

VICTORIAN PARATEXTS

By Bill Bell

IN THE POST-THEORETICAL (re)turn to history there is now, in literary and cultural studies, an increasing preoccupation with material relations, manifest in the growing number of interdisciplinary approaches foregrounding the importance of the production, circulation, and reception of texts. It has become increasingly evident that, despite internal claims for praxis, a much-vaunted cultural materialism has found itself at times imaginatively and practically restrained as a consequence of extreme textualist legacies. The familiar and too easy dichotomy between the so-called empiricism and the so-called critical theory is now beginning to recede as empiricist methodologies, much maligned in the post-humanist critiques of the 1980s, are beginning to make their presences felt again, though in revitalized and theoretically informed ways.

One consequence of the attempt of a number of critical discourses to take stock of their own position within institutional practice has been a belated turn towards the problematics of material meaning. As Hans Gumbrecht and Ludwig Pfeiffer have recently argued, despite its analytic rigor, the tendency of post-structural theory towards an over-developed interpretive habit has regrettably resulted in a general disregard for a whole range of material practices, “techniques, technologies . . . procedures, and ‘media’” (6, 12). Yet the call for an examination of the materiality of the text in such terms need not, as Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer recognize, represent a reaction against already established critical protocols. It might be argued, after all, that such a sociological regard for meaning, although lapsed in recent decades, finds at least something of a provenance in the theoretically engaged discourses of early media and cultural studies, best exemplified in the preliminary work of Marshall McLuhan in North America and Raymond Williams in Britain.

The pages that follow offer a brief resume, by no means comprehensive, of some of the more important recent work to be undertaken in an area that has grown up within revived attempts to negotiate a course between textuality and empiricism, its title inspired by the recent English translation of Gerard Genette’s *Seuils* — as *Paratexts* — a work that since its first publication in the 1980s has had a major influence on those who have come increasingly to think in terms of the text as a material object as well as a hermeneutic field. Standing on the threshold of meaning, argues Genette, the paratext “constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but of *transaction*” (2). Genette’s encyclopedic analysis of the diverse range of framing devices impinging on and informing

the meaning of the literary text offers a salutary corrective to those critics who, despite the presence of such seemingly obvious signifiers, continue to regard the text as a disembodied transmitter of meaning.¹ As an intellectual tool, the paratext, as defined by Genette, provides one of the most useful means to date in the attempt to rethink the relationship between the material book and its textuality, heralding, among other things, a timely return for the Derridean *hors texte*.

For a broad-ranging window on some of the important kinds of work going on in the area of what might therefore be called paratextual studies, one could do worse than begin with John Jordan's and Robert Patten's *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices*. The book's introduction ("Publishing History as Hypertext") provides its editors with an opportunity to present an unusually thoughtful *tour d'horizon* of a field that, by their own admission, has not yet come to anything like a consensus on its own aims and objectives. Ultimately, the collection itself functions as a working illustration of just how broad the area still is these days, finding expression in a welter of empirical and sociological as well as more abstract theoretical approaches.

The volume opens with Simon Eliot's informative account of trends in the British book trade between 1800 and 1919, providing a model for the statistical analysis of fluctuating levels of production throughout the long nineteenth century. Although Eliot's account begins with the necessary caveats about methodology, highlighting the relative unreliability of standard sources used to accumulate raw statistical data for instance, the article provides a useful first step towards a more general understanding of changing trends in the availability of print throughout the period. Perhaps most interesting for the non-specialist reader will be Eliot's attempts to tie fluctuating trends in niche production to larger cultural phenomena. The rise in titles produced after 1830, for example, is attributed to a growing public awareness of political debate surrounding the 1832 Reform, while a cause for the exponential increase in the decade following 1845 is found in the topicality of popular controversies such as those surrounding the Oxford Movement and the Great Exhibition. Also illuminating is Eliot's account of the advent of Christmas as an increasingly commercial venture from the 1830s on. Through an analysis of production figures Eliot is able to demonstrate how the festive season was early on to subject itself to the forces of commodification through increased monthly production, a trend that leveled out as the economics of Christmas began to occupy larger and larger proportions of the publishing year.

It is not only of course in the case of book production that the increased commodification of literary culture in the nineteenth century can be traced. As a theme on which Victorian critics have been spilling ink for several decades, the serialization of fiction has long been recognized as one of the most conspicuous examples of the imposition of market imperatives on textual form. Unsurprisingly, several of the articles in the volume take up aspects of serial publication, often developing them in highly original, and at times provocative, ways. Continuing an argument first pursued in their study of *The Victorian Serial* (1991), Linda Hughes and Michael Lund seek in their chapter to demonstrate ways in which "textual/sexual pleasure" can be seen in the structural form of the serial itself. Finding a case study in the appearance of *North and South* in the pages of *Household Words*, the writers go on to argue that generic features such as postponement and anticipation served both to heighten and, ultimately, to satisfy Victorian readerly desire in demonstrable ways.

A more sociological approach to reading habits occupies Jonathan Rose, who in his article “How Historians Study Reader Response: or, What Did Jo Think of *Bleak House*?” proposes to offer alternative ways of looking at the intellectual life of the British working classes. The “common reader” has been for several decades a subject of fascination for Victorian scholars, most notably in the pioneering work of Richard Altick and more recently in David Vincent’s analyses of nineteenth-century working class literacy. While recognizing his debt to such scholars, Rose goes on to claim that there is much yet to be learned about reading habits from a systematic survey of working-class memoirs, namely that the poor were far more literate in the nineteenth century than most cultural historians have been willing to grant. An accompanying article by Kelly Mays on what she calls “the disease of reading” takes a more representational approach as it picks up the question of prevailing middle- and upper-class attitudes towards the proliferation of reading matter. Exploring transformations over time in the way that both female and working-class readers were constructed in and by the mainstream polite press, Mays finds a clear correlation between the emergence of such institutional organizations as the University Extension Movement and the Home Reading Union and widespread anxieties about the reading habits of women and the poor. A minefield of methodological questions lies ahead for such accounts (the authority of empirical evidence — often highly anecdotal — in relation to larger structural arguments about trends in literary reception for example). Nevertheless, the presiding argument — that “real readers” sometimes differed radically from their conceptual counterparts — is a persuasive one. Whether these shadowy figures are in fact recuperable is a matter that historians and critical theorists are bound to argue out for a long time to come.

While poststructural approaches to authorship have done much in recent years to problematize and ultimately to reorient conceptions of authorship, Stephen Gill’s essay on Wordsworth’s posthumous copyrights demonstrates how more established means of historical analysis can be deployed in order to make similar claims for the instability of literary authority. Those already familiar with Gill’s published work on *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (1997) will here find an elaboration, on bibliographical grounds, of his argument for a multiplicity of posthumous Wordsworths. Through close readings of variant editions, Gill shows how the Wordsworth circulated in a given time and place was determined largely by copyright law and publishing practice: “whenever discussion touches on the reception of Wordsworth in the Victorian period, caution is in order. Which Wordsworth were they reading, and which Wordsworth are we talking about?” (88). The nineteenth-century dissemination of Wordsworth in the polite press provides a similar focus for Peter Manning’s “Wordsworth in the *Keepsake*,” an essay whose title disguises the important contribution it makes to current understandings of romantic authorship. In a reading of the tension that existed between the populist pretensions of the Wordsworthian aesthetic and the way in which it operated at the level of material practice, Manning traces the history of a series of poems commissioned for publication in a middle-class ladies’ annual of 1829. Through a detailed account of the complex economic negotiations surrounding the poems and their reception, Manning is able to situate Wordsworth within a conspicuously feminine, conventionally constructed, polite milieu in a way that mere internal evidence cannot, more than justifying his conclusion that it was in its material practices that the Romantic poet’s name became his capital, and that the aesthetic individual and the acquisitive bourgeois subject could be seen to merge in the literary marketplace.

Two essays on that most productive and acquisitive of romantic bourgeois, Charles Dickens, explore the issue of authorship yet further through readings of a text that has long fascinated students of the Victorian book trade. J. Hillis Miller uses “Sam Weller’s Valentine” as an occasion to meditate on the economic and performative history of the nineteenth-century valentine card. A text like *Pickwick Papers*, argues Hillis Miller, “is not fully explicable by what preceded it” (119), but affected in profound ways the very culture it is often assumed to reflect. Moving from a range of signifying practices represented in *The Pickwick Papers* to equally complex examples of textual exchange found in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Miller concludes yet another playful deconstruction that serves to bring into question “common sense” notions of cultural intention. Robert Patten, on the other hand, considers the use of retrospection in *Pickwick* in order to demonstrate how this and other works of serialized fiction were calculated to invite audiences into a nostalgic celebration of the recent past. Connecting recollection to desire and reading to the more literal consumption of food, Patten concludes by situating the text within its own contemporaneity, sharing with its first readers a location “between a conventionally represented, shared, and idealized past and an apprehensively viewed future” (138). In so doing, Patten’s approach is typical of the unremitting commitment to the historic situatedness of texts to be found in many of these articles and in which this volume finds its thematic integrity. Despite the judicious recognition in its introduction that the subject area is “still in its formative phase,” even a cursory glance at this collection provides ample evidence of the contribution that these new models of reading are bringing to bear on larger issues in nineteenth-century cultural history.

As Genette has argued, an awareness of the paratextual must ultimately lead to a consideration of “the most socialized side of the practice of literature . . . the way its relations with the public are organized” (14). A useful complement to Genette’s analysis of the paratext and one that is coming increasingly to inform publishing history is Pierre Bourdieu’s extensive analysis of the institutions of cultural production. In recent years, Bourdieu has himself suffered the fate of becoming institutionalized, *de rigueur* among academic critics, the influence of his own work operating as an ironic commentary on the very legitimation process that he himself seeks to diagnose. Some would argue, on the other hand, that Bourdieu’s recent cultural legitimation has less to do with the transformation of an avant garde critique into symbolic capital than with an increasing self-consciousness within certain sectors of the humanities about their own transitional position within institutional and cultural relations. In *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880–1914*, Peter McDonald attributes the influential significance of Bourdieu to his ability to “articulate the mediating ground between textuality and social history, symbolic value and material production” (20), situating a new form of literary sociology within an ongoing conversation between older forms of historicism and more contemporary forms of Marxism. In an attempt to translate this kind of mediatory practice into an anglophone literary milieu, McDonald is one of a number of recent scholars to focus on the consequences of the increased commodification of literature in the final decades of the nineteenth century. In a thoughtful introduction entitled “The Literary Field in the 1890s,” McDonald traces what he sees as the emergence of a new kind of literary culture at *fin de siècle*, seeking to move on from more conventional accounts of the author-publisher relationship to consider what, following Bourdieu, is termed “the implicit structures underlying social relations” (10). Despite sometimes looking like an old-fashioned sociological structuralist, Bourdieu has

long been committed to a historicist project which challenges the assumptions of more thoroughgoing interpretive practice. It comes as no surprise therefore to find McDonald taking issue with the Barthesian model of authorship, a model which in his view evades “the correspondence between the innumerable spaces of writing and the non-discursive structure of the field” (18). In an attempt to resituate the writer between the discursive and the literary-sociological, McDonald goes on to offer a detailed account of the late Victorian literary landscape, engaging a colorful *dramatis personae* of “purists” and “profiteers,” from writers as diverse as Conrad, Bennett, and Conan Doyle to a host of middlemen like George Newnes, W. T. Stead, and Edmund Gosse, all focused through the lens of Bourdian analysis. Describing a world in which ambition postures as aesthetic integrity, and self-interest masquerades as disinterestedness, McDonald puts paid to latent notions of authorial autonomy, presenting in its place a range of players in the field for whom “calculated self-concealment” eventually becomes “something of a habit” (66). Tracing the sacralization of Conrad by the community of letters, with Henley as gate-keeper and Garnett as patron, McDonald shows how one of the key figures of the period negotiated and eventually took his place as a legitimated member of a literary elite. In the battle for an aesthetic disengagement from the pressures of the new mass market, Conrad is made to represent the quintessential example of the avowedly avant-garde writer whose unspoken ambition is fame. Following an extended reading of Arnold Bennett’s pivotal role in the art of fiction debate, *British Literary Culture* concludes with an account of Conan Doyle as the aesthetic elite’s representative outcast, demonstrating how even the most “successful” of authors can be seen at turns to exploit and repudiate popular literary convention. Thus the popular writer in the 1890s is made to take up a troublingly ambivalent position in relation to contemporary literary culture: “Neither a purist nor a profiteer, he occupied a more uncertain position between these two extremes as a populist with high aspirations who became increasingly anxious about his own literary standing” (121). Despite a persuasive case made in the introduction, the superimposition of Bourdieu’s analysis of French culture onto the cultural milieu of Britain in the same period is nevertheless contentious. To what extent, we might well ask, is Bourdieu’s own position on the 1890s overdetermined by the more explicitly defined, and rigidly institutionalized, salon culture of which he writes. Such methodological difficulties aside, McDonald offers an impressively sustained attempt to situate literary texts and their authors not only in relation to conventional discursive definitions of the literary field in the late nineteenth century but also in terms of what is called “particular non-discursive position[s] within it” (4).

The last two decades of the nineteenth century have long fascinated textual historians, not least because of the dramatic transformation of the literary audience that occurred in the period, an observation justified by Richard Salmon in his introduction to *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity*. It was at the end of the nineteenth century that a radical redefinition of the term “public” itself took place, as Enlightenment values gave way to more commercial definitions of literary production and consumption. One of the underlying themes in McDonald’s book, namely the emergence of a new kind of literary celebrity in late Victorian Britain finds similar fascination for Salmon, who sees the importance of Jamesian fiction not only in its critique of commodity culture but also in its participation in the economics of commodity exchange. Detecting a severe bifurcation in the life and work of one of the age’s most influential literary thinkers, Salmon observes how James’s career was divided between “the apparently antithetical pursuits

of popular theatrical success and an elite readership for his tales of ‘literary life’” (3). In this instance the need to sustain such a seemingly contradictory position is finally attributed to a set of larger structural transformations in the “public sphere” in which James was himself to become a key player. By the early twentieth century, concludes Salmon, “the literary text could no longer simply be used as a medium ‘in’ which advertising was held up as an object of critique: it had also to recognize itself in the image of its other” (177).

A more familiar Marxist interpretation of the same time frame is offered by N. N. Feltes in a compact collection of essays arranged around the theme of *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel*. Presenting his reader with a bewildering array of topics from copyright to the Society of Authors, the promotion of the Hundred Best Books to the plight of the woman writer, Feltes attempts to provide a total account of the way in which “British publishing transformed itself . . . from a petty-commodity literary mode of production to a capitalist literary mode of production” (xi). With sections on Besant, James, Stephenson, Caine, Corelli, and Bennett, the net is cast impressively wide, in each instance seeking to demonstrate how the ideology of the text can be made symptomatic of its position within an advanced capitalist formation. Formidably consistent as he is in his findings, it has to be said that Feltes’s handling of documentary evidence and the way it is made to serve an already prescribed political agenda makes at times for inflexible analysis. At others — for instance in the sophisticated way in which it teases out the development of the “literary” as a category valorized and subsequently institutionalized by the late Victorian market — ideological imperative and scholarly investigation come together to provide an unusually lucid and persuasively combative account. To criticize further would be carping. Feltes’s work as ever reflects a particular ideological milieu, a point of which he makes us more than aware in his introduction — “In the Althusserian/Poulantzian tradition in which I am trying to work” (xii) — and as an example it is among the best of its kind. Despite the criticisms it makes of predecessors — among them Peter Keating’s magisterial social history of the novel, *The Haunted Study* (1989) — Feltes’s work, both here and in his earlier collection, *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (1986), represents an important contribution to an ongoing conversation about one of the most fascinating, not to say most turbulent, periods in the development of literary labor.

One of the claims that Benedict Anderson makes in his well-known account of the rise of *Imagined Communities* (1983, 1991) is that the imagination of cultural synchronicity across vast distances was to a great extent made possible in the nineteenth century through the mediation of what he calls “print capitalism.” Situating commercial textuality at the center of the colonial project, Anderson thus credits the material book with helping to define a common imperial identity for a number of otherwise geographically disparate groups. In her recent survey of *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, Elleke Boehmer similarly observes that “at its height the British Empire was a vast communications network . . . [and] at least in part, a textual exercise.” Through such communications networks, argues Boehmer, “colonization seeded across widely separate and vastly different territories cultural symbols which exhibited a remarkable synonymity” (12–13). Aspects of what Boehmer calls “the textuality of empire” find detailed consideration in Richard Phillips’s *Mapping Men and Empire*. Having subtitled his study “A Geography of

Adventure,” Phillips goes on to offer a critical account of several colonial texts — drawn from cartography to the adventure novel — tracing the way in which the production and circulation of a literary tradition from Defoe to Ballantyne could be seen to embody and promote imperial desire. Presenting the documentary evidence from the organizing perspective of what he calls “the geographical imagination,” Phillips shows how popular works like *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Coral Island* can be seen to have exerted a powerful influence over nineteenth-century reading audiences. While it has long been recognized that such texts played a crucial role in informing imperial ideology, Phillips also imagines the possibility of resistance to dominant values at the point of reception: “No adventure story is intrinsically . . . conservative, since no adventure story has a singular meaning” (115). Like many texts the literature of empire, despite its explicit intentions, often bears within itself unpredictable possibilities for social change. A more detailed consideration of colonial readers themselves would have made for a more persuasive argument (Phillips bases most of his claims on secondary evidence, conjuring hypothetical responses almost exclusively from internal readings of the novels); at the very least, however, *Mapping Men and Empire* begins to open up the important question of the actual reception of literature in a colonial context. While the postcolonial critic has too often been content to ascribe an ideology to the imperial text, it may well be that historic forms of resistance await discovery in the everyday circulation and surprising use to which such texts have been subjected.

With the availability of bibliographical tools such as the *Wellesley Index* and the *Waterloo Directory*, the study of British periodical literature has been without doubt one of the best referenced and most indexed areas within Victorian Studies. That this has not always been true for the colonial periodical is an observation made by J. Don Vann and Rosemary VanArsdel in their introduction to *Periodicals of Queen Victoria's Empire*. Like its companion volume, *Victorian Periodicals and Victorian Society* (1994), this is an enormously useful reference guide, arranged by subject category, and offering helpful introductory essays on a remarkably diverse selection of neglected publications. Chapters dedicated to Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, Southern Africa, and a miscellany of what are called “Outposts of Empire,” offer historical overviews of the development of respective indigenous presses within the context of general cultural history, followed by descriptive bibliographies of the most important of the publications themselves. Although the development of the native press varied considerably between colonial regions, taken together these essays demonstrate the importance of the periodical press to the formation of imperial as well as emergent national identities. Reginald Tye's remarks on the significance of the pioneer press in New Zealand might be taken as a more general assessment of the significance of the press in a colonial setting, functioning as an agent “to inform and act as a forum for political debate” as well as providing a space where new societies “found expression” (209). Elizabeth Webby traces the rise of the Australian magazine press in similarly expansive terms, from its humble origins in the 1820s to the full-blown and richly diverse literary culture for which it was responsible in the 1890s, while Merrill Distad's remarkably full survey of the Canadian press in the same period is almost a monograph in itself. All in all, *Periodicals of Queen Victoria's Empire* demonstrates the crucial importance of the periodical press to even the most basic understanding of the high colonial period. The appearance of

this helpful guide is bound to encourage new work in an area whose relative neglect to date has been undeniable.

Since the publication of Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* (1977), a number of attempts have been made to historicize the role of nineteenth-century women, both as readers and writers. One recent study to take the question of female readership into the domain of the Victorian periodical is Margaret Beetham's *A Magazine of their Own: Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800–1914*. Offering a history of the woman's magazine as "feminised space," Beetham sees radical potential in what is conventionally regarded as an oppressively commercial and politically imposing genre. While it was clearly not always, nor even mostly, the case, this study shows with methodological clarity how women's literary culture was a crucial place where gender was both produced and contested in the nineteenth century. Beginning with an account of woman's position vis-à-vis the promotion of commodity culture, creating her as a consumer of texts among other material objects, Beetham goes on to survey three periods in the development of the female periodical, from fashion magazines early in the century to the so-called "advanced" magazine of the 1890s. In each instance it is shown how the magazine encourages more than other genres a high degree of readerly resistance to dominant values. Cultural participation through transgressive reading practices is a theme similarly informing Sally Mitchell's *The New Girl*. Tracing the development of a new kind of girl's adventure fiction from its origins in the 1880s to its ultimate demise in the early twentieth century, Mitchell moves through the genre by way of a set of defining themes, from work and education, to the masculine aspirations articulated in the pages of what was to become "girl's culture." Occupying a space outside the officially sanctioned life of the late nineteenth century, these magazines and novels were ultimately fated to fall under the dead hand of a segmented modern marketplace, Mitchell concludes, with an accompanying ideological freight that would by the 1920s close off all possibilities of a resistant female culture.

The History of the Book (an approximate translation of the French *histoire du livre*, variously referred to as "the sociology of the text" and "media history") is one of a number of areas of cross-fertilization which, at a time of institutional austerity, has grown up with remarkable vigor between more established disciplines in the humanities.² It would of course be misleading to suggest that the issues involved in any of these recent studies, let alone the concerns that inform them, are entirely new. The groundswell of activity of which the work discussed here is only a small sampling finds precedent in disciplinary histories going back at least to the 1950s, exemplified in the continental sociology of Escarpit and Febvre, and in the technical bibliography of Greg and Bowers. That much of this work continues within the interdisciplinary context of Victorian studies should come as no surprise. From Richard Altick's pioneering work on *The English Common Reader* to the study of the rise of the popular press in Raymond Williams's *The Long Revolution*, and later in John Sutherland's detailed accounts of Victorian author-publisher relations, the nineteenth century has long represented a conducive location for trying some of the most important issues in the sociology of the text. And if these recent offerings are any indication, we are set to learn a lot more about Victorian paratexts in the near future.

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NOTES

1. There are those who will find in Genette's latent belief in the transcendence of the text in itself — at one crucial juncture we are told that “typesetting is only a materialization of the text, the paper is only an underpinning of its materialization, even further removed from the constitutive ideality of the work” (35) — a model of reading that does not go far enough. It might well be argued that in the assertion that “the paratext is only an assistant, only an accessory of the [real] text” (410) the full significance of the text's constitutive materiality is evaded.
2. Something of the scope and volume of the field can be witnessed at the website of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing: <http://www.indiana.edu/~sharp>

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