

Reviews

RACHEL ABLOW, *Victorian Pain*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. Pp. xii + 191. \$39.95.

Rachel Ablow's *Victorian Pain* points out that while "discussions of pain tend to serve as investigations into the status of persons—as agents, as objects, and as loci of affects—they are also almost invariably questions about the nature and parameters of social life" (p. 4). Ablow positions her study between Elaine Scarry's famous claim that pain is inherently incommunicable and Ludwig Wittgenstein's and Veena Das's assertions that pain is always social. Ablow is not interested in adjudicating between these opposing camps, but rather, in situating pain as something that vibrates between them. "Suffering was regarded as *both* social *and* as inherent in individual, identifiable persons," she asserts, and this unstable situation redefines both social life and personal identity (p. 17). For if pain makes one a person, it may be an oddly generic personhood, and if pain operates in a social register, it may make for contagious relations with anomalous others. In the intensely concentrated, meticulously organized pages of *Victorian Pain*, Ablow shows us the way that pain allowed nineteenth-century thinkers to refashion their understanding of bodies, emotions, sympathy, and sociality.

Ablow begins with an introduction that explores the private liberal subject and the expansive social world in the context of historical investigations of the treatment of pain in the nineteenth century. What happens when anesthesia makes pain a mere preventable accident, not a divine punishment for sin? How might the rise of the clinic, as so famously traced by Michel Foucault, intersect with the need for personal care? Ablow investigates hypochondria, which for Victorians meant something like a self-absorbed illness that others could not access—an argument that will inform her later readings of both John Stuart Mill and Charlotte Brontë. In the introduction Ablow also presents the crucial theories that will shape *Victorian Pain*: Scarry's account of the incommunicability of pain, Wittgenstein's positing pain as a kind of "move within a language

game” (p. 6), and Das’s claim that “suffering is coextensive with social life” (p. 7).

In chapter 1, Ablow analyzes Mill’s breakdown to show how suffering allowed him to rethink the liberal subject. In Mill’s utilitarian youth, he assumed that each person had an isolated set of responses (pain/pleasure), but eventually moved to the idea that there was some kind of social transaction in feelings. Mill begins with a strangely detached and universalist sort of emotion, and it is William Wordsworth who teaches him a sense of personal interiority. Mill is able to put this newly acquired sense of distinctive personhood into play with his larger sense of shared social feeling. “His discovery that he can speak of a pain that he possesses as distinctly his own, yet is also possessed by all those around him, constitutes a source of literally unutterable satisfaction, a condition of human sociability, and hence, too, an inexhaustible resource for both a sense of self and social life” (p. 47).

In chapter 2 we learn that Harriet Martineau’s experience of suffering led her to a very different set of beliefs from Mill. Martineau saw pain as isolating, not social—and she liked it that way. The solitude of ill health freed Martineau from actual social responsibilities, allowing her the pleasure of choosing to imagine society instead. Moreover, Martineau mistrusted sympathy, regarding it as diffusing suffering by making the sick person feel guilty for causing misery to her friends and trapping people in social roles. Ablow teases out a fascinating tendency of Martineau to imagine a kind of generic interlocutor. As Martineau invited de-individuation and impersonality, ultimately her own self meant no more than any other. Martineau values “a kind of abstraction of particularities” and “impersonal ‘benevolence,’” a richly productive paradox that allows her to enjoy a version of her suffering as a kind of cognitive experience (p. 65).

In chapter 3, Ablow tackles the text that has good claim to be the most anti-sympathetic narrative in the Victorian period, Brontë’s *Villette*. Lucy Snowe rejects and despises sympathy and sociality. Like Martineau, she finds isolation absolutely necessary—although, unlike Martineau, she also admits that it is painful. In deft readings, Ablow discovers that sociality in *Villette* occurs not so much among the characters as in its figurative language, for Lucy’s metaphors slip eerily into somatic reality. To compare a family catastrophe to a shipwreck is one thing, but actually to remember the taste of the salt water is to make that misery immediately, bodily, present. In this sense, we register Lucy’s feeling “in one of the most visceral ways possible,” transcending sympathy or knowledge (p. 91).

Pain creates ambiguous personhood, social relations, figurative language—and, as Ablow shows in chapter 4, it can also slip the boundaries of the biological. “Culture and nature are not different things in [Charles] Darwin’s work; instead, they are, in Benedict de Spinoza terms, different ‘attributes’ of the same thing,” Ablow remarks intriguingly (p. 94). In Darwin, sensations are indistinguishable from emotions. The purely sensory affect and the culturally defined feeling are one. Darwin’s sympathy allows for a material entry into others’ pain, so that, as in *Villette*, someone can feel another’s feeling. But it also allows for a radically strange ontology in which beings can merge or split, in which the person feeling the affect is both himself and an observer.

Nobody, however, writes a more creepy version of pain than Thomas Hardy, the subject of Ablow’s chapter 5. For Hardy, pain is fluid and homeless, like a fog; it can affix to trees, to boots, as well as to people. Through marvelous readings of *The Woodlanders* and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Ablow shows how imbuing objects with emotional life and pitying them can constitute an “ethical imagination” (p. 131). Angel Clare, she argues, responds incorrectly to Tess’s pain by regarding her rape as essentially the end of her life, instead of taking the more helpful approach of seeing it as a past event from which she has moved on. The strange nature of pain is especially vivid here, the way in which pain might not rest in its origin but communicate itself across a wide environment that, in Hardy, includes artifacts and nature itself.

In a brief afterword about torture and George Eliot, Ablow brings up the myth of the “speaking body,” the idea that pain can make someone speak the truth. This problem speaks to the fundamental dynamics of her study. When a person is in pain, how does the body speak to others—how do others listen, and respond? Ablow shows that our assumptions about suffering might not hold true for all Victorian writers. Sympathy can actually make people feel worse. Emotions, metaphors, and bodily sensations are not necessarily different, and in fact can slide into one another. Isolation or a weird kind of disembodied or mechanistic sociality might turn out to be what sufferers want.

Ablow does not, as it were, solve pain. She does not aim to define it, tell us how it really works, or construct a larger theory of its function in the nineteenth century. Rather, she shows us how one Victorian writer after another imagines suffering in ways that mediate personal subjectivity and social relations. *Victorian Pain* is an intensely tight, precisely calibrated study of a single mechanism in the work of five or six writers. But what I value most about this book is that it does not force us to choose between Scarry’s incommunicability and

Wittgenstein's language games, but, rather, it shows how exhilarating it can be to survey the slippery, ambiguous territory between those camps, a strange land traversed by novelists, political economists, and scientists alike in the nineteenth century. Pain has no answers; pain changes things; and it is the merit of this book that it charts those changes with unremittingly intelligent attention.

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LISA OTTUM AND SETH T. RENO, eds., *Wordsworth and the Green Romantics: Affect and Ecology in the Nineteenth Century*. Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2016. Pp. viii + 253. \$85 cloth; \$40 paper.

The essays collected in *Wordsworth and the Green Romantics: Affect and Ecology in the Nineteenth Century* take seriously two Romantic preoccupations, feelings and nature, that have sometimes seemed indulgent, light, or evasive. These subjects were, of course, not trivial to many writers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when ecology and sympathy were becoming the subjects of sustained and multifaceted inquiry. To such writers, emotions were not "mere products of ideology," and nature was more than an escape from political reckoning (p. 8). Editors Lisa Ottum and Seth T. Reno have positioned their volume at the vanguard of third-wave ecocriticism, loosely distinguished from earlier work in the field by its interdisciplinarity. By analyzing literary texts in tandem with historical discourses of science, philosophy, and medicine, recent ecocritical work navigates between the potential naïveté of first-wave Romantic ecocriticism, in many ways a reaction against New Historicist skepticism, and the suspicion of some second-wave criticism, like Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), which seizes on the ideological underpinnings of Romantic writers' natural visions. Some of the most exciting work in this third wave—including Theresa M. Kelley's *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2012), Robert Mitchell's *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science and Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2013), and Alan Bewell's *Natures in Translation: Romanticism and Colonial Natural History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2017)—has been written under the aegis of literature and