

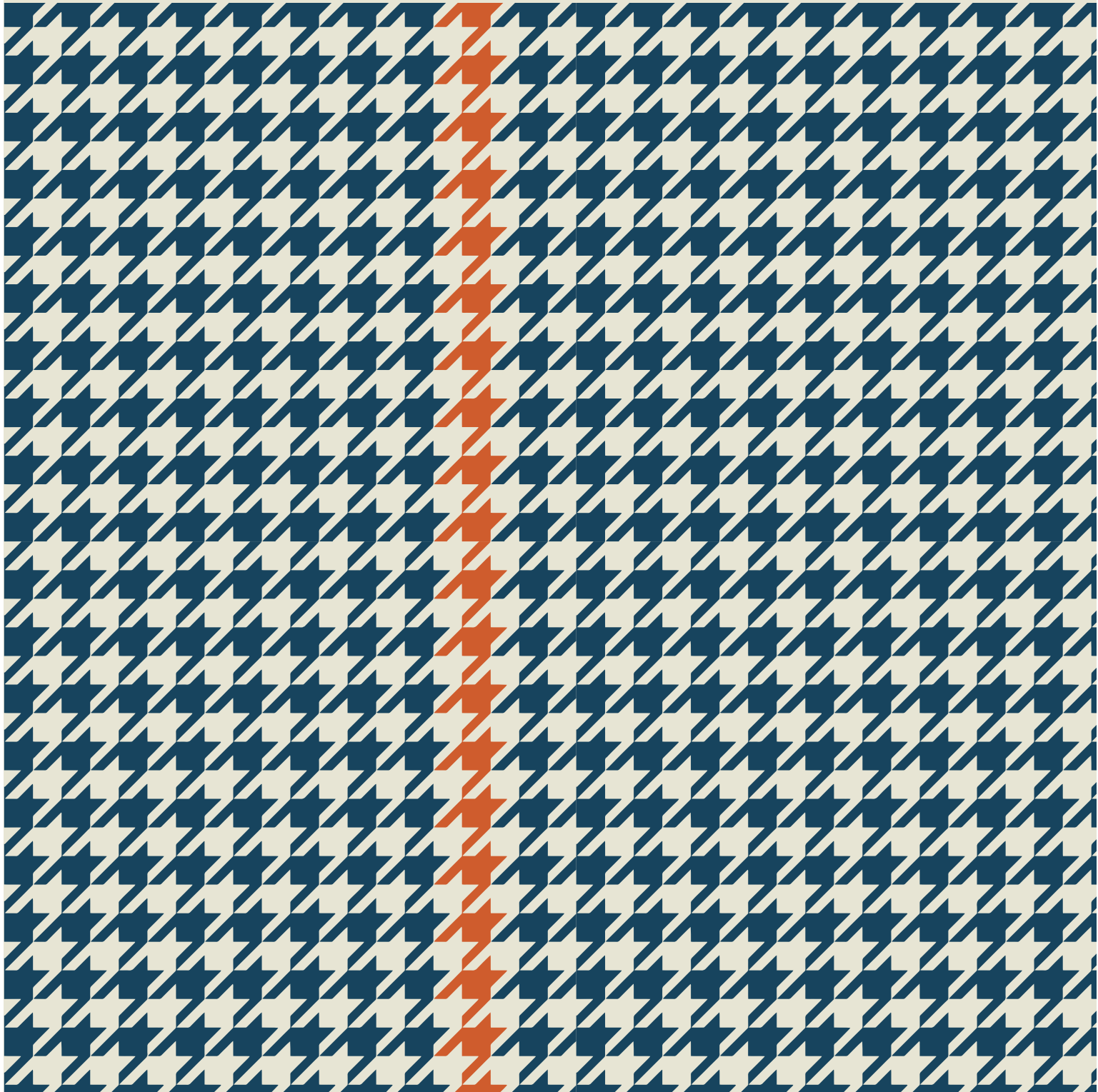
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Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Culturali Comparati
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia
Palazzo Cosulich - Dorsoduro 1405
30123 Venezia | Italy
english.lit@unive.it

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Victorian Literature and the Aesthetic Impure

Edited by
Mariaconcetta Costantini

Introduction

Mariaconcetta Costantini

(Università degli Studi G. d’Annunzio di Chieti-Pescara, Italia)

The Victorians witnessed an important process of reconceptualisation of aesthetic principles, which was closely intertwined with the social and economic transformations of their age. Questions concerning beauty, artistic value and the enjoyment of artworks had been raised powerfully during the Enlightenment, when «the word [aesthetic] and several important senses of the term [...] came into existence» (Grady 2009, p. 5). This legacy had a strong impact on the following century. First appropriated and reworked by the Romantics, aesthetic concepts were further developed by later artists and philosophers, who participated in lively debates on the nature of the artistic and the beautiful.

Such debates came to play a central role in nineteenth-century Britain. While reflecting on theories formulated by their predecessors both at home and abroad, Victorian intellectuals tackled specific problems posed by phenomena that were altering their own socioeconomic system. Two main triggers of artistic concerns were the rise of the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie, and the growth of a commodity culture fostered by the flourishing capitalist economy. Both phenomena fuelled controversies over the quality of mass-produced artworks, the changing relationship between producer and consumer, and the consequences of an increasing democratisation of taste. In coping with such preoccupations, the Victorians cleared the way for new aesthetic views. If some espoused eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century principles, which kept influencing their cultural milieu, others came to terms with the ongoing social changes by developing alternative notions of what constituted beauty, pleasure and art.

The relevance that ‘impure’ forms of production, consumption and appreciation of artworks acquired in Victorian culture proves that mid- to late-century Britain was a crucial site of aesthetic rethinking – one in which the strongly-felt effects of capitalism highlighted some limits and contradictions of pre-Victorian theories. What many Victorians became aware of, for example, was the failure of an objective pursued by eighteenth-century philosophers, who had searched for unifying aesthetic standards amid the endless variety of subjective experiences. Though stigmatised by purists, this awareness was favoured by the nineteenth-century proliferation of

tastes and styles, which attracted manifold thinkers. The latter's interest in what lacked purity and universality anticipated the twentieth-century scepticism about universally shared experiences, thereby laying the premises for modern theorisations.

This revisionary process was favoured by a particular historical conjuncture. The rapid transformation of nineteenth-century economy and society, the growth of a consumer-oriented market, the affirmation of a «popular 'aesthetic'» implying «the subordination of form to function» (Bourdieu 2010, p. 24), and the contamination of class lifestyles, created a fertile terrain for the germination of new thoughts. Besides detecting some weaknesses of the old philosophical agenda, the Victorians anticipated views that would become prominent in the following century, including the recognition that taste is no pure, shared and 'metaphysically' grounded notion.¹

The above-mentioned redefinition of taste shows the extent to which the Victorians elaborated ideas inherited from eighteenth-century philosophy. Some problems they faced, for instance, had already emerged in the aesthetic theory of Immanuel Kant, who had become entangled in complexities for which he had offered unsatisfactory solutions. A main issue was to explain the nature of «the Judgement of Taste», a mental process of recognition of beauty that should reconcile subjective universality with subjective purposiveness and objective pleasure (Carritt 1962, pp. 69-71). Although Kant had attempted to disentangle this knot, some paradoxical aspects of his theory remained unsolved, including the question of the subjective/objective nature of aesthetic apprehension: «how can a judgement, empirical and depending on no conception, and predicating no quality of the object, but only our subjective feeling, claim to be valid for all men?» (p. 67). Equally controversial were the Kantian efforts «to separate 'disinterestedness', the sole guarantee of the specifically aesthetic quality of contemplation, from 'the interests of the senses', which defines the 'agreeable', and from the 'the interest of Reason', which defines 'the Good'» (Bourdieu 2010, p. 33). The difficulty of stripping pleasure of any «norms of morality and agreeableness» became fully discernible in Victorian culture, which witnessed the emergence of «the negative opposite of the Kantian aesthetic»: «popular 'aesthetic'» (p. 33).

«Primarily a formalism», which entailed an appreciation of beauty for its own sake, Kant's aesthetic doctrine remained significantly autonomous from practical ends. In the post-Kantian age, however, this autonomy was

1 In Aldo Marroni's view, such recognition is a distinctive feature of twentieth-century aesthetics, which conceives taste as a set of impure, mutable relations: «Il fatto di riconoscere che il gusto non può essere fondato su una struttura immutabile e disincarnata di valori 'metafisici' puri e condivisi, ma è l'esito di una rete fluttuante di relazioni in movimento nel tempo e determinata attraverso tutti gli strati sociali, lo fa apparire come quel forte sentire più aderente ai nostri tempi» (Marroni 2007, p. 201).

called into question by new philosophical theories,² as well as by the centrality that the idea of usefulness acquired in the production and consumption of artworks. In similar ways, the nineteenth century highlighted some contradictions inherent in the conceptualisation of 'pure' aesthetic experiences, which had led Kant to disallow «the 'lower senses' of taste, touch, and smell; sexual and erotic desire; and any merely subjective associations» (Grady 2009, pp. 6-7). If «pure taste» entailed «a refusal of 'impure' taste and of *aisthesis* (sensation), the simple, primitive form of pleasure reduced to a pleasure of the senses» (Bourdieu 2010, p. 488), the affirmation of popular forms of entertainment and cultural production raised more forcefully the question of the function fulfilled by disgust - i.e., the refusal of facile, cheap and coarse objects - in distinguishing proper from improper artworks.

Victorian culture proved to be an important arena for reconsidering the Kantian notion of disgust. Still upheld by orthodox critics, the stigmatisation of what was crude and vulgar in art nonetheless became an object of contention among intellectuals, who strove to negotiate fresh notions of beauty and enjoyment. Abundant evidence of this theoretical ferment can be found in the main artistic medium of the age: literature. While betraying a deep fascination for impure styles and motifs, Victorian literary works bear witness to the central role that British intellectuals came to play in the nineteenth-century redefinition of what deserved aesthetic legitimation.

As the articles collected in this issue demonstrate, the Victorians contributed to this process of aesthetic reconsideration in two important ways. On the one hand, they laid the foundations for an «impure aesthetics» that was to be developed in the twentieth century - one which, in Grady's words, was «primarily a product of 'Western Marxism', above all of Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno», who saw the aesthetic both «as an autonomous practice» and as «a social construct» that «participates in the market economy, the social-status system, the political world, the religious communities, and private life» (Grady 2009, pp. 21-22). On the other, Victorian literati were captivated by impure notions which, no longer viewed as mere sources of disgust, became an essential part of their aesthetic experience. The pleasure they took in representing «big, complicated, messy worlds» (Arac 2011, p. viii), their use of vulgar images and their violation of codified stylistic norms confirm their penchant for an aestheticisation of the impure.

By attaching new values to the dichotomy purity/impurity, the Victorians anticipated some theories developed by twentieth-century anthropologists

2 Suffice it to consider some implications of Friedrich Nietzsche's thinking which, in E.F. Carritt's words, suggests that «art should not aim at 'beauty' - that is at making us rest in contemplation of the expressive image - but should issue immediately in an emotion directed to practical ends: the work of art should not be attended for its own sake but should secretly stimulate our behaviour» (Carritt 1962, p. 101).

and philosophers, who would analyse the socio-cultural meanings acquired by this dichotomy in the never-ending negotiation between sameness and heterogeneity, conservation and innovation. Notable, among these theories, is Mary Douglas's association of purity with the human tendency to preserve order and regularity against anomie: «Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise» (Douglas 2002, p. 200). Yet, as Douglas herself clarifies, the immobility of purity ultimately proves a deadly factor, while creativity and vitality pertain to the dynamic sphere of impurity. A similar drive to perversion pertains to the «abject» conceptualised by Julia Kristeva, which mobilises the system by corrupting rules and dissolving boundaries. «[T]he artistic experience [...] is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies», claims Kristeva, who sees the history of art as a dynamic process of contamination and catharsis (Kristeva 1982, p. 17). If applied to the Victorian artistic experience, these ideas suggest that, after a phase dominated by Kantian aesthetic and by ossified neoclassical norms, artists came to perceive impurity as a regenerative element which could counteract the immobility of homogeneising models of refinement and beauty.

Hardly conceivable in rational terms, the impure is generally associated with mysteries and primeval energies that escape human comprehension (Marroni 2007, p. 40). This tendency is evident in Victorian culture which complicates, rather than solves, some aporias of eighteenth-century aesthetics. A case in point is its declination of the idea of sublimity, which gives proof of the age's taste for merging opposites together, such as ugliness with beauty, delight with pain. Neatly differentiated from pure beauty by Kant, but already viewed in terms of impure pleasure by Edmund Burke, the sublime became in fact an elusive concept in the course of the nineteenth century. At the turn of the century it was notably defined as «a species, instead of the antithesis, of beauty» by A.C. Bradley, whose ideas had clear transgressive implications: «The pleasure we take in sublimity, instead of being immediate, purely affirmative, as is that of beauty, is conditioned by a previous negative stage of repulsion in which we feel 'checked, baffled, menaced'» (Carritt 1962, p. 156).

In ways similar to the sublime, effects of repulsion/attraction are recurrently evoked in the literature of the age, most notably in popular novels, whose images of violence and gross corporeality excite morbid pleasures. By associating residues of the bodily and the repressed with aesthetic categories, moreover, the Victorians raised the question of art's powers of *mimesis*. Amply discussed and practised at the time, literary realism became an object of controversy for nineteenth-century writers and critics, who strove to determine its limits and aesthetic value. At stake was an issue that would be explicitly addressed by twentieth-century theorists: whether art should be imaginary and destined to produce disinterested pleasure, or whether it could be contaminated by repressed desires cir-

culating within the social sphere. By experimenting with various degrees of realism, Victorian writers challenged the former assumption and paved the way for a more flexible idea of what constituted proper representation. Their widening of aesthetic categories was favoured by a literary practice largely adopted at the time: the constant merging of subgenres, discourses and methods of representation, which enabled realism to penetrate into non-realistic forms, thereby making it difficult to identify and preserve pure literary forms.

As hinted above, these changes were accelerated by the rapid expansion of the nineteenth-century literary market which, especially in Britain, altered intellectual labour, together with consumer attitudes and tastes. As a consequence, the Victorians witnessed a blurring of the opposition between «free art» and «mercenary art» established by Kant, with an inevitable reduction of the autonomy, purity and freedom of intellectual creativity (Meredith 1952, p. 164).

The extent to which the literature of the age responded to this process of refocalisation deserves critical attention. Particularly noteworthy is the Victorian aestheticising approach to the idea of impurity, which demands to be more closely investigated in the various forms it took within a dynamic, heterogeneous literary production.

Such an objective is pursued by the authors of the thirteen articles collected in this issue, which investigate different aspects of the process of aesthetic redefinition activated by Victorian writers. While drawing on established methodology, each article offers glimpses into particular meanings attached to the word «impurity», as well as into the aesthetic connotations the word acquired in relevant writings of the time. The order in which the contributions are arranged, moreover, sheds light onto the complex evolution of motifs, genres and ideas, which marks the distinction of nineteenth-century British literature.

A wide-ranging survey of the long nineteenth century is offered by Francesca Orestano, who demonstrates that Victorian culture was a crucial hinge in the development of modern aesthetics. Besides focusing on new criteria emerging at the time, Orestano describes the age's tendency towards the dissolution of objective standards of beauty and the consequent rethinking of eighteenth-century ideas in relation to the changing system of cultural production: «The purity of art and the purity of taste are notions that have to be readjusted within the present context: the notion of taste not silenced, but made subservient, with a blessing, to economic interests triggered by the technology of mechanical reproduction». The article not only examines some implications of the connection between art, trade and scientific progress; it also suggests that chemistry came to symbolise the paradigm pure/impure both in Victorian literature and art criticism. A science intrinsically impure in its objective (as a study of the infinite combination of elements), chemistry acquired epistemic relevance

in the course of the nineteenth century and was used, among other things, to render «those mixed elements – whether in history, art, or aesthetics – that react one upon each other, producing new substances». Taste itself and the appreciation of beauty were insistently represented through this overarching metaphor. A nonfictional example of its recurrence can be found in Walter Pater's «Preface» to *The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry* (1877), which establishes an effective parallel between the work of the chemist and the passionate response of the aesthetic critic.

Not differently from Orestano, Andrew Mangham and Silvana Colella explore the intermingling of art (and literature) with other spheres and fields of knowledge. The central concern of Mangham's article is the influence that medical statistics exerted on the narrativisation of hunger in a century dominated by the grim realities of poverty and starvation. Based as it was on facts and figures, this scientific discipline risked to reduce all stories of suffering «to a clipped and unrepresentative number». Sensitive scientists such as statistician William Farr saw this danger and strove to negotiate a new balance between sympathy and scientific observation. In the 1830s-40s, Farr drew inspiration from the oral tradition to describe the tragedies of the starving. The emotional responses produced by his medical writings counteracted the dispassionate empiricism of science, thereby inaugurating an impure aesthetic that was to play a central role in the Social Problem Novel. Unsurprisingly, Mangham detects important convergences between Farr's medico-narrativisation of hunger and the novelistic representation of this social affliction offered by Charles Kingsley one decade later: «Like the writings of William Farr, Kingsley's *Alton Locke* was a response to the perceived statistical tendency towards the simplification of starvation».

Another source of impurity in Victorian culture was the cross-fertilisation between aesthetic and commercial interests, which Colella explores in relation to Walter Bagehot's literary essays. Besides making a case for the re-evaluation of Bagehot's understudied writings, the article asserts the importance of his contribution to «the cultivation of an impure critical stance» as well as to «the orientation of the cultural tastes of the middle classes». As Colella contends, Bagehot's «critical perspective was predicated not on an elitist form of detachment from the unrefined, materialistic or even vulgar philosophies of the commercial classes, but on a kind of empathic and respectful proximity to the practicalities that affected the life of the 'transacting and trading multitude'». Especially relevant was his exaltation of *vita activa*, a basic tenet of the trading community culture to which he belonged. Thanks to his personal experience of the world of business, Bagehot developed views that stood in sharp contrast with the convictions of the Victorian champions of purity. His essays bear evidence of his critique of models of aloofness and abstraction exalted by early century theorists, as well as of his mistrust of the cultural elitism theorised by Matthew Arnold a few years later.

Remarkably present in the age's nonfictional production, the Victorian responses to pressing aesthetic dilemmas are most conspicuous in the mid-century novel, a genre that became a main forum for intellectual debate. The periodical press in which many novels were serialised proved to be a fundamental medium of circulation of new ideas of taste and art. Most important, in this regard, were the experiments conducted by best-selling novelists such as Charles Dickens and the representatives of the 'sensation school'. The impure motifs and hybrid style of their narratives generated discussions over the aesthetic legitimation of artworks which patently violated norms upheld by the high culture tradition. What is noteworthy, however, is that these discussions not only led to the social stigmatisation of novelists. They also favoured a transformation of the very tastes and principles of the Victorian middle classes, who gradually developed an appetite for impure narratives labelled as vulgar in the orthodox press.

The innovative function fulfilled by the mid-century novel is dealt with in three articles which explore the relation between this genre and the Victorian rethinking of aesthetic criteria. In «Fact and Taste: Thematic and Metaliterary Impurity in *Hard Times*», Saverio Tomaiuolo develops an idea that is central to the tradition of Dickens criticism: that *Hard Times* «provides an interesting access to a creative internal struggle experienced by Dickens» in an important phase of his artistic career. Through a multi-leveled reading of the novel, Tomaiuolo demonstrates that, more than other Dickens works, *Hard Times* raises concerns about literary representation and professionalism which were haunting its author in the 1850s. In addition to confirming the Dickensian oscillation between hardly reconcilable opposites, such as unbridled creativity and down-to-earth factuality, this novel pivots around an idea of impurity that takes manifold textual shapes. A narrative that disturbingly juxtaposes fancy with fact, the carnivalesque with the grim reality of industrialism, *Hard Times* simultaneously challenges formalism with its «hybrid assemblage of contrasting styles», thereby suggesting the complexity of the author's reflection on the limits and values of literary representation.

Another proof of Dickens's unorthodox interests was his taste for corpses displayed to public gaze - a taste he shared with sensation novelists like Wilkie Collins. The manifestation of this impure taste in some mid-century novels is analysed by Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, who comes to two important conclusions: that Victorian popular novels embodied and recorded cultural responses to medical science, particularly to bodies exhibited in anatomical museums; and that fictional representations of this morbid anatomy «offer insights into definitions of popular literature and popular taste». While proving the centrality acquired by the «anatomical gaze» in mid-Victorian literature, Talairach-Vielmas investigates the historical sources of this gaze, including medical shows and exhibitions that were targeted as offensive and potentially depraving. These critiques were

strongly evocative of those levied against the sensation novel which, in the same period, was «frequently condemned for breeding forms of impure taste in the readers». Such convergences are palpable in Collins's *Armadale*, a sensation novel that capitalises on morbid tastes associated with medical science. As Talairach-Vielmas argues, *Armadale* betokens a new type of realism which, quite graphic in its details, was anchored within a culture of exhibition that spectacularised the body. Strongly influenced by Victorian medicine, this culture was intertwined with the development of sensational realism – a mode of composition «aligned with exposure, exhibition and opening, terms which are reminiscent of the world of anatomy and surgical skill».

The emphasis laid on physicality was undoubtedly a peculiarity of mid-Victorian sensationalism. Further reflections on this topic are offered by Anne-Marie Beller in a study of the revisions Mary Elizabeth Braddon made to her penny serial *The Outcasts* before its publication in three volumes as *Henry Dunbar*. As Beller contends, the sensation genre lacked the necessary distance from the corporeal that defined pure taste and was «frequently criticised for its insistent corporeality and unwholesome depictions of physical violence and sensuality». Its impurity was made more offensive by the class identity of its target audience which, primarily bourgeois, was encouraged to develop a taste for violence and sensuality that had much in common with the lower-class appetites of penny-novel readers. For these reasons, the rise of sensationalism posed the problem of reconsidering aesthetic principles in relation to the habitus of social groups (Bourdieu 2010, pp. 166-168). How marked was the 'classed' nature of genres at the time? And to what extent did the new genre contribute to the vulgarisation of middle-class tastes? After describing Braddon's efforts to reduce the proliferation of bodies in *Henry Dunbar*, Beller comes to an interesting conclusion: «Braddon's revision of her penny serial into a circulating novel for the middle classes illustrates that the key difference between the two classed genres was largely cosmetic rather than a matter of intrinsically divergent tastes». Such a view is confirmed by the mixed reception of *Henry Dunbar* by middle-class critics, some of whom strikingly seemed to appreciate the more violent version destined to the penny-novel market.

The impassioned debate around the sensation genre revealed the complexity of literary discourse in a crucial period of transition for the novel. As proved by the strong responses of their opponents, sensationalists called into question the divide between high and low culture, as well as the classed nature of established forms of literature. The questions they raised not only influenced the theorisation and practice of the novel; they also had an impact on other literary genres developed in the second half of the century. Poetry itself bears evidence of this theoretical ebullience. In «'Sensational nonsense': Edward Lear and the (Im)purity of Nonsense

Writing», Raffaella Antinucci examines Lear's poetic production in light of the objections he raised to the literary use of sensation, despite his life-long friendship with Collins. Still, there are, in Lear's poetry, elements that evoke the impure quality of sensation literature, such as the fetishisation of the body, the recurrence of violent images, and the «pervasive cross-fertilisation of literary forms and themes». Antinucci delves deep into these contradictions to demonstrate that Lear engaged with both sides of the cultural divide. While using high literary conventions that appealed to a sophisticated audience, he in fact resorted to trivial subjects that were supposed to gratify lower-class tastes. For all these reasons, many of his poems betray an undecidability that has something in common with the renegotiation of Victorian cultural canons triggered by Collins and his fellow novelists: «Lear's nonsense ultimately elicits an aesthetic response that, in Kantian terms, is reflective and sensual, pure and impure, rational and sensational, at the same time».

Apart from Lear, other Victorian poets appropriated and reinterpreted views of the beautiful and the artistic that circulated within their cultural milieu. An interesting case is taken into account by Jude V. Nixon, who discusses the fragmentary impulse recurrent in Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetry. As he argues in «Hopkins's Poetic Porcupines and the Aesthetic Taste», most unfinished works of the Jesuit poet have been viewed as aesthetically displeasing by critics, who have ignored two important facts: that Hopkins wrote fragmentarily and theorised on the imperfect; and that some poems fretfully classified as incomplete were, instead, intentionally planned to suggest irresolution. The poem «St. Thecla», among others, testifies to Hopkins's creation of «poetic porcupines, miniature works of art severed and isolated from the larger whole, but entirely self-contained and unfinished in their completion». In order to appreciate such formalistic complexities, this and other 'fragments' should be read in light of the Romantic tradition, as well as of seminal aesthetic notions of perfection developed by Kant, Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Schiller. Besides revealing Hopkins's «contribution to the Romantic poetic fragment as a form that can inspire aesthetic emotions», the approach adopted by Nixon unveils meaningful convergences with earlier philosophical ideas, including Schlegel's conceptualisation of the beauty of the fragment, and Schiller's view of the moral as the foundation of grace and beauty.

The Victorian elaboration of the Romantic legacy is also taken into consideration by Roger Ebbatson, who compares «the function and effect of the aesthetic gaze in a group of 'mirror' poems, focusing upon issues of representation and the male gaze». A symbol that recurs in the Romantic theorisation of the mimetic in art, the mirror reappears in a number of Victorian poems, in which it acquires a variety of erotic and artistic meanings. In particular, Ebbatson's analysis focuses on the declination of the mirror symbolism in the works of two poets: Algernon Charles Swinburne's

«Before the Mirror», a supplementary text inspired by a Whistler painting, and three late-Victorian poems composed by Thomas Hardy. By drawing on philosophical and psychoanalytic theories, Ebbatson highlights significant differences between the two poets' use of the mirror as a generator of projections of the self and of various forms of desire. His conclusion is that the mirror's reflexivity came to embody the two poets' divergent views of art. More specifically, for Swinburne the work of art functioned as «a non-mimetic or purely formal object, one determined by traditional canons of beauty» which were to acquire new centrality in fin-de-siècle symbolism. Unlike him, Hardy willingly embraced «the 'impure aesthetic' of artistic realism» and used his mirror imagery to articulate a more radical response to the decline of folklore culture.

The last group of articles bring the attention back to fiction. Under scrutiny here is the late-Victorian evolution of long and short fiction from the 1870s to the fin de siècle, a period in which mid-Victorian issues mingled with new aesthetic preoccupations. In «Impure Researches, or Literature, Marketing and Aesthesis: The Case of Ouida's 'A Dog of Flanders' (1871-Today)», Andrew King reflects on how the publishing market contaminated reader responses to literary texts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cogent proof of this contamination can be found in the effects that marketing decisions had on the material format and the reception of «A Dog of Flanders». Initially conceived as a narrative for adults, this short story by Ouida was successively repackaged as children's story, art-book designed as gift, and animal-rights protest tale. In exploring the various stages of this transformation, which also affected the books' paratextual components (including cover images), King copes with two main methodological questions. First, he asserts that the aesthetic desire for a product such as Ouida's story should not be interpreted in terms of Kantian disinterestedness, but should rather be viewed as necessarily impure, owing to the lure exerted by the physicality of the desired object. Secondly, he underlines the importance of conducting «impure researches». Based as they are on the recognition that «a text is, to our reading bodies, the ever increasing sum of the history of its sensuous presentation and perception», these researches pay attention to the materiality of texts, thus protecting us from the danger of depriving a literary work of its afterlives.

A different interpretation of the necessity of impurity is given by Maria Luisa De Rinaldis in a reading of two short stories composed by Pater in the 1880s-90s. After clarifying that Pater's aesthetic views were shaped by a dual tension between the pure and the impure, De Rinaldis explores the ways in which this duality affected «his understanding of the category of the sacred, in line with contemporary anthropological thought». The 'imaginary portraits' drawn in «Denys l'Auxerrois» and «Gaudioso, the Second» well render the author's wish to project the impure into the domain of sacredness and, in so doing, to make it signify regeneration. This

semantic reconfiguration is evident in the itinerary of degeneration and sacrifice followed by Denys, as well as in Gaudio's contamination with «inert impure material» which «gives solidity to the sanctity and purity of life». «A beauty which is untouched by impurity is sterile», observes De Rinaldis, before concluding that the Paterian re-orientation of the sacred towards the human anticipates twentieth-century aesthetics, including some ideas upheld by Adorno and Giorgio Agamben.

Distinctively crude and perverse is, instead, the notion of impurity at the core of Arthur Machen's works, which dramatise pressing fin-de-siècle anxieties. As Gilles Menegaldo asserts, in his reading of *The Great God Pan* and *The Three Impostors*, Machen created hybrid texts that pivot around this notion both stylistically and thematically. Alongside «a certain form of impurity» resulting from the combination of «various genre conventions at time verging upon parody or pastiche», the two narratives exhibit motifs and images that are meant to «generate a strong feeling of fascination mingled with a sense of horror and abjection». This predilection for gothic, lurid details is best visible in Machen's depictions of the city as a labyrinthine space «fraught with uncanny connotations», and in his predilection for corporeal images evocative of ugliness, violence and repulsive metamorphosis. By turning the body into a generator of pleasure inextricably combined with disgust, the Welsh writer contributed to freeing literature from the constraints of pure, formalistic representations of beauty, thereby adding a further element of modernisation to the sensation novel legacy. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Machen's association of the corporeal with a hyper-connoted idea of impurity foregrounds the Kristevan conceptualisation of the «abject» as an element of disturbance of purity and order, something that «does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite» (Kristeva 1982, p. 4).

Together with fiction, drama was strongly influenced by an impure taste which, particularly at the fin de siècle, drew nourishment from the fast spreading consumer culture. The aesthetic implications of this cross-generic exchange are best noticeable in Oscar Wilde's production of the 1880s-90s, which offers thought-provoking clues to the complex interaction he established with the dominant culture of his age. In «Consumerism, Celebrity Culture and the Aesthetic Impure in Oscar Wilde», Pierpaolo Martino examines some ambiguities of the aesthetic credo held by the Anglo-Irish author, who «seemed to embrace opposite and irreconcilable approaches to consumerism». Already evident in his American lectures, which consecrated his celebrity cult, the difficulty of harmonising high art with low culture, the love of beauty with materialistic desires, continued to characterise Wilde's artistic views in the 1890s, as evidenced by many contradictions inherent in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and in his famous plays. Still, as Martino argues, it was exactly by dithering over irreconcilable positions that Wilde came to play a countercultural, innova-

tive function within his milieu. The «first proper celebrity of the modern age», he developed views that were to exercise a powerful influence on the following century, and would shape our own perception of fashion, style and the beautiful. «Wilde's impure aesthetics seems to be one of the most relevant legacies of late Victorian culture, to which postmodernity itself – as we have come to know it, with its 'taste' for bricolage and the mixture of high and low cultures – is heavily indebted».

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