The Craft of Fiction: Teaching Technique, 1850-1930

Mary Stewart Atwell

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The Craft of Fiction:

Teaching Technique, 1850-1930

by

Mary Stewart Atwell

A dissertation presented to the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Washington University in
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Doctor of Philosophy

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Introduction

In June 1890, J.M. Barrie published a piece called “Brought Back from Elysium” in the *Contemporary Review*. Though it purports to be a play, it is in fact a parody of a range of literary schools, including the Realist, the Romancist, and the “Elsmerian.” Representatives of each of these schools, along with a Stylist and an American, arrange for an interview with the ghosts of Tobias Smollett, Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, and William Makepeace Thackeray. The reader might assume that the living writers have invited the ghosts in order to learn from them, but in fact, their project is just the opposite. As the Elsmerian informs the ghosts, “Since your days a great change has come over fiction…and it struck us that you might care to know how we moderns regard you” (848).

How the writers regard them is, in effect, as naïve bumbling. The writers assume that the ghosts will be “surprised to hear that fiction has become an art” (848), so intensely engaged with the theory of itself that “there is not a living man in this room…who has not written as many articles and essays about how novels should be written as would stock a library” (850). The ghosts, on the other hand, are humbly aware that they know nothing of this new art; Scott admits that “I was only a child….I thought little about how novels should be written” (849), while Smollett exclaims “What novels you who think so much about the art must write nowadays!” (853-4). Only Thackeray dares to defy the new masters, remarking “perhaps if you thought and wrote less about your styles and methods and the aim of fiction, and, in short, forgot yourself now and again in your stories, you might get along better with your work. Think it over” (854).
Though Barrie’s portraits of both the living and the dead are undoubtedly exaggerated, certain key assumptions at the heart of his parody have been hardy enough to survive into twenty-first century criticism. When Thackeray and Dickens tell the living writers of the love they felt for their characters and their absorption in their own fictions, they are signaling their ingenuousness, their lack of experience—in a word, their artlessness. They are ignorant of the idea that the novel is a technical construction, able to be dissected and analyzed in its constitutive parts. Sixty years after Richard Stang demonstrated, in *The Theory of the Novel in England*, that nineteenth-century literary periodicals were deeply invested in questions of technique, the limited scholarship on the history of creative writing still assumes that discussions of the craft of fiction began with Henry James, parodied as “The American” in Barrie’s play. To the contrary, I argue that earlier examinations of the craft of fiction were central to developing notions of the writer’s identity and purpose. Going beyond Stang, I also demonstrate that the increasing consensus that technique could indeed be taught would have a profound effect on, and carry over into, the institutionalized study of creative writing in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

As I discuss in the chapters to follow, James’s reputation as the source of fictional technique is particularly inappropriate given his antagonism to the idea that the craft was worth teaching. In his famous 1884 essay “The Art of Fiction,” he argues that the only useful advice to a talented writer was “Ah, well, you must do it as you can!” (508), and he presents the technical readings in the prefaces to the New York Edition of his novels not as guides to the aspirant but as a sort of *Cliff’s Notes* to his own work. Though James’s view that an understanding of craft is mainly useful for appreciating the
accomplishments of the great has few vocal adherents in the twenty-first century, it is true that the question of whether writing can be taught has not, as Mark McGurl has shown, been definitively settled even today. In _The Program Era_, McGurl quotes the following passage from the website of the Iowa Writers Workshop: “If one can ‘learn’ to play the violin or to paint, one can ‘learn’ to write, though no processes of externally induced training can ensure that one will do it well” (26). The quotation marks indicate that there is some question as to the validity of a course of study based around the acquisition of craft, and that the teachers and administrators feel—or expect their students to feel—somewhat ironical about the whole idea. McGurl doesn’t comment on the quotation marks, but the reader may observe that one can scarcely imagine the Juilliard website referring to “learning” to play the violin, or the School of the Art Institute of Chicago talking about “learning” to paint. The resistance to the idea of “learning” to write has roots in a concept of crucial importance to the history of authorship: genius.

The idea that genius was the one needful ingredient in composition had one of its most ardent advocates in Edward Young, an eighteenth-century author and “preferment-hunter” (Steinke 1). In his 1759 “Conjectures on Original Composition,” Young drew a clear line between works of genius—“originals”—and works based on the imitation of other authors:

> An original may be said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it grows, it is not made; imitations are often a sort of manufacture wrought up by those mechanics, art, and labour, wrought of pre-existent materials not their own (Young 45).

Later Young identifies genius as “the power of accomplishing great things without the means generally reputed necessary to that end”—in other words, as original thought (49).
In his taxonomy of composition, genius and originality are mutually defined, the concepts inextricable, the very vagueness of the terms hinting at their relation to the creative power of the divine. In this elevation of original genius above “mechanics, art, and labour,” Young may have had a personal as well as a theoretical agenda. *Conjectures* was written in his middle age, after a youth spent in attendance on Pope’s circle of neoclassicists and in the composition of works modeled on the ancient writers. Martin Steinke describes Young as “a versatile and vacillating follower of the trends of his time” (7), and in this passage, it is clear that in breaking with Pope’s circle he has allied himself with the Romantics: “in the fairyland of fancy, genius may wander wild; there it has a creative power, and may reign arbitrarily over its own empire of chimeras” (Young 52). Young had by this time been appointed rector of Welwyn; sure of an income, he could afford to celebrate ungovernable genius and originality at the expense of remunerative imitation.

Martha Woodmansee, in her essay on “The Genius and the Copyright,” identifies Young as a key figure in the glorification of genius that would be given voice by William Wordsworth, fifty years later, in his introductory essay to the *Preface*:

> Genius is the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe: or, if that be not allowed, it is the application of powers to objects on which they had not before been exercised, or the employment of them in such a manner as to produce effects hitherto unknown (quoted in Woodmansee 429-430).

For Wordsworth and for many writers who followed after him, evoking the rhetoric of genius could be a way to explain and justify their lack of popularity with the public. However, some critics argue that the language of genius can serve broader ideological interests as well. In the context of mechanical inventors’ fight for copyright protection, Clare Pettitt writes that genius is “turned to work as a powerful way of controlling,
through the conservative popular press, the social aspirations of the masses. If the self-made man remains a ‘wonder,’ the threat to the status quo is limited” (77). In Culture and Society, Raymond Williams indicates that the definition of the artist as a “special kind of person”—a genius—“offer[s] an immediate basis for an important critique of industrialism” (43). Following Williams, Robert Macfarlane argues that the rhetoric of originality and genius was mobilized in reaction to the “status of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction” (24), while Jennie Batchelor suggests that genius, in opposition to both industrial and artisan labor, supported “the value and authority of the man of letters...[which was] predicated upon his lack of productivity, his non-participation in the making of the nation’s wealth” (93). Woodmansee, on the other hand, views the concept of genius as empowering for the writer, arguing that as moments of “inspiration” become, over the course of the eighteenth century, “increasingly credited to the writer’s own genius, they transform the writer into a unique individual uniquely responsible for a unique product” (429); that is, they allow the writer to claim sole ownership of his literary property. Paul K. Saint-Amour extends Woodmansee’s argument, stating that the very concept of copyright necessitates a “consecration” of original genius in the literary imagination (3).

These interpretations of the ideology of genius will each have their relevance in the chapters that follow. In fact, in the early decades of this period, encomiums to original genius will be so prevalent in the periodical press that they will prompt Macfarlane to argue that “1840 can usefully be considered as the high-water mark of [the rhetoric of] originality” (Macfarlane 39). Macfarlane cites John Stuart Mill’s essay on Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle’s “The Hero as Prophet” for their championing of the
concepts of originality and genius, but they were certainly not its only advocates. In
1843, we find an anonymous writer in Fraser’s criticizing recent French novels for their
too artful style, and sounding very much like Edward Young as he praises,

the spontaneous eloquence of the tongue-tipped pen, which does not spin out, but
pours out, in fervid verbosity, the first warm, unpremeditated conceptions of the
mind, and, as it glowingly proceeds, starts at every step new coveys and flights of
images and ideas.

The critic opposes this method to that of more calculating or derivative writers: “it is to
imitate this rare faculty of extemporising on paper, which, coming from the abundance of
the heart, is always full of matter and delight, that the spinners-out aim in their
counterfeit rhapsodies” (“French Romances” 189). The writer of the “tongue-tipped pen”
seems to be composing without effort or forethought, while the “spinners-out” employ
just those qualities to build on what has already been done. Though, like Young, this
critic never directly states that original genius is superior to imitative work, he really
doesn’t need to.

If Macfarlane and John Charles Olmsted are right in arguing that Romantic
corrects like original genius underlie much criticism of the 1830’s and 1840’s (Olmsted
1: xiv), then to what can we ascribe this new flowering of Romantic ideology? Perhaps,
as Pettitt suggests, it had something to do with the new push for copyright reform in the
eyear 1840’s. Woodmansee notes the symbiotic relation between original genius, literary
property, and authorship when she remarks that Young’s essay “makes a writer’s
ownership of his work the necessary, and even sufficient condition for earning the
honorable title of ‘author,’ and he makes such ownership contingent upon a work’s
originality” (431). Improving on the 1710 Statute of Anne, the 1842 Copyright Act
extended copyright protection for the author’s lifetime and for two years after his death. Since, as Woodmansee shows, the concept of original genius underlay all copyright—it was what allowed the author to create a unique product—genius was, in a sense, what the statute was protecting. Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd, architect of the 1842 Act, frequently referred to genius in his speeches, and his efforts to protect it were supported by a community of authors in the early stages of professionalization. Bulwer-Lytton had himself fought for dramatic copyright reform as a Member of Parliament, and Dickens was invested enough in the question to dedicate *Pickwick Papers* to Talfourd in thanks for his effort to “secur[e] to [authors] and their descendants a permanent interest in the copyright of their works” (quoted in Pettitt 76). Catherine Seville, in *Literary Copyright Reform in Early Victorian England*, suggests that the campaign for reform gave a “network of [literary] friends and acquaintances” an excuse to meet frequently to discuss their common interests, and may indeed have provided a testing ground for professional organizations like the Guild of Literature and Art (152-3).

Bulwer-Lytton and Dickens wanted copyright reform because it would enable them to count on a continuing profit from their writings. For similar reasons, they wanted writers to be viewed as members of the professional classes, entitled to a respectable living wage. As I will discuss in Chapter One, the rhetoric of original genius was of utility not only in the copyright debates, but also in conceptualizing a writer’s relationship to the market. Copyright reform alone wasn’t going to enable the general run of writers to make enough money to live a middle-class life. Writers came up with various schemes by which their fellows could receive additional funds—for Forster, this surplus could come from state pensions; for the founders of the Guild of Literature and
Art, they could come from the support of other writers. All of these schemes claimed, in Pettitt’s words, a “supplementary value” for the work over and above the accepted rate of exchange (158), and what could this surplus value be based on but an excess of genius that could not be properly valued by the market?

It is perhaps not very surprising that writers advocating for the value of their productions should want to claim for those productions a unique value based on their originality and inimitability. What is more curious is that some of these same supporters of professionalization also drew on increased analogies between their work and the work of the laboring classes. In the preface to an inexpensive reissue of one of his novels aimed at a railway readership, Bulwer-Lytton expresses his hopes that

> these works…thus cheaply equipped for a wider and more popular mission than they have hitherto fulfilled, [may] find favour in those hours when the shop is closed, when the flocks are penned, and the loom has released its prisoners;--may they be read by those who, like myself, are workmen (quoted in Sutherland, *Victorian Novelists* 33).

Though here, with his reference to the loom, Bulwer-Lytton is allying himself with urban industrial workers as well as rural workers in agriculture, a more common version of this rhetorical flourish can be seen in Dickens’s comic essay *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices*, co-written with Wilkie Collins. The essay, composed by Dickens and Collins during a walking tour of the Lake District, is arranged as a series of episodic vignettes in which the two apprentices go to the races, climb mountains, and listen to ghost stories at wayside inns. The apprentices accomplish very little, but they and the reader are always aware of the work they should be doing in service to “a highly meritorious lady (named Literature), of fair credit and repute” (323).
Pettitt is right in identifying an inconsistency in Dickens “willfully and deliberately dr[awing] the analogy between manual labour and writing, while also looking for a value for his talent that was supplementary to its market rate” (158), but the contradiction is by no means inexplicable. The concept of original genius might be necessary for advancing writers’ professional interests in terms of literary property, but the concept of work was equally necessary to their efforts to showcase the similarities between writing and other professions. Though “The Lazy Tour” insists upon the travelers’ idleness, it paradoxically undercut that impression by situating writing within an apprenticeship system. Apprentices had to work hard and fulfill their training to advance in their fields, and in this and other analogies that allied fiction to an artisan labor force, mid-century writers sought to portray their profession as necessary, useful, and bounded by rule and precedent.

When Dickens and Collins refer to their fictionalized selves as “apprentices,” they are allying themselves to a specific set of associations within the artisan labor force. The Elizabethan Statute of Apprentices, which mandated and codified the apprenticeship system within certain fields, was abolished in 1814, but the tradition survived in many trades for thirty years or more (Burnett 254). Within handicraft trades, it was felt that the apprenticeship system kept up a high standard of workmanship, as well as allowing for the upward mobility of those who moved through its ranks. Unlike in the newer mechanized trades, “the ladder of opportunity could carry the ambitious [handicraft] apprentice into the owning and employing class” (252).

Though a handicraft apprentice might aspire to control the means of production one day, he was first and foremost identified as a craftsman, and a craftsman was defined
as having certain knowledge about his field, as one who had learned “a specialized craft or ‘mystery’” (Burnett 249). Though the first entry in the Oxford English Dictionary that identifies “craftsman” with “creative artist” dates from 1876, we can find the connection much earlier if we look for usages of the word “craft” to signify the work performed by such an artist.

The use of the word “craft” in the context of fiction writing would intuitively seem to be anachronistic to the nineteenth century. It is a term that we associate with twenty and twenty-first century writers’ workshops and writers’ manuals. And yet from the 1830’s and 1840’s on, we find writers and critics for the periodical press using “craft” to describe the specific knowledge and set of skills that a writer possesses, as well as the professional “brotherhood” in which he is a member. Though usages of the term can sometimes take on the pejorative cast associated with witchcraft—“craft” as a form of cunning or trickery—it is more often used in the sense today identified with “craftsman,” as the knowledge of “a trade or profession as embodied in its practitioners collectively” (OED). For example, in 1844 we find George Henry Lewes commenting that Balzac should omit from his novels

the inconsiderate exhibition of his labour. Now, no one likes to see the scaffolding obstructing the full view of a house: the results, and not the means, should alone be represented….all this mystery of the craft should be kept confined to the workshop, and not obtruded on the public (“Balzac and George Sand” 425).

The metaphoric usage is transparent here. Lewes is figuring Balzac as an artisan in the handicraft trade of house building, who out of laziness “obtrudes” his labor on his readers rather than concealing it from view. This use of “craft” may be a substitute for a term
even more strongly associated with artisan labor, “workmanship.” In 1837, a critic for the *Edinburgh Review* uses Lewes’s same figure of speech to describe GPR James’s failure to conceal his writerly labors:

As his historical and antiquarian information would…seem to have been generally acquired for each novel…it has a proportional value in his eyes; he cannot afford to part with any of it; in some shape or other it must be laid before his readers. He is so much enamoured, in short, of his workmanship, that he leaves the scaffolding visible, as well as the building itself (Moir 197).

Whether the writer is a craftsman, with the privileges of professional association that the term entails, or merely a lowly workman, the message is clear: he should know the secrets of his trade, and should keep them firmly out of sight of the reader.

As we move forward in the century, we find the metaphorical sense of “craft” diminishing, perhaps in response to an increased sense that fiction writers were indeed members of a legitimate profession. In an 1854 essay on Thackeray for the *Edinburgh Review*, N.W. Senior comments approvingly on Thackeray’s attitude toward the eighteenth-century writers featured in *English Humourists*, whom he treats “with the cordiality of a brother in the craft” (241). Here the connotation is that of membership in a guild or trade, a meaning we find echoed in phrases like “master of the craft” (Elwin 359), and, in reference to Fielding and his imitators, “the conspicuous descendants of his own craft” (Smith 18). However, none of these examples make the leap to the modern definition of the writer’s craft that we see in the work of Vernon Lee. In her 1895 article “On Literary Construction” in the *Contemporary Review*, Lee states that “the craft of the writer consists…in manipulating the contents of his reader’s mind, that is to say, taken from the technical side as distinguished from the psychologic, in construction” (404).
Here “craft” refers neither to membership in a brotherhood of workers nor to the learned skills of a trade, but has taken on a definition specific to the practice of fiction writing.

In Chapter Four, I will discuss the best-known promoter of the phrase “the craft of fiction,” Percy Lubbock, who in his book of that title sought to combine James’s rigorous technical standards with a more democratic, student-centered methodology inherited from writers like Bulwer-Lytton, Besant, and Bennett. Through Lubbock, the term was passed down to become a familiar phrase in twentieth and twenty-first creative writing handbooks, and Lee’s use of it, at least, would not be out of place in a contemporary text. However, partly for reasons of academic disciplinarity, the very few studies on the history of creative writing have been content to go back no further than James in tracing the origins of the concept. Because the work on this topic is so limited, I have been required to define my own field to a certain extent. Below I will discuss some of the authors and methodologies that I found most helpful in theorizing and analyzing nineteenth-century perspectives on technique in fiction.

I will begin with a text that, though it focuses on a time outside my period, draws conclusions about the eighteenth-century technical discourse that were extremely helpful in tracing the developments of those concepts. At the opening of The Economy of Character, Deidre Lynch announces that she will focus her discussion on the “pragmatics of character,” marking “the changing ways in which eighteenth-century writers and readers used the characters in their books” (4). Rather than viewing technique as a self-contained system, in a manner associated with New Criticism and narratology, Lynch will “reconnect…personal meanings to social processes and, in particular, to the market culture of the Regency” (6). Lynch’s analysis of the concept of
character was particularly useful to me in my reading, in Chapter Two, of the correspondence of Bulwer-Lytton and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, in which Bulwer-Lytton calls on the association between round, complex characters and the “respectable” novel to both encourage Braddon and keep her in her place as his apprentice. However, Lynch’s approach was of broader utility in presenting a model by which social history could be connected to the analysis of craft. In this dissertation, as in The Economy of Character, the terminology and the system of values that writers call on when discussing technique have real implications for the world outside the text.

In Chapters One and Two, for instance, we see that the position of the student of fiction was very different for women than it was for men. The terms of Braddon’s apprenticeship with Bulwer-Lytton, like Elizabeth Gaskell’s with Dickens, were in some ways dictated by questions of gender. Both women writers were celebrated by their mentors for certain literary talents—in particular, both were praised at their skill in managing a plot—but both also found their prospects of advancement forestalled by assumptions about their limitations. Gaskell was criticized for being unable to keep her fictions within the length limits prescribed by serial publication, while Braddon could not seem to meet Bulwer-Lytton’s standards when it came to the delineation of character. In considering the ways in which women were seen as both peculiarly attentive to and peculiarly unsuited for literature, I have found Kate Flint’s The Woman Reader, 1837-1914 to be particularly useful. As Flint demonstrates, women’s physiology was believed naturally to incline them to acts of imagination:

Maternity’s “natural” concomitant, the ability to venture with sympathetic identification into the lives of others, guaranteed that women’s susceptibility to indemnificatory modes of reading was perceived to be related to the inescapable
facts about the way in which her biological make-up influenced the operations of her mind (31).

However, if women’s susceptibility for escaping to imagined worlds gave them a facility for reading and writing, it also made them particularly vulnerable to the “moral, sexual, religious, ideological dangers” (4) involved in reading the wrong books. Prohibitions on certain kinds of reading may not have been exercised in every household, but it can be assumed that they barred a great many aspiring women writers from receiving the broad education in literature that would support and inform their efforts to learn their craft. Even among those whose reading was not invigilated by parents or husbands, few had Gaskell’s and Braddon’s opportunity to learn technique from a famous and successful writer; in fact, they may even have had a hard time learning the basics of grammar. As Charlotte Mary Yonge relates in the Reverend George Bainton’s The Art of Authorship, it took her years to learn that “every sentence must have a verb, &c. Of course every student knows this,” she comments, “but young ladies do not” (79). Women who were not able to learn the skills required for writing well were in danger of resembling the writers so ruthlessly parodied by George Eliot in “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” able to express herself “with perfect correctness in any language except English” (445).

Even if young women were able to receive the training in craft and style that would enable them to improve their work, they were still at a disadvantage when it came to enjoying the benefits of professionalization. In the words of John Stuart Mill, “women artists are all amateurs” by definition (quoted in Feltes 41). Clifford Siskin and Jennie Batchelor, in their valuable studies of writing as work, demonstrate that the identity of the professional writer was conceptualized in a way that made it difficult, if not impossible,
for women to fulfill the role. Siskin writes that over the course of the nineteenth century, the idea of work moved “from an earlier ideal—that which a true gentleman does not have to do—to the primary activity informing adult (male) identity” (21). Work as the basis of male identity was built on the ideology of separate spheres, which assumed that women would take charge of domestic responsibilities. When writing was defined as work, that existing association “gender[ed] textual production in ways that were to have damaging and longstanding consequences for women writers” (Batchelor 113). As we will see in the following chapters, women writers in apprentice relationships with better-known male writers were obliged to find a precarious balance between their work as wives and mothers and what Elizabeth Gaskell called the “appointed work” of the artist (quoted in Schor 4). Though identifying writing as work might have aided the burgeoning professional movement by putting it on a level with other professions, it also set up exclusionary parameters for women that, as we will see in the fiction of Vernon Lee, remained intact even at the end of the century.

Siskin and Batchelor’s research elucidates the advantages and disadvantages of the analogy between writing and work, but it remains curiously silent on a crucial related question. In what part of the writing process did the work consist? Was it the physical act of sitting at the desk and moving the pen? Was it the task of securing a publisher and assisting them with promotion? For writers like Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton, who, as we have seen above, drew the comparison between writers and laborers and also talked frequently about the mental labor of composing a piece of fiction, the answer would seem to be obvious. The work of writing consists in acquiring and employing a knowledge of technique—in other words, in craftsmanship. McGurl in The Program Era focuses on
the twentieth century, but his observation that research in the acquisition of technique is virtually unattempted can also be applied to criticism of the nineteenth century. His remark that “it is only a small exaggeration to say that the rise of the creative writing program has been entirely ignored” by scholars (24) could be extended to the history of the craft of fiction in general. *The Program Era* provided a model of how the technical elements of fiction could be approached in a literary-historical framework.

Like the mid-century writers who compared writing to work in a shop or with a loom, McGurl knows that he is contradicting cherished ideas about the relation between writing and inspiration. He shows the staying power of those ideas when he invokes “the continuing appeal of the romantic conception of original genius” underlying John W. Aldridge’s condemnation of “‘assembly-line writing programs…producing a standardized aesthetic, a corporate literary style’:

> The claim here is that the collective pursuit of perfectly crafted, workshopped prose has the effect of eliminating the salutary unpredictability of the students in question, ironically reproducing the machine-made quality of formulaic genre fiction on another, slightly more elevated or rarefied cultural level (26).

With the use of words like “machine-made” and “formulaic,” McGurl underlines the relationship between the rhetoric of writing program critics and that of earlier proponents of original genius. Aldridge, like Edward Young, wants to oppose writing to labor and retain its connection with the ineffable. In his analysis, McGurl refuses to go down that road, remarking that “what is needed…are studies that take the rise and spread of the creative writing program not as an occasion for praise or lamentation but as an established fact in need of historical interpretation” (27).
However, the parameters of McGurl’s historical interpretation may be influenced by his own disciplinary constraints. He is trained as an Americanist, and refers approvingly to his fellow Americanist D.G. Myers’s view that creative writing has its roots in “early twentieth century progressive educational reform” and represents “one of the purest expressions of that movement’s abiding concern for student enrichment through autonomous self-creation” (3). The connection between creativity and the philosophy of educational reformers like John Dewey is central to McGurl’s argument as well, and though he acknowledges that the study of creative writing has something to do with learning technique, he consistently deemphasizes craft in favor of self-expression. His phrasing in this interpretation of the writing program experience is instructive: “Taking a vacation from the usual grind, the…writer becomes a kind of internal tourist voyaging on a sea of personal memories and trenchant observations of her social environment, converting them, via the detour of craft and imagination, into stories” (16, italics mine). In McGurl’s version of creative writing, craft is relegated to a subordinate clause, a forgettable island port on the sea of self-discovery.

Given the strictures of his argument, it is easy to understand why McGurl doesn’t spend much time talking about the craft of fiction. He is interested not in what is learned in the creative writing program, but in the cultural significance of the relation between writing and the university. In addition, the fact that his training is in literary studies rather than creative writing may lead him into minor misrepresentations. This is particularly evident in his discussion of the concept of point of view, or as McGurl calls it, borrowing the critical language of Gerard Genette, “focalization.” McGurl assumes an
intrinsic connection between point of view as technical element and point of view as cultural lens:

in the twentieth century, point of view would become both an object and a vehicle of cultural politics, a matter of explicit debate: is it wrong for a white writer to write a first person narrative from a black point of view?....the dynamics of narrative focalization project a simplified model of the modern pluralistic society as an assemblage of different and sometimes conflicting, but always aesthetically redeemable, points of view (49).

McGurl is certainly not wrong that the choice of point of view can lead to ideological debate. However, he overlooks the fact that to the writer, the term point of view refers first to the perspective from which the events of the story are narrated, only secondarily to the cultural identity of the character. Point of view is a narrow technical question before it can be a broad social question. McGurl’s observation that craft choices are never neutral is a valuable one, but his conflation of the literal and the metaphorical meanings seems to indicate a lack of awareness of or lack of interest in the content of the technical discourse.

Though McGurl never refers to the technical meaning of point of view, he does refer to its history, stating that the term “made its first appearance on the American scene in Percy Lubbock’s The Craft of Fiction…which was essentially an expansion and codification of the narrative theory developed piecemeal across Henry James’s prefaces” (49). In fact, as I discuss in Chapter Three, the use of the term “point of view” precedes James, but it is no surprise to see him cited here as the source of this element of craft. “Jamesian” is perhaps the most-used adjective in The Program Era, shorthand for thoughtful and meticulous analysis of technique in fiction. McGurl states that in Flannery O’Connor’s studies at Iowa, she learned “Jamesian narrative poetics…codified
in the New Criticism” (141), while Ken Kesey is shown “donning the shackles of the
Jamesian and New Critical model of narration” (208) as a student at Stanford. Philip
Roth is named “a self-consciously Jamesian craftsman” (230), while “miniaturists” like
Lydia Davis and George Saunders “sta[y] wholly within the Jamesian/New Critical
regime of conscious craft and control” (376). McGurl never defines the connection
between James and New Criticism, but seems to be assuming a genealogy that runs
through Lubbock to Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon, authors of an early short story
anthology with the undoubtedly Jamesian title *The House of Fiction*.

As I will demonstrate, the filial relation between James and writing program
progenitors was by no means as uncomplicated as McGurl’s linking of the two would
suggest. However, this is only one of the reasons why the references to James as the
foundation of all modern investigations of the craft of fiction are misleading. Like D.G.
Myers, Tim Mayers, and Paul Dawson in their studies of the history of creative writing,
McGurl neglects the contributions of British writers to our understanding of the role of
technique in fiction writing. Indeed, he disregards James’s own investment in and
engagement with the discussion of craft in the British periodical press. What James
called the era of discussion was, as I show in Chapter Three, the source of many of the
technical pronouncements found in his prefaces and in essays like “The Art of Fiction.”

Though McGurl’s focus on the development of the discipline of creative writing
is a valuable model, I hope to combine a literary historical approach that fills in the
prehistory of his argument with an attention to the specifics of the technical conversation.
That is, I want to interpret what writers had to say about the elements of fiction both as a
writer, alert to the precise meaning of the terminology of craft, and as a critic, aware of
the cultural import of the valuation of certain kinds of writing—and certain kinds of writers—over others.

Richard Stang’s *The Theory of the Novel in England*, with its methodical analysis of the discussion of craft in nineteenth-century periodicals, comes closest to approximating this ideal. Stang addresses the notion that James represents the first appearance of a conscious approach to craft in his introduction, criticizing the “persistent cliché” that England was “remarkably insulated” from discussions of technique “until infected or fertilized…by either Henry James or George Moore in the eighties” (ix). However, Stang himself sometimes falls into the habit of reading the development of the technical discourse teleologically, referring at one point to Bulwer-Lytton “anticipat[ing] James’s favorite analogy for the novelist” in the preface to *The Last of the Barons*, and crediting him with “an almost Jamesian…insistence on the need for the novelist to be an intensely dedicated craftsman” (12). Olmsted, in his introduction to *The Victorian Art of Fiction*, makes a similar statement, citing the “embryonic Jamesians” to be found in nineteenth-century periodical criticism (1: xiii).

In this dissertation, I intend to correct for this deceptively limited concentration on James’s contributions in two ways, first by examining the discussions of craft that occurred quite apart from him, and second by demonstrating that the real value of technical analysis hinged on the question of whether writing could be taught. James did not believe that it could, but the majority of his technically-minded predecessors and contemporaries felt differently. We might think, for example, of Bulwer-Lytton, who addresses his essays on technique in *The Monthly Chronicle* to students of the craft of fiction:
These remarks for the summary of the hints and suggestions that, after a careful study of books, we submit to the consideration of the student in a class of literature now so widely cultivated, and hitherto almost wholly unexamined by the critic. We presume not to say that they form an entire code of laws for the art….Genius will arrive at fame by the light of its own star, but Criticism can often serve as a sign-post to save many an unnecessary winding, and indicate many a short way (“On Art in Fiction” 238).

We might also mention George Henry Lewes, who in “The Novels of Jane Austen” boldly states that “the art of novel-writing, like the art of painting, is founded on general principles” that could be analyzed and passed on from master to student (108), or of the anonymous writer who in an 1840 review in The Athenaeum chastises his contemporaries for failing to learn “those models and rules of art, which made the fame or fortune of their predecessors” (“The Dowager” 347). Like the majority of the writers I will discuss in the following chapters, all three of these tip a hat to the necessity of genius while concentrating their remarks on examinations of why writers neglect to live up to the technical ideals and suggestions about how they might do better.

We will see many examples of writers who were interested in a technical analysis of fiction and in passing along their insights to other writers, but perhaps the most open about the idea that fiction was a learned skill was Anthony Trollope. Unlike Bulwer-Lytton, Lewes, and the anonymous writer in the Athenaeum, Trollope never bothered to preface his remarks on technique with the caveat that genius did not require them. His unusually exact and exacting methods and his readiness to share them with his readers have received plenty of critical attention, then and now. His Autobiography, written at the end of a long and successful career, not only presents those methods but also includes a chapter of “rules of art” directed to the aspiring writer. Because it offers an instructive
example of an exploration of the craft of fiction unmediated by the claims of genius, I will discuss the Autobiography here rather than in its chronological place in the chapters to come. Though Trollope didn’t know it, and though modern critics have largely failed to recognize it, this was where the study of fiction writing was going.

Some of Trollope’s recent critics agree that his account of his practice is anomalous, seeming to view it not as a preview of the future but as a confusing side trip. Sutherland, for instance, cannot reconcile Trollope’s “secretarial exactitude and the aggressive account of it he gives of it in the Autobiography with “the substantial creative effort that went into his fiction” (Victorian Fiction 140), while P.D. Edwards seems embarrassed or even alarmed by Trollope’s custom of requiring himself to write so many words per page, so many pages per day:

The habit of writing became compulsive, an addiction; and the few faint hints he gives us, in his account of his life, of the possible imaginative exhilaration of the creative process, the joys of “living with” the creatures of his imagination, hardly counteract the chilling effect of the mechanical, early-morning ritual that ground out 250 words per quarter-hour, with or without “inspiration” and regardless of hangovers….Most [reviewers] were prepared to concede—politely rather than enthusiastically—that his methods of composition served him well, however unsuitable they might prove for novelists in general. No one wished to quarrel with his own evaluation of himself as toil-worn craftsman rather than inspired thinker (x).

Despite the quotation marks around the word “inspiration,” Edwards’s rhetoric makes it clear that he shares the reviewers’ disdain for Trollope’s self-presentation. The critics’ use of words like “secretarial” and “mechanical” hearken back to the proponents of genius who associated any account of the process of fiction writing with lower-class work, and forward to those who, like Aldridge, persist in claiming that a methodical study of creativity is bound to make for inferior fiction.
Edwards implies that Trollope’s remarks were taken as an idiosyncratic description of one man’s system, fine for him but not to be widely imitated. However, he offers no citations from contemporary criticism, and indeed it would have been strange if the *Autobiography* had been read in this way, since Trollope is fairly open about his intention to offer prescriptive remarks on what a writer should be and do. Though, unlike many of his contemporaries, he does not make frequent use of the word “craft,” he is as insistent as any of these on the idea that a fiction writer must be a hard worker. His preeminent model of the writer as unwearied laborer is his mother, also a novelist, who is praised for both for her regular production of novels and for her refusal to allow her writing to interfere with her duties to her family. Following his mother’s example in dedicating himself wholeheartedly to the work of writing, Trollope enthusiastically adopts the language of labor, advancing the opinion that a writer should “look at his work as does any other workman.” For him it was “the furrow in which my plough was set…the thing the doing of which had fallen into my hands, and I was minded to work at it with a will” (122).

For who writers follow Trollope in devoting themselves “with a will,” the profession offers a way of supporting their families. After Thomas Trollope’s numerous failed business ventures, Anthony’s mother Frances raised the children on the profits from her novels, and her son eulogizes writers who are enabled to do the same, even though celebrating writing as the means of making a middle-class living contradicts the widespread assumption that it should not be a trade:

I am well aware that there are many who think that an author in his authorship should not regard money….A barrister, a clergyman, a doctor, an engineer, and even actors and architects, may without disgrace follow the bent of human nature,
and endeavour to fill their bellies and clothe their backs, and also those of their
wives and children, as comfortably as they can….but the artist and the author
forget the high glories of their calling if they condescend to make a money return
a first object. They who preach this doctrine will be much offended by my
theory, and by this book of mine (106).

They might also be offended by Trollope’s frequent comparisons between himself
and the clergyman and the barrister, as he advances “as another man does in another
profession” (107). When he does turn to the subject of genius, Trollope insists that
though “I have never fancied myself to be a man of genius,” even those thus consecrated
might benefit from regular habits. Indeed, he objects strongly to those,

who think that the man who works with his imagination should allow himself to
wait till inspiration moves him. When I have heard such doctrine preached, I
have hardly been able to repress my scorn. To me it would not be more absurd if
the shoemaker were to wait for inspiration, or the tallow-chandler for the divine
moment of melting….I was once told that the surest aid to the writing of a book
was a piece of cobbler’s wax on my chair. I certainly believe in the cobbler’s wax
much more than the inspiration (120-1).

He counsels young authors to “seat themselves at their desks day by day as though they
were lawyers’ clerks” (122), counting not on genius but on their own capacity for hard
work to advance their fortunes.

If Trollope implied that cobbler’s wax and long hours were the only thing that a
writer needed to compose good fiction, Sutherland’s and Edwards’s uneasiness with his
methods might be warranted. It would not be responsible to tell a young aspirant that if
they sat in a chair long enough, success would be assured. But Trollope offers another
aid: his own counsel. In Chapter Twelve, “Novels and the Art of Writing Them,” he
announces his intention to “offer some advice on the art to such tyros in it as might be
willing to take advantage of the experience of an old hand” (229). His experience,
distilled over the next thirteen pages, is dense with suggestions, many expressed with a confident finality: “There should be no episodes in a novel” (237); “He [the writer] is not allowed, for the sake of his tale, to make his characters give utterance to long speeches” (240). Suspicious of the claims of genius and inspiration, Trollope seems to follow Lewes and Matthew Arnold in elevating unity as the goal of novelistic construction, stating firmly that “every sentence, every word, through all those ages, should tend to the telling of the story” (237). However, he never announces his allegiance to one doctrine over another. Indeed, Trollope is clear that his advice is aimed solely at encouraging the production of fiction that is interesting to the reader, and that keeping the reader engaged should always be the writer’s first goal.

It is perhaps because he is intent on appealing to an audience rather than couching an ideological argument in the form of craft advice that his rules of art have aged so much better than those of many of his contemporaries. Many of them would be perfectly at home in a twenty-first century handbook. Though Trollope does not describe the Autobiography as a handbook, he does make the startling claim that the book is written for the benefit of the writers who will come after him:

I…lay claim to whatever merit should be accorded to me for persevering diligence in my profession. And I make the claim, not with a view to my own glory, but for the benefit of those who may read these pages when young and who may intend to follow the same career. Nulla dies sine linea. Let that be their motto (365).

Trollope disclaims any right to the title of “man of genius,” but he is clearly proud of his industry and his knowledge of his craft. For him, as for the writers I will examine at the end of this dissertation, these are the needful ingredients for success in the writing of
fiction. As we approach the twentieth century, even the lip service to genius that we see in the Autobiography begins to disappear.

However, it is difficult to trace a direct line of assent from Trollope to the later authors of guides for aspiring writers. Those who might be expected to be influenced by him, like Bennett and Walter Besant, do not quote him, and for James he is only a negative example. In James’s essay “The Art of Fiction,” published the year after the Autobiography, he speaks of his impatience with writers who reveal to the reader that their fiction is invention and not history:

Certain accomplished novelists have a habit of giving themselves away which must often bring tears to the eyes of people who take their fiction seriously. I was lately struck, in reading over many pages of Anthony Trollope, with his want of discretion in this particular. In a digression... he concedes to the reader that he and this trusting friend are only “making believe”... Such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me, I confess, a terrible crime (504).

Just as in Barrie’s parody, James here recasts the technical strategies of the past as naïve and ineffective. Although James refers specifically to Trollope’s habit of apostrophizing the reader, he by implication indicts any acknowledgment that fiction is artifice. Instead of being the reader’s superior, Trollope positions himself as his equal, ready and willing to discuss the secrets of the craft.

Though Trollope was ahead of his time in some ways, his comfortable assumption that being a successful writer made him the equal of any other professional man would not have been possible without earlier efforts toward professionalization. In Chapters One and Two, I trace the promotion of fiction writing as a respectable line of work undertaken by Trollope’s friends and brothers in the craft, Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton. As I indicated above, these efforts involved many disparate enterprises, including
lobbying for copyright reform, the founding of writers’ organizations, and—most
importantly for my project here—the establishment of a technical discourse. However,
this discourse was never neutral. Though both Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton helped to
make the practice of fiction writing more accessible, it is important to note that they also
had their own motivations for advancing their particular views on technique. For Gaskell
and Braddon, who engaged in apprentice relationships with Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton,
the partnerships were both enabling, giving them a forum in which to discuss the
specifics of technique, and restricting, tying them to a certain vision of what good fiction
should be.

Though Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton were not perfect mentors, they did help to
open the profession to a wider variety of people. In Chapters Three and Four, I examine
James’s paradoxical effort to reverse this trend, simultaneously presenting his own ideas
about craft and denying that it could be taught. However, the works on fictional
technique that generally have been assumed to be influenced by James—including essays
by Robert Louis Stevenson and handbooks by Vernon Lee and E.M. Forster—depart
from him on this question of teachability. These works, along ostensibly critical texts
like Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction* and Joseph Warren Beach’s *The Method of Henry
James*, present a compelling model of the transmission of the craft of fiction that will be
followed by teachers of writing throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century.
Without the triumph of what Bennett called the “democratisation of art” traced in these
chapters, the institutionalized study of creative writing would not have been possible.
As I discussed in the introduction, the 1842 Copyright Act, in allowing writers to assume extended rights over their work, helped fiction writers to begin to think of themselves as a group, with a common set of knowledge and perhaps even a common purpose. In the 1840’s and 50’s, no one did more to advance that purpose than Charles Dickens. His familiarity to the public—Chambers’ commented that he walked around London “like a Roman conqueror” (quoted in Pettitt 65)—raised the profile of the fiction writer, and made it known that this was a field in which one could make more than a respectable living. Sutherland goes so far as to argue that, “Dickens’s gross fortune…did more to raise the profession than any number of…lectures on ‘The Dignity of Literature’, or ‘The Hero as Man of Letters’” (23).

If Dickens’s public persona did much to make the fiction writer respectable, it also gave him a stage from which to make a case for his own ideas of what professionalization should look like. In one year, 1850, Dickens presided over three significant monuments in the professionalization of the fiction writer: the founding of the Guild of Literature and Art, the serialization of David Copperfield, and the publication of the first issues of the journal Household Words. In these three forums, Dickens drew on each of the models I examined in the introduction, contending that the writer needed both genius and the ability to put in hard work. As with other intellectual workers, this labor was not mere exertion, but a process of training in the field. In John Forster’s words, “whereas for ‘the votaries of commerce…gain is the object of their efforts,’ for ‘the votary of intellectual labour…learning, or the mastery of art, is the object of effort’”
(quoted in Lund 696). In this chapter, I will demonstrate how Dickens used the Guild, *Copperfield*, and *Household Words* to promote this particular vision of the professional fiction writer, who, while endowed with a certain aptitude, was obliged to train himself through hard work in order to reach that “mastery of his art.” This is particularly evident in his mentorship of authors at his periodicals, where, in Sutherland’s phrase, he evoked “the atmosphere of what we might call a writing workshop” (*Victorian Novelists* 186).

Just before these milestones, much of the conversation about professionalization revolved not around what the professional writer was to be or to do, but how he was to be compensated. On the one hand, advocates of professionalization like Forster and Lewes wanted to argue that writing involved the same intensive effort as any other profession, and was therefore deserving of the same respect. On the other, they saw that for many writers who were not Dickens, it was extremely difficult to make a living in an unfettered marketplace. As critics have noted, the attempt to argue at the same time that writing was the equal of other professions and that it deserved to be compensated in a different way could lead the proponents of professionalization into logical dilemmas.

In an 1847 essay on the subject in *Fraser’s*, Lewes begins with the assertion that certain truths are now beyond argument; “literature has become a profession…a means of subsistence, almost as certain as the bar or the church…. [and] there is no evading the ‘great fact,’ now that it is so firmly established. We may deplore, but we cannot alter it” (285). Lewes himself is not particularly interested in deploring, but in setting forth principles under which the followers of the profession may be able to organize and advance their interests. To him, the standard-bearer is Samuel Johnson, “the first professional author—the first who, by dint of courage and ability, kept himself free from
the slavery of the bookseller’s hack” by earning “his subsistence in public patronage” (286). According to Lewes, the only honorable success for a writer comes from appealing to a middle-class readership. However, in the current state of things, such honorable success is impossible, because the public isn’t willing to pay writers what they deserve. An Englishman “is by no means impressed with any horror at an author’s destitution,” and in fact “he absolutely thinks it is a pity authors should be otherwise than poor; poverty is the only proper stimulus” (293). Before these modern-day Johnsons can earn a decent income in the marketplace, public attitudes must change.

Lewes’s argument seems at times a bit muddled. Though appealing to the public is a better route to respectability than “attendance on the great” or work as a “bookseller’s hack” (286), the public cannot be trusted to reward writers at a level sufficient to their desserts. At the same time, Lewes insists that he is not “arguing in favor of pensions to literary men. We want no government largesse” (293). Instead of handouts, he endorses government-sponsored “professorships” and “public offices” for writers on the German model (294). Only when authors are seen in positions of esteem will the publishing industry and the public be taught to value them appropriately.

The subject of writers’ compensation arose again in the periodicals during the publication of Thackeray’s novel *Pendennis*, which, like *David Copperfield*, can be read as a *Künstlerroman*. Thackeray got in trouble for one chapter in particular, in which Pendennis and his friend Warrington attend a dinner party hosted by a buffoonish publisher and attended by rogue’s gallery of nitwit novelists, including one who doesn’t even know what the novels published in his name are about. As Michael Lund has remarked, because Thackeray’s illness paused serialization from October to January of
1849, this particular number was in the public eye for an unusually long time. At the beginning of the new year, a response emerged in the form of an editorial in the *Morning Chronicle*, igniting what has been called the Dignity of Literature controversy.

Since the debate often has been framed by critics, including Lund and Pettitt, as a quarrel between Thackeray and John Forster about the writer’s role in society, it is important to note that *Pendennis* is only the occasion for, and not the subject of, the series of editorials. In Daniel Hack’s words, “the questions *Pendennis* raises concerning the respectability and moral probity of authors…is subordinate to the central issue of whether or not the marketplace should be the sole source of funding for intellectual and literary endeavors” (695). After beginning by accusing Thackeray of “fostering a baneful prejudice” against writers (quoted in Lund 16), the *Morning Chronicle* goes on to discuss the topic of state pensions for writers, concluding that they are not necessary because genius is its own reward. Forster replied with two editorials in *The Examiner*, arguing that writers did indeed perform a service that deserved to be compensated, “but that the state must supply that reward because the ‘let-alone system’ had failed to do so” (Lund 18).

Like Lewes, Forster suggests that the free-market economy is not a sufficient source of income for the professional writer. However, he runs into perhaps inevitable difficulties when he tries to explain why writers should be compensated at a non-market rate. At one point, he invokes the division of labor, arguing that literary men provide “enlightenment and refinement” to the industrial classes that is necessary to the wellbeing of the state (quoted in Hack 697). Since this image of a balance of responsibilities might indicate that things are fine as they are, Forster then indicates that the gift of literature is
so valuable that neither the state nor the marketplace can ever really pay for it. He states the work of writers cannot be measured by its value to the market, echoing, as Hack notes, “a foundational claim of aesthetic theory, the incommensurability of aesthetic value and exchange value” (698). When Forster gives the opinion that “the qualities which constitute a great literary…eminence are essentially distinct from those which constitute a good man of business” (35), he is citing the literary man’s possession of genius, that excessive quality that exists apart from and above the concerns of trade.

Forster seems to be taking the view that the production of literature is so beyond the comprehension of the public that it can’t possibly be fairly valued in the marketplace, leaving the state the responsibility of supplementing the going rate. In his reply, Thackeray denies the existence of a problem, concluding, in effect, that the system is adequate to its purpose:

I believe that the social estimation of the man of letters is as good as it deserves to be, and as good as that of any other professional man….instead of accusing the public of persecuting and disparaging us as a class, it seems to me that men of letters had best silently assume that they are as good as any other gentlemen; not raise piteous controversies upon a question which all people of sense must take to be settled (quoted in Lund 19).

While defending *Pendennis*, Thackeray also orients the discussion back toward the question of where the writer stood in relation to “any other professional man,” rather than in relation to the state. Though it sometimes has been assumed that Dickens supported Forster in the Dignity of Literature controversy, I will show that it is on Thackeray’s ground rather than Forster’s that Dickens took up the question. In his work on behalf of the Guild, in *David Copperfield*, and at *Household Words*, Dickens was primarily
concerned with defining the professional writer as a worker assuming and deserving the same respect as “any other professional man.”

After copyright reform in the early 1840’s, the members of Dickens’s circle, including Forster and Bulwer-Lytton, were intensely interested in organizing to advance their interests with publishers and with the public. As Nigel Cross remarks, this is a key moment in any profession, as it indicates that the members have begun to think of themselves as a unit (59). For literary men, one could date this group consciousness from the founding of the Royal Literary Fund in 1790, but Forster, Dickens, and Bulwer-Lytton were determined to differentiate themselves from the Fund, whose grants to indigent writers they saw as a form of charity. Applicants wrote pleading letters, and even appealed personally to well-known members of the Fund to support their petitions. By the 1840’s, there were frequent and loud protests that the Fund’s bequests were unrelated to the value of the recipients’ literary work. If the public judged the professional writer by those benefitting from the Fund, they would continue to view writers as objects of pity and scorn, unable to make a living. The Guild sought to address these stereotypes, and did it with a mode of alternative funding unconnected with government.

In 1850, Dickens directed and acted in a play that Bulwer-Lytton had written—the title, Not So Bad As We Seem, refers to professional writers—in a performance at the house of the Duke of Devonshire, hoping that the duke’s endorsement would help them to raise the first donations for the Guild. ¹ A year later, Dickens, Forster, and Bulwer-

¹ Perhaps partly because the founders neglected to establish a workable structure for funding its activities, the Guild was never very successful. The parliamentary bill that allowed for its incorporation contained an odd provision forbidding it to operate for seven
Lytton published a prospectus for the Guild that, like Thackeray’s editorial in the Dignity of Literature controversy, turns the conversation from the question of how writers should be paid to what they should do and be. What the writers benefited by the Guild will be is, in essence, independent scholars or public intellectuals, who will travel the country giving lectures and readings. Though the writers are paid partly for this mission of spreading “enlightenment and refinement” to an industrial populace, it is stipulated that these duties will not take up so much time “as to deprive the Public of their [the writers’] services in those departments in which they have gained distinction, or to divert their own efforts for independence from their accustomed pursuits” (854). The beneficiaries’ first obligation is to write; for their comfort and convenience while they do so, cottages will be provided on Bulwer-Lytton’s property at Knebworth. The arrangement is akin to a combination of a modern residency program with a university professorship, with the writers at times serving as educators-at-large and at others living in solitude, concentrated on their work.² Above all, the founders are concerned that the money provided by the members “should bear the character of a tribute to merit, not of an alms to destitution” (855). Indeed, the decision to endow the residencies through donations seems designed to do an end run around the question of the writer’s relation to the market. When a writer who deserves distinction cannot support himself through the profits of his own work, the founders suggest that the proper recourse is not government but the brotherhood of artists. In his article on the Guild in Household Words, Dickens doesn’t even mention the idea of state pensions, asking merely

² The Times critiqued this aspect of the plan in particular, suggesting that writers might prefer to receive the money and decide for themselves where they lived (Cross 74).
whether Literature shall continue to be an exception from all other professions… in having no resource for its distressed and divided followers but in eleemosynary aid; or whether it is good that they should be provident, united, helpful of one another, and independent (quoted in Hack 699).

Once the process by which writers would be benefited had been established, there remained the question of what the Guild could do to promote its founders’ views of what a successful professional writer should look like. The prospectus provides some answers. Not only does it fail to follow the writers we examined in the introduction in assuming that genius is all that matters, but, like many of Dickens’s writings of this era, it suggests that genius must coexist with other important ingredients. In addressing the societal failures that the Guild aims to rectify, the prospectus does state that writers of extraordinary gifts—Chatterton, Southey, and Burns are mentioned—should not be forced into low-status jobs or abject poverty (856). Members do not necessarily need to be the equals of these gentlemen, but they must have some innate ability setting them apart from the “large proportion of authors and artists [who] fail simply because their abilities are not suited to the profession they have embraced” (855). However, the prospectus also refers to the writers who may benefit from the Guild as “the great mass of our fellow-labourers” (855), in an image suggesting kinship with the artisan labor force. Finally, the choice of the word “Guild” is chosen to bring to mind Saxon societies of craftsmen organized in a common field (855). The name implies that members of this Guild, like members of one of the Saxon societies, share a certain body of knowledge. Their ability to cohere as a group depends not on their individual genius—a difficult quality to measure at any time—but on the work they produce by means of particular skills.
Thackeray too promoted the idea that a writer was a laborer, but without the
distinction that was crucial to the founders of the Guild. As we have seen, Forster spoke
of intellectual labor as training, but for Thackeray, writing done for money could not be
distinguished from other kinds of work without risking insufferable pretension. In a
review of Bulwer-Lytton’s memoir of the late writer Laman Blanchard, Thackeray
compares writing to blacking boots, insisting that:

I have chosen the unpolite shoeblack comparison, not out of disrespect to the
trade of literature; but it is as good a craft as any other to select. In some way or
other, for daily bread and hire, almost all men are labouring daily. Without
necessity they would not work at all, or very little, probably. In some instance
you reap Reputation along with Profit from your labour, but Bread, in the main, is
the incentive. Do not let us try to blink this fact, or imagine that the men…are
working for their honour and glory, or go onward impelled by an irresistible
aflatus of genius (quoted in Howes 274).

Given Thackeray’s family background, it may seem surprising that it was he rather than
Dickens who came to claim and even flaunt the label of literary hack. However, as
Sutherland discusses in Victorian Novelists and Publishers, there were practical as well
as ideological reasons why the two writers differed about the role of the professional
writer. Both Dickens and Thackeray were in the employ of Bradbury and Evans, but
while the publishers inserted stipulations in Dickens’s contract about the length, scale,
and even content of his early novels, they issued no such guidelines to Thackeray.
Sutherland notes that with Pendennis, Thackeray rarely seems to have written ahead of
his deadlines (103), and that since he was paid for each number as he finished it, he had
no motivation to “design…a long-term plan for his narrative” (102). Ironically, the sense
that Thackeray was a gentleman\(^3\) may have encouraged his publishers to take a more laissez-faire approach in their handling of him, and this attitude may in turn have influenced him to forgo planning and write at the last minute. In other words, it is possible that if Thackeray had been less of a swell, he might also have been less of a hack.

For *Esmond*, which was originally published in a volume edition rather than serialized, Thackeray was kept more in harness, and Sutherland comments approvingly that this more stringent contract “exercised a necessary measure of tough disciplinary control over the author” (106). It goes without saying that the feeling that writers were improvident pleasure-seekers who needed tough disciplinary control was one of the negative stereotypes that professionalization sought to mitigate, and Dickens addressed it again in the story of *David Copperfield*. Dickens’s comments to Forster indicate that he was unsure about David’s choice of a career as late as November 1849, and Lund suggests that he may have made David a novelist in response to *Pendennis*, “add[ing] to Forster’s efforts [in the Dignity of Literature debate] by having David Copperfield become…an author who was also a regular Victorian businessman” (25). Whether or not he was responding specifically to Thackeray’s novel, Dickens clearly wanted *Copperfield* to function in tandem with his work for the Guild in improving the reputation of the

\(^3\) The eulogiums after Thackeray’s death dwelled on his reputation as a gentleman-author. In a reference pointedly uncomplimentary to Dickens, James Hannay in the *Edinburgh Review* speaks of Thackeray as “a polished gentleman, and castigated “the numerous weaklings to whom his [Thackeray’s] severe truth and perfect honesty of art seemed horrible after the riotous animal spirits, jolly caricature, and lachrymose softness of the style which he was putting out of fashion” (quoted in *Letters* 10: 347). Dickens complained to Wilkie Collins that the eulogists set Thackeray apart “as if the rest of us were of the tinker tribe” (10: 347).
writer. As my reading will demonstrate, Dickens’s portrait of the writer as a professional man depicts David as a writer with some natural talent, who through work trains himself to acquire the knowledge necessary to succeed in his field.

At first glance, *Copperfield* would seem to be a novel that celebrates hard work in all its forms, and particularly what Dickens calls elsewhere the “infinite pains” involved in writing fiction (*Letters* 11: 136). He advances the idea that his society is as a whole confused about the meaning of work—at Uriah Heep’s school, they taught “from nine o’clock to eleven, that labor was a curse; and from eleven o’clock to one, that it was a blessing and a cheerfulness, and a dignity” (741)—and in its portraits of workers, the novel certainly inclines toward the second teaching. As Ruth Danon notes, in the early sections of the book, David is preoccupied by his perceptions of what people do for a living and how they do it. In his visit to the Peggottys at Yarmouth, “every place that David sees is described as the location for a particular occupation” (50). Both Mr. Peggotty and Ham are “skilled work[men]” who put their all into their labor (*Copperfield* 316), and though David admires them greatly, he seems at first to no idea how to follow their example. Danon points out that David is used to following others’ advice about where to live and what to do, and his constant habit of observing of the work going on around him indicates some awareness that he “has not yet identified his vocation” by finding “work consistent with his nature” (49).

Dora, David’s first wife, certainly does nothing to help the process. One way that the reader knows that Dora is not the right match for David is that she motivates him to engage in acts of unproductive, non-meaningful work. While wooing her, David is inspired with this revealing flight of imagery:
What I had to do, was, to take my woodman’s axe in my hand, and clear my own way through the forest of difficulty, by cutting down the trees until I came to Dora….Great was the labour; priceless the reward. Dora was the reward, and Dora must be won….I had a good mind to ask an old man…who was breaking stones upon the road, to lend me his hammer for a little while, and let me begin to beat a path to Dora out of granite (505).

If the picture of David cutting his way through an endless forest didn’t make the point, the image of breaking stones on the road surely shows that this is merely exertion, not work to a purpose. When Traddles cautions his friend about the great labor involved in learning shorthand, David repeats his simile, “only feeling that here…were a few tall trees to be hewn down, [and] immediately resolv[ing] to work my way on to Dora through this thicket, axe in hand” (512). In another passage, a moment of retrospect allows David to reflect that at this time he “made it a rule to take as much out of myself as I possibly could…. [and] made a perfect victim of myself” (521).

While David exhausts himself to no purpose, Dora is repelled by the very idea of effort. When David asks, with elaborate gentleness, if she might be willing to learn to keep track of their accounts and to cook a few simple dishes, she’s so horrified that she almost faints (526). Dickens is careful to let the reader know that the problem is not that Dora is too refined or haughty to be a working man’s wife; indeed, when she somehow gets the impression that David is a “poor labourer” reduced to working with his hands, she presses him to take her money for himself (527). As the fact that Dora does not even know what her prospective husband does for a living would indicate, she is simply too light and fragile to be counted on for work of any kind. In his notes for the novel, Dickens refers to “poor little Dora, not bred for [the world] a working life” (quoted in Danon 75)—the substitution of the latter phrase suggesting that the world and the
working life are synonymous, and that Dora, not being made for the one, cannot survive in the other. In indirect reference to Adam’s curse in Genesis, David tells Dora that “we must work to live,” and she responds with incredulity: “Oh! How ridiculous!” (528).

Through the example of Agnes and the Peggottys, through the painfully acquired discipline learned at Murdstone and Grinby’s, and through the ever more evident contrast between himself and Dora, David learns something important: he is made for the working life. However, many critics—including Sutherland, Pettitt, Philip Collins, and Mary Poovey—have noticed that when David leaves shorthand behind and begins to live from the profits of his writing, he falls curiously silent about what his work entails. Poovey characterizes David’s writing career as “explicitly effaced” (100), while Sutherland states that Dickens’s “uneasiness with the subject matter…lead[s] almost to an apology for the writer’s efforts” (26). Collins goes so far as to argue that it was a mistake for Dickens to make his hero a novelist if, for whatever reasons, he felt so reluctant to flesh out the assertion that David succeeded in this line….Dickens plays false here to the art he professed, for he well knew how much self-commitment…goes into creation: and if “every energy of my soul” was exerted, such an effort obviously deserves more detailed attention (quoted in Lund 24).

It is true that, in a novel obsessed with the concept of meaningful work, Dickens says little about what David does at his desk. When writing is mentioned at all, David has a notable habit of burying the reference in a subordinate clause. During his marriage to Dora, two allusions to writing are found in nearly identical sentences: “Sometimes, of an evening, when I looked up from my writing…. (617); “Sometimes, of an evening, when I was home and at work—for I wrote a good deal now, and was beginning in a small way to be known as a writer….“ (628). On the walk that takes him to Mrs. Steerforth’s house,
he is “thinking of the book I was then writing—for my success had steadily increased with my steady application” (647). David is frank about his lack of interest in talking about his work, telling the reader, “it is not my purpose, in this record, to pursue the history of my own fictions. They express themselves” (671). With metafictional sleight of hand, he refers us to his published books for more insight: “I do not enter on the aspirations, the delights, anxieties, and triumphs, of my art. That I truly devoted myself to it with my strongest earnestness…I have already said. If the books I have written be of any worth, they will supply the rest” (823). These books, of course, do not exist. Even the eponymous volume in the reader’s hands—the book that is David Copperfield—was decreed by David “never…to be published on any account.”

We can see that Dickens was facing an insoluble problem. Though he would play with the stereotype of writer as good-for-nothing in *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices*, in his serious work he sought to show that writing took skill and dedication. On the other hand, he did not want to follow *Pendennis* and, by discussing writing as if it were a job like any other, leave the impression that David did it only for money. While it is true that David is never seen sweating over an empty page, I would argue that the critics who address this topic overlook several important passages where he speaks of his apprenticeship as a writer. Here he reveals the importance of the third term in the triad of Dickensian professionalization, the one produced by the combination of genius and work: the author’s mastery of his art.

The idea that a young man must go through a process of training in his field is noted approvingly in the novel, as where Wilkins Micawber responds to his father’s criticism about his failure to follow a career:
He demanded, with some temper, what he was to do? Whether he had been born a carpenter, or a coach-painter, any more than he had been born a bird? Whether he could go into the next street, and open a chemist’s shop? Whether he could rush to the next assizes, and proclaim himself a lawyer? Whether he could come out by force at the opera, and succeed by violence? Whether he could do anything, without being brought up to something? (743).

David is at least as disadvantaged as Master Micawber in this regard, but though he doesn’t have anyone helping to bring him up to a profession, he does have an important set of silent tutors: his books. These novels are first mentioned early on, as the young David, locked in his room by the Murdstones, goes to the bookshelf for comfort. He lists them for the reader: “Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, The Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe,” along with the Arabian Nights (53). Except for the last, each is either a proper name or a title, and the fact that they are not written in the form of titles underscores the impression that these are David’s companions, his friends. At school at Salem House, it becomes clear that he has learned much from them, and he repeats the stories at night for a rapt audience of boys in his dormitory (88). Back with the Murdstones after his mother’s death, David is neglected, and again turns to the familiar tales: “They were my only comfort; and I was as true to them as they were to me, and read them over and over I don’t know how many times more” (125). In his childhood, this constant reading and rereading seems to be simply the recourse of an unhappy boy, and it is not until later that the value of that long acquaintance with the early novel becomes clear. In a curious passage, David interrupts his narration of his time at Murdstone and Grinsby’s to inform us that

Mr. Micawber, about this time, composed a petition to the House of Commons, praying for an alteration in the law of imprisonment for debt. I set down this
remembrance here, because it is an instance to myself of the manner in which I fitted my old books to my altered life, and made stories for myself, out of the streets, and out of men and women (163).

Since the story inspired by Mr. Micawber’s petition is not mentioned again in the narrative, the reader must conclude that the passage refers to a novel written by the adult David, with which the reader is assumed to be familiar. Though he tells us elsewhere that he will not talk about his books in his autobiography, this moment contradicts his claim, and provides a revealing window into his habits of composition. By immersing himself in the novels he loves, David has learned them well enough to be able to transpose them onto his own life and make something new out of the combination. This “mastery of art” is the quality that separates David’s work from the labor engaged in by the Peggottys; however, Dickens never suggests that David is entitled to supplemental compensation for his unusual kind of work. Indeed David, like Dickens himself, seems to do quite well in the marketplace as it is.

We see here that though he has lacked a formal apprenticeship in any field, David all the time has been secretly training himself for the profession of fiction writer. If he says little about the specifics of that apprenticeship, another passage may indicate a reason. When his aunt, remarking the long hours that David spends at his desk, comments that “I never thought, when I used to read books, what work it was to write them,” David responds that “It’s work enough to read them sometimes….As for the writing, it has its own charms, aunt” (838). One assumes that these “charms,” like the pleasure that anyone else might find in her vocation, are not easily explained to a lay audience. While familiarizing his readers with the profession through his portrait of the writer as respectable gentleman, Dickens also wanted to suggest that the knowledge
obtained through a mastery of art is beyond the understanding of the untrained. As his
texts about *Household Words* indicate, these matters were, in his opinion, best discussed
between one writer and another.

This conversation about the technicalities of fiction writing was a major part of
Dickens’s relationship with the writers who published in his journals, *Household Words*
and *All the Year Round*. David Saunders, in *Authorship and Copyright*, discusses the
practical reasons why Dickens needed trained and experienced writers working for him.
In a system of serial production, which depended on content being produced quickly and
on time, editors became ever more enamored of consistency, “which is both a private
moral character and the attribute of professional conduct bound by legal conditions”
(138). If Dickens failed to hire writers who worked consistently, he would lose money.
Thus, at *Household Words*, the question became not only how well could you write, but
how well—how consistently—you could write for this particular format. With
contributors who were just learning the dimensions, Dickens could be a patient and
informative tutor, as when he writes to Mary Boyle about the need to “compress” her
story, and make it “pleasanter by compression.” In a moment that reveals his own
autodidactical training, he tells her that all pieces for *Household Words* must have “that
compactness which a habit of composition, and of disciplining one’s thoughts like a
regiment, and of studying the art of putting each soldier into his right place…have taught
me to think necessary” (*Letters* 6: 297). He makes it clear that authors who were not
willing to write and revise according to his notions of compactness would not be
published in his pages. Writing to Anne Marsh, he informs her “introduction is too long,
and in many places the dialogue needs abbreviation,” and though “I should be sorry to
lose so affecting and powerful a story, I do not for a moment question your right to withdraw it…if you cannot, on consideration, allow any weight to my objections” (6:477).

As the story of Smith, Elder shaping *Esmond* through stipulations in the contract would suggest, Dickens was not unusual in asking his writers to pay attention to the formal dimensions of the publication. Royal Gettman comments that “the three-decker was seen in the first instance as a physical thing…so many pages, so many lines per page” (quoted in Feltes 26), and if volume publication required such a practical perspective, it was surely even more necessary when writing a serial. The space was small, the turnaround rapid, and “in a week the novelist would need to devise, in five pages, an installment which…added to the narrative yet was sufficiently barbed with suspense or the promise of good things to come to keep the reader wanting more” (Sutherland *Victorian Novelists* 172). The “compactness” that Dickens preached in his letters was therefore required by the form of publication, but Saunders and Sutherland argue that a preference for first-person narrators and stories of crime also became part of the house style. This may have been because stories containing these elements could catch the reader’s attention quickly, but they may have also been a way of catering to Dickens’s preferences as a writer and a reader. As I will discuss below, Dickens thought that Wilkie Collins was particularly skilled at writing to the standards of his periodicals and rewarded him accordingly.

For Dickens, who had spent the early part of his career as the beck and call of sometime-unscrupulous publishers, there were clear advantages to, in Saunders’s words, “deal[ing] with the division of labour between authors and publishers by occupying both
their domains himself” (142). His journals gave him a reliably remunerative forum for his own fiction as well as a stage from which to promote to other writers his ideas of how fiction should be written. This process of training in his personal standards could be seen as a kind of teaching; less charitably, it could be viewed as exploitation or even violation. Recent critics generally have inclined toward the second reading. In language that recalls Dickens’s habit of taking anonymous night walks around the city, Hilary Schor notes that

Dickens’s name was everywhere in the journal (and in its publicity)—and his was, of course, the only name. All contributions to Household Words were anonymous—but Dickens’s name…ran at the top of every leaf; his imprint was everywhere; his voice was pervasive; and indeed, his initial vision of the journal (as a shadow that would go inside the homes of others, would—in Dombey’s phrase—“take the house-tops off,…and show….”) suggests his desire precisely to intrude, silently, but potently (92).

Saunders states that “where respect for the integrity of an individual author’s work was concerned All the Year Round was on par with Hollywood” (142), while Lillian Nayder describes the journals as “a class system in which contributors were the servants or hands and Dickens himself was the master” (9). N.N. Feltes depicts “relations of production analogous to those prevailing in a textile mill” (63), and Poovey takes the argument even further, indicting not only Dickens but the entire system of serial production of fiction:

Because of the absolute standardization of the form--the fact that each serial part had to contain exactly thirty-two pages, which had to be produced according to an inflexible schedule and internal form--the writer was constructed not as an individual, much less a “genius,” but as just one instance of labor, an interchangeable part subject to replacement in case of failure or to repair in case of defect. One sign of this notion was that when a novel was serialized in a magazine, as many Victorian novels were, the editor…might direct the plot into more marketable channels or even rewrite parts of it, with or without the author’s permission (104).
Though Poovey acknowledges that these conditions were set by the realities of production and not by the individual publisher’s despotic whim, the image of the writer as an “interchangeable part” is perhaps a bit overstated. Certainly it is not entirely accurate to the state of things at Dickens’s journals, where some parts were considerably more valued than others, and for personal as well as professional reasons. What she and many of these critics seem to respond to with particular ire is the idea that the editors of serial publications rewrote their contributors’ copy. Dickens undeniably did so, and was not the least bit apologetic about it. In a typical letter to his manager at *Household Words*, W.H. Wills, he writes that a piece submitted to the journal was “horribly dismal,” but that he could “alter it myself in ten minutes” (*Letters* 6: 50). The critics who censure this practice never mention the fact that, as I will show, Dickens’s contributors accepted and in some cases welcomed his habit of rewriting. The assumption that this fairly common editorial practice produced negative consequences—for the writer and for the work—may indicate a bias in favor of original genius in contemporary criticism, one that still colors the way we read nineteenth-century collaborations. As Saint-Amour notes, the contemporary scholar contemplating a critique of original genius confronts “a peculiar problem of reflexivity,” since originality is a fundamental principle of advancement in “the very institutional contex[t] [the university] where such scholarship is produced and evaluated” (6).

Among the critics who view Dickens’s editorial influence in a more positive light, Sutherland is perhaps the most vocal. His reading of Dickens’s work at the journals echoes his larger argument about the benefits of the “tough disciplinary control” that the
best publishers exercised over their authors. Sutherland even turns the factory-floor metaphor used by Poovey and others to good account, declaring that

*All the Year Round* was in many ways the epitome of the furnace-like conditions in which much of the best Victorian fiction was created…. [and] it was, when handled properly, a superb instrument for fiction. No writer in *All the Year Round* could forget for a moment the mechanics of publication. The pace, narrowness and need for “incessant condensation” cut away all fat; the responsiveness of the sales to any slackening of tension kept the novelist nervous and alert (172).

Sutherland makes it clear that he’s not just saying that writing to the demands of the journals was good for Dickens or for fiction, but that it was good for the writers as well: “What kind of partner was Dickens for his ‘fellow labourers…? A very good one it turned out” (170).

Certainly Dickens would have inclined to this way of thinking. When founding *Household Words*, he wrote a series of polite letters to potential contributors—mostly women—that reveal that he saw the editor/writer relation as a mutually beneficial partnership with respect on both sides. To Gaskell, he writes that “I should set a value on your help, which your modesty can hardly imagine” (6: 22), and he tells Marsh that “I should strive to make the business arrangements satisfactory to you in all respects, and to conduct them in no unworthy spirit” (6: 43). It may occurred to these writers that there were advantages to doing business with another writer, both because he understood what it was like to be on the supply end of copy and because he knew how fiction writing worked. Bulwer-Lytton, notoriously touchy about criticisms of his work, seems to have felt this way. Sutherland writes that Dickens offered several fairly major suggestions for the revision of *A Strange Story*, which would appear in *All the Year Round*:
This interference was something no normal publisher could venture with an author of Lytton’s stature. Bentley, for example, had been unable to explain to Lytton in terms sufficiently authoritative that Harold was too portentous…But suggestions offered, as they were, inter pares were acceptable to the great man (Victorian Novelists 184). 4

Dickens was even capable of offering advice about writing when there was no immediate business advantage involved. Though his usual policy, oft-repeated in his letters, was never to read or comment on unsolicited manuscripts, he occasionally broke his own rule. In 1859, after reading several chapters of a novel in progress, he writes to Thomas C. Evans advising him “never to be afraid of being pathetic when any tenderness naturally arises in you out of the situation, and never to regard it as a kind of weakness that needs to be jested away” (9: 107). Evans does not seem to have been a regular correspondent, but with writers he knew well and mentored over time, Dickens was both more directive and more lavish in his praise for good work. With the two journal contributors whom he made the greatest efforts to mentor, Gaskell and Collins, he was particularly supportive. In my view, these were more productive partnerships than they 

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4 Nayder notes that several the critics who see Dickens’s editorial role as fundamentally benevolent do not respond well to the notion that the influence between writer and editor went both ways. Returning to the factory metaphor, A.W.W. Ward argues that when Dickens’s work reveals that he has absorbed Collins’s perspective on craft, “the master of humour and pathos, the magician whose potent wand, if ever so gently moved, exercises effects which no one is able to resist, seems to be toiling in the mechanician’s workshop, and yet never attains to a success beyond that of a more or less promising apprentice,” while J.W.T. Ley complains that Collins turns Dickens into “a story-manufacturer” (quoted in Nayder 199). The view that Collins and not Dickens was responsible for the mechanistic aspect of their partnership is curious, and neglects to consider other well-known instances of Dickens taking advice from his fellow writers—most notoriously from Bulwer-Lytton, who convinced him to change the ending of Great Expectations. Dickens was comfortable with his decision to accept advice from his friend, writing to Collins that “Bulwer was so very anxious that I should alter the end…and stated his reasons so well, that I have resumed the wheel, and taken another turn at it. Upon the whole I think it is for the better” (9: 428).
are generally considered to be, giving two less experienced writers the opportunity to learn technique from one of the masters of the craft. However, the evolution of these disparate partnerships reveals a difference that has less to do with levels of talent than with the contributor’s gender, and his or her relationship with Dickens off the page. As Elsie B. Michie argues, Gaskell was to experience *Household Words* not as a place where she, a respectable woman, could safely enter the public sphere, but as “a place where the Victorian separation between the public and the private was enforced” (85).

Although Dickens cultivated women writers of his acquaintance for his journals, their relation to the journal was different from the beginning of *Household Words*. As legal realities dictated, their contracts were written in their husbands’ names, and they were paid considerably less than marquee contributors like Bulwer-Lytton and, later, Collins. Dickens’s correspondence with Gaskell was, in the early days, uncommonly cordial; Schor refers to “Elizabeth Gaskell’s literary flirtation with Charles Dickens” (83), and in one notable letter, he calls her his “dear Scheherazade—for I am sure your powers of narrative can never be exhausted in a single night, but must be good for at least a thousand nights and one” (*Letters 6*: 545). Schor takes the title of her book, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace*, from this letter, and finds the implications of the figure somewhat troubling:

Dickens’s offhand editorial flirtation has a[n]…ambiguous side: in this vignette of authorship, the male storyteller captures the fabulist princess for himself; it is his stories that he wants her to tell. She is there to seduce him, and he to publish her tales—a curious encounter of fiction and the market, of desire and its containment, of female power and male anxiety….I have appropriated this tale not to give Dickens the last word but to point to a problem in Victorian authorship: the difficulty, one we are still far from understanding, of the woman writer (3).
Part of this “difficulty of the woman writer” is her position between two worlds of work—the work of writing and her domestic work in service of her family—and it is one that Gaskell struggled with throughout her career, not only in her writing for Dickens. In a bind that I will examine more fully in the following chapter, Gaskell was trapped between the demands of running a house, raising children, and living up to her social obligations on the one side, and on the other, her fiction. There was never enough time, and Gaskell was most candid about the pressures when speaking about someone else, writing in her biography of Brontë that “a woman’s principal work in life is hardly left to her own choice; nor can she drop the domestic charges devolving on her as an individual, for the exercise of the most splendid talents that were ever bestowed” (quoted in Schor 5).

Given the fact that Dickens knew many women writers who were married with children, did he consider the unique pressures devolving on them as members of the profession? The answer would seem to be no. Certainly the evidence of his fiction presents no very sympathetic perspective on the issue. Though, as Poovey has demonstrated, he draws an analogy between David Copperfield’s work and Agnes’s housekeeping that seems intended to elevate the status of women’s work, it in fact suggests an identity between Agnes and her domestic duties that gravely limits her potential to find any other kind of meaningful work. The self-making individual in Dickens is, as Poovey writes, constitutively male, his identity formed by transcending the home and “temper[ing] his sexual and emotional desires by the possibilities of the social world” (90). Agnes succeeds because she recognizes and fulfills her true work as a teacher and homemaker; Dora dies because she cannot accomplish hers, but neither of
them has any choice in the matter, and it goes without saying that a fiction-writing Dora or Agnes is as impossible a being as Shakespeare’s sister.

Though he may not have been attentive to the particulars of her situation, Dickens clearly admired Gaskell’s fiction, and in the early days they engaged in a lively correspondence in which he frequently offered comments on her fiction. Sometimes he presented his criticisms after publication, when again the advice could not possibly be turned to his professional advantage. In December 1850, he writes to Gaskell that

I think The Heart of John Middleton—that’s the name I have given it—a story of extraordinary power, worked out with a vigor and truthfulness that very very few people could reach. Reading it at the office…I sat thinking about it for sometime, and then said to Wills that I wished you had not killed the Wife—that I thought it an unnecessary infliction of pain upon the reader, not justified by the necessities of the story—and that it seemed to me that the alteration of the last twenty lines or so, to the effect that she recovered, and saw her daughter grow into a woman, and still exercised her influence for all good over her husband, would be a wiser termination, though possibly a less striking one (6: 238).

Gaskell’s reply to Dickens does not survive, but his next letter—he tells her “you can put a pleasanter end to the next one” (6: 243)—suggests that she accepted and perhaps even agreed with the criticism. However, in spite of her initially pleasant relationship with Dickens himself, it is evident that Gaskell never felt part of the fight to establish the writer as a respected member of the professional classes. Neither she nor any woman would have been invited to join the Guild, and Gaskell’s one mention of the organization is revealing. In August 1852, Charles and Catherine Dickens called on the Gaskells during a visit to Manchester, inviting Elizabeth Gaskell to accompany them to a local meeting of the Guild. Gaskell spent the time looking at the caricatures of the speakers that Thackeray was drawing beside her—they were “very funny”—and complained
afterwards that “the room was so close, & the speeches were so long I could not attend & wished myself at home many & many a time” (197). Since the speeches could not have had any relevance to her situation as a writer with no legal rights in her own work and no professional organization representing her interests, it is scarcely surprising that she found no motivation to pay attention to them.

Gaskell had continued to write for *Household Words* during this time, and though she had disagreed with Dickens over a few changes to *Cranford*, their major editorial quarrel arose over the publication of *North and South*. In June 1854, she sent him what would become the first seven numbers, and in his reply he set out the way that he thought the story should be divided in the serials, stating ominously that “if it were divided in any other way—reference being always had to the weekly space available for the purpose in *Household Words*—it would be mortally injured” (7: 355). It is clear that Gaskell, unlike Collins, did not write with the serial divisions in mind, and indeed she had never received any encouragement to do so. Her reply seems to have registered some objection to Dickens’s emphasis on the divisions, and in his next letter, in July, he sounds somewhat snippier: “I dwelt on the necessity of my considering the capacity in the story itself of being divided…because I am under an imperative necessity on that head, which I can no more change than I can change the weather or my tenure of life” (363). Later in the month, he seems apologetic for his tone, commenting that “I…confined myself to the business part of our communication, because you seemed a little to resent my doing anything else. Your pleasant letter blows all that seeming, away in a breath.” He also assures her that *North and South* will be advertised in exactly the same way as *Hard
"Times. This was not a perk vouchsafed to all contributors, and Dickens remarks smugly, “I am sure you will find that to be as unobjectionable as such a thing can be” (382).

It is impossible to imagine Dickens addressing a male writer in these terms; here, if anywhere, Schor’s reference to a “literary flirtation” seems apposite. By late August, however, when Dickens writes again, his frustration has returned. Gaskell has not made the cuts he has suggested, and has sent back the unaltered proof for the second part of *North and South*. He implies that she had earlier agreed to the changes: “This is the place where we agreed that there should be a great condensation, and a considerable compression” (402). In spite of early letters assuring her that length was no objection to publication in *Household Words*, evidently Gaskell as well was expected to observe the house style of “compactness.”

Finally, after *North and South* had concluded its run in *Household Words*, he writes to her with praise and what sounds like an indirect apology for his behavior:

> Let me congratulate you on the conclusion of your story…it is the vigorous and powerful accomplishment of an anxious labour. It seems to me that you have felt the ground thoroughly firm under your feet, and have strided on with a force and purpose that MUST now give you pleasure. You will not, I hope, allow that not-lucid interval of dissatisfaction with yourself (and me?) which beset you for a minute or two once upon a time, to linger in the shape of any disagreeable association with *Household Words*. I shall still look forward to the large sides of paper, and shall soon feel disappointed if they don’t begin to reappear (7: 513-4).

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5 At the beginning of their correspondence, Dickens again and again assured Gaskell that she shouldn’t worry about length when writing for *Household Words*. On February 5th, 1850, he writes that her story in progress can spread from three to four numbers if she finds that she needs more length (*Letters* 6: 29); later in the month, he tells her that “I would rather that you occupy as many pages as you think your design wants, than that I should put any constraint upon you” (6: 34); in March, he writes, “Let me particularly beg you not to put the least constraint upon yourself, as to space. Allow the story to take its own length, and work itself out. I will engage to get it in, very easily, whatsoever the extent to which it may go” (6: 55).
Though Gaskell was published again in *Household Words* as soon as the following August, and continued her association with the Dickens periodicals for some time, her personal and professional relationship with the Inimitable never recovered, and they exchanged markedly fewer letters after 1854. He seems to have concluded, rather unfairly, that she could not adapt her style to the requirements of his journals, and she had her own reasons, which I will discuss below, for allowing the “literary flirtation” to cool.

The waning of Dickens’s mentoring relationship with Gaskell may have had many sources, but one factor that does not seem to have been responsible is Dickens’s habit of revising his contributors’ work. As I mentioned, many Victorian editors reserved the right to make changes to fiction in manuscript, and many of Dickens’s writers seem to have been quite comfortable with the process. Sutherland quotes a letter from Charles Lever in which he instructs Dickens to “cut—carve—and insert as you will with me—and always think of your public and not of *me* who have no amour propre about pen work,” commenting that “Dickens took full advantage of this permission, and would have done, one would imagine, if Lever had had the amour propre of a peacock” (*Victorian Novelists* 176). Early in 1854, before their correspondence about *North and South* had taken its discordant tone, Gaskell writes to Dickens in a manner suggesting that she is indeed making an effort to write with the compactness required for *Household Words*, and giving him permission to make any changes that were still necessary:

> It is 33 pages of my writing that I send today. I have tried to shorten & compress it, both because it was a dull piece, & to get it into reasonable length....I never wish to see it’s [sic] face again; but, *if you will keep the MS for me, & shorten it as you think best for HW* I shall be very glad. Shortened I see it must be (Letters 323).
Gaskell is evidently not pleased with her story, and may regret agreeing to serialize it in the first place, but it is less certain whether, at least at this point, she finds Dickens’s editorial practices “disappointing, frustrating, and aggravating” (Schor 140) and “understands herself as a slave to production” (142). Indeed, Gaskell seems accepting of the system at *Household Words* and no more inclined to claim the privileges of original genius than Charles Lever, a literary hack if there ever was one.

To support her argument, Schor chooses an interesting passage from Gaskell’s later letter to Anna Jameson. Gaskell by this time is undoubtedly uncomfortable with the pace of publication at *Household Words*. For the serial format,

> I had to write pretty hard without waiting for the happy leisure hours. And then 20 numbers was, I found my allowance; instead of the too scant 22…and at last the story is huddled and hurried up….But what could I do? Every page was grudged me, just at last, *when I certainly did infringe all the bounds & limits they set me as to quantity* (328, italics mine).

There is in Gaskell’s version plenty of blame to go around. Dickens and Wills have misled her about the amount of space she would be allowed, and she has failed to hold up her end of the bargain by observing Dickens’s standard of compression and compactness. However, Schor in her quotation omits the italicized phrase, leaving the impression that the fault, in Gaskell’s view, lay with Dickens alone. Taken together, the passage implies rather that she has concluded that any form of publication that will not allow her to wait for the “happy leisure hours”—presumably, the hours remaining after her domestic work has been completed—is simply not for her.

Of the fiction writers published by *Household Words*, Gaskell was (apart from Dickens himself) unquestionably the most talented, and the only one with whom Dickens
enjoyed something like a teacher/student relationship. Just as his relationship with Gaskell was cooling, however, Dickens was beginning to cultivate a new contributor who could fill the role of mentee: Wilkie Collins.

Dickens had met Collins through their mutual friend Augustus Egg in 1851, and the next year Dickens wrote to Collins to praise his novel *Basil*, published in volume form by Bentley. Characteristically, Dickens leavens his congratulations with a bit of friendly criticism:

I may assure you that I have read the book with very great interest, and with a very thorough conviction that you have a call to this same art of fiction. I think the probabilities here and there require a little more respect than you are disposed to shew them, and I have no doubt that the Prefatory letter would have been better away; on the ground that a book...should speak for, and explain, itself. But the story contains admirable writing, and many clear evidences of a very delicate discrimination of character. It is delightful to find throughout that you have taken great pains with it besides, and have “gone at it” with a perfect knowledge of the jolter-headedness of the conceited idiots who suppose that volumes are to be tossed off like pancakes, and that any writing can be done without the utmost application, the greatest patience, and the steadiest energy, of which the writer is capable (6: 823).

The letter is significant both for the way it expresses Dickens’s general philosophy about fiction—here again we see that equality between the need for talent and for hard work—and for its articulation of what would become his standard criticism of Collins: that he tried to explain too much, instead of giving the reader an opportunity to figure things out for herself. Clearly he thought that Collins had the ability and the temperament to succeed as a professional fiction writer; what he needed was a mentor, someone to guide and shape his intellectual labour. In the spring of 1855—not long, incidentally, after the dustup with Gaskell—Collins began to write for *Household Words*, and Dickens seems to have put an unusual effort into offering suggestions for revision, while continuing to
assure him that his work “show[s] everywhere an amount of pains and study in respect of the Art of doing such things, that I see mighty seldom” (7: 570). Here was a pupil well worth taking in hand.

In July 1856, Dickens wrote to Wills with an extraordinary proposal. Collins’s story *Anne Rodway* had just appeared, and after instructing Wills to give Collins the unusually high payment of twenty pounds—the story is “very specially good,” displaying “great pains…and so much merit”—he tells Wills that

I have a floating idea in my mind that after *Little Dorrit* is finished…he and I might do something in *Household Words* together. He and I have talked so much within the last 3 or 4 years about Fiction-Writing, and I see him so ready to catch at what I have tried to prove right, and to avoid what I thought wrong, and altogether to go at it in the spirit I have fired him with, that the notion takes some shape with me….I shall be very interested in knowing how the fancy strikes you, of my chalking out a story with him, and saying “Leave me this character or situation, and let me give you such advice about that, and now let us see what is the strongest thing for H.W. that can be made of it” (7: 159).

Though, as we have seen, Dickens like other publishers sometimes revised his contributors’ work, he had never collaborated with anyone in this way. Collins’s fitness for such an experiment is ascribable both to his talent and to his unusual aptness as Dickens’s informal student. With its evaluative emphasis on right and wrong, Dickens’s language here seems to have a moral dimension. The letter makes it clear that when he had in the past offered comments to contributors, he wasn’t just trying to teach the house style of *Household Words*; he was expressing what he believed to be the laws of the art of fiction, which writers would transgress at their peril. Collins was not just his pupil but his protégé, and Dickens would claim a paternal pleasure in his success, writing about *Anne Rodway*, “[I] feel a personal pride [in the novel]…which is a delightful sensation”
(8: 162). In later years, after Collins published his novel *No Name*, Dickens even took some credit, writing that

I cannot tell you with what a strange dash of pride, as well as pleasure, I read the great results of your hard work. Because, as you know, I was certain from the Basil days, that you were the Writer who would come ahead of all the field—being the only one who combined invention and power, both humorous and pathetic, with that invincible determination to work, and that profound conviction that nothing of worth is to be done without work, of which triflers and feigners have no conception (128).

Collins had received a staggering advance for *No Name*, and perhaps the money had something to do with Dickens’s delight in his student’s accomplishments. Dickens had established idea of the fiction writer as a professional man who, through hard work, could earn a more than respectable living, and now his favorite apprentice got to reap the benefits.

It is unfortunate that we have very little idea of what the talks about fiction writing between these two novelists entailed. Since Dickens’s lessons are not, for the most part, in the letters, one may conclude that they took place in person. As Dickens’s friendship with Collins solidified, Collins’s profile at *Household Words* also rose; in September 1856, we find Dickens writing to Wills to agree that Collins’s stories would henceforth be advertised in his own name, a perk not offered to any previous contributor. In this period, the tone of Dickens’s letters becomes increasingly casual and friendly, and in August 1857 he again raises the possibility of collaborating on a piece for *Household Words*:

Partly in the grim despair of this subsidence from excitement, and partly for the sake of *Household Words*, I want to cast about whether you and I can go anywhere—take any tour—see any thing—whereon we could write something
together….We want something for Household Words, and I want to escape from myself. For, when I do start up and stare myself seedily in the face…my blankness is inconceivable—indescribable—my misery, amazing (7: 423).

*Little Dorrit* had just completed serialization, which presumably accounts for Dickens’s “inconceivable” depression; however, it is worth noting that the letter is dated a year before his separation from Catherine Dickens, and not long after the beginning of his acquaintance with Ellen Ternan. He met Ternan and her sister on the set of a play that he and Collins had written together, *The Frozen Deep*. Though no letters between the writers on the subject of the Ternans survive, it seems likely that Collins knew of Dickens’s infatuation, and doubtful, given his own unconventional sexual mores, that he would have disapproved. It is probable that on the novelists’ walking tour in the north of England, they talked both of fiction writing and of Ellen Ternan, and that Collins’s aptness for the role of confidante gave him additional opportunities to learn the lessons of his art.

Over time, Dickens begins to address Collins as both an equal in the profession—in Dickens’s own words, a “Brother in Art” (11: 136)—and a sort of partner in crime. When, in the last stages of writing *No Name*, Collins was taken ill, Dickens proposes yet another collaboration:

Write to me at Paris, at any moment, and say you are unequal to your work, and want me, and I will come to London straight and do your work. I am quite confident that, with your notes and a few words of explanation, I could take it up at any time and do it. Absurdly unnecessary to say it would be a make-shift! But I could do it, at a pitch, so like you that no one should find out the difference….The trouble would be nothing to me, and the triumph of overcoming a difficulty—great. Think it an Xmas No., an Idle apprentice, a Lighthouse, a Frozen Deep. I am as ready as in any of those cases to strike in and hammer the hot iron out (142).
Here Dickens’s desire to help Collins seems mingled with a gleeful excitement at the idea of exercising his skill in a new way. His secret participation in Collins’s composition would be a kind of technical ventriloquism, in which half the fun would lie in the possibility of fooling or confusing the reader. Collins recovered and never asked for his assistance, but the notion that their collaborations are adventures, daunting but exhilarating, persists in Dickens’s correspondence. In 1867, while they are writing “No Thoroughfare” for *Household Words*, he addresses Collins as if the two were the characters in the story: “Let us be obliged to go over—say the Simplon Pass—under lonely circumstances, and against warnings. Let us get into all the horrors and dangers of such an adventure” (11: 413).

In 1858, Dickens separated from Catherine and broke with Bradbury and Evans. Since the publishers owned *Household Words*, Dickens was forced to close the journal; the following year, he would open *All the Year Round* on much the same plan as the first periodical. Though Dickens had had differences with Bradbury and Evans for years, including the dispute over the printer’s estimate for *North and South*, his decision to leave, and particularly his stated reasons for doing so, seem to have surprised the publishers. Dickens had published a statement in *Household Words* announcing that he and his wife could no longer live together, and appears to have expected Bradbury and Evans to carry the statement in *Punch* as well. The publishers’ reply was acidic:

> It did not occur to Bradbury & Evans to…require the insertion of statements on a domestic and painful subject in the inappropriate columns of a domestic miscellany. No previous request for the insertion of this statement had been made either to Bradbury & Evans, or to the Editor of “Punch,” and the grievance of Mr. Dickens substantially amounted to this, that Bradbury & Evans did not take it
upon themselves, unsolicited, to gratify an eccentric wish by a preposterous action (quoted in Letters 9: 565).

Whether or not their failure to grant his “eccentric wish” comprised the whole of Dickens’s motivation to leave his publishers, others agreed with Bradbury & Evans that the statement in Household Words was in poor taste. Gaskell, writing to Charles Eliot Norton, is clearly afraid that she will be obliged to contribute to All the Year Round in order to pay off an outstanding debt to Household Words. She was not only a well-known novelist but also the respectable wife of a clergyman, and seems to feel that she would lend credibility to Dickens’s new venture:

Mr Dickens happens to be extremely unpopular just now,—(owing to the well-grounded feeling of dislike to the publicity he has given to his domestic affairs,) & I think they would be glad to announce my name on the list of their contributors. And I would much rather they did not (535).

Gaskell did in fact contribute occasionally to All the Year Round, but no letters to or from Dickens survive after the North and South debacle, and in her correspondence with others, she sounds increasingly unimpressed with the journal and its proprietor. In 1859, she writes to George Smith that a story that wasn’t good enough for Cornhill might be good enough for Dickens to publish; in the following letter, she tells him that “I had made a resolution never to write for All the Year Round again, for several reasons” (596). Gaskell’s disapproval of Dickens’s conduct in regard to Catherine must be one of the “several reasons” keeping her from enjoying what, at the start of their correspondence, had promised to be a career-making opportunity to learn from the most successful novelist of her era. In time to come, while Gaskell communicated with Wills about her
infrequent pieces for the new periodical, Dickens continued to travel and collaborate with Collins.

We have seen that Dickens conceived of his relationships with writers at *Household Words* as mutually beneficial partnerships: he got to publish good fiction, and they got to have a publisher who understood their work on a different level. Unlike other editors, he could pass on his own knowledge of the craft and even, at times, take a hand in the revision process. However, only certain writers were fully welcomed into the folds of the profession as presided over by Dickens. Gaskell, who could not have gone on walking tours with him even if she’d wanted to, was barred both by her gender and her sense of ethics from getting the most out of what Sutherland calls the “writing workshop” (186) at *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. Dickens may have helped advance professionalization by presenting fiction writing as a teachable practice, but his choice of mentees kept the craft a closed system.
Though, in his letter to Forster about the young Wilkie Collins, Dickens refers to principles of “right” and “wrong” in fiction writing, he never committed these ideas to paper. In *David Copperfield*, the technique involved in writing was kept in the background, and in the letters to Gaskell and Collins, Dickens was far more apt to offer suggestions on a specific piece of work than to ruminate on the craft of fiction in general terms. His friend Bulwer-Lytton, however, went about things very differently. In his periodical essays, and in particularly in his correspondence with the sensation novelist Mary Elizabeth Braddon, we find a willingness to bring the inner workings of the craft— *David Copperfield*’s hidden “charms”—out into the open. Bulwer-Lytton and Braddon each established a professional identity that was deeply and publicly engaged with questions of how writing should be written and how it should be sold. However, although Bulwer-Lytton can seem surprisingly modern in his eagerness to address his thoughts on technique to “future students,” the principles he promulgated were not transparent, nor were they universally applicable. They were formulated in a way that promised to enhance his status as one of the masters, and in so doing enforce familiar distinctions between the respectable professional novelist and the hack writer.

As Cross demonstrates in *The Common Writer*, the hack had been a familiar archetype since the 1830’s, and the label could be affixed to anyone who admitted to writing for money. For Thackeray, accusations of hackdom seem to have been more amusing than irksome, but for a writer like Bulwer-Lytton, the idea of writing from “base commercial motives” was anathema (Cross 90). The frequent analogies between the craft
of fiction and handicrafts were mobilized in part to underline the concept that writers were not lazy hacks but professionals well-versed in their field, but the designation of writer as craftsman presented particular problems for women writers like Braddon. Women were infrequently engaged in formal apprenticeships in the artisan workforce, and indeed, as Jennie Batchelor and Norman Feltes argue, the concept of professionalization in the arts was constituted to exclude women’s work and women workers. As we will see, Braddon in her relationship with Bulwer-Lytton was able to do what Gaskell was not, using the master/student power differential implicit in the apprenticeship system to her advantage. However, it took a rhetorical sleight of hand, as well as a policy of strategic silence about her other “work” as wife and mother.

If the fact of her gender forced Braddon to subsume certain elements of her life in order to fit into the role of apprentice, she does not seem to have any qualms about viewing writing as a trade. The master/student relationship she established with Bulwer-Lytton was not, like Dickens’s relationships with Collins and Gaskell, based on her making money for her mentor; however, in the Bulwer-Lytton and Braddon correspondence, it is understood that she wants to benefit financially from her work. Though, as I will discuss below, the two often talk about how Braddon could raise her artistic standards, she is never shy about expressing the fact that she had to make a living. For a writer like Bulwer-Lytton, who wanted at once to make money and to maintain a certain social standing, the relationship between the labor of writing and the financial gain derived from that labor was more vexed. Bulwer-Lytton’s desire to veil his financial ambitions was entirely in accordance with the general tone of the literary journals at
midcentury, which often express dismay at the association of literature with market forces.

_The Athenaeum_ is perhaps the most strident in this vein. In an 1839 review of *Jack Sheppard*, a writer mounting an oblique criticism of William Ainsworth’s sensationalist plotting places the blame on the state of the market rather than the novelist: “It is not his fault that he has fallen on evil days, and that, like other tradesmen, he must subordinate his own tastes to those of his customers” (803). These critics profess shock and dismay that “the literary market is subject to the same laws of supply and demand which regulate the commercial world” (Charles Chesterfield 740), and that writers as well as publishers seem determined to sell their wares. Sometimes we find the relation to manual labor made more explicit—the writer disparaged for their attentiveness to the market through a comparison to a lower-class worker. Criticizing Dickens’s awareness of the requirements of serial publication, a writer for *Fraser’s* describes *Oliver Twist* as “written ‘to match, as per order’” (“Charles Dickens and His Works” 400).

A tradesman (one who sells) is of course not the same as a craftsman (one who makes). The figuring of writer as tradesman is almost always negative, while, as we have seen, the association with craftsmanship can be largely positive. However, the stigma of trade, however buried, is inevitably present in the metaphor of crafts and craftsmanship; craftsmen did not work for free. This association between writing-as-labor and financial remuneration was particularly problematic for Bulwer-Lytton, who was proud of his descent from an old Hertfordshire family, and often reluctant to acknowledge that he wrote for money. In _England and the English_, he comments that
We blame Lord Byron for this absurd vanity [being proud of his family] too hastily, and without considering that he often intended it rather as a reminiscence to his equals than as an assumption over his inferiors. He was compelled to struggle against the vulgar feelings of England, that only low people are authors. Every body knows what you are when you are merely a gentleman, but they begin to doubt it when you become a man of letters (99).

Underlining the personal nature of this conflict, Bulwer-Lytton follows this analysis with an anecdote about an old man who, knowing that Bulwer-Lytton wrote novels, would not believe that he was a gentleman when they met in society.

A writer in Bulwer-Lytton’s situation had to walk a thin line. On the one hand, the profits that he made from his novels were no less important to him than her profits would be to Braddon. Through much of his adult life, he supported his family with the money he made from his works, commenting in one letter to his daughter that “My hand is my only friend--and my only wealth. As long as I trusted only to that all went well in the money way” (Mitchell 128). He wanted wealth, and wanted the respect that came from being seen as an industrious professional man. He may even have felt, with his character Roland Caxton, that “de-fine-gentlemansing” yourself through hard labor actually made you more of an aristocrat (The Caxtons 228). But since this trick only worked if other people continued to view you as an aristocrat, his reputation remained a sore spot.

Though Bulwer-Lytton’s tone in the remarks on Byron is neutral, even disinterested, the frequent ridicule to which he was subject from writers and critics indicate that he made this anxiety about his social status a bit too public. Macauley, Carlyle, Disraeli, and Thackeray all mocked his family pride (Mitchell 105), and in a
largely sympathetic essay on Bulwer-Lytton’s work, Lewes becomes impatient when addressing the subject of class:

Bulwer has created no small amount of not undeserved ill-will of wishing to be considered rather as a gentleman than as an author. It is a foppery which sits very ungracefully upon him. There are few authors of any station who have worked harder or reaped more substantial pudding and praise from their labors. Why then this otiose assumption of superiority—this impatience with Grub Street? (2).

In Lewes’s view, this apparent conflict between Bulwer-Lytton’s rewards in “substantial pudding” and his family background is entirely self-imposed. His problem is not that a gentleman cannot be an author, but that an author cannot or should not be pretentious about his status as a gentleman.

Given the amount of effort that he put into being seen as a member of the upper classes, one would think that Bulwer-Lytton was safe from the association of writing with devalued labor if anyone was. Yet, in reviews and even in posthumous essays, critics often associate him with a particularly labor-intensive method of writing fiction. In a withering 1830 essay in Fraser’s, Ned Culpepper suggests that Bulwer-Lytton is basically unfit for his chosen career, and must compensate for his deficiency through an intense industry that is all too visible to the reader (510). Though less overtly negative, the choice of words in William Caldwell Roscoe’s National Review essay from 1859 depends on the same associations: “What a world of patient industry, what an indefatigable striving to make the most of his vocation, what an uphill energy all these novels display!” (281). Later in the essay, Roscoe refers to Bulwer-Lytton’s “labours” and “hard-worked scholarship” (287). The implication seems to be that if he were a natural novelist—a genius, perhaps—he wouldn’t have to work so hard. Though Braddon
often lauds him as a master of characterization, Roscoe make the same objection to his characters; they are too worked-over, too evidently constructed rather than born. They are “not real men and women one has been amongst for these three volumes; they are only admirable imitations of men and women, with ‘Sir Bulwer-Lytton hoc fecit’ written all over them” (291).

This line of interpretation shows up most strikingly in two more nuanced essays: the one from Lewes quoted above, and an essay by Leslie Stephen published in the *Cornhill* after Bulwer-Lytton’s death. Lewes foregrounds Bulwer-Lytton’s industry, but without the derogatory connotation that we find in the work of Culpepper and Roscoe. Bulwer-Lytton has

worked his way to eminence--, worked it through failure, through ridicule. His facility is only the result of practice and study. He wrote at first slowly and with great difficulty; but he resolved to master the stubborn instrument of thought, and he mastered it (“Memoir of Sir E. Bulwer-Lytton” 8).

For Lewes, it seems, the genius model is out the window; the writer’s route to success is simply practice and hard work. Perhaps for the benefit of writers who might want to imitate Bulwer-Lytton’s methods, Lewes even includes some detail on his daily routine:

Another habit will show the advantage of continuous application. He only works about three hours a day--, from ten in the morning until one--, seldom later….Yet what an amount of good hard labor has resulted from those three hours! He writes very rapidly, averaging twenty pages a day of novel print (8-9).

Though Bulwer-Lytton’s son challenged this popular account of his father’s schedule, protesting that the novelist “worked every morning until noon and again every evening past midnight” (Mitchell 35), the fact of Lewes’s approval is more important than the
truth of the statement. As we have seen in the remarks from the same essay on Bulwer-Lytton’s pride in his family connections, there is, for Lewes, no necessary contradiction between social standing and artistry. Neither, it seems, is there a contradiction between artistry and labor. Lewes never seems as enthusiastic about Bulwer-Lytton’s novels as he does about Charlotte Brontë or George Sand, but he explicitly states that Bulwer-Lytton has “mastered” his art—that he is, in fact, a master.

Lewes’s liberal attitude toward the association of writing with labor is unusual. Stephens, writing twenty-five years after Lewes, is less critical than Culpepper or Roscoe of Bulwer-Lytton’s “exertions” (36) as a novelist, but also less appreciative than Lewes of the results of those exertions. Again with Stephens, we see the mere fact of Bulwer-Lytton’s laboring seeming to count against the value of his work:

So far as industrious labour can take a man of great ability and of studiously cultivated literary skill, Lord Lytton is an admirable model. Nobody could combine his materials more judiciously, or turn to better account the results of much laborious thought guided by excellent taste. But we always feel the want of that vivifying power which is possessed in its perfection only by a very few men in the course of ages….He can put together all the elements of a story or a character according to the most approved rules of art…but then he cannot send through his creations that electric current which makes them start into reality (354).

The laborious laborer, Bulwer-Lytton is “admirable” so far as he goes, but is fundamentally incapacitated to reach the upper echelons of artistic achievement. Like Roscoe, Stephens places particular emphasis on Bulwer-Lytton’s failure to animate his characters with that “electric current” of genius, galvanizing them from paper creations to living beings.
There is no parallel to this metaphorical strain in criticism on Bulwer-Lytton’s contemporaries. Perhaps, as the fate of their reputations would seem to show, he just wasn’t as talented a writer as Dickens or George Eliot. But perhaps this recurrent theme is influenced by the critics’ (excluding Lewes) feeling that it was a bit unseemly for someone in Bulwer-Lytton’s position to put in the work that he did—to sweat so conspicuously over his labors. In the correspondence with Braddon, Bulwer-Lytton finds a neat way of negotiating his recurrent anxiety that being seen to labor too hard could cause people to regard him as less of an aristocrat. He and Braddon both assume that there is a higher level of literary craft, an artistic level raised above the marketable skill of knowing how to please the public. This craftsmanship is not the realm of original genius, but it is carefully distinguished from the world of profit and loss.

These levels of fiction can be seen most clearly in the opposition between novels of character and novels of plot or “incident.” Bulwer-Lytton and Braddon by no means invented this opposition—as Richard Stang points out, the distinction between character and plot can be found in the Poetics (128)—and they were neither the first nor the last to use it to distinguish between classes of novels. However, they made the opposition a convenient shorthand for the differences between them, socially and professionally. As Braddon’s repeated encomiums to Bulwer-Lytton as her artistic “master” underline, this was a conception of artistic partnership in which he would always be seen as the superior.

As Deidre Lynch has shown, the concept of what makes a good fictional character is not stable, and has at certain times had little to do with what we would now define as psychological realism. In The Economy of Character, Lynch argues that to early eighteenth-century readers, character was all on the surface, a matter of visible signs like
a birthmark or a certain kind of complexion (26). In the preface to Tobias Smollett’s *Ferdinand, Count Fathom*, “character” is secondary to the plot, and the term refers not to “fleshed-out representations of people” but “the instrument that integrates the plot…a means for producing social context” (87). According to Lynch, many nineteenth and twentieth century critics have ignored the sense in which conceptions of character participate in social space. In the work of Ian Watt, for example, the “dialectical movement” from Richardson to Fielding to Austen “projects a history in which characterization evolves according to a purely internal logic, protected from material contingency” (4). With her attention to the “pragmatics of character” (9), Lynch aims to remind us of how different ways of writing and reading character are accorded different degrees of social value, as “deep-feeling reception of texts” is separated from “mindless consumption” (9).

Though the concept of character may not have progressed from Richardson to Austen, it is certainly true that ways of thinking about character changed, as “with ever more explicitness, concern with the character…[became] a concern with a being that, through its capacity to prepossess…train[s] the reader in sympathizing and so in participating in a social world” (89). In the essays by Roscoe and Stephens, we found the assumption that characters are--or should be--“real men and women,” animated enough to appear to live off the page as well as on it. However, the technique required to produce these “real men and women” is so occluded that it is as if they are assumed to have produced themselves through an inherent will to live.  

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6 At times this assumption of characters’ extra-textual reality is taken to a rather ludicrous extreme. In an essay for the *Contemporary Review*, Karl Hillenbrand censures the “really feminine perfidy” with which George Eliot, in *Middlemarch*, “tries to discredit” her
little apparent agency on the part of the writer that he would seem to function more as a sorcerer than a craftsman. Thus David Masson in his famous comparison of Thackeray and Dickens argues that,

It is by the originality and interest of its characters that a novel is chiefly judged. And certainly it is a high privilege, that which the novelist possesses, of calling into existence new imaginary beings; of adding, as it was, to that population of aerial men and women, the offspring of past genius, which hovers over the heads of the actual population of the world (76).

Masson explicitly references the genius model of authorship; there is no labor here, no “exertions” or “continuous application.” The silence of these critics on exactly how one would learn to “call[l] into existence new imaginary beings” is telling. The implication seems to be that these are skills that simply can’t be learned; you either have them or you don’t.

The same critics who were silent on the historical or social specificity of models of characterization were, it seems, more than aware that their praise for a certain kind of novel was a reaction against a different, less respectable kind of novel. Citing Masson’s book of lectures, *British Novelists and Their Styles*, Stang writes that Masson

found appalling the ignorance of human nature displayed in “the ordinary run of novels,” “a Psychology, if the truth must be spoken, such as would not hold good in a world of imaginary cats, not to speak of men--impossible conformations of character; actives determined by motives that could never have determined the like; sudden conversions brought about by logical means of such astounding simplicity that wonder itself is paralyzed in contemplating them” (88).

character Rosamond Vincy (400). Hillenbrand does not specify exactly how Eliot schemes against Rosamond, but he certainly suggests that she maintains an independent existence apart from Eliot’s representation of her.
Though Stang does not say so directly, the novels that Masson is criticizing are undoubtedly novels that he felt relied too heavily on plot interest at the expense of the characters. With the growing interest in the psychological depths of character developed a depreciation of the events of the narrative. The character must be prior, and an anonymous writer in the *Westminster Review* was not the only one who felt that “the occurrences in question have neither more nor less interest than they can derive from the characters of the persons to whom they are represented as happening” (“Balzac and His Writings” 211). For a critic writing in the *National Review*, the novels of George Eliot express the proper relation of the two elements, avoiding “all those artificial enhancements of interest which do not arise fairly out of the moral constitutions of the characters” (quoted in Stang 127). Presumably these characters will in their independent, excessive life give rise to the appropriate circumstances that express or challenge their “moral constitutions.”

The use of this term “plot” in relation to Victorian literary criticism does require some explanation. Critics could use the word “plot” to refer to one of two things: either the structure of the narrative, commonly assumed to be based on the Aristotelian unities, or the events related through that structure. According to Stang, “plot” could also have a pejorative connotation based on its association with the “conventional devices” of melodrama (129). In the *Fortnightly Review*, Lewes argues that novels that depend on “plot-interest” are not really literature (540), and as late as 1887 we find George Meredith explaining to a correspondent that “I do not make a plot” (quoted in Stang 40), instead following his characters through the novel and relating their self-determined adventures.
Although Lynch does not discuss plot in her call for attention to the social value of modes of characterization, the contemporary periodicals make clear that the classing of novels did not only involve one kind of character taking precedence over another. As different types of character reinforced social distinctions, so did the distinction between novels of character and novels of plot (or “incident”) separate classes of readers. R.H. Hutton in the *Spectator* describes the novel of character as “the only true novel” (652), and Whitwell Elwin in the *Quarterly* is yet more explicit: “To be hurried on in breathless suspense distracts the attention from the merits of style, sentiment, and character, and appeals chiefly to minds which are incapable of appreciating more sterling qualities” (184). A critic in *Fraser’s* seems to acknowledge that different writers may have different aims, conceding that “there are novels of incident and there are novels of character; and each, to be judged fairly, must be judged by a different test” (“On the Treatment of Love and Novels” 415). In the end, however, he relies on the familiar system of values: “The former [novels of incident] are the melodramas of narrative fiction. They consist of a compilation of stage effects…. In the intellectual point of view they occupy the lowest point in the scale” (415-416).

But not all critics were as doctrinaire as Hutton or Elwin. For a significant minority, deemphasizing plot in the service of the characters was a logical impossibility. As a writer in *Blackwood’s* asks, “how can people be delineated without circumstances?” (quoted in Stang 130). In an 1855 essay in the *National Review*, Walter Bagehot complains of writers who “fal[l] into the error of neglecting the tale in delineating the characters” (336), and protests that “a plot of some rapid movement is the very essence of art” (339). He distinguishes between “action”—the motivating power behind that “rapid
movement”--and “imported incident” (346), in a distinction similar to that made by the National Review critic who praised George Eliot for avoiding “artificial enhancements of interest.” The conclusion again seems to be that the appropriate actions should arise out of the characters’ personalities, out of their excessive fullness, rather than being imposed by the author. This again brings us to the familiar question of how “living” characters that operate independently of the authors’ intentions can be created on the page, but it does, at least, attempt to correct an overwhelming critical bias toward the novel of character.

It is important to note that when Bagehot is separating the desirable aspects of plot from the undesirable, he refers not to “plot” but “incident.” In reference to the work of sensation novelists like Braddon, this was the preferred, inevitably pejorative term. In the Fortnightly Review, Lewes explicitly linked the sensation novelists to the use of what he called “striking incident,” where the events of the narrative are manipulated for effect rather than rising out of “the natural evolution of [the] story” (quoted in Stang 130). In a review in the North British that makes a startling connection between George Eliot and the sensation novelists, H.H. Lancaster puts the responsibility for the popularity of the novel of incident on the reading public’s demand for exciting stories: “readers of the present day are an impatient generation, and must be interested somehow,” and “this necessity leads,” even in writers like Eliot, “to sensationalism and unnaturalness of incident” (209). The reviewer will only hope that in Eliot’s case, this taste for incident will not lead to “the unnaturalness and extravagance of Miss Braddon, or…the ridiculous sensuality which disgusts us in the pages of Ouida” (228). Though women were both the primary readers and often the authors of sensation fiction, Lancaster here suggests that
sensationalism and the novel of incident have the troubling power to de-feminize an
author--to make her “unnatural.” As a genre, the sensational novel of incident was both
gendered and gender-suspect.

As many critics have noted, sensation fiction could be and often was blamed for a
host of social problems. In a 1863 essay in the *Quarterly Review*, Henry Mansel agrees
that the sensation novel depends far too heavily on incident: “indeed, as a general rule, it
consists of nothing else….The human actors are, for the most part, but so many lay-
figures on which to exhibit a drapery of incident” (193). He then takes the argument
further, by implying that the consumption of this class of novel will have an
unwholesome effect on its young readers. Mansel is a bit vague about what precisely
these effects would entail, but his refrain that sensation fiction stimulates the “nerves”
gives us a clue. As I mentioned in the introduction, Kate Flint demonstrates that certain
reading habits were thought to lead to deleterious results for young women in particular
(53). By acting on their more delicate sensibilities, exciting stories of illicit activity
deranged women’s nervous systems and might even disturb the physiological functions
of maternity. Mansel is clearly critical not only of the novels that would produce these
consequences, but of the novelists who produced the novels. He singles out Braddon as a
writer working with material that is beneath her. *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*
are “works of an author of real power, who is capable of better things.” With an oblique
nod to the metaphor of writer as craftsman, he calls her “a builder” whose
“skill…deserves to be employed on better materials” (197).

Lewes echoes Mansel’s points that the sensation novel trades too much in incident

in an 1865 essay:
It is quite fair to praise Miss Braddon for the skill she undoubtedly displays in plot-interest of a certain kind—in selecting situations of crime and mystery which have a singular fascination for a large number of readers; and the success she has gained is due to the skill with which she has prepared and presented these situations so as to excite the curiosity and sympathy of idle people. It is a special talent she possesses; and the critic is wrong who fails to recognise in it the source of her success. But he would be equally wrong, I think if he confounded this merit with other merits, which her novels do not display....her grasp of character, her vision of realities, her regard for probabilities, and her theoretical views of human life, are very far from being on a level with her power over plot-interest ("Criticism in Relation to Novels" 533).

Though less enthusiastic than Mansel, Lewes acknowledges Braddon’s advantages as a craftsman. She has “skill,” even “talent,” and certainly she has been rewarded with “success.” As a writer, she is adept at the selection as well as the presentation of certain scenes. However, by catering to the preferences of “idle people,” she is complicit in a devaluation of culture. The technique she practices with such facility is formulated to appeal to the lowest common denominator; it is a type of “plot-interest” that involves plenty of crime and mystery, but is inconsistent with reality, character, and even probability.

We do not know how Braddon responded to Lewes’s critique, or if she read it at all. The Bulwer-Lytton correspondence does reveal, however, that she had ambitions beyond the sensation novel, and sought to improve her craft with the goal of moving her fiction upmarket. In Bulwer-Lytton she found one of the very few mid-century figures, writer or critic, who was as eager to talk about the craft of fiction in terms of technical specifics as she herself was. As editor of the New Monthly Chronicle and then the Monthly Magazine, Bulwer-Lytton wrote and published essays with titles like “Literature as a Profession” and “On Art in Fiction.” More than any other writer of his time, he
promulgated the idea that literary technique could be discussed and even taught, “the labours of future students simplified and abridged” (“On Art in Fiction” 218). He seems to have felt that his efforts in this direction were in some respect the fulfillment of a social mission; he had to do what no one else was willing or able to do. As he writes in Blackwood’s, “The fault I find chiefly with novelists is their contempt for their craft…The first essential to success in the art you practise is respect for the art itself” (quoted in Stang 14).

Bulwer-Lytton realized that he was something of an anomaly in his generation, but he believed that it was important to set an example for the writers who would come after him. In his essays on technique, he again and again refers to the figure of “the future student” or “the young author” who will benefit from his advice. The same novelists who demonstrate contempt for their craft neglect this aspect of their vocation as well, and he quotes approvingly Scott’s confession to Lockhart that “I would not have young writers imitate my carelessness” (“On Art in Fiction” 228). The conscientious student must be aware that, as Bulwer-Lytton maintains in the preface to The Last of the Barons, “just as there are certain rules that a painter or a sculptor must learn, so there is a definite art of the novel, and one must master it as he does any other art” (quoted in Stang 13). Not only did Bulwer-Lytton believe that young students of writing could be taught, but he had very particular ideas of what the experienced writer should teach them.

And just what did this code consist of? In the section on character, Bulwer-Lytton cautions the writer not to have too many characters, and to forbear from making them repeat funny phrases as Scott does (“On Art in Fiction” 221). Perhaps in implicit
response to criticism of his Newgate novels *Paul Clifford* and *Eugene Aram*, he insists that characters should be complicated:

> As the bad man will not be painted as thoroughly and unredeemably bad, so he, whom you represent as good, will have his foibles and infirmities. You will show where even the mainspring of his virtues sometimes calls into play a counter vice. Your just man will be sometimes severe—your generous man will be sometimes careless of the consequences of generosity. It is true that, in both these applications of art, you will be censured by shallow critics and pernicious moralists….But no man can be an artist who does not prefer experience and human nature to all criticism (223).

He also recommends that if it is necessary to portray a completely virtuous character, it works best if they happen to be old (223).

> It is easy to find the ridiculous in Bulwer-Lytton’s code of laws, hard to imagine how advice at once so vague and so particular to a single person’s experience could be of much help to “the young author.” Yet it is impossible to exaggerate the originality of his project. In 1838, when “On Art in Fiction” was published, very few people were talking about fiction in these terms. With his abiding interest in professionalization, evident also in his advocacy for copyright reform and his work on behalf of author societies like the Guild, Bulwer-Lytton may have had in mind the establishment of a coherent, shared basis of knowledge that would be of use to both masters of the craft and to aspiring students.

In Braddon, he found the perfect pupil. Though they met only a handful of times, their correspondence extended almost ten years and included dozens of letters on each side, and Braddon seems to have genuinely appreciated his comments on writing in general and her work in particular. Braddon thanked him for each letter and flattered him constantly, referring to him as “the first master of the art of construction” (late 1863 to early 1864), “master of all other masters,” “the greatest writer of the age” (mid to late
1865), “last but very far from least of the Barons!” (undated 1866).7 At one point she
asks “when are you going to arise in your Tritonic might and crush all of us…with a new
novel” (early 1866) and compares Shakespeare’s work unfavorably to his (27 Sept
1872).8 Despite its fulsomeness, Bulwer-Lytton seems to have had no objection to the
praise, and it may be that Braddon saw a professional advantage to be had in flattering a
man with so many connections in the respectable literary world. However, it is also clear
that she looked to Bulwer-Lytton for a specifically technical guidance that she found
nowhere else. She may have felt that he understood her ambitions and challenges better
than those closer to her. Her husband and publisher John Maxwell remarked that “it is
natural for her [Braddon] to write as it is for a mountain torrent to flow” (quoted in Wolff
334), but Bulwer-Lytton understood that for her, writing was work.

Since most of Bulwer-Lytton’s letters to Braddon have been lost, we have only a
partial record of what their master/student relationship entailed. However, even with
only half the correspondence, it is possible to piece together a sense of their working
relationship—what she wanted from her “master,” and what he offered her in the way of
encouragement and advice. She tells him more than once how much he has influenced
her work, even at times citing him as the reason she became a writer: “I shall always
consider myself in a manner your pupil. It was your encouragement that first kindled the
flame of ambition in my breast. It was your example that made me wish to be a novelist”

7 Braddon did not date her letters. The dates given here are provided by her biographer,
Robert Lee Wolff.
8 Though Bulwer-Lytton may have been the “master of masters,” he was not the only
writer who Braddon addressed in these terms. Presenting her son Will, also a writer, to
Wilkie Collins, she eulogizes Collins “the Master of my craft [who] is also my friend.”
In the same letter, she refers to Will as a “devoted disciple” of Charles Reade (quoted in
Wolff 331). Here as with Bulwer-Lytton, Braddon’s habit of presenting herself as a
student of eminent writers is a strategy as well as a tribute.
(undated 1863). However, the correspondence is not all homage; at times she is clearly responding to specific technical advice that he has offered in the past:

You do not perhaps remember telling me that the strongest or safest point in a story or a play is domestic interest--that is to say the position of a man and wife as compared to that of lovers--yet every story I have hitherto written has been built more or less with this idea in my mind (May 1863).

The two often offered each other reading recommendations, and made it evident in their responses that they were reading with a certain goal in mind: that of learning techniques that they could apply to their own work. In one of his two surviving letters, Bulwer-Lytton asks, “Have you read Soulié’s novels? They are worth studying for the sake of their extraordinary ingenuity in plot” (quoted in Wolff 128). Braddon responds that “I have read Soulié, at least many of his stories, and have helped myself to some of them very freely for my anonymous work. He is certainly magnificent for continuous flow of invention--incident arising out of incident” (Dec 1864).

Without directly mentioning the novel of character that she associates with Bulwer-Lytton, Braddon often laments her failure to live up to his example. She tells him that she “will write a better novel upon the principle you suggested,” and that though “I doubt I shall ever write an artistic novel--or a novel that will satisfy you…I hope and believe I may write a much better novel than any I have written yet--and succeed in pleasing you” (mid to late 1865). She casts him as the arbiter of her artistic, as opposed to financial and popular success, and adopts the rhetoric of the inferior so enthusiastically that the reader may wonder if she is subtly mocking his assumption of superiority. In one of the few letters in which both his advice and her response are clear from context, she thanks him effusively for correcting her grammar:
It is so kind of you to take the trouble to point out my misdemeanors against the perpetually ill used Lindley Murray, and I am so intolerably stupid as not to take advantage of your kindness. You told me after “John Marchmont” that I mustn’t say “frightened at,” whereupon…I concluded that it should be “frightened of”—afraid of, frightened of. Since your last note it dawned upon me that there’s still another preposition, and I suppose it might be “frightened by,” and so it shall be in the future, unless I hear from you to the contrary (undated 1864).

However, it is not only in the realm of grammar that Bulwer-Lytton’s opinion seems to cause Braddon to change her own. They were both widely read in French literature and traded thoughts on a number of French writers—not just Soulié, but Balzac and Flaubert as well. As her late essay on Zola reveals, Braddon admired the French writers of her day, and at some points seems to expect Bulwer-Lytton to share her enthusiasm. In January 1864, she writes “Have you read anything of Gustave Flaubert’s, and do you like that extraordinary pre-Raphaelite style. I have been wonderfully fascinated by it.” When Flaubert comes up again the following summer, after Bulwer-Lytton has evidently raised the subject of the similarities between Madame Bovary and Braddon’s The Doctor’s Wife, her language is very different. Here she still struck by Flaubert’s style, but dismayed by the “hideous immorality” of his novel (early summer 1864). Not only does this sort of moral outrage seem out of tune with Braddon’s usual attitude toward French fiction, but it directly contradicts her sentiments in her unpublished essay on Zola, in which she calls Madame Bovary “the very mildest of improper stories.” A similar about-face occurs in their discussion of Balzac. After assuring Bulwer-Lytton that he is a far better writer than Balzac could ever be, she tells him that “I should like so much to hear what you think of him, if you have time, or
inclination, to tell me” (Nov or Dec 1864), and replies to his thoughts in the following letter:

A thousand thanks for your criticism on Balzac…enlightened by your criticism I seem to see the false flash and glitter, the impossibly elegant Madame de Beausaufs, the incredibly supine husbands….Don’t you think that Balzac’s stories--if such they can be called--are all painful--so many studies in morbid anatomy (9 Dec 1864).

She did not always view “morbid anatomy” so negatively. Less than a year after the exchange with Bulwer-Lytton, she writes to Edmund Yates that “the Balzac-morbid-anatomy school is my especial delight” (quoted in Wolff 137).

Braddon had good reason to be somewhat cagey when it came to the relation of morality to a writer’s subject matter and technique. She had been lambasted in the press for the supposed “hideous immorality” of her own work. It makes sense for her to defer to Bulwer-Lytton on questions of what was and was not respectable in terms of technique, but in less sensitive areas, she makes it clear that her own ideas about how to write a novel sometimes conflict with the master’s. While they discussed Flaubert, Braddon and Bulwer-Lytton also traded thoughts about Scott in an exchange that began when Braddon described a recent rereading of The Bride of Lammermoor: “I cannot tell you how tame and poor the language seemed to me. Was the cause my vicious taste--or is the Wizard of the North a trifle dull and commonplace for modern readers” (undated 1864). Though perhaps not in so many words, Bulwer-Lytton seems to put the blame on her vicious taste, and when Braddon responds she is “charmed by the [Scott’s] quiet grace of the level writing--which you so praise.” However, she “hold[s] to my opinion that he cannot describe a catastrophe” (summer 1864). After Bulwer-Lytton objects to
this characterization, she tells him she is “pleased to get your noble criticisms on Scott; but you must not despise me if I am slow to appreciate him correctly” (7 Sept 1864). She is still unable to appreciate Scott correctly in a later letter, where she insists that “I still think that the catastrophe is weakly told, and painfully hurried” (mid to late 1865). Braddon is on safer ground here than when discussing the morality of French fiction. Though Bulwer-Lytton is her teacher, and though she maintains the inequality of their relationship through her continual praise of his prodigious talents, she recognizes her strength in producing “plot-interest,” and knows a weak catastrophe when she sees one.

However, Braddon did not want to stand on her reputation as a sensation novelist, a cultivator of plot-interest. She often chafed against the sensation label and disliked the publication schedule that her popularity with an impatient public required, complaining that “it has been my good, or bad fortune to be flung into a very rapid market, and to have every thing printed and published almost before the ink with which it was written was dry.” She insists that she is unhappy not only with the critical response to her fiction, but with the way the formal demands of publication have cramped her development as a writer: “The moment I abandon melodrama…I feel quite at sea. Perhaps this is because I have written nothing but serials, which force one into mechanical action in the desire to sustain the interest” (May 1863). The serial form could not of course be avoided, but Braddon might at least attempt to change her own technique. The solution was the novel of character.

Braddon and Maxwell agreed with the conventional wisdom that writing novels of character was the route to respectability and artistic prestige. Maxwell advertised Braddon’s novel Circe as “a story of character, not of incident, and fraught with a terrible
moral” (quoted in Wolff 211), and in the case of The Doctor’s Wife, which I will discuss below, Braddon made a determined effort to meet the standards obligated by the novel of character. Despite his interest in Soulié, Bulwer-Lytton seems to have made the familiar case that character should be prior to incident, and Braddon assures him that she has taken his advice to heart. In a January 1864 letter, she writes that

I have thought very much over what you said in your last letter in regard to a novel in which the story arises naturally out of the characters of the actors in it, as contrasted with a novel in which the actors are only marionettes, the slaves of the story. I fancied that in “John Marchmont,” the story was made subordinate to the characters, but even my kindest critics tell me that it is not, and that the characters break down when the story begins….

I venture to think you will like my new story “The Doctor’s Wife” (this is not a title of my own choosing) more than anything I have yet done, because I am going in a little for the subjective.

The “subjective” point of view was a critical term associated with the novel of character, and there can be no doubt that this is what Braddon set out to compose in The Doctor’s Wife. Later she again assures Bulwer-Lytton that the novel will be more to his taste than her previous work: “There is more attempt at character painting in it, and I have given it more thought than anything else” (undated 1864).

With this project as with none other, she asks directly for Bulwer-Lytton’s help. Later in the same year she expresses her hope that The Doctor’s Wife will represent a turning point in her writing career:

I am especially anxious about this work; as it seems to me a kind of turning point in my life, on the issue of which it should depend whether I sink or swim. I am not a bit tired of writing. I feel rather as if I had scarcely begun yet in real earnest, but had been only squaring my elbows—very inelegantly by the by—and trying my paces with a few false starts (7 Sept 1864).
She had already sent Bulwer-Lytton a copy of the manuscript requesting comments, but it appears that he did not get back to her until the novel had already begun serial publication. In that response, he seems to have objected to the ending of The Doctor’s Wife, in which the heroine’s young husband dies unexpectedly. Braddon admits that “I was cruelly hurried in writing it [the ending], and only towards the last decided upon what I should do with George and Isabel” (Nov or Dec 1864).

In line with critics who promoted the novel of character, Braddon did insist on her character’s extra-textual reality. Her hero is Roland Lansdell, a Byronic country landowner, and she reminds the reader of the novel more than once that he is a real person, or as good as real:

Heaven knows I write of him in sober earnest….I have seen and known him, or such as him. He is no lay-figure upon which I would hang cheap commonplace moralities; but a creature of real flesh and blood, and mind and soul, whose picture I would paint--if I can. If he does not seem real after all, it is because my pen is feeble, and not because this man has not really lived and suffered, and sinned and repented (201).

The doctor’s wife, Isabel Gilbert, is, unlike Lansdell, emphatically a creature of the text. She believes that her “story” will begin when she meets a Childe Harold or a Lara (81), and hopes that her days will not close upon “the same dull record, the same empty page” (82). Though Dr. George Gilbert is obviously not the Byronic figure for whom she has longed, when he proposes she feels “that the story was beginning all at once, and that she was going to be a heroine” (87). Isabel has none of the excess value, the living quality, that literary convention indicates makes for a good character. All she wants in life is to imitate the heroines she admires, and by her flatness, her text-boundedness, she emphasizes Lansdell’s potential for jumping off the page.
We have seen that while Braddon had definite ideas about literary questions that purely pertained to technique, she was much less confident when it came to areas where technique intersected with morality. But though she contradicted herself in her characterization of *Madame Bovary* as both “hideously immoral” and “the very mildest of improper stories,” she understood, as any English novelist must, that a story “founded on” *Madame Bovary* required some adjustment. Since allowing Isabel to leave her marriage for Lansdell would have opened Braddon up to more charges of culpable stimulation of her readers’ nerves, the writer’s solution is to leave Isabel entirely—and implausibly—unaware of Lansdell’s intentions toward her. She conceives “a platonic attachment” for him (250), and shortly before he asks her to run off with him, the narrator informs us that adultery was “as far beyond her power of comprehension as the possibility that she might steal a handful of arsenic out of one of the earthenware jars in the surgery, and mix it with the sugar that sweetened George Gilbert’s matuitional coffee” (276). Given that Isabel knows “enough French to serve for the reading of novels that she might have better left unread” (27) and likes to imagine herself as Edith Dombey, her entire ignorance strains credibility, but that ignorance was necessary to Braddon’s project. She wanted not only to write a novel of character, but also to write a respectable novel that would distance her from her reputation for sensation. With these goals in mind, it is clear that the “character” in question must be Roland Lansdell, not the eponymous doctor’s wife.

Along with making Lansdell her “hero,” as she names him in a letter to Bulwer-Lytton (early summer 1864), Braddon also separates herself from her sensational past by creating a fictional sensation novelist, Sigismund Smith. At the beginning of the novel,
Smith is a boarder with Isabel’s family, and he introduces her to his childhood friend Gilbert. He visits the young couple periodically and is always eager to talk about his work, which traffics in murder and melodrama. Lyn Pykett remarks that with Smith, Braddon “distances her own ‘artistic’ narrative from the low genre(s) with which she has hitherto been associated and some of whose machinery and effects she continues to employ” (x), but rather than making such a character as unlike herself as possible, Braddon constructs him as in some sense a figure for the artist as a young woman. The narrator relates a story in which Smith goes to stay at a country house, and on asking the owner whether he would mind if Smith set a murder there, is told to “People it with fiends, my dear boy!” (50). This is a story that Braddon liked to tell herself about the house where she conceived the idea for *Lady Audley’s Secret*, and Smith also resembles her in his practical attitude toward the sensational fiction he rattles off with such ease.

He is as unromantic as the prosiest butcher who ever entered a cattle-market. He sold his imagination….He slapped his heroes into marketable shape, as coolly as a butterman slaps a pat of butter into the semblance of a swan or a crown, in accordance with the requirements of his customers (28).

As the butcher and butterman metaphors suggest, Smith is a worker. He has time for craft--for learning the techniques that will best please his public--but not for artistry. To once again underline the fact that she has moved beyond this attitude in her own work, Braddon has her narrator inform the reader that “This *[The Doctor’s Wife]* is not a sensation novel. I write here what I know to be the truth” (358). The “truth” of the novel of character, which is also the truth of the world outside fiction, is here contrasted with the constructedness of Braddon’s former métier, the novel of incident.
We may assume that Braddon was pleased by the critical response to *The Doctor’s Wife*. The *Saturday Review* described it as “in the strictest sense a novel of character,” and the *Spectator* also used the much-sought-after designation (quoted in Wolff 166). Her later novel *Joshua Haggard’s Daughter* would be regarded in the same terms, and puffed in the *Athenaeum* as a story depending “upon analysis of character rather than complication of incident” (quoted in Wolff 274).

Yet Braddon does not seem to have been totally satisfied with respectable novels of character. This may have had something to do with Bulwer-Lytton’s response to *The Doctor’s Wife*, which I will discuss below, but it may also be that she didn’t see why character and incident should be opposed categories. After the publication of that novel, she writes about a subsequent project that, “I want if possible to make the story one of character and incident also” (9 Dec 1864). Though some critics refused to acknowledge that Braddon had moved beyond the sensation novel with *The Doctor’s Wife*, Bulwer-Lytton’s response to her work may have been the most puzzling and discouraging of all. In late 1864, immediately after the publication of *The Doctor’s Wife*, Braddon writes,

> I feel inexpressibly flattered by your advising me to write a novel of character, for it has been the fashion with most of my critics to say that I can only tell a story and have no notion of character (Nov or Dec 1864).

We may question whether this claim of “inexpressible flattery” was really genuine, given the fact that writing a novel of character was what she thought she’d just done. In the opinion of many critics, and perhaps of Bulwer-Lytton as well, Mary Elizabeth Braddon could not write a novel of character due to the simple fact that she was Mary Elizabeth Braddon, the author of that infamous pair of “bigamy stories” (Mansel 196), *Lady Audley*
and *Aurora Floyd*. The novel that combined character and incident was simply not possible—not for her, and perhaps not at all.

The master/student relationship depends, after all, on inequality. In handicraft apprenticeships, the student served a certain number of years under a master, thereby earning the rights of a professional. But Braddon’s apprenticeship had no fixed end date, and it would always be in Bulwer-Lytton’s interest to regard her as a student who still had much to learn. Braddon in constructing herself as the student of a master is disadvantaged not only by the inexact professional standards in her field, but by the way that her gender sets her apart from other students. She was not just an apprentice; she was a woman apprentice, and one with claims on her time that might be seen to distract her from her professional labor.

One of the strangest notes in the correspondence with Bulwer-Lytton is the total absence, for the first four years, of references to Braddon’s husband and children. Since the early 1860’s, Braddon had been living with Maxwell, her publisher. Maxwell’s wife had been placed in a mental institution, and he and Braddon raised the children of this first marriage together, also eventually having five children of their own. Though it is impossible to imagine that Bulwer-Lytton was ignorant of the relationship with Maxwell, Braddon never speaks of it, and mentions the “people” she lives with only in the most oblique terms. She complains that she never has time to read; she writes in the morning, and at night “other people talk to me, and think me a bear if I read” (17 Jan 1864). In another letter, she apologizes to Bulwer-Lytton for “writing flippant nonsense that will disgust you, but there have been people talking in the room and bewildering me terribly for the last few minutes” (9 Dec 1864). These people could have included her mother.
and various guests, but it must be assumed that they also included Maxwell and the eldest of their children.

These mysterious references to “people” disappear after 1867, when Maxwell’s first wife died and he and Braddon were able to marry. From this point forward, she signs herself Mary Maxwell rather than Mary Braddon, and the letters are peppered with references to “baby” and “my little Willie.” And yet, considering the large role that her large family must have played in her daily routine, Braddon says very little about her personal life. When her vexed relationship to the novel of character threatened to prevent the student from becoming a master herself, keeping her writing work separate from her domestic work was one way to encourage Bulwer-Lytton to view her as a professional. As Batchelor notes, the newly professionalized world of fiction writing depended upon “the gendered divisions between…the genius and the hack, the useful and the ornamental, the professional and the popular and the mind and the body” (148). We might easily add character and incident to Batchelor’s list. As the mindless, transgressive element of the craft of fiction, incident was almost inevitably gendered feminine.

The apprenticeship with Bulwer-Lytton was, in the end, only a partial means to the professional respect that Braddon craved. In one letter after the publication of *Aurora Floyd*, she imagined a scenario in which

I could have sat at yr feet for ever, content to waste years upon patient work which should never have seen the light, with the far-away hope of yr saying some day as the great music-master said to his pupil “Go, my son, I can teach you no more. You can now write a great novel” (quoted in Wolff 155).

However, as we have seen, it was not in Bulwer-Lytton’s interest to bring this fantasy to life. As long as Braddon were the pupil and he the master, his own role as a craftsman in
the elevated sphere of the novel of character was secure. And perhaps Braddon was not really as eager to fulfill his prescriptions as this letter might suggest.

In the end, the changing standards of her field would do more for Braddon’s status in the profession than Bulwer-Lytton ever could. In 1882, nine years after Bulwer-Lytton’s death, William Dean Howells published an essay titled “Henry James, Jr.” that set off a furor in the English periodical press. The critics took umbrage at Howell’s sententious description of the state of fiction in the 1880’s, so reminiscent of Barrie’s parody:

The art of fiction has, in fact, become a finer art in our day than it was with Dickens and Thackeray. We could not suffer the confidential attitude of the latter now, nor the mannerism of the former, any more than we could endure the prolixity of Richardson or the coarseness of Fielding. These great men are of the past—they and their methods and interests; even Trollope and Reade are not of the present. The new school derives from Hawthorne and George Eliot rather than any others….The moving accident is certainly not its trade; and it prefers to avoid all manner of dire catastrophes (54-5).

This disdainful attitude toward catastrophes is a bizarre attribute to associate with the Henry James of The American, but it may have been intended less as a real critical appreciation than a shot across the bow. If that was the case, Howells certainly succeeded in his mission. When he wrote that “the stories were all told long ago; and now we want merely to know what the novelist thinks about persons and situations” (56), the critics took him to mean that plot could be dispensed with altogether, and they objected fiercely. In the National Review, Arthur Tilley takes exception to the idea that readers only wanted to know about “persons and situations,” commenting that “The new school in short wholly underrates the strength of plot interest or pursuit as a human emotion. For we all have what Mr. James calls ‘a weakness for a plot’; which the wise
novelist will humour if he can” (259). In the *Contemporary Review*, Karl Hillebrand agrees with Barrie that the new school talked too much about the precepts of their art while producing little of lasting value (270), and also suggests that the focus on character development was untrue to both human nature and the illustrious past of the British novel: “‘Become another,’” Hillebrand writes, “‘is that not the first requirement of a novel hero of our days? Fielding would rather have expected that the adder should lose her venom, than that Blifil should cease to be a scoundrel’” (281). A few years later, H. Rider Haggard would pick up on a latent implication in the arguments of Tilley, Hillebrand, and others to indicate that the new school was vaguely immoral, even emasculated: “About their work is an atmosphere like that of the boudoir of a luxurious woman, faint and delicate, and suggesting the essence of white rose” (175). Most provocatively of all, L.J. Jennings in a review of *A Portrait of a Lady* and Howells’s *A Modern Instance* contends that the new school’s insistence that all the stories had been told was a cover for their inability to come up with good stories: “A more convenient theory could scarcely be provided for those who have turned to novel-writing as a pleasant means of acquiring profit and reputation, without any natural gifts for the work” (225). Jennings interprets James’s distinctively elliptical dialogue as a way to fill pages while compensating for a lack of skill in generating incident. Given James’s high artistic standards and reluctance to be seen as a “popular” novelist writing for monetary gain, this criticism might have struck particularly close to the bone.

Among the more nuanced responses to the “new school” of Howells and James is an essay that never mentions them by name, Robert Louis Stevenson’s “A Gossip on Romance,” which argues that a novel without incident would be not only unpopular but
unreadable: “The desire for knowledge, I had almost added the desire for meat, is not more deeply seated than this demand for fit and striking incident” (72). Stevenson here rehabilitates the term, “striking incident,” that Lewes had associated with the sensation novelists’ failure of artistic decorum. As if in delayed response to Bulwer-Lytton as well as to Howells and James, he protests that “it is not character, but incident” that makes for good fiction (77). When the critical bugbear is not sensationalism but tedium created through a lack of plot, it seems that satisfying the public desire for excitement is not such a bad thing after all.

Despite his unmistakable taste for melodrama, James’s critical attitude toward character and incident was very much what Howells’s essay suggests. In 1884’s “The Art of Fiction,” he goes so far as to argue that the binary is inherently ineffectacious, since every part of a story has something to do with character: “What is incident but the illustration of character?…It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look at you in a certain way” (512). Though this is certainly not what Bulwer-Lytton and Braddon would have considered incident, James’s failure to obey generic distinctions is in a sense a continuation of Braddon’s own project. Like her, he asks why a novel must do either one thing or another, and comes to the conclusion that it can in fact do more than one thing.\(^9\) It is perhaps not as strange as it seems that, in an early essay on Braddon, James compares her to Jane Austen and commented approvingly that “Miss Braddon…goes to work like an artist” (quoted in Wolff 153). Near the end of both their lives, he addresses her in a letter as a “distinguished confrere” and “a

\(^9\) Braddon found another advocate in Trollope, who in the Autobiography, published in the same year as James’s “The Art of Fiction,” argues that “a good novel should be both” realistic and sensational, attentive to both character and plot: “If a novel fail in either, there is a failure in art” (227).
magnificent mamma, a benefactress to the literary State!” (Oct 1 1911). This may be what Cross names “suave Jamesian hyperbole” (220), but certainly James did not go to such trouble for many writers of his acquaintance. In the same letter, he told Braddon that “I used to follow you ardently and track you close”—suggesting that she had indeed, in a sense, become a master of Masters.

A feature on Braddon in Edmund Yates’s 1884 compendium of the personal lives of the rich and famous, Celebrities at Home, goes still further than James in redefining conceptions of what the novel has been and should be. Placing Braddon beside the Marquis of Harrington and the Empress Eugénie in his table of contents, Yates takes it for granted that her popularity has made her respectable, and presents the reader with an exhausting variety of detail about her writing habits. She writes for only two hours a day, but since she has thought out the story beforehand, this allows for “the production of four pages of letterpress” (318). She likes to write in a “low uncomfortable chair…with a piece of thick cardboard on her lap, and a little inkbottle held firmly against it with the left hand” (319). In a tribute that seems designed to appeal to aspiring writers as much as die-hard Braddon fans, the novelist is constructed as an independent artisan, who sticks to a demanding production schedule but is no slave to the publishers. Mr. Maxwell is nowhere mentioned in this portrait of “Mrs. Maxwell at work” (320), and by all appearances both her work and her “household duties” are performed in perfect, unalienated freedom, her apprenticeship ended at last.

At the end of his gossipy tribute, Yates also offers an interesting retelling of the debate between the novel of incident and the novel of character:
In 1862 the critics had been weaned from the strong situations which the late Lord Lytton and Charles Dickens had used so skillfully, and insisted on the merit of the *roman de caractère*, made popular in France by Balzac, and in England by his great disciple Thackeray. *Lady Audley* was cried down as “sensational,” but was eagerly read by the public, who, despite the teachings of superior beings, are always impressed by dramatic force (323).

This account is startlingly different than Braddon’s own record of her influences in her correspondence with Bulwer-Lytton. Between the two novelists, it is taken for granted that Bulwer-Lytton himself was the master of novels of character, and that it was Balzac who employed “striking incident,” Balzac and other French writers from whom Braddon adapted some of her more scandalous plots. Yates’s version of literary history rehabilitates Braddon and sensationalism, returning her novels to an originary Englishness and to the proud example of her mentor Bulwer-Lytton. In this long view, she is permitted to have her character and her incident too.
Like the chapter of *Pendennis* in which Pen attends a literary soirée, Howells’s praise of James became the occasion for a lively critical discussion about what a writer was and ought to be. While the critics of the New School lambasted the American writers for being tedious and arrogant, James found opportunities to respond and set forth his own ideas about the craft. Perhaps his best-known retort to the idea that he was a mediocre talent parlaying his modest gifts for monetary gain occurs in his essay “The Art of Fiction,” where he takes a subtle jab at a nameless writer in the *Pall Mall Gazette* who disparages “certain tales in which ‘Bostonian nymphs’ appear to have ‘rejected English dukes for psychological reasons’” (“Art of Fiction” 517). Though Isabel Archer is from Albany, not Boston, this is clearly a reference to the Lord Warburton storyline in *The Portrait of a Lady*, but James does not call attention to this fact, merely stating that “for a Bostonian nymph to reject an English duke is an adventure only less stirring, I should say, than for an English duke to be rejected by a Bostonian nymph” (517). Whether the incident in question is a lady looking at you in a certain way, or, presumably, a lady passing the cruet, James maintains that no critic can prescriptively disallow it as a subject for art: “We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, what the French call his donnée; our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it” (513).

The essence of James’s “Art of Fiction,” written in reaction both to the New School critics and to Walter Besant’s essay of the same name, is that no prescriptive rules whatsoever can be set for the writer. In terms of subject matter, this argument presents a subtle rejoinder to those who would restrict the freedom of the writer, believing that art,
in James’s words, means “picking a bouquet for Mrs. Grundy” (515). However, along with preserving the writer’s right to his donnée, James’s version of the art precludes the possibility of establishing a set of principles by which aspiring writers might be guided in their attempts. If writing could be taught, it would become a commodity, and in his efforts to establish fiction as one of the fine arts, James was preeminently concerned that the old association of writing and commerce be consigned to history. In this chapter, I will juxtapose his endeavor to raise the prestige of fiction writing by foreswearing the idea of a teachable practice with another tradition, running from Besant’s own “Art of Fiction” to literary handbooks by the Reverend George Bainton, Arnold Bennett, and others. The lessons contained in these handbooks may, like the letters from Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton, advance idiosyncratic and subjective vision of proper technique, but they still represent an important step in the “democratisation” of the craft. They embodied a teachable art of fiction that provided a needful counterweight to James’s influential insistence that writing could not be taught.

Both Besant and James were, like Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton, advocates of professionalization, but in their use of the word professional, they meant something very different. In his “Art of Fiction,” Besant laments the fact that writers “hold no annual exhibitions, dinners, or conversazioni…have no President or Academy; and…do not themselves seem desirous of being treated as followers of a special Art” (6). The same year that the essay was published, he sought to remedy this failure of initiative through the founding and promotion of the Society of Authors. Here again Besant was the inheritor of the mantle of Bulwer-Lytton, who tried and failed more than once to establish a professional organization for writers.
James was also a member of the Society of Authors, though perhaps a less than enthusiastic one. He was inducted in 1888, and the same year he wrote to Robert Louis Stevenson in regard to a dinner that the Society had given for American authors, commenting that “I belong to it, and so do you, I think, but I don’t know what it is” (3: 240). If James didn’t know what the Society of Authors was, it wasn’t because they hadn’t gone to the trouble to elucidate their mission. Its three stated aims were “(1) the maintenance, definition, and defense of literary property, (2) the consolidation and amendment of the laws of domestic copyright, and (3) the promotion of international copyright” (Hepburn 42), and the members spent much of their time on issues of legal rights to the written word, even traveling to Berne to make up the English delegation of the 1886 International Conference on Copyright (Bonham-Carter 128). When James said that he doesn’t know what the Society is, it is likely that he was expressing his dismissive attitude toward its particular definition of professionalism. In an 1895 letter to Edmund Gosse, James writes:

> The fact is that authorship is guilty of a great mistake, a gross want of tact, in formulating & publishing its claim to be a “profession”. Let other trades call it so—& let it take no notice. That’s enough. It ought to have of the professions only a professional thoroughness. But never to have that, & to cry on the housetops that it is the grocer & the shoemaker is to bring on itself a ridicule of which it will simply die (quoted in Salmon 106).

As Richard Salmon argues, the term “professional” “carries at least two distinct connotations” in the letter (106). James dislikes the kind of professionalism, represented by the Society, that would conflate the writer’s profession with that of the grocer and the
shoemaker.\textsuperscript{10} At the same time, he “wishes to retain a notion of ‘professional thoroughness,’ absent, he claims, from the works of the self-declared professionals, that escapes reduction to purely economic motives” (107). As Mark McGurl argues in \textit{The Novel Art}, in his work from this period James was establishing a way of talking about what McGurl calls the “art-novel,” a novel with a concern for aesthetics new to the English literary scene. However, the art-novel as practiced by James does not, as McGurl claims, facilitate “brotherhood” among literary artists (15). In fact, its aim is very much in opposition to the professional organizations of the period—not to democratize the practice and marketing of fiction writing, but to establish it as a fine art above the understanding of all but a select few. For James, who lived on the proceeds from his fiction his entire adult life, changing the conversation to aesthetics was a convenient way of eliding the question of whether one wrote for money and separating himself from the middle-class writers who catered to novel-hungry masses. In this context, “art” becomes just another way of saying genius: that which is inaccessible to the public at large; that which cannot be acquired through effort and discipline, but only appreciated after the fact.

Besant opens his essay by stating the following three propositions:

1. That Fiction is an Art in every way worthy to be called the sister and the equal of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture, Music, and Poetry; that is to say, her field is as boundless, her possibilities as vast, her excellences as worthy of admiration, as may be claimed for any of her sister Arts.

\textsuperscript{10} Salmon points out that James also used the Society, requesting Besant’s advice on periodical publication and hiring the agent A.P. Watt to represent him in the late 1880’s. His simultaneous acceptance of and disdain for professional organizations certainly implies that “James’s relationship with Besant’s model of literary professionalism was…more ambivalent than the coded distancing of [James’s] ‘The Art of Fiction’ might suggest” (108).
2. That it is an Art which, like them, is governed and directed by general laws; and that these laws may be laid down and taught with as much precision and exactness as the laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion.
3. That, like the other Fine Arts, Fiction is so far removed from the mere mechanical arts, that no laws or rules whatever can teach it to those who have not already been endowed with the natural and necessary gifts (3-4).

Though he never says it as directly as Besant does here, the general tenor of James’s essay certainly concurs with Besant’s proposition that the rules of fiction cannot be taught. The inconsistency in Besant’s essay, which James identifies and uses to advance his own argument, is suggested in the puzzling juxtaposition between the second and the third propositions. If fiction can be taught only to those with natural ability, why compose an essay offering advice on the practice of fiction to a general audience? Did Besant believe that only those with the “necessary gifts” would read his work? In fact, as the development of his argument suggests, Besant did not insist very strongly on his third proposition, and may even, by the close of the essay, have disregarded it entirely. In the Appendix, he speaks of the letters he received “every week…from young beginners asking for counsel and guidance” (46). It seems unlikely that every one of the young beginners to whom Besant responded were blessed with natural gifts; indeed, some would question whether Besant himself could boast of these endowments. In content, his essay is firmly in the tradition of Bulwer-Lytton’s remarks in *The Monthly Chronicle* and in the letters to Braddon--practical tips directed less at the creation of fine art than the production of marketable work. In this sense, Besant is indeed suggesting that fiction was one of the “mechanical arts”--in other words, a craft.
Besant’s rules and pointers in his “Art of Fiction” are too numerous to discuss in full, but a few selections will suffice for the whole. He suggests that the public prefers—and, one would assume, will pay for—happy fiction over depressing fiction:

Let him [the writer] remember that in story-telling, as in alms-giving, a cheerful countenance works wonders, and a hearty manner greatly helps the teller and pleases the listener. One would not have the novelist make continual effort at being comic; but let him not tell his story with eyes full of sadness, a face of woe and a shaking voice (37).

In a discussion of how detail may contribute to the theme or mood of a scene, Besant also recommends the pathetic fallacy: “the weather, the wind and the rain, with some writers, have been made to emphasize a mood or passion of a heroine” (15). He advises that “young novelists” go to the British Museum and pay attention to what sorts of paintings people like; that they carry a notebook to jot down observations; and that they write every day to exercise their technique: “I earnestly recommend those who desire to study this Art to begin by daily practice in the description of things, even common things, that they have observed, by reporting conversations, and by word portraits of their friends” (23).

Underlying all is Besant’s conviction that the most important rule of fiction writing is to “never go beyond your own experience” (18), and, by implication, that the writer’s experience will be sufficient to the task.

Like Bulwer-Lytton’s tenet that virtuous characters must be old, Besant’s rules, in their specificity and idiosyncrasy, would be easy to mock. James eschews this temptation, pleasantly asserting that, “there is something very encouraging in his [Besant’s] having put into form certain of his ideas on the mystery of story-telling” (287). However, as the development of his argument will show, James agrees with very little
that Besant has to say about that “mystery,” and as he draws out his objections, he calls attention to the contradiction at the heart of Besant’s art of fiction. If only a writer with genius can succeed, might he not, in his superior judgment, find an exception to any prescriptively determined rules of fiction? And if these rules do admit of exceptions, what is the use of calling them rules, or talking about them at all?

It is the general principle of James’s art of fiction that, when it comes to fiction, no general principles can be maintained. Besant mistake[s] in attempting to say so definitely beforehand what sort of affair the good novel will be….The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel…is that it be interesting….The ways in which it is at liberty to accomplish this result (of interesting us) strike me as innumerable and such as can only suffer from being marked out, or fenced in, by prescription (292).

Thus by agreeing with Besant’s first proposition, that fiction is a fine art, James counters his second, that it is teachable. In James’s view, “the form [of a novel]…is to be appreciated after the fact” (508), a position that effectively shuts down any discussion of the art of fiction by its practitioners. Though he commends Besant for his lessons to young writers, and agrees to offer “some comprehensive remarks…to the ingenuous student,” the content of those remarks is so very comprehensive that one imagines that they would be of little help:

I should remind him first of the magnificence of the form that is open to him, which offers to sight so few restrictions and such innumerable opportunities….This freedom is a splendid privilege, and the first lesson of the young novelist is to learn to be worthy of it. “Enjoy it as it deserves,” I should say to him; “take possession of it, explore it to its utmost extent, reveal it, rejoice in it” (520).
As I will discuss in the following chapter, James maintained the position that art should not be limited by prescription throughout his career, and no doubt there was behind his words a sincere desire that the English writer enjoy the same freedom that he had witnessed among Flaubert’s circle during his time in France. This insistence that questions of morality exist quite apart from questions of artistry is presumably the reason why many critics, including McGurl, claim that James is “working…with precedents set in France by Gustave Flaubert” when he endeavors “to claim the Anglo-American novel from the domain of popular entertainment and to argue for its potential as what he called ‘fine art’” (2). But though James’s defiance of Mrs. Grundy might well have been influenced by the Continental writers of his acquaintance, there is in “The Art of Fiction” a decidedly English anxiety about what was happening to the great quantities of novels published every year: “It must be admitted that good novels are somewhat compromised by bad ones, and that the field, at large, suffers discredit from overcrowding” (291). By elevating his sort of fiction to a fine art, James could separate his own novels from that deluge of “bad ones,” and from their readers as well.

In his 1900 New York Times article titled “The Future of the Novel,” his anxiety about readership is still more evident. James sounds very like the earlier critics who inveighed against the sensation novel as he watches in horror the increase of readers attracted by “the flare of railway bookstalls”:

The flood at present swells and swells, threatening the whole field of letters…with submersion. It plays, in what may be called the passive consciousness of many persons, a part that directly marches with the rapid increase of the multitude able to possess itself in one way and another of the book. The book, in the Anglo-Saxon world, is everywhere, and it is in the form of the voluminous prose fable that we see it penetrate easiest and furthest. Penetration appears really to be directly aided by mere mass and bulk. There is an immense
public, if public be the name, inarticulate but immensely absorbent, for which, at its hours of ease, the printed volume has no other association.

With its vision of a teeming unrestrained reading public, this passage brings to mind James’s offensive observations of black and immigrant culture in *The American Scene*, and reveals the latent classism at the core of his interest in promoting fiction as a “fine art.” This public, like that invoked by the critics of sensation fiction, is also gendered, as James makes an identification between “the ladies and the children” and “the reader, irreflective and uncritical.” Interestingly, James maintained this suspicion about a too broad and too feminine readership for the novel despite the fact that he would have benefited from a greater demand for his own fiction. One would assume that though the desire to support himself from his work was important, to him the desire to establish fiction as an endeavor above questions of money and popularity was more important still.11

We can see now why Besant’s promotion of an “art of fiction” was attractive to James, and the methods Besant promulgated so very much less appealing. Though Besant refers to fiction as a fine art existing apart from the “mere mechanical arts,” his emphasis on the specifics of literary construction and his eagerness to help his “young

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11 James may at times have exaggerated his need for money, but his poverty seemed real enough to his friend Edith Wharton, who writes in *A Backward Glance* of the “anxious frugality” on display at Lamb House: “in his daily life he was haunted by the spectre of impoverishment, and the dreary pudding or pie of which a quarter or a half had been consumed at dinner appeared on the table the next day with its ravages unrepaired” (243-4). Wharton also relates an anecdote about a visit to James when he had her suitcases brought to the house on a wheelbarrow, commenting that “he had bought the barrow with the earnings of his last book and hoped that the earnings on the next book would enable him to have the barrow painted” (Powers 18). In the last years of James’s life, Wharton arranged for some of her own profits from Scribner to be diverted into an unusually generous advance for *The Ivory Tower* (Edel 476-7).
beginners” suggest that he had a much more democratic view. Not everyone could write good fiction, perhaps, but there were enough people out there with basic ability to make the writing and publication of a handbook worthwhile. In his “Art of Fiction,” James cordially but firmly disagrees. He calls the art of fiction not a craft but a “mystery,” and though this word can in an archaic sense connote a guild or trade organization, it can also, in its more familiar meaning, indicate something that cannot be understood by the uninitiated. And if art is a mystery, above the comprehension of all but a select few, then, as James implied, it is both useless and presumptuous to set out “rules” for its practice. This was a position he maintained throughout his career, in public and in private writings. In 1899, he writes to Mary Ward that she is wrong in attributing to him a belief in

but one general “hard and fast rule of presentation.” I…rather resent, frankly, you attributing to me a judgment so imbecile. I hold that there are five million such “rules” (or as many as there [are] subjects in all the world--I fear the subjects are not 5,000,000!) only each of them imposed, artistically, by the particular case—involved in the writer’s responsibility to it; and each then—and then only—“hard and fast” with an immitigable hardness and fastness….acquit me, please, please, of anything so abject as putting forth something at once specific and a priori (4:109-10).

In a quotation from Paul Bourget, Leon Edel records James expressing a similar view:

“we agreed that the laws imposed upon novelists by aesthetics resolve themselves into this: to give a personal impression of life” (3: 89). Finally, in “The Future of the Novel,” James writes that, “the form of the novel that is stupid on the general question of its freedom is the single form that may, a priori, be unhesitatingly pronounced wrong.” As we have seen, this refusal of prior standards for the novel, justified on moral and on aesthetic grounds, will stymie any attempt at instruction. Instead of the practical and
practicable art of fiction that the opening of his essay seems to promise, we are left, finally, with James’s inspiring but vague injunction, “try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!” (510).12

A few years after the debate that James named “the era of discussion” (502), a novel appeared that opposed the views that writing could be learned and that it was an inscrutable mystery in familiar but distinctive terms. As Cross argues, George Gissing’s *New Grub Street* tells the story of an era of literary upheaval, when “social and economic changes had a more dramatic effect on the conditions of authorship than at any time since Gutenberg.” Though Cross enumerates some of these changes—“the expansion of the popular press, the founding of the Society of Authors, the rise of the literary agent”—he does not mention essays like Besant’s, which suggested to people without university educations or pretensions to genius that they too could become writers. This new sense that writing is a learned skill changes the lives of both of the characters at the heart of *New Grub Street*, though it leads to success for only one of them.

The title of the novel refers to the eighteenth-century street known for its preponderance of hack writers, and one of the main characters, Jasper Milvain, is an unapologetic member of that fraternity. Jasper believes wholeheartedly in writing for the market and loves to pontificate on the subject, telling his sisters that

12 Given that this is perhaps the best-known line from “The Art of Fiction,” it is curious to note that James seems to have borrowed his phrasing from Besant’s specific and concrete suggestion that the aspiring writer carry a notebook to jot down his impressions: “There are places where the production of a notebook would be embarrassing—say, at a dinner-party, or a street fight; yet the man who begins to observe will speedily be able to remember everything that he sees and hears until he can find an opportunity to note it down, so that nothing is lost” (21). Clearly the phrase “nothing is lost,” like “art of fiction,” meant something very different to James than it did to Besant.
Literature nowadays is a trade. Putting aside men of genius, who may succeed by mere cosmic force, your successful man of letters is your skilful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost of the markets; when one kind of goods begins to go off slackly, he is ready with something new and appetising (38).

Though Jasper tips his hat to genius, he does not follow custom in assuming that his lack of it is a material disadvantage. All a writer really needs to succeed is determination and the minimum skill level that will allow him to perceive what the public wants and give it to them. Jasper does not write fiction, but he encourages his sister to write pious, ladylike “Sunday school novels” as a way of making extra money, and insists to them too that a lack of genius is no bar to success: “There’s no question of the divine afflatus; that belongs to another sphere of life….what on earth is there in typography to make everything it deals with sacred?” (43).

Jasper’s key points—that writing is a business, that he writes only to make money, that genius is utterly beside the point—are repeated frequently and enthusiastically, and his insistence can be seen as an indication of Gissing’s distaste with this way of looking at the world. The hero of the novel is after all not Jasper, but Edwin Reardon, a struggling novelist who cannot write to please the public or use the lessons of the art of fiction to improve his work. The similarities between Gissing and Reardon are numerous. Trapped in an unhappy marriage, Reardon, like his creator, strives to support his family with his fiction, but often sinks into a depression that makes it impossible for him to write. A passage detailing Reardon’s efforts to write when uninspired could be a transcript of Gissing’s diary from the period:

Occasionally he dipped his pen into the ink, and seemed about to write: but each time the effort was abortive. At the head of the paper was inscribed “Chapter III,”
but that was all….Useless; he scarcely knew what he wished to put into words, and his brain refused to construct the simplest sentence (77).

Reardon’s preferred term for the labor of writing is “work,” and the context suggests that this is not meaningful or honorable work, but merely a kind of pointless drudgery that becomes more rather than less difficult. And yet, because the uneducated public assumes that writing fiction is easy and pleasurable, no one comprehends Reardon’s struggle. As his wife’s brother tells her, Reardon “might write his two novels a year easily enough, just like twenty other men and women. Look here, I could do it myself if I weren’t too lazy. And that’s what’s the matter with Reardon. He doesn’t care to work” (276).

From Reardon’s perspective, there is bitter irony in this. Paradoxically, it is because he does “work,” forcing himself to try to produce what will make him the most money, that his writing is so unprofitable. As a younger man, he had written good novels that sold reasonably well and were admired by critics. Seeing himself as a rising star in the literary world, Reardon made the mistake of marrying a middle-class girl who expected to be supported in the manner to which she was accustomed. Amy Reardon is ultimately responsible for her husband’s failure. Not only does she object to living “like the wife of a working-man” (274), but she quietly influences her husband to give up the kind of writing that has brought him success in the past in favor of a lower-quality fiction. Though not a writer herself, Amy takes an interest in the business of the literature that becomes an index of her moral decline:

If a new novel that had succeeded came into her hands she perused it in a very practical spirit, commenting to Reardon on the features of the work which had made it popular; formerly, she would have thought more of its purely literary merits….Her interests were becoming more personal; she liked to hear details of the success of popular authors--about their wives or husbands, as the case may be,
their arrangements with publishers, their methods of work. The gossip columns of literary papers—and of some that were not literary—had an attraction for her. She talked of questions such as international copyright, was anxious to get an insight into the practical conduct of journals and magazines, liked to know who ‘read’ for the publishing houses (99).

An intelligent and perceptive reader, Amy has always had the ability to comprehend the artistry that goes into the production of high-quality fiction. Formerly, however, it was an understanding that could be put to no practical use. The fact that her eye is now attuned to “the features of the work that had made it popular” proves what an unfit helpmate she is for her eminently impractical husband. Though Gissing would give careful attention to middle-class women’s perilous financial situation in *The Odd Women*, *New Grub Street* seems to have little sympathy for the fact that Amy and her child depend on Reardon’s ability to supply the market with a product that is reliably saleable. As she contends when her husband protests that he hates the word “market,” he “can’t afford to hate it” (79).

The cordial disagreement between Besant and James about what fiction is—a teachable practice that will enable the writer to support himself through his writing, or an aesthetic concern above the world of commerce—undergirds the battle between Jasper and Reardon at the heart of *New Grub Street*. Like Besant, Jasper envisions a world of an unlimited market for fiction, and a capable workforce to supply it. For Reardon, who can’t reconcile himself to Jasper’s vision of the world, success is impossible. He isn’t a hack, and he isn’t a genius either. Gissing makes it clear that Reardon’s talents, though real, are limited in scope: “It was significant…that no native impulse had directed him to novel-writing. His intellectual temper was that of the student, the scholar” (90). This point is significant because it leaves the door open for the possibility that a writer with
more native ability than Reardon could have made his way despite the degraded status of
the profession. In the end, the novel argues that starvation in a garret is inevitable not for
writers of genius, who will thrive in spite of the odds, but for writers with talent, who can
produce work that is good but not great, and refuse to cater to the market by lowering
their artistic standards.

As Reardon’s failure becomes inevitable, his protests against the business of
fiction become more and more emphatic. “What an insane thing it is to make literature
one’s only means of support!” he exclaims. “To make a trade of an art!” (81). Jasper
agrees that there is no place for artistry in the marketplace, though he is markedly
unsympathetic to Reardon’s suffering. To his sisters, Jasper comments that no writer can
succeed who “is absurd enough to be conscientious, likes to be called an ‘artist,’ and so
on” (37). Predictably, what Reardon finds most challenging, and most offensive to his
principles, is the “construction” of a plot. When Amy recommends that he “give…a
week to invent a sensational plot, and then a fortnight for the writing” (84), Reardon
protests that “the invention of a plot is just the thing that I find most difficult” (85).

In the 1880’s of New Grub Street, the distinction between the novel that depends
on characterization and the novel that depends on what Lewes calls “plot-interest” is
alive and well. Inevitably, the novel of plot-interest trails its familiar associations. This
is the kind of fiction that can be written by anyone—or at least by a lot of people--and if it
can be written by anyone, it is not artistry but a kind of mechanical labor. The writer in
Fraser’s who criticized Dickens for writing novels “to match, as per order” would have
sympathized with Reardon’s gripe, when Jasper encourages him to “get it done, so many
pages a day” (109), that the *Odyssey* “was not written at so many pages a day, with a workhouse clock clanging its admonition at the poet’s ear” (155).

The choice as presented in *New Grub Street* is a stark one: either an entire lack of both artistic and moral principles (Jasper subtly woos Amy Reardon during her husband’s decline) and popular success; or artistic conscientiousness, failure, and early death. It is worth noting, however, that Jasper Milvain isn’t the only character who manages to thrive in the tarnished world of New Grub Street. Reardon’s friend Whelpdale, whose novels have been even more unsuccessful than Reardon’s, cheerfully decides to set himself up as a literary agent and tutor. In a conversation with Reardon, he sets out his plan to make money by teaching what he can’t do:

What do you think I’m writing just now? An author’s Guide. You know the kind of thing; they sell splendidly….Then I have a splendid idea. I’m going to advertise: “Novel-writing taught in ten lessons!”….No swindle; not a bit of it….The first lesson deals with the question of subjects, local colour--that kind of thing. I gravely advise people, if they possibly can, to write of the wealthy middle class; that’s the popular subject, you know. Lords and ladies are all very well, but the real thing to take is a story about people who have no titles, but live in good Philistine style. I urge study of horsey matters especially; that’s very important. You must be well up, too, in military grades, know about Sandhurst, and so on. Boating is an important topic….I shall teach my wife carefully, and then let her advertise lessons to girls; they’ll prefer coming to a woman, you know (249).

Whelpdale’s novel-writing in ten lessons is a kind of burlesque of the art of fiction as formulated by people like Bulwer-Lytton and Besant. Certainly, if this is how writing is to be taught, there is nothing very artistic about it.

As James certainly saw, when one begins to speak prescriptively about what the novel should and should not do, the line between “let him not tell his story with eyes full of sadness, a face of woe and a shaking voice” and “write of the wealthy middle-class” is
thin one. Both “rules” admit of so many exceptions that they are virtually useless. One can imagine his reaction to Besant’s proposition that the Society be not only a liaison between the writer and the marketplace, but also a sort of proto-MFA program teaching the craft. After setting out his thoughts about “The Art of Fiction,” Besant remarks that:

I am certain that if these laws were better known and more generally studied, a very large proportion of the bad works of which our critics complain would not be produced at all. And I am in great hopes that one effect of the establishment of the Society of Authors will be to keep young writers of fiction from rushing too hastily into print, to help them to the right understanding of their Art and its principles, and to guide them into true practice of their principles while they are still young, their imaginations strong, and their personal experiences are as yet not wasted in foolish failures (33).

Though Besant’s vision of a Society teaching writing as well as advising on questions of law and business was never realized, training writers in “a right understanding…and a true practice” of the art of fiction was for him a key element of professionalization. In 1887, he expounded a vision of the Society’s future couched in the terms of a colonialist project. Fifty years from the present, the Anglophone world would demand “a great army of men and women constantly engaged in writing’…with branches all over…. [Besant stated that] ‘I have not yet learned in my dream whether the central office is to be in Chicago or London’” (quoted in Bonham-Carter 138).

Besant’s dream must have seemed a grandiose fantasy to his listeners, but other voices spoke out in milder terms for the need for writers to organize not only for advantage in negotiations with publishers, but in order to learn to produce a better product. Responding to the founding of the Society in 1884, The Observer comments, “unhappily, book making is about the only business which men take up without having been trained for it by a sufficient pupillage; and, indeed, it is too often, like cab-driving
and the small coal trade, adopted after all other avenues to a livelihood have closed” (quoted in Bonham-Carter 122). Presumably certain aspiring writers--those to whom a comparison to cab drivers and coal sellers was not an abomination--were in the market for such pupillage, and in the absence of a formal training program through an organization like the Society of Authors, literary handbooks appeared to fill the void. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a handful of these books appeared on the London literary scene, including, in 1886, Percy Russell’s *The Literary Manual or, A Complete Guide to Authorship*, and, in 1890, the Reverend George Bainton’s *The Art of Authorship*. Bainton’s guide is notable for both the curious story of its composition and its inclusion of remarks from many well-known practitioners of the art of fiction, from George Meredith to Thomas Hardy to George Gissing to Henry James.

Bainton’s intentions in publishing a guide on authorship are quite mysterious. He appears in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography only as a Congregational minister in Coventry, the father of the composer and conductor Edgar Leslie Bainton. Though he had no known connection to the literary world, in 1888 he wrote to a number of authors expressing his desire,

to address our young people, in response to their request, by way of a lecture upon the art of composition and the means essential to secure a forcible and interesting style of expression….To that end I have taken the very great liberty to write to you and solicit your generous help. May I be permitted to ask whether in early life you gave yourself to any special training with a view to the formation of style (quoted in Bonham-Carter 160).

In his diary, Gissing records receiving “a letter from a stranger…who says he is going to deliver a lecture on the art of composition, and is writing to one or two well-known authors ‘requesting them to give him hints as to their own methods of study’” (*Letters*...
However, Bainton’s communication with Gissing contained some slight misstatements; he had in reality written not to one or two authors, but to at least one hundred and fifty-nine. Hall Caine’s wry response may be typical of the duped authors’:
“It was not until the book appeared that I realized that the man had written to everybody, that his ‘young men’ were all fudge, that the book was the thing, and that thanks to the folly of folks like myself, he had got it cheap” (quoted in Bonham-Carter 161).

It is probable that Bainton had profit in mind; certainly he was less than honest with his correspondents. However, the desire to make money and the desire to help aspiring writers may have coexisted. Bainton’s first chapter is entitled “Good Writing: A Gift or an Art?”, and after quoting many authors expressing their opinion that it is a gift, he comes out strongly on the side of art: “I cannot but feel that the common idea about genius…is most pernicious. It has a too serious tendency to set up insurmountable barriers to the masses of men, while they sit down in the conviction that they are nothing and effort is useless” (41). Of the twenty-three writers quoted in this chapter, only three agree with Bainton that good writing is more of an art than a gift. A writer who published under the pseudonym Cuthbert Bede, after commenting that “I do not believe in heaven-born geniuses,” repeats Trollope’s line from the Autobiography: “the best aid to genius was a bit of cobbler’s wax to fasten yourself to your stool until you had accomplished your allotted task” (50).

Writing to his friend Eduard Bertz, Gissing writes again of Bainton in a tone that is both flattered and dismissive of his correspondent’s project: “A foolish clergyman wrote to me last year, saying he was going to give a lecture on style, and, as an admirer of my books, (mirabile dictu!) he ventured to ask how I had ‘obtained my skill in diction.’ I’m afraid my civil answer, though civilly acknowledged, gave him small help; however, he said he should quote it in his lecture” (61). I have found no record of how Gissing reacted to the disclosure of Bainton’s subterfuge.
There was a dangerous potential for leveling in this promulgation of the art of writing. As Bainton writes in his epilogue, hard work and faithfulness of purpose can lead “the humblest worker [to] become an artist” (352). However, James wasn’t the only one who responded with muted enthusiasm to the idea that anyone could become a writer. In 1894, Hubert Crackanthorpe published an essay in Yellow Book that poured scorn on the very notion of a fiction writer being educated into competence.

Crackanthorpe calls on some familiar tropes, disparaging the uneducated reader who believes that “in order to produce good fiction, an ingenious idea, or ‘plot,’ as it is termed, is the one thing needful,” and returning to Thackeray’s metaphor in informing his reader that writing fiction is not like blacking boots: “the more boots you black, the better you do it” (269). Curiously, however, the word “genius” is never employed to stand against this working-class, inexpert point of view. Instead Crackanthorpe speaks of “the literary artist” who is “shamefully ill-paid” while “the man who merely caters for the public taste…amasses a large and respectable fortune” (267). While trading on a familiar distaste for the idea of fiction as a commodity, Crackanthorpe completes the identification between “genius” and “artist.” For Crackanthorpe as for James, the literary artist, like the genius before him, is the one who stands above the world of work and commerce.

He is also the one for whom training and practice is superfluous; he doesn’t need to “black boots” to learn how to write. The more teachable the practice of fiction appeared, the more it seemed to be open to anyone. And if it was open to anyone, it might be akin to the kind of work that could be done by anyone--in other words, labor. In the National Review, Edmund Gosse frets about the “successful novelist…[who] ‘catches
on,’ as they say, and…becomes a laborious professional writer. He toils at his novels as if he were the manager of a bank or the captain of an ocean steamer.” To Gosse too, this was not art but a joyless, thankless indenture to the marketplace. The writer under these circumstances “has no time to look at life” (173); he is a creature enslaved by his work. For different reasons, William Morris makes a similar point about working-class men who become writers. Unlike Morris himself, who “had leisure, pleasure, good-health” and could pursue literature in the right spirit, the young working men who George Bainton had supposedly been asked to lecture should be “warn[ed]…off art and literature as professions, as bread-winning work, most emphatically” (61). Though Morris certainly does not say that working men are less fit to be writers than rich men, he follows the line of argument laid out by Crackanthorpe and Gosse in suggesting that writing for money under a capitalist system is not, and can never be, meaningful work.

Though in his comments Bainton tried to make a case for hard work and mastery of the craft, in 1890 he was nearly as lonely a voice as Bulwer-Lytton had been fifty years earlier. Within the next fifteen years, however, a spate of new handbooks would appear that owed much more to Bulwer-Lytton and Besant than it did to James. These guides were a great deal more explicit about what Arnold Bennett called “the business side” of writing, and entirely unapologetic about the idea that people might want to make money from it. Instead of appearing once or twice in a decade, guides to writing and publishing experienced a mini-explosion at this time. The anonymous handbook titled How to Write a Novel lists forty-five periodical sources on the writing of fiction published between 1890 and 1898, and has an entirely different list for guides published in book form. But if, at the end of the century, the publishing industry and the periodicals
became receptive to the idea that fiction writing might indeed be teachable, why did the change happen, and why so quickly?

One could argue that it had something to do with the new respect accorded to English literature as a subject of academic study. In *Victorian Interpretation*, Suzy Anger shows that certain of the newly-minted professors of English, notably the Shakespearean scholar William Dowden, promoted careful attention to a text as a route to understanding the author’s mind (136). McGurl and D.G. Myers argue that the practice of close reading as promoted by the American New Critics influenced the development of creative writing in the university by training readers to pay attention to technique; perhaps this earlier brand of close reading influenced the attitudes toward the teaching of fiction in a similar way. However, the connection between developments in the English universities and the new spate of handbooks on craft is undeniably tenuous. These guides owe more to a different tradition, and as we pursue it, a glance at the frontispiece to *How to Write a Novel* will be instructive. It was presented as part of a series published by Grant Richards of London, other titles including *How to Deal with Your Banker, Where and How to Dine in Paris*, and *How to Invest and How to Speculate*. Clearly the series is aimed at an audience that cares about money and using it judiciously, and also about the finer things in life. If these readers want to write novels, it may because they enjoy reading them, but it may also be because they think it’s a good way to make a profit. In appealing to this market of would-be diners and investors, publishers were allying themselves with an offshoot of the self-help movement inaugurated by Samuel Smiles.

The basic tenets of Smiles’s program in *Self Help* are well known. Since work is “a law of God,” it is “the duty of each individual to develop his God-given internal
faculties.” The training of the mind through self-help enables a worker to give his best efforts according to his sphere in life, and contributes to the advancement of civilization (Travers 230). Smiles himself did not preach social mobility or financial gain through self-help, but some writers in the same tradition did (239). In the early twentieth century, books with titles like *How to Get Rich Quick* or Grant Richards’ own *How to Deal with Your Banker* began to appear, marking the fact that Smiles’s message had been adapted to a new purpose. The business now was not development of the faculties in honor of the glory of God, but development of the faculties in pursuit of a profit.

Arnold Bennett was a natural fit for the self-help tradition. An autodidact from the Potteries district of the West Midlands, Bennett by all accounts cared deeply about his work as a writer and took it very seriously. He also liked to pontificate about his right to be paid for his labor, a habit that made him an easy target for writers like Ezra Pound. In “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,” Pound satirizes him as Mr. Nixon, who

advised me kindly, to advance with fewer
Dangers of delay. “Consider
“Carefully the reviewer.

“I was as poor as you are;
“When I began I got, of course
“Advance on royalties, fifty at first’, said Mr. Nixon.…
“And give up verse, my boy,
“There’s nothing in it” (quoted in *The Author’s Craft* ix).

Perhaps partly due to his bad reputation with Pound, Woolf, and other modernists, Bennett has been largely forgotten by modern criticism; the few studies of his work published in the past thirty years seem mainly interested in arguing that he is either worth reading or not worth reading. For just that reason, John Carey announces Bennett as the
“hero” of his anti-modernist manifesto *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, gleefully recounting how Bertrand Russell called him “vulgar,” and T.S. Eliot described him as “a red-faced man ‘with an air of impertinent prosperity and the aspect of a successful wholesale grocer...[and] a most disagreeable cockney accent’” (153). Carey argues that Bennett’s genial suggestion that literature was for everyone, not just the wealthy and genteel, proves his difference from and superiority to the snobby modernists. However, as Carey concedes, Bennett advocated for the widest possible reading public not only for reasons of principle, but because he wanted to sell his own work to as many people as he could. Though he saw no contradiction between the production of first-class work and the pursuit of popularity and profit, Bennett, like Thackeray, does not seem to have minded being called a hack.

Bennett’s works on how to write fiction, comprising some periodical writing and his 1903 handbook, *How to Become an Author*, were probably written with similar mixed motives—to open the discussion of technique to a general audience, and to line his own pockets. The handbook may be seen as representative of the new spate of books on the subject, and its title is telling. Bennett is not so much interested in how to do something, as in how to *be* something—the kind of person who produces and sells a certain product. Assuming that you’re reasonably talented, it’s perfectly legitimate to write fiction for money, and you can count on making a good bit of it. “Fiction is a lucrative profession,” he tells us. “It cannot be compared with stock-broking, or brewing, or practice at the parliamentary bar, but it is tolerably lucrative” (21). To benefit from these rewards, however, the writer must have certain qualities apart from a minimum degree of aptitude for fiction. He must know how to set his own prices, and understand “the exchange value
of his qualifications” (20). He must be a hard worker, able to “compose three thousand words of his very best in a week” (26). He must adapt his own preferences to those of his readership, and “judiciously compromis[e] between his own ideals and the desires of the public” (27). Most importantly, he must know how to deal with agents, publishers, and booksellers on equal terms. The last chapter is titled “The Business Side,” and Bennett has a lot to say about it:

When the book is written the troubles of the author are nearly over, but the troubles of the merchant with a piece of merchandise to sell are about to begin. Let the aspirant recognise clearly that the remainder of his enterprise is not artistic but commercial. Let him grasp the fact that he is going forth to encounter men of business on their own ground, and that it therefore behoves him to act like a man of business and not like a man of genius (171).

Demonstrating his debt to Besant, Bennett advises “the aspirant with a legal turn who wishes for further information” to join the Author’s Society, thoughtfully including their address (187).

Above all, Bennett counsels his aspiring writers not to forget that the “general public” is the final arbiter of the work they produce. Eventually they’ll want to sell what they’ve written, and to do so, they must consider the standards of the marketplace. They are advised to start with action, “so…the reader’s interest may be aroused at once” (97); to keep things moving, “every sentence…inspir[ing] the reader with wish to read the next one (108); and above all, to end the story as soon as it approaches dullness. Bennett’s favorite phrase in his how-to may be “stop it.” He tells the writer, “whenever any scene…begins to be perfunctory, stop it. Stop it ruthlessly” (148); “when a conversation has served its purpose, stop it instantly; if advisable you may summarise its conclusion” (144). Where the New School was accused of going on and on in order to produce as
many pages as possible of printed matter, Bennett never considers the idea that his writers might want to be paid by the word. Their true task is to find an audience, and that audience will reward them for keeping the story brisk and exciting.

At some points, Bennett takes on a bullying tone, as when he instructs the aspirant who cannot detect the quality of two quotations from Cowper and Ruskin to “try to feel it until he succeeds in doing so” (54). This appreciation for the great is just as necessary for the writer of sensational serials as it is for what Bennett calls, borrowing Edmund de Goncourt’s term, the “écriture artiste” (quoted in Carey 154). In a telling passage, Bennett praises Matthew Arnold, “who got his ideas from the Greeks,” for laying out three principles applicable to every brand of art: the significance of the choice of an interesting subject, the requirement of “accurate construction,” and the fact that style is less important than either of the first two. “The curious thing,” Bennett writes, “is that these three principles are vital not only to good art, but to...popular art. It will be equally to your advantage to conform to them, whether your aim is to produce a rival to Adam Bede or to thrill the readers of a halfpenny paper with a sensational serial” (93).

Elsewhere, Bennett gives the opinion that the sensational serial is “a legitimate form of literary art, and I would advise the cultured aspirant not to pour out his scorn upon it” (120). In his 1865 review of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s novels, Lewes conceded that Braddon was very adept in her own sphere, but argued that her talents could have been put to better use on better material. Bennett has no such scruples. After all, “literary excellence is comparative,” and “what is one woman’s drivel is another’s George Eliot” (124). The rise of the mediocre bestseller lamented by Q.D. Leavis in Fiction and the
Reading Public was, for Bennett, simply a fact, one that the intelligent writer had the right to exploit if he could.

Whether she’s aiming at drivel or at Eliot, it is imperative that the writer take her apprenticeship seriously. It takes effort to learn to write well, and since good work sells better than inferior work, putting in the time and effort at the beginning maximizes your investment. Like so many other critics, Bennett draws comparisons to other fine arts in lamenting the relative lack of training undertaken by most fiction writers:

Literary aspirants…should begin at the beginning, as apprentices to all other arts are compelled to do. The serious student of painting who began his apprenticeship by trying to paint a family group, would be regarded as a lunatic….The student of painting would be instructed to copy drawings, to draw from the antique, to draw from the single model, to accustom himself to the medium of oils, before he made any attempt at a composition in oil-painting (38).

Bennett is “perfectly aware” there are many writers who did not learn to write in this way, but he maintains they should have done so: “There is not a successful inexpert author writing to-day who would not have been more successful—who would not be better esteemed and in receipt of a larger income—if he had taken the trouble to become expert” (38). While James’s favorite metaphor for the novelist was the painter or architect, Bennett figures him as an athlete or an acrobat, training his body and “painfully tumbling in private” (45).

Bennett wants to be the coach for these endeavors, and he’s a demanding one. In fact, he sometimes sounds as if he’s trying his hardest to discourage his readers from ever taking up the pen. He tells us that “novelists enjoy writing novels no more than ploughmen enjoy following the plough” (132), and that “there are moments in the working-day of every novelist when he feels deeply that anything—road-mending,
shopwalking, housebreaking—would be better than this eternal torture of the brain” (133). Like Gissing, Bennett feels that writing is toil and labor, but for him this is not a sign of a lack of capacity but a recommendation. The fact that writing doesn’t seem to come naturally should strike the aspirant as a good sign: “the best proof of a vocation for the novel is that abstention from fictional composition should produce a feeling of uneasiness….A talent never persuades or encourages the owner of it; it drives him with a whip” (133). Not only is he not troubled by the idea of “literature as a trade,” he isn’t at all reluctant to connect it with just those manual activities that were so unpleasant an association for the critics of the *Athenaeum*.

In his periodical writings, Bennett’s basic pronouncements are consistent with those seen in *How to Become an Author*: plot is important; you must maintain the reader’s interest. However, if *How to Become an Author* is the beginner’s manual, the series of essays published as *The Author’s Craft* is the graduate text—more philosophical, less practical and didactic. In an essay titled “The ‘Average Reader’ and the Recipe for Popularity,” he speaks at length about the desire for “the democratisation of art” that underlies the project of *How to Become an Author*. Bennett differentiates between the “minority,” who cares about art and knows something about how it is made, and the “majority,” who doesn’t understand and accuses the minority of “arrogance and affectation.” James, as we have seen, lays this fault squarely at the feet of the majority, but Bennett sees it differently:

If 50,000 people buy a novel whose shortcomings render it tenth-rate, we may be sure that they have not conspired to do so….There must be another explanation of the phenomenon, and when this explanation is discovered some real progress will have been made towards that democratisation of art which it is surely the duty of the minority to undertake, and to undertake in a religious spirit. The missionary
does not make converts by a process of jeers; he minimises the difference between himself and the heathen, assumes a brotherhood, and sympathetically leads forward from one point of view to another (52).

Bennett’s religious language may distract us from the fact that what he is outlining here is at bottom a process of education. He knew that there was a model for tenth-rate work—one woman’s drivel is another woman’s George Eliot—and as long as the market existed, he didn’t dispute a writer’s right to supply it. However, we see here that he did dispute the idea that “another woman” should have to be content with drivel. Bennett is vague about the process by which she might be taught to appreciate something better, but one would imagine that it would have something to do with both writers and publishers—surely members of the minority—supplying a slightly better product, gradually weaning their readers from tenth-rate to ninth-rate literature, and so on.

For publishers, this transition would presumably require a big change—a moral commitment to improving the taste of the majority. For the writer, it involves nothing more onerous than following Bennett’s “recipe for popularity.” If the writer sticks to this recipe—which is two pages long and rather unsystematic—he will please the “great public” without offending the highbrows, “unit[ing] in a mild ecstasy of praise the two extremes—the most inclusive majority and the most exclusive minority” (58). Coming from the pen of almost any other serious writer of the period, the phrase “recipe for popularity” could not have escaped a negative connotation, but for Bennett it is entirely positive, and in his other periodical writings he sees fit to censure writers who do not advance in the direction he has proposed. Among its many other steps, the recipe requires characters “devised to catch both the sympathy and the admiration of the reader” (59), and this was an element that Bennett famously found lacking in the work of
Virginia Woolf. He criticized her ability to create effectively realistic characters in “Is the Novel Decaying?”, and she sniped back at him in her well-known essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.”

Though Woolf’s ideas about technique and attitude toward the previous generation are strongly associated with modernism, the terms in which she criticizes Bennett are old indeed. He and his fellow Edwardians are too concerned with work—with “factories, prisons…law courts,” with “the voice of…effort and industry.” This effort is manifested in their prose, and inextricable from it is their failure to create characters that lift off the page, leading an independent existence in readers’ mind. For Woolf, to create a character is to capture “a will-o’-the-wisp, a dancing light, an illumination gliding up the wall and out of the window” (“Mr. Bennett” 387)—an activity quite removed from factories and law courts. Her effort to render character in this way proves the Georgians to be literary artists, while assigning Bennett to that brotherhood of clumsy workmen represented by Bulwer-Lytton and Besant. It was a familiar reaction, and unsurprising from Woolf, who seems to have been disappointed in Bennett since he failed to live up to the challenge issued in her essay “Neo-Impressionism and Literature,” in which she asked him to recognize the affinities between the modern art he loved and the modern literature he scorned. As the analogy with painting suggests, she concurred with James that fiction was one of the fine arts, and would go even further than he in asserting that the technique behind it was inexplicable even by the most sophisticated of its practitioners, a matter of will-o’-the-wisps vanishing out the window.

In terms of literary history, we know who won this argument. Arnold Bennett is now considered a minor writer, while Woolf is seen as one of the great novelists of the
early twentieth century. In terms of their different approaches to the craft of fiction, things are not as clear. When McGurl asserts that the main concern for twentieth century teachers of fiction has been “how to adapt modernist principles of writing” (x), the accuracy of his statement depends on which modernist principles we are talking about. The belief that fiction is one of the fine arts and that characterization is an important element of technique could perhaps be considered modernist principles (though they have their roots in the nineteenth century). If, however, we are talking about the idea that fiction is a discipline that can be learned to a certain extent by rule, the lessons of the writing program are, if anything, anti-modernist.

The handbooks used in fiction writing classes throughout the twentieth century owe much to the handbooks in the self-help tradition; they are in effect simply highbrow “how-to”s. The writer is led through the construction of a work of fiction piece by piece. Elements of craft are considered separately, and plot is important. Even if the writer might prefer to focus on character, he is instructed that the story must not be forgotten. In E.M. Forster’s words, “Yes—oh, dear, yes—the novel tells a story….That is the highest factor common to all novels, and I wish that it were not so” (26).

This line of descent has been overlooked by critics. The two in-depth studies, by Myers and McGurl, that touch on the craft of fiction as a historical phenomenon both begin with an interest in how creative writing functions within the university. Since most creative writing programs are found in America, the scholars’ focus is exclusively American, a perspective that can lead to some critical elisions. McGurl wants to argue that the novel as written from within the confines of the university is newly preoccupied with aesthetics; therefore, it makes sense for him to connect the method of that novel with
High Modernism. However, as we have seen, the craft of fiction as understood in recent
decades has as much to do with all but forgotten writers like Besant and Bennett as it
does with Woolf or even James. In the next chapter, I will discuss a series of late
nineteenth and early twentieth century works that represented an unlikely marriage
between these disparate perspectives, combining James’s insistence that discussions of
fiction focus on aesthetics rather than money-making with the rather democratic attitude
that craft can be explained to and learned by the willing student.
“You Will Be Surprised to Learn that Fiction Has Become an Art”:
James’s Legacy to the Craft of Fiction

Though in many of the works considered in this dissertation the words “craft” and “art” are used interchangeably, James’s preference for “art” was no arbitrary choice. As I will discuss, he wanted to link fiction with the fine arts, and particularly with visual art, with its long tradition of cultural prestige. However, he also wanted to use the language of aesthetics to elevate fiction above associations with trade and with the sort of practical pedagogy espoused by Besant. Of the works I will examine in this chapter, which follow James in discussing technique with subtlety and complexity, most make a notable return to the language of craftsmanship.

I will begin with pieces by Robert Louis Stevenson and Vernon Lee that have a direct relation to the James of “The Art of Fiction.” Though both of these writers may be seen to respond to James, they also make their own significant contributions to the understanding of the craft of fiction, most notably in Lee’s development of the term point of view. Next I will turn to James’s prefaces, which set out his views on technique with more comprehensiveness than ever before, while continuing to set tight parameters around the field of fiction. The children of a later era—Percy Lubbock’s The Craft of Fiction, Joseph Warren Beach’s The Method of Henry James, and early classics of the writer’s workshop by E.M. Forster and Caroline Gordon—take certain elements from James’s approach, others from the tradition of Bulwer-Lytton, Besant, and Bennett. Describing fiction as a fine art analogous and comparable to music and the visual arts, they also contradict James’s opinions in several particulars, all with the goal of making the lessons they impart more accessible to readers.
I will begin by returning to the era of discussion. Both Stevenson and Lee had been influenced and even inspired by James, and both quietly disagreed with him on the question of whether the art of fiction was comprehensible in its finer points by the lay public. Stevenson’s “A Humble Remonstrance,” appearing in Longman’s in 1884, was a direct response to the essays by Besant and James. As if his purpose wasn’t clear enough from his title, Stevenson announces in the opening paragraphs his intention to quarrel with both writers on several key issues. The first has to do with the phrase “the art of fiction,” which Stevenson suggests should more properly be named the art of fictitious narrative in prose (140). But Stevenson also wants to offer advice to a person he calls “the obtrusive student” (146), and this advice differs significantly from both the practical tips presented by the Besants and Whelpdales of the world and James’s vague “Ah, you must do it as you can!”

If Stevenson leans to one side of the debate, it is clearly to James’s. They were longtime friends, and Stevenson’s opinion of James’s abilities as compared with Besant’s is evident in the first paragraph, where he speaks of “two men certainly of very different calibre…Mr. James the very type of the deliberate artist, Mr. Besant the impersonation of good nature” (139). But, Stevenson argues, the “deliberate artist” is mistaken when he denies the possibility of prescriptive technical standards for the novel. Stevenson is prepared to offer such standards, which are, in contrast to those of his fellow debaters, both specific enough to be useful and comprehensive enough to be broadly applicable:

Let him choose a motive, whether it be of character or passion; carefully construct his plot so that every incident is an illustration of that motive and every property employed shall bear to it a near relation of congruity and contrast; avoid a sub-plot, unless as in Shakespeare, the sub-plot be a reversion or complement of the main intrigue; suffer not his style to flag below the level of the argument; pitch
the key of conversation, not with the thought of how men talk in parlours, but with a single eye to the degree of passion he may be called upon to express; and allow neither himself in the narrative nor any character in the course of the dialogue, to utter one sentence that is not part and parcel of the business of the story or the discussion of the problem involved (147).

“A Humble Remonstrance” is not intended to be a literary handbook, but Stevenson is intent to demonstrate that it is possible to give a young writer good and useful advice. The extent to which he differs from James on this point can be seen in their disparate use of the comparison of writing to visual art. The metaphor would have been familiar to James’s readers, and James elaborates it in his objection to puritanical strictures that would prescribe certain content, and in doing so prohibit the novelist from truly describing the world as he sees it:

It is still expected, though perhaps people are ashamed to say it, that a production which is after all only a “make believe”…shall be in some degree apologetic—shall renounce the pretension of attempting really to compete with life….The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does compete with life. When it ceases to compete as the canvas of a painter competes, it will have arrived at a very strange pass. It is not expected of the picture that it will make itself humble in order to be forgiven; and the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete. Their inspiration is the same, their process (allowing for the different quality of the vehicle) is the same, their success is the same. They may learn from each other, they may explain and sustain each other (504).

More than a hundred years after the founding of the Royal Academy, there could be little doubt that painting was a fine art, and James wished to claim for fiction the same respect and freedom of subject matter accorded to the painter. However, he later admits that the metaphor is not after all complete, because “the painter is able to teach the rudiments of his practice….If there are exact sciences there are also exact arts, and the grammar of painting is so much more definite that it makes the difference” (508).
One wonders what James’s evidence was for his assertion that the grammar of painting is “so much more definite.” Could it not be rather that the “grammar” of fiction had not yet been formulated in a way that was both useful and comprehensible to the student? This point of view finds an unlikely proponent in Hubert Crackanthorpe, who while disparaging the idea that fiction is a skill that can be learned through manual repetition--“the more boots you black, the better you do it”--does argue that art of fiction will one day reach the intelligibility of the art of painting (267). Stevenson does not object specifically to James’s declaration that painting is a more exact art than fiction, but his very different perspective on this issue can be seen in his comparison of their methods of argumentation in these complementary essays. James

spoke of the finished picture and his work when done; I, of the brushes, the palette, and the north light. He uttered his views in the tone and for the ear of good society; I, with the emphasis and technicalities of the obtrusive student. But the point…is not merely to amuse the public, but to offer helpful advice to the young writer (266-7).

We can imagine James protesting that he had no idea of amusing the public, but Stevenson’s point is still well-taken. With his return to the pictorial metaphor, Stevenson subtly responds to James’s belief that there is no way to talk of “the brushes, the palette, and the north light” in fiction, and therefore no substantive way of helping the young writer. Though Stevenson disdains the phrase “the art of fiction,” he is the only one of the three to propose a set of principles that can be compared to the instruction that a painter might give his pupil. If fiction is a fine art as James claims, it may be taught accordingly, and Stevenson advances the discussion of how this teaching might proceed.
We would not want to go too far, however, in extolling Stevenson’s desire to make the art of fiction available to the aspiring writer. Stephen Arata argues that Stevenson’s investment in romance was in part a reaction to a realism he saw as the language of Besant-esque “professionalism,” and that he disdained the move to professionalize as “inseparable from the middle classes, that fatuous rabble that he preferred to jest at rather than join” (196). When compared to James, Stevenson’s vision of the path to literary artistry looks very accessible indeed, but this is not by any stretch of the imagination Besant’s “great army of men and women constantly engaged in writing.” Fiction as fine art, whether accepting pupils or not, is still a phenomenon of the upper classes. Still, the movement to articulate a technical discourse that would resemble the grammar of painting represented a significant step forward in the democratization of the art of fiction.

When Vernon Lee’s “On Literary Construction” was published in the *Contemporary Review*, the author was thirty-nine and already the author of thirteen books, including *Studies of the Eighteenth Century*, begun when she was only thirteen and published when she was twenty-four. Though James believed that she had “no distinct faculty” for fiction (3: 181), he admired her as the author of “two or three very imperfect but very able and interesting books on the Italian Renaissance” (3: 66). As I mentioned in the introduction, Lee’s “On Literary Construction” contains the first usage that I have found of the word “craft” in the modern sense pertaining to fictional technique. Lee opens her essay by stating that, “the craft of the Writer consists, I am convinced, in manipulating the contents of his Reader’s mind, that is to say, taken from the technical side as distinguished from the psychologic, in construction” (404). In a later
essay, she defines craft as “a teachable practice explicable by rational, scientific means” (The Handling of Words 41). This usage of “craft” still retains the sense of artisan production that we saw in mid-century criticism--Lee compares construction to “the physical construction of a building in stone and brick” (Words 43)--but it also refers more explicitly to a set of technical principles.

According to Lee, writing good fiction is a matter of anticipating the reader’s reaction to every turn of the plot, every revelation of character, every word in every sentence, and shaping that reaction--in her word, “manipulating”--in order to produce the desired effect. The writer “must, as it were, drive the Reader to a certain goal along a certain road of his choice; and the Reader is perpetually on the point of stopping, of turning round, or of going off at a wrong turning” (41). The writer must be smarter than the reader, since he has “not only to make his Reader think or feel the right thing, but also to prevent his perpetually thinking or feeling the wrong one” (42). To aid the writer in learning to construct his work carefully, so the reader will follow his intentions without making any wrong turns, Lee offers suggestions as practical as anything out of Besant’s “Art of Fiction,” stating at one point that

I have sometimes recommended to young Writers that they should draw diagrams, or rather maps, of their essays or stories. This is, I think, a very useful practice, not only for diminishing faults of construction in the individual story or essay, but, what is more important, for showing the young Writer what amount of progress he is making, and to what extent he is becoming a craftsman (“On Literary Construction” 407-8).

If the young writer finds that his map is not as neat as he would like it to be, it will mean that he has failed to keep his objectives in mind, and has confused his susceptible reader. By keeping an educated eye to good and bad uses of construction, the writer will teach
himself to avoid mistakes before they happen. In other words, he will, through a process of careful reading, become a better writer than he was before.

In a critique of Besant’s “rules,” James in “The Art of Fiction” protests that “I cannot see what is meant by talking as if there were a part of a novel which is the story and part of it which for mystical reasons is not” (516). In terms of James’s own work, this remark makes a great deal of sense. Though James’s and Howells’s distaste for plot may have been exaggerated by Barrie and critics unfriendly to the New School, James had in fact argued that “it is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look at you in a certain way” (512), and in his novels, so it is. But his statement that one cannot talk about “story” as an element separate from the entirety of the novel also supports his view that it is impossible to talk about what a novel should or should not do. It is, in a sense, just this refusal to consider the elements of fiction as distinct from one another that would make any attempt to establish an art of fiction analogous to the “grammar of painting” an exercise in futility. However, as I will discuss below, James’s friend Percy Lubbock would take James’s own novels as the subject of study in a work that did not hesitate to separate out the elements of fiction and discuss them individually. Lubbock never mentions Lee, but at times she seems to anticipate his arguments, particularly in her focus on point of view.

The term “point of view” is so strongly associated with James and Lubbock that even Richard Stang implies that it is not characteristic of the nineteenth century (107). However, I have found the term in an essay by T.H. Lister on Scott from 1832, in a piece on Richardson by Leslie Stephen from 1878, and most notably in Lee’s “On Literary
supreme constructive question in the novel is exactly analogous to that question in painting; and in describing the choice by the painter of the point of view, I have described also that most subtle choice of the literary craftsman: choice of the point of view whence the personages and action of a novel are to be seen (413).

Not only does Lee elaborate one way in which technique in painting can indeed be compared to technique in fiction, but she also offers a practical and lucid way of considering this rather complex technical question. In turning her attention to the idea of point of view, Lee could not have been influenced by James’s exploration of the “center of consciousness” in the prefaces to the New York Edition, which were published between 1907 and 1909. In fact, it seems more likely that the discussions of point of view in the work of two Jamesian acolytes, Lubbock and Joseph Warren Beach, were actually influenced by Lee.

In “On Literary Construction,” Lee’s careful and detailed attempts to elaborate a set of principles that would be instructive to “the young writer” are an illuminating advancement of the “art” as explicated by Besant, James, and Stevenson. Sutherland and a few other critics go so far as to describe Lee as James’s “apprentice” (152), but by the nineties, when she began to write about the art of fiction, they were no longer speaking.\[14\]

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\[14\] The three works that I have been able to find on the James/Lee relationship—a chapter Sutherland’s *Victorian Fiction*, and essays by Carl J. Weber and Burnett Gardner—all take the position that Lee was James’s apprentice, though the James/Lee letters suggest that James, believing his correspondent to be fundamentally untalented, never gave her any practical advice about writing fiction. Weber is markedly unsympathetic to Lee, censuring her for her “violent attack” on James in “Lady Tal” (675).
The story of their friendship and its dissolution provides an interesting commentary on the aspect of the art that James had vigorously denied--its potential teachability.

According to Burdett Gardner, James and Lee first met in the 1870’s, when James visited the Pagets in Florence. At the beginning, their relationship was quite cordial; in her letters, Lee claims that James “takes the most paternal interest in me as a novelist” (quoted in Weber 673), and describes him as “most sweet and encouraging” (674). James’s own letters are always very complimentary in regard to Lee’s early work on Italian art, and it seems that he enjoyed her company. In reply to a letter in which Lee proposed to dedicate her first novel to him, James’s tone, though characteristically facetious, also expresses a genuine respect for her talents:

I am greatly interested in the coming advent of Miss Brown, and will give her, and the valuable portrait, my most sympathetic attention. But to tell the truth it frightens me a little that you should attach to me the honour of such an invocation….I have been reading your Euphorion and I find it such a prodigious young performance, so full of intellectual power, knowledge, brilliancy, the air of being comme chez vous at the dizziest heights of the Idea--that dedications should come to you not from you. Please hint that you offer me Miss Brown only to encourage me! (3: 50).

But some months later, after Miss Brown had made her appearance, James changed his tune. In December 1884, he writes to Thomas Sergeant Perry that Miss Brown was “violently satirical, but the satire is strangely without delicacy or fineness, and the whole thing without form as art. It is in short a rather deplorable mistake--to be repented of” (3: 65). In January, he communicates his opinion to Grace Norton: Miss Brown is “a disagreeable and really very unpleasant novel dedicated to me, by Vernon Lee….She has not the kind of ability that a novel requires” (3: 66). It was May before James wrote to Lee herself, and though he had told Perry that he would “tell her what I think--at least
part of it,” he clearly hoped that his silence had spoken for him. He damns Miss Brown with faint praise, remarking that he “find[s] the donnée exceedingly in the right direction,” but never even hints that he believes that Lee is incapable of improvement as a fiction writer. On the contrary, he tells her that “I regard Miss Brown as a most interesting and (if the word didn’t sound so patronizing I should say promising) experiment….Write another novel; you owe it to yourself, and to me” (3: 87).

It would appear from this passage that James, on reflection, had changed his mind about Lee’s potential as a fiction writer. However, in 1887 he writes to Edmund Gosse that “as a writer she has gone through all her paces” (3: 181). In 1890, Lee sent James a copy of her story collection Hauntings. He responded with a long letter that said a great deal about Italy and the general question of the supernatural in fiction, but virtually nothing about the stories themselves (3: 277). This genial refusal to discuss technique with those he believed to lack a special facility was typical of James’s interactions with other writers. It is notable, for example, in James’s correspondence with and about Mary Ward, who, unlike Lee, did style herself as his pupil in the art of fiction.

James visited and socialized with the Wards, and was largely complimentary about Mary Ward’s early efforts as a fiction writer. In 1884, he replies to a gift of her first novel with approval: “The whole thing is delicate and distinguished, and the reader has the pleasure and security of feeling that he is with a woman (distinctly with a woman!) who knows how (rare bird!) to write” (3: 59). It is not clear whether it is people in general or women in particular who generally don’t know how to write, but in either case, Ward is the notable exception. In 1899, he writes in regard to her novel Eleanor that, “I find myself supposing completely that you ‘know how you’re doing it,’ and
enjoy, as critic, the sweet peace that comes with that sense” (4: 111). This “know how you’re doing it” comes very close to “Ah, you must do it as you can”--James’s vague but friendly advice to the writer with enough of a natural gift to figure out her own methods. After the publication of the wildly successful Robert Elsmere, which outsold James’s own novels by a large margin (Sutherland 155), James speaks very differently of Ward. To Edith Wharton, he reports that Ward’s new work is so terrible that he can’t even bring himself to read it: “I have had practically to tell her that all power to read her has abandoned me--though I have put it as the power to read any fiction” (4: 375). When William James plan a rendezvous with the Wards during their visit to the States, Henry sniffs that he is not to treat them with any special consideration: “I’m not in any degree ‘beholden’ to them--I regard it as quite the other way round; and she, amiable and culture-crammed woman as she is, is strangely stupid. (Burn and repeat not this--such reverberations…come back to me from the U.S.!)” (4: 381). James does not explain how Ward had changed from a “rare bird” to a “strangely stupid” woman, but it seems likely that the transformation had something to do with the financial success that James coveted and never achieved.

The letter to William was written in 1905, twelve years after James’s falling out with Lee. It seems possible, however, that “reverberations” of the kind that James feared reaching the Wards could, at some point in the late eighties or early nineties, have made it back to Lee herself. In 1893, she published a volume of stories that contained a story titled “Lady Tal.” Though James claimed not to have read it, it didn’t take long for him to find out that one of the characters in “Lady Tal,” a writer named Jervase Marion, was a thinly disguised caricature of himself. Marion has “well-adjusted speech” and a “precise
mind,” but there is “something conventional” about him (7-8); he “secretly despised all English ones [novels], and was for ever covering that exquisite artistic sense, that admirable insincerity of the younger Frenchmen” (32). If this weren’t enough to remind one of James, Marion is described as a “psychological novelist…a cosmopolitan American…an inmate of the world of Henry James and a kind of Henry James, of a lesser magnitude” (11). When William and his family visited Florence, Henry discouraged them from visiting Lee, explaining that,

she has lately, as I am told (in a volume of tales called Vanitas, which I haven’t read), directed a kind of satire of a flagrant and markedly “saucy” kind at me (!!)…[a] particularly impudent and blackguardly sort of thing to do to a friend and one who has treated her with such particular consideration as I have. For God’s sake don’t betray that I have spoken to you of this or betrayed the faintest knowledge of it; I haven’t read these tales and never mean to. They are, moreover, the others, excessively, to my sense, brutal and bad (4: 402).

One wonders whether James, with his repeated denials of having read the story, protests rather too much. If he had read “Lady Tal,” he would have found something even more curious than Lee’s “saucy satire” of himself--an allegory of the master/student relationship that took aim at his position that there was no point in teaching the art of fiction.

Jervase Marion has come to Italy to rest between novels, and on this trip he particularly wishes to avoid aspiring novelists: he “had always fled from manuscripts as from the plague” (35). Much to his dismay, he finds himself striking up a sort of friendship with Lady Tal, a British expatriate who, quite surprisingly, wants to learn to write. Marion reluctantly agrees to look over her novel, which is terrible. He hopes to discourage her through condescension, but Lady Tal refuses to honor his desire for
solitude. She insists that Marion “show me when I have gone wrong” (48), and he agrees to do so. He decides to make a character study of Lady Tal, and their long days poring over the manuscript become to him so much research. Lady Tal, however, genuinely wants to learn what he has to teach:

Lady Tal had become so…enthusiastic for the novelist’s art as revealed by Marion, that her perpetual intrusion upon his leisure was that merely of an ardent if somewhat inconsiderate disciple. In the eyes of this young lady, development of character, foreshortening of narrative, construction, syntax, nay, even grammar and punctuation, had become inexhaustible subjects of meditation and discussion (53).

Though Marion firmly believes that Lady Tal will never be a successful novelist, he continues to work with her, making notes and persuading her to revise. As the last scene reveals, he has fallen in love with her, and, more implausibly still, she has fallen in love with him. Marion, so shy of intimacy in every context, is more willing to permit a romantic relationship with this young woman writer than to take her seriously as a student of the craft. Instead of an apprenticeship, Lady Tal is left with a “literary flirtation.”

James and his circle seem to have recognized the similarities between James and Marion at a glance, but remained quiet on the subject of the equally obvious resemblances between Lady Tal and Vernon Lee. Both are British women living in Italy; both have paralyzed brothers to whom they are devoted. Lady Tal promises to dedicate her novel to Marion, just as Lee had dedicated Miss Brown to James. The story is not a caricature so much as a double portrait of Lee as the blundering novice, James as the consummate but cold professional. But why would Lee want to satirize James in this way? Was she the “tiger-cat” that James described to William, become “impudent” and
“blackguardedly” for no reason at all? Was it, as Gardner suggests, that Lee felt that she herself had been satirized, used as the model for the character of Christina Light in *Roderick Hudson*? Sutherland argues that though James disliked *Miss Brown*, he cannibalized its story of a young actress “taken up by a bored artist and poet” in his novel *The Tragic Muse* (155); perhaps Lee was angry with him for that reason. Either of these explanations would be consistent with the portrayal of Marion, who before his change of heart is eager to exploit Lady Tal for his own fictions.

However, the dynamics of their tutorial leads one to wonder whether Lee might have learned that James, in spite of his compliments, believed that she had no future as a fiction writer. Surely she noticed that his letters commenting on her works were slow to arrive, and markedly lacking in enthusiasm. “Lady Tal” was undoubtedly a satire, and a cruel one, but it was also an indictment of an apprenticeship system far more unequal than the one existing between Gaskell and Dickens or Braddon and Bulwer-Lytton. While seeming to take her under his wing, Marion ensures that Lady Tal can never learn what he knows, can never become an artist in her own right; she must do it as she can, and how she can will never be good enough for him.

Though James was fond of being addressed as the beloved “cher Maître” by his fellow novelists, his feelings on the master/student relationship were probably not very different from the attitude of Jervase Marion’s in Lee’s “Lady Tal.” Marion feels that his talent separates him irrevocably from his pupil, and that the idea of being asked to transmit his knowledge across that gulf is a folly, even an insult. James’s own stories of the master/student relationship, most written in the ten years prior to the prefaces, are so focused on the genius of the master that the student sinks in the background, sometimes
choosing a kind of self-effacement in tribute to the master’s preeminence. I will discuss
two of these, “The Death of the Lion” and “The Figure in the Carpet,” in which the
student’s attempts to understand the master turn the stories into parables about the
failures of critical interpretation. James’s two masters of the art of fiction, Neil Paraday
and Hugh Vereker, are celebrated by an uninformed public that can’t discern their true
merits, and indeed this failure of misunderstanding is fatal for one of the two.

In “The Death of the Lion,” James addresses the limits of public appreciation for
artistic genius, but the publication of the story seems to have been one of the more
pleasant experiences of his long career. In the preface to the volume containing this and
other stories, James records how Henry Harland, editor of Yellow Book, encouraged him
to write for the first number. James explains his delight in the realization that Harland
was not going to give him any restrictions, not even a word count:

For any idea that I might wish to express I might have space…elegantly to
express it….One had so often known this product [the short story] to struggle, in
one’s hands, under the rude prescription of brevity at any cost…that my friend’s
emphasised indifference to the arbitrary limit of length struck me…as the fruit of
the highest artistic intelligence (The Art of the Novel 219).

In other words, Harland is able to see the act of writing the way James himself sees it, as
a mysterious process that cannot be confined by prescription, not even the usual editorial
concerns about space and sales. Ironically, this “artistic intelligence” is exactly what Neil
Paraday’s critics are unable to offer him. In the opening of the story, he is proclaimed a
genius in the periodical press, and a journalist—perhaps a figure for Edmund Yates, who
profiled Mary Elizabeth Braddon and others in his Celebrities at Home—seeks Paraday
out for an interview. The journalist tells Paraday and the narrator, “A great interest is
naturally felt in Mr. Paraday’s surroundings” (*Complete Stories* 364). The public wants to know about “his study, his literary sanctum, the little things he has about” (367), and also “would greatly appreciate any expression of his views on the subject of the art he so brilliantly practises” (365).

The narrator is also a journalist, but has given up his work to become a sort of professional fan of Neil Paraday. Unlike the would-be interviewer, the narrator understands that the only way to approach Paraday’s genius is by studying his work, and the only way to honor that genius is to leave him alone to get on with it. The narrator convinces a pretty American girl who admires Paraday and would like to meet him that the best thing she can do for him is to go away: “do you want to know…how to perform an act of homage really sublime?...Succeed in never seeing him at all!” (376). Paraday tells the narrator that all he wants is to be left alone (370), but he isn’t good at saying no to enthusiasts, and he allows a flighty hostess named Mrs. Wimbush to conscript him for the constant parties at her country house. Mrs. Wimbush couldn’t care less about Paraday’s work; she and her friends see an author as “a creature of almost heraldic oddity” (371), but she thinks that having a famous figure around gives her a certain cachet. When Paraday gives her his novel in progress to her to read, she passes it on to a friend who passes it on to Lord Dorimont, who leaves it on a train. Paraday dies, and the narrator laments the lost manuscript, assuring the reader that “if such pages had appeared in his lifetime, the Abbey would hold him today” (391).

Paraday is, as James felt himself to be, misunderstood and underappreciated, and Hugh Vereker, in “The Figure of the Carpet,” bears key similarities to Paraday. Vereker functions as a sort of pet celebrity for his socialite hostess, Lady Jane; like Mrs.
Wimbush, she proclaims her love for the author’s work despite the fact that she’s never read it. However, while Paraday is a weak figure who can’t say no to journalists or tear himself away from his hostess, Vereker knows that no one reads him properly and seems to find it amusing. After the narrator, again a journalist and book critic, publishes what he thinks is a penetrating piece on Vereker’s oeuvre, he overhears Vereker comment that “it’s the usual twaddle” (576). Seeing that he’s hurt the narrator’s feelings, an apologetic Vereker follows the narrator into his room to explain to him that he meant no offense. It’s not simply that the narrator misunderstood him; it’s that everyone misunderstands him, and sometimes he can’t help but resent it.

As critics have commented, this scene has an erotic connotation unusual in James’s work. The characters are in a bedroom; Vereker touches the narrator several times, and the narrator responds with blushes. However, the tension is overtly literary, sexual only by implication. Vereker tells the narrator that his books contain a “little trick” that is both the content of the text and his motivation for writing, and encompasses style, form, and substance. The narrator asks questions, but Vereker replies with disappointment and evasion, and the narrator recognizes that “my questions…[are] crude and my distinctions pitiful” (581); his failure to understand Vereker is the sign of his participation in “the bottomless vulgarity of the age” (595).

The narrator tells his friend Corvick about Vereker’s “little trick,” and Corvick and his fiancée Gwendolen, also a writer, become obsessed with its discovery. Here the sexual connotations of the search becomes more evident, as Corvick and Gwendolen “take him [Vereker] page by page…inhale him in slow draughts and let him sink deep in” (587). Corvick, posted to India, finally determines the secret, and when he and
Gwendolen are married, the narrator speculates that she may have married him in order that he may communicate his discovery to her: “For what else but that ceremony had the previous ceremony been enacted?” (599). Gwendolen is duly initiated, and when Corvick dies on their honeymoon, the narrator contemplates becoming her second husband. Like the narrator of “The Aspern Papers,” he is willing to consider marriage, which seems not to appeal to him otherwise, in order to secure a literary treasure. Vereker’s secret has become his entire life, as it has for Gwendolen as well: “The stake on the table was of a different substance, and our roulette was the revolving mind, but we sat round the green board as intently as the grim gamblers at Monte Carlo” (591).

The reader, like the narrator, is never let in on the little trick, but we have been taught to value it properly. To the truly discerning, Vereker is the greatest writer of the age, and his secret is “all gold and gems…one of the most wonderful flowers of art” (595). One would think the Anglophone world would be in an uproar, but aside from the narrator and his two friends, no one even realizes that Vereker’s artistic depths haven’t been plumbed. James certainly knew that the case was an extreme one—in the preface, he names certain elements of the story “ironic or fantastic” (228)—but it is equally evident that he also worried about being misread, like Vereker, by an uncaring and somewhat dim-witted public. In the preface to the same volume, he speaks of the story “The Coxon Fund” as “such a complicated thing that…some pursued question of how the trick was played would probably not be thankless” (The Art of the Novel 231). Elsewhere, in his remarks on The Awkward Age, he laments the failure to see the plan by which he arranged the various characters’ points of view: “I was to fail to make out in the event that the book succeeded in producing the impression of any plan on any person.
No hint of that sort of success, or of any critical perception at all in relation to the business, has ever come my way (108). When James imagines the master/student relation, as he does in the two stories discussed above, he envisions neither an interchange of ideas nor a one-sided dispensation of wisdom, but a corrective to the incapacity of the general run of readers. He imagines a student who dedicates his life to a proper appreciation of the master.

Leon Edel tells us that in preparing his complete work to be printed as the New York Edition, James “seems to have had an image of himself as the ‘American Balzac’” (324). The edition was the monument by which he would be known to history, and he intended that he should be known as the great and representative novelist of his time. However, in writing the prefaces to the novels and tales he made a decision that was, in a sense, yet more ambitious: he would explain to his readers exactly what he had done and why he had done it. James and his biographer Edel make it clear that his intent was to provide a guide to the understanding of his work—to justify himself, as his fictional authors refused to do, to an inattentive public. The prefaces were, in James’s words, “the history of the growth of one’s imagination” (47).

James wrote eighteen of these prefaces, one for each of the volumes of the New York Edition. He indicates more than once that he hopes to educate his readers into a proper appreciation of his art—to save himself from the fate of Neil Paraday and Hugh Vereker—and I’ll discuss below the particular technical points that he tried to put before the public. However, a few significant larger themes emerge out of the prefaces, addressing James’s larger concerns about the role of the writer in society.
First, James uses the prefaces to reinforce the conception of the professional writer introduced in essays like “The Art of Fiction.” We saw in the introduction how writers like Lewes employed homely metaphors of building and workmanship to represent the writer as an artisan, learning his trade and pursuing it in a practical spirit. These metaphors will be taken up again in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including by Jamesian disciples like Percy Lubbock, but James, clearly aware of the trope, gives it a new twist. Discussing the construction of *The Portrait of a Lady*, he remarks that he meant it to be

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\text{a structure reared with an “architectural” competence… I would leave no pretext for saying that anything is out of line, scale or perspective. I would build large—in fine embossed vaults and painted arches…and yet never let it appear that the chequered pavement, the ground under the reader’s feet, fails to stretch at every point to the base of the walls (52).}
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Not a lowly workman, James is the architect who conceives and executes his plan on a grand scale, constructing a cathedral-like edifice. He is also the illusionist, employing a Vereker-like trick to keep the reader from noticing that the ground under his feet is not quite solid. In the previous chapter, I discussed James’s ambivalent attitude toward Besant’s brand of professionalism, which threatened to associate the writer with “the grocer & the shoemaker.” In the prefaces, he evokes a “professional thoroughness” while making it clear that this writer is no common laborer.

As in “The Art of Fiction,” James’s conception of the professional writer is distinct from other professionals in other fields partly because he does not have learn to his trade in the familiar way, through training and hard work. James reminds us often that he does not have to follow the Besant method—taking notes, developing
observational skills—to find material for fiction. In the preface The Princess Cassamassima, he explains that he didn’t need to do research to write about a society of anarchists; all he had to do was walk around the parts of London that his character would frequent:

I recall pulling no wires, knocking at no closed doors, applying for no “authentic” information; but I recall also on the other hand the practice of never missing an opportunity to add a drop, however small, to the bucket of my impressions….To haunt the great city and by this habit to penetrate it, imaginatively, in as many places as possible—that was to be informed (77).

This ability to invent without effort is essential not only to James, but to all writers. If you don’t have it, you simply don’t have what it takes, and you won’t be able to recognize a great subject even if it drops in your lap: “if you haven’t, for fiction, the root of the matter in you, haven’t the sense of life and the penetrating imagination, you are a fool in the very presence of the revealed and assured” (78).

Secondly, James takes advantage of this opportunity to air his grievances with the publishing industry. In The Method of Henry James, Beach tells us that James accommodated himself cheerfully to the demands of serial publication, even “rejoic[ing] in it as an opportunity for the exhibition of one’s finest skill” (34). However, James’s praise of Henry Harland in his remarks on “The Death of the Lion” suggests, on the contrary, that he could only trust the “artistic intelligence” of an editor who agreed not to set any limits at all. Again and again, James returns to his dislike for the exigencies of the word count, complaining that editors’ insistence that stories fall between six to eight thousand words has prevented the nouvelle, a successful and widely-used form in other languages, from flourishing in English. In his account of the writing of “The Middle
Years,” James compares himself to “a warden of the insane engaged in a critical moment in making fast an inmate’s straitjacket” (232). In this he presents a marked contrast to Trollope of the Autobiography, who found the limitations imposed by publication so salutary that he kept himself to a word count even when he didn’t have to. Only in his remarks on The Ambassadors does James change his tune, speaking of his intent to “exploit and enjoy these often rather rude jolts” of the serial breaks (317). Certainly, though, this is a qualified and somewhat ironic enjoyment. Constraints imposed from without, James tells us, can “operate as a tax on ingenuity—that ingenuity of the expert craftsman which likes to be taxed very much to the same tune to which a well-bred horse likes to be saddled” (295).

If editors and publishers thought of James as a well-bred horse, he could hope for suitable approbation from only one quarter: his readers. As I have mentioned, his most obvious and significant intention in the prefaces is to cultivate a judicious appreciation of his own work. James felt that his fiction marked a departure from previous methods, and he makes the most of his opportunities to take aim at the novels of the past, perhaps most famously in the passage on “large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary” (84). In his insistence on “economy” over looseness of construction, James sounds undeniably Flaubertian. He has a “preference for…the ‘neat’ evocation…with fewest attendant vaguenesses and cheapnesses, fewest loose ends dangling” (256), and repudiates again “the baseness of the arbitrary stroke” (89). Above all, James dislikes what he calls “the mere muffled majesty of irresponsible ‘authorship’” (328), which seems to mean using an omniscient narrator rather than limiting oneself to a single “center of consciousness.” An omniscient narrator reserves the right to intrude in
and comment on the action, and as I mentioned in the introduction, this unnecessary and inartistic practice bears the name of Trollope. In interrupting the action to remind the reader that he is writing fiction, Trollope’s “irresponsible ‘authorship’” becomes “a terrible crime” (“The Art of Fiction” 289). In forswearing the omniscient narrator altogether, James cements his opposition to this technique and to all the arbitrariness and baseness of the Victorian novel.

As Joseph Warren Beach notes, James’s attempt to explain himself in the prefaces was unprecedented: “No writer of fiction, no literary artist in any genre, has ever told us so distinctly, and at such length, what he was trying to do” (2). This tutorial embraced the large-scale issues of professionalism and authorship that I have noted above, but they also, more narrowly, focused on questions of technique. James believed that the key to reading him correctly was to comprehend his use of technique, and this necessitated a partial initiation into his writing practice. I will identify three of the technical concerns that James discussed at most length: selection, scene, and center of consciousness, or what later critics, following Lee, would call “point of view.”

The question of selection is allied to what James names “economy.” The artist creates out of the “splendid waste” of life (The Art of the Novel 120), and he has to know what to put in and what to leave out. He has to know how to choose and arrange the elements of his story without being either wasteful or “arbitrary.” In discussing selection, James frequently returns to the metaphor of visual art: “relations” between people are what makes art interesting, but they are regrettably “difficult to isolate, to surround with the sharp black line, to frame in the square…that helps any arrangement of objects to become a picture” (101). Selection and economy are important because they enable the
artist to create a harmonious whole, with the significant objects subordinated to the less
significant (136). Though James rejects the narrative strategies of earlier British
novelists, his “harmony” of parts sounds very like the “unity” promoted by critics like
Leslie Stephen, and identified by Richard Stang as one of the central technical
preoccupations of Victorian criticism (111).

In his analysis of the scene, James may have been both more groundbreaking and
more influential. In the preface to *What Maisie Knows*, James praises the novel as a
“little constituted dram[a], [a] little exhibitio[n] founded on the logic of the ‘scene’”
(157). The “scene,” as the borrowing of the term from drama indicates, should be
dramatic and “as definite…as the hammer on the gong of the clock…expressing all that
is in the hour” (323). James explains that the “intervals” between scenes are intended to
be “all preparative” as the scenes themselves are “illustrative”; the two structural
elements alternate, one “taking up the theme from the other very much as the fiddles, in
an orchestra, may take it up from the cornets and flutes” (158). He does not have a name
here for the interval between scenes, but elsewhere he will name it the “picture,” a word
that Percy Lubbock will borrow for his more sustained analysis of “the pictorial and the
dramatic” in *The Craft of Fiction*.

The terms are new to criticism, and James’s description of the scene is something
that we cannot find in earlier ruminations on craft by the likes of Bulwer-Lytton or
Besant. Though James protests, in “The Art of Fiction,” that he “cannot imagine
composition existing in a series of blocks” (296), the worth of his technical
pronouncements in the prefaces consists precisely in the fact that he *does* consider
composition as blocks—some of those blocks being scenes, others the “pictures” between

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them. This distinction would, through Lubbock, become familiar to students of twentieth-century books on craft, but James’s idea of the scene does more than simply allow for a new understanding of the structure of fictional narrative. It also paves the way to James’s most influential contribution to the craft of fiction: his analysis of the center of consciousness, or point of view.

With no thought of writing a guide that would be of use to the aspiring writer, James had no particular obligation to define his terms, and at times the reader of the prefaces is forced to guess at the meaning of the technical vocabulary he has invented to explain his practice. A case in point is his discussion of the “discriminated occasion.” The discriminated occasion seems to be the raw idea of an event or series of events that the writer has decided to include in his narrative. For it to have the desired effect, James tells us, the reader has to have direct access to the person who is experiencing it:

There is no economy of treatment without…a related point of view….In this truth resides the secret of the discriminated occasion—that aspect of the subject which we have our noted choice of treating either as picture or scenically, but which is apt, I think, to show its fullest worth in the Scene (300).

If a discriminated occasion must be seen through the eyes of a single individual to reach its potential, we may infer that the drama of the scene is not the familiar Braddonian drama of “novels of incident,” but rather an interior drama. James’s remarks in the preface to *Roderick Hudson* support this interpretation:

The centre of interest throughout “Roderick” is in Rowland Mallet’s consciousness, and the drama is the very drama of that consciousness—which I had of course to make sufficiently acute in order to enable it, like a set and a lighted scene, to hold the play….The beauty of the constructional game was to preserve in everything its especial value for *him* (16).
Although James is not the first to note that establishing a character’s point of view was an important part of construction, he does insist on its importance with an unusual emphasis. However, while breaking new ground in this area, James also reinforces old distinctions. Locating the drama of a narrative in the center of consciousness hearkens back to the character/incident dichotomy that I examined in Chapter Two, in which character is always given precedence over the potentially sensationalistic drama of incident. In “The Art of Fiction,” James states that “it is an incident for a woman to stand with her hand on a table and look at you in a certain way” (512), but here he goes beyond the earlier argument, denying the necessity of incident in any form. The scene in *The Portrait of a Lady* where Isabel Archer broods in front of the fire “throws the action further forward than twenty ‘incidents’ might have done” (*The Art of the Novel* 57).

When it comes to a definition of character, James seems to be firmly in line with critics like Roscoe and Stephens, who gave the opinion that characters are not made or constructed but born. In the preface to *The American*, James describes the process of creating a character as a mystical, almost an erotic process: “a beautiful infatuation this, always, I think, the intensity of the creative effort to get into the skin of the creature; the act of personal possession of one being by another at its completest” (37). James credits Turgenev with reinforcing his natural inclination to see characters as independent beings.

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15 Percy Lubbock does suggest that James’s interest in the problem of how to show “a mind in action” is shared by a much earlier novelist, Samuel Richardson. However, James differs from Richardson in the critical intelligence and technical expertise that he brings to bear on the issue. Though the two writers are “both faced by the same difficulty…one of them is acutely aware of it, and takes very deep-laid precautions to circumvent it; the other, I suppose, does not trouble about the theory of the procedure” (152). With less judgment, E.M. Forster draws a similar parallel between James’s and Richardson’s depiction of mental agitation in *Aspects of the Novel* (15).
“subject to the chances, the complications of existence,” and needing only “the right relations, those that would most bring them out” (43). This way of thinking about character is a constitutive part of James’s genius, and he describes recognizing his inability to foreground incident early in his career: “I might envy, though I could not emulate, the imaginative writer so constituted as to see his fable first and to make out its agents afterwards” (44). This passage, with its representation of an unusually hesitant and uncertain young James, is reminiscent of the fan letter to Braddon in which James records his surprising youthful passion for her sensationalist novels of incident. The question is raised whether the importance accorded to character and the center of consciousness in James’s essays was the result of a reasoned decision about the best way to write a novel, or the idiosyncratic solution of a writer who found that his talents lay in one direction rather than another.

Whether James’s methods had their roots in principle or in insecurity about his own limitations, it is certain that they are used to support distinctions not only between elements of craft, but between different kinds of people. Again and again in the prefaces, he tells us that “we”—presumably the writer and the reader—are most affected by those characters whose center of consciousness is a sensitive instrument:

The figures in any picture, the agents in any drama, are interesting only in proportion as they feel their respective situations….But there are degrees of feeling—the muffled, the faint, the just sufficient, the barely intelligent…and the acute, the intense, the complete, in a word—the power to be finely aware and richly responsible. It is those moved in this latter fashion who “get most” out of all that happens to them and who in so doing enable us, as readers of their record…also to get most….We care, our curiosity and sympathy care, comparatively little for what happens to the stupid, the coarse and the blind; care for it, and for the effects of it, at the most as helping to precipitate what happens to the more deeply wondering, to the really sentient (62).
The class implications are unmistakable, and are underlined by the comment, in the preface to *The Princess Cassamassima*, that the “meaner conditions, the lower manners and types, the general sordid struggle…the ignorance, the misery and the vice” that form the background of Hyacinth Robinson’s conversion to anarchism are unimportant in themselves (62), and only worth noting in the effect they have on the “finely aware and richly responsible” center of consciousness.\(^\text{16}\)

Less obviously, the analysis of the center of consciousness also establishes a precedence of genders. In the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, James writes of his audacity in deciding to make Isabel Archer his central character. In Shakespeare, he explains, a character like Portia “matters to Antonio, and to Shylock, and to the Prince of Morocco,” but Shakespeare never asks her to carry the weight of being the audience’s sole interest. Even George Eliot, whose passage on the “frail vessels” of human affection James quotes here, never asks her “Hettys and Maggies and Rosamonds and Gwendolens” to be the center of the narrative. These characters “have their inadequacy eked out with comic relief and underplots” (49-50). James, on the other hand, will invest the entirety novel in Isabel Archer, braving the “deep difficulty” of making her consistently interesting to the reader (50). By insisting on the boldness of asking a reader

\(^{16}\) While James argues that only a character with a certain gentility of soul can make a good center of consciousness, he frequently figures secondary characters as domestic help. In the preface to *The Princess Cassamassima*, he states that “my sense of a really expressed character is that it shall have originally so tasted of the ordeal of service as to feel no disposition to yield again to the strain”; in his remarks on *The Portrait of a Lady*, he says the characters appeared to him “like the group of attendants and entertainers who come down by train when people in the country give a party” (53). These remarks underline the preoccupation with class that underlies James’s criticism as well as his fiction, and reminds us that the characters with the intelligence and capacity for response to claim an independent existence are a rarity, even in his fiction.
to care about a young woman’s consciousness, James argues implicitly that the default center of consciousness is male, and that he must apologize for—while also celebrating—his decision to go against the grain.

James’s insistence on the preeminence of the center of consciousness, his disingenuous attribution of mental superiority to a class-dependent sensibility, and his condescending comments about the inner life of young women would be troubling in a handbook, but he was not writing a handbook. He never intended the prefaces to be published together, and probably would not have been thrilled with Richard Blackmur’s decision to name the 1934 edition *The Art of the Novel*. The prefaces read very differently as a descriptive account of one man’s experience than as a prescriptive take on how fiction should be written. Ironically, a metaphor from the prefaces inspired the title of one of the first fiction anthologies to be used in university writing programs—*The House of Fiction*, written by Caroline Gordon and James Tate and published in 1950. This apparent coincidence of aims between James and the twentieth century American writing program may be one reason why McGurl assumes that James would have been in sympathy with modern teachers of creative writing. A closer look at the way the phrase “the house of fiction” is used in the prefaces will suggest otherwise.

“The house of fiction,” James writes, “has in short not one window, but a million; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will.” At each of these windows stands a writer. “He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white….And so on” (46). Presumably each of these inhabitants could, like James, write an account of
their practice if they chose to do so, describing the singular view from their particular room. Gordon and Tate, on the other hand, are interested not in writers as individuals but in the “certain ‘constants’ or secrets of technique which…appear in the works of all the masters of the craft…[and] which have been handed down from master to master throughout the ages.” They are less interested in the fact that the house of fiction has many windows than in the fact that it has many rooms, allowing students to explore “the basic techniques in systematic fashion” (ix). Though Gordon was a devout Jamesian, here she spins the Master’s words for her own ends, adapting them to a purpose it is unlikely he would have approved.

It is easy to imagine James turning up his nose at Gordon and Tate’s “basic techniques in systematic fashion,” but possibly he might have looked more kindly on two earlier books that made use of the prefaces, Beach’s *The Method of Henry James* (1918) and Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction* (1921). Both Beach and Lubbock were earnest admirers of James, and both seemed to feel the need to translate the prefaces into a language that would be more readable to non-scholars. As Beach expresses it in his introduction,

> deeply interesting as they are, few but professional students would have the hardihood and pertinacity to make their way through these explanatory reviews….It remains for the student to collect and set in order these scattered considerations, to view them in connection with the stories themselves, and, from the whole, to put together some connected account of the aims and method of our author (2).

These “professional students” of James, setting out to complete the Master’s project of explaining himself to the public, ended in establishing a vocabulary of technique that made his idiosyncratic practice newly accessible to aspiring writers.
Lubbock’s book is probably the better known among writers, perhaps due to a title that seems to announce its subject as technique in general rather than James’s technique in particular. Lubbock frequently laments the “long indifference to…questions of theory,” which leaves “a reader of novels…amazed by the chaos in which the art is still pursued” (197). There is no “received nomenclature” for critics to refer to (22), “no connected argument, no definition of terms, no formulation of claims, not so much as any ground really cleared and prepared for discussion” (272). Lubbock aims to reform this perpetual casualness, and James is the “begetter of all our studies….Others…had opened the way but the novel in its wayward exuberance had hardly been held to any serious account of its practice till it was called to confront the most magisterial of its makers” (viii). In “The Art of Fiction,” James expresses his regret that “the English novel was not what the French call discutable” (502); Lubbock and Beach give James the credit for beginning that discussion that he was unwilling to claim for himself.

In terms of method, both Lubbock and Beach follow the principles laid out in the prefaces, though in a considerably more lucid and organized manner. Predictably, Lubbock argues that the novel has experienced a progressive movement from a focus on plot to a focus on character, and he echoes James in his view that the essence of characterization lies in an exploration of the center of consciousness—or, to use Lubbock and Beach’s term, “point of view.” More explicit than James himself, Lubbock states that “the whole intricate method, in the craft of fiction, I take to be governed by the question of point of view—the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story” (251).
In his discussion of structure, though Lubbock mentions James’s distinction between “drama” and “picture,” he also introduces a pair of terms that will wear considerably better. In a passage on Madame Bovary, Lubbock remarks that, “I speak of his [Flaubert’s] ‘telling’ the story, but of course he has no idea of doing that and no more; the art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as matter to be shown, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself” (62). “Showing” a story is allied with James’s “scenic” or “dramatic” method, and James is the exemplary scenic novelist. In Beach’s words, Thackeray, or Balzac…are always telling the reader what happened instead of showing them the scene, telling them what to think of the characters rather than letting the reader judge for himself or letting the characters do the telling about one another. I like to distinguish between novelists that tell and those that show; and when I say that James was a dramatic story-teller, I mean that he was one of those that show through scenes….I find the essence of the dramatic, in fiction, in the confinement of the story, like a stage-play, to the “here and now,” that is to the particular place and time in which the dialogue is occurring or the characters’ ruminations are being carried on (lxxx).

Though James does at one point in the prefaces argue that novels need both scenes and the intervals between them, Lubbock and Beach are drawing on the distaste expressed in the preface to The Ambassadors for “the seated mass of explanation after the fact, the inserted block of merely referential narrative” (321). At its most refined, this preference for scene leads to the conversations in James’s late novels in which the characters discuss at great length everything the reader might possibly need to know. While these scenes

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17 The chronology here is rather confusing. Though The Method of Henry James was published three years before The Craft of Fiction, the remarks quoted here are found in Beach’s Introduction, included in a 1954 reissue of The Method. Since the distinction between “showing” and “telling” does not occur in the 1918 edition, we can assume that Beach was influenced by Lubbock’s terminology.
may not be “dramatic” in the familiar use of the term, Beach recognizes that James’s method contains the potential for drama by keeping the reader in a “particular place and time.”

As Beach’s reference to Thackeray and Balzac indicate, the emphasis is on “showing” as a mark of James’s technical advantage over the novelists of the past. For these critics, James is a *sui generis* scholar of the novel while earlier novelists are simply concerned with telling a story, “taken up to such an extent with their material and their attitude towards it, as to have comparatively little attention left for the niceties of the art in the disposition of it” (Beach 1). This is a familiar argument, expressed in Howells’ essay and parodied in Barrie’s “Brought Back from Elysium,” and both Lubbock and Beach use it freely. Like Howells and James, they scorn the practice of an omniscient implied author commenting on the action. In connection with this offense, Beach mentions everyone from Fielding to Eliot and Meredith, and Lubbock at times makes these novelists sound almost Homeric in their lack of awareness of the technical advantage of choosing a point of view, speaking of “the old, immemorial, unguarded, unsuspicious way of telling a story, where the author…imposes no limitation upon his freedom to tell what he pleases and to regard his matter from a point of view that is solely his own” (263). The worst villain in this regard, however, is not James’s bogeyman Trollope but Thackeray. “Among the great,” he is the only writer who seems to find a positively willful pleasure in damaging his own story by open maltreatment of this kind; there are times when Thackeray will even boast of his own independence, insisting…on his own freedom to say what he pleases about his men and women and to make them behave as he will (88).
One can hear Lubbock’s frustration with Thackeray’s habit of referring to his characters as “puppets,” when to Lubbock they are “men and women.” James’s insistence on the scene, though a technical advance in its own right, is also valuable for precluding this kind of treatment.

Though Lubbock and Beach draw heavily on James’s conceptual framework as discussed in the prefaces, each differs from him in significant ways. Beach is unapologetic about separating out the elements of fiction, giving his chapters titles including “Picture,” “Point of View,” and “Dialogue.” Neither takes the time to deplore the concept of literature as a trade, indicating either that talking about money doesn’t interest them or that they are reconciled to the idea that both novels and guides to the writing of novels are subject to capitalist exchange. Most significantly, while telling us the terms “craft” and “art” are really “one and the same…with no real working distinction to be drawn between them” (v), Lubbock announces in the title his own preference for “craft.” In discussing why readers and writers need to understand technique, he turns to the old metaphor of the craftsman, which sounds very different here than James’s vision of an architect building cathedrals:

Nobody can work in material of which the properties are unfamiliar, and a reader who tries to get possession of a book with nothing but his appreciation of the life and the ideas and the story in it is like a man who builds a wall without knowing the capacities of wood and clay and stone. Many different substances, as distinct to the practised eye as stone and wood, go to the making of a novel, and it is necessary to see them for what they are (20).

Here both writer and reader are builders in stone and wood, each complicit in the project of constructing the wall. Lubbock underscores in his own preface that learning the craft of fiction is “homely” work that “holds you fast to the matter in hand, to the thing that
has been made and the manner of its making” (v). James certainly would have agreed, but after his attempts to establish “the manner of its making” as an exalted pursuit, he probably would not have cared for Lubbock’s return to the humble language of craftsmanship.

Though Lubbock and Beach may not be orthodox Jamesians in every respect, James is still their “only begetter,” the reason for their studies and the example that endorses their conclusions. Now that writers like James are composing more complex novels, Lubbock argues that we must train ourselves to be the “cunning,” technically informed reader that James wishes for in the prefaces (253). Lubbock hopes that future readers and critics will follow his example in *The Craft of Fiction* in analyzing the technical properties of the novel:

> I can imagine that by examining and comparing in detail the workmanship of many novels by many hands a critic might arrive at a number of inductions in regard to the relative properties of the scene, the incident dramatized, the incident pictured, the panoramic impression and the rest; there is scope for a large enquiry, the results of which are greatly needed by a critic of fiction, not to speak of the writers of it (267).

This passage is significant for two reasons. First, it envisions a vibrant discourse on fictional discourse, one that would in fact begin to take shape in the decades after the publication of *The Craft of Fiction*. Second, it suggests that craft is indeed teachable. In the last phrase, indicating that analysis of technique is useful to writers as well as readers, this most devoted of the Master’s students gives an entirely different face to his project in codifying and explicating the prefaces.

As McGurl deftly demonstrates, in the decades after the publication of the works by Lubbock and Beach, most of the teaching of craft took place in the context of the
university. However, with his focus on institutionalization in the United States, he never mentions what is surely a seminal moment in the incorporation of the craft of fiction into an academic setting: E.M. Forster’s Clark lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, later collected as *Aspects of the Novel*. Forster’s essays, revealing their parentage in their combination of the aesthetic approach to craft with a practical attitude about the possibility of its transmission, also begins to suggest a reason why the development of a technical conversation before James has been so overlooked.

After the near-exclusive focus on James in the works by Lubbock and Beach, Forster’s catholicity of reference and freedom from conventional wisdom is striking. He is just as willing to discuss Bennett’s *The Old Wives’ Tale* as *The Ambassadors*, and values plot just as much as character. Though his famous distinction between flat and round characters is often taken to imply the superiority of characters with psychological depth, he himself raises Dickens as a counter-example, commenting that “his immense success with types suggests that there may be more in flatness than the severer critics admit” (72). All in all, Forster seems remarkably liberated from the pressure to throw his lot in either with the geniuses and literary artists or with the humble craftsmen. The explanation for this cheerful refusal to join one party or the other can be found in the first lecture, when Forster asks his students to imagine the English writers he will go on to discuss,

not as floating down that stream which bears all its sons away…but as seated together in a room, a circular room, a sort of British Museum reading-room—all writing their novels simultaneously. They do not, as they sit there, think “I live under Queen Victoria, I under Anne, I carry on the tradition of Trollope, I am reacting against Aldous Huxley.” The fact that their pens are in their hands is far more vivid to them (9).
The metaphor of the novelists working in the same space, unaffected by time, will allow Forster to make technical comparisons between James and Samuel Richardson, H.G. Wells and Dickens, Sterne and Woolf, and to conclude that the craft of fiction does not change—in fact, is impervious to change. “All through history,” Forster tells us, “writers while writing have felt more or less the same. They have entered a common state which it is convenient to call inspiration, and having regard to that state, we may say that History develops, Art stands still” (21).

Though later writers of literary handbooks have disagreed with Forster about the relative importance of point of view and the methods by which character is constructed, the notion that the principles of craft are ahistorical has become universal. In early standards of the workshop like Understanding Fiction, by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, and in contemporary favorites like Janet Burroway’s Writing Fiction and Alice LaPlante’s Method and Madness, “rules of art” are expressed in declarative statements. The writers are careful to grant that their principles admit exceptions and that every fiction writer must, to paraphrase James, “do it as she can,” but these variations are always credited to the writer’s individual artistic vision, never to historical contingency.

This assumption that technique exists apart from social forces makes the literary-historical amnesia suffered by the late Victorian writers in Barrie’s Brought Back from Elysium a constant of our discourse. The work of Myers and McGurl, while providing interesting hypotheses about how creative writing ended up in the university, spends so little time on the specifics of craft that the development of the content of the workshops remains outside the realm of historical analysis.
This inattention to craft as a historical phenomenon may have several ill effects. If technique is eternal, there is no reason for writers of handbooks and teachers of creative writing to refer to anything written outside our borders or before 1950. For students of creative writing, an approach that relies so much on the contemporary and the easily accessible may leave the impression that texts that require more of an investment from the reader have nothing to teach. In addition, the lack of knowledge on this subject impoverishes our cultural conversation about fiction. If, as the organization VIDA (Women in Literary Arts) has demonstrated, women are far less likely to be reviewed in outlets like the *New York Times* and the *London Review of Books*; if, as many women writers have suggested, novels by men are much more likely to be interpreted as important books on important subjects, couldn’t this have something to do with an enduring critical preference for the (male) novel of character over the (female) novel of incident?\(^\text{18}\) By asserting that technique was both complex and accessible, writers like Lee, Stevenson, Lubbock, and Forster took the first step toward establishing a rich and productive conversation about how fiction is made. The next step will involve a new awareness of the influence of context and subject position on what we say about how we write.

\(^{18}\) For VIDA’s 2012 Count, see Amy King, “VIDA Count 2012: Mic Check, Redux.” The 2010 debate about whether male writers of literary fiction receive undue praise from the literary establishment is summarized in Ruth Franklin, “*The New York Times*, Jonathan Franzen, and Sexism in Book Reviewing.”
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