Gripping Words: Sensing the World Beyond the Page in Victorian Literature

Reading with the senses in Victorian literature and science, by David Sweeney Coombs, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2019, 240 pp., $39.50 (cloth), ISBN 9780813943428

David Sweeney Coombs' *Reading with the Senses* explores the relationship between theories of sensory perception and modes of reading in Victorian science and literature. In doing so it offers, as Coombs' puts it, "an intellectual history of how we came to think of perception in terms of access to the world" (10). Coombs traces this line of argument through an impressive range of historical and theoretical frameworks, moving skilfully from eighteenth-century philosophy to contemporary theories of embodied cognition (e.g. James Gibson, Alva Noë). At the same time, his study engages closely with recent developments in literary studies that relate to practices of reading—whether "surface", "close", or "deep"—and work in cognitive literary studies that explores how "reading hotwires our capacity for visual, positional, and auditory perception" (2).

This is a conceptually rich intervention in a growing body of work in literary studies that aims to think more carefully about the phenomenology of reading. Its principal contribution, in this respect, is to demonstrate how nineteenth-century writing about modes of sensory perception is often engaged (directly or by analogy) with the question of how we gain knowledge of the world indirectly through the descriptive capacities of language (what William James calls "knowledge by description", as opposed to "knowledge by acquaintance"). The opening chapter provides an overview of the scientific and philosophical background to this central problem. In an impressive synthesis of eighteenth and nineteenth-century theories of perception, Coombs provides an elegant summary of work by Thomas Reid, John Stuart Mill, and Hermann von Helmholtz. Scholars of the senses will find his account of the distinction between sensation (the basic intuition of sensory stimuli) and perception (the conscious mental apprehension of such stimuli) particularly useful. This leads into a discussion of the "radical empiricism" of William James, which in many ways provides the dominant model for Coombs' "anti-representational" approach to his literary texts. In James's account, descriptive language functions to make the sensory experience of the world more immediately present. In this respect, Coombs suggests, it offers a useful way of rethinking the stakes of reading in Victorian literary texts: not an exercise marked by distance or detachment, but rather a process that affords an openness to the world as it is disclosed to us.

In the chapter that follows, Coombs explores how George Eliot's *Romola* (1863) reflects on themes of illusion and illiteracy in order to consider the challenges that her readers faced in engaging with a historical novel set in quattrocento Florence. Through a series of perceptive close readings, he demonstrates how Eliot's text acknowledges its struggle to make the past feel immediately present. A similar struggle can be traced, Coombs suggests, in nineteenth-century debates in the science of optics, where psychologists such as Hermann Lotze and Hermann von Helmholtz grappled with the question

of how visions and hallucinations come to be believed as real. This leads back to Coombs central concern—the shifting tension between "knowledge by description" and "knowledge by acquaintance"—which is traced in detail in theories of language from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, ranging from J. S. Mill to Bertrand Russell. A chapter on Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878) is similarly concerned with questions of sensory deprivation and obscurity. Coombs focusses on the text's interest in the challenges posed to perception by different modes of visual impairment, showing how this forms part of a much broader fascination with the dangers of reading and misreading in the novel. Coombs returns to William James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890), which shares Hardy's interest in how darkness modifies our sensory capabilities. A rewarding discussion of Alexander Bain's theories of association nicely demonstrates Hardy's interest in non-visual forms of sensing, where aural and tactile sensitivity become key to navigating disorientating environments. Essentially, Coombs suggests, visual deprivation prompts in Hardy's characters a more affectively rich mode of sensory perception, requiring as it does an imaginative turn to "associative" modes of thinking.

The second half of the book looks at the relationship between description and perception in texts by writers in the Victorian Aesthetic Movement. Vernon Lee's aesthetic essays from *Belcaro* (1881) and her controversial novel *Miss Brown* (1885) form the focus of a chapter that investigates the tension between the primacy of direct sensory stimulus and the abstraction of formal appreciation. For Coombs, Lee's writing on the experience of art is preoccupied by the risk of descriptive language displacing the artwork itself. As such, he suggests, her writing rejects forms of descriptive mediation (such as the tagging of objects in a museum) and problematises "associative" accounts of aesthetic response. Instead, Lee closely describes the moment-by-moment physiological experience of the body, whilst at the same time remaining committed to an abstract formalist theory of aesthetic response. Lee's aesthetics of empathy (*Einfühlung*) have been the subject of considerable scholarly attention in recent years, both within literary studies and in the history of art. Coombs' contribution here lies in situating Lee's often knotty theorising as part of a broader concern with the function of descriptive language in nineteenth-century psychology and art writing. He traces in Lee's aesthetics the dynamics of what he calls "intimate withholding": "the motional dynamics of a reading practice that is at once close and distant" (130). This is implicitly linked to the distinctly chaste queer erotics of Lee's aestheticism, in which the insistence on art's formal autonomy often seems to perform its own peculiar displacement of sexual desire.

The next chapter examines Walter Pater's essay "The School of Giorgione" (1877). Coombes" interest here lies in Pater's recurring tropes of music and harmony, which he links persuasively with the acoustics of the German physicist Hermann von Helmholtz. For both Pater and Helmholtz, Coombes suggests, perception was understood as an act in which our engagement with discrete objects was constantly at risk of being overwhelmed by the intensity of sensory stimuli. Yet music's non-referential

quality means that there can be a complete perceptual focus on its sensory qualia, without the risk of the object itself being displaced. Coombs uses this as a model for considering Pater's use of "literal metaphors"—that is, figurative language that can only be properly grasped if taken literally. While Pater's fundamental commitment to the sensuous immediacy of embodied experience is well-established, Coombs connects what he calls Pater's "kinky literalism" to the writer's defence of queer erotic desire. This is nicely grounded in a careful account of how such feelings are channelled through sensory engagement with material objects.

Reading with the Senses is an ambitious piece of scholarship, integrating an impressive range of often highly abstract and technically challenging scientific and philosophical writings to pursue engaging readings of its chosen literary texts. While the volume will primarily be of interest to specialists working in Victorian studies, it will also be of use to those in sensory studies working on the histories of psychophysics and neuro-aesthetics, and those interested in literary representations of sight and sound. At times, the thrust of the study's central argument gets lost amongst the breadth of its disparate interventions: Coombs' deeply impressive account of Lee's aesthetics of empathy, for instance, is overshadowed in a chapter which also tackles nineteenth-century gallery design and the dynamics of masochism in the Victorian novel. At the same time, Coombs might do more to consider the wider social or political stakes of his writers' interests in the capabilities of language to make the material world feel more immediately present. Whilst he is up front about the fact that the study's focus is "on the abstraction that is the normative case" (10), this occasionally seems to close off some of his most promising lines of enquiry. There's an intriguing recurring interest, for example, with what Coombs calls "kinky" forms of sensory engagement, yet the implications of this remains under-explored. Nevertheless, this is an admirable and thought-provoking study that helps us think more clearly about the ends of description in nineteenth-century literature.

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