Victorian Literature and Culture (2006), **34**, 385–387. Printed in the United States of America.
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SOUND AND SCENTS

By Barbara T. Gates

AFTER MORE THAN A DECADE scrutinizing the importance of sight in the nineteenth century, Victorian scholars are training their own sights on other senses. Books like Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* (MIT 1990), James Krasner's *Entangled Eye* (Oxford 1992), and Kate Flint's *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge 2000) – studies that revolutionized our understanding of why and how sight mattered in Victorian culture – have recently been complemented by books like the two under review here. Janice Carlisle's *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction* and John M. Picker's *Victorian Soundscapes* have much in common. While focusing on a sense other than sight, each shifts gracefully between Victorian culture and literature, and each demonstrates concern with class and gender. Both books can certainly awaken a reader to a new recognition of what it meant to be alive during an era of rapid change and rampant class-consciousness. We sniff out others along with the characters in Carlisle's chosen novels and retreat to our own quiet studies with sighs of relief as we read about Picker's Victorian scholars' and illustrators' attempts to create soundproof studies in order to exclude the cries and clatter of London streets. As we do so, it is all but impossible to come away without a refreshed perception of what it meant to be a middle-class Victorian male, besieged by the smell of an alluring woman or the annoying sound of a persistent organ grinder.

Carlisle's book is smaller in scope and time frame than is Picker's, devoted as it is to one genre and one decade, the 1860s. But what Carlisle details is a fascinating subject: just how human exchanges can be prescribed by olfaction and how odors consequently define encounters between literary characters. The scents of her period are subtle, different from the malodorous scents of death and poverty found in the novels of the 1840s, she tells us. Her first chapters are devoted to discussing the whys and wherefores of such differences as she sets up the terms of her study. In these early sections, Carlisle presents generalizations and cultural norms, while in later sections, she analyzes specific novels and types of characters. This reader would have profited from more social analysis in those early chapters, along with a more extended discussion of the culture of smell as defined by Victorian science, although Carlisle touches briefly upon Grant Allen's and George Henry Lewes's popular conceptions of smell and on Alexander Bain's psychophysiology. But Carlisle is most expertly at home in the world of the novel, and here is where she excels. Her book moves from the culture of scent, to the demonstration of scent in a series of novels, to the more probing study of one particular novel. In doing so, it ranges comfortably among some eighty texts, centering on works like Dickens's *Great Expectations*,Oliphant's *Salem Chapel,* Meredith's *Evan*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150306051229 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Harrington, and the novels of George Eliot, and concluding with an entire chapter on *Our Mutual Friend*. Throughout, Carlisle demonstrates just how olfaction enables the characters of these novels to discern differences among people. She is less concerned with the smell of the culture – odors of neighborhoods, rivers, streets, or food, for example – than with scents detectable during personal exchanges.

Carlisle's main focus is on the middle-class male, a figure she believes is all but scentless in mid-Victorian novels. He dominates the world of olfaction as he does the worlds of commerce and privilege, but not through his personal odor, only through his sense of smell. Others, like the working classes and women, smell different to him, but in Carlisle's opinion, this leaves the middle-class male a kind of odorless nil, an ideal without a presence. Thus many of the heroes of 1860s fiction become, in Carlisle's terminology, "melancholic men" (chapter 2) who seem scentless and sad in a world of olfaction. They are therefore insubstantial and non-corporeal when compared with the more substantial women they crave or the sweaty workers with whom they come into contact. Carlisle's is an interesting theory when she applies it to characters like Dickens's Pip (as juxtaposed, for example, to the more substantial Estella) or to Meredith's heroes. But eventually her theorizing about and describing this character type leads Carlisle away from the universe of olfaction and into the world of melancholia – an area critically examined far more frequently than is the world of scent. This derailing produces a provocative book about the Victorian novel and a pioneering study of Victorian scent, but it invites more studies of this fascinating sense.

The senses explored in the two books discussed in this review are of course entirely different and can account in part for dissimilarities in the books' narratives. As Carlisle points out, following Bain, sound waves penetrate only to the ear, but the organ of smell is more "deeply lodged" (43). This could explain her decision to privilege depth over range in her own study. But Picker's choice of narrative method – just four probing chapters that read like discreet case studies – ultimately gives a better sense of Victorian sound than Carlisle's does of Victorian scents. Episodic and brief though it may at first seem, *Victorian Soundscapes* has not only a longer timeline – the Victorian era from the late 1830s to its end – but also a more carefully plotted sense of chronology than Carlisle's. Occasionally, Carlisle will choose a figure like the late-century Freud to illuminate the 1860s, assuming that later critics can often best help illuminate an earlier time. Picker, on the other hand, although he chooses to focus on isolated episodes from Victorian culture, probes further into the precise milieu in which they occur and moves forward in time from episode to episode. Thus with respect to novels, to keep our genres comparable for a moment, Picker is moved to pair fiction writers with concurrent cultural incidents and/or scientific discoveries – Dickens with Charles Babbage (chapter 1) or George Eliot with Hermann von Helmholtz (chapter 3) – rather than to read culture through the scrim of the novel.

From its outset, beginning with the thunderous eruption of Krakatoa, a sound heard round the world, Picker's book reverberates with sound. The Victorian age, Picker sets out to show, was an "ausculative age" (7), full of dissonance and resonance. It was also an age of close listening – one that saw the development of the microphone and the improvement of the stethoscope – and an age rife with nuisance sounds. Picker's brilliant second chapter, "The Soundproof Study: Victorian Professional Identity and Urban Noise," a chapter that readers of *Victorian Literature and Culture* may have read in an earlier guise in *Victorian Studies* (42: 1999/2000, 427–53), resonates with nuisance sounds and may offer the best example of just how the episodic chapters in Picker's book operate. It juxtaposes scholars and desk workers

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150306051229 Published online by Cambridge University Press

like Thomas Carlyle and John Leech over against a variety of vendors and street musicians in a war to quiet the streets of London. The deskmen took on street noise with a vengeance, pursuing every possible legal and moral angle in attempts to create peace and quiet in their studies or workplaces. This spirited chapter brings together an eclectic set of texts in order to tell its story. Leech's cartoons, Babbage's complaints, parliamentary records, Michael Bass's *Street Music in the Metropolis* (1864), and selections from the *Times*, the *Owl*, and *Punch* are arrayed to give a you-are-there feel to this chapter that culminates in the passage of the Street Music Act in 1864. The kind of work that Picker exhibits here represents the best of contemporary cultural criticism.

In a subsequent chapter, Picker compares George Eliot's sympathetic sense of resonance (her sound of the "squirrel's heartbeat" on the "other side of silence," for example [*Middlemarch* 2: xx]) with contemporary scientific discussions of sound waves and the invention of the telephone. This chapter includes a fascinating picture of Queen Victoria ardently listening to Bell's invention, reproduced on the cover of a yellowback aimed at railway readers. Picker's study then concludes by nudging us toward the twentieth century with a discussion of recording and Edison's now famous wax cylinders that hold Browning's and Tennyson's voices. The 1888 debut of the phonograph, Picker tells us, led to "a new kind of relic, a grooved talisman of identity" (122) which leads him to a final discussion of the famous photograph of Barraud's dog in 1899, head cocked and listening to "his master's voice" played in a Victrola.

I began this review by noting that the two books discussed here give a deeper sense of what it meant to be a middle-class Victorian male. My terminology was deliberate. Although each book breaks new ground in Victorian studies, both take us back to the dominant figure in the nineteenth century, the man of some means and education, the person who is seen to dominate smelling and listening. Through figures like Dickens and Leech and their output, Carlisle and Picker carry us to new areas for cultural inquiry. But, for all their virtues, both of their books leave ample room for further study of sound and scents. How, one is left wondering, did women or street musicians feel, see, hear or smell when they themselves sensed otherness or discerned middle-class men hot on their scent? And what about the novels of other decades or the many sound bites that must have transpired in the spaces between Picker's plangent examples? As we Victorianists continue to sniff out Victorians, we might put our bloodhounds onto the scent of such questions.

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WORKS CONSIDERED

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Picker, John M. *Victorian Soundscapes*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150306051229 Published online by Cambridge University Press