

Re-orienting Victorian Studies: A European Perspective

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Approaching Victorian literature from a Continental European perspective is not, it might seem, the most obvious way of trying to re-orient Victorian studies: not only is popular perception of English literature across Europe shaped, largely, by the works of leading Victorian novelists such as Dickens and the Brontës, but Continental European critics have also, over the last century or so, offered a number of very significant contributions to the study of the literature and culture of the Victorian period. Indeed, one of the most influential early studies of Victorian fiction was written in French: Louis Cazamian's *Le Roman social en Angleterre, 1830-1850* was published as early as in 1903, though it was not translated into English until 1973. Students of individual Victorian writers have long been familiar with the work of Continental critics and editors: Sylvère Monod has written extensively on Dickens, Inga-Stina Ewbank on the Brontës, while Pierre Coustillas is arguably the most prominent critic and editor of George Gissing worldwide.¹ A number of monographs and collections of essays trace Continental European influences on the lives and careers of major Victorian writers, particularly those who, like Browning, Charlotte Brontë, or George Eliot spent significant amounts of time on the Continent and chose Continental settings for many of their novels and poems.²

At the same time, however, the study of the relationship between the world of Victorian literature and culture and the context of Continental Europe remains firmly Anglocentric, or to be more precise Britocentric: both Continental Victorianists and Continent-conscious Anglophone critics tend to think about the relationship between Victorian Britain and Europe very much from within the context of English literary studies, relating their discoveries and analyses back to the conceptual frame of reference defined firmly in terms of the literary and cultural context of the British Isles, and therefore unlikely to engage with the study of this relationship from a perspective which would incorporate a multiplicity of points of view representative of the diversity of Continental European traditions and cultures. This is, perhaps, not very surprising given the nature of literary studies as a discipline, defined as it is by the medium of language and therefore likely to develop within its own linguistic confines. What is interesting, however, is that while the practice of literary history and criticism differs quite radically between different literary cultures, the dividing lines between the different modes of literary-critical thinking tend to be defined not so much by the first language or the geographical location of the individual critic, but by the language and tradition of the literary culture in the study of which the critic specialises. Italian or Czech critics of English literature are more likely to share a critical language and a conceptual framework of the discipline with their fellow English scholars from the Anglophone world than with their compatriots specialising in the literatures of their own languages.

The insularity of the Anglophone tradition of literary studies is, however, not just a direct consequence of the language-based nature of its subject, and nor is it quite the case that the prevalent perception of what happens in Europe is defined, in British literary circles, by the familiar constation: 'fog in Channel, Continent cut off'. It is important to remember that Anglophone criticism has, over the years, developed a number of literary-critical approaches

(such as, to quote the most obvious example, New Criticism) which foreground close textual analysis at the expense of more context-oriented critical practices. As a result, many Anglophone readers do not feel comfortable with the concept of translation, and therefore cross-cultural influence: the very concept of reading foreign-language literature in translation, very much part of the daily cultural experience of Continental Europeans, tends to be perceived, in the Anglophone world, with a degree of scepticism, as an experience which is, from the purely literary point of view, somehow incomplete and therefore not fully satisfactory in either intellectual or aesthetic terms. A consequence of that scepticism is a lack of readiness, among English scholars, to see literature in English as a constituent part of the broader literary and cultural context of the history of Europe, particularly in the modern period. The closer to our own time, the more uneasy about cross-cultural influences we become: while Chaucer is more likely to be seen as an English heir to the tradition of French mediaeval romance, or of Boccaccio, nineteenth- and twentieth-century English writers tend to be perceived primarily in the context of the literary and cultural movements, traditions, and influences operating within the environment of the English language rather than against the broader canvas of European or indeed world literature. It is the purpose of the present paper to try to go beyond those limitations, and to see ways in which a broader, more comparative perspective might open up opportunities for a more nuanced, more complex understanding of literature in English, particularly in the Victorian period - in other words, to look ways of re-orienting Victorian literary studies from a Continental European perspective.

A good starting point for this discussion is offered by a rather unique volume, first published in Paris in 1992 - *Lettres européennes: Histoire de la littérature européenne*, edited by Annick Benoit-Dusauroy and Guy Fontaine. Translated into English and published by Routledge in 2000 as *History of European Literature*, the book did not make much of an impact in the English-speaking world; it does not seem to have been noticed, for example, by *The Times Literary Supplement*, and, not surprisingly, there has been no new English edition following the publication of a revised version of the volume, in Brussels, in 2007. What the volume offers is precisely what its title promises: a history of European literature told, by a team of some 200 literary scholars from all across Europe (including the British Isles), from a pan-European perspective, and with as little reference as possible to linguistic and national boundaries. The book's thirteen main chapters divide European literary history, from the beginning of the second millennium to 1968, into chronologically defined periods; it is only the initial section, focusing on the heritages of the main cultures of ancient and early mediaeval Europe, and the last chapter, discussing one major author from each and every country of Europe in an attempt to produce a panorama of contemporary European writing, that are in any way culture- or nation-specific. In each of the central thirteen period chapters, attention is paid, again on a pan-European basis, to the key literary and cultural trends of the epoch discussed, to the emergence of new literary genres which typified the spirit of the period, and to the most representative writers of the time, regardless of where they came from and what language they wrote in. In consequence, the volume can be seen as postulating a new concept of a pan-European vision of literary history, and a new pan-European literary canon. In the context of our reflections, then, the immediate question to ask is: what does *Lettres européennes* say about Victorian literature, and what does its perception of Victorian writing tell us about the Britocentric approach to literary studies which is dominant in the mainstream Anglophone literary-critical discourse?

The first point to notice is the differences in periodisation. The evolutionary character of the development of Victorian culture from the 1830s through to the end of the century, symbolised by the longevity of such key cultural and literary figures as Thomas Carlyle, Cardinal Newman, or Lord Tennyson, tends to stress continuities rather than discontinuities, and invites generalisations about Victorian culture, Victorian values, Victorian aesthetics, and so on. While we may talk about early-Victorian optimism or the mid/late-Victorian crisis of belief, the overall idea of the underlying unity of the Victorian era, or indeed of the long nineteenth century, remains the dominant feature of the perception of the period across the Anglophone world. *Lettres Européennes* proposes a different perception: it postulates the identification, in the literary history of nineteenth-century Europe, of three distinctive periods: the first half the century, identified broadly with Romanticism; the second half of the century, identified as the age of realism and naturalism; and finally the epoch of the *fin de siècle*.³ The threshold between the first two is, of course, 1848, the year of revolutions, known in some parts of Europe as the Spring of Nations - *le printemps des peuples*; the dividing line between the latter two is much more fuzzy, but it can be taken to fall somewhere in the early 1880s.

These particular points of transition are, of course, nothing new to nineteenth-century scholars, who have long been used to having the Victorian era sub-divided into more distinct sub-periods. The real issue lies, however, not so much in the identification of the differences between the 1830s, the 1860s, and the 1890s, but in the way in which the choice of 1848 as the most significant turning point in the history of nineteenth-century European literature modifies our perception of the trajectory of the entire century, and makes us rethink our perception of some of the historical, social, and cultural forces that drove the development of nineteenth-century European - and British - writing. A re-examination of those forces may well result in a redefinition of our understanding of some of the key concepts we commonly use when we describe nineteenth-century literary culture, in a reshaping of our perception of some of the key literary figures of the period, and in a reconstruction of the nineteenth-century literary canon - in a word, in re-orienting our vision of the literary history of the nineteenth century.

The centrality, in the Continental European perception of the development of nineteenth-century history and culture, of the year 1848 is, of course, indicative of the significance of politics as a defining feature of the spirit of the times: in purely literary terms, 1848 was by no means a remarkable vintage, the most prominent work published that year being, arguably, *La Dame aux camélias*, by Alexandre Dumas, *fils*. At the same time, however, the politics of Europe were undergoing a dramatic change: the revolutions in France, Germany, the Habsburg Empire, and Italy reshaped the political landscape of the Continent, variously removing ruling dynasties, forcing the liberalisation of political systems, and reawakening the spirit of nationalism, previously suppressed under foreign rule or weakened by the political fragmentation of ethnically rather than administratively defined national territories. But what was perhaps the most interesting feature of that pan-European revolutionary movement as it spread across the Continent in the early months of 1848 was the fact that it was, to a considerable degree, a cultural as much as a social and political phenomenon: a political expression of the liberal, democratic, and nationalist ideologies which dominated the intellectual life of Europe in the 1830s and the 1840s. More so than their counterparts at any other major point in the modern history of Europe, the revolutionaries of 1848 were inspired by the literary and public activity of the leading writers of the period. While the economic crisis of the late 1840s and the hiatus

between the social and political aspirations of the increasingly powerful middle classes and the largely conservative and fundamentally undemocratic political establishments of the major countries of Continental Europe created the conditions for the social unrest that dominated the life of Europe in the 1840s, the responsibility for the emergence of the radical ideologies and for igniting the revolutionary fervour that triggered the revolutions across the Continent can be ascribed as much to the political leaders of Europe's liberal movements as to the literary works and the public activities of poets, playwrights, and novelists such as Alessandro Manzoni, Heinrich Heine, Adam Mickiewicz, Victor Hugo, and Sándor Petőfi. *Tout court*, the revolutions of 1848 marked the culmination, the triumph, and ultimately the demise of Continental European Romanticism.

This is, of course, the point at which Britain or, to be more precise, Great Britain - Ireland was at that stage developing her own distinctive political and cultural dynamics – finds itself dramatically out of step with the rest of Europe; not only did the events of 1848 have only a relatively limited impact on the political life of the country, but it could also be argued that the evolutionary changes which had contributed to the shaping of the British political system from the late seventeenth century onwards, and which reached its most powerful expression in Lord John Russell's electoral reform of 1832, meant that the United Kingdom was, in broad terms, significantly ahead of its Continental neighbours in terms of the liberalism of its political system, guaranteeing British subjects civil liberties to which people from a number of other European countries could only aspire. What this meant in cultural and literary terms was that the Romantic ideas which dominated Europe in the early nineteenth century found in Britain, in comparison with most of Continental Europe, a very different soil on which to grow. As a result, the Continental perception of early-nineteenth-century British literature, its significance and its internal dynamics is rather different from the way Anglophone criticism has tended to read it: an analysis of those differences can therefore offer us a way of re-evaluating the heritage of British Romanticism and its impact on the development of the literature of the Victorian era.

To discover how Continental critics read British Romantic literature, we can turn again to *Lettres européennes* to see which early-nineteenth-century writers its authors and editors identify as the most representative exponents of European Romanticism. The volume's selection of the masters of Romantic writing includes eight names, among whom there are two British writers - Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron; the others are Heinrich Heine, Adam Mickiewicz, Aleksandr Pushkin, Honoré de Balzac, Hans Christian Andersen, and Nikolai Gogol.⁴ The list is of course necessarily selective, but it does indicate something essential about the way in which early nineteenth-century writing in Europe is perceived to have developed: Continental critics clearly value, in particular, literature that moves out of the private sphere into the outer world; literature which engages with, and shapes, the social and political world in which it is created; literature which focuses not so much on the self but on the relationship between the individual and society. This is, of course, somewhat unexpected for many Anglophone readers, whose perception of Romanticism is associated, in particular, with the introspection of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, or with the melancholy intimacy of Keats's 'To Autumn' - but the very absence of those writers from the Benoit-Dusauso/Fontaine version of the European Romantic canon does perhaps indicate something important about the literary heritage of the English language. It may well be the case that Anglophone critics pay, in comparison with their Continental counterparts, a disproportionate amount of attention to the introspective qualities of early nineteenth-century

writing; it may indeed be the case that the relative peace and security of early-nineteenth-century Britain, its participation in the Napoleonic wars notwithstanding, made the writings of some of the key British writers of the Romantic period appear in some way rather self-centred, and therefore disengaged from the actual social and political reality of the early-nineteenth-century world. The significance of the selection, as key European Romantics, of Scott and Byron goes beyond the fact that they are the two Romantic writers from the British Isles who made the greatest popular impact on Continental Europe, or indeed who set the action of a considerable proportion - in Byron's case, indeed, the majority - of their works on the Continent. More importantly, Scott and Byron also embody, in their different ways, a model of writing that is firmly embedded in the public discourse of its time - they are, in fact, the only major British Romantics whose work could never be criticised as being in any way self-indulgent or escapist. The central concern of Scott's, whether in his Scottish novels, or in those set in England, or indeed on the Continent, is, after all, with the mechanisms of the operation of the forces of history, and with the processes of the modernisation of societies and cultures away from the models of inward-looking, self-focused traditional communities such as the Scottish clans towards more open, varied, inclusive structures, the establishment of which is a condition *sine qua non* of social and economic progress. In the case of Byron - and the Byron that is revered on the Continent is as much the Byron of the Oriental tales as the Byron of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan* - what makes him central to the tradition of European Romanticism is the championing of the cause of individual, communal, and national freedom against the oppressive social, political, or religious power of Europe's imperial regimes, which found its ultimate symbolic expression in the circumstances of Byron's death during the struggles for the independence of Greece. In that sense, both Scott and Byron - the two oldest of the eight masters of European Romanticism identified by Benoit-Dusausooy and Fontaine - prepare the ground for their Continental successors, whose literary careers developed in the tense political atmosphere of post-1815 Europe, and in opposition to the new political reality which emerged following the restoration of the rule of the Bourbons in France and the signing of the Holy Alliance Treaty.

The way in which this Continental perception of Romanticism - and specifically, of British Romanticism - can suggest to us the possibility of reconsidering some of our established perceptions of Romantic writing does of course have a major impact on the understanding of the Victorian period, and in particular of its early stages. It is, of course, a critical commonplace to stress the (post-)Romantic dimension of the work of writers such as Tennyson, the Brownings, and the Brontës. It is possible, however, that a Continental-style reading of their work can help us re-balance our evaluation of the significance of their respective contributions to the development of Victorian literature in its European context, and in consequence revise our perception of the Victorian literary canon. In this context, perhaps the most striking consequence of the adoption of the Continental vision of Romanticism would be a rethinking of the conceptual map of Victorian poetry. The most obvious case is that of Tennyson. In comparison with the work of his Continental counterparts, his early poetry appears strangely inward-looking, self-indulgent, and effete: the Tennyson of 'Mariana', 'The Lotos-Eaters', and the early narrative poems is certainly far too absorbed in the contemplation of his characters' - and by extension, his own - melancholy moods to provide the kind of dynamic engagement with the modern world that we find in the work of Heine or Hugo. It is only rarely that the young Tennyson manages - as he does in 'Locksley Hall' - to escape from the trap of the very English, post-Wordsworthian and post-Keatsian style of Romanticism, but he does not manage to do that consistently enough to

become a major European - as opposed to British - Romantic poet: spending seventeen years contemplating the death of a loved one was not exactly what the rest of Europe was busy doing in the 1830s and the 1840s, as a result of which the publication of *In Memoriam*, two years after the revolutions of 1848, suddenly appears, in the pan-European rather than exclusively British context of its time, strangely muted and anticlimactic.

By comparison with Tennyson, the Continental reader is much more likely to appreciate the poetry of Robert Browning, and not just because of his regular use in his poems of French, Spanish, Italian, and sometimes even Russian characters and settings. 'The Lost Leader' is in fact a declaration of the rejection of the mainstream English, Wordsworthian model of Romanticism in favour of the more Continental-style international one, embodied in the notoriously obscure *Sordello* as well as, rather more accessibly, in some of the early poems from *Dramatic Lyrics* and *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, such as, for example, 'The Italian in England' or 'The Confessional', or, in a more indirect way, 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister' or 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St Praxed's Church'. At the same time, however, Browning's Romanticism is full of paradoxes. For a start, it is, by the standards of Continental Europe, strangely (and, true Romantics might have argued, excessively) cosmopolitan: his readiness, throughout his career, to embrace Mediterranean settings, and the relative scarcity, in his *œuvre*, of poems dealing with specifically English, or British, themes, make him appear peculiarly indifferent to the idea of nationalism, so central to the Continental Romantic mindset. In symbolic terms, his own status, during the most creative middle period of his life, as a British expatriate choosing to live in Italy for purely personal reasons stands in direct contrast to the experience of a number of his Continental contemporaries, forced to live a life of exile away from their respective home countries as a result of their active involvement in radical politics - some of the major writers whose names come to mind in this respect include Heine, Mickiewicz, and Hugo. Linked to this limitation of Browning's emotional engagement with Englishness is also his anthropocentrism, his urbanity, and the literariness of his poetry. There are few major Romantic poets in Europe who are less interested than Browning in nature and in folklore; rather characteristically, when he does, in 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin', explore a story deriving from a traditional legend, he goes for one which is, firstly, foreign, and secondly, established in the German literary (as opposed to folk) tradition securely enough to have lost any real flavour of vernacular freshness and authenticity.

This is not to say that Continental-style European Romanticism is not to be found in the tradition of Victorian literature in English - but to find it, we need to go to Ireland, where the 1800 Act of Union, ending a short, eighteen-year-long period of independence, during which Ireland was formally linked with Great Britain only through the person of the monarch, resulted in the development of a Romantic nationalist spirit very much along Continental European lines. Although both the Act of Union and subsequent legislation, including the crucially important Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, which formally ended anti-Catholic discrimination across the United Kingdom, guaranteed Ireland the same levels of democratic participation and political liberalism that applied in the other parts of the British Isles, the strength, across Irish society, of the sense of distinctive national identity resulted in the gradual emergence, in the public life of early-nineteenth-century Ireland, of a kind of political, ideological, and indeed literary discourse which saw the cause of Irish nationhood as an integral part of that pan-European liberal nationalist movement that was gathering momentum across the Continent in the 1830s and the

1840s. With the weekly newspaper *The Nation* providing the platform for the manifestation of its support not only for the repeal of the Act of Union, but also for similar causes across Europe, the Young Ireland movement became the most prominent exponent, in the British Isles, of the Romantic nationalist ideals which led to the revolutions of 1848 - indeed their own short-lived attempt at armed struggle, led, in July that year in Co. Tipperary, by William Smith O'Brien, was the only instance of active revolutionary activity in the United Kingdom during the period.

In literary terms, by far the most important writer associated with the Young Irelanders was the poet James Clarence Mangan. Heavily influenced by his Continental, particularly German, contemporaries, he wrote, throughout his career, several hundred poems, some of them original and some translated or adapted from a variety of sources, constituting what is probably the most substantial, and the most coherent, body of revolutionary Romantic writing in English. A lower-middle-class Dublin Catholic who never travelled beyond the immediate vicinity of his city, and a drug addict with a self-destructive streak that made him a classic *poète maudit*, Mangan displays a protean ability to enter into the mindsets of conspirators, revolutionaries, political exiles, and victims of oppression as he moves across the whole of Europe and the Middle East and back to Ireland, bringing together all the factors that constitute the essence of politically inspired Romantic verse: an awareness of the national past, a commitment to the cause of individual freedom and political liberty, and a breadth of perspective which enables him to see beyond the limitations of his own immediate context and reach out towards the experience of other countries and nations. His readiness to respond, in poems such as 'Siberia' or 'Gasparo Bandollo', to contemporaneous events on the Continent, and to see them as another expression of the same kind of ideology that underpins his elegiac poems on Irish past, such as 'Lamentation of Mac Liag for Kincora' or 'Lament over the Ruins of the Abbey of Teach Molaga', makes it possible for him to bring together the local and the universal in a way that would make him, when approached from a European perspective, a much more prominent presence on the Victorian literary scene than what the circumstances of his life and the conventional Hibernocentric readings of his poetry have tended to reduce him to.⁵

At the same time, however, that very Irish dimension of Mangan's work, when considered from a European perspective, does carry with it implications which can help us re-orient our perception of his art - and perhaps of the broader context of early-nineteenth-century writing - even further. A surprisingly large proportion of his poems are translations and adaptations, usually via the German, of poems from the Turkish and the Persian, or poems based on Middle Eastern motifs; most of them deal, in one way or another, with precisely the same kind of political/nationalist themes as Mangan focuses on when writing about Central or Southern Europe, or indeed about Ireland. A good example is 'The Caramanian Exile' - in all likelihood an original poem, purporting to have been translated from the Turkish, telling the story of an exile from an Anatolian province of Caramania following its conquest by the military might of the Ottomans:

THE CARAMANIAN EXILE

I see thee ever in my dreams,
 Karaman!
 Thy hundred hills, thy thousand streams,

Karaman! O, Karaman!
 As when thy goldbright Morning gleams,
 As when the deepening Sunset seams
 With lines of light thy hills and streams,
 Karaman!
 So thou loomest on my dreams,
 Karaman!
 Nightly loomest on my dreams,
 Karaman! O, Karaman!

...

Ere my fighting years were come,
 Karaman!
 Troops were few in Erzerome,
 Karaman! O, Karaman!
 Their fiercest came from Erzerome;
 They came from Ukhbar's palace-dome;
 They dragged me forth from thee, my home,
 Karaman!
 Thee, my own, my mountain home,
 Karaman!
 In life and death my spirit's home,
 Karaman! O, Karaman!

...

But Life at worst must end ere long,
 Karaman!
 Azrael avengeth every wrong,
 Karaman! O, Karaman!
 Of late my thoughts rove more among
 Thy fields; – foreshadowing fancies throng
 My mind, and texts of bodeful song,
 Karaman!
 Azrael is terrible and strong,
 Karaman!
 His lightning-sword smites all ere long,
 Karaman! O, Karaman!

There's care to-night in Ukhbar's halls,
 Karaman!
 There's hope, too, for his trodden thralls,
 Karaman! O, Karaman!
 What lights flash red along yon walls?
 Hark! hark! – the muster-trumpet calls! –
 I see the sheen of spears and shawls,
 Karaman!

The foe! the foe! – they scale the walls,
 Karaman!
 To-night Murad or Ukhbar falls,
 Karaman! O, Karaman! (345-7)

The theme and setting of the poem, as well as its emotional intensity, conveyed through the dynamism and the complexity of its rhythm, and the insistent use of rhymes and repetitions, give it a strongly unusual, exotic feel - and yet, while ‘The Karamanian Exile’ is clearly an example of Mangan’s interest in the Orient, it can hardly be seen as Orientalist in the post-Saidian sense. Not only does the protagonist of the poem speak in his own powerful voice, but his sense of displacement and oppression, corresponding to the experience of thousands of exiles who became a prominent presence in the social and political fabric of Europe in the early nineteenth century, generates in him precisely the same kind of attitude and response as would have been familiar to both Continental and Irish readers in the 1840s. In consequence, what Mangan is doing here is not exercising some form of Occidental appropriation of his Middle-Eastern theme, but rather extending the range of his international agenda to another culture, one which had been part of the cultural and political discourse in Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe since the late Middle Ages. Read from this perspective, the Romantic tradition of engagement with affairs of the Middle East, and particularly of the Ottoman Empire, represented not only by the work of Mangan, but also of his high Romantic predecessors such as Byron, loses a good deal of its hegemonical edge: in the context of the historical and cultural experience of countries such as Greece, Hungary, Poland, or Russia, the concept of Orientalism does not carry the same kind of politically or culturally imperialist connotations as it does in the British Isles - but it takes an Irish Romantic poet working in a Continental European mode to remind us of that.

These are some of the ways in which adopting a Continental European perspective might impact on our perception of the poetry of the Victorian period - but what about the novel? As we have noticed before, the pantheon of the fathers of European Romanticism identified by the writers and editors of *Lettres européennes* does not include any early Victorian novelists, but that is, perhaps, understandable: Victorian fiction does not really get into its stride until the 1840s, and as for Charlotte and Emily Brontë, the only major Victorian novelists who could be seen to fit into the Romantic framework of early nineteenth-century writing both philosophically and chronologically, the limitations of the range of their work, and their concentration on the private rather than public dimension of the lives of their protagonists, might be seen to explain why their novels are seen as less significant in the development of European fiction than the comprehensive analyses of the mechanisms of the operation of modern society found in the works of Balzac or the biting satires of Gogol. Surely, though, a similar list of the most prominent European writers of the later nineteenth century is bound to recognise the achievement of leading Victorian novelists, such as Dickens and George Eliot?

Surprisingly, the answer is no: the list of canonical late-nineteenth-century European writers proposed by Benoit-Dusauroy and Fontaine does not include anyone writing in English. Their select group of five masters of late-nineteenth-century European literature consists of Victor Hugo, Charles Baudelaire, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Henrik Ibsen, and Leo Tolstoy. At first sight, the list sounds rather paradoxical: a period defined, supposedly, by the centrality of the aesthetics of

realism and naturalism, and by the prominence of the quintessentially realistic genre of the novel, is represented by three novelists of whom only one (Tolstoy) can be seen as constructing his world in essentially realistic terms as he unfolds his complex tales covering every aspect of human existence, from the intimate nature of love to the mechanisms of the operation of global forces of history. Of the other two, Hugo is essentially a Romantic who creates his impassioned idealistic romances about the eternal struggle of good and evil in an attempt to promote the cause of the social and moral progress of humanity; on the other hand, Dostoevsky both adopts and subverts the framework of realist fiction to write novels which attempt to combine psychological analysis and philosophical inquiry in order to explore the complexity of the human mind and the nature of the operation of good and evil not so much, as is the case with the novels of Hugo, within the structures of society, but rather in the confines of the individual human soul.

And yet once we appreciate the scale of the projects that Hugo, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy set themselves as they set out to write *Les Misérables*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *War and Peace*, we begin to understand why the Continental pantheon of nineteenth-century fiction has no room for Dickens, George Eliot, or Hardy. By comparison with writers like Balzac (chronologically belonging to the Romantic period, but in many ways the most significant exponent of the aesthetics of realism in nineteenth-century French fiction), Hugo, Dostoevsky or Tolstoy, British Victorian novelists appear peculiarly limited in their range of interests and unable to give their fictional worlds a sense of universality that we discover in the works of their French and Russian contemporaries. For all the differences between their artistic methods, the inhabitants of Dickens's London on the one hand, and the people from the towns and villages of the Midlands of England described by George Eliot on the other, are both rendered in a manner that keeps them constrained within the limitations of their Englishness, their class, their family situation, and so on. Dickens's attempts to universalise his characters tend to lead him towards allegory and/or satire, while George Eliot acknowledges the limitations of her artistic aims when she praises, in *Adam Bede*, the perfection of the aesthetics of Dutch realist painting. It is perhaps Hardy, in his portrayal of Michael Henchard and Tess Durbeyfield, that comes closest to giving his characters an existence that takes them, as it were, beyond the confines of the novels to which they belong. And yet their ultimate insignificance in Hardy's conception of the universe, as mere human specks on the cosmic canvas of human history, reduces their stature to a level at which they ultimately become mere victims of their own failures and/or of the ordinances of fate - tragic, maybe, but essentially lacking in the heroism that would take them to a higher level of symbolic significance. On the contrary, Hugo's Jean Valjean and Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin both transcend the limitations of their nationality and social class to become embodiments of the most profound values of humanity; their English equivalents - Amy Dorrit, Adam Bede, Gabriel Oak - are far too narrowly conceived, and far too firmly embedded in their respective worlds of the Marshalsea, Hayslope, and Weatherbury, to acquire the kind of metaphysical quality that we see in *Les Misérables* and *The Idiot*. The difficult relationship between Adam Bede and Arthur Donnithorne and the rivalry between Gabriel Oak and Sergeant Troy might appear more immediately familiar to the reader, and therefore more true to the practical experience of life, than the epic struggle between Jean Valjean and Javert, but they come nowhere near conveying the powerful spiritual message that lies at the heart of Hugo's novel. To find a similar sense of Continental-style universality in Anglophone writing we shall have to wait until the twentieth century - and it will once again come from an Irishman: Joyce's Leopold Bloom will become European literature's first Everyman figure of the twentieth century, earning his creator a place

in the Benoit-Dusauso/Fontaine list of the masters of early-twentieth-century European writing in the process.

And what about the aesthetics of European writing of the second half of the nineteenth century, and the extent to which our Anglophone-culture-focused perception of Victorian literature matches the vision of the period, as the age of realism and naturalism, offered by our European counterparts? The identification of realism as one of the epoch's key modes of literary expression is not likely to raise many brows: the debate about the very definition of realism, the diversity of its forms and the limitations of its usefulness as a critical concept has long been part of Victorianist literary discourse. Naturalism, however, is a rather different proposition: while we are happy enough to recognise, for example, the naturalist dimension of some of the scenes in the novels of Thomas Hardy, in which the narrator's close focus on often mundane descriptive detail suddenly brings to light the symbolic qualities of the characters, objects, or situations described, there is little evidence in Victorian writing of the kind of explicitness and brutality in the presentation of the darker side of human existence, on the individual as well as communal level, that we associate with the work of Emile Zola, Frank Norris, or Upton Sinclair. Could it be the case that the thematic limitations of a large proportion of mainstream Victorian fiction, with its focus on the domestic and the familiar, mitigated against Victorian writers embracing the naturalist mode of writing more decisively? It is not insignificant perhaps that the two novelists of the period who came closest to adopting naturalist aesthetics, George Moore and George Gissing, were both, to a greater or lesser extent, outsiders on the Victorian literary scene - Moore through his Irishness, and through the influence of the years he spent in France, and Gissing through his unconventional personal history. Uncomfortable as some of us may feel about the frankness and brutality of *A Mummer's Wife* or *The Nether World*, we may well need to accept that Moore and Gissing are among some of the writers whose contribution to Victorian literature, when seen through a Continental lens, is in urgent need of reassessment.

With the chapter of *Lettres européennes* devoted to the literature of the *fin-de-siècle* similarly focusing on writers from the Continent to the exclusion of those writing in English (for the sake of completeness, it is perhaps worth noting that the volume's list of the key literary figures of the period includes Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud, Friedrich Nietzsche, August Strindberg, Anton Chekhov, and Maurice Maeterlinck),⁶ the overall picture of Victorian writing in English, as perceived by the contributors to this pan-European project, is quite disappointing: while numerous Victorian novelists and poets are mentioned in the course of the discussion of individual trends, movements, and literary genres, no Victorian writers are accorded the iconic status of key figures in the development of nineteenth-century European writing. This is, of course, like any exercise in literary and historical classification, largely a matter of balancing a diversity of individual opinions and judgements, to be taken with an appropriate dose of healthy scepticism - but nonetheless it does, it seems, point out the strengths and weaknesses of both the traditional Anglophone reading of literary history, and indeed of the Continental approach. In trying to re-orient our reading of Victorian literature in the light of its perception on the Continent we should perhaps recognise that Victorian literary culture was perhaps too self-centred, too tame, not ambitious enough in asking fundamental questions about the nature of humanity - too parochial, maybe? Ironically, it is maybe the fact that Britain was, for most of the Victorian era, the most powerful, stable and advanced country in the world, both politically and economically, that made the writers of the period somehow more complacent, less ready than

their Continental contemporaries to address in their writings, head-on, the most pressing social and political issues of the day, and to explore the epoch's most complex philosophical dilemmas. Maybe Victorian writers felt somehow too cosy, too relaxed in their comfortable middle-class imperial existences to grapple with the problems of the world on the scale their Continental counterparts attempted to do?

At the same time, however, we should not perhaps overlook the fact that the Continental reading of European literature proposed by the authors and editors of *Lettres européennes* has its limitations too, that the collective perspective generated by some 200 scholars from across Europe is as subject to evaluation and criticism as any individual interpretation of the same material. For a specialist in Victorian literature, there appear to be three major areas here which might need rethinking - and which might perhaps result in an attempt to re-orient the Continental perspective on European writing in the light of the experience of the Anglophone world as well. Firstly, the approach adopted in the Benoit-Dusauso/Fontaine volume is - understandably, perhaps, given the nature of the project, but still - fundamentally Eurocentric: a more balanced account would take into consideration the complex literary relationships between Europe and other literary cultures, both within the Western literary tradition and outside it. Secondly, the project focuses on literature as a vehicle for the discussion of serious social, political, philosophical, and cultural issues, and pays rather less attention to its potential for playfulness and comedy - there is no mention in the volume of *The Pickwick Papers*, or indeed of *Alice in Wonderland*. And finally, last but not least, there is the issue of gender: among the 66 writers, from Pierre Abélard to the twentieth-century Flemish writer Hugo Claus, who are accorded in the volume the status of classics of European literature, there is not a single woman: even if we reluctantly accept the absence from the list of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, then how about Simone de Beauvoir? Those are, of course, serious criticisms - but what they stress is the need for a continuous revision of our assumptions about and perceptions of literature and culture, fossilised as they might become if we stay for too long within one particular cultural, ideological, or critical paradigm, however worthy in themselves its principles might be. If a Continental reading of nineteenth-century European literature can give us some ideas about re-orienting our perception of Victorian literature, then in much the same way the heritage of writing in English and the Anglophone tradition of literary criticism have valuable contributions to offer to the study of the literature and culture of Continental Europe; it is only through a constant process of the cross-cultural, comparative re-examination of our literary and cultural traditions that we can achieve a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complex and dynamic phenomenon that is modern Europe.

Notes

¹ See also *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, edited by Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young, and Pierre Coustillas.

² For example, see Enid L. Duthie, *The Foreign Vision of Charlotte Brontë* (London: Macmillan, 1975), Jacob Korg, *Browning and Italy* (London: Ohio University Press, 1983), John Rignall (ed.), *George Eliot and Europe* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1997), and Andrew Thompson, *George Eliot and Italy: Literary, Cultural and Political Influences from Dante to the Risorgimento* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).

³ See Benoit-Dusauso and Fontaine, *Lettres européennes*, 394-530.

⁴ See especially 426-446.

⁵ See for example, Robert Welch's *Irish Poetry from Moore to Yeats*, 76-115.

⁶ See 516-530.

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