

VINETA COLBY

Yesterday's Woman

Domestic Realism in the English Novel



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Vineta Colby

Woman

Domestic Realism in the English Novel

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“. . . the Weaknesses, the Pains of the Body may be inexpressibly alleviated by the Conversation of a Person, by Affection endeared, by Reason approved; whose tender Sympathy partakes of your Afflictions, and shares your Enjoyments; who is steady in the Correction, but mild in the Reproof of your Faults; like a guardian Angel, ever watchful to warn you of unforeseen Danger, and by timely Admonitions prevent the Mistakes incident to human Frailty, and Self-partiality. . . . Happy is her Lot, who in an Husband finds this invaluable Friend!”

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Yesterday's Woman
Domestic Realism in the English Novel

“Oh, Sir Austin,” she ejaculated, “it is surely our Education which causes us to shine at such a disadvantage! You make dolls of us! puppets! Are we not something—something more?”

“Aren’t we yer mothers?” shouts the M’Murphy.

—George Meredith, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859)

Introduction

THIS study is an attempt to explore and illuminate that grey area in the history of the English novel, the first half of the nineteenth century. The towering presences of Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott dominate the era, yet, like giants among pygmies, they are not wholly representative of it. We remember the age far more for poetry than for fiction, for genres than for individual novels; but mainly we mark time between, say, 1818, when the last of Jane Austen's works was published, or perhaps 1824, when with *Redgauntlet* Scott published his last widely read novel, and that flowering decade of the 1840's which saw the emergence of Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontës, and Mrs. Gaskell.

Among the scores of novels that filled the artistic vacuum of this almost half-century were many of considerable interest and a few of real literary merit. Not neglected masterpieces, they nevertheless deserve rereading and close study for their intrinsic qualities and also for what they tell us about that glorious and seemingly miraculous rebirth of the great novel in the mid-nineteenth century. They were the minor novels that both the major novelists and the large novel-reading public read in their childhood and youth. They do not account for the creative genius of the major novelists, but they provided themes and ideas, they shaped styles and formed attitudes toward a still new art form that, in spite of the prestige given it by Scott and Austen, remained morally and aesthetically suspect.

It is the contention of this study that the most important contribution made by these novels was in the emergence of domestic realism, understood here in its narrow sense as simply a literary manner and, in its larger sense, as a whole

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artistic conception or vision of life. The single most striking feature of the major Victorian novel is its essentially bourgeois orientation. It is anti-romantic, un-aristocratic, home- and family-centered. Its values, its subjects, and its principal characters are drawn from middle-class life. It is domestic by the standard dictionary definition of the word "domestic"—"of or pertaining to a particular country," as this type of novel tends to be local, even provincial; "adapted to living with or near man, tame," as it deals almost exclusively with human relationships within small social communities; "of or pertaining to the home or family," as it draws its subjects mainly from the daily life and work of ordinary people: courtship, marriage, children, earning a living, adjusting to reality, learning to conform to the conventions of established society and to live within it tranquilly, if not always happily.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the emerging novel is female-dominated. The large number of women novelists, the far larger and ever-increasing number of women readers, the tendency even among men novelists to refine their subjects, soften their language, and write about bourgeois family life, all suggest that "female domination," a popular phrase during this period, would be a fitting subtitle to this study. Even the wildest flights of romantic imagination in the Victorian novel were launched from the female-dominated hearthside: *Wuthering Heights* with its housekeeper-narrator relating a chronicle of middle-class (however atypical) family life; the heroines of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* realizing their romantic dreams ultimately in domestic reality, Jane as the wife of a chastened, reformed rake, Lucy as a spinster schoolmistress. Dickens' imagination soars above the realities of middle-class family life, but invariably descends to them at the end. His untamed romantics like Steerforth and Carton are doomed, and Pip pays bitterly for his misguided romanticism. In Thackeray's social satire, while smug bourgeois values are constantly challenged, the female imperatives of home and hearth win out. After all

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his *weltschmerz* has been released, Arthur Pendennis settles down at the family fireside to watch his young friend Clive Newcome follow a similar but more painful course. Even Becky Sharp is at last tamed and domesticated. Indeed, in the last glimpse we have of her, going to church and charity bazaars, is she not perversely but unmistakably the archetype of female domination?

It is tempting to see this tendency as crowned by the dominant female image of Queen Victoria herself, but history does not tolerate such over-simplifications. Numerous studies of this period have demonstrated that change and reform were emerging even in the Regency period, long before a modest and delicate-looking young girl ascended to the throne of England. As over the years the Queen developed into an ample matron, she created many images—all of them reflected in the novels as well as in the life-styles of her subjects—devoted and submissive wife, loving mother, grieving widow, dominant matriarch, ruling empress. But her image was reflecting rather than formative. The novel that developed in her reign owed nothing to her active influence but much to the social and moral developments of the early nineteenth century that influenced and molded her as they did all her subjects.

I have attempted to isolate some of these developments for closer scrutiny and to study their influence upon the fiction of the first half of the century. Specifically, I have examined the changes in manners and mores from the Regency into mid-century as registered in the novel of high society, focussing on Mrs. Gore and her contemporaries; new directions in educational theory, as reflected mainly in novels by Maria Edgeworth and Susan Ferrier about young men and women growing up to the responsibilities of mature life; the profound alterations in religious thinking and practices recorded in evangelical literature from the didactic tales of Hannah More and Charlotte Elizabeth to the novels of religious conscience and self-examination of Elizabeth Missing Sewell and Charlotte Yonge; and, finally,

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changing attitudes toward reality itself as mirrored in the love story, now domesticated into stories of human relationships in community, home and family life, and illustrated here primarily in Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook*. Wide and scattered as these areas may be—society, school, church, community, and home—they come together under the rubric of domestic realism. Other developments in the nineteenth-century novel, some equally or perhaps even more significant—such as regionalism, social realism, sensationalism—are beyond the scope of this book. I have, however, been aware at all times of the complex inter-relationship of ideas, issues, and literary influences that produced the domestic novel under study. The beauty of the nineteenth-century English novel is its sensitivity to its total world. That, alas, is also in the long run its chief peril to students, who can never hope to grasp and encompass its dimensions. At best we can only map trails and chart its outlines and tentatively explore its depths.

I

Ut Pictura Poesis: The Novel of Domestic Realism as Genre

Our little habitation was situated at the foot of a sloping hill, sheltered with a beautiful underwood behind and a prattling river before; on one side a meadow, on the other a green. My farm consisted of about twenty acres of excellent land, having given an hundred pound for my predecessor's good-will. Nothing could exceed the neatness of my little enclosures, the elms and hedge rows appearing with inexpressible beauty. My house consisted of but one story and was covered with thatch, which gave it an air of great snugness; the walls on the inside were nicely white-washed, and my daughters undertook to adorn them with pictures of their own designing. Though the same room served us for parlour and kitchen, that only made it the warmer. Besides, as it was kept with the utmost neatness, the dishes, plates and coppers being well scoured and all disposed in bright rows on the shelves, the eye was agreeably relieved and did not seem to want richer furniture. There were three other apartments, one for my wife and me, another for our two daughters within our own, and the third, with two beds, for the rest of my children.

The little republic to which I gave laws was regulated in the following manner: by sun-rise we all assembled in our common apartment, the fire being previously kindled by the servant. . . .

—Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, ch. 4

I

ENGLISH domestic realism may have been invented in this passage from *The Vicar of Wakefield* in 1766. Proudly describing his modest home—"the little republic to which I gave laws"—Reverend Primrose epitomizes and apotheosizes the eighteenth-century bourgeois ideal. No classic pastoral landscapes, no romantic vistas, no epic flights of the poetic imagination here. This idyll is home-based and family-centered.

Generations of English novel readers and novel writers grew up on *The Vicar of Wakefield*. It is unlikely that a single major Victorian novelist did not know the book and probably, at least in his youth, love it. If in his sophisticated maturity he laughed at its sentimentality or winked at its cynicism, the Victorian continued to cherish its basic images of home and family life. In this characteristic paragraph Goldsmith captured the spirit of simplicity, intimacy and privacy, immediacy and precision of detail, that informs English domestic realism. Size is modestly scaled down—"little habitation," "little enclosures," "one story," "three other apartments." Spaces are small and enclosed—the house "at the foot of a sloping hill," "sheltered," "covered with thatch," "an air of great snugness." Inside and outside there is "neatness," "nicely white-washed" walls decorated only with home-made pictures, no "richer furniture." Order and symmetry prevail—a meadow on one side, a green on the other, the well-scoured dishes arranged "in bright rows." Dreamy and idyllic as the scene is, it is also filled with specific material detail—size, function, price—"twenty acres," "an hundred-pound for my predecessor's good-will," the sleeping arrangements of the family, the uses to which the rooms are put. As we read on, we get a precise account of the family's living routines from morning prayers to sunset.

Apart from its faithful attention to physical detail, this descriptive passage is interesting for its aesthetic and moral

implications. The total picture is both pleasant and good. The Vicar's evident self-satisfaction reflects his judgment that his laws (which are also God's laws) are right. The neatness and order, the comfort and security of the homestead prove him so. Nature and man live in a harmony to which the physical beauty of the landscape and the modest attractiveness of the house testify. Because it is pious and virtuous, the Vicar's simple life is also beautiful, a work of art. For the Victorians it literally became so, inspiring many of the leading painters of the age. Thus domestic realism stretched from the printed page to the painted canvas. Hollins, Maclise, and Frith painted the Primroses in various scenes from the novel. In 1844 Mulready added his painting of the family to an already proliferating number, provoking Thackeray's good-humored outburst in *Fraser's Magazine* that although he had vowed to notice no more pictures from the novel, the work of Mulready "compelled the infraction of the rule, rushing through our resolve by the indomitable force of genius, [and] we must as the line is broken, present other Vicars, Thornhills, and Olivias, to walk in and promenade themselves in our columns, in spite of the vain placards at the entrance, 'VICARS OF WAKEFIELD NOT ADMITTED.'"¹

The working relationship between the artist and the novelist was never closer than during the period in which the domestic novel flourished. Dickens gave much personal attention to the illustration of his novels. Some novelists, like Thackeray and George Du Maurier, illustrated their own work. Other novelists wrote art criticism professionally—Henry James, Mrs. Oliphant, and Thackeray again. These and still other novelists—Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot—

¹ 29 (June, 1844); rptd. in *Works of W. M. Thackeray* (Biographical Centenary ed.), xiii, 419-45. Illustrated editions of *The Vicar of Wakefield* were steady bestsellers; among the more distinguished illustrators were Bewick (1798), Rowlandson (1817), Westall (1819), Cruikshank (1832), Mulready (1843), Hugh Thomson (1890), and Arthur Rackham (1929).

introduced painters as characters and discussed painting in their novels. What caught the artist's imagination and moved his heart was much the same as what inspired the novelist—domestic life, portrayed in the simple reality of its day-to-day course. "The heroic, and peace be with it! has been deposed," Thackeray proclaimed in 1843, "and our artists, in place, cultivate the pathetic and the familiar."² In 1855, viewing a Paris exhibition of English painting, Baudelaire was struck by its "intimate glimpses of home," and another visitor to the show, Richard Redgrave, observed that to walk from the salon containing French and other continental paintings into the British gallery "was to pass at once from the midst of warfare and its incidents, from passion, strife and bloodshed, from martyrdoms and suffering, to the peaceful scenes of home."³

Bourgeois genre painting, as Mario Praz has written, had "an addiction to narrative." Other styles of painting—religious, allegorical, and symbolical—that draw upon mythology, epic, and history transcend mere circumstantiality. They invite multiple interpretations, but offer no simple explanations. Genre, however, is drawn from the everyday reality that can be described, explained, accounted for. It is therefore anecdotal.⁴ This woman is reading a letter, taking a music lesson, nursing a child, preparing a meal, dressing in a cluttered and shabby bedroom. She is an ordinary woman—not the Virgin receiving the Annunciation or holding the Christ child. We are free to speculate: does she have a lover? what was she doing a moment before? what is she thinking about? Victorian novelists were especially attracted to this style of painting because of its air of "truth,"

² "Letters on the Fine Arts," *Stray Papers*, ed. Lewis Melville (Philadelphia, n.d.), p. 214.

³ Graham Reynolds, *Victorian Painting* (London, 1966), p. 94.

⁴ *The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford, 1956); *Mnemosyne: The Parallel Between Literature and the Arts* (Princeton, 1970), Ch. 1; and *Conversation Pieces: A Survey of the Informal Group Portrait in Europe and America* (University Park, Pa., 1971).

its concern with subjects that could be instantly recognized and verified by the experience of the viewer. "Dutch realism" is a recurring phrase in nineteenth-century art and literary criticism. In *Adam Bede* George Eliot cited it as justification for her whole approach to fiction: "It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise. I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or of absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions" (Ch. 17).

Among the "lofty-minded" was Henry James, novelist and art critic, deploring, as many others did and still do, the excesses of genre—its sentimentality, triviality, and banality—every bit as much the plague of the novels as of the paintings. It is significant that James's condemnation embraces the novel as well. Reviewing the Royal Academy's exhibition of 1877, he observed: "The pictures, with very few exceptions, are 'subjects'; they belong to what the French call the anecdotal class . . . they are subjects addressed to a taste of a particularly unimaginative and unaesthetic order—to the taste of the British merchant and paterfamilias and his excellently regulated family. What this taste appears to demand of a picture is that it shall have a taking title, like a three-volume novel or an article in a magazine; that it shall embody in its lower flights some comfortable incident of the daily life of our period, suggestive more especially of its gentilities and proprieties and familiar moralities, and in its loftier scope some picturesque episode of history or fiction which may be substantiated by a long explanatory extract in the catalogue."⁵

Whether for aesthetic good or bad, genre, Biedermeier, domestic realism swept over Germany and France in the early nineteenth century as powerfully as the countervail-

⁵ "The Picture Season in London," in *The Painter's Eye*, ed. John L. Sweeney (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), p. 148.

ing force of romanticism had swept Europe in the last decades of the eighteenth century. In England its effects on painting were pervasive and long-lasting. Its effects on the novel were more curiously mixed. A newly emerging art form, the realistic English novel was in a state of rapid evolution and development throughout the nineteenth century. It was plastic and flexible. Its history was far shorter than that of painting and its public vastly larger. To draw close parallels between the two art forms, however inviting such efforts may be, is perilous. Far too many histories and critical studies of the nineteenth-century novel make reductive and simplistic generalizations about its bourgeois-sentimental character. *The Vicar of Wakefield*, a kind of archetype of the domestic novel, illustrates the pitfalls of the genre approach. Is it, as it appears to be, a glorification of home, family, and church? Or is it, as we may also read it, an acid-etched satire on those same honored institutions? Its implications are less profound than those of the Book of Job, from which Goldsmith took his theme, but no less ambiguous. Genre painting is a fixed scene on canvas. We may speculate on the action and circumstances involved, but we usually know what we see. Fiction, however, involving the complexities and ambiguities of language and concept, is open-ended and resists critical generalizations.

A novel of wit written by a notoriously sophisticated man of letters, *The Vicar of Wakefield's* enduring popularity cannot be accounted for only by its simple sentimental appeal. Those elements of domestic realism—privacy, enclosure and warmth, precision of detail—that we noted in a single descriptive passage are more than accidental literary effects. Goldsmith knew the nature of the public for whom he wrote and the nature of the society about which he was writing. *The Vicar* was widely imitated in lower-class fiction up through the mid-nineteenth century. Working-class readers, crowded into industrial towns, in dreary slums and dingy factories, devoured pastoral-domestic idylls of rustic life. Titles like *The Cottage Girl*, *The Pride of the Village*,

The Maid of the Village, or the *Farmer's Daughter* dot the bestseller lists of the 1840's.⁶ Although that same public was reading a variety of fictional genres—latter-day romances and gothic tales—the modest attractions of domestic fiction seem to have had special staying powers. The mass public was at last discovering what realistic novelists from Defoe onwards had known, namely, the pleasure of recognition and identification, the appeal of homely detail, precise and specific and recognizable to the average reader. One of the shrewdest and most perceptive witnesses to nineteenth-century cultural developments was Harriet Martineau, who, writing of her youth, attributed the great success of Miss Mitford's sketches of rural life, *Our Village* (1824-1832), to her exploitation of "that new style of 'graphic description' to which literature owes a great deal":

"In my childhood, there was no such thing known, in the works of the day, as 'graphic description,' and most people delighted as much as I did in Mrs. Ratchliffe's [sic] gorgeous or luscious generalities—just as we admired in picture galleries landscapes all misty and glowing indefinitely with bright colours—yellow sunrises and purple and crimson sunsets,—because we had no conception of detail like Miss Austen's in manners and Miss Mitford's in scenery, or of Millais' and Wilkie's analogous life pictures, or Rosa Bonheur's adventurous Hayfield at noon-tide. Miss Austen had claims to other and greater honours; but she and Miss Mitford deserve no small gratitude for rescuing us from the folly and bad taste of slovenly indefiniteness in delineation."⁷

Homely descriptive detail became increasingly graphic in the early nineteenth century. In the most popular novelist of the period, Sir Walter Scott, it served the special function of recreating the dead past of history with activities

⁶ Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man* (Oxford, 1963), p. 103.

⁷ *Autobiography*, ed. Maria Weston Chapman (Boston, 1878), I, 315-16.

and interests recognizable in the living reality of his readers. Scott resolved, he wrote in his introduction to *Waverley*, to throw the force of his narrative on "those passions common to men in all stages of society, and which have alike agitated the human heart, whether it be throbbled under the steel corselet of the fifteenth century, the brocaded coat of the eighteenth, or the blue frock and white dimity waistcoat of the present day." Sharing almost equal time with his battling knights in armor, feuding clansmen in tartan, and dramatic highland scenery, are the "broth, onions, cheese" and the roasted yearling lamb—"It was set upon its legs, with a bunch of parsley in its mouth, and was probably exhibited in that form to gratify the pride of the cook, who piqued himself more on the plenty than on the elegance of his master's table" (*Waverley*, Ch. 20). Jeanie Deans, that noblest and homeliest of Scott's heroines, is as remarkable for her cheese-making and the contents of her pantry ("in which she kept her honey, her sugar, her pots of jelly, her vials of the more ordinary medicines") as for her integrity and courage. The daily living habits of the rugged Highlanders were in fact a subject of endless fascination to Scott and, evidently, to his readers. In *Old Mortality* we get a faithful account of the dinner offered to the Laird of Milnwood's domestics:

" . . . old Robin, who was butler, valet-de-chambre, footman, gardener, and what not, in the house of Milnwood, placed on the table an immense charger of broth, thickened with oatmeal and colewort, in which ocean of liquid was indistinctly discovered, by close observers, two or three short ribs of lean mutton sailing to and fro. Two huge baskets, one of bread made of barley and pease, and one of oat-cakes, flanked this standing dish. A large boiled salmon would now-a-days have indicated more liberal housekeeping; but at that period salmon was caught in such plenty in the considerable rivers in Scotland, that instead of being accounted a delicacy, it was generally applied to feed the servants. . ." (Ch. 8).

Rob Roy, a veritable travelogue of the wild remote regions of the north, balances the flamboyantly romantic adventures of its hero with documentation on the realities of life in a rough highland public house:

"The interior presented a view which seemed singular enough to southern eyes. The fire, fed with blazing turf and branches of dried wood, blazed merrily in the centre; but the smoke, having no means to escape but through a hole in the roof, eddied round the rafters of the cottage, and hung in sable folds at the height of about five feet from the floor. The space beneath was kept pretty clear, by innumerable currents of air which rushed towards the fire from the broken panel of basketwork which served as a door, from two square holes, designed as ostensible windows, through one of which was thrust a plaid, and through the other a tattered great-coat; and moreover, through various less distinguishable apertures, in the walls of the tenement, which, being built of round stones and turf, cemented by mud, let in the atmosphere at innumerable crevices" (Ch. 28).

Jane Austen, on the other hand, seems to revert to the eighteenth century with its fondness for typology and generalization. Much as we *think* we know her world—landscapes, interiors, and the habits and activities of her characters—we discover that she gave scant space to physical description of any kind. Pemberley, Rosings, Mansfield Park are magnificent houses, but we know surprisingly little about their details—their size, furnishings, numbers and arrangements of rooms. Nevertheless, Jane Austen utilized the techniques of domestic realism. Having so thoroughly mastered her art, with a few economical strokes she achieved what lesser novelists needed paragraphs for. "She stimulates us to supply what is not there," Virginia Woolf observed, or, as Margaret Lane points out, ". . . she takes such an immediate grasp of our attention, so firmly trains our imagination on to her characters and the exact social milieu in which they have their being, that our inner eye obediently supplies everything that she has economically

left out.”⁸ The eye for domestic detail, for example, with which she sees the squalor of Fanny Price’s home in Portsmouth is cruelly perceptive: “She sat in a blaze of oppressive heat, in a cloud of moving dust; and her eyes could only wander from the walls, marked by her father’s head, to the table cut and knotted by her brothers, where stood the tea-board never thoroughly cleaned, the cups and saucers wiped in streaks, the milk a mixture of motes floating in thin blue, and the bread and butter growing every minute more greasy than even Rebecca’s hands had first produced it” (*Mansfield Park*, III, ch. 15).

She characterizes with domestic detail: fussy, talkative but loving Miss Bates worries about her niece’s failing appetite: “. . . and she really eats nothing—makes such a shocking breakfast, you would be quite frightened if you saw it. I dare not let my mother know how little she eats—so I say one thing and then I say another, and it passes off. But about the middle of the day she gets hungry, and there is nothing she likes so well as these baked apples, and they are extremely wholesome, for I took the opportunity the other day of asking Mr. Perry; I happened to meet him in the street. Not that I had any doubt before—I have so often heard Mr. Woodhouse recommend a baked apple. I believe it is the only way that Mr. Woodhouse thinks the fruit thoroughly wholesome. We have apple-dumplings, however, very often. Patty makes an excellent apple-dumpling” (*Emma*, II, ch. 9).

In her domestic arrangements practical Charlotte Collins reveals her determination to make the best of her marriage

⁸ “Jane Austen,” in *The Common Reader* (London, 1925), p. 174; *Purely for Pleasure* (London, 1966), p. 102. See also Karl Kroeber, *Styles in Fictional Structure* (Princeton, 1971). On the basis of tabulations of word usage, Professor Kroeber confirms that Jane Austen uses little physical description, but he also demonstrates, through a close analysis of her style as it relates to theme and characterization, that her art “consists of subtle complexities . . . presented in a simple, lucid, even conventionalized manner” (p. 19).

to an insufferable bore. She chooses a small back room for her private parlor: "Elizabeth at first had rather wondered that Charlotte should not prefer the dining parlour for common use; it was a better sized room, and had a pleasanter aspect; but she soon saw that her friend had an excellent reason for what she did, for Mr. Collins would undoubtedly have been much less in his own apartment, had they sat in one equally lively; and she gave Charlotte credit for the arrangement" (*Pride and Prejudice*, II, ch. 7).

The use of itemized domestic description for social "placing," for satire, for special effects of all kinds, was firmly established by the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Long before Dickens lampooned the bourgeois prosperity of the Podsnaps, Susan Ferrier in *Destiny* (1831) impaled the Ribleys, a London couple "whose household gods were all united in one, and that one—comfort," with an inventory of the furnishings of their drawing-room: ". . . with its little serpentine sofas and formal circle of chairs; its small elaborate mirrors, stuck half-way up the wall; its high mantel-piece, decorated with branching girandoles and Dresden shepherds and shepherdesses; its Brussels carpet, with festoons of roses; its small bare satin-wood tables; its tall twin fire-screens, embroidered forty years ago by Mrs. Ribley's own hands; not a vestige of a book or work, or any such lumber was to be seen in this room, appropriate solely to the purpose of sitting in bolt upright. . ." (Ch. 72).

With catalogues and price lists of fashionable London shops and menus of exclusive clubs and dinner parties, Mrs. Gore set her Regency aristocrats and parvenus firmly in their scene. Maria Edgeworth placed her socially ambitious Irish Lady Clonbrony, trying to make an entree into fashionable London society, with the advice of her interior decorator, Mr. Soho, "the first architectural upholsterer of the age": "You fill up your angles here with *encoinières*—round your walls with the *Turkish tent drapery*—a fancy of my own—in apricot cloth, or crimson velvet, suppose, or *en*

flute, in crimson satin draperies, fanned and riched with gold fringes, *en suite*—intermediate spaces, Apollo's heads with gold rays. . ." (*The Absentee*, ch. 2).

Descriptive detail, however, is merely a utility device of the fiction of domestic realism. It serves the needs of the novelist who is seeking to portray a way of life, a milieu in which his characters can move. The impression of family life that stamps itself upon the reader of the pastoral, idyllic opening pages of *The Vicar of Wakefield* is graphic but unreal because the family is not engaged in believable activity. They are described in detail but not in motion. In many late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century family portraits we notice that everyone is either engaged in some appropriate activity or so represented as to suggest his or her identification with specific duties and activities—the mother with a baby in her lap while older children cling to her skirts, the father holding a book or an implement identifying his line of work, the children with balls or toys, sometimes even the family cat ready to pounce on a caged bird or the dog caught silently in the act of yapping.⁹ We have a sense of life arrested, caught in a moment of normal activity and about to resume that activity the moment that the sitting ends. These are not Keats's "Cold Pastoral," frozen in sculpture. Goldsmith himself ridiculed the allegorical posturing of the Vicar's family when they sat stiffly for their family portrait—his wife as Venus "with a stomacher richly set with diamonds and her two little ones as Cupids by her side, while I, in my gown and band, was to present her with books on the Whistonian controversy" (Ch. 16). When he attempted to draw their "life picture," the family was at tea

⁹ See, for example, Hogarth's portrait of the Graham family in the Tate Gallery. Of these paintings in general Mario Praz writes: "In the conversation piece the environment is depicted with an attention to detail no less scrupulous than we find practised in the portrayal of the sitters, and this gives to the picture a *Stimmung*, an intimate feeling which is not shared to an appreciable degree by the group scene, isolated or presented against a summarily indicated background as it is" (*Conversation Pieces*, p. 56).

—engaged, in other words, in ordinary domestic activity: “On these occasions, our two little ones always read for us. . . . Sometimes, to give variety to our amusements, the girls sung to the guitar; and while they thus formed a little concert, my wife and I would stroll down the sloping field that was embellished with bluebells and centaury, talk of our children with rapture, and enjoy the breeze that wafted both health and harmony” (Ch. 5).

These painterly details appear in strikingly similar ways in the nineteenth-century domestic novel. One of the best and most popular domestic novelists, Charlotte Yonge, writing almost a century later than Goldsmith, places her family in nature with more individualized detail but the same painter’s eye for a “conversation piece”—light, sky, a landscape background with laboring farmers, a foreground peopled with her characters, each engaged in some typical action or inaction:

“It was a glorious day in June, the sky of pure deep dazzling blue, the sunshine glowing with brightness, but with cheerful freshness in the air that took away all sultriness, the sun tending westward in his long day’s career, and casting welcome shadows from the tall firs and horse-chestnuts that shaded the lawn. A long rank of haymakers—men and women—proceeded with their rakes, the white shirt-sleeves, straw bonnets, and ruddy faces, radiant in the bath of sunshine, while in the shady end of the field were idler haymakers among the fragrant piles, Charles half lying on grass, with his back against a tall haycock; Mrs. Edmondstone sitting on another, book in hand; Laura sketching the busy scene, the sun glancing through the chequered shade on her glossy curls; Philip stretched out at full length, hat and neck-tie off, luxuriating in the cool repose after a dusty walk from Broadstone; and a little way off, Amabel and Charlotte, pretending to make hay, but really building nests with it, throwing it at each other, and playing as heartily as the heat would allow” (*The Heir of Redclyffe*, ch. 7).