Victorian Noon
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Victorian Noon: English Literature in 1850.

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Preface

_Victorian Noon_ requires a preliminary word. It is an odd title for what may well be an odd book. I have borrowed the title, or rather adapted it, from G. M. Young, who speaks of mid-nineteenth-century England as "the Victorian noon-time."¹ Since Young recommends that historians of the Victorian period concentrate on the social and political developments, the public events and the private dramas within a particular year, it may also seem that I have borrowed from Young my reasons for the book as well as its title. And certainly I have had his suggestion in mind for some time. The truth is, however, that _Victorian Noon_ grew unprompted and uninvited. As I read for a study of Matthew Arnold and his nineteenth-century critics, I found myself taking notes about writers at mid-century. When checking on the biography of a friend or critic of Arnold I would soon be asking: Was he (or she) alive, or how old was he in 1850? Whom did he know? What was he reading? Was he writing? The person might be a journalist or a poet, old or young, famous or unremembered.

Quite simply, I became intrigued by the richness and diversity of the literature of mid-nineteenth-century England. Eighteen fifty, like 1859, was an extraordinary year. I began to think—and with moments of vacillation have thought since—that _Victorian Noon_ ought to be written, that it could show much about the Romantic heritage, about the mid-nineteenth-century literary world, while it offered new ways of looking at certain English classics.

I have also come to realize why few writers have followed G. M. Young's suggestion, or at least what pitfalls he invites us into. For whatever is said by way of explanation, the focus on a given year will seem arbitrary. History's categories rarely confine themselves to a single year. Things sprawl in time, and cause and effect move us backward and forward. My
own topic involves literature rather than social or political history, but it also raises difficult questions. Is there, after all, any intrinsic connection between the literary events of a given year? Would demonstrated relationships prove more convenient than meaningful?

My justification for the book and responses to such questions will, I hope, become clear soon enough. I want to say first that the focus on the historical, thematic, or biographical relationships of a single year seems to me at once a fitting response to the Victorians' own preoccupation with the patterns of time—and with 1850 as a pivotal or "transitional" year—and also an appropriate study for a literary historian today. Although I am not a structuralist, I have thought in terms of a favorite structuralist distinction: that between a synchronic and diachronic approach to a subject. If literary history tends to be diachronic, or chronological, perhaps it is worthwhile to look at our subject in a synchronic or contemporaneous way, considering works in their immediate context and weighing the forgotten with the great. I suspect that such a broad invitation might take us back to traditional critical methods as well as push us to semiotics. An exhaustive critique of Baudelaire's "Les Chats" or of a Balzac short story may be understood as an outgrowth of the New Criticism and a study of the potential plot elements of fiction as a neo-Aristotelian approach. Even discussions of formal intellectual contexts may be seen as extensions of the Arthur Lovejoy studies in the history of ideas. Whatever the practical effect of structuralist aesthetics, I have accepted the reminder to include materials beyond an accepted canon. On the other hand, I have resisted the temptation to dwell on more than a few individual works and have felt free to play with temporal metaphors, moving back and forth as well as across.

A study of the literature of a particular year might be approached in a variety of ways. It would, for example, be illuminating to discuss the connections between English and European or American literature. In America too 1850 was a watershed. Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter*; Emerson published *Representative Men*; Poe's "Poetic Principle" appeared posthumously; Melville published *White Jacket*, shortly after publishing *Redburn*; and *The Whale*, soon to be *Moby Dick*, would appear the following year. Melville went to England in the fall of 1850 to sell new books to English publishers. American works were read in England, just as English works were read—and pirated—in America. To attempt a study of international literary relations would, however, be another venture altogether, and I have limited my attention to English works in
England, unless making a quick comparison or discussing (as in chapter III) the uses to English writers of a Dante or Goethe.

Even with the geographical limitation, various possibilities would be open. I might have followed the example of John Dodds in The Age of Paradox, who writes a kind of diary of mid-century years. The chronological sweep of literature reviewed in the Athenaeum or Examiner or Dickens's Household Narrative could serve for a month-by-month discussion of what books were available and how they were being read. I have chosen instead to group my chapters around well-known or representative works and to discuss them in terms of contemporary responses, historical circumstances, and pertinent traditions or parallels, mentioning chronology only where it seems appropriate.

Apart from asserting the extraordinary range and quality of the literature at mid-century, Victorian Noon has no overriding thesis. I am dubious about reductive theses and interested, to put this positively, in doing justice to the subject. My aim is firstly descriptive. I want to know how The Prelude was received, what relation there might be between Dickens and the Pre-Raphaelites, how contemporary reviewers spoke to new directions in fiction and poetry, or how they handled inherited assumptions. But a description of mid-century literature raises broader, theoretical issues about the status of imagination, the uses of myth and memory, the significance of heavily used words like nature, the impact of religious and scientific inquiry on literary works. I address these issues in changing contexts and in relation to authors whom we might otherwise think of as unrelated.

After a general, introductory chapter which offers a framework for discussion and places the literature briefly in its historical setting, I move on to a chapter entitled “Poetics,” which comments on the defense of imaginative works in a society obsessed by mechanical power and committed to historical schemes of progress. Chapter III continues the discussion of critical vocabulary with reference to the two recognized great poets of the time: Wordsworth and Tennyson. The chapter explores the Victorian homage to Dante in terms of poetic autobiography. Chapter IV broadens the discussion of poetry, its norms and expectations, by turning to Arnold, Clough, and Browning, whom I call “dramatic elegists.” In chapter V I turn more centrally to religious issues, concentrating on John Henry and Francis Newman, and reading them in light of contemporary poets. Religious autobiography leads back to Wordsworth and also to Dickens's autobiographical David Copperfield, which I introduce with
Ruskin's chapter "The Lamp of Memory" in chapter VI. My commentary on Wordsworth and Dickens speculates on the importance of Romantic conventions for writers of the time, novelists no less than poets.

Chapter VII plays with a wide range of authors. This is an omnibus chapter, mentioning contemporary reviews of fiction, prefaces by novelists, and other contemporary remarks about the stature of fiction. I refer to George Henry Lewes's reviews of Charlotte Brontë to clarify the mid-century emphasis on literary figures who are at once unprepossessing and, in Carlyle's phrase, "men-of-letters as heroes." Chapter VIII focuses on one writer, Charles Kingsley, whom I take as an index to the age, commenting on his religious views, his critical principles, and on his polemical writings. Chapter IX is a discussion of the Pre-Raphaelites and The Germ. The Pre-Raphaelites serve to pull together theories about nature and tradition, and I compare the short-lived Germ with Dickens's enormously successful Household Words.

Chapter X raises further questions about mid-century tastes and about the possibility of, or the recognition of, a literary culture. Entitled "Postscripts," it explores again the relationship between the public optimism of the time, expressed in plans for the Great Exhibition, and the melancholic strain in so much of the literature. There was, in Dickens's words, clearly a "summer-dawn" of literature of mid-century, but the literature seems at odds with the nationalism, the pride, even the tastes epitomized in what Punch promptly labeled "the Crystal Palace."

The range of these contents will indicate how much of Victorian Noon must be indebted to the work of other scholars. My borrowings should be clear in footnotes, although the vast range of scholarship addressed to Tennyson, Dickens, Arnold, Browning, Thackeray, Wordsworth, John Henry Newman, and other writers who enter this study, would make it at best unwieldy to list all pertinent works. I have tried at various points to debate specific arguments of what I take to be representative views. Apart from incidental borrowings, I must point to some evident models for Victorian Noon. I refer to 1859: Entering an Age of Crisis, a work by several hands and without the intent of unity, but an obvious forerunner; to Mid-Victorian Studies, a collection of reviews and essays by Kathleen and Geoffrey Tillotson; and especially, perhaps, to Kathleen Tillotson's Novels of the Eighteen-Forties, from which I have learned much. Other pertinent studies include Jerome Buckley's Victorian Temper, a work of greater scope than mine, but a helpful model; John Dodds's study, The Age of Paradox, mentioned above; and Masao Myoshi's "The Colloquy of the Self: 1850" in The Divided Self.
My indebtedness here goes beyond my reading. I want to express thanks to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and its president, Gordon Ray, who sponsored another topic, but who made the writing of this book possible, and also to Deans Raymond Erickson and William Drew and the Central University Research Council of the University of New Hampshire, who provided funds for travel and typing. Mr. Hugh Pritchard and the staff of the University of New Hampshire Library have been patient and cooperative, despite excessive requests for inter-library loans. I am also grateful to the staff of the Huntington Library, who are always very helpful, and to the British Library. Throughout the writing of the book, Mary Dargon, English graduate secretary at the University of New Hampshire, not only has found time to type illegible drafts, but has worked with unflagging good will on the administrative chores we have shared. I want to thank, too, John Quimby, who prepared the photographic plates, Trixie McLean, who typed the final manuscript, and Peter Johnson and Patricia Rooney, who saved me time and error.

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C. D.

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