

BOOK REVIEWS

William A. Cohen, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses*.

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There is an indelible moment in George Meredith's *The Egoist* (1879) when Sir Willoughby Patterne gazes into Laetitia Dale's eyes in order to seek out his own reflection. Willoughby not only sees himself in her eyes, but he "squeezes himself passionately." This act, while redolent of narcissistic allusions, is also a compelling example of sensory perception and one that I believe is interesting to think about in the context of William A. Cohen's recently published literary study of the materiality of the human body, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses*. As Cohen observes, "focusing on a somatic locus and origin of the self makes a subject of the body and, at the same time, makes an object of the self: both are feeling things, but in different senses" (9). Therefore, while it is not unusual to categorise Sir Willoughby Patterne as both subject and object through his act of looking, Cohen's study prompted me to instead consider the sensory implications of moments such as this in Victorian fiction.

Embodied is firmly situated within the growing critical awareness of Victorian sensory culture in its relation to literature and offers an exciting contribution to the fertile potential of this field. Cohen dedicates his first chapter to addressing the relevant historical, cultural, political and philosophical discourses of the human body in its relation to human subjectivity, and positions his own literary argument within this interdisciplinary nexus. Conceptually, Cohen deals with a wide variety of ideas including human subjectivity and consciousness as it is channelled through bodily perception. He debunks conventional hierarchies of human senses by going beyond concentrating simply on the visual and the auditory and instead considers the role of the interiority of the human body in its shaping of human subjectivity in Victorian literature.

Sensation fiction would seem to be the most obvious Victorian literary genre to explore such concerns with its focus on heightened emotional drama being typically represented through both the minds and bodies of its characters, and because of its unique ability to produce parallel sensory experiences between the text and reader. However, the strongly visceral and affective qualities of sensation fiction are only briefly mentioned in Cohen's opening chapter as an example of how the relationship between "inner self and outer form" (13) is anatomised, particularly in the fiction of Wilkie Collins. In subsequent chapters, Cohen carefully considers five canonical nineteenth-century writers, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy and Gerard Manley Hopkins. At first glance, these writers seem to be a peculiar assemblage; however Cohen argues that each author presents a particular understanding of bodily materialism in the last half of the nineteenth century. They are also united by the fact that Victorian fiction regularly exploits the body's materiality to represent interior being.

The first two writers examined, Dickens and Brontë, are chosen because they frequently ground human subjectivity in a corporeal form, thus enabling a materialist approach to many of their novels. Cohen demonstrates how characters in *The Old*

Curiosity Shop, *David Copperfield*, and *The Professor* embody this idea of “subjective interiority” (27) through in-depth analysis of all three texts. In the next chapter he turns his attention to Trollope’s “The Banks of the Jordan” (1861), a serialised story that provides a literary context for a meaningful discussion of skin. Cohen not only considers the sensory implications of this paramount “organ of perception,” he also draws attention to external bodily categories such as race and gender that are inscribed on the skin. This chapter challenges notions of the skin as a barrier between the internal and the external by thinking about it as a permeable surface and as an intermediary for sensory perception.

The relationship between interior and exterior is revisited in the next chapter with Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*. Cohen responds to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theory of faciality and suggests that in Hardy’s novel, “the face is a fungible medium in which the subject’s ethereal thoughts or feelings are given the material shape of an object” (91). Moreover, Hardy’s representation of the dualistic correlation between face and interior being is shown to anticipate the later phenomenological work of these twentieth-century philosophers.

Subsequently the final chapter is devoted to exploring Hopkins’s writing, underpinned by the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Georges Bataille. Cohen identifies a division between proximate and distance senses; that is, senses such as sight and hearing are typically classified as being removed from the body as opposed to taste, smell and touch which are very ‘embodied’ senses. Cohen reframes sight as a more corporeally grounded sense, as evidenced by Hopkins’s poetic theory that, “I look through my eye and the window and the air” (116). The act of looking in this instance evokes Merleau-Ponty’s proposal that “perceiving subjects perceive themselves as perceivable” (18). This model of reversible perception could well be explored in other examples of Victorian literature and *Embodied* clearly shows the further potential of this thematic approach.

A fine study of Victorian sense culture, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* is thorough in exploring human consciousness and characterisation as they are grounded in sensory perception in later nineteenth-century fiction. Insightful and lucidly argued, its chronological layout is valuable in identifying the unifying critical principles claimed by Cohen in his introductory chapter.

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