

Crept like a frightened girl.”⁹ Enrobing all with its poly sensuality, Wilde’s dawn is not the curtain falling on the night-stage of desire but the cautious yet inevitable permeations that characterize Victorian sexuality itself.

NOTES

1. Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (1964; rpt. London: Routledge, 2009); Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (London: Allen Lane, 1979).
2. Vernon Lee, *The Enchanted Woods, and Other Essays on the Genius of Places* (London: John Lane, 1905), 99–100.
3. Robert Browning, “My Last Duchess,” in *Poems*, Vol. 2 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1849), 258–60, 259.
4. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, “Eveline’s Visitant,” in *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Short Stories*, ed. Dennis Denisoff (Peterborough: Broadview, 2004), 205–14, 211.
5. Algernon Swinburne, “The Leper,” in *Poems and Ballads* (London: A.C. Hotten, 1866), 137–43.
6. Vernon Lee, “Oke of Okehurst, or The Phantom Lover,” in *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (London: John Lane, 1906), 109–91.
7. Oscar Wilde, “The Harlot’s House,” in *Selected Poems of Oscar Wilde* (1885; London: Methuen, 1919), 140–43, 141, 142.
8. Wilde, “The Harlot’s House,” 140, 141.
9. Wilde, “The Harlot’s House,” 143.



Soul

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TO many in the twenty-first century, “soul” is a residual concept—a remnant of metaphysical discourses gradually displaced in the nineteenth century by the vocabulary of the new sciences of mind such as psychiatry, psychology, and neurology.¹ Yet when poetry scholars Susan J. Wolfson and Herbert F. Tucker explored Romantic and Victorian gendering of soul nearly two decades ago, they opened up the concept and

its consequent discourse—“soul-talk”—to more wide-ranging investigation in terms of its ethico-political significance for poets.²

Most Victorian poets had a strong opinion about soul: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for instance, considered it the nonmaterial counterpart of the fallen fleshly body, incompatible with material representation and only partially accessible to consciousness. For Arthur Hugh Clough, soul had affinities with today’s psyche, a rational consciousness dogged by irrational compulsions. But for literary scholars today, perhaps some of the most intriguing insights on soul emerge from Jeremy Bentham’s *Theory of Fictions* where it takes the form of a nonmaterial or “inferential entity” that cannot be affirmed by perception but only “inferred from a chain of reasoning.”³ Like other inferential entities—among them God and love—soul can only be understood in relation to a real, perceivable entity, like the body.

Bentham designates inferential entities “fictitious,” by which he means grammatically spoken of as if perceivable, even though the claim of perceptibility is not actually being made: “To be spoken of at all, every fictitious entity must be spoken of as if it were real.”⁴ To call soul “fictitious” is not therefore to imply that it has no existence or is a “non-entity,” but rather to indicate that its existence cannot be verified by the sensory perceptions. The limitation of language imposes this choice between “existence” and “non-existence,” so that in reality, fictitious entities owe “their impossible, yet indispensable existence,” as well as their shape, to language itself.⁵ Fictitious entities such as soul are therefore linguistic inventions, multifarious language effects without which we could not think, or discuss our thoughts, feelings, or intuitions or their relations to material conditions.⁶ They are linked to both physical and mental experience without being reducible to either, so that Bentham’s fictions, as Isobel Armstrong explains, offer a way of negotiating between language’s capacity both to detach from the things it describes and to signify those things.⁷

As an enabling fiction, soul existed in as many forms as the bodies used to represent it, but in his pioneering “animadversions” Tucker identifies two prevailing conceptions in the nineteenth century, both drawing on classical models and each lending itself to particular Christian inflections. The pneuma (L. *spiritus*), a spirit imprisoned in the temporal, fallen body, is prominent in Protestant doctrines. It is based on the assumption that “soul and body do not mix” and is “the majority position on the soul.”⁸ Pneuma is as resistant to imagination and material representation as is the divine spirit from which it derives, and it therefore requires “feats of representational prowess” to be accessible.⁹

An alternative model, *psuchē* (L. *anima*), is an embodied vitalizing principle that is as “hospitable to imagination as the *pneuma* is hostile.” It belongs with “immanence” and is commonly manifest in Roman Catholic incarnationist ideas such as Gerard Manley Hopkins’s Christ, who “plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his.”¹⁰ Tucker’s point is not that this pairing is in any way stable; on the contrary, we may find individual poets exploiting both models for diverse effects. Rather, nineteenth-century soul-talk reminds us of the paradox underlying representation itself—namely, that to reach imaginatively beyond the material limits of this world is still to be bound by the materiality of language. It is the medium of our imaginative aspiration, whether we choose to protest its inadequacy to *pneuma*—the “filthy rags of speech” derided by Browning’s Pope¹¹—or relish its capacity for creativity (*psuchē*). The inferential nature of the soul allows us that choice.

Given nineteenth-century poets’ sensitivity to language’s representative paradoxes, their virtuoso language skills, and the vigor with which they experimented with poetic form, soul was presumed to be their special bailiwick. John Stuart Mill, for one, confidently observes that “The truth of poetry is to paint the human soul truly: the truth of fiction is to give a true picture of life.”¹² Furthermore, reform-minded poets, such as the Brownings, Clough, and Algernon Charles Swinburne undertook to remind readers that since the time of Plato and Aristotle, spiritual well-being had been considered crucial to a healthy polis. Soul was indeed integral to the concept of “civic virtue,” recognizable today as an underexamined dimension of virtue’s successor, “moral character,” and the “character-talk” to which it gave rise.¹³ For soul’s inferential nature allowed poets to negotiate between the empirical, referential experience of political praxis and the abstract idealism of ethics to produce an ethico-political discourse that resisted yielding to either.

NOTES

1. A more thoroughgoing discussion of soul appears in *Victorian Soul-Talk* on which this piece draws. Julia F. Saville, *Victorian Soul-Talk: Poetry, Democracy, and the Body Politic* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
2. See Herbert F. Tucker, “When the Soul Had Hips: Six Animadversions on Psyche and Gender in Nineteenth-Century Poetry,” in *Sexualities in Victorian Britain*, ed. Andrew H. Miller and James Eli Adams (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996),

- 157–186; Susan Wolfson, “Gendering the Soul,” in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995), 33–68; “A Lesson in Romanticism: Gendering the Soul,” *Lessons of Romanticism: A Critical Companion*, ed. Thomas Pfau and Robert F. Gleckner (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 349–375.
3. Bentham, quoted in Charles Kay Ogden, *Bentham’s Theory of Fictions* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1932), 8.
 4. Bentham, in Ogden, *Bentham’s Theory*, 13.
 5. Bentham, in Ogden, *Bentham’s Theory*, 15–16.
 6. Bentham, in Ogden, *Bentham’s Theory*, 17.
 7. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 150.
 8. Tucker, “Hips,” 167 and 168.
 9. Tucker, “Hips,” 167.
 10. Tucker, “Hips,” 168; Gerard Manley Hopkins, “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” lines 12–13, *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Norman H. Mackenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 141.
 11. Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, ed. Richard D. Altick and Thomas Collins (Orchard Park: Broadview, 2001), bk. 10, line 373.
 12. John Stuart Mill, “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties,” in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 343–365, 346.
 13. For detailed accounts of moral character see Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and Lauren M. E. Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). I take the term “character-talk” from Collini, *Public Moralists*, 113.



Sound

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SOUNDSCAPES shape individual and cultural consciousness, and the industrial revolution made the nineteenth-century world louder.