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Review of Carolyn Lesjak, *Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel*.

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Carolyn Lesjak, *Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006. 349 pp. ISBN 9780822338888.

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Contrary to the expectations raised by its subtitle, Carolyn Lesjak's *Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel* (2006) does not provide an exhaustive survey of the nineteenth-century British novel. Instead, this study tackles the difficult subject of the relationship of labor to pleasure against the background of both a rapidly changing world economy and the contemporaneous critical debates about realism. As Lesjak points out in her introduction, she uses the term genealogy in a Foucauldian sense as an innovative attempt to "highlight the 'descent' between texts that have been treated as disconnected from one another either by generic tradition, subject matter, or political orientation" (7).

Central to Lesjak's theoretical perspective is the conviction that, in the Victorian novel, industrial labor should be sought out "in all its inscrutability in order to make visible its continued and often vexed presence" (3). In reconceptualizing the traditional surmise of the (in)visibility of labor in the industrial novel, Lesjak manages to bridge the gap between the topical social criticism inherent in the content-oriented, industrial novels epitomized by Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), and the higher stress on form, aesthetic development and the ability to "deal in timeless truths" (2) that characterizes later realism, such as Oscar Wilde's. Another major critical standpoint is the opposition Lesjak sets forth between the meaning of "pleasure"—that of a "social project relying on the collectivity for its realization," for which she opts (consciously following Wilde and William Morris)—and the "more individually situated, psychoanalytic approaches to satisfaction and happiness" (4) conveyed by "desire." Although Lesjak enlists the work of Marx, by situating, for instance, Wilde's *Soul of Man* within a socialist context, she productively constructs a context of Marxist criticism that goes beyond any conventional materialist critical traditions. Moreover, in drawing on texts that range from Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1968), Catherine Gallagher's *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* (1985) and Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987), to Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988) and Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Lesjak lays the groundwork for a complex, highly stimulating comparative interrogation of the connection between pleasure and labor in the Victorian novel.

Each of the three sections of *Working Fictions* deals with a different narrative genre: the industrial novel, the *Bildungsroman*, and the utopian novel, respectively. In the opening chapter, "Representing Work and the Working Class in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*," Lesjak examines the apparent contradictions in largely excluding work and the working-class struggle from representation. Lesjak argues that although *Mary Barton* participates in the preponderant narrative of class conciliation "on the employers' terms," the novel also calls that into question by expressing briefly and problematically "the emotions and sympathies and experiences" belonging to the "proletarian public sphere" (60-61). As its authorial preface suggests, *Mary Barton* was intended as "a stimulus to the ignorant middle classes, who, as the reasoning went, would readily respond with charity and good will if only they knew of the inhumane conditions under which the laboring classes were suffering" (30). In Lesjak's view, however, this conventional response backfired and came in for criticism in precisely the terms it aimed to resolve—namely, the

contemporary revolutionary threat from the Continent and the issue of class discord. Given its seemingly ineffective application in practice, as suggested by Chapman's request to Gaskell for an explanatory preface, this situation highlights one of the different historical manifestations of what Lesjak rightly considers "labor's overall problematic: how to represent industrial labor and working-class laborers without simultaneously promoting social revolution" (3). She notes that "the working class is represented in the pub or the home, thereby allowing it to be defined in terms of its pleasures as opposed to its productive activity" (26); thus, by "displacing conflicts in the sphere of production to the sphere of consumption, the industrial novel artificially establishes a divide between production and consumption, and work and pleasure" (14-15).

Lesjak also explores the complexities of *Mary Barton's* sexual (and pleasure) politics by closely analyzing Esther's melodramatic plot of the fallen woman. Alongside the aforementioned division, they eclipse "the economic inequalities on which the productive sphere is based" (15), but they do not resolve the problems of laborer/capitalist relations. No mention is made, however, of the actual objects of production or manufactured goods, such as the blue cotton handkerchiefs, or the shawls alluded to in the opening chapter of the novel. (In this precise particular, *Working Fictions* and Elaine Freedgood's *The Ideas in Things* [2006] seem to complement each other, as the latter delves into the evasive significance and histories embedded in material culture, the checked English calico curtains, among other objects, in *Mary Barton*.) Lesjak devotes a section entitled "The Scene of Production, or, 'We Made Them What They Are'" (44-50) to substantiating how John Barton's arguments not only evoke "a deep knowledge of political economy" (44), far vaster than Elizabeth Gaskell is keen to recognize, but also unwillingly incite "class against class" (49). But this is not the only conflict Lesjak elucidates, since the reader—even during Barton's prolonged absence from the text after murdering Carson—is constantly led to sympathize with his emotions, feelings and views on labor and capital, which contradicts the "explicit statements about the 'truth in such matters'" (46) made by the narrator, who is driven more "by moral concerns" and "reform" than by "concerns of social inequality" and "the supersession of capitalist relations" (47).

Within the same generic scope of the industrial novel, in Chapter Two, "A Modern Odyssey: *Felix Holt's* Education for the Masses," Lesjak rereads George Eliot's novel from the premise that workers are considered to "lack a proper education in political know-how" (71); ignorant, uncultured and mostly illiterate, they are easy to persuade, a depiction that remains questionable given that while the novel is set in the "period of crisis of the First Reform Bill of 1832, ideationally the crisis it . . . attempts to reconcile is that of the Second Reform Bill, contemporaneous with the actual period in which Eliot was writing the novel" (73). Thus "two distinct historical moments [are conflated] into one moment . . . This metaleptic return has direct consequences for Eliot's representations of work. Since the ultimate basis for political judgment rests on cultural capital, neither work nor the workplace are necessary sites for political claims to representation" (73). A good case in point is the formation of Esther's character and intellectual identity, "her private journey through successive stages of personal development" (77) and an internal process of "personal subjection" (80). Functioning "as a liminal figure" operating "from within an indeterminate class position," Esther's "ultimate acceptance of Felix mirrors the transformation desired by the text for the working class: accommodation to current social conditions in the interests of the health of the nation as a whole" (76). Lesjak also finds *Felix Holt* actively stretching the notion of the displacement of production in favor of

consumption, the latter being spatially contextualized in the pub, not at work. Eliot's novel avoids explicit representations of labor in an attempt to dampen the tensions inherent in the relations among capitalism, imperialism, nationalism, culture and realism, and industrial workers and their labor. Consequently, it is "the absent space of work that will be filled by the concept of 'nation', which, unlike work, serves to unite the heterogeneous workers and middle-class citizens populating *Felix Holt*" (73). Furthermore, Esther's domestic pleasure, derived from her subjection to Felix under "England's cultural project of nationhood" (81), is meant to compensate for those reprehensible working-class leisure pursuits presented in the novel. In this sense, it is this "romantic plot of *Felix Holt* [that] makes explicit the link between culture and power, a link obfuscated in the realm of work and production" (77). Yet work and pleasure here still form, genealogically speaking, an awkward association. *Felix Holt*, says Lesjak, ultimately "enacts a narrative of instrumental rationality in which labor only finds expression in its narrowest sense as the antithesis of pleasure" (83).

Working Fictions traces further genealogical branches of the labor novel by confronting two *Bildungsromane* in the third chapter, "Seeing the Invisible: The *Bildungsroman* and the Narration of a New Regime of Accumulation": Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-61) and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Lesjak judiciously strings together the narrative implications associated with the fruits of a global capitalistic economy: modernity, change and the workings of imperialism. Starting from the conventional assumption that locates the British Empire in the margins of the Victorian novel, Lesjak examines *Great Expectations* from a fresh perspective which involves imperial relations, domesticity and the representation "of the organization of labor as a whole" (90-91). Lesjak reconsiders what is scarcely commented on by critics—"the nature of Magwitch's actions themselves" (94) in relation to the *Bildungsroman*; she points out that "work so pervades every aspect of the novel that it is simply not seen . . . as such." In this way, predictably, the novel participates in the seductions of an emergent middle-class culture premised on the invisibility of the body, work, and class—in short, a culture that exults the banal [sic]" (95). This exaltation of the trivial or 'triviphilia', Lesjak suggests, also rests on the fact that "almost no one in the novel seems to really want to work at all" (97). Dickens situates imperial labor away from the metropolis, specifically—and invisibly—in Magwitch's labor in Australia, thus registering "the literal dependency of England on her colonial possessions and slave labor" (99). This reading is compatible with Freedgood's similar conclusions on the presence of Negro Head tobacco in *Great Expectations*, which is seen as a fetishistic imperial encoding of "Aboriginal genocide" in "the most apparently negligible of details" (2006: 82). Lesjak moves from the invisibility of working-class labor in the novel to that of "middle-class work and its structures of consumption/pleasure" (106). Specifically, Pip's reply to Estella—"I do well"—not only conceals the fact that he lives off Magwitch's work, but also, and most importantly, obscures "the means for making profits, namely, the accumulation of surplus value" and "the insufficient and inhumane conditions under which imperial workers labor" (109).

In thoroughly analyzing how *Daniel Deronda* deals with "the limits of modernity" in terms of a growing sense of the disintegration of social interaction and communication—what she calls "the structure of 'relationality'" (112)—, Lesjak notes that Eliot finds in Judaism, Zionism, and the Diaspora "a figure of dispersal to counter the negative effects of modernity's dislocations" (111). Lesjak is successful in reconciling the two seemingly antagonistic main plots of the novel: that

is, the *Deronda* and Gwendolen narratives, which serves to confirm that the representation of labor disappears from *Daniel Deronda* and "gets absorbed into an abstract notion of identity" (126) which not only mediates ironically in the representation of "the values of commerce" (119) empire, gender, the foreign and the domestic, but also exposes the inconsistencies and faults of British nationalist ideals of a national community by carefully confronting them with the alternative, and apparently more functional, international community adumbrated by Zionism. The reader's attention is directed to the fact that *Deronda* "thus bears the traces of hybridity underlying any construction of national identity." Overall, Lesjak fruitfully explores how Eliot devises a cosmopolitan sense of community free from the restraints and contradictions of industrialization, capitalism and imperialism, and acquiescent with prevailing British culture, which, in turn, "can constitute itself as a coherent internal unit" (132).

The utopian and the utopian novel are the foci of critical attention in the third part, perhaps the most eloquent and balanced in *Working Fictions*, as the concept of pleasure is fully integrated into the discussion of labor. Chapter Four, "William Morris and a People's Art: Reimagining the Pleasures of Labor," endeavors to show that in his utopian narrative, *News from Nowhere, or an Epoch of Rest, Being Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance* (1890), Morris questions the division between labor and pleasure taken for granted by the industrial novel and implicitly presents its "utopian possibilities" as constituting a "counterculture of modernity" (139). Pleasure is not independent from labor, which is no longer an alienated and abstract form, but related to "the principles of revolutionary international socialism" (142), which, according to Lesjak, has largely contributed to relegating Morris, as opposed to Eliot, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin or Matthew Arnold, to a sub-canonical status among literary critics (142). Given his multifaceted professional creativity, says Lesjak, the figure of William Morris—following the path of Carlyle, Ruskin and Marx—counteracts the marked division of labor into specialized compartments dictated by capitalism, as well as the negative consequences of its system of production (144). Lesjak focuses mainly on the implications of Morris's political writings—such as "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," "Art and Socialism" or "How We Live and How We Might Live"—, as opposed to his romances, in order to demonstrate that, for Morris, there should be pleasure, art, and personal gratification in work and its conditions, not just alienating specialization, mechanization, and wages; all in all, that labor is "culturally formative" and "it constitutes the basis of sociality" (146). Pleasure "is thus never secondary but always of equal importance" (150) to labor, which has to be "useful"—that is, it has to produce "goods that people want and actually can use" (151)—and operate outside the exploitative "division of society into classes" (153). Lesjak disregards conventional Morris criticism that views him as antimodern and adopts a more flexible approach to Morris's responses to his society and their hypothetical validity or applicability nowadays: namely, his insistence on "imagining an intimate relationship between labor and pleasure" which "can help articulate a politics of collective struggle in which the preconditions of creative labor mark the divide between reform and revolution" (157). As opposed to the previous novelistic lineage analyzed in *Working Fictions*, where "labor and pleasure, the political economy and the economies of desire and sexuality" (165) are still (re)presented as separate oppositions, for Lesjak, Morris's "utopian romance *News from Nowhere* highlights the centrality of labor," its representation, art—"as the expression of pleasure in labor" (183)—, and of pleasure to the essential concerns of "community, identity, and stability" (164).

In Chapter Five, "Utopia, Use, and the Everyday: Oscar Wilde and a New Economy of Pleasure," Lesjak sees Wilde's socialism not as a mere pose, but as a distinctive continuation of Morris's own intention of "overcoming the increasing separation of labor from any notion of pleasure" (182). The differences between Morris and Wilde lie not only in stylistic terms, but especially in the fact that Wilde "points us to the commodity world, challenging us to taste of the pleasures of a varied and expansive world object" (183). This is projected onto Dorian's collection in Chapter Eleven of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), which should be anatomized as a "collection of histories," again marking a convergence with Freedgood's work and Thing Theory. Through a "recycling" of "objects, phrases, quotes, even character names," Wilde denaturalizes "meanings and institutions." Wilde, says Lesjak, revalorizes the use of things as mere utilities, which "maintains the integrity of objects and, crucially, makes possible an intimate relationship to them" (188). In extolling the green flower as "superbly sterile," Wilde envisions a relation to objects that would arrest "the purposefulness with which bourgeois norms instrumentalize use" (191-92). Finally, Lesjak examines Wilde's singular notion of individualism under socialism in the context of *De Profundis* (1905), with the categorical conclusion that he "proffers glimpses of a new modernity in which individual pleasures would no longer come at the expense of the collective" (197).

On the whole, *Working Fictions* makes for demanding but also generous reading, as it fulfils its function of tracing "the lived division between labor and pleasure which currently structures our experience" (206), thus applying its critical principles to the past and the present. If anything negative is to be noted, it is that the direct or explicit discussion of work or pleasure is occasionally absent from that argumentation, especially in the substantial section devoted to *Daniel Deronda*. This may be disconcerting to the reader trying to come to terms with the theoretical relationship of this specific novel to the others analyzed in *Working Fictions*; but as Lesjak notes in the introduction, the texts examined "exemplify rather than exhaust the new critical possibilities such a rethinking allows" (6), which leaves the door wide open for those who wish to look further into the nineteenth-century British novel from this fertile perspective.

Works Cited

Freedgood, Elaine. *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006.