



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

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The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects the unique qualities of his or her project. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <http://www.neh.gov/grants/guidelines/fellowships.html> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

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Project Title: Nineteenth Century British Literature and the Problem of Thinking About Others

Institution: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Project Director: Adela Pinch

Grant Program: Fellowships

Nineteenth Century British Literature and the Problem of Thinking About Others

We tend to feel that thinking about people we love is the next best thing to being with them. But the history of ideas about the powers of the mind is full of strange accounts that describe the act of thinking about another as an ethically problematic, sometimes even a dangerously powerful thing to do. My project is designed to explain why, when, and under what conditions we find it possible, or desirable to believe that thinking about another person could harm him or her. When does a belief in our mental powers over another seem delusional, and when might holding such a belief seem in fact an essential part of being a moral person?

My book investigates these questions through a study of the writings of a time and place that gave such concerns a particularly intriguing modern form: nineteenth-century Britain. The book explains why nineteenth century British writers—poets, novelists, philosophers, psychologists, devotees of the occult--were both attracted to and repulsed by radical or substantial notions of purely mental relations between persons, and why they moralized about the practice of thinking about other people in interesting ways. Above all, my book explores how these issues took shape through specific literary forms and practices. I show how some of the era's distinctive innovations in literary form often set the terms for its philosophical and psychological understandings of the act of thinking about another.

Working at the intersection of literary studies, philosophy, and psychology, this project is thus designed both to shed new light on a truly neglected strand of Victorian thought and literature, and to reveal the contemporary consequences, and contemporary value, of this strand of thought about thinking. In our own era, beliefs about thinking about other people range from fascinated ambivalence about “magical thinking,” “telekinesis,” or to use Freud’s term, the delusions of “the omnipotence of thought”—the notion that thinking about another can actually harm him or her—to more reasoned admissions that behaving or believing as if our thoughts could affect others may indeed be a powerful yet ordinary part of social life (e.g. Gopnik 1997). Studying the ways in which nineteenth-century texts account for the act of thinking about another person may, I propose, provide new insights into the history of ideas about mental causation, practical ethics, and the sociability of the mind. When are we likely to conceive of “thinking,” as did Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1801), “as pure act and energy, as distinguished from thought”? How do we evaluate Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetic agonies about whether it is right to think about her beloved (“I do not think of thee—I am too near thee,” she admonishes) in her “Sonnets from the Portuguese” (1850), and strikingly similar musings in Hannah Arendt’s powerful essay, “Thinking and Moral Considerations” (1971): “to think about somebody who is present implies removing ourselves surreptitiously from his company and acting as though he were no longer there”? How might

the climax of George Eliot's novel, "Daniel Deronda" (1876), in which a woman believes she has killed her husband "in her thoughts," illuminate a long history of debates about "thought crime"? How did nineteenth-century writers balance a commitment to mental freedom with a suspicion of mental force?

My book provides some answers to some of these questions through an analysis of the work of key nineteenth-century British writers, all of whom have been selected for this study because their writings address a common thread of concerns from different angles. I have structured the book into three parts, focused on the three forms of writing under study here: philosophical prose, lyric poetry, and prose fiction.

Part One explains the existence of a concern with the force of thinking in seemingly disparate kinds of nineteenth-century philosophical prose. Its first chapter traces the career of ethical ambivalence about the act of thinking in texts from nineteenth-century mental and moral sciences, focusing in particular on Scottish philosopher James Frederick Ferrier's "Introduction to the Philosophy of Consciousness" (1838-9). My chapter, which is the first substantial literary-critical treatment of this highly literary, unusual philosophical text, argues that Ferrier's strenuous conception of thought as a form of action results from the exemplary, historically significant intersection in his work between idealist and empiricist approaches to the psychology of relations between minds. The second chapter explores accounts of the sociability of the mind in both later nineteenth-century accounts of paranormal mental activity and British idealist philosophy. Bringing occultist "psychical researchers" such as F.W.H. Myers and innovative Victorian idealists such as Shadworth Hodgson and J.M.E. McTaggart together with prominent Victorian sages such as G.H. Lewes and T.H. Huxley, I seek in this chapter to provide a context, and an interpretation, of Victorian debates about "epiphenomenalism": the question of whether the mind can, or cannot, cause things to happen.

Part Two examines nineteenth-century lyric poetry and poetic theory as articulations of ideas about thinking about a beloved person. The first of its chapters (Chapter 3) explores the relationship between poetic uses of second person pronouns, and anxieties about intimacy. It focuses on the paradoxes that ensue when poets from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Elizabeth Browning and Christina Rossetti utter "I think of thee"—or more provocatively, "I do not think of thee." The next chapter (Chapter 4) explains how Victorian prosodists theorized the relationship between thinking about another and poetic rhythms. I evoke a rich, new context for an episode in Coventry Patmore's book-length poem "The Angel in the House" (1854-62) (an episode, to my knowledge, graced with no previous scholarly treatment) in which a woman claims, rhythmically, "He thought I thought I thought I

slept.” I focus on the reverberations of this episode in George Meredith’s “Modern Love” (1862) and in other poems of the era, and I explain its relationship to Victorian theories of poetic rhythm which viewed rhythm as the pulsation of thought from mind to objects.

Part Three opens with a chapter on the intersections among ethics, psychology, and strategies of narration in George Eliot’s great novel “Daniel Deronda.” My chapter explains why George Eliot regarded belief that thinking about someone might make something happen to them as simultaneously factually false and ethically efficacious. I demonstrate how Eliot’s curious attitude towards “magical thinking” emerges in and through the novel’s parsing of cause and effect, and through its ways of representing—and sometimes refusing to represent—the act of thinking. My analysis of this novel thus elaborates on two things that I find throughout this study: 1) a tenacious pattern in nineteenth-century writing which could be described as a simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from belief in the “omnipotence of thought,” and 2) a persistent embedding of that ambivalence about thinking within the very forms of writing. The book ends with a chapter exploring some of the legacies of this cluster of concerns in twentieth-century ethical and psychological theory. Beginning with a critical analysis of Freud’s discussion of the “omnipotence of thought” in “Totem and Taboo” (1913), and moving through exemplary texts in psychoanalytic theory (e.g. Bion 1962) and moral philosophy (e.g. Levinas 1998), I suggest that modern human sciences always hold onto a belief in the act of thinking of another as a powerful social force, even when such a belief seems to defy rationality.

In the widest terms, this project aims to participate in an interdisciplinary conversation about how the humanities can contribute to the understanding mental life, at a time when the study of mental life and mental processes seems to have been ceded overwhelmingly to the cognitive and behavioral sciences. The cognitive mood of our era has recently spawned a range of literary-critical titles that take up literature’s relation to thinking (Gourgouris 2003, Armstrong 2005, Vendler 2004). My approach has been neither to embrace the cognitive sciences as the key to literature and culture, nor to stake out literature’s difference from them. (It is fascinating that neuroscientists have confirmed empirically the Victorian worry, found for example in Barrett Browning’s sonnets: that to think hard about another person was a special mental activity that shut out all the sensory world: Saxe 2003, Kaweshima 1995). Rather, my strategy has been precisely to tease out beliefs about one mode of cognitive activity—thinking about another person--from a body of literature which not only has a rich history, but is also located provocatively at the crossroads of cognition and sociability, literature and ethics. The project is a plea for taking seriously the role of thinking in an account of social, not simply individual life, and a plea for taking seriously the role of sociability in accounts of mental

processes.

In this perspective I have been guided by my particular point of view as a scholar of the writings of nineteenth-century Britons, who often saw no contradiction between the moralizing of the act of thinking, and materialist or biological accounts of mind. But my book also tackles a problem in Victorian studies as a scholarly field, which has alternately emphasized the idealist, or the biologicistic, bent of Victorian intellectual life. As a result of decades of outstanding studies linking Victorian literature to the era's developments in the sciences, most recent scholarship has emphasized the biological, empiricist, and materialist side of Victorian approaches to the mind (e.g. Gallagher 2006, Levine 2002, Shuttleworth 1996). Some scholars have continued to emphasize the links of nineteenth-century Anglophone intellectual life to continental idealism and phenomenology (e.g. Loesberg 2001, Cameron 1989). But one advantage of my distinctive focus is that the idea that thinking is a form of acting on others was of interest to Victorian adherents of both the idealist and the materialist views of mind, and belongs to neither camp. It thus provides a unique opportunity to study the interaction of the era's different intellectual trends.

I was originally trained as a scholar of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century literature (often termed the Romantic period in English), and my first book, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen*, focused on the ways in which "the passions" formed the center of philosophical, psychological, and literary concern during that era. In shifting the focus of my scholarship from ideas about feeling, to ideas about thinking, I have been propelled into the later, Victorian decades of the nineteenth century, which made thinking itself the chief topic of philosophical and psychological speculation. This book has thus taken me into significantly new areas of research. A year at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences in 2003-2004 allowed me to bring to completion the researching and drafting of Chapter 1 (on approaches to thinking in early nineteenth-century moral and mental sciences), Chapter 3 (on apostrophe and thinking in Victorian love poetry), and Chapter 4 (on Victorian metrical theory and thinking about others). I am currently completing Chapter 5 (on George Eliot's "Daniel Deronda" and the omnipotence of thought). With NEH support 2007-2008 I will be able to complete the book. During July-December 2007, I plan to complete the research and writing of Chapter 2 (on later Victorian idealisms and paranormal mental relations—the chapter furthest afield from my previous scholarship). In January-February 2008 I will write Chapter 6 (a short conclusion on 20th-century legacies); in March-April 2008 I will write the book's Introduction; and in May-July 2008 I will complete revisions to the manuscript as a whole. _____ has expressed interest in my book, and I plan to deliver the final manuscript to the publisher in August 2008.

Exemption 4

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Meredith, George. "Modern Love" (1862)
Myers, F.W.H. "Phantasms of the Living" (1886)
Patmore, Coventry. "The Angel in the House" (1854-62)
Rossetti, Christina. "Monna Innominata" (1881)
Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Poems" (1816--1822)

II. Selected Secondary Texts: Nineteenth-Century British Culture and the "Sciences" of the Mind

- Gallagher, Catherine. "The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel" (2006)
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III. Selected Secondary Texts: Literature and "Thinking"

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