

**Peter Melville Logan, *Nerves and narratives: a cultural history of hysteria in nineteenth-century British prose***, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1997, pp. xvii, 248, £32.00. \$40.00 (hardback 0-520-20473-5); £12.95, \$16.00 (paperback 0-520-20775-0).

A familiar item in publishers' catalogues these days is the book whose cornucopian title (*Madness, death, and gender*) is belied by a harrowingly truthful subtitle ('Lay Sisters at Little Piddlehampton Hospital, 1380–1381'). Peter Logan seems to have got it the other way round. Considered as a study of the relation between some nineteenth-century conceptions of the nervous system and some nineteenth-century autobiographies and novels, *Nerves and narratives* is exemplary: imaginative, lucid, well-informed, and not without a certain quiet wit. But some doubt will remain as to whether it can be thought to constitute a "cultural history of hysteria in nineteenth-century British prose".

Logan's aim is to relate developments in nineteenth-century literary realism to changes in the representation of the body. He argues that a "new body" appeared in British medical and social theory towards the end of the eighteenth century, a body marked by its susceptibility to hysteria and other nervous conditions. Nervousness had once been the prerogative of the aristocracy; its epidemic outbreak among the middle classes drew feverish attention to the consequences of a specific (urban) environment and to a specific style of life; in short, to modernity. A striking feature of the newly nervous body was its tendency to talk, especially to talk about itself; indeed, the story told about nervousness became a symptom of nervousness. Sometimes the story took the form of a novel or an autobiography. Logan's texts, in the first two parts of his book, are Thomas Trotter's *A view of the nervous temperament* (1805), Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English opium-eater* (1821), and novels by William Godwin, Mary Hays, and Maria Edgeworth. During the late Georgian period, these nervous

narratives helped to make the middle-class nervous body a focus of commentary and alarm (including alarm about the effect they themselves might have on the nerves of the reader).

Part Three of *Nerves and narratives* traces, in rather more schematic fashion, two developments in thinking about the nervous body: one sociological, the other scientific. In the first place, Logan argues, the sanitary reports and "Condition of England" novels of the 1830s and 1840s directed attention away from the middle-class body to the working-class body: a body whose main problem was not too much sensibility, but too little. Thus, Edwin Chadwick's *Report on the sanitary condition of the labouring population of Great Britain* (1842) described a working-class dangerously "insensible" to its own misery (and in particular to the miasmatic stench which were thought to cause epidemic disease). In the second place, a conception of the nervous system as a hierarchical structure centred on the brain had by 1840 given way to a conception of the nervous system as a network of semi-autonomous centres spread throughout the body, each with a degree of regional authority. Logan contends that realist fiction adapted to the new regime by acknowledging the inherent ambiguity of bodily signs. His final chapter concentrates on George Eliot, a writer more conversant than most with advances in neurological theory. He concludes that the bodies in her fiction cannot express the "truth" of their feelings because they no longer know what it is.

A study of this nature is bound to be selective. Problems arise when the selectiveness fails to act as an internal check on generalization. Logan claims that the fierce campaign against the corrupting effects of the novel which reached a climax between 1790 and 1820 was all but over by 1830; with the subsequent emergence of the nerveless working-class body as a focus of commentary and alarm, he adds, the realist novel was "finally freed" of its dangerous reputation for upsetting the susceptible middle-class reader. However, the only way this argument can be

sustained is by omitting any reference to the sensation novels thronged with palpably nervous middle-class bodies which gave rise during the 1860s to a fury of indignation. "The reader's nerves are affected like the hero's", Margaret Oliphant stridently complained in a review of the most famous of them all, Wilkie Collins's *The woman in white* (1860). Such omissions make *Nerves and narratives*, admirable though it is in the terms announced by its title, something less than a "cultural history of hysteria in nineteenth-century British prose".

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**Judith Walzer Leavitt**, *Typhoid Mary: captive to the public's health*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1996, pp. xviii, 331, illus., \$14.00 (paperback 0-8070-2103-2).

This book is about liberty, more especially about liberty and responsibility, about the rights and liberties of apparently healthy people who can transmit deadly diseases. It is a theme with very modern resonances, for it encapsulates current problems surrounding human immuno-deficiency virus and drug-resistant tuberculosis, but it is also a theme with a solid history based in the treatment of healthy carriers of typhoid fever. Typhoid is transmitted by the faecal-oral route, often in contaminated water supplies, but also through food and soiled clothing among other routes. It has apparently just one natural reservoir, the human body, and a certain proportion of sufferers continue to excrete pathogenic typhoid bacilli in their faeces and/or urine for months or years after the original illness has passed. The existence of the healthy carrier was first suggested by Robert Koch in 1902; a few years later it was confirmed during a campaign to eradicate typhoid from south-west Germany. Historically the most notorious example of a carrier comes from the United States: in March 1907, a New York cook of Irish parentage, Mary Mallon, became the first person in the United States to be identified as a

healthy typhoid carrier. As Typhoid Mary, Mallon achieved lasting fame and notoriety (in the English-speaking world at least), partly as a potent symbol of harm, partly for the practical and ethical dilemmas raised by her condition. Mallon's story, as both symbol and dilemma, is the focus of this book, not just for the window it provides on history, but because of its relevance to modern public health dilemmas relating to AIDS, to drug-resistant tuberculosis, and perhaps also to problems as yet unrecognized with other emerging infections.

Mallon's identification as a carrier, her vigorous rejection of co-operation with the public health authorities, and her continued insistence that she was perfectly healthy and so could not be a disseminator of disease, led her to virtually a life-time's incarceration on North Brother Island. She was a woman, she was single, she was a servant, she was an Irish Catholic: other carriers—male bread-winners, in particular—were not so treated, although attempts were made to keep tabs on them. Mallon's case was special, and around it Leavitt has constructed a thoughtful analysis of the problems associated with the management of "healthy" carriers in general, and of Mallon in particular. Themes of conflict and contrasting values run through this analysis: the liberty of the individual versus the welfare of the community; acceptance versus rejection of modern scientific methods and knowledge; co-operation versus rejection of bureaucratic intervention; middle-class, American-born, Protestant, attitudes towards servants, single women, Catholics and the Irish. While Mallon's story and its details are interwoven with the text throughout the book, Leavitt has chosen to emphasize how differently such a story may appear according to the perspective from which it is viewed. Thus the laboratory scientists, Leavitt argues, saw Mallon's identification and incarceration as demonstrating science's ability to conquer disease, while the health authority saw her as a justification for an increase in its own power, and the lawyers saw a case that hinged on individual rights and issues of justice. The American middle class judged Mallon by the