



OXFORD

# NOVEL POLITICS

*Democratic Imaginations in  
Nineteenth-Century Fiction*

ISOBEL  
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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,  
United Kingdom

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First Edition published in 2016

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016940533

ISBN 978-0-19-879372-4

Printed in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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For Cora Kaplan



## Acknowledgements

I have taught the nineteenth-century novel to several generations of students on the mountain campus of the Middlebury Bread Loaf MA in Vermont, and it is they who made this book happen. We were always struck by the discrepancy between our perceptions of the risk and experiment in the novels we read and the caution and sense of limit we found in academic criticism—the assumption that texts must be limited either by nineteenth-century ideologies or by disciplinary forces in the culture. The energy and intellectual imagination my students brought to the texts made them read otherwise. I thank them warmly for the delight and insight that was the starting point of this book.

*Novel Politics* is for Cora Kaplan, who read an early draft, and whose wisdom, generosity, and deep and demanding scholarship enabled a rewriting when the book had reached an impasse.

I have been lucky in having challenging critics. Amanda Anderson read an early proposal and pointed out some fundamental problems; Tyler Curtain took me stringently through the book's omissions at a later stage; Josephine McDonagh suggested some material changes, and was always on hand to question and advise. George Levine generously pointed me towards work on Darwin. The three anonymous readers of the manuscript offered transformative advice. Their reports were works of thinking in their own right. The book's shortcomings are down to me.

I owe particular thanks to Ruth Livesey and Ella Dzelzainis for allowing me to see parts of their edited book, *The American Experiment and the Idea of Democracy* (2013) in manuscript, to Emma Clery for putting me right on illegitimacy in the eighteenth century, to David Gillott for solving a knotty research problem and wonderful expertise, to Colin Jones for his advice on nineteenth-century family history, to Talia Schaffer for reading advice, to John Rignall for details of Lewes's work, and to Toni Griffiths for information. Warm thanks to Jeni Buckley for invaluable help with the bibliography. The advice of friends and mentors is an indispensable part of a book's growth. Influential have been the late Simon Dentith, Laura Marcus, Helen Carr, Alison Mark, Mary Hamer, and Laurel Brake in England and Emily Bartels and Anna Henschman in America.

The unmissable annual conferences on George Eliot run by my dearest friend the late Barbara Hardy and Louise Lee at the Institute of English Studies over the last few years were inspirational. I gave lectures relating to



this book at the universities of Loughborough, Leicester, Sheffield, Sussex, Southampton, Oxford, and Chawton Library in England and Johns Hopkins University in the USA. On every occasion the comments I received were invaluable and I thank the many questioners unknown to me for their contributions.

My nephew, Colin Burrow, shared his scholarly knowledge of the classics and helped materially with technological expertise. My polymath husband, the late Michael Armstrong, always came to the rescue with information and ideas whenever I was stuck. I mourn his loss and thank him for a lifetime of challenge and discussion. Exuberance is beauty.

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# PART I

## DEMOCRATIC IMAGINARIES



# 1

## Genealogies

### INTRODUCTION

This book explores the living presence of democratic imaginations in novels of the long nineteenth century, and the way a democratic aesthetic shapes narrative form. The democratic imaginary has been systematically under-read. A belief that the novel indelibly registers bourgeois ideology and morality—Franco Moretti calls the novel the symbolic form of the bourgeois nation state—has meant that the novel's default position has been read as conservative and hegemonic.<sup>1</sup> The novel's seeming commitment to realism is a related problem: Fredric Jameson believes that the realist novel has an 'ontological commitment to the status quo as such'.<sup>2</sup> He writes that the cultural logic of realism 'requires a conviction as to the massive weight and persistence of the present as such, and an aesthetic need to avoid recognition of deep structural social change as such and of the deeper currents and contradictory tendencies within the social order' (p. 281). These critiques are directed to the classic realist novel and assume that there is such an (inevitably conservative) entity. Latterly, critiques of neoliberal 'compulsory democracy', which assume democracy is a mere front for global capital, an ally, not an opponent, of market individualism, have consolidated these claims.<sup>3</sup>

These readings belong to a perceptible shift in criticism. Identifying the reframing of discourse in the 'new' postcolonial studies of the 1990s, Neil Lazarus noted that the history of ex-colonial states was no longer seen

<sup>1</sup> Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900*. London and New York: Verso Books, 1998, p. 20. Throughout the book the first reference to a text is given in the notes, with subsequent references in parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Afterword', in *A Concise Companion to Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 279–89, p. 280. Jameson follows up this argument in detail in *Antinomies of Realism*. London and New York: Verso Books, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> See Simon During, *Against Democracy: Literary Experience in the Era of Emancipations*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012. During's serious and challenging book is joined by a larger contingent of French writers, represented in Giorgio Agamben and others, *Democracy in What State* (2009), trans. William McCuaig. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

through accounts of crisis or conflict. An ‘epochal transformation’ from the overarching world order of ‘modernity’ to another, ‘postmodernity’, has meant the displacement of ‘the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment (including, notably, the “grand narrative” of capitalist history) [which] are not merely arguable or susceptible to criticism, but have become definitively *obsolete*.’<sup>4</sup> A ‘struggle-based’ (p. 12) model of politics has given over to a more wary account of cultural difference and the complexities of colonial discourse. Arguably, not merely postcolonial studies but the whole field of criticism has become warily responsive to the obsolescence of such grand narratives—including those critics working in the tradition of Marxist criticism itself, those from whom I have just quoted.

A book that reads for a democratic imagination in the nineteenth-century novel encounters an inhospitable critical environment. Nevertheless I aim to undo the readings characterized above. The book describes the principles of a radical reading through a consideration of six novels of illegitimacy. It takes up illegitimacy as a heuristic device for examining its challenge to cultural norms, exclusion, social abjection, and perceived inequity.<sup>5</sup> Three novels of bearing illegitimate children and three novels of being one are case studies in the second part of this book—Walter Scott, *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818), Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth* (1853), George Moore, *Esther Waters* (1894), Jane Austen, *Emma* (1815), Wilkie Collins, *No Name* (1862), and George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (1876).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> My heuristic task has benefited from the considerable research on illegitimacy, both in terms of historical documentation and the fictional representation of illegitimacy in nineteenth-century novels, by Jenny Bourne Taylor and others. See Jenny Bourne Taylor, ‘Received, a Blank Child: Charles Dickens, John Brownlow and the London Foundling Hospital—Archives and Fictions’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 56. 3. (2001) 293–363; ‘Bastardy and Nationality: The Curious Case of William Shedden and the 1858 Legitimacy Act’, *Cultural and Social History*, 4. 2. (2007) 171–92; ‘Bastards to the Time: Legitimacy and Legal Fiction in Trollope’s Novels of the 1870s’, in *The Politics of Gender in Anthony Trollope’s Novels*, ed. Regenia Gagnier et al. Burlington, VA and Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, pp. 45–60. See also, Alys Levene, Thomas Nutt, and Samantha Williams, eds., *Illegitimacy in Britain 1700–1920*, 3rd edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005; Ginger Frost, *Living in Sin: Cohabiting as Husband and Wife in Nineteenth-Century England*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008; Margot C. Finn, Jenny Bourne Taylor, and Michael Lobban, eds., *Legitimacy and Illegitimacy in Nineteenth-century Law, Literature and History*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> The editions of the six novels are as follows: Walter Scott, *The Heart of Midlothian*, ed. Claire Lamont. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982; Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth*, ed. Angus Easson. London: Penguin, 1997, rev. 2004; George Moore, *Esther Waters*, ed. Hilary Laurie. London and Rutland VT: J. M. Dent, Charles E. Tuttle, 1991, rev. 1994; Jane Austen, *Emma*, eds. Adela Pinch and James Kinsley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008; Wilkie Collins, *No Name*, ed. Virginia Blain. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986; George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Edmund White. New York: The Modern Library, Random House Inc., 2002.

Part I sets out the ways we might think about democratic imaginations and the novel. Part II is a reading of the six novels through a poetics of democratic imagination that is both formal and discursive.

The family is an invariant element of the novel of this era, but it is defined through its other, illegitimacy. The family entity, dictating codes of exclusion and entitlement, hierarchy and class, and constantly shifting the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, depends for its stability in civil society on a definition of illegitimacy, by which it is underpinned. Illegitimacy becomes a nexus for a democratic imagination because it challenges cultural certainties, but its significance is greater than this, as the philological history of the word demonstrates. Its reverse reflection, 'legitimacy', *OED*'s etymology reminds us, coming into Middle English from Latin, is formed from *lex*, the law. The dictionary's definition of 'illegitimate' (deriving from the sixteenth century) stresses this: 'Born to parents who are not lawfully married, not entitled in law to full filial rights.' The general meaning of 'illegitimate' is emphatically associated with the law: 'not in accordance with or authorized by law; not in accordance with a rule'. Not simply spurious, the illegitimate is defined as one without legal identity, outside the law, outside heredity, a being without biological parents. The law assumes that it can arbitrate over biology, when in fact the law and biology are not parallel systems, but it ensures that illegitimacy is always an irritant to itself and its systems. Nevertheless the law is powerful enough to render the illegitimate an outsider and by extension stateless, a non-subject. The illegitimate body belongs to no one, has no roots. Thus illegitimacy and the *radical*—that which cuts to the root of things, reconceptualizes roots—come together as a challenge to the democratic imagination. It has to think through the claims of the illegitimate *ab initio*, going to the extreme limit of social space to do so and even to the limits of species being. For once you are placed outside the law your status as a fully human being can be questioned.

The law complicated this status further in the nineteenth century: it abandoned the illegitimate to legal non-being and at one and the same time exercised a coercive definition of its subjecthood. After the new Poor Law of 1834, the illegitimate mother could no longer claim financial support from the father on the grounds of paternity—paternity always being uncertain—and instead the new law ruled that economic relief for the mother must be assigned to the parish of her birth.<sup>7</sup> It was a blow both for and against patriarchal power. For, because it released the father from

<sup>7</sup> For an astute account of the post-1834 standing of illegitimacy and its implications for the culture as a whole, see Irene Tucker, *A Probable State: The Novel, the Contract, and the Jews*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000, pp. 108–13.



responsibility for his casually conceived offspring; against, because it erased him. In so far as the mother was solely responsible for the child deemed self-evidently hers, this ruling endorsed matrilineal power; in so far as it forced her into social and legal isolation it created a new kind of category of negative matrilineality. Though Thomas Malthus seems uncharacteristically generous to the illegitimate mother, marking the gender-driven injustice that ensures that a woman may be 'almost driven from society for an offence which men commit nearly with impunity', he was quick to point out that the 'offence' of illegitimacy meant that the woman and her children must 'fall upon the society for support'.<sup>8</sup> As for the illegitimate child, in the second volume of *Principles of Population* he insisted that 'after the proper notice has been given, they should on no account whatever be allowed to have any claim to parish assistance . . . The infant is, comparatively speaking, of no value to the society' (vol. 2, p. 141). This was amended to 'little value' in 1806, a change that makes little difference. If the child was deemed to have parents at all, that parent was its literally de-graded mother. It was severed from its birthplace, with no roots in a locality, uprooted both biologically and topographically. This outsider status, a double outsider status for mother and child, is why illegitimacy in the novel was for writers and is for us as readers a test case for radical thinking.

What does democratic imagination mean in this context? John Dewey described democracy as 'more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience . . . the widening of the area of shared concerns, and the liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities'.<sup>9</sup> Pragmatism's Hegelian heritage, and Dewey's seeming tendency to naturalize democracy as a form of life without political foundations, have earned him some sceptical readings. The usefulness of his formulation is that it points to an egalitarian way of life that implicitly refuses the taxonomy of legitimate and illegitimate. But it also points to a problem that I have to confront my readers with from the start. When uncoupled from its strict political meaning, the achievement of a universal franchise, the semantics of 'democratic' are unspecific. It is nevertheless the best word I can find. It may seem inappropriate to a century where full democracy was never achieved, and whose leading intellectuals—Carlyle, Mill, Arnold—it is only too well known, resisted

<sup>8</sup> T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1803), ed. Patricia James. London: 1989, vol. 1, p.324.

<sup>9</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1916. Quoted by Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987, p. xx.

the franchise. But as will be seen, I am not writing of novels whose politics are restricted to the franchise. I am speaking of the 'democratic' in a wider sense that collocates a number of meanings that on their own would be insufficient—egalitarian, radical, a life in common, comprehending an inclusive human species being. Its negative connotations are equally important: refusal of hierarchy and authoritarianism, repudiation of what I will later term the deficit subject, the subject that falls outside accounts of the fully human, consigned to bare life. A democratic imagination emerges through praxis in novels, through the capacity to *image* states and conditions, not through discursive definition. The common good, what it means to be human in the company of others, are concepts democracy strives to define. The meaning of democracy is always in process. It is an open term, perpetually demanding a new content. Inevitably 'democratic' risks a fiduciary element when it enters expositional language just as it risks essentialism. Despite this risk I am committed to it and to the need for testing out the integrity of its meaning in different contexts. As we know, democratic societies can always commit atrocities; but the democratic ideal remains a creative possibility. Recently Simon During produced an impressive taxonomy of six forms of conservatism, and argued that 'Particular ideas or values are not conservative by nature; they are conservative as historically situated and intended.' He adds that conservatism's 'structural tendency is to support hegemony'.<sup>10</sup> This suggests that locating a conservative text involves *reading* for hegemony as much as attending to the historical situatedness of the text. By the same token locating a democratic text means frankly *reading* for the anti-hegemonic. And reading for a democratic imagination acknowledges Adorno's principle: 'The greatness of works of art lies solely in their power to let those things be heard which ideology conceals'.<sup>11</sup>

A democratic imagination initiates a critical inquiry that belongs equally to the themes and to the poetics of the novel, where it is possible to see a social imaginary working formally and discursively. The corollary of this argument is that the novel of the long nineteenth century is deeply experimental. To attempt to discover a democratic aesthetic in the explicitly 'political' novel is to look in the wrong place, for two reasons: first, the modern category of 'social problem' too often preordains a limited thematic reading that iterates the conservative default model; second, the

<sup>10</sup> Simon During, *Against Democracy. Literary Experience in the Era of Emancipations*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Theodore Adorno, 'Lyric Poetry and Society', in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner. New York and London: Routledge, 1989, pp. 155–71, p. 157.

historical nineteenth-century writer was often hostile to the ballot, and the mechanics of the ballot are not where political energy lies. As a starting point the place to look is the prevalence of genealogy in the novel of this time. Why genealogy? Because it is about the law of exclusion. It is committed to hierarchy. It turns on the law. It is governed by the status of biological descent rigidly defined, by roots. Genealogy is established through the law of the father and implicitly on the transmission not only of biological identity but also of property, frequently designated as ownership of land. Nevertheless the genealogical imperative in the British novel of the long nineteenth century is extraordinarily self-conscious and deconstructive in its awareness of the protocols of inclusion and exclusion, of the new codifications of lineage, privilege, and class in print culture's encyclopaedias of the aristocracy, and of the old Enlightenment project of determining affiliative roots, wedded increasingly with a Darwinian reading of inherited characteristics. To question genealogy is to question the law, the *lex* on which it is founded, and thus a whole value system and relations of power.

## CODIFYING THE ARBOREAL FAMILY

‘throw up your chin a moment . . .’

Family genealogies outside the novel are elaborate exercises in construction, organized as they are round the male line and primogeniture. They are a product of artifice. To construct a genealogy in fiction must involve an understanding of the fictiveness of genealogy itself. It must be a constructive and a deconstructive project, for to construct not a historical but an imagined family tree is to be sharply aware of the legal, social, and economic rules and protocol, past and present, governing not only primogeniture but class, status, entitlement, and exclusion. To construct may be to collude, but it must always be an act of extreme self-consciousness. The arboreal model of family itself comes into question. Genealogy in fiction hints, overtly or covertly, at scepticism about social hierarchy, family lineage, and the permanence of the law, and both exposes and imagines the codes of inclusion and entitlement that generate exclusion. Postmodernism has taken the arboreal model to an ironic extreme, assuming the whole meaning of a novel is its genealogy, in the *Romanzo Historico* (1974) of Carla Vasio and Enzo Mari, a novel entirely constructed as a family tree.<sup>12</sup> But its antecedents are the sceptical and deconstructive genealogies of the nineteenth-century novel.

<sup>12</sup> Carla Vasio and Enzo Mari, *Romanzo Historico*. Milan: Milano Libri Edizione, 1974.

Sooner or later the narrator lets the reader know the genealogy of his or her main characters. Here are two examples that occur right at the start of novels from the end and the beginning of the century respectively. 'Throw up your chin a moment, so that I can catch the profile of your face better. Yes, that's the D'Urbeville nose and chin—a little debased.' In one of the most self-conscious acts of genealogy-making, Hardy, at the end of the century, treated the conventions of a long tradition of antiquarian research into family origins with open irony. He begins the first chapter of *Tess of the D'Urbevilles* (1891) with an extensive genealogical initiation: a scholar clergyman and amateur philologist tells John Durbeyfield he is 'the lineal representative of the ancient and knightly family of the "D'Urbevilles"', who go back to the Norman conquest: though its inherited characteristics are now 'debased'.<sup>13</sup> The myth of degeneracy goes hand in hand with the notion of 'pure' lineage—hence the wry force of Tess as a 'pure' woman. The tragedy unfolds from there. For the hypothetical affiliation of the Durbeyfields with 'Sir Pagan D'Urbeville, that renowned knight who came from Normandy with William the Conqueror' (p. 13), is not incidental to the plot, though the clergyman shrugs off his information as 'useless'. Hardy makes the germ of the tragedy lie in the obsession of certain forms of nineteenth-century historicism and linguistic research with 'tracing back', with roots, and the model of the arboreal family tree. He exposes its essential illogic. If widely dispersed affiliations are eligible as 'family', when do relations of affinity terminate? When do we effectively cut them off? The brutal answer is, when poverty takes over. The root of the tragedy is in its concern with the legal fiction of roots.<sup>14</sup>

Such genealogical irony is just as evident at the beginning of the century, where one might expect less scepticism. Jane Austen offers information immediately in *Mansfield Park* (1814): 'About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady'.<sup>15</sup> That 'good luck' deconstructs in just two words both aristocratic lineal entitlement *and* meritocracy as a basis for privilege. Genealogies call up whole power structures and formations. When, later in the novel, we come to the realization that Sir Thomas is a slave owner

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbevilles*, ed. Simon Gatrell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, chapter 1, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> See Hans Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967; Stephen G. Alter, *Darwinism and the Linguistic Image: Language, Race, and Natural Theology in the Nineteenth Century*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland. London: Penguin Books, 2000, chapter 1, p. 5.

on his Antigua estate, retrospectively the 'luck' of marrying into wealth and status takes on an even sharper political and legal edge. We wonder about the shallowness of this new slave-owning wealth, its pretence of heredity: what were Sir Thomas's antecedents? All we know is that his activities have been sanctioned by a—new?—baronetcy. Significantly his house is 'modern built', a fashionable Palladian construction, we assume, testifying to recently acquired status.

The genealogical imperative receives bracing deconstructive mockery in Thackeray's account of an aristocratic pedigree. Lord Steyne's monster pedigree in *Vanity Fair* (1848) gleefully lists the empty functions on which his *ancien régime* aristocratic capital is based. A depthless, scintillating array of mere names undermines his claims—a Whig myth of descent—to belong to an organic history dating from the Druids. Here the Steyne genealogy is a series of titles, where entitlement is tautologically invested in titles. These are not a *chain* of signifiers but a discontinuous list that reiterates power:

... the Most Honourable George Gustavus, Marquis of Steyne, Earl of Gaunt and of Gaunt Castle, in the Peerage of Ireland, Viscount Hellborough, Baron Pitchly and Grillsby, a Knight of the Most Noble Order of the Garter, of the Golden Fleece of Spain, of the Russian Order of Saint Nicholas of the First Class, of the Turkish Order of the Crescent, First Lord of the Powder Closet and Groom of the Back Stairs, Colonel of the Gaunt or Regent's Own Regiment of Militia, a Trustee of the British Museum, an Elder Brother of the Trinity House, a Governor of the White Friars and D.C.L.<sup>16</sup>

Thackeray, like Hardy, is mordantly aware that the credentials of lineage are the preserve of upper class groups (though punningly the Most Honourable Gustavus propagates a stain on family history that goes unnoticed by the upholders of privilege). Thackeray was more than aware of that prestigious codification of aristocratic lineage, Burke's Peerage, initiated in 1826 by John Burke. *Vanity Fair* refers to Burke and twice to his predecessor and rival, Debrett, whose records derived from John Almon's *The New Peerage* of 1769. Such pretentious documentation is also sinister in this text: Sir Pitt Crawley as Baronet is entitled to wear the 'blood-red hand' (9, p. 123) on the escutcheon of his coat of arms, a reminder that the category of baronet originated in bloodshed and the necessity to raise money for war in Ulster. Debrett's was an elite manual for the privileged, but Burke's labour of genealogical documentation was ceaseless: he went beyond the aristocracy to codify that lesser group of gentry that fell just

<sup>16</sup> William Makepiece Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, ed. J. I. M. Stewart. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968, chapter 64, p. 753.

below hereditary entitlement. He embarked on *A genealogical and heraldic history of the commoners of Great Britain and Ireland enjoying territorial possessions or high official rank, but uninvested with heritable honours* (1833–8), a work that continued to be updated to the 1960s. He also edited *The Patrician: A monthly journal of history, genealogy, antiquities, heraldry*. His son, Sir Bernard Burke, continued the work of exclusive social taxonomy with *A genealogical and heraldic history of the landed gentry of Great Britain* (1886). The earliest genealogical society was actually American, the New England Historic Genealogical Society, founded in 1845. English genealogists preferred to document the elite, such as *Walford's County Families* (1860). This zeal for documenting family privilege was clearly part of a general movement of codification that saw the first Census of Great Britain take place in 1801. However, the Burke records were a new nineteenth-century project of hierarchy and exclusion, a new form of genealogical law-making. It is significant that this intensification of the codification of the aristocracy happened at the time when the agitation for political reform that culminated in the Reform Act of 1832 was under way.

The supreme fiction of aristocratic genealogy is one thing. Details of family, fortune, and descent appear, less dramatically than in the examples here, but no less certainly in virtually all fictional texts of the period documenting upper and middle class family. The act of construction and the act of questioning run parallel. We hear from Trollope on the first page of *He Knew He Was Right* (1869) that Louis Trevelyan had married Emily Rowley, daughter of Sir Marmaduke, governor of the fictitious tropical Mandarin islands, who at fifty possessed an income (and eight daughters) no larger than the £3,000 a year his twenty-four-year-old son-in-law could realize on his inherited wealth. It is Trollope who exposes the functions of genealogy when one of his personae, Mr Wharton, in *The Prime Minister* (1876) speaks of Ferdinand Lopez, a character whose origins are unknown, as a man without 'belongings'.<sup>17</sup> He does not mean 'belongings' as property, but the record of birth and affiliation that affirms your legal and social status. Your genealogy 'belongs' to you and shows others where you belong. Without its guarantee of family history you have no identity or standing.

Thus, as important as the provenance, status, and wealth of such figures, is the fact that they belong to a recognized history of biological law. The politics of genealogy are subtle: George Eliot is careful to relate that Dorothea, in *Middlemarch* (1872) is descended from a 'Puritan

<sup>17</sup> Anthony Trollope, *The Prime Minister*, ed. David Skilton. London: Penguin Books, 2004, chapter 5, p. 44.

gentleman who served under Cromwell', not only registering the unusually intense social feeling that Dorothea expresses, and that a modern reader might miss, but also making sure of a gendered understanding. Women are 'lineal' descendents as well as men.<sup>18</sup> Daniel Deronda is uncomfortably aware of the Mallinger family tree from a boy, uncertain of his part in it, an illuminated document that is brought out to show off the longstanding aristocratic Mallinger lineage when Grandcourt and Gwendolen visit. Genealogies in the novel register almost impersonally criteria for expanding or contracting the limits of social inclusion and are sensitive to the nuances of groups and formations and the changing configurations of class hierarchy. Sir Marmaduke belongs to a new professional bureaucracy invested in colonial governance, and Dorothea is affiliated to a proud minority tradition of Puritan gentry-republicans reaching back to the Civil War. It is no wonder she castigates her wealthy compatriots (with radical feeling rarely taken seriously either by her fictional contemporaries or by readers) for living complacently in their 'great houses', from which they should be whipped (p. 31).<sup>19</sup> *Daniel Deronda's* Sir Hugo Mallinger, on the other hand, is a Whig grandee, a formation conspicuous in nineteenth-century fiction. These fictional characters' understanding of social experience, class, and status, is often determined by the ways they can see beyond their own conditions—or not. Mallinger, over-confident but in some respects correct, is convinced, for instance, that political reform will not substantially change the aristocratic and elite class structures of England or make a 'serious difference' to them.<sup>20</sup>

If characters do not belong to such established groups their place in provincial life is carefully localized. The lineage of Elizabeth Gaskell's 'fallen' woman in *Ruth* (1853) is an example. Significantly this is a matrilineal account. 'Ruth's mother had been the daughter of a poor curate in Norfolk, and, early left without parents or home, she was thankful to marry a respectable farmer a good deal older than herself'.<sup>21</sup> As Ruth's mother slips down the social scale in the move from being the daughter of a professional man and gentleman to becoming the wife of a country farmer, so Ruth slips further, in less than a generation, by joining the labouring poor and becoming a seamstress on the deaths of her parents. The precariousness of class and status and its material power to order lives is poignantly understood.

<sup>18</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton. London: Penguin Books, 2003, chapter 1, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Barbara Hardy for reminding me of Dorothea's vehemence.

<sup>20</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Edmund White. New York: The Modern Library, Random House Inc., 2002, chapter 69, p. 721.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth*, ed. Angus Easson. London: Penguin Books, 2004, chapter 3, p. 33.

The point of emphasizing the genealogical imperative in the novel is that genealogy enables us to probe details of origin that have been set up with purposive deconstructive design. Genealogy is the place in the novel that exposes origins and indeed the myth of origins in such a way that one cannot say that ideology is going on behind the novel's back. What we encounter is a sharply critical self-consciousness where class and status are reimagined. It is where we will find the self-conscious markers of a democratic imagination. It is where the notion of a default conservatism has to be substantially complicated and revised.

There are two ways in which the genealogical imperative manifests itself in the novel: direct and indirect. Sometimes writers introduce problems of class and privilege openly: Trollope's *Cousin Henry* (1879) deals frankly with the contradictions and artifice of primogeniture. But many novelists leave details to be deduced, often exposing a dubious entitlement or problematic family history that points to the precariousness of the social order and its constructedness. In contrast to *Mansfield Park*, Austen uses the indirect deployment of genealogical matter in *Emma* (1815). We hear that Emma is handsome, clever, and rich, but later that the Hartfield estate is a small 'notch' in the Donwell land. From this we deduce the relative brevity of the Hartfield family's ownership of wealth, and its possibly dubious and parvenu origins in comparison with the longstanding history of the Tory landowning Knightleys—in the non-stop commentary that initiates her acquaintance with Emma, the upstart Mrs Elton remarks that both her own sister's Maple Grove and Emma's abode are 'modern' houses, which doesn't augur well. The grounds of Emma's genealogical snobbery and her eugenic commitment to 'blood' become curiously problematical. After her hysterical response to Elton's proposal of marriage, adding the taint of trade to its insult, her fear of sexuality, of her own and others, hides behind a sense of entitlement that becomes suspect and euphemistically uncertain: though the Woodhouse fortune does not come from 'landed property', Emma tells herself, in a revealing moment of free indirect discourse, they have been settled in Hartfield for 'several generations' (number unspecified), they are of 'a very ancient family' (how ancient unspecified), with an income not from land but 'from other sources' (unspecified).<sup>22</sup> If an income did not originate in land in the early nineteenth century, it is hard to see where else it could have come from except from inward trade or outward trade with the colonies. Some critics characterize this income as stocks and bonds, but stocks and bonds have simply transformed the vulgar income derived ultimately from

<sup>22</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma*, eds. Adela Pinch and James Kinsley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, chapter 16, p. 108.



trade into a more distant form of it. To whom do those words, 'handsome', 'clever', 'rich', belong? Are they the internalized vocabulary of privilege to which Emma has been early acculturated? In any case, they cannot remain unquestioned.

Family history is bound up ideologically with the broader movement of history. In a very different novel, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) the same indirectness is at work, but we can still deduce a significant genealogy for the Earnshaw family. Lockwood, the fact-gathering urban outsider who fancies himself as an amateur anthropologist, visits Wuthering Heights. He sees the date, '1500', over the door of the farm-house, and 'grotesque' carvings of griffins and 'shameless' (illegitimate?) little boys in its stone lintel, with the name, 'Hareton Earnshaw' inscribed there.<sup>23</sup> The year 1500 takes the Earnshaw family back to the reign of Henry VII, and to the establishment of Tudor power after the Wars of the Roses. It's even possible that the origin of the (presumably Yorkshire) Heights was a grant of land awarded for a part in this conflict. Perhaps the Earnshaws earned something. Emily Brontë places the Heights at the junction of two great historical upheavals, these wars, and the coming of Protestant England under Henry VIII. The 'shameless' carvings that clearly make Lockwood uncomfortable about his sexuality are not remnants of medieval iconography: early modern putti were part of the influx of renaissance art into England at this time, a movement that continued into the Elizabethan era. Emily Brontë's accurate, though slightly early placing of putti in this location, suggests that she knew of the revival of putti through what is sometimes termed the Victorian renaissance revival.<sup>24</sup> The 300-year-old Earnshaw family was once cultured and upwardly mobile, it seems, but now its isolation has forced it in upon itself, though always with libido and aggression to spare. Its ossification as a farming family without the entrepreneurial talent of the rentier practices of Thrushcross Grange has declassified it. Its introversion makes it a prey to another cultural phenomenon of modernity, romantic love, and the compensatory hubris of the romantic subject that creates its own terms for existing in the social world. The carvings, stone remnants from another era, point to an enduringly 'shameless' erotic

<sup>23</sup> Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. David Daiches. London: Penguin Books, 1985, chapter 1, p. 46.

<sup>24</sup> The putto, revived in quattrocento art, arrived in England as part of the so-called Northern Renaissance in approximately 1500, and interest in putti reappeared in the nineteenth-century revival of renaissance art. See Charles Dempsey, *Inventing the Renaissance Putto*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. See also Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992; Katherine Wheeler, *Victorian Perceptions of Renaissance Architecture*. Aldershot and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2014.

unconscious at *Wuthering Heights*, where romantic love depends on possession, on being possessed, and on possession of the other. Passional possession and material possession become hopelessly entangled.

Emily Brontë's historical and political insight is so deeply and profoundly embedded in her text, and so indirectly, that its implications and indirectness require teasing out. This embeddedness appropriately rounds off these detailed examples of the genealogical imperative because the critique of the law of exclusion engaged by the democratic imagination occurs in this narratologically embodied way. It is immanent. The democratic imagination comes into being through praxis. It is a critical project: it does not pursue a finite agenda or preordained plan. Yet it is sustained by a purposive imagining of the constructed fragility of social forms and how they could be otherwise.

Unwillingness to read this kind of indirectness and its purposiveness is the reason why the genealogical imperative and the centrality of the family to the novel is frequently seen as a limiting factor, a concern with domestic values that is taken as evidence of the conservative default mode, an elite middle class idiom. An extreme form of such criticism has aligned the novel with an Englishness that is in identity with the nation and an ideology of power and hierarchy on the assumption that the family affiliations and credentials so carefully mapped in fiction are a microcosm of the nation state and its authority. In turn the nation state comes to be envisaged as an extended family. We have seen Franco Moretti's reading of the novel: for Terry Eagleton the novel is the literary form most typical of the bourgeois culture that is both agent and shaper of the nation state.<sup>25</sup> (Moretti and Eagleton have been joined by more open critics who are re-reading the working class novel, and who see mainstream fictions as canonical, realist, and middle class.)<sup>26</sup> These critics belong to a strong tradition of Marxist criticism and take up what can fairly be expected to be a predetermined position. Yet in his impressive *Nation and Novel* (2006), even such a subtle and less aligned critic as Patrick Parrinder is inclined to bring the novel and its family themes under the rubric of the nation state: taking up Benedict Anderson's model of the imagined community, he writes that 'if the novel is a representation of an imagined community, then so, as many recent writers have argued, are our ideas of

<sup>25</sup> A view best represented in Terry Eagleton's *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*. Oxford: Wiley, 1995.

<sup>26</sup> See in particular Ian Haywood, *Working Class Fiction (Writers and their Work)*. Tavistock: Northcote House Press, 1996; Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, 'The Virtue of Illegitimacy: Inheritance and Belonging in *The Dark Woman* and *Mary Price*', in *G. W. M. Reynolds: Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press*, eds. Anne Humphreys, Louis James. Aldershot and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2008, pp. 213–26.

nationhood'.<sup>27</sup> He sees the presence of family genealogies as the sign of national allegory: the more prominently genealogy is stated at the outset, 'the more clearly is family identity linked to national identity' (p. 33). For example, both Jane Austen and the Brontës are for him 'Tory daughters'. 'Novelists like Austen and Charlotte Brontë lead us through romantic complications, intricate false alarms, and delicate misunderstandings to an endorsement of Tory England' (p. 185). Undoubtedly the nation state hovers over the novel at this time. Genealogy and the nation are interlocking categories. Yet to disarticulate them, and to bracket the idea of nation, has the advantage of exposing the radical impulse of the genealogical imperative and the way it persuades us, in and through a reading of its particulars, to reimagine society.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, once we assent to genealogy as critique rather than consolidation, the legitimacy of the nation state itself comes under question.

This book begins with family genealogy because it opens out a debate on how to read for a democratic imagination. To consolidate a reading of democratic imagination through genealogy, I turn in the final part of this discussion to that 'conservative' text, *Felix Holt* (1866). This is a disappointing novel, not to say disquieting, if one concentrates on the immediately political elements of the franchise, the hustings, and electoral corruption. Its lack of belief in political process and distrust and lampooning of the working class is frequently dismaying. But its designation as a 'political' novel is precisely what gets in the way of a radical reading, rather as the tag 'condition of England novel' circumscribes those texts that come under this description. To look for the radical here through political institutions is to look in the wrong place.

### FELIX HOLT

There is general agreement about two aspects of this novel: first, that Felix Holt, the radical, is not radical, and neither is the novel as a whole. Second, that the 'highly complex legal plot', as a recent editor, Lynda Mugglestone, calls it, is one of the 'chief problems' of the novel, and is simply a mechanical device for manoeuvring Ester into the inheritance of

<sup>27</sup> Patrick Parrinder, *Nation and Novel: The English Novel from its Origins to the Present Day*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> Genealogical details are literally present as descriptive items in the text. Their implications can be read. The nation state is frequently theorized from details that *stand in* for it, metonymically, as in the example above. The nation is important in two of the six novels I discuss, *The Heart of Midlothian* and *Daniel Deronda*. It is a more distant category in the others.

Transome Court and establishing her elite class status.<sup>29</sup> Her rejection of this status is a plot manoeuvre that is partly a concession to the romantic alliance with Holt, and partly a way of demonstrating her serious moral transformation. The elaborate genealogical plot is not often taken seriously, but it needs to be. It is worth remembering that working class novelists frequently granted poor and illegitimate characters an unexpected aristocratic lineage, a practice that Ellen Bayuk Rosenman has ascribed to a deeply held ideology of land rights in common that was codified in Chartist discourse.<sup>30</sup> It is interesting that Eliot aligns herself with such narratives. Except to note that Rosenman is one of the few to take the legal plot seriously, however, I shall not pursue the theme of natural rights but turn to the machinations of genealogy engineered by Eliot in collaboration with Frederick Harrison, her lawyer friend. The critical presence of genealogy in the novel occurs in the indirect, embedded way I have described. But significantly, the law, *lex*, is crucial to its genealogy. Its fictive exclusions and purely legal manufacture of entitlement are central to the plot. But it is genealogy rather than conventional politics that generates radical questioning.

The novel has been contaminated by the later 'Address to Working Men' of 1868, published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in January, after the Reform Act of 1867, with the avowedly conservative purpose of warning against the evils of an extension of the franchise. There can be no apologetics for this document. Nothing can mitigate Eliot's distrust of the working classes in this pamphlet: 'the danger hanging over change is great, just in proportion as it tends to produce such disorder by giving any large number of ignorant men, whose notions of what is good are of a low and brutal sort, the belief that they have got power into their hands, and may do pretty much as they like'. 'Civil war' is not too strong a term for the dominance of ignorant working class interests.<sup>31</sup> 'Felix' begins by saying that if labourers of all sorts had been 'well-judging, industrious, sober' (p. 485), they could have shamed the upper classes out of vice—religious, political, economic—thus laying national corruption at the door of the unenfranchised working class. Similarly, the abuse of child labour is seen as the sole responsibility of the poor, who should see to it that they do not send their children to work. The working class are exhorted to preserve the leisure of the cultured class in order to preserve the 'treasures of knowledge' and of 'refined needs' (p. 495), without being told that they

<sup>29</sup> George Eliot, *Felix Holt: The Radical*, ed. Lynda Mugglestone. London: Penguin Books, 1995, p. 479.

<sup>30</sup> Bayuk Rosenman, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>31</sup> 'Address to Working Men', Eliot, *Felix Holt, Op. Cit.*, pp. 485–99, p. 492.

might have access to this knowledge themselves. Eliot's thinking is often associated by critics with the liberal aestheticism of Schiller and Arnold, with its ideal of cultural education as a prerequisite for citizenship, and above all with John Stuart Mill's cautiously liberal reading of the franchise.<sup>32</sup> But Eliot's polemic in this document displays none of Mill's agonistic sense that individual autonomy and participation in debate and in collective life should be universal in civil society—while at the same time fearing its consequences. Though he constantly puts himself in impossible positions—everyone should have a voice but not the same kind of voice—Mill repeatedly recognizes, in 'Considerations on Representative Government' (1861), that the labouring, or any class, 'cannot justly be excluded' from the franchise, and that participation in political discussion creates a democratic polity of socially responsible and rational beings.<sup>33</sup> Though he repeatedly found ways of limiting the class ascendancy of manual labourers, fearing 'a low grade of intelligence' and 'class legislation' as the dangers of representative government, and excluded those on parish relief from the franchise, 'Government of the whole people by the whole people, equally represented' (p. 448), was his ideal. The circulation of ideas as a basis for democratic citizenship was essential—'I know not how a representative assembly can more usefully employ itself than in talk' (p. 433)—yet he struggled so hard to ensure that 'every interest and shade of opinion' could be 'passionately pleaded' that his solutions create a form of virtual representation for all, predicated on discussion, not action, as the terminal point of democratic citizenship.<sup>34</sup> What representation actually represents, what to be 'equally represented' entailed, was a puzzle for him. (In voting do we represent the self or are we a proxy for something else?) Nevertheless 'Considerations on Representative Government' and *On Liberty* (1859) are honourable documents, genuinely aware of the problems of majority rule and government by interest groups.

The political axis of the novel is very different from Eliot's later 'Address'. This kind of discrepancy between a writer's avowed beliefs and the fiction she or he writes is one reason why I have avoided correlating texts with their

<sup>32</sup> See Chapter 3 for the critical tradition stemming from formative work such as that by Catherine Gallagher in *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832–67*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

<sup>33</sup> John Stuart Mill, 'Considerations on Representative Government' (1861), in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977, 33 vols., vol. 19, part 2, *Essays on Politics and Society*, p. 448. Online Edition.

<sup>34</sup> Mill's strategies for circumventing class interest were a graduated franchise in which working class voters would have a single vote, while the educated would be allowed multiple votes, and the breaking of the tie between locality and representation: voters could vote for any candidate anywhere in the country.

extra-texts: fiction often belies what is said outside it. Never trust the teller, trust the tale. Felix Holt attempts to *live* a political commitment to education of the labouring class (adopting Mill's understanding that education is a prerequisite for democratic participation), and eschews confrontation and activism as a consuming and ultimately destructive pursuit. This is an agenda-less stance often adopted by Eliot and astutely described by Amanda Anderson as a cosmopolitan stance. In this the novel comes nearer to Mill's principles, though it never coincides with them.<sup>35</sup> The novel is dialogic as the address is not—we remember the second chapter of *On Liberty*, 'On the Liberty of Thought and Discussion', that makes the play of opinion axiomatic in a participatory civil society. The dialogic principle of the novel is affirmed in the two election-day speeches. These two speeches, roughly equal in length, made by a working man from industrial England and subsequently by Felix, set up respectively a serious and informed Marxist agenda and a policy of rational disengagement associated with a liberal stance—'you may get power sooner without votes' (p. 292). The materialist and idealist arguments are deliberately set against each other to dramatize antithetical positions, both granted considerable intellectual respect by the narrative voice. The first speech offers an account of class exploitation and oppression—its Marxism is classic, and detailed with real political inwardness. The red-haired stranger, a working man and factory labourer who speaks before Felix, sets up an agenda, originally formulated by Francis Burdett, associated with very early Chartist thinking, and this is how commentators rightly view his speech: 'we must have universal suffrage, and annual Parliaments, and the vote by ballot, and electoral districts' (p. 290).<sup>36</sup> But his ideological knowledge goes much further than the six points of the 'People's Charter'. He offers an informed critique of the oppression of monopoly capital and of aristocratic power—'in some countries a poor man can't afford to buy a spoonful of salt, and yet there's salt enough in the world to pickle every living thing in it... The aristocrats are pretty sure to try and govern for their own benefit' (p. 289). For him the Reform Bill of 1832 is a 'trick' (p. 289), a form of bribery to placate the unenfranchised. He sets up religion as the opium of the people: 'a religion that gives us working men heaven, and nothing else' (p. 290).

Felix, on the other hand, puts a familiar anti-reform case: the mechanistic, computational thought behind reform arguments and majority rule relies on machinery rather than human energies; an educated public

<sup>35</sup> Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

<sup>36</sup> See Eliot, *Felix Holt*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 533.