

Book Reviews

Post-1800

RACHEL ABLOW. *Victorian Pain*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. Pp. 191. \$39.95 (cloth).

doi: 10.1017/jbr.2018.53

The “strange subject position” of the body in pain—the shapeshifting nature of a sensation that is neither expressible to others nor fully recognizable as one’s own—what Dickens described as “a pain somewhere in the room” is the effective starting point of Rachel Ablow’s provocative new study, *Victorian Pain* (4). The book enters a robust and disciplinarily wide-ranging field of pain studies that has flourished in the last three decades or so, since the appearance of Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* (1985) and David Morris’s *The Culture of Pain* (1992).

Historically, Ablow’s study is advantageously positioned. As she explains in her introduction, pain changes meaning in the nineteenth century in ways that tend to reflect the much broader ideological transitions—scientific, psychological, and religious—that collectively transformed the relations between self and society, the individual and the universe (1). At the same time, pain’s language in this period starts to bend the normal boundaries between self and other, human and nonhuman, person and thing: the very distinctions that were, likewise, being called into question in this era of evolutionary biology and neuro-mechanical psychology. “That is not to say that pain ‘destroys’ language,” Ablow observes; “only that it rearranges common protocols, often becoming lyrical, poetic, or rhapsodic in ways that clearly call attention to themselves as literary” (8).

Ablow’s main contribution as a literary critic to the theory of pain, and her signal departure from Scarry, is in her approaching pain’s elusiveness as rather a provocation than an inhibition to language and knowledge. As an opening move, Ablow lays down the coordinates of Scarry’s “epistemological” model of pain as at once objectively unknowable, subjectively transparent, and linguistically out of reach (Scarry, 4; Ablow, 5). Ablow turns the tables on Scarry’s premise by tracing the writing that happens, often prolifically, in the presence of pain—and watching pain’s experience respond, on both a psychosomatic and a sociopolitical scale, to that same literary shaping. “[P]ain,” Ablow contends, pivoting from Scarry’s model to

Wittgenstein's, "constitutes something akin to a move within a language game"; it is "something we learn as well as something we feel" (6).

Structurally, these chapters unfold from a series of strange literary behaviors in the presence of something physically or psychologically "moving": the kind of odd authorial choices whose interpretative difficulty Ablow takes as both deliberate and instructive in light of the social and biological frameworks they attempted to navigate. For J. S. Mill and Harriet Martineau, pain is a figure of isolation, and the central articulation of the alienation they feared was endemic within the modern liberal society. That these authors went to such tremendous, creative lengths *not* to divulge their own pain is exactly consistent with that anxiety, as Ablow goes on to reveal through Mill's self-described mental crisis as a young adult, followed by Martineau's firsthand accounts of the physical illness that kept her bedridden throughout her career. What emerges from these writings is the larger spelling-out of the kind of sociolinguistic play Ablow introduced under the heading of the Wittgensteinian "language game": from Mill's search for a poetic of feeling that "leaves the content almost wholly undefined" (46) to Martineau's persistent self-questioning and eventually "forsaking [of] all description" of her own pain (quoted in Ablow, 67).

In the third chapter Ablow plumps out this trend with a series of graphic, but strangely illegible, metaphors of suffering in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853): the local effect being consistent with a certain narrative caginess about the central psychological catastrophe toward which the novel continually gestures. More broadly, *Villette* offers a crowning instance of the kind of writing that simultaneously courts and fends off the "prying" eyes of readers (72)—the synecdochic extension, Ablow suggests, of an urban collectivity whose sympathy Brontë (departing in this way from Mill and Martineau) feels ultimately compelled to reject.

Chapter 4, on Darwin's *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), marks a midway shift from the social to the "ontological" coordinates of pain: what Ablow proposes as an interest "in the ways in which pain calls into question the givenness of our objects of study (human beings, organisms, species, etc.) through its fecundity in *relation to things*" (95, emphasis added). From his unique perspective as a natural and evolutionary biologist, working in the complex and overlapping fields of neural, generational, and biological behavior and affect-transmission, Darwin steadily reverses the same social and perceptual distinctions that Mill, Martineau, and Brontë took for their premise. Migrating between self and other, nature and culture, the individual and the collective—and still more radically, between the "willed and the involuntary, the felt and the unfelt" (97)—pain opens up in Darwin's vision to new possibilities of intervention and mediation that feel radical even from this side of medical history.

The fifth chapter, on Thomas Hardy's natural realism, is in many ways an extension of the fourth. Pursuing the curiously mobile existence of feeling in Hardy's novels, Ablow revisits the possibility that Darwin introduced with his suggestion of the singular/multiple life-form, "both one and many, a single will and many different individuals" operating within a unified affective economy (106). This theory challenges a longstanding assumption about the emotional shiftiness of Hardy's novels and their underwriting pessimism and even amorality. The mobility of emotion is, Ablow suggests, rather a unifying than a disintegrating force in the natural-biological universe of the late nineteenth-century novel: an affective continuum in which all are "members of one corporeal frame" (quoted in Ablow, 134).

The culminating theoretical turn happens in this book's afterword, where Ablow revisits her predecessor, Elaine Scarry—this time on the nineteenth-century grounds where, we are reminded, Scarry's training and teaching began. This is a refreshing spin on the twenty-first-century outreaching that afterwords are normally tasked to perform in Victorian literary studies. Ablow's reversal of that trend speaks, perhaps more powerfully than I can convey in the space of this short review, to the securely historical footing her study has

established around the patently, and very urgently, current issues which these chapters recurrently suggest.

Kiera Allison
 Emory University
kiera.allison@emory.edu

ALLISON ABRA. *Dancing in the English Style: Consumption, Americanisation and National Identity in Britain, 1918–50*. Studies in Popular Culture. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017. Pp. 304. \$135.00 (cloth).
 doi: 10.1017/jbr.2018.54

Allison Abra begins her story of twentieth-century dance in Britain with a tourist tale from British dance instructor Alan Mackenzie's Paris holiday. The anecdote reveals the importance of national imaginaries, even when we are at play. Observing the enthusiastic response of French dancers to a group of Americans dancing the foxtrot, Mackenzie makes an unflattering comparison between French "cosmopolitanism" and English taste: "In London this could not have happened," he notes with pride. "Here," he adds, "the dancing is an absolutely national development, extremely characteristic of the national temperament, and very suited to it" (1). The discerning taste of the British here is rooted in the vitality of its "native" dance culture.

What Mackenzie overlooks—that the culture he claims with pride was a recent construct fabricated in large part by dance instructors like himself—provides the topic of Allison Abra's discerning study. Mackenzie was not just an observer, but a privileged one; the comments quoted above were published in the *Dancing Times*, the British dance profession's premier periodical. Alongside the managers and promoters of the new dance palaces catering to middle-class audiences that cropped up all over England in the wake of the First World War, professionals like Mackenzie helped shape the dance culture that he regarded as second nature to Britons.

Abra's account begins with the dance boom of the early 1920s in Britain, a time when "war-weary men and women of all classes took to the dance floor in an effort to celebrate their victory and forget their traumas" (2). The new dance fever was sparked by wildly popular foreign imports such as the foxtrot and tango: sensual dances that caused a moral panic among authorities. Abra's starting point is a "moment of transformation and disorder"; her focus, however, is on the two groups who emerged in the 1920s who tried to stem the "chaos" by promoting their specialized notions of proper English dance (3). As Abra details, professional dance instructors and dance hall managers did their utmost to "seize control of and restore order to the new dancing juggernaut" (3).

Abra sees British dance culture in the early twentieth century as the product of an often-turbulent negotiation between these professional groups and the consumers who constituted the dancing public. As Abra observes, popular interest in the tango and foxtrot "boosted enrolments in dancing schools and kept people interested in an evening out at the palais" (3). At the same time, dance professionals defined dance as disciplined movement rather than spontaneous expression. In the process, they created a brand: an "English style" of ballroom dancing that incorporated—and subtly modified—the exuberance of the foxtrot and tango. English ballroom was a hybrid dance form, occupying a middle ground between Victorian decorum and the liberated movements of modern dance.

Dancing in the English Style breaks new ground in many areas. Much of the current scholarship on dance focuses on gendered performance or integrates the topic into the sociology of youth culture. While specialized scholars will find much of interest in Abra's treatment of