LOOKING BACKWARD

Why Looking Backward Is Necessary to Looking Forward

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> By treating the imaginary element that is "sex," the deployment of sexuality established one of its most essential internal operating principles; the desire for sex—the desire to have it, to have access to it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth. It constituted "sex" itself as something desirable.
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> —Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1[1]

ALTHOUGH my critical focus has shifted in recent years onto other areas—both earlier and later—of novel studies, I find myself returning to the novels of the 1840s, which is, in my view, the pivotal moment in the history and theory of the British novel. This is the moment when novels relegated forever to the past a future that ensured domestic contentment. During the period from 1847 to 1900, as Georg Lukács tells the story, the historical novel faltered and then froze in its tracks, as the narrative of an individual caught in the winds of historical change capitulated to descriptions of demonically fetishized objects that obscured the engines of change. What Lukács doesn't mention is that, halfway through that same period, novels abruptly ceased to formulate a country house providing what Hannah Arendt has called "a model of national housekeeping."[2] From the ashes of that bourgeois appropriation of certain aspects of the genteel way of life, the novels of the 1840s assembled a single-family household as a kinship system uniquely capable of operating at every level of English society. To go by these novels, one would think that belonging to such a household was not only the same as

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belonging to English society itself but was also necessary to one's biological survival. In returning to that moment, I want to consider, more pointedly, what these two observations concerning the form of the Victorian novel have to do with one another, a question that was very much in the air in 1977, when I received my doctorate and took up my first university post.

1978 saw the publication in English of Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality,* Vol. 1. His pairing of these concepts gave sexuality a history and history a sexuality, in the process revising both. Foucault launched this project with a simple appeal to common sense. If, as convention would have it, the Victorians were so squeamish about sex that they mounted a concerted effort to restrict manifestations of it, then why did they talk and write about little else? Why did major authors produce such a vast, luridly detailed, and always self-contradictory field of discourse that reorganized the lives of literate people around normative heterosexuality? What prompted the emerging human sciences to classify "other people" with terrifying consistency as sexually backward or depraved? Mere bourgeois squeamishness struck me as an inadequate reason for British intellectuals and novelists to reimagine virtually all social relations in sexual terms. When Foucault turned attention away from the cause of such cultural behavior and urged those willing to take him at his word to consider what it accomplished sociopolitically, he set off a conceptual revolution. He insisted that coercion was not the answer, that there had to be a comparably irresistible "inducement" before the dominant culture would forsake the pleasures of the body for those of discourse. My own work picked up on this argument and pushed it a step further by implicating the spread of novels in this transformation. Why else, if not as an inducement, did novels of the period offer the new ruling class so many innovative ways of violating the companionate relationship of man and woman and the household that they made together?

The discourse of sexuality was hardly new to the Victorian period. During the previous century, it had already succeeded in enclosing the individual mind within a body that was home to fundamentally antisocial desires that endowed certain individuals, chiefly men of property, with the rationality that entitled them to make decisions on behalf of others. We do not have to read very far into the nineteenth century, however, before we find this discourse—novels as well as medicine, law, and the new social sciences—shifting public attention decisively away from the individual and onto those unruly others, to humankind in the aggregate,

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from whom the rational individual henceforth found it necessary to distinguish her or himself. These forms of writing brought the discourse of sexuality to bear on men who neither inherited nor married fortunes but had to earn a living, and thus on the single-family household that such men presumably supported if they had the self-discipline to do so. As it reorganized domestic life around such a household, the discourse of sexuality seemed bent on defending British domestic life against the very forces of change that were breaking traditional kinship systems, driving whole populations off the land, and cramming them into industrial towns and cities. Had Foucault put more stock in novels, he would surely have seized on the curious subgenres that make up so much of Victorian fiction as an especially rich archive of the changes wrought on daily life by this economic transformation. He convinced a number of us that a discursively produced "sexuality" had indeed reorganized the British novel according to the conceptual architecture of discipline, on the one hand, and, on the other, the methods for regulating population.

Before he cast his spell on my generation of novel scholars, we already had a way of addressing, with theoretical precision, the question of how the machinery of capital took off during the early decades of Victoria's reign and displaced the means by which an increasing number of people made a livelihood, but we had nothing approximating the clarity and force of Marxist critique with which to explain the novel's sudden domination over other literary forms, much less the proliferation of the curious subgenres that accompanied its ascent. Foucault provided a way to see the unofficial and apparently commonsensical institutional practices and government policies clustered, respectively, around the concepts of "discipline" and "biopolitics" as the means of understanding how people at all economic levels either learned to manage their sexuality or had it managed for them. Thus it was largely owing to the publication of *The History of Sexuality,* Vol. I, in English that Victorian studies became the first literary field to make sense of the novel's redefinition of the liberal individual as male, insatiably desirous, inherently competitive, and born to cope with an industrializing world whether by regulating his own unruly nature or subjecting it to the time-work discipline of industrial production. Because such men took to devising ways of curbing, sublimating, or channeling both forms of aggression, the grotesquely disfigured forms of the novel that emerged near the midcentury mark would provide an especially rich archive for those of us who wanted to address the question of the gendered division of labor and its impact on the everyday life of an entire population. These novels document

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the emergence of a historically different type of woman as the foundation of the single-family household. Insofar as it depended on her affective labor to supplement income earned elsewhere, the Victorian household collapsed the most basic social unit and the most basic economic unit into one.

In his 1976 lecture series at the Collège de France, which appeared in English in 2003 as *"Society Must Be Defended,"* Foucault identifies "sexuality" as "the point where body and population meet," which makes it not only "a matter for discipline, but also a matter for regularization."[3] He uses the figure of "the masturbating child" to suggest how the discourse of sexuality instilled a self-wariness that fostered surveillance at the parental level by conjuring the threat that degeneracy would afflict their descendants, as the medical literature would have it, "unto the seventh generation."[4] Thanks to "the play of technologies of discipline on the one hand and the technologies of regulation on the other," Foucault concludes, Victorian society succeeded in "tak[ing] life under its care."[5] That is to say, society was responsible, by proxy, not only for those raised in and for respectable households but also for humanity in the aggregate—urban populations whose members did not enjoy such a secure position. Thinking of human beings not as individuals, but as different demographic slices of a population, social scientists and engineers sought to remedy the problem posed by this human surplus by regularizing the birth and death rates, sanitation, the spread of disease, and so forth.

Armed by Foucault with such abstractions as "power" and "technologies," we could explain how, by committing an unsolvable problem to discourse, that problem became conceptually manageable and a problem one could therefore live with. This transformation of an ungovernable surplus population into manageable information went a long way toward explaining how British novels engaged the discourse of sexuality and adapted the formal "technologies" of previous fiction to produce male and female readers who wanted nothing more than to secure a place for themselves within a nuclear family. But Foucault's model of discourse fell short of explaining how, during the 1840s, those same technologies somehow acquired the power to reimagine British society from the bottom up.

To secure its authority, the class that stood to benefit from that transformation of the mode of production had to transform the means of reproducing the conditions that brought about that transformation. In addition to raw materials (say, cotton or wool) that class would not

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only have to replenish the supply of labor. It must also, as Louis Althusser reminds us, establish new means of reproducing the relations of production—which is to say, the means of making those relations seem natural and necessary, if not always desirable and right.[6] This mode of social reproduction comes close to what Foucault means by the "technologies" integral to the discourse of sexuality—namely, practices of supervision, measurement, and evaluation that offered the individual a sense of self-mastery and, in doing so, a sense of having a self to master in the first place.[7] Insofar as the novel's narrative procedures gave readers the means to produce and occupy leisure time, the novel assumed a central role within the discourse of sexuality. It proposed a historically specific form of heterosexual desire as the source of the problem of surplus population and forms of discipline as the means of redirecting unruly sexual energy. In thus schooling sexual desire, the novel reproduced and naturalized the English household with such regularity that it became all but impossible for novel readers to imagine an alternative. By contrast to other forms of writing, the novel could disparage an earlier kinship system produced by the courtship practices of a landowning gentry as backward or exclusionary and, in so doing, adapt their household to survive the shocks of rapidly changing economic conditions. During the period between Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1817) and the novels by Emily (1847) and Charlotte Brontë (1848), the single-family household consequently displaced the capacious manor house of a benevolent Mr. B, Squire Alworthy, or Mr. Darcy that once supported the surrounding community.

The early novel enabled literate people at all levels of society to imagine a better household for themselves than external circumstances would seem to justify. Reaching its apogee in the hands of Jane Austen, the marriage plot that shaped these novels dealt with economic disruptions of daily life by loosening the kinship rules that restricted the English manor house to men and women of inherited wealth. Where the world these novels made available to the vernacular imagination was one in which everyone who counted was in some sense dependent on property, those who populated the Victorian novel were ultimately dependent on a man whose only property was often his potential property in the forms of labor or knowledge that might materialize. An entirely different economic unit from Austen's country house, the single-family household that resulted was designed to perpetuate a historically new kinship system organized around a sharply gendered division of labor. In perpetuating that internal division, the single-family household also reproduced the division of labor necessary for capitalist production. Here, for the first

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time in history, was a kinship system that presumably held true across class and even cultural lines. Were this family, at any level of society, unable to sustain its members, the blame fell squarely on that household itself and the insufficient labor of a woman's love—in contemporary parlance, "affective labor"—to compensate for fluctuations in the family income. By what inducement did novels convince the reading public that this was the only respectable way to live?

In order to imagine a household that would make sense to readers during the so-called "Hungry Forties," Charlotte Brontë and her sister abandoned the version of the manor house Austen had made to seem inclusive by means of courtship rituals that paired men and women of the respectable classes on the basis of their qualities of personal character. They incorporated that machinery in novels that promptly broke it down. From the debris, the Brontës assembled a single-family household that could be supported by the income from wage labor and commercial investments, as well as by land and inherited wealth. Their readers, like those of Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, and many others, encountered a sequence of households, each one held together by a woman's affection and supported by her husband's income. Linked to others at their income level who shared the same quality of care, such formally similar households, each responsible to its own immediate family, provided the only visible means of distributing vital resources, services, and information to the population.

From this reformulation of the British household, we may infer a number of important social, psychological, political, and economic consequences. By offering the synopses to follow, I make no claim to be exhaustive but simply want to pose a question that has not yet been adequately addressed and thus never answered: How did Victorian intellectuals and novelists turn the household into a reproductive mechanism that, in guaranteeing its own future, also guaranteed a future for industrial capitalism? With that question in mind, let me identify a few component parts of that reproductive apparatus that—despite the best efforts of Foucault and feminism—still pass for natural.

1. The shrinking private sphere: For the sake of argument, let us say that a novel like *Jane Eyre* transforms Austen's concept of domestic life from that of an extended community, which lives off the land and the generosity of the landowner, into a self-sustaining single-family social unit. Wouldn't it behoove us, then, to pay more attention to the formal means by which this and other major novels of the same decade reduced

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the size of the family and limited intimate relationships to the form generally regarded as the nuclear family? To reconfigure kinship in this way, the novel had to alter and often eliminate the rituals of courtship, revising the risks involved and the possible benefits to be gained by finding the one and only partner with whom an individual could form an enduring household. The result was to transform the qualities of masculinity and femininity that held true across class lines, broadening the class spectrum of those considered capable of forming self-sustaining households. Though certainly lacking money and the family connections of Florence Dombey or Mary Barton, Jane Eyre compounds their deficiency in heroine-worthy qualities with unattractive scrawniness and obstreperous behavior. Is it because Jane is anything but warm and compliant and often demonstrably antisocial that she is easily the most memorable British heroine of the 1840s? To answer this question, one needs to consider how her lack of traditional social skills and virtues might equip this protagonist to remodel the national household in a way that made sense to a British readership in the throes of industrialization.

2. The intimate bond: It was Charlotte Brontë's declared intention to make the emotional link between Jane and Rochester strikingly different from the friendship binding a like-minded couple that gradually gathers emotional force in Austen novels. Brontë carried through on her promise by reformulating love as a tie of personal attraction so strong that it turned each individual into an extension of the other. The result was a fundamentally antisocial bond that could never be broken, in certain cases, even after death, a bond that therefore served as the basis of a more constricted and highly individuated kinship system than Austen had imagined. In the complex and unstable social environment of the 1840s, love could not reproduce the same social alliances among prominent families than it had done just forty years before. Love had become a medium of communication that detached those whom it engaged not only from their extended families and local communities, but from the dynamics of the new economy as well. Given its quasi-magical power of detachment, love began to exercise the lethal force it had in classical romance—on the one hand, restricting each participant to love only one person who was often out of reach and, on the other, condemning households based on a less stringent attachment to failure. Hence the broken households that litter the landscapes of Dickens's city, George Eliot's town, and Thomas Hardy's countryside.

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3. Economic unevenness: Out of the debris of a household that once invited readers to imagine the government of town and shire acting in a similarly benevolent manner on behalf of the entire community, the novels of the 1840s crafted highly individuated and self-contained households limited to and reconfigured for the income-earning man, the caretaking woman, and their immediate offspring—the assumption being that the households that observed these principles of kinship could support that family on radically different sources of income from the head of household and different compensatory forms of affective labor from his wife. To accept the proposition that such a household was natural and desirable, if not necessary and right, one had to agree that nature had endowed women with a vast reservoir of affection that could make up for the irregular flow of income from her husband's wages. From this it followed that the reason for the failure of the household economy came down to a woman's failure to draw on her natural capacity as a woman. In other words, the household formulated according to these principles shifted the government's responsibilities of caring for its people from the shire, parish, and nation onto the single-family household, where these responsibilities fell squarely on the shoulders of the woman to keep the household economy afloat by means of the labor of her love. This idea that a certain quality of love could compensate for the uneven distribution of income reorganized family life so that it would reproduce the relations of capitalist production. Formerly the stuff of romance, the single-family household went on to become the primary apparatus for distributing resources, services, and information to the British population at various levels of income.

4. Historical discontinuity: Once one compares the hereditary haunts of Thornfield Hall with the humble dwelling of radical Chartist John Barton and the well-appointed household of Paul Dombey, owner of a shipping company, it quickly becomes apparent that all three households in shambles call for much the same domestic remodeling to occur at different levels of society. Brontë, Dickens, and Gaskell subjected the traditional household to a ruthless process of modernization that renders it capable of replenishing not only the supply of workers, managers, and leisure-class consumers, but also women of taste and social skills appropriate to each. I see this basic structural change in the mode of social reproduction as necessarily antecedent to reconfiguring daily life around the workplace (be it the factory, a business, or plantations in the colonies), on the one hand, and the single-family household, on the other. The

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importance of the discontinuity between the gratifications of domestic life these novels have relegated to the past and the household that could see the English population through the Hungry Forties cannot be overstated. That this bipolarization of daily life happened across class lines in no way mitigates the brutality with which Victorian novels pulled the plug on the traditional life support system for some people and not others. In the outrage with which they do so, these novels side with E. P. Thompson's assessment that, for those who depended on wage labor, there was no continuity between the practices of everyday life past and present, only the violent ruptures of modernization.

5. Subjection begins at home: Given the repetition of the same ethically inflected economic logic at various income levels, how could those without the economic means required by such a household not aspire to belong to one? How could they not imagine happiness in domestic terms—or at least feel they ought to do so? Thanks to the palpable unevenness of the distribution of resources, services, and education, men and women at different levels of society necessarily encountered the material limitations of their way of life and therefore of the future they could realistically imagine. Novels saw to it that those men and women viewed the entire system of social relations from within those limits—both horizontally, in terms of class alliances, and vertically, in terms of the level of taste and qualities of emotion to be enjoyed in households at a higher social level. The novels of the Brontës, Dickens, and Gaskell leave it to the woman of the household to see that her children are educated, their possibilities limited, and their expectations raised to guarantee the reproduction of more or less the same relations of production from one generation to the next. Indeed, failure on the part of parents in this respect provided a frequent and more effective means than Victorian success stories of making such a future the desideratum of the novel. By putting the household so regularly into crisis, novelists were able to offer a better household as the solution to the problem, which was a matter of reestablishing domestic life on the basis of sexual restraint, work discipline, and regulated consumption.

6. Reproductive labor: A glance at any one of Dickens's city novels provides a panorama of singularly mismanaged and abusive households that spew their contents across the economically partitioned landscape, from the sepulchral interior of Chesney Wold to the fetid tenements of Tom-All-Alone's. While these distinctions may seem less extreme in *Jane Eyre* than those organizing *Bleak House*, the sequence of households

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forming Brontë's narrative actually represents a comparable economic spread and requires more clearly differentiated forms of remedial work from women (i.e., child-rearing at Gateshead, educating orphan girls at Lowood, enforcing moral discipline at Thornfield, overseeing domestic work at Moor House, and folding love into all these skills at Ferndean). In addition, Brontë has Jane entertain the possibility of life as a missionary's wife in India in order to classify that form of affective labor as out of bounds for a domestic novel, declaring that the homeland is where the heart is. *Jane Eyre* is but one of many novels that consequently yields an inventory of the curious forms of noncontractual labor supplementing male income at different social levels.

7. Oppositional resistance: During this time of scarcity, the policy of deferring to parents the sole responsibility for the health, welfare, and education of their dependents, no matter what the price of bread, understandably gave rise to popular indignation. Working-class women participated in boycotts and organized protests, according to Joan Scott, but "they did so under the Chartist aegis to demand male suffrage and thus assert property rights that came to them through their husbands' or fathers' labor."[8] Resistance on the parts of working class men and women paradoxically affirmed a single-family household "resembling middle-class ideals and susceptible to middle-class pressures," which included the removal of women from the workplace.[9] When they objected to the forms of self-subordination that accompanied their consignment to domestic labor, the feminists of the 1860s soon discovered how easily they could be labeled histrionic and lumped together as an unruly underclass. By pitting their interests against those of men, in other words, Victorian feminism affirmed the very authority to which they objected, putting them in the double bind that Wendy Brown explains as follows: because "it is feminism's promise to address a social injury [which is] constitutive of [woman's] identity," when feminists attempt to do so, they "are often maligned as selfish, irresponsible, or often, more to the point, simply unfeminine."[10] This recurring paradox suggests that we cannot think outside of this double bind unless we are willing to challenge the very gender difference on which both intimate family ties and feminism itself are founded. No matter how creatively we may reconstitute it, the single-family household consequently activates the same logic as the prisoner's dilemma.

8. Outside the household: By leaving so many people out in the cold, the conflation of kinship and economic subsistence produced migratory

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populations that wandered the countryside in search of work and piled into the overcrowded tenements of city novels. An aura of degeneracy clings to such outsiders in the Victorian novel, the consequences of which include unofficial forms of political disenfranchisement, the denial of economic opportunity, deportation, and annihilation. Indeed, too many minor characters end up in this abject position to dismiss their obtrusive appearance in the novel as merely referential. Like Heathcliff, Jane Eyre occupies the category of stranger at several points in Brontë's novel and poses a threat to the households that take her in, not one of which remains intact at novel's end. Nor is it enough to say that the novels of the Brontës, Dickens, and Gaskell based their appeal on the implication that readers would be as good as dead without a stable, self-sustaining household. Coupled with the extreme forms of domestic captivity in the novels I have mentioned, the exhilaration that Jane feels on escaping the confines of Gateshead, Lowood, and even Moor House suggests that a disciplined household indeed had enough in common with a penal institution to generate a contrary yearning for the freedom to move and circulate in the world beyond those confines.

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To identify the logic by which a few Victorian novels reproduced and updated the operative mode of kinship is but to scratch the surface of the narrative machinery that tailored "the discourse of sexuality" for industrial capitalism. The novel not only reproduced itself as a narrative form in expanding numbers but also replenished and updated a constellation of beliefs instrumental in the reproduction of the relations of production. Simply put, happiness could be found nowhere else but in a household founded by a loving couple and sustained by the woman's labor of love. Those who failed to establish a bond of intimate love on which to found such a household were sure to perish, and such a failure was a moral lapse. Operating as a delivery system for this ideological ensemble, the Victorian novel altered an earlier model of kinship relations, or family, so that it provided the basic economic unit, or household, of a society organized by industrial production. To do so, novels of the 1840s waged perpetual war against other ways of living and reclassified large sectors of the population as potentially disposable. Though conspicuously failing to provide the population with health, education, and welfare, the household formulated by Victorian fiction nevertheless bequeathed the disastrous legacy of this way of imagining community to the Fordist family. Though even then, a century and a half ago, that

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household had outlived its usefulness as a means of caring for a national population, the single-family household lives on today in the "responsible" household of neoliberal discourse, a household that is supposed to bear the enormous cost of providing health and education to those who cannot afford it.

As a conflation of the basic social and economic units, the self-sustaining social unit formulated in and as a fiction well over a century ago now provides a rationale for dismantling the welfare state. To understand the power of its discursive technologies is clearly as important now as it was then. In a society where less than half of the population today has any inclination to live in a normative household, moreover, we are now in a better historical position than ever before to understand the cultural apparatus of social reproduction responsible for the problems I have listed, an apparatus that continues to serve the few at the expense of the many and attributes that unevenness to the moral deficiency of those who cannot earn a living wage. Insofar as the Victorian novel exposed the operations of the self-sustaining single-family household as *the* component of the discourse of sexuality responsible for reproducing the social relations of production, a symptomatic reading of neoliberal economics would, in my view, have to begin there. To imagine an alternative to multinational capitalism, such a reading would first have to formulate an alternative to the single-family household, one that does not reproduce the relations of capitalist production but nevertheless keeps people economically afloat and capable of enjoying life. Short of that, in trying to look forward, we will find ourselves necessarily looking backward.

Notes

1. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 56–57.
2. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 28.
3. Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended,"* 252.
4. Foucault, 252.
5. Foucault, 253.
6. Althusser, *Reproduction of Capitalism*, 52.
7. Althusser, 141.
8. Scott, *Gender*, 65.
9. Scott, 65.
10. Brown, *States of Injury*, 158.

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