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*The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and  
the Form of Victorian Fiction , and: Telegraphic Realism:  
Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems (review)*

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WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly, Volume 37, Numbers 1 & 2,  
Spring/Summer 2009, pp. 279-283 (Review)

Published by The Feminist Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsqr.0.0151>



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RICHARD BAIN'S *THE PHYSIOLOGY OF THE NOVEL: READING,  
NEURAL SCIENCE, AND THE FORM OF VICTORIAN FICTION*,  
NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2007

RICHARD MENKE'S *TELEGRAPHIC REALISM: VICTORIAN FICTION  
AND OTHER INFORMATION SYSTEMS*  
STANFORD: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2008

JASON TOUGAW

Nicholas Dames's *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* and Richard Menke's *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems* belong to a subgenre of literary criticism we might call "Literature and . . ." During the past decade, a vast number of books and dissertations have investigated links between literature and the many facets of culture and history that inform literary evolution and vice versa. These books are far too numerous to catalog, but a few titles will illustrate the point: *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* by Deborah Nelson (confessional poetry and privacy law), *Literature and Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Britain* by Janis McLarren Caldwell, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* by Victoria Rosner, (literature and architecture/interior design), *Consciousness and the Novel* by David Lodge. While the subgenre is by no means new, its widespread and growing predominance is notable. "Literature and . . ." seems to be the moment's method of choice. There are good reasons for this. Of course, there is probably no facet of life that has not been represented in works of literature. In addition, one legacy of the high-theory moment of the 1980s and 1990s has been a collective commitment to examining the interconnections between literature, history, and politics. To some degree, that same high-theory moment has led to a backlash: a generation of scholars educated on the abstractions of theory have sought to examine literature's concrete relationships to culture.

Dames and Menke both examine the seemingly ineffable cross-directional influences between Victorian literature and cultural history in order to render them concrete, visible, and intelligible. Dames's book focuses on the relationships between the Victorian novel and nineteenth-century brain

[WSQ: *Women's Studies Quarterly* 37: 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 2009)]  
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science (physiological psychology, psychophysics, ophthalmology, and experiments with speed reading) and Menke's on Victorian fiction and emerging communications technologies (the penny post, the telegraph, wireless telegraphy). Both books examine primarily canonical texts and authors, emphasizing the details and interpretations that emerge under the lens of their respective "ands." Dames discusses Thackeray in relation to the dynamics of a reader's attention; the influence of Wagner on Eliot with regard to what he calls "elongated form;" fragmentation in Meredith; and, unexpectedly, Gissing and "the birth of speed readers" (209). Menke discusses the role of the penny post in novels by Trollope and Dickens, the thematizing of telegraphic communication in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, "disembodied information" (27) in Eliot's "The Lifted Veil," and the explicit representations of electric communication in James's "In the Cage" and Kipling's "Wireless." The challenge for readers of "Literature and . . ." books is to parse the highly specific and sometimes idiosyncratic contributions their authors are making toward a more general understanding of the texts and histories they investigate. How might a sustained and convincing reading of Thackeray's many portraits of "readerly absorption" in *Vanity Fair* (83) or a graceful and astute recasting of *Jane Eyre* and Edward Rochester's telepathy as telegraphy inform our general understanding of these novels? How does a scholar-critic synthesize the various "ands" on display in order to make productive interpretive or pedagogical use of them? The question is a motivating force for both Dames and Menke, who cast it in terms specific to their projects.

For Dames, that question is "How, then, did readers of the past—for my purposes, the Victorian novel-reader—read? What transpired in mind and body as reading occurred?" (6). The answers, he suggests, are important and relevant because the question wasn't asked enough during the twentieth century, largely because literary criticism and cognitive theory went their separate ways. As a result, "the psychological processes of novel-reading . . . are continually being recruited into contemporary debates about literature and civic virtue, which not only potentially distort and misrepresent the actual rhythms and practices of novel-reading, but also construct dubious ethical hierarchies (which are often hierarchies of taste, or class) of kinds of novel consumption" (3). As twenty-first-century critics pick up the Victorian thread and reweave the study of cognition and the study of reading, we may come to a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the ethics, aesthetics, and physiology of reading.

Menke doesn't phrase his motivation in the form of an explicit question *per se*, but an implicit one is apparent throughout the book: How did new information technologies shape the development of realism? In his words, "I intend this book as not simply a thematic study of new media technologies in fiction but an examination of how fiction could begin imagining itself as a medium and information system in an age of new media. Accordingly, the point of this study is not only to discuss fiction that weaves plots around particular Victorian media technologies, although several of the following chapters do just that. Rather, I have sought to delineate the deep ways in which new technologies, and the wider understandings that a culture could derive from them, register in literature's ways of imagining and representing the real" (3–4). Menke's stated intention is twofold: (1) to delineate the relationships between literary writing and new media, an approach clearly influenced by Marshall McLuhan and one that promises to be relevant for any era, including our own, and (2) to offer a new way of understanding the evolution of literary realism during the nineteenth century (an evolution that is more web than trajectory, involving the Brontës' gothic psychologizing, Trollope's dramatization of the quotidian, Dickens's classificatory social typology, Eliot's expansive social philosophy, and James's obsessive investigation of interiority).

Despite the stated motives of both authors, whose pursuit would seem to appeal to any literary scholar—and, in fact, even to a broader, more public audience—their books read as though they are written primarily for other specialists. Dames and Menke assume a great deal of knowledge of Victorian history and of the texts they examine, and neither does much to orient the nonspecialist. Both offer a tremendous amount of convincing evidence to demonstrate the accuracy and relevance of their arguments, but the result in both books is that they begin to feel repetitive. Both writers choose to emphasize historical and textual details, rather than following through on the threads of their arguments that would make them relevant to nonspecialists—say, the connections between an ethics and an aesthetics of reading in Dames, or the relationship between distinctively literary writing and that conducted for the sake of practical communication in Menke. But this is a tendency of the genre, more than a flaw of Dames's and Menke's particular contributions. If high theory emphasized the grand rhetorical gesture at the expense of close examination, the "Literature and . . ." approach has a tendency to overspecialization, emphasizing close examination at the expense

of synthesis. Nonetheless, perhaps the most valuable—and certainly the most memorable—contribution of any work of literary criticism is a striking and convincing reading of a literary text. Dames's and Menke's books include no shortage of such readings.

Dames reads *Daniel Deronda* through the lens of Eliot's ambivalent and evolving response to Wagner. When he quotes her 1855 essay "Liszt, Wagner, and Weimar," he emphasizes the fact that its reflections on artistic form are rooted in her study of both human physiology and evolutionary theory. Speculating on what she considers the dissatisfying result of Wagner's formal experiments with melody, Eliot writes, "As to melody—who knows? It is just possible that melody, as we conceive it, is only a transitory phase of music, and that musicians of the future may read the airs of Mozart and Beethoven and Rosine as scholars read the Strabreim and assonance of early poetry. We are but in 'the morning of the times,' and must learn to think of ourselves as tadpoles of the future frog. . . . Still, the tadpole is limited to tadpole pleasures; and so, in our state of development, we are swayed by melody" (136–37). Dames argues that this early response to Wagner would later inform Eliot's writing of *Daniel Deronda*, as a cognitive experiment in form that could achieve both aesthetic and political aims. According to Dames, Wagner's influence is apparent in Eliot's use of the leitmotif, or recurring element, to sustain a long narrative, perhaps one capable of training readers to sustain attention to what he calls "elongated forms." What's most convincing and memorable about Dames's reading, though, is the argument about Eliot's method, her conception of her narrative experimentation in evolutionary terms, her belief in narrative's capacity to alter the brains of her readers.

By contrast, the most memorable reading in Menke's book focuses on a single detail in *Jane Eyre*: the moment, ordinarily understood as one of the novel's many gothic flourishes, when Jane and Rochester seem to communicate their love and commitment telepathically. Jane, determined to sacrifice herself by marrying St. John and enduring life as a missionary's wife, feels an "inexpressible thrill" that, in Menke's words, enables "her senses to waken to a world of true impressions hitherto beyond their reach" (78). In this state, she hears Rochester's voice beckoning her to come to him. Jane replies—"I am coming! . . . Wait for me!" (78)—and Rochester hears her in kind. Menke reads this detail as a response to the emergence of the telegraph, which seemed, like Jane's "inexpressible thrill," to reveal a "new world of true impressions" about the physical laws that govern communication. These new laws enabled new forms of social life, made possible by the rapid transmis-

sion of information across great distances. In the process, they redefined both information and communication in ways that would alter the fundamental rhythms of both work and personal communication. Menke concludes that Brontë's "cosmic telegram" exploits the new technology to "confirm its paradoxical realism," a realism characterized by "an almost electric mode of narrative closeness and fictional truth-telling for an emerging age of long-distance intimacy" (87–88).

Readings like these, which are convincing because they are both bold and nuanced, are made possible in the new contexts in which "literature and . . ." projects place familiar texts. Dames's and Menke's books are strong examples, offering vast quantities of information that contextualize the literary texts they examine and making imaginative and nuanced arguments about them. Nonetheless, reading books like these, it's difficult not to miss the grand rhetorical gestures of previous generations of criticism. These gestures seem almost to have become taboo, because they veer too far toward generalization and grandiosity. While this may have been true of many of high theory's most influential texts, the criticism of the present and the future would do well to find a little more middle ground, to make more room for synthesis and to appeal to nonspecialists.

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