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Review of The Reenchantment of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, and Serialization

David Payne

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David Payne, *The Reenchantment of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, and Serialization* (Palgrave, 2005), pp. xiii + 206.

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‘To begin reading George Eliot,’ David Payne suggests, ‘is speedily to encounter the conviction that modernity is best approached from an oblique angle.’ Unlike, say, her contemporary, Charles Dickens, George Eliot’s fictions ‘return us to the provincial settings of Austen and Scott; and they set their actions in historical pasts which, as we read along, soon appear quite specific.’ Payne’s study of Dickens, Thackeray and George Eliot is primarily concerned with the Victorian response to modernity, but in a fairly specific methodological way, that entwines ‘the ideological history of theology and political economy, the literary history of the novel, and the commodity history of the serial into a single sociological narrative of developments in religion, social theory, and literary culture.’ If modernity was often experienced as disenchantment, Payne argues, then these novelists ‘reenchanted the Victorian world when they delivered their gospel of disenchantment in the symbolic vessels of Christianity, still the primary source for their society’s ordeals of development, and in the literary form of the serial, a potent sign of the commodification of culture.’

Payne focuses on the early work of Dickens, plus *Little Dorrit*, the early work of Thackeray, plus *Vanity Fair*, and the early short fiction of George Eliot, plus *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch*. It is good to see new work on texts still arguably understudied, including *Sketches by Boz*, *The Book of Snobs*, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, and ‘The Lifted Veil’. Payne’s readings of the texts are often suggestively complex and in places, strikingly so, but I am not exactly sure why he studies these serial writers and not others. Payne believes that Thackeray and George Eliot are Dickens’s ‘two greatest rivals in the form’, though other writers might usefully be drawn in to his discussion to prove this point; as it is, Elizabeth Gaskell isn’t mentioned, and there are only a few paragraphs on Trollope and a few pages on Wilkie Collins, to name only three of the novelists who might make Payne’s study more wide-ranging and deeper in its reach.

In writing about George Eliot, Payne takes his cue initially from the 1856 essay on Wilhelm Riehl, ‘The Natural History of German Life’, in which ‘Marian Evans was already proposing a new kind of prose form: “incarnate history,” the representation of historical change in a register with biological and theological overtones.’ In England, Marian Evans writes in the essay, ‘Protestantism and commerce have modernised the face of the land and the aspects of society in a far greater degree than in any continental country,’ and the result is a lack of organic connection across society. Protestantism and capitalism become the ‘two principal markers of modernity’ in ‘Janet’s Repentance’, a story of contradictions in which ‘the aesthetic of incarnation constructed around Janet Dempster strains towards the raptures of the saint before collapsing into the shameful movements of the hysteric.’ The concept of bourgeois marriage, through which George Eliot tries to ensure lasting social relations, leads to an anxious, disenchanted modernity.

For Payne, ‘the great historical paradox, to which *Middlemarch* does better justice than any other Victorian novel, is that one principal means of obtaining assent to the very modernity responsible for desacralisation was to infuse literary culture with a moral authority it had never

before been asked to assume.’ In his discussion of the novel, Payne is concerned less with providing a radical new reading of it, than with historicizing it and teasing out the ways George Eliot’s intellectual context – her early engagement with F. D. Maurice, J. S. Mill, and Harriet Martineau, and her access to a kind of ‘incarnate liberalism’, and her position in the 1870s – informed the novel, especially the characterization of Dorothea.

The conceptual impulse behind much of Payne’s study comes from sociology – its origins in Marx, and more significantly, its fuller articulation in later figures like Durkheim (or, more recently, Bourdieu) who took modernity, broadly speaking, as his subject. Payne thinks of the writers he discusses as ‘sociological novelists’, and George Eliot, for example, is said to resemble ‘her successor sociologist Max Weber.’ What George Eliot the sociologist and her two contemporaries manage to do for Payne is express ‘alienation and disenchantment in and for a historical consciousness’ while at the same time invoke ‘myths of benevolence and sacrifice from a lost Christian culture.’ The novelists are ‘emblems of Victorian modernity’ – emblematic of the contradictions of modernity which look to the past while commenting on the present, expressing ‘disenchantment’ while simultaneously offering ‘re-enchantment’, a kind of transcendence within modernity despite itself, in a literary culture of novel-worship. This is not the book to turn to for a general understanding of Victorian serialization, of nineteenth-century modernity, and of the development of sociological thinking in the period; but it is an intelligent, nuanced set of readings that often comes at its material from its own, fresh, ‘oblique angle’.

Mark Turner
King’s College London