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The Art of Alibi: English Law Courts and the Novel, and:
Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence: The
Scientific Investigations of Poe, Dickens, and Doyle
(review)

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latter text he associated the practice with degeneration. The New Woman was also divided and muddled on the issue of eugenics and birth control. Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh deliberately courted controversy by proselytising for the working class to use contraception to alleviate poverty (rather than to sexually liberate women), but they based their argument of the classic eugenicist fantasy of degeneration – implicitly referring to the Irish, they declared that ‘children born of such parents are literally a lower race’ (cited 176). As some New Women tried to reconfigure Medea as an archetype of righteous anger and female emancipation, Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1896) produced a desolate version of child murder, a symbolism of despair ‘relieved of all its meanings’ (182). Yet, just beyond the chronological range of this book, it is worth noting that Charlotte Perkins Gilman, another feminist eugenicist, found a unique solution to these problems in her Utopia *Herland* (1915). In this exclusive female society, reproduction occurs via parthenogenesis.

Chapter 7 is devoted to the Irish ‘threat’ to English society, and completes the circle which began with Swift’s *Modest Proposal*. George Egerton’s infanticidal story ‘Wedlock’ is interpreted as an allegory about the growing pressure for Home Rule and the traditional call for Ireland to sacrifice her sons. The tragic figure of Medea is the New Woman’s answer to Swift’s Yahoos: flawed yet justified sacrifice, versus social and racial degeneration. Both critiques are devastating and disturbing.

Ian Haywood

Jonathan H. Grossman, *The Art of Alibi: English Law Courts and the Novel* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), xii + 202 pages, illustrated, hardback, £27.50 (ISBN 0 8018 6755 X).

Lawrence Frank, *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence: The Scientific Investigations of Poe, Dickens, and Doyle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), x + 249 pages, illustrated, hardback, £47.50 (ISBN 1 4039 1139 8).

In spite of many differences, these two studies of nineteenth-century crime and detection narratives also share some features in terms of methodology and subject matter. Both Grossman and Frank’s approach can be characterized as broadly new historicist and there is overlap in some of the authors and texts they analyze (Dickens and detective fiction by Poe and Doyle). The two studies each contextualize these narratives, Grossman with regard to the legal system, Frank in relation to contemporaneous scientific debates. However, whilst questions of

literary genre ultimately constitute the focus of *The Art of Alibi*, Frank's work places greater emphasis on historical context and detailed analysis of a range of textual material. Grossman's study will mainly be of interest to literary historians, legal historians and cultural historians of crime, whereas Frank's *Victorian Detective Fiction* will appeal to historians of science and literary scholars.

Grossman's 2002 publication is one of a number of recent studies – Jan-Melissa Schramm's *Testimony and Advocacy in Victorian Law, Literature, and Theology* (2000) and Lisa Rodensky's *The Crime in Mind: Criminal Responsibility and the Victorian Novel* (2003) are further examples – on the interrelationships between law and literature. There is much to admire in Grossman's readings of works by Godwin, Mary Shelley, Dickens, Gaskell and Bulwer, framed by fascinating analyses of two paintings: Abraham Solomon's *Waiting for the Verdict* (engraved 1866) and Robert Gemmell Hutchison's *Awaiting the Verdict* (1890s) – paintings he considers as indicative of an epistemological shift pointing to the centrality of the law courts as a narrative space.

Grossman's project traces 'how prevailing figurative scenes of justice have shaped narrative paradigms across different eras' (5), and it covers material from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries. The increasing presence of lawyers in the wake of the 1836 Prisoners' Counsel Act transformed the courtroom into 'a newly complex storytelling forum' (20), a development which, according to Grossman, served as 'one catalyst in the developing art of narrating other people's minds' (23). Grossman is seemingly careful to insist that the relationship between courts and novel was not an immediately causal one, suggesting that these legal transformations (as part of a wider epistemological change) 'percolated in the imaginatively flexible art of the novel, in which such changes found powerful exploration and origination, expression and response' (23). Ultimately, how firm or tentative Grossman imagines the relationship between novel and legal trial as narrative arenas remains somewhat unclear.

Central to the book's argument is the notion that the novel as a literary form can only be understood 'in the context of a specific set of cultural relationships, which it both reflects and produces' (36). Here, Grossman specifically ties its emergence to the judicial shift from scaffold to court and argues that 'historically, *novel* names a departure from the genre of the criminal biography' (36). In this context, one may certainly take issue with Grossman's periodization. Although criminal biography and broadsheet sales declined over the second half of the nineteenth century, huge numbers of broadsheets in particular were still being sold at mid-century. Grossman's contention that 'at the

apogee of trials in the 1840s the novel solidified as the dominant literary genre' (25) reveals a class bias in his critical trajectory that privileges the novel – and newspaper reporting of trial scenes – over broadsheet publications which are neglected as a supposedly less 'complex' storytelling mode.

Grossman's reading of Godwin's *Caleb Williams* as a repudiation of the genre of criminal biography relies on this critical framework. His analysis is based on and reinforces the notion that criminal biography and broadsheets are politically conservative narrative forms, 'essentially moralistic tracts for lawful behavior' (28). This assessment of the ideological implications of gallows literature has been contested elsewhere, but Grossman does not acknowledge the different critical approaches to this popular form.¹ Godwin scholars may also wonder at Grossman's unproblematic use of the generic term 'novel' with regard to *Caleb Williams* (termed a 'romance' by Godwin himself) and his reading that appears out of step with current trends to consider the Anglo-Jacobins' writings in a transnational, rather than a national, context.

The following chapter analyzes Godwin's daughter Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a text that 'has never registered as a particularly legal story' (62). Grossman shows how the novel both criticizes and holds on to the legal system as 'at once a primary source of injustice and a necessary locus for framing just relations' (79). The readings of Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* and Gaskell's *Mary Barton* suggest how these narratives rely on contemporaneous debates around the design and construction of law courts, how the 'architecture' of these novels was conceived 'in the midst of the physical reshaping of the nineteenth-century cityscape around central courthouse buildings' (136). Here, Grossman draws on a number of illustrations (the building plans for the Royal Courts of Justice amongst them) and has interesting things to say about how 'courthouse design physically organized the participants' segregation and convergence as the narratological epistemology of the judicial process dictated' (132). The final chapter turns to a discussion of viewpoint, narrative structure and the representation of the criminal's consciousness in the Newgate novel, mainly Bulwer's *Paul Clifford* and *Eugene Aram* as well as Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. Again, Grossman draws an analogy between the development of narrative technique (the combination of a third- and first-person perspective) and narrative strategies, audience participation and observation in the courtroom. Arguably, much could be said about the representation of criminal consciousness and conflicting viewpoints in broadsides as well, but Grossman's emphasis on the novel as a genre precludes what could have been a fruitful comparison. The study concludes by looking at detective

fiction's refusal to provide the criminal's perspective and suggests that it 'should be understood as a reaction both to the emergence of an identifiable narrative genre – the Newgate novel – and, more generally, to the larger juridical narrative paradigm of which the Newgate novel formed a part' (161).

Detective fiction is the focus of Frank's monograph *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence* – or at least that is what its title would indicate to the reader. Frank provides close readings of Poe, Dickens and Doyle alongside those of various scientific texts, and this insistence on the 'defiance of conventional generic classifications' (7) – in contrast to Grossman's approach – is laudable. His analysis is extremely skilful, well written and convincingly argued, but the long passages of close investigations of geological, paleontological, archaeological and evolutionary writings in each chapter can be repetitive at times. The detailed discussion of these scientific texts is more central to the study than its title and the organization into three parts (Poe, Dickens, Doyle) would initially suggest and may not be to the liking of literary scholars primarily interested in readings of the three authors.

The section on Edgar Allen Poe analyzes 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' under consideration of its historical context, when 'both a resurgent evangelicalism and a conservative Natural Theology were confronted by a positivist science that was to have its nineteenth-century culmination in Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*' (30). Frank traces allusions in the story to Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, Pierre Simon Laplace's nebular hypothesis (a precursor of the Big Bang theory) and writings by John Pringle Nichol, professor of astronomy at Glasgow. According to Frank, Poe's story 'explored the implications of the nebular hypothesis at a moment when the contest between differing worldviews had not been decided and when the future could not be predicted' (42); detective Dupin, then, becomes 'the individual as a creature of history who must reconstruct the past even as he comes upon the fact of the contingency of certain events, without any reassuring knowledge of the future' (43). The reading of Poe's 'The Gold-Bug' similarly points to the futility of the natural historian William Legrand's efforts to establish causal chains by means of a paleontological and archaeological reconstruction of the past. Frank's interpretation of Legrand's conviction that the 'creation of an historical context by which to render any text intelligible' is 'an article of faith [that] smacks more of desire than method', involving 'the willing of evidence and of meaning into existence' (53) also reads like a meta-critical comment, directed at certain forms of historicism. Furthermore, although Frank notes Legrand's 'racist condescension' (51) towards his black servant

Jupiter in passing, his analysis of 'The Gold-Bug' in terms of language and meaning, rather than race relations, implicitly positions itself against recent endeavours in American Studies to highlight the racialized imagination that informs Poe's fiction.

The opening passage of Dickens's *Bleak House* has been commented upon exhaustively, but Frank manages to provide a new angle, placing the novel (with its references to mud, clouds, dinosaurs and 'the death of the sun') – like Poe's 'Murders in the Rue Morgue' – in the context of debates surrounding the nebular hypothesis. Discussing the novel's structure alongside Laplace, Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* and other texts, Frank argues that the two narrative perspectives reflect the coexistence of a 'providential and teleological' narrative 'after the fact' (represented by Esther) (78) and a narrative that eschews realism's conventions of causality, past-tense and omniscience (represented by the anonymous correspondent's present-tense narration) (84). *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, written after the publication of Darwin's *Origin* and Lyell's *Antiquity of Man*, which challenged the doctrines of Natural Theology irrevocably, also 'explores the problematic nature of evidence' and 'the art of reconstructing in narrative form the inaccessible past' (102).

Finally, Frank explores the 'scientific investigations' of Doyle in his Sherlock Holmes stories, discussing texts such as Winwood Reade's *Martyrdom of Man*, a recapitulation of the century's scientific explorations that 'culminat[es] in a religious skepticism' (135). Sherlock Holmes's universe, Frank notes, 'is a Darwinian one in which change prevails' (143), and the detective's cases introduce Watson, acting as a proxy for Doyle's readers, to a worldview constructed by Charles Lyell, Robert Chambers, Herbert Spencer, T.H. Huxley, John Tyndall, John Lubbock and E.B. Tylor (152). *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is organized around 'absent evidence, by a hypothetical origin that is never fully available to the detective' and concerned with 'the unreliable geological and archaeological records that so preoccupied Lyell and Darwin' (159). Whilst Doyle's detective fiction 'promoted a secular, naturalistic worldview', Frank argues that these stories simultaneously 'examined the foundations of naïve empiricism' (168).

Although new historicist in methodology, Frank's publication is also indebted to some of the key tenets of post-structuralism or deconstruction and occasionally appears to retreat into a critical relativism that overemphasizes the 'ambiguity inherent in any system of meaning' (51). Frank suggests an analogy between his own method and nineteenth-century paleontology, which in turn, he argues, provided a model for detective fiction. If, as Frank argues, detective fiction

'subvert[s] its own claims to the truth' and that 'in excavating the past, the detective encounters an infinite regress without a point of origin: there is no firm grounding for any hypothesis' (26), we are left to wonder whether this is to be read as a meta-reflexive comment on his own project.

Frank is right, of course, in problematizing an all too easy positivist understanding of history as a depository of facts and figures that can easily be recovered and ordered into a narrative of cause and effect to provide an accurate picture of the past. But by insisting on the 'elusive mysteries at the centre of history' (126), by explicitly resisting Stephen Knight's and Dennis Porter's politicized readings of crime fiction (4), and by associating the social control paradigms of D.A. Miller and Ronald Thomas with an 'illusory solace' (125), Frank privileges an approach that may seem to some relativist at best, if not politically reactionary in its implications. Moreover, there is a tension between his desire to trace a relationship between (literary) narrative structures and scientific writings, and his contention that the excavation of origins and ultimate meaning is impossible. Committed to a deconstructionist notion of the indeterminacy of meaning, Frank concludes (in decidedly anti-materialist fashion) by questioning the capability of any narrative to explain 'the mystery of the origins of consciousness' (197). Such an approach centred around the 'haphazardness' of historical interpretation raises the question whether this kind of self-erasing and apolitical critique is a form of intellectual response that we – in a current climate characterized by increasing ideological polarizations – can still afford. Frank vaguely refers to current US-American conflicts over creationism, intelligent design and evolution at various points, implying a parallel to nineteenth-century debates, but the reader is left to draw their own conclusions as to how his project fits into this ideological landscape.

Anne Schwan

Endnote

1. For a recent discussion of execution ballads as 'a resistant cultural and textual space where ballad writers could interrogate specific crimes, judicial proceedings, and punishments', see Ellen L. O'Brien, "'Every Man Who Is Hanged Leaves a Poem': Criminal Poets in Victorian Street Ballads', *Victorian Poetry* 39 (2001), 319-39 and "'The Most Beautiful Murder": The Transgressive Aesthetics of Murder in Victorian Street Ballads', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28 (2000), 15-37.