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Marianne Noble, *Rethinking Sympathy and Human Contact in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: Hawthorne, Douglass, Stowe, Dickinson*

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REFERENCES

Marianne Noble, *Rethinking Sympathy and Human Contact in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: Hawthorne, Douglass, Stowe, Dickinson*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 306 p., ISBN 9781108481335, £75,00.

- 1 The title of Marianne Noble's new book lays out unambiguously her bold ambition, which is no less than to "rethink sympathy and human contact." After exploring *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* in her first monograph (2000), she now offers to investigate the ways in which four writers from the 1850s and 1860s – Hawthorne, Douglass, Stowe, and Dickinson – revisited and revised their initial understanding of sympathy over the course of their careers. Her method consists in focusing on these authors' engagement with sympathy in their "second and third books" (4) and, in the case of Dickinson, in her poetry from the early 1860s compared to earlier letters and poems. The delimitation of her corpus brings into view the larger framework of her project, which, as her key verb "rethink" suggests, is essentially of a revisionary nature. In her view, the field of nineteenth-century American literary studies is saturated with critiques of sympathy to the point of exhaustion. In the wake of Lauren Berlant's pioneering work, many scholars such as Kristin Boudreau, Elizabeth Duquette, Lloyd Pratt, and others have indeed sought to expose the limits of the antebellum culture of sympathy whose pernicious effect is, or so the critical consensus

goes, to “[siphon] energy away from political engagement and channeling it toward tender feelings” (4). Yet as Noble argues, these critics often rely on a series of conceptual reductions and substitutions which eventually lead them to dismiss sympathy as such, instead of recognizing that their target is in fact only one in several modes of sympathy. Drawing on a wide range of contemporary affect theorists and philosophers, Noble demonstrates that Berlant and her epigones understand sympathy exclusively as “affective epistemology” (6), where identification is predicated on the possibility to know the other’s inner feelings. This entails violating the other’s integrity “with narrow, probing eyes,” as Dickinson says (F 550), and ultimately denying them their singularity. For Noble on the contrary, what brings Hawthorne, Douglass, Stowe, and Dickinson together is a shared commitment to sympathy as “a means to an ethical not-knowing” which “explicitly abjures knowledge based on erasure” (10). This form of sympathy is grounded in ethics rather than epistemology; it involves the acknowledgement of difference rather than the presumption of sameness; it enables care rather than subjugation. It is, in other words, a “benevolent skepticism” (19) which understands selfhood as shifting, relational, and ever unfathomable. With this claim, Noble positions herself, if implicitly, within recent debates in literary studies about the perceived exhaustion of critique (Latour), our increasing “disenchantment with disenchantment” (Bentley 291), the necessity to favor “reparative” readings over “paranoid” interpretations (Sedgwick), and the importance to extricate hermeneutic practices from a sterile depth drive to privilege tactful engagement with surfaces (Best and Marcus, Felski).

- 2 Interestingly, Noble locates these very debates as already animating the antebellum period, which allows her to frame her argument as a series of embedded and overlapping revisionary moves, as if the individual stories of her authors’ careers offered a *mise en abyme* of the history of criticism itself and as if the nineteenth century provided a mirror to our contemporary conversations. Literally bookending her analysis, Emerson and Melville are taken as representative figures of sympathy-as-epistemology and its skeptical impasse. Their writings, in “Experience” and *Moby-Dick* especially, dramatize the desire to penetrate social masks in the hope of unveiling the true selves that lie behind. They also epitomize the frustration of that desire and its attendant, despairing skepticism at the possibility to ever enter into contact with others and with the world. In chapter 1, Emerson’s essays provide a first instantiation of Noble’s revisionary method: from *Nature* to “Experience” and “Nominalist and Realist,” Emerson is seen to revise his early belief in cosmic harmony, after the death of his son in 1842 confronted him with the realization that “failures of human contact” were “endemic to human nature” (42). Emerson scholars will be familiar with this narrative, but it does help Noble to articulate the two limitations that she discerns in Emerson’s thinking about sympathy, contact, and relationality: its impersonality and its self-centeredness. In the end, Noble argues, Emerson’s sympathy goes out to impersonal nature the better to come back to the self-reliant individual, instead of being directed towards caring for others. As Emerson himself claimed forcefully in the Divinity School “Address,” “the soul knows no persons” (81). Although Noble does not cite this aphorism, it exemplifies her critique of Emersonian Transcendentalism as a philosophy in which others are but an encumbrance. She then turns to Thoreau, Louisa May Alcott and Whitman as further Transcendentalist revisions. Moving from Thoreau’s excursion to Mount Ktaadn in *The Maine Woods*, where contact is primarily an experience of the nonhuman, to Alcott’s *Behind a Mask*, where contact is less a matter of

unmasking than of performance and performativity, to Whitman's *Calamus*, which develops a phenomenology of embodied and homoerotic touch, Noble demonstrates how these authors progressively challenge the "Emersonian framework" (58), all the while "[thinking] within this framework" (85), committed as they remain to Emerson's setting of the conversation's terms and to his notion that persons are the problem rather than the solution to the issue of social relations.

- 3 The subsequent chapters show how Hawthorne, Douglass, Stowe, and Dickinson charted "a different path, one that embraces persons as part of the project of human contact" (85). More accurately, Noble reveals how these authors both revised the Emersonian framework and revised themselves as they kept on writing. In the case of Hawthorne, the Puritan legacy superimposed on the Transcendentalist perspective to make "human contact [...] both an existential and a social necessity" (86). In "The Minister's Black Veil" and *The Scarlet Letter*, however, sympathy amounts to unveiling inner truths and proves, by virtue of its epistemological pull, paradoxically unsympathetic. By contrast, *The House of the Seven Gables* is seen to model sympathy as affective presence and tactful care. Yet contact in the novel remains fleeting and unstable, so that Hawthorne's theorization of sympathy as positively enabling proves ultimately unsatisfactory. It is especially inadequate as it fails to extend to African-Americans whom Hawthorne is portrayed as being unable to sympathize with. Yet in this view, the failure is Hawthorne's – or his texts' – rather than sympathy's, which allows Noble to rescue the concept to put it to further examination in the following chapter.
- 4 Chapter 3 focuses on Douglass and provides perhaps the most explicit example of revisionary writing, since Douglass famously revised his own 1845 narrative ten years later in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Foregrounding revision as a process of self-assertion, Douglass seems indeed particularly suited to Noble's critical project. Close reading and comparing passages from the 1845 text and its 1855 rewriting, Noble contends that, while the former depicts how slavery destroys all forms of selfhood, the latter brings into focus the possibilities of both black resistance and white empathy. From this perspective, the mechanics of the 1855 text spur simultaneously, and contradictorily, identification and surprise on the part of white readers. On the one hand, white readers are invited to recognize in the slave a self that is similar to theirs because he does not think of himself exclusively as a slave. On the other hand, they are meant to experience surprise for exactly the same reason: by dissociating black selfhood from the condition of enslavement, Douglass offers a defamiliarizing picture that challenges white expectations. In the end, these opposed motions foreground empathy as a matter of "positionality" (159) rather than identification, thus privileging what Edward Said has called "mental travel" over essentializing impulses (160). The chapter ends with a reading of *The Heroic Slave* where, Noble contends, Douglass reflects on "the power of empathy to revise perception" (164) by allowing white readers to distance themselves from the dominant, white narrative perspective. At the same time however, the novella imagines aggression and revolt as a path to human contact, one that evidently parallels and rivals sympathy, which leads Noble to acknowledge the limits of reading Douglass for empathy.
- 5 Chapter 4 then turns to Stowe to suggest that both *Dred* and *The Minister's Wooing* challenge the earlier model of sympathy put forward in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as is well known, suffering is posited as universal, which is erroneously supposed

to enable sympathetic identification through imagined fellow feeling. *Dred* and *The Minister's Wooing* for their part are seen to explore gender and race relations away from professed universality and to articulate an ethics of care “predicated on a refusal to appropriate another person” (175). This reading allows Noble to cast Stowe’s writing, much like Hawthorne’s in chapter 2, as prefiguring Emmanuel Levinas’s “ethical ontology” and D. W. Winnicott’s “relational psychology,” both of which entail recognizing and respecting the other as a subject in their own right (182-183). This is where one of Noble’s most provocative claims comes to light. In Winnicott, the process of subjective differentiation is part of the self’s development and maturation. From this perspective, Winnicott’s psychology does not only provide the *terminus ad quem* for the genealogy of sympathy and human contact experiences that Noble wishes to trace: it also models implicitly, and perhaps more problematically, literary writing as itself a process of maturation, whereby later revisions would, as if by virtue of their belatedness, refine and improve earlier figurations.

- 6 Finally, chapter 5 engages with Dickinson’s poetry and correspondence to chart a similar evolution from an understanding of sympathy as “affective fusion” (201) to the notion of sympathy as “Sweet Skepticism of the Heart” (207, F 1438). Through meticulous close readings of several letters’ and poems’ lexicon, syntax, and scansion, Noble brings to the fore what she terms “the caring core of Dickinson’s caustic thought” (215). Among the many figures that Noble unfolds, the paronomasia between “meet” and “meat” that structures the 1865 poem “Experiment to Me” (F 1081b) best encapsulates Dickinson’s effort to turn away from predatory encounters, where the persona is hungering after the “Meat within,” and towards what an 1863 poem calls “a wiser sympathy” (237, F 780). In the context of the latter poem, this “wiser sympathy” is understood as a new social and political “contract.” Differing from readings which emphasize the decline of affective bonds and the rise of contractual relations in the United States in the wake of the Civil War, Noble argues that sympathy, now reframed as benevolent skepticism, remains the cornerstone of sociality such as Dickinson imagines it. Yet she concludes that the kind of contact enabled by this new form of sympathy remains “limited,” as the poem does not go beyond the affirmation of “basic shared bereavement” between the persona and the addressee (238). This allows Noble to distance Dickinson from her text and to suggest that her poetry, though it makes valuable step in that direction, does not fully bear out its promise to rethink sympathy.
- 7 By the end of Noble’s investigation, this move will be familiar to her readers, insofar as it recurrently concludes her reading of each of her chosen authors. Although their writings may help us begin the process of reconfiguring sympathy, none of them offers a completely satisfactory model in the end. This must not, however, or so Noble contends, lead us to despair sympathy altogether, but rather encourage us to remain hopeful, which is another way of defending literary criticism as a “practice of hope” in “disenchanted times,” to quote Christopher Castiglia’s recent vindication of literary studies. But such critical disposition, or mood, also sounds very Emersonian. As Emerson once noted in his journal: “I am *Defeated* all the time; yet to Victory I am born.” (JMN, 8: 228) These Transcendentalist echoes eventually bring us back full circle, for as much as Marianne Noble’s book looks ahead towards twentieth-century phenomenology, ethics, and psychology, and up to very contemporary theories of affect, it is also a project of recovery. She recovers in particular the figure of J. G. Herder as an overlooked, but crucial interpreter of eighteenth-century Scottish Common Sense philosophy for antebellum American literary culture. A critical reader

of Hume and Smith, Herder was the first to coin the notion of *Einfühlung*, which would be translated into English as *empathy* in the early twentieth century, and he grounded his theory of sympathy in holistic pluralism rather than universality, thus providing an early alternative to the epistemology of sympathy that Noble sees Hawthorne, Douglass, Stowe, and Dickinson attempting to revise.

- 8 As with all strong claims, Marianne Noble's calls for praise, but also invites discussion and debate. Her transatlantic counter-genealogy of sympathy, from Herder's anthropology to Levinas's ethics through the antebellum United States literature, has obvious purchase, testifying as it does to the importance of anti-exceptionalist critical narratives, as well as to the fruitful entanglements of literature and philosophy as one of the more innovative fields of enquiry in recent nineteenth-century American literary studies. Yet her insistence that Hawthorne, Douglass, Stowe and Dickinson "anticipate" Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, and Winnicott begs the thorny question of the historicity of literature, literary criticism, and philosophical concepts. While it importantly reminds us that ideas do have a history, it also asks us to consider the temporalities of interpretation, as well as the potentialities of anachronism. *Rethinking Sympathy and Human Contact* also confronts the daunting and vexed question of literature's relation with reality and authenticity. For Noble, antebellum American literature models our relation to reality in the form of what she repeatedly calls "genuine human contact" (e.g. 2, 67, 176, 204, 241), that is, the ability to experience authentic encounters with actual people. Yet with the exception of Whitman's erotics of touch, the various kinds of "contact" that she considers remain, by her own admission, "essentially metaphorical" (19). This creates a dazzling paradox, whereby reality is ultimately conceived of under the aegis of metaphor. Furthermore, understanding contact as metaphor leads to downplay other, more violent and disturbing forms of bodily encounters, as in the case of slavery or war. Admittedly, these fall outside the scope of this book, but its emphasis on genuineness may be taken as a license for scholars to further problematize the concept of contact, not only in opposition to social masquerade, but also in relation to the biopolitics of physical coercion. One way of going about it would be to attend, as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have, to the counterpolitics of "hapticality": they propose for instance that "the touch of the undercommons" be understood as "the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you" in ways that are "not regulated, at least not successfully, by a state, a religion, a people, an empire" (91). Another would be to follow the path laid out by Naomi Greyser in *On Sympathetic Grounds: Race, Gender, and Affective Geographies in Nineteenth-Century North America* and to trace how sympathy works towards the distribution of space to produce common as well as exclusory grounds for contact. What is certain, though, is that, in provoking its readers to reflect on the affordances of sympathy and the fraught possibilities of relationality, *Rethinking Sympathy and Human Contact* joins a wider and important conversation about the ways in which literature imagines togetherness and the functions of sentiments, emotions, and affects within these emplotments. That is not the least of its merits.

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Subjects: Recensions

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