BOOK REVIEW

Reading Bodies in Victorian Fiction: Associationism, Empathy and Literary Authority by Peter J. Katz (Edinburgh University Press, 2022) 256 pp., paperback, $24.95

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When Nancy meets her demise in *Oliver Twist* at the hands of Bill Sikes, or when Tess passes away in desolation in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, readers might clutch their chest in horror or audibly gasp in response. In *Reading Bodies in Victorian Fiction: Associationism, Empathy and Literary Authority*, Peter J. Katz interrogates the complexities of these reactions: how do audiences both read *and* respond to nineteenth-century literature? Does reading make readers better people? What kind of literature initiates feelings of empathy? Katz explains that the Victorian authors Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Walter Besant, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon experiment with the phenomenology of the reading body, an entity which is intrinsically bound with a contemporaneous turn to affect theory in literary studies. Mid-century Victorian authors such as these intertwine the mechanisms of the reading process and bodily ethics. Understanding the empathetic intent of nineteenth-century fictions, he argues, is possible through the philosophical theory of Associationism. Katz reads Dickens, Collins, Besant, and Braddon as Associationists. He 'offers a culturally contextualised methodology to understand how Victorians imagined what happened in their bodies as they read' (p. 3).

By the end of the nineteenth century, Katz notes, literacy rates in Britain would reach over ninety percent (p. 42), and this highly literate populace changed the production and subsequent emotional reception of literature. Alongside an engaging overview of empathy as it connects to the discipline of English, Katz engages with the relevant philosophical and critical perspectives, from Deleuze and Guattari and Eve Kosofsky Sedwick to Rita Felski in *Limits of Critique*, though he carefully delimits his association with any of them. Katz then establishes his engagement with a 'Victorian philosophy of fiction in which literary value depends

on a text's capacity to cultivate empathy through feeling' (p. 2). While sympathy requires imagination, he argues, empathy is a subconscious and embodied element of the reading experience.

In the introduction, Katz provides an ontological summary of past and present epistemology on 'empathy-building' (p. 18). Katz uses Mudie's Circulating Library as a useful case study, a mid-Victorian book-lending institution which redefined the reading public's relationships with books. For those foraying into teaching affect and embodiment in Victorian novels, Katz presents Mudie's as a pedagogically accessible place to start. To curate an appealing selection of titles, Mudie's cultivated an exceptional sense of reading authority, one which created a divisive moral ambiguity:

> the populists on the one side rallied around the validity of common thinking, common sentiment, common readers. Mudie and his allies on the other raised the banner of the shepherding literary class, the intellectual elite, the need for curators and scholars (p. 9).

Katz proposes a more holistic, all-encompassing approach to understanding the 'common reader', who was accused of 'being too emotional and too embodied. But novelists and thinkers at the forefront of popular literature argued that emotion and embodiment are in fact the keys to good literature and good reading' (p. 14). By the mid-1800s, the moral effects of literature were a well-known aspect of popular novels, and Katz argues that many 'authors set up sensational, uncritical, materially bound reactions to stimuli as the primary path to empathetic self-abnegation' (p. 16). In other words, the mid-Victorian novel exercised its powers beyond the realm of repression and temperance; readers were encouraged to feel without bounds.

In Chapter One, 'Feeling Bodies: Associationism and the Anti-Metaphorics of Materiality', Katz focuses on the Associationists – David Hume, Joseph Priestley, Dugald Stewart, Alexander Bain – and, oddly, Isaac Newton, who he uses to introduce his theoretical framework. Associationists, Katz illumes, 'overturned the idea that memories, imaginations and living bodies cannot elicit physical change in other bodies, because they understood that language is in fact a mediator, a physical force that, like gravity between atoms, bridges the gap between bodies' (p. 29). Language is an interceding embodiment of feeling, and for the authors that Katz

examines, demystifying the principality of human experience begins and ends with the material form of the book. Though Katz introduces a bewildering variety of names and concepts in this introductory chapter, the argument is neatly and linearly presented, with helpful subtitles which concisely summarize forthcoming approaches.

The second and third chapters apply Katz's framework by reading Charles Dickens' 'The Hospital Patient' (1837) and *Great Expectations* (1861) as repositories of empathetic sensation. Both works are grounded in the experience of reading 'textual bodies' (p. 81), as well as metaphoric and symbolic forms of embodiment. Katz's reading of Pip Pirrup and the serial form provides an innovative perspective on a well-loved character, one which encourages new pedagogical pathways:

> [Pip's] repeated misreadings of others' intentions teach readers not to jump to conclusions, and not to read for codes and linearity, but instead to embrace embodied reading. And this admonition is bound up in the serial form, for the novel uses its form to reinforce this practice emotionally (p. 21).

Katz's ideas handily apply to in-classroom discussions of *Great Expectations*: one might encourage students to imagine the affectual impact on Dickens' audience as they anticipated the next instalment. Further, Katz emboldens his readers to view mid-Victorian novelists like Dickens as both novelists and *teachers*. They teach their audience how to respond to their works.

Chapter Four, titled 'Plastic Bodies: The Scientist, Vital Mechanics and Ethical Habits of Character in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*', assesses the mechanisms and materialism of reading bodies. Similar to Dickens' use of the serial form to create anticipation in readerly bodies, Collins teaches his readers to read evidence – a mechanical requirement in a detective novel – alongside the reading of differing, often marginal bodies. Though the reader and other characters might try to solve the mystery, Katz argues that Ezra Jennings is the novel's 'most intensely embodied self' (p. 129). Katz briefly engages with some facets of queer and disability studies, though more elaboration would be a welcome addition to the study. As he articulates, *The Moonstone* narrates the experience of embodiment,

> but there is a dark side to this celebration: the bodies that are allowed to be bodies procure materiality at the expense of other bodies. White, male characters vampirically transfuse vitality from the female, queer and non-white bodies around them. (p. 120)

Many of the chapter's subsections focus on characters in the margins. As Katz explains, 'successful readers in *The Moonstone* read at the expense of bodies sacrificed in the margins of the text. Most of these bodies never find a voice' (p. 22). The following chapter is well-placed, as it provides an interesting answer to voiceless female embodiment, and further, how the reading public might respond to this invocation.

Titled 'Represented Bodies: The Lawyer, Conclusions and Circumstantial Evidence in *Lady Audley's Secret*', Chapter Five intersects Victorian science on the reading process with the Associationist qualities of the sensation novel. Reading mid-Victorian forms of embodiment, Katz expresses, becomes more complex with the emphasis on the female body in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel: 'there is nothing virtuous about self-renunciation if female bodies exist only to be read and discarded to the margins. Flattened science that reads bodies for their use-value offers only self-annihilation, not empathy' (p. 161). However, Katz resists a feminist re-reading of the text through the lens of empathy. Instead, he notes that 'while it is tempting to read the novel as pure rejection of patriarchy, as revelling in the redemptive power of small moments of resistance, to do so effaces the violence of self-annihilation' (p. 161). Acknowledging self-annihilation in *Lady Audley's Secret*, in Katz's terms, means interrogating what he calls a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (p. 188), one which dismisses the impact of reading experiences of 'pain', or the ability to 'sit with the pain and let it exist' (p. 188). Intriguingly, Katz also briefly engages with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's celebrated reading of *Lady Audley's Secret* and concludes that it 'resists literary authority' and 'champions acknowledgment' (p. 163), and this tension between suffering and subversive bodies continues into the final chapter on Walter Besant's *Children of Gibeon*.

Beyond his case studies of Victorian novels, Katz unravels a 'history of disciplinary knowledge: the way literary studies has decided what questions it should ask, and what kind of knowledge can answer those questions' (p. 2). This exploration of literary authority provides a vigorous structural and theoretical framework, one

which comes in and out of focus throughout the entirety of the study. Though Katz focuses on mid-Victorian novels, he also provides avenues toward incorporating theories of embodiment into broader pedagogical practice: he notes that reading is an 'ethical pedagogy, a way to improve oneself and one's interactions with others' (p. 41). For readers, scholars, and teachers of Victorian fiction, Katz' book offers a fascinating study of how mid-Victorian novelists taught their publics how to read and respond to their literary works. In turn, *Reading Bodies in Victorian Fiction* teaches twenty-first-century readers how to not only engage with literature both within and without the nineteenth-century, but also how to create a new pedagogy of ethics, one which 'train[s]' bodies 'for encounters in the lived world' (p. 151).