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Victorian Hard Wiring

Feeling for the Victorian “bump,” we would often begin the part-time MA by reading early on, for example, Mrs Gaskell’s *Ruth* (published in 1853). It is ostensibly the usual old Victorian story. Pretty young girl from the lower classes, seduced by young “gentleman,” is left abandoned and pregnant. Just when she is on the point of drowning herself, however, a brother and sister take her in, and help her through the birth and the subsequent years of rearing her baby boy, passing her off as a young widow for the sake of social appearances. But of course, one day the so-called truth comes out, and suddenly Ruth finds that, before he hears it from the unkind lips of others, she has to tell her son Leonard, still no more than a boy, the one thing from which she had always shrunk as a parent – the true story of her sexual past. Here is the confession of mother to son that one person in the MA group, herself a single parent, naturally chose:

Up they went into her own room. She drew him in, and bolted the door; and then, sitting down, she placed him (she had never let go of him) before her, holding him with her hands on each of his shoulders, and gazing into his face with a woeful look of the agony that could not find vent in words. At last she tried to speak; she tried with strong bodily effort, almost amounting to convulsion. But the words would not come; it was not till she saw the absolute terror depicted on his face that she found utterance; and then the sight of that terror changed the words from what she meant them to have been. She drew him to her, and laid her head upon his shoulder; hiding her face even there. (*Ruth*, ch. 27)

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It is that rebounding sight of the boy's *absolute* terror that leaves her no room for her own fearful feelings. Collecting herself, she no longer hides her face but almost visibly takes on the responsibility – that forbidding Victorian word (responsibility!) suddenly made human:

“Leonard!” said she at length, holding him away from her, and nerving herself up to tell him all by one spasmodic effort, “Listen to me.”

Then she tells him that when she was very young she did very wrong. God, she believes, will judge her more tenderly than men. But still, she says, it was wrong in a way that Leonard will not understand yet. And even as she says it, “she saw the red flush come into his cheek, and it stung her as the first token of that shame which was to be his portion through life.” People will call her the hardest names ever thrown at women:

“and, my child, you must bear it patiently, because they will be partly right. Never get confused, by your love for me, into thinking that what I did was right ...

“And Leonard,” continued she, “this is not all. The punishment of punishments lies awaiting me still. It is to see you suffer for my wrongdoing. Yes, darling! they will speak shameful things of you, poor innocent child, as well as of me, who am guilty. They will throw it in your teeth through life, that your mother was never married – was not married when you were born –”

The punishment of punishments is for a parent to know that the mistakes of her youth – the very mistakes that made her a mother – have damaged the life of her child almost before it began, in a way that as a protective mother she herself would never have wanted or allowed. And that she has now to explain to the boy. It turns life back to front. You don't have to be a Victorian in that particular circumstance to have the imaginative emotion.

But think of “the Victorians” when you read this, and you may well think how characteristically unjust it is – in ways that the literature

itself is only just beginning half to register – not only that Leonard should be stigmatized as illegitimate but also that Ruth should still blame herself for that. There is something indignantly important to be said about the way that social shame creates, unconsciously, a personal guilt and a misplaced sense of personal responsibility in an unhappily victimized woman, such as to redouble her injury. But the *reader* will also be noticing other things – for example, all the subtly implicit thought that is going on within the changing physical language of the sequence: Ruth never letting go of her boy, first holding him with her hands on his shoulders, while silently “*gazing into*” his face; then drawing him “*to*” her and “*hiding her face*” in his neck; then finally, holding him “*away*” from her as she begins to speak the all too adult, separating words.

It is by putting oneself into the tangle of these physical and emotional specifics that a great test comes upon a reader. In the modern world Ruth would have nothing for which to apologize, no terrible sense that her son could be labeled a bastard and herself a loose or fallen woman. Thankfully, the world of *Ruth* the novel has been left behind, made a painful historical document merely, in the subsequent march of social progress. For surely it would have been better here if Ruth could have carried out her task of explanation without the pain of thinking she had done wrong in her youth or that the people who now wrong her with cruel names “will be *partly* right”?

But in one sense it would *not* have been at all better: it would only have been easier. Undoubtedly that humane Unitarian Elizabeth Gaskell wanted more kindness in the world. But what moves Mrs Gaskell is not how her characters could imaginably get out of the temporary givenness of their situation but rather how they recommit themselves to staying within it and making something of it. It is not so much a feeling of guilt as a sense of primal responsibility that makes Ruth, regardless of extenuations, not seek finally to evade all the implications of her own story howsoever it has come upon her. Here this persistence depends upon Ruth having to believe that the position in which she finds herself is not wholly unjust, but a mixture of innocence in guilt. And though it is clearly wrong to her that her wrongdoing should have its effect upon Leonard’s future life, still Leonard

himself must not get confused, even by his love for her, into ever thinking that it was simply right. Seen from some humane political position far outside the novel, it may well be socio-historical pressure that makes her take that moral line against herself; but from within it, personally, and from within her, what motivates Ruth is love for Leonard, in the mother's care that the mother's own past example should not be his false moral standard. I love the way Ruth has to take that difficult double view of herself as both person and parent: in the personal feelings of her own private autobiography; in her overriding duty as a mother. That is what is so powerful about Victorian literature: the constant shift between vulnerable person and necessary function, in a world that must find its formal changes achieved even through informal and contingent means. In Dickens it is terrible when the great father-figure is revealed to his children as also a man in his own damaged right, embarrassing, vulnerable, or crudely culpable: it is a sudden and painful *rite de passage* that the age has to keep reliving.

The Victorian bump can feel hard. But what is hardest for the modern reader in this novel is that the imaginative situation would not be so deep here if Leonard *were* free of this unjust stigma. It is essential to the predicament. So: do we let children go on being called bastards and young girls slags because it produces better novels? Am I really saying that life is deeper when it was harder and we had what Mrs Thatcher used to call "Victorian values"?

Certainly it would be easier to be the man who saves Ruth from committing suicide, if he did not believe that she had committed a sin in becoming pregnant. But what is remarkable about Thurstan Benson is the way in which he finds himself rejoicing in the birth of Ruth's baby as a new life, even in the teeth of an argument with his own sister, Faith:

"The sin appears to me to be quite distinct from its consequences."

"Sophistry – and a temptation," said Miss Benson, decidedly.

"No, it is not," said her brother, with equal decision. "In the eye of God, she is exactly the same as if the life she has led had left no trace behind. We knew her errors before, Faith."

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“Yes, but not this disgrace – this badge of her shame!”

“Faith, Faith! Let me beg of you not to speak so of the little innocent babe, who may be God’s messenger to lead her back to Him. Think again of her first words – the burst of nature from her heart! Did she not turn to God, and enter into a covenant with Him – ‘I will be so good’? Why, it draws her out of herself! If her life has hitherto been self-seeking, and wickedly thoughtless, here is the very instrument to make her forget herself, and be thoughtful for another. Teach her (and God will teach her, if man does not come between) to reverence her child; and this reverence will shut out sin, – will be purification.”

He was very much excited; he was even surprised at his own excitement; but his thoughts and meditations through the long afternoon had prepared his mind for this manner of viewing the subject.

“These are quite new ideas to me,” said Miss Benson, coldly. “I think, you, Thurstan, are the first person I ever heard rejoicing over the birth of an illegitimate child. It appears to me, I must own, rather questionable morality.” (*Ruth*, ch. 11)

This is a “Victorian” religious language but not least because the situation is like a religious paradox: the disaster in Ruth’s *first* life is also at the self-same time the saving gift and triumph of her *second* – namely, that she has become a mother. In George Eliot’s *Silas Marner* (1861) a child saves an adult’s life, naturally, without intent or consciousness, but there the bad father is split off from the good adoptive parent. Here in *Ruth* what is good and what is bad are entangled. It would be easier if there were no problem here; it would be easier if one had a single, simple belief under which to categorize the situation. But Benson, like Ruth herself later in confession to Leonard, has not one but *two* powerful thoughts, at once inextricable and yet hardly compatible, the good-in-the-bad. These contrary pulls in the dense mix of the Victorian realist novel are what produce between them something humanly less definable and less predictable, making for the personal individual achievement that is re-creative of a real morality. For this is Benson acting more like Christ than like a Christian – the Christ who surprised his over-literal disciples when he would not condemn the woman taken in adultery or blame another who poured precious

ointment on his head instead of selling it to help the poor. Grace overcomes ethics narrowly conceived. It is in that very spirit that some of the greatest Victorians, such as Mrs Gaskell herself, are in a sense anti-Victorian, if Victorian only means such men as Mr Bradshaw in *Ruth*, the condemning Pharisee who likes to draw “a clear line of partition, which separated mankind into two great groups” – the saved and the damned (ch. 25). But Benson himself has no such clear lines, and it is telling that he was “very much excited; he was even surprised at his own excitement”: that human response, transcending itself, is also what being a reader means, in going beyond any over-clear agenda.

This present book is thus for *the reader*, not “the critic” or “the student” or “the scholar” as such – though with the hope that the reader survives still within those other forms. For the Victorian is the first great age of nation-wide reading, Matthew Arnold insisting in his preface to *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) that it mattered not only *that* a person read every day but *what* the person read every day. Critics (even Arnold himself to a degree) are those who seek distance from the text, theoretical and historical, making it an object; but readers go to the book to internalize it, personally, emotionally, as if they might just find revealed there a version of the secrets of their lives.¹ That’s why, to teach reading to an ordinary, serious community, the part-time MA that we first offered in Liverpool was in Victorian literature – because Victorian literature, and in particular the realist novel, is the most accessible of all, in terms of its commitment to a recognizably ordinary, mundane life. As such, it offers the portrait of such lives to real-life equivalents and identifiers as a form of emotional education.

Such reading is an immersed kind of thinking, different from other kinds of conceptualization, yet too often unrecognized as thinking. The reader first simply accepts the life-form in which the book exists, and then is absorbed in the people involved in it. The historical accidents of the predicament don’t matter, save as clothing. For there are many ways in which a parent can harm a child’s life without ever having wanted to do so; just as many as the ways in which children can be felt as a gift whatever the mess that engendered them. Good readers know

that their deep, unsorted *memories* hold more of themselves than do their mere *ideas* of what they are. That is why they are glad to find a moment, a passage, in a literary work releasing feelings and triggering forgotten sympathies that surprise them with echoes that have lost, or never even held, a place in the limited frameworks of their conscious agendas. The emotion the reader feels *is* the immediate act of imagination here, the book's meaning existing simultaneously in front of the eyes and behind them. And thus with *Ruth* that affective sympathy, close to the novel's original intent and on the novel's own terms, is actually nearer to the past – precisely in so far as it is no longer felt as past, historically.

But the predicament is what matters, howsoever it arises, because what is moving is what human beings *do* with the given predicament, what the predicament as form brings out of those human beings as life's content. All the other, less individual ways of dealing with the predicament are history and are politics, but they are not literature.

That is no reason, of course, to let everything in the literal world outside books remain as it is, whatever the suffering or injustice. But equally, if you could imagine being able to remove all the predicaments in the world, it still might not be enough, and it might even be too much. And that last, famously, is the thought that precipitated the symbolic breakdown of the great program of nineteenth-century social reform in the person of its epitome, John Stuart Mill.

Almost from the cradle, Mill had been hot-house educated by his philosopher-father to become the great utilitarian social reformer. The son, as rational logician, was to make and to be that utopian future for which James Mill had worked in his own life-time. With that inherited master-scheme of increasing human happiness and abolishing human misery so firmly worked into his mind, the younger Mill recalls in his *Autobiography* how

I was accustomed to felicitate myself on the certainty of a happy life which I enjoyed, through placing my happiness in something durable and distant, in which some progress might be always making, while it could never be exhausted by complete attainment.²

So the great Cause carried him along until he reached a prematurely tired adolescence. Then began the process that later left him asking in retrospect why, so unthinkingly, he had always needed the final goal of general human happiness to be ever distant, inexhaustible, and even unachievable. In the mental crisis of 1821, depression, with its questionings, came to Mill like a rite of passage between the movement away from the father and the emergence of an independent life:

In this frame of mind it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself, "Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you were looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?" And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, "No!" At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for. (*Autobiography*, ch. 5)

He had relished the idea of the struggle for widespread reform, in the creation of a new and easier world, a new future with a new and happier form of human nature. But if ever, imaginably, that political struggle was completed – fulfilling itself in the utopian ending of *all* struggles for human beings – there would be for J. S. Mill nothing left in the dry resultant ease that was worth living for. The struggle, as means, was parasitic upon an end to which the reformer could look forward if indeed it never came. It was therefore sufficient as an "end" only in temporal terms, in the future-historical, not as an existential goal. The suddenly collapsed state in which Mill found his life cut short was, he said, like what he imagined it to be for converts to Methodism when smitten by their first conviction of sin. The great Victorians were unafraid of the great life-questions that in earlier ages had been put in religious terms – or rather, afraid, still put them, and often without help of religion. Yet in a secularized world Mill had no redemptive conversion available to him, equivalent to Methodism, not even in social politics. He had come to the verge of two radically

untenable realizations in terms of who he had been and what he had stood for – though later he shied away from them again. First: that a program of social and political reform was of itself, however useful and necessary, never sufficient in the fulfillment of human existence, and something else was also somehow needed. Second: that, illogically or paradoxically, the energy of human life always needed the very difficulties it sought to overcome, if it was not to decline into inertia. It was as though happiness or ease were not, perhaps, the goal or the purpose. Mill began to read poetry, in search of what was missing emotionally from his account of human existence.

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In the background to reading the Victorians there is always something problematically tough, hard, and narrow, the demanding claims of which have either to be met or resisted. Its name was morality or conscience, insistent on the necessity of its place in the world because of the theology of the Fall. Laws, corrective rules, and guiding principles existed as a second nature, to compensate for the fallen ruin of our first nature. This is what in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) Matthew Arnold was to identify as the stern Hebraic world-view, still strong in the first half of the nineteenth century, from the grim chains of which, in his view, a civilizing and cultured second half of the century had to free itself. It is what I am calling the hard wiring that underlines all subsequent mental modifications in the Victorian bump.

Here is an example of such stern demands taken from a minor and lesser-known novel, Elizabeth Sewell's *Journal of a Home Life* (1867). All you initially need to know about Miss Sewell is that the greatest influence in her life was her brother, and that William Sewell was a follower of Newman and Keble and Pusey in the Tractarian Movement, which sought to combat an age of increased secular liberalism through a strict high-church counter-reformation.

Miss Sewell's protagonist in *Home Life* is Mrs Anstruther, a widow by the time the book opens. She had not married the man she had first loved but instead at twenty-eight had given herself, in compassion, to someone old enough to be her father – a lonely, military man, whose first wife had died, leaving him with two little

girls called Ina and Cecil. When their father's career required him to return to his posting in South Africa, these girls were left in England to be raised by their maternal grandmother, Mrs Penrhyn, and sent to boarding school. In South Africa with a new wife, Colonel Anstruther raised a second family of four children. But on his death, after nearly 11 years away, Mary Anstruther returns to England not only with her own children but also with the added responsibility of the guardianship of the step-children who were left behind, now aged 15 and 13. This is a novel about being a parent and in particular a step-parent. It is like a novelist's recipe. Take some of what are to us the hardest, most unattractive of so-called "Victorian attitudes" in a parent (such as the need for discipline and morality). Only put them not into a forbidding patriarch such as Dombey but into a mother instead, a step-mother but not a wicked step-mother, a lonely woman who is absolutely devout in her sense of principles and responsibilities but also humanly affectionate, vulnerable, and herself in need of affection. Add in the crucial fact that the inherited children do need these uncomfortable disciplines, but also of course that they half-resist them. That is the mix.

"It seems," Mrs Anstruther writes to herself in her journal, "that the materials of life, like the constitution of the body, and the characteristics of the mind, are prepared for us, and we cannot alter them; but we may arrange them." If there ever was a primal world of absolute freedom and choice, for her it is now lost in the powerlessness of youthful fantasy and superseded by a second world of unchosen and circumscribed reality. From the large-scale freedom to plan and to change, there is a challenging shift to the restricted ability to arrange and manage:

If there was one thing more than another which as a girl I resolved that I would never be, it was a step-mother. I had such a clear perception of the difficulties and awkwardnesses of the position; and, I remember, I used to argue about it furiously, and declare that it was unnatural – never intended; that it never could work for happiness; and a great deal more of the same kind; and the very first thing I did when I came to what are called years of discretion, was to marry a man with two children. (*Home Life*, ch. 29)

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Life as thus depicted would be a grimly dutiful, ironically determined thing, were it not also so *unpredictably given* for acceptance. For the great challenging word here is “unnatural” – as if *that* was what the modern world increasingly felt like it was becoming. The social arrangements were moving beyond “nature,” in being no longer governed or intended by the biology of a divinely created universe. Ina and Cecil were not Mrs Anstruther’s natural children, and they were already more than half formed in their characters and habits by the time they were left in her charge. The children are not bad as such; it is nothing as dramatic as that. But they can’t be left to carry on as they have been doing at boarding school – or rather they can so easily be – for they lie a little, they don’t work very hard, they take their norms from their contemporaries. It is not long before Mrs Anstruther catches Ina casually making a social engagement without her guardian’s consent, knowing it would not be given. It may not have been outright “deceit,” Mrs Anstruther tells Ina, but in letting the thing happen it was an indirect version, a “shuffling” that characterizes her subsequent excuses:

“I have never thought of that sort of thing being shuffling,” said Ina; “we all did it at school. When we wanted to have our own way we managed to get it, that was all.”

“Precisely; that was all. Ina, dear, I want you to see how much there is contained in that expression ‘that was all’. It means, to accustom ourselves to a low moral standard – to suppose that everything which is not absolutely wrong, is right.” (*Home Life*, ch. 12)

For Mrs Anstruther a home should be a protection against these low social norms, a rectifying counter-tradition to “we all did it.” But for Ina, morality is no more than a set of external rules, and of course the more strict the rules, the more she feels forced into shuffling. How to break that circle is Mrs Anstruther’s problem. As a second mother she feels she is only, as it were, borrowing these children, while owing a responsibility for them not only to their recently lost father but to their long-dead mother, to both of whom they must be finally restored. But anything she can do in this charge can be done only by a mixture of sincerely willed duty and careful educative strategy – nothing can be

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simply loving, instinctual, easy, or unconscious in this second, artificial family. At her first reunion with Ina and Cecil, she speaks bravely and frankly of her own four children by their late father:

I said laughingly, that they were little half brothers and sisters, who I hoped might some day become three-quarters, as they never could be whole ones; and just then I remarked that the two girls drew nearer to each other, as though tacitly consenting to the fact that no one could ever be to them what they were to each other. It goes against me to speak in this manner; I do so long to have my family all one; and these two elder children touch my heart in a way they can little imagine. But I will be patient, and lay the foundation of our mutual relations in the truth, and then the superstructure will be firm. (*Home Life*, ch. 3)

The sad truth that “goes against” the grain is that she never can be their natural mother and that with “these two elder children,” the family is not naturally all one and whole.

It was that big old naming word “natural” that John Stuart Mill, as liberal progressivist and modernizer, had seized upon. Actually (he argued) “natural” was a word masquerading unconsciously in defense of what was often no more than socially ingrained “custom” and long-established “interests.” Women, it was said, were “naturally” subordinate to men; the family was a “natural” institution – people felt it in their bones. And that is the difficulty that exists, said Mill in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), when the boldly rational reformer is contending against the irrationality of what has become through long association a deep, emotionally rooted prejudice; a prejudice claiming, moreover, to be natural feeling, instinctive belief, and traditional, plain common sense:

So long as an opinion is strongly rooted in the feelings, it gains rather than loses in stability by having a preponderating weight of argument against it. For if it were accepted as a result of argument, the refutation of the argument might shake the solidity of the conviction; but when it rests solely on feeling, the worse it fares in argumentative contest, the more persuaded its adherents are that their feeling must have deeper ground, that the arguments do not reach; and while the feeling remains,

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it is always throwing up fresh entrenchments of argument to repair any breach made in the old. (*Subjection of Women*, ch. 1)

Precisely because of our preconceptions, we do not know what human nature is, says Mill: we can only find out what it may *become* in experimenting toward a new future beyond traditional historical structures of society, gender, and family. In Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) there is even talk on Millite lines of raising children in some social commune instead. For Mill's is the challenge to the experiential authority of so-called natural feeling. And this too is the great value of the Victorian dilemma: namely, that there is no position in the period to which there is not an opposite offered in the ever-continuing conversations and shifting disputes of the age – in its melting-pot of the traditional and the modernizing held together at a crucial point in the formation of the Western conscience. (To Heathcliff – if we could imagine it across genres and categories – Mill would be like some super-intelligent version of Linton, a modern man in distorted denial of an incorrigibly demanding nature.) It is this that is the only important use of history for literature: that history should be made imaginably personal and present. *Doing* the Victorians, rather than merely knowing about them, involves imaginatively inhabiting in oneself as reader all that it means, personally, to exist in that often frightening transition between a world that seemed natural and one that had begun to go beyond such traditional bearings.

It also means struggling with the interrelation of the apparently large and the ostensibly small from the very inside of the process, at a point when the scale and place of almost everything in the mundane world seemed up for grabs. Poor Mrs Anstruther, for example, is embarrassed by her own excessive irritation when she hears some school-friends of Ina and Cecil whispering and giggling across the dinner table about their own concerns. It is rude of them but of course it is trivial. But however trivial in itself, it is a tendency and an example that Mrs Anstruther fears is ominous. And this is what parenthood can be like in the felt disproportions of practice – large, important principles trying to work themselves into small places without the clumsiness of undue anxiety.

So there is something large in the background to this anxious local commitment, when Mrs Anstruther takes on the final upbringing of her step-daughters. Indeed, that is the role of the largeness of morality or religion in such a world: that it should exist to emphasize the importance of its taking its place within the small. And the small here is the home life of a family-arrangement that represents, without great drama, what is awkwardly uncharted, relatively unprecedented, and almost anomalous. As a hybrid, this family in its mix of new and old would be for the reader of Mill the testing-ground for a genuine social, historical experiment. These two girls have not been brought up properly; they don't really understand morality or religion in an inward human sense, but only as abstractions. It is another part of the uncomfortable predicament that Mrs Anstruther comes to them at once late but not perhaps too late.

Ina in particular is not all that her step-mother would have her be. The problem in Mrs Anstruther's eyes is that Ina wants her own way and yet also wants to be liked and socially approved, to seem conventionally good and dutiful. This double need makes her duplicitous. "I do not, as yet, thoroughly understand Ina's character," the step-mother writes to herself in the journal that is her only counselor, "There is just something in it which gives me the idea of insincerity; but I am not a believer in insincerity as a motive, and I suspect that what appears to be so is rather a very determined self-will, which must carry its point, and when direct means fail, will choose those which are indirect" (*Home Life*, ch. 12). Direct untruth would be easier. The understanding of the psychologically *indirect* is what is so frightening. Mrs Anstruther can hardly bear to see how Ina will not be straight, in an attempted relation to truth, but too often is evasive and silent and passively secretive instead, in all the hidden willfulness of half-attempted freedom: "this easy glossing over what was wrong, twisting facts – not exactly dressing them up and exaggerating – but twisting, combining them, so as to form a pretty picture, the very antipode of reality" (ch. 9). To Mrs Anstruther there is a sort of cut-off unreality in Ina. Above all, what increasingly troubles the step-mother is self-deception, when *unknowingly* falsehood is taken as truth at a level that morality can hardly reach. "I have often felt certain she was

deceiving herself," Mrs Anstruther writes of Ina, "and I am learning more and more to dread self-deception. I used to think that it was not compatible with truth in word or action, but I begin to believe that to a certain extent it is" (ch. 43). What makes Mrs Anstruther so disturbed is that the great Victorian threat to morality, here embodied in small anxieties, is not so much immorality any more but human psychology. If the nineteenth century is the great age of psychology, the significance of that fact is not decreased but enhanced by the recognition that for some Victorians, not entirely wrong-headedly, it was a deeply equivocal and unsettling achievement.

The increased awareness of psychology is part of that process of continuous adjustment and readjustment that is the inner drama of the Victorian story, in the effort to take nothing from either the importance of principle or the necessities of practice. In *Home Life*, there is a painful scene created when the obstinately interfering mother of the first Mrs Anstruther, Mrs Penrhyn, encourages impressionable young Ina to have to do with the charismatic Mrs Randolph. Mrs Randolph is not a bad woman, but she is living in a neurotic chaos of matrimonial disintegration. If the step-mother is struggling to create the right environment around Ina, then Mrs Randolph, whatever may be felt for her in her own situation, is potentially a damaging influence. These fears of laxness and bad example are easy of course to label "Victorian" and then dismiss as snobbish or priggish. But they remain in our background-memory of what being a guardian means, of what social influences can do, before we can dismiss the concerns as old-fashioned or over-protective. It is the same fear of moral miasma that Dickens's Little Dorrit feels when she sees her father, her brother, and her sister all succumbing to the prison mentality. At any rate, regardless of Mrs Anstruther's objections as to the undesirability of the association, Mrs Penrhyn slyly presumes to invite Mrs Randolph to stay in her house during the Christmas visit of Mrs Anstruther and the children, without prior warning. Mrs Randolph's visit being sprung upon Mrs Anstruther so unexpectedly, it is the indirectness that is so infuriating. As so often, Elizabeth Sewell is marvelous in registering her protagonist's anxious sense of bottled-up outrage forced to express itself as mere irritation. But she

also reveals Mrs Anstruther's own concern as to how far that irritation is indeed petty – or is made so by the external disregard of the principles it struggles to stand for. Here is a long passage that I take to be just the sort of thing a merely casual modern reader – but not a real reader – would dismiss as old hat:

Mrs. Penrhyn has treated me very badly. When I was talking to her the other day she ought to have told me that Mrs. Randolph was coming, even if she had not mentioned it before. And I have a suspicion – a very unpleasant one – that Ina has known of the invitation from the beginning, and has been told not to tell me. If it should be so – but I won't forestall worries – the question is, what am I to do – or rather, can I do any thing? If Mrs. Penrhyn does not choose to give me the ordinary confidence which I have a right to expect as the children's mother, and her guest, can I resent it? Am I bound to do so?

I have a strong persuasion that if people don't keep their own place, and stand for what is their due, they bring themselves into difficulty; and I can plainly see the ill effect of this setting-me-aside process upon Ina's mind, how it tends to exalt her position in the family, and to make her look upon me as a person apart from it. And I might very fairly remonstrate with Mrs. Penrhyn – at least, show her that I was displeased. But I question much, whether I should do any good. If a neglect or rudeness – be it small or great – cannot be resented effectually, I suppose it is better to let it pass unnoticed. And, after all, the important point is, not how Mrs. Penrhyn acts or feels toward me, but what effect her conduct and Mrs. Randolph's coming will have upon Ina.

With regard to this, I cannot say how powerless I feel. The little influence which I thought I had gained at home is entirely neutralized here. . . . It is in vain to fight against the inevitable. Mrs. Randolph shall come or go, without any remark from me. So also I will not inquire whether Ina knew of the visit and kept it from me. Ignorance is as often wisdom as it is bliss. I am not required to stand upon my right if I am not supposed to be aware that any right has been infringed; and if Ina were to tell me – as no doubt she would – that her grandmamma had forbidden her to mention that Mrs. Randolph was expected, I could say nothing – I could only look displeased, and so give the idea that I was jealous. (*Home Life*, ch. 26)

We would not normally have in this day the vocabulary or the syntax to make such a *fuss*, since that is what we would be tempted to think it. Yet its real name here is not *fuss*: that is to say, there is an imaginable world in which it stands for more than that. Only, it is as though what have been formal concerns, vital to human practice, are left without a language in a more informal society. What remains is only perhaps the muted background-feeling of vague, frustrated unease embarrassed by its own solicitude. Yet this is what novels can do long after the death of their authors and the lapsing of the times to which they refer: give, to what it would otherwise be so easy to dismiss in historical abstract as merely priggish or over-scrupulous, a sympathetic embodiment in a human situation and a human personality that makes the position emotionally imaginable. For Mrs Anstruther is here forced into the anomalous tension of private silence when the communal values she believes to be generally binding can find no particular space in her immediate world. That is what she means by trying to inhabit one's place and stand up for one's due, by a personal exemplification committed to make these beliefs still exist and physically count in the world. Yet what is intended as a humanely concerned defense of Ina's welfare is implicated in a power struggle: it makes for a context where the step-mother's attempt to salvage her own standing, for the sake of influence, is painfully vulnerable to being mistaken for egoistic jealousy – and indeed all too liable to become it. That is what happens when what is truly a *function*, embodied in a person, is treated by others in a less formal world as no more than merely personal. "I cannot say how powerless I feel." Her sheer embarrassment at the consciousness of how she is slighted and how she can be misinterpreted is given a place and a pained dignity in that alternative novel-world, between private and public, which is the realm of readers.

Almost always in Victorian literature there is still the presence of what I have called the hard thing – the Hebraic world, as Arnold called it, of harsh conditions and tough judgments, of struggle and of difficulty. "You have to stand up for yourself"; "Children must be brought up properly." To such as Arnold, literary man and educationalist, such maxims would be no more than crude and philistine talismans. And Dickens would know all too well what cruelty could be hidden within

those slogans. But when a novel puts the (notionally) same thing into a different place, it is no longer the same thing at all, even though it may bear the same public name or is paraphrasable within the same general terms. We worry about “Victorian” parental attitudes, we want to let our children grow freely, we don’t want to be untrusting of life or over-protective as to influences outside the home. But when I see the hard thing in Mrs Anstruther, tough and in difficulties in her effort to bring the children up properly, then I see something essential to parenthood in her predicament, howsoever it is particularly problematized. And I see another version of that struggling hard-core element, different again but related, in a greater novel, Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). For there a wife who would just about manage to go along with the ways of her dissolute husband becomes a mother who cannot. At a deep primal level Helen Huntingdon fears the father’s influence upon her boy – in both genetic and environmental terms, as we would call them – as she had not been able to fear the man’s influence upon herself. But her absolute and transcendent need to counter the father’s influence, and to provide what in abstract could be called a moral example, is compromised within the particular relative circumstances in which she finds herself:

I am too grave to minister to his amusements and enter into his infantile sports as a nurse or a mother ought to do, and often his bursts of gleeful merriment trouble and alarm me; I see in them his father’s spirit and temperament, and I tremble for the consequences; and, too often, damp the innocent mirth I ought to share. (*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, ch. 37)

The very syntax mimes the bitterly ironic configuration: that word “innocent” trapped in the very effort to protect it. But the father has no such weight of sad concern on his mind. He is light-hearted when he sees the boy, is good fun it seems, even offering sips of alcohol, while the mother looks on unattractively silent and worried:

therefore, of course, the child dotes upon his seemingly joyous, amusing, ever indulgent papa, and will at any time gladly exchange my company

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for his. This disturbs me greatly; not so much for the sake of my son's affection (though I do prize that highly, and though I feel it is my right, and know I have done much to earn it), as for that influence over him which, for his own advantage, I would strive to purchase and retain, and which for very spite his father delights to rob me of, and, from motives of mere idle egotism, is pleased to win to himself, making no use of it but to torment me, and ruin the child. (ch. 37)

You can feel through the syntax how the hard thing – the essential element, the necessary general principle – is battling to find a place for itself within this particular compound. That is always the task, as Iris Murdoch describes in her own tribute to the nineteenth-century novel: “How do the generalizations of philosophers connect with what I am doing in my day-to-day and moment-to-moment pilgrimage? ... My general being co-exists with my particular being. Fiction writers have, instinctively or reflectively, to solve the problems of this co-existence when they portray characters in books.”³ You could almost count how many different thoughts, coming from how many different levels or directions, there are in a single sentence that Helen Huntingdon writes in her lonely diary. “Not so much for the sake of my son's affection (though I do prize that highly, and though I feel it is my right, and know I have done much to earn it), as for that influence over him which, for his own advantage, I would strive to purchase and retain”: three “though-type” clauses in a parenthesis, a “not so much” on one side matched by an “as for that” on the other, while the crucial “for his own advantage” seeks its rightful justificatory place within the overall sentence ... and so on.

Such relativism, especially in those who would be absolute in their principles, is what makes for an increasingly complicated syntax in the rich, dense life of the Victorian novel. It is a syntax that stands for the internal struggle toward an integrated, mapped-out orientation within the world – just as surely for George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver as for Helen Huntingdon or Mrs Anstruther. But Maggie is not an older woman struggling to apply single-minded, old principles in the face of an entangled new situation. She is a young girl baffled by the lack

of emotionally meaningful connection in the painful raw materials of the world around her:

She could make dream-worlds of her own – but no dream-world would satisfy her now. She wanted some explanation of this hard, real life: the unhappy-looking father, seated at the dull breakfast table; the childish, bewildered mother; the little sordid tasks that filled the hours, or the more oppressive emptiness of weary, joyless leisure; the need of some tender, demonstrative love; the cruel sense that Tom didn't mind what she thought or felt, and that they were no longer playfellows together; the privation of all pleasant things that had come to *her* more than to others: she wanted some key that would enable her to understand, and, in understanding, endure, the heavy weight that had fallen on her young heart. (*The Mill on the Floss* (1860), book 4, ch. 3)

This text is a list – father, mother, brother Tom, dull facts, hard tasks, painful gaps – in search of a syntax to make sense of this life, not in a dream-world but in this real one. Like a person, an initially simple sentence in the Victorian realist novel has to take in more and more. It tries to be receptive to the imagined world impinging upon it, to trace out the interrelations of clauses as of people, in the struggle for “some key” from within itself that would create connective understanding. But connective understanding does not mean that everything easily joins together. It has also to let in more difficult inclusions, syntactically close to contradiction or negation, such as David Copperfield's own pained admission “But that it would have been better for me if my wife could have helped me more ... and that this might have been; I knew.”⁴

“Oh, it is difficult, – life is very difficult!” cries Maggie toward the end of the novel, when she is torn in love between brother Tom and lover Stephen, between deep, past, familial ties and strong, sexually present ones:

“It seems right to me sometimes that we should follow our strongest feeling; but then, such feelings continually come across the ties that all our former life has made for us, – the ties that have made others dependent on us, – and would cut them in two. If life were quite easy

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and simple, as it might have been in Paradise, and we could always see that one being first toward whom – I mean, if life did not make duties for us before love comes, love would be a sign that two people ought to belong to each other. But I see – I feel it is not so now.” (*The Mill on the Floss*, book 6, ch. 11)

In some primal paradisiacal world, thoughts would not “continually come across” each other; the chronology of feelings would be in step with their importance. But in this fallen Victorian second world, one time, one thought, one person gets overlaid upon another, like threads in a skein, like lenses through which we have to peer. One thought is simple; two may be a contradiction or a conflict; but the generation of three, four, five, and more are what creates the melting-pot, or the holding-ground, or the deep reservoir of the realist novel, and demands readers who do not seek merely a single theme, a simple idea. That is why George Eliot’s syntax has to be so complex, in its modeling of the world, given how difficult it is even to make out an apparently simple human creature such as pretty Hetty Sorrel in her young thoughtlessness: “Nature has her language ... but we don’t know all the intricacies of her syntax just yet, and in a hasty reading we may happen to extract the very opposite of her real meaning” (*Adam Bede* (1859), ch. 15) There can be no such hasty reading of George Eliot as, in the ambition of Victorian high realism, she tries to lock into the very syntax of the world’s own complex composition. Intellectually, George Eliot belonged with the liberal *Westminster Review* set of rationalists such as Mill. But she knew how hard it was to deal with complexity and as a novelist never did begin from a position of assured intellectual achievement: her hard, single-minded figures such as Maggie’s brother Tom or Adam Bede himself can hardly bear the uncertainties and anomalies. What always interests George Eliot is the recurring moment of change, the renewed and renewing *rite de passage* of corrective realization, the difficulty of readjustment in that shift of gear or focus that is never once and for all. As when (for example), the ego of one human being rediscovers, as if for the first time, the real presence of another person in the world – “the first stone against which the pride of egoism stumbles is the *thou*, the *alter ego*”⁵ – or

when a toughly tightened framework of understanding has to take in more than it can easily hold.

“No man is sufficient for the law which moral perfection sets before us,” wrote Ludwig Feuerbach in the translation made by George Eliot, “but for that reason, neither is the law sufficient for man, for the heart.”⁶ The clash of rule and person, of criticism and affection, of judgment and grace, of morality and psychology: these are the mid-century struggles for balance that find supreme expression in George Eliot.

This is what happens when a greater writer takes up something of what Elizabeth Sewell represents. A young man goes to see his old mentor, the easy-going local vicar, in some desperation: Arthur wants to tell Mr Irwine that he has been tempted to do something wrong – to lead on and seduce an innocent young woman – so that in the act of telling the temptation will go away. It is like a memory of the ancient act of confession but now in a later, informal setting:

there was this advantage in the old rigid forms, that they committed you to the fulfilment of a resolution by some outward deed: when you have put your mouth to one end of a hole in a stone wall, and are aware that there is an expectant ear at the other end, you are more likely to say what you came out with the intention of saying, than if you were seated with your legs in an easy attitude under the mahogany, with a companion who will have no reason to be surprised if you have nothing particular to say. (*Adam Bede*, ch. 16)

But the fact that the young man is in the presence of an old friend, who has no inkling of the serious internal struggle he has come to confide, shakes his own belief in the reality of its seriousness. Helping the evasion, there is a primitive feeling in Arthur that reality is only what is physical and external and present. “It was not, after all, a thing to make a fuss about”: that “after all” is like Ina’s “that was all,” dismissing the reality of the moral dimension nagging away in his head. But when on the brink of confession Arthur pulls back from what previously he intended, George Eliot seizes upon the micro-moment, as if she were a super-version of that moral conscience that Arthur has at the last moment jettisoned from himself.

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Was there a motive at work under this strange reluctance of Arthur's which had a sort of backstairs influence, not admitted to himself? Our mental business is carried on much in the same way as the business of the State: a great deal of hard work is done by agents who are not acknowledged. In a piece of machinery, too, I believe there is often a small unnoticeable wheel which has a great deal to do with the motion of the large obvious ones. Possibly, there was some such unrecognised agent secretly busy in Arthur's mind at this moment – possibly it was the fear lest he might hereafter find the fact of having made a confession to the Rector a serious annoyance, in case he should *not* be able quite to carry out his good resolutions. (*Adam Bede*, ch. 16)

The confessional has been taken away. There is no Mrs Anstruther, looking out for Ina. Instead, it is as with Jude in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* when he most needs somebody advising him: "But nobody did come, because nobody does" (ch. 4). In place of confession, there is the novel with its discovery of what is now technically known as free indirect discourse: the inner mental language of the character released, without the character acknowledging it, into the language of the narrative. The realist novel does not put it "Arthur thought this or said that"; whatever he thinks, whatever he does not say, is simply exposed to sympathy, to judgment, to the world of readers.

But just because the presence of the moral teacher is taken away, it does not mean morality itself has gone with it. There is a famous letter from George Eliot to Frederic Harrison (August 15, 1866) on the role of moral didacticism in art:

That is a tremendously difficult problem which you have laid before me, and I think you see its difficulties, though they can hardly press upon you as they do on me, who have gone through again and again the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they revealed themselves to me first in the flesh, and not in the spirit. I think aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching because it deals with life in its highest complexity. But if it ceases to be purely aesthetic – if it lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram – it becomes the most offensive of all teaching. ... Consider the sort of

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agonizing labour to an English-fed imagination to make art a sufficiently real back-ground, for the desired picture, to get breathing, individual forms, and group them in the needful relations, so that the presentation will lay hold on the emotions as human experience – will, as you say, “flash” conviction on the world by means of aroused sympathy.⁷

Take away the formal confessional and the physical confessor, and the morality does not disappear but goes into psychology, as at some key moment in the telling of the human story: in George Eliot’s terms, the idea and the spirit have to work within the individual flesh, and only thus does the “diagram” become the “picture.” With George Eliot, wrote the Victorian man of letters John Morley, the reader with a conscience opens the book as though putting himself in the confessional.⁸ In adult life you can carry on going wrong: there may be no sign, no person, to indicate even that it is wrong. That is how most of us manage to get by, uneasily half let off the imperfections in an equivocal version of freedom.

But still the novel in its own particular version of knowing silence sits and watches characters such as Arthur evading confession “in case he should *not* be able quite to carry out his good resolutions.” Nobody in real life ever wants to be exposed as Arthur is here by the novel around him. But any reluctantly identifying reader with a memory and a conscience is so exposed, silently, by proxy, as another of those in-between characters who won’t sacrifice the claims of their life to the claims of morality and yet would not be immoral either. Through silent immersion in the novel, in its silent inner replacement of the ancient confessional, the reader finds in the human mind, here depicted in Arthur, fear of the mind’s own unacknowledged agents in the back-ground – fear of the psychological small wheel that moves the more clumsily obvious ones.

Arthur could have turned the threatened future into an articulated thought that, made into an external marker, would have put an obstacle in the way of that future’s happening. Instead, precisely by not anticipating the future in one way, he lets it happen in another, even by pretending not to anticipate. In fact, he tacitly chooses not to let

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this *present* become in the *future* a definite *past* whose promise he has broken. It is *that* complicated at the literary micro-level of the small internal wheels, however much at the cruder macro-level of ordinary human vocabulary we may call it simple “hypocrisy” or “evasion.” In this George Eliot is like her researching doctor in *Middlemarch* who loves the imagination that “reveals subtle actions inaccessible by any sort of lens,” tracking them by inward light through their long pathways in the dark:

he wanted to pierce the obscurity of those minute processes which prepare human misery and joy, those invisible thoroughfares which are the first lurking-places of anguish, mania, and crime, that delicate poise and transition which determine the growth of happy or unhappy consciousness. (*Middlemarch*, ch. 16)

“Those minute processes,” “those invisible thoroughfares,” “that delicate poise and transition”: this is the novel as analogous to research into the sub-structures of the brain. The realist imagination of the novel is not interested in fantasy but in finding deep within that ordinary named reality that we think we already know something stranger, more serious, and more complex than we ever thought it to be.

That is the picture, not the diagram. But in another sense a diagram does remain just visible behind the picture, as through X-ray vision. It is a diagram of hard wiring evolved out of hard times. For what the diagram here stands for, as part of our evolutionary template, is that underlying moral code of human purposiveness that the Victorians were, variously, losing, scared of losing, trying to retain, seeking to modify or to escape, wondering how to place. So many novels after 1850 re-create something of that old moral order in their first half, in order to see how to work through it in the second. Or a moralistic work such as Maria Edgeworth’s *Helen* (1834) gets rewritten in a psychological form in Mrs Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters* (1866). In “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse”, first published in 1855, Matthew Arnold famously spoke of living in a time “between two worlds,” one well-nigh dead, the other still powerless to be born. The Victorian bump exists equivalently between old and new, between

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tough and tolerant, between absolute and relative, between belief and unbelief. Held in such tense transition between the two worlds, it is for us, I am saying, no longer history as such but the site of a dilemma that will not ease itself by simply letting go of one out of any two important alternatives. It won't let go of either, and we should not let go of it. "I have often thought it is part of the inner system of this earth," says the protagonist of J. A. Froude's *The Nemesis of Faith* (1849), "that each one of us should repeat over again in his own experience the spiritual condition of its antecedent eras."