

Natalie Prizel, *Victorian Ethical Optics: Innocent Eyes and Aberrant Bodies*. New York: Oxford UP, 2024. 320pp. ISBN: 9780192888563

In *Victorian Ethical Optics: Innocent Eyes and Aberrant Bodies*, Natalie Prizel offers readers an account of the Victorian period in which the era's famous excesses—its long novels, detailed paintings, and elaborate taxonomies—are symptoms of neither epistemological overconfidence nor imperialist thirst for territory, but of “a culture with an almost limitless and limitlessly expansive norm” (29). “‘Gathering up’ is what the Victorians did best,” Prizel writes, reminding us that gathering up everything makes it harder, not easier, to delimit normality. The norm emerges in the edit, in the disregarded outlying statistic or the flaw omitted from the portrait, so, Prizel submits, objects created by those notoriously poor editors, the Victorians, may hold an interest for crip and queer theory, where “antinormativity” has “so long [been] the watchword” (26).

Enter John Ruskin, the Victorian sage who, while not a champion for the queer community or people with disabilities in any straightforward way, did feel strongly that artists ought to include in their work everything true—not just what they deem beautiful. As Prizel demonstrates, Ruskin's instructions to artists do not appear trivial when set beside a political project. On the contrary, they articulate an ethical standard high enough to contain a multitude of political projects. Prizel, whose commitments lie at the intersection of queer and disability studies, takes as her north star the Ruskinian notion of “innocence of the eye” (Ruskin qtd. in Prizel 4): vision that precedes interpretation and remains, therefore, unimpaired by expectations and assumptions. Ruskin warns, “we always suppose that we *see* what we only know” (qtd. in Prizel 4). The art student is likely to look past her canvas at grass that is yellow in the sunlight and yet dip her brush in green paint all the same. In the context of disability, the knowing eye diagnoses, while to the innocent eye belongs to the blank stare that, because it cannot label and interpret, “might allow disabled subjects space for self-definition” (11).

The book is divided into three sections. The first section, comprising the first two chapters, explores how fictional characters with disabilities use their own artistry to “shield” their bodies from knowing eyes (38). The first chapter explores how *Our Mutual Friend*'s Jenny Wren uses her dollmaking to assert “mastery” (60), and concludes with a discussion of the titular heroine of Dinah Craik's *Olive*, who is de-sexed by her spinal curvature just enough to win the freedom to be an artist. Chapter two discusses Philip Wakem, the artist from George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, who uses his drawings to pull attention away from his hunched back.

The second section turns to nonfictional representations of people with disabilities who display their bodies “strategically” (38). These include the beggars and street-sellers with disabilities featured in Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, which Prizel reads through the lens of performance theory in chapter three, and Edward Albert, a Black sailor and author whose legs were destroyed at the hands of white shipmates, discussed by Prizel in chapter four. Part three, which contains two chapters and an epilogue, “considers the way artists and writers use disability—and particularly the sensory impairment of blindness—to make larger claims about relational aesthetics across genres, modes, and forms” (38). Chapter five argues that blindness as it appears in visual art (including work by the Pre-Raphaelites, Michael Halliday, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, and David Wilkie), and in *Poor Miss Finch* by Wilkie Collins, brings

the work into the realm “of the generic or everyday” (38). Chapter six centres on John Everett Millais’s *The Blind Girl*, proposing that in the 1850s and ‘60s there emerged “an *aesthetic of stillness*” that is “conducive to the innocence of the eye,” and stems from the power a painting has to arrest its viewer (234). The epilogue returns to Ruskin, this time contrasting his aesthetic ideals with Modernism’s, arguing that he articulates an ethic the world continues to need.

Prizel champions Ruskinian aesthetics rhetorically and by example. The book shines when the author engages in that “close looking that surrenders to the object as such” (20), letting the texts she clearly admires speak to her. Her discussion of Jenny Wren might even restore innocence to the eyes of those who have held themselves aloof from Dickens, suspicious of his broad appeal and reputed sentimentality. She certainly made this reader repent her cynicism. The study of Mayhew’s nutmeg-grater seller in chapter three is also unforgettable. By invoking performance theory, supplying historical context, and close reading, Prizel details the text’s contradictory politics without diminishing the portrait’s affective power. The epilogue offers a fascinating account of a eugenicist impulse in Modernism.

Some questions raised by the book which will remain for future work at the intersection of Victorian and disability studies concern religion. At one point Prizel contrasts “broad acceptance of that which is—a reality grounded in difference, including physical aberrance that need not imply affliction” with “conservative belief in God’s providence” (224), but are these necessarily alternatives? Might not the belief beget the acceptance? And is “conservative” meant to be self-evidently bad in a book about Victorian disability, given the different positions on eugenics taken by, for example, G. K. Chesterton and George Bernard Shaw? After all, as Prizel acknowledges, Ruskin’s ethical optics emerged from his faith. Surely, as Prizel maintains, “there is no reason that such value should be solely the purview of the [sic] religion.” But it seems not entirely in keeping with the cripp-queer spirit of the project to add, “we might insist on ethical continuities that remain useful if adapted to the times” (285-86), insofar as that returns us to keeping up and fitting in. Future research at the crossroads of queerness, disability, and the nineteenth century may have to contend with theology that is all the more interesting for exceeding readymade political categories. Those who undertake that research will have to sympathetically engage individual cases, embracing them in all of their nuance and even contradiction. They will find a model for that work throughout *Victorian Ethical Optics*, wherever Prizel turns her eye on works of art and literature.

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