

Patrick Brantlinger. *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1998. Pp. vi, 254. \$39.95, 19.95 pb.

*The Reading Lesson* is the fifth in a series of comprehensive and synthesizing books written by Patrick Brantlinger over a period of fifteen years. The others are *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (1983), *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (1988), *Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America* (1990), and *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain, 1694-1994* (1996). Each of these books ranges widely and seemingly effortlessly over a broad sweep of cultural history, narrative genres, and theoretical approaches and issues. *Bread and Circuses* traces the history of theories of mass culture from Juvenal to the present and concludes by exploring briefly the possibility of "the construction of a shared culture of the highest humanistic and creative value on a mass, even global scale" (294). *Rule of Darkness* describes the development of British imperialist ideology through various narrative fictions but especially the novel. It concludes with a measured assessment of Conrad's achievement in *Heart of Darkness*, which was to "invoke a moral idealism" it could not contain (274), or, in other words, to acknowledge — against its own will — "the horror" at the heart of the imperialist project. *Crusoe's Footprints* traces the development of cultural studies in Britain and the United States from the theory and canon wars of the 1960s and 1970s to the present. Although *Crusoe's Footprints* was written as an introductory survey of the field of cultural studies, it too, like *Bread and Circuses*, concludes with a commitment to future possibilities: "The inclusion of 'the masses' in the *schöner Schein* of a 'common culture' must continue to be the goal of cultural workers; an authentically democratic mass culture uniting people through recognition of a respect for differences, for 'otherness,' is the aim, not the enemy" (198). *Fictions of State* explores the "fictiveness" of national identity and, through various theories of the fetish and of public credit, outlines the ways in which fictional narratives both produce and critique the modern nation-state, especially the imperial nation-state. The focus is on British cultural history and the book concludes with an examination of a "postindustrial, postcolonial, and postmodern" Britain redefining itself in the wake of two significant legacies: on the one hand, an imperial legacy manifested in the "emergence of ethnic and immigrant 'subcultures' and literatures" within Britain's borders (246), and, on the other hand, the legacy of the Thatcher years, which have resulted in the thorough "monetarization" of contemporary British culture (254). While Brantlinger's earlier books conclude on a note of optimism with regard to the democratizing potential of mass culture, *Fictions of State* concludes on this more pessimistic note:

[C]lass conflict, high unemployment, the state's seemingly insoluble fiscal crisis, the continuing "troubles" in Northern Ireland (despite the recent cease-fire), increasing demands for devolution on the part of Scots nationalists, and racism and racial tensions that are not about to disappear suggest that the dystopian visions of the future — or nonfuture — expressed by Orwell's *1984*, Larin's "Going, Going," Burgess's *Clockwork Orange*, Jarman's *The Last of England*, Martin Amis's *Money*, and the Sex Pistol's "Anarchy in the U.K." may be features of British culture for some time to come. (263)

In many ways, *The Reading Lesson* returns to the terrain which Brantlinger first mapped out in *Bread and Circuses*, though here the focus is more thoroughly textual. That is, he returns to the question of the anxieties provoked in conservative cultural elites by the rise of mass literacy and its concomitant narrative forms, especially the novel. As in his earlier books, *The Reading Lesson* draws on a variety of critical schools and theoretical approaches. Derrida's rearticulation of the concept of the *pharmakon* is evoked to suggest the ways in which the nineteenth-century novel sought to "innoculate" the reader against its own deleterious effects. Barthes's notions of *le plaisir de texte* and of *jouissance* act as springboards for extremely productive questions about the challenges and possibilities of critically evaluating narrative forms which were (and are) read purely for pleasure or entertainment. Individual novels are read against their historical backgrounds and socio-cultural contexts; *Oliver Twist*, for example, is read against the rise of discourses of criminology and juvenile delinquency, while *Lady Audley's Secret* is read against changes in the newspaper publishing industry arising from the 1861 removal of the newspaper duty and the tax on paper. For the most part, this critical *bricolage* is an effective strategy; it certainly makes for a wonderfully — and appropriately — *readable* book. The only times when this approach seems to falter are when Brantlinger evokes psychoanalysis (through Freud, Lacan, or Žižek) as a way of exploring such issues as the fear of regression in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Gothic novels or the disappearance of the omniscient narrator in sensation novels of the 1860s. It may be that the use of psychoanalytic terms here is less convincing because they carry a much greater cultural weight than more literary critical or literary theoretical terms. That is, they carry the weight of *explanation* rather than *demonstration*; or, to put it another way, it is more difficult to put them to the apparently simple, tool-like use to which Brantlinger puts some deconstructive and poststructuralist terms. One wonders, too, whether psychoanalysis is evoked to help compensate for the impossibility of reconstructing the experience of real readers, a problem which Brantlinger recognizes in his introduction.

The relations between nineteenth-century writers and their readers is the major theme running through *The Reading Lesson*. As

Brantlinger notes, while “the ultimate unknowability of the common reader” is a source of uneasiness for “all modern authors,” “the mass readership that arose with capitalism, urbanization, industrialization, and the progress of education” in the nineteenth century created even more anxiety about “the unpredictability of reading and its effects” (17). These anxieties are reflected in the kinds of readers which the novels evoke, ranging from the monstrous reader in *Frankenstein* to the criminal reader in *Oliver Twist*, the detective reader in the sensation novel, and the obliterated reader in such late-Victorian science fiction as *The Time Machine*. As Brantlinger points out throughout *The Reading Lesson*, “popularity” became an increasingly vexed issue for nineteenth-century writers; they wanted readers, but *too many* readers were almost worse than no readers at all. While Dickens’s readership was comprised of a still numerically comfortable and relatively homogenous middle-class, the new literary marketplace for later Victorian writers like Gissing was “far more diversified, as well as larger” (187). Moreover, it was a market which had begun to spill over its banks and to become “increasingly imperial” and “global” (186). Too many readers, too many writers, and too many books were all the perceived effects of mass literacy and the mass culture it provoked.

As its title suggests, *The Reading Lesson* works on numerous levels: to evoke late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century arguments for and against instruction in literacy, to describe the “scenes of instruction” so characteristic of Victorian industrial novels (95), to outline the “lessons” radical and working-class readers drew from the texts they read, to point to the ways in which nineteenth-century British novels foreground acts of reading within their narratives, and finally, I would suggest, to foreground the *kind* of book Brantlinger himself has written. *The Reading Lesson* itself has a novelistic quality which is most evident in its narrative sweep — it tells a convincing story about reading in nineteenth-century Britain — and in its narrative voice, which is the voice of a teacher. Like so many good stories, the story of reading which Brantlinger tells has a beginning, a middle, and an end. In the beginning is the promise of “the revolutionary power of democratic literacy” (48) expressed by Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*; in the middle are Thackeray’s and Trollope’s self-denigrating, but somehow also self-satisfied, “claims of the *easiness* of undertaking the ‘business’ or ‘profession’ of literature” (129). The end of *The Reading Lesson*, in which Brantlinger evokes recent debates about the purported decline in “cultural literacy” brought about by too much television or too much poststructuralist theory, returns us to the beginning and to those earlier anxieties about democratic education and mass literacy. At the opening of this review, I emphasized the conclusions of Brantlinger’s earlier books because his is a critical and narrative voice we have learned to trust for its balance and its optimism. It is difficult

to say whether *The Reading Lesson* ends on an optimistic note. What is the future of reading? While Brantlinger refuses to answer this question, his book does end on what seems at least to be a note of affection for the addictive, toxic, seductive fictionality of the novel.

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