



# The Poetics of Poesis: The Making of Nineteenth-Century English Fiction

By Felicia Bonaparte

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Examining novels written in nineteenth-century England and throughout most of the West, as well as philosophical essays on the conception of fictional form, Felicia Bonaparte sees the novel in this period not as the continuation of eighteenth-century "realism," as has commonly been assumed, but as a genre unto itself. Determined to address the crises in religion and philosophy that had shattered the foundations by which the past had been sustained, novelists of the nineteenth century felt they had no real alternative but to make the world anew.

Finding in the new ideas of the early German Romantics a theory precisely designed for the remaking of the world, these novelists accepted Friedrich Schlegel's challenge to create a form that would render such a remaking possible. They spoke of their theory as *poesis*, etymologically "a making," to distinguish it from the mimesis associated with "realism." Its purpose, however, was not only to embody, as George Eliot put it in *Middlemarch*, "the idealistic in the real," giving as faithful an account of the real as observation can yield, but also to embody in that conception of the real a discussion of ideas that are its "symbolic signification," as Edward Bulwer-Lytton described it in one of his essays. It was to carry this double meaning that the nineteenth-century novelist created, Bonaparte concludes, the language of mythical symbolism that came to be the norm for this form, and she argues that it is in this doubled language that nineteenth-century fiction must be read.

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**Bibliography**

- Rank: #3006202 in eBooks
- Published on: 2016-01-11
- Released on: 2016-01-11
- Format: Kindle eBook

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Prodigious in scholarship, allusion, reading, and suggestiveness, *The Poetics of Poesis* aims to do nothing less than offer a new reading of the nineteenth-century English novel. This is an original and substantial contribution to the study of the nineteenth-century novel and indeed to understanding the history of the novel in this period. Bonaparte's scholarship is amazing. She explains the difficult German writers, not to mention Kant and Hume, with an ease coming from her mastery of these texts and her enthusiasm to communicate her argument.

(Barry Qualls, Rutgers University, author of *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction: The Novel as Book of Life*)

Clearly the result of many years of reading, thinking, teaching, and writing about this immense body of material, *The Poetics of Poesis* is quite extraordinary. Brilliantly original and strikingly learned.

(J. Hillis Miller, University of California, Irvine, author of *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James*)

#### About the Author

Felicia Bonaparte, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the City University of New York, is the author of *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester: The Life of Mrs. Gaskell's Demon* (Virginia).

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