THE NINETEENTH CENTURY SOCIAL NOVEL IN ENGLAND

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The term 'social novel' was used by Louis Cazamian in *Le Roman social en Angleterre* ([1903] 1973) to identify a body of fiction written on urban and industrial issues, and published between 1830 and 1850. This essay shares his focus, although the definition is to some extent an arbitrary one. As Robert Colby has demonstrated in *Fiction with a Purpose* (1967), the English novel from the 1840s to the 1860s was characteristically concerned with social and moral issues. Further, the term 'social' could be applied to many later novels, through to such works as Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1918) in the twentieth century.

Cazamian's definition is, however, useful. It not only brings together a group of works with a shared concern but different emphases, including 'the condition of England', 'the industrial' and 'the social problem' novel, it also identifies the way in which they approached their subject. The 'social novel' as Cazamian explored it grew out of a profound realignment of public consciousness, brought about by the urban and industrial changes at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The genre lost its impetus as this concern merged into an acceptance of sociological forces which denied the individual capacity for moral action. For a matter of some thirty years the novel became an imaginative arena in which human issues could be argued. By the time George Gissing and Arthur Morrison wrote, characters in 'social' fiction had become helpless victims in the web of social evolution. The novel had lost its role as an area of significant debate. Further, the growing concern with 'realism' from the 1860s paradoxically limited the novel's ability to explore social issues, for the focus on accuracy of description, the emphasis on 'objective truth', emptied the subject of its symbolic and metonymic significance.

Since Cazamian wrote his study, different approaches to the subject have evolved. It is therefore useful to preface a brief account of the genre itself with some notice of the ways in which the subject has been analysed since 1903. For Cazamian, the 'social novel' was a historical fact, a group of fictional works growing from and influencing the Victorian period. In form, it combined the arts of reportage and literature, and was affected by biographical and historical factors. This approach is well illustrated in Kathleen Tillotson's *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (1954).

By the 1950s current criticism was being challenged by Leavis's focus on reader response to the 'life-enhancing' values of literature (his study of the novel, *The Great Tradition,* had appeared in 1948) and from the insights of Marxism. Georg

Lukács's *The Historical Novel* was written as early as 1936–7, but it was published in England only in 1962. Marxist influence on British and American novel criticism has been late, indirect and generalized. Nevertheless Arnold Kettle's *Introduction to the English Novel* (1951–3) and Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (1958) brought socialist perspectives to bear on the subject as have, more recently, such works as David Craig's *The Real Foundations: Literature and Social Change* (1974) and Igor Webb's *From Custom to Capital: The English Novel and the Industrial Revolution* (1981). Although not specifically on the 'social novel', Terry Eagleton's Marxist study of the Brontës, *Myths of Power* (1975), has also been influential. It is now difficult to consider the novel without an awareness of class perspectives.

This includes considering the audience for which the fiction was written. The Victorian novel as conventionally identified was in fact read by a small minority of the Victorian public: as Gertrude Himmelfarb has noted (1984, p. 435), the 'social novels' most Victorians read were not by George Eliot or even by Dickens, but by an author few academic critics have noticed, G. W. M. Reynolds. Works read by the Victorian masses for entertainment such as Reynolds's *The Mysteries of London* (1845–8), or those read by Radical working-class readers as sampled in Y. V. Kovalev's *An Anthology of Chartist Literature* (1956), still await extended study.

As the implied reader has been given greater consideration in interpreting the text, the focus has shifted from the fiction as documentary evidence to examination of the discourse of the 'social novel' itself. Particular attention has been paid to the 'the poor', which has become recognized as a symbol rather than an objective reality. Sheila Smith's *The Other Nation: The Poor in English Novels of the 1840s and 1850s* (1980) approached the issue through a multidisciplinary approach, exploring the transformations of 'reality' that occur between fiction and the visual arts, and parliamentary reports and journalism. Gertrude Himmelfarb in her massively researched study (*The Idea of Poverty,* 1984) took a more directly historical approach. Starting her investigation with the political economy of Adam Smith and Malthus, she examined the different modes in which the poor were portrayed. These include the various images in Dickens, the 'Gothic Poor' of G. W. M. Reynolds, Mayhew's journalism, and the 'Industrial Poor'. Thus a genre which Cazamian saw as a reflection of the times, now focuses a debate concerning the way the novel shapes and refashions history. This approach is implicit in Kate Flint's anthology of source materials for use in studying the fiction, *The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change* (1987).

Finally, contemporary theory has considered the way the rhetorics of discourse through which the novel is told themselves have social significance. Although he died

in Russia in 1975, the impact of M.M.Bakhtin in the West has come largely in the 1980s. His work *The Dialogic Imagination* (trans. 1981) contains little specific criticism of the Victorian social novel, but its ideas have influenced work in the field. 'Dialogism' declares that a 'single' literary form does not exist; it is made up of a variety of forms and meanings, all of which affect each other, so that the total meaning can only be understood in terms of interaction within the greater whole.

The implications of 'dialogism' can be seen in a work such as Catharine Gallagher's *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction, 1832–1867* (1985). This on the one hand examines the metaphysical debates that underlie social issues in the fiction, in particular those concerning individual free will, social control and historical inevitability. Is John Barton in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), for instance, a tragic hero responsible for his fate, or a helpless victim of the industrial situation? On the other hand Gallagher identifies the range of available rhetorics—such as realism, melodrama, tragedy, and the domestic tale—each of which implies certain attitudes to the 'reality' it represents. Thus 'realism' involves a neutral record of appearances; melodrama, an identification of opposing and absolute moral forces; while tragedy explores a conflict within the main protagonist. By identifying the often contradictory mixture of forms of fiction contained even in single novels, Gallagher convincingly points to uncertainty and confusion within the attitudes of the Victorian author. Her important study breaks new ground, but paradoxically points up the importance of the earlier historical approach. For her findings are limited by her uneven knowledge of the literary forms she examines and their social context, particularly concerning the 'popular' ones such as melodrama and cheap magazine stories. The following argument will draw on contemporary critical developments, but as far as possible will ground them in a historical social and literary context.

One can place the 'social novel' within four overlapping phases. The first, pre-Victorian, stage saw the realignment of earlier forms to express the changing urban and social consciousness of the nineteenth century. It includes such diverse writing as the Jacobin novel, the novels of Sir Walter Scott and the fictionalized journalism of Pierce Egan. The second phase can be identified with Dickens, and establishes the imaginative viability of the city. The third incorporates economic and political debate within a fictional framework— the novels of Disraeli and Gaskell. Finally, the social issues become absorbed within a focus on the social organism as a 'given' to be analysed rather than debated, while the possibility of objective realism is itself becoming questioned.

This phase can be identified with the work of George Eliot, and the influence of popular Darwinism. The first phase has been charted by Gary Kelly in *The Jacobin Novel 1780–1805* (1976). This group of novels grew from the ferment surrounding the

French revolution and was related to the early romantic movement. It dramatized the human suffering caused by social institutions, in particular those of class and the legal system. In form it was rooted in the eighteenth century novel of sentiment and manners rather than in social realism. Nevertheless in such works as Charlotte Smith's *The Romance of Real Life* (1786), Holcroft's *Anna St Ives* (1792) and, most notably, Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), this fiction does explore personal and psychological aspects of social conflicts. *Caleb Williams* centres on the relationship between master (Falkland) and servant (Williams) as the shared knowledge of a crime Falkland has committed corrupts and destroys both. It looks forward to *Frankenstein* (1818) by Godwin's daughter, Mary Shelley, which also explores the complex web of identity, power and responsibility. As George Levine has demonstrated in *The Realistic Imagination* (1981), this gothic tale is grounded in an imaginative conception of social relations for which later, more literal, fiction lacked a language. Gaskell in *Mary Barton* (1848), searching for an image to describe the uneducated working classes, turned (confusedly) to 'Frankenstein, that monster of many human qualities' (ed. 1970, pp. 219–20).

The move towards a more naturalistic engagement with reality came with the work of two totally dissimilar but immensely popular writers. Sir Walter Scott dominated the English novel from 1814 to 1830. His Chaucerian sympathy with human nature regardless of class, sex or culture, and his historical sense of the way individuals are conditioned by social context, freed the genre from earlier constrictions. The weakness of his plots and conventional heroes and heroines became a strength, turning the focus, as Lukács noted, on the 'ordinary' hero and the presentation of common life. Yet at the same time Scott infused the ordinary, through his historical sense, with romantic interest. He created a paradoxical fusion of Romanticism and Realism that was to inform the mid-Victorian and distinguish it from parallel developments on the Continent.

Scott wrote centrally of the Scottish Highlands and Lowlands. The urban world came sharply into focus with Pierce Egan's *Life in London* (1820–1). Egan was a sporting journalist with a vivacious curiosity and delight in all aspects of city life. No court, street, alley or cellar, he wrote, was too obscure to have a history and an interest, and he brought London into the field of fiction through the adventures of the innocent Jerry Abershaw, under the tutelage of Corinthian Tom, man about town. Further, he took the contrast between rich and poor, the 'light' and the 'dark', and made it his organizing principle for experiencing the city, alternating scenes of high life with those of the London underworld. The work was hugely popular. Carlyle complained that it dominated the London stage in the 1820s, and Egan himself in 1830 listed more than a hundred derivative works. It made town life accessible for fiction in a new way.

Egan was a writer of limited imagination and inflexible style, and his fiction is heavily dated. From the appearance of *Sketches by Boz* (1836–7), however, his world was expanded by the hugely talented Dickens—who also began writing as a journalist. Like Egan, Dickens showed the romantic side of everyday urban life: indeed, he created an inverse romanticism out of its squalor and human degradation. Egan described the city: for Dickens it became a moral and social geography. *Oliver Twist* (1838) sensationally 'exposed' Jacob's Island and the criminal areas around Farringdon Street: but it was also the metaphysical stage on which the demonic Fagin attempted to entrap the preternaturally good Oliver into ways of evil. In Dickens's work London places and objects carry moral weight. In *Dombey and Son* (1848) the state of Dombey's soul is reflected in the various changes to his house and the state of his city office; Camden railway cutting images the cosmic crisis of England moving into the railway era. In his later work Dickens became more rather than less symbolic in his use of urban landscapes. In *Bleak House* (1853), Chancery becomes the centre of the fog of litigation enveloping Britain; in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) the financial world becomes contracted to the filth of urban dust heaps.

Dickens is at once central and untypical in the 'social novel'. A novelist universally associated with social issues, he was attacked for allowing his imagination to come between his writing and his subject, and his underlying attitudes can be evasive. In his fiction, most characters have a job; but Dickens rarely shows them at work. His novels are centrally about social relationships, yet his model for this would seem, as Cazamian noted, a perpetual Christmas of warm feelings, and the benevolent paternalism of Fezziwig in *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Even his explicit working-out of class and industrial issues in *Hard Times* (1854), based on a hasty visit to a factory strike in Preston, identified the factory problem not with economics but with the Utilitarian denial of human imagination, and juxtaposed the factories of Coketown against the bizarre world of Sleary's travelling circus. In his later novels Dickens's sense of Victorian society becomes increasingly dark, and his heroes and heroines express the need to escape its corruption, to preserve a private integrity, as with Esther Summerson *(Bleak House)* and Amy Dorrit (*Little Dorrit*, 1857).

Yet the lack of structured social theory opened the way for imaginative explorations of moral complexity. In *Oliver Twist*, for instance, from one perspective Oliver is the obvious hero and his final prosperity is a victory for bourgeois values of honesty and decency. Yet from another, middle-class values are identified with the workhouse and the heartless magistrate, Fang. As Arnold Kettle pointed out (1951–3, vol. 1, pp. 123–38), Fagin and the Artful Dodger by expressing a human energy in the face of an exploitative and heartless society can also be seen as the heroes. The

ambivalence is expressed through the mixture of styles within the novel: Oliver Twist is presented in an aura of domestic melodrama, the Artful Dodger with comic realism. Similar complexity exists in Dickens's other works, including *Hard Times* (see Gallagher, 1985, pp. 149–66). Yet this does not imply contradiction: the imaginative perspectives complement each other, reflecting the ambiguous position of the middle-class novelist in terms of Bahktin's 'dialogic imagination'. Dickens's championing of Sleary's magical circus against the schoolroom in *Hard Times* is a paradigm of his contribution to the social novel: he transformed 'facts' through the entertainment of the imagination, making the reader see social reality in a new light.

|To consider our third category of social novel, other fiction confronted issues of political and economic issues within more naturalistic parameters. Appearing before Dickens began writing, Harriet Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832) sold 10,000 copies in serial form, and her uncompromising advocacy of Utilitarian tenets, regardless of the promptings of sympathy, was part of the social fiction against which Dickens was to react. Her novellas, *The Hill and the Valley, A Manchester Strike* and *Weal and Woe in Gaveloch,* portray industrial distress and political action with insight and some compassion, but can offer no remedy for falling wages and unemployment other than birth control. The economic realities of excessive labour supply have to be accepted. This stance found its implacable opponent in Thomas Carlyle, who turned from the logical basis of Utilitarianism to the moral categorical imperatives of Kant and the transcendental idealism of Goethe. Social reality was but the symbolic clothing for the Immanent, and in *Signs of the Times* (1829), he fulminated against the contemporary worship of 'Mechanics' in place of 'the mysterious springs of Love, and Fear, and Wonder, of Enthusiasm, Poetry, Religion' (ed. 1971, p. 72). Carlyle's assertion of human values in the face of cold analysis was influential in directing the social novel in idealistic directions: Dickens dedicated *Hard Times* to Carlyle, and those who followed a more directly representative strategy found in Carlyle the vindication of a humanistic approach to social fiction.

Thus while the 1840s was marked by an intense debate about the state of the nation, by parliamentary reports, blue books and journalistic investigation, it also saw a spate of imaginative activity, exploring social issues in terms of fiction, drama and the visual arts. It was an era that turned to the idealistic modes of melodrama. Frances Trollope's *Michael Armstrong the Factory Boy* (1840) and Elizabeth Stone's *William Langshawe, the Cotton Lord* (1842) resolved economic issues in terms of good overcoming evil, although Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood* (1838–40) offers a less compromising focus on the underlying injustices of the factory system. The conflicting requirements of investigative fiction and its resolution in individual and human terms, put pressures on narrative form. This was answered in different ways, one of the most striking of which was that of Benjamin Disraeli.

Of his trilogy, *Coningsby* (1844) is a *roman-à-clef,* dramatizing the political movements of the 1830s; *Tancred* (1847) is a mystical work set partly in the Holy Land, where his eponymous hero searches for enlightenment; *Sybil* (1845), by contrast, focuses on the forties, and the division between the traditional south and the industrial north. The grim wastes of the industrial Mowbray are given a realistic treatment, based on parliamentary blue books; naturalistically portrayed, too, is the amoral, vital Devilsdust, the young working-class representative of the new England. Disraeli asserts his Tory belief in the need for a governing hierarchy by satirizing the effete English aristocracy, but also shows the industrial masses to be in need of political direction. The Young England vision of leadership is heightened by theatrical presentation: Charles Egremont, younger son of the oppressive Lord Marney, sees a radiant figure gliding by moonlight among the shadows of the ruined Marney Abbey. She is Sybil, significantly the daughter of the Chartist Walter Gerard; rejected because of his rank, Charles finally wins her hand after proving himself among the poor. In the novel's climax, the abbey is burned, and Lord Marney killed by the rioters. In the process he reveals papers that prove Sybil's rights to the lands of Marney. A heady mixture of blue book realism, operatic symbolism and political theory, *Sybil* remains a unique and effective social novel.

An interesting comparison to Disraeli's work is provided by G. W. M. Reynolds's *The Mysteries of London* (1846–8). Although a radically (in both senses of the word) different work, looking to Eugène Sue's sensational *Mysteries of Paris* (1842–3) rather than to Disraeli, it has its own flamboyant style and shares similar strategies. Reynolds also shows us a social world divided and opposed; both old aristocracy and the poor are rejected. Indeed, Reynolds presents a view of the poor dehumanized even below those portrayed in *Sybil;* society is held together by a web of the crime and violence created by economic exploitation. Throughout the immensely long tale, serialized week by week in penny numbers, the 'documentary' dimension is set against a struggle, heightened by melodramatic presentation, between the virtuous Richard and his unscrupulous capitalist brother Eugene. The latter is finally murdered by his French valet, leaving Richard to depart for Europe as a freedom fighter. Reynolds, for all his Chartist sympathies, offers little hope of leadership from the proletariat, and the circulation of 40,000 claimed for *The Mysteries of London* suggests his views were acceptable to many working class readers (James, 1974, p. 165).

If Reynolds portrayed a bestialized poor, Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction is distinguished by its sympathetic insights into the life of the Manchester workers. The opening chapters of *Mary Barton* (1848) are unrivalled in their warmth and accuracy of perception. Yet, even here, the pressures of reconciling an objective account of the social situation with analysis and evaluation splits the narrative. The murder of a mill

owner's son by an embittered worker is largely based on the notorious murder of Thomas Ashton by the mill-hands Joseph Mosley and James Garside in Woodley. Yet the murder had taken place in 1831, and even then was untypical: by making it central to a novel set contemporaneously in the 1840s, Gaskell was heightening the drama at the expense of objectivity, and she confuses Chartism, Communism and trade unionism as the violent underbelly of industrial despair. The shifting of authorial attitudes, as marked by changing narrative modes, has been noticed above, and the novel's double closure evades much of its early insights. It offers the dying John Barton, in a Christ-like tableau, being reconciled with his victim's father; and finally a summer scene in a country garden overseas between the married Mary, Jem and their child.

Gaskell's subsequent novel *North and South* (1854–5) juxtaposes the three carefully characterized worlds of the south (Helstone), Manchester, and, briefly, commercial London. The issues of class and regional difference are given fictional form by the hard-fought romance between the southern Margaret Hale and Henry Thornton, factory owner. The crisis precipitated by a lockout is resolved in melodrama as Margaret faces the mob and receives a missile aimed at Thornton, and their final marriage is paralleled by a growing cooperation between millowner and the workers. It is in many ways a more accomplished and logical work, but it lacks the fresh immediacy of *Mary Barton*.

By the end of the forties, the debate over Utilitarianism was giving way to the religious controversies aroused by Evangelicalism, the Oxford Movement, and theories of evolution. Charles Kingsley's ebullient *Yeast* (1851, but first published in serial form in 1848), consists largely of dialogues between Lancelot Smith, a rich merchant representing the questing middle classes, and a series of interlocutors, notably the Cornish gamekeeper and ex-miner Tregarva. The long discourse concludes with a mystical intimation that Lancelot will work towards the regeneration of England through the tenets of the 'muscular Christianity' of Evangelical Anglicanism.

Kingsley's theories are fleshed out in *Alton Locke* (1850), based on the lives of the working-class poets Thomas Cooper and William Lovett, and exposing the appalling conditions of the sweatshops of east London. These turn Locke to Chartism, under the influence of which he riots, is imprisoned, and converted to Christian Socialism shortly before his death. This intermittently powerful work includes a detailed documentation which reflects a new style of investigative journalism. This was being forged in particular by Henry Mayhew, and was to culminate in his *London Labour and the London Poor* (1860). Kingsley has himself been inspired by Mayhew to contribute his investigation into the tailoring sweatshops, 'Cheap Clothes and Nasty', to *The Morning Chronicle*, and he introduced this reportage directly into *Alton Locke*.

Before he dies, Locke experiences an extraordinary dream of evolution, from creation to the advent of mankind. Charles Darwin was only to publish *The Origin of Species* in 1859, but as Gillian Beer has shown
(1983, *passim*), evolutionary ideas were influential at least from the publication of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830–3) and Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844). There is a link between Mayhew's investigative journalism, evolutionary theory, and the demise of the social novel of the forties, for each in its way is a reflection of a scientific rather than humanitarian concern, a rejection of moral and social absolutes. George Eliot, finely analysed in terms of Darwin by Gillian Beer (1983, pp. 149–67), portrays *Middlemarch* (1870) as a web of interconnection in which characters are trapped by time and kinship, from which the only escape is into the private world suggested by another image, that of the labyrinth.

This sense of closed possibilities informs the major novels on social themes in the latter part of the century. They range across George Moore's 'realist' depiction of life in the Potteries, in *The Mummer's Wife* (1885), and of the servant class, in *Esther Waters* (1894); Gissing's despairing accounts of the life of the poor in *Demos* (1886) and *The Nether World* (1889); and Arthur Morrison's accounts of London East End life, notably *A Child of the Jago* (1896). The failure of human free will in an alien universe also haunts Thomas Hardy's great rural novels (1872–95).

The 'social novel', then, was linked to its period in ways far more complex than those envisaged by Cazamian. Its inherent problems of both form and content reflected the failure of British society to resolve the issues raised by the industrial revolution. Particularly significant was the inability of the socialist movement to create fiction embodying truly radical perspectives on the class struggle. Engels praised Margaret Harkness's *A City Girl* (1887) for a positive socialist approach to urban realism, but her gifts as a writer were minor. Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, the first truly socialist classic of working-class life, appeared at the end of the First World War. William Morris created a socialist view of English society in *News from Nowhere* (1891); but, long after 1952, the year in which it was set, it remains as much a Utopian fantasy as when it was written in 1891.

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