

# **Trust your senses? An Introduction to the Victorian Sensorium**

**Wendy Parkins**

“Trust your senses not your neighbours.”

– London Transport security notice.

In the wake of 9/11 and the London bombings of 2005, public safety campaigns in London featured signs with the above warning on the underground and at bus stops. The postmodern sensorium is now regarded as a trustworthy source of information as citizens are hailed to pay attention to their senses in order to protect their community. In the twenty-first century, it seems that sensory experience has become a valued resource in the fight against terrorism. What we may know of our neighbours through the more public proximities of urban everyday life is pitted against the private, interior knowledge provided by our senses: the look that seems hostile, or the infringement of personal space that causes our heart rate to accelerate with anxiety, apparently warrants reporting to the authorities rather than being dismissed as just another uneasy sensory impression that is part of the fabric of urban experience. Within the binary logic of this security campaign, your senses are reliable, your neighbours are not.

What would the Victorians have made of this? Did they trust their senses? Did they believe the private knowledge gained from individual sensory experience to be more reliable than publicly-validated forms of knowledge? How typical, for instance, was John Ruskin's assertion in *Modern Painters* that an error – of judgement, of perception – was “caused by an excited state of the feelings”? The unreliability of sensory perception was further emphasized by the troubling link between the sensory and the sensual, a recurring concern for some Victorian commentators, as the “Fleshly School of Poetry” controversy exemplified. In his review of Rossetti's poetry, it will be remembered, Robert Buchanan described “Nuptial Sleep” as registering “merely animal sensations,” and condemned Rossetti's work as a sign of the pernicious spread of sensuality throughout Victorian culture. For other Victorians, however, the senses could offer a valuable and different mode of knowledge not accessible through more rational means, such as a unique mode of sympathetic connection with the wider world, as William Cohen has compellingly described in his recent exploration of Victorian literature and the senses. For Thomas Hardy, Cohen argues, bodies are represented as “part of and open to the world through their senses” (“Faciality” 440), while Gerard Manley Hopkins understood sensory experience as a means of access to the divine (Cohen *Embodied* 108).

It is not surprising to find such a wide divergence of opinion on the value and veracity of sensory experience in the nineteenth century. In an era of rapid industrialization, urbanization and increasing democratization, the Victorian sensorium was under assault as never before. As Stallybrass and White argued in their influential study *The Politics*

and *Poetics of Transgression*, the development of the modern city was concomitant with a ‘transformation of the senses’ (134). In the dangerous promiscuities of city streets, for example, anxiety about the demarcation of spaces and the segregation of populations was exacerbated by new forms and experiences of visibility that, for good or ill, opened up the city to the Victorian gaze: who was made visible and invisible by the new public spaces and forms of transport which exposed spaces previously hidden from sight? And how should urban observers respond—morally, politically—to the new information or social experience afforded by the evidence of their eyes? More significantly for Stallybrass and White, the haptic became a particularly acute and fraught aspect of modern urban life: the fear of being touched encoded fears of contamination and contagion that “became the tropes through which city life was apprehended” (135). More recently, Stephen Arata has examined how sensory experience increasingly emerged as a problem in late-Victorian modernity. Citing such varying examples as Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* and Georg Simmel’s “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Arata notes that “Innumerable late-Victorian accounts of the malady of modern life make their way round to the issue of sensory overload: too many images, too much noise, way too much information, all of it too often resulting in nervous collapse, neurosis, dysfunctions of various kinds” (198).

This special issue on “The Victorian Sensorium,” then, takes up a topic which has long been of interest to Victorian scholars but which has also been reinvigorated by the impact of the ‘corporeal turn’ on Victorian studies. Over the past two decades, the study of gender and sexuality has perhaps dominated this research but more recently other aspects of embodied experience, including affect and emotions as well as the senses, have been taken up by scholars of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Recent monographs have examined hearing, touch and smell in the Victorian era (*Victorian Soundscapes*, *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction*, *Filth: Dirt, Disgust and Modern Life*) while titles such as *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain 1800-1910* and *Victorian Glassworlds* not only attest to an ongoing scholarly interest in visual and material culture by Victorian scholars but an attention to the inter-relation between body, mind and imagination in sensory encounters with things.<sup>2</sup>

In *Common Scents*, Janice Carlisle has examined a range of Victorian novels in which she argues that the “olfactory is the sensory modality” (3) through which the lived experience of social inequalities was registered. The sense of smell seemed to be a self-evident truth, a deeply-embedded common ‘sense’ that could offer a reliable because instinctive form of knowledge in encounters with social difference at a time when conventional certainties and assumptions were being increasingly challenged by upheavals in class relations and social hierarchies, deriving in no small part from the increasing vehemence of the political demands of the working classes. In this way, Carlisle argues, it may be possible to consider novelistic representations of smells and smelling as constituting “a structure of sensations” (9), in a play on Raymond Williams’s famous concept of “structures of feeling”; that is, a means by which cultural meanings and social relationships were experienced and negotiated in deeply felt, if not always consciously interrogated, ways. “Within the context of an olfactory encounter” as represented in novels of the 1860s, Carlisle contends, class may be seen as “a practice of

everyday life, a way of comprehending quotidian, individual experience” and thus a powerful reminder that “class is not a thing, but a relation, even more an event” (12, 13).<sup>3</sup>

Implicit in Carlisle’s book, as in John Picker’s *Victorian Soundscapes*, is the notion that the close study of one sense allows us to track larger social transformations during the Victorian period – such as the growth of cities, developments in transport and communication technologies, changes in production and manufacture, the rise of new leisure practices and forms of popular culture – through providing specific examples or individual case studies that illuminate both the personal and the public, political dimensions of Victorian life and culture. Picker’s case study of Thomas Carlyle’s campaign against street music and organ grinders and his quest for a soundproof study is particularly fascinating in this context. Carlyle was renowned for his “aversion to noises of all kinds, ranging from piano-playing neighbors to crowing roosters and chickens” (“Soundproof” 428-9) but he was not alone: doctors, clergymen, academics, artists and artisans similarly railed against street music and street noise, even if not all were able to afford the expense of a soundproof study.<sup>4</sup> Street music, and urban street culture more generally, presented a specific challenge to a “burgeoning professional caste .... because, unlike members of the more established professions, they lacked a separate, official workplace that affirmed their vocational status” (Picker “Soundproof” 428). Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, Georgiana Burne-Jones noted that her husband had “never at any time joined in the cry against [street organs]” (173), an observation that was not only intended to demonstrate Edward Burne-Jones’ affinity with urban life but which also implicitly demarcated the legitimate work space of the distinguished artist’s studio from the more tenuous position of the “housebound professionals” (“Soundproof” 428) that Picker discusses in *Victorian Soundscapes*. Negotiating the place of the contemplative life within the sensory excess and shifting social identities of the modern metropolis was a difficult task, Picker shows, and one that often sought to mobilize new definitions of noise and its impact (both physical and social) to control and subdue aspects of urban street life deemed unruly or unhealthy.

Perhaps the most notable recent contribution to Victorian ‘sensory studies’ is one I have already mentioned, William Cohen’s *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (reviewed in this issue by Kirby-Jane Hallum). Cohen argues that the “flow of matter and information between subject and world” (xii) that the senses make possible provided a powerful means by which Victorian writers could explore the nature of subjectivity and inter-subjective relationships. The proximate senses of smell, taste, and touch, in particular, “bring the external world into or onto the body” (6) and hence enable exchanges between the interior world of the subject and the world beyond. In depicting tangible contact between the subject and external objects through the senses, writers such as Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Trollope, Hardy and Hopkins represented embodiment as “the inescapable condition of possibility for human existence” (131) even as they understood the sensing body as either an avenue to transcendence or as a means of social or political agency in the material world. A good example of this latter depiction of sensory experience can be seen in Ruskin’s pamphlet, “The Opening of the Crystal Palace,” in which Ruskin describes a multi-sensory encounter between rich and poor in order to provoke, in turn, a response from his readers. Ruskin’s essay is an impassioned

rejection of what he sees as the uncritical celebration of the spectacle of the new, represented by the Crystal Palace, at the expense of the preservation of the past. To underline this point, Ruskin draws an analogy between the lack of concern over Europe's crumbling artistic heritage and a sumptuous dinner-party at which the feasting participants are blind to the social inequities that confront them:

But it is one of the strange characters of the human mind, necessary indeed to its peace, but infinitely destructive of its power, that we never thoroughly feel the evils which are not actually set before our eyes. If, suddenly, in the midst of the enjoyments of the palate and lightnesses of heart of a London dinner-party, the walls of the chamber were parted, and through their gap, the nearest human beings who were famishing, and in misery, were borne into the midst of the company – feasting and fancy-free – if, pale with sickness, horrible in destitution, broken by despair, body by body, they were laid upon the soft carpet, one beside the chair of every guest, would only the crumbs of the dainties be cast to them – would only a passing glance, a passing thought be vouchsafed to them? Yet the actual facts, the real relations of each Dives and Lazarus, are not altered by the intervention of the house wall between the table and the sick-bed – by the few feet of ground (how few!) which are indeed all that separate the merriment from the misery. (430)

What I find curious here is how the analogy rather gets away from Ruskin. What begins as a call to preserve the past, through the conventional metaphor of art as “food for the human heart,” falters due to the strongly sensory terms Ruskin deploys. Proceeding from an initial emphasis on visual experience (“set before our eyes”), Ruskin's analogy invokes a range of sensory responses to dramatize the profound impact of a face-to-face encounter with the sufferings of poverty. The interruption of a banquet by malnourished bodies placed on the “soft carpet” beside each diner provides an arresting image of the shocking proximity of poverty to privilege in the modern city, separated by only a “few feet of ground”. Ruskin's depiction of privilege as a form of deliberate sensory deprivation that actively excludes an awareness of the “misery” that surrounds the “feasting and fancy-free” classes is intended to provoke an emotional response. In contradistinction to his view in *Modern Painters* that feelings may lead us astray, Ruskin's call here to “feel the evils” of the situation implicitly assumes that felt experience has a positive potential. Enabling a new or heightened understanding of the “real relations” that exist between rich and poor, such felt experience is necessary, Ruskin implies, for the privileged to be shaken out of complacency and stirred to social action.

Ruskin's ambivalence about the place of feelings is not atypical of the varied articulation of emotions and the senses in Victorian culture, as the contributors to this special issue ably demonstrate. Drawing on a range of textual and visual sources, the authors discuss diverse aspects of Victorian sensory culture that show the rich potential that attention to this area continues to afford Victorian scholars. The issue opens with Nicola Bown's fascinating exploration of Victorian post-mortem photography of children, a topic that will no doubt call forth a range of feelings and responses from twenty-first century readers. Easily dismissed now as a morbid Victorian practice, photographs of children

taken soon after death marked a unique conjunction of technology (in the form of carte-de-visite photography) with the most profoundly intimate experience of suffering, the loss of a beloved child. Bown argues that the materiality of such photographs—as objects to be touched, carried, or wept over—played a significant role in the culture of mourning, closely linking the feelings of bereavement with the feeling, or touch, of the image. Touching the dead, Bown notes, is a “persistent theme of consolatory literature”: both a reality of ‘laying out’ rituals and a powerful symbol of the desire to maintain a connection with the irrecoverable beloved, touch represented nurture, connection and love.

The emphasis on Victorian feelings of loss is continued in the second article, where Holly Furneaux explores “the rich vocabularies through which women’s pain at an intimate friend’s marriage is represented.” Interweaving textual examples from women’s life writing—including the correspondence of Emily Dickinson—with Dickens’s *Bleak House*, Furneaux notes a recurring tendency to deploy the Gothic, a mode associated with negative or extreme emotions, to provide a language to express the intense feelings of loss and separation which could not otherwise be articulated. Discussing, for instance, a scene in *Bleak House* which has often provoked disquiet among critics—Esther’s furtive watch outside the door of the newly-wed Ada on her wedding night—Furneaux notes the similarity in tone and feeling with contemporary accounts of the loss of a beloved female friend to marriage. Notably, the striking image of live burial is repeatedly used in Victorian sources, marking “marriage as a potentially fatal disruption to female friendship, whilst laying bare the social expectation and legal situation under which a women’s individual identity ceased at her marriage.” Marking an important contribution to recent scholarly work on romantic friendship, Furneaux’s article suggests that there is still much to explore in the area of Victorian affective culture, not least its trans-Atlantic dimension, as the example of Emily Dickinson’s appropriation of the work of Dickens demonstrates here.

With Judith Johnston’s contribution, “Sensate Detection in Wilkie Collins’s *The Law and the Lady*,” this special issue moves to an area that may seem an obvious point of interest for the theme, namely, sensation fiction. Johnston examines how emotion and imagination become “unlikely investigative tools” in solving the mystery at the heart of *The Law and the Lady* through the figure of the detective-heroine, Valeria Macallan, who seeks to prove her new husband is innocent of the murder of his first wife. Valeria is not unusual in Collins’s fiction for relying on the veracity of strong feelings and impulses to uncover the truth—as others have noted, for instance, even Walter Hartright is much given to nervous responses and heightened sensitivities<sup>5</sup>—but in *The Law and the Lady* this is taken much further. Valeria is variously motivated by sexual desire, jealousy, intuition, or revulsion and, it transpires, the heroine-detective is in fact pregnant for the duration of the investigation. What Johnston describes as “sensate detection” in Collins’s novel combines sensation fiction’s customary emphasis on shocking events and emotional excess with a detective narrative driven entirely by a woman’s curiosity. As this would suggest, *The Law and the Lady* cannot simply be championed as a radical overturning of Victorian gender assumptions but, in the figure of Valeria, Collins nonetheless presents a heroine for whom emotions offer a powerful form of agency.

In the final article in this issue, the focus turns to the Victorian sensorium in the Antipodes. Molly Duggins examines an album belonging to the Archer family, prominent pastoralist who settled in Queensland from 1855. Compiled from 1865 to 1874, the Archer family album combines photographs, drawings, watercolours, clippings and quotations depicting a range of subjects, from domestic interiors and gardens to images of indigenous inhabitants. Evidence of the rise of the popular natural history movement in the nineteenth century, as well as the persistent influence of Romanticism, the Archer family album should not merely be seen as a personal record of a settler family. Duggins argues that the album may also be seen as an instance of a distinctly colonial impulse to evoke emotional or affective responses (such as wonder) to the “peculiar antipodean riches of Australia” and, through such responses, legitimise the appropriation of those riches. “Colonial collage” in the form of the arrangement and aestheticization of antipodean natural and material culture within the album mirrored the colonial process of decontextualization and appropriation. “Employing wonder as an effective and culturally sanctioned aesthetic medium,” Duggins argues, “the Archer family album presents a sensory spectacle of curated nature and culture” that registered contact with cultural difference through distinctly Victorian sensory, aesthetic and scientific registers.

\*\*\*\*\*

The impetus for this special issue was the AVSA conference on the theme “The Victorian Sensorium” held at the University of Otago in February 2009. The three-day programme saw presenters enthusiastically addressing a broad spectrum of topics on the theme—from the delights of Victorian cakes to the deprivations of Edwardian boarding-house life—but the experience of the conference was profoundly marked by the absence of the keynote speaker, Sally Ledger, who had tragically and suddenly died in London shortly before she was due to make her first trip to New Zealand. It was poignantly apposite that Sally had intended to speak about Victorian sentimentality as a cultural form that sought to articulate powerful feelings that could not be otherwise expressed. We continue to feel her loss.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Evidence of the rise of ‘sensory studies’ can be seen in publishing lists, new journals such as *The Senses and Society* (Berg) and journal special issues (see, for example, “The History of the Senses” in the *Journal of Social History*, Summer 2007).

<sup>2</sup> John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), Janice Carlisle, *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (eds), *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005), Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008), Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Carlisle here acknowledges the influence of the work of E. P. Thompson, as well as Williams, on her conceptualization of class.

---

<sup>4</sup> According to Picker, Carlyle's study at the top of his Cheyne Row home featured "double walls, skylights, and new slated roof with muffling air chambers" ("Soundproof" 429).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, D. A. Miller, "Cage Aux Folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*," *Representations* 14 (1986), 107-136.

### Works Cited

- Arata, Stephen. "On Not Paying Attention," *Victorian Studies* 46.2 (2004): 193-205.
- Burne-Jones, Georgiana. *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones. 1833-1867. Vol. I.* London: Macmillan, 1904.
- Carlisle, Janice. *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.
- Cohen, William A. *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses.* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2009.
- . "Faciality and Sensation in Hardy's *The Return of the Native*," *PMLA* 121.2 (March 2006): 437-452.
- Picker, John M. "The Soundproof Study: Victorian Professionals, Work Space, and Urban Noise," *Victorian Studies* 42.3 (2000): 427-453.
- Ruskin, John. "The Opening of the Crystal Palace: Considered in Some of its Relations to the Prospects of Art (1854)," *The Works of John Ruskin, Volume XII*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1905. 415-432.
- Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression.* London: Methuen, 1986.