

Selling Sentiment: The Commodification of Emotion in Victorian Visual Culture

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Let me assure you that ... you have ... brought to the consideration of me that quality in yourselves without which I should but have beaten the air. Your earnestness has stimulated mine, your laughter has made me laugh, and your tears have overflowed my eyes.¹

The above quotation formed part of Dickens' address to his readers in one of his last speeches. Although it refers to a novelistic career it also captures the sentimental impulse in Victorian culture as a whole; that is to say, the power and the pleasure of communal and interactive feeling. Dickens' words hint at a climate of emotional supply and demand which was to influence the work of many artists as well as writers and which led to rousing contemporary debates about taste, morality, the notion of artistic integrity and what constituted 'the real' in a society increasingly attuned to mass production.

The dynamics of popular Victorian sentiment can be regarded primarily as a concern with the sharing of emotion, rather than the moralistic or inward looking sensibilities typified by eighteenth century and Romantic forms of feeling. This involved a consensual writer/reader, artist/viewer exchange predicated on a mutual understanding of the cogs of homogenised emotion. The pleasure of the sentimental was to be gained by the reader/viewer responding in a way that was expected of them following a successful navigation of social codes, signs and symbols. Often criticised as mawkish, crude and solicitous by critics both then and now, commercialism was the premise on which popular Victorian sentimentality was based and was the root of its often self-referential appeal.

Integral to the popularity of sentiment was its recognition factor by means of established tropes and conventions. Arguably, the same familiarity that made narrative art accessible also made advertising successful, and many of the same motifs appeared in exhibition watercolours, book illustrations and posters. Sentiment operated as emotional souvenir: material proof of feeling that could be easily digested, displayed and revisited. Throughout the Victorian period there was an increasing investment of emotion in the ephemeral: greeting cards, scrapbooks and music sheet covers. From beautifully illustrated dictionaries of the language of flowers, to the manufactured memories of *The Keepsake*, forms of feeling were standardised and reproduced in keeping with a new art-buying public and the possibilities of wider image dissemination. Crucially, cultural

homogenisation entailed social democratisation and contemporary debates on taste were bound up in class and gender issues, which regarded works of feeling to be cheapened by their un-edifying, ready-made interpretations.

This article will explore how, in the cut-throat commercial world of image production, sentiment became manifest and identifiable, if only as a notional phenomenon, and how the means of presenting feeling could itself become so reproduced as to leave only a suggestion of emotional intention. The article has grown out of preparatory work for an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum: *A Show of Emotion: Victorian Sentiment in Prints and Drawings*, which attempts to demonstrate the ways in which the supremacy of the image could cut across the distinctions between fine art paintings and works intended solely for mass consumption.

I

The Development of the Visual Sentimental

From its origins in eighteenth-century sensibility and the philosophies of feeling, to the pejorative connotations of the sentimental in Victorian culture and beyond, much has been written on the development of sentiment as a self-indulgent, insincere appeal to the tender emotions. However, linear progressions are seldom easy to maintain and even a cursory glance at the subject matter in paintings, prints, drawings and illustrations, reveals the tandem development of an increasingly commercial society that did not necessarily trace its origins to the corruption of moral artistic aims. Advances in image production and dissemination created a mass culture, and public demand for certain types of image became increasingly discernible. What is considered to be ‘Victorian’ sentiment arguably first appeared in England as early as the 1720s to cater for a market that craved accessible and sensually satisfying art.

Images known as Fancy Pictures tapped into the growing need for the unchallenging and aesthetically pleasing. Made popular in the early eighteenth century by the French artist Phillip Mercier and maintaining their appeal until about the 1820s, Fancy Pictures were named at a time when the term ‘fancy’ was more suggestive of fantasy, or imagination. They were usually portraits of young working-class women, embellished with a narrative element that was intended to titillate and please the growing art buying

public. Typically, these images represented a girl carrying out everyday domestic chores, selling oysters or purchasing a ballad. They were chiefly intended to be pleasing to look at and intellectually undemanding. As Martin Postle points out, women were conceived ‘as figures of male fantasy and objects of covert desire’ and such pictures ‘were just one manifestation of the emergence of a sense-driven culture’.² Such popular, if vacuous, images were as much a precursor to the Victorian sentimental picture as Rousseauesque appeals to the moral sentiments, mutated and perverted for a populist audience that didn’t know better. Indeed, the concept of a ‘sense driven culture’ – a public motivated by its search for low-key emotional rather than intellectual or moral gratification – is central to the appeal of sentiment as a genre.

II

Subject Matter and the Blurring of Sentimental Genres

In truth, that which can be termed a sentimental image ranges from a Royal Academy oil painting aiming at social commentary to Keepsake Beauty prints – generic images of women published in annuals or showpiece books. Often, the same artist spanned a range of sentimental genres, with the burgeoning print trade proving so lucrative that commissioned illustration work frequently informed exhibition painting. Frederick Walker re-produced some of his most popular images in both paint and print, employing what was termed a ‘homely’ style.³ The provenance of a selection of his paintings attests to the dynamism of the nineteenth-century art market and the numerous outlets for the dissemination of images.



Fig. 1 Illustration to *The Seasons. Spring Days*

In 1862, the enterprising Dalziel Brothers gave Walker free rein to produce ten engravings, around which they commissioned poetry as part of their popular *Dalziels’ Fine-Art Gift Book* series. The resulting prints were published in a *Round of Days* (1866), *Wayside Posies* (1867), *Picture Posies*, (1874) and *English Rustic Pictures* (1882), indicating the recyclable nature of images and the continuing public profile that an artist’s work could maintain through wide publication. Three of these original designs,



Fig. 2 Illustration to *The Seasons, Autumn Days*

including *Spring* and *Autumn* (Figs. 1 & 2), formed the basis for highly finished watercolours of the same title. The watercolour versions, painted in 1865 (Figs. 3 & 4), also maintained a visual presence, despite residing in private collections for the remainder of the century. They were first purchased by the collector William Leech; they were then lent by him to Walker's memorial exhibition at the Deschamps Gallery, New Bond Street in 1876; sold for a high sum at Christie's in 1887 to the art dealer Sir William Agnew; reappeared at the Royal Academy winter exhibitions in 1891 and 1901; and finally entered the public collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1911.

Walker's work can be seen as inhabiting the middle ground of sentiment. With *Spring* and *Autumn* he employs the popular theme of the seasons and the common association of women with nature but makes use of established biblical motifs, such as the apple and the tree, to suggest both the timelessness of his subject matter and the transition from innocence to experience.



Fig. 3 Walker, *Spring*

The watercolours, especially *Autumn*, in which the female figure appears older and more languorous than in the print, do display a greater depth of feeling than the Dalziel illustrations. This rescues them from accusations of mawkish sentiment but demonstrates how the same image could be imbued with, or denied, emotional profundity according to its visual context.



Fig. 4 Walker, *Autumn*

Certainly, the subject of nature and the seasons inspired visual material throughout the nineteenth century, which ranged from the traditional to the fashion-dictated. Beautifully illustrated editions of the language of flowers, for example, meant that emotions were often reduced to visual signs that became so established as to leave little room for independent interpretation. *In Doubt* (Fig. 5), by the artist Emily Farmer emphasises the gap between the power of Victorian visual symbols and the subtlety of



Fig. 5 Farmer, *In Doubt*

human emotion. The woman's dress is suggestive of bridal wear, although not traditional for the period. She has a forget-me-not pinned to her breast, often worn to signify constancy and love, yet her downcast eyes and the verbal clue of the painting's title betray her qualms. The painting has a number of narrative elements but it marks a transition between the engagement of the viewer's interpretative faculties, encouraged by the narrative painter and the more aesthetic self-indulgent presentation of tender feeling that typified the sentimental picture.

Fig. 6, from a series of the Twelve Months, still in uncut-proof stage, also demonstrates the increasing use of stock motifs and



Fig. 6 *December*, engraved by Taylor

characterisations, here resulting in a more whimsical sentimental aesthetic and denying the kind of temporal sensibility employed by Walker. Similarly, Thomas Riley's *Gathering Apples* (Fig. 7) straddles the boundaries between timeless classic and popular banality. It was published in the art magazine *Portfolio* as a visual



Fig. 7 Riley, *Gathering Apples*

intermission between articles and bore the accompanying justification:

The association of human and vegetable forms is natural and happy; it is the union of the two greatest worlds of creation known to us, and it has been so valued and understood by the greatest artists of past times.⁴

In retrospect the image seems unimaginative, a tender oft-repeated take on the kind of mother and child scenes of which the Victorians never seemed to tire. This suggests the possibility of a process of contextual sentimentalisation; pictures drained of genuine feeling by the proliferation of similar scenes, rather than attributes integral to the image itself. Crucially, it also identifies sentiment as a malleable concept that changes with time as well as situation.

In its subject matter, the work of Charles West Cope inhabits a similar position on the cusp of sentiment. Like his contemporary, the Pre-Raphaelite turned Royal



Fig. 8 Millais,
Happy Springtime

Academician, John Everett Millais, his work was technically accomplished but often tainted by questions of taste and accusations of artistic compromise. Both Cope and Millais produced work for the Etching Club, which published, alongside illustrated editions, more decorative books such as *A Selection of Etchings* (1865) which gave artists the freedom to contribute prints suitable for a 'best of' publication. Millais' *Happy Springtime*,

1860 (Fig. 8), again demonstrates the popularity of the mother/child/nature subject and, in a similar vein to Walker's working practices, inspired a finished painting: *The Nest* was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1887 but prompted *The Magazine of Art* to brand it 'suggestive of the Christmas number style of art, dry and disagreeable in colour and steeped in the tritest kind of popular sentiment'.⁵

Cope himself made a conscious move towards what can indeed be seen as works of 'popular sentiment'. These ranged from well-received narrative art to generic maternal scenes. We know from his *Reminiscences* that he was acutely aware of the need to sell rather than merely exhibit works. The failure in 1841 to find a buyer for a social-themed painting incited the artist to comment that:

The non-pecuniary success of the picture of the 'Board of Guardians' was a great blow to me and entirely shook my confidence in the taste of the British public. That a most successful work, written about in the papers and admired by crowds should be allowed to come home unsold was a new experience to me. I felt that I had done my best with a highly dramatic subject, and that, with the prospect of an increasing family, it would be risky to spend time and money which might not be repaid with interest. Why go on repeating such pictures.⁶

This acknowledgement of market conditions signalled a change of direction for Cope. After 1841 he began to produce paintings that still touched upon topical themes but were also possessed of a more discernable sentimental appeal, employing forms of feeling, rather than social or moral commentary.

The Young Mother (Fig. 9), exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1846, is unusual in its depiction of a woman breast-feeding but typical of Cope's move towards more accessibly tender subject matter. Usually depicting women and/or children, his new work was drawn from his own experience of family life and possesses a domestic quality that at once removes it from established contemporary understandings of high art. Alert to the



Fig. 9 Cope,
The Young Mother

need to make his pictures relevant and appealing, *The Young Mother* tapped into topical media debates which suggested that middle-class women should breast-feed their children rather than expose them to the risk of cholera and bad morality associated with the working-class wet nurse⁷. The painting's success draws upon the genuine emotions of the artist (he used his own wife and child as models), the touching and intimate quality of the scene and the viewer's own participation in this intimacy. As the reviewing critic from the *Athenaeum* commented:

Simple and unpretending though it be, [it] is full of the gentle refinement which springs under the brush when the artist unaffectedly gives way to the feelings of tenderness inspired by maternal affection nursing the baby in its fond embrace.⁸ Certainly, the ideas expressed in this statement draw upon an appreciation of genuine feeling that often informed criticisms of the sentimental as lacking in authenticity. Although *The Young Mother* functions as a standard Virgin and child celebration of maternal feeling, its appeal is also sensual and physical. In comparison, sentiment on a more mawkish level subjugates personal feeling to the immediacy of the image and the gratification that can be gained through recognition of the familiar.

As an extension of the popularity of time-themed subjects, such as the months and seasons, and in keeping with the tactics of popular literature, many artists drew upon rites of passage, such as motherhood, as inspiration for sentimental material. As Fred Kaplan points out: 'Dickens prefers to dramatise the same data and sensations *in extremis* – birth, death, marriage, separation, violence, communal rituals – individual, immediate responses to the passages of life'.⁹ The poetry of Jean Ingelow, for example concentrates on key life moments, significantly visualised in accompanying engravings. *Songs of Seven* takes the reader on a sentimental journey through a woman's life stages identified in the poem as Exultation, Romance, Love, Maternity, Widowhood, Giving in Marriage and Longing for Home. The appeal is to the heart, employing routine poetical devices, to engage but not challenge the reader:

I shall not die, but live forlore –
How bitter it is to part
O to meet thee, my love, once more!
O my heart, my heart!¹⁰

Together with Arthur Boyd Houghton's illustrations (see Fig. 10), the effect is akin to melodrama, an experience where sensation and immediate gratification become ends in themselves. Houghton employs the common visual signifier of a prostrate woman, a motif that was also used to depict female distress responses to everything from death to abandonment, disappointment in love and recollections of heartbreak – instantly recognisable yet prosaic representations.



Fig. 10 Houghton, *Songs of Seven, Widowhood*

Certainly, illustrations were integral to the establishment of stock motifs, and even to figurative poses, which gave visual credence to trying experiences. It comes as no surprise that time and time again artists illustrated the same aspects of texts.

Teamed with the increasingly mutual relationship between painting and print it is difficult to be certain whether artists painted the same scenes because they were popular or whether the opposite was true. What came first: the sign or the sentiment?

III

Communal Feeling and the Souvenir: Public Visualisations of Private Sentiment

For the nineteenth-century audience, the heightened portrayal of certain key life moments were, without doubt, linked to wider cultural thought rather than merely existing in an insular world of art and literature. As has been well documented, death for the Victorians was the ultimate occasion for studied response and ritualisation: the deathbed scene, the funeral, the stages of mourning. It is with death that sentimental visual culture retains its moral impetus throughout the century, focusing on the untimely demise of saintly characters too good for this world. It is, however, with notions of tragedy and pathos that sentiment is also at its most performative; based on social expectations, tearful reactions to visual representations of death become an anticipated release rather than a spontaneous response.



Fig. 11 *Memorial Card for Albert, the Prince Consort*

Visually, death was processed through a complex system of sentimentalisation, which was less about fake emotion than the Victorian regard of communal feeling and

collective memory. Many sentimental works arose from the commercial notion of the souvenir; the investment of memory in a physical object as public proof of feeling rather than as expressions of private grief. Laurence Lerner charts extraordinary commercial responses as early as 1817 when the death in childbirth of Princess Charlotte prompted the increased production of bombazine (a fabric suitable for mourning) to meet public demand and the selling of seats for the funeral. He also cites the bemused reaction of *Cobbett's Political Register*, which stated: 'It is nonsense, and, indeed worse, it is vile hypocrisy to talk about *personal sorrow*, or personal feeling of any sort'.¹¹

Personal feelings were, it seems, the form, not the function. Arguably, the public desire, fuelled by the growth of journalistic accounts and the souvenir industry, was to be

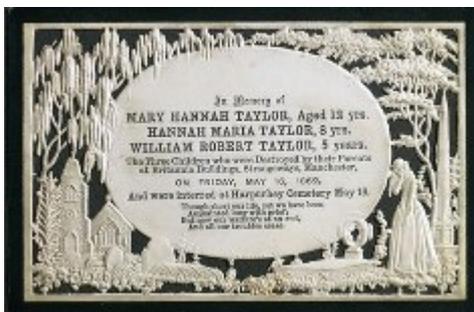


Fig. 12 Taylor Memorial Card

part of an event and to share a common cultural reference. Feeling, that to which most individuals can lay claim, is arguably the simplest premise on which to base the communal, encouraging the public to wear their hearts on their sleeves, or at least hang their feelings on their walls. Fig. 11 shows a

commercial mourning card for the death of Prince Albert, mounted in a contemporary, cheaply made, cruciform frame for display in a modest room. Similarly, Fig. 12 shows a mass-produced mourning card for three children murdered by their parents in 1862, an event which prompted a national outpouring of grief. 'Lest we forget' became an industry in its own right and one in which memory could be marketed.



Fig. 13 Artist Unknown, *The Old Armchair*

Such a climate also witnessed an investment of memory and feeling in the physical and a growing awareness of 'sentimental value', as demonstrated in the music-sheet cover *The Old Arm Chair* (Fig. 13). The past, and notions of nostalgia spawned visual responses that ranged from scenes such as *Knight and Lady* (Fig. 14) by George Cattermole, a Victorianised view of the historical past that



Fig. 14 Cattermole, *Knight and Lady*

appeals to the feeling heart rather than the antiquarian mind, to a tangible cult of childhood.

IV

From Subject to Style

Many nineteenth-century images of children, for adult consumption, carry the trace of affectionate morality, with subjects such as the tending of animals or the blossoming of religious sentiment. Such scenes, however, also operate alongside the purely aesthetic,



Fig. 15 Hill,
Two Small Girls

works that reference tender feeling through the established signs and symbols but prioritise the image as a self-indulgent end in itself. The watercolour by Richard Hill (Fig. 15) is especially interesting, as it was also reproduced in print form with significant changes. One print version shows strings of necklaces hanging from the girl's finger where, in the watercolour, a butterfly sits. This demonstrates not only the resourcefulness of the increasingly powerful print trade but also the dilution of authenticity in a climate where image types could be re-hashed.

The substitution of a butterfly for jewels marks the final leap from the sentimental to the kitsch, aligning the representation of the child with commodity rather than nature.

Images such as Hill's also raise the question of whether the sentimental became a style as well as a subject or theme.



Fig. 16 Myles Birkett Foster,
The Milkmaid

Certainly with painting, particular visual pointers; pastel colours, delicate brush-strokes, wide-eyed, rosy-cheeked, innocent beauty could often be

employed to denote the emotional territory of the image. This can be



Fig. 17 Allingham,
A Cottage at Chiddingfold

seen most clearly in the work of Myles Birkett Foster and Helen

Allingham, (Fig. 16 & 17), both of whom built an image industry on the popularity of richly-hued rural idylls. In the case of Hill's watercolour the viewer is subjected to a

hyper-reality of exaggerated features and plumpness – an artificiality that further aligns sentimentality with the growing industry of kitsch, but also creates a recognisable style that identifies the aim of the image whilst requiring little interpretative work on the part of the viewer.

Richard D. Altick touches upon the artistic move from the ‘genuine’ to the merely recognised, from the subject to the style, when he discusses the nineteenth-century vogue



Fig. 18 Smythe,
Under the Greenwood Tree

for scenes from literature. These veered between artistic interpretations of narrative, strictly plot-based illustrative works, established and repetitive favourite scenes, and figurative or landscape studies which merely referenced a known work of literature in the title. His argument – that certain novels gained sufficient popular currency to negate the need to actually visit the original source – suggests the potential brand status of both literature and art. Perhaps, what has come to be known as the sentimental is the

supplanting of original response with second-hand feeling – homogenised emotion, common to a society rather than an individual. Examples of this include Lionel Percy Smythe’s ‘Under the Greenwood Tree’ (Fig. 18), which imbues the landscape with the sentimental impulse of its namesake novel by Thomas Hardy (as well as referencing a song in Shakespeare’s *As You like It*) whilst tapping into the popularity of watercolour landscape idylls, and C. R. Leslie’s female studies, (Fig. 19), in the style of the Keepsake Beauty but often featuring literary titles.

Essentially, the style of painting faces, as seen in Leslie’s pictures, provided fashionable appeal, and a blank canvas which allowed the image to operate on a primarily decorative level. They demonstrate the visual familiarity that artists were keen to employ to ensure a sale. Thackeray, who was vociferous in his belief that one should ‘look to have your heart touched by [art]’, nevertheless hit upon the increasingly blurred boundaries between genuinely touching emotion and a vacuous subject matter that was purely



Fig. 19 Leslie,
Griselda

transactional.¹² He describes the Keepsake prints as ‘little better than prostitution,’ showing as they do, ‘Ladies in voluptuous attitudes and various stages of Deshabille’. (sic)¹³ Certainly, sentiment could be titillating as well as tender.

V

Sentimental Exposure: Display, Collecting and the Public

It seems almost too obvious to point out that motivations for purchasing images differed widely. Sentimental works are seldom associated with the connoisseur, perhaps because so many images labelled as sentimental seem to prioritise subject over style. Art has always had a decorative function. However, this aesthetic impetus arguably reached new heights with the increase in middle-class housing in the nineteenth century and the need to furnish such spaces with suitable material. Thackeray acknowledged the appeal of the accessible when he commented archly in 1842: ‘Our painters must suit the small rooms of their customers, and supply them with such subjects as are likely to please them ... we want pleasant pictures that we can live with – something that shall be lively, pleasing, or tender, or sublime if you will, but only of a moderate sublimity’.¹⁴

The ways in which these moderated scenes were purchased and displayed is inseparable from the effects, and indeed the affects, of the images themselves. How did true feeling manifest itself in an age when those with disposal income, such as Emily Tennyson, were buying art to match their wallpaper rather than as expressions of personal taste?¹⁵ Perhaps, whatever reproduced images lost in the pretence of genuine and spontaneous response, they gained in mass recognition and reaction. They are closer in essence to modern understandings of kitsch as ‘elaborately aestheticized commodities’, which in their sometimes ephemeral and contextually tasteless way, served as self-knowing cultural signposts.¹⁶ This is particularly pertinent to notions of collecting sets of prints for open display in the home.

George Baxter, for example, one of the great innovators of nineteenth-century image-making, patented his process for producing colour prints that shared the vibrancy of oil paint, but were much cheaper to buy and essentially mass-produced. The way in which Baxter’s prints were marketed and collected is integral to our understanding of contextual sentiment and the place of emotional response within a culture of copy. Indeed, as well as



Fig. 20 Baxter,
The Lover's Letter Box

Letter-box was recommended, along with other sentimental single-figure images, 'for a moderate-sized room'.¹⁸

The profile of the art-exposed, as opposed to the art-buying, public is also an integral part of the sentiment story. In many ways the shared experience of the widely disseminated image fuelled the popularity of the sentimental in the face of questions of taste and suggestions of manufactured feeling. The appeal of such sentimental art was its immediate and unchallenging availability.



Fig. 21 Artist
Unknown, *Dew Drop*

Much has been written on the accessibility of images to all social classes via visual media such as the shop window display. By the late nineteenth century, the one hundred or so music shops in London provided an enticing and colourful street gallery, or commodity spectacle. Music-sheet covers helped both to sell the music and to provide affordable art, with many being torn off and kept. They were part of a fast, demand-led industry. Many are characterised by shoddy production, with bleeding badly-aligned colour and images chopped at the top, evidence of a guillotining process that valued speed over standards. Fig. 21 shows a typical generic cover for a waltz. It demonstrates the commercial potential of women in rustic settings, with the dew-drop symbolising consolation and hope.

Merciless marketing, it seems, contributed considerably to public recognition of certain images and motifs. T. J. Barrett of *Pears' Soap*, the company that caused a taste controversy by its use of Millais' painting *Bubbles* in an advertisement, stated: 'I maintain

that we personally can do more good for the spread of art and culture than your Royal Academy or your endless galleries’, and throughout the century, debate raged on the eyesore versus poor-man’s-gallery status of advertising hoardings.¹⁹

In terms of market crossovers, Ronald Pearsall suggests that music-sheet covers were purchased in such large numbers because ‘it was the smart thing to do; they were bought by people who would not be seen dead in a music hall’.²⁰ Thus can be seen a complex exchange of visual material, from the art gallery to the street and, in reverse,



Fig. 22 Cruikshank, *The Sentimental Novel Reader*

from the music hall to the drawing room. Sentiment, increasingly tainted by its association with the commercial, was renegotiating the thresholds between what was considered high and low culture. George Cruikshank’s illustration, *The Sentimental Novel Reader* (Fig. 22) depicts a servant neglecting her duties in pursuit of emotional gratification. Similarly, the impulse of Dickens’ short tale ‘Sentiment’ in *Sketches by Boz* centres around a young girl’s love for a social

inferior. Being sentimental it seems, often indicated a demeaning attachment to lower class activities. The writer J. B. Frith, in his article ‘Some Aspects of Sentiment’, suggests that:

To describe a novel as sentimental is to suggest that it contains sorry reading, and will only be acceptable to readers of a very inferior culture. It is to the gallery of the theatre that melodrama appeals most strongly, and it is in the gallery that the sentimental songs of a music hall gain an encore for the singer. It is with difficulty that the pit can be induced to shed tears, though their laughter is easily aroused. As for the stalls, they will neither laugh or weep.²¹

However, regarding the appeal and communal response to musical performances, Ronald Pearsall argues that:

In its reaction to tear-jerkers, the working class audience was at one with its betters. ‘I shall never forget Grisi’s rendering of “The Minstrel Boy” at the Crystal Palace,’ wrote Mrs E. M. Ward, the artist. ‘She refused to sing again after three encores. The audience, who had listened to her singing spellbound, arose in a mass, and the applause was like thunder. It seemed as if the glass roof would shatter, it was so tremendous.’²²

Evidently, the workings of the sentimental were multifarious and the dynamics of power complex. The wide-reaching influence of sentiment as a subject rendered it increasingly difficult to control. Art-establishment definitions of suitable subject matter for painting became redundant when such subjects were so reproduced, bowdlerised, swallowed up

and spat back out by a visual culture that was spreading so widely. The benchmark for taste and appreciation was, more than ever before, peer response.

VI

Sentimental Response: Rules for Reaction

The influence of communal response in the reception of a work of sentiment, to a large extent negated original intention and rendered the meaning of the work subject to time, place and people. Indeed, the importance of the communal nature of a public expression of emotion is wonderfully satirised in Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* (1889), during the episode in which the members of a drawing-room audience, unable to appreciate the true subject matter of a song sung in German, take their responses from one another, mistakenly laughing at what is supposed to be a tragic performance. Jerome also suggests the fine line between sentiment and humour when he comments of the German performer that 'it was his air of seriousness, almost of pathos, that made it so irresistibly amusing'.²³ The comic success of this episode rests upon assumptions that emotional reaction was, in large measure, dependent on expected and mutually approved responses. The situation was exacerbated in the nineteenth century by the number of communal leisure activities – the theatre, the art gallery, the music-hall, drawing-room concerts, and domestic visits – aimed at social class cohesion. The tenuous boundaries between sentimental pathos and humour also call to mind Oscar Wilde's remark that 'one must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing'.²⁴ Made in 1895, the comment is perhaps less evident of changing attitudes towards the sentimental than it is of the always-precarious position of sentiment on the precipice of pastiche. Certainly, sentiment has long enjoyed a relationship with satire, and in the 1840s, the original reviews of Dickens novels, were sometimes as cutting as the response given by Wilde. George F. Ford mentions Albert Smith's parodies of *Dombey and Son* in his magazine *The Man in The Moon*, one of which centres on the funeral of Paul Dombey at which a chorus of Circulating Library Keepers sings a Requiem to the dead child:

Thou art gone from our counter
Thou art lost to our pocket
Thou hast fallen, brief mounter
Like stick from a rocket.²⁵

That a work of sentimental tragedy can be at once tear-jerking and amusing within the same culture, whatever the intention of the artist or writer, immediately positions sentiment within a climate of self-knowledge. Music-sheet covers, such as Fig. 23 with their quasi-sentimental take on romance, are thus particularly demonstrative of the complex blurring of the boundaries between the funny and the feeling, and offer an arch perspective on the sentimental. Within the same evening a music-hall audience could be exposed to the tragic and the humorous, and be expected to laugh and cry. This makes the lines



Fig. 23 Wilkinson, *No Gems Have I Dear Girl to Offer*

between genuine feeling and communal expression difficult to draw, the collective emotions

being no more false than a self-indulgent moral sensibility. In wide-reaching enjoyment of the sentimental, there seems to have been very little between the communal feeling excited by the music hall and the outpouring of emotion at one of Dickens' celebrated public readings, themselves commercial ventures, captured so chin-tremblingly in Maclise's sketch (Fig. 24). In a 'pay you by feeling' culture, sentiment becomes a matter of supply and demand where subjects are ideally simple and iconic yet



Fig. 24 Maclise, *Dickens Reading the Chimes*

influence/genuine response is difficult to gauge.²⁶

VII

Conclusion

It would seem inevitable that a commodification of emotion took place within nineteenth-century visual culture. However, the extent to which feelings were genuine, or genuinely contextual is a matter of greater complexity. Similarly problematic, in an environment when most of the people were exposed to most of the material most of the time, is the relationship between high and low culture. Certainly, the numerous outlets into which sentiment poured itself—art galleries, journalism, souvenirs—points towards sentimental cultures rather than a single-driven motivation for emotional matter.

Perhaps forms of feeling were diluted through exposure, in a society that could purchase physical proof of its emotional sway. Certainly, sentimental objects, although often dependent for subject matter on the nostalgic past and the passing of time, were themselves becoming increasingly ephemeral—self-knowing kitsch that saw consumption as an end in itself and possession as feeling. As Thomas Carlyle suggests:

The barrenest of all mortals is the Sentimentalist ... Does he not lie there as a perpetual lesson of despair, and type of bedrid valetudinarian impotence? (sic) He is emphatically a Virtue that has become, through every fibre, conscious of itself; it is all sick ... it can do nothing ... [except] keep itself alive.²⁷

The work of sentiment can be seen as that which is dependent, above all else, on taste, fashion and quick-fix feeling, rendering it self-serving and ephemeral. The emphasis falls on reception rather than delivery. With motive obscured by affect and the image an end in itself, commercial transaction becomes, by default, the most reliable defining feature of the Victorian sentimental image.

Illustrations

Fig. 1. Frederick Walker (1840-1875), Illustration to *The Seasons. 1 – Spring Days* by Dora Greenwell, 1862, wood engraving, published in *A Round of Days*, 1866; *Wayside Posies*, 1867; *Picture Posies*, 1874; and *English Rustic Pictures*, 1882; edited and engraved by the Dalziel Brothers, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. E.2958-1904.

Fig. 2. Frederick Walker (1840-1875), Illustration to *The Seasons. 3 – Autumn Days* by Dora Greenwell, 1862, wood engraving, published in *A Round of Days*, 1866; *Wayside Posies*, 1867; *Picture Posies*, 1874; and *English Rustic Pictures*, 1882; edited and engraved by the Dalziel Brothers, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. E.2960-1904.

Fig. 3. Frederick Walker (1840-1875), *Spring*, 1865, watercolour, given by the executors of Sir William Agnew, bt., 1911, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. P.2-1911.

Fig. 4., Frederick Walker (1840-1875), *Autumn*, 1865, watercolour, given by the executors of Sir William Agnew, bt., 1911, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. P.3-1911.

Fig. 5., Emily Farmer (1826-1905), *In Doubt*, 1881, watercolour, bequeathed by the artist, 1905, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. D.395-1905.

Fig. 6. Artist Unknown, *December* from a series of the Months of the Year, engraved by Robert Taylor, c.1870, proof on India paper, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. E.706.L - 1888.

Fig. 7. Thomas Riley (working, late nineteenth century), *Gathering Apples*, 1882, etching, published in *Portfolio* Vol. XIII, 1882, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. E.5153-1904.

Fig. 8. John Everett Millais (1829-1896), *Happy Springtime*, 1860, etching, published in *A Selection of Etchings* by the etching club, 1865, Victorian and Albert Museum, no.E.724-1905.

Fig. 9., Charles West Cope (1811-1890), *The Young Mother*, 1845, oil on panel, given by John Sheepshanks 1857, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. FA.53.

Fig. 10. Arthur Boyd Houghton (1836-1875), *Songs of Seven: Widowhood*, Illustration to *Songs of Seven* by Jean Ingelow, wood engraving; by the Dalziel Brothers, published in *Poems by Jean Ingelow*, 1867, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. E.313: 54 to 60-1910.

Fig. 11. *Memorial Card for Albert, the Prince Consort*, printed by J.T Wood, 1861, embossed paper, lithograph and letterpress, in contemporary cruciform frame, bequeathed by M.J. Franklin, 1987, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. E.1505-1987.

Fig. 12. *Memorial card for Mary Hannah Taylor, Hannah Maria Taylor, and William Robert Taylor*, about 1862, embossed paper, lithograph and letterpress, bequeathed by M.J. Franklin, 1987, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. 1509-1987.

Fig. 13. Artist unknown, *The Old Armchair*, about 1860s, music-sheet cover, lithograph, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. E.2652-1921.

Fig. 14. George Cattermole (1800-1868), *Knight and Lady*, about 1840s, gouache, bequeathed by Chauncey Hare Townshend, 1869, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. 1449-1869.

Fig. 15. Richard Hill (worked 1830s), *Two Small Girls, one with a Butterfly on her Wrist*, 1837, watercolour, bequeathed by H. H. Harrod, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. E.833-1948.

Fig. 16. Myles Birket Foster (1825-1899), *The Milkmaid*, 1860, watercolour, bequeathed by John Jones, 1882, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. 520-1882.

Fig. 17. Helen Allingham (1848-1926), *A Cottage at Chiddingfold, Surrey*, date unknown, watercolour, bequeathed by Henry L. Florence, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. P.20-1917.

Fig. 18. Lionel Percy Smythe (1839-1918), *Under the Greenwood Tree*, 1902, watercolour given by a member of the Walpole Society in memory of the glorious Battle of Jutland, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. P.5-1919.

Fig. 19. Charles Robert Leslie (1794-1859), *Griselda*, 1840, oil on panel, given by John Sheepshanks, 1857, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. FA.128.

Fig. 20. George Baxter (1804-1867) after a painting by Jessie McLeod (working mid-nineteenth century), *Lovers' Letter-Box*, 1856, Baxter process print, bequeathed by Francis William Baxter, 1932, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. E.3069-1932.

Fig. 21. Artist unknown, *Dew Drop*, about 1850s, *Music-sheet cover*, colour lithograph, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. E2626-1921.

Fig. 22. George Cruikshank (1792-1878), *The Sentimental Novel Reader*, date unknown, pencil and watercolour, given by Mrs. George Cruikshank, 1884, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. 9809A.

Fig. 23. George Ellerton Welly Wilkinson (1833-1888), *No Gems Have I Dear Girl to Offer*, about 1850s, colour lithograph, given by H.C. Andrews, 1914, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. E.2505-1914.

Fig. 24. Daniel Maclise (1806-1870), *Dickens Reading the Chimes*, 1844, pencil, bequeathed by John Forster, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. F.74.

¹ Charles Dickens, *Speeches*. Cited in George H. Ford, *Dickens and his Readers: Aspects of Novel-Criticism Since 1836* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press for University of Cincinnati, 1955), p. 23.

² Martin Postle, *Angels and Urchins: The Fancy Picture in Eighteenth-Century British Art* (Nottingham: Djanogly Art Gallery, 1998), pp. 7–8.

³ John George Marks, *Life and Letters of Frederick Walker*, A.R.A (London: Macmillan, 1896), p. 30.

⁴ *Portfolio*, 13 (1882): 212.

⁵ *Magazine of Art* (1887): 272. Cited in Mary Bennett, *Artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Circle: The First Generation* (London: National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, 1988), p. 161.

⁶ Charles West Cope, *Reminiscences of Charles West Cope, R.A.* (London: Bentley, 1891), p. 145.

⁷ Debates about breast-feeding can be traced to the Enlightenment, demonstrating ongoing concerns surrounding the middle-class mother. See Carol Duncan, 'Happy Mothers and Other New Ideas in Eighteenth-Century French Art', in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds), *Feminism and Art History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 201-219.

⁸ *Athenaeum*, 22 (May 1847): 552.

⁹ Fred Kaplan, *Sacred Tears: Sentimentality in Victorian Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 46.

¹⁰ Jean Ingelow, 'Songs of Seven', in *Poems by Jean Ingelow* (London: Longmans, 1867), p. 194.

¹¹ *Cobbett's Political Register* (25 April 1818). Cited in Laurence Lerner, *Angels and Absences: Child Deaths in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Vanderbilt University Press, 1997), p. 5.

¹² William Makepeace Thackeray, 'A Second Lecture on the Fine Arts: The Exhibitions', pp. 743–750, *Fraser's Magazine*, 19 (June 1839): 745.

¹³ William Makepeace Thackeray, 'A Word on the Annuals', pp.757–763. *Fraser's Magazine*, 16 (Dec 1837): 758.

¹⁴ William Makepeace Thackeray, 1842. Cited in Catherine May Gordon, *British Painting of Subjects from the English Novel: 1740–1870* (London: Garland, 1988), p. 111.

¹⁵ 'In 1856, when Tennyson and his wife moved into their home at Farringford, they found that his father's pictures were insufficient to cover the stains on the wallpaper, and Emily asked their friend Thomas Woolner, the sculptor, to look out at pawnbrokers' for some paintings of "red and flesh colour and bright frames"'. Richard D. Altick, *Paintings from Books: Art and Literature in Britain, 1760–1900* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985), p. 79.

¹⁶ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 31.

¹⁷ Statistic from Ronald Pearsall, *Victorian Sheet Music Covers* (London and Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1972), p. 44.

¹⁸ C. T. Courtney Lewis, *The Picture Printer of the Nineteenth Century: George Baxter 1804–1867* (London: Sampson Law and Marston, 1911), p. 104.

¹⁹ T. J. Barratt, *Pall Mall Gazette* (14 June 1884): 19–20. Cited in Julia Bigham, 'Commercial Advertising', in Margaret Timmers (ed.), *The Power of the Poster* (London: V&A Publications, 1998), pp. 172–220, p. 179.

²⁰ Pearsall, *Victorian Sheet Music Covers*, p. 44.

²¹ J. B. Frith, 'Some Aspects of Sentiment', *Westminster Review*, 138 (August 1892): 125.

²² Pearsall, *Victorian Sheet Music Covers*, p. 74.

²³ Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat* (1889; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p. 73.

²⁴ Oscar Wilde, remark made to Ara Leverson, cited in Lerner, p. 180.

²⁵ 'Inquest on the Late Master Paul Dombey', *The Man in the Moon*, 1 (1847), p. 159. Cited in Ford, pp. 51–52.

²⁶ Fred Kaplan comments that Dickens would have been aware of the following passage from Boswell's *Life of Johnson* quoted by John Forster in *Life of Goldsmith*: 'Boswell: "I have often blamed myself, sir, for not feeling for others as sensibly as many say they do." Johnson: "Sir, don't be duped by them anymore. You will find these very feeling people are not very ready to do you good. They pay you by feeling."' Kaplan, *Sacred Tears*, p. 11.

²⁷ Thomas Carlyle, *Critical Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. 3, pp. 9–10. Cited in *Sacred Tears*, Kaplan, p. 135.