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Victorian Beauty

Victoria Mills and Heather Tilley

This introduction celebrates the work of Professor Hilary Fraser and discusses the contributions to this issue of 19 on the theme of Victorian Beauty.



We are delighted to introduce this very special issue of *19* on the topic of ‘Victorian Beauty’ in honour of Professor Hilary Fraser. It is particularly fitting that *19* should be the vehicle for this Festschrift as it was Hilary who started the journal — the first online journal in nineteenth-century studies — in 2005.¹

Hilary was born and educated in East London. She read English at Leicester University and completed her doctoral work, on Gerard Manley Hopkins and his circle, at St Hilda’s College Oxford in 1979. Her first academic post was at the University of Buckingham (1978–82) before she moved to Perth, Western Australia where she published her first books as part of a strong group of nineteenth-century colleagues and graduate students. These included the monographs *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature* (1986), *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (1992), and, with Daniel Brown, *English Prose of the Nineteenth Century* (1996). She returned to the UK in 2000. After a year as a visiting fellow at Clare Hall Cambridge (2000–01), and another as Dean of Arts and Humanities at Canterbury Christ Church (2001–02), she was appointed to the Geoffrey Tillotson Chair of Nineteenth-Century Studies at Birkbeck, University of London.

It was, in Hilary’s words, her ‘dream job’. Birkbeck’s distinctive record of excellent teaching and research matched by a proud mission to welcome students of all ages and backgrounds, chimed with and reinforced her personal educational ideals. She held the Tillotson Chair for the rest of her career. In addition to her professorial duties, she served as head of English (2005–06, 2008–09), and as the inaugural Dean of the School of Arts, a post she held for eight years (2009–17) while maintaining her writing and research commitments. Her achievements in her field of research were recognized when she was elected President of the British Association for Victorian Studies between 2015 and 2018. During these years at Birkbeck, Hilary led the Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies as Director from 2002 until 2012. In a recent discussion with the editors of this issue, Hilary paid tribute to the centre, describing it as an institution that has long been famed not only for its intellectual vibrancy and innovation, but for the warm sociability which is key to any successful, outward-looking academic environment. After nearly two decades at Birkbeck, she retired in 2020. She is now Professor Emerita and plays an active role as a distinguished Honorary Fellow.

In the early stages of planning this issue, we kept returning to the notion of beauty as a unifying force to explore and celebrate Hilary’s work. From her early examination of nineteenth-century histories of the relationship between aesthetics and religion in

¹ *Interdisciplinarity*, ed. by Hilary Fraser, *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 1 (2005) <<https://19.bbk.ac.uk/issue/127/info/>> [accessed 5 March 2023].

Beauty and Belief to the more recent investigation of women's engagement with art in *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century: Looking Like a Woman* (2014), Hilary has long been interested in the ways in which notions of beauty can be explored across a range of nineteenth-century discourses and cultural forms.² The breadth and depth of Hilary's scholarship in this area is extraordinary. With an effortlessness that belies the rigour of her scholarly endeavour, Hilary has examined, and further illuminated, the work of some of the major literary and cultural figures of the Victorian period (John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Gerard Manley Hopkins, George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, Oscar Wilde) and she has been at the forefront of new scholarship seeking to uncover and establish new voices, often those of women, including Vernon Lee, Michael Field, Maud Cruttwell, Anna Jameson, Mary Merrifield, and Elizabeth Rigby.³

The inaugural issue of 19 focused on interdisciplinarity and carried an introduction from Hilary in which she outlined the importance of 'creative collaboration', 'both between disciplines and between institutions, [...] postgraduate students and more experienced academics'.⁴ Hilary's work traverses the widest possible range of written and visual forms and has involved a number of such creative collaborations: with Deirdre Coleman on the edited collection *Minds, Bodies, Machines, 1770–1930* (2011); with Stephanie Green and Judith Johnston on *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* (2003); and with Daniel Brown on *English Prose of the Nineteenth Century*. With Nick Burton, Hilary co-authored an article that demonstrates the pleasures and possibilities of collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and aesthetics: 'Mirror Visions and Dissolving Views: Vernon Lee and the Museological Experiments of Patrick Geddes' (2006) examines the visual dynamics of Geddes's Outlook Tower in Edinburgh, complete with its camera obscura and darkened 'inlook room', which was also the subject of an essay by art historian, philosopher, scientist, and literary critic Vernon Lee.⁵ Burton and Fraser explore the aesthetic experience of visiting the Outlook Tower through their short film

² Hilary Fraser, *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth-Century: Looking Like a Woman*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 95 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³ For a full list, see *Women Writing Art History*, pp. 1–14. For important earlier interventions on Michael Field and Vernon Lee, see 'A Visual Field: Michael Field and the Gaze', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 34 (2006), 553–71; and 'Women and the Ends of Art History: Vision and Corporeality in Nineteenth-Century Critical Discourse', *Victorian Studies*, 42 (1998–99), 77–100.

⁴ Hilary Fraser, 'Introduction: Interdisciplinarity', 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 1 (2005) <<https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.432>>. This inaugural issue developed from a conference convened by the late and much missed Sally Ledger, 'The Moving Subject: Interdisciplinarity in Nineteenth-Century Studies', held at the Institute of English Studies during the summer of 2004.

⁵ Nick Burton and Hilary Fraser, 'Mirror Visions and Dissolving Views: Vernon Lee and the Museological Experiments of Patrick Geddes', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 28 (2006), 145–60.

‘The Tower of Mirrors’ (the title mirrors that of Lee’s essay) which, through its use of montage, repetition, and dissolves, disrupts linearity and evokes the embodied nature of visual experience.

Hilary is also a scholar who has movingly interleaved the personal, cultural, and the aesthetic. The article ‘Grief Encounter: The Language of Mourning in *Fin-de-Siècle* Sculpture’ (2018) explores sculpture as a medium of mourning, drawing on the aesthetic theories of Walter Pater and Vernon Lee, to frame Hilary’s own encounters with late nineteenth-century sculpture in the context of personal bereavement.⁶ Part way through the article she questions her response to Auguste Rodin’s *Les Bourgeois de Calais* (1889): ‘Ambushed as I was by the flesh and blood of memory, did I abandon the aesthetic of disinterest and detachment in which I had been trained, and fail to look at it *as a work of sculpture* with sufficient attention?’ (p. 47, emphasis in original). Hilary’s writing is both arresting and beautiful. As Simon Schama remarked during his response at the book launch for Fraser’s most recent monograph, Hilary ‘writes like an angel’. And, of course, Hilary continues to research and write; her scholarly edition of Pater’s *The Renaissance*, Volume 1 of the ten-volume *Collected Works of Walter Pater*, published by Oxford University Press is forthcoming (2024), and a short book on art writing with the provisional title, *The Critic as Artist*, has been commissioned by OUP for delivery in 2026.

We approached a number of Hilary’s colleagues and former students with the invitation to contribute to this celebration of her work. We were unsurprised by the enthusiasm and alacrity with which people responded, despite our initial invitation round being sent in the difficult context of 2021, when we were still navigating the stresses and increased workloads associated with the pandemic. Given the nature of the Festschrift, we aimed to be as inclusive and open with the theme as possible, while also encouraging contributors to respond to Hilary’s wide-ranging body of work. It has been tremendously exciting to see how contributors have responded to our invitation. The issue is divided into three sections, which befittingly showcase exciting and innovative new directions in scholarship, as well as dazzle with smaller reflections and readings of Victorian beauty. The issue comprises a collection of six articles; a forum consisting of eight shorter position pieces offering interventions into the aesthetic and political issues underpinning the notion of ‘Victorian beauty’; and a gallery section made up of six close readings of a range of different objects and texts inspired by Hilary’s work on Victorian art, art history, and gallery experiences. Gallery pieces range from painting

⁶ Hilary Fraser, ‘Grief Encounter: The Language of Mourning in *Fin-de-Siècle* Sculpture’, *Word & Image*, 34 (2018), 40–54. Also discussed by Carolyn Burdett and Patricia Pulham in this issue of 19.

(Maria Alambritis's analysis of John Singer Sargent's portrait of Vernon Lee in which she considers how Lee is represented as an authoritative cultural mediator who, as Hilary has observed, 'decisively usurped the gaze'),⁷ poetry (Lesa Scholl's close reading of Alice Meynell's 'The Two Poets' which explores the tension between the material and divine in her poetic imagination), and woodcarving (Marina Warner's assessment of the skill and artistry of the fascinating Pinwill sisters, responsible for a number of woodcarving designs across Cornwall and Devon towards the end of the century).

Part of the delight of the *Festschrift* lies in offering a diverse and eclectic smorgasbord of writing, and readers will of course choose their own journey through the issue. We do, however, want to draw attention to some recurring themes and correlations between contributions. While demonstrably focused on a Romantic-era poet, Isobel Armstrong's article on Letitia Elizabeth Landon's editing of *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap Book* (1832) establishes a number of productive frameworks for thinking about 'Victorian' beauty which echo throughout the issue. Not only does Armstrong offer a fine reading of the prefatory poem on the then Princess Victoria, her analysis of the *Scrap Book's* material and aesthetic qualities also examines wider debates on the mass production of art objects through the changing technology of the stereotype, the sister arts, and on the colonial and gender politics which underpinned Landon's endeavour. Daniel Brown's gallery piece on two laudatory poems by Emmeline Stuart-Wortley on the Great Exhibition of 1851 echoes some of Armstrong's concerns. He considers the strategic effects of seemingly trite, clichéd (and indeed stereotyped) poetry by examining how Stuart-Wortley's work not only celebrated luxury goods but also functioned itself as a consumer good. Meaghan Clarke's contribution likewise examines women's roles within the Victorian art world, though focused more towards the latter part of the century. She uses Hilary's groundbreaking contributions to art historical criticism to offer a revisionist account of women's professional roles within Victorian museum and gallery worlds, assessing this through the exciting lens of the way museum acquisition and collection practices can reveal the changing status (and legacy) of women art writers. Clarke's article focuses on three writers and the ephemerality of their archives: Emilia Dilke (E. F. S. Pattison) was a specialist in eighteenth-century French art; Gertrude Campbell was a London-based art reviewer; and Christiana Herringham developed technical expertise on the early Renaissance. Susanna Avery-Quash also considers how notions of beauty were constituted through shifting museum acquisition practices in her gallery piece on Margarito d'Arezzo's *Virgin and Child Enthroned*. She explores the controversy attached to the acquisition of this work, as Charles Eastlake, the first director of the National

⁷ *Women and the Ends of Art History*, p. 90.

Gallery, came under pressure to expand the institution's collecting practices away from simply what was considered 'beautiful' towards a more historicized survey approach.

Given Hilary's most recent scholarly endeavours, it is perhaps fitting that Pater features strongly in this special issue, with a number of contributors choosing to focus on his work. These include Catherine Maxwell's article examining the 'strange beauty' that shapes Pater's aesthetic thought, which she argues can be understood as a direct legacy from his precursor Algernon Charles Swinburne, traced carefully through personal as well as literary connections between the two writers. Laurel Brake attends to Pater's biography and his navigation of the late nineteenth-century periodical press and world of letters to illuminate the complex personal and queer politics that shape his work. Brake also assesses Pater in relation to another of his precursors — Matthew Arnold — though more to stress the shift away from Arnold's critical practice of objective interpretation towards a politics of appreciation. Jonah Siegel's meditation on the importance of perspective in the nineteenth century and its complicated relationship to point of view is also illustrated most extensively through Pater's writing, notably his work on Plato and Platonism.

The article section closes with Kate Flint's exploration of the Victorian fascination with the beauty of fireflies. Flint brings together a range of written and visual material, which seeks to describe the peculiar power and attraction of fireflies, including literary and scientific writing by Ruskin and Henry David Thoreau, poetry by Eugene Lee-Hamilton and Robert Frost, paintings by John Simmons and Edward Robert Hughes, and an illustration by Arthur Rackham. She argues that the luminous effect of the firefly is replicated in the ephemeral way it flickers across the literary landscape of the nineteenth century. Flint's article introduces an important new dynamic of Victorian beauty: its relationship to the natural world and our own urgent debates on climate change. Flint stresses the moral role inherent in 'ecological aesthetics' — 'that wonder at beauty still has a part to play in our engagement with the natural world' — as well as introducing a more cautionary note about how human practices (including light pollution) have devastated firefly habitats.

The relationship between Victorian beauty and more contemporary debates on environmentalism is also acknowledged in Dinah Birch's contribution to the forum. Birch's piece examines Ruskin's changing ideals of beauty, and she argues that as Ruskin became more interested in justice, he grew less interested in beauty. Birch considers how, in his quasi-apocalyptic lecture 'The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century' (1884), Ruskin is one of the first to argue that human activity could degrade the climate, making him a significant figure among a new generation of ecological critics. The forum continues to examine new perspectives shaping our investigation

and interpretation of Victorian beauty, including Regenia Gagnier's fascinating cross-cultural study of beauty and the Beautiful, which brings together analysis of contemporary Western, Islamic, and Chinese aesthetics. Stefano Evangelista also invites us to reflect on the Western assumptions underpinning notions of Victorian beauty, through a consideration of Lafcadio Hearn's analyses of Japanese art. Carefully attending to the elements of Hearn's practice bound up with more orientalizing approaches, Evangelista stresses that Hearn nonetheless contributed to making Japanese art comprehensible to readers at the turn of the century by translating and explicating its own distinctive beauty. Ana Parejo Vadillo's contribution to the forum demonstrates how Michael Field was inspired by the way in which the Pre-Raphaelites combined different art forms, and how this approach shaped their decadent verse-dramas from the late 1800s and 1890s. Focusing on *Fair Rosamund*, published by Bell in 1884 and bound, along with *Callirrhoë*, in what Edith Cooper describes as 'awkward vegetable parchment', Vadillo reveals how an 1897 edition by the Vale Press, complete with cover design by painters Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, 'made possible what had been from the start the core of Michael Field's Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics: for their poetry to be communicated through, and in dialogue with, the other arts'.

Contributors also move beyond beauty as a visual quality to consider its multisensory, haptic nature. This includes Carolyn Burdett's gallery piece, which actually takes the gallery space itself as object. Inspired by her and Fraser's work on Vernon Lee, Burdett reflects on how reading and engaging with Lee's embodied aesthetics has shaped and changed her own critical and emotional responses to artworks. Lene Østermark-Johansen's forum contribution explores Isadora Duncan's long-standing fascination with Botticelli's *La Primavera* inspired by a print of the painting in her childhood home. Extending Fraser's questioning of what types of visual practices 'looking like a woman' might constitute, Østermark-Johansen considers how Duncan transposed her interest in Botticelli's image to the medium of dance, touching upon the way that Duncan's art form of danced pictures anticipated the birth of the moving pictures. Lynda Nead's forum contribution offers a fascinating assessment of the way that Victorian beauty was reworked by post-war British cinema. She explores this in relation to the film *Pink String and Sealing Wax* (1945) in an attempt to understand not only what Victorian beauty meant to post-war Britain, but also what work Victorianism did for the nation in a period of recovery and redefinition, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality.

In our early planning for the Festschrift we focused obvious attention on the centrality of beauty to Hilary's critical and creative thinking. More than this however, our discussions kept returning to the notion of beauty as a quality that aptly defines Hilary's approach to professional relationships, and her careful and compassionate

nurturing of students and early career colleagues. Hilary has modelled a way of engaging in intellectual discussion and debate driven by an inherent grace and kindness that encourages confidence in others to develop better and fuller ideas. This may be a less tangible legacy than her books and articles cited above, but those who have worked with Hilary will attest to the profound impact that her mentorship has had on their studies and research. In her forum contribution, which stresses the importance of ‘feeling’ in Hilary’s writing, Patricia Pulham generously traces the important and formative influence of both Hilary’s thinking and support on her own academic work. Detailing her personal engagement with two of Hilary’s essays, Pulham advocates for the value of emotional resonance within our critical practice. Roger Luckhurst’s forum contribution also offers a more personal perspective on Hilary’s career, by humorously contrasting Hilary’s evolving scholarship on beauty and aesthetics in parallel with his work on monsters, mummies, and vampires. As a final word on the contributions to this forum, Luckhurst befittingly situates Hilary as an integral and valued part of a network and community of Victorian studies scholarship at Birkbeck including, of course, our much-missed friend and colleague Sally Ledger.

The editors of this issue met Hilary at around the same time, both as students on Birkbeck’s flagship [MA Victorian Studies](#). Indeed, it was Hilary who brought us together; we met outside the lift when the English department was based in 30 Russell Square en route to Luisa Calè’s formative and formidable graduate seminars on Maurice Merleau-Ponty that Hilary had suggested we attend. We were both lucky enough to have Hilary as our doctoral supervisor, along with Maria Alambritis, Lesa Scholl, and Daniel Brown, all contributors to this issue. We have known Hilary for nearly two decades, during which she has been an important interlocutor and source of support through our academic endeavours, experiences of motherhood (changing nappies on the floor of her office during supervisions is a particularly vivid memory!), our own bereavements, career changes, and most recently, through the ongoing challenges facing English at Birkbeck and arts and humanities provision more widely across the UK. Hilary has made an enormous contribution to nineteenth-century studies at Birkbeck and beyond. Hers is, and continues to be, a huge presence, shaping both the scholarship and the lives of so many: thoughtful, kind, incisive, steely, empathetic, beautiful Hilary.

