

E.S. Dallas, Mid-Victorian Individualism, and the Form of the Book Review

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So far as E.S. Dallas was remembered at all by twentieth-century scholars, it was as the author of *Poetics* and *The Gay Science*, books that attempt to systematize literary criticism as the study of the psychological mechanisms by which poetry produces pleasure in a reader – books, too, which went virtually unread in Dallas’s lifetime. Only recently has critical discussion of Dallas shifted to his journalism, which was as widely read as the two books of poetic theory were ignored. Over a thirty-year career, Dallas contributed essays on political, social, and literary topics to at least a dozen periodicals, chief among them the *Times*: from the mid-1850s to the mid-1860s he served as the newspaper’s primary obituarist and book reviewer, and was thus one of the most influential figures in the mid-century literary community. George Eliot, writing to her publisher in 1859 about the prospects of *Adam Bede*, suggested that “the best news from London hitherto is that Mr. Dallas is an enthusiastic admirer” (24). Anthony Trollope, generally suspicious of the influence of reviewers, admitted in his *Autobiography* that the *Times*’ 1860 notice of *The West Indies and the Spanish Main* had “made the fortune of the book,” and that Dallas “had done me a greater service than can often be done by one man to another”: Trollope successfully asked £600 for his next novel, a fifty-percent increase over what he had been paid for his previous one (81-82). In 1865 Dickens presented Dallas with the manuscript of *Our Mutual Friend* in gratitude for a laudatory review that had boosted the book’s sales; the following year, mere rumors of a hostile notice from Dallas

prompted Moxon to withdraw Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* from circulation. Dallas's influence over authors, of course, was a result of the power he wielded over readers. Trollope, in a well-known passage from *The Warden*, estimated that forty thousand copies of the *Times* were sold daily, with at least five readers per copy, and suggested that among the newspaper's quarter-million followers, "it is omnipotent. What the Tsar is in Russia, or the mob in America, that the [*Times*] is in England" (56). It was fortunate for mid-Victorian literary taste, Trollope opined in the *Autobiography*, that in his role as the Thunderer's literary critic, Dallas "did better work than has appeared since in the same department" (96).

Scholarship on Dallas's reviews has been slow to develop partly because of the bibliographic problems caused by the anonymity of Victorian journalism. The *Wellesley Index*, for instance, lists only about two dozen pieces by Dallas, most of them summaries of political news written for *Blackwood's* or the *Cornhill*; since it catalogues only quarterlies and monthlies, *Wellesley* sheds no light on Dallas's work for the *Times* or the half-dozen other weeklies and dailies for which he wrote. Most reviews attributed to Dallas have been identified by working backwards from the letters of canonical authors like Eliot, Trollope, and Dickens. But an unpublished dissertation from the 1930s by Francis X. Roellinger uses the *Times*' editorial diaries to identify a more-or-less complete list of work for which Dallas was paid by the paper.¹ The list contains more than 150 reviews: from 1857, when the diaries commence, through 1866, when Dallas left off regular work for the *Times* to write *The Gay Science*, he contributed an average of fifteen a year to the paper. Before 1862, about three-quarters of these were of nonfiction books, mostly history and biography; after 1862, they were more evenly split between nonfiction and fiction, with a handful of reviews of poetry sprinkled in. Roellinger's list thus allows a comprehensive look at a body of work that Trollope thought "omnipotent" at mid-century.

Another reason for the critical neglect of Dallas's journalism is that for much of the twentieth century, book reviews were consulted primarily for their overt commentary on canonical authors. Encountering one of Dallas's

reviews in Routledge's *Critical Heritage* series and reading it for its content can leave one underwhelmed, since many of his opinions are nineteenth-century commonplaces: Tennyson is the greatest Victorian poet, but lacks the epic scale of Milton; Browning is next-best, though too obscure; Dickens is a comedic genius, Thackeray a great prose stylist, George Eliot a brilliant moralist. Since the turn of the millennium, however, several critics have proposed new ways to look at reviews, and provided useful contexts for addressing Dallas's work. Leah Price's *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel*, for instance, argues that reviews are related to abridgments, compilations, expurgations, and extracts, genres whose function is "to represent another text in miniature" (145). She contends that the form of a review – that is, how it chooses to miniaturize the text being reviewed – has important cultural implications for a wide range of issues, such as the way we locate and proportion literary value:

The conventions of the review shaped Victorian assumptions not only about how to read, but about the structure of literary texts. By alternating excerpts with plot summaries, they encouraged readers and writers alike to think of texts as accumulations of freestanding beauties strung together by longer stretches of narrative padding. Reviews defined style – for which only direct quotations could provide evidence – as more absolutely a form of personal property than plot, conventionally summarized in the reviewer's voice. [...] As a result, reviewers privileged the parts, which they were empowered to reproduce verbatim through sampling, over the whole, which they could represent only through their own inauthentic mediation. (139)

Price's word "inauthentic" highlights her further suggestion that Victorian reviewers were uncertain about their own authority. Literary texts may have been more valuable as parts than as wholes, but reviews that consisted mostly of summaries or extracts were only parts, and someone else's parts at that, prompting doubts about "whether a profession devoted to representing other texts can claim an independent voice" (145).

Price quotes several of Dallas's reviews of George Eliot as support for her argument that Victorians privileged the quotable part over the whole, and when sampled individually, much of Dallas's work does indeed seem to conform to the structural conventions of the Victorian review. But Dallas actively chafed under those conventions: as early as 1855, just after his arrival in London, he was complaining to his mentor John Blackwood that "I wish you would oblige me with a hint about these *Times* articles. My paper on *Maud* is the only *critical* one that I have seen for many months. The others are all *narratives* abridged from the books reviewed" (qtd Buurma 120). A comprehensive view of Dallas's work, made possible by Roellinger's bibliography, reveals that he has a complex attitude toward the miniaturization of texts, and that he employs summary differently depending on the genre he is reviewing. Moreover, Dallas generally miniaturizes in an effort to privilege the whole over the part – just the opposite of what Price says was the Victorian norm. The reason for this seems to be that while the proper relationship between the part and the whole is indeed a crucial issue in his work, he is not thinking of that relationship as solely or even primarily a textual matter, as Price does. Dallas uses both the content and the form of his reviews to engage in the public discussion of individualism that was reaching its peak during his tenure with the *Times*: his work provides not only literary advice about the proper structure and proportion of texts, but also ethical advice about how individual people should relate to the social whole that surrounds them.

Dallas's notice of Sir William Napier's *Life and Opinions of General Sir Charles James Napier, G.C.B.*, is a useful starting point, since its structure (apart from its length) is typical of the way Dallas shapes reviews of biographies throughout his career. The initial review, covering the first two volumes of the biography, came in two parts; a third part covering the third and fourth volumes appeared a month later. Each of the three parts runs roughly four columns in the *Times*: the first column of the first part contains general comments about this particular biography and the practice of biography generally; the second column is an overview of Charles Napier's character; and the remaining ten columns are an

abridgment of the biography, beginning with Napier's parentage and ending with his death. The abridgment follows the conventions of the review as described by Price, alternating "plot" summaries and excerpts. Dallas characteristically excerpts fewer and shorter passages than did most Victorian reviewers, which might seem to deviate from what Price describes as their tendency to highlight "freestanding beauties," but he adopts a comparable structural practice, summarizing some stretches of Napier's life quickly, while summarizing important anecdotes in detail. The review privileges textual parts over the whole every time it says something like, "in the incidents of [Napier's] childhood there is nothing very remarkable, and the only circumstance that seems worthy of record is his first appearance in public, which his brother relates with the most imperturbable gravity of style, and which is chiefly memorable as being the unfulfilled programme of his life." The biographer surrounds this half-page anecdote with sixteen and a half pages of fluff; the reviewer excerpts it in order to teach the reader to distinguish the thematically and stylistically important part from the prosaic whole.

But Dallas's appreciation of anecdotes is less a matter of finding a biography's ideal proportions than it is of finding its ideal length, and it is from Dallas's concerns about length that the ethical ramifications of his reviews begin to emerge. The Napier review begins with the assertion that "Sir Charles Napier was a very distinguished General, and Sir William Napier is a very able historian. Nevertheless, the career of the former can scarcely be said to merit a record extending over 2,000 pages." Complaints about the length of life-and-letters-style biographies are common all across the Victorian period, not just in Dallas's reviews. Susan McPherson has argued that they stemmed from concerns about how different classes of readers would respond to textual parts and to wholes: well-educated scholars might find individual letters useful, and understand their relationship to an overarching narrative; but the general reader was likely to find them boring, and to skim uniformly over both trivial details and important anecdotes, thus missing the educational import of a work (49-50). Dallas does offhandedly accuse the Napier biography of being

“written without the slightest regard for the patience of readers and the shortness of human life,” but his real concern is that the length of the book reveals a fundamental imbalance in the Victorian understanding of how the human part relates to the social whole. The first column of the review is a diatribe that runs to almost a thousand words, selections from which will have to suffice:

It cannot have escaped the notice of the most cursory observer that of late years history has been growing more and more biographical in its tendency, while biography has been growing more and more historical in its tone. [...] We have learned to magnify so much the importance of individuals that there is scarcely a memoir published now-a-days in which the subject is not regarded as of national interest. If he voted at a county election, he is supposed to have powerfully assisted in carrying the Reform Bill – hence a chapter on rotten boroughs and corruption generally; if he doffed his hat in the streets to George IV., he is supposed to have had a powerful influence in checking rebellion – hence an edifying dissertation on the balance of the three estates. Now, while by a process of this kind history has been very much bettered, it is by no means clear that biography has been equally benefited. [...] We are not disposed to underrate the importance of individuals, but really in this world of ours there are differences of degree that ought to be observed, and it is the height of absurdity, because the action of every unit of a nation or a party tells upon the total result, to insist on tracing that action through all its ramifications. [...] But to a labour of this kind biography is tending more and more in every department, although most glaringly in those religious memoirs which are at present, in consequence of their number, the most important section of our biographical literature. A Dissenting grocer, who makes money and

extends his operations till he is regarded as a marvel by the countryside, has his life written in the most high-flown style as the pattern of a British and Christian merchant; a sickly undergraduate who never does anything, but makes up for his nothingness by writing in his diary all his good intentions, is paraded before the world as a favourable specimen of the earnest and evangelical student; and so we may go through the whole list. [...] Hence, not he who is the greatest man or who has performed the greatest exploits, but he who has written most, gets the longest biography; so that while the "Life of Nelson" is complete in a small pocket volume, when the life of Admiral Napier comes to be written, it will be in not less than six huge tomes, fit only for the shelves of the British Museum.

Dallas felt that the Napiers egregiously overvalued their importance to British history and culture, but the passage clearly conveys his opinion that rampant individualism is not the unique failing of one particular family. It should be no surprise, then, that close echoes of this passage show up in several of his other reviews (see, for example, "Curren Bell" and "*Plutarch's Lives*"). Nor is individualism merely a literary problem limited to professional biographers who overvalue their subjects: the unseemly length of a life-and-letters biography is only possible, after all, because every ordinary subject – from a Dissenting grocer to a sickly undergraduate – overvalues himself, using diaries and memoranda and epistles to record every moment of his existence instead of actually doing something that might warrant recording.

Dallas discusses individualism most directly in an essay on popular literature that he contributed to *Blackwood's* in 1859. He argues there that pamphlets and tracts nominally produced by polemical organizations are really the expression of eccentric individuals, and offers the example of a hypothetical Mr. Hare, who makes up his mind that fishing is cruel, starts an organization for the suppression of the same, gathers a few followers by offering them important-sounding chairs, attracts a few more who want

to be seen with the chairs for snobbish reasons, calls meetings, publishes minutes and tracts and petitions, and finally makes himself enough of a nuisance that Parliament agrees to consider the abolition of fishing. Dallas concludes:

The power which an estimable, good-for-nothing, little man [...] with quick, sharp walk, low forehead, and wiry face, talking eternally, and, with every word he utters, sending a spray of saliva from his mouth, which lights on the page before him or defiles the countenance of his listener, while the wretch is quite unconscious of the disaster – the power, we say, which he is enabled to acquire through the medium of associations, is one of the strangest phenomena of our time. (520)

He notes that several Victorian sages had recently addressed this phenomenon, but suggests that his take on it differs from both Carlyle's and Mill's. Carlyle scorns associations, but does so because he thinks they crowd out heroic individualism; Dallas scorns them because he sees them as a prime expression of individualism, which is not heroic but diseased. He is even further from the values of *On Liberty*, published just a few months before the *Blackwood's* essay, than from those of *Heroes and Hero-Worship*: the eccentric individual voice that Mill wants to preserve is precisely what Dallas would like to marginalize or suppress. Dallas's position is remarkably similar, in fact, to the one Arnold would shortly take up in *Culture and Anarchy*, where the Philistine insistence on "doing as one likes" disrupts the balance of the social whole; the parable about Mr. Hare is a forerunner of Arnold's complaint that issues of wide cultural import were constantly being overshadowed by private bills proposing that a man be allowed to marry his deceased wife's sister.

And like Arnold, whose critical effort "to see the object as in itself it really is" is more an attempt to find cultural balance than textual proportion, Dallas wanted to use his writing to help rein in what he saw as the rampant individualism of mid-Victorian Britain. The internal proportions of his miniaturization of the Napier biography are less important to him than the

fact that the twelve columns he gives Napier bear the same proportions to Nelson's "small pocket volume" that Napier's importance to the country bears to Nelson's. Never again would Dallas allow even that much space to the review of a biography; his notices get shorter the longer he writes for the *Times*. It is telling that the biography he reviews most enthusiastically is Samuel Smiles' "little book," *Industrial Biography*—one of those patented anthologies in which Smiles gives major figures several chapters and minor figures several pages, but gives no one the four-volume life-and-letters treatment.

Comparing Dallas to Victorian sages brings us back to Price's assertion that book reviewers often wondered whether their job representing other texts was compatible with an independent voice. The Napier piece exemplifies other features of Dallas's miniaturizations of biographies which seem designed to justify a claim to that voice. For the first two columns, the article is clearly a review of a recent text, containing statements like, "the pen of the historian [...] has produced a work chiefly remarkable for combining all the faults which a biographer can possibly commit." Once Dallas starts to abridge, however, the essay reads much more like a summary of Charles Napier's life than of William Napier's book: the prose focuses on the biographical subject, and references to "historians" or "works" or "biographers" largely drop away. This occurs even when Dallas's only knowledge of a subject could have come from the book he was reviewing. Long stretches of his notice of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* narrate, as if first-hand, events from Brontë's private life that simply were not known before the publication of Gaskell's book. The very titles of Dallas's reviews further blur the extent to which they represent other texts. Except for a trailing asterisk linking to a bibliographic footnote at the bottom of the first column, the *Times* formatted the titles of reviews exactly like the titles of other articles; it thus becomes difficult to know whether to read a title as "*General Sir Charles James Napier*," which would signify that the essay is a secondary representation of a primary text by that name, or as "General Sir Charles James Napier," which would situate the piece as itself a primary text on

that figure. The latter reading, in fact, makes Dallas's reviews of biographies initially indistinguishable from the obituaries which were his other major contribution to the *Times*; it frames those reviews not as judgments of other texts, but as better-proportioned alternatives to them. An anonymous journalist who aligned himself with Victorian sages and felt it his responsibility to help correct a monstrous individualism needed the independent voice that Price argues book-reviewing lacked; obscuring the very genre of the review could thus help Dallas justify his claim to an important ethical function.

Dallas says in his notice of Smiles that "novels are but fictitious biography," so it is surprising to find that he gives his reviews of fiction a somewhat different shape than he gives his reviews of biography, and assumes, along with the new shape, a modified voice and a modified ethical function. Rachel Sagner Buurma has shown that for the most part Dallas's reviews of fiction avoid long plot summaries, which "seemed likely to transform the review into a failed repetition of the novel's form" (520). She assumes, however, that Dallas was striving for formal innovation as a good in itself, and that for him, any repetition would be a failed one; this is clearly not the case in his reviews of biographies, which use miniaturization to create improved repetitions of other texts. If Dallas's reviews of fiction avoid wholesale reproduction, it may be because he saw novels as formally adequate examples of balancing the individual with the social whole, and did not feel the need to improve them, as he did biographies.

The practice of summarizing novels became a subject of public discussion in 1860, when Wilkie Collins, in the preface to *The Woman in White*, asked that reviewers not spoil the book's plot in their notices of it. Dallas openly addressed this request in his review, agreeing that "on the whole, Mr. Wilkie Collins is right in protesting against the ordinary method of reviewing novels, the greater part of the review being devoted to an abridgment of the story. Nobody cares for the abridgment; and, if the story is a good one, the abridgment may be unjust both to author and reader." But he immediately qualifies his assent, saying, "yet not so

[unjust] as Mr. Wilkie Collins supposes. [...] The framework of the story is of comparatively small interest. A critic might, in nine cases out of ten, give the leading points without sensibly affecting the pleasure which a reader takes in the more detailed account of the novelist." Dallas's qualification hinges on a subtle but important disagreement about the definition and function of story. Collins is thinking of plot temporally, as something that can be spoiled if a reviewer reveals the end of a story before a reader begins it. Dallas, on the other hand, seems to be thinking of plot spatially, as something which is always grasped whole, but which can be represented in miniature with only leading points or in full as a more detailed account. Given Dallas's preference for miniaturized biographies, it sounds strange to hear him say that the abridgment of a novel is of "comparatively small interest." An explanation might start with the idea that while a temporal plot connects events, a spatial plot connects characters – and novels (particularly mid-Victorian novels) contain many characters, whereas biographies typically focus on one.

Dallas always approaches novels primarily as collections of characters. This can occasionally lead to unusual readings, as, for example, when he calls *Great Expectations* Dickens' most Pickwickian novel in years, a book with a loose story but a gloriously extravagant cast of characters. His review shows virtually no interest in Pip or understanding of the novel as a *Bildungsroman* that traces the development of its protagonist through time. It focuses instead on supporting figures – Joe, Pumblechook, Wemmick, Magwitch, Wopsle, and Georgiana Pocket – and represents the novel as an almost picaresque collection of static characters distributed through space. Dallas loved *Adam Bede*'s ensemble cast: "the minor sketches are superabundant; they crowd the canvass. We have not here one great and real character in the midst of a mob of lay figures. The subordinate personages are in their way quite as well pictured as the leading ones." Collins, by contrast, he condemned not only for a lack of skill in drawing characters, but also for an ethical failure to balance them. The preface to *The Woman in White* boasts of the novel's innovative structure, which has various narrators contributing first-person

perspectives that together form a whole. Dallas objects that the technique is a cheat because Collins respects neither characters nor the relationships between them: one character with a bad memory remembers important information while another with a good memory forgets it; the hero and the villain, whose interests are diametrically opposed, produce narratives that dovetail precisely. “There is no reason for all this,” Dallas argues, “but the will of the author, who usurps a somewhat tyrannical sway over both characters and incidents.” Mill had popularized the phrase “the tyranny of the majority” the previous year in *On Liberty*; Dallas is accusing Collins of “tyranny of the individual,” and calling his novel a failure as a result.

Successful novels depict a well-proportioned social whole, and thus need to be represented differently than biographies, which privilege the individual. The reviews of *Adam Bede* and *Great Expectations* exemplify the shape Dallas most often adopts when writing about fiction. He begins, as he does his reviews of biographies, with a column of general comments about the author and the genre. But instead of making the remainder of the essay a long summary, he gives only a short one (thirteen sentences for *Adam Bede*, nine for *Great Expectations*), then devotes the majority of his space to an analysis of various characters, copiously illustrated with extracts. The sole function of the plot summary is to give readers a framework for understanding the subsequent discussion of the characters. Dallas’s summaries of novels are magnitudes of order shorter than his summaries of biographies – but not because the ethical need to shorten novels is greater. Quite the reverse: Dallas seems to feel that while miniaturization is a good way to represent a single individual, it can only problematically represent a social whole, and may as well be avoided as far as possible. Pip’s story can be adequately conveyed by a nine-sentence summary of *Great Expectations*, but Dallas says in his discussion of the novel’s supporting cast that “to enjoy these characters, the story itself must be read.”

The review of *Adam Bede* helps explain why Dallas felt that “the framework of the story” is of less value than “the more detailed account of the novelist,” whereas the reverse is true of biographies. He argues that

George Eliot's theme is "that we are all alike, that our natures are the same, and that there is not the mighty difference which is usually assumed between high and low, rich and poor, the fool and the sage, the best of us and the worst of us." Only "matured minds," he continues, learn to see past the surface differences that mark us as individuals; "it is only after much beating about, long intercourse with society, and many strange discoveries and detections, that the truism which we never doubted becomes a great reality to us, and we feel that man is like to man even as face answers to face in a glass." The ramifications of this idea for the subject of textual abridgment are significant. As a reviewer of biographies, Dallas can use miniaturization to represent a text because even a brief account will be sufficient for most readers to grasp what makes its single subject unique. As a reviewer of novels, however, he faces a conundrum. He can try to represent a novel's social whole by devoting the majority of his review to a discussion of multiple characters – but the more characters he tries to cover in the limited space available to him, the less room each will get, and the more likely it becomes that readers will understand only what distinguishes one character from another, rather than what connects him to the whole. A review can effectively stand in for a biography; it can never adequately replace a novel. Approached from this perspective, Dallas's work runs quite counter to Price's assertion that Victorian reviews "encouraged readers and writers alike to think of texts as accumulations of freestanding beauties strung together by longer stretches of narrative padding" (139). The extracts that Price sees as the privileged parts of Victorian novels are in Dallas's opinion precisely those parts that, through their very concision, misleadingly represent characters as distinct individuals rather than as parts of a well-proportioned whole. Price's assertion that "narrative padding" could only be inauthentically represented by reviewers is one with which Dallas would readily agree, but she sees those parts as being devalued by Victorian reviews, whereas Dallas thought it was only through the experience of "longer stretches of narrative" that readers could, over time, appreciate a novel's vision of a social whole and absorb its ethical truth.

Dallas's belief that the reviewer could never match the novelist on his own ground means that he assumes a different voice in his reviews of fiction than he does in his notices of biographies. When writing on novels, he tries to claim an independent voice not by competing with the authors he is reviewing, but by taking a cue from comparative anatomy, philology, and mythology – fields that, he felt, revealed that “in all alike, the more we examine and the more we know, may be found a radical identity of speech, similarity of traditions, customs, beliefs, and a unity of character” (“*Tales from the Norse*”). A review discussing just one author was like a biography written on just one subject; it created “a despotism of taste,” as Dallas put it in a piece on Tennyson. A review that used its initial column to set an individual work in context, however, could match the novel's ethical function without trying to repeat its form. Thus almost a third of the review of *Adam Bede* is devoted to comparing George Eliot to Thackeray; more than half of the review of *Great Expectations* is spent situating that book first in Dickens' career, and then in a constellation of serial novels. And to offset the tendency of the short form to highlight surface differences rather than underlying unity, Dallas overtly references earlier reviews in later ones: when arguing, for instance, that a core idea of *The Virginians* is that “we are all alike,” he reminds his readers that “it has already been shown in these columns,” eight months before, that the same theme was central to *Adam Bede*. Readers who followed Dallas through ten years' worth of reviews for the *Times* might thus, through long intercourse with his entire body of work, become matured minds able to appreciate the great truth of unity. The reviewer could thus maintain a voice independent from the novelist while working toward a goal they shared: helping the mid-Victorian public focus less on the individual part than on a well-proportioned collective whole.

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Note

¹ The diaries begin two years after Dallas started writing for the *Times*, so his earliest contributions to the paper are still largely

unidentifiable. The diaries probably contain other omissions: a handful of reviews (like those of *All the Year Round*'s Christmas numbers for 1863, 1864, and 1865) have reasonably been attributed to Dallas, but do not appear in Roellinger's list.

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