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The prevailing literary form, or type, of the present age, is undoubtedly the novel—the narrative picture of manners; just as the epic is the natural literary form of the heroic or traditional period.—Thomas Shaw, Outlines of English Literature (1849)

Contemporary reviewers of David Copperfield did not compare it with The Prelude. A given reviewer might have been interested in both works, thought of them in comparable ways, and written separate reviews of each, in which he used interchangeable terms. But lines were drawn. Basically, critics considered poetry and fiction to belong in two distinct compartments; they gave poetry one sort of review, fiction another. David Masson, who was soon to establish a reputation as a critic of fiction, and who published an influential essay on Wordsworth (in 1850), ignores Wordsworth in his review of Copperfield because Copperfield belongs with Pendennis:

Thackeray and Dickens, Dickens and Thackeray—the two names now almost necessarily go together. It is some years since Mr. Thackeray, whose reputation as an author had until then, we believe, been of somewhat limited extent, suddenly appeared in the field of literature already so successfully occupied by Mr. Dickens. . . . From the printing-house of the same publishers they have simultaneously during the last few years, sent forth their monthly installments of amusing fiction—Dickens his “Dombey” and his “Copperfield,” and Thackeray his “Vanity Fair” and his “Pendennis.” Hence the public has learned to think of them in indissoluble connection as friendly competitors for the prize of light literature.

As a friend of Thackeray, Masson would be inclined to place him first
in the pairing, but the pairing itself, the comparison between Dickens and Thackeray, reflects the interest of Masson’s contemporaries.

Masson went on to write an acute discussion of narrative techniques, characterization, and the respective novelistic worlds of Dickens and Thackeray, both of whom he very much admired. He thinks of them nevertheless in an oddly patronizing way. Here, after all, is “light” literature intended for amusement and determined in part by public demand. Less patronizing than Masson but even more ambivalent is an anonymous writer for the Prospective Review (in 1851), who begins his article on Copperfield and Pendennis by saying that, because of serial publication, the novels of Dickens and Thackeray are necessarily formless, and while one attribute of art is the overcoming of difficulty, there can be no way to overcome the restrictions faced by the two novelists: “The serial tale . . . is probably the lowest artistic form yet invented; that, namely, which affords the greatest excuse for unlimited departures from dignity, propriety, consistency, completeness, and proportion. . . . With whatever success men of genius may be able to turn this form to their highest purpose, they cannot make it a high form of art, nor can their works in that kind ever stand in the first class of the products of the imagination.”

These comments by a reviewer sensitive to the achievements of both Dickens and Thackeray illustrate a widespread assumption about the inferiority of the novel. If Dickens and Thackeray cannot make the novel a first-class imaginative work, then no one can. “Consistency, completeness, and proportion,” terms that would have suited Stephen Dedalus’s aesthetics, imply a type of literary work that is almost antithetical to the loose baggy fictional monsters of the nineteenth century (with those of Jane Austen and perhaps a few other authors excepted). “Dignity” and “propriety” suggest a social aspect of the criticism; at least they raise the issue (discussed in the previous chapter) as to the kinds of characters and the range of materials appropriate in literary art. The reviewer assumes a decorum that comes directly from eighteenth-century theories of art, theories scarcely friendly to the practitioners of fiction because drawn from essentially aristocratic notions as to the subjects, the kinds, and the readers of literature. But even if we construe “completeness and proportion” in a Coleridgean sense, still, an understanding of literature predicated on poetry lumps all fiction in a bothersome category of the unorganic, the unformed, and the unarguably second-rate.

In Coleridge’s time there was, no doubt, good reason for such a judgment. By and large, fiction was written for commercial or polemical reasons,
Men of Letters as Hacks and Heroes

rarely getting the care given to poetry and rarely thought of, even by the novelists themselves, as serious literature. By mid-century, certain things had changed. Sir Walter Scott had won a modicum of respect along with enormous popularity for the novel, and Jane Austen had convinced some readers that novels might indeed aspire to artistic unity. More recently, Disraeli, Mrs. Gaskell, and “Charlotte Elizabeth” had used the novel for political or moral ends, raising sympathies and pleading cases, but tempering propaganda by the introduction of articulate and intelligent characters. And then, by the late 1840s, the Brontë sisters had offered their radically passionate—and provincial—books to the reading public.

The public itself, increasingly large and influential, had already recognized in Dickens and Thackeray the two outstanding fiction writers of the age, agreeing tacitly with Dr. Johnson that the great writer subverts the genre that he uses, creating of it something valuable as well as new. Possibly because the public was so large and influential, it prompted critics like the Prospective reviewer to make their negative assessments. They could see the glut of books published, the insatiable need, or at least demand, for entertainment, and they knew that, as in earlier years, most novels were written by hacks for people who wanted simply to be amused.

When we look back to the fiction of the middle years of the nineteenth-century, we remember the Brontës, Mrs. Gaskell, Kingsley, Disraeli, and Borrow, along with Dickens and Thackeray. We forget the vast armada of novels appearing in penny magazines, or even in reputable publications. G. W. M. Reynolds, who published the Political Instructor (1849–50), was in the middle of his long career at mid-century, writing popular favorites like The Mysteries of the Court of London, the first volumes of which appeared in 1849. Mayne Reid began his amazing career in 1850 with The Rifle Rangers, a story set in Mexico, which is simply a catalogue of extraordinary adventures told in a careless first-person account. Among others, Lamartine admired the book, which won for Reid almost instant success. By the turn of the century, his works had sold over a million volumes.4 Another nineteenth-century favorite also appeared in 1850. Thomas Prest’s String of Pearls, the story of “the Demon Barber” who kills his clients and passes them on to a co-conspirator to be made into meat pies, became one of the most famous fictional melodramas, though the novel as novel is repetitious, sentimental, and almost interminable. Prest’s literary failings are understandable: he had published five dozen books in the previous ten years. Charles Lever’s picaresque Con. Creagan:
The Irish Gil Blas reminds us of another prolific writer of the time, and Lever's books, if largely forgotten today, are more than a step above Prest's Fatherless Fanny; or the Mysterious Orphan, "embellished with the most splendid engravings," and Ela the Outcast, or the Gypsy Girl of Rosemary Dell. The range of fiction at mid-century was enormous, in quality as in kind, and reviewers of Dickens or Thackeray seem to have kept Ela the Outcast and her innumerable cousins in mind whenever they addressed themselves to Copperfield and Pendennis.

An obvious question, however, is why the glut of bad poems in the middle years of the century affected reviewers in an altogether different way from the glut of fiction. Just as critics assumed the "low" stature of fiction and the moribund state of the drama, so they also acknowledged a great deal of second-rate verse. Looking back on his mid-century years, William Bell Scott writes in his autobiography that they were poor years for poetry. If he forgets Tennyson, Browning, Rossetti, Arnold, Meredith, and Clough, he recalls a common enough complaint about the deluge of versifiers. This was indeed a time of prolific versifying, a time when a surprising number of people were able to write with a certain fluency and able, too, to get their works published. Bailey's Faustian Festus won an incredible popularity after its publication (in 1839), surely because his competition was not too great. And if we except Browning, who was unpopular still; Tennyson, whose great fame began with In Memoriam, and Wordsworth, as representative of an earlier generation, the 1830s and 1840s might have seemed inauspicious to contemporary readers.

Nevertheless, critics could admire Festus or Sidney Dobell's The Roman (1850) while acknowledging its faults. When they discussed fiction, they worked at a critical disadvantage, accepting the long relegation of fiction to a second-class position. A bad poem was a bad poem, whereas a bad novel illustrated once again that novels were an inferior literary type. Neither history, epic, tragedy, comedy, lyric, nor satire, the novel might combine all, but this was identifiable as none. At mid-century, it remained a bastard form. Divisions of literature (in magazines, for example) continued to follow not only classical or neoclassical categories but also the values associated with those categories. The fact that poets were not producing epics or classical dramas or Horatian satires, or that such works, if written at all, were not read, may have prompted critics to new understandings of poetry, but it seemed to have little effect on their estimate of new directions in fiction.

To say that critics were reluctant to acknowledge a vigorous and modern genre on its own terms is not, however, to say that they saw no merit in it.
Masson’s review of Thackeray and Dickens testifies to his admiration just as it shows his reservations. Like many of his colleagues, Masson is simply ambivalent. When the *Prospective* reviewer draws parallels between the theater in Shakespeare’s time and serial publication in his own time, arguing the common nineteenth-century idea that the age demands the muse, his conclusion is that contemporary novelists cannot overcome the liabilities imposed by periodical publishing, although Shakespeare achieved his greatness precisely because he could overcome the liabilities of the theater. This is a shrewd enough assessment of the problems and pitfalls of serial publication, which most novelists of the time themselves admitted, and which caused Trollope, in the coming years, to insist on finishing a book before it began to appear. Thackeray’s illness during the writing of *Pendennis* and Dickens’s startled recognition, while he was writing *Copperfield*, that someone next to him was trying to buy a number he had yet to write indicate the hazards of piecemeal composition. But while the reviewer deplores such composition and regrets its effect on both writer and reader, he finds for Thackeray and Dickens surprisingly high praise. Having listed their faults, he goes on to say that they are, after all, the characteristic writers of their generation. In a “chaotic” and “unquiet” time, fiction represents the “indigenous epic and genius of our country.”

And once more his opinion is typical. Earlier I have quoted Tennyson and Clough in praise of fiction. Here again is a forgotten writer, Thomas Shaw: “The prevailing literary form, or type, of the present age is undoubtedly the novel—the narrative picture of manners; just as the epic is the natural literary form of the heroic or traditional period.” For these as for other mid-century critics, novels are at once cheap entertainment and indigenous epic, light literature and accurate recorder, the victims of impossible publishing circumstances and the voice for millions. They are the representative works, spawned by the age, potentially powerful as well as rich—and, withal, manifestly lacking in art.

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“I long to unburden my memory.”—Eliot Warburton, *Reginald Hastings* (1850)

Some of the ambivalence about the novel came, then, from its broadly public and at times shoddy role as entertainer, some from its inherited classification as low art. But just as the debunking of the novel continued
at mid-century, so too did the confusion as to what the novel is and what it can do. From the outset, the novel was associated with the new, with the formless, the sprawling, the chaotic, and this holds whether we think of the novel originating with Defoe, or with Rabelais, or whether we look back to classical sources in Petronius. What seems ironical about so many mid-century discussions of fiction is the hackneyed assumption that the genre itself is new. Wordsworth's blank-verse epic about his own life might cause George Lewes to shudder, but Lewes does not ascribe the faults of *The Prelude* to its novelty. Conceiving of literature as the "reflex" of the age, he can join the widespread praise for Tennyson and stand almost alone in his praise for Browning. He knows that Browning risks ugliness with his audacious verse, and he is wise enough to see a comparable risk in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. But though many of Lewes's contemporaries came to share his assumptions about *realism*, they wanted ugliness neither in poetry nor fiction. The more Dickens assessed the failings of his society in years to come, the more his readers would call for "entertainment," as if Dickens had somehow overstepped his privileges. While assuming a lack of precedent or authority for an art form that seemed to be new, critics were nevertheless distrustful about the new directions that the art form took.  

Along with confusions about novels and novelty, mid-century critics accepted a lingering misconception as to the subject matter of fiction. They assumed like John Stuart Mill the distinction between the inner world of poetry and the outer world of fiction, and though there were critics who realized the inappropriateness of the division, it remained for most a stumbling block. Even a sensitive reader like Aubrey De Vere, who could recognize the need for poetry to observe "outward things" and to infuse mere things with symbolic life (see the "Poetics" chapter), failed to see that fiction might learn from poetry. Novelists themselves were ahead of their critics. Charlotte Brontë knew that she was speaking of a world that took possession of her from the inside. No less than poets of the time (whose work she generally deplored), she realized that her source of strength was an unconscious force, her subject an interior life. Similarly, a few years later, George Meredith speaks of the essential subject of fiction as "internal history," because self-knowledge is the end of novelistic no less than of poetic composition.

Meredith points ahead to more sophisticated theories of fiction that we might associate with George Eliot or Henry James. Like Brontë, Meredith assumes a connection between fiction and poetry, proposing what is really an expressive theory of the novel—and an alternative to misunderstandings
of his day. We have this further paradox in mid-century writings about fiction, for the common distinction between the inner and "ideal" subject of poetry and the outer and "natural" subject of fiction contrasts with the workings of the literature itself and with two of its evident traditions.

In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt describes *Moll Flanders* in terms I have used for *The Prelude* and *David Copperfield*. He says, for example, that Defoe's "total subordination of the plot to the pattern of autobiographical memoir is as defiant as assertion of the primary of individual experience in the novel as Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* was in philosophy." Moreover, the primacy of individual experience is a conception understood by English empirical philosophers as a function of memory. To Locke, "the individual was in touch with his own continuing identity through memory of his own past thoughts and actions." Self-awareness has, in other words, been a recurrent subject in the English novel, inasmuch as the consciousness of time and of personal identity in time elicits both the "unburdening" and the exploration of memory.

If we borrow one or two of Watt's arguments about the early novel, we might find them even more useful applied to a later literature. For his understanding of fiction in its double capacity of realistic narrative and self-exploration seems at least as appropriate for the novel in the age of Brontë and Dickens as for the novel in the age of Defoe or Sterne. The very terms we rely on for description—realism, for instance—are mid-nineteenth-century terms, which reflect both new and renewed directions in fiction.

A "pattern of autobiographical memoir" aptly describes *Moll Flanders*, *Pamela*, or *Tristram Shandy*, but it is especially pertinent for *David Copperfield* or *Jane Eyre*, in which the narrator indentifies a pattern in the "phases" of his or her life, and interprets the shape of the book according to the disciplining of emotions. Here the recollections of a centripetal "I" (see chapter V) equate self-discipline with plot and bend heterogeneous experiences to the autobiographical perception. Behind the autobiographical energy lies a profound shift in apprehensions about mimesis and truth.

I wonder, to approach this in another way, how many eighteenth-century confessing narrators truly grow in awareness, truly match in their complexity the complexity of the narrative itself? Pamela's self-understanding is minimal throughout her story. Neither she nor Robinson Crusoe, nor Roderick Random, nor even Tristram Shandy, changes significantly in the course of time. Clarissa, who best illustrates Ian Watt's argument, is perhaps an exception in her century. In the middle of the nineteenth century, David
Copperfield becomes the rule. At least part of the reason for the flood of autobiographical fiction is, as I have suggested in the previous chapter, the example of the Romantic poets, who explore the particular in terms of the author's own memory, and hence present the fullest literary equivalent for the *cogito ergo sum*. Dickens has the experiments of Wordsworth and of Carlyle behind him, and he shares with Browning a sense of the intensity of his art which recalls an earlier generation of poets.

But while mid-century novelists are aware of Romantic poets, they do not, any more than their critics, point to them as models. (Kingsley, as I shall show in the following chapter, is an exception.) Thackeray, who was to lecture on the English humorists in 1851, pays constant homage to Fielding, turning like so many of his colleagues to eighteenth-century forerunners. David Copperfield's reading, like his author's, emphasizes Smollett, Fielding, Goldsmith, and Defoe among English writers, although Dickens thought Defoe lacking in "tenderness." When Bulwer-Lytton at mid-century attempts an autobiographical narrative, he borrows from his immediate contemporaries, but he also invokes Sterne, introducing outlandish names, chapters that go nowhere, hobbyhorse-like uncles and scholarly fathers, and calling attention in his preface to the "extremely slight" plot and the experimental nature of his novel as a whole. George Borrow time and again asserts his own eccentricity along with the novelty of *Lavengro* (his book began as autobiography and turned into a magnificent hodgepodge, an "anatomy," told in the first person), and like Wilkie Collins and other contemporaries, he still refers to the archetypal book about man alone: Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Maybe with Defoe's novel in mind, several mid-century novelists—and nonfictional writers like Newman—introduce shipwrecks, which disturb normal relationships, alter perceptions, and, as in *David Copperfield*, result in death for some characters while isolating others as though they were young orphans.

Whether or not writers turned specifically to Defoe or to Sterne, certain characteristics of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Tristram Shandy* seem to occur in mid-century fiction. Melville's *Moby Dick*, though American and still a year away from publication (and unfavorable English reviews), nicely combines Sterne's amorphous narrative with Defoe's sense of a new Adam, offering a first-person exploration of time and human isolation—as well as of seas and ships and large whales. There is nothing in English literature of the time like Melville's novels, but there is a related preoccupation with the materials of Defoe and Sterne and with the possibilities of an expanding art. As Melville and Dickens, Bulwer and the Brontës, Thackeray and Borrow, indicate, a central quality of that art is the radical
emphasis on self-discovery. Autobiographical fiction is at mid-century the characteristic fiction. While it drew from eighteenth-century predecessors, it depicts, not man alone, but individual men and women alone, sharing the “introverted vision,” the self-discovery through memory, with poets in the tradition of Wordsworth.

To a limited extent the emphasis on self-discovery is recognized by mid-century critics, though without significant application. The Prospective reviewer of Copperfield and Pendennis agrees with Patmore and De Vere, Carlyle and William Rossetti, about a prevailing “self-consciousness”:

Perhaps the chief reason why we call so many of the works of imagination produced in the present day “unhealthy,” is the self-consciousness of the beings which they depict. The books called moral, and those called immoral, are alike occupied with the actions, thoughts, and sensations of men and women, who are striving, not to act out their inmost selves, but to determine, throughout the details of action, what their inmost selves would really be about.

One assumption behind this statement is that shared by Matthew Arnold and Eneas Sweetland Dallas—the two men of the early fifties who come closest to proposing a coherent literary theory—as to the problems inherent in fundamentally expressive works and the need for “action,” in a traditional dramatic sense. Neither Arnold nor Dallas, however, really addresses himself to fiction, and what we see in most of their contemporary critics is a floundering based on the prejudices they shared. Arnold admired and later cited David Copperfield; he was “moved” by Mrs. Gaskell’s The Moorland Cottage (1850); and later he did write on Tolstoi; but by and large he seems to have read fiction as though it had no connection with genuine literature.

It is scarcely decorous . . . to speak at all, even where we speak impersonally. But—as thoughts are frozen and utterance benumbed, unless the speaker stand in some true relation with his audience—it may be pardonable to imagine that a friend, though not the closest friend, is listening to our talk; and then, a native reserve being thawed by this genial consciousness, we may prate of the circumstances that lie around us, and even of ourself, but still keep the inmost Me behind its veil. To this extent and within these limits, an author may be autobiographical, without violating either the reader’s rights or his own.—Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Custom House” (1850)
Like his countryman Melville, Hawthorne indicates that “the autobiographical impulse” (his own phrase) was as active in America as in England. The rambling “Custom House” introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* bears an apparently slight relation to the work that follows, since Hester Prynne’s story belongs to a distant historical time and is told by third-person narrator. But Hawthorne, essentially proffering a contract to his readers, places the narrative that follows in the context of his own historical understanding, while acknowledging a compulsion to confess.

Few English prefaces of the time are so explicit as Hawthorne’s. To read them is not to get such an immediate sense of self-expression as the dominant fictional interest, as though writers turned in concert to a new purpose. Pertinent as he is, Hawthorne may remind us that the autobiographical interest is neither limited to England nor of spontaneous flourishing. Much of what I am describing began in earlier years. *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, though reissued in 1850, and recognized by Lewes and others as of great importance, had appeared in 1847. James Hogg had published the tortured *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* twenty years before. And Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, a story of haunting self-scrutiny, belongs to the last decade of the eighteenth century. George Borrow’s echo of Goethe’s *Dichtung und Wahrheit* at the beginning of *Lavengro* or Kingsley’s invocation of *Sartor Resartus* in *Alton Locke* show novelists responding to influences that had been available for a long time. A change is marked at mid-century, but it is not monolithic, and it obviously does not occur exclusively in the year 1850.

Aspects of the change are clear in a number of mid-century prefaces, albeit acknowledged in different ways. More than anything else, novelists were interested in defending the *truth* of their narratives, along with the sincerity of their motives. The word *truth* has always been a thorn to writers and to literary theorists since the time of Plato’s *Ion*. It has been a particular thorn for writers of fiction. Fielding wants to establish the truth of his portrayals, and though his truth is a generic truth, it is as central as the ironic appeal in Lucian’s “True History” or in the innumerable assertions of personally realized truth in nineteenth-century literature. I have mentioned Macaulay’s theories about the inutility of traditional literary forms in times of a matured civilization and Macaulay’s inference that scientific prose is the appropriate literature for his age. This is, again, close to Carlyle’s position at mid-century, at least with regards the novel. It was said of Carlyle that he admonished novelists to write history and biography and poets, including his friend Tennyson, to write prose. In the essay “Diderot” (1833) Carlyle had speculated that novelists
must, in a new generation, gradually do one of two things: either retire into nurseries, and work for children, minors and semi-fatuous persons of both sexes; or else, what were far better, sweep their Novel-fabric into the dust-cart, and betake them with such faculty as they have to understand and record what is true,—of which, surely, there is, and will forever be, a whole Infinitude unknown to us, of importance to us! Poetry, it will be more and more come to be understood, is nothing but higher Knowledge; and the only genuine Romance (for grown persons) Reality.21

Kathleen Tillotson, in quoting this passage from Carlyle, says that “novelists knew better than to accept such advice and threats,” though they may have been “put on their mettle.” But if, “after Carlyle, the rift between the ‘prophetic’ and the merely entertaining novel widens,” novelists were perhaps responding to his criticism. Of course novelists were hardly likely to give up their source of livelihood because of his opinions, and on this as on so many topics, Carlyle both reflects and stimulates current ideas. His impatience with the novel might simply have been the traditional and widely shared distrust of imaginative literature, charged with Carlyle’s own rhetoric. Yet looked at another way, his admonition in the “Diderot” essay introduces a kind of hope for fiction, so long as writers of fiction contrive to supplant their fictions with truth. To remind ourselves that fiction is art and that art is artifice has really little to do with what mid-century novelists told themselves and their readers in justification of their work. Sharing an ambivalence or a confusion similar to Carlyle’s own, they may after all have followed his advice. Only the rare writer at mid-century—like Ruskin in his preface to The King of the Golden River—admits that his work is intended for “amusement”; and Ruskin’s disclaimer points out his sense of the novel as “light” literature, which he contrasts implicitly but absolutely with serious art and with his own other writings. One might say that Ruskin, like Marryat and Charlotte Yonge, is taking Carlyle literally—and writing for children. By 1850, when King of the Golden River appeared, Marryat had, toward the end of his life, published Children of the New Forest (1847), and Charlotte Yonge, who was planning her children’s magazine, Monthly Packet, had already written Kenneth, her first romance for children.23

No doubt Carlyle’s facetious recommendation to “work for children” had little to do with the rapidly increasing numbers of children’s magazines and stories, of which the mid-Victorians were masters. Still, a writer like Kingsley, who considered himself a disciple of Carlyle, could think of a work like Water Babies as prophetic, just as he could think of a novel like Yeast as true. Many writers of children’s books were unwilling to
categorize their work merely as entertainment. Nor, for that matter, were writers of cheap adult fiction necessarily happy to be entertainers; and if Carlyle created a rift between prophetic and entertaining books, the entertainers could at least claim to be prophets. Thus lesser novelists at times invoke truth to suggest the object lesson of the book. In *The Maniac Father*, Thomas Prest says that his book describes "the miseries which a dereliction from the path of virtue is sure to entail." The actual melodramatic and exploitive quality of the novel is clear in almost any sentence: "With feelings of exultation the profligate and unprincipled Baresford quitted that fair girl whom he was seeking to make the victim of his secret and disgusting passions."* The Maniac Father points again to the flood of cheap fiction published at the time and to the obvious fact that much of this fiction had as little to do with self-awareness as it had with "the path of virtue." The appeal to moral value is a gesture we might properly associate with statements about literature in early and mid-Victorian England—remembering, however, that "the path of virtue" was not as yet quite so equatable with prudishness as it later became and that it was not invoked so often as we might assume.

The widespread assertion of truth suggests that the authors of *The Maniac Father, The Rifle Rangers, and The Old Oak Chest* share an ambition for their fiction with the authors of *Copperfield* and *Pendennis*. Thackeray’s preface to *Pendennis* cleverly turns the narrator’s self-conscious showmanship into a defense of the authenticity of his fiction. He says that "if this kind of composition, of which the two years’ product is now laid before the public, fail in art, as it constantly does and must, it at least has the advantage of a certain truth and honesty, which a work more elaborate might lose." Thackeray is acknowledging the validity of contemporary criticism about fiction, accepting even artistic failure as a consequence of the novel’s serial publication and of its desired effect. Although *Pendennis* is not autobiographical in method (it is autobiographical in content), Thackeray sees his book as confessional. He identifies precisely what Kaye and other reviewers notice about the workings of his novels and their relationship with the public. The novel is, for Thackeray, “a sort of confidential talk between the writer and the reader, which must often be dull, must often flag. . . . The perpetual speaker must . . . lay bare his own weaknesses, vanities, peculiarities.” Self-consciousness then seems for Thackeray something to be aimed for, since the confessing and reminiscing mind of the narrator becomes the necessary mediator between the subject and the involved reader. Thackeray sees his method as “natural.” It cannot be direct
or formally precise, because truth itself is neither. Yet it “strives to tell the truth.”

Dickens points to some of the same ends in his brief preface to *David Copperfield*. Reluctantly finishing his “favorite child,” and sending off his characters, as David sends off Micawber, Peggotty, and Little Em’ly, Dickens assures his readers that “no one can ever believe this Narrative, in the reading, more than I have believed it in the writing.” The story comes out of himself and, presumably, works on the reader to the extent of the novelist’s own emotional involvement. I shall return to this question shortly. Here let me add that Thackeray’s and Dickens’s assertion of truth is the Carlylean truth of *sincerity*. And sincerity for most mid-Victorian novelists is thought to complement that other Carlylean truth, *reality*.

If we think of mid-century novelists aiming at the truth of reality on the one hand and the truth of sincerity on the other, we can appreciate tendencies in their fictions which are, while not necessarily contradictory, at least potentially so. Carlyle’s implied categories may be subsumed under the general word *truth*, but they reflect mimetic assumptions about fiction as reality and expressive assumptions about art as sincerity, to both of which the mid-nineteenth-century novelist often makes his appeal. We can understand the two assumptions best, perhaps, by looking at the contemporary interest in history and in painting. Shifts in the uses and understanding of history indicate the applications of words such as *manners*, while analogies with painting raise questions about *nature* and therefore about the subjects as well as the techniques of the new fiction.

Even granting the humor in a title like *The Personal History, Adventures, Experience, & Observation of David Copperfield the Younger, Of Blundestone Rookery (Which He never meant to be Published on any Account)*, or *The History of Pendennis, His Fortunes and Misfortunes, His Friends and His Greatest Enemy*, we can acknowledge an emphasis on detail, on inclusiveness, on some equivalent for “history,” the principal word in both Dickens’s and Thackeray’s titles. We might construe history ironically, as comic history, but the irony in these two titles does not quite obscure the justification of fictional truth as history that characterizes so many novels of the time. As Fielding’s “History” of Tom Jones suggests, the justification is not new to mid-century fiction; the emphasis may be.

The example of Sir Walter Scott is still in the minds of mid-century writers, who come at the tail end of the vogue for “costume novels,” but who are interested in several of Scott’s historical precedents. G. P. R.
James, a workhorse of a novelist—he had written thirty novels within the previous decade—prefaces *The Old Oak Chest* (of 1850) with an invitation to remember the model of Scott. James looks back sixty years, cites the example of *Waverley*, and pointedly remarks the parallels between 1789 and 1849 (when thoughts of revolution were still in his readers' minds), while discussing the changes that have occurred in this most eventful period of human history. Once the narrative begins, however, James's historicism seems at best a gentle nostalgia for the time of the narrator's own youth. Anthony Trollope, publishing his third work of fiction in 1850, assumes a comparable time perspective in *La Vendée*, a staunchly antirevolutionary study of upper-class life in western France during the revolutionary period. These books, like Harrison Ainsworth's *Lancashire Witches* (1848), are costume novels, offering detailed pictorial accounts of a past era, usually with a conservative or reactionary political intent. Michael Sadleir calls Trollope's work "a queer, unreadable lump of anti-revolutionary propaganda."

Whatever their attitude toward revolution and other social and political upheavals, mid-century novelists accepted historians' roles. Wilkie Collins's first work of fiction, *Antonina; or the Fall of Rome: A Romance of the Fifth Century* (1850) mixes Goths and Gibbon with patricians and defenseless heroines in a long account about the sacking of Rome. Collins flaunts his historical accuracy in his preface, citing historians, weighing historical evidence, and defending what he calls "proper notes," in support of characters who are "the practical exponents of the spirit of the age." Although the story is set centuries earlier, Collins boasts about "the appearance of verisimilitude" in a book that he labels romance. As the phrase *spirit of the age* suggests, he sees himself working as a historian, though with greater impact because of the powers of his imagination.

So, too, Eliot Warburton, who tells the story of *Reginald Hastings; or a Tale of the Troubles in 164--*. Warburton does not use the term *daguerréotype*, which Henry Reeve adopted to describe the historical method of Leopold von Ranke, but he assumes with Reeve the fundamental importance of "the discovery of Old Manuscripts." Manuscripts embody "the frank and manly, yet tender spirit" of lives otherwise lost to our understanding, and Warburton thinks that sympathetic identification with his hero can thus bridge the years. "For the passions. . .are unchangeable by time."

Warburton's insistence that "passions are unchangeable by time" offers an apology for historical fiction while indicating the new directions of
that fiction. *Reginald Hastings* is set in the 1640s, *La Vendée* in the 1790s, and historical studies of this sort not only continue to be written at mid-century, they have continued to be written ever since. Nevertheless, the great popularity of such works was waning, and the novels like *Copperfield* and *Pendennis* that critics and other readers thought characteristic of the times are histories of another order. Trollope records in his *Autobiography* an interview with a publisher who remembers *La Vendée*: "I hope [your new book] is not historical, Mr. Trollope? Whatever you do, don't be historical; your historical novel is not worth a damn."\(^{32}\) For Trollope, as for Collins after *Antonina*, the new emphasis is to be on a different kind of historicism, on what Bulwer (in the preface to *The Caxtons*) calls "common household affections."\(^{33}\)

Yet whether novelists address themselves to a remote or recent era, they are writing, in their own terms, a version of history, and Warburton's defense of historical fiction raises questions as appropriate for the past of *Copperfield* and *Pendennis* as for that of *Reginald Hastings*. Warburton knows that the authenticity of his story is dependent on both a believable picture of Hastings's times and on the psychology of the character himself, the storyteller, whose perspective may be different from the author's or from that of the dispassionate historian. Warburton recognizes that "one fault (or merit, as the case may be) of an Autobiography, is, that it necessarily leaves its chief moral deductions to the reader."\(^{34}\) Implicit here is an important awareness. For in spite of the political messages in novels like *La Vendée*, Warburton identifies a major development in the fiction of his time. His historicism—like Thackeray's and like Browning's, which I have touched on earlier—is essentially a method of sympathetic narrative, interested in cause and event, and committed to the notion of an unchanging "human nature," but desirous of illustrating human nature in the private thoughts of a particular individual. The effect is to leave moral deductions to the reader, who, for this reason too, becomes an active participant in mid-century fiction.

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Many of our best artists are now employing Photography with the greatest advantage in their studies, with a camera... the lover of Nature is enabled to select his subject, and by a delay of a few minutes only to carry off a transcript.—Robert Hunt in the *Art Journal* (1850)\(^{35}\)

The concern with historical truth coincided not merely with an interest
in "Old Manuscripts," or historical evidence but also with graphic accuracy and with a widespread interest in verisimilitude. The 1840s were active years for experiments in photography, with Fox Talbot and other Englishmen competing with French pioneers like Daguerre and Blanquart-Evrard. In The Thirty Years' Peace, Harriet Martineau speaks of photography as a way of preserving invaluable evidence for posterity, and photographers were soon, in the Crimea, to record their first war. Most photographers (witness Hill and Adamson in Scotland) seem, however, to have been particularly interested in portraits on the one hand and landscape on the other. Early photographic essays of the Alps indicate how the "sun paintings" were used to record the beauties of nature. Fox Talbot called his 1844 book on photography The Pencil of Nature. Ruskin admitted to an interest in the daguerreotype, though he later recanted; and the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites probably owe something to the new cameras. Holman Hunt's overwhelmingly detailed painting The Scapegoat shows Hunt, like a number of contemporary photographers, performing a kind of pilgrimage to the Near East, from which he brought home his photographic record.

Possibly the Pre-Raphaelite interest in bright color has as its origin the desire to outdo the various browns of the early photographers as much as the browns of the Royal Academy. At any rate, photographic accuracy, however labeled, is something that we can see appreciated in historical studies, in social reports (such as Mayhew's), in painting, and of course in photographs themselves. We can see the same appreciation in contemporary fiction, although, interestingly enough, most novelists equated the "realist" tendency with painting or with lithographic rather than with photographic art. Mayne Reid speaks typically of having "drawn [his book] from nature." The novelist Lady Chatterton, as if to define her own stylistic peculiarities, asserts that she has "followed nature, instead of proceeding on the supposed principles of art." The common appeal of the times to nature may take, in fiction, the direction indicated by Harriet Martineau toward a general accuracy, or it may take a more personal and subjective direction, with an altogether different emphasis. The problem is epistemological as well as aesthetic, and it represents a basic division in mid-nineteenth-century theories of the mind.

R. H. Horne's The Poor Artist; or Seven Eye Sights and One Object (1850) is a short, allegorical piece of fiction about a struggling artist trying to "deal with external nature." The painter learns various lessons from animals and insects in the woods, among them the need to preserve "the memory of any new object." His painting of a bright, gold coin for
various animals results in a work called *The Private Experience of an Artist*, and the painting, which illustrates the tyranny of the eye and the privacy of knowing, leads the artist back through sympathetic realization to civilization, success and marriage. Horne's work is untypically short and untypically like a fairy tale, but Horne's interest in the vision of artists and the importance of perceiving nature are both common preoccupations with his fellow novelists. The moral of Ruskin's fairy tale *The King of the Golden River* also rests on sympathy and on respect for the bounty and beauty of the natural world.

I have mentioned earlier Ruskin's difficulties when he confuses the Coleridgean "I am" of the imagination with a view of art that seems otherwise impossibly mimetic and the related thinking of Charles Radcliffe and Robert Mackay. Radcliffe's *Proteus* insists on the minute observation of nature in order to assert "the unity of nature," and Radcliffe urges what amounts to a symbolic reading of the external world. Similarly Mackay, in *The Progress of Intellect*, reminds his countrymen of their lack of a visionary quality, all too evident in their inability to think mythically. Any civilization, he says, "is imperfect and comparative." "A man is never perfectly sane, or perfectly matured. In every stage he shows more or less of that tendency to self-delusion most conspicuous in the earliest recollections of his race." What Mackay urges is a renewed sense of wonder, an appreciation of the unseen, in a jaded civilization. As for Horne and Ruskin and Radcliffe, he finds an ambiguous but necessary restorative in nature. Nature does not, for any of these men, supplant religion, but it is thought of in largely religious terms: it must be witnessed, interpreted, studied with a "disciplined" and sympathetic eye. In a society rapidly becoming mechanized while it mechanized the thinking of its people, nature seemed to offer both a means to self-awareness and possible escape.

When Kingsley's Alton Locke leaves London for Cambridge, his first journey outside of London, the English countryside comes to him as a revelation, a commentary on his own life and on the life of those condemned forever in Jacob's Island and other London slums. Even the epitome of slums, the places where criminals and outcasts and the unspeakably poor were packed together, had the ironic title rookeries, an indication of how far they were from the pure English countryside. Dickens in his *Household Words* tells about accompanying policemen to the rookeries, suggesting that most Englishmen would not indeed believe in their existence. And yet, "fidelity to nature" could be invoked when an author described such places. Truth of observation, verisimilitude, and
accuracy applied to squalid lives as well as to the beauties of the countryside, the two directions part of a single equation. The emphasis on country beauty was in part a pastoral gesture, a reaction against the ugliness of Manchester, Birmingham, or London itself. David Copperfield returns to London after living in the Alps and after hearing “great Nature” to find the city covered in its winter blanket of fog and smoke and cold. In *Pendennis*, Thackeray follows his master Fielding in equating certain virtues not only with the country as opposed to the city (although his London is not that of Dickens) but also with country people.

One of the best examples of implied pastoralism is Mrs. Gaskell’s *Lizzie Leigh* (published in *Household Words* in 1850), which contrasts the austere but honest life in the country with the evils of the city, to which Lizzie Leigh goes, happily to be saved from prostitution at the last moment. Mrs. Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) begins with some of the Barton family and other operatives on the edge of Manchester, close to the beauties of nature that are such a small part of their difficult lives. And *The Moorland Cottage*, published as a Christmas book in 1850, uses pastoral conventions as well as settings. The conventions, however, are Wordsworth’s. The narrator sets this book in the Lake District and begins with an invitation taken from *Michael*: “If you take the turn to the left...you will come to the wooden bridge over the brook; keep along the field-path, which mounts higher and higher, and...you will be in a breezy upland field...Look!”

Even Frances Trollope, prolific writer, like her son, of novels of manners, introduces a bit of pastoralism into her mid-century book. *Petticoat Government* (1850) describes the courtship of Judith Maitland, who, after minor difficulties with her maiden aunts (she is wealthy, like Thackeray’s Blanche, but also wholesome and orphaned, like Laura), and a relationship with an inappropriate baronet, finally marries the relatively impemcious Charles Worthington. Trollope’s new comedy ending, which is still a parody of the silver-fork ending, is apparent, yet Trollope includes in this novel two further nods to the times. Worthington is a painter, “a poor artist,” who bests the wealthy aristocrat, but more important, he takes his bride, not to a house in London, but to a retreat somewhere in the mountains near Cortina D’Ampezzo. The narrator tells of a friend who has been stranded on his journey out of Italy and who meets the young couple:

> Every step seemed to disclose some new charm, for charm there was even in the black gorges that sometimes opened almost beneath their feet; and in the strange variety of light and shade there was a charm too—and in the wide-spreading distance there, and in the close leafy covert here, none of it could be passed by
Men of Letters as Hacks and Heroes

without pausing. But at last this enchanting path seemed to end, for it came to a turn so sudden, as to show nothing beyond it but a vast mass of perpendicular rock.  

Predictably, the turn leads to "a smiling lawn" and to domestic happiness, where artist and wife and child will live happily ever after, except for their equally happy winters in Rome.

While the artist is relatively insignificant in Petticoat Government, he shows Frances Trollope aware of a new sort of protagonist, an articulate, educated, and sensitive man—a forerunner of George Eliot's Ladislaw, who is similarly the unfavored suitor in the eyes of the heroine's family. Trollope is also aware, despite her satire on the "English tourist," of natural beauty. This gentle comedy of manners concludes with a lesson on the virtues of isolation and the importance of natural scenery.

The picture of "manners," which novelists as well as critics assume as a primary responsibility of the literature, involves a further aspect of "truth to nature." In Lavengro, George Borrow mocks an English historical painter (intended possibly for Benjamin Haydon), who clothes a country mayor in Roman costume and poses him before an imaginary Roman arch. Borrow's satire on historical painting may also be a commentary on the pomp and trappings of historical fiction, which forgets the romance in English life along with the beauty of English scenery. For a painterly model of English scenery, Borrow suggests Crome, his contemporary. For the painterly model of characterization, he turns back to Hogarth, just as Smollett and Fielding had done before him. Yet he does not want caricature. He thinks of Hogarth as the honest English painter, he who will paint the red nose and the large paunch, but who—like the best novelists—will also record all that he sees without the falsities of convention.

In an apparently contradictory way, Wilkie Collins (son of a painter, whose biography he had recently written) defends his narrative about the fall of Rome in terms of its fidelity to nature, and, no less than Borrow, shows his awareness of painting techniques:

... it was thought that the different passages in the story might be most forcibly contrasted with one another, that each scene, while it preserved its separate interest to the mind of the reader, might most clearly appear to be combining to form one complete whole; that, in the painter's phrase, the "effects" might thus be best "massed," and the "lights and shadows" most harmoniously "balanced" and "discriminated."  

So far as anything of Hogarth is here, it is his theoretical "line of beauty," although the narrative as scenes, separate but united, might suggest
Hogarth's progress paintings. What is interesting in Collins's description is his assumption that a narrative must move from compelling scene to compelling scene, even if it is not a serial publication. Like Thackeray, Collins will not allow that this makes for failure in art; on the contrary, he introduces the parallels with painting to give authority to what he calls his narrative "system." He was in years to come to accept something akin to Borrow's thinking, in that the defense of Antonina seems to fit a novel like The Woman in White (1860) better than the epic narrative of the fall of Rome. In taking his materials from English scenes and middle-class people, Collins in his later novels illustrates Borrow's view that what interests most is that closest to home.

The obsession with nature and with accuracy of description coincides, then, with the mid-century trend toward a more recent historical past. Bulwer's appeal "to common household affections" characterizes the time and the setting of his novel as much as its values, and Bulwer, in this as in so much else, offers a good indication about the interests of his fellow novelists. David Copperfield, Pendennis, The Moorland Cottage, and in its way Lavengro, all insist on the centrality of "household affections" and all deal with a version of manners, asking how people live their lives—lives which, like Thackeray's characterization of his narrative—"must often be dull, must often flag."

But the emphasis on "manners" in mid-century fiction can be misleading. In the first place, as Kathleen Tillotson has pointed out, novelists of the late 1840s may be describing the habits and social relationships of people, but they are not describing the habits of their immediate contemporaries. They are far more interested in a somewhat earlier generation, the years of the author's youth, before the advent of railways or in the early years of the railways. (Collins's next book, a record of his 1850 walking tour in Cornwall, was called Rambles beyond Railways.) In Pendennis, the railway is just making its way into the countryside where Pen and Laura grow up, and this critical moment in the lives of individuals as in the development of communities remains as important in later years to George Eliot and to Thomas Hardy (in Tess of the d'Urbervilles, for example) as to Dickens and Thackeray. Middlemarch is a typical novel in this respect. By the 1860s, the portrayal of near-contemporary manners—manners divided from the reader by a generation—has become the norm. But the relation of Middlemarch to mid-century fiction qualifies still further the emphasis on manners.

Like mid-century novelists before her, George Eliot compares her work with that of the Flemish painters (not, significantly, with Hogarth), whose
honest and accurate depictions of a middle-class society, along with a sensitive appreciation of country landscape, provide a model for the novelist. Almost without an English rival, *Middlemarch* describes the march of middle-class men and women in the Midlands toward the middle years of the century. Yet the emphasis on the ordinary in George Eliot's novel usually sets off the extraordinary in her characters. George Eliot was of course aware of her husband George Lewes's speculations about fiction, including his theories of *realism*, and she was probably aware of the conflicting tendencies in his assessment of the functions of the novel.

In an 1850 review of Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (for which Lewes repeats much from his earlier review of *Jane Eyre*) he speaks of the Brontë novels as though they were types for George Eliot's fiction. Not only does he discuss the role of women writers, finding them the best observers of everyday life, he sees Charlotte Brontë as an important force in contemporary fiction. Charlotte Brontë is "graphic" and "powerful," perhaps unmatched in her "pictorial" sense. "The aspects of external nature [in *Jane Eyre*] were painted . . . to your soul as well as to your eye, by a pencil dipped into the soul's experience for its colours." Lewes asserts that "Art . . . deals with broad principles of human nature, not with idiosyncracies," but his sense of the power in *Jane Eyre* comes from a recognition of its intensely personal expression of "reality. From out of the depths of a sorrowing experience, here was a voice speaking to the experience of thousands."

If we remember Lewes's definition of poetry as the account of the human soul, we can see that, without quite saying so, he reads *Jane Eyre* as though it were an "epos of the soul," suggestive of "broad principles," but immersed in "individual experience." And though *Middlemarch* is a provincial novel of an altogether different sort, George Eliot expresses a comparable interest in individual experience and in the "singular" and idiosyncratic. Dorothea, while living in a calmer world than Charlotte Brontë's *Jane*, is important to her author as an illustration of modern heroism, specifically sainthood. In spite of its panoramic vision, *Middlemarch* concentrates on the aberrants, on the Dorotheas, the Lydges, the Bulstrodes, the Ladislaws. Looked at in this way, George Eliot's world, like Charlotte Brontë's, is a world of eccentrics. What Charlotte Brontë offers in *Jane Eyre* is a study of an ordinary girl (as Jane keeps reminding us) who is yet courageous and independent. She serves as a type, not only for George Eliot's characters in the decades to come, but also for a host of mid-century works, works which, like *David Copperfield*, read at times like essays on the nature of modern heroism.
When reissuing *Jane Eyre* (in 1850), along with the novels of her now dead sisters, Charlotte Brontë tried again (unsuccessfully) to find a publisher for *The Professor*. She wrote in her preface:

I said to myself that my hero should work his way through life as I had seen real living men work theirs—that he should never get a shilling he had not earned—that no sudden turns should lift him in a moment to wealth or high station . . . that he should not even marry a beautiful girl or a lady of rank. As Adam's son he should share Adam's doom, and drain throughout his life a mixed and moderate cup of enjoyment.  

This could serve at once as a reaffirmation of principles in eighteenth-century fiction and as an epigraph for the new fiction of the time. In *Frank Fairlegh* (1850), Francis Smedley boasts about the dubious stature of his "hero." Frank's "shortcomings doubtless evince a lamentable contrast to the perfection of the stereotyped novel hero; but as it has never been my good fortune to meet with that faultless monster, a perfectly consistent man, or woman, I prefer describing character as I find it." If Smedley had remembered *Jane Eyre*, or looked at *Copperfield* and *Pendennis*, he would have admitted to setting up a straw man. For the new heroes are, like Jane Eyre, obviously flawed characters, usually from less than the highest ranks of society (usually, indeed, like Pendennis, of lower-middle-class background), and they are held up by their authors as "real" alternatives to the heroes of romance or the heroes of silver fork novels. In the same year as *Frank Fairlegh*, Dickens's hero wonders if he will turn out to be the hero of his own book, and Thackeray is saying, categorically, that Pendennis is no hero at all. Thackeray is also telling his readers to look at their own lives and to find heroism there—if they can.

If the hero or heroine in mid-century fiction is "in eclipse"—to use Mario Praz's phrase—we might expect novels of social interaction rather than novels about the emotions and experiences of isolated individuals. To some extent this is true of *Pendennis*, in which the hero meets a great number of people from a range of social classes. Even *Copperfield* can be read as a great panorama, in which David is merely a recording personality. And yet the emphasis on manners, like the emphasis on broad historical trends, seems less important to most of the novels of the time than what Lewes calls the "reality" of one voice "speaking to the experience of thousands." Novelists who insist on the unheroic attributes of their characters are simultaneously preoccupied with the nature of the hero and the limited possibilities for heroic action. There may not be, as in *Middlemarch*, direct allusions to saints' lives or to epic possibilities,
but there are explicit questions about the role of modern heroes in works that are likely to be both large and ironic. If these are questions that have lurked behind fictional narratives from the time of Don Quixote, with its parody of romance, they are particularly appropriate for fiction about ordinary lower- or middle-class lives, the more so when the characters are articulate and intelligent. Despite their intelligence, such characters are not privileged, and they know they are not privileged; they are aware of life as “a mixed and moderate cup of enjoyment at its best.”

Preoccupation with heroes reflects, as I have suggested earlier, Carlyle’s hope for modern heroes, and if Carlyle himself found most fiction sordidly lacking in heroism, a type of his modern hero materializes in the novel. At mid-century, the sensitive and articulate characters who often tell their own lives (and are therefore implicitly writers, like Jane Eyre) are also sometimes men of letters. Like George Lewes’s own struggling poet in Ranthorpe (1847), they are “poor artists,” often lonely and orphaned or at least independent, and they must succeed, in spite of their sensitivities and sufferings, as literary hacks.

The career of Pendennis is the stumbling career of a man who, without great talent, energy, or discrimination, can work as a literary hack and finally establish a modest reputation in London’s vast publishing empire. Thackeray is scornful about the publishers, editors, and the other writers whom Pendennis encounters, and the early readers of the novel had good reason for taking Thackeray’s satire as indictment of what reviewers and other writers are proudly calling the literary profession. Thackeray’s own feelings, as I noted in the introduction, are ambivalent about the status of writers, and he comes in part to regret the extremes of his criticism. But the criticism is there and legitimately there. Oddly enough, young men growing up at mid-century will look back on Pendennis as a proud defense of journalists and of periodical literature in general. Edmund Yates, in Recollections and Experiences, recalls Thackeray’s novel as the turning point in his professional life: “I was encouraged to hope that I might succeed, perhaps more than anything else, by reading the career of Pendennis. . . . There is no prose story in our English language . . . which affects me as much as Pendennis.”

Thackeray’s is the most detailed of contemporary descriptions of the publishing world, but Kingsley’s Alton Locke (see chapter VIII), Borrow’s Lavengro, and Dickens’s David Copperfield are all narratives about future men-of-letters making their way and (with Pendennis excepted) telling their own stories. When R. H. Horne, in a novel that combines characters and dialogue out of Peacock with the polemics of Kingsley, prefices The Dreamer and the Worker (1851), he says that his book though comparable
with Kingsley’s “claims for the literary man, and public teacher [embodying in the character Archer], a due recognition of his order.” Implicit here, as perhaps in the other novels about novelists, is a defense of the literary man as a necessary “dreamer” or outsider—as the “self-conscious” recorder of his own life, and as the apparently ordinary voice who can “speak for thousands.”

In his constant communication with the reader, the writer is forced into frankness of expression, and to speak out his own mind and feelings as they urge him.—Thackeray, Preface to Pendennis

We come back, then, somewhat deviously, to the questions raised by mid-century reviewers or implicit in their judgments. “The serial tale,” dismissed by many reviewers as lacking consistency, completeness, and proportion, while praised—often within the same article—as the indigenous modern epic, was, as Thomas Shaw said, the “prevailing literary form of the age.” The prejudice against “light” literature was also a measure of both its self-consciousness and its popularity, a word used commonly for either approbation or censure. At a time when the reading public bought large numbers of sermons, scientific treatises, as well as histories, the word popular could have strange applications. The Dean in Kingsley’s Alton Locke may be partly a satiric figure, but when he tells young Alton that works like John Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding are popular, he represents a common desire to separate widely known or available works from the erudite or scientific. Whatever else novels accomplished, they cut across privilege and class, for they were read by men and women of all classes, including people like Arnold, who thought, with Kingsley’s Dean, in terms of a cultural elite.

In such a literary climate, it is not surprising that Carlyle and Macaulay might dismiss genuinely popular works of imagination, knowing that serious literature would be read and that fiction, to a great extent, catered to the uneducated, the unthinking, and the “semi-fatuous persons of both sexes.” Only a rare critic like George Lewes at mid-century discusses fiction as though it should be taken seriously. Lewes’s review of Shirley, which attempts to place Brontë’s novels in a great tradition of English fiction, addresses such questions as fictional “reality,” the novelist’s “artistic fusion,” “power,” and “discipline.” Again, Lewes’s comments on
Charlotte Brontë anticipate his later conversations with Marian Evans, who, as George Eliot, fully embodies his critical principles while she exploits mid-century fictional developments. But even Lewes, though he uses the same critical standards to judge Charlotte Brontë as he does to judge Wordsworth, does not make the association between new tendencies in poetry, which he, like most critics, ascribes to Wordsworth. The contemporary recognition of “self-consciousness” as a hallmark of the literature seems to be made about both fiction and poetry separately—without the inference that the exploration of personality, the experiments with versions of autobiography, and the reliance in memory are attributes equally of the novels and the poems of the age. But since self-consciousness is itself often deplored in poetry, it is in any case hardly likely to improve the status of fiction. As light literature, condemned to formlessness, novels still receive the skimpiest of estimates from most reviewers, even when the reviewers admit that novels have tremendous influence, that they can cut across class lines, and that, because of their inclusiveness, they should be looked at as equivalents for epic.

Against the prejudices of reviewers, and against the traditional prejudices against imaginative literature, writers of fiction tend to justify their works in the terms of their critics, although always with the awareness that the public would decide their fate. Hence Thackeray admits to his failing in art, but, like so many of his colleagues, claims that what he loses in art he gains in both sincerity and reality. The emphasis on the truth of narratives, as I have indicated, often takes the form of justification as history, and writers like G. P. R. James point to the still revered model of Walter Scott, while Wilkie Collins and Eliot Warburton claim accuracy of fact along with the authority of manuscripts or the analogy of painting. Ironically, the parallels drawn with history more or less coincide (as Collins and Trollope indicate) with the demise of the costume novel and the increased emphasis on a recent past.

With the shift to a recent past comes a defense of the novel as the picture of manners, a word invoked as often as history or nature. What I have tried to suggest, however, is that the “realistic” tendency (and Lewes uses the term realist in discussion of Jane Eyre), apparent in references to Hogarth and to Flemish painters, as well as to history and to the recording of manners, in fact implies what Mayne Reid calls “depicting any new phase in life and manners.” The new is the singular for Reid, as it is in different but analogous ways for George Borrow, Bulwer-Lytton, the Brontës, and even Dickens, who, according to David Masson and other reviewers, draws a picture of a social world that bore small resemblance to
an England they knew. The singular character becomes, moreover, not only the center of works as diverse as *Petticoat Government* and *Lavengro* and *Jane Eyre*, he (or she) becomes in many cases the narrator of his (or her) own story. Thus the self-consciousness complained about by the *Prospective Review* writer and other readers of Carlyle is really a necessary function of literary works with a new, if unacknowledged, intent. “Moral deductions,” in Warburton’s words, are left in mid-century novels “to the Reader,” who participates in the workings of the books. *Truth*, therefore, for many of these novelists, as for Wordsworth before them and for Browning their contemporary, is the truth of personal experience, of reminiscence, of a relative historicism, which meets with corresponding sympathy in the mind of the reader. For the reader is invited time and again (as in *Pendennis*) to compare his own memories, his own self-estimate, with those of the narrator.

Finally, the potentially contradictory assumption about accurate history and honest treatment of “Adam’s sons” on the one hand and the preoccupation with heroes on the other hand lead in many novels to a protagonist who is “ordinary,” who is not a hero, or who doesn’t know if he will become a hero in the course of the narrative. This self-conscious figure turns out, often enough—and really for the first time in English fiction—to be a man-of-letters.