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Michael Slater

The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: the Art of being Ill by Miriam Bailin, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth Century Literature, I. (Cambridge University Press, 1994)

In this densely-argued and fascinating study Miriam Bailin begins by noting the frequency with which the sickroom figures in Victorian fiction as 'a haven of comfort, order and natural affection' in which an alternative, and more congenial, society is created around the invalid and the tormenting moral complexities of life outside, the difficulties of reconciling past and present selves, are simplified. In 'Janet's Repentance', a key text for Bailin, George Eliot writes: 'Within the four walls where the stir and glare of the world are shut out, where a human being lies prostrate, thrown on the tender mercies of his fellow, the moral relation of man to man is reduced to its utmost clearness and simplicity.... As we bend over the sick-bed, all the forces of our nature rush towards the channels of pity, of patience, and of love'. This luminous moral clarity is for Eliot, who wrote when she was nursing her father, 'These will ever be the happiest days of life for me', one of the greatest 'consolations of debility' (to quote the title of one of Bailin's chapter-sections). Bailin points to the tender relations established between nurse and patient with the potential eroticism of the situation transformed into what Charlotte Brontë calls in *Villette* 'the passion of solicitude'. She also, illuminatingly, argues that Victorian writers seem often to be presenting nurse and patient as 'two sides of the same self', noting how often the roles are exchanged between pairs of characters such as Shirley and Louis Moore in Brontë's *Shirley* or Janet Dempster and the Reverend Tryan, 'or the constant shifting from one role to another by a single character (Caroline Helston, Ruth Hilton, and Romola)'.

After a succinct but enlightening discussion of the real-life case-history of Florence Nightingale and how, over many years, she used invalidism as a means of formidable empowerment, Bailin continues with a sympathetic feminist critique of Tennyson's *The Princess* which I found very persuasive. The end of the poem with women in authority but as nurses caring for passively dependent males is, she argues, 'the closest Tennyson can come to his vision of a more equal distribution of gender traits which would recuperate rather than endanger the social body'.

The rest of the book is taken up with a consideration of the sickroom in, first, Charlotte Brontë (very much focused on the figure of Caroline Helston in *Shirley*, though *Jane Eyre*'s ending up with Mr Rochester in a sort of permanent blissful 'sickroom' at Ferndean is glanced at in passing), secondly Dickens, and thirdly Eliot. Bailin develops a most interesting argument about Dickens's sickroom scenes where a period of feverish delirium, dominated by a great 'anxiety of convergence' with regard to past and present, is succeeded by a tranquil, happy convalescence which 'serves as a provisional or preliminary heaven'. She draws a parallel between the condition of feverish restlessness (and it was always in such terms that Dickens described his own state when he was at work on a story) and the narrative act, finding a particularly apt and telling quotation from *Master*

Humphrey's Clock to support her argument: 'the connection Dickens makes so early in his career between the life of the imagination and the feverish dreams of the sick man suggests how deeply he felt its force'.

Eliot's depiction of the 'sickroom sanctuary', Bailin contends, 'is more inclusive in its healing powers' than the depictions of Brontë and Dickens. For her it 'offers, under the rubric of domestic realism, a vision of absolute moral clarity, of perfect integrity of motive and deed ... It is, in effect, the romance of her realism'. After a detailed discussion of 'Janet's Repentance' as Eliot's 'most direct expression of the therapeutics of nursing', Bailin proceeds to consider *Romola* and her ministrations in the plague-stricken village where, as in 'Janet', 'illness offers the possibility of instinctive moral conduct with its salubrious effects on the worn and wounded spirit' and *Deronda* where 'sickroom solace' is carried to its farthest limits in the presentation of Deronda as the nurse of an entire nation, figured in the novel by his nursing of Mordecai. In *Romola* and still more in *Deronda* Bailin sees Eliot as subverting the premises of her own realism and in *Theophrastus Such* she seems to move still further away from the 'witness-box' presentation of an existing society as we find ourselves in 'the solitary sickroom of the dyspeptic observer of the moral and cultural foibles of his age'.

Bailin concludes with a brief look at some late-Victorian writers such as James and Conrad who show the sickroom as a site of manipulation on the part of the patient (quite malign manipulation in the case of *The Nigger of the Narcissus* – though Bailin could have found an equally malign invalid-tyrant in *Little Dorrit*) and some perceptive comments on the effect of the rise of biomedicine, and the removal of the sick body 'from the personal and communal domain to clinics and hospitals' on the presentation of sickness in modern fiction – though in these days of 'care in the community' we may yet return to Victorian values in this respect!

Altogether this is a rewarding and stimulating discussion of its chosen subject even if it makes no mention of the most famous of all Victorian sickrooms, the one in Wimpole Street, and it worthily inaugurates what promises to be an important series for all students of nineteenth century literature and culture.