

NOTES AND SHORT ESSAYS

A Note on Gilmore's *The Novel in the Victorian Age* and Orel's *The Victorian Short Story*

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Victorian prose fiction is justly celebrated as one of the great triumphs of a turbulent, rapidly changing age. Two studies, Robin Gilmore's *The Novel in the Victorian Age: A Modern Introduction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1986) and Harold Orel's *The Victorian Short Story: Development and Triumph of a Literary Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986) give solid overviews of the concerns, social background, and achievements of nineteenth-century fiction. Although the novel has been well studied, Gilmore gives new shape to an intimidatingly amorphous subject. Orel has a more open field since the British short story has not only taken critical second place to the novel but has not received the same attention as its American and Continental cousins. Some overlap is unsurprising since both authors limit their subjects by focusing on major writers, and Dickens, Trollope, Hardy, and Stevenson wrote in both genres. More significant similarities arise, however, in the emphasis both Gilmore and Orel place on their authors' similar attitudes toward the evolving forms of their genres, toward the presentation of social reality or truth by artistic means, and toward the demands of both an expanding reading public and of changing publication methods.

In discussing the English novel during Victoria's reign, Gilmore groups authors more or less chronologically according to their treatment of general social conditions, often finding parallels among apparently dissimilar novelists of designated periods. Although all Victorian novelists may be called realists in that they believed "that novels could tell the truth about reality, and in so doing exhort, persuade, and even change their readers" (p. 10), the reality described changed so rapidly from the 1840s into the twentieth century that the history of the Victorian novel can almost be read as the changing interpretation of change itself.

Beginning with the oft-disparaged silver-fork novels of Disraeli and Bulwer-Lytton, Gilmore shows how an increasingly middle-class audience encouraged the shift from these fictions that yearn backwards to a revitalized aristocracy to those reflecting the tensions between the past and a present of Reform Bills, industrialization, and Chartism—the social and political problems dealt with by Gaskell, Kingsley, and Disraeli. Perhaps because introductions to the Victorian novel so often scant Disraeli, Bulwer-Lytton, and Kingsley, Gilmore's placing them in their era revitalizes their achievements.

The tensions between past and present led authors in other directions from the social-problem novels, such as the increased inwardness of fictionalized biographies (*Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield*). The pull toward a personal past reflects a Romantic fusion of self with nature without rejecting the regional detail.

In his retreat into fictional autobiography and portraits of social injustice, Dickens reflects the tensions of the present. But he also spans the other temporal

concerns of the Victorian novelists: how to react to the legacy of the past and how to accommodate oneself to the pessimism of the late nineteenth century. Since Dickens's novels span these attitudes toward change, it is a bit disturbing initially to move from the 1870s of *Edwin Drood* back into the 1850s what Gilmore (borrowing from W.L. Burns) calls the novels of the "age of equipoise." Although Gilmore is careful to point out that Dickens's novels do not show confidence in the balance of revitalized aristocratic leadership and rising middle-class expectations, Dickens does share with Trollope, Wilkie Collins, and George Eliot the themes of rising class expectations and self-help. And yet the disparate responses of Dickens help make sense of Eliot's yearning for the past, of Trollope's focus on domestic realism, and on Collins's sensation novels.

Shifting attitudes toward social change and the mixed form so typical of Victorian novels, in which subgenres such as the detective and the sensation novel are explored, are paralleled by publishers' attempts to accommodate the reading public. The passing of the three-decker and of the panoramic worldview it offered its audience is connected with the transitional mood of the later Victorian novel. The works considered in the final chapters, ranging from Hardy, James, and Meredith through Gissing, Butler, and Moore, reflect changes in audience and in authorial perspective. Whether the result is the increasing inwardness and detachment of James or the escape from bewildered melancholy into the romances of Stevenson, the late Victorian novel becomes increasingly fragmentary. It can no longer hold in balance, or even address, the tensions between past and present or the fears of and hopes for the future. Hardy's irony, James's increasingly self-conscious narrators, and Stevenson's "restless and unsettled" imagination all point to an increasing pessimism about the novel's ability to treat both the real and the ideal.

The Novel in the Victorian Age is ambitious in both its aims and its scope. Gilmore places his novelists in both historical and critical contexts that illumine their connections to their world and to one another without ignoring the strengths and weaknesses of individual novels.

Like Gilmore, Orel limits his authors to those he finds representative of trends, themes, and significant changes in Victorian prose fiction. Also like Gilmore, he pays close attention to publishing history as it affected the evolution of the short story. Orel, however, is much more directly concerned with the relationship of public to author than is Gilmore. Like the novel, the short story cannot easily be categorized by form or subject. But the Victorian novel has consistently attracted more critical attention than the Victorian short story, an omission Orel rectifies. He argues that the English and Irish short story share characteristics that distinguish them from either the Continental story or from the aesthetics, espoused by Poe, that dominate criticism of the American story. One such characteristic is an attitude toward fact, or truth, whether the truth is that of a larger-than-usually-acknowledged autobiographical element in Le Fanu's short stories, or Carleton's emphasis on the fact underlying even his most moral fictions. The works of these two Irish authors are also a good introduction to the difficulties of defining a short story and of the strong oral element on much Victorian short fiction.

Dickens's stories, probably the best-known of those Orel discusses, similarly emphasize social truth, as well as a formlessness that Orel claims make the British writers of the short story seem amateurish to many of their later critics. Varying as they do from the approximately 35,000 words of the *Christmas Books* to sketches of only a few pages, Dickens's stories show a diversity of styles and subjects that reflect his understanding of what his public wanted more than any aesthetic end.

Like the Irish writers, Trollope claimed that all of his stories were based on "the remembrance of some fact" (p. 79). Like Dickens, however, he was always

aware of filling the fictional demands of his public, and also like Dickens, many of his stories were published in magazines he edited. More than any other author discussed, Trollope's indifference to printed criticism makes his stories difficult to assess by aesthetic or genre standards.

For Hardy, like the Irish writers, the oral element is vital. And like all those so far discussed, he liked to stress the fact on which his fictions were based. Unlike the other authors, however, his struggles with magazine editors were constant, and he was genuinely unhappy with the tastes of the largely female audience for periodical fiction.

Oddly enough, Stevenson and Kipling offer Orel more grounds for aesthetic judgment than other Victorian writers. Stevenson's struggles to write so that he, as author, need not comment explicitly about a fiction's moral give his work critical depth, but he was often dissatisfied with his achievements. Part of this unhappiness arose from his perception of a market that wanted escapist fiction, part from magazine policy discouraging extensive revision, and part from his belief that fiction should educate by implicit moral if not by fact. Perhaps these often conflicting factors led to the unevenness of his output, and to the continued popularity of what he called his "crawlers."

Like Stevenson, Kipling wrote his stories to order. Orel argues that Kipling's stories are neither simplistically chauvinist nor interesting only for their exotic subjects. Kipling liked the brevity of the story form and worked technical wonders with it. Orel finds Kipling's Anglo-Indian stories among the best of Victorian short fiction.

By the 1980s the "modern" short story, with its focus on irony, a strong narrator, and paradox, was emerging. Orel chooses Conrad and Wells to detail different narrative techniques, focusing on their use of narrative voice. In the evolution of Marlowe, Conrad learned to manipulate the rich detail of his exotic background. Wells's omniscient narrators let him discuss the "new" sciences and their applications.

By focusing on the unjustly neglected field of the British short story and by concentrating on nine authors, their connections with evolving publication techniques and with their audience, and on their attitudes toward reality in their genre, Orel has presented a valuable addition to scholarship and a genuinely fascinating study.

Taken together, these two works supplement each other nicely. The narrower focus of Orel's study makes it more cohesive, but the very scope of Gilmore's study is also an advantage to one wanting an overview. Victorian prose fiction has been well served by both authors.

A Note on Dinos Christianopoulos's

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JOHN TAYLOR

Though Dinos Christianopoulos (b. 1931) is best known as a poet—a selection of his poetry, translated into English by Kimon Friar, is soon to be published by Boa Editions—he has also written short stories, prose poems and what in Anglo-American literary jargon have come to be called "short shorts," such as the fourteen