VISION AND REPRESENTATIONS OF EMOTIONS IN THE VICTORIAN DISCOURSE

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Abstract: *The discourse of emotions make use of visual images to describe the deep feelings of characters and their passions. In this paper we try to see how Victorian novels give structure to emotions and how they represent the mind. Facial syntax represents a well-known convention of the novel discourse. It works by translating the inner scenes into emotional and expressive language. The voice represents also a good means to add, to translate or to hide information to the readers about the characters discourse.*

Keywords: *emotions, facial syntax, non-verbal language, Victorian discourse.*

Sentiments are associated by Locke, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, with abstract moral qualities such as wisdom and beneficence, with the processes of mind and with ideas, which are not regarded as purely mental or innate but derived from sense experience. The idea of the superfluity or excess of meaning which lies beyond linguistic expression, which forms Johnson's second definition, is also found in Locke. 'There are not words enough in any language', he notes in his 'Epistle to the Reader', 'to answer all the variety of ideas that enter into men's discourses and reasonings.'

The definitions of sentiment given by Johnson emphasize rational thought, judgment and language and it is this intellectual element which dominates the lexicons of the early nineteenth century. Its derivatives during the nineteenth century extend and modify its meaning.

The word *sentimental* is defined in the 1799 *Complete and Universal Dictionary*. It is noted by its compiler James Barclay to be a word only recently introduced into the language. Associated with imaginative literature, sentimental is observed to have as yet no precise meaning. Its definition, as an 'affecting turn of thought' introduces an element of feeling. The word sentimental is included the 1812 dictionary based on Johnson, where it maintains the intellectual emphasis, giving the definition 'reflectful' or 'thoughtful'.

We may define sentimentality as a writer's consciously indulging in emotion for its own sake, pushing the reader to emotional peaks through exaggeration, manipulation of language and situation, and such mechanical tricks as dwelling on the suffering and purity of a dying child.

> "Spirit," said Scrooge, with an interest he had never felt before, tell me if Tiny Tim will live."
> "I see a vacant seat," replied the Ghost, "in the poor chimney corner, and a crutch without an owner, carefully preserved. If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die."
> "No, no," said Scrooge. "Oh no, kind Spirit! Say he will be spared." — *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Stave Three: "The Second of the Spirits."

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The Victorian novels develop successful communication of emotions and feelings. When a novel creates hierarchies of feeling and understanding, it opens up a position for reader to align himself/herself to the level of omniscience. There are many ways in which literary texts name and communicate emotions. Authors often describe characters' facial expressions and this technique is a very common one to describe emotions through facial expressions. The *facial syntax*[1] refers to the idea that face sometimes speak, although silently, in a language of its own. The discourse of speaking face uses the first person and the present tense, and it is introduced through a simile, for example "he looks at her as if he wants to say…".

Facial syntax represents a well-known convention of the novel discourse. It works by translating the inner scenes into emotional and expressive language. The face acts like a translator between the knowing narrator and the multitude of social meanings, leading the reader into the world of nonverbal language interpretation – gestures, mimics, looks and glances.

The description of speaking looks and expressive glances have a very important power upon the main characters in the novel "Wuthering Heights" who can communicate only in the silent language of eyes:

> While enjoying a month of fine weather at the sea-coast, I was thrown into the company of a most fascinating creature: a real goddess in my eyes, as long as she took no notice of me. I 'never told my love' vocally; still, if looks have language, the merest idiot might have guessed I was over head and ears: she understood me at last, and looked a return - the sweetest of all imaginable looks. And what did I do? I confess it with shame - shrunk icily into myself, like a snail; at every glance retired colder and farther; till finally the poor innocent was led to doubt her own senses, and, overwhelmed with confusion at her supposed mistake, persuaded her mamma to decamp (Bronte, 2007:7)

The silent talking face can communicate things that cannot be spoken aloud - "*I 'never told my love' vocally"*- and can establish private channels of communication – restricted agreements of feelings and understandings – across social spaces.

Bronte uses the visual channel of communication in different social contexts to perform a wide range of social and sentimental functions. Sometimes, a face can communicate silently mutual feelings between two lovers, or other time an intense look can translate the intensity of the romantic feeling. The extract above shows us that faces speak against each other communicating in ways that are sensitive to the place and time.

Other times the mutual exchange of looks has a completely different reaction from one of the interlocutors:

> She never opened her mouth. I stared - she stared also: at any rate, she kept her eyes on me in a cool, regardless manner, exceedingly embarrassing and disagreeable. (Bronte, 2007:14)

But not only the eyes can communicate silently. The other parts of the face can also participate to the act of communication adding supplementary information to the words. An illustrative example is the dialogue between the main characters of the novel *Wuthering Hights*, when the facial signs of the girl translate her emotion feelings:

[1] Expression used by Stephanie Trigg in *Faces that speak*

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> ’I shall be glad to have a cup,’ I answered.
> ’Were you asked?’ she repeated.
> No,’ I said, half smiling. ‘You are the proper person to ask me.’
> She flung the tea back, spoon and all, and resumed her chair in a pet; her forehead corrugated, and her red under-lip pushed out, like a child’s ready to cry. (Bronte, 2007:16)

The communication of emotions in a novel is illustrated not only by the movement of the face and body, but also by the voice. Laughter, weeping, shouting, crying, sighing, coughing and throat clearing represent other means of communicating important information about characters’ mood and silent language. For example in the excerpt below we can see that that the shouting of the Mr. Heathcliff can translate his deep grief after her death:

> He dashed his head ahead against the knotted trunk, and, lifting his eyes howled, not like a man,but like a savage beast.(Bronte, 2007: 193)

A very versatile cough which we found in the Victorian novels is the Dickens’ memorable Mr. Snagsby in *Bleak House* , who masters throughout the novel a laugher repertoire of its extraordinary functional variety:

> “Yes, sir.” Mr. Snagsby turns up the gas and coughs behind his hand, modestly anticipating profit. Mr. Snagsby, as a timid man, is accustomed to cough with a variety of expressions, and so to save words. (Dickens, 1989: 67).
> […] Mr. Snagsby after consulting his cough of consideration behind his heand. (Dickens, 1989: 79).

The works of Charles Dickens, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde maintain a realist core overlaid by fantastic elements that come from the language used to characterize the core narrative or from metatexts or paratexts (for instance stories that characters tell). The fantastic in this way becomes a mode of interpretation in texts concerned with the problems of representation and the ability of literature to produce knowledge. Paradoxically, each of these authors relies on the fantastic in order to reach the kinds of meaning nineteenth-century realism strives for.

It is not surprising to find such a wide divergence of opinion on the value and veracity of sensory experience in the nineteenth century. In an era of rapid industrialization, urbanization and increasing democratization, the Victorian sensorium was under assault as never before. As Stallybrass and White argued in their influential study *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, the development of the modern city was concomitant with a ‘transformation of the senses” (134). In the dangerous promiscuities of city streets, for example, anxiety about the demarcation of spaces and the segregation of populations was exacerbated by new forms and experiences of visuality that, for good or ill, opened up the city to the Victorian gaze: who was made visible and invisible by the new public spaces and forms of transport which exposed spaces previously hidden from sight? And how should urban observers respond - morally, politically - to the new information or social experience afforded by the evidence of their eyes? More significantly for Stallybrass and White, the haptic became a particularly acute and fraught aspect of modern urban life: the fear of being touched encoded fears of contamination and contagion that “became the tropes through which city life was apprehended” (135). More recently, Stephen Arata has examined how sensory experience increasingly emerged as a problem in late-Victorian modernity.

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Citing such varying examples as Max Nordau's *Degeneration* and Georg Simmel's "The Metropolis and Mental Life," Arata notes that "Innumerable late-Victorian accounts of the malady of modern life make their way round to the issue of sensory overload: too many images, too much noise, way too much information, all of it too often resulting in nervous collapse, neurosis, dysfunctions of various kinds" (198).

In her turn, Brontë attempts to show Jane's passionate nature as wicked, it is Jane's passion that creates her vivid and commanding personality. From the time of her childhood at Gateshead, Jane displayed a strong, unweilding constitution and an emotional nature. For example, after the incident of John's attacking her with a book, Jane comments, "my blood was still warm; the mood of the revolted slave was still bracing me with its bitter vigor." As Jane grows into an adolescent, she again finds herself involved in very deep and conflicting emotions. Vivid metaphors and image such as this one of fire, which also create the passionate nature of the work, and drag the reader deeper into the narrative. "Fiery iron" and "blackness and burning" are both used to illustrate Jane's emotions at this point. Visions of fire also link Jane to Bertha. Both characters are repeatedly involved with fire, especially in regards to Rochester, relating either to an internal "fiery" passion or through the physical setting of a fire.

The Victorian period is renowned for its culture of shared powerful feeling: its mawkish sentimentality, its anxieties of gender and class, its fantasies of empire, its elaborate matrix of sexuality, and - most memorably - its literature, defined both by complex portraits of emotion and an equally complex ability to spur emotion in readers.

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