Problem Novels

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Conclusion: The Serious Work of Sensationalism

[Robert Audley] sat for hours smoking and thinking—troubled and gloomy thoughts making a dark shadow upon his moody face, which neither the brilliant light of the gas nor the red blaze of the fire could dispel.

Very late in the evening he rose from his chair, pushed away the table, wheeled his desk over to the fireplace, took out a sheet of foolscap, and dipped a pen in the ink …

“I shall draw up a record of all that has occurred between our going down to Essex and to-night, beginning at the very beginning.”

He drew up the record in short detached sentences, which he numbered as he wrote.

It ran thus:

“JOURNAL OF FACTS CONNECTED WITH THE DISAPPEARANCE OF GEORGE TALBOYS, INCLUSIVE OF FACTS WHICH HAVE NO APPARENT RELATION TO THAT CIRCUMSTANCE.”

In spite of the troubled state of his mind he was rather inclined to be proud of the official appearance of this heading. He sat for some time looking at it with affection, and with the feather of his pen in his mouth. “Upon my word,” he said “I begin to think I should have pursued my profession instead of dawdling my life away as I have done.”

—Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Lady Audley’s Secret (1862)

We labor under the delusion that power metaphors not only are locked into power but deliver analyses that are themselves powerful … And we settle into a power argument that is self-confirming, habitual, and flattering to all of us who want to beat up on others. Nothing wrong with that. The problem is that making power an unquestioned center limits the stories we can tell about our practices and the discursive practices we study—cultural, literary, multimedia.

Every sensation narrative worth its salt gives its readers the big payoff—the revelation of a shocking secret, the deeply affecting portrayal of “high-impact” emotional energy with which to identify. If you have been following the narrative so far, you will suspect that the secret of Problem Novels has something to do with ambivalent agency and the vexed pleasures of reading, but like the secret in No Name, it was revealed at the beginning of the book. In any case, here is the satisfying conclusion, where all of the reader’s labor will be rewarded. I want to end with two texts that address the literary critic’s ambivalent agency and consider how these might shed light on the mystery of, and argue for a continued attachment to, sensational criticism for Victorian (and other literary) scholars.

The first quote above provides the penultimate clue. It turns out that even Lady Audley’s Secret, the urtext of invisible disciplinary power, makes no secret of that power. If Robert Audley’s detective work in Lady Audley’s Secret can be distinguished by any particular characteristic, it is probably his angst-ridden musings on the seriousness of his task and on the limits of his own agency, which he imagines alternately as horribly empowered and as subject to external forces. His statement to his uncle provides an example of the former: “God forbid … that I should ever bring trouble upon such a noble heart as yours! God forbid that the lightest shadow of dishonour should ever fall upon your honoured head—least of all through any agency of mine!” (129). Conversely, he displays the latter attitude when he thinks to himself: “Whatever the mystery may be, it grows darker and thicker at every step; but I try in vain to draw back, or to stop short upon the road, for a stronger hand than my own is pointing the way to my lost friend’s hidden grave” (167). This tension between instrumentality and agency is summed up in Robert’s musing: “Why do I go on with this? … how pitiless I am, and how relentlessly I am carried on. It is not myself; it is the hand which is beckoning me further and further upon the dark road whose end I dare not dream of” (172). Here, as throughout the novel, Robert imagines himself with immense power over the lives of those he investigates, and yet he simultaneously conceives of his own will as being directed by disembodied “hands.”

His vacillation between fatalism and intense guilt underscores the seriousness of his task. His job is no fun. His responsibility to his missing friend, George Talboys, cannot be shirked, but carrying through with the investigation will make Robert responsible for
ruining the lives of his family when he reveals the truth about his uncle’s wife. This is why the pivotal scene that I quote above—in which Robert commits to paper all the particulars of the mystery—is an odd one. In it we see him, as usual, brooding on the mystery and his own role as detective. Yet the decision to write out the details of the situation that makes him so miserable produces a strange momentary pleasure as he contemplates his own agency with pride and affection. His pleasure, in addition to looking a little silly, seems in questionable taste given the novel’s reiterations of the deadly seriousness of the work. Robert has just discovered what James Kincaid notes in “Resist Me, You Sweet Resistible You”: it’s fun to write “power stories,” and even more fun to write oneself into the story as the “official” detective who gets to “beat up on others.”

In his appraisal of critical practice after Foucault, Kincaid suggests that what he calls “power stories”—those interpretations that seek to reveal the workings of power—are prurient entertainment masquerading as serious work. Engaging in these narratives, observes Kincaid, allows critics to claim positions of resistance to power that offer “little victories for critics and scholars, but the fact that those victories are rigged, guaranteed in advance by the discursive formulas, takes away some of the sweetness” (1326). The stories that Kincaid identifies are what I have been calling sensational criticism. As I have argued, even recent work that critiques the “monolithic” power metaphor continues, notwithstanding that critique, to be structured by the same generic demands for sensational revelations. And it is precisely because of the “self-confirming” nature of these narratives that they continue to appeal to us, because the story is less about revealing things about the Victorians that were previously obscured than about secretly enjoying our own critical agency.

That we as critics enjoy a certain privilege in our interpretive work, however, hasn’t been a secret, at least not since Nietzsche (author of the original power story) described the “will to interpret” in On the Genealogy of Morals:

The cause of the origin of a thing and its eventual utility, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart; whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it; all events in the organic world are a subduing, a becoming master, and all subduing and becoming
master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous “meaning” and “purpose” are necessarily obscured or even obliterated. (77)

To make things mean is to wield power, however obscurely, and as Nietzsche shows, wielding power is fun.

Nor is it a secret that reading—even reading literary criticism—can be a naughty pleasure. I am taking it as a given that I am not the only one who gets a giddy thrill from reading and writing criticism. At least, if this is my perverse taste, it is one I share with Roland Barthes, who famously describes reading criticism in *The Pleasure of the Text*:

> How can we take pleasure in a reported pleasure? ... How can we read criticism? Only one way: since I am here a second-degree reader, I must shift my position: instead of agreeing to be the confidant of this critical pleasure—a sure way to miss it—I can make myself its voyeur: I observe clandestinely the pleasure of others, I enter perversion ... The writer’s perversity (his pleasure in writing is *without function*), the doubled, the trebled, the infinite perversity of the critic and his reader. (17)

Yet the perverse fun of literary detective work seems to be stubbornly forgettable. We may notice with regret that other people are engaging in “Foucauldian melodrama” (Adams 859), but “we” ourselves engage in “extremely responsible and archivally informed” research (Jonah Siegel 310). Why is it that Victorian cultural studies, by and large, refuses to know its own sensational pleasures?

In *Annoying the Victorians* (1995) James Kincaid exhibits his (perverse) pleasures in literary scholarship for his readers’ voyeuristic pleasure. This is the final clue. Throughout *Annoying the Victorians* Kincaid presents himself to his readers—like Robert Audley chewing on his feather pen and gazing at his handiwork “with affection”—in the act of enjoying his own critical agency. *Annoying the Victorians* is “problem criticism” in the same way that the novels in this study are problem novels, insofar as they all invite their readers to consider their investments in reading. Kincaid argues cogently for why his book does not simply produce readings of texts but attempts to denaturalize the methods by which we produce readings. His interpretations, he claims, will be “annoyingly wrong” (6). But this is because he is not trying to know the texts better, but to “use texts
to suggest how it is they come to be known” (15). True to his word, he offers up his critical methods as comic display. For example, he writes this “review of scholarship” for his chapter on George Meredith’s Modern Love:

I have read everything ever written on Meredith’s Modern Love … When I say that I have read everything ever written on Modern Love, that of course doesn’t mean that I have read everything ever written on Modern Love, or that I’ve read every word of what I have read or that I remember much of it. What I have done is consult the MLA bibliographies one by one … starting with the latest and working backward until I had reached a point where enough was enough, the point where the sort of insights I had myself (and needed to be sure nobody who had had them before had published them) seemed very unlikely to pop up. (136)

Here, as throughout the book, Kincaid offers interpretations that both perform and parody our critical practices. He offers, indeed, an opportunity to “estimate [our] capacity for comic perception” by seeing our own habits rendered “somewhat ridiculous” (Meredith Essay 42).

In a 1996 review of Kincaid’s book for Criticism, however, Antony Harrison is not disposed to “accept the correction” (42) proposed by Kincaid’s comedy:

Annoying the Victorians redoubles the pleasure of the primary text by adding to it the pleasure of sophisticated serio-comic criticism. What this book does not do, however, is add to our understanding of the Victorians or their culture or the ways in which the primary texts Kincaid treats operated in their Victorian contexts. This, of course, would be the job of historical criticism, which Kincaid not only eschews, but apparently despises. (167)

The job of historical criticism is huge, according to Harrison: “Simply stated, it regenerates a world. That is, it opens our eyes to the operations of literary texts within plausibly reconstructed historical fields of social and political particulars whose relations were previously unknown or opaque to us” (168). Harrison concludes that, despite how “delightful” Kincaid’s book is, since historical criticism does do this work, and Kincaid doesn’t, “it is difficult for me to envision the conclusion to [historical criticism]
or to imagine its supersession—either by some as yet unformulated critical methodology or by the rejuvenation of some anterior critical compulsion. This would, needless to say, include Kincaid’s serio-comical version of deconstruction” (169). In other words, Harrison cannot, finally, accept the book simply because it does what it says it will do and doesn’t do what it says it won’t do.

He argues against Kincaid’s book on two registers. First, one might say that in describing Kincaid as “the Oscar Wilde of contemporary Victorian studies” (271), Harrison is arguing for genre preference, but his preference (realism) can’t brook any other genres (decadence). It is hard to imagine a review of a novel or film arguing that the text fails because it isn’t in the right genre. But somehow the stakes seem higher in literary criticism. The reason for this becomes clear in the second register of the Kincaid-Wilde comparison: seemingly Kincaid’s criticism is perverse, nonproductive. Historical criticism, on the other hand, is productive: it creates knowledge; it is not perverse. “We” are not writing to satisfy a “critical compulsion” but to “regenerate a world.”

Harrison’s objection to Kincaid’s book shows why Barthes’ diagnosis of the critical perversion isn’t quite right. As readers we are not voyeurs, watching the masturbatory pleasures of our fellow critics writing “without function.” Rather, like Ruskin’s woman in Sesame and Lilies, who is “taught to enter with her whole personality into the history she reads” (81), we are masochistically invested in our own agency. We “extend the limits of [our] sympathy with respect to that history which is for ever determined … and to the contemporary calamity, which, were it but rightly mourned by [us], would recur no more hereafter” (81). Harrison’s review illustrates one of the fundamental tropes of cultural studies criticism: that our work is work and that we undertake it earnestly and treat our mysteries with the seriousness they deserve. The prescriptions of genre look at least like methodological, and often like ethical, imperatives, and our pleasure must be disavowed, subsumed by the sense of our accountability. Doing it may be fun, but if you are doing it for fun, you are not doing it right. And if you are not doing it right, you are abjuring a solemn responsibility. This is the downside of indulging in a fantasy of critical omnipotence: one must feel a terrible responsibility and nagging sense of inadequacy.

In “Resist Me, You Sweet Resistible You,” as in Annoying the Victorians, Kincaid invites us to sidestep the “responsibility” of literary criticism, offering instead a promising vision of a discipline undisci-
plined. Power stories are not productive, he argues, but restrictive. In their place he presents a manifesto for utopian plenitude:

Story multipliers can find starting points by accepting what power stories deny. Alternative stories accept the possibility of the random and the uncaused, defy logic, and espouse an economy of surplus … Story multipliers have no plots or long-term strategies, only local and disposable tactics, and they welcome all genres and genre mixtures, especially the impure. (1332)

If Foucauldian (and post-Foucauldian) scholarship tells the story of the detective-critic, imbued with exceptional observational and deductive powers, then Kincaid tells the tale of a world in which new species of critics flourish—a world of joyful contradiction and invention, where everyone gets to tell a story, and every story is different.

The problem with this utopia, to extend the metaphor of perversion, is that we’re just not wired that way. You can’t tell a masochist to be a foot fetishist and expect it to stick. The discipline of the academic profession is not undisciplined; it is, rather, extremely circumscribed, codified, exclusive, and even punitive. Entering into the discipline demands that we undergo years of training and submission to arcane rules and practices. Staying in it demands that we constantly renew our commitments to submit to its authority, through participation in annual reviews, third-year reviews, tenure reviews, peer reviews, book reviews, etc. Naturally, submitting to our discipline produces pleasure too. Why do it, else? But the pleasure is in the submission, specifically in the bind of agency that finds itself subjugated yet active, choosing its punishment, as it were. This is why, given the invitation to reject sensational criticism in favor of multiple, alternative stories, I find that I cling to the ambivalent agency that sensationalism can offer.

In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Robert’s momentary pleasure is quickly superseded by the labor itself:

When Robert Audley had completed this brief record, which he drew up with great deliberation, and with frequent pauses for reflection, alterations, and erasures, he sat for a long time contemplating the written page.

At last he read it carefully over, stopping at some of the numbered paragraphs, and marking several of them with a penciled cross; then he folded the sheet of foolscap, went over to a cabinet on
the opposite side of the room, unlocked it, and placed the paper in … a pigeonhole marked *Important.* (101)

Braddon’s detailed description of the writing and editing process, besides looking much like the academic writing process, reasserts the seriousness of the detective work. Robert’s work is *Important.* In other words, Robert must forget his pleasure in his task in order to reinvest in it so that his continued performance of it will be meaningful. What is clear in the novel, though, is that Robert is right on all counts: he is a pitiless agent of discipline; he is also subject to a “stronger hand than [his] own” (167), and he is rewarded by a perverse pleasure in the contemplation of his subjection and his power. What Robert is *not* is a dupe of discipline.

This, finally, is the story that *Problem Novels* seeks to tell: sensation criticism, like sensation novels, allows its readers and writers to participate in fantasies of knowingness. But, as with the novels in this study, sensationalism in literary studies need not signal our hapless compliance with discipline. Besides telling us that old story we love to hear—that if we apply ourselves seriously and responsibly enough, we can know the Victorians inside and out—sensation criticism also tells the story of our ambivalent professional selves. Like Robert Audley, we are neither wholly powerful nor wholly subjugated. We too are agents of disciplinary power—not a monolithic, all-encompassing panoptical power, it is true, but a vast institutional network nonetheless. We too are subject to forces beyond our control. Yet we can also, like Robert, enjoy moments of perverse pleasure in the contemplation of our serious work.