

What We Think About When We Think About Other People

Thinking About Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing. Adela Pinch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 247pp.

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<1>In the last decade, scholars of nineteenth-century literature have gotten their hands on tangible objects, discrete things, and a host of other stuff (in the strict sense of that word) encapsulated by the term “materialities.” Books written by literary scholars explore hair, tea, machines for communication and transportation, and the noise and the smells the material world gives off. Adela Pinch comes at the period from a point diametrically opposed: by way of the mind in its characteristic activity of *thinking*. Her narrowing of this very general topic to “thinking about other people” makes her subject paradoxically more, not less, amorphous, even odd: the homeliness of the phrase, which defies translation into a more dignified Latinate abstraction, weighty technical term, or trendy buzzword, underscores the ordinary, pervasive, and protean character of the topic. But in the course of this intelligently argued, gracefully erudite, and beautifully written book, “thinking-about-other-people” emerges as a rich category and useful heuristic, something good to think with.

<2>This is not a book about gender, although gender enters into its pages (how could it not?). For that we must wait until the third chapter, which is also where the project’s suggestiveness for reading literary texts really takes off. The first two chapters are devoted to some nineteenth-century intellectuals, many of them professional philosophers, who have mostly been consigned to the dustbin of intellectual history. We are introduced to the early nineteenth-century Scottish philosopher William Ferrier, and James Hinton, an otologist-turned-speculative thinker. We encounter others whose names may be known to literary critics for the company they kept or influenced: Charles Bray, J. M. E. McTaggart, and members of the Society for Psychical Research such as Frederic H. W. Myers. Through them we discover a range of opinion about what Pinch calls, variously, mental force, mind-power, or mental causation.

<3>Advocates of mental force sought to tilt philosophical idealism towards a more materialist understanding of the world, and argued for a continuity between the energies of mental activity and those of the physical universe. We may think here, as Pinch does, of *Tintern Abbey*’s “motion and . . . spirit that impels/ All thinking things, all objects of all thought/ And rolls through all things” (100-102).(1) Some mental force theorists asked whether thinking can make things

happen in the physical world: whether mind can affect matter, or whether thoughts can act upon another mind or person not present—as we implicitly claim when we tell friends during times of trouble, “I’m thinking of you.” Though these questions can point to telepathy and mesmerism, phenomena whose meanings for nineteenth-century culture have been studied by others, Pinch focuses on a more intellectual and even academic (if still somewhat off-beat) philosophical discourse in these chapters.

<4>The later literary critical chapters emphasize the more ordinary kinds of thinking about other people that most of us do all the time. Here Pinch begins to fulfill her promise, tendered in the first paragraph of her introduction, to explore the ethical implications of her topic. We generally mean something benign, or even beneficial, when we tell someone “I’m thinking of you,” but Pinch shows that having another in one’s thoughts even lovingly can seem an act of appropriation or aggression. In the third chapter, Pinch demonstrates the negative force of thinking about another person through a nuanced reading of Coleridge’s “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” which in her careful exegesis betrays a troubling attitude towards “gentle” Charles Lamb, who is addressed in the poem, and who (as Pinch points out) really *did* feel wronged once the poem was published. Turning to several women poets—Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Christina Rossetti (Alice Meynell and Mary Elizabeth Coleridge having earlier provided material for her argument)—she argues that women poets seem more inclined than their male counterparts to express pessimism about the efficacy of thinking about another. Here one may wonder if the deck has been stacked, since the chapter discusses many more female than male poets. But Pinch persuades on the larger point that thinking about other people, even lovingly, can feel to the thinker more harmful than beneficial: it may underscore, or even create, a sense of unbridgeable distance from the beloved object of thought; it may even seem, as D.W. Winnicott theorized, to destroy that object.

<5>The final chapters are the strongest in the book. In the fourth, Pinch juxtaposes Coventry Patmore’s often-maligned *The Angel in the House* (1854-62) with George Meredith’s infinitely finer *Modern Love* (1862). Both are long poems about marriage, one an idealization, the other an anatomy of a marriage that fails disastrously. Pinch suggests brilliantly that Meredith’s sonnet sequence responds to a particularly cloying lyric from Patmore’s *Angel* that ends on the line “He thought I thought he thought I slept.” It rewrites this nested thinking-about-another-person-thinking-about-the-person-thinking (etc.) by unpacking it over a long narrative in which each party to the marriage is shown responding to the knowledge that the other is thinking about him or her. Unlike Patmore’s, this one ends badly, revealing yet another instance of thinking about others as a hindrance to connection rather than a help. The fifth chapter, on *Daniel Deronda* (1876), is where the argument takes its most cogent ethical turn. Gwendolen Harleth’s irrational fear that she killed her husband by wishing him dead turns out to be precisely what persuades Daniel of her capacity for moral growth. If, as the poets in the preceding chapters suggest, our good thoughts about others can have baneful effects, George Eliot’s final novel shows that our very human regrets about bad thoughts may be inextricable from our status as moral agents.

<6>It is a testimony to Pinch’s skill as a literary critic that I experience her argument about the ethical dimensions of thinking about others, especially in the third and fourth chapters, as less valuable on its own terms than as a thematic device for framing a set of superbly nuanced

readings of texts that she has beautifully and tellingly juxtaposed. The arguments about poetic form of Chapter Three, which focus on the addresses in the second person that structure the poems she discusses (“I think of you”; “I must not think of thee”; “When will ye think of me?”; “Do you think of me?”), are ultimately more memorable than the way they contribute to an argument about the ethics of thinking about others—though in fact they are beautifully intertwined. Attention to form as a thematically relevant aspect of meaning is one of the most compelling and pleasing aspects of this book, which always has its eye on the literary aesthetics of the writing it explores. Chapter Four ends with a fascinating discussion of the metrical characteristics of some Romantic and Victorian poems about thinking, ingeniously contextualized in terms of nineteenth-century metrical theory. Chapter Five has very interesting things to say about free indirect discourse, the rhetorical device peculiar to prose fiction, especially the psychological novel that exploits it, and that makes such novels (in Pinch’s phrase) “machine[s] for thinking about other people.”

<7>Returning to some of the earlier material of this interesting book, I cannot resist observing that mental force theory has some contemporary adherents. Witness the claims of the (aptly named) Japanese physician Masura Emoto, whose popular book *Hidden Messages from Water* (2005) asserts that the affective quality of thoughts directed at a vessel of water before it is frozen will determine the appearance of the ice crystals that form from it: positive or loving thoughts supposedly produce symmetrical crystals, and negative ones result in irregular shapes. Since we are largely made of water, the argument runs, the motion that impels these objects of thought must also roll through all thinking things. In our own time, clearly, many still wish to bridge the mind/matter divide and to believe that our thoughts have power and ethical efficacy. In less dramatic ways, we all probably harbor some of the less-than-rational beliefs about the effects and the meanings of thinking about other people that Pinch discovers in the writers whose work she has so compellingly brought together here.

Endnotes

(1) William Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour. July 13, 1798.” *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Eds. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy. 4th ed. New York: W. W. Norton, 1996. 699-703.(^)