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Odile Boucher

The Criticism of Fiction
in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, 1832-1850



It is a matter of some regret that in his recent collection of essays from Victorian periodicals on the novel,¹ John Olmsted did not include an extract from the pages of *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* which merits a place next to the oft quoted essays and reviews of *Fraser's Magazine*, *The Edinburgh Review* or *The Athenaeum*. Founded in 1832 by the Scottish publisher and bookseller William Tait, this magazine was destined to counter-balance from 1832 to 1861 the extreme conservatism of *Blackwood's Magazine* in Scotland's capital, and to be an organ of Radical ideas carrying on in Scotland the work of the *Westminster Review* of London. In a letter to the poet and essayist Thomas Doubleday, William Tait points out the support given to his enterprise by the staunchest Reformers of the time:

I am supported by the best writers and the best men in the country, by Articles or by influence, Bentham, Dr. Bowring, Col. F.P. Thomson of the *Westminster Review*; the Editors of the *Examiner*, *Spectator* and other liberal papers; Joseph Hume. I have many and excellent friends, being known to be a sincere Reformer and having always come forward when any thing was to be done for the cause.²

Tait's owed its literary fame to the articles and short notices of Christian Isobel Johnstone, a Scottish journalist, literary critic and novelist who wrote the literary section of the magazine, the "Monthly Register of New Publications." Some estimations of the literary achievements of *Tait's* should be quoted:

Mr. Tait...early manifested a turn for literary pursuits, and during the period of the Reform Bill agitation, launched his magazine on the world, with great effect in advancing the Radical cause, with which he was so much identified; of much use also in bringing forward young authors who afterwards rose to distinction--Nicoll, Aytoun, Ebenezer Elliot, and Theodore Martin--among the rest....Mrs Johnstone nominally edited the Magazine for a series of years, and her reviews and fine taste in selecting from new books did much for its popularity.³

...on the whole, it was more of a literary than a political organ. Its working genius was Mrs Johnstone, a novelist and critic of great ability; while Mr Tait conducted the necessary correspondence with the actual and would-be contributors. It was Mrs Johnstone, however, who generally passed judgement on the articles offered, and she was herself a large contributor, both in fiction and in criticism; many of the long and admirable reviews of important new books, for which the magazine was famous, coming from her pen.⁴

In its many pages devoted to the criticism of fiction, *Tait's* made its conception of the function of literature perfectly clear:

Is it not the first duty, the noblest privilege, of genius, of poetry, of invention, of all that is best in literature and art, to raise and purify society, to widen the sphere of our sympathies with the pure and the lofty, as well as with the tender and the beautiful; to plant high and firmly the standard of virtue, whatever of toil, and pain, and self-denial, is to be encountered in pressing upward and onward toward the mark?⁵

Such was for *Tait's Magazine* the calling of art, and because of its clearly discernible criteria of moral and social usefulness in its criticism of fiction, it has rightly been described as "a Utilitarian publication."⁶ Far from being peculiar to *Tait's*, such criteria are universally present in the criticism of the two decades 1830-1850. The constant demand to have the

novel rooted in reality and to find its subject-matter in contemporary situations is a feature of the criticism of that period. At a time when R.H. Horne believed purely imaginative romance to be extinct,⁷ *Tait's*, just like *The Athenæum*, expressed its disapproval of the type of novel qualified by David Masson as "the novel of supernatural phantasy,"⁸ on the grounds that the novelist entered the realms of fantasy purely because he was incapable of discovering suitable material for his fiction in the world around him:⁹

There is so much interest and beauty in the world of actuality, on which the talents of writers of fiction may be employed, that we think it a pity that a writer of ability and observation should waste his strength on the praeternatural.¹⁰

Tait's indeed believed that nothing but the real was a suitable foundation for fiction as only characters closely resembling true human beings could arouse the reader's sympathy and sustain his involvement with the novel itself:

The venture was made, in a late number of this Magazine, to claim for histories of real life a share of the interest lavished upon fiction...For there is a power in the actual, quite peculiar to itself, and rooted in the deepest grounds of human sympathy. The knowledge that what I am now hearing was the real history of a living man, touches me with an emotion allied to personal feeling, and forces my imagination to complete a story that the narrator may have merely sketched. Far less active is the assistance given to the fabulist, who is seldom trusted for more than he himself exhibits. It is rarely that we attempt to pursue his invention beyond the limits which he has drawn around it.¹¹

Quite naturally, the thesis-novel met with the approval of *Tait's Magazine* which reviewed extensively this type of fiction and saw it as a sign of the much improved standard in novel-writing, the seriousness of the preoccupations with which it was concerned contrasting favourably with the Minerva Press romances of past generations:

It is to the credit of the age...that, in the most slight and ephemeral work of entertainment, as well as in the highest compositions of the class romance, we find those great political and moral questions which stir the general heart to its core, often ably discussed, and always

in some shape brought prominently forward to point the moral, if not to adorn the tale. In not unfrequent instances, the basis, aim and end of the most brilliant fictions of the day has been the "Condition of England Question."¹²

The opinion of one whose social and political radicalism had made her a staunch ally and personal friend of William Tait, Harriet Martineau, as to what should be the subject-matter of the novel, corresponded exactly to the Magazine's own theory on the subject. A few months after Walter Scott's death, *Tait's* published her little known, yet brilliant essay "The Achievements of the Genius of Scott," in which she defined the new direction that fiction ought to take at this turning-point in the history of the English novel:

Instead of tales of knightly love and glory, of chivalrous loyalty, of the ambition of ancient courts, and the bygone superstitions of a half-savage state, we must have, in a new novelist, the graver themes--not the less picturesque, perhaps, for their reality--which the present condition of society suggests. We have had enough of ambitious intrigues; why not now take the magnificent subject, the birth of political principle, whose advent has been heralded so long? What can afford finer moral tendency than the transition state in which society now is? Where are nobler heroes to be found than those who sustain society in the struggle; and what catastrophe so grand as the downfall of bad institutions, and the issues of a process of renovation?...All the virtues which have graced fictitious delineations, are still at the service of the novelist; but their exercise and discipline should be represented as different from what they were....Fiction must not be allowed to expire with Scott, or to retain only that languid existence which is manifest merely in imitations of his works: we must hope,--not, alas for powers and copiousness like his,--but for an enlightened application of his means of achievement to new aims.¹³

On some occasions, *Tait's* protested against the tendency on the part of writers to use the novel as an instrument of ideological propaganda, a deviation from the praiseworthy aims of the thesis-novel; such a protest is particularly evident in its reviews of religious novels in the eighteen-forties.¹⁴ Its remonstrances however were never as loudly voiced as those to be found in *The Athenaeum* or *Fraser's*, both of which were more fully aware than *Tait's* of the problems that such a con-

ception of the use of fiction writing involved. *Fraser's* could see in propaganda novels an over-ruling emphasis of the social, political or religious message at the expense of the form conveying it under the pen of countless pseudo-novelists:

Whoever has anything to say, or thinks he has,...puts it forthwith into the shape of a novel or a tale, whereby, whatever the world may gain by way of instruction on that particular crotchet, is gained at a clear sacrifice of the medium through which it is conveyed.

It is growing up into a kind of ambition among authors of all creeds, colours and capacities, to write books "with a purpose in them;" a very excellent thing, if the "purpose" be sound and healthy and intelligibly worked out. But something more than this is necessary--fitness of the purpose for the form chosen as its exponent.

But we must protest, in sober seriousness, against the practice which is rapidly gaining ground amongst us, of writing political pamphlets, ethical treatises, and social dissertations in the disguise of novels.¹⁵

The lack of attention given by *Tait's* to technical problems of the narrative form indicates its narrowly utilitarian conception of fiction: its ultimate test of the value of a work of fiction resides, not in the appropriateness of its form, the balance of its structure, or the power of its writing, but in its moral or social utility, as shown in this extract from its review of *Wuthering Heights*:

The novel contains, undoubtedly, powerful writing, and yet it seems to be thrown away. We want to know the object of a fiction. Once people were contented with a crude collection of mysteries. Now they desire to know why the mysteries are revealed. Do they teach mankind to avoid one course and take another? Do they dissect any portion of existing society, exhibiting together its weak and strong points? If these questions were asked regarding *Wuthering Heights*, there could not be an affirmative answer given.¹⁶

Here again, the use of such criteria in reviewing fiction was not peculiar to *Tait's*. Similarly, and at exactly the same period, *Fraser's Magazine* saw it as the duty of fiction to expose social problems and to guide the reader's reflection on contemporary issues:

...the novel, if it would discharge its proper functions and take the place in literature which appears to be marked out for it, must become the fearless though informal censor of the age, and hold society in severe check by mercilessly exposing the errors, weaknesses, absurdities, excesses and even crimes, which disfigure and disturb it.

Under this conviction most of our new novelists of any mark or likelihood, consciously or unconsciously, fulfil their mission. They apply the principles of art to their legitimate purpose, and, while exciting the imagination by pictures full of interest, by narrative skilfully constructed, and by displays of tragic and comic power, compel the reader to reflect on the tendencies of the period in which we live, and ask himself toward what goal it is that events are now precipitating society.¹⁷

In spite of such pressing demands for the representation of reality in the novel, *Tait's* was unable to reconcile what it considered to be the duty of novel writers to concern themselves with, and the incapacity of the reading public to accept this new use of fiction by writers in whose hands the novel had ceased being a source of entertainment and a means of escape into an imaginary and ideal world. According to *Tait's*, no contemporary novelist possessed the skill displayed by Defoe or Fielding in rendering a faithful picture of reality attractive to the reader. Moreover, since the early Victorian public, fed on the fashionable novels of the eighteenth and thirties, showed an almost exclusive interest in high-life characters, most novelists complied with their wishes in order to ensure the success of their books. *Tait's* saw nothing to reproach Bulwer Lytton with when he turned his back on the social and penal injustices he had described in *Paul Clifford*, and indulged his readers with a representation of ideal characters and imaginary situations in *Ernest Maltravers*, thereby overstepping the boundaries of realism:

With more skill in authorship--for who will sympathize with poverty? but with less truth of delineation, Mr Bulwer has placed his man of genius, Ernest Maltravers, far above the pecuniary difficulties with which it is the common fate of the highest genius long to strive.... True, and the struggles and temptations of wealth and lassitude command a readier sympathy from the immense majority of readers; and Mr Bulwer well knows the nature of his audience, and he is perhaps quite right, in a work of entertainment, not to throw away any element of success. Age, and ugliness are ventured upon by no one save your De Foes

and Fieldings, and those vulgar fictionists who somehow contrive to make the *real* more interesting than the *ideal*. Sir Walter Scott understood the secrets of his art better than to hazard a hero in squalid poverty, or a heroine that was not a resplendent beauty, and moreover in her tenderest teens....Our sympathies expire with the joys and sorrows of heroines of thirty.¹⁸

Likewise, bearing the taste of the reading public in mind, *Tait's* regretted the presence of realistic descriptions of the conditions of life of England's lowest social classes in Harriet Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy*: "even in arguing this difficult and perplexed question, it cannot be necessary to picture the pauper-population of England as so shockingly depraved and degraded."¹⁹ The readers' fundamental attitude to the novel as a source of entertainment was still very much alive in the eighteen-forties and it forbade the presence of crudely realistic scenes in novels, a point made again by *Tait's* in its review of Grace Webster's *Ingliston*: "The varying phases of a misery of which poverty alone is the cause are dwelt on perhaps too long and too minutely for a skilful work of entertainment."²⁰

Critics also demanded that fiction should provide an antidote to the many problems that the "hungry forties" were confronted with, a point that was reiterated throughout the decade:

Enough of what is mean and bitterly painful and degrading gathers round every one of us during the course of this pilgrimage through this vale of tears to absolve the Artist from choosing his incidents and characters out of such a dismal catalogue....Never was there a period in our history of society when we English could so ill afford to dispense with sunshine.²¹

Tait's joined in the unanimous outcry against the intrusion of painful subjects, controversies and polemics into fiction which had to be kept as "a garden of sweet-smelling flowers and household herbs" and guarded against "rank and bitter weeds":²²

We could sometimes wish that Sectarians and Tractarians, Protestants and Romanists, and all sorts of theorists and controversialists, would leave the flowery domains of fiction to their original purposes, as the common pleasure and recreation ground of civilized communities, as places whence bitterness and jealousies are fenced out, and which are set apart for the graces and amenities of life.²³

It is difficult to reconcile such contradictory demands except by recognizing the two decades 1830-1850 as a period of transition for the novel which had come to be seen as a powerful instrument for social change and ideological propaganda, which however had to retain its former role as a source of entertainment. It is obvious, though, that the tendency of early criticism of fiction was strongly in favour of the representation of reality in the novel because of its morally and socially useful effect.²⁴ The novel reviews to be found in *Tait's Magazine*, if more widely known, would contribute to an enrichment of the discussions on the criticism of fiction in Victorian journals for they provide a remarkable example of the utilitarian attitude to fiction clearly discernible in the eighteen-thirties and forties and epitomized in this statement from *Tait's*:

We do not think any book worth perusal which does not either inculcate some useful moral, or tend to some general purpose. Let the epicureans of literature say what they please, Utilitarianism is the great principle which, in this department, as well as in every other, must ultimately prevail.²⁵

Université de Nancy II

NOTES

¹John Charles Olmsted (ed.), *A Victorian Art of Fiction: Essays on the Novel in British Periodicals. 1830-1850* (New York & London, 1979).

²8 February 1832. Unpublished correspondence. University of Edinburgh Library, MS Dc. 4. 101-103.

³Joseph Irving, *The Book of Scotsmen* (Paisley, 1881), p. 514.

⁴James Bertram, *Some Memories of Books, Authors and Events* (London, 1891), p. 30.

⁵*Tait's*, N.S., V (January 1838), 22.

⁶"...a Utilitarian publication which emphasized the instructive quality of fiction." Joseph Thomas Bennett, "The Critical Reception of the English Novel, 1830-1880" (Ph.D.

thesis, New York University, 1968), p. 113.

⁷See "Mrs Shelley and Imaginative Romance," in *A New Spirit of the Age* (London, 1844), II, 223-32.

⁸David Masson, *British Novelists and their Styles* (Cambridge, 1859), 224-5.

⁹See the review of Bulwer Lytton's *Zanoni*, *Tait's*, N.S., IX (April, 1842), 215-9.

¹⁰Review of *The Old Maiden's Talisman, and other Strange Tales*, *The Athenaeum*, 8 March 1834, 177.

¹¹*Tait's*, N.S., IX (May, 1842), 293.

¹²Review of *All Classes: a Novel*, *Tait's*, N.S., XIV (December, 1847), 799.

¹³*Tait's*, N.S., II (January, 1833), 459.

¹⁴"Novels we should fancy the last place in the world for religious controversy. Is there not one nook to be left in the domains of literature for quiet and tranquil enjoyment, in these renewed times of England's troubles?" Review of *The Monk and the Married Man*, *Tait's*, N.S., VII (April, 1840), 267.

¹⁵*Fraser's*, XLII (November, 1850), 574-5.

¹⁶*Tait's*, N.S., XV (February, 1848), 138.

¹⁷"Recent Novels," *Fraser's*, XXXVIII (July, 1848), 33.

¹⁸"The New Novels," *Tait's*, N.S., IV (December, 1837), 748.

¹⁹*Tait's*, N.S., II (October, 1832), 126.

²⁰*Tait's*, N.S., VII (April, 1840), 284.

²¹Review of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, *The Athenaeum*, 25 December 1847, 1324-5.

²²"A Triad of Novels," *Fraser's*, XLII (November, 1850), 575.

²³Review of *Chillon; or Protestants in the Sixteenth Century*, *Tait's*, N.S. XII (May, 1845), 310.

²⁴See Cheryl Lively, "Truth in Writing. The Standard of Realism for the Novel in *Fraser's Magazine*, 1830-1850," *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter*, VI, 3-4 (December, 1973), 3-10.

²⁵*Tait's*, N.S., II (August, 1835), 517.

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