

Why Read the Serial Versions of Victorian Novels?

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The Hegemony of the Revised Text in Volume

Reading the author's final version of a text (whether it be a poem, a novel, or a play) has been the rule in the Humanities since chairs of literature began to be established in the late nineteenth century in Britain and America. Thus, the serial version of a text has usually been regarded as a rough draft not particularly indicative of the author's final intentions; indeed, many critics have preferred to neglect the serial text entirely, dismissing it as an unfortunate by-product of Victorian popular culture, and focussing exclusively on the author's final revision of the text. This attitude is particularly true of such Hardy novels as *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and *The Well-Beloved* for which the revised and serial texts offer significantly different readings in certain places.

The Place of the Serial Text in the Work's Critical History

The revised texts were not those upon which many a Victorian novelist built his or her popular reputation; rather, the serial texts were those to which the greatest number of Victorian readers responded. Victorian readers may have first encountered the Brontë sisters in triple-deckers, but they met a host of writers for the first time in part publications. Furthermore, the serial text produced the initial popular and critical responses that form the basis for the work's critical history. At some points, for example, Dickens had more readers perusing his weekly magazines and reading in instalments *Hard Times* or *A Tale of Two Cities* than purchased the *London Times*. Thus, reception theory and reader-response criticism require that the critic consider how the public was responding week-to-week to the Ur-text of *Great Expectations* in *All the Year Round* in 1861, or to that of *Martin Chuzzlewit* month-to-month in 1843. The serial text may be an unpolished diamond, but it was that text and not the final revision (often produced decades later) in which the Victorian readership saw itself and its world reflected, and to which it responded, often with great emotion, as was the case with the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Negative response (as Dickens interpreted the drop in monthly sales of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, for example) could induce a writer to try fresh plot gambits (e. g., sending Martin to America), to introduce new characters (consider the galaxy of "American Originals" in *Martin Chuzzlewit*), and to develop new themes and settings.

The Importance of the Plates that Accompanied the Serial Text

Finally, in the case of stories that had been serialised in magazines and journals, the final volume editions usually lacked the plates that guided and elucidated the initial readers through the print medium, augmenting the print-narrative or letter press with a narrative-pictorial sequence that assisted readers in following a complex, extended narrative over months or even years with a large cast of characters, unfamiliar character types, and settings beyond the ken of the primarily urban readership. Such is very much the case with the Wessex Novels of Character and Environment that Hardy published in Victorian periodicals between 1874 and 1895. The plates and vignettes, often placed at the beginning of each instalment, set up an anticipatory set in the readers, alerting them to significant moments that would occur somewhere in the current week's or month's letter press. The plates, then, contributed not merely to the suspense, but to a critical mindset, since the readers are invited (or perhaps "seduced" by the power of the visual medium) to compare and contrast their own visions of these narrative moments and the artist's against the original textual passage itself. Such a process of reading and re-reading is far more enriching because it reveals nuances of the text that a bare reading of a volume edition simply cannot. The sheer sense of anticipation and the process of realization, as Martin Meisel has pointed out, cannot be experienced as the first nineteenth-century readers experienced them except in a part-by-part reading that incorporates the originally visuals.

The Serial Text as a Product of the Times

The original serial text is the most accurate reflection we have of the writer's initial narrative impulses and responses to events in his or her life, whether those events be personal (such as a failed marriage, the birth of a child, or a trip abroad) or societal (the opening of a railway, the failure of a major financial institution, or the founding of the union workhouses). Sometimes "errors" perceived by later readers in a serial text are merely "misreadings." For example, the critic Arlene Jackson faults the vignettes of *The Cornhill* editions of *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *The Hand of Ethelberta* for failing to capture exact moments in the narratives; in fact, careful reading of the accompanying letter presses (not the revised volumes) reveals that these vignettes do not merely establish mood or setting, but are in fact the visual artists' interpretations of moments in the printed texts that the first readers saw. Jackson's misascribing of narrative moments depicted (in *The Trumpet-Major*, misidentifying Matilda Johnson as Anne Garland, and in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* incorrectly identifying the dying Alec D'Urberville as the sickly Angel Clare, for example) dramatises the dangers of too rapid and uncritical a reading of a narrative text. The business of the gifted illustrator, the Phiz or Helen Paterson Allingham, was to provide a coherent pictorial interpretation of situations, conflicts, and especially characters, augmenting textual symbols and icons and consistently portraying such details as Michael Henchard's nose in Barnes's rendering of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* to create a reliable visual and textual reading.

The Virtues of an Unrevised Text

If a gifted visual artist such as Picasso were given the opportunity to revise a significant work, he would undoubtedly remake the image according to later experiences and perceptions, perhaps using skills and techniques he did not possess at the original time of composition. However, the great work of art is not created in a social vacuum; rather, it is a reflection of the artist's total experiential world at a particular moment, however rough and imperfect as a work of youth it may be. It was the original *Guernica* of Picasso to which the world responded; it was the original work, with heavy brush-strokes and shades of black and white, that provoked a widespread response to Franco's Fascism in Spain. A revised version might be technically superior, but would lack the freshness of invention and the moral conviction of the original. Such may be a final justification for re-reading Victorian novels in their original, serial forms.

Related Materials

- Want to Experience What Reading Novels Serially is Like? — Christopher Hapka's site will e-mail works to you section by section