



Journal of European Periodical Studies

an online journal by ESPRit, European Society for Periodical Research

‘The Last New Novel’: Valuation Strategies in Reviews of Fiction Published in the *Athenaeum* and the *Saturday Review*, 1855–59

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Journal of European Periodical Studies, 10.2 (Winter 2025)

ISSN 2506-6587

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The *Journal of European Periodical Studies* is hosted by Ghent University

Website: ojs.ugent.be/jeps

To cite this article: Anne-Marie Millim, ‘The Last New Novel’: Valuation Strategies in Reviews of Fiction Published in the *Athenaeum* and the *Saturday Review*, 1855–59’, *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, 10.2 (Winter 2025), 17–32

‘The Last New Novel’: Valuation Strategies in Reviews of Fiction Published in the *Athenaeum* and the *Saturday Review*, 1855–59

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates two seminal Victorian periodicals during the critical period of 1855–59 — the *Athenaeum* (1828–1921) and the *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* (1855–1938). I examine the rhetorical and typological strategies underlying the attribution of value in reviews of fiction and illustrate the generic complexity of this prominent form. I show that, beyond its overt interest in enabling or preventing the sale of novels, the mid-century book review takes an economic outlook in the methodological and hermeneutic processes through which literary value is defined and communicated by reviewers. Reviewers writing for the two periodicals at hand can be seen to display an economic orientation in their typology and epistemology, employing forms of quantification that stretch from the counting of specific elements to the abstract non-numerical calculation mimicking the logic of a balance sheet customary in commercial bookkeeping.

KEYWORDS

Reviews, fiction, style, communication, value, economic humanities, accounting practices

Introduction

The book review is a dominant genre in Victorian periodicals but has received comparatively little critical attention. A recent intervention by Laurel Brake, Fionnuala Dillane, and Mark W. Turner has underlined that the book review needs to be recognized for its centrality in the Victorian literary field and marketplace.¹ Within the history of the genre, scholars have long understood the early 1850s as a caesura in reviewing practices, when the role attributed to critics, both by readers and by themselves, changed significantly.² With the abolition of the stamp tax and advertising duties, a flood of new publications of all types hit the Victorian marketplace in the 1850s. This expansion of the literary market entailed an increase in critical commentary, so that buyers’ interest in books, as well as the estimation of their value, was likely affected by the literary criticism they encountered in periodicals. Periodicals thus existed in an environment of economic competition, which made it necessary for weeklies, biweeklies, monthlies, quarterlies, and yearlies to distinguish themselves through selling points such as novels published in instalments, celebrity gossip, or, notably, book reviews. As consumer items in their own right, periodicals facilitated the sale of literary works, shaping the literary market in significant ways.

This article investigates two seminal Victorian periodicals during the critical period of 1855–59 — the *Athenaeum* (1828–1921) and the *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* (1855–1938). Both claimed the status of cultural arbitrators within a literary field that they perceived as fast-moving and inconsistent in quality. I examine the rhetorical and typological strategies underlying the attribution of value in reviews of fiction, the ‘most popular form of literature for English readers’ at mid-century, according to Merle Mowbray Bevington, but not the most respected.³ I illustrate the ways in which the book review functions as a ‘techne of navigation’, as Brake, Dillane, and Turner have noted, highlighting its generic complexity, which they view as ‘decidedly influenced by ideology in its various gatekeeping interventions and by economic and pragmatic motives that influence its length, its subject matter, and often its critical stance’.⁴ I show that, beyond its overt interest in enabling or preventing the sale of novels, the mid-century book review takes an economic outlook in the methodological and hermeneutic processes through which literary value is defined and communicated by reviewers.⁵ In establishing and communicating their moral and aesthetic assessment of new novels, I argue, reviewers writing for the two periodicals at hand display an economic orientation in their typology and epistemology, employing forms of quantification that stretch from the counting of specific elements to the abstract non-numerical calculation mimicking the logic of a balance sheet customary in commercial bookkeeping.

Reviewers, as Dallas Liddle has shown, wielded immense power in defining notions of literary value by recommending or opposing new publications.⁶ The reviewers

1 Laurel Brake, Fionnuala Dillane, and Mark W. Turner, ‘Nineteenth-Century Reviews and Reviewing: Communication, Compression, and Commerce’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 55.2 (Summer 2022), pp. 55–75.

2 See for example: Joanne Shattock, ‘Reviewing Generations: Professionalism and the Mid-Victorian Reviewer’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 35.4 (Winter 2002), pp. 384–400; John Woolford, ‘Periodicals and the Presence of Literary Criticism, 1855–64’, in *The Victorian Periodical Press: Samplings and Soundings*, ed. by Joanne Shattock and Michael Wolff (Leicester University Press, 1982), pp. 109–42.

3 Merle Mowbray Bevington, *The Saturday Review 1855–68: Representative Educated Opinion in Victorian England* (AMS Press, 1966).

4 Brake, Dillane, Turner, ‘Nineteenth-Century Reviews’, p. 155.

5 As was customary at mid-century all reviews were published anonymously. Authors of reviews, when stated, were identified using the *Curran Index*.

6 Dallas Liddle, *The Dynamics of Genre: Journalism and the Practice of Literature in Mid-Victorian Britain* (University of Virginia Press, 2009).

contributing to the *Athenaeum* and the *Saturday Review* present literary criticism as a demanding and sometimes annoying intellectual task, often portrayed as an act of service towards the reader. The author is given the full responsibility for the value, often conceptualized as utility, of his or her books, and expected to produce texts that captivate, enlighten, or fascinate the reader. Endorsements of impact by both the *Athenaeum* and the *Saturday Review* hinge on the notions of the readers' gain in insight, maturity, and knowledge versus the loss of their time, attention, and patience. Acclamatory reviews from the *Athenaeum* foreground the anticipated improvement of the readers: 'No one can take up this very agreeable volume without becoming interested and following its graceful drama to the end', regarding Rachel Butler's *Jessie Cameron: A Highland Story* of 1857, or 'There is a vein of simple good sense and pious feeling running throughout, for which no reader can fail to be better' for Margaret Oliphant's *Lilliesleaf* of 1855.⁷ The review of F.G. Trafford's *The Moors and the Fens* of 1858 in the *Saturday Review* foregrounds an aspect considered crucial by both journals, namely the impact of a novel on the reader: 'The personages in this book leave an impression on the memory which is indelible compared to the crowd of dim shadowy ghosts which flit in and out of the mind in the course of twelve months' novel reading'.⁸ As these examples announce, value tends to be defined as a captivating and memorable story, morally uplifting ideas, and an emotional or intellectual learning outcome accompanying the reading experience.

Many book reviews contain sections that appear like narrative balance sheets to account for the value of the text under review. These are not just scaffolding for reasoning but rather render the acts of balancing that motivate the assessment of value. Brake, Dillane, and Turner consider the book review as an instrument of intellectual and commercial power that commands the attention of the reading public towards, or away from, texts:

The review is, above all, selective. Whatever the mix of creative, critical, commercial, or interested motives, the review presents an account of the texts, performance, or artwork from among many that go unnoticed, and that account, by necessity of the form as re-view, is always from a partial angle, however generous the approach.⁹

These scholars' perspective of the review as a rendition of a reading and appreciation process is at the basis of my argumentation. I show that the review not only provides a qualitatively-oriented narrative account of the book examined, but it also creates an economic account of the factors determining the latter's value that is quantitative but not numeric in nature. A brief excerpt from Philipp Harwood's review of *Gertrude, or Family Pride* (1856) by Frances Milton Trollope (1779–1863) in the *Saturday Review* exemplifies reviewers' tendency — which I will illustrate in more detail later — to view components of the narrative as needing to be balanced out to form a successful product: '*Gertrude* [...] has not even the poor merit of cleverness in execution to redeem a feeble plot, insipid characters, and false morality.'¹⁰ In this equation, Trollope's style cannot compensate for the flaws in the conception of the story, characterisation, and ideology, and hence the reviewer's assessment is negative. This economic mindset does not mean that practices from commercial bookkeeping were strategically applied in the evaluation of books, but rather that the latter underlie the management of diverse

7 'Jessie Cameron: A Highland Story', *Athenaeum* (24 January 1857), p. 115; Geraldine E. Jewsbury, 'Lilliesleaf', *Athenaeum* (8 December 1855), p. 1432.

8 Robert Arthur Talbot Gascony-Cecil, 'The Moors and the Fens', *Saturday Review* (10 April 1858), p. 377.

9 Brake, Dillane, Turner, 'Nineteenth-Century Reviews', p. 156.

10 Philip Harwood, 'Gertrude', *Saturday Review* (8 December 1855), p. 101.

data and complex situations beyond the wealth industries, as Jack Amariglio, Joseph W. Childers, and Stephen E. Cullenberg have shown.¹¹ Forms of accounting, whether numerical or narrative, are integral to human processes of reasoning, the emotional engagement with peers, and environmental conditions, as Harro Maas has shown.¹² From the eighteenth century onwards, Maas argues, ‘keeping books increasingly came to be seen as a way to control and regulate not only one’s business but also one’s personal and family life’.¹³ Accounting can thus be seen as a product of sixteenth-century basic note-taking, as Jacob Soll maintains, and represents a fundamental ‘first step in the chain of information gathering’.¹⁴ The book review is part of the traditions of note-taking and book-keeping in that it involves acts of collecting, stock-taking, and synthesis.

Reviewers’ narrative calculations of assessment tend to follow recognizable patterns. Nicholas Dames’s notion of journals having a ‘protocol’, namely a ‘set of habitual, deeply characteristic, and unexamined operations that express, while not explicitly formulating, a “theory” of the literary’, allows us to characterize the strategies of navigation that produce valuation.¹⁵ Protocols are ‘unstated [and] uncodified’, do not express ‘the difference between right and wrong’, and are ‘not a subject of professional controversy’.¹⁶ They are ‘tool[s] rather than the object of labour’ and bring together ‘material and nonmaterial factors’.¹⁷ This latter aspect is particularly fundamental to this article, as the act of valuation also relies on navigation strategies that guide the reader through the review on the journal page, including the typescript, font size, paragraphing, indentations, quoted passages, and sections of paraphrase. The rhetorical strategies of the journals reflect their perception of their work: the *Athenaeum* saw it as its mission to protect the taste, patience, and moral integrity of the reader through providing a clear communication of the assessment of quality and a synthesis of the dimensions investigated. The *Saturday Review* sought to integrate the reader into the process of reading and reviewing the novel at hand. The *Athenaeum*’s reviews, particularly the ones published in the ‘New Novels’ section tended to be about 30 lines in length, but there are occasional longer or shorter reviews. In all sections, the book’s title is presented in italics, followed by the author and publisher’s names (alternatively: ‘By the author of [previous work]’). The author is seen in his or her creative development, as well as in comparison to the other authors writing in a similar genre. Novels tended to be evaluated as either improvements, conceptualized as added value, or disappointing deteriorations, conceptualized as value subtracted, compared to the previously published oeuvre. The reviews published in the *Saturday Review* tend to be much longer than the *Athenaeum*’s. They often cover 2–3 columns, and present a reference to the author, title, and publisher in a footnote signaled by an asterisk. There is less consistency in terms of the structure of the reviews, as reviewers seem to wish to surprise, rather than to guide the readers.

Book reviews are forms of evaluating and accounting for cultural capital. They allow us to rethink valuation and measuring practices as necessarily numerical and therefore divorced from literary criticism and creative writing. Book reviews accentuate the enmeshment of the cultural, social, and commercial worlds, rather than instituting

11 Jack Amariglio, Joseph W. Childers, and Stephen E. Cullenberg, ‘Introduction’, in *Sublime Economy: on the Intersection of Art and Economics* (Taylor & Francis, 2009), pp. 1–25.

12 Harro Maas, ‘Letts Calculate: Moral Accounting in the Victorian Period’, *History of Political Economy*, 48 (2016), pp. 16–43.

13 Ibid., p. 17.

14 Jacob Soll, ‘From Note-Taking to Data Banks: Personal and Institutional Information Management in Early Modern Europe’, *Intellectual History Review*, 20.3 (2010), pp. 355–75 (p. 356).

15 Nicholas Dames, ‘On Not Close Reading: The Prolonged Excerpt as Victorian Critical Protocol’, in *The Feeling of Reading: Affective Experience and Victorian Literature*, ed. by Rachel Ablow (University of Michigan Press, 2010), pp. 11–26.

16 Ibid., p. 14.

17 Ibid., p. 15.

the superiority of either of those domains. Further study of book reviews can therefore enrich the field of periodical studies by demonstrating the mechanisms of valuation that periodicals display and highlighting the points of connection between literature and economics. Crosthwaite, Knight, and Marsh show that, contrary to the dominant belief, literature and economics are not 'remote' or 'antithetical' to one another, with the former allowing the imagination to flourish and the latter 'confining itself to the brute facts of scarce resources'.¹⁸ They insist that as practices and as fields of study, these forms 'have continued to shape one another's language and rhetoric and habits of thought and behaviour in myriad ways'.¹⁹ This connected history is now marked by 'a relationship of mutual disavowal', which can be observed in book reviews in two ways.²⁰ Critics disapprove of the excess in new novels, believing that they lower the standard of literature. At the same time, they also establish criteria of value for evaluating literary products that render the common history of literature and economics and, at times, consciously seek to align with economic practices. Mary Poovey's seminal work on the interplay between literary and financial writing styles, modes, and contexts, *Genres of the Credit Economy*, has contributed substantially to the deconstruction of generic and conceptual boundaries between these fields.²¹ Her study *The History of the Modern Fact* helps us understand that, while today, fields of knowledge production that rely on numbers ('non-interpretive') tend to wield more authority than those that are narrative-based ('interpretive'), 'historically, there was no necessary connection between the epistemological unit I am calling the modern fact and numbers as a specific form of representation'.²² Poovey argues that the economic practice of double-entry bookkeeping, which appeared in the 15th century, inserted itself into the tradition of rhetoric to bring stability into the notion of value and the adequacy of knowledge. Her work helps us conceptualize reviewing as a practice of reflection and communication that seeks to generate factual information through a systematic process.

In the economic humanities, correspondences between the modes of literature and economics have been exposed by several generations of scholars examining the language, organisation, logic, and goals of economic thinking since the beginnings of the field in the 1970s and 1980s. Since at least the 1990s, Victorianist literary scholars have been attentive to the structural, thematic, and operational correspondences between literary and economic thought. Scholars like Francis O'Gorman, Patrick Brantlinger, Anna Kornbluh, and William Henderson have shown that both a literary and an economic engagement with the world centres on understanding, categorising, and stabilising realities that are perceived as unstable and often unmanageable.²³ Both forms operate by abstraction, comparison, and metaphorization to establish a systematic context-based understanding of value. If in the economic realm, these processes of valuation often seem to revolve around the price of goods, services, and land, in the literary realm, value often regards the quality of writing and depth of reflection inherent in a literary work. Nevertheless, economic value is also attributed to aesthetic objects and experiences, and

18 Paul Crosthwaite, Peter Knight, and Nicky Marsh, 'Introduction: The Interwovenness of Literature and Economics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Economics* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 1–16 (p. 1).

19 Ibid., p. 1.

20 Ibid., p. 1.

21 Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

22 Mary Poovey, *The History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. xii; pp. 4–5.

23 Francis O'Gorman, ed., *Victorian Literature and Finance* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Patrick Brantlinger, *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain, 1694–1994* (Cornell University Press, 1996); Anna Kornbluh, *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form* (Fordham University Press, 2014).

literary objects are also commodities that circulate in a competitive marketplace. Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen, significantly, view the novel as a form that developed concurrently to the science of political economy since the eighteenth century.²⁴ While they consider the novel as a factor that separated literature and economics from one another, Victorian book reviews show that a striking overlap continued to exist.

Value in the Literary Marketplace

The nineteenth-century British literary marketplace was an industry facilitating the sale of objects related to literature, such as books, cartes-de-visite of authors, and periodicals. What was also being sold, contrarily to previous centuries, is the literary craft of authors, to be actuated by buyers in the reading process. In this marketplace, ‘light reading’, thought to jeopardise intellectual growth, circulated alongside the work of celebrity novelists promising cultural capital to the reader. In this context of valuation, a novel could waver from a work of art to a commercial object and vice-versa, as Sir James Fitzjames Stephen (1829–94), in his review of Charles Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* (1857) in the *Saturday Review*, made clear:

Dickens remarks ‘that he has never had so many readers’ — of course he means purchasers, though the terms are not convertible. In our slight experience we can assure him that we have yet to meet the man or woman, boy or girl, who can honestly say that he or she has read *Little Dorrit* through. It is the *cultus* of the middle classes to purchase Dickens; but an Act of Parliament would fail to enforce the serious reading of his last production.²⁵

For Stephen, purchase decisions that are motivated by the celebrity status of an author merely perform readership. *Little Dorrit*, for many, according to Stephen, remained a commercial object that has the utility of raising the purchaser’s cultural capital, which is based on book ownership, rather than furthering knowledge or giving entertainment. William Hepworth Dixon, in the *Athenaeum*, argued the opposite by positing that ‘Mr Dickens has obtained the ear of his country more completely than any other man; and, on the whole, he uses his glorious privilege for the noblest ends.’²⁶

The phenomena under investigation in this article can be seen as characteristic of the hinging moment in the nineteenth century, when, as Regenia Gagnier has observed, the ‘modern concept of scarcity was transformed’.²⁷ While scarcity had informed notions of value hitherto, she shows, the political economists of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, such as William Stanley Jevons (1835–82) and Carl Menger (1840–1921), came to see the ‘insatiability of human wants’ as fundamentally human:

[The] early theorists of consumption saw that as the basic needs of subsistence were satisfied, humankind’s desire for variety in shelter, food, dress, and leisure grew limitlessly, and thus the idea of needs, which were finite and the focus of political economy, was displaced by the idea of tastes, which were theoretically infinite.²⁸

24 Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen, ‘Taking Account of the New Economic Criticism’, in *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics*, ed. by Woodmansee and Osteen (Routledge, 1999), pp. 3–50 (p. 5).

25 James Fitzjames Stephen, ‘Little Dorrit’, *Saturday Review* (4 July 1857), p. 15.

26 William Hepworth Dixon, ‘Little Dorrit’, *Athenaeum* (1 December 1855), p. 393.

27 Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 4.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

The development of the nineteenth-century literary marketplace was fueled by the increase in buying power and a vastly expanded offer of products, which stimulated the demand for pleasure, novelty, and entertainment. Reading behaviours that had, up to the eighteenth century, involved the frequent re-reading of selected texts — often including the Bible — had, with the mass-production of ‘the last new novels’ substantially changed by the mid-nineteenth century to the cursory reading of a multitude of books. Reviewers functioned as mediators between the supply of new appearances and the tastes of the readers, which they sought to affect via the notions of quality employed by encouraging or discouraging purchases. Unlike advertisers, reviewers did not wish to sell products at all costs, but they intervened in large-scale formations of taste bearing moral agendas.

In both the *Athenaeum* and the *Saturday Review*, the language in which quality is assessed and expressed operates based on a concept of value that draws on the lexical fields of quantity, mass, and cost. In both periodicals, the reviewers rely on quantification in their guidance in numerous ways: they make use of enumeration, economic terminology, and the quantification of intensity, admiration, and disappointment. They draw on a form of narrative calculus when they consider the balance of strengths and weaknesses as the basis of the book under review. In the delivery of their assessment, reviewers demonstrate different techniques of communicating the verdict of quality: *Athenaeum* reviewers tend to deliver the assessment in the first line, without necessarily explaining in detail the processes underlying this synthesis. Reviews published in the *Saturday Review* tend to employ a back-and-forth technique to mimic the reviewer’s reading process and to allow the future reader to anticipate the deficiencies and strengths of the respective book. It is important to emphasize that the process of reasoning inherent in reviews is based on non-numerical quantification that does not mimic numerical calculation, and thus the primary impression of reviews is dominated by their narrative-based discussion. However, the argumentation that leads to assessment in reviews can in fact be seen to measure the text by implicitly adding perceived strengths and subtracting perceived weaknesses, arriving at a ‘total’ of the thus derived valuation.

While the appreciation of literature and art can very well depend on impulsive subjective likes or dislikes, reviewers publishing in periodicals tended to present a trajectory of argumentation aiming for clarity, fairness, and comprehensiveness. Nevertheless, critics could be cutting, sarcastic, or mocking when drawing on quantification. Lord Robert Arthur Talbot Gascoyne-Cecil (1830–1903), in his review of Barbara Hemphill’s *Freida the Jongleur* (1857) in the *Saturday Review*, for instance, counted, or pretended to, the number of thrilling plot features, which he clearly esteemed to be too high:

Such a choice collection of genuine horrors have rarely been collected into so short a composition. There are two sieges, three capital trials, eleven hairbreadth escapes, one suicide, four executions — two of them involving many deaths.²⁹

Quantification, in this case, is numerical and takes the form of counting narrated events to highlight an overabundance of action. Stephen communicates the negative assessment of his critique via biting sarcasm: ‘If [Miss Hemphill] would publish her compositions in *Punch* as a parody on Mr James, she would achieve a wonderful success’.³⁰ The *Athenaeum*’s review of *Freida the Jongleur* by Horace Stebbing Roscoe St John is more measured, drawing on the lexical field of plenitude to make a similar point to Stephen’s: ‘Those readers who have a taste for novels so compounded of history and romance will

29 Robert Arthur Talbot Gascoyne-Cecil, ‘Freida the Jongleur’, *Saturday Review* (14 March 1857), p. 249.

30 Gascoyne-Cecil, ‘Freida the Jongleur’, p. 249.

find an incessant continuity of incidents and of theatrical situations, and an abundance of passion and terror, in Freida the Jongleur.³¹

When it comes to the terminology available in literary criticism in the nineteenth century, Isobel Armstrong observes that, for poetry, there was an ‘absence of a literary vocabulary’ and Justin Snider notes that ‘Victorian criticism relies on a blandly repetitive set of aesthetic judgments: literary works are found to be “human”, “natural”, “sincere”, or “simple”, “healthful”, “manly”, “noble”, or “distinct”.’³² A certain lack of tools of expression was also palpable to Victorian critics, as Walter Bagehot’s (1826–77) review of Georgiana M. Craik’s (1831–95) novel *Lost and Won* (1859) for the *Saturday Review* shows. Bagehot openly draws the connection to the language of economics, viewing it as superior to literary criticism in its precision:

We have frequently had occasion to regret that the language of criticism is defective in terms to express the minor degrees of excellence in novel writing. The number of novels is so great, and the shades of merit are so many, that we need a finely pointed nomenclature. The language of trade is far more effective. It has very accurate, though often very odd words to distinguish the hundred sorts and qualities of the various articles of commerce; and it is especially copious in marking the minute shades between ‘middling’ and ‘good’ which it is so difficult to distinguish sharply. [...] No one believes that literary excellence has fewer shades of distinction than cotton, and yet how few are the words of the critic in comparison with those of the broker.³³

Bagehot, a critic who wrote extensively on economics and politics, calls for a more finely grained and expressive terminology for literary criticism, which indicates a privileging of economic thinking and writing over forms of knowledge production less reliant on precision. In this passage, he insists on the inherent value of literary products, implying that well-made novels share a permanent and reproducible shape comparable to consumer items. Concurrently, the concern with the ineffectiveness of the language of criticism points to the difficulty, and hence the value, of the critic’s work.

Analysis

The present analysis is based on reviews selected from a corpus of 502 reviews from the *Athenaeum* and 71 reviews from the *Saturday Review* published between 1855 and 1859. I look at an overlap of books reviewed in both journals, which amounts to 52 books, representing 73.2% of the *Saturday Review*’s material versus 10.3% of the *Athenaeum*’s. 31 of the novels reviewed were written by women, 16 by men, and for 5 novels, the author remains unknown. Out of the 105 reviews of the 52 books at hand — the *Athenaeum* published two of *Little Dorrit* in 1857 — 39 were written by female reviewers, 23 of which were authored by Geraldine E. Jewsbury for the *Athenaeum*. It is clear, therefore, that Jewsbury takes prominence in the present sample of reviews for the *Athenaeum*. 40 reviews were written by men, while 25 could not be traced to an author. In terms of the assessment of the novels, the *Athenaeum* gave a positive review for 20 novels, a negative one for 16, and a mixed one for 16. The *Saturday Review* gave a positive review for 7 novels, a negative one for 24, and a mixed one for 19. For Bevington, ‘the

31 Horace Stebbing Roscoe St John, ‘Freida the Jongleur’, *Athenaeum* (7 March 1857), p. 308.

32 Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry, 1830–1870* (Athlone Press, 1972), p. 6; Justin Snider, ‘Aesthetic Categories and the Social Life of Genre in Victorian Criticism’, *Victorian Studies*, 59.3 (2017), pp. 450–56 (p. 450).

33 Walter Bagehot, ‘Lost and Won’, *Saturday Review* (16 April 1859), p. 474.

great majority of reviews [in the *Saturday Review*] were slashings', namely critical reviews marked by hostility, which he attributes to the journal's 'corporate style' and the 'enforced word limit for articles and its weekly publication cycle', as Hugh Craig and Alexis Antonia have noted.³⁴ My sample presents more generous reviewing than expected but it does confirm that in the 1850s, the '*Saturday Review* was "down" on popular novelists'.³⁵ Furthermore, the *Saturday Review*'s reviews are considerably longer than the *Athenaeum*'s, leaving ample room for addressing complexities or ambiguities, making unequivocal positives all the rarer. When comparing the reviews by the journals for the respective novels, I observed a disagreement in 39 out of 52 cases, 2 positive agreements, 9 negative agreements, and 6 mixed agreements. In my analysis, I compare and contrast the deliberation strategies manifested in the reviews of three 'last new novels', reviewed by both periodicals. I look at 1 out of 2 reviews that are positive in both journals, 1 out of 9 of those that are negative, and 1 out of the 6 mixed assessments in order to foreground the particularities of the respective reviewing styles.

When it comes to monitoring taste, both periodicals distanced themselves from criticism that stressed the authority of the critic. Ellen Miller Casey has qualified the *Athenaeum* and the *Saturday Review*, along with the *Spectator*, as the leading weeklies of the mid-nineteenth century. She notes that these weeklies 'shared many standards for evaluating fiction', as '[a]ll were for morality, probability, interest, and good writing', and renounced 'naturalism' and 'analysis'.³⁶ Laurel Brake remarks that the reviews published in the *Athenaeum* were never 'severe [unlike the *Saturday Review*] for the sake of severity'.³⁷ The chosen corpus demonstrates that the tone and assessment of the *Saturday Review* are more strikingly harsh than the *Athenaeum*'s, but, nevertheless, the latter also published slashings. Jewsbury's review of H.M.W.'s *Catherine De Vere* (1857), for instance, presents the novel as the 'most foolish, washy, slip-slop story it has been our lot to read for some time. Beyond the mildest and most ineffectual of good intentions, there is nothing in the book to recommend it to mercy'.³⁸ Angered at the anti-feminist marriage plot of the novel, Jewsbury attacks the writer for having failed the readers: 'Uncultivated and inexperienced writers have no right to inflict the result of their hours of idleness upon the public'.³⁹ The angry tone stands in contrast to the unknown reviewer of the *Saturday Review*'s assessment of the same novel, who declares himself superior to the 'young ladies of England' who turn to novels as 'amusing companions for their lighter hours', and withholds judgment on the basis of his sex: 'as we are not young ladies, perhaps we are incapable of a fair judgement on the subject, and therefore we had better make our bow and leave the point entirely to their decision'.⁴⁰ If both these periodicals share valuation practices centered on the needs of the readers, the reviews discussed above demonstrate the fact that the amount of time involved in writing and reading a novel also defined its tastefulness. Excessive length and stylistic convolutedness were seen as authorial indulgence plaguing the reader, thus lowering the value of the respective novel.

34 Bevington, *Saturday Review*, p. 155; Hugh Craig and Alexis Antonia, 'Six Authors and the "Saturday Review": A Quantitative Approach to Style', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 48.1 (Spring 2015), pp. 67–86 (p. 80).

35 Bevington, *Saturday Review*, p. 155.

36 Ellen Miller Casey, 'Weekly Reviews of Fiction: The Athenaeum vs. the Spectator and the Saturday Review', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 23.1 (Spring 1990), pp. 8–12 (p. 8; p. 10).

37 Laurel Brake, 'Nineteenth-Century Newspaper Press Directories: The National Gallery of the British Press', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 48.4 (Winter 2015), pp. 569–90 (p. 585).

38 Geraldine Jewsbury, 'Catherine De Vere', *Athenaeum* (23 May 1857), p. 661.

39 Ibid., p. 661.

40 'Catherine De Vere', *Saturday Review* (13 June 1857), p. 558.

To illustrate the differences and similarities in navigation strategies manifested by the two periodicals, I have compared critiques of books reviewed in both the *Athenaeum* and the *Saturday Review*, namely *The House of Elmore* by Frederick William Robinson (1855), *Our Cousin Veronica* by Mary Elizabeth Wormley (1855), and *Sylvan Holt's Daughter* by Lee Holme (1858), ranging from recommendations to indifferent memorandums, on to slashings.⁴¹ My analysis of the strategies of navigation conducive to useful reading has taken into consideration the expressions of approval and disapproval relating to the style and story of the respective works, the ordering of the elements of critique, and the placement of the assessment of quality.

Approval: Linear Clarity vs Productive Back-and-Forth Assessment

Our Cousin Veronica: Scenes and Adventures over the Blue Ridge, a novel by Mary Elizabeth Wormley of 1855, was reviewed by Geraldine E. Jewsbury in the *Athenaeum* in 1856. It is typical of the *Athenaeum*'s 'New Novels' reviews in its accessibility in terms of length, style, and navigability. The reason for occasional expressions of annoyance does not seem to lie in the conviction of the general superiority of reviewers, but in their perceived duty of guiding, and ultimately defending, their readers through their work. Jewsbury's brief review of 21 lines exemplifies the dominant navigation practices of the periodical, which were geared towards the simultaneous grasping of multiple dimensions of the book under review. As is almost always the case with the *Athenaeum*'s reviews, the reader is informed of the assessment the reviewer makes of the quality of the novel in the first line, considering different contextual dimensions: 'As we have often occasion to speak severely of American novels, we are glad of an opportunity to give praise where praise is due. "Our Cousin Veronica" is a charming book, written evidently by an educated and highly cultivated woman'.⁴² The measure of valuation here is comparison in terms of Jewsbury's perspective on the book, the standard of the national literature to which it belongs, and her clear positioning on both the novel and the author. Rather than presenting an introduction to the characters and a plot summary at the beginning, Jewsbury offers a synthesis of the moral issues at stake in the novel, the position of the author, and her own/the *Athenaeum*'s views:

The pictures of Virginian life are admirable, and the mode in which the question of domestic slavery is treated strikes us as both wise and just. The authoress takes a much broader view of the subject than is common to find in works of fiction. She has studied the subject, and does not speak as a partizan on either side, but as one who accepts facts and sees the difficulties that beset the question.⁴³

Over several lines, the readers are thus navigated through the aesthetic and political credibility of the novel and the author, without being told more about the plot than the fact that 'The character of Veronica, the heroine, is charming in its grace and womanliness'.⁴⁴ The balancing inherent in the second sentence of the excerpt presents the excess of the benefit of the novel — the utility of reading the book — in light of the lack that characterizes the context, resulting in the emphasis of a double addition.

41 Frederick William Robinson, *The House of Elmore* (Hurst & Blackett, 1855), Mary Elizabeth Wormley, *Our Cousin Veronica* (Bunce & Brother, 1855), and Lee Holme, *Sylvan Holt's Daughter* (Smith, Elder & Co., 1858).

42 Geraldine E. Jewsbury, 'Our Cousin Veronica; or Scenes and Adventures over the Blue Ridge', *Athenaeum* (12 April 1856), p. 458.

43 Ibid., p. 458.

44 Ibid., p. 458.

The third sentence similarly presents the author's praiseworthy stance against a deficient context, which again leads to the triumph of a double addition. Based on these acts of valuation, Jewsbury 'cordially recommends this story to any [*Athenaeum*] readers who wish for a pleasant healthy book', indicating that the perfect balance between the undeniable moral impact and the endearing demeanour of the heroine render a level of intellectual and psychological complexity that is sufficiently stimulating to be useful.⁴⁵

The *Saturday Review* picks up on similar strands as the *Athenaeum* in its comparative calculations, such as American fiction and the moral problems connected to slavery. The reviewer intends to involve the reader via the back-and-forth technique of argumentation characteristic of the periodical, designed to render the sequence of additions and subtractions of value as experienced in the reading process. Henry James Sumner Maine (1822–88), who reviewed *Our Cousin Veronica* in 1856, does not offer an assessment of the novel as a whole at the start. Rather than offering a synthesis of the criteria of valuation, he begins the review by an anticipation of the reader's dislike, thus creating a basis of deficit that will either dominate the balance underlying the valuation, return to a balance due to additions in value, or be turned into benefit by numerous additions:

The reader familiar with American novels, who finds that the history of *Our Cousin Veronica* commences before that young lady has attained her teens, will be apt to throw down the book. There is no greater nuisance in literature than the plague of infantine heroines, with which the 'Little Nell' of Mr. Dickens' *Old Curiosity Shop* has afflicted American fiction. In the present case, however, the condemnation of *Our Cousin Veronica* would be premature.⁴⁶

Appealing to the previous knowledge and taste of the reader, and thus creating a bond, Maine aggravates the former by associating the novel with a type of writing that does, in fact, not characterize it. After offering 29 lines of plot summary, Maine allows insight into his compositional methodology: 'We have stated as much of the plot as is necessary to illustrate the main object of the story' and further indicating that 'Here we are brought to the moral of *Our Cousin Veronica*. It is a manifesto against Slavery — not at all a violent one — but on that account the more telling and the more trustworthy'.⁴⁷ The multiple dimensions of 'here' reveal the intersections of the logic of the novel and that of the review. The reviewer presents it as his task to navigate the reader through both these texts concurrently. The distribution of deficits and benefits in this review mimics the reading process and is engineered to captivate the reader through surprising contrasts.

Disapproval: Clarity vs Critical Instability in Valuation

Geraldine E. Jewsbury's 1855 *Athenaeum* review of *The House of Elmore: A Family History*, written by the prolific popular writer Frederick William Robinson (1830–1901), spells out the periodical's protocol regarding the guidance to be afforded to the reader by the novelist.⁴⁸ The effort of the *Athenaeum* reviewers to produce measured and constructive criticism even when displeased becomes apparent, especially if Jewsbury's text is read in contrast with the *Saturday Review*'s 1855 review, which makes a spectacle of slashing

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 458.

⁴⁶ Henry James Sumner Maine, 'Our Cousin Veronica', *Saturday Review* (8 March 1856), pp. 372–73 (p. 372).

⁴⁷ Maine, 'Our Cousin Veronica', p. 372.

⁴⁸ Geraldine E. Jewsbury, 'The House of Elmore: A Family History', *Athenaeum* (8 December 1855), pp. 1432–33.

it. Valuation, for the *Athenaeum*, is not to be subjective. The novel at hand is eventful, sensational, and, according to Jewsbury, ‘unhealthy’.⁴⁹

The *Athenaeum*’s review of *The House of Elmore* is emblematic of the navigation strategies inherent in the journal’s protocol: the assessment of the reviewer regarding the subject, style, and pleasantness of the novel under review tends to appear at the very beginning and is only very rarely preceded by plot summaries, pensive reflections on the general subject area, or humorous comments. Jewsbury’s style, structure, and attitude render the principal agenda of the *Athenaeum* reviewers to write with clarity and to pronounce unmistakable statements on the stylistic and narrative craft, originality, and general interest of the respective novels. The review at hand demonstrates that expressions of disapproval generally remain respectful. It is rare that reviewers give way to their frustration and make offensive comments, and, in this vein, Jewsbury contains her condemnation. The rudimentary chart below illustrates the components that Jewsbury finds unbalanced in the novel at hand:

‘The House of Elmore’ is a powerful novel. No reader will lay it down before he comes to the end; yet it is exceedingly unpleasant, and the reader who has been once seduced into its perusal will certainly never take it up again. The story is dismal, morbid, and unreal to the last degree. It is founded on the old tragic notion of a whole family being doomed to shame and ruin on account of some crime committed by an ancestor. What the sin was in the present case is not clearly shown. The reader is left to find his way through a heavy gloom which is not enlightened even at the last moment. He must take things as he finds them.⁵⁰

While reviewers in the *Athenaeum* tend to signal approval when benefits outweigh deficits, in this case of decided disapproval, the assessment is split into the ambiguous ‘powerful’, locating the addition of value in the captivating nature of the narrative, undoing it via the subtraction of the slightly delayed declaration of the latter’s ‘exceeding unpleasantness.’ Jewsbury thus quickly navigates her readers through the strengths, weaknesses, and the improprieties of the novel.

The style adopted by Mary Saunders Bennett (1813–99) in the *Saturday Review* is less geared towards clarity than towards actively engaging the reader via a broken syntax, turns in argumentative line, and openly indecisive assessment:

The author of the *House of Elmore* has made a great mistake in giving his work the form of a novel — for which the subject is not in the least degree fitted — instead of that of a melodrama, in the materials for which it is so rich. Put on the boards of some ‘People’s Theatre’ in the far East of the metropolis, it would have been sure to receive that instant welcome and unanimous applause which it is more than problematical whether it will meet with in its present guise. But perhaps, after all, the writer has judged wisely — he knew that human nature can bear a larger amount of tragedy in a novel than in an acted drama, and, out of kindness, has spared his fellow men what would have been an almost unbearable harrowing of their feelings. Or it may have been an *embarras de richesse* which obliged him to prefer the three-volume novel to the five-act play.⁵¹

49 Ibid., p. 1432.

50 Ibid., p. 1432.

51 Mary Saunders Bennett, ‘The House of Elmore’, *Saturday Review* (15 December 1855), pp. 119–20 (p. 119).

Quality	Addition of value: benefit	Deficit of value: Subtraction
Powerful	+	
Readable	+	
Unpleasant		
Invites re-reading		
Story		- -
Foundation of inherited sin		
Reader transparency		
Reader guidance		
Revelation of intrigue at the end		
Assessment	2 +	9 -

Bennett embeds her valuation of the novel in a situation of deficit so deeply-rooted that it cannot be compensated by any additions in value: if Robinson's narrative is fundamentally unsuitable for the form of the novel and apt for sensational musical theatre, there can be no utility in engaging with it. Right at the start, Bennett creates further deficit by suggesting an alternative generic scenario, imagining the dramatic production. Having thus instilled an impression of a vivid spectacle in the reader, she abruptly changes course and considers that 'but perhaps, after all' the argument she so forcefully defended a moment ago needs to be reverted, then further re-considered in an 'or'-clause. She so quickly follows up a deficit by a benefit that the reader cannot follow the logic of the argumentative calculation. The unfixed critical position and the erratic style of the argumentation that mark this review are characteristic of the literary criticism published in the *Saturday Review*. The goal of this back-and-forth valuation strategy, which extrapolates the novel from its generic givenness, seems to be to forego unilateral assessment for the benefit of approximating a direct engagement with the 'host text'.⁵²

Bennett's review is a slashing, a listing of deficiencies without any redeeming benefits that would lead to the balance required for a recommendation. The reason for thus flagging this novel as devoid of utility goes back to the protective function of criticism, ensuring the productive time management of potential readers, who are presented as not necessarily equipped to recognize *The House of Elmore* as 'trash'.⁵³ The

52 Dames, 'On Not Close Reading', p. 13.

53 Bennett, 'The House of Elmore', p. 119.

valuation strategies employed demand the patience and persistence of the reader to grasp the direction of Bennett’s calculation, only fully revealed at the end:

We need scarcely say that it has not been without much disgust, and at the cost of great self-denial, that we have waded through these volumes; but we shall be amply rewarded for our toil and our pains, if through the concentrated essence of the novel which we have attempted to give, we have rendered its utter absurdity and vulgarity more palpable to those who might not otherwise have perceived the heights and depths of either. Such a work as this would indeed be beneath criticism, were it not that the simple fact of its being for a time ‘the last new novel’ will procure for it many a reader, who, if he had been previously put on his guard, might happily have been prevented from committing the sin of wasting a single moment over the trash.⁵⁴

The deficiencies of the novel are perceived as so immense that they position the novel outside of the frame of valuation. Nevertheless, the pressure to review is imposed by novelty, a quality that is merely contextual and not inherent, or even related, to the book itself. The review is thus devoted to doing justice to the pains endured by the reviewer in valuing the book: efforts not balanced out by pleasures. The vocabulary of investment is striking here: to avert the ‘waste’ of the reader’s time and effort, is to prevent the reading of the book.

Critiquing Mediocrity: The Function of Stating and Refuting

The protocol of depersonalising the reviewer’s subjective reading experience, which is then presented as the inadequate potential experience of the reader, can be observed across many periodicals of the period. The vicarious reading conducted by the reviewer for, or, as if along with, the reader, is the most essential feature of book reviewing and can be identified in both the *Athenaeum* and the *Saturday Review*. Jewsbury’s 1858 *Athenaeum* review of *Sylvan Holt’s Daughter* by Holme Lee [Harriet Parr (1828–1900)] presents the structure of a series of qualifications, characterized by the additions and subtractions of value. Jewsbury starts out combining the repetition of the title and the character review when vouching in the first sentence that ‘Sylvan Holt’s daughter is a fascinating young woman, with whom we recommend our readers make acquaintance for themselves. This work is, we think, the best proportioned and best sustained story the author has yet written.’⁵⁵ Jewsbury immediately and unambiguously recommends the novel and praises the realism and delicacy with which the characters are drawn. She then criticizes the pacing of the story, defending the limited patience of the reader: ‘The story, however, lags occasionally,—it has too little *go* in it; the author dawdles over conversations and descriptions till at times the interest in the tale nearly stagnates.’⁵⁶ By using the definite article ‘the’, rather than the possessive ‘my’, Jewsbury here generalizes her own reading experience, and, with a reproachful tone, reprimands Lee for the lack of emotional energy to substantiate the abundance and over-detailedness of the descriptions. Here too, the vocabulary of investment represents the reader’s attention as a resource reserved for the reception of pleasure, not for tolerating the frustration of boredom.

54 Ibid., p. 119.

55 Geraldine E. Jewsbury, ‘Sylvan Holt’s Daughter’, *Athenaeum* (13 November 1855), p. 616.

56 Ibid., p. 616.

The author of the *Saturday Review*'s 1858 review of *Sylvan Holt's Daughter* is unknown.⁵⁷ Like the *Athenaeum*'s review, it presents several indicators as to the unspoken protocol underlying the reviewing practices of the periodical, but expands its perspective to the wider literary field:

Of most novels written and published to supply the market, the less said the better; and we wish the decencies of journalism would permit us to check them off successively with a short common form, declaring their uselessness and insipidity. But there are a few novels published every season, which, if not of permanent merit, are quite up to the level of most books that call for a review. To this class belong the tales written by the lady who publishes under the name of Holme Lee.⁵⁸

The reviewer criticizes the pressure inherent in the protocol of periodical writing that demands a fair and nuanced discussion and assessment of even the least impressive books. He or she wishes for a different protocol that offers a structure for dismissal, sincere judgment, and the withholding of engagement.

The series of qualifications that starts with a sweeping generalisation of the low standard of fiction is qualified by a 'but'-refutation, which then is again qualified by an 'if'-interjection in order to visualize the merits of *Sylvan Holt's Daughter*, which is, according to this logic, worthy of a review. This process of qualification, based on generalisation and subsequent specification, is again at work when the reviewer engages more closely with the narrative:

She hovers, as is so customary with these lady-novelists, on the brink of naughty passions. The consequences of a married woman's error fill the first half of the work, and the progress and results of a married man's flirtations fill the second half. Still an inner virtue is preserved, and everybody gets better as the end of the tale draws near. To this we are all accustomed. Holme Lee does not give us anything new: but what she does give us is so much better than the product of bunglers in the trade, that, comparatively, it may be called good.⁵⁹

Novelty, which Bennett had established as an insufficient factor to balance out other weaknesses, is here perceived to be lacking but compensated for by other strengths. Qualifying Lee's lack of innovation with a 'but'-refutation, the reviewer discerns the achievement of the novel only in contrast to the poorly conceived books that dominate the market. The present review is an illustration of the concatenated evaluation that characterizes many of the reviews published by the *Saturday Review*. Instead of the *Athenaeum*'s characteristic synthetic statements, the *Saturday*'s reviewers implicate the reader into the process of evaluation and discussion. Statements of judgment suggesting inadequacy are here punctuated by a qualifying 'still' that re-establishes a balanced plateau of satisfaction when the novel is shown to have reached the level of customary quality.

Conclusion

In the field of economic humanities, scholars like Maas and Soll have shown that the genres related to life-writing, much like numerical forms of accounting, are geared towards gaining control over an influx of observations and impressions, achievements

57 Anon., 'Sylvan Holt's Daughter', *Saturday Review* (13 November 1858), pp. 483–84.

58 Ibid., p. 483.

59 Ibid., p. 483.

and mistakes, progress and set-backs, enriching cultural experiences, observations of the natural world, as well as a variety of emotional states. This article has proposed a point of connection between the economic humanities and periodical studies in identifying the presence and nature of quantifying modes of thought and writing in one of the seminal genres of the Victorian press. It has drawn attention to the managerial function assumed by literary critics reviewing books for periodicals in channelling the flood of impressions preceding and accompanying the reading process. Reviews of literary works, notwithstanding the predominant conventions of a given historical moment, do not simply render the impressions of the critic as reader, but communicate his or her assessment of the quality of the respective work, to be understood in the wider context of production and reception. As this article has shown, reviews of fiction display a logic of accounting in their assessment production, determined in terms of the books’ position in literature as a whole and in terms of the creative capacity of the author. Considering the wealth of avenues to investigate when it comes to the links between literature and economics in Victorian book reviews, this article is a prolegomenon in periodical studies. While I have sketched the reviews’ engagement with style, characterisation, plot, readability, and the ways in which the evaluation of these angles functions in a system of balance, there are numerous aspects related to these categories that would be worth exploring. The notion of standard is often evaluated in terms of the country of production, the specific genre (for instance romantic, religious, military, or nautical fiction), the extent of the oeuvre of the author, the periodical at hand, the reviewer’s reading history, the teaching and learning potential of the novel, or reactions to other reviews. Larger categories of evaluation also include the novel’s realism, verisimilitude, authenticity, and believability, the intended moral didacticism, as well as the portrayal and judgment of the writer’s sex and class. The present study focused on two periodicals during a limited time span, and it would be immensely rewarding to enlarge the sample of journals and compare reviewing practices at different moments in the nineteenth century.

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