

Poetry Circus: The Senses and Embodiment

Professor Sophie Ratcliffe

1. SHE issues radiant from her dressing room,
Like one prepared to scale an upper sphere
By stirring up a lower, much I fear
How deftly that oil'd barber lays his bloom !
That long-shank'd dapper Cupid with frisk'd curls,
Can make known women torturingly fair ;
The gold-eyed serpent dwelling in rich hair,
Awakes beneath his magic whisks and twirls.
His art can take the eyes from out my head.
Until I see with eyes of other men ;
While deeper knowledge crouches in its den,
And sends a spark up : — is it true we're wed ?
Yea ! filthiness of body is most vile.
But faithlessness of heart I do hold worse.
The former, it were not so great a curse
To read on the steel-mirror of her smile!

George Meredith, *Modern Love* VII (1862)

2.
Their sense is with all their senses mixed in
Destroyed by subtleties these women are!
More brain, O Lord, more brain! Or we shall mar
Utterly this fair garden we might win
[...]
This woman, O this agony of flesh'
[whose agony?!]
Modern Love, XLVII

3. Some Background

Some various definitions of ‘sense (n)’

I. Faculty of perception or sensation.

- a. Each of the special faculties, connected with a bodily organ, by which man and other animals perceive external objects and changes in the condition of

their own bodies. Usually reckoned as five—sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch. Also called *outward* or *external sense* (cf. 8).

- b. c. *pl.* The faculties of physical perception or sensation as opposed to the higher faculties of intellect, spirit, etc.
- c. a. *pl.* The faculties of corporeal sensation considered as channels for gratifying the desire for pleasure and the lusts of the flesh. Also *sing.*, any one of such faculties so regarded.
- d. . Applied to faculties of the mind or soul compared or contrasted with the bodily senses; usually with some defining word, as *inner sense*, *interior sense*, *internal sense*, *inward sense*. *moral sense*: see *moral sense n.* at *moral adj.* Special uses 2.

4. ‘il y a un peu de testicule au fond de nos sentiments les plus sublimes et de notre tendresse la plus epuree’ (Diderot, 3 November 1760)

5. strength
Of usurpation, when the light of sense
Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
The invisible world

The Prelude, Book VI, 599-603 (1805 version)

Wordsworth is trying to state his position, even as he fails. But the trick he has stumbled upon here is as glorious as such a thing could be. *The light ... goes out* can mean ‘light proceeds from the source’ as well as ‘the source fails’. By combining the two, Wordsworth induces his baffling *sense* to become a lighthouse occasionally flashing not on any spiritual world, but on the dangerous and actual sea, which at other times is invisible merely because the captain is in darkness.

William Empson, ‘Sense in the Prelude’, *The Structure of Complex Words* [1951] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995) pp. 294-5

- 6. There has been a controversy started of late . . . concerning the general foundation of Morals; whether we attain the knowledge of them by a chain of argument and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer sense; whether like all sound judgement of truth and falsehood, they should be the same to every rational intelligent being; or whether, like the perception of beauty and deformity,

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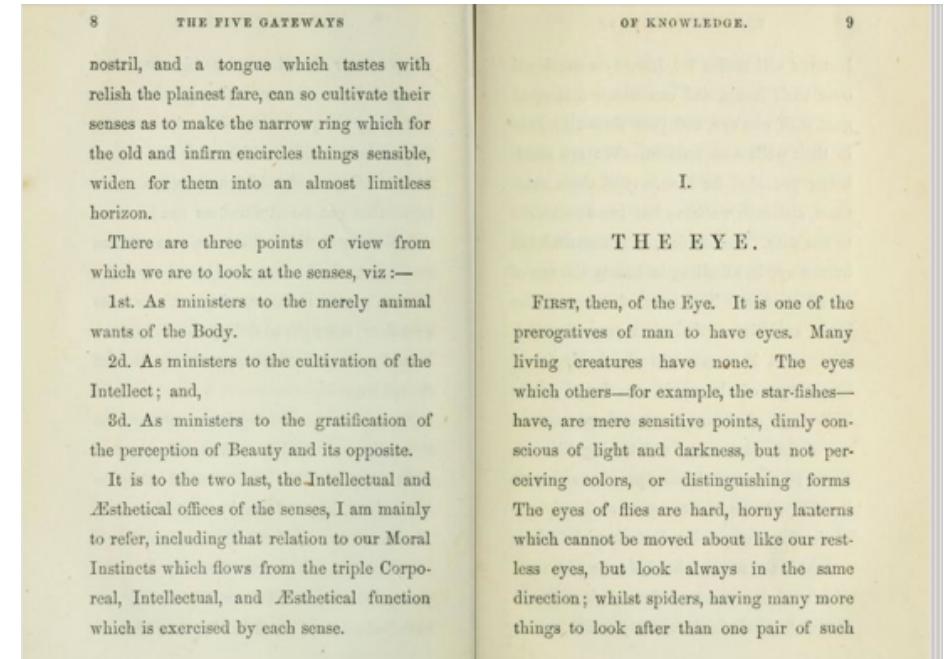
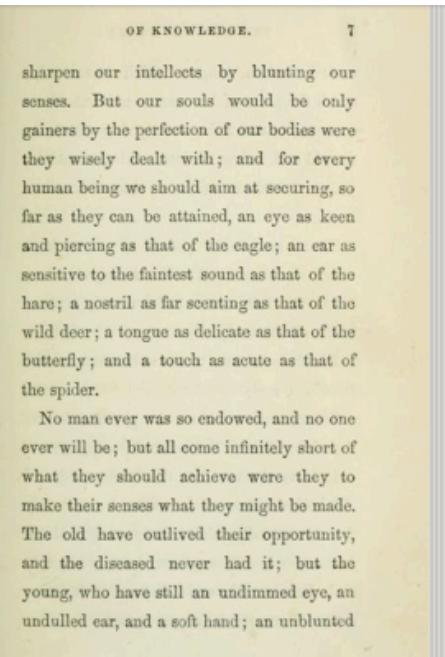
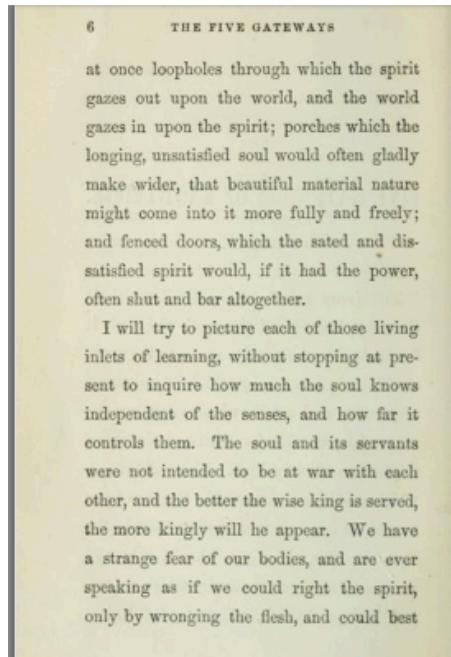
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they be founded entirely on the particular fabric and constitution of the human species

David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principal of Morals* (1751)

7. By sensations, in the strict meaning, we understand the mental impressions, feelings, or states of consciousness, following on the action of external things on some part of the body, called on that account sensitive. Such are the feelings caused by tastes, smells, sounds, or sights. These are the influences said to be external to the mental organisation

Alexander Bain, *The Sense and the Intellect* (1855)



George Wilson's *The Five Senses; or, Gateways to Knowledge* (1857)

Keats and Shelley are both **poets of sensation rather than reflection**....Tennyson belongs decidedly to the class we have already described as **Poets of Sensation**....[aware] of the slightest impulse from external nature, their fine organs trembled into emotion at colours, and sounds, and movements, unperceived or unregarded by duller temperaments...So vivid was the delight attending the simple exertions of eye and ear, that it became mingled more and more with their trains of active thought, and tended to absorb their whole being into the energy of sense

Arthur Hallam, 'On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson', a review of *Poems: Chiefly Lyrical* 1831

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the melancholy, which so evidently characterizes the spirit of modern poetry...the return of the mind upon itself ... seeking relief in idiosyncracies rather than community of interest'

Arthur Hallam, 'On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson', a review of *Poems: Chiefly Lyrical 1831*

A good account of sensation/reflection/Hallam appears in Gregory Tate, *The Poet's Mind*, p. 23-4

The eye, then, was intended by its Maker to be educated, and to be educated slowly: but if educated fully, its powers are almost boundless. It is assuredly then a thing to be profoundly regretted, that not one man in a thousand develops the hidden capacities of his organ of vision, either as regards its utilitarian or its aesthetic applications

(Wilson, p. 32)

Whether we look to Alfred Tennyson's "poetics of sensation", the mid-century "Spasmodic" phenomenon, or the so-called fleshly school of the 1870s, Victorian poetry demands to be read as physiologically inspired ...whereas the predominant eighteenth-century model of poetic transmission privileged the mind's interpretive role...nineteenth-century readers gave credit to the body as an arbiter of poetic truths'

Jason R. Rudy, *Electric Meters* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009) p. 2. See also Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* and Kirstie Blair *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart*.

[*Modern Love*] gives a Carlylean effect of seeing the action by occasional flashes of lightening ... the lack of definition of the quatrains robs the strophes of much potential beauty of form...the most luxurious ... melodic beauty is so delicious ... that it angers one with him', Unsigned Review, *Traveler's Record* 1892.



Holman Hunt, 'The Awakening Conscience' (1853)

13. Nothing is more notable than the way in which even the most trivial objects force themselves upon the attention of a mind which has been fevered by violent and distressful excitement. They thrust themselves forward with a ghastly and unendurable distinctness, as if they would compel the sufferer to count, or measure, or learn them by heart.

John Ruskin, Letter to *The Times* 25 May 1854, quoted in Caroline Arscott's 'Employer, Husband, Spectator: Thomas Fairbairn's Commission of *The Awakening Conscience*' in *The Culture of Capital*, ed Wolff and Seed.

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Pre Raphaelites and detail

We are presented with that which is merely disgusting...elaboration of ugliness; expatiation on sordid or unimportant details'

Anon., *A Glance at the Exhibition of the Royal Academy*, 1850, qtd in Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*

'the meanest details...all finished with the same loathsome minuteness, is disgusting'

The Times, 9 May 1850, on Millais, also qtd in Bullen.

14. 'attention always contained within it the conditions for its own disintegration, it was haunted by the possibility of its own excess'

Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (2001), p. 47

Our best novelists in point of composition, and of the management of detail, have mostly been women...whose style acts upon the nervous system like a symphony of Haydn or Mozart.

J. S. Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 1869

this strange disease of modern life/With its sick hurry and divided aims

Matthew Arnold, *The Scholar Gypsy* (1853)

15

A Group by Woolner

ONLY the prism's obstruction shows aright
The secret of a sunbeam, breaks its light
Into the jewelled bow from blankest white;
So may a glory from defect arise:
Only by Deafness may the vexed Love wreak
Its insuppressive sense on brow and cheek,
Only by Dumbness adequately speak
As favoured mouth could never, through the eyes

Robert Browning, 1862

16.

"Generally speaking, the eye is greeted on all hands with a confusion worse confounded of incongruous objects", 'Exhibition Tactics', *Recreative Science 1*, no. 5 (June 1862), p. 377

quoted in Britt Salvesen, 'The Most Magnificent, Useful and Interesting Souvenir: Representations of the International Exhibition of 1862', *Visual Resources* January 2011. Salvesen adds that 'The writer's conflation of the optic and haptic in his description is an indicator of the sensory overload that must have been experienced by many'

Here we stand transfixed in amazement, as the great sight first opens to our gaze, and are filled with conflicting emotions as we vainly endeavour to measure space and magnitudes, and embrace the mighty whole; while, at the same time, we are almost irresistibly tempted to examine individually the curious objects in our immediate neighborhood...Things equally confusing, curious, and beautiful, meet the eye

Views of the International Exhibition (London, Edinburgh, and New York: Nelson and Sons, [1862]), pp. 2-3.

17.

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WESTMACOTT, J. S.		
MARBLE STATUE—THE PERI	Artist.	
"One morn, a Peri at the gate Of Eden stood disconsolate."—MOORE's <i>Lalla Rookh</i> .		
* PLASTER STATUE—A GIRL AT A FOUNTAIN	Artist.	
PLASTER STATUE—VICTORY TAKING THE WREATH FROM HER HEAD, TO CROWN A VICTOR IN BATTLE	Artist.	
WESTMACOTT, R., R.A.		
MARBLE STATUE—DAVID WITH THE HEAD OF GOLIATH	Artist.	
MARBLE BUST—THE LATE EARL TALBOT, K.G. (as LORD LIEUTENANT OF IRELAND)	Hon. Mrs. J. C. Talbot,	
MARBLE BAS-RELIEF—BLUE-BELL	Earl of Ellesmere	
WILSON, J.		
A CASE OF INTAGLIO GEMS, WITH IMPRESSIONS FROM THE SAME	Artist.	
WOOD, S.		
MARBLE STATUE—ELAINE	F. Squire, Esq.	
"And thus they moved away; she stayed a minute, Then made a sudden step to the gate; and there Her bright hair, blown about the serious face, Yet rosy, kindled with her brother's kiss, Paused in the gateway, standing by the shield In silence, while she watch'd their arms far off Sparkle, until they dipp'd below the down. Then to her tower she climb'd, and took the shield, There kept it, and so lived in fantasy."—TENNYSON, <i>Idylls of the King</i> .		
WOODINGTON, F. W.		
MARBLE BUST—ARIEL	Artist.	

150

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SCULPTURE.]	BRITISH DIVISION.	[PRINCIPAL GALLERY.
	WOOLNER, T.	
MARBLE GROUP—BROTHER AND SISTER	T. Fairbairn, Esq.	
MARBLE STATUETTE—LOVE	A. H. Novelli, Esq.	
PLASTER STATUE—LORD BACON	Artist.	
(Model for the statue erected in the New Museum at Oxford.)		
MARBLE BUST—PROFESSOR SIDGWICK	Trinity College, Cambridge.	
MARBLE BUST—ALFRED TENNYSON, ESQ.	Trinity College, Cambridge.	
MARBLE BUST—RAJAH BROOKE	T. Fairbairn, Esq.	
MARBLE BUST—THE REV F. D. MAURICE	Mrs. Maurice.	
MARBLE BUST—W. SHAW, ESQ.	W. Shaw, Esq.	
MARBLE Bust—W. FAIRBAIRN, ESQ.	T. Fairbairn Esq.	

Official Catalogue of the Fine Art Dept: International Exhibition 1862

17b, People take their literature in morsels, as they take sandwiches on a journey....The race has made up its mind to be fugitive, as well as minute

Walter Bagehot, 'The First Edinburgh Reviewers' (1855) available online through the Liberty Fund

18. John Keble claimed that *The Christian Year* was designed to have a "soothing tendency" (vii) written for an age "when excitement of every kind is sought after with a morbid eagerness" (v). It was conceived as being 'Deliberately segmented and portable',

Krista Lysack, 'The Productions of Time: Keble, Rossetti and Victorian Devotional Reading, *Victorian Studies* 55.3 Spring 2013, 458

19. They safely walk in darkest ways

Whose youth is lighted from above

Where through these senses' silvery haze

Draws the veil'd moon of nuptial love.

Who is the happy husband? He

Who, scanning his unwedded life,

Thanks Heaven, with a conscience free,

'Twas faithful to his future wife

Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House*

20. a 'breviary for married lovers', Osbert Burdett, *The Idea of Coventry Patmore* (1891)

21 'Patmore strove to maintain an intellectual reserve against the bodily pull of poetic rhythm. ... [he] believed in the power of poetry to "inflame and propagate" dangerous thoughts and feelings' (Patmore 1856, 361). Metrical regularity was both a means of containing inflammation and ...a way to regulate the intellectual and emotional disposition of the content.' (Rudy, p. 15)

Selected Further Reading

Megan Ward, 'Feeling Middle Class: Sensory Perception in Victorian Literature and Culture', Ph.D Dissertation (available online as a downloadable pdf)

Rachel Ablow, *The Feeling of Reading* (2012)

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

Michael Diamond, *Victorian Sensations* (2004)

Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel* (2007)

Gillian Silverman, *Books and Bodies: Reading and the Fantasy of Communion in 19th Century America*

Barry Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*