Thomas Constantinesco, *Writing Pain in the Nineteenth-Century United States*

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REFERENCES


1 In *Writing Pain in the Nineteenth-Century United States* Thomas Constantinesco pursues a single, beguilingly complex task: to allow historical renditions of pain in nineteenth-century America to speak for themselves. At the heart of the project are close readings of pain which allow the book to do “theory and history” (4) as well as intimate analysis. The close reading of pain reveals to Constantinesco that suffering, in mind and in body, has its own syntax. Pain produces figurations, forms, grammar, cadences, rhythms, and tonalities, which eerily oscillate between a given sufferer’s experience and a wider field of linguistic and social meaning. The individual sufferers in the book—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harriet Jacobs, Emily Dickinson, Henry James, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Alice James—produced discourses of pain that trembled and vacillated with the pulses of their agony, only sometimes coming into full legibility. Their articulations, which sporadically overlapped, conjured up alternative communities of suffering that redrew, through the rich textures of pain, some of the political dimensions of nineteenth-century society. Pain was therefore generative, producing aesthetic forms and socio-political worlds.

2 But these sufferers were not alone. The ever-intrusive apparatus of nineteenth-century society shaped their pain-swept interior worlds. While these sufferers took some consolation in the knowledge that agony produced kinships between ostensibly disparate people, there were also more socially solicitous forces at play. In nineteenth-century America all sorts of formations instrumentalized pain, making it obscure and only partially intelligible even to the person who was undergoing it. Therefore close
reading has the secondary function of critique for Constantinesco. In addition to trying to make pain speak, to become articulate, the book interrogates the framing discourses of pain which often ill-fitted the lived experience of it and the narration of the same. Indeed, frequently these modes take on a politically malignant aspect, as they seek to direct pain toward biopolitical imperatives, ones in which racial and sexual hierarchies were at play. Part of the project the research undertakes is to delicately parse out the differences between pain-as-felt, pain-as-represented, and pain-as-socially-shaped.

Broadly speaking, many of the formations that made demands on pain can be referred back to the terminology and the project of nineteenth-century liberalism and capitalism. Nineteenth-century capitalism demanded that all pain be useful, a necessary step in a redemptive process of self-remaking from which the energetic, healthy citizen could emerge. This framework was a secular transformation of the Puritan ethos that saw pain as a test from the godhead, which, if passed through, was a measure of spiritual grace. Then there were the imperatives of literary and political sentimentalism, which undergirded abolitionist and proto-feminist thinking. Sentimentalism, in the guise of sympathetic identification, asked that those in pain felt collectively in such a way as to erase the real material barriers of race, class, and gender. Pain would, then, operate as a spectacular form of political performativity, with the sufferer’s body a node for a sentimental, fantastical, liberal, nation of affect stripped of real historical division. Then there was also medicine. The nineteenth century saw the advent of anaesthesia and aspirin, both of which meant that there was the historically unprecedented possibility of a painless body. While the book acknowledges the real ameliorative effects of these medical advances, it also picks up on a secondary meaning of anaesthesia, something like “de-aestheticizing” to show how it was that medicine dulled and numbed the representational and figurative potentiality of pain. These modes are always, themselves, framed by the wider categories of liberal individualism, particularly those of race and gender, which themselves co-opt, redirect, and qualify pain.

As such, the analysis in Writing Pain in the Nineteenth-Century exists in a conceptual niche, at some mid-point between suffering, its representation, and the wider fields of meaning that enfold it. Each chapter, with varying degrees of emphasis, then, tries to listen to pain as it was (insofar as that is possible given some of the language for describing pain then has vanished now), to track how it was that pain made the transfer from body and mind into language and form, and to attend to the ways in which such a transfer was inevitably cross-cut by assumptions and discourses that were not purely the sufferer’s own. The most thrilling moments of the book come when this literally painstaking work scores away the framing narratives of liberalism to reveal kernels of individual subjecthood, ones that would not necessarily be recognized as such, that evolve in relation to pain. These form the most original part of the book and are the concepts on which it rests. After all, it was on the basis of these alternative configurations of self that non-liberal political communities came into being.

These identity categories are scattered throughout the book. Most daringly, and with the most high-wire political tension, is when Constantinesco suggests that Harriet Jacobs, in her narrative, theorizes a form of “willed pain.” To actively feel pain was for Jacobs, the book argues, a way of knowing that she had a political life. As such, pain allowed her to reject the legal apparatus of slavery which made her into a fungible object bereft of political subjectivity. Pain became a locus for all the ways that she
exceeded these limitations: “Jacobs circumscribes the visual spectacle of the Black body in agony in order to contest its reification, while refusing to uncouple Blackness from the body through the reproduction of its aural performance of pain” (77). Similarly useful is the narration of pain in Alice James’s diary where “the subject emerges from the ghostly space of this difference” (this difference being the split between suffering pain and, as it were, witnessing it through later narration) “between self and other, which is the product of pain” (202). Pain allows James to define herself without it being the defining feature of her reality in a way that generates a warm wit, a melancholy, and an often acerbic satirical humour (often at the expense of her brothers and medical men.) Perhaps paradoxically, Emerson, the arch-individualist, is, when it comes to pain, the least original. For Constantinesco, Emerson directed pain towards the production of an indifferent, abstract, immaterial self. This imperious self was the product of overcoming pain to the extent that, rhetorically at least, suffering barely registered and was numbed through thought and reflection. Emerson thereby reproduces the register of nineteenth-century capitalism, insofar as suffering becomes a route into “future profit” (35) and a progressive emergence of a new disinterested selfhood. However, again through close reading, Constantinesco demonstrates that there are formal and linguistic tremors buried beneath the surface of Emerson’s renditions as well as conceptual tensions when it comes to the formulation of pain in relation to race. In each of these cases, what is most impressive and notable is the illegibility and non-intelligibility of these forms of selfhood within the framing narrative of classical liberalism. These are messier, internally riven identity categories that are self-consciously awkward, ambivalent, and equivocal. They have pain at their root.

6 But as Constantinesco puts it in the chapter on Emily Dickinson, pain is not just “the paradoxical site of subjectivity” but also “the fraught ground of togetherness” (115). Accordingly, he tracks the sort of societies that existed, or which were adumbrated, if not actually realized, through pain. Jacobs is a case in point. Her work suggests a community of racialized sufferers whose pain (past, present, and future) unites them. This community actively refutes sympathetic identification, of the sort that sentimentalism had as the basis of collectivity. Incidents “models a sociality of willed embodied pain, which is legible as an alternative to both the disembodied metaphysics of abstract citizenship and the levelling epistemology of sentimental sympathy” (85). Similarly the “queering” of pain in Phelps’s The Gates Ajar (where pain takes on an erotic, same-sex, even incestual logic among sufferers) creates “a circuit of queer transmission and reproduction by way of substitution and surrogacy” (165). Constantinesco demonstrates how it is that pain created bonds between people that tangentially glance against and redistribute those associated with the development of the liberal state in the nineteenth century (nation-state, place, race, and gender).

7 Constantinesco’s study is frequently revelatory and always attentive and careful in its readings and conclusions. It is a book that does not wish to overstate its argumentation, even though it is always perceptive and patient. While the close reading leads onto larger concepts and arguments, there is also a great deal to be gained from meticulous moments of insight in the text. The book frequently registers small puns and slight driftings of meaning. Constantinesco is particularly attuned to those within Emily Dickinson’s work. Little observations like suggesting that the line “there is a pain – so utter” indicates the strength of the pain and an imperative to write about it hold together the work throughout and provide a microcosm of the whole.
The book certainly covers some of the most famous sufferers of the nineteenth century in Harriet Jacobs, Alice James, and Emily Dickinson, and its pre-eminent theorists and narrators in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Henry James’s place in the history of pain is perhaps less self-evident, possibly indicated by the fact that Constantinesco sees his most cogent articulation of pain in an underread early short story, rather than his better known work. I wondered if there were a few others which might have been included to increase the range and tenor of pain in the era. Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories, for instance, are very often predicated on the spectacular display of illness and suffering of the gendered body. His work was also a product of, and participant within, a mass-market of genre writing about pain, rather than the more private modes—memoir, diaries, less well-known stories, and unpublished poems—that form the basis of much (but not exclusively so) of the analysis here. There would also be space to expand on the racial dynamics of suffering in relation to indigeneity and settler colonialism. The notion of the affective grief of Native Americans was (and is), as Dana Luciano argued, central to the biopolitical project of national mourning, after all; and, in the work of someone like Zitkala-Ša, the wounded, bleeding indigenous body (sometimes in allegorical forms) is at the very centre of a political and aesthetic project concerning the continuing effects (and affects) of Anglo-Iberian empire.

Writing Pain in the Nineteenth-Century United States also focuses on communities of suffering that are reparative and politically progressive. However, pain and grievance often also underwrite more conservative, reactionary movements in the United States, then and now. Arguably the central imaginative figure of Trumpism, for instance, is the suffering white male citizen. One possible route for extending the project might well be to look at how this figuration of suffering operated in the nineteenth century in the formalization of American conservatism and ethno-nationalism. The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk, for instance, with its graphic (and entirely fictionalized) renditions of the pain of an abducted young woman catalyzed the first concerted wave of xenophobia, anti-immigrant, and anti-Catholic mania in the United States. Similarly, the notion that immigration made the nation-state ill propelled nativist fictions, where various avatars of the nation-state (male and female) were forced onto the sick-bed as prone analogies for the injured body politic.

But these are quite minor points and that they come to mind has more to do with the richness of what is already in the book prompting further reflection. The research offers many spurs to further thought. As it is, it not only is a book that develops the field’s knowledge and understanding of the history and meanings of pain within the context of the medical humanities, but also a piece of work that introduces and theorizes new forms of political subjecthood that the carapace of nineteenth-century liberalism might otherwise obscure.
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