

Endurance and Suffering: Narratives of Disease in the 19th Century

John Wood's latest book, *Endurance and Suffering: Narratives of Disease in the 19th Century*, takes its inspiration from photographs of people with dermatological diseases, taken for the purposes of George Henry Fox's medical research. *Endurance and Suffering* is a multi-media book that includes epigraphs with notes from Dr. Fox's case studies, the photographs themselves, and poems written by Wood to accompany them.

A warning: the images are graphic in that they reveal living people with all their abnormalities and emotional vulnerabilities. The fact that these people lived two centuries ago does not lessen the impact of their photos. A young woman with scabies covers her breasts bashfully. Another has crescent-shaped syphilitic scabs down her neck and back, and faces away from the camera, yet wears her earrings and hat. A man with Epithelioma drools helplessly before the camera, as he's lost his lips. To say John Wood wrote sympathetic odes is an oversimplification. Wood enters these photographs, imagines what these people endured, and resurfaces with a new vision of them. The accompanying poems are frightening, as only poems that say what usually remains unsaid can be. In "C. T., age 35: LICHEN RUBER," the photo subject is a woman whose head is wrapped in cloth, and whose body is covered with lichens. The poem's speaker, a viewer of the photo, says he returns again and again to the image to wonder at the covered head and:

To stare at her breasts,
which for some reason
the lichens did not colonize,
breasts many a man might
gladly woo were they
on another's body, and any lady
might esteem were the head
a head, the stance not a hobble,
and the lichens scrubbed away.

For John Wood, sexuality is not taboo, but rather essential for seeing that those who have been aesthetically disfigured are no less human. In "E. H. C., aet. 58: CORNUA CUTANEA," the husband, with horns growing out of his mouth, repulses his wife:

But science did not stanch her revulsion,
and it discharged like a slow and constant suppuration.
He could smell it—on the furniture, the dinner plates,
the pages of his Bible, and all about her body.
And she, too, like the children, dreamed,
dreamed of crabs climbing out of his mouth,

dreamed them walking their bed at night,
 crawling the length of her, under her gown, burrowing
 as his mouth would still attempt—his needs and humors,
 his sinew and inwards, having not changed.

It takes resolve to view the photographs and read the book (I had to read it in two sittings, days apart, due to the need for an emotional respite). The rewards, however, are great. Readers can expect to expand their capacities for sympathy and further their criticism towards normalized, Western standards for beauty. (Note: no mainstream U.S. publisher would accept the book, which is soon to be released through a German publisher.)

John Wood's poems are sometimes free verse, sometimes iambic and end-rhymed, each giving way to the personality of the photo subject as Wood sees her or him. Not one is immune to committing horrendous acts or noble gestures; all are human. In "P. D., age 73: EPITHELIOMA," P.D. is portrayed as the proverbial Job, wondering at the cause of his misfortune, though he acknowledges that, unlike Job, his sufferings are limited to the disfigurement of his mouth; his children have not been killed, nor his prosperity diminished. But Wood's poem is also a hopeful yet sober love letter, ultimately addressed from P.D. to his wife; perhaps, he suggests, a miracle will allow them to kiss as they had before his Epithelioma.

Wood discomforts by poeticizing the sexual behaviors of venereal disease sufferers, as in "Syphiloderma Gummatosum: LITTLE LADY LENA," an allusion to Aquilina, the dominatrix prostitute of Thomas Otway's play, *Venice Preserved*. Another poem, "Syphiloderma Tuberculosum: THE PASSIONATE SHEPHERDESS TO HER LOVE" is an allusion to Marlowe's famous pastoral poem. Accompanying the photo of a syphilitic patient (the "shepherdess"), with red bumps and scabs, the poem reads ironically, written in terse iambic tetrameter and explicit language:

Lie down on me, my body's silk.
 You're my honey; I'll be your milk.
 I'll bring you warm and bubbling jugs,
 And you will purr and lick my dugs.
 I seep, I run, I ooze desire.
 My open legs are smeared with fire.
 Oh come and kiss my pepper-skin.
 My taste sets testicles a-spin.

The shepherdess's venereal disease is presumably, though not necessarily, the result of an amorous encounter, but in this poem she is clearly an unlikely fountain of desire.

Wood's poems have no equal. Their subject and treatment are as moving as they are stunning: moving in their tender, humanizing effect; stunning, for their graphic and often uncomfortable intimacy. The most tender of these is perhaps "A. C., aet. 19, U.S.: ELEPHANTIASIS," in which a woman with enlarged thighs

is, as we first see her, a shy, insecure disfigured woman, but also is shy, insecure everywoman, and finally is, as Wood says, no less than the very Earth Mother, fecund and beautiful as all creation.

(Estella Ramirez)