

Melissa Dickson, *Acoustics in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Science: Listening at the Threshold*. Port Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2025. 293 pp. ISBN: 9781009490450

Acoustics in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Science: Listening at the Threshold provides an interdisciplinary exploration of how auditory advancements shaped Victorian literature and art. Melissa Dickson began this book during her time as a postdoctoral researcher within a large European Research Council project, *Diseases of Modern Life: Nineteenth Century Perspectives*, led by Sally Shuttleworth at St. Anne's College. During her time at Oxford, Dickson received a Higher Education Innovation Fund Award. It allowed her to draw upon medical history, specifically of the stethoscope, a significant element within her first chapter of this current academic contribution. After working with a collaborative network at the University of Birmingham, Dickson settled at the University of Queensland, where she completed the final phase of her book, which brings together the medical, scientific, and artistic fields of Victorian culture. By exposing what could be heard as well as the unheard, nineteenth-century acoustics "provides the writer a language not only to represent and conceptualise human emotions but also to model the nature of the relationship between the self, others, and the world at large" (Dickson 2). Dickson introduces her work with reference to George Eliot's narrator in the preamble to the 1866 novel *Felix Holt, the Radical*. At the end of said preamble, Eliot's description of the English Midlands is rooted within Virgil's *Aeneid*. The topos of the human transformed into a bleeding tree becomes a symbol for noiseless, unspoken human suffering, an underlying current within much of Eliot's work. Dickson clarifies that, "Eliot frames this project as one guided by the ear," thus shifting into nineteenth-century acoustic science. Dickson then references William Henry Preece's 1878 lecture to the society of electrical engineers. Dickson connects Preece's awareness of sound as both auditory and physically vibrational to Eliot's similar perception within her novels. This parallel is the first of Dickson's numerous, well-researched connections between science and literature.

Dickson's book highlights the malleability of the human self while contained within a limited sensory perception. Even as Victorian medicine and science achieved great progress within the field of acoustics, these findings brought fears and threats to the Victorian perception of identity. These anxieties, as Dickson explores, expressed themselves most often within literature and art, spaces in which the imagination expanded along with knowledge of the material body. As Dickson begins with a collision of science and literature, she concludes with the point that, "[s]cientific progress, it seems, carried with it the continual fear of a backward slide and loss of control" (226). This insight, Dickson concludes, is true to both Victorian culture and our contemporary anxieties regarding artificial intelligence's influence on art, fiction, and the very essence of writing.

Dickson likens her work to William Cohen's 2009 *Embodied* in that she, too, assumes the nineteenth-century body as a material. In contrast to Cohen, Dickson's focus "is primarily on the ingress and egress of acoustic vibrations," and how the Victorians' evolving understanding of sound affected science, medicine, and the arts of the time. Therefore, Dickson's goal is not merely to collect evidence of the vast progress of Victorian research into acoustic science, as John Picker's 2003 *Victorian Soundscapes* has already done. Her intention is to shift from what is heard to what is unheard "— the philosophical space that was pried open between sound and silence in which a new aesthetics of wonder and creative possibility emerged" (8). With profuse

research into every element of Victorian culture — fiction, philosophy, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, animal studies, spiritualism, and the psychical field — Dickson provides readers with an array of interdisciplinary considerations before presenting her arguments regarding the ways in which these findings shaped Victorian literature.

While not refuting or responding to a particular argument overall, Dickson's literary conclusions rely on wide-ranging nineteenth-century developments from the stethoscope to séances. At times, her research, references, and vast scope can overwhelm; however, the denseness of the book is necessary, as Dickson fuses scientific fields with those concerning the literary imagination. For example, Part II of her book deals with sounds that only non-human beings experienced amid the raucous of the industrializing London streets. Here, Dickson assesses a quieter realm inaudible to human ears that are pummeled with "urban cacophony" (13). She then introduces William Hyde Wollaston, an English chemist, and his 1820 proposal that even people who are not decidedly deaf to any degree may still be insensible to certain tones from musical instruments, the chirps of crickets, or the sound of bats. That an auditory world existed beyond the assumedly supreme human realm, Dickson argues, not only contributes to the audio as part of Victorian self-identification. Wollaston's discovery also led to a cultural paranoia. The collective Victorian identity became threatened by such an unknowable realm. From this "paranoid, white imperialist mindset," the gothic monsters within Stevenson, Stoker, and Collins's novels arose (81). Rather than simply demonstrating an awareness of overall cultural shifts, Dickson includes detailed, intricate scientific findings to inform her literary arguments.

While Dickson's points regard literature and art, her inclusion of the vast advancements within science and medicine are necessary for such an exploration of acoustics. Therefore, the title exposes her equal emphasis on literature and science, immediately depicting Dickson's dependence on scientific findings for the ethos underlying her literary arguments. Those more familiar with literary or culturally theoretical discourse will come away from the book with a greater scientific understanding of Victorian culture.

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