Feeling Dickensian feeling

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Critics rarely discuss 'feeling' anymore: it sounds like an outmoded and untheorized way of discussing something more complex and sophisticated. 'Emotion' is occasionally summoned as a replacement descriptor, but this too covers the pages of too many popular self-help books to seem intellectually viable for use in critical discussion. 'Affect' is usually the profession's champion: theoretically 'rigorous' (it sounds intricate and difficult), philosophically inviting (we can map and so rethink the word historically in lots of interesting ways), and endlessly quantifiable (it means so many different things everyone can produce a reading of the limits of what it defines). The problem with affect, however, is that it often directs the critic to analyse it rather than the text in which it appears: discussions of affect tend to produce discussions of affect, rather than of its significance for the text in question. One word that aptly expresses felt experience is sentimentality, a representation of 'personal experience, or one's own feeling,' but a word with which modern critics are consistently uncomfortable.[1] Sentimentality is generally quarantined in the past, historicized as an eighteenth-century preoccupation distinct from our current moment which may be decoded only through an external context.

One might argue, however, that because sentimentality describes personal feeling, it demands that we actually feel, a factor Dickens explored in his work as a way of suggesting that the reader have an emotionally immediate relationship with the text. Dickens considered it imperative for readers to experience the sensation of sentimentality in literature, rather than explain it away: this experience was moral and civilizing and designed to allow people to live harmoniously in an increasingly discordant society. While modern critics are often suspicious of this idea, it remains that civil and ethical codes in western society are still reinforced as a means for upholding good feeling between people, putting them at ease by disabling unpleasant feelings. Dickens is intent on reminding us of such codes as well as being concerned to teach us ways of reading them: he encourages us as readers to interpret the world through its emotional content, training us to do so by providing readers with literary scenes fuelled by sentimental feeling. If we then choose to critically and historically analyse

these scenes, rather than experience the feeling within them, we miss their sensual expression and turn sentimentality into something else. There is certainly a long tradition of doing just this, beginning with Oscar Wilde's jab at *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41) ('one must have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without laughing') but widely reflected in many twentieth-century critical assessments of Victorian sentiment. Aldous Huxley considered Dickens a model example for discussion in his *Vulgarity in Literature* (1930); and George Orwell critiqued him for his 'unnecessary detail' and lack of 'poetic feeling.'[2] Critics like Philip Allingham argue that Victorian sentimentality is nothing more than 'a writer's conscious indulgence in emotion for its own sake, pushing the reader to emotional peaks through exaggeration, manipulation of language and situation, and mechanical tricks,' like dead or dying children, vulnerable puppies etc.[3]

This paper, then, is concerned with why modern literary criticism, notably that inflected by new historicism, is so intent on stripping sentimentalism of its sentimental feeling. In Part I, I discuss the problems that ensue when feelings are separated from criticism and suggest that new historicism avoids addressing immaterial subjects, like feeling or belief, by translating them into external events. Modernity's difficulties with feeling are well rehearsed and I build on these concerns to assess their specificity for criticism of writers, like Dickens, who depend on its expression and reception. Part II turns to Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect* (2004) and its forwarding of a model of feeling that works through what she calls 'living attention,' an everyday-life version of what literary critics do when they close read. In light of her work I suggest that we might consider new modes of reading which privilege feeling over analysis, and discernment over judgement. Finally, Part III offers a reading of 'A Christmas Carol' (1842) that first, presents Ebenezer Scrooge as a cautionary figure who begins by quantifying the world and ends by feeling it; and second, focuses on the emotional content of the tale to demonstrate what I will call here a sense-based criticism, a way of reading that privileges specificity and particularity in the reading process, both of words and sentences but also of readers' responses.

I

The idea of 'compartmentalizing' feeling has become increasingly popular with a profession obsessed with, but troubled by variant feelings, suggesting as it does that we separate assorted

experiences of feeling into isolated categories, or compartments, for safe-keeping. The compartmentalizer thus relates to his or her body and mind like a train in which feelings associated with mundane, routine activities sit in one carriage playing scrabble, while those related to work or professional life sit in another with their laptops, and those wrapped up with more powerful or deep emotional experiences trail in the last coach half-asleep, weighed down underneath all the luggage. Which is all very well until it comes to comprehending literary expressions of sentimentality which demand that the reader associate (rather than dissociate, as T. S. Eliot put it) all one's feelings together - bodily and mental - in order that an engagement with the text succeed.[4] One might choose not to connect with the text's expression of feeling by adopting an aloof, ironic, removed or cynical mode of reading, but such a stance, as the Victorians warned, serves only to estrange the reader from what he or she reads and consequently his or her culture and society.

Echoing this Victorian concern, much recent criticism, by Brennan but also others like Wendy Wheeler, Isobel Armstrong and James Elkins, for example, demands we stop ignoring our emotional experience of what we read or see.[5] Removing our work from our lives by depositing emotional responses to texts into one box and emotional responses to the world in another has several negative consequences. First, our capacity for a thoughtful and careful response to each experience we have (what Brennan calls 'living attention' and to which we return later) becomes increasingly blunted: filtering what we feel into separate categories serves to dilute and fragment feelings to the extent that we finally can't remember what it means to feel them. We might have 'saved up' our feelings for our private time, but our professional dependence on an identity rooted in a cerebral cynicism at work can dull our senses so much that it becomes increasingly difficult to be emotional in any situation. On the other hand, by severing our response to what we encounter at work from what we confront elsewhere, we risk a split consciousness wherein we arbitrarily release feelings during our leisure time in order to be rid of them in readiness for work time. Feelings become like the worst kind of hobby ('preoccupations with which [we] become mindlessly infatuated merely in order to kill the time', says Adorno), let loose randomly on friends and family and thus dealt with superficially and then misunderstood or repressed.[6] The sense of horror and barbarism hobbies conjure for Adorno derives from his sense that they demand meaningless

and empty pursuit: so too can feelings, unattended and uncared for, become fuel for actions most would regard as inappropriate, immoral or cruel. Adorno's demand that we become emotionally committed to everything we do, achieving them with 'all [our] attention' as 'part and parcel' of our lives, is to reject the kind of neutrality from which (political) extremes, like capitalism or fascism, might emerge. The purpose of respecting feeling as the props of contemplation and reflection is also to stress their significance as our best tool with which to approach texts, as well as personal experience. Whatever the outcome of our feelings, and however we might read that outcome from any number of subject positions, is besides the point if we have failed to value their impact on the way we read and write.

Wendy Wheeler also points out the problematic effects of dissociative behaviour in *A New Modernity* (1999), arguing that our current position as subjects freed from tradition and superstition imposes upon us a sense of rootlessness and alienation.[7] 'Uncushioned' from the effects of modernity by our refusal and/or inability to engage emotionally, we become stuck in our own rationalism, freed from the illusion and enchantment once promised by tradition, superstition, magic and religion. As Wheeler argues, this Enlightenment liberation into reason demands '"rationalist" and "individualist" responses' to the world which force a condition of 'inner splitting and self-persecution.'[8] Where thinkers like Leibniz and Shaftesbury insisted that, while creation was made up of individuals, these individuals were ultimately bound to each other as an expression of 'the whole,' our own culture atomizes communities into narcissistic units intent on personal progress and production.[9] Our feelings consequently become self-directed and where they seem unreasonable or impolite (anger or aggression, for example), they are repressed by our ego-driven concept of who we are as potentially dangerous to private achievement. Yet as Freud indicated, while our conscious thought locks out feeling it suspects to be 'bad,' our unconscious still registers it, producing an intense feeling of guilt which causes us to withdraw from the community that should provide an antidote to the bad feeling in the first place. Enlightenment models of community and family in particular lack the affectivity necessary to make them work, and so destroy the very idea of the human that enables humanism to function as an alternative to faith or belief. Ignoring affective life stops the individual from responding to the world through a process of emotional identification (what Wheeler calls 'practical love') resulting in the triumph of

reason in decision-making at the expense of compassion.[10] Worse still, because modernity encourages a non-affective response to the present world, it is likely that we will also have a non-affective response to the past, making it near impossible to recognize sentimentality in texts.

One field that has fully embraced the urgency of rethinking human feeling is neurobiology, intimating as it does that the human brain maps its present through its understanding of the past, suggesting that historio-critical reading of texts might contribute to the way we act now. [11] Antonio Damasio's work, for example, declares that all human reasoning is always coloured by feeling and to deny this leads to an inaccurate idea of reasoning itself and a false sense of our engagement with experience.[12] Yet the current vogue for compartmentalizing feelings and separating work from 'free time' serves to reinforce certain ways of reading which leave the past in the past. New historicism promised to be literary criticism's hermeneutical saviour, declaring that the historical and political nature of texts had been neglected due to the dominance of formal close reading in the academy. Its key premise is that literary works are shaped by the society which produced them and as such can only be used as 'a basis for the reconstruction of an ideology.'[13] A possible difficulty with this approach is that the text always comes to signify through its hidden (ideological) agenda rather than what it might more obviously connote, such as its immaterial or experiential aspects. A feeling can only be experienced in the present by the reader, and so a scene written to evoke feelings in him or her is not concerned with the past, but only in that moment in which the reader emotionally reacts. It is, of course, possible to analyse the way in which certain ideologies in the past have been upheld by feeling.[14] Imperialism, for example, as Edward Said argues, is reliant on feelings of grandeur and providence, exemplified in a character like Dickens' Dombey.[15] Yet new historicism seems deliberately to unmask all metaphysical representations - such as that of sentimentalism - and in doing so, reveal some kind of displaced history that lies beneath it. A Greenblatt or a Liu may choose to explore their own authorly feelings by communing with a dead past, but they often strip the text itself of its emotional meanings.[16] An event like the death of little Nell, for example, becomes nothing more than a code to be cracked, the new historicist committed to translating the meaning of that scene into another, apparently less allusive form, showing what the text

'really' - that is, ideologically - means. Sentimentality is then unravelled to reveal a veiled subtextual meaning which the text then becomes: the historical moment is invariably read as the hidden ideological referent of the text. Once we have the 'answer' - the death of little Nell is, for example, about Roman Catholicism, capitalism, fatherhood - the meaning becomes closed and sentiment ceases to be felt. The flaw in predominantly historical readings, then, is that they set up a one-to-one correlation between text and event which squeezes the experience of sentiment out: historicists might be invested in the plurality of the text and offer lots of different readings (the death of little Nell is about doctrine or the economy or parenting) but each reading is bolted into its own circle of meaning and sentiment ignored.

Those critics who do engage with sentimentality are often rendered either prurient, intellectually inept or, as the conservative right often labels the empathetic left, a bit of a 'soft touch.' This dismissal of feeling is again because of the way in which the dominant critical trend invites us all to read sentimentality in texts as an event or marker of something else other than it is (for example, the sappiness of the critic rather than a feeling with which to engage). What Dickens shows us, I think, is that sentimentalism is not a historical event in disguise, but rather a textual hook for our senses, demanding that we read through our senses and feelings rather than our minds and critical faculties. Given our present historical, mind-based intellectual climate, it is no surprise, perhaps, that much recent work on the wider issue of feelings, emotions and sentiments is focused on 'affect,' a word which describes the material effects of feelings in the outside world rather than their experiential qualities and impact on the body as raw sensation. New historicism, for example, reads sentimentality through its ideological impact on the way it is experienced, and the consequent judgements that are made because of it, by both textual characters and living readers. Instead, we might choose to approach feeling on its own terms by using a sense-based methodology that privileges a form of close reading which is intimate and physical (literally 'close'). Before attempting to implement this methodology in a discussion of 'A Christmas Carol,' I'd like to discuss the work of the late Teresa Brennan, who avoids the mechanical trap of affect to embrace the more sensitive idea of attentive feeling.

II

In *The Transmission of Affect* (2004), Brennan addresses our modern inability to discuss or articulate feelings in a raw way: we can only defer them onto external identities or objects that seem to signify, or make 'distinct,' as Bourdieu would have it, the feelings we think we have.[17] Where she differs from Bourdieu, however, is in her emphasis on our failure to feel what we feel, choosing as we do to feel instead in accordance with cultural norms and ideological givens rather than those swings that occur physiologically within our bodies. Ideologically-driven feeling ignores personal experience of or reflection on the world and blocks those raw sensations that can give us information about whether a state is painful or pleasurable, bad or good. We work out whether a feeling is bad or good, Brennan argues, by remembering the 'good feelings of living' we have already individually undergone: we can only willingly do or feel bad things by rationalizing them intellectually and distancing them from our emotional being.

Brennan suggests that this unwillingness to feel our own emotions, and thus to be able to read those of others, is a relatively new phenomenon: up until the end of the seventeenth century, she suggests, it was generally understood that humans physically projected and introjected feelings back and forth between each other. Feelings were perceived to be like affective radio waves, what we now call 'pheromones,' pollen-like chemicals that move from our bodies into the atmosphere and which are then absorbed by others through smell or touch. The consumption of such pheromones physiologically affects our nervous systems because the process causes the secretion of hormones which change how we feel. We 'catch' affects as if they are contagious: they infect our bodies and so shift our gut reaction to and reception of the world.[18] The Enlightenment, however, focused as it was on the imagination and thought, destroyed our awareness of this process by imposing a closed, bounded idea of the self anchored in the mind. David Hume and Adam Smith, for example, both suggested that human feeling is provoked by the thought of another's situation and feelings, rather than the introjection of them into our bodies. Trapped within the mind, feelings are prevented from travelling out beyond the self, causing the subject to lose touch with what it means to physically feel. The body's loss of the memory of its porous aspect means that feelings are shut away inside the body, disabling our experience of our own feelings and those of others.[19]

Our current reception of other people's feelings, then, is unconscious, in that we are sealed off from them emotionally and biologically: Brennan calls this 'spiritual arteriosclerosis' - a state in which our hearts become blocked up - preventing us from receiving the feelings we individually experience and the feelings transmitted by others. This is presumably why individuals do things which make them miserable or validate actions which are emotionally unhealthy: cut off from our feelings, we don't feel this pain, but instead allow our inner selves to be consistently eroded until we break down. Like Georg Simmel's 'metropolitan man,' we attempt to protect ourselves against this meltdown by valuing the 'head instead of [the] heart,' the former a shield against what Simmel describes as 'the threatening currents' of the city which undertake to 'uproot him.'[20] Continually bombarded by the 'onrushing impressions' of the city, metropolitan man becomes over stimulated and his nervous system collapses, rendering him unable to react to 'new sensations with the appropriate energy.'[21] He convinces himself that his strong intellect, objective ability and propensity for a 'matter-of-fact attitude' to people and the world will grant him a freedom from the restrictions of the slower, intimate and emotionally dependent relations found within the small town or rural areas.[22] Yet for Simmel, this freedom consists only of reciprocal reserve and mutual indifference, leaving the self able to register, if not feel or deal with, sensations of emptiness and worthlessness. On the other hand, the 'small-town man' he so despises is that which might restore this self, the 'rhythm of life and sensory mental imagery' flowing 'more slowly, more habitually, and more evenly' and resting on 'deeply felt and emotional relationships.'[23] Such a measured and subjectively responsive way of life, regardless of where geographically it is lived, allows for the model of discernment Brennan favours, one which doubts the mind and allows judgements to re-register in the body as feelings.

By mind, Brennan does not mean thought but instead the ego, the vulnerable and insecure part of us which feels always under threat and so seeks constant reassurance. If a feeling is the body's reaction to the mind, then the body is continually receiving a message of fear and threat from the ego, one ultimately rooted in the fear of death and annihilation. The ego always thinks death is imminent and so defends itself by identifying with external things which seem to offer it stability: possessions, social status, relationships, belief systems,

political, racial, religious, sexual and other collective identifications. As Brennan argues, the ego is nothing more than a constellation of attitudes, judgements and identifications which are shaped and formed ideologically. Identification with the mind and the ego over a position of sensory experience in the present moment creates aggressive boundaries between us and the other and leaves us constantly in a state of unease. So, when one judges, one is possessed by the ego and consequently ideology, a state one can be loosened (if never fully liberated) from by reading the world, the other and texts through feeling rather than the mind.

Brennan calls this reading process 'discernment,' one wherein analytical attitudes pass from a state of judgement into a state of cognitive reflection that works through our senses rather than our minds. Egoic judgement is fuelled by ideology; emotional discernment works through the senses - hearing, tasting, touching, smelling and seeing - finally registering in us as a feeling. That feeling might be fleeting and temporary, as experiences received through the senses usually are, but in being so it reflects the state humans should aspire to, one of emotional immediacy rather than (false) security. We communicate our sensory feelings by naming them and then comparing them to feelings experienced in the past, a process Brennan calls 'the comparison of memories.' When the ego is in control, we summon up how we feel by comparing ourselves to external ideas and other people. When the feelings are in control, we work out what we feel by comparing that feeling to our own memories of feelings we have previously experienced, a process Brennan calls 'living attention,' or concentration. Judgement always works against this: 'The more one lives in the emotional world of judging or being judged the more the affects disrupt concentration or the process of sustaining attention.'[24] The ego is always focused on its own ends and judgemental structure and so cannot attend in a receptive way. Living attention, on the other hand, can only grow in climates of love and hope; we resist negative affections by neutralizing them with love, optimism, and the deployment of living, energetic attention. We literally 'take care' of feelings, our own and those of others, by being both careful and concerned in our perception of them. This attention, or state of being in the present, is for Brennan biologically connected to love, our capacity for awareness, compassion and survival being all based in the same synaptic part of the brain.[25] Beyond this kind of evidence, however, Brennan insists that attention, love and reflection are all linked because they give us emotional and mental focus

and help prevent those judgements, on ourselves and others, that do us so much harm.

III

Literary critics, one might argue, are in an ideal position in which to practice living attention through their engagement with texts. Current methodological trends such as new historicism might invite us to judge texts as ideological signs, but this process is one that approves egoic interpretation and privileges affective, rather than sense-based responses. In the light of Brennan's argument, I think we can only dismiss sentiment if we judge it rather than discerning it. My final argument here is that Dickens proposes a way of reading parallel to Brennan's living attention, encouraging readers to suspend their egos and read through feeling. The ego is always dependent on the idea that activity is mindless when it is not directed from the standpoint of self-interest, which means that the ego's interpretations are always tendentious; the ego-driven interpretation of the death of little Nell cannot see it beyond a particular viewpoint based on the censorship of other readings. Whereas if we read the death of little Nell through our senses, we can be more receptive to its sentimental expression. What Orwell called his 'unnecessary detail' is in fact vital to our reading of Dickens through the senses. Dickens builds Nell's death scene by stressing the heat of the 'dull, red' fire in her room, the smell of the 'embers,' the sound of her 'terrible low cry' and attendant 'sounds of grief and mourning,' the refusal of the birds to taste food in her absence, the touch of her old clothes, the sight of her stillness.[26] Certainly Dickens' contemporary readers were moved by such attention and transmitted their consequent feelings between each as Brennan claims humans can. Early in February 1841, for example, crowds gathered on the quaysides of Boston and New York anxious to learn whether little Nell had died in the latest monthly instalment. Those on board ships coming from England called out to those on shore to reveal her fate and whole crowds convulsed into tears, a collective outpouring of feeling spurred not by the novel's historical detail but by its sentiment. We might choose to historicize their emotional reaction, just as modern commentators endlessly do so when they judge and then censure the nation's demonstrative responses to events like the death of Princess Diana or 9/11. But for Brennan, and I think for Dickens, such judgement would be to fall back in to the ego's demands that we produce something quantifiable from what we feel

rather than just undergo the process of feeling.

Dickens was the target of much twentieth-century critique of literary feeling or sentimentality, and he remains popular within Victorian studies partly because of his transformation into a commentator on everything from the law to the railways. While we rarely tolerate the sentimental Dickens today, such intolerance is annually frozen each Christmas. Festively suspended from our analytical selves, we are able to temporarily applaud Dickens' representations of kindness, generosity, belief in human dignity and so on, aspects of his fiction for which we damn him the rest of the year round.[27] We like Dickens at this time of year because, as Ruskin noted: 'His Christmas meant mistle-toe and pudding - neither resurrection from the dead, nor rising of new stars, nor teaching of wise men, nor shepherds,' a Dickensian elevation of feeling over knowledge or intellect.[28] 'A Christmas Carol' might even be read as a cautionary tale against investing in reason and rationality, Scrooge a veritable metropolitan man, edging 'his way along the crowded paths of life, warning all human sympathy to keep its distance' and wallowing in his difference from the naïve company imposed on him.[29] '"It's enough for a man to understand his own business,"' Scrooge growls when asked to contribute to a Christmas fund for the poor, '"and not to interfere with other people's. Mine occupies me constantly,"' an echo of 'the brevity and scarcity of the interhuman contacts granted to the metropolitan man' (39).[30] After reluctantly releasing Bob Cratchit from his duties on Christmas day (his inference that he is "'ill-used'" paying Bob a "'day's wages for no work'" is if nothing else logical), Scrooge returns home to encounter a domestic space devoid of feeling (40). His rooms are 'dark' and barren, and their inhuman feel is stressed by the pointed mutation of the door's knocker into Jacob Marley's face marking as it does the beginning of Scrooge's humanisation and education in feeling (41). This process begins by introducing Scrooge to negative feelings: fear (he double-locks himself in after the door knocker incident); discomfort (he extracts 'the least sensation of warmth' from the 'handful of fuel' burning in his fireplace); frustration ('"Humbug!'" he says); and horror (at the appearance of Marley's chain-dragging ghost) (43).

That Marley is a warning of what an unfeeling Scrooge might become is reiterated by his ghostly lack of bowels, a part of the body commonly thought to house the emotions.[31] Yet even when confronted with this sign, Scrooge resists all sentimentality, distrusting his senses,

and, like a good new historicist, longing for material evidence of the ghost and reading his feelings as anything other than feelings:

> ‘You don’t believe in me,’ observed the Ghost.
> ‘I don’t,’ said Scrooge.
> ‘What evidence would you have of my reality, beyond that of your senses?’
> ‘I don’t know,’ said Scrooge.
> ‘Why do you doubt your senses?’
> ‘Because,’ said Scrooge, ‘a little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato.’ (45)

Desperate to ‘distract[ ] his own attention,’ and keep ‘down his terror,’ Scrooge deflects Marley’s ‘infernal’ affects, desperate to materialize his emotional reaction as an iffy snack. Unable to ‘feel,’ Scrooge is brutally woken into feeling by the Ghost’s shaking of his chains ‘with such a dismal and appalling noise, that Scrooge held on tight to his chair, to save himself from falling in a swoon’ (47). Even as Scrooge begs his one-time partner to ‘“Speak comfort to me, Jacob,”’ his capacity for reassurance is limited as the Ghost iterates, declaring that good feeling ‘“comes from other regions, Ebenezer’” to which, in Scrooge’s current ‘“worldly” mindset, he is barred (48). The tragedy of Marley’s situation is that such regions are eternally prohibited to him, and he exits the scene into a mist of lamenting fellow phantoms, all desperate to redeem themselves through good actions but stripped of ‘the power’ to do so (52). His fatal focus on trade in mortal life allows Marley to now see that the real business of existence is feeling, ‘mercy, forbearance, and benevolence’ (49). For a materialist like Scrooge, however, feeling is literally exhausting and his encounter with such sensations ends the first part of the story as he falls asleep, drained by ‘the emotion he had undergone’ (52).

Clinging to his materialist outlook, Scrooge vainly attempts to decipher his experience with Marley by reasoning it out, a tactic Dickens parodies by repeating the word ‘thought’ to convey the emptiness of such an approach: ‘Scrooge went to bed again, and thought, and thought, and thought it over and over and over, and could make nothing of it’ (54). Yet at the sight of the first spirit, Scrooge allows himself to feel; from that point on he is a different man, his conversion located not in the final chapter when he buys the Cratchits a prize turkey

or reconciles with his nephew, but here in the second part where he wishes both that he had offered a donation to a Christmas caroller the night before (59) and also been more empathetic towards Bob (64). In New Testament mode, Dickens proposes that any honest engagement with feeling directly leads to a later fulfilment of good actions. The task the spirits are presented with, then, is teaching Scrooge how to respond to the world through his senses, each of them symbolizing a particular form of good feeling: gentleness and compassion (the Ghost of Christmas Past); joy and cheerfulness (the Ghost of Christmas Present); and an albeit spooky kindness (the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come).[32]

The first spirit begins the process by attempting to diffuse Scrooge's metropolitan nature. It is only when the 'city had entirely vanished' that Scrooge is able to engage with the detail of the rural world of his childhood, 'every gate, and post, and tree' with its 'bridge, its church, and winding river' (57). His 'heightened and excited' awareness of everything around him in this environment unlocks his capacity for sentimentality and living attention. During the vision of the Fezziwigs' dance, for example, he engages with positive feeling through recollecting it (Brennan's 'the comparison of memories'), embracing his past, sentimental self and shedding his current unfeeling one: 'Scrooge had acted like a man out of wits. His heart and soul were in the scene, and with his former self' (64). As readers, we too are invited to feel warmth at the 'vast substantial smile' of Mrs Fezziwig, her 'beaming and lovable' daughters and the overriding happiness of the Christmas scene and it is now Scrooge that reminds us not to try and materially account for what drives such feeling. Fezziwig's power to spread such joy, Scrooge admits, 'lies in words and looks; in things so slight and insignificant that it is impossible to add and count 'em up' (64).

The remaining chapters serve to underline Scrooge's new belief that he must trust his 'own feeling,' as his former lover, Belle, reminds him, and encourage others to do the same (66). Dickens reinforces and then enables this by presenting scenes which encompass good feeling through appealing sensual detail, and events which summon negative feeling through grim, almost repellent statements. For example, the Ghost of Christmas Present offers Scrooge a vision of the Cratchits' Christmas meal so detailed that it runs as one of the tale's longest narratives, cataloguing as it does each member of the family, their idiosyncrasies and the preparation of their food. Each aspect of the meal is described carefully, the hot gin and

lemon drink, the 'hissing hot' gravy, the vigorously mashed potatoes, the tenderness of the goose, and a pudding which is depicted not only through its smell, but with reference to its cooking pot, its wrapping and its shape and size until it stands 'blazing in half of half-a-quartern of ignited brandy, and bedight with Christmas holly stuck into the top' (80-81). By contrast, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come presents Scrooge with an apparition of an illicit pawnbroker ready to trade the possessions of the deceased that is so sensually violent that the reader is almost forced to stop reading. Arriving at the 'den of infamous resort,' Scrooge has passed through a London deemed 'foul and narrow; the shops and houses wretched; the people half-naked, drunken, slipshod, ugly. Alleys and archways, like so many cesspools, disgorged their offences of smell, and dirt, and life, upon the straggling streets; and the whole quarter reeked with crime, with filth, and misery' (98). Linguistically as intense as the description of the Cratchit meal, the detail of this episode emotionally reflects the internal state in which Scrooge began his adventure and the reader is reminded of how considerable, and imperative, his about-turn has been.

Certainly Mrs Cratchit refuses to forget Scrooge's 'odious, stingy, hard, unfeeling' self, even after Tiny Tim has declared his redemptive 'God Bless us every one!' (82-83). Reinforcing the fragility of sentimentality by invoking Scrooge's rather quick turn from bad to good feeling, Dickens suggests that Scrooge has further to go in his transformation. He is still a materially wealthy metropolitan man at this point in the narrative, and must learn to exchange physical riches for inner feeling. As Fred announces: '"His wealth is of no use to him. He don't do any good with it. He don't make himself comfortable with it'" (87), a statement which almost directly foreshadows Simmel's observation that 'it is by no means necessary that the freedom of man be reflected in his emotional life as comfort.'[33] It is, of course, Bob that is truly 'comfortable' within the story, his breakdown after visiting Tiny Tim's grave in the last spirit's vision serving only to emphasize his closeness to his son and related intimacy with his living family:

> 'My little, little child!' cried Bob, 'My little child!'
> He broke down all at once. He couldn't help it. If he could have helped it, he and his child would have been farther apart perhaps than they were.
> He left the room, and went up stairs into the room above, which was lighted cheerfully, and hung with Christmas. There was a chair set close beside the child, and there were

> signs of some one having been there, lately. Poor Bob sat down in it, and when he had thought a little and composed himself, he kissed the little face. He was reconciled to what had happened, and went down again quite happy. …
> 'I am very happy,' said little Bob, 'I am very happy!'
> Mrs Cratchit kissed him, his daughters kissed him, the two young Cratchits kissed him, and Peter and himself shook hands. (106-07)

The Cratchits never lose the capacity to feel, whether emotionally (sadness or joy) or physically (they often touch and embrace) and their exchange of affectionate feeling infuses their domestic space with what Wheeler calls practical love and emotional identification. The reader and Scrooge alike come to realize through evocations of love such as this one that it is not death that defeats human feeling, but the human refusal to feel when living; as Dickens' narrator suggests: 'It is not that the hand is heavy and will fall down when released; it is not that the heart and pulse are still; but that the hand WAS open, generous, and true; the heart brave, warm, and tender' (102). Scrooge's release into feeling not only allows him a transformed selfhood ('"I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a school-boy'") but it grants him a new way of reading, and so engaging with, the world (111).

What Scrooge reveals, then, I think, is that the senses are the vehicles for the discernment of feeling, in texts, other people and our entire environment, allowing us to assess situations in a way that is mentally healthier for us than productive analysis. The consequences of Scrooge's final burst of feeling motivate him into philanthropy, church attendance and a renewed emotional connection with his community that he achieves through his sense-based perception. If we too are to read representations of feeling and sentiment on their own terms, rather than to egoically translate them into something else, we might sometimes have to do so without the crutch of history. As Hazlitt claimed, history might provide 'the empty cases in which the affairs of the world are packed,' but 'all that is worth remembering in life' is the feeling and experience of it.[34] Perhaps the best sense-based reading of 'A Christmas Carol' is Brian Henson's *The Muppet Christmas Carol* (1992) which stays famously close to Dickens' text and is narrated by Gonzo the Great (as Dickens), Kermit and Miss Piggy (as the Cratchits) and Fozzie Bear (perfecting the role of 'Fozziwig'). The film is uncompromisingly sentimental, much of it performed as a musical and Scrooge's

(Michael Caine) transformation welcomed by a finale designed only for non-egoic readers happy to celebrate seasonal good will. What would it mean for academics to privilege this good will through a sense-based criticism, and echo Marley's declaration that: '"Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business, charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!'" (49)?

One way of answering this question is by considering the implications of Marley's statement with regard to our response to our research, our disciplinary communities and our students. In a research culture now heavily influenced by a global and capitalist market place where scholars compete for status, funding and research-time, sense-based reading might help to re-emotionalize the profession. Many of us do read in the contexts of our own homes or shared communities of friends and family, enjoying texts for the feelings within both them and ourselves; and plenty of readers experience Dickens through the emotional content he relays but are perhaps too costive to allow themselves these responses in criticism. A sense-based criticism does not propose we pretend to engage with the text free of context; but it does invite us to acknowledge our affective susceptibility to the temporal immediacy of experience before its subsequent mediation by cultural conventions and contexts which either allow or mediate it in some way as 'event.' Armstrong's work continues to be invaluable in this arena of thinking in part because she embraces the significance of feelings as both an integral aspect of the (currently referred to as neoformalist) reading and writing experience. Her reading of Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' in 'The Victorian Poetry Party,' for instance, is an exemplary piece of sense-based criticism, I think, inviting us to read the poem aloud, and 'then perform it, with the body as dance or tableau, with the voice as song, with the eyes as pictorial/visual representation,' suggesting that readers enact the movements of the handloom weavers, perceive the eroticism of the flashing mirror and discern the icy emptiness of the lady's suicidal journey along the river.[35] Not only can the physiological impact of the poem be accessed by such techniques, but so too can those emotions concurrent with this bodily encounter with the text be slowly felt, affectively restoring those who might otherwise feel detached or removed from the poem.

A central problem with such an approach to texts is that it tends to be a protracted one:

our costiveness might be as much to do with time as feelings, a communicatively rich and thus emotionally demanding way of reading at odds with our modern commitment to efficiency and competence (as well as institutional demands). Living attention certainly requires time, and the length of Dickens' novels (but equally the density of Wordsworth's shorter lyrics, for example) demands a unhurried response of a kind many readers may be uncomfortable with: we seem incapable of lingering with feelings, often sliding into the non-feeling of boredom as a modernist defence against emotive experience. Boredom with elaborated discernment or attention to difficult detail alike is surely part of a modern rush to consume quickly rather than digest steadily, a preference that spills over into an academic profession now at the mercy of statistics and money. We might, then, choose instead to favour modes of reading that refuse to quantify our research as capital to be sold for intellectual profit. Our students too need to develop ways of becoming familiar and comfortable with texts in order that they work from a solid emotional and aesthetic foundation when pursuing their theoretical and historical thinking: they are taught to be suspicious of feeling too soon in their reading careers and then burn out forgetting why they chose to study literature in the first place. To read through feeling is pedagogically and intellectually more stimulating anyway and pulls our attention back to the literary text so that we engage with context from solid emotional ground. As Peter Barry declares, we risk losing the text in our 'fact-finding' missions for frameworks to explain it away, and argue ourselves out of a discipline by emotionally untying ourselves from textuality and finding false solace elsewhere.[36]

Links

http://www.jameselkins.com/

http://www.journalsonline.tandf.co.uk/link.asp?id=p5w21777h3482237

http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/pva/pva305.html

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Muppet_Christmas_Carol

http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Charles_Dickens_%28character%29

http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Fozziwig

http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Bob_Cratchit

http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Tiny_Tim_Cratchit

http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Muppet_Wiki

[1] *OED* definition.

[2] See Aldous Huxley, *Vulgarity in Literature: Digressions from a theme* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930); and George Orwell, 'Charles Dickens,' *Inside the Whale; and other essays* (London: Gollancz, 1940).

[3] See Philip Allingham, 'Sentimentality: the Victorian Failing,' http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/pva/pva305.html, accessed 15/12/05.

[4] See T. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets,' *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1999), pp. 281-291.

[5] See Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (London: Blackwell, 2000); James Elkins, *Pictures and Tears: a history of people who have cried in front of paintings* (London: Routledge, 2004); and the discussion of Wheeler below.

[6] Theodor Adorno, 'Free Time,' in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 187-197 (pp. 188-89, 192).

[7] Wendy Wheeler, *A New Modernity: Change in science, literature and politics* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1999), p. 1.

[8] Wheeler, *A New Modernity*, p. 3.

[9] Wheeler, *A New Modernity*, p. 12.

[10] Wheeler, *A New Modernity*, p. 156.

[11] Wheeler, *A New Modernity*, 33; and see Gerald Edelman, *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of the Mind* (London: Penguin, 1994).

[12] See Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: body and emotion in the making of consciousness* (London: Vintage, 2000).

[13] Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 144; it is notable that Belsey's recent work addresses new historicism's more conservative reaction to European theory, see, for example, 'Historicising New Historicism,' *Icons and Iconoclasts: The Long Seventeenth Century: 1603 to 1714*, Aberdeen University, 2006.

[14] See B. L. Crawford, 'Charles Dickens, uncommercial space-time traveller: Dombey and Son and the ethics of history,' *Dickens Quarterly*, 19:4 (2002), 187-219.

[15] See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003).

[16] See, for example, the confessional introduction of Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous possessions: the wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); and Alan Liu's epilogue on critical self-consciousness in *Wordsworth: the sense of history* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

[17] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* [1979] (London: Routledge, 2006).

[18] Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 68-71.

[19] For some general context on these questions, see 'Perspectives on Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect*: Forum,' *Women: a Cultural Review*, 17:1 (2006), 103-117.

[20] Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903), in *Simmel on Culture*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 174-185 (p. 176).

[21] Simmel, 'Metropolis,' p. 178.

[22] Simmel, 'Metropolis,' pp. 176, 178, 183.

[23] Simmel, 'Metropolis,' p. 175.

[24] Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*, pp. 126-27.

[25] Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*, p. 131.

[26] Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* [1840-41], ed. Norman Page (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 533-540.

[27] John Irving, 'In Defense of Sentimentality,' *The New York Review of Books*, November 25, 1979.

[28] See *Letters of John Ruskin to Charles Eliot Norton*, 2 vols (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co, 1904), ii.5.

[29] Charles Dickens, 'A Christmas Carol' (1842), in *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Writings*, ed. Michael Slater (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 35; all other references are included in the text.

[30] Simmel, 'Metropolis,' p. 183.

[31] See Dickens, 'A Christmas Carol,' p. 277fn.22.

[32] For the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come's kindess, see 'A Christmas Carol,' p. 110.

[33] Simmel, 'Metropolis,' p. 181.

[34] William Hazlitt, 'On Poetry in General,' (1818), in *Romantic Criticism 1800-1850*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Edward Arnold, 1968), pp. 109-110.

[35] Isobel Armstrong, 'The Victorian Poetry Party,' *Victorian Poetry*, 42.1 (2004) 9-27 (pp. 8, 25-26).

[36] Peter Barry, 'An Academic Discipline Forsees its Death,' *PN Review*, 173 (2007), 16-20 (p. 19).