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THE EVOLUTION OF ARTISTIC PSYCHOLOGISM IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE: FROM DICKENS TO HENRY JAMES

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ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: This article investigates the evolution of artistic psychologism in Victorian literature, tracing its development from the early social-behavioural psychologism of Charles Dickens through the moral-analytical psychologism of George Eliot and the atmospheric interiority of Charlotte Bronte, to the refined central-consciousness technique of Henry James. The study argues that this evolution is not a linear progression but a complex, multi-directional process shaped by sociocultural, scientific, and philosophical transformations of the Victorian era. Drawing on close reading and comparative-typological analysis of representative works including Great Expectations, Middlemarch, Jane Eyre, and The Portrait of a Lady, the article identifies four distinct phases in the development of psychologism: the social-external phase, the moral-analytical phase, the atmospheric-symbolic phase, and the cognitive-perspectival phase. Each phase is defined by a characteristic set of narrative techniques, authorial strategies, and philosophical assumptions about the nature of individual consciousness. The findings demonstrate that Victorian psychologism

constitutes a unified but internally differentiated literary phenomenon, and that its evolution anticipates the stream-of-consciousness experiments of literary modernism. The article contributes to the comparative study of English literary history and offers a typological framework applicable to the analysis of psychologism across literary traditions.

Introduction. The Victorian era (1837-1901) produced one of the most remarkable transformations in the history of English literary art: the emergence and systematic deepening of artistic psychologism as a dominant narrative mode. In the space of six decades, the English novel moved from a literature primarily concerned with the social surface of human behavior to one capable of rendering the finest gradations of inner experience, moral conflict, and the unconscious workings of the mind. This transformation was not the achievement of a single author or movement; it was the cumulative result of a series of creative breakthroughs distributed across the careers of the major Victorian novelists.

The concept of artistic psychologism, understood as the systematic and technically mediated representation of a character's inner life, has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry. In the Russian tradition of literary studies, the foundational theoretical work was done by A. B. Yesin [1], who defined psychologism as the totality of artistic means directed toward the depiction of the inner world, and distinguished between direct, indirect, and summarised forms of psychological representation. In the Anglo-American tradition, the problem has been approached from different angles: J. Hillis Miller [2] analysed the formal properties of Victorian narrative consciousness; W. J. Harvey [3] examined the ethical dimensions of Victorian characterisation; and N. Dames [4] situated the psychological novel within the history of nineteenth-century psychological science.

What is less well theorised, however, is the evolutionary dimension of Victorian psychologism: the question of how and why the dominant techniques and philosophical assumptions of psychological writing changed across the period, and what internal logic, if any, governs this change. Existing accounts tend either to treat individual authors in isolation or to offer broad periodisations that do not attend to the specific transformations in narrative technique. The present article addresses this gap by proposing a four-phase model of the evolution of artistic psychologism in Victorian literature, grounded in comparative-typological analysis of representative works.

The aim of the study is to trace the trajectory of artistic psychologism from its early social-behavioural manifestations in the fiction of Charles Dickens to its most refined cognitive-perspectival form in the late novels of Henry James. The specific objectives are: to identify the defining characteristics of each phase; to analyse the representative narrative techniques associated with each phase; to examine the relationship between each phase and the broader sociocultural context; and to assess the contribution of the Victorian evolution of psychologism to the development of modernist fiction.

The methodological foundation of the study combines the historical-literary method, comparative-typological analysis, and close reading. The primary material consists of Great Expectations (1861) and Dombey and Son (1848) by Dickens; Middlemarch (1871-72) and The Mill on the Floss (1860) by Eliot; Jane Eyre (1847) and Villette (1853) by Bronte; and The Portrait of a Lady (1881) and The Wings of the Dove (1902) by James.

Materials and methods. The theoretical framework of this study draws on three intersecting bodies of scholarship. The first is the theory of artistic psychologism as developed in literary studies. Following Yesin [1], psychologism is understood as a compositional principle rather than a simple thematic concern: it involves not merely the presence of psychological content but the systematic subordination of narrative structure, point of view, imagery, and temporal organisation to the goal of rendering inner life. This distinction allows for a more precise typological analysis than approaches that treat any attention to character interiority as evidence of psychologism.

The second body of scholarship concerns the narrative theory of the Victorian novel. Miller's account of the novel's 'will to know' [2] provides a productive framework for understanding how omniscient narration functions as a form of psychological penetration. Genette's narratological categories [5], particularly the distinction between diegetic levels and modes of focalisation, are employed to analyse shifts in narrative point of view across the four phases. The concept of free indirect discourse, as theorised by Banfield [6] and Pascal [7], is central to the analysis of how Victorian authors moved from external to internal representation of consciousness.

The third body of scholarship concerns the relationship between Victorian literature and Victorian science. Dames [4] has demonstrated the direct connections between associationist psychology, as developed by Bain and Spencer, and Victorian narrative technique. The present study extends this line of inquiry by tracing how changing models of the mind, from associationism through evolutionary psychology to the proto-phenomenological psychology of William James [8], are reflected in successive phases of literary psychologism.

The comparative-typological method is applied to a corpus of eight novels drawn from four authors whose careers span the full arc of the Victorian period. For each novel, close reading is applied to selected passages of psychological representation, with attention to the following analytical categories: the mode of access to character consciousness (direct interior monologue, free indirect discourse, authorial summary, or behavioural inference); the temporal organisation of psychological representation (whether inner life is presented as a sequence, a simultaneous field, or a stream); the relationship between psychological representation and narrative authority (whether the narrator claims privileged access to consciousness or presents it as opaque and inferential); and the philosophical model of selfhood implicitly operative in the text.

These analytical categories enable a systematic comparison across authors and phases, and provide the basis for the four-phase typology proposed in the findings. The typology is not intended as a rigid scheme but as a heuristic framework that captures the dominant tendencies of each phase while acknowledging the complexity and overlap that characterise any historical literary development.

Result and discussion. The comparative analysis of the primary corpus yields a four-phase model of the evolution of artistic psychologism in Victorian literature. Each phase is characterised by a distinctive configuration of narrative techniques, a specific model of selfhood, and a particular relationship between the individual consciousness and the social world.

Phase One: Social-Behavioural Psychologism in the Early and Middle Dickens (1840s-1860s). The psychologism of Charles Dickens represents the starting point of the Victorian evolution, and it is a psychologism that operates primarily at the surface of consciousness. In the early and middle novels, psychological depth is achieved less through direct rendering of inner experience than through the accumulation of external detail: the physiognomic description of faces, the symbolic attribution of qualities to objects and environments, and the recording of habitual behaviour as a code of character. The Dickensian narrator claims omniscient authority over character psychology, but this authority is exercised through a kind of moral reading of surfaces rather than through the penetration of interiority.

In Dombey and Son, the inner life of the proud merchant is rendered through the imagery of coldness and rigidity that pervades both his physical environment and his social demeanour. The famous description of his counting-house as a space where warmth is structurally excluded functions as a psychological portrait: the architecture externalises the

character's affective incapacity. The technique is powerful, but it operates by displacement rather than direct access: the reader infers the inner state from its outward correlatives. [9]

Great Expectations marks a significant advance within the Dickensian mode. The first-person retrospective narration of Pip introduces a temporal complexity that is absent from the earlier novels: the narrating Pip looks back on the experiencing Pip with ironic awareness, creating a split in narrative consciousness that allows for a form of psychological self-analysis. The famous opening scene on the marshes, in which the child Pip encounters Magwitch, is rendered with a precision of emotional texture that goes beyond the behavioural surface: the terror, the moral shock, the strange compound of guilt and sympathy are registered with a directness that anticipates later modes of interior representation. [10] However, even here the psychologism remains largely retrospective and social in orientation: the inner life is interesting above all as the site where social pressures are registered and processed, and the primary analytical framework is moral rather than cognitive.

Phase Two: Moral-Analytical Psychologism in George Eliot (1860s-1870s). The psychologism of George Eliot represents a decisive qualitative advance. What distinguishes Eliot's psychological writing from Dickens's is, above all, the nature of the narrator's claim to knowledge. Where the Dickensian narrator reads character from the outside, the Eliotic narrator penetrates directly into the interior, offering sustained analytical commentary on the workings of motive, self-deception, and moral development. This penetration is backed by an explicitly philosophical framework: Eliot's fiction engages directly with associationist psychology, evolutionary ethics, and the positivist tradition, and her narrative technique reflects this theoretical investment.

In The Mill on the Floss, the psychological portrayal of Maggie Tulliver is organised around the conflict between passionate impulse and moral duty, rendered through extended passages of analytical narration that decompose the character's inner experience into its motivational components. The narrator's voice is authoritative and analytic, but it is also empathetic: Eliot's great achievement is to combine the precision of psychological analysis with the warmth of moral understanding. [3] The technique of free indirect discourse, already present in Dickens, is developed by Eliot into a far more supple instrument: the boundary between narrator's analysis and character's experience becomes productively blurred, allowing the reader to inhabit the character's consciousness while remaining aware of its limitations.

Middlemarch represents the summit of the moral-analytical phase. The famous passage in which Dorothea Brooke, returning from Rome, looks out of her carriage window at the world

she had thought to reform, and recognises the gap between her ideals and her actual situation, is one of the great moments of Victorian psychological analysis. The narrator's commentary moves fluidly between direct statement of psychological fact, free indirect rendition of Dorothea's inner voice, and philosophical reflection on the general conditions of human self-knowledge. [11] The technique here is what Miller calls the omniscient narrator's 'will to know': the claim to have full access to the character's inner life and to be able to render it with analytic completeness.

Phase Three: Atmospheric-Symbolic Psychologism in Charlotte Bronte (1840s-1850s). The psychologism of Charlotte Bronte develops in a different direction from Eliot's. Where Eliot's is primarily analytical and discursive, Bronte's is atmospheric and symbolic: inner life is rendered not through direct analysis but through the affective charge of the physical environment. This technique, which Rashidova [12] has identified as the defining feature of Bronte's artistic style, transforms landscape and setting into a system of psychological signs, where the state of the weather, the quality of light, and the character of architectural space encode the emotional and moral condition of the protagonist.

In Jane Eyre, the famous red room scene, in which the child Jane is locked in punishment, achieves its psychological intensity through the symbolic loading of the physical space: the red curtains, the white counterpane, the locked door, and above all the mirror that reflects Jane's own image back at her as a ghostly other. The scene does not analyse Jane's terror; it enacts it through the accumulation of symbolic detail. [13] The technique is closer to poetry than to the analytical prose of Eliot: it works by creating a sensory and emotional atmosphere that the reader inhabits rather than observing from the outside.

In Villette, this technique reaches its fullest development. Lucy Snowe's psychological isolation in the alien city is rendered through a sustained atmospheric symbolism in which fog, moonlight, enclosed gardens, and the contrast between interior warmth and exterior cold become the grammar of a psychological language. The famous scene in which Lucy, alone in the empty school during the long vacation, is brought to the edge of nervous collapse, achieves its effect through the accumulation of environmental detail: the silence, the heat, the strange light, the absence of human presence. [14] The technique anticipates the impressionist interior monologue of the modernists in its refusal of analytic explanation in favour of direct sensory and emotional impression.

Phase Four: Cognitive-Perspectival Psychologism in Henry James (1880s-1900s). The psychologism of Henry James represents the most technically refined phase of the Victorian evolution and the one that most directly anticipates the innovations of literary modernism.

What distinguishes James's psychological writing from all three preceding phases is its systematic organisation around the concept of point of view. In the Jamesian novel, the story is not told by an omniscient narrator who has privileged access to all characters' inner lives; it is focalized through the consciousness of a single central character, whose perceptions, interpretations, and misunderstandings become the primary medium through which events are rendered.

This shift from omniscient narration to limited focalisation has profound consequences for the representation of consciousness. In Eliot, the narrator can tell us what a character thinks and feels with analytic completeness; in James, we can only know what the central consciousness perceives, and the reliability of these perceptions is always in question. The result is a psychologism that is simultaneously more intimate and more epistemologically uncertain than anything in the preceding phases: we are inside a consciousness, but we cannot step outside it to verify what we see. [2]

In The Portrait of a Lady, the central consciousness technique is applied to Isabel Archer with extraordinary subtlety. The famous Chapter 42, in which Isabel sits alone by the fire reviewing her situation, is often cited as one of the most technically accomplished passages in Victorian fiction. James himself described it as a 'representation simply of her motionlessly seeing' [15], and the technique is precisely that: the entire chapter is organised as an act of perception and interpretation, with no external events and no authorial analysis, only the movement of Isabel's mind as it confronts the reality of her situation. The passage anticipates the interior monologue of Joyce and Woolf not only in its method but in its philosophical implications: consciousness is here not a transparent window on reality but an active, constructive, fallible process of interpretation.

The Wings of the Dove pushes the cognitive-perspectival technique even further. The narrative is organized as a sequence of limited perspectives, each of which reveals a different facet of the central situation without any authoritative synthesis. The result is a kind of perspectival relativity in which psychological truth is always partial, always mediated, always dependent on the position of the observing consciousness. This is a long way from the behavioural surfaces of the early Dickens, and it is also a long way from the analytic confidence of Eliot: it is, in effect, a proto-modernist epistemology of consciousness. [4]

The four-phase model proposed here reveals several important features of the Victorian evolution of psychologism. First, the evolution is not simply a progression from simple to complex or from external to internal: each phase develops a specific form of psychological representation that has its own strengths and that addresses different aspects of inner

experience. The atmospheric symbolism of Bronte is not less sophisticated than the analytical prose of Eliot; it is differently sophisticated, addressing dimensions of experience that analytic prose cannot easily reach. Second, the evolution involves a progressive questioning of narrative authority: from the confident omniscience of Dickens and Eliot, through the empathetic but still authoritative narration of Bronte, to the radically limited perspective of James, there is a consistent movement toward greater epistemological modesty about the narrator's access to consciousness. Third, the evolution is driven not only by literary influences but by the broader intellectual culture of the period: the development of psychological science, the crisis of religious certainty, and the transformation of philosophical models of selfhood all find direct reflection in the successive phases of literary psychologism.

Conclusion. The present study has traced the evolution of artistic psychologism in Victorian literature through four distinct but interconnected phases, from the social-behavioural mode of Dickens to the cognitive-perspectival mode of Henry James. The analysis demonstrates that this evolution constitutes one of the most significant developments in the history of English literary art, and that it cannot be adequately understood by focusing on individual authors in isolation.

The four-phase typology proposed here, comprising the social-behavioural phase, the moral-analytical phase, the atmospheric-symbolic phase, and the cognitive-perspectival phase, provides a framework for understanding the internal logic of this evolution. Each phase is defined by a characteristic set of narrative techniques, a specific philosophical model of selfhood, and a particular relationship between the individual consciousness and the social world. The progression from phase to phase involves not simply an increase in psychological depth or complexity but a systematic transformation of the narrator's epistemological relationship to the consciousness being represented.

The most significant general finding is that Victorian psychologism is a unified but internally differentiated literary phenomenon. The differences between Dickens, Eliot, Bronte, and James are not differences of degree but differences of kind: each author develops a distinctive mode of psychological representation that reflects a different understanding of what consciousness is, how it can be known, and what its relationship to language and narrative is. Together, these modes constitute a comprehensive exploration of the possibilities of psychological representation in prose fiction.

The study also confirms that the Victorian evolution of psychologism directly anticipates the innovations of literary modernism. The cognitive-perspectival technique of James, with its limited focalisation, its epistemological uncertainty, and its refusal of authoritative

psychological synthesis, prefigures the stream-of-consciousness method of Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner. Victorian psychologism is not a precursor to modernism but its immediate foundation.

The findings have implications for the comparative study of literary traditions. The typological framework developed here is applicable beyond the English literary tradition: the four phases identified in Victorian fiction can serve as a comparative baseline for the analysis of psychologism in other national literary traditions, including Russian literature of the same period. A productive direction for future research is a systematic comparison of the Victorian and Russian traditions of psychologism, both of which undergo significant parallel development in the second half of the nineteenth century, and both of which contribute foundational techniques to the modernist literature of the early twentieth century.

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