



Against Thoughts and Prayers

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Review of

Veprinska, Anna. *Empathy in Contemporary Poetry after Crisis*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 203 pages

Anna Veprinska's *Empathy in Contemporary Poetry after Crisis*, a volume in the Palgrave Studies in Affect Theory and Literary Criticism, examines empathy in poetry with so much nuance that the book almost stalls. A harrowing dash this book is not. Yet, Veprinska provokes reflection on the meaning of poetry written after traumatic experiences by questioning what empathy means, and should mean, to poets and readers of poetry.

Before I get to the crux of my criticism, let me say this: Veprinska knows how to read. She shines in the close readings she conducts on contemporary poems. In the chapter "The Unhere," Veprinska studies Charles Reznikioff's Holocaust, Robert Fitterman's "This Window Makes Me Feel," Cynthia Hogue and Rebecca Ross's *When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina*, and other poems, and weaves an intricate, erudite understanding of two traumatic events. She probes the diction, the approaches the various poets take, and the empathetic force of the poems to support her central argument. In key portions of the text, the book succeeds in supporting her argument with these readings without instrumentalizing these readings for the sake of the argument.

Veprinska's book argues for a complex understanding of empathy. Empathy, she says, is generally and wrongly understood as an undiluted good. Common logic says that when we feel what another person feels, we move closer to them and understand them better, and that closeness and understanding humanizes them. Veprinska argues that this understanding of empathy is "problematic": "While empathy has the potential of threading together, with attention and tenderness, various subjects, empathy also has the potential of causing harm. This doubleness is at the root of the challenge that empathy poses as a possible ethical response to someone else's trauma" (187). Veprinska goes further and says that the "attempt to 'cultivate' more empathy [is] unethical" (188).

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Statements like these might upset readers who hold a naïve understanding of empathy, but others might find Veprinska's view of empathy as harmful to be a bit of old wisdom repackaged. Most people know intuitively that cheap empathy is useless, even harmful. Take the meme "thoughts and prayers," a ubiquitous, meaningless response to all manner of trauma that internet trolls use to mock naïve empathy. Rather than act for the benefit of the victim—an act that might come at a cost to ourselves—slogans dribble from our mouths and social media. *Terrible what happened, mate. Thoughts and prayers.*

This is exactly the point that Paul Bloom made in *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, a book that Veprinska never references. In that well-reviewed book, Bloom argues that empathy negatively influences moral decisions, "grounds foolish judgements and often motivates indifference and cruelty" and "is different from being compassionate, from being kind, and most of all, from being good. From a moral standpoint, we're better off without it" (2-4). Both Veprinska and Bloom conclude that empathy is too often a substitute for action. Empathy is easy, but true love, true giving, true sacrifice, is hard. The fact is, as Bloom makes clear, some people cannot empathize, others do not want to, and those that can, and do, might not do it well. Egotists always put themselves at the center, whether co-opting another's story or taking another's pain as their own for the sake of a scoring a few lines of free verse poetry. This idea is not new, although Veprinska makes the examination of empathy useful to poets by showing how bad poetry empathizes badly and good empathetic poetry stimulates reflection.

Besides her fine readings of current poetry, Veprinska's contribution rests in "empathetic dissonance," an oxymoron she coins to capture the negative values of empathy. Veprinska develops and complicates this concept through close readings of a range of contemporary poetry born from three catastrophes: the Holocaust, the 9/11 terror attacks, and Hurricane Katrina. These readings feature in the middle three chapters: "The Unsaid," "The Unhere," and "The Ungod." Veprinska uses the prefix "un" to the chapter titles to negate, or reverse, the familiar understandings of three common words. These intentionally dissonant titles aim to disorient in the same way that "empathetic dissonance" does, but they communicate poetic pretention more than to inform the reader. Indeed, these chapter titles confuse. For example, Veprinska writes at excruciating length to try to define what she means by "ungod": "Although the focus of this chapter is the ungod, it would be amiss if this opening section did not consider God, a figure of presence that both informs and stands in opposition to the ungod. Specifically, the ungod draws on God through the ungod's theistic possibility that God exists. Although. . . ." And with that second qualifying "although," Veprinska parses her definition into infinitely finer and more abstract meaning. Now, defining terms is quintessentially academic, and this book is itself quintessentially academic, but after a while the layers of nuance Veprinska builds up around her topic and her tiptoeing around sensitivities begins to grate.

This hedging, hypersensitive quality of Veprinska's scholarship manifests in other ways, notably in her worries about appropriation. Empathy, she warns, can lead to appropriation of emotion, with the empathizer appropriating the victim's pain and turning concern for another into concern for one's self. This is a theoretical and practical issue that Veprinska says poets must confront, particularly for poets who want to inhabit the experience of other people. This problem deserves attention and Veprinska treats it with requisite concern. The problem is that Veprinska reflects these worries about appropriation back on herself. She treats the poems she surveys with respect and concern—her book is a masterclass in etiquette, so much so that it is practically Victorian—yet she strains to assure readers that she is not appropriating anything that she should not. In her dedication she says that she hopes her “empathy has not been an overstepping” (v) and later admits, just in case anybody thought that she was enjoying her work, that “the participation of [her] project in appropriation [...] makes [her] uncomfortable” (186). Veprinska's constant worry about appropriation at least seems genuine if pious, rather than driven by a fear of the cancel cops—a well-grounded fear, since appropriation is verboten in today's academy and with a sizeable section of the so-called “creative” community. The result, nevertheless, is a book that rarely modulates its dour tone.

My griping here indicates a displeasure with Veprinska's palette than her conclusions. Smoke, charcoal, and black: these are the colours she writes in. In the chapter “The Ungod,” she limits her study to agnostic and atheistic poetry about God. This conscious lack of engagement with religious, god-oriented poetry no doubt contributes to the joylessness of the chapter and to the general gloom of the book's argument, but it also weakens the argument by limiting the poems under discussion to works that tend toward hopelessness. As I say, it is a problem with a limited palette. A similarly narrow selection appears in her sources. Veprinska references scholars in fields that few people other than specialists would recognize. She makes passing reference to Wordsworth, leans heavily on Rebecca Solnit, reads contemporary poets some readers will have at least heard about, but otherwise ignores big names and big thinkers. Her theological foundation in “The Ungod” is particularly thin. She deploys writers whose work allow her to make the case for her “ungodly” selection of poetry in this chapter but ignores the reams of current philosophy and theology that, while they may not use the word “empathy,” meditate at length over how we should love, what we owe to others, how we nurse a person through pain, and even, maybe most importantly, why pain and evil exist.

Veprinska's talent resides in close reading. She undoes herself when she ventures into politics, as she does in the conclusion. Here, she clumsily suggests that empathy is a Western problem and then generalizes about colonial politics and the “power relations” that exist between “culturally and nationally diverse groups” (188). This slide into en vogue progressive politics undermines much of her book by reducing human relations to power disputes, a move that makes empathy an interesting but essentially needless side drama in the lives of individuals. For example, she says, rightly, I think, that “the

empathetic void [...] can lead to genocide, terrorism, and racial and economic divides” (195) but then extends these evils to include Brexit and disputes over immigration policies, which are also born, she says, from a lack of empathy. She takes great pains to nuance her discussion in the opening chapters, and then drains all nuance from a complex political debate about the nature of citizenship, identity, and nationality and maligns every single Brexiteer as empathetically incapacitated. It is an unsophisticated conclusion to a book that otherwise has all the sophistication and etiquette expected from a highly rarefied academic text.

WORKS CITED

Bloom, Paul. *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. HarperCollins, 2016.