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Review of Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction.*

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Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998. i-iv + 254 pp. ISBN 0253212499 (paperback).

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Patrick Brantlinger's *The Reading Lesson* considers the questionable cultural capital of the novel in the nineteenth-century alongside the concept of mass literacy. He opens the book noting that "the often vehement opposition to novels and novel-reading, a widespread reaction to one of the earliest forms of modern, commodified mass culture, is familiar, well-charted territory. Less familiar is how that opposition affected novels—how, indeed criticisms of novels and novel-reading were inscribed in novels themselves in many ironic, contradictory ways" (2).

The Reading Lesson succeeds in charting this less familiar territory. In fact, Brantlinger claims that it is neither the canonizers of Victorian novels nor the "demystifying critics who treat [great novels] as versions either of Foucault's panopticism or of Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses" who have the greatest insight into Victorian novels (21). Rather, it is the novelists themselves who can best theorize the "destabilizing, perhaps demoralizing, tendencies of fiction" (21). This quotation shows Brantlinger's bent toward a literary history that recovers the projects of novelists. In place of a postmodern approach, he returns to the approaches and concerns of the novels' authors as the best place to begin his readings. His work spotlights anti-novel moments within a vast number of nineteenth-century novels, giving center stage to anxiety about the novel form and about the anti-progressive effects of literacy. Specifically, Brantlinger examines the rise of popular press novels directed at the working classes—such as Newgate crime fiction and Penny Dreadfuls. He also shows middle-class anxiety over misreading/misinterpreting printed material, which serves as a commonplace plot device in much mid-century detective/sensation fiction. *The Reading Lesson* will be particularly welcome to scholars who research comparative literature in the nineteenth century because Brantlinger ties the concerns of literary aesthetics to the social construction of readership, thereby making the claim that mass literacy *shapes* the content of the Victorian novel. Brantlinger explores the novel as a politically volatile form—starting with the English Gothic novel's reaction to the French Revolution.

This book provides an interesting overview of post-Marxist approaches to the novel and readership in Victorian England. Brantlinger's representation of both primary nineteenth-century texts and secondary research in the field is astonishingly comprehensive. Of special note for those approaching this book from a comparativist perspective is Brantlinger's use of post-Marxist and psychoanalytic approaches, in addition to his focus on the anxiety and ambivalence of the novelists he studies. The success of this method can be found in chapter six, "Cashing in on the Real in Thackeray and Trollope," where the concept of "realism" is placed between formal and post-structuralist approaches (for example, that of Jean Joseph Goux) to reveal its duplicitous lack of representing the real (or dangerous reality-challenged status) in a thought-provoking and complex way. He speaks at length in this chapter about the truth-claims of the written word and what happens when printed documents, such as newspapers, misrepresent the truth. He discusses, via an engaging reading of Žižek in "Novel Sensations of the 1860s," the way that sensation fiction of the 1860s prefigures psychoanalysis (161) and conflates pornography and surveillance.

Brantlinger presents a novel consumer who can simultaneously celebrate, identify with, and judge criminality in his or her reading.

Brantlinger has organized *The Reading Lesson* in nine chapters that move chronologically through the nineteenth century. The first historical and generic thematic Brantlinger takes up is the Gothic novel and the fear that the English masses, if literate, would follow the example of the neighboring French masses. After the introductory chapter on the trope of the poisonous book in the nineteenth century (specifically that the reading of fiction would poison the working classes and more generally lead to the "decay of culture and society" [24]), Brantlinger provides a chapter on "Gothic Toxins" (his term for the art in question), set against the 1790s backdrop of Jacobins and the French Revolution, followed by the third chapter, "The Reading Monster." Here, a close reading of *Frankenstein* is surrounded by inquiries into Hobbes, Carlyle, *Mary Barton*, and many other sources commenting upon the perceived monstrosity of the literate masses.

Brantlinger next addresses sociological questions surrounding the increase of criminality in the early to mid-nineteenth century in chapters four and five. He begins with a reading of *Oliver Twist*, followed by a look at industrial novels from Harriet Martineau's *A Manchester Strike* (1832) through George Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866). Brantlinger provides historical information on the culture of criminality, showing the ways in which both literacy and the development of more effective law enforcement created a five-hundred percent increase in crime between 1800 and 1841 (Porter in Brantlinger 75). On the topic of mass literacy as an actual or supposed threat enabling criminality, chapters four and five provide significant historical insight.

Chapter four offers the type of sociological approach to the threat of literacy that the title implies. Brantlinger here shows the way in which literacy led to crime in the nineteenth century by analyzing Mayhew's classification and professionalization of criminals as well as presenting cases in Victorian novels in which an author identifies with the criminal. In writing about Mayhew's *London Labor and the London Poor*, Brantlinger notes, "The very profession of names and specializations among beggars, mobsmen, sneaksman, and so on implies a productive ingenuity and energy that more than parallels the legitimate professions" (87). With the significant increase in literacy among the poor in the nineteenth century, Brantlinger notes, popular fiction, such as Newgate crime novels, could actually teach the poor reader how to commit crimes. Statistics show that most criminals were semi-literate and semi-educated. A common theme of fiction, as in Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, teaches that criminals and the morally virtuous could both easily foil the police. Brantlinger further notes an argument advanced by both Marx and Foucault: that poor criminals actualize the social network of the criminal justice system. Brantlinger makes a convincing case for Dickens's celebratory identification with the criminal who holds this power. He describes Dickens's criminal as a character with agency, power, ingenuity, and freedom.

Chapter five serves as a bookend to the criminality examined in chapter four. Its focus is on the role of reading in shaping citizens. For instance, Harriet Martineau's novels were written to instruct the working classes in non-disruptive behavior and in satisfaction with their social position. This chapter also looks at the class reconciliation encouraged by Utilitarianism, as well as the threat of Chartism, and the bourgeois ideology of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and

Shirley. It clearly shows the Arnoldian common-culture bent of the subgenre of industrial fiction directed at the working and middle classes.

Brantlinger moves on to discuss the antithesis to Gothic strains in questions of realism in the final chapters of *The Reading Lesson*. He addresses his seemingly most passionate concerns in chapters six and eight: the former is titled, “Cashing in on the Real in Thackeray and Trollope,” and the latter, “The Educations of Edward Hyde and Edwin Reardon.” Chapter six makes compelling inquiries into realism, novels as commodities, and the satirical stance toward fiction that Thackeray and Trollope take in their novels. Equally engaging, in chapter eight Brantlinger interprets Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as a Gothic version of Gissing’s *New Grub Street*, which he reads as revealing a sense of failure in and ambivalence about capturing a mass-market readership. In chapter seven, “Novel Sensations of the 1860s,” there are quite a few echoes of the earlier chapter, “Gothic Toxins,” but with an interesting twist. Brantlinger discusses the infusion of Gothic elements into realistic fiction, highlighting the circumstance that the truth claims of printed materials are frequently challenged by sensation novels. Within sensation novels, for instance, newspapers frequently lie or mislead. Brantlinger ends, in chapter nine, by focusing on the excess of novels in the late-Victorian press:

Like the motif of the poisonous book in Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray*, the theme of too much literacy—of humanity becoming overbooked, or of the very success of culture leading to a sort of collective suicide—that Gissing, Hardy, Morris, and Wells all express points to that pathology of reading that is often evident in earlier novels as anxiety about novels but that also points ahead to the modernist reification of the antithesis between high and mass culture. (206)

In the novels Brantlinger treats, this reification does not yet exist, and the ambiguity involved in reading novels provides Brantlinger with a rich landscape.

Brantlinger’s closing word on mass literacy seems like a sleight of hand. The masses present throughout his book suddenly disappear:

What Raymond Williams so eloquently said about “the masses” in *Culture and Society* can be applied equally to novel readers and consumers of other forms of so-called popular and mass culture: “To other people, we also are masses. Masses are other people. . . . There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses.” (300)

There may not be masses in actuality or in a post-Marxist moment, but there are in the *The Reading Lesson*, where Brantlinger provides a comprehensive treatment of the figure of the newly literate masses in the nineteenth century.

Occasionally, the very copious care Brantlinger takes in referencing creates an unwieldy textual density in his unfolding critical narrative. Any given paragraph may well reference three other Victorianists and several nineteenth-century novels. It is, in fact, this knowledgeable saturation of the text that substantially limits an argument, as such, from developing in this book. It is almost as if a thorough enough go at the topic in all of its complexity would make any specific argument inelegant and overly narrow. This is not to say that Brantlinger does not make specific

arguments when he presents various readings: it is just that these arguments do not constitute the focusing lens of the book.

The Reading Lesson's bibliography and notes reflect Brantlinger's care and scholarly generosity. This useful book makes the meaningful contribution of providing plenty of background for the reader with a general interest in British literature and an encyclopedic trail for anyone who wants to survey the field. Brantlinger legibly and meticulously delivers the topics of novelists' anxieties about the genre, and the ambiguous lesson of novel-reading as it encounters mass literacy. Such meticulous legibility makes *The Reading Lesson* exemplary in this respect.