Adorno, Theodor W., 15n16, 29, 44–46, 90
adultery: in Cécile, 163, 166; in Effi Briest, 22, 186, 190, 195, 195n, 197; in L’Adultera, 196–97
Africa, vanishing mystery of, 7
The Age of Capital (Hobsbawm), 12
ahistorical societies, 12
Alexandria Quartet (Durrell), 210–11
Allen, James Smith, 57
Altick, Richard, 18
Americans, in The Way We Live Now, 136–43
Amery, L. S., 155–56, 156n1
Anderson, Benedict, 4, 29–30, 32
Andreas-Salomé, Lou, 12
Anna Karenina (Tolstoy), 178n10
Annette et le criminel (Balzac), 52n
Anti-Dueling Association, 114
antiquarianism, 41, 45, 47. See also antiquities; collections; museums
The Antiquary (Scott), 41, 45, 160
antiquities, 32–34, 38–40, 160. See also antiquarianism; collections; museums
anti-Semitism, 131, 141
Asmundsson, Doris R., 103n
Atala (Chateaubriand), 162
Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900 (Moretti), 3, 5, 6, 71, 77, 90, 94, 111
Au Bonheur des Dames (Zola), 46n, 84
Auerbach, Erich, 15
Austen, Jane, 3, 5–6, 6n5, 32, 112
An Autobiography (Trollope), 93, 95n, 101, 111, 124, 135
Avery, George C., 175n2, 190
Bachman, Maria K., 96
Bakhtin, Mikhail, 111
Bal, Mieke, 28
Baldensperger, Fernand, 67, 69
Balzac (Fernandez), 37n10
Balzac, Honoré de, 27–46, 47–64, 65–84; Buffon and, 11; cartography and, 32, 69–70; collections in, 28–35; empiricism and, 18; interest in science of, 46; on public transportation, 72; scientific progress and, 19. See also La Fille aux yeux d’or; La Peau de chagrin; Le Père Goriot; other specific works
Bang, Herman, 45n15
Bann, Stephen, 33
Barchester Towers (Trollope), 148
Bardèche, Maurice, 49
Barry Lyndon (Thackeray), 92, 92n4
Barthes, Roland, 16
Beckett, Samuel, 16, 16n17
Beccqueumont, Daniel, 139n
Bedarf Deutschland der Colonien?
(Fabri), 156
Bell, David F., 39, 64n, 71–72, 72n3
Benjamin, Walter, 111
Bennett, Tony, 31, 33
Berlin: in Cécile, 155–74; in Effi Briest, 181, 186–89, 191–92, 195–97, 199; in L’Adultera, 162; metamorphosis of museums in, in 30, 33, 35; in Vor dem Sturm, 159, 160
Berlin Alexanderplatz (Döblin), 209
Berman, Nina, 157–58, 158n5, 177n
Berman, Russell, 15, 34n3, 156–57, 158n5, 177n, 179, 180n, 182, 187, 202
Bernd, Clifford Albrecht, 176n6
Berol, Laura M., 103n
Bersani, Leo, 39
Bhabha, Homi, 14n14, 20
Bildungsroman, 88, 90–91, 94–95, 106–7, 110
Bisztray, George, 44n
Bleak House (Dickens), 129
Bloomfield, Morton W., 105
Bock, Henning, 30
Boileau, 15
Bonard, Olivier, 66
Bonwit, Marianne, 178n10
borders: in Phineas Finn, 111–13, 128–29; in Phineas Redux, 117, 124; in The Way We Live Now, 151
Brantlinger, Patrick, 29
bricabracologie, 45
The Bride of Lammermoor (Scott), 121
Brieger, Christine, 172n16
British colonialism, 168, 168n13
British Family Antiquity: Containing the Baronetage of Ireland (Playfair), 12
British imperialism, 6, 168, 168n13
Brontë, Charlotte, 92, 97, 102
Brontë, Emily, 90
Brooks, Peter, 5n, 13, 37n9, 59
Brown, Bill, 17n20
Brown, Marshall, 15n16, 16, 17, 19
Brunschwig, Henri, 156n2
Buchanan, Alexandrina, 41
Buddenbrooks (Mann), 210
Buffon, Georges-Louis Leclerc de, 11
Bullock, A. L. C., 156n1
Burke, Edmund, 57
Byron, Lord, 80

Cabinet des antiques (Balzac), 45
Cailliet, Emile, 44n
Cain, James M., 207
Cairo Trilogy (Mahfouz), 211
Can You Forgive Her? (Trollope), 97, 114, 117, 135
Capital (Marx), 59
capitalism, 7n, 14
Carofiglio, Vito, 57
cartography: Balzac and, 32, 69–70; Fontaine and, 180; impact on fiction of, 3–9. See also mapping; unmapping
Castle Richmond (Trollope), 95
Cazauran, Nicole, 39
Cécile (Fontane), 67, 155–74; adultery in, 163; Berlin and the foreign in, 166–72; colonialism in, 163–66, 166–74; disenchantment in, 167–71; dueling in, 168, 170; enchantment in, 156, 167, 170, 173; familiarity in, 155–74; foreigner-in-Europe motif in, 173–74; Friedrich on, 195n; globalization in, 22, 163; imperialism in, 156–58, 162; importance of world in, 162; lostness in, 166; magic in, 165; mystery in, 164; romance in, 163–66, 167, 171; scientific progress and, 19; shrinking of world in, 22, 158, 169, 173; supernatural in, 165, 173, 175; telegraphy in, 19, 166, 169–70, 171n
cervantes, 14, 18
Chakrabarty, Dipesh, 13, 19, 30, 32, 182
Chambers, Helen Elizabeth, 164–65, 175n1, 186n14
Champfleury, 15n15
Chasles, Philarète, 36
Chateaubriand, François-René de, 162, 162n9
Chatterjee, Kaylan, 11n11
Chatterjee, Partha, 11, 11n10, 17
Cheyette, Bryan, 132n
Citron, Pierre, 36

city, global. See global city

Clifford, James, 28, 34n4

Cockshut, A. O. J., 151

Cohen, Derek, 131, 132n

collection-as-history, 33


Colley, Linda, 90

Collins, Philip, 146

Collins, Wilkie, 42, 46, 68, 96, 124, 148

colonial imagination, 187

colonialism: British, 168, 168n13; in Cécile, 163–66, 166–74; in Effi Briest, 53, 175–80; fiction and, 2–9, 10–14; in Fontane’s early fiction, 157–62; German, 53, 155–57, 157–63, 163–66, 166–74, 175–80; in La Fille aux yeux d’or, 71; in Le Père Goriot, 48–53; Moretti on, 71; in Phineas Finn, 89–94, 94–101; Said on, 89, 89n, 156n; in The Way We Live Now, 53

colonial knowledge, 9–13. See also historiography

Comédie humaine (Balzac), 11, 67, 71

crime, novelistic, 9, 28, 79–80, 212

conjuring, 142

Conrad, Joseph, 7, 45n14, 55, 207, 209

crime, novelistic, 9, 28, 79–80, 212

content, narrative, 6–7, 17–18, 17n19

Cook, James, 34n3, 157

Cooper, James Fenimore, 162, 167, 172n16

Cotsell, Michael, 145

The Country and the City (Williams), 134

The Country of the Pointed Firs (Jewett), 34n5

Cousin Phillis (Gaskell), 105n

Crane, Susan, 32

criminology, 48–53

Curtis, L. Perry, Jr., 89

criminal underworld, 48–53

cuvier, Georges, 33, 34n5, 41

Dällenbach, Lucien, 41

Daniel Deronda (Eliot), 95, 182n, 190

Dante, 81

Dargan, E. Preston, Jr., 37n10, 41

Das Amulett (Meyer), 46

Das Kolonialproblem Deutschlands (Johannsen and Kraft), 156n1

David Copperfield (Dickens), 92–93

Death in Venice (Mann), 210

Debreuille, Jean-Yves, 66

de Duras, Claire, 2

Defoe, Daniel, 1–2

de la Motte, Dean, 48, 57–58

demystification, 5, 13–14, 21

department stores, 46n, 84

Der blaurote Methusalem (May), 177

Der Raubgraf: Eine Geschichte aus dem Harzgau (Wolff), 166n

Der Stiehlön (Fontane), 161, 172

desacralization, 5, 14

“Des Cannibales” (Montaigne), 1–2

Description de l’Égypte (Fourier), 32

A Description of Millenium Hall (Scott), 6n


Dialectic of Enlightenment (Horkheimer and Adorno), 29

Diamond, Marie Josephine, 67

Dickens, Charles, 45, 53, 72, 92, 129, 145, 150, 151n15, 172n16, 178

Die Harzreise (Heine), 164

Die Judenbuche (von Droste-Hulshoff), 160

Die schwarze Spinne (Gotthelf), 159–60

Die Waehrerwandschaften (Goethe), 160

difference, narrative, 9–13

Diocese of Killaloe (Murphy), 105

Live Now, 143, 145, 150. See also
Entzauberung
disorder, zones of, 10
distance, narrative, 1–9, 209
Divine Comedy (Dante), 81
Döblin, Alfred, 209
Does Germany Need Colonies? (Fabri), 156
A Doll House (Ibsen), 178n10
Dombey and Son (Dickens), 129, 129n
domestic center, national, 3–5
domestic space, 23, 42, 167, 190, 192, 196, 199, 207
Don Quixote (Cervantes), 14, 18
Doody, Margaret Anne, 37n10
Dougherty, Elizabeth Jane, 88, 94, 96, 99, 111
douglas, roy, 90
“The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid” (Salih), 45n14
downing, eric, 14–15
doyle, arthur conan, 7
doyle, roddy, 107
dreiser, theodore, 8
drent, Janke, 83
du Camp, Maxime, 71
dueling: in Cécile, 168, 170; in Effi Briest, 163, 192–93; in Phineas Finn, 114–15, 122–23, 150; in The Way We Live Now, 139
The Duke’s Children (Trollope), 72n4, 133, 135, 151
Duranty, Louis Edmond, 15n15
Durrell, Lawrence, 210–11
Du Sommerard, Alexandre, 33–34

eagleton, Terry, 89–90
eça de queirós, José Maria, 46
Éducation sentimentale (Flaubert), 84
Edwards, Owen Dudley, 96, 103n
Edwards, P. D., 94, 148
Eilert, Heide, 197
Ein Schritt vom Wege (Wichert), 196–97
El-Enany, Rasheed, 211
Eliot, George, 8, 95, 182n, 190
Ellernklipp (Fontane), 162n10
Ellison, David, 54
empire: in Effi Briest, 159, 179; empiricism and, 27–46; in La Fille aux yeux d’or, 65; in La Peau de chagrin, 27–46; in Le Père Goriot, 48–53; objects of, 29–36; orientalist paradox and, 29–36; remapping realism and, 1–23; subjects of, 48–53. See also imperialism
empirical science, 11
empiricism: in Effi Briest, 179; empire and, 27–46; in La Fille aux yeux d’or, 179; in La Peau de chagrin, 27–46, 179; overview, 14, 17–19, 205–6, 209; in Phineas Redux, 124–30, 132
Index ~ 237

Redux, 104, 116–17, 124
Encyclopédie, 2
Engels, Friedrich, 71, 104, 104n
England’s relations with Scotland, 181n
Enlightenment, 14, 29, 41, 192n
Entzauberung, 19, 29, 35, 55, 73, 78, 192n. See also disenchantment
epistemology: detective, 124–26; empirical, 28, 40, 46, 49; empirical, scientific, 79; of enumerative empiricism, 44; of imaginative mysticism, 44; materialist, 34n5; narrative, 45, 124, 132, 159; optical, 58, 67; overview, 12, 17; realist, 205–6; transhistorical, 29; urban, 129
espionage, 7, 54
Essais (Montaigne), 1–2
ethnicity: in Effi Briest, 22, 175, 175n1, 180, 180n2, 202; in Phineas Finn, 89–94, 94–101
Eugénie Grandet (Balzac), 51
The Eustace Diamonds (Trollope), 105, 116, 117, 121, 124–28, 145
Evans, Christine Anne, 176n4, 190, 198

Fabri, Friedrich, 156
Famine, Irish, 90, 92, 103–5, 111
The Fantastic (Todorov), 37
“Father Giles of Ballymoy” (Trollope), 93
Faulkner, Karen, 112
Faulkner, William, 91
Faust (Goethe), 80
Fegan, Melissa, 103n, 104
Felber, Lynette, 95n
Felman, Shoshana, 67
Fernandez, Ramon, 37n10
feudalism, 8
Findlen, Paula, 35, 41
Fischer, Alexander, 57, 61
Fisk, Harvey, 137
Fisk, James, 137
Flaubert, Gustave, 45n14, 57, 84, 138n6, 150n13, 178n10, 180, 199
Fontane, Theodor, 155–74, 175–203; cartography and, 180; early fiction of, 157–62; on England’s relations with Scotland, 181n; foreigner-in-Europe motif, 67, 70; importance of space in, 161; scientific progress and, 19. See also Cécile; Effi Briest; other specific works
foreigner-in-Europe motif: in Cécile, 173–74; Fontane, Theodor and, 67, 70; in La Fille aux yeux d’or, 205; in La Peau de chagrin, 205; Lukács, Georg on, 174; overview, 1–5, 8, 10, 16, 19, 205–6; in Phineas Finn, 205; in Phineas Redux, 205; Trollope, Anthony and, 67, 70; in The Way We Live Now, 67, 132–36. See also otherness
foreignness in modernist fiction, 209–14
form, narrative, 2–3, 6, 13, 17–18, 17n19
Forster, E. M., 210
Forster, Johann Reinhold, 157
Fortunata y Jacinta (Galdós), 135, 172n16
fossils, 34n5
Foster, Georg, 34n3
Foster, Roy, 89
Foucault, Michel, 34n5, 89
Fourier, Jean-Baptiste-Joseph, 32
France, Anatole, 209
Freud, Sigmund, 12
Freytag, Gustav, 171–72, 171n
Friedrich, Gerhard, 163, 173, 195n
Friedrichsmeyer, Sara, 157, 177, 177n, 178n9
Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne (Høeg), 212–13
Furst, Lilian R., 16n18

Galdós, Benito Pérez, 135, 172n16
Gärtner, Martine, 67
Gaskell, Elizabeth, 92, 97, 105
geography, 205; imaginative, 3, 27, 103, 129, 175–203; novels and, 3–9; political, 113
Geppert, Hans Vilmar, 160
The German Colonial Claim (Amery), 155–56
German imperialism. See German colonialism

German Literature in the Age of Imperialism (Lukács), 174

Germany’s Claim to Colonies (Amery), 156n1

Germany’s Colonial Problem
(Johannsen and Kraft), 156n1

ghost, Chinese. See Chinese ghost

ghost stories, 197–98

Gide, André, 210

Gilmartin, Sophie, 134

Ginzburg, Carlo, 52–53, 63–64

Gissing, George, 145

Glauser, Alfred, 57

global city, 64, 129, 133, 143, 145–46, 145n, 212

globalization: in Cécile, 22, 163; in Phineas Finn, 99, 129; in Phineas Redux, 133; Ramponi on, 148n; in Stopfkuchen, 171n; in The Way We Live Now, 22, 135, 145–46, 173

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 8, 32–33, 35, 80, 80n, 160

Gordon, Charles George, 167

Graffigny, Madame de, 2

Grawe, Christian, 148, 152

Great Expectations (Dickens), 53, 107, 129, 150, 159, 178

Grieve, Heide, 160

Guha, Ranajit, 12, 13, 17

Guichardet, Jeannine, 64n, 71

Guildry, Glenn A., 175n1

Gulliver’s Travels (Swift), 9

Guthke, Karl S., 176n5

Haggard, H. Rider, 7, 207, 209

Halperin, John, 104

Hansen, Marcus L., 156n2

Hardy, Thomas, 190, 190n

harriedness, 135, 145–46, 149

Harte, Bret, 172n16

Harte, Liam, 90

Harvey, David, 72n3, 148

Hatch, Alfredred Smith, 137

Haussmann, Georges-Eugene, 71

Hayens, Kenneth, 162n9

Heart of Darkness (Conrad), 45n14

Heidenreich, Bernd, 156

Heine, Heinrich, 164, 194

Hemingway, Ernest, 207

Kennedy, Hugh L., 103n

Hertz, Bertha Keveson, 132n

Hinsley, Curtis, 34n5

Hirsch, Marianne, 175n1

historiography, 12–14, 17–20, 30, 39, 41, 157n4

history: realism and, 10, 12–13; as source for deed, 18; as source for plot, 18

Hobsbawm, Eric, 12, 19n, 151

Hoefnagel, Dick, 91

Høeg, Peter, 161, 212–13

Hohendahl, Peter Uwe, 173

Holub, Robert, 15, 16, 19

home, vs. away, 4

The Home and the World (Tagore), 11n10

Hooper-Greenhill, Eileen, 31–32, 35

Horkheimer, Max, 29

Hornback, Bert E., 148

Howells, William Dean, 17n19

Hudson, George, 137n

Hugo, Victor, 81

Hynes, John, 106

Ibsen, Henrik, 178n10

imagination: colonial, 187; enchantment and, 82; fate of, 7–8; imperial, 143, 176, 184, 202; science vs., 35–36, 41; senses vs., 36–45; spiritual, 177

imaginative geography, 3, 27, 103, 129, 175–203

imperial centers, 10, 64

imperial imagination, 143, 176, 184, 202

imperialism: British, 6, 168, 168n13; in Cécile, 156–58, 162; in Effi Briest, 175, 176n6, 177n, 179, 182; in La Fille aux yeux d’or, 84; in Le Peau de chagrin, 28–29, 43; in Le Père Goriot, 54; overview, 5–6, 11–12, 11n10, 206; in Phineas Finn, 89, 99, 101; in The Way We Live Now, 134

imperialism, German. See German colonialism

Index
Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism (Lenin), 7
Imperialist Imagination (Friedrichsmeyer, Lennox, and Zantop), 157–62
imperial knowledge, 9–13
imported foreigners. See foreigner-in-Europe motif
Irishness, 89–94, 94–101
Irish Reform Bill, 101, 104
Irrungen, Wirrungen (Fontane), 150n12, 172, 181n
Ivanhoe (Scott), 117

Jakobson, Roman, 16
James, Harold, 142
James, Henry, 45–46
Jameson, Fredric, 8–10, 13–14, 186, 191, 208, 209–10
Jamison, Robert L., 190
Jane Eyre (Brontë), 9, 159, 178, 178n10
Jewett, Sarah Orne, 34n5
Jewishness, 131, 141
The Jews’ Beech Tree (von Droste-Hülshoff), 160
Johannsen, G. Kurt, 156n1
Johnston, Conor, 103n
Josephs, Herbert, 192n
Jourda, Pierre, 67
Joyce, James, 15, 209

Kafka, Franz, 15
Kearney, Richard, 89
Kearns, Katherine, 15, 16n18, 17n19
The Kellys and the O’Kellys (Trollope), 95
Kemp, Martin, 41
Kincaid, James, 136
Kipling, Rudyard, 55, 178, 207
Knoepflmacher, U. C., 41n, 207n2
knowledge, imperial, 9–13
Kolonialliteratur, 158n6
Kong-Kheou, das Ehrenwort (May), 177
Kontje, Todd, 157, 158n5, 177n
Kraft, H. H., 156n1
Kroll, Frank-Lothar, 156
Kunstkammer, 30
Kureishi, Hanif, 212
Kwame, Ahyi, 156n2

La Comédie humaine (Balzac), 18
L’Adultera (Fontane), 22, 162–63, 195–97, 195n, 196–97
La Fille aux yeux d’or (Balzac), 65–84; alternating styles in, 66–67, 79; colonialism in, 71; crisis of knowledge and narrative in, 84; critics on, 66–67, 71, 78; disenchantment in, 65, 67, 70n, 71–77, 78–84; empire in, 65; empiricism in, 179; enchantment in, 64–66, 70–78, 82–83; foreigner-in-Europe motif in, 205; imperialism in, 84; La Peau de chagrin vs., 69, 82–83; Le Père Goriot vs., 49; lesbianism in, 83; London in, 69, 72; lostness in, 106; mystery in, 70–72, 76–77, 112; otherness in, 65–67, 69, 76, 78; overview, 65–66; Paris and disenchantment in, 78–84; Paris and enchantment in, 70–78; Paris in, 21, 65, 66–70; Phineas Finn vs., 107; realism and romance in, 65–84; reenchantment in, 65, 70, 75–76; romance in, 73, 75, 80, 82; sensory impact of nature in, 78; stylistic and thematic imbalance of, 66; supernatural in, 81; violence against the feminine in, 83; vision and disenchantment in, 78–84; The Way We Live Now vs., 147
La Muse du département (Balzac), 33
L’Antiquaire, 33
La Peau de chagrin (Balzac), 27–46; collections in, 28–35, 36–41, 44–46, 160; crisis of knowledge and narrative in, 84; disenchantment and realism in, 36–45; disenchantment in, 29, 35, 60–64; empire in, 27–46; empiricism vs. enchantment in, 27–46, 179; enchantment in, 28, 30, 35–37, 39, 45–46; foreigner-in-Europe motif in, 205; imperialism in, 28–29, 43;

Kontje, Todd, 157, 158n5, 177n
Kraft, H. H., 156n1
Le Père Goriot vs., 49–50; magic in, 42, 44, 44n, 49, 208; museums and, 28–35, 34n5, 40; mystery in, 42, 44; orientalist paradox in, 29–36; overview, 27–28; Paris in, 28–29, 33, 37, 42, 46, 48–49; Phineas Finn vs., 107; supernatural in, 43, 45; vision vs. knowledge in, 36–45; Vor dem Sturm vs., 160; The Way We Live Now vs., 151
La Recherche de l’Absolu (Balzac), 46
La Vendée (Trollope), 91n2
Leatherstocking Tales (Cooper), 167
Le Cabinet des antiques (Balzac), 46
Le Colonel Chabert (Balzac), 51
Le Cousin Pons (Balzac), 33, 46
L’Éducation sentimentale (Flaubert), 45n14, 57, 138n6, 150n13, 180
“L’effet de réel” (Barthes), 16
Lehan, Richard, 209
Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich, 7
Lennox, Sara, 157, 173, 177
Le Père Goriot (Balzac), 47–64; colonialism in, 48–53; criminal underworld in, 53–60; crisis of knowledge and narrative in, 84; as detective novel, 59–60; disenchantment in, 48, 53, 58–60, 60–64; empire in, 48–53; enchantment in, 53–54, 57–58; imperialism in, 54; marginal realism in, 47–64; mystery in, 59; overview, 47–48; Paris in, 21, 47–55, 59, 61, 63–64, 63n; Phineas Finn vs., 107; romance in, 54, 56–67
Le Réalisme (Duranty), 15n15
Leatherstocking Tales (Cooper), 46, 49, 60, 77
Les Illusions perdues (Balzac), 46, 49, 60, 77
Les Mystères de Paris (Sue), 55
Les Trébuchations d’un Chinois en Chine (Verne), 177–78
Lettres d’une Péruvienne (de Grafigny), 2
Lettres persanes (Montesquieu), 2
Levin, Harry, 40
Levine, George, 10, 15, 16, 45, 109, 182n, 207
Lévi-Strauss, Claude, 12n
L’Histoire des Treize (Balzac), 49, 65
L’Immoraliste (Gide), 210
Lindau, Paul, 172n16
L’Ingénu (Voltaire), 2
Linnæus, Carolus, 11
literary realism, 88
Lodge, David, 92n5
Lolita (Nabokov), 15
London: in La Fille aux yeux d’or, 69, 72; Makdisi on, 35n7; in Phineas Finn, 88, 93, 107, 110–17, 117–24; in Phineas Redux, 117, 121–24, 129; in The Way We Live Now, 131–36, 137–40, 143–51
London, Jack, 207
Lonergan, Patrick, 88, 92, 96–98, 106
Lonergan, Richard, 209
Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth, 162
The Lost World (Doyle), 7
Louis Lambert (Balzac), 36n, 46
Lounsbury, Coral, 126–27
Lukács, Georg: on Balzac and romanticism, 37n, 207; on birth of the novel, 5, 13; Bisztray on, 44n; on Fontane, 104, 104n; on foreigner-in-Europe motif, 174; on The Home and the World, 11n; on La Fille aux yeux d’or, 71; on Le Père Goriot, 59, 60; on modernism and realism, 15, 15n; on Waverley, 91

Mackdissi of Ballycloran (Trollope), 95, 103, 105, 107
Macherey, Pierre, 16
MacRaild, Donald M., 90
Madame Bovary (Flaubert), 178n10
magic: in Cécile, 165; in Effi Briest, 187–91, 192n; Jameson on, 8–10, 14; in La Peau de chagrin, 42, 44, 44n, 49, 208; otherness and, 8–10
Mahfouz, Naguib, 211
Makdisi, Saree, 35n7, 91, 160–61
The Making of the English Working Class (Thompson), 90
Manfred (Byron), 80
Mann, Thomas, 15, 210
*Mansfield Park* (Austen), 3, 5–6, 32
mapping: in *Phineas Finn* and *Phineas Redux*, 109–30; of the world, 3–9, 32, 180. See also remapping
*Martin Chuzzlewit* (Dickens), 129, 172n16
Marx, Karl, 59
Massol-Bedoin, Chantal, 77
Mathews-Kane, Bridget, 103n
Maturin, Charles, 132, 142
May, Karl, 158, 209
McClure, John, 7–10, 54, 66, 72n, 72n3, 129, 184, 185, 186–87, 198
McKeon, Michael, 13
McMaster, R. D., 139n
*The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (Lukács), 15
*Melmoth the Wanderer* (Maturin), 132, 142
metropolitan center, 4, 70–71, 101, 206
Meyer, Conrad Ferdinand, 46
Michel, Arlette, 39n, 49
*Middlemarch* (Eliot), 8
Millais, John Everett, 91n3
Millott, H. H., 39n
*Mimesis* (Auerbach), 15
*Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow* (Høeg), 212–13
Mitchell, W. J. T., 34n5
Mittenzwei, Ingrid, 186n15
Mitterand, Henri, 6, 20, 37–39, 44
modernism, 15
modernist fiction, foreignness in, 205–14
*Modeste Mignon* (Balzac), 51–52, 54–55
*Molloy* (Beckett), 16n17
Mommsen, Theodor, 155
monological realism, 16
Montaigne, Michel de, 1–2
Montesquieu, 2
*The Moonstone* (Collins), 42, 46, 68, 124–25, 127, 129
Moretti, Franco: on borders, 111–13; on colonialism, 71; on conservative narratives in English novels, 94–95; on Dickens and London, 147, 150; on *Effi Briest*, 195; on evil and mystery in English novels, 116; on France in 19th-century English novels, 90–91; on literary-historical development, 207n; on novelistic space, 3–8, 8n, 17, 20; on *Phineas Finn*, 106; Said on, 32; on space and style in *La Fille aux yeux d’or*, 77–78; on Victorian novels, 136
Morse, Samuel, 145n
Mortimer, Armine Kotine, 15n15
Mozet, Nicole, 64n, 71
Müller-Seidel, Walter, 175n2, 177n
Murphy, Andrew, 89, 94
Murphy, Ignatius, 105
museums, 28–35, 34n5, 40, 46, 46n. See also collections
“The Mutiny of the Mavericks” (Kipling), 55
“My Son the Fanatic” (Kureishi), 212
mystery: in *Cécile*, 164; disappearance of, 3, 7, 19, 35; in *Effi Briest*, 177, 187–90; imported foreigners and, 5; Jameson on, 10, 14, 208–9; in *La Fille aux yeux d’or*, 70–72, 76–77, 112; in *La Peau de chagrin*, 42, 44; in *Le Père Goriot*, 59; Moretti on, 116; in *Phineas Finn*, 114, 117, 128–29; in *Phineas Redux*, 115, 121–23; Trollope and, 109; in *The Way We Live Now*, 134, 139
*The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (Dickens), 151n15
Nabokov, Vladimir, 15
Nandy, Ashis, 11–12, 11n11, 17, 30, 129, 211
Napoleon, 32, 42, 48, 57–58, 90–91, 94, 140, 159, 162
Nardin, Jane, 103n
Nathan, Sabine, 136, 139n
national domestic center, 3–5
nationalism, master narrative of, 5. See also mapping
natural history, 31, 34–35, 34n5, 35n7, 41, 46
*The Naturalisation of the Supernatural* (Podmore), 11n10
naturalism, 44, 45n15, 206–7
Neal, Frank, 105
Nef, Ernst, 201
Noakes, Richard, 11n10
North America (Trollope), 137n
North and South (Gaskell), 92
nostalgia, 151
novelistic conflict, 9, 28, 79–80, 212
novelistic style, 4, 6, 17
Noyes, John K., 158, 158n5, 177n
Nykl, Alois Richard, 43
objects of empire, 29–36. See also antiquities; collections; museums
occult, 11n10
Odden, Karen, 138n7
O’Hara, Jim, 90
The Old Curiosity Shop (Dickens), 45
Oliver Twist (Dickens), 72, 147
opium, 151n15
order, zones of, 10
The Order of Things (Foucault), 34n5
Orientalism, 14, 27–30, 179
Orientalism (Said), 4, 11, 14, 27, 182, 207
orientalist paradox, 14, 27–29, 29–36, 44, 46, 184, 207
Orientzyklus (May), 158
Orlando, Francesco, 39n
Osinski, Jutta, 161n
otherness: Berman and Noyes on, 158n5; in Effi Briest, 181, 184; Holub and Berman on, 15; in La Fille aux yeux d’or, 65–67, 69, 76, 78; magic and, 8–10; in Phineas Finn, 89, 98, 112; in Phineas Redux, 117. See also foreigner-in-Europe motif
Ourika (de Duras), 2
Our Mutual Friend (Dickens), 145, 147

Palace of Desire (Mahfouz), 211
paranoia, 14
Paris: in La Fille aux yeux d’or, 21, 65, 66–70, 70–78, 78–84; in La Peau de chagrin, 28–29, 33, 37, 42, 46, 48–49, 52–55; in Le Père Goriot, 21, 47–55, 59, 61, 63–64, 63n
The Pathfinder (Cooper), 167
Payne, David, 14n13
Pecora, Vincent, 46
Perera, Suvendrini, 151n15
periodization, 205–6
in, 115, 121–23; otherness in, 117; overview, 109–10; reenchantment in, 110, 117–24, 130; romance in, 113–23; transformation of English currency in, 133; *The Way We Live Now* and, 133

physical space, 4

Pick, Franz, 32

Pimentel-Anduiza, Luz-Aurora, 64

Playfair, William, 12

plot, history as source for, 18

Podmore, Frank, 11n10

Pold, Søren, 64

Polhemus, Robert M., 111, 125

political geography, 113

Pomian, Krzysztof, 30–31

Poncin-Bar, Geneviève, 55

Prendergast, Christopher, 71, 81–82

*The Prime Minister* (Trollope), 102, 113–14

progress, and fate of 13–20

Proust, Marcel, 36, 41

Provincializing Europe (Chakrabarty), 30, 182

psychoanalysis, 12

public transportation, 72

Pugh, Anthony, 62

*Quitt* (Fontane), 162n9, 172n16

Raabe, Wilhelm, 171–72

race. See ethnicity

Radcliffe, Stanley, 157n3, 169, 182, 202

radical realism, 27

railways, 144–45; in *Cécile*, 163–65, 168, 170; in *La Fille aux yeux d’or*, 72

Rainer, Ulrike, 176n5, 190

Ramponi, Patrick, 148

rationalization, 10

realism: disenchantment and, in *La Peau de chagrin*, 36–45; limits of, 205–14; literary, 88; marginal, in *Le Père Goriot*, 47–64; monological, 16; overview, 10, 14–15; radical, 27; remapping, 1–23; romance and, reconsidered, 205–9; romance in *La Fille aux yeux d’or* and, 65–84; secularism and, 13

realisms of content, 17

realisms of form, 17

realistic détailisme, 18

reenchantment: in *Effi Briest*, 187; in *La Fille aux yeux d’or*, 65, 70, 75–76, 78; overview, 14, 14n, 206; in *Phineas Finn*, 110, 117–24, 130; in *Phineas Redux*, 110, 117–24, 130; in *The Way We Live Now*, 143

*Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Burke), 57

Reichelt, Gregor, 175n1

Reid, James H., 54, 64n

religion, master narrative of, 5

*A Relíquia* (Eça de Queirós), 46

remapping: in *L’Adultera*, 196; of narrative space, 3, 9; in *Phineas Finn*, 103, 113; of realism, 1–23. See also mapping

René (Chateaubriand), 162, 162n9

Renoux, Charles Caius, 33

Reuter, Hans-Heinrich, 202

Revolutionaries, 57

Robb, Graham, 72

Robbins, Bruce, 53, 146, 150, 183–84

*Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe), 1–2, 5

Roch, Herbert, 168n13

Rollins, Yvonne, 178n10


Ronai, P., 52n

*A Room with a View* (Forster), 210

Rushdie, Salman, 212

Ryan, Judith, 158–59, 176n4, 177n, 178

Sadleir, John, 137
Sadleir, Michael, 106, 134

Said, Edward W.: *Effi Briest* and, 175–76; on empire and space, 65; on German colonialism, 156n; on historiography, 14, 17; imaginative geography and, 179–80, 180n; imperialist conceptions of space and, 177n; on imperialist organization of space, 22; Irish colonialism and, 89, 89n; on narrative space, 3–7, 9; on Orientalist mindset, 158; orientalist paradox and, 14, 27–29, 29–30, 32, 35, 37, 44, 46, 184, 207; on science and imperialism, 11; on secular criticism, 182–84

Sainte-Beuve, Charles Augustin, 36

Saisselin, Remy G., 46n

Sallt, Tayeb, 45n14

Sassen, Saskia, 64, 145–46

Savage, Catherine, 57

*Schach von Wuthenow* (Fontane), 162

Schuster, Ingrid, 175n2, 185, 190

Schuster, Peter-Klaus, 200

scientific progress, 13–20

Scotland, England’s relations with, 181n


secular criticism, 182–84

secularism, 13, 30, 184, 206

secularization, 5n, 7–8, 15, 29, 74, 81, 176, 182–88

Seller, Christine, 178n10

semi-historical cultures, 12

senses vs. imagination, *La Peau de chagrin*, 36–45

shamanism, 30

Shears, Lambert, 160

*Shirley* (Brontë), 92

Shklovsky, Viktor, 6


Sidney, Philip, 15

Sittig, Claudius, 158, 158n6, 176n6, 178n9

*Smilla’s Sense of Snow* (Høeg), 212–13

Smith, Pamela H., 41

Smith, Zadie, 212

social spaces, 4

Soelberg, Nils, 67

*Sozialroman*, 201

space: domestic, 23, 42, 167, 190, 192, 196, 199, 207; novelistic, 2–4, 6–7, 9, 13, 17, 21–23, 65; physical, 4

spaces, hierarchy of, 4

spiritual domain, 11

spiritual imagination, 177

spiritualism, 198

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 178–79

*Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (Balzac), 33

Sprenger, Scott, 36n

*A Star Called Henry* (Doyle), 107

Stephan, Inge, 173

*A Step Off the Path* (Wichert), 190–97

Stern, J. P., 175, 178n10, 182, 202

*Stopfkuchen* (Raabe), 171–72

*Before the Storm* (Fontane), 45

Stoumbjerg, Per, 213

*Structural Anthropology* (Lévi-Strauss), 12n

Studies in European Realism (Lukács), 207

style, novelistic, 4, 6, 17

Subiotto, Frances M., 175n2, 198

Suck, Titus S., 57

Sue, Eugène, 55

Super, R. H., 137

supernatural: in *Cécile*, 165, 173, 175; in *Effi Briest*, 22, 42, 175–203; in *La Fille aux yeux d’or*, 81; in *La Peau de chagrin*, 43, 45

Sutherland, John A., 139, 148

Swales, Erica, 175n2

Swift, Jonathan, 9

Tagore, Rabindranath, 11n10

Taine, Hippolyte Adolphe, 14, 37n10, 45n15

*A Tale of Two Cities* (Dickens), 129

Tallis, Raymond, 16n17, 206

Tanner, Tony, 146, 148
Index ~ 245

Taylor, A. J. P., 156n1, 156n2
Tebben, Karin, 195n
telegraphy: in Cécile, 19, 166, 169–70, 171n; in The Way We Live Now, 145–46, 145n
tension, epistemological, 10
tension, narrative, 6
Tess of the D’Urbervilles (Hardy), 190, 190n
Thackeray, William Makepeace, 68, 92–94, 97
Thérèse Raquin (Zola), 45n15
Thompson, E. P., 90
thresholds, 111
Tod in Venedig (Mann), 210
Todorov, Tzvetan, 37–38, 43–44
Toelken, E. H., 33
Tolstoy, Leo, 178n10
totems, 34n5
Tracy, Robert, 103n, 104, 132, 148
Trollope, Anthony, 87–108, 109–30, 131–51; challenges to form and, 18; foreigner-in-Europe motif in, 67, 70; scientific progress and, 19. See also Phineas Finn; Phineas Redux; The Way We Live Now; other specific works
Trumpener, Katie, 160

Ulysses (Joyce), 209
the uncharted, 11
Un cœur simple (Flaubert), 199
Under the Pear Tree (Fontane), 159
underworld, criminal, 53–60
unhistorical cultures, 12
United Irishmen’s Rebellion of 1798, 89–91
unmapping: in La Fille aux yeux d’or, 70–78, 78–79; of narrative space, 3, 9, 66, 77; in Phineas Finn and Phineas Redux, 109–30
Unterm Birnbaum (Fontane), 159
Utz, Peter, 176n6, 177n, 178

Van, Annette, 137n, 141

Vanity Fair (Thackeray), 68, 92
Vanoncini, André, 49
Verne, Jules, 177–78
Vigny, Alfred de, 71
Villette (Brontë), 92, 102
violence against the feminine, 83
vision: in La Fille aux yeux d’or, 78–84; in La Peau de chagrin, 36–45
Voltaire, 2
Von Hofe, Gerhard, 161n
von Droste-Hülshoff, Annette, 160
von Hofmannsthal, Hugo, 49
von Humboldt, Wilhelm, 8, 30, 35, 44
Vor dem Sturm (Fontane), 45, 156–57, 159–63, 180
The Voyage Out (Woolf), 7, 209

Wall, Stephen, 133
Wallraf, Ferdinand Franz, 32
Warning, Rainer, 64n, 70n, 178n10
Watson, Janell, 39n
Watt, Ian, 13, 18
Waverley (Scott), 118–19, 160–61
The Way of the World (Moretti), 90, 94
The Way We Live Now (Trollope), 131–51; Americans in, 136–43; challenges to form of, 18; colonialism in, 53; commerce in, 132–36; crime in, 132–36, 137–38; critics on, 131–32, 134, 137; disenchantment in, 143, 145, 150; dueling in, 139; foreigner-in-Europe motif in, 67, 132–36; globalization in, 22, 135, 145–46, 173; harriedness in, 135, 145–46, 149; imperialism in, 134; La Fille aux yeux d’or vs., 147; La Peau de chagrin vs., 151; Le Père Goriot vs., 52, 139; London in, 131–36, 137–40, 143–51; mystery in, 134, 139; nonlinearity of structure, 148; overview, 131–32; Phineas Redux and, 133; romance in, 137–38, 140, 142; scientific progress and, 19; shrinking of world in, 18, 22, 135, 138n7, 146, 150; telegraphy in, 145–46, 145n
Weber, Max, 19, 35, 39n
Weber, Samuel, 39
Wellek, René, 207
White, Richard, 137
*White Teeth* (Smith), 212
Wichert, Ernst, 196
Widman, Joseph Viktor, 176n6
Williams, Raymond, 134
witchcraft, 142
Wittig, E. W., 96–97, 103n
Wolff, Julius, 166n
Woloch, Alex, 62n

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Page Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wellek, René</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, Richard</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>White Teeth</em> (Smith)</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wichert, Ernst</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widman, Joseph Viktor</td>
<td>176n6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams, Raymond</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>witchcraft</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wittig, E. W.</td>
<td>96–97, 103n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolff, Julius</td>
<td>166n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woloch, Alex</td>
<td>62n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woolf, Virginia</td>
<td>7, 15, 209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wordsworth, William</td>
<td>35n7, 207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Wuthering Heights</em> (Brontë)</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youngman, Paul</td>
<td>164–65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zantop, Susanne</td>
<td>157–58, 158n5, 173, 177, 177n, 194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zola, Émile</td>
<td>45n15, 46n, 84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Realism’s Empire is a highly cohesive study. While many critics have written on the tension between romanticism and realism in nineteenth-century fiction, Baker’s approach grounds this tension historically and provides a systematic framework that accommodates many of its parameters.”
—Gail Finney, professor of comparative literature and German, the University of California, Davis

“In engaging with questions important to critics and theorists of postcolonialism, Geoffrey Baker offers a valuable argument for scholars reexamining the Western Canon in light of contemporary concerns about globalization. Baker’s scholarship is extensive, comprehensive, and impressive. He admirably synthesizes key theoretical and historical concepts to forge an original way of thinking about the interactions of foreign and native in several canonical fictions of the Western tradition.”
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If realist novels are the literary avatars of secular science and rational progress, then why are so many canonical realist works organized around a fear of that progress? Realism is openly indebted, at the level of form and content, to imperialist and scientific advances. However, critical emphasis on this has obscured the extent to which major novelists of the period openly worried about the fate of mystery and the dissolution of tradition that accompanied science’s shrinking of the world. Realism’s modernization is inseparable from nostalgia.

In Realism’s Empire: Empiricism and Enchantment in the Nineteenth-Century Novel, Geoffrey Baker demonstrates that realist fiction’s stance toward both progress and the foreign or supernatural is much more complex than established scholarship has assumed. The work of Honoré de Balzac, Anthony Trollope, and Theodor Fontane explicitly laments the loss of mystery in the world due to increased knowledge and exploration. To counter this loss and to generate the complications required for narrative, these three authors import peripheral, usually colonial figures into the metropolitan centers they otherwise depict as disenchanted and rationalized: Paris, London, and Berlin. Baker’s book examines the consequences of this duel for realist narrative and readers’ understandings of its historical moment. In so doing, Baker shows Balzac, Trollope, and Fontane grappling with new realities that frustrate their inherited means of representation and oversee a significant shift in the development of the novel.

Geoffrey Baker is assistant professor of comparative and British literature at California State University, Chico.