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Saverio Tomaiuolo, *Victorian Unfinished Novels: The Imperfect Page*

Laurence Talairach-Vielmas



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REFERENCES

Saverio Tomaiuolo, *Victorian Unfinished Novels: The Imperfect Page* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 204 p, ISBN 978-1-137-00817-6

- 1 The field of literature abounds with unfinished novels which have often inspired later writers to rewrite the story with a closure. Recently, Dan Simmons's revision of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* in *Drood* (2009) took fans of Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins into the catacombs beneath London, and many neo-Victorian novels are frequently sequels of unfinished Victorian novels. These unfinished novels, however, are seldom examined by literary critics, as Saverio Tomaiuolo's *Victorian Unfinished Novels: The Imperfect Page* argues, proposing therefore to explore the unfinished novels of some of the most popular novelists of the Victorian period. Indeed, Tomaiuolo's *Victorian Unfinished Novels* looks at novels by Charlotte Brontë, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Robert Louis Stevenson, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope and even Henry James, and analyses the texts with as much consideration as if they were the closed textual entities literary critics generally prefer. The task is not easy, especially with Victorian novels which may be characterised by their conventional (happy) endings, the closure of the narrative always providing a teleological vision of the world. So, as Tomaiuolo wonders, how can the literary critic decipher the meaning of the textual blanks and analyse novels which resist closure?
- 2 The introduction opens with Charlotte Brontë's unfinished manuscript, "Emma", which comprised only two chapters and nonetheless inspired many contemporary sequels and radio programmes. It is followed by W. M. Thackeray's *Denis Duval* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (Chapter One). Tomaiuolo looks at links between Thackeray's biography and his unfinished novel, focusing on the significance of

memory in the story, for instance, or explores Thackeray's experiments with other genres, such as the historical romance and the military picaresque. In Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, none of the stereotypes that were generally associated with her writing are missing, even if the novel is peppered with many of the ingredients of the sensation novel. In both novels, Tomaiuolo contends, the writers describe the developments of characters in a fast-changing society and experiment with different literary genres. A study of Charles Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* prolongs the discussion (Chapter Two), Dickens's unfinished novel being particularly known through the manifold sequels and adaptations the novel has inspired since its publication. As Tomaiuolo explains, three parts were published before Dickens's death whilst the remaining three parts were issued by John Forster who ignored Dickens's erasures and thus published a text that may not correspond to what Dickens had initially planned. Still, the novel, though unfinished and characterised by "a paradigm of dissolution and decomposition" (52), is nonetheless shaped by circular patterns. Such a tension between dissolution (textual, moral or bodily) and the structural patterns Tomaiuolo sees in the text may construct the novel as a reflection on form, Tomaiuolo suggests, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* shaking the foundations of the Victorian novel. The study is furthered with an analysis of R. L. Stevenson's *Weir of Hermiston* and *St. Ives* (Chapter Three), two novels which Tomaiuolo sees as reflecting life's chaotic and unpredictable structure—and even, arguably, as anticipating postmodernism. In the last chapter, on Anthony Trollope's *The Landleaguers* and Wilkie Collins's *Blind Love*, Tomaiuolo looks at the themes the writers deal with, from the question of women's roles to the Irish question, contextualising the two late-Victorian unfinished novels.

- 3 It is hard to see why Collins's novel, carefully planned and finished by Walter Besant, is examined alongside Trollope's *The Landleaguers*, just as the reader may find it difficult to find the links which unite Thackeray and Gaskell or understand some of the other comparisons which punctuate the textual analyses. Readers hardly know when they reach the conclusion (on Henry James's *The Sense of The Past*) what the rationale behind the book really was. However, the book does succeed in bringing together texts that critics may consider as "dismissed ... literary fragments" (14). By providing rich plot summaries and foregrounding significant issues in each of the studied novels, Tomaiuolo's book does prompt reflections on what these Victorian unfinished novels revealed about their authors, their society and the evolution of realism throughout the Victorian period.

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Keywords: Victorian literature, Charlotte Brontë, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Henry James, Robert Louis Stevenson, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope
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AUTHORS

LAURENCE TALAIRACH-VIELMAS

Université de Toulouse 2 - Jean Jaures

Professeur

talairac@univ-tlse2.fr