian lyric, dramatic monologue, verse epic, or anti-narrative narrative poem. This persistent separation may be seen as a largely unquestioned inheritance from the Victorian period and as detrimental to our grasp of the novel’s ideology and aesthetic. In the 1830s and after, as is commonly known, poetry ceased to be centrally important in the same way, for example, that it had been during the prior century or even the Romantic period. Despite Tennyson’s popularity well into the 1850s and afterwards as the Poet Laureate, poetry moved further and further to the cultural margins.

However, this inheritance – poetry as not useful to society or even to cultural capital anymore – continues to perpetuate an almost unbridgeable critical gap between Victorian poetry and fiction. The fact that much nineteenth-century poetry is not simple lyric, but is dramatized or narrativized lyric is an important point. Unlike Romantic poetry, Victorian poetry illustrates a profound discomfort with a central “I” of unmediated experience, a coherent self, and with what James would call a structural center. Instead, this poetry repeatedly calls into question the status of point of view and the status of representation itself. It raises problems of how we make meaning.

Let me illustrate briefly what I mean with a very short poem and go on to establish connections to the novel aesthetic through particular fictional examples. The poem “Home” (1876) by Dora Greenwell, a still under-read Victorian woman poet, condenses in one set of words two entirely different readings. It both presents and endorses the morals and ideologies of the Victorian middle class and exposes them to merciless questioning at the same time.

*Home*

Two birds within one nest;
Two hearts within one breast;
Two spirits in one pair,
Firm league of love and prayer,
Together bound for aye, forever blest.
An ear that waits to catch
A hand upon the latch;
A step that hastens its sweet rest to win;
A world of care without,
A world of strife shut out,
A world of love shut in.

Ostensibly this poem is a hymn to domestic calm through the affective mode of sensibility popularized by two women poets of the Romantic period, Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon. The fact that stanza one is missing a line in position six can refer to the fact that unity and blending have occurred, so there may have been two separate hearts originally, but they unite now in one marriage nest. This first reading is the affective, expressive reading.

However, these meanings are also put into radical question by a second reading, a commentary on the first, which does not annul it, but which exists in tension with it. In terms of subjectivity, one of the key lines is
“Two hearts within one breast.” Not only does it refer to married union, but, rather, it indicates two sets of feeling in one breast, i.e. self-division. The same duality and splitting occur in the line “Two spirits in one fair” (line 3), which means person.

When one realizes, too, that there is no “I” in this poem, except a displaced one in the sound “for aye” (an “I,” one might argue, displaced into eternity), one also wonders about that missing line in stanza one. Could it represent an absent person or refer to the fact that the speaker is, in some sense, not affectively present in the way she should be? The story of homecoming can also take on a reversal of meaning: not the woman waiting with joy for the man to come home and take his rest, but a woman who would rather go to her heavenly rest than open the door. Note the semicolon that divides lines two and three in stanza two—separating the sentiments and story of homecoming into two possible moments: daily ritual; one-time death.

There are many other textual issues, but the force of the last “shut” resonates. A tension between being shut out or in is reproduced in the alternating emphases contained in the last three lines’ final words: “without,” “out,” “in,” where the feeling of a love, not embraced, but “shut in” as a door closes, becomes an issue of captivity as well as security. The second reading of the poem, then, translates nest into cage, speaks of marriage as bondage, and seeks an alternative to “forever” in the here and now. There are many examples of Victorian poems that offer expressivity on one level and commentary on another.

The instance of “Home” relies on language to tell two stories. However Victorian poetry relies on other overt strategies to keep two readings in tension such as the dramatic monologue, the mask lyric, pendent poems, the female echoing and rewriting of male genres, or women’s lyrics responding to specific poems by men about women. Yet no matter how dualism is established in or among poems, tensions of expressivity and commentary are kept alive, not resolved.

The dialectical nature of much Victorian poetry is matched by the dialectical play and tensions of ideological oppositions in a novel such as Wuthering Heights. The aesthetic of the Victorian novel repeatedly foregrounds and tries to heal such tensions in a variety of ways, until, with a novel like George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda (1876), the fissures can no longer be smoothed over. Let me offer two examples from the mid-Victorian novel, however, before turning to how the novel develops towards modernism in terms of aesthetics, politics, and epistemology.

Elizabeth Gaskell’s North and South (1855) is an industrial novel and a romance that has often been read by critics as one or the other genre. Following the tenets of realism, it works to join two very different plots and spheres, private and public, into a (false) coherence through metonymy. As Catherine Gallagher has suggested, Gaskell does so through the use of the heroine Margaret Hale as a central ethical point of view. Gaskell connects social and family themes by Margaret’s judging of ethical dilemmas as similar in both spheres. This use of Gaskell and this connection of spheres leads some critics to read the book as a novel of self-education. Yet, as Gallagher notes, the novel provides, as well, a “running ironic commentary” on its “official ideas.” It forcefully questions its narrator in a variety of ways. By way of example, as Margaret moves through the novel from her rural home to a factory town, she is consistently challenged in her moral views. Margaret’s influence on the men and women around her “does not” as Gallagher points out, “form a recti-linear narrative pointing directly to social harmony.” In fact, as the novel continues, and particularly through the challenge posed to Margaret by the sexual appeal and moral ambiguity of John Thornton, the novel shows that a single standard of ethical behavior will not work to weld public and private worlds or self and society.

In spite of a realistic closure, which integrates the domestic love plot with the public issues of factory control and revolt, the novel is still built on the separation of the private and the public—a problem it does not face directly. As Patricia Ingham explains, in her fine analysis of discourse and the use of dialect in this novel, North and South in fact produces no closure on a number of important social and personal questions it raises. The marriage of Thornton and Margaret does not resolve the strife that has existed in their encounters; the cooperative relationship between Thornton and Higgins, one of his employees, cannot be reproduced, writ large, to sort out the problems of industrial society; the question of what is a strike? is transformed into: how can we avoid a strike? rather than ever being answered. In short, the ideological opposition between self and society in the novel is smoothed over aesthetically, by means of metonymy, but the ideological fissures remain as deep as ever.

Even George Eliot's Middlemarch (1872), which is considered by many critics the perfect example of aesthetic unity in the Victorian period, shows itself to be deeply skeptical about any ideological totalities. Idealism, scientific rationalism, Evangelical Christianity, and Romantic idealism, embodied and enacted in varying degrees of complexity, by Edward Casaubon, Tertius Lydgate, Nicholas Bulstrode, and Will Ladislaw, particularly, are all progressively shown to be not only partial, but also flawed.

George Eliot’s narrator refers to his project in chapter 15 as significantly different from that of an eighteenth-century predecessor, Henry Fielding. "I
at least have so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe.\textsuperscript{14} The image of the web, which Eliot draws upon to emphasize the organicism at the heart of her fictional undertaking here, is a three-dimensional spatial form which foregrounds surface connections. The novel’s interlacings work through the movements of her characters, who are connected either by family ties, acknowledged or disavowed, and by what Eliot calls “the irony of events.”\textsuperscript{15} In this sense, the novel is comparable to many of Dickens’s novels that rely on a huge canvas of characters, chance encounters, and intricate links through events. However, the plots of Eliot’s Middlemarch are themselves organically shaped into overlapping spheres. Four separate but analogically-linked plots, the stories of Dorothea Brooke, the Garths, Lydgate, and Bulstrode, are set within the provincial life of Middlemarch, which is itself set within the larger sphere of the religious, scientific, historical, and social changes in the nation during the 1830s. As U. C. Knoepflmacher notes, however, to isolate the component ideological strains in this construct “is to lose the impact of their joint effect.”\textsuperscript{16}

The central problem which Middlemarch poses but does not answer is the viability and place of a Romantic will and ideal in a world dominated by provincial awareness, on the one hand, and by empiricism, progress, and scientific rationalism on the other. As in North and South, another novel that takes up important social issues, Middlemarch betrays a formal bifurcation it does not heal, though unlike Wuthering Heights, it does not make an overt display of that bifurcation. Ethical moralizing replaces a substantial engagement with history and the real. As Terry Eagleton puts it, there is a mystification inherent in realism “which by casting objective social relations into interpersonal terms, constantly holds open the possibility of reducing one to the other.”\textsuperscript{17} This is particularly true, I would argue, of the mid-nineteenth century novel. As noted, we also find it prominently in novels like North and South and Middlemarch, on either side of that mid-point.

Eliot’s last novel, however, Daniel Deronda, marks a major turn in the fortunes of realism as an aesthetic in the period. In its open split, so wide as ostensibly to harbor two different novels, and thus reminiscent formally if not thematically of Wuthering Heights, this novel commands our attention primarily for a total rewriting of realist character and action. It illustrates, even more dramatically than does Middlemarch, a crisis in value and interpretation about coherence itself. In other words, if realism as an aesthetic seeks to promote coherence – of character, of a reader-subject, of plot lines, of connections among social viewpoints – then Daniel Deronda questions the premises of realism, even as it questions whether coherence is possible at all in a fragmented culture.

Yet Daniel Deronda goes further; it also questions the very nature of the self by offering us characters who tend to be flat and one-dimensional, such as Henleigh Grandcourt, Daniel Deronda, and Ezra Mordecai Cohen, while at the same time giving us Gwendolyn Harleth, one of the most richly complex characters in Victorian fiction. A quotation about Grandcourt cannot serve to evoke Deronda and Cohen, but can, at least, point to the issues at stake: “How trace the why and wherefore in a mind reduced to the barrenness of a fastidious egoism, in which all direct desires are dulled, and have dwindled from motives into the vacillating expectations of motives: a mind made up of moods, where a fitful impulse springs here and there conspicuously rank amid the general weedingness?”\textsuperscript{18} Eliot articulates here a reduction of realist character to a collection of signs. We could, however, take this quote as a description of what occurs in the novel form between Wuthering Heights and Daniel Deronda, between 1848 and 1876. For Brontë, characters are filled with desire, clear motive, moodiness, and impulses they act upon. Yet Eliot’s novel records character in terms of negativity or absence: dulled desires, expectations only of motives, a dominating moodiness in a weedingness of mental, spiritual, and emotional confusion. Some of the major characters in Daniel Deronda do not know themselves, do not know each other, and are difficult to penetrate because they lack realist depth. Character in this book, like narrative event, is premised more on accident or mystery than anything else. Notably, the book opens with a gambling scene in which Gwendolyn is trying her luck at roulette and ends with the death of the Jewish character Cohen, who, of all the characters in the novel, most firmly believes in a mysterious, transcendental unity surpassing earthly fragmentation.

Although many have argued that the Christian/Jewish split in the plot points to a defect, and that the second half is a failure, my sense is that such a criticism comes only from a realist-trained perspective. F. R. Leavis, for example, would have done away entirely with the Jewish half. Eliot’s project, however, fundamentally calls realism into question. For her, Judaism mixes the real and the ideal, the spiritual and the material, the traditional and the progressive. She tests it for its applicability to renovate her own society and she uses it to challenge the novel form itself. She sets world-view against world-view, type against type, and allows them to reframe each other, question each other, and even call each other to account, before she falls back on providence and Daniel Deronda as a new figure of messianism. In this important novel, the mystery of character, of
self, of event, of society points to the ideological break in experience and value that is more fully realized formally in novels of the later Victorian period.

The fortunes of realism and the ideological break I have been situating formally can be illustrated even more dramatically by looking carefully at a novel of the 1890s: Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), which more self-consciously confronts issues raised forcefully by Daniel Deronda and tackled head-on by *Lord Jim*: epistemology and interpretation. Hardy explores these issues by dwelling on the self and a world felt to be fragmenting or under attack.

Chapter 2 of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* opens by describing Marlott, the village where Tess was born. But the passage goes beyond mere description by providing the reader with important aesthetic directives. After locating the village geographically in “the Vale of Blakemore or Blackmoor” and noting that tourists and landscape painters have usually avoided the valley, Hardy’s narrator predicts that its beauty will attract future viewers. Yet he quickly chills the enthusiasm of such prospective viewers. After initially asserting that the fertile spot never succumbs to dried-up springs or brown fields, he now calls attention to the droughts of summer only to recite further obstacles: poor ways to travel, difficult roads, and consequent disappointments one might want to avoid. The narrator then reverses himself once again by insisting that any traveler from the coast will inevitably be delighted by contrasts between the calcareous downs and lush cornlands (Tess, 22).

It would be easy to misread these oscillations in emphasis as something approaching equivocation. Yet here Hardy conditions his readers by exposing them to a multitude of conflicting impressions. Offering different reasons for coming to the valley, different routes, different kinds of walks, he then introduces further variables: the pace of arrival, the weather, vertical/horizontal positionality, time of year, and decisions about whether to travel with a guide or alone. Hardy’s description is not simply figurative or symbolic, but epistemological. He knowingly destroys a common literary convention from Romantic poetry and the realist nineteenth-century novel in which a landscape is presented and endowed with significance by a strong poetic “I” or a central, omniscient and omnipresent narrator. Instead, Hardy’s narrator stresses the partiality and noteworthiness of every point of view.

With its emphasis on what we see, how we know and nominate, how we experience, how a thing can be viewed multiply, and how it affects us physically, mentally, emotionally, the description of Marlott glosses the aesthetic undertaking of *Tess*. Reminiscent of Marlow’s fathoming Lord Jim through a mist of impressions, Hardy’s aesthetic demands that readers grasp reality as objectively varied, changing, and filtered by many and contradictory subjective impressions. At every narrative level—plot and event, the handling of time, narration, character, language use, and intertextual allusion—Hardy relies on multiplicity, seeming contradiction, incongruity, and dialogism, strategies he adapts within a general framework of tragic ambiguity. In so doing, Hardy questions the very foundations of representation and belief. He asks his readers to become conditioned into thinking simultaneously in terms that are multiple and even contradictory.

Hardy pushes readers, as does Conrad after him, to understand the relativity of their values and judgments. This does not mean that Hardy is a relativist. It does mean that he sees stereotypical values and judgments (such as blame the victim, or the seducer is a cad, or rape ends a woman’s life) as being socially constructed, historically shaped, and often irrelevant to a particular situation. Certainly they should be irrelevant to a discriminating readership.

*Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is a particularly significant text to this discussion because it reproduces, through challenges to realism on every front, a divorce between experience and value. The novel assaults the reader with shocking materials that it does not soften. It is probably the only novel in the English language that allows a heroine to be raped, abandoned, thrown into poverty, arrested for murder, and hung. Unlike the work of Gaskell or Eliot, both of whom wrote novels about fallen women—Ruth in *Ruth* (1853) and Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* (1859)—this novel offers no final explanation or satisfying closure for its events. Indeed, Hardy seems to mock a fulfilling closure by suggesting a perpetuation of tragic relationships in having Angel Clare marry Tess’s sister, Liza-Lu, and the final scene is so heavily aestheticized by a Giotto painting analogy and jarring intertextual references, that it rings false.

By exploding conventions that previously cemented the bond between narrator and reader, Hardy undermines narrative community. He shatters narrative form to make his readers experience fragmentation, the “ache of modernism” (Tess, 140). But he does so in ways that make the bifurcation of *Wuthering Heights* appear tame in comparison, rather than radical. That breakage—esthetic, ideological, and social—would eventually issue forth, during World War I and afterwards, in a fully developed, different aesthetic for fiction, modernism. Yet it is instructive to remember that the glaring differences once noted by critics between Victorian and modernist novels are conditioned as much by critical practice as by history. Just as we may connect *Wuthering Heights* and *Lord Jim*, so seemingly different from one another, through issues of aesthetic form, construction of subjectivity,
and influences of dominant ideology, so, too, we may connect the conventionally disparate literary periods of Victorian and modernism.

NOTES

9 Janet Gray introduced me to the work of Greenwell in 1991 and offered a reading of “Home” similar to this one.

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Industrial culture and the Victorian novel

Among the vast array of goods and materials produced during the aggressive onset of industrialism in Britain in the early Victorian period, none was more widely disseminated, more instrumental to everyday life, more essential to the shaping of industrial culture than information. For along with the grand *mélange* of *things* that seemed to flow unchecked out of British factories, a river of knowledge (and questions) about how the world worked coursed through every aspect of Victorian life. The era’s most conspicuous outward signs of unprecedented material change – steam engines, factories, railroads, urbanization – denoted even grander transformations in the way people thought and acted. Received notions about everything from gender to nationalism, from class to religion, from propriety to biology were open to question. Even assumptions about such fundamentals as space and time were challenged. Not only were people living differently, they were thinking differently, talking and writing differently, acting differently. They were *existing* differently. Such monumental changes and the effects they wrought became both the form and the substance of nearly all forms of inquiry. On the abstract level, thinkers like Mill, Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris, and Pater took up the issue of “progress” – or at the very least “change” – in terms of its political, moral, and aesthetic implications. Others, from novelists such as Gaskell, Dickens, Disraeli, Kingsley, and Frances Trollope to the new breed of social investigator like Edwin Chadwick, James Kay-Shuttleworth, and Henry Mayhew, while often fully aware of the abstract principles that grounded their work, were more directly invested in the concrete examples of change (as either progress or decline) that quotidian life provided.

The well-documented rise in literacy in Britain during this period underscores the mutual dependence of the cultures of information and industrialism. The novel, in its rise in popularity as well as in its participation in shaping cultural practices, is a particularly good example of this relationship. As a number of critics have pointed out in various ways, a neat