

Mediated Experience

The Feeling of Reading: Affective Experience and Victorian Literature. Ed. Rachel Ablow. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010. 216pp.

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<1>*The Feeling of Reading* is a perfectly poised, beautifully curated collection. It blends the recent turn to affect with a longer history of scholarship on reading, showing what happens when we edge past formalist and historicist debates about the ethics of reading and allow instead the strangeness of Victorian reading to remain. One of the great pleasures of this collection is that it is multi-dimensional enough for reassuringly uneven textures to emerge: reading is portrayed as incomplete, eccentric, pretended and tired. The essays engage questions of reading's duration (Nicholas Dames), location (Kate Flint) and reiteration (Rachel Ablow and Catherine Robson). Remarkable for a grouping of such eminent scholars, all essays are very true to the subject of the collection. Each of the essays flows with a sense of real pleasure at the opportunity to write about the "feeling of reading" and indeed the phrase rebounds word-for-word between the authors.

<2>This anthology is no simple celebration of the processes and protocols of reading, nor is it indulgent. In fact, it shrinks from the assumption that fiction loves, unproblematically, to portray the glories of fiction-making and fiction-reading. A powerful and striking thread through the essays is that reading was, for Victorians, all about being mediated, and even estranged. Nicholas Dames argues that the prolonged extract commonly used in literary reviews of the period produced "a productive kind of estrangement" (15); Leah Price examines novels that distance their characters from the verb "to read"; Herbert Tucker considers the tiring effects of reading; Rachel Ablow considers how belief (and reading) refracts subjectivity through an other and Stephen Arata writes on the "impersonal intimacy" between readers and fictional characters.

<3>The collection is particularly well sequenced (which means it *does* feel good to read). Nicholas Dames' essay "On Not Close Reading" opens the book; a strong beginning because it sets up a methodological disjunct between Victorian practices of reading and the critical mode that still dominates twenty-first century literary scholarship. He points out that the Victorian literary review was commonly built around surprisingly hefty excerpts of the original text. This form was, he concludes, something other than laziness on the part of the reviewer, and more about experiential recapitulation. It was, he argues, a way to "convey the effect of reading" (17). And

rather than diminishing the labor of reading, the excerpt functioned to lengthen the duration of reading, producing the time necessary to *have feeling*.

<4>As Dames' essay eschews the presumed privilege of closeness, Kate Flint's essay "Traveling Readers," also catches up the question of reading at a distance. She nimbly reverses the notion that reading transports the reader by asking "What does it mean to read when one is *away* from home?" (28). Does reading make an any-place of place, or does the site of reading make a world of difference? Her essay effects important anti-consumerist, anti-colonial interventions, since much work on literary circulation defaults to the model of the colonizing metropolis exporting texts to the colonized periphery. Flint dedicates her essay instead to cultural fracture, unheimlich experiences and failures to recapitulate England abroad, and I believe we are on the brink of a wave of exciting work in this area. As we might expect from a scholar who gave us *The Woman Reader* (1995), this essay is one of two in the collection that pay welcome attention to gender.(1)

<5>The other is Leah Price's "Reader's Block," an essay which takes us inside scenes of reading embedded in Victorian novels, to remark that although nineteenth-century fiction likes to depict the reading of fiction, it also surprisingly often represents "blocked" reading. Price traces depictions of unread books, pretenses at reading and disavowals of reading. This essay is deliciously attentive to the material—the "outside of books and the interiority of readers" (64)—and enfold numerous cartoons of reading as sexual distraction and abandonment. Her focus on the role of books as both impediment and prop to marriage makes me wish to see her in conversation with another piece of recent scholarship on sexual relation, text, material and "between-ness"—Sharon Marcus' *Between Women* (2007).(2)

<6>John Plotz's article places reading at a pivotal point in John Stuart Mill's struggles to articulate the relationship of self-determination to social coercion. The key term in Plotz's argument is "mediated intimacy"; the idea that Mill sought out reading not as a replacement for sociality, but as a generative and freeing form of social interaction. For Mill, the aurality/orality of conversation was at best distractive noise, at worst, falsifying. To use Mill's own passionate descriptions, the "wonderful miracle of reading" is a "peopled solitude" (77).

<7>From Mill's reification of reading as a way to resist the impress of the social, the collection shifts to examine how reading could, conversely, be used to manage young minds. In a long-legged essay, which reaches from the nineteenth-century to the present day, and between British and American texts, Catherine Robson examines the pedagogical practice of children's memorization and recitation of poetry. She focuses on how this practice is portrayed in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and promotes the genre of the prosimetrum (the work that contains both verse and prose) to scholars other than those in classical and medieval studies. In common with many of the other essays, Robson's conclusion is about the persistence of form: the content of memorized poems might be scrambled by Alice's fall down the rabbit hole, but the somatic and mental posture remains.

<8>Herbert Tucker's vibrant essay pays attention to a marginalized affective register: fatigue. His exploration of "poetic fatigue" and "its defining opposite, poetic afflatus" (114) links versification with electroplated soup spoons, in hot pursuit of Victorian conceptions of "energy."

It took energy not only to produce verse, Tucker points out, but also to be a reading audience for it. This is the era, he reminds us, of literary societies, who worked hard to manufacture literary elitism. And it is decidedly poetry, rather than prose, which Tucker describes as “more insistently mediated [. . .] more immediately present to consciousness” and, thus, more mentally taxing. Reading poetry calls upon the “inward eye and ear and tongue” (117) and the strain of creating this somatic scape brings the reader closer to the strains of the poetic protagonists. Tennyson’s *Lady of Shalott* grows sick and tired, Mariana wishes she were dead, and the attentive reader’s attentiveness draws them closer in to this affective region. Tucker’s reading is generosity itself: we should not chide ourselves (like Alice) for growing weary or sleepy; instead, we should understand it as all part of the poetic process. For if Victorian poetry fatigued the reader, it also rested them: “The tissue of Victorian verse incorporates a calisthenic of focus and relaxation” (120).

<9>For Stephen Arata, a similar model of tension and release opens up Walter Pater’s neglected 1885 novel *Marius the Epicurean*. “To be impassioned and contemplative is to be at once engaged and detached” (133), he writes. Most penetratingly, Arata explores the detachment of death, arguing that the dead make the best analogue for how fictional characters work. When Marius threatens to weep over his dying friend Flavian and Flavian is unimpressed, Arata suggests that Marius mimics readers who might weep over fictional characters who are, perforce, insensible to their emotions. This essay’s focus on impersonality echoes Plotz on Mill’s “mediated intimacy” and also suggests (though does not cite) myriad links to queer scholarship on sexual marginalization and liminality. Arata’s turn to Barthes, and his focus on Pater’s ahistorical historicism, makes me think of the work of, for example, Carolyn Dinshaw or Heather Love.⁽³⁾ This recent queer scholarship is a rich resource on impersonality and the tricky business of not touching through time. Heather Love’s work is particularly relevant, since her book *Feeling Backward* (2009) includes a chapter on Pater that links his “aesthetic of failure” with marginalized sexual identity; Love’s argument is about martyrdom and exquisite feeling and would be a good interlocutor here.

<10>It is sexuality that forms a bridge between Arata’s essay and Ablow’s following essay about the pleasures of intermediating belief. “Reading and Re-Reading” is centered on a wonderfully original reading of Oscar Wilde’s “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” (1889), which allies the story to the work of John Henry Cardinal Newman. Critics have been leery of addressing the question of religious belief in Wilde’s work. Ablow reminds us, however, that “The Portrait” is structured by belief and martyrdom, and most importantly, by conversion. She likens the repeated conversions of “The Portrait” with Newman’s *Loss and Gain: The Story of a Convert* (1848), in which the hero Charles converts to Roman Catholicism. This conversion is consequent to an encounter with his friend Willis, who kisses him and leaves him with a sense of transformation and communion. For both Wilde and Newman, the most vital passion comes not from knowing ourselves, but rather from imagining who we are by mediating ourselves through a beloved. Newman’s work suggests “we believe our beliefs to be true not just because of what it feels like to hold them [. . .] but because of what it feels like to love *someone else* who holds them.” This agile and convincing essay is about having illative sense, that is, sense that is the product of inference. In Ablow’s hands, reading and re-reading are iterations that fuse text and lover, and blur together “[b]elief, experience, love and reading” (168).

<11>The collection concludes with an essay by Garrett Stewart about George Eliot and the “transferred life” of human sympathy and identification. Like Ablow’s essay, it is also about faith, and what happens to it in transmission. Focusing on the transference that frames Maggie Tulliver’s life story in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), this essay crystallizes the way Philip Wakem is a character who “tells Maggie’s story back to the heroine *herself*” (184). As the transference of belief is crucial to “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.”, in Stewart’s account of *Mill*, it is the passing of narrative control that is formative: “In a sense, Philip has thus taken over from the nameless narrator of the prologue, who passed the baton to omniscience early on” (185). What I find so animating about this reading is that it turns on the figurations of disability. This novel is, Stewart reminds us, framed by somatic loss: numb arms, dozing and fatigued characters, and a hunched back. Philip occupies a “bookish [. . .] remove from social contact” (192), but is the only one who can bestow on Maggie the gift of “feeling read” (204).

<12>*The Feeling of Reading* is very much about fiction. The prose form and the more quotidian kinds of reading—of newspapers, or letters—don’t get much of a look-in. Nor do we learn much about what not reading, or not being able to read, felt like: there’s no index entry for illiteracy, and the question of working class subjects’ access to texts would dovetail well with the concerns of the collection. But this is a description merely of the scope of the collection, not its oversights. Ablow’s introduction ably describes the vast shifts in reading culture that occurred across the course of the nineteenth century, including a massive growth in literacy rates and a concomitant rise in the ways and means of disseminating text. The Victorian text is, as she shows it to us, is a veritable ganglion.

Endnotes

(1)Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.(^)

(2)Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England*.Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.(^)

(3)See Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) and Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.(^)