

Pablo Maurette
The Forgotten Sense.
Meditations on Touch

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When speaking or writing about art and literature, *cognition* is often the leading term. It helps explain how in addition to offering artistic pleasure literature and art help us see the world, learn about it, understand it. When contemplating Michelangelo's bust of Brutus one grasps the bitter mixture of disappointment and determination. When one reads or recites Shakespeare, Sonnet 116 ("Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments"), one feels invited to reflect on perfect love. In Homer's *Iliad* one finds a grand display of heroic passions, a splendid presentation of an East Mediterranean armed conflict at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. But why in order to understand the world should art and literature require us to travel to places far away, long past? Because our actual experience is narrowly limited whilst the additional cases art and literature offer – overstated and implausible as they might sometimes be – teach new important lessons or at least clarify what we already know to some extent. How do these lessons reach us? Either through our most trusted senses, sight and hearing, as it happens when we look at Brutus's bust and we attend the performance of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, or just through language, as when we listen to the recitation of Shakespeare's sonnet 116 and Homer's *Iliad* or when we read these works. If we rely just on language, we do not hear love itself, but solely the words that invite us to reflect on it. Language, in this case, involves either a detour since it requires us to move through words to the image of the world they propose, or a shortcut given that both the passage from words to

meaning and from meaning to knowledge take place within our mind. Cognitive poetics is the discipline that reliably examines the way in which literature imparts knowledge. It pays considerable attention to the interplay between the situations, actions and feelings presented by a literary work, to their coherence, their likelihood, as well as their appeal to the readers' sense of verisimilitude and rightness¹.

Among the sensorial sources of knowledge, the most obvious are the above-mentioned sight and hearing, the former having for a long time occupied the place of honor among senses. In his fascinating meditations on touching – the forgotten sense, as he calls it –, Pablo Maurette labels “oculocentrism” the philosophical privilege granted to sight and begs to disagree. As he reminds his readers, in Plato's *Republic*, «the sun and the light stand for truth and intelligence» and similarly, according to Aristotle «sight allows us to know in the clearest and most exclusive way [...] to draw distinctions, separate, categorize». Touch, by contrast, is in Aristotle's view «the most pernicious and distracting» (13) sense when it links us to the physical world, but, as Plato admits and, later, Plotinus emphasizes, the mysterious contact between the soul and the divine origin of the world can be metaphorically described as tactile. Lucretius, however, being an Epicurean, asserts that touch, *tactus*, «rules the nature of things» (15), given that the universe is a set of moving atoms that constantly hit each other, engendering all that is and all that happens. Consequently, one might consider that all bodily senses are versions of touching and, as Maurette puts it so well, «[t]hinking and knowing are tactile faculties as well; also dreaming, philosophizing, and poetizing» (16).

Concerning art, Maurette reminds us, during the last third of the eighteenth-century Johann Herder reflected on the relation between sight and touch in sculpture, while at the turn of the nineteenth-century the great Austrian art historian Aloïs Riegl labelled “haptic” the tacit sense of space projected by paintings and its distance from the spectator.

¹ Karin Kukkonen in *A Prehistory of Cognitive Poetics* (Oxford University Press, 2017) reflects on the trans-historical validity of cognitive poetics and offers an ample bibliography.

More recently, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari adopted this notion as a counterpart of the older “optic”, while Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body and Michel Henry’s reflections on the self-affection / self-impact of the flesh brought to attention deep, almost imperceptible sensorial and affective movements. The “affect-theorists” (Brian Massumi, Eve Sedgwick and Lauren Berlant among others) continue this line of exploration in art, film and literature. Present since the earliest stages of life in every part of the human body, reacting to one’s own touch, fully immediate, the haptic constitutes, in Maurette’s terms, «the last line of defense between the outside world and our interiority» (12).

Maurette notices that led by a familiar prophetic impulse some historians of culture claim that our century represents the beginning of a haptic age, yet chooses to follow Riegl’s wiser view of the haptic as an omnipresent practice subject to historical change. What, in Maurette’s view, does belong to “the morning of modernity” is a haptic “awareness”, inaugurated, according to him, by Lorenzo Ghiberti’s persuasive tactile analysis of an ancient Roman statue that represents an androgynous figure (17-18). Similar visual art examples of haptic recognition are Antonio Canova’s *The Three Graces* (1817) and Gennaro Cali’s *Psyche Abandoned* (1832), both highlighted in Alexander Sokurov’s film *Russian Ark* (2002). When looking at these works of art, Maurette aptly says, »[w]e are touched in the distance; it is touch through affect, it is haptic» (21).

The next questions are whether the haptic approach touches important aspects of literature and, if so, how would haptic literary history and criticism fulfill its mission. By inviting readers to intimacy, friendship, but also, precisely thanks to the surface contact, to a search for «unsuspected depths, unfamiliar sensations and primordial affections» (22), Maurette answers. The modern novel, he argues, excels in this task by augmenting details, first of settings, cloth, jewelry and bodily features, then, based on free indirect speech, of the soul, both conscious and unconscious. In such novels, Maurette’s first example being Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, true depth lies at the surface. Melville’s *Moby Dick* operate in the same way: torrents of details aim at showing

that the true meaning of life lies in small sensorial and affective experiences. By emphasizing interactions at the surface, according to Maurette, modern haptic narratives suggest that our (Lucretian, one might add) world is both right there, ready to be touched, and ultimately and «irremediably Godless» (23).

Long before modern times, by contrast, Homer's epic poems described cosmic interactions between mortals and gods, the latter approaching the humans «from their unfathomable distance» (32), as well as, for all these actors, the passions and conflicts that trouble them. Most scenes and objects – the Trojan army watched by Helen and Priam from the walls of Troy, Achilles' shield – being eminently visual, the art of Homer and his time would qualify as an optic rather than haptic. But should we perpetuate the old Hegelian assumption that each historical period and its culture are homogeneous and drastically different from predecessors and successors? Maurette goes beyond this approach and suggests a combination of the two categories – optic and haptic – into a continuous range of possibilities between two extremes. Homer's art for him is both optic and haptic, each to a certain extent. Towards the end of book 16 of *The Iliad*, when the Trojans try to drag the dead body of Patroclus to Troy while the Achaeans pull the same body towards their ships, the poet compares their efforts to what happens when

some master tanner
Gives the hide of a huge bull for stretching
The beast's skin soaked in grease and the men grab hold
Bracing round in a bread circle, tugging, stretching hard (39)

The scene is still optic, yet, as Maurette points out in an inspired close-reading, the hide – the skin of the dead bull – belongs to the tactile, haptic repertory. He also reminds the reader that in book 19 of the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus returns home claiming that he is a wondering beggar, his old nurse recognizes the hero's visual features but fully accepts who he is only after touching his calf and feeling the scar she knows should be there.

Returning to the materialist view of nature, Maurette reminds us the recent important work of Stephen Greenblatt², who together with Valentina Prospero, Lisa Piazzini, Gerard Passannante and Ada Palmer drew attention to the rediscovery of Lucretius during the Renaissance. Significantly, the interest in Lucretian philosophy of the body and its inevitable corruption was contemporaneous with a disturbing explosion of contagious tactility brought by the epidemic of syphilis and smallpox spread on both sides of the Atlantic during the new era of intercontinental explorations. In his irresistibly seductive style Maurette comments on this encounter between philosophical speculation and skin putrefaction, adding a couple of digressions on Joel-Peter Witkin famous photography *Still Life Mexico* (1993) and Giordano Bruno's execution on the stake in Campo di Fiori, Rome, in 1600.

A chapter on philematology – the discipline that studies kisses³ – focuses on a specific kind of kiss, the one given with an open mouth, but not without examining counter-chronologically several philosophical classifications of this interpersonal form of touch. The taxonomy developed by Kierkegaard's character Johannes in the *Seducer's Diary* (the first part of *Either / Or*, 1843), turns out to be much less informed than Francesco Patrizi's dialogue *Delfino or on the Kiss* (1577) and less passionate than Johannes Secundus's *Liber Basiorum* (1541), perhaps because the earlier two authors allow Neo-Platonic reflection on love to nuance their approaches. Poetry, from Catullus to Maffio Venier (a mid-sixteenth-century Venetian whose tipsy short poem "Kiss me my darling" Mauretta translates), Philip Sidney and Shakespeare, celebrates

² Greenblatt, Stephen, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, New York, W. W. Norton, 2011

³ Not knowing the meaning of this term, the present reviewer searched it on the Wiktionary, which defines it as «the scientific study of kissing». In the upper corner of the Wiktionary screen one can see the picture of a sailor and a young lady kissing each other. The two adults hold a baby who attentively considers what they are doing. The text under the picture explains: «A United States Navy specialist who had returned from a deployment kissing his wife while their son engages in philematology».

the ludic and propaedeutic role of kissing, applauding its role in erotic sentimental education. A scene from Andrei Tarkovsky's unforgettable first movie, *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), an episode from Guy de Maupassant's *The Kiss* (1882) highlight the enigmatic power of the kiss, while more recent texts by Karl Ove Knausgaard (2014) and Julio Cortázar (1963) describe in great detail long-lasting kisses. At the end of the chapter, Brancusi's sculpture *Le Baiser* (1913) presents a barely separated couple forming a block of stone. Mauretti concludes: «they are not two lovers, they are one kiss» (105).

The charm of Maurette's book comes from its author's willingness to espouse the most diverse points of view and always discover their attractive side. Lucretius and materialism excite him, yet in the fifth chapter, "The French Connection", he approvingly discusses *Incarnation: A Philosophy of the Body* (2000), the last book of Michel Henry (1922-2002), a French phenomenologist whose work deserves to be better known. Criticizing the primacy philosophers have virtually always attributed to the intellect, Henry reflects on the role of lived, embodied experience, the most fundamental and most common one being the sense of one's own flesh, of one's own body. Calling it self-affection, Michel Henry describes it as a primal awareness that one is a concrete, living individual. Whereas since the early seventeenth century the French Epicurean tradition examined the interactions between human senses and concluded, like its European partners, that touch, not sight, is the deepest, most interesting sense, Michel Henry discovers a deeper, invisible, tacit awareness of one's body. The Christian doctrine of the Verb made Flesh holds «the key [...] to that other great mystery, that of our own flesh, that is revealed in a pre-sensorial self-affection» (126). Only in France, Maurette exclaims, the country where both Epicureanism and materialism blossomed, can one find a philosopher who describes «the mystery of the living flesh that manifest itself like tremor in the dark night of the soul» (128).

What comes next in Michel Henry's silent phenomenology is the ability to move one's body, which engenders a feeling of elementary corporal power ("I can"), as well as the insight that the outside world is real. To illustrate the opposition between "I can" and the reality of the

world, Maurette resorts to the medieval literary example of Lancelot, the King Arthur's Court knight who, driven by love for Queen Guinevere, Arthur's wife, makes his way to her place by bending the unsurpassable iron bars at her window. He hurts his hands, he bleeds but, in Guinevere's embrace, he does not even notice his wounds. The primal "I can" grants him power. As Maurette comments, Michel Henry seems to paraphrase and change one of Karl Marx's famous dicta into «philosophers have hitherto only *seen* the world in various ways when the point is to *live* it» (114). Moreover, since the world is not just what one sees and measures, one might ask philematologists whether «the kiss lovers exchange is only a bombardment of microphysical particles» (115).

The last chapter, "Skin Deep" returns to the main theme of the book – the kinship between on the one hand, Renaissance art and scientific thought, and on the other hand, the haptic impulse of modernist literature, visible in Hugo von Hofmannstahl's *Lord Chandos's Letter*, Marinetti's futurism, Joyce's *Dubliners* and Kafka's *Penal Colony*. The chapter also visits Thomas Browne's reflections on gardening and texture and ends with several images of Marsyas and Saint Barthelemy's skin flaying in Renaissance paintings and sculpture. Surface taken away, the bleeding bodies cannot survive. As Maurette states in his last sentence, when these two adventurous periods, Renaissance and modernism, hit the rock bottom where one can't go further, «they both show that even that is nothing but surface» (160).

Immensely learned, open to a great variety of traditions and disciplines, *The Forgotten Sense* belongs to a new crop of readable, friendly books, reminiscent of open conversations among cultivated people. Energetic, diverse, the book agreeably jumps from one period to the next and from one issue to another, in the end succeeding to make a strong point about an invisible, yet deeply 'touching' aspect of art and literature.

To conclude, a few ideas concerning Maurette's present and future projects. First, while the atomism and materialism inspired by Lucretius had an important impact on the development of modern science and philosophy, a wider, plural movement included, in science the birth of

mathematical physics and astronomy, in literature and arts the rediscovery of classical norms, and in religious life the impact of the Reformation. Looking at a painting by Brunelleschi or Masaccio, one did not only 'see' the represented scene but also 'feel' the mathematically ruled harmony of the world and 'reverberated' at its silent beauty. When, soon, radical trends of the Reformation prohibited sacred paintings, the white church walls most probably aimed at helping the faithful to pay attention only to the Scripture and echo its call.

Next, Maurette's superb comments about the wealth of insignificant details in realist literature might also help nuance Michel Henry's insight that we do not just "see" the world, we "live" in it. Descriptions of architecture, furniture, cloth, physiognomies and bodies in Balzac and Flaubert certainly convey the sense that countless inconspicuous items surround us. Yet realist writers remind us that we 'see' them and that many of them, if considered attentively, may convey significant information. In Flaubert's story *A Simple Heart* (1877), the description of Mme Aubain's living room mentions a barometer hanging on the wall. It has no role in the story and in the early days of structuralism, a critic argued that it just aims at suggesting the 'reality' of the place in general, without referring to anything concrete. Not quite, answered another critic: during the last quarter of the nineteenth century having a barometer at home was the mark of the affluent, educated bourgeoisie. Readers of *A Simple Heart* only vicariously live in Mme Aubain's house and see its furniture, but if they pay attention, they can notice significant details.

Concerning literary modernism, Maurette's examples beautifully illustrate this trend's interest in touch and surface. One might add that Hofmannstahl, Joyce and Kafka's cited texts generate a special kind of dizziness that subverts the readers' silent inner balance and their equally silent ability to keep a straight path. But this is not always the case. In Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-27), where the interest in non-visual elements and self-affection deals with submerged memories of taste and scent (rather than touch), they stir up an unknown side of inner 'depth'. The fragrance of a madeleine (a small biscuit) dipped in a cup of tea reawakes the narrator / main character's childhood

memories leading him, after many detours, to understand his true calling: creative writing.

These are just minor suggestions. In its present form Maurette's book is an exceptionally interesting debut of a highly promising young literary critic.

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