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How Nineteenth-Century American Literature Got Its Nerve Back

Donald E. Pease
Dartmouth College

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Donald E. Pease

The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature by Justine Murison, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture, gen. ed. Ross Posnock. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. 215. \$90.00 cloth.

The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature was published in Ross Posnock's Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture series at Cambridge University Press. Unlike the other contributors to this series, Justine Murison situates her work at the cusp of a recent neuroscientific turn embraced by a new generation of scholar-critics intent on supplementing rather than replacing psychoanalytic interpretive paradigms. Murison stakes the interpretive politics of *Politics of Anxiety* on the revival of a nineteenth-century discourse of *nervous physiology* that prefigured psychoanalysis. After locating the historical origins of the neurocognitive turn in nineteenth-century understandings of nervous physiology, Murison demonstrates how this pre-Freudian discourse challenges prevailing assumptions about psychology and affect in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary scholarship. Rather than restricting her project to this biopolitical turn, however, Murison mines the nineteenth-century scientific archive to proliferate historical angles from which to approach nineteenth-century American literature.

According to Murison, the nineteenth-century precursors of the neuroscientific turn shared with their descendants the desire to find evidence-based perspectives from which to explain the anxious, nervous artifacts called *literary texts*.

The Politics of Anxiety engages complexly with the discourse of nervous physiology to show how it structured nineteenth-century narratives of national history and social life. Murison specifically explains how American authors and readers responded to questions about heredity, self-possession, freedom, sexual desire, and biological determinism by exploring pre-Freudian explanations of the nervous system.

In the nineteenth century, the *nervous body* replaced the previous model of the relation between mind and body as regulated by the fluid exchange of the humors. As the repository of antebellum American culture's basic psychosomatic assumptions, the discourse of nervous physiology exerted widespread physical, as well as metaphysical, influence. The nervous system it described was believed to govern the body and the body politic by exposing both to environmental vicissitudes. Perceived as a system of dynamic interaction with its environment that demanded constant physiological adjustments, nineteenth-century American society was understood to be nervous because it was fraught with the power to change, yet utterly dependent upon an anxious body politic.

Nineteenth-century American culture was an era of somatic ethics and nervous politics. Somatic nervousness supplied nineteenth-century artists, politicians, social scientists, historians, reformers, and

physicians with a lens to inspect the physiological imperatives structuring moral, spiritual, and political struggles. These imperatives could not be explained as biologically determined because the aberrant physiology of the nervous system resisted such universalizing claims. Although the discourse of nervous physiology endowed soma with anxious significance, the precise workings of the nervous system remained a mystery to scientists and physicians, as well as their patients. This lack of certitude facilitated discourses about the nervous system that were expressive of diverse, even contradictory, explanations and opinions.

Confusion surrounding the nervous physiology and the lack of agreed-upon criteria for the certification of physicians made it difficult to distinguish scientifically verifiable medical practices from pseudoscience and sheer quackery. Unlicensed until the 1870s, the field of medicine included "irregular" practitioners—homeopaths, Grahamites, phrenologists, botanical Thomsonians, mesmerists, table tappers, hydropaths, and spiritualist mediums. Physiological terms for the nerves—which included "sympathy," "animal electricity," "the nervous fluid," and the "odylic principle"—became truly ubiquitous only when they entered the idiom popularized within newspapers, journals, fictional tales, and novels.

In *The Politics of Anxiety*, Murison reads across an archive spanning literature, medicine, politics, and popular culture to show how the notion of the nervous self assumed hegemony by finding its way into *Putnam's* and *The Democratic Review* and *United States Magazine*, theological debates about spirit bodies, phrenology, homeopathic medicine pamphlets, mesmeric procedures, abolitionist and domestic ideologies, gothic tales, political satires, city mystery novels, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, spiritualists' rationales for prescribing water cures, calisthenic manuals, how-to-books in electrical psychology, animal magnetism instruction, fictional accounts of phantom limbs, and sundry other discourses. Murison also productively glosses local meanings that the nervous system accrued within a variety of professions and social practices—naturopathy, abolitionism, séances, rights activism, mesmerism, phrenology, table rapping, and preaching. *The Politics of Anxiety* is especially valuable in showing how nineteenth-century American literature used the nervous system as a framework to shape the representations and experiences of cultural, political, and religious change in the United States.

As the key term in the emergent discourse of nervous physiology, "susceptibility" plays a crucial role in Murison's explanation of the ways in which the

nineteenth-century discourses of nervous physiology differed from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic account of anxiety. Defined as a predisposition in between the normal and the pathological operations of nervousness, susceptibility marked an epistemological shift in understanding the causes of nervous anxiety and in diagnosing proper treatments. It signified the composite effect of the multiple pathways through which culture affected nineteenth-century Americans' inmost nervous fibers and the principal cause of their collective desire to create buffers against involuntary visceral responses. Naming the affective disposition of the nervous system through which bodies and cultures intermingled, susceptibility facilitated the linkage of questions of identity to broader historical and social formations.

By showing how the nineteenth-century emphasis on nervous anxiety was a deeply somatic and symptomatic rendering of the relation of susceptible subjects to society and culture, Murison endows Freudian symptomatic reading with a somatic prehistory. Freud had initially situated anxiety within the discourse of nervous physiology that described it as the repression of neuronal impulses. He disaffiliated from the field of nineteenth-century neurology when he uprooted "anxiety" from its positioning within the discourse of nervous physiology and transplanted it onto

the psychotopology of the unconscious. The discourse of psychoanalysis officially began after Freud redescribed anxiety as the origin rather than the effect of nervous repression. In the transition, Freud transposed the status of “anxiety” from a strictly physiological symptom to a psychological condition that presupposed the unconscious.

The political stakes of *The Politics of Anxiety* entail Murison’s recovery of a pre-Freudian archive informed by the nineteenth-century somatic language of *corporeal* nervous anxiety that matched Freudian *psychic* anxiety in explanatory power. The term “susceptibility” antedated “anxiety” and located “*corporeal* anxiety” at the core of the embodied self. In the nineteenth century, it was the nervous system (rather than the psychic unconscious) that brought the body of the “susceptible subject” into open interaction with the environment. In tying his notion of *psychic* anxiety to psychoanalytic claims, Freud bracketed somatic questions concerning how culture shapes bodies and minds. *Psychic* anxiety also occluded the ways in which assumptions about nerves had underwritten historical and political narratives since the late eighteenth century.

After Freud situated “anxiety” within unconscious psychic processes, he endowed the discourse of psychoanalysis with a methodological affect and interpretive

reach capable of explaining a broad range of historical, social, and cultural matters. “Anxiety” incited the production of knowledge of meanings hidden in a text’s margins and ellipses; “anxiety” also generated resistance to the knowledges so produced. By elevating “anxiety” into the source of psychoanalytic knowledge production as well as its result, Freud placed anxiety outside history as its transcendental cause. In demonstrating its diacritical relationship with “susceptibility” in the discourse of nervous physiology, Murison has transposed “anxiety” (and the broader theory of the nervous system it references) as an object of historical analysis rather than its structuring frame.

Murison organizes the individual chapters of a major cultural debate about embodiment and agency so as to revalue the staple topics of the nineteenth-century literary sphere—sympathy, domestication, realism, and romance—in light of these pre-Freudian investments in the nervous system. In the opening chapter, she takes up Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Sheppard Lee* to show how Bird used hypochondria to criticize sentimental modes of reading deployed in the abolitionist movement. As the title suggests, Murison’s second chapter, “Frogs, Dogs and Mobs: Reflexes and Democracy in Edgar Allan Poe’s Satires,” explains how Poe deployed mammalian reflexes to satirize the Democratic Party’s idealizations of

government. Murison's third chapter, "Invasions of Privacy: Clairvoyance and Utopian Failure in Antebellum Romance," exposes the gendered labor hierarchy in the era's reconstruction of domesticity. In the fourth chapter, Murison argues that nineteenth-century mesmerists produced a neurological vision of the self that reinvigorated Americans' spiritual and political engagement. Murison concludes her remarkable book by turning to William James's accounts of spiritualism to show that the contest between embodied mind and open body never ended—even after medical professions restricted debate to experts. Murison's final chapters include exemplary accounts of the ways in which Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. and S. Weir Mitchell, in particular, developed the *truth technologies*—the authorized procedures of falsifiability, confirmation, and disconfirmation—that converted the tentative epistemic objects produced within the discourse of nervous physiology into scientifically authorized entities.

One strand of argumentation in *The Politics of Anxiety* converges with discussions of what Lauren Berlant has called the "intimate public sphere" in showing how nervousness also came to structure cultural expectations and the U.S. citizenry's self-understanding. Murison's excavation of the interdisciplinary archive of nervous physiology also productively complicates Christopher Castiglia's and

Jennifer Fleissner's conceptualizations of the relation between democratic citizenry and social change. In the antebellum era, U.S. citizens harbored the belief that they were inhabitants of a nation of nerves that represented a healthy alternative to the degeneracy of Europe. Inspired by the market revolution and Jacksonian democracy, the national desire for self-betterment fueled the perception that the enduringly hardy men and women of the colonial times had been succeeded by a race more susceptible to dissolution. Practices of the identification, calculation, and management of nervousness expanded the role for American literature in a political and public sphere suffused by insecurity.

In what I take to be her most significant line of argument, Murison has sketched out a preliminary cartography of an emergent biopolitical form of life and the possible futures it predicts. Nineteenth-century novelistic romance did not function as the opposite of scientific realism but as its critical supplement. Nineteenth-century novels included and were sometimes included within the discourse of nervous physiology. Novelists who scrutinized the vulnerabilities and mysteries of social life contributed to the development of this burgeoning science.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Brockden Brown,

Robert Montgomery Bird, George Lippard, and other novelists under Murison's inspection based their versions of "romance" in science even as they imagined characters and situations that reached beyond known scientific limits. In exploring a neurological vision of the body and mind, their fictional experiments reflected, tested, and extended medical professionals' unstable and highly provisional understandings of the workings of the nervous system. Their representations of the causes and effects of nervousness helped shape the ways in which nineteenth-century individuals understood and related to themselves and to each other. The transformation in the truth discourses of nineteenth-century biosciences prefigured the profound a shift in human ontology—the kinds of persons we take ourselves to be—that has emerged in the twenty-first century.

These novelists used the nerves as a metaphor to reimagine the role of the self amidst political, social, and religious tumults, including debates about slavery and the revivals of the Second Great Awakening. In doing so, they envisioned culture as an affective formation that was at once threatening to the substance of the body yet crucial to the formation of the embodied self (and the social body at large). Since the body absorbed and mediated the world through the nerves, these novelists believed that the

nerves supplied the body with the means to say something back. The discourse of nervous physiology provided novelists an idiom with which to conduct this conversation. The significance of their work inhered in the ways American novelists reshaped how experts and laypeople interpreted, spoke about, and understood nervousness.

Drawing upon the epistemologies of life that were taking shape in the biosciences, these novelists shared the belief that consciousness was a somatic, nervous, and impulsive expression of the physiological body that was comparably complex and open. They inspired and drew inspiration from experimental scientific speculation that shared their aspiration to comprehend the susceptibilities and sympathies of social life. Nineteenth-century fiction became the basis for readers' explorations of the nervous self. Readers who scrutinized their responses to novels to comprehend the workings of the nervous physiology did not construe novelists' description of reading as an index of nervous susceptibility to be simply metaphorical. The nervous responses of nineteenth-century's susceptible readers constituted the somatic precursors of the twentieth century's anxious readers. Since the reading experience rendered them susceptible to the world, readers considered it an exemplary enactment of psychology grounded in nervous physiology—and crucial to the

formation of the embodied self and the social body at large. The presumption of Whitman's notion of the body electric and Oliver Wendell Holmes's disquisition on the physiology of versification was that literature could quite literally get under the skin and directly affect the reader's nervous physiology.

Murison shows how Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* usefully illuminates the role that nervousness played in the nineteenth-century somatic imaginary. Nervousness conveyed antithetical meanings. It could reference strength and vigor, as well as weakness and agitation. While an increase of nerve force could animate and spiritualize the body, it could also indicate powers that might weaken the body. Nerves could empower self-control; nerves could also undermine it. Hawthorne turns the semantic variations of the word "nervous" into resources for the construction of characters who embodied and reflected the contradictions of antebellum nervousness. By the time George Miller Beard coined the term "neurasthenia" and S. Weir Mitchell developed the rest cure in the 1870s, nerves not only explained modern selfhood but also produced an image of weak and vulnerable citizens.

Murison's analysis moves beyond traditional dichotomies that set the humanities against the sciences and the psyche in opposition to the brain. Such antagonisms

cannot help us understand the relations of power and knowledge of ethics and subjectification that are taking shape within the biosciences. Rather than embracing the idea that each historical or cultural period is characterized by a single attitude or mode of relating, Murison locates her neuroscientific intervention alongside other mutations and in the midst of multiple histories.

The shift that Murison has sketched out entails a new way of seeing, judging, and acting upon human normality and abnormality. It enabled different forms of self-governance even as it facilitated different forms of state governance. I wish Murison devoted more attention to the critical questions that the biopolitics of anxiety raised when novelistic accounts of nervous physiology drew upon prevailing social and cultural anxieties about gender. In shaping these fears and anxieties into fictional forms, these novelists gave expression to prevailing social, political, ethical assumptions about what women wanted. They then linked these assumptions to an ethic of self-control and self-realization that women were compelled to internalize. Such transformations also raise broader questions about the relationship between the production of interiority and social control. The identification of nervous susceptibility could position the affected individual within circuits of constraint in

the nineteenth century. The inner space that has opened up to the neuroscientific gaze in the twenty-first century now makes it possible to scrutinize the innermost affective dynamics—fear, rage, and violence, as well as kindness, humor, and self-awareness. But what are the dangers and risks inherent to these forms of governmentality? These questions solicit a critical biopolitics that is missing from Justin Murison's timely monograph. But *The Politics of Anxiety* supplies the nerve required to undertake such a project.

Donald E. Pease is the Ted & Helen Geisel and Founding Director of the Futures Of American Studies Institute at Dartmouth. The editor or coeditor of ten volumes, including Cultures of U.S. Imperialism (Duke University Press, 1992), Futures Of American Studies (Duke University Press, 2002), and Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies, as well as the series Re-mapping the Transnational Turn in American Studies (Dartmouth College Press, 2012), he is also the author of three books, including Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context (University of Wisconsin Press, 1987) and The New American Exceptionalism (University of Minnesota Press, 2009). In 2012, the American Studies Association (ASA) awarded Pease the Carl Bode-Norman Holmes Pearson Prize for Outstanding Contributions to American Studies.