

**Transatlantic Cross-Currents:
Reform and Authorship in Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Literature**

The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World. Amanda Claybaugh. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. 246 pp.

Narrative in the Professional Age: Transatlantic Readings of Harriet Beecher Stowe, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Jennifer Cognard-Black. New York: Routledge, 2004. xvi + 214 pp.

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<1> During the last two decades, scholars in the rapidly expanding field of transatlantic literary studies have documented literary exchanges and reciprocal influences, prompting us to rethink national narratives and traditions and situate works and writers within a transatlantic literary marketplace. However, as Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor note in their introduction to the collection *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*, transatlantic literary studies “has to date been relatively unreflective about its methods and assumptions.”⁽¹⁾ Manning and Taylor urge scholars to move away from hierarchical notions of influence and the often-unexamined category of “literary relations” and pursue new ways of reading transatlantically. Both Amanda Claybaugh’s *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World* and Jennifer Cognard-Black’s *Narrative in the Professional Age: Transatlantic Readings of Harriet Beecher Stowe, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* seek to expand the scope of transatlantic studies by examining the ways in which British and American writers collaborated on issues of reform and professional authorship.

<2> Claybaugh’s fascinating text examines the pervasiveness of reform rhetoric and the role of reform in the rise of Anglo-American realism. This sweeping study highlights literary engagements with a wide range of nineteenth-century reform movements, including antislavery, suffrage, temperance, and anti-imperialism. One of her central claims is that we must understand social reform as an Anglo-American phenomenon. While many reformers crossed the Atlantic on lecture tours to raise money and awareness for their causes, more important, Claybaugh argues, was the increasing circulation of printed materials made possible by the growing ease of movement between nations and by authorized and unauthorized reprintings in the era before international copyright. Readers on each side of the Atlantic not only consumed reform texts, but also played a role in shaping and transforming the debates. These reform movements and the

discourses of reform also played a crucial role in the development of the novel, particularly the creation of “the novel of purpose”: indeed, Claybaugh states that the novel of purpose “took its conception of purposefulness from reform” (7). Like reformist writing, the novel of purpose was seen as having the ability to educate and enlighten readers. While in the past the genre had been condemned by critics as frivolous – we need only think of Samuel Johnson’s admonition that novels are for the “young, the ignorant, and the idle” – now novels were elevated and understood to be “working for the social good” (7). One of Claybaugh’s most significant arguments is that many of these writers were “reluctant reformers” – engaging reformist discourse because it was expected by readers and reviewers, not out of deep conviction or commitment. The idea of the novelist as reformer became entrenched in the nineteenth-century literary imaginary.

<3> In the Introduction, Claybaugh examines the reformist career of Harriet Martineau, an influential figure on both sides of the Atlantic. Martineau was an antislavery campaigner in England who came to the United States in the 1830s to give a series of speeches on abolition. Returning to England, she co-authored with American activist Maria Weston Chapman a history of the U.S. antislavery movement, published columns on the Fugitive Slave Act and *Dred Scott* ruling, penned travel narratives of her U.S. tours that engaged debates about slavery and the plight of industrial workers, and published reformist novels that fictionally represented reform debates. Martineau, Claybaugh asserts, set forth a way to engage reformist subject matter and use narrative to effect social change.

<4> Chapter 2, “Social Reform and the New Transatlanticism,” carefully presents Claybaugh’s methodology, examining the ways in which nineteenth-century critics understood the idea of “literature in English,” a literature that crossed national borders. The focus on nationally defined literature is largely a twentieth-century critical phenomenon, which has led to the “institutional as well as intellectual” divide in literary studies that transatlanticism seeks to bridge. Claybaugh argues that transatlanticism has rediscovered what “nineteenth-century critics took for granted; that English language works should not be read in isolation from one another” (14). Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) is a prime example of the power of the twin networks of Anglo-American print culture and social reform. The transatlantic bestseller places readers in sympathetic identification with slaves and reveals the ways in which reform was predicated not on charitable giving but on a transformation within an individual’s heart and mind. The novel had the power to create this sense of identification more effectively than reform pamphlets and tracts. In the last third of the chapter, Claybaugh argues that novel of purpose played an instrumental role in the development of Anglo-American realism, which shares with the novel of purpose a sense of “verisimilitude and purposefulness” (38). She demonstrates how realist novels borrowed a variety of techniques, tropes, modes of characterization, and plots from reformist fiction.

<5> After this methodological chapter, Claybaugh has five chapters focusing on specific writers, though surprisingly she does not examine many of the writers most often associated with the novel of purpose: Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Kingsley, Benjamin Disraeli, and Rebecca Harding Davis. Although she focuses on novels that are not overtly reformist, it would be interesting to see how Claybaugh would read *Mary Barton* (1848) or *Life in the Iron-Mills* (1861). Chapter 3 does focus on Charles Dickens, long associated with reform literature, although Claybaugh

argues he began his literary career with little intention of being a reformer, only gradually fashioning himself into a novelist of purpose. While Dickens certainly adopted subject matter and storytelling techniques from reformist texts in his early novels (the debtors' prison in *The Pickwick Papers* [1836-37], the Yorkshire schools in *Nicholas Nickleby* [1838-39]), Claybaugh argues that Dickens did not intend for his texts to enact social changes and was surprised when they in fact did. She traces the turning point of his reformist career to his first trip to the United States in 1842 and the subsequent publication of his travel narrative *American Notes* (1842), in which he takes on the persona of reformer. In his chapter on slavery, Dickens reprints (without acknowledgment) lengthy passages from abolitionist Theodore Weld's tract *American Slavery As It Is* (1839). While antislavery tracts were forbidden in the South, Dickens' popularity ensured the book, with its embedded tract, would be printed by publishers in the North and South. At the same time that Dickens finds his reformist voice, he also begins to focus on national-based reform and national identity, arguing in his novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44) that the false American rhetoric of reform cannot be applied to British movements.

<6> Chapter 4 examines how British author Anne Brontë and American author Elizabeth Stoddard engaged the central questions of the Anglo-American temperance movement. Although she had no personal contact with them, Stoddard imagined herself as part of a transatlantic community of women writers, including George Sand, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and the Brontë sisters. Along with Anne Brontë, Stoddard uses the tropes of the temperance movement not only to comment on the evils of drink, but also to engage ongoing debates about marriage reform (88). Claybaugh argues that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and *The Morgesons* (1862) employ the typical temperance cautionary narrative of how drunkenness causes suffering for wives and children, but go still further to "criticize the institution of marriage itself, the ways in which it constrains female autonomy" (91). In both novels, this autonomy is connected to property rights. Helen cedes control of her property not only to her first drunken husband, but also to her violent second husband, while Cassandra eventually seizes control of the family property and gains "self-possession."

<7> In Chapter 5 and 6 Claybaugh examines the ways that George Eliot, Henry James, and Mark Twain, all transatlantic figures, negotiated reform and realism. Eliot distinguished between the realist novel and reform writing, arguing that reform texts were overly didactic and err by romanticizing the subject or engaging in excessive description of horrors. Her vision of the realist novel included the sense of purposefulness that was the hallmark of reformist fiction, and Eliot believed that realism could serve "as a kind of substitute for reform" (121). Claybaugh examines *Felix Holt* (1866), which has an anti-reformist agenda, and *Middlemarch* (1871-72), which she describes as "the nineteenth century's greatest meditation on reform" (124), in which a variety of attempts to enact reform by various characters fail; the realist novel does not enact the happy ending, the reconciling of opposites and the positive social change that we see in reform novels. James, heavily influenced by continental realism, questioned the motives for reform in *The Princess Casamassima* (1885-86). The princess, for instance, engages in reform more out of curiosity and voyeurism than a desire to see social change. The protagonist Hyacinth Robinson engages in a sort of surveillance during his work of reform, determining the worthy and unworthy, and enacting disciplinary power. In both *The Princess Casamassima* and *The Bostonians* (1885-86), James critiques the reform novel and the reformer's focus on "types,"

representative figures who can stand for a group of people or social movement, even while engaging in reform debates.

<8> In her examination of Twain, Claybaugh focuses on his British reading tour in 1884-85. Twain was on a double bill with reform writer George Washington Cable, who was well established in the northeastern publishing world. As Claybaugh notes, the elite literary magazines privileged works with reform purposes. Twain, she argues, was on the periphery of the literary world in large part because of his refusal to write “with a purpose”; it was only when *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) began to be read as a commentary on slavery and racism, rather than as a comic or boys’ book, that Twain’s status in the Anglo-American literary world was reevaluated. In an insightful reading, Claybaugh asserts that these critics misread *Huckleberry Finn*, which she states is “neither a nonpurposeful novel nor a purposeful one, but rather a novel that is divided by the very question of purposefulness” (162).

<9> Claybaugh’s final chapter on Thomas Hardy is absorbing, but ultimately seems disconnected from her larger argument about the role of transatlantic print culture in the development of reform and realism. There is little sense of the ways in which Hardy is influenced by, or influences, the Anglo-American marketplace. Hardy’s purpose in this study seems to be to reveal the end of the novel of purpose, the point at which literature moves away from its reformist goals. In *Jude the Obscure* (1895), reform efforts are shown to be ineffectual and the only hope, Hardy imagines, would come through something “more utopian and visionary” (186). The book’s epilogue, which examines the ways in which imperialism “altered the terms of Anglo-American reformist collaboration” (217), would perhaps have made a stronger final chapter. Claybaugh’s discussion of Twain’s engagement in the debate about the Congo and her assertion that the emerging discourses of human rights were indebted to these earlier reformist traditions are brief but suggestive and merit further inquiry. Taken as a whole, Claybaugh’s finely written, detailed study demonstrates new ways in which we can see these authors working transatlantically.

<10> Cognard-Black’s *Narrative in the Professional Age* was published as part of the Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory series at Routledge edited by William E. Cain. The book critically examines how Harriet Beecher Stowe, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps negotiated the roles of woman, artist, and professional. Both Stowe and Phelps corresponded with Eliot from the mid-1860s until Eliot’s death in 1880. All three were widely read on both sides of the Atlantic. Cognard-Black focuses on these writers in the 1870s, after they had established prominent positions in the transatlantic literary marketplace and were grappling with increasing professionalization and marketeering in the literary world. Throughout her study, Cognard-Black traces several interconnected threads, including the mid-century move toward literary professionalism; developments in technology, communication and the literary marketplace; and how these writers created a distinctly feminine aesthetic.

<11> In the first chapter, Cognard-Black examines how Stowe and Phelps looked to Eliot’s “strong femininity” as they sought to develop their own feminine aesthetic and demonstrates the way both American writers were influenced by the burgeoning women’s movement. At the end of the Civil War, Stowe asserted that the “question of Woman and her Sphere is now, perhaps, the

greatest of the age,” although her engagement in the activist movement was indirect, mirroring in many ways her relationship with the abolitionist movement (27). Stowe and Phelps separately but simultaneously developed a discourse of “feminine strength,” looking to English women writers, especially Eliot, who was their “avatar of strong femininity,” for an imagined community of female artistic peers. Cognard-Black rejects the typical account of transatlanticism in which American writers, lacking confidence about themselves and their national literature, look to “superior” British writers. Instead, she argues, Phelps and Stowe sought compatriots in their quest to create an aesthetics of strong femininity. Cognard-Black cites Stowe’s assertion that intellectuals are not bound by national borders, but that the “highest class of mind in all countries loses nationality, and becomes universal” (60).

<12> Chapter Two focuses on Stowe’s “The True Story of Lady Byron’s Life” (1869) and its sequel *Lady Byron Vindicated* (1870), a fascinating example of transatlanticism, in which an American woman writer stepped in to defend the public reputation of a British woman. Cognard-Black asserts that the publication of these texts marks a transformation in Stowe’s career played out on a transatlantic stage. Stowe’s article was written in the mode of a sentimental novel, and was savaged in the press for its lack of definitive proof and its appeal to feelings over facts (indeed, it was full of factual errors). This appeal, which had served Stowe well in the transatlantic bestseller *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, no longer worked in the era of new media, including the Atlantic telegraph, which changed how news was delivered and received. In rewriting this story as *Lady Byron Vindicated*, Stowe reclaims her position of authority, presenting the proof the public called for and drawing on professional discourses from journalism, law, and psychiatry. Cognard-Black argues that Stowe’s relationship to professionalism was fraught, for at the same time that she recognized its necessity, she saw it as at odds with her concept of the “true artist, one through whom the divine makes itself known to the world” (85).

<13> In her third chapter, Cognard-Black focuses on Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876), published simultaneously in England and the United States. Cognard-Black asserts that the character Gwendolen struck a chord with American readers and functions as Eliot’s critique of “advertising, consumerism, and sensationalist fictions as well as the rise of capitalist-driven professionalism” (94). In contrast to the commercial economy, represented by the work of the “professional beauty” Gwendolen, Eliot argues for an aesthetic economy. Gwendolen undergoes a metamorphosis, moving away from sensation and false professionalism toward authenticity and artistry. Yet at the same time Eliot understands the literary marketplace where her books are consumed; her popularity in the transatlantic marketplace led to the publication of an unauthorized sequel, *Gwendolen*, penned by an anonymous American author. Ironically, the sequel is an unabashed sensational novel, promulgating the very aesthetics Eliot sought to discredit.

<14> The final chapter of *Narrative in the Professional Age* focuses on Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ novel *The Story of Avis* (1877), which Cognard-Black argues “serves as a culminating case study of the historical, political, economic, and aesthetic trends encountered by Stowe, Eliot, and Phelps throughout the 1870s” (117). In this *küntslerroman*, Phelps attempts to bring together her aspirations to “high art” and her aesthetics of feminine strength within the form of the “lowbrow” popular novel, which she hoped would reach and educate a mass audience. Phelps

pays homage to her two greatest intellectual influences – Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot – in the novel; indeed, it can be read as a rewriting of Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856) and Eliot’s *Armstrong* (1871). By the 1870s, Phelps and Eliot had become intertwined in the American literary imaginary, as Phelps had positioned herself as Eliot’s American emissary, even presenting a series of lectures on Eliot at Boston University. In the novel, Avis is a painter who enacts the tensions between artistry and professionalism felt by Stowe, Eliot, and Phelps herself. Ultimately Phelps’ novel sold poorly and Cognard-Black argues that contemporary readers and critics were “not ready to accept her vision” (147).

<15> Cognard-Black’s study engages and extends transatlantic studies in significant ways. She resists the “antagonist thesis” of Robert Weisbuch and other critics who argue that nineteenth-century American writers felt a sense of inferiority to their British counterparts, suffering a sort of Bloomian “anxiety of influence.” Cognard-Black argues instead that the transatlantic relationships of Stowe, Eliot, and Phelps were not simply examples of British influence on American writers (although Eliot clearly *was* an influence), but demonstrate literary collaboration and interdependence. This recognition of the variety and complexity of nineteenth-century transatlantic literary history is exactly what Manning and Taylor call for in their text. Cognard-Black offers readers a tantalizing glimpse at the unpublished letters between Stowe and Eliot and Phelps and Eliot, which illuminates the ways in which women writers were working together across national boundaries to create identities as women intellectuals and develop a feminine aesthetic. However, she spends little space analyzing their personal correspondence, leaving readers with many unanswered questions about who initiated the epistolary relationships and the extent of the correspondence. In addition, Cognard-Black acknowledges that Stowe and Phelps knew one another, but does not pursue the ways they may have influenced one another.

<16> Cognard-Black’s study is at times too ambitious in its claims. For instance, she argues in the introduction that “strong femininity” was indebted to and entwined with the transatlantic movement for women’s rights. In the subsequent chapters, however, she largely ignores the influences of feminists and the women’s rights movement on these writers, as well as Stowe, Eliot, and Phelps’ influences on the movement, beyond a mention of Phelps’ publication of articles on the “woman question” in the *Independent* and *Woman’s Journal*. Cognard-Black’s discussions of early feminism are largely relegated to footnotes. Another intriguing thread is Cognard-Black’s discussion of mid-nineteenth century new media, especially the introduction of the Atlantic telegraph, “the emblem of an imaginary, transatlantic nation” (16). While she does return to the telegraph and the way it shaped readers’ attitudes toward narrative and “facticity” in the chapter on Stowe, she does not fully pursue it in later chapters.

<17> Their inevitable limitations aside, both *The Novel of Purpose* and *Narrative in the Professional Age* demonstrate the range, flexibility, and necessity of transatlantic literary studies. These valuable projects contribute to the growing body of transatlantic literary, cultural, and intellectual history and illuminate new methods of thinking about the transatlantic project.

(1) Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor, "Introduction: What is Transatlantic Literary Studies?" in *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*, eds. Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007): 5. (^)