

Jaffe, Audrey. *The Affective Life of the Average Man: The Victorian Novel and the Stock-Market Graph*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-8142-5171-3.

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As Audrey Jaffe demonstrates in *The Affective Life of the Average Man: The Victorian Novel and the Stock-Market Graph*, the economic looms large in Victorian studies as well as in contemporary thought and politics, with cultural and political figures alike scrambling to devise plausible, reassuring narratives of the financial present and future. Current western societies, Jaffe compellingly argues, inherit from their nineteenth-century predecessors a fixation on quantifying distinctions between the reliable investor and the irresponsible speculator, legitimate and illegitimate forms of market activity, and the vexed relation between an economy of personal, emotional well-being or happiness and a materialist economy. However, the distinction between happiness and economic measures proves negligible as does the line between the “pulse of the people” and the excitable stock market (53). The average, the public, and the stock market all get produced simultaneously as comparative measures. We are interpolated, but imagine ourselves not to be like everyone else. We respond to and influence the fluctuating money market (at once the measure of the public pulse and its pace setter) in fairly predictable ways, in part acting on its excitements, while simultaneously affecting them with our own. We purport to separate happiness from economics, but measure our

happiness by attaining what others also want, an affective state that mimics the acquisitiveness of market dynamics. We are constituted by the major fictions and ideologies of our time (the novel, the stock market) but, of course, bring them into being and lend them vitality.

What impresses the reader of Jaffe's work here—and elsewhere—is its succinctness in honing in on a particular issue and its ability to span past and present. In four compact chapters, Jaffe traces the imbrication of cultural productions (especially the novel) with the market economy, noting their shared investment in circulating and reifying abstracts like the “average.” Both deploy a technique that Jaffe terms “distant reading,” in which the average emerges as an “imaginary mid point . . . devised to anchor the system” (9). The novel with its characterological system of averages and exceptions, as much as the stock market graph and ticker, aim to make comprehensible a welter of differences and emotions that, by definition, exceed the predictable or the rational. The first chapter considers the “relentlessly comparative” characterization of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and the undercurrent of “likeness anxiety” that pervades the novel, which constructs a host of peripheral, ordinary characters as a backdrop for the rare exception (40). In the second chapter, Jaffe analyzes the Victorian drive to legitimize the stock exchange through narratives that convert risk-taking and speculation into matters of moral management and perspicacious readings of character. While all stock market activity initially bore the stamp of illegitimacy, increasingly public narratives (such as investment advice manuals) sought to minimize the sheer unpredictability of activities that, Jaffe avers, most resemble gambling. These narratives urged, instead, the necessity of making a clear distinction between the solid, dependable investor—who

manages the money of others as carefully as he restrains his emotions, eschewing all excitability—and the untrustworthy jobber, or speculator: a self-enriching, emotionally unstable figure. These themes recur in novels such as Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1855-57) (the subject of Chapter 2) and Anthony Trollope's *The Prime Minister* (1875-76) (the subject of Chapter 3), both of which draw their energy from the dramatic rise and fall of the stock market, while simultaneously supplying cautionary tales about the speculator's financial and emotional irregularities. Not only must one learn to read character astutely, but one must also make prudent emotional investments to avoid taint by association. Jaffe's fourth and final chapter traces the "happiness economics" of Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849-50), an economics that functions rather like a graph, reducing all complexity to a clear representation of what "everyone wants" (87-88). The novel, then, employs a form of distant reading common to the graph, the market, and the ticker, which create fictions of stability and comprehensibility. Moreover, though *David Copperfield* explicitly refuses the fungibility of money and happiness, the latter's economy of scarcity and competition mimics that of the former.

The novel has often been received as a cultural alternative to—even corrective of—the quantifying, codifying systems Victorians devised to interpret the bewilderments attendant on the tremendous period growth in urbanization, technology, and capitalism. Jaffe aims to estrange readers from this reassuring reading, and her comparisons of the novel and stock market prove apt. But if the novel derives real world energy from the stock market and the graph, and these in turn derive cultural authority from their deployment of a recognizable cast of characters and an agonistic plot, does it necessarily follow that the Victorian novel *predominantly* functions like a graph or a law of

averages? Take, for example, *Middlemarch* and the character of Mary Garth, whose physical features Eliot portrays as follows: “If you want to know *more particularly* how Mary looked, *ten to one* you will see some face like hers in the crowded street tomorrow....” (qtd. in Jaffe 31; Jaffe’s emphasis). Identifying this description as a characterological form of distant reading, Jaffe turns her attention to other *Middlemarch* characters (Chettham, Lydgate), arguing that the novel draws firm distinctions among background and foreground, average and exceptional. Yet two questions arise. Does the physical description of Mary Garth epitomize her fairly substantial role in the novel? And, philosophically speaking, might distance or detachment not also potentially operate, as Amanda Anderson has suggested, as “the basis for an ever-expanding horizon of ethical and political engagement” (*Powers of Distance* [Princeton, 2001], 119)? Precisely in contrast to her unremarkable physical features, Mary Garth functions anomalously, even subversively, within the novel: as a plain girl adored by her handsome cousin Fred and equally dreaded by his mother Mrs. Vincy; as a strong-minded young woman who prefers to work for a caustic, ill-tempered old uncle, who does not acknowledge kinship with her, to the more reputable but less flexible working conditions as a governess; and as one, who at “the age of two-and-twenty . . . had certainly not attained the perfect good sense and principle recommended to the less fortunate girl” (*Middlemarch*, chapter 12). Humorous, outspoken, cuttingly ironic, deeply loyal, practical, and literary minded, Mary, with her stubborn particulars, does not get idealized as does the exceptional Dorothea; nor is Mary a type of the “less fortunate girl.” The novel proves at least as concerned with diversity as it does with likeness, and in Eliot’s fiction (as well as in Dickens’s) diversity repeatedly vitalizes community (see Gillian Beer’s *Darwin’s Plots*

[Cambridge, 2000) on this issue) and serves to expand perception, affection, and thought. Moreover, even when Eliot calls attention to identifiable likenesses and the average, the point tends to be that those who see in terms of generalities miss the inherent contradictions and subtleties of the individual. To Mrs. Vincy, Mary will always be the *average* girl—read, not conventionally attractive—who inexplicably captured the imagination and affections of her prized son. But the narrator adds complexity even to the physical description of Mary: “Rembrandt would have painted her with pleasure, and would have made her broad features look out of the canvas with intelligent honesty” (140). In Eliot’s narrative, many, if not all, characters warrant complex, evolving descriptions of their inconsistent conduct and emotions, their imperfections, and their moments of fineness: Mary, Lydgate, Rosamond, Celia, and even the blandly likeable Chettham. While Rosamond and Celia certainly function in part as the conventional femininity against which Dorothea gets positioned, neither of the younger women give up their own judgement in deference to their respective husbands and both significantly shape the dynamics of family and community.

The novels of Dickens, which draw on melodramatic tactics more extensively than Eliot’s, feature the financially untrustworthy man as a fallen figure. On the question of the individual’s relationship and responsibility to the community, however, Dickens’s approach varies both within and between novels. Jaffe predominantly discusses the admonitory gist of Dickens’s representations of the speculator as an individual failure from whom the more regulated families must separate themselves. Yet she is careful to add that the failed speculator doubles as one suffering from a compulsive disease, indeed, from a disease that also infects much of society. Such analysis—when Jaffe places the

quantifying tactics of markets and novels in dialogue with their uneasy, split allegiances—constitutes the most cogent feature of this erudite book, which unflinching asks keen questions. However pervasive Victorian codification proved to be, disruptions, ambivalences, and resistances emerged within the very systems that strove to simplify and manage individuals and markets. Jaffe's book makes a very fine contribution to the growing field of Victorianist studies (see Mary Poovey and Catherine Gallagher) of the market economy as inseparable from cultural productions like the novel.

Biographical Notice:

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