Much of this book tries to define and then redefine the new science of “narratography”--Stewart’s awkward if serviceable neologism, first used in his 2007 book on “postfilmic cinema,” *Framed Time*. Stewart repeatedly tries to say what narratography might look like once it emerges, and how it might differ from older and better-established critical approaches. For Stewart, the latter includes especially the narratology of Tzvetan Todorov, Peter Brooks, Roland Barthes, and Gérard Genette (renamed “Girard Genette” in the index in a way that is both unnerving and somehow strangely apt, given the book’s dual focus on violence and narrative). But for Stewart, the problem with narrative theory is that it involves too much abstraction and too much “avoidance of surface texture”: in narratology, “the grain of narration” is “dispensed with” (3). And it is here, in its ability to acknowledge the “drift of the signifier” (22), to attend to the “scriptive matter of narrative writing” (220), to the “thingness of language” (211), that narratography can be said to intervene. It is here that it might be invented. In a demand that is not unreasonable if certainly somewhat unusual, Stewart calls for readings of narrative texts that proceed, quite simply, “word by word” (220).

In order to get to this point of invention, however, Stewart produces many pages of definitional theorizing as he repeatedly returns to saying once again and differently just what it is that makes “narratography” distinctive. And much of the force of this original, penetrating and densely argued study, much of its interest for a reader, is in what happens as Stewart worries away at the question of what exactly narratography might add up to, how it might work, and how it can be put to work. So in addition to a general Introduction, the book has a space-clearing “Prologue” as well as a summarizing and forward-looking “Epilogue.” But almost every chapter also attempts to refine and redefine the critical discourse of narratography. At one point quite early on, Stewart provides what he calls the “most basic and uncontroversial definition” of his approach, even italicizing it for good measure: “*the apprehension of mediated narrative increments as traced out in prose or image by the analytic act of reading*” (9).

But perhaps his new critical enterprise is better, more clearly and less ambiguously summed-up in the title to Chapter Two, which is wittily and knowingly named (after a
comment in Edgar Alan Poe’s story “Berenice”) “Attention Surfeit Disorder”. There is an ongoing dialogue, if not dispute, with other critical approaches to narrative prose in *Novel Violence*, including not least with various forms of historicism, from which the book borrows and which it develops, and with structuralism, to which the book also owes much even while using it as a point of departure. While neither structuralist narratology nor new historicism can exactly be said to involve a form of critical ADHD, the gist of Stewart’s book has to do with the possibility that such conceptually and theoretically sophisticated meta-engagements with the nineteenth-century novel are simply not patient, not careful or not *attentive* enough to the detailed and delicate micro-disturbances (even down to the sound-effects of individual phonemes) that go to make up narrative prose – to the way that nineteenth-century narrative fiction in particular involves what Stewart calls “distortions of plot by prose” (228). In this respect, *Novel Violence* might even be said to offer a kind of critical-theoretical Ritalin for twenty-first century literary studies – if it wasn’t for the fact that for Garrett Stewart reading is, or should properly be, “a place of unrest” (228, 229), should itself involve a certain kind of disturbance. So instead of large-scale analyses of the structures of plotting and narrative voice or perspective, and instead of explorations of the social, cultural, economic and political contexts of prose texts, Stewart’s narratography pays careful, not to say obsessive attention (it is self-confessedly a *disorder* of reading that he seeks to analyze, after all, and sickness is never very far from the surface of Stewart’s sense of what the nineteenth-century novel has to offer) to the graphemic, the written in, the writing of, narrative, even at the micro-level of syntax, of the word, and of the oral/aural slip and slide of phoneme.

Stewart sees his new book as a kind of summing-up or re-theorizing of the seemingly disparate set of studies that he has produced since his first book in 1974. Those familiar with his more recent books in particular – especially *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (1990) and *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (1996) – will not be surprised to learn that the attention to linguistic effects on a micro-scale in *Novel Violence* is detailed, inventive, precise and extraordinarily alert to the play of words. Which is to say that there has never been anything quite like this book (since Stewart’s last book, at least) and that there may never be anything like it again (until he writes another). There is a certain irony in this concerted critical singularity, though, since Stewart’s declared intention is to found a new school, or at least a new mode, of reading, a methodology of reading that would be based on paying attention to the ways in which – to put it simply – narrative is a formation of language (not just a plot or the abstraction of narrative structure,
and not just a discursive reflection on its own historical predicament). But Stewart’s way of reading, and writing indeed, is so singular, so idiosyncratically bound up in the details of language, of the rich peculiarities of individual sentences, of the detailed effects of language-in-use, that it is difficult to see narratography ever becoming anything more than a one-man show, a remarkable and sometimes circus-like critical acrobatics of reading. Not that Stewart is unrealistic about this: there is, as he somewhat wearily comments at the end of his book, rather a “short list of subscribers” to the kind of “close-grained analysis of prose as medium” for which he is calling. Nevertheless, as he decisively remarks, whether or not we have patience enough to trace it “the inscribed evidence remains” (220).

But this is all perhaps just as it should be. Because what Stewart evinces, in the end, at least as far as this reviewer is concerned, is literary criticism at its most intellectually taut, most hermeneutically alert: Stewart reminds us that literary criticism is or should be nothing other than an individual reader engaging with, being driven by, something like a surfeit of attention towards the intricacies and exigencies of language, of writing itself – as well as always with attention towards larger questions of theory, structure, genre, and history. In this respect, Stewart is something like a postmodern, hyper-theorized William Empson or indeed a rather different Christopher Ricks. He mentions both critics at least twice, in fact, and although he frames his book around and in dialogue with a number of other notable critics and theorists – especially Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit in their The Forms of Violence, Peter Brooks in Reading for the Plot, and Georg Lukács in Theory of the Novel (from which Stewart takes an epigraph for each of his chapters and with which he gradually builds up an argument) – it is to the kind of fine-grained, inventive, often startling and sometimes infuriating attention to the shifting and often slippery movement – the “drift,” as he calls it – of words themselves that you find in Ricks and Empson, that Stewart perhaps owes most in terms of his sense of a critical tradition. In other words, what Stewart is about, what he is up to, has to do with a particular kind of attention to what he calls “the sudden slippage, the give and final snap, of prose’s own tensile energy” – to “Empson’s ‘play, in the engineering sense’” (6).

In addition to the plethora of self-definitions that stud and even in some ways structure Novel Violence, there are a series of chapters that play out the theory, that practice or “experiment” with it (this is Stewart’s word for what he’s doing: see 28, 34), while also always never departing very far from a (re-)theorization of it. These chapters develop the idea of narratography in the context of a series of nineteenth-century narrative texts, mainly but
not all novels and mainly but not all, or at least not equally, canonical: Dickens’s *Little Dorrit*, Poe’s stories, Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, and Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (Stewart also does extraordinary things with a passage from near the beginning of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in his epilogue, as well as with various other texts in less concentrated ways along the way). And as his title announces, Stewart is engaged in thinking about the violence in and of these examples of nineteenth-century writing, all of which, after all, engage with violence in a thematic sense, and engage it, often in extreme forms, including murder, to further their typically fervid plots. But while it is never entirely lost from critical view, a thematic reading is often the very last thing on Stewart’s mind as he analyzes instead the extent to which violence is “endemic” to the power of nineteenth-century prose as well as being “incumbent on certain of its representational tasks” (15). Pitting Roman Jakobson’s understanding of the metaphorical “violence” of poetic language against, or mapping it onto, Bersani and Dutoit’s recognition that English and European realist fiction is “driven,” in a psychoanalytic sense, by real or representational violence, Stewart argues that in Victorian fiction “the violence of language, its drastic swerve from referential stability, is dispatched to formalize (and at times defuse) that more focused violence rendered in language by the histrionic agonies that multiply across Victorian plots” (22). To put this into perhaps less tortured, less indeed *histrionic* language than Stewart’s own always tensile if not always entirely “readable” prose – prose that is almost hyper-alert to, and therefore sometimes not optimally effective in, its own paronomastic and other aural/oral effects – one could say that the “poetic” deformations of prose both reflect and sometimes elide the often disturbing scenes of violence in your standard (if extraordinary) nineteenth-century plot. And although it is true that “violence and linguistic deviance are never equated” in Stewart’s analysis (25), nevertheless, as he suggestively puts it, in Victorian fiction “violence repeatedly incites to style” (24).

In the end, this is a book about reading and nothing else, and the pleasure and interest one might take in reading it have to do with one’s sense of catching someone – someone who might almost be said to be disordered by a surfeit of attention to a text’s particular way with words – in the act of reading: it is in this as much as in the invention of a new critical school or theory that *Novel Violence* really works. Along the way, it is true, we get some incisive and sometimes clarifying commentary on the way narratives, particularly nineteenth-century narratives, work – the idea, for example, that the nineteenth-century novel involves “by definition” what Stewart characterizes as “a release and repeal of desire at once” so that it is,
characteristically, “an arena of broken hope” (177). Or to take another example, there is this dense and densely performative and somehow darkly illuminating sentence – illuminating despite its routed and warped phrasings – late on in the book, a sentence that sums up what Stewart has been saying again and again and each time differently about the interaction of narrative line and linguistic form: “Graphing the progress of an inscribed narrative along the phrasings routed and warped by its own force, rather than charting their schemata on a stable grid of its inactivated formal structure: this is reading when given over to the moment-by-moment force of form and its constitutive solicitation…of response” (180). This is reading, then, under certain conditions (conditions defined by and to a certain extent restricted to the work of Garrett Stewart). And in this “this” the performativity that marks the book as a whole is once again emphasized. What one witnesses in reading this book is not so much a theory as a reader – a master-reader, a reader mastering and being properly mastered by the work – at work.

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