

Adam Gordon. *Prophets, Publicists, and Parasites: Antebellum Print Culture and the Rise of the Critic*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020. Paperback, 280p. \$27 (ISBN: 978-1-6253-4453-3).

Adam Gordon's *Prophets, Publicists, and Parasites: Antebellum Print Culture and the Rise of the Critic* examines the role of the critic and criticism in early nineteenth-century America using a wide variety of sources to show how critical forms shaped arguments. This deliberate inclusion of a range of source types allows the author to compare and study criticism with a unique perspective. As Gordon argues, the definition of literary criticism should be expansive enough to include different forms because of how criticism is inextricably linked to the forms in which it circulated. In defining these forms, he states, "By 'critical form,' I mean two intertwined and overlapping structures: the print media through which criticism circulated (monthly magazines, daily newspapers, anthology, pamphlet, etc.) and the critical genres through which it expressed itself (brief notice, lengthy review essay, tabloid literary gossip, etc.)" (6). A strong case is made that studying these different forms can also bring a new perspective to the current debates over the value of criticism.

Gordon is an associate professor of English at Whitman College, and this book is primarily based on his dissertation from UCLA, which is evident from the organization of the chapters. His arguments build upon scholars who have written about the impact of print technologies, reprinting, and criticism studies, including Caroline Levine, Leon Jackson, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Meredith McGill, Trish Loughran, Lara Langer Cohen, Michael Warner, and Jordan Stein. The book covers a period when American print culture became "an increasingly connected national market" (18) in which the availability of education and more reading material increased literacy across all strata of the American population. Readers turned to critics to navigate the literary marketplace because of the amount of available print materials and to provide explanations and context for publications. To show how nineteenth-century critics categorized and evaluated critical practice in relation to critical forms, Gordon structures the chapters around five individuals (Rufus Wilmot Griswold, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Frederick Douglass, and Edgar Allan Poe) and the critical forms of lectures/essays, anthologies, magazine reviews, newspaper criticism, and reprinted reviews.

The first chapter focuses on Emerson and the critical form of quarterly book reviews, demonstrating how he adapted his critical ideas to venues. Gordon describes how quarterly reviews promoted the Transcendentalist movement because relevant publications were coming out of places like Germany; but, in addition to the language barrier, the physical books were hard to acquire. Reviews informed people of new works and provided summaries and the significance of books. As Gordon

states, “Models of critical dissemination matter, in other words, since different formats carry with them specific conventions that influence the message, content, and style of the thoughts expressed” (55). Transcendentalism and Emerson specifically show how literary criticism cannot be divorced from physical dissemination.

In comparison, Rufus Wilmot Griswold, the subject of the second chapter, created literary compilations and aimed to give a representative sampling of the national literature, which could then be used for the creation of new literary productions. As Gordon explains, this view of building upon the past contrasted sharply with Emerson, who thought American literature needed to be unburdened of the past to be original. In comparison, Griswold thought an entirely new literature was neither possible nor desirable and that progress would not occur without authors being able to survey American works comprehensively. Griswold began the task of canon formation and was the first American professional anthologist (73–74).

The third chapter turns the focus to magazine reviews and Edgar Allan Poe, who was known for severe, honest criticism that aimed at improving literature. As Gordon points out, Poe’s work reflected the tension between his high standards and self-scrutiny. Gordon provides the example of Poe reviewing himself and his critical hypocrisy, in how he committed literary crimes that he accused others of doing. For Poe, the figure of the author was a deliberate construct, and an effective critical persona had to be crafted. As Gordon points out, Poe knew he needed to cultivate sensation, despite his contribution to the professionalization of criticism. One of his contradictions detailed by Gordon is that he called for serious criticism and tried to elevate American letters while also generating self-publicity and scandals.

The chapter on Margaret Fuller focuses on her work with newspaper book reviews and how she turned them into a respected medium. She was the most widely read of the book’s authors, but as Gordon explains, the ephemerality of newspapers was debilitating to her critical legacy. As Gordon notes, her reviews directly show “how critical values, theories, and legacies are bound up with the print media that disseminate them” (168). Gordon asserts that the newspaper book review is a long overlooked critical genre of this era, and he asserts that Fuller’s tenure as literary editor of the *Tribune* marked the origins of the newspaper book review section in America and set a new standard; it brought literary criticism to the masses, and its placement showed its importance to the everyday world of readers. The excerpted passages and translations were central to her reviews but were mostly excluded from twentieth-century collections of Fuller’s writing, which we can now see demonstrates the importance of context and sources in research. Newspapers’ materiality posed difficulties for Fuller’s critical legacy; and, as Gordon explains, newspaper

criticism continues to pose problems for scholars. They are preserved less frequently and were built for cheapness and short-term use, so they have not endured as well and require serious commitments of space and resources to maintain. In addition, they lack access points like table of contents or indexes and are often poor quality, which poses challenges for optical character recognition (OCR) technologies and makes keyword searches unreliable (209). This combination of factors for the access to and preservation of newspapers led to Fuller's reviews being much slower to receive recognition.

The last chapter looks at Frederick Douglass and the response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in pamphlet reviews, critical companion volumes, and reprinted reviews in periodicals. Despite their low critical authority, Douglass used reprinted reviews as a weapon in the war against slavery. Reviews kept Stowe's novel a current topic of controversy and prolonged its cultural impact, and this response was an example of the role that print forms played in the mobilization of literary criticism as an agent of political change. Gordon examines three sites of critical response to Stowe's novel: lengthy pamphlet reviews by Southerners, Stowe's book-length critical rebuttal, and reprinted critical responses in the Black press. Gordon shows how critics used material forms to forward their agendas and that the success of the book was bound up in its materiality. To respond to the book, Southerners turned to pamphlets, which provided more space for their arguments, had low production costs, and made it possible to circulate the reviews widely, as opposed to the limited audiences and brief temporal lifespans of periodicals. These possibilities prompted the development of a new material form in American critical history, the book-length reviews, including Stowe's own rebuttal *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

This response by Stowe consisted of facts to prove the accuracy of her book, with the authority of her evidence depending on the original publication context. This was a guiding editorial principle for Frederick Douglass, and the critical response to Stowe's novel in his paper challenges the definition of criticism, which is why it is the focus of the last chapter and is labeled "critical reprinting" by Gordon. Reprinting in this era, as Douglass did, reoriented criticism toward communal and distributed authorship instead of being individual and centralized. In response to Douglass' approach to criticism, Gordon offers two claims: first, that this era's critical culture relied on a diverse range of critical forms beyond reviews and literary notices; and, second, that Douglass wielded the power of reprinted and hybrid criticism to create a critical forum that privileged values of community debate over the authority of a single critical perspective. In summation, Gordon claims that, by looking at the critical reception to Stowe's novel in Douglass' paper, he is redirecting the gaze to focus on less stable critical forms, hybrid texts.

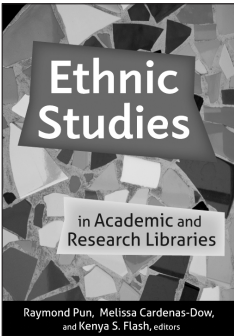
Gordon states that the combination of recent digital technologies and the ideological return to the archive has enabled scholars to reclaim critical margins and that he was able to “identify, collate, and evaluate all mentions of Stowe’s novel” (251). But it is important to not be overly reliant on these techniques and to question what source set is being searched; these texts often have poor OCR, particularly if they are in nonstandard formats that were meant to be ephemeral and poorly printed, which could lead to these sources being further obscured. As Gordon states, “My own sense, and the approach that informed this study, is that we must carefully balance the expanded access provided by digital databases and keyword searches with continued direct engagement with the physical texts themselves, as each confrontation, whether digital or analog, yields different sorts of insight and understanding.” (263)

Gordon provides data on how the majority of Douglass’ critical engagement with Stowe’s novel was through reprinted articles, which allowed conflicting viewpoints and a variety of material forms in his paper. As Gordon states, “This instrumental sense of the utility of criticism is visible, I suggest, through the types of critical forms Douglass reprinted in his paper in which the value of criticism was linked to its practical power to effect social and political change.” (254) Gordon provides the excellent example of Douglass reprinting antislavery society minutes, which detailed the treatment of Stowe’s novel within the proceedings of an actual political gathering. As Gordon asserts, it is important to read this literary criticism within the context of its material form, and he compares criticism in Douglass’ paper to current online communities and reviews, since Douglass similarly offered an alternative vision to scholarly monographs or journal reviews.

Gordon concludes his book with the description of a physical Amazon bookstore and the “democratized critical future” of Amazon reviews but does not mention the reliability of the source of the reviews. But, as he notes, there are many venues for criticism currently, and the form in which it circulates shapes the way that readers consume it and the role it serves within society. On a positive note, Gordon states, “...criticism has never been practiced more widely or more energetically than today; and there have never been more critics than now in the digital era, even if this criticism takes new and unsettling forms.” (272) He gestures toward thinking about the new roles for criticism and suggests that criticism is read to feel connected to others in the experience of art: “...reviews in the twenty-first century counter the isolation of late-capitalist culture and bring us together through and around the act of critical reflection. In doing so, criticism has never been more vital to our lives” (273) and that “criticism is at the heart of the experience of being human” (277).

As Gordon points out, there are many new possibilities for building upon his work, particularly with the ever-expanding source sets available online. Based on his presentation of the field, the most evident tension is between the approach of returning to the archives to study the physical items versus using the large-scale digitization projects and databases, but, as the author notes, scholars have been slow to apply newly available digital methodologies to literary criticism. Gordon expertly demonstrates the relevance of his studies to the present moment; as he describes, “As a coda, I turn briefly to the current state of American criticism in the wake of the digital revolution. Where many twenty-first century critics see rupture, however, I see continuity, as technological changes once again prompt an examination of critical principles” and “This approach reaffirms my overriding argument, finally, that to understand criticism, then as now, we need to pay attention to the material form it takes” (35).—*Nicole Topich, Weill Cornell Medical College DeWitt Wallace Institute of Psychiatry*

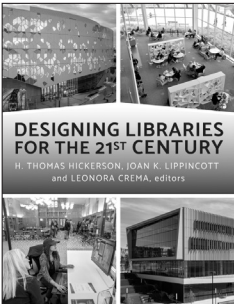
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