

Literature and Sensation

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Edited by

Anthony Uhlmann, Helen Groth, Paul Sheehan,
and Stephen McLaren

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

ANTHONY UHLMANN, HELEN GROTH,
PAUL SHEEHAN AND STEPHEN MCLAREN

Historically, literature has played an important role in the representation, interrogation and manipulation of sensation, affect and the senses. “Sensation” indeed has at times emerged to the forefront of artistic thinking. Undoubtedly one of John Keats’ most-quoted statements, his exclamation in a letter of 1817, “O for a life of sensations rather than thoughts” has, as Newell F. Ford has noted, met with three main kinds of reaction: puzzlement, being deplored, or being revised or “clarified” in order to rationalise away the implied radical challenge to social norms (1949, 1). William Wordsworth’s unique virtue however, for Samuel Taylor Coleridge, lay in a more dialectical engagement: the “union of deep feeling with profound thought”, a balance of “truth in observing” and imaginative modification of sensory objects: above all, “the prime merit of genius” (Coleridge 1997, 54) lay in his ability to apply the tone and atmosphere of a child’s senses of wonder and novelty, with fresh feeling, to everyday material that had been familiar for perhaps some forty years. Coleridge’s famous distinction of fancy and imagination contrasted the everyday faculty of memory and perception, the product of sensations, with the higher, “esemplastic” power of imaginative re-rendering, which involves in part the destruction of remembered images (175). While the greater status is accorded to the latter, sensation and perception remain the primary forms of imagination, and are closely linked to this higher, secondary imagination.

The Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid in 1785 usefully defined these two frequently coupled terms: sensation and perception. The “external senses”, he wrote “have a double province—to make us feel, and to make us perceive” (cited in Humphrey 1992, 24-25). In common with many thinkers since, Reid appears to have emphasized perception over sensation. Perception he defined firstly, as the “conception and belief which nature produces by means of the senses”, whereas sensation is defined simply as the feeling that accompanies perception.

Sensation was not, in the nineteenth century, solely a Romantic preoccupation. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Victorian novel of sensation treated melodramatic, shocking or astonishing material. Or the quest for sensation could take on an extreme, and distinctly unromantic tenor. Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man* in *Notes from Underground* suffers from a surfeit of "consciousness" and seems to find relief in any sensation for sensation's sake, even if that consists only of avenging an imagined or real slight, revelling in toothache, or exercising cruelty upon an undeserving target.

In the twentieth century, Modernists re-engaged in sophisticated ways with sensation and perception, through a rich array of sources: scientific, artistic and philosophical. Scientific ideas about perception have long been of interest to artists, because both art and science try to understand how we feel, how we perceive. In a diary entry of 19 December 1920 Virginia Woolf marvels over the insights expressed by Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (of 1817): "Fancy reforming poetry by discovering something scientific about the composition of light" (1978, 81).

Woolf famously declared that the world changed on or around September 1910, with the first post-Impressionist exhibition in London. All art, said Roger Fry, "depends upon cutting off the practical responses to sensations of ordinary life, thereby setting free a pure and as it were disembodied functioning of the spirit" (1974, 242). This exhibition brought to the public's awareness a new art which subordinated conventional representation to the "direct expression of feeling" and which besides, "implied a reconsideration of the very purpose and aim" of art (237). This latter theme of course resonates deeply in the early years of what was later to be called literary modernism. Woolf too, in her celebrated image of life as a "luminous halo" rather than a "series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged" stresses the conveying of an "unknown and uncircumscribed spirit" (1925, 189). She privileges neither sensation nor perception but rather, a dialogue of the two, a theme restated in her essay on "How to read a book" (1932, 258-261). This view can be contrasted to Russian formalists of the early twentieth century, who valorised the concept of *ostranenie*, "defamiliarization", a technique designed to jolt the reader into seeing works of art, and the matters represented, in new terms: to re-educate their perceptions, but without directly embracing sensation.

Paul Cézanne was one of the artists featured in the 1910 exhibition. In the late nineteenth century, Cézanne had developed the concept of "sensation" to describe thinking in painting, and argued for the possibility of a "logic of organized sensations" (Kendall 1998, 299). Whereas the idea

of an impression, for the French Impressionists, carries the sense of a passive reflection, nature pressing its image on the artist who then faithfully records the moment, sensation involves a complex process of interactions which is more active than passive. Cézanne claimed that the painter is comprised of two parts, the eye and the mind. While it is possible to work without the mind, in the manner of the best Impressionists, such as Claude Monet—who, Cézanne said, was “all eye”, but “what an eye”—the kind of art Cézanne sought, related the composition of a painting to an understanding of what the eye has perceived.

Sensation, then, is both “outside” (in nature) and “inside” (in the mind), but it can also be transferred to the brushstroke, laid down on the canvas and might in turn be sensed by a viewer. What troubled and irritated Cezanne, says Roger Fry, was his “incapacity to express his ‘sensation’ in such terms as would make its meaning evident to the world” (1974, 259). That Cézanne used the word “sensation” to refer to the brushstroke itself and the way it builds colour is apparent through the famous story of his falling out with Paul Gauguin. Gauguin had joked about copying Cézanne’s technique of applying brushstrokes. Cézanne was reported as saying: “Oh, this guy Gauguin! I had a little sensation, just a little, little sensation ... But, you know, it was mine, this little sensation. Well, one day this guy Gauguin, he took it from me” (cited by Shiff 1998, 26).

Far from being purely artistic preoccupations, the interplay of sensation and perception is also reflected in recent and contemporary debates in theories of mind, cognition and perception. Nicholas Humphrey in his *A History of the Mind* returns to the Mind-Body problem that has obsessed philosophers since Descartes. Humphrey suggests that both Cartesian dualism and various monistic theories are problematic (1992 2-6). In his evolutionary history of consciousness he privileges not perception but rather, raw sensation. The latter, he implies, has been largely ignored by twentieth century psychology (30). Indeed, in one psychology textbook with the title *Sensation and Perception*, chapter after chapter is devoted to one aspect or another, of perception (Goldstein 1999). Two of the seventeen chapters are devoted to cutaneous and chemical senses respectively. Perceptual matters rate 36 headings in the index, whereas “Sensations” is the sole index listing for “sense”-related matters.

Humphrey’s approach is summarized in a series of propositions. The first three are worth quoting. Firstly: “To be conscious is essentially to have sensations”. Secondly, “in the absence of bodily sensations ‘I’ would cease to exist. *Sentio, ergo sum*—I feel, therefore I am.” Thirdly, all

sensations are located at spatial and temporal boundaries: between “me” and “not-me”, between past and present (Humphrey 1992 98). It is at the boundaries, Humphrey suggests, where “all things interesting in nature” happen and, he implies, the same might be true of books (1).

In the philosophical realm, in some influential thinkers of recent decades one might hear distorted echoes of Keats’ cry. Jacques Derrida critiqued the “logocentrism” of Western thought in favour of a deconstruction of traditional discursive structures. Gilles Deleuze, working on the English painter Francis Bacon, who in turn drew upon Cézanne’s ideas in developing his own aesthetic method, created concepts that turn about Cézanne’s understanding of “the logic of sensation”. Cézanne’s aesthetic was built upon a complex theory of human perception and the emotions produced through perception. For Bacon, and for Deleuze, the function of art is to capture sensations, to render visible invisible forces, to make these immediately perceptible and to enable them to act directly on the nervous system of the viewer.

This collection of essays then, offers a timely and varied series of perspectives on seminal and continuing debates about literature and sensation, and demonstrates so many ways in which literature and sensation inform each other. Rather than adopting any chronological or literary taxonomic principle, we have opted to organize these essays into four divergent but interconnected thematic perspectives: “The Sensational”, “Making Sense”, “The Senses and Literary Representation”, and “Felt Sense”. Thus, for example, James Joyce’s first novel looks very different when analyzed from three contrasting perspectives. O’Leary’s approach to “Making Sense” demonstrates that *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a wonderful vehicle for the “experiment” of interrogating our own experience, from raw sensation to mediated experience. The school of thought that emerged from Hugh Kenner’s famous chapter on “*A Portrait in Perspective*” could lead to the fixed perception about its protagonist, the budding poet Stephen Dedalus that “The only creative attitude to language exemplified in the book is that of Stephen’s father” (Kenner 1955, 133). William Martin’s exploration of the senses and Joyce’s lyric prose style however, points to a suggestive relation between poetic rhythm and language in Dedalus’ poetic sensibility, while Stephen McLaren’s analysis in “Felt Sense” of the poet’s engagement with a “conundrum of sense” counters readings of a derivative poet. Both Martin and McLaren, in readings of the scene in which Stephen writes a villanelle, demonstrate that attention to the sensory side of poetic composition provides an effective challenge to decades of ironic readings of the subject of that “*Portrait*”.

The Sensational

Literature, and particularly the novel, has long been associated with sensational representation. Tales of murder, criminality, natural catastrophes, political intrigue, betrayal and psychological trauma are synonymous with the history of fiction. Nineteenth-century sensation fiction exemplifies this phenomenon, not only representing the “sensational” transformations of nineteenth-century society, but transporting readers into the mind: self-consciously dramatizing the psychological impact of the shocks of modernity. As the prominent nineteenth-century sensation novelist Margaret Oliphant (cited in Jay 1995, 45) observed:

We, who once did, and made, and declared ourselves masters of all things, have relapsed into the natural size of humanity ... It is a changed world in which we are now standing ... [and] ... it is only natural, in an age that has turned out to be one of event, that art and literature should attempt a kindred depth of effect and shock of incident.

Each of the six essays in this section approaches the nature of sensational representation from a different historical and cultural perspective. The consistent theme is the nexus between sensational writing and contemporaneous historical, political and social events. Paul Sheehan begins with an analysis of Thomas De Quincey’s provocative 1827 essay “Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts”. Sheehan explores how the sensational idea of murder was exploited by nineteenth-century aesthetes who were eager to defy mainstream Victorian values as a way of accessing a world of pure aesthetic experience. Reading through the lens of nineteenth-century sensation fiction, Helen Groth considers the problems arising from recent recuperations of the idea of cosmopolitanism as a model for thinking and feeling beyond the limits of self and nation. Focusing on the work of Edward Bulwer Lytton, one of the most successful and sensational writers of the period, Groth reconstructs the historical context for Lytton’s sensational dramatization of the last days of Pompeii. Lytton invited readers to project back into the plight of a past culture in order to respond more sympathetically to present political events, one of which was the plight of refugees from recent eruptions of Vesuvius.

While Lytton transformed himself from literary celebrity into public intellectual, Angela Dunstan examines the more toxic effects of celebrity on the tragic life of Pre-Raphaelite muse Elizabeth Siddal, who is best known as the corpse that lover Dante Gabriel Rossetti disinterred to

retrieve the unpublished poems he had buried with her. Dunstan analyzes the ways sensational biographical events have obscured the significance of her literary and aesthetic contribution to the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Charting transformations in sensational writing from the nineteenth century to contemporary crime fiction, Pamela Newton finds in the social crime fiction genre, a realism based on perceptions of “people, place and politics”. Newton explores continuities between the exploration and exploitation of the idea of murder in nineteenth-century narrative and in the work of two contemporary novels: Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* and Peter Temple’s *The Broken Shore*.

This focus on contemporary literature is sustained in an analysis of Ian McEwan’s evocation of the sensationalized experience of terror in *Saturday*. Reading McEwan’s writing in the context of recent cognitive theories of emotion, Maria Takolander explores the way in which the manipulation of emotion and suspense in *Saturday* destabilises the novel’s ethical stance as an intervention into contemporary debates about the nature of terror. Finally, Larissa McLean Davies examines elements of the career and work of Australian writer, Helen Garner. Garner has long been associated with sensational topics, often causing outrage among second-wave feminist critics and social commentators. McLean Davies argues that Garner’s least controversial work, *Cosmo Cosmolino* has the most to tell us about the limits of second-wave feminist fictional engagements with the politics and aesthetics of the sensational.

Making Sense

As Gilles Deleuze outlines in *The Logic of Sense* (2004)—a work which draws the “nonsense” of Lewis Carroll into dialogue with Ancient Stoic understandings of the manner in which sense or meaning is generated—the disciplines of Literature and Philosophy offer mutually informative ways of thinking about the nature of meaning and the meaningful. The kind of sense conveyed by literature is never simple: it unfolds itself through paradoxes that seem momentarily to hold elements of uncertainty in place. Just as Menelaus captures the shape-changer Proteus in *The Odyssey*, forcing him to reveal something of his knowledge of the unknown, literature can create meaning by capturing uncertainty. The seven papers in this section consider the manner in which literature might be thought both to make sense and hold it in suspense: drawing readers in to the difficult process of interpretation. They further consider the ways in which meaning might emerge from feeling and feeling from meaning, with sensation both generating and being generated by sense.

In recent years, the Nobel Prize-winning author J. M. Coetzee has developed a unique kind of thinking, one that both works beside and challenges philosophy. For example, in *The Lives of Animals*, he subtly shifts an essayistic form into the fictional domain. Rather than giving a conventional lecture on animal rights at the 1997-98 Tanner Lectures at Princeton, Coetzee offered a fictional account of the lectures of Elizabeth Costello in a unique form that forces us to confront the dialogical power of literature: a power that allows multiple points of view to clash, to be contrasted and contested, to be held in suspension, forcing us to think about the implications of philosophical viewpoints that do not fit into, or pose a direct challenge to, dominant ways of thinking. In this collection, Coetzee, in developing a response to the question “Is there thought without language” considers, among other things, the uncertain process of literary composition, the emergence of a metaphor or the title of a work of fiction by systems of thought that may not be systematic, guided only by what “feels right” and yet which allows the beauty, the surprise of unexpected sense to emerge.

Further exploring the links between feeling and meaning, Emma Simone develops an understanding of Virginia Woolf’s preoccupation with the relationship between the subject and the world, a relationship which Woolf herself describes as being felt as a series of shocks. Simone draws Woolf into dialogue with Martin Heidegger’s concept of *Angst*, showing how this meaningful sensation acts as a catalyst that allows the subject in Woolf’s works to reveal essential aspects of being. Timothy O’Leary examines a different side of the same problem in considering the work of Woolf’s exact contemporary James Joyce. In reading Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, O’Leary draws upon the work of Michel Foucault and Hans-Georg Gadamer to consider the social and historical nature of experience, and its transformative potential. Is it possible, he asks, for a novel such as *A Portrait* to change the way that the reader subsequently experiences the self and the world?

For a time the work of Theodor Adorno, and his critical project, fell from favour within the academy. Yet the importance of Adorno’s work has recently begun to re-emerge at a moment when the industries of mass culture have a more structuring influence on the human potentials both to think and to feel than at any previous time in history. Conti develops a reading of the manner in which Adorno’s concept of “aesthetic negativity” defends the “sensational” moment of art from both the depredations of popular culture and the idealizing rationality of the sciences, asking us to again consider literature’s capacity to move us to think. Ben Denham develops an adjacent idea: that the “difficulty” of works is important to the

process of generating thought. Drawing on contemporary art, neuroscience and philosophy, Denham considers the role of a greater sensory confound (comprising the five senses together with other senses such as balance and proprioception) in the production of meaning. An experiment in “difficult reading” reveals that the process of reading does not merely involve logical understanding, but is *felt*, even in uncomfortable ways. Niven Kumar turns to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a thinker who developed an exchange between literature and philosophy that is as powerful as any in literary history. Kumar argues that Coleridge’s understanding of how sense impressions might offer us valid and useful ways of achieving knowledge and making discoveries within the world, assumes two modes of being: *reason* and *creation*. These modes, Kumar contends, develop into a separation within being itself, one that implies, following the work of Maurice Blanchot, a disembodiment or fragmentation. Kumar examines this embodied absence, which is felt in tracing the gaps between sense and nonsense, in the work of Jorge Luis Borges and Franz Kafka.

Finally, Anthony Uhlmann explores the manner in which James Joyce turns to philosophy in developing an aesthetic theory of relationships in *Exiles* (which differs in important ways from the aesthetic theory outlined in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*). Joyce sketches this aesthetic logic in his notes to *Exiles* and develops it further in the play itself, entering into dialogue with Spinoza and Shakespeare around the meaning, and affective power of, the feeling of jealousy. Joyce conceptualizes jealousy itself as offering a primary term within aesthetic experience because it involves uncertainty: an oscillation between love and hate that holds an intensity of feeling, an intensity of meaning, in place. The Proteus of *The Odyssey*, struggling against his captors then, enters into relationship with the Proteus of *Ulysses*.

The Senses and Literary Representation

Literature implicitly engages with all five senses, using a refined and nuanced repertoire of conventions to find ways of representing them. The seven papers in this section address the stimulation of sense organs, and the physical sensibility and bodily conditions that result, to raise a number of compelling issues about the nature of literary representation. These range from the recording of stimuli in order to give more intimate contours to fictional “inner” worlds, to using sensory experience as a way of pressing at the boundaries of the representable and confronting not only literature’s far-reaching capabilities, but also its thresholds and (theoretical) limitations. Covering a wide variety of standpoints—cognitive, ethical,

aesthetic and scientific—these papers explore literature’s sensorial realm in its manifold guises.

Brian Boyd begins by addressing literature and cognition from a provocative new direction. Literature, he suggests, can be interpreted in relation to scientific themes, for example as a set of behaviours viewed within evolutionary terms. It is time, Boyd argues, for us to consider what science might have to offer literature. Engaging with science, particularly cognitive psychology and its analysis of our appetites for play and for new cognitive patterns, might indeed offer us a rich, evidence-based engagement with the art of literature. Maria Angel and Anna Gibbs work from a different direction, examining the network of connections between literature, cognition and new media art. They demonstrate how these connections illuminate, in the first instance, a view of language that makes the literary a privileged site for understanding the implication of the body in writing; and then, the ways in which writing organizes relations with and between readers, through its construction of social imaginaries.

The question of deafness, and its portrayal, is an important concern in contemporary literature. For Donna McDonald, deafness should be approached not from the point of view of lack or loss of sensation, but as an alternative sensory experience. Examining two recent works, Vikram Seth’s *An Equal Music* and Frances Itani’s *Deafening*, McDonald considers the difference between “witnessing” and being “immersed” within the experience of deafness, and examines the potentials of each approach. Suzie Gibson, in a reading of J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, observes that the scientific attitude of mastery over the object world is disturbed and disrupted by literature, which deals with desires, emotions and feelings. She argues that the possibilities and limits of our relationships to ourselves and to others are dramatized through the entanglement of emotion and responsibility. Crucially, then, the determining media for our ethical responses are the sensations, whose importance ought to be recognized and given proper consideration.

For Caroline Webb, Angela Carter performs a similar manoeuvre in “The Bloody Chamber”. Carter uses language that is highly sensuous, even erotic, to implicate the reader in the protagonist’s guilt. In Webb’s view, Carter’s evocation of sensation becomes the means through which the power of patriarchal vision and its construction of sexuality is contested, using sensational images and rhetoric to elicit an ethical investment from her readers.

Moving from the ethical to the aesthetic, William Martin examines James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In his highly nuanced reading, Martin outlines the Symbolist association between words

and colour, and brings it to bear on the “sensuous material” that is one of the cornerstones of the novel. By tracking the relationship between sensation and rhythm in *A Portrait*, Martin is able to show how Joyce reworks the prose poem to convey the otherwise ineffable, rich inner life of protagonist Stephen Dedalus. And finally, James Gourley compares the work of another modernist to a contemporary novelist. Both Samuel Beckett’s *Worstward Ho* and Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist* move away from conventional “literary” representation towards an art that is strikingly image-based. Their works foreground the boundaries and potentials of language in literature, and adumbrate a threshold that all writing of the senses must inevitably confront.

Felt sense, affect and effect

In *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning* (1997), Eugene Gendlin addresses thinking beyond the purely logical and conceptual and in particular, explores the relation between experiencing and cognitive concepts. This project involves in part, reversing the usual philosophical convention by prioritizing experiential sense (such as a felt sense) over cognitive system. In this final section of *Literature and Sensation* a series of papers explores how texts can represent, or engage the reader with, experiential bases of knowing: experience of the senses and sensation, of affect and other effects in literature.

Experiential knowing can shape literary creation. Drawing upon eco-critical theory, Bonny Cassidy examines a poetics of listening to “the life of a place”, and describes a peculiarly Australian eco-poetics that affords a sense of place in Australian poetry as “An environmentally grounded poetics uses the body to take us beyond an isolated/isolating human experience”. Jennifer Hamilton describes how, in the writings of Hans Christian Anderson, what is repressed, inimical to or inexpressible by logical sense is conveyed in the narrative: Anderson’s unintelligible and amorphous desire finds expression in dramatic meteorological metaphors; a blinding snowstorm, a vertiginous and precarious landscape of frozen desire that appeals to “the base and bodily sensational properties” of weather and temperature and represents in literature, the place where “feeling is the sole carrier of meaning”, where sense as meaning both “originates and unravels”.

Stephen McLaren demonstrates that in the villanelle scene of Joyce’s *A Portrait*, the act of poetic composition depicted there originates in the noetic but ineffable, and he traces the poet’s progress across a threshold of sense. The aesthetic philosopher reasoning in a mode of sense that is, in

Deleuzian terms, purely logical and possible, here engages in an artistic process that embraces the sensational and the uncanny, a new artistic mode of thinking that is steeped in experiential sense and through which nonetheless he endeavours to make sense of the object of his affections.

Literature can convey or induce some sense or understanding of experiential knowledge, as well as producing other effects. Kate Mitchell's paper examines how contemporary historical fictions cast history as romance in A. S. Byatt's novel *Possession: A Romance* in order to posit affective modes of knowing the past, and positions literature at the centre of historical recollection. Sue Kossew suggests that Lloyd Jones' Booker short-listed novel *Mr Pip* textualizes both the affective aspects of literature—literally, how reading can change lives—and how what could be seen as the sensational, in its graphic descriptions of violence, can also effect social and personal change. In a survey of representations of poets in film, David McCoey shows that the poet is portrayed as having privileged access to the special realm of sensation and consciousness. The poet becomes a focus of the sensational, and in films such as *Pandaemonium*, *Sylvia*, *The Hours*, *Dead Man*, and *Libertine* the representation of poets as visionary and anti-authoritarian sees poetry and poets taking on a radically transformative role.

The experiential aspects of reading, in traditional print and in new electronic forms, have fascinating implications for our understanding of the role of the senses in the process of understanding a text. Hazel Smith's analysis of new media writing such as "text movies" explores further implications for reading and sense; these new forms may induce heightened sensation, but without cognitive, emotional identification. For example, in Coverley's (2001) *Afterimage*, a broken narrative of memories of a lost father points towards emotional identification but is interrupted by strategies that emphasise a flux of sensations. Smith concludes that in the future, sensation in literature may find "new directions beyond the page and even beyond the screen".

The essays in this volume partake a little of the spirit of the art they study, in offering detailed and often subtle readings of literature according to the sensations they represent, incite, or evoke in us. In his *A History of the Mind*, Humphrey discusses Shakespeare's *Richard II*. When Bolingbroke is exiled from England, his friends attempt to console him with the thought "that he can always find solace in remembering or thinking about happier days". Bolingbroke's retort: "[who can] cloy the hungry edge of appetite/By bare imagination of a feast" (I. Iii) points out Humphrey's moral: that purely perceptual knowledge also is bare in that it

lacks the “rich vestments of sensation” (75). Steven Pinker, in *How the Mind Works*, takes on two primary explanations of mind: a computational model, and an evolutionary model of adaptive selection. For Pinker, however, good art, in contrast to purely functional cognition, is best understood in terms of the philosopher Nelson Goodman’s description: in art, no detail can be removed, ignored or altered without changing the work as a whole. (Goodman, cited in Pinker 1998, 544) Good art then, is replete; the sensations evoked by minor details, or in subtle techniques of brush-stroke, melody or description, lead us to unexpected discoveries (Pinker 1998, 544).

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PART I:
THE SENSATIONAL

MURDER FOR MURDER'S SAKE:
THOMAS DE QUINCEY
AND THE WORK OF DARKNESS

PAUL SHEEHAN

In January 1889, *Punch* magazine published a brief note about Oscar Wilde, and his controversial essay, which had just appeared in a rival journal. The note begins by describing the essay as “a rather De Quincey-ish article”, and concludes that it is “not too De Quincey-ish, but just De Quincey-ish enough” (Baron de Book Worms 12). The Wilde essay in question, “Pen, Pencil, and Poison”, had appeared only days earlier in the *Fortnightly Review*. It purported to be a satirical critical biography of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright—the artist and murderer who had been a minor celebrity in the 1820s and 30s. In terms of the Aesthetic movement that Wilde had by then already taken charge of, appointing himself as its unofficial spokesman and administrator, “Pen, Pencil, and Poison” signals an important turn. For although the movement was unreservedly concerned with transgression, to date this had largely taken the form of sexual irregularity.

Baudelaire’s original title for what became *Les Fleurs du mal* was *Les lesbiennes*; and when the book eventually did come out, lesbian sex was the least of its scandals—it also featured vampirism, sadomasochism and necrophilia. This was the spirit that A. C. Swinburne, who himself claimed French ancestry, set out to import into English aestheticism—with his Baudelairean novel *Lesbia Brandon*, and with such poems as “Anactoria” and “Fragoletta”, which celebrated the erotic delights of androgyny, flagellation, Sapphic love, and the many and varied guises that morbid carnal desire could take. Wilde, of course, was no stranger to deviant sexual practices. In “Pen, Pencil, and Poison” however, the desire to transgress is shifted, from sexual decadence towards criminal misconduct—even more notoriously, towards murder. Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, the subject of the essay, fits Wilde’s schema perfectly. As an artistic and intellectual dandy, he showed the same stylistic brilliance and panache in writing art criticism as he did in poisoning his uncle, mother-in-law and sister-in-law. At least, this is Wilde’s avowal in the piece that, for all its

satirical thrust, more properly belongs to the genre of the “Imaginary Portrait”. It was Wilde’s mentor, Walter Pater, who had inaugurated the genre in the 1860s, when he gave the Aesthetic movement its name.

In choosing that particular name, Pater sought to restore primacy to the Greek word *aesthesis*, literally “perception”—the basis of aesthetic experience, insofar as it engages the faculty of sensuous intuition, capturing the immediacy and intensity of the present moment. Yet it is also attuned to what takes place immediately after perception, which is sensation; aestheticism, *aesthesis* and sensation are thus all of a piece, and all reducible to the *impression*. However, in what became the unofficial manifesto for the Aesthetic movement, the “Conclusion” to his 1873 *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater does not privilege any of these words. He avers that we are all under sentence of death, all sufferers of the disease of mortality. How best then to spend the limited time that has been granted us? “[O]ur one chance”, writes Pater, “lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time” (153). He has already made reference to the “counted number of pulses” allotted us, denoting something like a heartbeat, perhaps, a fatal index of “vital forces” that embody the “purest energy” (152). “Pulsations”, on the other hand, suggests something more: perceptual experience that is hard-wired to the nerve endings, initiating the process of sensation and giving us what he calls the “fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness” (153).

The connections Pater is making here are extended by Wilde in his lucubrations on crime. The criminal sensibility finds its ultimate outlet in murder, one of the most extreme and intense forms of sensation it is possible to experience. In this regard, murder is figured as a way of gaining access to the world of aesthetic bliss dreamed of not just by Wilde and Pater, but by all nineteenth-century aesthetes and decadents. One of the first stirrings of that world occurred much earlier in the century. As hinted at above, Wilde’s essay was immediately recognised as a dandyish rewriting of a piece written in 1827: Thomas De Quincey’s controversial essay, “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts”. The *Punch* columnist, on the other hand, was less than enamoured of the precedent. “When I say De Quincey-like”, he writes, “I meant that it reminds me of that *bizarre* “Essay on Murder considered as one of the Fine Arts”, (sic) which ... I wish the Opium-eater had never written” (12).

Wishing that, however, means discounting a significant part of De Quincey’s literary output. For to say that he was fixated on the subject would be an understatement; over the next eighteen years, he produces a “Second Paper” on art and murder, a “Postscript” (which was longer than both early pieces combined), and some manuscript notes towards yet

another paper.¹ The first piece, like its sequel, appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*, based in Edinburgh, which had courted controversy ten years earlier with a campaign directed at the "Cockney School of Poets", a series of libellous attacks on John Keats, Leigh Hunt and William Hazlitt. This time, the *Blackwood's* editor was fearful of a public outcry, so he added a note at the start invoking the name of Swift, thereby instructing his readers to prepare themselves for satire and black comedy. De Quincey himself followed suit, comparing the piece to Swift's "A Modest Proposal". As it turned out, the essay was granted an enthusiastic reception and has since become, after *The Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, De Quincey's most famous piece of writing (see Lindop 284).

In this essay, I want to question the received wisdom concerning De Quincey's literary legacy. Though he is generally seen as belonging to English Romanticism, his acknowledged influence on the nascent Aesthetic movement is considerable—principally, because the *Confessions* was so prized by the next generation of French writers. Baudelaire's writings on opium directly acknowledge the precedent; in fact, "Un Mangeur d'Opium", the second part of Baudelaire's *Paradis Artificiels* (1860), is a loose paraphrase of De Quincey's opium-eating experiences. The latter's writing on the aesthetics of murder, however, suggests an alternative route for that influence. As well as leading directly to his Decadent inheritors later in the century, such as Wilde, it also inspires more obliquely the theme of art-inflected murder that becomes prominent in the last decades of the twentieth century, reaching not only so-called "serious" literary culture, but also popular culture.

"On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" is feted for being a "brilliant *tour de force* in sustained irony" (Lyon 148). But taken at face value, the subjects of the title are somewhat misleading, insofar as the essay is neither a carefully planned treatise on aesthetics, nor a macabre exposition of violent crime. V. A. De Luca reads it as a succession of masks: first is the self-declared connoisseur of murder, the "straight man" who gets the piece underway; and then comes his parodic double, telling outrageous anecdotes such as the tale of the Syrian Assassin who, when his own life was being threatened, was so impressed by the talent on display that he made his assailant a Duke, and "settled a pension on him for three lives" (De Quincey 2000 *Vol. 6*: 117). Beneath the parody, irony and black comedy, however, lurks a further mask or disguise, one that asserts itself less stridently. "For the real substance of the essay", says De Luca, "is an exercise in elusiveness" (45).

The first indication of that elusiveness is the essay's form. It is presented in the guise of a lecture, a specialist's address given in London,

before members of the Society of Connoisseurs in Murder. (Unlike later nineteenth-century attitudes, connoisseurship is conceived of here as a social phenomenon; Pater, by contrast, will depict it as an intensely solitary activity.) One of the effects of this rhetorical move is to bring out the theatrical nature of the piece. Insofar as aestheticism fixes on the artificial, seeking to oust whatever tries to pass itself off as “natural” and/or normative, the theatre is its unswerving ally; increasingly, throughout the nineteenth century, to aestheticise something—sexuality, say, or criminality—means to theatricise it. As J. A. Chamberlain puts it: “Only on stage, or behind a mask, would truth be conveyed; the theatre, alone among the arts, demonstrated the essence of a complete aesthetic experience” (109). De Quincey makes good on this conceit. In the final section there are even mock “stage directions”, describing an outbreak of spontaneous applause made in response to what is taken to be an admission, by the lecturer, of having committed a murder himself.

De Quincey conveys the spirit of the piece at the outset, in its most quoted passage: “Everything in this world has two handles. Murder, for instance, may be laid hold of by its moral handle, (as it generally is in the pulpit, and at the Old Bailey); and *that*, I confess, is its weak side; or it may also be treated *aesthetically*, as the Germans call it, that is, in relation to good taste” (2000 *Vol. 6*: 113). The “Germans” he refers to here owe the word to one philosopher in particular: Alexander Baumgarten, whose *Aesthetica* (1750) seeks to establish the specificity of the title term. In Baumgarten’s estimate, “aesthetics” refers not just to perception, or sensuous cognition, as a mode of knowledge separate from reason, and a form of human experience and a branch of intellectual enquiry distinct from logic. Aesthetics is also defined as something closely related to *taste*, and accordingly is lined up with notions of beauty and pleasure.

De Quincey’s borrowing of Baumgarten’s term here was once thought to be the first such usage in the English language; that distinction now belongs to Coleridge, for an article he published in *Blackwood’s* six years before De Quincey’s, in 1821 (see Leask 92-3). In any case, given the context in which De Quincey uses the word, it is suggestive of a deep attachment between art and murder. This passage exemplifies the tone of the piece: a kind of deadpan bathos, that moves blithely from those high-minded arbiters of moral rectitude, the Church and the Law, to the comparatively frivolous claims of connoisseurship; whilst hinting that the latter actually have more purchase on our interests, in relation to the “weak” position of the former.

The basis for this reversal of priorities, says De Quincey, is the voracious desire for spectacle. A fire in Oxford Street, for example, a

potential “conflagration of merit” (2000 *Vol. 6*: 114), is arresting insofar as it provides sensory delight. The visual pleasure this delivers is predicated on the suspension of conventional moral responses—a crucial manoeuvre, for murder to be enjoyed as a fine art. However, as we shall see, more than just moral reflexes need to be bracketed, for this to be properly carried out.

The macabre detail of the piece invites a comic response, rather than a horrific one, as De Quincey’s erudition and wit enable him to range over history, philosophy, literature and biography. He begins by taking us through a “great gallery of murder”, to demonstrate that the killing arts, far from being a product of the nineteenth-century, actually begin with the Book of Genesis. When Cain stabs his brother Abel, he becomes “the inventor of murder, and the father of the art” (ibid 116). The fact was not properly acknowledged, however, until the seventeenth century. In his description of the deed, in Book XI of *Paradise Lost*, Milton adds the picturesque effect of Abel’s dying with his soul bloody and wounded: Cain “Smote him into the midriff with a stone/That beat out life: he fell; and, deadly pale,/Groan’d out his soul with gushing blood effus’d”. The addition of a bleeding soul in those last four words, says De Quincey, shows that Milton is as prone to the desire for luridness and spectacle as any writer of sensation (ibid 117).

The implications of Cain’s pioneering act become more fully realized throughout the seventeenth century, “The Augustan Age of Murder”, when a spate of assassinations of princes and statesmen gives the art a new lease of life. The age reveals the potential ubiquity of murder, haunting all creative urges, lurking in the heart of “every artist who happens to be possessed by the craving for scenical effect” (ibid 118)—even, as we just saw, an artist so serious and sombre as John Milton. Since the seventeenth century, other connections have become paramount. De Quincey devotes the largest part of his essay—about forty per cent of it, in total—to assaying the links between murder and *philosophy*. He examines the lives of Descartes, Locke, Spinoza, Hobbes and others to emphasise the materiality of murder. De Quincey’s theatrical bent takes over here again, as he sketches out a series of increasingly absurd yet nonetheless evocative scenes of philosophical fancy. He pictures Leibniz fretfully guarding his throat, and concludes that he died partly of the fear that he *could* be murdered, and partly of vexation that he *wasn’t*. An argument between Berkeley and Malebranche degenerates into a boxing match, in which Malebranche is floored in the first round (ibid 123). But behind these comical scenarios, De Quincey is making a serious point. Even philosophers, for whom cerebration, contemplation and *mind* are cardinal, are corporeal beings, hence limited by the body and its proneness to

violation by others. The development of modern philosophy is thus to some extent a *bodily* affair, in which the realm of pure reason and reflection is forced to cohabit with tormented thoughts about injury, mortality and murder.

This emphasis on the material basis of murder, as the threat of physical violation, is backed up by a real-life event. Underlying De Quincey's "Murder" essays—indeed, all his writings on violent crime—is the Williams murders of 1811.² In December of that year, John Williams broke into a warehouse in Ratcliffe Highway, in London's East End, and slit the throats of the Marr family (husband, wife, infant son) and their young apprentice. De Quincey's response, twelve years after the frenzy of public outrage and indignation has abated, is to theatricalise the deed: "Mr. Williams made his *debut* on the stage of Ratcliffe Highway, and executed those unparalleled murders which have procured for him such a brilliant and undying reputation" (2000 *Vol. 3*: 151). De Quincey's sardonic remark is made in a short piece published in 1823, a preface of sorts to the "Murder" essays, entitled "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*"—one of De Quincey's most celebrated writings, and an enduring piece of Shakespeare criticism.

If murder is linked to art through the combination of sensation and visual pleasure (or "scenical effect"), and the material basis of the act is decisive, it seems inevitable to find in it a theatrical dimension. Anticipating Wilde, De Quincey suggests that life imitates art, that the "great artistry" of Williams is anticipated by the "genius" of Shakespeare. In *Macbeth*, there is a knocking at the gate after Duncan has been slain; similarly, after the Marrs are murdered, a servant girl returns from an errand and knocks on the warehouse door. Knocking, then, indicates a threshold, formalizing the fact that an unspeakable act has just taken place. A much later fictional murder, carried out not as fine art but as *acte gratuit*, makes vivid metaphorical use of the same gesture. In *L'Étranger*, Camus's anti-hero Meursault fires several bullets into the Arab on the beach, and hears in their reports the disaster to follow: "I understood that I had shattered the balance of the day ... They were like four sharp knocks on the door of misfortune."³

The act of murder demands a suspension of the world of everyday human activity, a deferment that is lifted when knocking is heard. As De Quincey notes: "The murderers, and the murder, must be insulated—cut off by an immeasurable gulph [sic] from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs ... [T]ime must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion" (2000 *Vol. 3*: 153). Murder, in other words,

is an *autonomous* undertaking that makes clear the work of the aesthetic, in its similarly self-enclosed—which is to say, disinterested—aspect. And after it is accomplished, that “ordinary tide” can return: “Hence it is that, when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds” (ibid). Murder is theatre, a sinister carnival of fury and darkness, fleeting and unreal in its perfection.

Murder is sensational, finally, because it demands such a deeply felt response. It is the overwhelming intensity of its sensory command, suggests De Quincey, that makes us all potential connoisseurs of murder, stirred to a greater or lesser extent by violent crime. Frederick Burwick writes: “[Murder as a fine art] recognizes and analyses the workings of a morbid curiosity shared by humanity at large. ... It is addressed against the sneak-a-peak hypocrisy of those who deny their own curiosity and denounce others who indulge it.” (86) De Quincey’s apparently heartless “celebration” of aesthetic delight is thus also a form of social criticism. It has led some critics to link De Quincey with such later “true crime” works as Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*; from which is but a short step to modern sensational journalism.

But although the art of murder is, for De Quincey, a strictly observational phenomenon, a question of connoisseurship rather than creation, I suggest that echoes of his attitude can be seen from the other direction, in the making of art, as the aesthetics of murder enters twentieth-century letters. We need only think of Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, who declares early on in his address to the reader that “[y]ou can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style” (9). At certain moments in the novel, when Humbert is prevented from indulging his nympholeptic cravings, he has murder on his mind. Charlotte Haze, whom he has married to get closer to Lolita, is his first potential victim. “I did not plan to marry poor Charlotte in order to eliminate her in some vulgar, gruesome and dangerous manner”, he confides. “Other visions of venery presented themselves to me swaying and smiling” (70). An opportunity arises during a lakeside swim with his new bride, when he realizes how easy it would be to engineer “a perfect removal”—perfect because the element of surprise would cause Charlotte “to inhale at once a lethal gallon of lake” (86). Typically, the murder-scenario is imagined as a high-art production: “It was like some dreadful silent ballet, the male dancer holding the ballerina by her foot and streaking down through watery twilight” (86). This is a recurrent tendency in Humbert’s fantasies: the compulsion to dramatize his desires, so that events must be *staged* in order to be properly described