

Introduction: Psychology/Aesthetics in the Nineteenth Century

Carolyn Burdett

Surveying a range of writing on aesthetics in 1908, the *Edinburgh Review*'s contributor notes that:

Beauty has held its secret from the prying investigator longer than any other department of experience. More of modern scientific light has been thrown on the obscure domains of moral and even of religious experience than upon that of aesthetic experience.¹

The most cursory survey of the psychological literature of the nineteenth century suggests that, if true, this would not be for want of effort. The nature of beauty and aesthetic pleasure were matters of intense interest for the developing discipline of psychology. But as the essays in this issue of *19* attest, aesthetics was not coyly resistant to 'modern scientific light' or merely an object for its scrutiny, but instead was a significant factor in its development, in turn shaping modern psychology.

As Neil Vickers reminds us in the first essay of this issue, 'psychology' and 'aesthetics' were being born more or less simultaneously in the eighteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth, psychology had reached maturity as a professionalized science. In Wilhelm Wundt's equipment-packed room at Leipzig in 1879, the study of mind went inside the laboratory. Experimental psychology aimed to provide a newly objective knowledge of secrets hitherto the domain of human souls, as it cut its disciplinary moorings from moral philosophy and theology. In Britain, though coming relatively late to laboratory-based experimentation in comparison to Germany and the United States, the final third of the century was increasingly dominated by similarly materialist enthusiasms as physiology and psychology converged. Humans were reconceived as complex bodily machines, as communicative networks of reflex actions radiating from the brain and the central spinal cord and thence to the nervous periphery. Evolutionary theory in turn offered ways to understand such psycho-physiological phenomena, linking even the most seemingly sovereign of human experiences, such as the feeling of love for another person or the love of God, to vestigial instinctive behaviours which had once conferred evolutionary advantage.

As idealist concepts of aesthetic response based on the work of Kant and Hegel started to give way to this materialist, physiologically-based psychology, the idea of the aesthetic was simultaneously viewed as subject to the same ‘laws’ as other kinds of human and animal behaviour, and as a means to test their limits. In 1875, the philosopher and psychologist James Sully contributed the entry on ‘aesthetics’ to the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. In it, he noted the problem of the enormous diversity of objects to which the term ‘Beautiful’ might be attached, concluding that: ‘There is certainly a great want of definiteness as to the legitimate scope of aesthetic theory.’ He continued:

It will be seen, too, how closely this point bears on the question of the relativity of aesthetic impressions, whether there is any form of beauty which pleases universally and necessarily, as Kant affirms. The true method of resolving this difficulty would appear to be to look on aesthetic impressions more as growth, rising, with the advance of intellectual culture, from the crude enjoyments of sensation to the more refined and subtle delights of the cultivate mind. The problem of the universal and necessary would then resolve itself into an inquiry into a general tendency. It would be asked what kinds of objects, and what elements of sensation, idea, and emotion, tend to become conspicuous in aesthetic pleasures, in proportion as the mind advances in general emotional and intellectual culture.²

Subjecting aesthetic response to the light of scientific enquiry was also a means to define and evaluate the goods of Victorian culture and civilization. Issues of power, privilege, and hierarchy were never far away from discussions of beauty.

The essays collected here touch on the rich diversity of topics clustering at the intersection between aesthetics and psychology over the course of the century. These include the physiology and psychology of perception, the relation of attention and memory, the status of introspection as psychological method, the relationship of ‘inner’ to ‘outer’ reality, and that between emotion and memory. Could beauty any longer be understood as a universal quality, and how was it affected by the challenges of cultural popularization? Did art foster moral quality and lead to beneficial ethical action? Psychologists such as Alexander Bain, writing at the mid-century, tried to answer the last question affirmatively by distancing aesthetic from other sensory experiences, emphasizing the former’s qualities of disinterestedness and the fact that its pleasures

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intensify as they are shared.³ By the end of the century, however, beauty appeared to have been decoupled from ethics in the hedonistic values of ‘art for art’s sake’ aestheticism. For critics of the latter, ‘taste’ seemed either mere fashion or a fit subject for satire, and aestheticism inevitably conducive of a selfish life.⁴

Across all these issues and debates persistent themes emerge for the scientists, psychologists, novelists, poets, theatre and gallery-goers, and aesthetic theorists considered here. One is the question of bodies. Beauty is a sensory experience, but one which might be guided or even determined by cognitive and intellectual faculties. On the other hand, bodies as sources of sensory feeling could also be experienced as irritation and distraction, barring aesthetic pleasure. Grant Allen, author of the influential *Physiological Aesthetics* (1877), writes of the effect on the nervous system of an uncongenial climate. Witnessing sights in the tropics which intellectually he recognizes as containing elements of beauty, they nevertheless fail to produce ‘the faintest thrill of pleasure’. The same scenes viewed later as photographed images, ‘seen now under an English sky and an English nervous diathesis, strike me as exquisitely beautiful’.⁵ Victoria Mills’s contribution to this issue describes George Eliot recording her inability to enjoy ‘the actual vision enough’ during a trip to Rome. Eliot anticipates the more satisfyingly beautiful Rome she will recall and imagine when reproducing these scenes later, in the form of created narrative. Bodies are not obedient sensory conduits for aesthetic experience but are instead constantly configured in complicated relations with mind. Eliot makes sense of her dulled impressions of the ‘real’ Rome by way of current psychological theory: she is experiencing a ‘double consciousness’ that tells her that these currently unengaging sights will subsequently be recollected replete with aesthetic feeling.

Double consciousness, dream-states, reverie, trance, dissociation, negative attitude of attention, subliminal and multiplex personalities: these limit-case states of consciousness explored by Victorian psychology were also often the privileged conditions for aesthetic experience.⁶ This was not without its anxiety, as Mills suggests, echoing Eliot’s own concerns: ‘We have no firm control over dreams, trances, or reverie. Might then these states lead to a diminished agency?’ In *Middlemarch*,

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Dorothea's dream-like state before the statue of Ariadne in the Vatican museum is, Mills argues, part of an aesthetic experience in which the conscious and unconscious mind engage in dialogue. Museums are the 'dream space' where this encounter, and its implicit dialogue with current theories of consciousness, takes place.

Tiffany Watt-Smith examines a very different 'reverie' state in her investigation of the neurologist Henry Head's techniques of self-experimentation and observation. Head voluntarily underwent a painful surgical procedure in order to chart the physiological and mental process of recovery. To experience his own sensations without the distortions of external distraction or the effects of will, he entered a state he called a 'negative attitude of attention'. Head was intensely proud of his skill in psychological introspection. As Watt-Smith demonstrates, however, its techniques were also those deployed by actors and theatrical audiences. Head was an enthusiastic theatre-goer and his self-observations were as much a part of theatre as they are of the scientific laboratory. Privileged states of imagination, of poetic, artistic, and dramatic creativity, and of aesthetic pleasure, turn out to be a necessary strategy for the skilled scientific investigator too. Reverie, the 'negative attitude of attention', disarms or circumvents the potentially ruinous effects of too much self-consciousness which threatens to derail introspective method.⁷

Introspective skills and aesthetic sensitivity often coincided. Carolyn Burdett's examination of Vernon Lee's psychological aesthetics shows how Lee's theory originated in her rapt attention to her lover's apparently hyper-sensitive body and remarkable introspective skills. As the women's relationship grew more distant, Lee relinquished the hope that she (and others) might eventually experience similar bodily reverberations when viewing beautiful objects. Armed with a new concept borrowed from German aesthetics – empathy – she sought to show that aesthetic response must be understood as a mental process, involving memory and imagination. The body, though, keeps finding a way back in, albeit a body itself undergoing transformation in physiological laboratories as technological instruments extended, exteriorized, and altered sensory perception.

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For Frederic Myers, founder member of the Society for Psychical Research and co-author of the two-volume study of ghost sightings, *Phantasms of the Living* (1886), it was poetry which allowed him to dramatize, imagine, and explore the dynamic relation between conscious and unconscious states that might even extend beyond the limits of the mortal body. Helen Groth presents Myers as a self-identified ‘minor poet’ and ‘amateur *savant*’, enraptured by poetry’s ability to intensify inner experience and to render ‘the invisible or subliminal aspects of everyday life visible’. Putting his poetry back alongside the ‘*savant*’ writing for which Myers is now best known, Groth shows how a stylistically nostalgic verse may nevertheless be thematically experimental.

Writing and reading poetry, visiting the theatre or a museum, looking at art: these activities are, for the writers investigated here, also experiments on minds. As Matthew Beaumont reminds us, it is this capacity – the capacity to experiment on his own mind – that for Pater made Coleridge the ‘archetypal aesthetic critic’. Neil Vickers’s investigation of how Coleridge understood the two terms he helped to bring into currency and into contact with each other, psychology and aesthetics, shows that both terms emerged sharing a ‘common burden’: they ‘had to prove their worth in moral terms’. It is through his encounters with German-inflected ideas about ‘Ästhetische Theorie’ and ‘psychologie’ that Coleridge found ways to lighten that ‘common burden’. In the process, he pressed mental introspection into service as a means to bodily cure.

For Pater, famously, there was no cure for the pains of living but only a prescription for the fleeting pleasures of art and song. Matthew Beaumont reads Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* as a ‘laboratory for thinking about consciousness’. But *Studies* is also a séance, in which Pater’s sympathetic engagement with the artwork is at the same time an encounter with the artist’s psychology and his own. It is rhetoric – Pater’s ‘ecstatic prose’, as Beaumont describes it – that invokes spirits of the past which reach and touch Pater in the present. This is introspection as epiphany, occult revelation, and Paterian ‘psychagogia’.

Helen Groth shows us that Frederic Myers’s post-theological and evolutionary vision of a subliminal self is ‘a psychological re-articulation of soul or spirit’; while for

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Vernon Lee, the task of psychological aesthetics is to contribute to ‘the general and applicable knowledge of that microcosm of complex and obscure movements which we call the human soul’.⁸ But this is soul reconfigured by nineteenth-century aesthetics and psychology. For Pater, ‘the soul [...] is a physical phenomenon, as material as it is transcendental’. By the century’s end, it is the soul which is the fugitive psychic space glimmering in the intersection of psychology and aesthetics, of sensation, perception, meaning, and emotion: Pater’s glorious ‘power of distinguishing and fixing delicate and fugitive details’ and Myers’s ‘fugitive bright lines [of] our subliminal states’.⁹

¹ ‘Beauty and Expression’, *Edinburgh Review*, October 1908, pp. 458-86 (p. 458).

² James Sully, ‘Aesthetics’, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9th edn
<<http://www.1902encyclopedia.com/A/AES/aesthetics-04.html>> [accessed 13/04/11]

³ Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* (London: Parker, 1859).

⁴ For an introductory discussion, see Dennis Denisoff, ‘Decadence and Aestheticism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 31-52.

⁵ Grant Allen, *Physiological Aesthetics* (London: King, 1877), pp. 56-57.

⁶ See Jenny Bourne Taylor, ‘Obscure Recesses: Locating the Victorian Unconscious’, in *Writing and Victorianism*, ed. by J. B. Bullen (London: Longman, 1997), pp. 137-79; and *Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts, 1830-1890*, ed. by Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

⁷ William Lyons, *The Disappearance of Introspection* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1986).

⁸ Vernon Lee and C. Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, 1912), pp. 73-74.

⁹ My thanks to Nicola Bown for suggesting the topic for the original conference which formed the nucleus of this issue, and for help in the conference planning; and to Jenny Bourne Taylor for help in planning, for contributing comments at the end of the day, and for one or two phrases incorporated in this Introduction. Jenny also secured a British Association of Victorian Studies conference grant which helped the day to run smoothly: thanks to her and to BAVS for their generosity. Isobel Armstrong summed up the day’s proceedings with her customary acuity and generosity: many thanks. My final but by no means least thanks go to the contributors to both conference and journal.