

Artistic Crosscurrents: Critical Vocabularies of Literature, Painting, Architecture, and Music in the Nineteenth Century

Paul Watt

From the late eighteenth century to well into the nineteenth century, writers—whether by accident or design—invoked vocabulary associated with one of the arts to help explain the form, function or aesthetic code of another.¹ Two particularly poignant uses of such vocabulary come firstly from Goethe, with his well-known phrase “Architecture is frozen music”² and secondly from Walter Pater’s assertion that “All art constantly aspires to the condition of music” (57). Countless such examples can be found in the works of many nineteenth-century writers. As we shall see in the articles that follow, a plethora of metaphorical and rhetorical devices (and strategies) criss-crossed writers, critical texts, and temperaments. Sometimes these connections and infiltrations are easy to discern yet at other times they are subtle and hard to detect. Such literature often aimed to educate the reader, and inspired a number of “different sorts of consequential writings—aesthetic, economic, pedagogical, political—and organized them around narratives of ethical development” (Miller 1).

Such constructions of vocabulary were implemented to help readers conceptualise the arts and was commonplace practice in the nineteenth century. This was inevitable for two reasons. First, the ordering of the arts in the Enlightenment had, to a point, facilitated a heightened awareness of how discourses concerning the arts might work and opened the path for such fields to be interpreted afresh.³ Second, and more obviously, many women and men of letters—some of them profiled in this special issue—were, by today’s standards, phenomenally well read. Unfettered by twenty-first century anxieties of clock-watching and disciplinary boundaries, they read—and they read widely—in English, French and German and many other languages besides. Some of these writers were autodidacts; many made a living by their pen (or at least tried to) and most of them could easily be considered polymaths. Many writers moved effortlessly between the writing of essays, books, pamphlets, and lectures, each pitched in a different register, tone, and sometimes style to reflect the ever-increasing variety of interests and capabilities of their publishers and readers. Unless they were hermits, writers of the second half of the century could not possibly have avoided the colossal impact that science and history had on critical discourses in other fields, hence the parlance of method and means of explaining aesthetics and psychology were often adopted in writings about literature, painting, architecture, and music.

A particularly poignant example of the potential for crosscurrents of vocabulary comes from Hippolyte Taine’s *De L’Intelligence (On Intelligence)* from 1879, which became a classic text of psychology. In the preface Taine wrote about the mechanics and scope of history:

Every perspicacious and philosophical historian labours as that of a man, an epoch, a people, or a race; the researches of linguistics, mythologists, and ethnographers have no other aim; the task is invariably the description of the human mind, or of the characteristics common to a group of human minds; and what historians do with respect to the past, the great novelists and dramatists do with the present. (xii)⁴

For Taine, the historian, the geographer, the psychologist and the writer (of both fiction and theatre) all ask common questions and explore similar ideas across time and medium. Of course these scholars and writers have their own vocabularies, their own way with words. Or do they? Are the words they use ever mixed up, shared, or stolen?

Referring again to Taine it is worth considering how his use of the word “physiology” was appropriated not by a fellow French historian or psychologist but by the English music critic, Ernest Newman (1868–1959). In Newman’s 1895 book, *Gluck and the Opera: A Study in Musical History*, he exploited the word “physiology” to describe Gluck’s psychology or nervous disposition. Upon publication this drew no comment whatsoever from the book’s reviewers and we can assume its readers took Newman’s point at face value. But some thirty years later, when Newman applied a physiological reading of Beethoven’s works in a series of essays in the *Sunday Times* (“A physiology of criticism”)—and implored the use of a physiological approach to criticism and history just as he had done in *Gluck*—the *Sunday Times* readers were dazed and confused. Newman’s reference to physiology, posited in its late nineteenth-century context, meant for him a psychological analysis of his subject, but this was completely lost on his readers who knew the term not as a means of understanding a subject’s healthy brain, but as a reference to their sickly body. Newman was at pains to point out that by a physiology of criticism he did not mean “a study of the composer in the light of his nerves and arteries, or even of his liver” (“A physiology of criticism 3” 7), yet that was precisely how his audience understood the term, which explained their confusion. Four articles into the series Newman was forced to bring the subject to a close:

The sooner I end this series of articles the better, for it is evident from the letters I receive on the subject that no one has the slightest idea what it is I am driving at. I must wait and see if I have better luck in a treatment of the subject on a larger scale elsewhere. The term ‘physiology’ is plainly a stumbling block for most people; they read into it a meaning I never intended, and then write me long letters that are most interesting in themselves, but hopelessly irrelevant to the theme. (“A physiology of criticism 4” 7)

Not only had the word “physiology” cut across history and psychology it had also cut across time. Within a generation its meaning had substantially shifted to how Newman was using it. There is no direct evidence that Newman borrowed the word from Taine but it seems very likely that he did (Watt, *Ernest Newman: A Critical Biography*).

Ernest Newman was cut from the same cloth as many of the writers discussed in this special issue. He was well read and as interested in one area (literature) as he was another (music). Furthermore, he had studied art and architecture at university. Newman had a wide frame of historical and critical reference; he was a critic who, along with Arnold and Wilde, saw the role of the critic as a pedagogue and agent of change and civilization. He was as well connected with European ideas as were some of the writers discussed in this special-issue who had antipodean connections and interests. His work was also strongly supported by institutions (such as the freethought movement)—as was the work of many writers in this era—and was concerned with the declining cultural value of not only of the critic, but of style and the written word.⁵ But why did he—and other writers in this volume—use the

language or vocabulary of one art to explain another? Rarely do writers tell us their motives, but we can only guess it was a pitch intended to bring a broader frame of reference to the reader, thus making the critic's view simpler to comprehend. We must ask the question, was a critic's intention to guide readers' thoughts and imaginations; to exploit the reader's knowledge of one of the arts and bring them into the fold of the author's argument? Or was it a technique employed to perform a text, itself a type of artistry?

This special issue had its genesis at the annual meeting of the Australasian Victorian Studies Association at Griffith University, Brisbane, on 11–14 April 2012. The theme of the conference was “Victorian vocabularies” and the papers in this special issue are based on presentations concerning the arts. The speakers interpreted this theme in quite different ways and we have before us a delicious take not just on words (as may be suggested by the conference theme) but on concepts about pitching and expressing literary ideas and the economic and aesthetic circumstances in which they were often framed. Deborah van der Plaats's article shows how Oscar Wilde's “The critic as the artist” (1891) established parallels between cosmopolitanism and decorative strategies of conventional, or Orientalist, form. It gives us a new context for reading Wilde's landmark essay and the period's “critical temperament.” Isabel Seidel shows the extent to which literary reviewing—or “word painting”—by Geraldine Jewsbury, Margaret Oliphant, and George Eliot used the language of the visual arts (from Dutch, Flemish, and French realists) to assess, describe, and criticise the novel, its characters, and scenes. The parallels are striking and laden with meaning and metaphor. Turning to a sculptor in the third article, Angela Dunstan discusses Thomas Woolner's “vocabulary of neglect” in his troubled career that paralleled the equally troubled fate of his profession in Britain. His vocabulary reframed the cultural value of sculpture and the economic and aesthetic milieu in which it operated. The final article, by Sarah Collins, is similarly less concerned about words per se but more with the contested sites of criticism, for example aestheticism, and the extent to which writers on music grappled with framing autonomy, sensation, and aesthetics.

The articles in this special issue tackle not only new vocabularies of the period in which their subjects were writing, but new ideas about the potential of language to transfer ideas across genre. By all accounts the Victorian authors discussed here had more luck in the nineteenth century when articulating their views to readers than did Newman in the twentieth century when he used an outmoded nineteenth-century term. These writers traverse not only ideas about criticism from their present but also of their near and ancient past, from Greece to Germany, and to Australia.

Notes

¹ Thanks to Katrina Dowling for editing and formatting the articles to house style and to Sarah Collins for suggestions that helped add nuance to the introduction. I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Australian Research Council who funded my time in bringing this volume to press.

² Goethe refers to architecture as “eine erstarrte Musik” in Eckermann (150).

³ See Lipkin.

⁴ See further Carpenter and Dames.

⁵ See Watt, “Ernest Newman's draft of a Berlioz biography” and “The catalogue of Ernest Newman's library.”

Works Cited

- Carpenter, William. *Principles of Mental Physiology* London: Henry S. King, 1874.
- Dames, Nicholas. *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction*. Oxford UP, 2012.
- Eckermann, Johann Peter. *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens (1823–1832)*. Ed. Gerhard Merian. Rev. ed. Berlin-Zehlendorf: Fritz Heyder, 1912.
- Lipkin, Lawrence. *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970.
- Miller, Andrew. *Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*. Cornell UP, 2008.
- Newman, Ernest. *Gluck and the Opera: A Study in Musical History*. London: Bertram Dobell, 1985.
- “A physiology of criticism.” *Sunday Times*. 16 December 1928, 20 January 1929, 10 February 1929, 17 February 1929. *Essays from the World of Music*. Ed. Felix Aprahamian. London: John Calder, 1976. 13–27.
- Pater, Walter. “The School of Giorgione.” *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. 1893. *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*. Ed. Harold Bloom. NY: Columbia UP, 1974. 17–63.
- Taine, Hippolyte. *On Intelligence*. Trans. T.D. Haye. Paris: Hachette, 1870. London: L. Reeve and Co., 1871.
- Watt, Paul. “The catalogue of Ernest Newman’s library: revelations about his intellectual life in the 1890s,” *Script & Print* 31.2 (2007): 81–103.
- *Ernest Newman: A Critical Biography*. Forthcoming.
- “Ernest Newman’s draft of a Berlioz biography (1899) and its appropriation of Emile Hennequin’s style theory,” *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 10.1 (2013): 151–68.

Paul Watt is a senior lecturer in musicology and the recipient of an Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Researcher Award in the Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music at Monash University. He is currently writing two books: a critical biography of Ernest Newman and a history of music criticism in nineteenth-century England. Concurrent projects include an edited book on nineteenth-century songsters (edited with Derek Scott and Patrick Spedding) and special issues of *Journal of Musicological Research* (‘Street Music’) and *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* (‘Networks of Musical Criticism’, edited with Sarah Collins). Previous publications include *Bawdy Songbooks of the Romantic Period* (edited with Patrick Spedding, 2011) and *Joseph Holbrooke: Composer, Critic, and Musical Patriot* (edited with Anne-Marie Forbes, 2015). His articles have been published in the *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle*, *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, *Music & Letters* and *Musicology Australia*. He is a contributor to *The Oxford Handbook of Opera* (2014) and the forthcoming *Cambridge History of Music Criticism*. Future projects include an article on musical expressions of Comte’s positivism and a book on music and morality in the nineteenth century. He has held visiting fellowships at the Institute of Musical Research, School of Advanced Studies, University of London and the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.