

Finnigan on Lerner (2018)

Lerner, Bettina. *Inventing the Popular: Printing, Politics, and Poetics*. Routledge, 2018, pp. 202, ISBN 9781409436768

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Opening with a quotation from Jules François Félix Fleury-Husson's (Champfleury) satirical review of Charles Poncy's "literary pretensions" (ix), Bettina Lerner writes: "This book explores texts written, published, and disseminated by a politically and socially active group of French working-class writers during the first half of the nineteenth-century. [...] This book is about encounters, some real and some fictionalised, that informed how a group of writers tried to position themselves in a rapidly changing literary field" (x–xi). Lerner avoids the temptation to re-tread familiar topics by applying voguish models of criticism and theory. Instead, she explores a body of texts that have remained at the margins of literary studies despite their fascinating complexities. Commenting on her choice of texts and authors, Lerner states: "The texts I examine do not so much repress their own history as lay bare a set of exchanges that have traditionally been omitted from literary-historical accounts" (xi).

Following a preface and preceding an epilogue, both of which are more expository than argumentative and, for this reader, too brief, Lerner divides her monograph into five chapters. Each chapter deals with a specific community of working-class writers, ranging from newspapers and anthologies, to more intimate, if not troubled, friendships. Through close readings of their works, Lerner demonstrates that her chosen worker-writers saw themselves not simply as protégés, but as the equals of more well-established authors within the literary world. In doing so Lerner illustrates that the flow of influence between the two groups was not one-directional but highly reciprocal.

Chapter one provides an introduction to the relatively unknown world of worker-writers by comparing them to more familiar texts such as Eugène Sue *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842–43). Lerner's choice of *Les Mystères de Paris* is particularly apt as, through her analysis, this "miserable narrative of working-class suffering" (44) provides a suitable metaphor for the real and nuanced expressions Lerner seeks to explore throughout this study. Acknowledging that many of the texts she discusses can be difficult to read "as literature" (16), Lerner identifies a number of models that allow for the analysis of non-canonical texts: notably Immanuel Kant's pure judgement of taste, Pierre Bourdieu's structures of the literary field, Jürgen Habermas's conception of the public sphere, and Lauren Berlant's intimate public sphere.

Moving forward, Lerner concentrates on exploring the world of the Parisian worker press. Discussing the shifting alliances between different currents of journalism, chapter two focuses on two strands of worker-press: one which satirized and articulated disdain for street literature and one that affirmed worker-class writers. Although Lerner astutely recognises that each strand of the press expressed a wide variety of political and social stances, following Oskar Negt's and Alexander Kluge's concept of the "proletarian public sphere," she is able to demonstrate with ease that complex changes in formats, editorial decisions, and values became a significant marker of social reading dynamics.

In chapter three, Lerner shifts her attention to argue that worker-poets did not simply mimic the romantic and popular poet Pierre-Jean de Béranger. Examining works by Savinien Lapointe, Jules Vinçard, and Charles Poncy, to name a few, Lerner challenges Jacques Rancière's assertion that worker-poets employed the language and style of Romantic poetry as an act of resistance. Moreover, Lerner interprets the worker-poets' experimentation with a variety of forms and traditions as "an attempt to appropriate and manipulate the dynamic relationships between poetry, song, and other forms of lyric expression" (63). This is supported by her thorough and insightful analysis of Vincard's "Aux goguettiers," Lapointe's "L'Utopiste," and Poncy's "Isly et Mogador," in which she foregrounds their use of a variety of formal techniques.

In a similar vein, chapter four further considers the assumption that worker-poets were imitators of Béranger. By problematising the processes of admiration and emulation, and focusing particularly on the connections between George Sand and Agricole Perdiguier, Lerner shows that the suggestion that working-class writers who fell under the protection of Sand were giving up a certain amount of their individualism and independence in exchange for financial and critical support is a misinformed fallacy. Furthermore, in a comparison of works by Sand and Perdiguier, Lerner convincingly illustrates that the relationship was reciprocal.

In chapter five, Lerner goes on to explore the relationship between Alphonse de Lamartine and Reine Garde. In her discussion, Lerner demonstrates with relative ease that, in his desire to position himself as the leader of "a new popular poetics" (132), Lamartine saw a friendship with Garde as a way to reach working-class readers. Much of the insight of this chapter comes

from Lerner's analysis of Garde's poetry as she sensitively argues that her poetics were different from those of Lamartine. More significantly, she ably conveys the originality of Garde's works in her use of emotion that is "less the mark of a rarefied individual and less still a mirror into her own past" (149) rather than that of many of the Romantics who "reached outward to claim a broader emphasis on community, collectivity and exchange" (148).

One of the major strengths of this study is Lerner's thorough research, which is coupled with an extensive bibliography and detailed index. Although this study does possess a notable level of jargon and terminology, Lerner is very clear about her methodology; no theory or terminology is used uncritically. Lerner's study complements Anne O'Neil-Henry's *Mastering the Marketplace* (2017) and Claire White and Marcus Waithe's edited volume, *The Labour of Literature in Britain and France, 1830-1910* (2018). The debates present here are original, well-conceived, and offer readers a concrete position from which to expand and further consider texts by working-class writers, the periodical press, and cultural ephemera in mid-nineteenth-century France.

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