The Novelty of Newspapers: Victorian Fiction After the Invention of the News (review)

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in small measure, some of the slapdash production values associated with the pulps themselves. Yet, overall, Re-Covering Modernism is a significant achievement: it opens the door to the study of a print form that, as Earle convincingly demonstrates, has much to tell us about twentieth-century reading practices, the impact and circulation of modernist narratives, and the possibilities for invention within the fiction factories of capitalism.


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In this short but rich study, Matthew Rubery charts the rise in popularity of the newspaper in nineteenth-century British culture. He is particularly interested in the newspaper’s influence on the Victorian novel. Throughout, Rubery “challenges the assumed divide between the period’s literature and journalism” (4). His discussion of the newspaper’s influence is structured by a clever, two-part division. The first half of the book talks about the newspaper’s front-page stories, including the shipping news and the personal advertisements. The second half of the book looks at the inner pages, including the leading article, personal interview, and the foreign correspondence. Both book parts focus on the newspaper’s powerful ability to draw the private and public spheres closer together. The Victorian novel, Rubery adds, recognized the newspaper’s influence upon the private and public lives of readers: “What all novelistic representations recorded by this book share is an interest in capturing how the supposedly impersonal news can directly affect the emotional lives of its readers” (13). And the newspaper, in turn, gave readers an opportunity to publicize their private thoughts and selves, be it through emotional responses to the shipwreck column or the public display of the personal interview. By the end of the nineteenth century, Rubery concludes, “there is no getting beyond the reach of the press” (168), and there is no clear-cut separation between the Victorian novel and the newspaper.
Rubery begins his book with a discussion of nineteenth-century readers’ growing interest in the front-page news coverage of the latest “shipping intelligence.” As Rubery explains, Victorian readers were drawn to the sensational accounts of shipwrecks and deaths at sea. More importantly, the shipping news became a means whereby readers could suddenly make public feelings and thought previously kept private. Indeed, Rubery comments upon the reader’s incredible ability to infuse seemingly objective data with the utmost intimate meaning: “It was as if audiences compensated for the objectivity of the shipping news by projecting an increasingly affective private response to its reports” (26). Looking at a range of novels, from Dickens to Stoker, Rubery shows how Victorian novels were quick to pick up on the popularity of these news stories as a medium between private and public spheres. He shows how novel plots regularly featured the heroine who, upon reading of a shipwreck, openly proclaims her feelings for the lover who is now lost at sea. These scenes of confessed love thus dramatize the newspaper’s impact on private and domestic life; readers, more often women, found in newspapers a means of publicizing what used to be exclusively private feelings.

In chapter 2, Rubery turns his attention to the relationship between the front-page advertisements and sensation fiction. There is, of course, an already well-established connection between sensation fiction and the newspaper’s crime stories. However, as Rubery shows us, sensation fiction did not limit its sources to the crime stories of “madwomen, murderesses, and mésalliances” (47). Instead, as Rubery argues, sensation fiction charts Victorian readers’ growing fascination with personal advertisements and the even more salacious information found in the advertisements’ agony column. In these front-page advertisements, readers discovered a network of communications ranging from professional interactions—such as employers seeking employees—to the secret world of “covert notes between lovers to conspiratorial messages between criminals” (51). *The Novelty of Newspapers* shows us that such personal advertisements were incredibly popular amongst Victorian readers, particularly women. In an exciting move, Rubery describes how “ordinary” women found in personal advertisement a refuge from the “loneliness, disappointment, and boredom” of regular domestic life (64). Sensation fiction thus reenacts the personal advertisement’s invitation to escape such a disappointing life and to reinvent yourself, to live a new and stimulating double life.
Part II, on the newspaper’s inner pages, begins with a chapter on the novelist Anthony Trollope and the rise of professional journalism. Rubery discusses how many, including Trollope, were concerned about the journalist’s effort to make the world of government and parliamentary politics visible to the general readership. This anxiety focused on the newspaper’s “semiliterate consumers” (84). Even more so, however, there was mounting concern about the journalist’s efforts to make the world visible while the journalist himself remained invisible. Trollope’s fiction nicely satirizes these “anonymity debates” (89). In Rubery’s analysis, Trollope’s representation of the “whispering conscience” (94) illustrated contemporary concerns over the journalist’s character and motivations. The journalist could wield the news media to shape popular and even political opinions. Hence, the nineteenth century witnessed a growing push to establish the journalist’s right to such powerful authority by uncovering or making public the journalist’s character and, by extension, accountability. Journalists and novelists alike recognized that authorial legitimacy depends upon the public’s confidence, and that same confidence, in turn, depends upon the author’s character. Yet, for critics like Trollope, only the novelist can instill such confidence because only the novel makes character readily available.

Chapter 4 is a discussion of how the nineteenth-century invention of the personal interview dramatically changed readers’ attitudes toward privacy. Rubery explains how American journalists were the first to embrace this new method of a publicized conversation between the interviewer and interviewee. The English were somewhat reluctant to copy their overseas neighbors and worried, in particular, about the personal dimensions of such a news story. There was debate as to what was “on” and “off” the record, and for many Victorians the personal interview was far too personal—to the point of intrusive. Still others argued that the interview was in fact impersonal insofar as the subject’s narrative and self-presentation was highly edited. For Rubery, Henry James’s fiction points out that it isn’t the interviewer who threatens the sanctity of privacy but the public itself. James’s literature portrays the increasing desire amongst individuals to publicize themselves and their inner thoughts and feelings. This marks the emergence of what Rubery calls the “boundaryless self” (111). In the nineteenth century, this new “keyhole journalism” was simply “responding to the increasing anonymity of urban life that lay behind the desire to read about other people in the newspapers” (131). Like so many other
Victorians, James worried about readers’ mounting desire for publicity, and his fiction thus attempts to preserve some degree of privacy, be it through unspoken communication or those revealing moments of what is not said or not published.

Rubery’s last chapter examines how the foreign correspondent became an increasingly important figure within the Victorian global imagination. The foreign correspondent kept English readers apprised of their country’s imperial missions, as well as successes or failures on the battlefront. The British public’s fascination with the foreign correspondent can be traced back to Henry Morton Stanley: “More than any previous journalist, Stanley made exploration of Africa a public spectacle through a sensational style that aimed to interest and excite audiences” (142). Stanley’s fabulous stories of his adventures in Africa had a formative influence on the young novelist Joseph Conrad. Rubery also charts Conrad’s profound disappointment with the stark discrepancy between Stanley’s version of the “Dark Continent,” as represented in the press, “and what he [Conrad] would encounter in Africa” (148). It is this discrepancy between representation and reality that would cast doubt on the figure of the foreign correspondent. Certainly, newspapers and the foreign correspondent offered readers a degree of cultural literacy, and the correspondent himself assumed a kind of cultural authority inherent in his “quasi-anthropological” work (143). However, oftentimes the correspondence was limited to mere surface encounters, recounting only the distant observations of outsiders looking in. It is precisely this distance between the correspondent and his subject of study that Conrad’s fiction so mercilessly scrutinizes.

Rubery’s discussion of the history of newspapers in the nineteenth century is both illuminating and exciting. His discussion of nineteenth-century readers’ complicated and oftentimes skeptical attitudes toward the emergent mass media is certainly a notable contribution to Victorian studies. I am also convinced by his argument regarding the role of newspapers and mass culture in the history of Victorian novel studies. More importantly, I can already see how Rubery’s project will inspire important work in Victorian gender and media studies. His discussion of how both domestic and urban female readers turned to newspapers for emotional contact and stimulation is of particular interest. There are obvious and exciting connections to be made between Rubery’s work and recent studies on the news
media within fin-de-siècle feminist and suffragette movements. In this final regard, then, Rubery’s work on Victorian newspapers is its own kind of media sensation. It not only carves out an exciting role for newspapers in literary studies, but it also provokes more questions and, hopefully, more work on the role of newspapers in the formations of gendered, public, and private subjectivities.