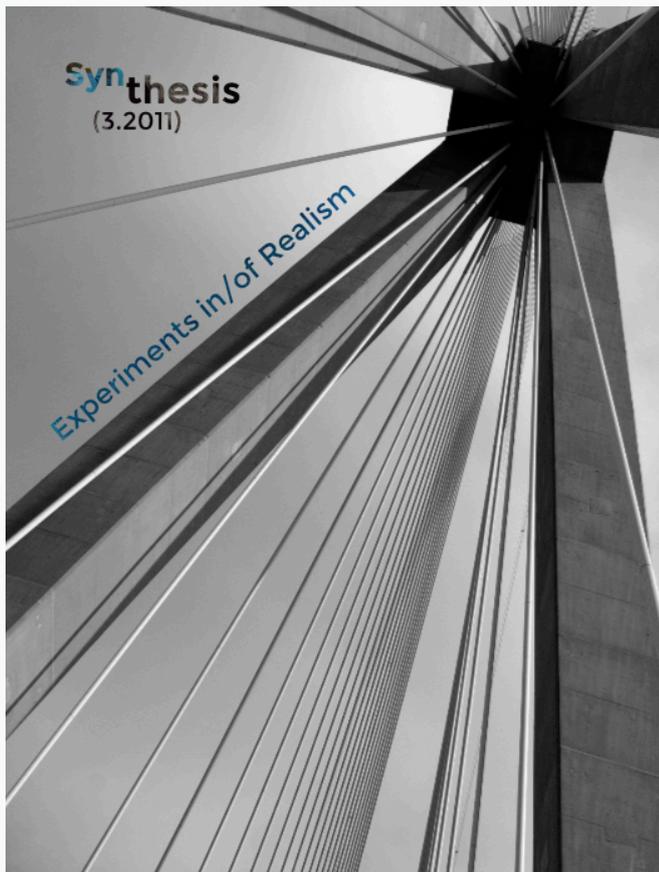


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### “There is no first reading”: (Re-)Reading Nineteenth-Century Realist Novels and their Critics

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# “There is no *first* reading”: (Re-)Reading Nineteenth-Century Realist Novels and their Critics

Dennis Walder

## Abstract

We all read with the knowledge, or at least the memory, of what we have already read. And even the novels we read are imbued with their predecessors to such an extent that reading a novel means in effect reading its predecessors as well. I take a contemporary novel, Kate Atkinson’s *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, and look at how it echoes earlier novels in the realist tradition to make the point that such novels are written with other novels in mind. As Roland Barthes put it, “there is no *first* reading.” According to Barthes, the common view that there is some pristine first reading of a book is as fictional as other popular cultural myths. The idea of a first, or single, reading is a pretence fostered by “the commercial and ideological habits of our society.” Every reading, even a so-called “first reading” is to some extent conditioned by other reading. Using Edward Said’s *Beginnings*, I look at how this is to some extent also true of critics of realist fiction, who echo and complicate each other’s readings.

“There is no *first* reading.” This remark comes from one of the classic texts of twentieth-century (post-)structuralism, Roland Barthes’ *S/Z* (16). In it Barthes demonstrated, through dissecting almost to extinction a little-known Balzac novella, *Sarrasine* (1830), the extraordinary richness of literary meaning generated by the reading of realist fiction and the extent to which the typical realist text always becomes more than itself—that is, more than a mere copy of reality—if read critically. In the following essay, I would like to suggest some implications of (re-)reading nineteenth-century novels from the perspective of the reader of contemporary—that is, relatively recent—fiction and novel criticism.

In particular, I want to suggest that European fiction from its earliest origins is typically intertextual, and that this helps to account for the continuing appeal as a mode of writing of realist fiction that, *pace* Barthes, is less transparent and more mixed and generically rich than is often assumed. Striving to capture a wider sense of reality through the medium of language paradoxically ends up focusing upon the nature of language itself. Further, I suggest that the general strategies of realist fiction are analogous to the strategies of some of its most influential critics, such as Raymond Williams and Edward Said, whose works are also intertextually related to each other. Reading texts within each other in this way reveals surprising continuities beyond the apparent boundaries of realism, which can then be seen as, after all, a form of representation that challenges even as it inhabits those boundaries, making us as readers more aware of the wider, postcolonial world in which we live today.

## I

We all read with the knowledge, or at least the memory of what we have already read. And even the novels we read are imbued with their predecessors, to such an extent that reading a novel means in effect reading its predecessors as well. According to Barthes, it is an illusion to think otherwise. To take an almost random example of a modern, contemporary novel: Kate Atkinson’s first novel, and The Whitbread Book of the Year for 1995, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*. These are the opening paragraphs:

I exist! I am conceived to the chimes of midnight on the clock on the mantelpiece in the room across the hall. The clock once belonged to my great-grandmother (a woman called Alice) and its tired chime counts me into the world. I’m begun on the first stroke and finished on the last when my father rolls off my mother and is plunged into a dreamless sleep, thanks to the five pints of John Smith’s Best Bitter he has drunk in the Punch Bowl with his friends, Walter and Bernard Belling. At the moment at which I moved from nothingness into being my mother was pretending to be asleep—as she often does at such moments. My father, however, is made of stern stuff and he didn’t let that put him off.

My father’s name is George and he is a good ten years older than my mother, who is now snoring into the next pillow. My mother’s name is Berenice but everyone has always called her Bunty.

“Bunty” doesn’t seem like a very grown-up name to me—would I be better off with a mother with a different name? A plain Jane, a maternal Mary? Or something romantic, something that doesn’t sound quite so much like a girl’s comic—an Aurora, a Camille? Too late now. Bunty’s name will be “Mummy” for

a few years yet, of course, but after a while there won't be a single maternal noun (mummy, mum, mam, ma, mama, mom, marmee) that seems appropriate and I more or less give up calling her anything. Poor Bunty. (13-14)

As the novelist Margaret Forster remarked: "Good grief, I can hardly believe it—a first novel which actually made me laugh, a first novel written so fluently and wittily that I sailed through it as though blown by an exhilarating wind; a first novel with a touch so light I only felt its truth and sadness after I'd finished it." <sup>1</sup>

What Margaret Forster doesn't say is just how many echoes of earlier novels there are in this fluent and witty opening, how far the author—who, by the way, has a failed Ph.D. on popular fiction—goes back to one of the founding novels of the eighteenth century—Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. *Tristram Shandy* was first published in York in 1759, and it's a neat coincidence that Kate Atkinson was herself born in York, where her novel is set. But more to the point, Sterne's novel begins at a similarly rather critical moment in the central character's life:

I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly consider'd how much depended upon what they were then doing; -- that not only the production of a rational Being was concern'd in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind; -- and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost: --- Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly --- I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that, in which the reader is likely to see me. -- Believe me, good folks, this is not so inconsiderable a thing as many of you may think it...

*Pray, my dear,* quoth my mother, *have you not forgot to wind up the clock?* ---- *Good G--!* Cried my father, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time, ---- *Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?* (5)

The hero of *Tristram Shandy* is worried that, because his mother was not concentrating on the business at hand when he was conceived, his whole life might be ruined. Fortune or chance lie at the centre of Sterne's novel, which helped establish one important thread for the development of the novel form: the self-consciously autobiographical narrative.

The connection between *Tristram Shandy* and *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* helps us to understand that, although many nineteenth-century novels also begin with a self-conscious, first-person narrator, such as the narrators of *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, or *Great Expectations*, the modernist novel harks back to Sterne, who emerges as the progenitor of such great moderns as Virginia Woolf, who dropped what she called the "scaffolding" (*Diary*, 26 Jan 1920; quoted in Flint xii), or the traditional mechanism of nineteenth-century novels, so that she could concentrate on getting right inside the minds of her characters, without necessarily identifying with them in the way we are encouraged to do by this kind of opening:

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously. (Dickens, *David Copperfield* 1)

For reasons of Victorian morality we would not expect a nineteenth-century novelist like Dickens to begin like Sterne or Atkinson with his hero's conception; so *David Copperfield*'s story starts with his birth. And, as readers may recall, *Great Expectations* picks up Pip's story later yet, while also encouraging us to identify with its hero: "My father's family name being Pirrip, and my christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip" (1). Not that the great modernist novels lack scaffolding, or structure, but it is hidden, or transformed into a different kind of patterning, of sound or image or symbol, as in D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915), or Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).

What the opening of *Great Expectations* anticipates, however, is the modernist awareness of naming as a function of language, as in this famous opening:

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo... . (Joyce 3)

We have here the apparently unmediated voice of James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, in the opening words of *A Portrait of the Artist* (1914-15), where Joyce gives us directly what his hero's "infant tongue" can manage, mimicking the child's use of language, while simultaneously echoing our earliest experiences of narrative, experiences of listening to, rather than reading, nursery stories. (Re-)reading it now, we can immediately sense its presence in Kate Atkinson's opening, in that parenthetical list of child-names for the mother, which, as in the *Portrait*, represents an enjoyment of language as a creative force in both written and spoken communication: "(mummy, mum, mam, ma, mama, mom, marmee)."

This playful pleasure in the potential of language is also what strikes the reader of Sterne today—especially if you have read Joyce or Atkinson as well. I don't know how far Sterne's own readers were aware of it, but what they were likely to have read before reading him was earlier fictions such as the picaresque and the epic, which Sterne, like Fielding before him and Joyce long after, invokes to mock as well as inhabit. But what then about that other commonly-cited precursor, Daniel Defoe?—with his Puritan interest in the moral implications of individual experience? Behind a novel like *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) lay travel-books and diaries—diaries replete with that Puritan concern to represent with a new realism the inner workings of the individual conscience which also appears in Samuel Richardson.

Insofar as nineteenth-century novels in English focus upon individual experience as a realistic moral testing-ground, Defoe was hugely influential; so that when, for example, Dickens searches for an appropriate image to define young David Copperfield's condition on arrival in London, he has David say that he feels "More solitary than Robinson Crusoe, who had nobody to look at him, and see that he was solitary" (72); or, indeed, when Kate Atkinson wants to suggest how past narratives hang about her heroine's birthplace, she says "and Robinson Crusoe, that other great hero, is also a native son of this city" (14).

And just to hammer home the point that novels are evidently written with other novels in mind, consider another opening, that can also be read in or through Kate Atkinson's opening, in particular her narrator's anxieties about having a mother with an appropriate name—"a plain Jane, a maternal Mary? Or something romantic, something that doesn't sound quite so much like a girls' comic—an Aurora, a Camille?" I am thinking of this famous opening:

No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her. Her father was a clergyman, without being neglected, or poor, and a very respectable man, although his name was Richard—and he had never been handsome. He had a considerable independence, besides two good livings—and he was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters. Her mother was a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper, and, what is more remarkable, with a good constitution. She had three sons before Catherine was born; and instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, as any body might expect, she still lived on—lived to have six children more—to see them growing up around her, and to enjoy excellent health herself. (Austen 1)

Catherine Morland's mother, then, is more like a plain Jane than a Camille—or Camilla, the name of Fanny Burney's more romantic or sentimental heroine. The opening of *Northanger Abbey* is designed to play off and laugh at contemporary expectations of what a novel's heroine should be like: the details

of this passage are written with an assumed awareness on the reader's part of other novels—in this case, the celebrated novels of Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Ann Radcliffe. Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* appeared in 1794, just four years before Jane Austen began writing *Northanger Abbey*, and it is most directly the novel against which Austen's was written. One of the things this connection also indicates is when the real emergence of women's voices in the novel may be dated, that is, during the 1780s and 1790s, the time of Clara Reeve's influential "conversations" on fiction, in *The Progress of Romance* (1785), one of the earliest examples of novel criticism in English.

Like these earlier women writers, but with a huge advance in technical control, Austen uses a narrative technique she was to develop into a sensitive instrument of subtly ironic, moral comedy, an all-knowing narrator who attends closely to the consciousness of one or more characters—a technique whose finest flowering appears in the later Henry James. In the passage I've just quoted, we might notice how Austen's narrator slips into the voice not yet of one of her characters, but anticipating it, the voice of an indignant young woman, by the merest modulation of tone—Catherine's mother "instead of dying" in bringing her into the world "as any body might expect" (that is, anybody who had been reading her contemporaries), still lives on, to contribute to the narrative.

The expectation of dying in childbirth is picked up by a later novelist, by Dickens, in the opening of *Dombey and Son*. Here once again we have the representation of the moment of the first appearance of one of a novel's central characters, Paul Dombey; although not only does his mother die as he is born, but our readerly expectations are more massively overturned when, despite the novel's title, and the emphasis of the early pages of the narrative upon his upbringing and education, it is Walter Gay who turns out to be Dombey's "Son and Heir" (as Miss Tox exclaims after Paul's death, "Dear me, dear me! To think...that Dombey and Son should be a Daughter after all!" [241]). "Son and Heir" is also the name of Walter's ship to Barbados, in which he might have drowned, if Dickens hadn't changed his mind and turned him into Florence's beloved. Walter Gay's story is a kind of *Robinson Crusoe* in miniature, hovering on the outskirts of Dickens's narrative, ironically inflecting the collapse of the whole Dombey trading enterprise. But the richer irony is that which surrounds Florence, dismissed by her father at the start as a "piece of base coin that couldn't be invested—a bad Boy—nothing more" (3). To return to my main point: which is that, as the beginning of one recent modern novel suggests, the openings of novels from the earliest to the present-day commonly, if not always, imply other novels. To return to Barthes, "there is no *first* reading." Indeed not. According to Barthes, the common view that there is some pristine first reading of a book is as fictional as other popular cultural myths. The idea of a first, or single reading, he argues, is a pretence fostered by "the commercial and ideological habits of our society," a society which tolerates re-reading "only in certain marginal categories of readers [such as] (children, old people, and professors)" (15-16). Every reading, even a so-called "first reading" is to some extent a learned or programmed response, which means it is conditioned by other reading. Atkinson's opening page only refers *explicitly* to one other kind of reading, girl's comics; although on the very next page she does mention both Sterne and Defoe; but, as I've been suggesting, the passage is haunted by other readings, not all of which I have picked up.

Now it may be argued that it is all very well for an experienced and committed re-reader like myself, marginalised as I may be alongside children and old people, to say that every reading is a re-reading; but I would argue that every reading is a re-reading simply because every reader has had to learn the language and its conventions, including the conventions of narrative, before or at least at the same time as learning to read. Nevertheless, I must admit that we do *in practice* still often read naively, as if for the first time, and further that we may need assistance in turning that reading into a re-reading. Indeed, if that weren't the case, why else do so many of us read critics and scholars and even reviewers, and listen to professors, who are always referring to other books they have read—or pretend to have read?

The underlying issue is highlighted by another novel opening, which I cannot resist offering. Here is a novelist who has played the game long before any self-consciously modern or even postmodern novelist or critic. The opening of Mark Twain's first-person, fictional autobiographical narrative, *Huckleberry Finn*, starts like this:

You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied one time or another. (49)

Twain's narrator then proceeds to tell us what happened at the end of the earlier novel, thereby apparently ensuring that we don't feel the need to read it, making us listen to *his* voice, and joining in the pretence—and, I am arguing, it is a pretence—that we don't need to know about other books, even those by the author, in order to read this one. But Twain also gives his naïve narrator that wonderful let-out clause, whereby we are assured that the author who created him "stretches" things anyway. So is all this a stretch, too? Nietzsche said twenty years before this was published that truths are "illusions, whereby we have forgotten that they are such" (52). At the very least, Twain's opening is a joke at the expense of all those nineteenth-century novels which began with the implicit claim that what they tell is the truth—or "the stern truth," as the preface to *Oliver Twist* has it (xvi).<sup>2</sup>

## II

So then if novels themselves encourage us not to be naïve readers, what might the benefit be of accepting this view, and not taking them for granted? Edward Said's answer, in his major early critical book *Beginnings*, is that we might realise some interesting and fundamental things about them, which take us towards a deeper understanding of what we mean by realism in fiction. The first of these things, is a "strong sense of doubt that the authority of any single voice, or group of voices is sufficient unto itself" (88). What he means by this is that we as readers always expect more; and, therefore, that is always what we find.

Thus, for example, our interest in Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* relies on our sense of her expectations of life being different from those of the life she currently leads; and so, after being presented as initially dissatisfied with her life, she goes on to develop another self through her marriage with Casaubon; and the self she leaves behind in that failed marriage she later recovers, tempered by her experience of self-deception. And as the author George Eliot creates the character of Dorothea (or Felix Holt or Daniel Deronda) to enact her will to be another, so the reader allows this development because it helps overcome our own sense of being isolated. According to Said, we all create fictional others, as alternatives to ourselves, to feed the illusion that we, individually, have power to control our lives (89). A dramatic example is provided by the story of Pip in *Great Expectations*, who begins his narrative as a kind of self-created being, but whose narrative then proceeds to both feed his illusions of power, and then disillusion him and us of them. I've already suggested that the beginnings of novels from *Tristram Shandy* onwards do very much remind us that their central character's life could well go in a different direction from that in which we are told it does go. As Dickens's David Copperfield says, whether he shall be the hero of his life or not, remains to be seen; which is why we read on.

The second of Said's fundamentals of fiction is a belief or an acceptance that "the truth—whatever that may be—can only be approached indirectly." This is done through the three elements with which the novel must "begin its work." These three elements are "human identity, human history, and human language" (90). The novel's work is to create identity and history through a kind of linguistic reconstruction. This is why at the centre of a novel there is always a character who is deliberately

original or unknown, unlike characters such as Oedipus, for whose portrayal a dramatist relies upon a mythic or socially accepted version of the past. Characters such as Robinson Crusoe or Madame Bovary or Isabel Archer require to have a past retrospectively constructed or invented for them—which is why, for example, after Henry James's memorable opening to *The Portrait of a Lady*, describing a group of people taking tea at an English country-house, he resorts to a lengthy flash-back in chapter three to give us Isabel Archer's history, before proceeding with the story, which then becomes her story. Typically, novel characters arrive in a milieu new to them, which either changes them or which they have to change. A more extreme example might be Etienne's arrival in Montsou in *Germinal's* opening pages; or there is Bazarov, the stranger brought home by Arkady at the start of *Fathers and Sons*, or Bathsheba Everdene, whose arrival in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* precedes by several chapters our being granted knowledge of her identity and history.

Hardy's narratives are however even more interested in the kind of character who prompts Said's *third* condition for the "generation of novelistic fiction": Sergeant Troy, a stranger, and one of those characters we experience as an *outsider*. Said typifies these outsiders as: "orphans, outcasts, parvenus, emanations, solitaries and deranged types whose background is either rejected, mysterious, or unknown" (92-93), that is to say, characters whose existence is premised on a fear of extinction, a fear which constantly threatens them, as the wilderness threatens Robinson Crusoe, or as Dracula threatens Jonathan Harker, or Mr Hyde threatens Dr Jekyll, or the Congo threatens Conrad's Marlow. All of this is of course another way of saying that novels are, ultimately, grounded in human experience, which is why we feel we can use our current theories of human experience to try and explain their appeal to us. Said's approach is rooted in Marxism refracted through structuralism, an approach according to which fiction offers illusory alternatives to the material realities of life; Freud's view, he says, would allow us to focus more on individual pleasure, on novels as a means "both to create alternatives to a confusing reality and to minimize the pain of experience" (94). This is why most nineteenth-century novels are as long as they are, and why that length remains satisfying, beyond the era when the material conditions of their production and reception encouraged the creation of three-volume or serial fiction. The long novel is prompted by a desire to create an experience of life, even if this also leads inevitably to a recognition of ending, to what Said calls the revelation of "a merely borrowed authority" (94). Why "borrowed"? Because the novel's world is both secular and temporary. Every novel gives the impression of truth, while finally suggesting that truth is more than it can display, since that is always as provisional and partial as our reading must be.

### III

I have been using Said's reflections upon novelistic beginnings to develop some ideas about the nature and interest of fiction in general, and about why we might enjoy the reading of nineteenth-century novels in particular. However, Said articulates his sense of what counts as a novel primarily from one particular *kind* of fiction: what he calls the "classic" novel, by which he means, simply, realist fiction. This begins to look like rather a disabling assumption, when we start to explore the truly amazing range of what was held to be a novel even only during the 19th century—including *Frankenstein*, *The Woman in White*, *Dracula*, or *The Awakening*. It is even more disabling when, in his later book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), he takes the nineteenth-century novel to task for what he considers its profound implication in, and not just implication in, but culpability for, imperialism. This is when I begin to resist his way of reading, a way of reading which presumes a naivety on the part of those of us whom he accuses of reading, say, Jane Austen, with an unawareness of the texts and documents which tell us about the West Indian sugar plantations upon which the wealth of her characters is based—most notably, Sir Thomas Bertram, in *Mansfield Park*.

Said sets out to remind readers today of the need, as he puts it, to

read the great canonical texts, and perhaps also the entire archive of modern and pre-modern European and American culture, with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented...in such works. (78)

By "ideologically represented" he means, for example, Kipling's Indian characters, whom he considers a distortion, although they *are* at least a presence in Kipling's fiction. We surely have to agree with him that it's important to give voice to what is silent or marginalised in the canonical works. And we agree with him, I think, when he says that references to India in *Jane Eyre* or to Australia in *Great Expectations* are made "because they *can* be," and they can be "because British power...made passing references to these massive appropriations possible" (78).

But *are* these *merely* "passing references"? I want to ask. Is that *really* how we read them today, so that we need Said to jolt us out of our naive habits of reading into accepting his version of nineteenth-century fiction? The answer is not straightforward.

Certainly we should read the nineteenth-century novels that have come down to us with an awareness of the wider, postcolonial world we have all inherited, in the multicultural societies of today, and which is made known and obvious to us today by a host of novels, not to mention the global media. We should not pretend that we can read *Heart of Darkness*, for example, without some awareness of the existence of a novel such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a novel which, as Achebe states, told the story he—representing his people—wanted to tell ("Named for Victoria" 70).<sup>3</sup>

Being aware of Achebe's novel today suggests that we also have to re-read and reconsider what was written by such major novel critics as Raymond Williams. Most scholars are specialists, which leads them to lose sight of the whole picture and to ignore the national and international context of, say, Dickens's representations of Victorian businessmen, which means missing the 'essential connection' between Dickens's fiction and its historical world. Dickens is central to Said's argument, and he uses Williams as a stick to beat both Dickens and those readers who fail to see the essential connections between fiction and history (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 13).

While I agree we should attend to what Said says in *Culture and Imperialism* about *Great Expectations*' complex connections with Australia via Magwitch's relation to Pip, I also think we can read it differently from how Said wishes us to read it, primarily by acknowledging that *Great Expectations* is no simple realist novel, but a *mixed* kind of fiction, incorporating popular Gothic elements such as dream, fantasy, and myth. Said simply takes for granted that Dickens's novel falls within the realist tradition of Defoe, Fielding, Jane Austen, and George Eliot, an assumption which limits the really subversive potential of such moments as that in which we witness through Pip's eyes the sentencing of Magwitch to death—a moment that takes us beyond realism, into a symbolic realm that declares the *equality* of the wealthy narrator and the deprived and brutal Magwitch, whose transportation to the colonies provided his wealth.

It is possible to trace where Said's reading of *Great Expectations* comes from, in fact. It comes from his reading of Raymond Williams, in particular his reading of Williams's Introduction to *Dombey and Son*. This Introduction was representative of Williams's whole approach in *The English Novel: From Dickens to Lawrence*, the series of Cambridge lectures Williams published in 1970. In his Introduction to *Dombey and Son*, Williams reads Dickens's novel as an insightful depiction of the new social and economic forces of the 1840s. The outlook of the firm of Dombey and Son, Williams asserts, could not have been better or more clearly stated than in that disturbing paragraph in which Dickens conveys the "one idea of Mr Dombey's life":

The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light. Rivers and seas were formed to float their ships; rainbows gave them promise of fair weather; winds blew for or against their enterprises; stars and planets circled in their orbits, to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the centre. Common abbreviations took new meanings in his eyes, and had sole reference to them. A.D. had no concern with anno Domini, but stood for anno Dombei—and Son. (*Dombey and Son* 2)

Unlike any of its predecessors, such as *Tristram Shandy* or *Robinson Crusoe*, this novel begins by conceiving a hero whose solipsistic vision fatally places him at the centre of all time and place. I mean Mr Dombey, not his son Paul, whose birth has just occurred. This paragraph underlines the importance of his son's birth to Dombey in terms of his overweening pride in himself and his company as the centre of the universe.

But, Said goes on to ask, "how *could* Dombey think that the universe, and the whole of time, was his to trade in?" Said attacks Williams and all who think like him for not supplying the obvious answer, which is that Dombey thinks like he does because Britain had by then expanded to India, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. "I sense a limitation," Said concludes, in Williams's "feeling that English literature is mainly about England, an idea that is central to his work as it is to most scholars and critics." Is it? This is quite a jump. And, Said continues, he will show throughout his book that English literature "makes constant references to itself as somehow participating in Europe's overseas expansion, and *therefore* creates what Williams calls 'structures of feeling' that support, elaborate, and consolidate the practice of empire" (emphasis added; *Culture and Imperialism* 14).

But do the English novels of the nineteenth-century really create "structures of feeling" that support, elaborate, and consolidate the practice of empire? And is Williams so culpable? Not to mention the rest of us (re)-readers of nineteenth-century novels. That "therefore" strikes me as both undeserved and unproven. For two reasons: firstly, Said is ignoring another book that Williams wrote, *The Country and the City*, published just three years after his Introduction to *Dombey*, where, as anybody who reads that book will realise, Williams shows he was well aware of the wider implications of the relationship between English literature and social change. Williams there points out, for example, that the country-houses of George Eliot and Henry James were at least in part the product of shifts in power and identity created through what he calls later nineteenth-century "industrial and imperialist development" (*The Country and the City* 338). And Williams was aware of writings from abroad that, as he put it, depicted "historical experiences" similar to those of the rural peoples of Britain—for example, the writings of the Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Indian R. K. Narayan, and the Guyanese Wilson Harris.

Williams also points out that there *are* English novels which have given a direct account of the experiences of slavery and plantation-life that underwrote the great English country houses, novels by Orwell, Forster, and Joyce Cary. Of course these offered "liberal ways of seeing the experience," whereas "the Indian and African and West Indian writers" provided the really "different and necessary perspective" we need (*The Country and the City* 342).

"A different and necessary perspective": that is an important phrase, reflecting a breadth of understanding and commitment on Williams's part, ignored by Said for the purposes of his polemic against the major nineteenth-century novels, their readers, and critics. It is Williams who remarks, for example, that "What is impressive about *Things Fall Apart* is that as in some English literature of rural change, as late as Hardy, the internal tensions of the society are made clear, so that we can understand the modes of penetration" brought by imperial expansion. And he goes on to point out that in the novels of writers like Ngugi, what has been

officially presented, to English readers, as savagery followed by terrorism, is seen in its real terms: so many different rural societies...invaded and transformed by an uncomprehending and often brutal alien system...rural communities uprooted and redirected by the military and economic power of a developing metropolitan imperialism. Nor is this only a process of the past or the recent past [he adds]; we have only to read, from South Africa, the writings of Ezekiel Mphahlele. (*The Country and the City* 342-43)

Not the most well-known of contemporary writers, and very far from the best; nevertheless, brought into the argument, which is that we read what we read through the different but necessary perspectives of other writers than those English novelists we may, for whatever reason, personal or institutional, be reading in the first place. It is Williams rather than Said, it seems to me, who thus persuasively encourages us to read the novels of the past in a way that is informed by our current reading; it is Williams who urges us to acknowledge that we read the past through the present—neither of which are stable entities. Yet there remains a limitation in Williams which, ironically, is silently accepted by Said: and that is his tendency also to read what he reads as if it were all realist fiction, or as if all that really counts is realist fiction.

This is my second reason for questioning Said's blanket condemnation of nineteenth-century novels for referring to Empire without, apparently, condemning it at the same time. If we read past novels through each other, as well as through the present, we are in effect accumulating a sense of the complexity of fiction and the various and never-ending series of affiliations present in any single novel. This sense of cross-reading should lead us towards a recognition of the difficulty facing any novelist or writer who tries to capture reality through the medium of language.

What I am also doing here is reading critics through each other, and behind both Said and Williams there lies a broader critical paradigm, derived from critics as diverse as Georg Lukacs and Ian Watt, according to which novels reflect socio-historical reality, critically or uncritically, in an everyday language pretending to be transparent. But, again, is this the appropriate paradigm for reading *all* nineteenth-century novels? My suggestion is that by reading some of the novels around us today, we are enabled to read many nineteenth-century novels from a more flexible and open perspective, aware of just how broad the realist paradigm may be.

To take just one example of a contemporary novel that challenges these paradigmatic assumptions: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Anyone who has read it will know how effectively it complicates and unsettles our sense of the realities we are dealing with in thinking about our reading of *Jane Eyre*. To read *Wide Sargasso Sea* is to be made to understand *Jane Eyre*'s connections with the colonial enterprise and its engagement with issues of race as well as gender through Rochester's mad Creole wife. And if we read novels such as Dickens's *Dombey and Son* as if we, too, were like Rhys, sensitive to the non-realist, symbolic, or deranged elements in it, we might be surprised at how far it goes in undermining the assumption of British power, overseas as well as at home. It is a mis-reading of that opening passage of the novel in which Mr Dombey's self-confidence is seen as a kind of cosmic egocentricity to read it as anything but a profound criticism from the very start of his trading operations: this is surely why Dickens concludes it with what would certainly have struck contemporaries as almost blasphemous as well as comically exaggerated: "A.D. had no concern with anno Domini, but stood for anno Dombei—and Son."

One critic who has read *Dombey and Son* with more openness to the different and necessary perspective engendered by reading postcolonial fictions is Suvendrini Perera. Perera sees the novel as a "complex interchange between the key categories of capital and adventure," each "enmeshed in the overarching ideology of empire." Perera uses Dickens's critique of a contemporary expedition to the Niger to underscore what he calls *Dombey and Son*'s interrogation of the "expansionist and adventurous vision of imperial trade." I'm not sure how far Perera thinks that interrogation goes,

although he helpfully points out how many of the characters in the novel are given connections abroad, ranging from the "black cook in a black caboose" serving on Walter's ship, to the unfortunate Master Bitherstone who (like the young Kipling years later) has been sent "home" from India to acquire a metropolitan education at Dr Blimber's Academy; and, of course, there is the overblown Major Bagstock and his black servant (Perera 81-84).

Perera seems to subscribe to the Said line here, arguing that the Native's predicament is merely comic. Yet consider the quotation Perera uses to back up his view: "The afternoon being sunny and hot...[the Major] ordered the Native and the light baggage to the front, and walked in the shadow of that expatriated prince." "Expatriated prince" is of course a joke, but it also ties in with other references to the servant's superior status in his own country, which undermine the malicious Major's treatment of him as a piece of "light baggage" on whom, of course, he is also utterly dependent (Perera 95).

Dickens's text makes it abundantly clear, I would suggest, that this particular colonial relationship is both ugly and unjust, and as with so many other aspects of the vast novel that is *Dombey and Son*, these details reinforce the novel's attack on the dehumanising impact of the commercial and expansionist ambitions which were then taking Britain into a leading role in India—a role reflected elsewhere in references to suttee and thuggee, practices the colonial power was using as a rationale for extending its control over the native princes of the Asian sub-continent during the 1830s and later.

And so when, in chapter XXIX, the Major maliciously sends his servant to enquire after Miss Tox's health after she learns that Mr Dombey is to marry a second time, the "expatriated Native" (as Dickens once again calls him) arrives in the nick of time

to catch the delicate burden in his arms, and to receive the contents of the little watering-pot on his shoe; both of which circumstances, coupled with his consciousness of being closely watched by the wrathful Major, who had threatened the usual penalty in regard of every bone in his skin in case of any failure, combined to render him a moving spectacle of mental and bodily distress. (441)

This comic tableau makes it quite clear that *both* the Native *and* Miss Tox are victims of the bullying, controlling masculinity seen in one extreme in the Major, and another in Mr Dombey, who is however made to lose it in the end.

This is just one small example of how Dickens actually works to undermine power and authority abroad as well as at home; although naturally his main focus is on the centre of power at home—and indeed, *in* the home. As the Governor Eyre controversy of the 1860s indicated, in public, like Carlyle and unlike George Eliot, Dickens did not stand in the way of imperial progress;<sup>4</sup> and there is much in his later journalism which can be found to reinforce the Said view of him.<sup>5</sup> But this does not mean we must read his novels as if they did not on one level or another, and in many of their most effective details, also contradict if not subvert prevailing assumptions about the desirability of imperial expansion, just as they contradicted, if not subverted, prevailing assumptions about the nature of realist fiction.

*Dombey and Son* is the first Dickens novel (if not the first English novel) in which we are made aware of being at the heart of empire, but it is also the first in which the systematic deployment of non-realist or symbolic devices to define both character and theme challenges what made Britain so: opposing Mr Dombey's frigid and unyielding nature with images of flow and motion, implicit from the start in the "dark and unknown sea that rolls round all the world" which the dead mother drifts out to join, the sea at Brighton whose waves the dying Paul hears at Dr Blimber's, the sea that transports Walter to the West Indies, and finally the sea beside which the broken, white-haired Mr Dombey has his daughter restored to him, like in some Shakespearean romance. For Dickens, as for Shakespeare, not to mention Kate Atkinson or Roland Barthes, the force for understanding and change lies in the imagination.

Finally, what I am saying is that many readings of nineteenth-century novels fail to understand or even perceive this force, and its implications in terms of realist conventions. I have been trying to suggest that as readers we have a certain freedom, to read the novels which lie before us as more open and various than they at first seem, if we read them naively—by which I mean without a memory of what else we have read, including critics. Reading novels nearer to us than the nineteenth century can help us to read their ancestors with more respect, more interest, and, more enjoyment. And after all, if we don't enjoy them, we might as well give up (re)-reading them.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted in the blurb, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*.
- <sup>2</sup> This is the 1867 Preface; in the original 1841 Preface, Dickens wrote "the stern and plain truth."
- <sup>3</sup> Achebe later attacked Conrad's 'racism,' which his work aims to oppose, in "An Image of Africa."
- <sup>4</sup> See Brantlinger 21.
- <sup>5</sup> For further discussion of this point, see Moore.

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