Introduction

That unquestioning optimism, that yet unarrested drive, that naivety in overlooking bleak problems, belong wholly to 1850.—Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, *High Victorian Design*¹

There must be a new world, if there is to be any world at all! ... These days of universal death must be days of universal new birth, if the ruin is not to be total and final.—Thomas Carlyle, *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850)²

*Victorian Noon* is an approach to English literary culture in 1850, the year Tennyson published *In Memoriam* and Wordsworth's widow issued the poem called, for convenience, *The Prelude*. Thackeray, at the height of his popularity after writing *Vanity Fair*, finished *Pendennis* in 1850 and published *The Kickleburys on the Rhine*. Thackeray generously recommended to others a work he thought, at times, superior to his own: Dickens's *David Copperfield*, the mid-century saga of Micawber, Uriah Heep, Steerforth, and David himself, the author-protagonist in a story of success. Carlyle also was active in 1850, publishing the angry and despondent *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, a stinging indictment of English life. One of many who learned from Carlyle, Charles Kingsley, wrote "Cheap Clothes and Nasty," an exposure of Englishmen's mistreatment of other Englishmen, and published *Alton Locke*, his account of the tailor-poet who grows up in London slums. Matthew Arnold, Arthur Clough, George Lewes, George Meredith, the Brownings, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti were all writing in 1850, which saw publication of "Memorial Verses," *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, and "The Blessed Damozel." Rossetti and his Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood began their short-lived *The Germ* to celebrate their views, and Dickens launched his
Household Words, which included a Philistine assault on the Pre-Raphaelites.

Not all the great Victorians made an appearance in 1850. Some, like Thomas Hardy, William Morris, Walter Pater, A. C. Swinburne, and Lewis Carroll, were simply too young. Leslie Stephen, Walter Bagehot, and Frederic Harrison were all soon to enter their careers in journalism. A writer like Benjamin Disraeli wrote before and after. Coningsby, Sybil, and Tancred belong to the mid-forties, and Disraeli was not to publish his next novel for another two decades. George Eliot had already translated Strauss’s controversial Life of Jesus (1846) but had yet to begin her career as editor and novelist. Among the Brontë sisters, Charlotte alone was still alive, although Wuthering Heights like Jane Eyre was reissued in 1850, and the Brontës were frequently reviewed. From Ruskin, only the fairy tale King of the Golden River appeared; Ruskin had, however, made his reputation with the early parts of Modern Painters and with The Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849). He was hard at work on The Stones of Venice (1851), a study he felt had bearing on civilization in modern London.

Some writers published uncharacteristic works this year. Trollope, soon to embark on the Barchester novels, published La Vendée, an antirevolutionary romance. He also wrote letters for the Examiner on the social and political state of Ireland. Wilkie Collins published his first work of fiction, Antonina, or the Fall of Rome, which hardly foretold the fine melodrama of A Woman in White. The works of other writers were in the air, among them the first volume of Macaulay’s History of England (1848), Carlyle’s Past and Present (1843) and Heroes and Hero-Worship (1841), and Newman’s tracts and sermons. But the list of works actually published in 1850 remains impressive in itself. Although the Apologia belongs to a later date, Newman published in 1850 the lectures On Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans. His brother Francis published Phases of Faith, an autobiography. There are works by Herbert Spencer, William Allingham, Elizabeth Gaskell, Thomas De Quincey, Leigh Hunt, John Stuart Mill, Walter Savage Landor, and posthumous works by Coleridge and Thomas L. Beddoes. The list could go on.

When Dickens, writing in Household Words, spoke of “this summer-dawn of time,” he may have had in mind the vigor of mid-century literature. More likely, he was expressing a sense of well-being, of hope and promise, which he shared for a time with his countrymen, and which was probably independent of the political events of the year. With one large exception, those events were inauspicious. In June, Sir Robert Peel died,
thrown from his horse. Pope Pius IX stirred old antipopery sentiments when he reestablished the Catholic hierarchy in England, appointing Nicholas Wiseman cardinal. Within the Anglican Church itself there arose a controversy called the Gorham Case, which preoccupied the Cabinet and puzzled laymen; it involved questions of church authority that had been raised by Newman and the Tractarians. If no longer vigorous, no longer really a movement as such, the Oxford Movement continued its influence. When his friend Manning converted to the Roman Church in 1851, Gladstone said he felt as if Manning had murdered his mother by mistake.  

Abroad, there were disruptions in Schleswig-Holstein and minor problems in Greece, but the revolutionary ferment of 1848 had gone. England's most trying international problems were perhaps those fomented by Palmerston, who was soon to attain his greatest power, and who infuriated the royal couple and embarrassed Lord John Russell, the prime minister, by his independent handling of foreign affairs. From California reports continued to flow in about Sutter's Fort and the lures and pitfalls of the hunt for gold. And apart from gold, English and Irishmen were still crowding inhospitable ships for the immigration to new worlds. Dickens's *Household Words*, among other magazines, openly endorsed emigration as a partial cure for social ills, which included, at mid-century, the recurrent threat of cholera in the cities; the overcrowding in "the Rookeries" (the subject of an 1850 book); the disquiet caused by "Navvies," who were building the now octopus-like railways; and the almost institutionalized problems of Sanitation, Crime, and Prostitution.

But in spite of such problems, the worst starvation and depression of the forties seemed to be over. The Corn Laws had been repealed; the harvests were improving. England began to enjoy the first acknowledged economic "boom" in history. By 1850, as Asa Briggs points out, England's "output of coal had reached 56 million tons a year; pig iron output was over two million tons—half the total world output; there were 1,800 cotton factories employing 328,000 workers and using steam engines with 71,000 total horsepower, and there were over 5,000 miles of railway." Sixty percent of the world's tonnage in 1850 was English. Such statistics, intriguing in their own right, also reflect the mid-century Englishman's pleasure in statistical evidence, which can be seen in the ecstatic accounts of what was possibly the most important event in mid-century England. In 1850, Prince Albert and Henry Cole (and before his death, Sir Robert Peel) were planning their triumphant industrial fair, the Great Exhibition. The opening of the Exhibition took place in May of 1851, but its creation was of 1850. With the "hungry forties" over and Chartism discredited, the
mood of the country seems to have been, if not jubilant, then at least confident, Paxton's Crystal Palace testifying to English hegemony in manufacturing and trade.

Many people objected to the Exhibition. Some, like Ruskin, thought it an abomination; others, like Dickens, soon grew tired of hearing about it. But as the regular and detailed accounts in newspapers and weeklies, art magazines and humor papers make clear, the Exhibition emerged as a symbol of national direction, even of hope for humanity. “Nobody who has paid any attention to the peculiar features of the present era [wrote Prince Albert in 1850] will doubt for a moment that we are living at a period of most wonderful transition, which tends rapidly to accomplish that great end, to which, indeed, all history points—the realization of the unity of mankind.” More obviously chauvinistic was G. R. Porter, who updated his *Progress of the Nation* in 1851. “It must at all times be a matter of interest and utility to ascertain the means by which any community has attained to eminence among nations. To inquire into the progress of circumstances which has given preeminence to one's own nation would almost seem to be a duty.”

Here in both passages, with the “transition” and the “great end,” the “utility,” “progress,” and “duty,” we can see the self-confidence and the self-consciousness of the new times. It is a quality in the lightest as well as most earnest of comments. A squib from *Punch* shows how such assumptions lent themselves to readily understood humor. Already nine years old and dedicating “the fulness of [its] Ninth Year to Nine Pins,” *Punch* speaks of the policeman as “that great embodiment of progress” because he says ‘Move on!’” Actually, as Mr. Punch was well aware, the policeman was an embodiment of progress, an instance of social reform, a sign of the times. Periodicals less radical and less satiric than *Punch* are replete in 1850 with summings-up and with golden prognoses for the years to come. There are articles in the conservative *Quarterly* and *Blackwood's*, contrasting the new equilibrium of English society with the chaos of 1848, often referred to as “the worst year in history.”

Literature has ever been the surest reflex of a people.—John Storey Smith, *Social Aspects* (1850)

To some extent the literature of the time expresses the optimism of public opinion—and, indeed, how are we to separate public opinion from
the pages of the popular press? We are faced in any historical inquiry with the voiceless feelings of the many perhaps conflicting with the highly vocal expressions of the few. Still, we can recognize in the sales of magazines and books as well as in contemporary reviews that confidence in economic prosperity is matched by a confidence about literature. If fiction still lacked the acknowledged stature of poetry in critical discussions, the praise of “Dickens and Thackeray, Thackeray and Dickens” became almost universal, and reviewers consistently pointed out the achievement of these two novelists in relation to Fielding, Scott, and other giants of the past. Few doubted that, whatever the pitfalls of serial fiction, the novel had found its masters. (This would change somewhat with the response to later books of both Dickens and Thackeray.) Similarly in poetry: despite a common refrain about the vast amounts of poetic dribble being published and the expectation of a greater age of poetry to come, there seemed a general acknowledgment that Tennyson in particular represented a high order of writing. Assessments of literature like the assessments of society tended to be as favorable as they were hopeful, and—for good or ill—a sense of “progress” extended into the arts.

Nevertheless, the mood of the literature often differed from the optimism of its reviewers. Carlyle, though damned for the ferocity of Latter-Day Pamphlets, knew that he was not alone in his distressed assessment of the “Condition of England.” For “in spite of our Statistics, Unshackled Presses, and Torches of Knowledge,” the age reveals itself as “one of boundless misery and sorrow.”

The deranged condition of our affairs is a universal topic among men at present; and the heavy miseries pressing, in their rudest shape, on the great dumb inarticulate class, and from this by sure law, spreading upwards, in a less palpable but not less certain and perhaps still more fatal shape on all classes to the very highest, are admitted everywhere to be great, increasing and now almost unendurable.¹¹

Carlyle’s polemics find their counterpart—as they show their influence—in fiction of the time. Yet there was at mid-century perhaps a different kind of borrowing from Carlyle. Just as in Household Words Dickens carefully balances bad tidings with good, so in David Copperfield he only touches on the social and political nightmares that preoccupy Carlyle. Written at the mid-point of Dickens’s career, and providing a kind of hiatus between Dombey and Son and Bleak House, David Copperfield is a long, retrospective assessment in Carlyle’s terms of “the hero as man-of-letters.”

At a time when he was learning most from Carlyle, Dickens writes
anything but an angry book. The same may be said of both Elizabeth Gaskell and William Thackeray, both of whom write not uncharacteristic but strongly pastoral novels. Mrs. Gaskell's *The Moorland Cottage*, coming after *Mary Barton* (1848), takes place in the Lake District and scarcely mentions the world of Manchester and mill owners and operatives. But Mrs. Gaskell will later return to the polemical art by which she is best remembered. And Dickens, if sanguine about the "summer-dawn," has not forgotten the awful equation between the sufferings of the poor and the wholesale contamination of society. Drawing on his own experiences as well as on Carlyle, he will soon begin (in 1851) his terrible anatomy of English law, English classes, and English public life.

Along with Dickens and Carlyle, Charles Kingsley, Joseph Kay, and Henry Mayhew discuss the other England, that of the downtrodden and dispossessed. Mayhew and his collaborators began in October 1849 their incomparable articles for the *Morning Chronicle* about the "London Labour and the London Poor." As "Parson Lot," Kingsley drew from Mayhew to write "Cheap Clothes and Nasty," and he attempted in *Alton Locke* the exposure of a thoughtless capitalist society. Joseph Kay, brother of Kay-Shuttleworth, published his disturbing report, *The Social Conditions of the Working Classes*, which showed how exploited and uneducated the English poor were, even by comparison with small nations of Europe. Another polemic caused no stir at all in 1850. The "Communist Manifesto" of Marx and Engels made its first English appearance in *The Red Republican*, a new, left-wing paper. Marx, an exile, had settled in London in 1849, condemned to the squalid housing and humiliating poverty described by Mayhew and Kingsley.

Marx's assessment of "the condition of the working classes" was no more accurate, and certainly no more irate, than Mayhew's and Kingsley's. His prophecy—and this may explain his almost total isolation in London—presupposed a different world. Revolutionary visions that might have had some application in 1848 had little or none in 1850, and even in 1848, Marx would have seemed strange and possibly mad to most Englishmen. For if reviewers of *Latter-Day Pamphlets* were to find Carlyle offensively pessimistic and frightening, they were hardly ready for Marxist dialectics. This is as true of intellectuals as of ordinary men and women. "The English intelligentsia," writes Asa Briggs, "was neither rootless nor rebellious; at its centre, it was stable and assured, with enough property to buy leisure and independence." Briggs clarifies the lack of rebelliousness, but he overstates the economic and emotional stability of contemporary writers. One intellectual—later to be known for his trenchant criticisms of
English culture—clearly worried about his leisure and independence, despite serving as secretary to the Whig statesman Lord Lansdowne and anticipating a career as Inspector of Schools. A member of the establishment though he was, Matthew Arnold could write, in “Memorial Verses,” about “this iron time / Of doubts, disputes, distractions, fears.” His urbane, even dandyish manner contrasted so radically with the melancholy in his poems that close friends and members of his family were surprised by *The Strayed Reveller* (1849). The point is that Arnold, beneath his urbanity and in spite of his career, was somehow “rootless.” His poems express that “ache of modernism,” the disaffection, or—to use a mid-century term appropriated by Marxists—the *alienation* of many intellectuals, who remained nonetheless far from thoughts of revolution.

Arnold helps to illustrate that underlying doubts or melancholy in mid-century literature bear a peculiarly tangential relationship to social or political issues, to what Marx, like Benjamin Disraeli, conceived as the warring of “two nations.” “This iron time” implies problems that may never be solved, problems of a society in which organic metaphors no longer obtain, where “democracy” raises a specter of conformity, uniformity, and a possible end to “civilization,” and where an individual becomes an unwitting part of a social mechanism. John Henry Newman addresses himself to such questions in *Certain Difficulties*; so does Francis, his erudite brother, in *Phases of Faith*. From their antithetical viewpoints, these men come to an awareness of large historical processes, of real or potential threats to the values of culture and of faith (see chapter V). They typify a widespread preoccupation in mid-century writers, for embattled faith and the precariousness of certitudes are at least implicit subjects in many works of the time. T. S. Eliot speaks about the lack of “serenity,” the tragic quality of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, and contemporary reviewers recognized this side of the poem, though they preferred to think of it as a noble hosannah of faith.

Arthur Clough, who considered *In Memoriam* magnificent, must have seen its somber side. His Faustian dialogue “Dipsychus” shares with Tennyson’s and Arnold’s lyric laments an account of religious and emotional tribulation. Even Browning, after success with more impersonal or “dramatic” poetry, returned to an apparently private vehicle in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*. The voices in his strange companion poems, no less than the voice of the Duke of Ferrara, may be dramatic projections, but they record the poet’s intimate struggles with questions of God, faith, and personal immortality—with what Tennyson aptly called “the way of a soul.”
Tennyson spoke of *In Memoriam* not only as “the way of a soul” but also as “a kind of *Divina Commedia*, ending with happiness.” “It is . . . the cry of the whole human race. . . . In the poem . . . private grief swells out into thought of, and hope for, the whole world.”¹⁶ Small wonder that Tennyson became Poet Laureate in 1850 at the instigation of Prince Albert, who was sponsoring his Great Exhibition for the benefit of the whole world. Like the broad English public, the prince saw in Tennyson a voice for the time. Did Tennyson, who struggled for answers and certitudes that were assumptions to Dante, invoke *The Divine Comedy* to move beyond the merely autobiographical or elegiac, to avoid what Carlyle called “self-consciousness”? In any case (and I raise the question in chapter III), we can speculate why, in the nineteenth century, Dante’s long poetic journey appealed to English poets, who had no conception of Purgatory, only a metaphoric notion of Hell, and scarcely any hope of a multifoliate vision.

Tennyson, Clough, Browning, and Arnold typify a large proportion of mid-century writers who expressed themselves autobiographically. William Aytoun’s coinage “Spasmodics,” to describe poets like Alexander Smith, indicated the contempt with which certain critics dismissed self-indulgent writing—as well as the commonplace nature of that writing. And what is true in religious essays and in poetry is also true in a large number of novels. *David Copperfield* and *Pendennis* may be Dickens’s and Thackeray’s most personal novels, and *Copperfield* draws on what Dickens had in earlier years drafted as autobiography. Thackeray narrates *Pendennis* in a third-person style that develops from *Vanity Fair*, but Thackeray seems in this later novel to speak more intimately with his reader, as though sharing the experience of Pen’s unfolding life; and Thackeray’s next major novel, the historical *Henry Esmond*, takes an autobiographical guise.

Lesser novelists followed the example of the giants. Even Alton Locke, which grows out of the polemical novels of the forties, is told as autobiography; so, too, Francis Smedley’s *Frank Fairleigh* and Eliot Warburton’s costume novel of the Civil War, *Reginald Hastings*. George Borrow, each of whose books is fundamentally autobiographical, was at work in 1850 on *Lavengro* (1851), a novel that began as autobiography and became the characteristic mixture of self-praise and exuberance that makes up Borrow’s fiction. To name an altogether different figure, Bulwer-Lytton, in 1849, published *The Caxtons*, a novel that reviewers rightly called eclectic. It hero-narrator, drawing parallels with Tristram Shandy, plays his own David Copperfield and proves himself both a self-made man and a gentleman.

As Bulwer would indicate, autobiographical forms do not imply a
necessary indebtedness to Wordsworth. Yet some debt seems likely. Kingsley said that his soul “had been steeped from boyhood” in Wordsworth’s poetry, from which Kingsley had learned how to “feel with nature” and to avoid “shallow and materialistic views.”¹⁷ In each of the novels I have mentioned the central characters learn a comparable lesson.

Whatever the reasons for the shift to autobiographical forms, there can be no question about their importance in the literature of mid-century England. Autobiography is not, of course, a nineteenth-century discovery; but the term autobiography barely anticipates the new century.¹⁸ It served to identify a genre that multiplied by staggering proportions throughout the century and that had its effect on fiction, poetry, and nonfictional prose. The mere popularity of autobiography can be seen in an announcement of the relatively staid Art-Journal, which ran a series of biographical and autobiographical accounts of artists (another term that had come to have broad application): “In autobiography there is a charm which narrative in the third person does not possess.”¹⁹ The charm derived from the intimate record, but so might truth. Frequently quoted at the time was Sir Charles Lyell’s remark that rocks and fossils reveal the earth’s autobiography. To the seeing eye, as poets like Wordsworth no less than scientists like Lyell knew, ordinary objects assume extraordinary significance, offering new dimensions of awareness. This is Ruskin’s point in his defense of Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites (see chapter IX). In several of his works Ruskin observes that the art of a people is its most revealing and worthy autobiography.²⁰ Kingsley says much the same thing in his lectures at the new institution for women, Queen’s College: “The literature of every nation is,” he says, “its autobiography.” And for Kingsley the converse is equally true: “The history of each individual [is] more or less the history of the whole human race.”²¹ As I shall try to show, the autobiographical impulse and autobiographical forms of mid-century literature are related to new theories of perception (including the mechanical eye of photography), new theories of history, new literary idols, and new permutations of Romantic literary styles.

Meanwhile, since it is the spiritual always that determines the material, this same man-of-letters hero must be regarded as our most important modern person.—Thomas Carlyle, Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History²²
In an age increasingly enamored of the captains of industry, as Carlyle himself called them, Carlyle’s account of the hero as man-of-letters might have seemed as quaint as it was strident. But Carlyle reflected his times as much as he influenced them. His sense of the man-of-letters came to be widely shared, and we can see one of its manifestations in Dickens’s and Thackeray’s mid-century novels, both of which record the lives of aspiring writers. Carlyle’s pronouncement about “our most important person” points to his own substantial position as man-of-letters and to the periodicals of the age, in which Carlyle and other writers found their main outlets.

It is, in fact, hard to overestimate the importance of periodical literature at mid-century. True, some of the best magazines, like the Contemporary and Fortnightly reviews, had not been founded by 1850; the Saturday Review and the Daily Telegraph were still five years away (as was repeal of the newspaper tax). But the Edinburgh and Quarterly continued to flourish, if not quite with their old energy, and so did Blackwood’s, the Westminster (soon to be edited by George Eliot), and the two powerful weeklies, the Spectator and the Athenaeum. The Athenaeum, that “mirror of Victorian culture,” was bought by as many as twenty thousand readers a week. Among the daily papers, of which London alone had over a hundred, the Times was the dean of respectable journalism and the Morning Chronicle, though in its final years, perhaps the most vigorous inquirer. Quarterlies, monthlies, fortnightlies, weeklies, dailies, magazines for women, magazines for political groups, for children, for religious sects, for the arts—dozens and dozens of publications came and went or lingered during the period. Eighteen forty-nine saw publication of the popular Eliza Cook’s Journal, along with the Journal of Design, and, beginning its long history, Notes and Queries. Eighteen fifty added The Germ and Household Words, another Journal by Leigh Hunt (who published his Autobiography in this year), Kingsley’s and Maurice’s Christian Socialist, and George Lewes’s Leader.

Together, such publications contained innumerable articles by legions of anonymous writers, the bulk of whom were never publicly known or have been, across the years, slowly forgotten. Yet, as Walter Houghton and his collaborators for the Wellesley Index have shown, many anonymous writers were not forgettable hacks: they included John Stuart Mill and George Eliot, Charles Kingsley and Coventry Patmore, George Lewes and W. E. Gladstone. Gladstone, by way of example, wrote a substantial review essay in 1850 on the poet Leopardi.

Gladstone did not make his living from his pen; other writers did.
Money as well as influence was to be had for such work. George Lewes, active as editor and journalist in 1850, recorded in his Receipts Book an income from writing of about £300. But this was modest. “There are many men now,” wrote J. W. Kaye (anonymously), “in London, Edinburgh, and other parts of the country, earning from £1000 to £3000 per annum by their literary labours.” Thanks mainly to periodicals, literature had become a “profession.” “Take it for all in all, with all its drawbacks, and all its abuses, it is a great, a noble, and delightful profession.” Kaye may have protested too much. Regardless, however, whether mid-century men of letters deserved the title of profession (and it has been denied them in our time as in their own), they enjoyed a higher standing than their forerunners earlier in the century, possibly because they included in their ranks the “mid-century clerisy,” university dons and other non-journalists like Gladstone. They were proud of their accomplishments. F. Knight Hunt, whose *The Fourth Estate* (1850) borrowed its title from Carlyle, praised periodical writers as the preservers of England’s freedom. Again, there were doubters. Kaye’s essay, which began as a review of Thackeray’s *Pendennis*—notorious for its satire on literary men—was apology as much as description. But Thackeray himself, retracting some of his strictures in *Pendennis*, could write: “Putting the money out of the question, I believe that the social estimation of the man of letters is as good as it deserves to be, and as good as that of any other professional man.” “The words in *Pendennis* are untenable, be hanged to them.”

If today we are inclined to think the satire in *Pendennis* entirely tenable and to accept (too hastily) Ruskin’s and Arnold’s impatience with the critical biases and puerilities of so many of the periodicals, Thackeray’s vacillation points to mixed attitudes of the time. John Henry Newman offers a further instance. In “Christ upon the Waters,” a sermon of 1850, Newman writes that Englishmen turn to magazines for intellectual sustenance as well as guidance and that the anonymous pontifical dribble of magazines actually determines English taste. Much like Arnold later on, Newman equates the freedom of the press with unbridled liberalism, or anarchy. On the other hand, Newman was to edit the *Rambler* (in 1859), and to give up the post under pressure and with regret. If he could not approve the influence of magazines, he was aware of their potential use.

Because of their influence, magazines are indispensable for an understanding of mid-nineteenth-century literature. I recur throughout the following chapters to reviews by men like George Lewes and David Masson and William Michael Rossetti not only because these are often
shrewd assessments but also because they tell us a good deal about the interrelationships of mid-century writers and about the climate in which they wrote. For reasons, however, of space and convenience, I limit my discussion of periodicals as such to one chapter and—while glancing for contrast at Dickens's *Household Words* and George Harney's *Red Republican*—to only one publication: the Pre-Raphaelite *Germ*.

The Pre-Raphaelites founded their Brotherhood in 1848, the year of European revolutions, and their intent was a revolution in taste, just as Harney’s was a revolution in fact. In 1850 the Pre-Raphaelites published four numbers of *The Germ*, the title itself asserting a metaphor of growth as well as an allegiance to “nature.” Ruskin admired the Pre-Raphaelites, arguing that, with Turner excepted, they were the only artists who offered welcome alternatives to the bad drawing and false colors of the Royal Academy. Although people disagreed about the virtues of the Pre-Raphaelites, the intent of the group coincided with the lifelong intent of Wordsworth and Ruskin, and with the intent of others who categorically disapproved of Rossetti, Hunt, and Millais. The respect for nature affected even the planners of the Great Exhibition, who accepted the greenhouse design of Paxton and preserved the great elms of Hyde Park in their new glass palace.

Dickens’s magazine, enormously successful throughout the 1850s, addressed itself to a broad public, so much so that Dickens constantly worried, revising and tampering to insure its appeal. Dickens contributed articles on the slaughter yards, on London’s waterworks, on the post office, on policemen, and on the Rookeries, those warrens of the underworld where filth, crime, and disease offended the sensibilities of well-heeled Londoners. If *The Germ* was a kind of artists’ manifesto, aspiring to a review, *Household Words* was a magazine for ordinary men and women, cutting across barriers of religion and to some extent of class.

What we call literature, and what we teach, is what the middle class—and not the working class—produced. Our definition of literature and our canons of taste are class bound.—Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse*  

To think of *The Germ* and *Household Words* in relation to the bulk of mid-century periodicals is to see the impossibility of an exhaustive account of the literature available to an Englishman living in 1850, let alone
the impossibility of mentioning all the literature being written. In only its second year of operation (1849), the new W. H. Smith bookstall at Paddington Station offered one thousand titles, and those mainly novels, to railway travelers.\textsuperscript{31} Even the most avid reader of the time could have known but a part of the fiction, poetry, translations, books from America, novels from France, books of exploration and travel, classical editions, scientific or historical treatises, critical studies, reprints, or new editions. If books did not appear in floods as they did in the late nineteenth century, they came fast enough. Moreover, they came in a variety of forms for a variety of audiences.

In a study she properly describes as ground-breaking, Martha Vicinus calls attention to "the Industrial Muse," the literature of working-class people, which finds no place in middle-class studies of middle-class literature. While I agree with Professor Vicinus about the importance of working-class entertainments, from broadsides to music hall (which was reaching its height at mid-century), I don't agree that nineteenth-century books that have remained popular have been preserved by academies, which have, in effect, established a canon. Enthusiasm of a wide public has brought writers like Dickens into the academy—just as lack of enthusiasm has kept others, middle- and working-class, among the unremembered. And we may delude ourselves about some of the remembered. Where is the public that still reads Arnold, Browning, even Tennyson? How many now read Carlyle and Ruskin? In any meaningful sense, is there a canon? Despite the appreciation of scholars, and quite apart from questions of class, most Victorian writers are probably more written about than read.

It remains true that various sorts of literature for the poor flourished at mid-century. My reasons for a largely middle-class focus have something to do with preference, more to do with the limits of space and with the simple fact that the bulk of mid-century literature came from the Philistines. But in fact a number of working-class writers—the not-so-mute inglorious Miltons—make at least a scattered appearance in \textit{Victorian Noon}. In addition to George Harney and his communistic \textit{Red Republican}, I touch on Thomas Cooper, "the Cockney Poet," and his appeal for a working-class literature, on Thomas Prest, purveyor of cheap melodramas, who died poor after publishing over sixty works in the 1840s alone. My interest in Prest centers on \textit{The String of Pearls}, because this grotesque bestseller bears on melodramatic tendencies in other works of fiction. Similarly, I am interested in Ebeneezer Elliott ("The Corn-Law Rhymer," who died in 1850 and received much attention), less as a working-class poet than as a lecturer who asserted "The Principle of Self-
Communion in Poetry" and therefore allied himself with major poetic movements of the day.

Elliott might remind us that 1850 saw the introduction of the first Public Library Act—at the time a wholly symbolic gesture. Efforts were being made to introduce reading materials into working-class lives, in years when older attempts, that of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge among them, were failing. Louis James has described how reading habits and reading materials "for the working man" changed dramatically from 1830 to 1850. During the years when Smith's railway stalls and Mudie's Circulating Library became established middle-class institutions, the penny dreadful tended to give way to the kind of reprints offered (for the first time in the 1840s) by publishers like George Routledge and Charles Knight, who catered to readers hungry for books in a society now about half literate. But entire studies could be written about Charles Knight and his work in publishing for the poor; or about the inexpensive reprints made available by Routledge and other pioneers in the long tradition "from Aldine to Everyman"; or about the implications of Smith's bookstalls or Mudie's Library for Victorian reading tastes. These topics are simply beyond my scope.

Another significant omission is the drama, which was, in spite of popular mid-century theaters, far less vigorous than other genres. Except for Douglas Jerrold (whose *The Catspaw* appeared in 1850), few mid-century playwrights are remembered at all. And few were acknowledged then. A writer for *Bentley's Miscellany*, describing "the Stage as it is in 1850," concluded that the theater had neither writers nor managers of consequence and that, with the retirement of Macready (which came in 1851), "we shall be in utter darkness." This and any number of comparable discussions illustrate the low estimate of the drama, along with the time-worn prejudice against the theater as connected with actors and audiences of dubious morality. Scott had expressed such opinions earlier in the century. Thackeray plays on the sentiment in his treatment of theaters and of "the Fotheringay" in *Pendennis*.

George Lewes approached the "decline of the drama" from a different perspective. Agreeing about the deplorable state of modern drama, Lewes argued that playwrights were at fault. Instead of imitating seventeenth-century plays, modern dramatists must "create a new form." "The escape into the Old Drama was a brilliant fallacy: it was the Young Englandism of Art: disgusted with the Present, yet without faith in the Future." For Lewes, who published his own Jacobean *The Noble Heart* in 1850—
a melodramatic tragedy, set in Spain—the drama should use a modern idiom “to move the general heart of men.”

If literature is “the reflex of the age,” for Lewes “drama [is] a reflex of our life.” And for some mid-century writers this was in part the case. The Bentley's writer mentions the “fashionable prestige” of private theatricals, which interested, for example, Queen Victoria and Bulwer-Lytton. Charles Dickens, always attracted by the stage, spent a great deal of energy while editing Household Words and finishing David Copperfield, planning, directing, and acting in a variety of plays. But plays, for Dickens or for any of his contemporaries, are not the remembered works. This is not to dismiss drama. It is to say that, public or private, the drama is a field in itself, involving theater history, architecture, acting styles, accounts of managers, and so on.

The limited comments on working-class literature, publishing history, and the drama may help to clarify my purpose, which is anything but an exhaustive survey. As one reader's account of mid-nineteenth-century literature, Victorian Noon is a compromise between description of the available literature and what I see as its lasting qualities. Again, my intent is the sketching of relationships, the assessment of the great and remembered in terms of the climate in which they wrote.

One further point is appropriate here. Implicitly, and for good reason, most readers respond to books in the way E. M. Forster advocates in Aspects of the Novel. Forster imagines the world's great novelists divorced from history and sitting in the same timeless room, as though their own contemporaries. To the extent that a book is worth reading, it will establish its world, drawing us away from the local or temporal—and from what Keats called the “irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Not to read with abandon is to invite both a failure of imagination and a loss of enjoyment. But once we have read, our interests change. We may want to think of a poem or a novel in any number of different ways, ways that are related to but also distinct from the initial reading. For this study I prefer to imagine, not the timeless and ordered reading room, but the variety, richness, and immediacy of real relationships and crowds of books. Perhaps we can immerse ourselves in a collective literature as well as in individual works.