rapidly developing commodity culture. In concluding his analysis of these disturbed dualisms, Bowen rightly emphasises the deconstructive, affirmative force of the incomparable Mrs. Gamp, who "compels our desire, makes us her familiars and *fetches* us, like one of the unborn, or one of the dead, or some of her old clothes" (218). Mrs. Gamp's clothes attest to the changing role of the commodity; for rather than bearing the traces of the congealed labour of their producer, they express the superabundant life of their former owner and reproduce her subjectivity in a perverse kind of propagation: "the very fetch and ghost of Mrs. Gamp, bonnet and all, might be seen hanging up, any hour in the day, in at least a dozen of the second-hand clothes shops about Holborn."[2] While the commodity-form here awaits its later theorisation by Marx, this is a world in which its power is already manifest in new relations between subjects and objects. As Bowen argues, *Martin Chuzzlewit* is indeed one of the "most prescient of modern novels" (184). His study as a whole compellingly demonstrates the extent to which Dickens's early fictions – "these other, wilder, freer ethical texts" (219) – anticipate the theoretical developments both of his day and our own.

Catherine Waters

***The Reading Lesson. The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, by Patrick Brantlinger. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998.**

This is an important book. It is important because the ability to read, the spread of mass literacy, is probably the single most significant phenomenon in the Victorian age. Contested by conservatives as disrupting the status quo, even as unnecessary for the working classes, reading was nevertheless advocated, promulgated and encouraged by many social radicals, and in the 1830s and 1840s the steady growth of cheap periodicals designed to help and encourage reading skills changed the publishing industry. Publishers saw opening before them a market of such proportions they must have been dazzled by the sight. Not surprisingly, it is in this precise period that serialised fiction first appeared and the shift from a focus on "useful knowledge" as distributed by the *Penny Magazine* and the Chambers Brothers in *Chambers's Journal*, both of which, not surprisingly, commenced operations in the reform year, 1832, to less useful knowledge in the form of fictional tales, brought about another round of debate producing very similar arguments to those put forward decades earlier, as critics and commentators dealt with the manifestation of the Gothic novel in the late eighteenth century. Critics generally were anxious about the corruption of the mind, and believed that the excitement of reading novels turned readers away from works that would improve the mind and the morals. As

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[2] Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, ed. Margaret Cardwell, World's Classics (1843-4; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984), 269.

Brantlinger shows, these concerns remained in the Victorian age and even recurred late in the century.

Brantlinger's *The Reading Lesson* rightly takes us back into the eighteenth century to trace the beginnings of the reading debate, as broached by writers themselves. Women writers like Hannah More and Jane Austen carefully negotiated their roles as women with public voices in an age resisting such ideological contradictions. They tried, and indeed did manage, to have it both ways, to condemn novel reading within the very pages of the novels they produced. Brantlinger's first chapter then offers a sound and carefully researched overview in his usual precise, compelling prose, that makes meticulous scholarship seem deceptively easy. This is followed by a discussion of the Gothic which proposes that Gothic novels double or mirror realistic novels, that the Gothic nightmare is dependent on an idea of reality, and using Cixous's term, Brantlinger demonstrates how Gothic's "delirious discourse" threatens to engulf all other forms of narrative, the Biblical for instance. This is a key strand of the thesis which the book explores, the function of "realism" in fiction generally and its connection to the reader. Part of the sheer pleasure of *The Reading Lesson*, with its nicely punning title reflecting on the "lesson" it offers to today's readers, is the manner in which, despite the twists and turns along the way, this thesis is returned to. I should note here too that Brantlinger makes excellent use of a range of recent, and not so recent, some even forgotten, critical studies both to inform and to assist the formulation of his own arguments.

Gothic novels are fictions with the potential to "bring down the world" written in an age when it did indeed seem as if the known world could be destroyed, as demonstrated by the tearing down of the French social and hierarchical order in 1789. This argument leads neatly into the third chapter in which "the mob," Edmund Burke's "swinish multitude," teetering always on the edge of violence, an entity always the subject of so much anxiety in the Victorian age as well, becomes also synonymous with a group that sounds, to our ears at least, infinitely more respectable, "the reading public." Here it is argued that "the reading public," about whom Coleridge expressed such disquiet, has been characterised by Mary Shelley in the shape of Frankenstein's monster. In concluding this chapter Brantlinger writes: "the disfigured figure of monstrous articulation and literacy *is*, in a figurative sense, the novel – or rather, it is *both* the novel and the reading monster" (68).

So we are brought to the novels of the Victorian age, significantly to Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, serialised in *Bentley's Miscellany* (1837-39), which Dickens was editing at the time, and which is thought to have popularised serialisation of the long novel. From hereon in, Brantlinger analyses the questions raised about the actual literary product offered to the reading public. In considering *Oliver Twist* for instance he suggests that it offers two kinds of reading, one valorised by the novel as wisdom, the other what he terms "criminal reading," literature that might mislead or fail to improve the reader. He notes that Thackeray accused Dickens of engaging readerly sympathy for "a set of ruffians whose occupations are thieving, murder, and prostitution" (72). The discussion which ends Chapter Four focuses on Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* and investigates the problem of writing as a construction, neatly

demonstrated by Brantlinger when Mayhew's novelistic construction of facts and statistics is constantly disrupted by the actual voices of the working-class poor interviewed and then reported in the text. The key issue in this chapter is the same issue which now haunts film, television and internet censorship. To what extent do criminal, vicious, or salacious representations corrupt their audiences? The following chapter, focussing on industrial novels, might be said to present the opposite conundrum. To what extent do novels with particular political agenda convince, or enlist the sympathy, of readers? While these questions emerge from Brantlinger's thesis, they remain unanswered. As with many discussions of the nineteenth-century reader, the actual effect of the various kinds of narratives on those who consume them is of a highly nebulous nature. Evidence, hard evidence, is scanty and what there is, often unreliable.

One of the particular benefits of this work, however, is the use of lesser-known nineteenth-century writing by noted authors. Harriet Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy* is a case in point. The critical discussion of "A Manchester Strike" lays bare the deficiencies, fallacies and inconsistencies in the economic philosophy Martineau espoused. And while Brantlinger's study owes a debt to previous critics and commentators (fully acknowledged) its value rests in the very readable synthesis he provides of a vast range of fictional, historical and cultural material.

Chapter Six is an engrossing study of classic realism and the uneasy shift between fiction and reality in the work of Thackeray and Trollope. Brantlinger demonstrates convincingly that both authors thought of the novel as untrustworthy or "counterfeit" and the reading public as that "great big stupid" to use Gissing's words (139). Brantlinger adds: "There is ultimately nothing more highly prized (more real) in [Trollope's] *The Eustace Diamonds* than the Eustace diamonds, and yet they [. . .] are themselves mere 'paste,' merely fictitious" (141). For the reader, however, and this is an area where the discussion does not stray, the "real" diamond, "as good as gold," is surely the tale itself, *The Eustace Diamonds*, which offers the reader the viable pleasure of an engrossing, captivating narrative. If Trollope and Thackeray held their readers in contempt, or were mere panders to public taste, is the reader then responsible for the author's sense of failure?

This question is resolved in the chapter on the sensation novel. Here Brantlinger quite brilliantly demonstrates the watershed, when readers came to be divided into "serious" or "expert" as opposed to "ordinary," and the Victorian world came face to face with the new modernity. The advent of the sensation novel (1861) reveals the Victorians to be on the cusp of the new consumer age. Whether novelists indeed "capitulated" to reader demand, or created that demand in the first place is a moot point which is still being argued today over the advent, for instance, of "reality" television and in part the fascination of Brantlinger's study is the way in which its questions and probings have such resonance for the media and communication issues of the twenty-first century. This comes through most strongly with the discussion of novel scenes which are potentially pornographic, or at least can be read as primal scenes often unfolding before the horrified gaze of innocent characters whose vulnerability the reader most usually identifies with. Villainous characters like Lady

Audley evoke "the entire erotic register of the sensational" (161) as do male villains in other tales: Count Fosco, Uncle Silas, Dracula. Sensation is a literary mode which undermines the naive empiric assumptions of realism where the ordinary and the everyday has its hidden other side and seeing can no longer mean believing.

Through close, careful readings of Stevenson and Gissing, William Morris and H.G. Wells, Brantlinger draws together these threads, by producing a fine exploration of *News from Nowhere* (1891) and Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) as texts which in themselves are analysing print culture at the end of the nineteenth century, invoking worlds without books in complex Utopian and dystopian fantasies. In the end it seems that the novel is a form which develops out of, and even in spite of, anti-novel rhetoric tightly tied to that all-powerful, but still relatively unexplored figure, the Reader.

Judith Johnston

***Struggle and Storm: The Life and Death of Francis Adams*, by Meg Tasker. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001.**

As the subtitle of Meg Tasker's new biography of the English and Australian writer Francis Adams makes clear, one of the most compelling aspects of Francis Adams's short life was his manner of leaving it. Having suffered from tuberculosis for many years, he eventually shot himself to avoid the final ghastly struggles against suffocation. His wife (or supposed wife) was with him when he died and Adams's final moments were later investigated in some detail, to determine whether criminal charges should be brought against her. Hence rather more is known about Adams's death – including some rather gruesome details involving false teeth – than about much of the previous thirty years of his life.

Tasker has, however, spent a good many years of hers researching what there is to discover about Francis Adams. But, as she makes clear towards the end of her book, her aim has not been to write the sort of biography which is often hard to distinguish from fiction:

> To anyone who expects biography to re-create the living man, I'm afraid my Francis Adams will appear a sorry simulation, with creaky joints and too much visible stitching. On the other hand, it would be misleading to hide the stitches, deny the long labour of reconstruction, and pretend that this interesting chap had just strolled in from the nineteenth century, ready to explain himself to the citizens of the next millennium. (213)

One of the most obvious indications of Tasker's wish to make more visible the speculation often concealed beneath the smooth surfaces of conventional biographies, is her decision to use two different type faces. The standard type used for most of the book presumably represents her attempt to tell the story of Francis Adams and his