

How to Read the Victorian Novel.

Levine, George. Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell, 2007. 200 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-1-4051-3056-1

Reading the Nineteenth-Century Novel.

Case, Alison and Shaw, Harry E. Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. 232 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-6312-3149-3

“There would be little point in creating a work of fiction, if it were possible to sum up adequately its meaning and impact in non-fictional words’, Alison Case and Harry E. Shaw observe in their recently published joint study of the nineteenth-century novel *Reading the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (2008, 92). In their new volume Case and Shaw demonstrate the rewards of informed, attentive reading and why we should read nineteenth-century fiction. In *How to Read the Victorian Novel* George Levine, too, is concerned with how to read and understand why Victorian novels can seem at once so looming and cumbersome, and yet so familiar.

These are useful publications to compare. Both books address the development of fiction published during the nineteenth-century through discussion of peak novels and authors. Both books share an interest in matters such as narrative voice, characterisation, structure, realism and the emergence of sensation fiction. Both are moderate-sized, paperback publications, presented as friendly guides that strive to make nineteenth-century fiction more accessible to the novice reader. And, in both, Henry James is an acerbic backstage presence, with his famous description of the Trollopian novel as a ‘loose large baggy monster’ applied broadly to the Victorian novel as an evolving form.

There is some common ground among the selected works, although Levine limits his discussion to the Victorian context and focuses on the commonalities and differences, the ‘family resemblances’, among influential novels of the time. Case and Shaw commence their study a little earlier and strive to encompass the century, from Jane Austen to George Eliot. They provide close, accessible readings of their chosen texts and relate them to theories of narrative voice, with particular reference to Bahktinian dialogism.

Levine offers an extended essay on narrative form in six chapters. He anchors his discussion in six works which he regards as central to the development of the Victorian novel, arguing that, as much as these are ‘books of their time, they were also books written partly against the grain ... exploratory and inquisitive as well as didactic and moralistic’ (Levine, vii). Levine’s observation, that the Victorian novel is both resisting and yet at times exploiting an epic romance tradition, is chiefly elaborated here through the premise that realism is the dominant mode of mid-to-late nineteenth-century narrative. This provides a highly effective strategy for interrogating the intricacies and contradictions within key novels of this period. Levine’s emphasis on realism also serves

to alert new readers to common ground among works which may appear, at first encounter, to be so different.

Reading the Victorian Novel is as much preoccupied with developments of form as with individual novels and authors, beginning with Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*. Addressing tensions between the need for formal narrative devices and attempts to convey ordinary life through observation and detail, Levine remarks that the Victorian novel 'tends towards comic form ... a "Pickwickian" affirmation of community and affection' (13). It is precisely the influence of this first novel by Dickens – 'barely a novel at all' (38) in its expansive, fragmentary nature – that most interests Levine here, for its utilisation of key narrative elements: 'those attitudes, preoccupations, contexts, subjects, and themes that would become central to Victorian fiction' (38). Its popular success, Levine argues, is another aspect of what makes *Pickwick* exemplary: the rise of the Victorian novel being driven by the rapid expansion of the publishing industry and the increasing command of commercial appeal.

Later in this study Levine considers Dickens' *David Copperfield* in association with Charlotte Brönte's *Jane Eyre*, noting the frequency with which childhood perspectives are elaborated in Victorian fiction. Levine relates these two novels specifically to the Victorian *Bildungsroman* which, he argues, has its basis in the realist enterprise, giving "fullest expression to the concerns, desires, and ideals of the new middle class" (81). The point that the rise of realism as a dominant narrative form is closely linked to the emergence of an aspiring and literate middle class, serves as a crucial historical reminder of the extraordinary social, economic and cultural changes that were wrought throughout the nineteenth-century in Britain, captured perhaps potently in George Eliot's novels. Indeed, Levine's discussion of realism features Eliot's *Middlemarch* as the 'culmination of the great tradition of moral realism that marked the mainstream of Victorian fiction' (126). This final chapter is laudatory and persuasive. Levine places *Middlemarch* at the centre of the evolution of narrative fiction and shows Eliot working within traditions, while experimenting with them, positioning its female protagonist Dorothea as the unfulfilled voice of 'ideal possibility' (135).

If *Middlemarch* meets Levine's description as the 'most unconventional of conventional novels' (129), it is his discussion of the contradictory realism of *Vanity Fair* that most irresistibly addresses the narrative continuities and discontinuities of the Victorian novel.

'There is no novel more self-conscious (and perhaps inconsistent) about the fact of its illusionism, about the difference between the claims of art and the claims of plausibility, about the inadequacies of omniscient representation in the efforts toward authentic representation...' (64).

Case and Shaw also discuss *Vanity Fair*, identifying Thackeray's 'intrusive narrator'

as a descendent of an eighteenth-century literary tradition, the moral essay (Case & Shaw, 90): more like ‘Scot’s companionable, storytelling narrator’ (91) than the verbal enactments of character, ‘the web of verbal and social/ethical distinctions’ found in the novels of Jane Austen (91). *Vanity Fair* offers a resourceful example of the complex, indeed dialogical, workings of narrative voice, whether expressed through the characters’ actions and conversation, authorial interpolation, plot, or through Thackeray’s invitation to the reader to make his or her own sense of the ambiguities within Becky Sharp’s moral character.

Case and Shaw adopt the voice of the narrator as the focus for their discussion. They declare their position at the outset: ‘In our view the key to a full experience of nineteenth-century novels is sensitivity to their narrators’ (6). Their discussion commences by interrogating two Jane Austen novels, *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice*, observing Austen’s use of free indirect speech to perform and move through the personae of her characters. This study includes rewarding chapters on Scott, Gaskell and Trollope and a lively discussion of the emergence of the ‘sensation novel’ in relation to Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Case and Shaw conclude their study, as does Levine, with *Middlemarch* and Eliot’s demanding but inviting narrator: one who welcomes dialogue by posing questions, whose ‘intellectual rigor flows into feeling and emotion’ (198).

Reading the Nineteenth-Century Novel is a wide-ranging study clearly intended to be used by students and teachers of literature. The authors present their terms clearly at the outset and provide definitions, context and reference points for their approach. An Appendix is also provided on the topic of free indirect discourse, which supports a consistent theme, followed by a list of further reading on each of the novels examined. Case and Shaw provide readers with a set of fruitful strategies for approaching a wide range of nineteenth-century novels. They skilfully manage their vast subject by engaging with the multivocal elements of fictional narrative and demonstrate useful interpretative strategies to novice literary critics in a way that is both accessible and theoretically aware. Importantly, they show us the pleasures of critical reading and give us many reasons to return to nineteenth-century novels time and again.

Of these two studies, Levine’s single-authored volume is, unsurprisingly, more integrated. His interest is to articulate how we recognise the evolving relationships among Victorian novels. He approaches the subject of connectedness, by posing the question directly: ‘what connection can there be?’ (15) between these disparate, rambling Victorian novels with their complex plots, numerous characters, formal conventions, interfering narrators multiple themes, and their expansive realism, which for contemporary readers can seem so strange. His thoughts lead us finally toward another question: that of Eliot’s Dorothea Brooke who, in asking ‘What can I do?’ (135), strives to contain and refine the minutiae of lived experience into meaningful form.

The Victorian novel might be said, similarly, to attempt to shape meaning out of imagined reality, to seek congruence within ambiguity and find some kind of plateau of mediation from which the story can be told. In surrendering to the ‘baggy monster’ of Victorian fiction, as both these studies indicate, we do not give in to a singular voice, nor to the false realism of convention, nor to the past with its convoluted manners, costumes and speech. We enter into a conversation that is only available to us through these powerful novels; to discover what Eliot herself called a ‘directness of sense, like the solidity of objects’ (qtd in Case & Shaw, 198) and, as Levine suggests in Eliot’s own terms, a way of listening to the roar beyond silence.

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