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

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## REFERENCES

Thomas Constantinesco, *Writing Pain in the Nineteenth-Century United States*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, ISBN: 978-0-19-285559-6.



- 1 Pain is part of life. It is part of literature as well. And in *Writing Pain in the Nineteenth-Century United States*, Thomas Constantinesco offers an intelligent, clearly organized, and insightful exploration of various ways in which pain is expressed—or not—through the written word in a selection of American literary works from the 1800s. Constantinesco takes his initial inspiration, in part, from Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*, a controversial work published in 1985, which has become recognized as one of the founding texts in the field of pain studies. According to Scarry, “Physical pain does

not simply resist language but actively destroys it.”<sup>1</sup> While such an observation might seem to suggest that articulating one’s pain is thus impossible, in fact, what is sometimes forgotten, as Constantinesco rightly points out, is that Scarry also highlights the fact that “the very recognition of the inadequacy of language to express pain is what makes the effort toward verbalization an ethical and political imperative” (2-3). Further on, he explains, “Pain is not so much adverse to language, then, as generative of poetic figuration, even if the figures it produces may never be fully translated into—converted as or recuperated through—intelligible idiom” (8). It is this struggle to create an expression of pain in nineteenth-century American writings that Constantinesco’s study carefully examines and perceptively illuminates.

- 2 *Writing Pain in the Nineteenth-Century United States*, it should be noted, does not pretend to offer an exhaustive treatment of the subject announced in its title. It presents, rather, what might be described as a series of case studies, focusing on one work or a small number of works in each of the six chapters devoted to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harriet Jacobs, Emily Dickinson, Henry James, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Alice James. There are obviously many other 19<sup>th</sup>-century American authors whose writings could have been treated in such a study. Indeed, the potential corpus is enormous. But Constantinesco’s choices have been judiciously made. The authors and works studied offer a broad, varied, and balanced representation of the writings of the period, which reflect, in part, the expansion of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century American literary canon over the last several decades. It could also be pointed out that the book’s title suggests a somewhat larger chronological span than is actually covered. In fact, all of the works studied—with the sole exception of those by Emerson, primarily published, for their part, in the 1840s—were written in the last four decades of the 1800s, either during or after the Civil War. Indeed, the theme of pain and the Civil War is a leitmotif in Constantinesco’s impressive book. It is a major element—though sometimes appearing obliquely—in the writings of all the authors examined, except Alice James. In any case, combining close readings with constant attention to historical and social considerations, *Writing Pain in the Nineteenth-Century United States* discerningly explores how all six of the authors struggle with the understanding and the expression of suffering during a century that Charles Sanders Peirce, as Constantinesco reminds the reader, defined as the “Age of Pain” (3).
- 3 The first chapter, “Ralph Waldon Emerson’s Economy of Pain,” serves, in part, as an introduction to the process of thinking about pain and its representation in literature. As Constantinesco admits, it is a bit odd to begin such a study with Emerson since he has long been seen as a thinker whose transcendental philosophy insulated him from the world of suffering, “whose master trope of an all-seeing ‘transparent eye-ball’ is suggestive of invulnerability and insensibility to pain by mere virtue of its incorporeality” (28). While some more recent critics have tried to counter that view, Constantinesco, rather than taking sides in the debate over Emerson’s humanity or lack thereof, focuses on defining—and not judging—the author’s intellectual grappling with pain. He describes Emerson’s vision as an “economy of pain,” based on a capitalist model in which “the experience of pain is ultimately redescribed as one of empowerment, as losses are transmuted into gains” (29). According to such a view, “pain does not so much signify loss as it indexes future profit” (35). One striking example can be found in Emerson’s discussion of the death of his son Waldo in the essay “Experience” (1844), where he writes:

In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more. I cannot get it nearer to me. If tomorrow I should be informed of the bankruptcy of my principal debtors, the loss of my property would be a great inconvenience to me, perhaps, for many years; but it would leave me as it found me, —neither better nor worse. So is it with this calamity: it does not touch me: some thing which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caducous.<sup>2</sup>

- 4 The capitalist economy of pain is on full display here. And Emerson not only represents the pain of the loss of his son as a financial setback that in the end will be inconsequential, but the former suffering is seen as eventually disappearing and falling away like autumn leaves. As Constantinesco explains, “The caducity of pain, as well as the fantasy of invulnerability it facilitates, run throughout Emerson’s writings” (39). But if the concept of an economy of pain offers a perceptive and coherent description of the dynamics of Emerson’s metaphysics of suffering, it does little to attenuate the callousness that the author’s description seems to convey. To be clear, it is not a question of whether or not Emerson felt real pain at the loss of his five-year-old son to scarlet fever—he certainly did. But intellectually, the sage of Concord seems, at least to a certain extent, to be a prisoner of his transcendental philosophy and its attendant economy of pain that ultimately requires a fundamentally optimistic outlook.
- 5 If the apparent insensitivity of Emerson’s conception of pain is linked to what Constantinesco refers to as his “conflicted response to the demands of sentimentality” (49), a certain shift can be seen in that response beginning in the mid-1840s in the author’s antislavery writings, which link this first chapter, like the succeeding four, to the Civil War. In addresses on topics such as “Emancipation in the British West Indies” (1844) and “The Fugitive Slave Law” (1854), Emerson displays a significantly greater ability to feel pain. As Constantinesco writes, “Despite the guardedness that Emerson exhibits in several of his essays against the spectacular parade of misery and the language of woundedness, then, his antislavery writings attest his commitment to, and his willingness to risk, an ethics of ‘sympathetic injury’” (55). These essays do not, however, represent an abandonment of Emerson’s earlier views. In the chapter’s conclusion, Constantinesco notes that Emerson held an “enduring attachment to the economy of pain that structures his idealist philosophy” (57). That philosophy makes him one of the most optimistic—yet perhaps the least sympathetic—of the six authors included in *Writing Pain in the Nineteenth-Century United States*.
- 6 The next two chapters focus on Harriet Jacobs and Emily Dickinson and form a diptych offering complementary responses to the problems implicit in Emerson’s economy of pain. Chapter 2, “Willing Pain in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” examines Jacobs’s 1861 work, which has come to rival *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* as one of the most important—and most studied—slave narratives of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As an example of writing pain, it is about as far from Emerson as one can image. Jacobs, who narrates the thinly veiled account of her life through the voice of her character Linda Brent, was a black slave from North Carolina. To evade the sexual advances of her master, she entered into a relationship with a young white lawyer, with whom she had two children. She then went into hiding in the confined space of her grandmother’s garret for seven years, until her final escape in 1842. The extreme pain she expresses is both psychic and physical, but what Constantinesco focuses on is the concept of “willed pain,” Jacobs’s conscious decisions at various points to choose self-

imposed pain that helped her to escape from other-imposed suffering. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, according to Constantinesco, models “a relation between pain, embodiment, and selfhood that contests the logic of convertibility between body and mind, pain and gain, that animates Emerson’s speculative economy of pain and that characterizes Western philosophy more generally” (61). And Jacobs, who, like Douglass, wrote her narrative herself, struggles much more overtly than Emerson with expressing herself on the page. In Chapter IX, “Sketches of Neighboring Slaveholders,” she writes, “No pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery.”<sup>3</sup> Near the end of the same chapter she declares, “as for the colored race, it needs an abler pen than mine to describe the extremity of their sufferings, the depth of their degradation.”<sup>4</sup> This struggle highlights the almost universal difficulty of writing pain (though it seems that in this particular case it can also be seen as an example of the typically Romantic trope of lamenting the inability to express the inexpressible). In any case, as Constantinesco perceptively points out, it is a good example of Elaine Scarry’s insight that “recognizing the inadequacy of language to express pain is what makes the effort toward verbalization an ethical imperative” (66). As he also notes, “Brent’s emphasis on the ‘painful task’ of recollection also foregrounds how much the writing of pain is inextricable from the pain of writing” (82).

- 7 If Harriet Jacobs’s slave narrative has an obvious link with the Civil War, it is sometimes forgotten that most of Emily Dickinson’s poems were written during that conflict and that a majority of the others were penned during Reconstruction. In a series of truly remarkable close readings, Constantinesco explores in Chapter 3, “Emily Dickinson and the ‘High Prerogative’ of Pain,” some of the many links between the poet’s work (in which pain has long been recognized as a major theme) and the war. He also highlights the sustained and ambiguous dialogue between the private and public spheres present in her writing; “pain,” he notes, “is less the fraught measure of individual selfhood than it is the problematic cornerstone of the community” (89). Indeed, as many Dickinson scholars have noted, the poet’s famous isolation was far from complete, and pain is one of the most important things that helped connect her with others. “Removed from the world of her contemporaries,” Constantinesco writes, “yet breathing in its atmosphere and keenly observing its vicissitudes, Dickinson shared the nation’s concern for grief as a vehicle for cohesion” (95). Indeed, the link between suffering and national unity has long been recognized. As Ernest Renan declared, for example, in his classic address delivered in 1882 at the Sorbonne, “*Qu’est-ce qu’une Nation ?*” (“What Is a Nation?”), “suffering together unifies more than joy. And as far as national memories are concerned, bereavements are of more value than triumphs.”<sup>5</sup> In Dickinson’s “The Hollow round His eager Eyes,” Constantinesco observes that “the sufferer becomes a national allegory of heroic pain and endurance” (109). According to the poet, however, not just any pain or bereavement will do, and the goal is not to get beyond suffering, but “to bring it to consciousness in order to release in us what Emerson might have called ‘a sense of reality’” (114). In a short undated poem, Dickinson writes, “Unto a broken heart / No other one may go / Without the high prerogative / Itself hath suffered too.”<sup>6</sup> For Constantinesco, as the poet’s “vocabulary of exclusiveness, monarchy, and empire suggests, only a select set of beings may be able eventually to claim the ‘high prerogative’ of great pain and to belong in its community” (116).
- 8 Chapters 4 and 5, focusing on Henry James and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, can be read as a second diptych, in part because, as Constantinesco explains in his “Introduction,” both

authors explore “how queer sociality responds to the gendered appropriations of pain through sentimental sympathy” (24). And, once again, the writings of both authors are linked to the War Between the States. Chapter 4, “Henry James, Invisible Wounds, and the Civil War,” examines a little-known early piece, “A Most Extraordinary Case,” published in April 1868 in the *Atlantic Monthly*. It tells the story of Ferdinand Mason, a Union officer who returns to New York after the end of the war, and who suffers from a “disorder” that is described as “deeply seated and virulent,”<sup>7</sup> but which has no obvious source. Mason is whisked away from a shabby hotel room in the city by his aunt, who takes him to her home on the banks of the Hudson River to convalesce. And it is there—while under the care of Mrs. Mason; her young, active, and beautiful niece, Caroline Hoffmann; and a local doctor, Horace Knight, also a war veteran—that the sentimental story plays out. As Constantinesco perceptively explains:

On the one hand, in a classic interweaving of masculinist paranoia and misogyny, the story reveals the manipulative politics of heterosexual nursing romance, where the domestic spectacle of masculine pain provides the female caregivers sympathetic control and sadistic pleasure. On the other hand, however, it sketches a tentative homoerotic community of veterans, where the display of emotional wounds heightens queer desires and holds out a fleeting promise of recovery. (123)

- 9 Ferdinand Mason, Constantinesco also points out, who “displays no tangible evidence of pain” (126), can be seen as a representative of the many Americans on the margins of the Civil War, “a larger disenfranchised constituency of men and women, whites and Blacks, veteran soldiers and emancipated slaves, who received no public recognition for the injuries they sustained” (126). Mason’s invisible disorder, whatever it may be, “proves detrimental to successful, heterosexual manhood, rather than constitutive of it” (135). The epitome “both of the wounded officer and of the Jamesian queer aesthete,” (136), Ferdinand Mason, who falls in love with Caroline Hoffmann, not too surprisingly, doesn’t get the girl—the appropriately named Dr. Knight does. And in the end, with the engagement of Horace Knight and Caroline Hoffmann having been officially announced, Mason succumbs to his mysterious ailment in what the doctor describes as “a most extraordinary case.”<sup>8</sup> At the end of the chapter, Constantinesco turns briefly to James’s much later autobiographical work, *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), with its well-known reference to James’s “obscure hurt,”<sup>9</sup> which justified the author’s exemption from participation in the Civil War—and which offers a striking parallel with Ferdinand Mason’s enigmatic disorder. Unlike in the story, however, James, now much older, interprets his own “hurt” as a sort of sacrifice to the nation that “legitimized his vocational desire for literature” as “a paradoxical token of national belonging” (140). Constantinesco concludes that “‘A Most Extraordinary Case’ and *Notes of a Son and Brother* thus present complementary responses to the problem of invisible pain, as invisibility is seen to either prohibit or on the contrary facilitate a queer sociality of pain” (144).
- 10 In Chapter 5, “The Pedagogy of Pain in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Gates Ajar*,” Constantinesco turns to a 19<sup>th</sup>-century bestseller, which also makes use of queer sociality in the quest for healing the pain of the Civil War. And, as in “A Most Extraordinary Case,” the work’s approach to the war is oblique since it includes no scenes of the conflict itself and, in fact, no direct participants in the war, at least not as active presences in the narrative. *The Gates Ajar*, published in 1868, is a novel written in the form of a diary that focuses on the grief of its first-person narrator, Mary Cabot, whose brother, Roy, is killed in the Civil War. Mary is at first inconsolable, and the

attempts at help on the part of various community members—who see her as refusing “to conform to the expected rules that govern the proper management of grief by refusing to speak of her brother and to come out of her house” (153)—only serve to inflict more pain. The arrival of her aunt, Winifred Forceythe, however, leads to a dramatic change in her outlook. “As in James’s ‘A Most Extraordinary Case,’ though from a female perspective,” Constantinesco explains, “the queering of pain facilitates the constitution of a community of women through shared grief—and perhaps more durably than in James, for that matter—against the normative sociality of sentimentalism” (152). Indeed, Aunt Winifred has also lost a loved one, her husband, and with the bonding between the two women, Mary’s healing begins. As Constantinesco writes, “in *The Gates Ajar* only the prospect of intimacy between women may guarantee sympathy’s efficacy” (158). But is it also Aunt Winifred’s unorthodox view of the afterlife as a place where the departed will lead lives very similar to the ones they led on Earth that gives hope to Mary—and also apparently gave hope to Phelps’s many readers. Somewhat as in the case of Emerson, “Phelps’s spiritual economy makes pain portable and transferable, which enables it to fade away eventually” (166). In *The Gates Ajar*, Constantinesco concludes, “the dead linger among the living both literally and metaphorically, not as a haunting burden that the living are painfully made to bear, but as a presence at once material and imaginative that nullifies the pain of grief” (169).

- 11 The final chapter, “Pain, Will, and Writing in the *Diary* of Alice James,” focuses on Henry James’s younger sister and the diary she wrote between 1889 and 1892. James’s *Diary* pushes the definition of “literature” a bit further than any of the other works studied because it was not clearly written as—or meant to be read as—literature. According to Katharine Loring, James’s companion, however, she did intend the diary to be published,<sup>10</sup> and, as Constantinesco observes, James herself encouraged a literary reading of what might otherwise be considered a “biographical document” “by drawing deliberately on literary precedents in order to fashion, if not to fictionalize, her autobiographical self” (174). Alice James certainly knew suffering. In her late teenage years, she “began experiencing what she later described in her diary as the first of the many ‘violent turns of hysteria’ that would make her life one of chronic pain and, eventually, invalidism until her death from breast cancer in the spring of 1892” (173). But James does not conform to the stereotype of the frail, female invalid. Despite all of the pain, there is a surprising strength, humor, sarcasm, and humanity in her writing (though there is also quite a bit of gossipy chitchat and recurring examples of class prejudice). And as Constantinesco explains, “Throughout her diary, pain simultaneously inhibits and spurs the drive to self-expression” (175). James’s mind, clearly, was not unwell. Indeed, “the diary provides another account of invalidism where the excess of spiritual energy offsets bodily decline, evidencing a chiasmic relation between the life of the mind and the body in agony” (181). To a certain extent, James, who at one point in her diary refers to herself as “a Barnum Monstrosity,”<sup>11</sup> played the role of the Victorian invalid. As Constantinesco perceptively points out, it can be seen as a strategy in which “the carnivalesque staging of the self—the representation of oneself as a grotesque and monstrous other—becomes a privileged yet oblique way to self-expression” (193). Whether acting out a role or not, one can imagine that Alice James was not always an easy person to have to deal with, and one of the more touching notes in her diary, which Constantinesco does not focus on, is her

genuine appreciation of her brother Henry's patience with her. As she writes in her entry for March 25, 1890:

Henry came on the 10<sup>th</sup>, and spent the day, Henry the patient, I should call him. Five years ago in November, I crossed the water and suspended myself like an old woman of the sea round his neck where to all appearances I shall remain for all time. I have given him endless care and anxiety but notwithstanding this and the fantastic nature of my troubles I have never seen an impatient look upon his face or heard an unsympathetic or misunderstanding sound cross his lips. He comes at my slightest sign and hangs on to whatever organ may be in eruption and gives me calm and solace by assuring me that my nerves are his nerves and my stomach his stomach—this last a pitch of brotherly devotion never before approached by the race.<sup>12</sup>

- 12 In this case, it seems, pain has genuinely increased Alice James's sensitivity and helped her to express love for her brother, offering at the same time another example of a community (of two) strengthened through common suffering—perhaps another example of queer sociality as a path towards expressing—and reducing—pain.
- 13 Constantinesco's study ends with a brief coda, in which he reminds his readers of one of the central tenets of his book: "By generating writing, pain also generates thinking, about itself and how its complex labor fashions individual identities and collective affiliations, 'making and unmaking' texts, ideas, stories, selves, and worlds, as Elaine Scarry might say" (207). In addition to extensive endnotes, the work includes an eighteen-page list of works cited, which could certainly prove useful to anyone interested in the writings examined in this impressive work or, more generally, in pain studies in 19<sup>th</sup>-century American literature. In *Writing Pain in the Nineteenth-Century United States*, Thomas Constantinesco offers a brilliant analysis of how various 19<sup>th</sup>-century American authors have struggled with—and, to varying degrees, have succeed at—producing literary expressions of pain, expressions that are also, it is worth pointing out, part of a healing process.

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## NOTES

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11. Alice James. *The Diary of Alice James*, Boston, Northeastern University Press, 1999, 63.

12. Alice James 104.

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