

WORDS AND IMAGES

Janice Carlisle

My story, like many others, begins with a book. By the time that I reached junior high school, I had become a committed, even an obsessive reader, but the first novel that I read that signaled that I might have found a vocation was Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. I don't remember precisely when and why I first read it – it certainly was not as an assigned text in school – and I can't remember why I loved it as much as I did, but it was the first book that I read over and over again, drawn in, I think, by what a twentieth-century critic called its “secret prose.” Rereading *Great Expectations* now, as I still do, I know what I have come to love about it. The wildly inventive qualities of its figurative language never cease to amaze me. The older Pip looks back on the story of his life and melds his young ability to be the kind of observant child that Dickens himself was with an adult capacity to turn those observations into verbal pyrotechnics. The plants in a ruined garden, for instance, are not simply weeds; rather, they seem to be “a spontaneous growth of weak attempts at pieces of old hats and boots, with now and then a weedy offshoot [taking on] the likeness of an old saucepan.” In this novel Dickens achieves a tone that is almost as often comic as it is deeply sad. Pip as a child during a memorable Christmas dinner is treated to “those obscure corners of pork of which the pig, when living, had had the least reason to be vain”; and, later on, his friend Herbert Pocket is so “desperate” to earn a living that he often talks of “buying a rifle and going to America, with a general purpose of compelling buffaloes to make his fortune.” Endlessly fascinating are also the complex ways in which Pip tries to make peace with his past even as he registers his inability to transcend his earlier meanness or to confront honestly what has driven his ambitions.

Yet now when I read *Great Expectations* again, I can also recognize – though I have only relatively recently recognized – that its plot and its main character must have set up resonances of which I, as a schoolgirl, could have been only barely conscious. When Pip tells the story of himself as a village boy who longs to escape his current

Janice Carlisle, Professor Emerita of English, has published books and essays on Victorian fiction, visual culture, and autobiography, including *The Sense of an Audience: Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot at Mid-Century* (1981), *John Stuart Mill and the Writing of Character* (1991), *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction* (2004), and, most recently, *Picturing Reform in Victorian Britain* (2012), a book on art and politics from the 1830s to the 1860s, which treats extensions of the middle- and working-class franchise in the context of Victorian painting and the wood engravings of illustrated journalism. She is currently working on a book-length study of Ford Madox Brown's epic painting *Work* and the one-man show of 1865 in which he first exhibited it to the public. Before coming to Yale, she taught at the University of Virginia and Tulane; she has also been a longtime faculty member of the Dickens Project, an international research consortium housed at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

circumstances, his home and his family, he must have seemed to be speaking for me. As a more than typically morose teenager, I must have heard my own sense of hopeless aspiration when Pip tells another working-class character that he fears that he will “never” be “anything but miserable — ... unless I can lead a very different sort of life from the life I lead now.”

Not that I am suggesting that I was somehow a twentieth-century female Pip. The differences between us are, of course, obvious. He is a blacksmith’s boy who wants to be a gentleman; I was a girl growing up in Simsbury, Connecticut, the daughter of an accountant and a housewife. What I did not share with Pip was his shame over his working-class origins, from my own version of which I was a generation away. My mother’s parents emigrated from Sweden before she was born, and her father worked in an iron foundry, and her mother’s father was a shoemaker. My father’s father was born into a family of poor, very poor Vermont farmers, and he later moved to Springfield, Massachusetts, where he worked as a second-class train engineer licensed to feed boilers with coal and, after that, as a housepainter. I like to think that if any one of these two sets of grandparents had been my parents, I would have honored them for what Pip calls the “virtue of industry,” but like so many of his self-excuses, that hope is probably just another form of self-deception.

In trying to think of such experiences as the starting point of an intellectual trajectory, I find that they seem more like the beginnings of a scrap of fabric in which the same threads weave in and out. George Eliot uses that metaphor in *Middlemarch* when she describes the evolving relationships of her characters as a “web” of “human lots ... woven and interwoven” over time, and it is equally relevant to the patterns evident in an individual life. In my case, those threads involve many subjects and impulses that can be traced back to my childhood: an interest in and respect for working-class lives and the desire to be doing something useful, along with the centrality of reading. Other factors, which I will describe below, suggest why the specific focuses of my research, in books on very different subjects, have been on the politics of class and Victorian visual culture. The literature of the Victorian period drew me in with both its aspirations and its failures, as well as its imaginative energy and its inventive language — all features epitomized by *Great Expectations*. Although I feel a dislike, even a distaste, for confessional literary criticism, another thread in my “web” involves reading and writing about autobiographies and autobiographical fiction. It should be easy for anyone who has read as many such works as I have to compose the present account. That is, of course, precisely the problem. I know that autobiographies are, to a more or less obvious degree, occasions for self-deception, evasions, and wish fulfillment. Their records of the past, real or fictional, are often tellingly troubled by unconscious needs and desires. My own quite limited exercise in “self-life-writing” in this essay no doubt suffers from such failures of perception.

In one of Pip’s more clear-eyed moments of looking back on his past, he says, “It is a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home.” Dickens emphasizes how

unattractively ungrateful Pip is, and both he and I had advantages of which we were insufficiently appreciative. A mistake that my students have consistently made about Pip's childhood is to think that it is impoverished. Pip is definitely not poor. Rather, he is raised by a respectable artisan, the blacksmith who married the young boy's much older sister; and Pip is never hungry, though he is often ill-used. I too enjoyed material benefits that I was not able to acknowledge. My parents had not gone to college, but they both valued education; and when I was two, they moved from an apartment in Hartford to a house that they built in Simsbury because, I like to think, it had a good school system, even if its high school, the Henry James, Jr. High, was named, more than a bit ludicrously, after a local school superintendent rather than after the better-known American novelist.

Most visitors to Simsbury now would probably find it to be a well-polished and charming New England town, so I need to stress that in the 1950s for many of its inhabitants it was not that at all. In fact, it was quite raw, exhibiting its own growing pains; and the new development of modest Cape Cod houses where my family lived had a distinctly unfinished air about it. Moreover, in the Simsbury of that time, homogeneity ruled – in a way that tended to make living there seem dull, gray, and flat. Until I reached the last years of high school, I knew no one who was not a white Christian. Yet that apparent homogeneity was misleading. Rather, Simsbury had distinct calibrations of class based on one's church affiliation and its location on Main Street. That hierarchy extended from the white Congregational Church on a hill at one end of town, past the Methodist Church on level ground, to the Catholic Church appropriately built on a slightly sloping patch of treeless land at the far end of Main Street. It goes without saying that my family did not have the cultural capital that would have made us welcome at the Congregational Church, and I always knew that being a Methodist was a badge of inferiority. When I picked up *Great Expectations*, I must have found particularly meaningful its evisceration of a class system that divides the blacksmith's boy from the gentleman's son in arbitrary and endlessly hurtful ways. In Simsbury the class distinctions in place were as rigid as anything Pip experiences in early nineteenth-century Britain, and even grade-schoolers there knew who counted and who didn't. Status also depended on the length of time that one's family had lived in the town. I knew from an early age that you were someone who mattered if your ancestors had settled in Simsbury at least one hundred years ago, and I was clearly not in that category. Added in my case to the typically stultifying effect of the conformity that characterized life in the 1950s was the fact that my home was no more congenial than the town. My parents both suffered from very different kinds of serious illness, the strain of which was felt by my younger siblings and me, though we were not made privy to its secret sources.

One form of escape from such circumstances was actually a form of engagement. My father was a deeply religious man, and he shared with John Wesley the conviction that "true faith . . . *cannot* subsist without works." Salvation by works was therefore the

watchword, not only in church but also at home. I adopted from my father one of his more admirable impulses, the need to be useful, which I indulged as often and sometimes as foolishly as possible. Yet doing good works can go only so far as a satisfaction, especially when one's faith is beginning to waver. Reading offered more sustaining consolations. One summer – it was in junior high, I think – we were given a list of one hundred books from which we were to choose three or four, but I read them all. I spent seventh grade at home because of an injury that usually happens only to short, pudgy football players – also not a category into which I fit – and during that year I became even more addicted to stories, some, I admit, told in television soap operas, but others recounted in novels, the longer the better.

In this context, *Great Expectations* was a timely discovery. It was the first narrative to give me more, much more, than simple escape. It offered not only the most imaginative uses of language, but also psychological and social complexities beyond those of any book that I had heretofore read. Its hold on me helped me, years later, to realize that a lifetime spent reading and writing and talking about books was what I wanted for myself. And I should add here, before we leave Pip, if not his creator, behind, that Dickens was my first literary love; and though there have been many others, I suspect that he will be my last. Teaching his fiction and experiencing with my students the enthusiasm that it generates have been prominent threads in my career; and his novels have often proved to me and, I hope, to my students that narrative has an unusually cogent way of conveying and even creating meaning.

But where are the images in this story? The origins of my fascination with the expressive potential of pictures probably go back to my childhood. Perhaps also searching for a way to escape her circumstances, my mother had a small collection of remaindered art books. Where she had found them I have no idea since there was no bookstore in Simsbury. Though I did not realize it then, the volumes dedicated to the work of one or another of the Old Masters prepared me to value all forms of visual art. One anecdote in particular suggests how much I should have prized what I, as a child, was being offered. When I was about ten, the whole family visited the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown. As we stood in front of a large painting by Bouguereau with its four enormous nude nymphs, my five-year-old brother looked up at my mother and said in a clear voice, “Mommy, I’m mortified.” Now a boy still in kindergarten who is being taken to an art museum and who is able to use correctly a word like *mortify* is not the child of a culturally impoverished family. Nor was I, despite my inability to recognize that fact at the time.

When I was lucky enough to attend college on a full scholarship at Mount Holyoke, several of the threads that I have been tracing came together. That very smart and highly educated women could stand at the front of their classrooms and share their knowledge and insights with their students was a revelation. Those professors all spoke with confidence, a quality that I notably lacked, but none of them could match the severe authority of Jean Sudrann – always her “Miss Sudrann” to my “Miss Carlisle.”

Her brilliant teaching of Victorian fiction confirmed what my earlier experience had foretold. The English department at Mount Holyoke was then still deeply imbued with a New Critical faith in the autonomy of the literary work and in the value of the close study of language; and Jean Sudrann was no exception to that rule, treating *Bleak House*, for instance, as nine hundred pages of prose poetry. I have followed her example by dealing with many texts, both visual and verbal, by analyzing the patterns that emerge from the details of form, from individual words and phrases to subtleties of shapes and colors. Also appealing in Victorian novels was their intense visuality, evident in the engravings that often accompanied their original publication and in characters and narrators who took it as their task to create verbal images to be seen in the mind's eye. Jane Eyre, as both narrator of and actor in her fictional autobiography, proves again and again her right to the title of artist by sharing with her readers descriptions both of the allegorical pictures that she draws and of the scenes that she sees.

Yet Victorian studies has also always been a field devoted to the study of history, even at the time when New Criticism or, later on, high theory discounted its importance. In reading novels such as *Bleak House* and *Middlemarch*, there is no way to shut out the real worlds to which they refer — no way not to want to learn about what Benjamin Disraeli in one of his novels called the Two Nations of the rich and the poor. Such content often reveals the cultural paradoxes that I have come to value in Victorian fiction, the contradictions that provide a not-too-distant mirror in which both my students and I could recognize the tendencies in our own culture to accept without question its skewed values and perceptual deformations. In my subsequent teaching and research, Victorian social and cultural and political history has become more and more prominent, and the images that illuminate that history have become more central to my thinking about it. But words and images have continued to be intertwined threads. When I began studying art history in a serious fashion, doing so seemed like second nature because much of the impulse behind Victorian paintings is narrative. Their first viewers talked about reading paintings as if they were three-volume novels. As in the case of Victorian fiction, the disconcerting features of contemporaneous paintings and engravings have stories to tell that make reading them a predictably illuminating challenge.

The subject of my first book, written long after I thought that I had grown out of my childhood religion, took up, not surprisingly, one of the earlier threads of my experience, the importance of Victorian novels as good works. I focused on what Victorian writers called their “sense of an audience,” an awareness that allowed them to think of their stories and their narrative techniques as opportunities for their readers to exercise the power of moral imagination. Moreover, according to Victorian aesthetic theories, which are now often dismissed as simply naive, a novel could create a sense of community among its readers. W. M. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* was therefore, in the words of a contemporary, “a common friend” joining one reader to another; and even the cynical

author of that novel thought that Tiny Tim was a “bond of union” between Dickens and every reader in England. Victorian novelists, more often than not, also made clear their personal engagement in the stories they wrote. Similarly, when I developed a perspective on what I called “the writing of character” in the works of John Stuart Mill, I picked up several other threads in the pattern of my own experience. As I interpreted it, Mill’s famous mental breakdown at the age of twenty had its source in his thwarted ambitions to serve others, not by writing books, but by winning a seat in Parliament—by doing good rather than by thinking about it. My research on Mill also indulged my penchant for obsessive reading. I started out to write an article on Mill’s *Autobiography* because it exhibits compelling conflicts and competing allegiances. Yet I soon decided that I couldn’t write about that one book without reading every word of the thirty-two volumes of the Toronto edition of *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, an activity authorized by Mill’s conviction that his writings were his character.

Although I have no doubt idealized my working-class grandparents, I have tried not to engage in more generalized romanticizing of nineteenth-century workers, the effect of what has been labeled by one critic “middle-class muscle envy.” Yet I have been repeatedly drawn to the subject of how Victorian culture accommodated or failed to accommodate working-class values and aspirations. It did not seem a distant leap then to move from Mill’s “self-life-writing” to autobiographies penned both for and by nineteenth-century workers. In the introduction to a collection of these texts called *Factory Lives*, I argued that these narratives deserve the close reading usually accorded the writings of canonical authors and that workers’ texts also have conventions and forms that ought not to be judged according to middle-class literary criteria. Such autobiographies often reveal the contradictions, if not the hypocrisy, of Victorian culture: members of the society that spawned the cult of the child could see as progress the passage of an unenforceable law that limited the manual labor of a nine-year-old to forty-eight hours a week. Workers who described their experiences as factory operatives often stressed the usefulness of their stories, written, as they were, in support of the legislative reform of the conditions of their labor. Later on, my interest in working-class experience entwined with the politics of class as it informed various Victorian reform movements, particularly those arguing for the enfranchisement of working-class men. In my most recent book—a study of the intersections of art and politics as ways of understanding the First and Second Reform Acts, passed in 1832 and 1867, respectively—the balance between words and images may seem to have tipped completely from the former to the latter as the chief texts to be read closely. The analysis of engravings and paintings, however, that I offer in *Picturing Reform* would not have been possible without the writings of the great Victorian art critic John Ruskin and those of the economist Walter Bagehot, men devoted equally from their very different perspectives to understanding the relation between the seen and the unseen. Writing this book constituted what I think of as my training in art history, training that was possible only through the generosity of several Yale art historians;

and it allowed me to see how the story of illustrated journalism that I was trying to tell could be enriched by putting it in the context of Victorian history painting, particularly the frescoes and oils that were created to adorn the new houses of Parliament.

In the book that I am currently writing, all these threads have come together in a study of the epic painting *Work* (fig. 1) by Ford Madox Brown and of the artworks in the 1865 self-sponsored exhibition at which he first presented it to Victorian viewers. Once again it might seem as if in this project images have effaced words, but *Work* is a painting filled with words, from those on the many posters depicted within it to those on its frame; and Brown himself became something of a novelist when he wrote the catalog for his 1865 exhibition. The value of good works or, more accurately, an assertion of the imperative to work, literally dominates the top of this painting: across its frame is engraved a variant of a biblical text, “I must work while it is day for the night cometh when no man can work.” Brown’s massive canvas, 4½ feet high by approximately 6½ feet wide, is crowded with people as they engage in their characteristic, everyday activities: taking exercise, selling herbs or oranges, talking, drinking, resting or sleeping, delivering baked goods or the mail, riding on horseback, playing childish games, distributing charity, policing the streets, and tending the young. Central in the painting is a group of navvies or excavators who are digging ditches for new water



Fig. 1. Ford Madox Brown, *Work*, 1852–65. Oil on canvas, 54 x 77¾ in. Manchester Art Gallery, UK/Bridgeman Images

lines in Hampstead Heath. Victorian class distinctions are made unmistakably visible in Brown's *Work*, and I was first drawn to the painting after writing in two previous books about a particular form of street politics that I call a comparative encounter, a meeting between two people of different status. My reading of nineteenth-century political history also focused my attention on the details of this painting. In the deep background on the right of the canvas, Brown depicts the typical events of a parliamentary election: there are sandwich boards that call on their viewers to vote for Bobus and, beyond them, a man pasting on a wall an early election tally. The question that I started out most wanting to answer involves the relation between the institutional politics of the Victorian mid-century and the strange street politics visualized in *Work*. The figures in the painting, even the dogs in the foreground, are arranged in hierarchies of class and value. Yet what status is accorded the navvies? Their central location seems to argue in visual terms that workers deserve respect because the material results of their efforts are useful, in this case making possible the delivery of water. But what does that fact say about the parliamentary election depicted in the background and the continuing controversy in Brown's time about the right to the franchise of at least some manual laborers? The intricacies of the visual language of *Work* are such that that question may have no settled answer.

What my account has so far failed to emphasize is the importance of my teaching, a thread continuously woven into the subjects about which I have written. That has been true particularly in the last decade or so of my career when, with the opportunities afforded by Yale, my teaching has often enriched my research. The Yale Center for British Art has been, not simply a place for study, though it certainly has been that, but a place in which to teach the intersections between Victorian fiction and Victorian art. Yet I greatly appreciate all the comments and insights of all my students, from the freshmen at Tulane in a writing course on visual culture to the graduate students at Yale who explored with me the relation between text and image in British novels and artworks of the 1860s. My teaching has allowed me not only to test the ideas that I have had before entering the undergraduate or graduate classroom, but also to encourage the emergence from our discussions of new and often surprising ideas. That fact has also been true of the number of classes that I have led for schoolteachers, either through the Yale New Haven Teachers Institute or through a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities that supported a course held at the Dickens Project in Santa Cruz. Remarkably, two different classes of public-school teachers in New Haven offered the same highly original and completely convincing reading of John Martin's *The Deluge* at the Yale Center for British Art. The standard interpretation of this painting focuses on the overpowering forces of nature – wind, water, landslide, thunder – as they execute the divine order to destroy an intransigently sinful humankind. What the teachers thought worthy of their attention, however, were the small human figures being engulfed by that cataclysm. The teachers saw the plight of those people, not as the representation of their well-deserved annihilation, but as a

demonstration of the acts of kindness and self-sacrifice that human beings are capable of during a crisis. It was hard not to think of their interpretation as an autobiographical reflection of their sense of their own circumstances as often overwhelmed teachers in underfunded urban public schools.

Moreover, the class members of the YNHTI and the NEH seminars titled “Why Literature Matters” taught me a lesson about the value of our work as teachers—a lesson that I now recognize has brought me full circle back to the now outdated and unspoken assumptions of the later years of my own education. During the 1960s and ’70s, few people—at least, few people whom I knew—questioned that it was worth one’s time to read and write about literature. Surprisingly, such bookish activities seemed in no way to conflict with the political turbulence of those times. In fact, I was able to do my graduate work in narrative at Cornell under the auspices of the National Defense Education Act, which was passed to address the shortcomings of the U.S. educational system after the shock of the Soviets’ success with *Sputnik*. How that happened I still cannot understand; perhaps Cornell was able to categorize nineteenth-century British English as a modern foreign language, an area identified for support by the NDEA. As all of us in the seminars for schoolteachers had to admit, the denial of the value of literature and of the humanities more generally now seems complete and irreversible, with very few academics bold enough to assert that literary study is as useful as the subjects joined together under the umbrella of STEM. The claim for the value of imaginative writing, both fictional and nonfictional, that the members of these seminars found most persuasive sounds tautological, if not simpleminded: reading literature offers the experience of reading literature, an experience that one can find nowhere else, one that demonstrates the power of language to make meaningful both one’s own conditions and those of others. As George Eliot wrote, narrative art is “the nearest thing to life”; and it can, therefore, “amplify experience.”

In addition, the sessions of both the YNHTI and NEH seminars consistently proved that reading literature can bring together people from diverse backgrounds and with diverse life stories with an efficacy that rivals that of other art forms and media. The teachers in the NEH seminar represented states from across the country, and they were chosen for their differences: one coming from a village in Alaska that is so remote that it cannot be reached by roads; others from cities with schools, public and private, as demographically distinct as possible, all black or all white. Some of the NEH fellows taught students taking advanced-placement courses; another, students with learning disabilities. I cannot claim that such differences did not create tensions and, at times, arguments. But we all witnessed the ways in which reading literature can create, at least temporarily, what Thackeray called “bonds of union.” Such an assertion makes clear that I have not transcended my early naivete about the potential usefulness of narrative experience, evident in my analysis of the ways in which Victorian writers conceived of their books as good works. I also recognize that fiction cannot meet the needs of what the philosopher Giorgio Agamben called biological or “bare life,” for the

support of which are required food and shelter and freedom from disease and violence. Yet in the times during which we are living, marked by increasingly irreparable forms of division and hatred, the ability to instill even a fleeting belief that difference can yield shared understanding and respect is a form of utility. Once felt, such a belief may provide a basis for the faith that a sense of community might be experienced again, perhaps in larger arenas than that of the classroom.

76

As a final gift, the last week of the NEH seminar overlapped with the annual Dickens Project conference dedicated to the reading of a novel by Dickens, in our case another of my early loves, *Little Dorrit*. There the NEH fellows were able to see why literature matters by becoming part of a reading community for whom it matters a great deal. During that time, a single literary work brought together several hundred people of different ages and ways of life – members of the general public, high school students and teachers, university faculty, graduate students, and aging Road Scholars. This event therefore confirmed what the fellows in the seminar and I had already learned about community, and that experience strengthened our faith in the possibility that those lessons could be conveyed to our students and to people beyond our classrooms, however unlike each other those individuals might be. And to say that is, of course, not to mention what the conference also afforded us: opportunities, seemingly 24/7, to share in the joys of Dickens's imaginative language and to profit from his understanding of the politics of everyday life.