Reading Materiality and the Senses in Victorian Literature

Embodyed: Victorian Literature and the Senses, by William A. Cohen


Anna Gething

In line with his previous major publications, Cohen sets out to strip back and surprise with Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses. While perhaps not dealing so overtly with exposing the unsavory as did Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life (2005) and Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction (1996), Embodied, as its title suggests, similarly confronts the messy stuff of bodies: the “strangeness” of “fleshy matter” (p. xvi) that has “excited, terrified” or left “awestruck” the Victorian writers explored here (p. 25). Crucially, it is the relation between inner being – questions of self, soul, and mind – and external physicality that governs...
this text’s discussion, with the senses providing the vital channels of communication between the two. “Recent scholarship,” Cohen explains, “has tended to regard the human body as the location at which external, objective identity categories – such as race, sexuality, gender, and disability – are inscribed. A focus, by contrast, on the interior, subjective experience of self and sensation can yield an account of the ways in which such politics come to be felt internally” (p. 16). Such is Cohen’s ambitious and persuasive mission in the chapters that follow.

Cohen references an extensive range of literary genres in his discussion of nineteenth-century ideas about bodily materialism, including autobiography, gothic fiction, poetry, the short story, private journals, and newspaper articles. The first chapter employs these references to provide a historical, cultural, and critical context for the close readings of sensory encounters that shape the subsequent chapters, which focus on a range of canonical and non-canonical Victorian texts. Factors including mass industrialism and urbanization, the advent of evolutionary theory, and newly emerging notions of race and ethnicity all combined, says Cohen, to fuel a concern in the Victorian era with the materiality of human existence; a concern shared by authors of the period who “find cause for writerly provocation and explanation in embodiment as they seek to work out the effects not of the soul being the body’s prison but of the soul giving up its ghost to the material of the body” (p. 25). Chapter 2 begins the literary journey by examining embodiment of the interior and its penetration, both painful and pleasurable, via the sensory organs, as represented in Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *David Copperfield* and Charlotte Brontë’s *The Professor*. Chapter 3 then interrogates Anthony Trollope’s serialized story “The Banks of the Jordan” in a discussion of skin politics: “bringing together discussions of racial and gender identity with psychological and phenomenological accounts of the skin both as a permeable, sensory surface and as a socially coded marker of identity” (p. xiv). Chapter 4 moves on to explore the corporeal landscapes of Thomas Hardy’s novel *The Return of the Native*, highlighting Hardy’s heavy emphasis on sensory perception and the consequent dissolution in his writing of the distinction between internal and external, human and environment. The poetry, journals, letters, and devotional writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins are the subject of Chapter 5, which introduces theology to the consideration of self and soul, and which engages directly with the twentieth-century theoretical concepts of embodied subjectivity that inform Cohen’s discussions throughout this book. Specifically, he draws on aspects of twentieth-century French philosophy that echo the Victorian challenge to stable subjectivity on the basis of the always shifting, seeping body: the theories of Georges Bataille, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari both provide
models for interpreting the writing of nineteenth-century authors and, Cohen argues, are prefigured by them (p. xiii).

In his opening chapter Cohen states that his interest in the influx from the external world into or onto the body explains the particular significance to his discussion of the proximate senses (smell, taste, touch) and, in turn, of the distance senses (hearing, vision) when they are rendered tangible and proximate (pp. 6, 23). He goes on to talk of how the work of one of his central theoretical figures, Merleau-Ponty, centers on sight, as “vision is the dominant human sense, the one most richly evoked in language, and the highest in the classical hierarchy of the senses” (p. 17). Arguably, and perhaps disappointingly, vision maintains its position atop this hierarchy of the senses throughout Cohen’s analysis, which in fact tends towards a reading of vision and hearing over the traditionally proximate senses. Taste and smell, in particular, though described as “the two most incorporative sensory modalities” (p. 129), receive relatively brief attention. The all-male selection of theorists provokes a similar desire for more. While giving some elegant and absorbing readings, there is the occasional sense that a wider, and multi-gendered, range of theorists might make for a richer and more convincing analysis: passing references to the very relevant work of Mary Douglas, Julia Kristeva, Elizabeth Grosz, and Judith Butler, for example, suggest potential for further useful development. This is, however, an important and insightful text, one which makes a valuable contribution to the neglected study of the senses in literature.

To end with a note on the beautiful cover art of this book: a detail from a piece by Valerie Hammond, whose “desire to record both the tangible and elusive aspects of the human condition” (Resource Library) illustrates appositely Cohen’s compelling and subtle study of the human essence in Victorian literature; his proposal of embodiment as “a way of suspending subjectivity, of forestalling the fantasy of completeness that inheres in the concept of the human, without necessitating transcendence of the material” (pp. 135–6).

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