

Dining with the Darwins: Senses and the Trace in (Neo-)Victorian Home Cooking

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Abstract:

An infinite number of projects, books, films, performances and merchandise was launched across the globe in conjunction with Charles Darwin's twofold anniversary in 2009. Published immediately before the Darwin commemorative year, in which the entire world seemed to participate, to a greater or lesser extent, in the celebration of the man and his work, *Mrs. Charles Darwin's Recipe Book: Revived and Illustrated* (2008) appeared, at first sight, to be little more than a mere side dish to go with the abundant, commemoration feast. However, this collection of Emma Darwin's recipes and notes on home cooking has more to it than meets the eye. In this essay I explore how it, in fact, invites us to sense the Victorian past through the elaboration (and ingestion) of the dishes therein. Drawing on recent notions of the trace, I analyse the cookbook's potential in terms of neo-Victorianism, proposing a reading of *Mrs. Charles Darwin's Recipe Book* as a successful attempt, out of the many recent endeavours, to render the Victorian past more material.

Keywords: Darwin, home cooking, *Mrs. Charles Darwin's Recipe Book*, neo-Victorian, phenomenology, senses, the trace.

It being the 150th anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin's most famous work, *The Origin of Species* (1859), as well as the bicentenary of his birth, 2009 was bound to become *the* year of Darwin commemoration. A simple search on the Internet provides one with extensive lists of worldwide events, publications, films, documentaries, performances and merchandise released in conjunction with, or immediately before and after, Darwin's twofold anniversary that year. While many scholars seized the opportunity to return to Darwin to either develop a "more finely grained understanding of the relationship between his ideas and those of his contemporaries" (Smith 2009: 219), or to discuss "the history of evolutionary thought" in order to perspectivise "our current understanding of evolutionary biology" (Perlman 2009: 628-629), the years around 2009 also saw a culmination of work done by biographers, historians and other academics who since the

1970s have aimed to (re-)present the man “fully embedded in his social and cultural context” (Browne 2010: 371). What has occupied many Darwin scholars in the last four decades, Janet Browne assures us, has been to dismantle traditional accounts of his search for a theory, and to undo the myth of Darwin “as an isolated thinker who independently revolutionized the Victorian worldview” (Browne 2010: 371). This project of undoing myths and traditional accounts of Darwin in order to reconstruct the imagery of the man not only as an exceptional thinker and scientist but also as an ordinary husband and father, coincides with the general tendency of contemporary biographical narratives to give, as Cora Kaplan puts it, “eminent Victorians a new look” (Kaplan 2007: 38). Indeed, as Browne points out, today’s biographies of Darwin “are dealing less with the details of science and more with the cultural features that create a scientist” (Browne 2010: 372). This has to do not only with the “shift in historiographical perspective” (sounding all too familiar to anyone working in the field of neo-Victorianism) but also with “the wealth of available archival materials documenting Darwin’s life and times”, which allow a representation of the man which blends his “scientific endeavors with his family life [...] providing a strong sense of the materiality of Darwin’s domestic situation” (Browne 2010: 371-372). For the purpose of this article, Browne’s comment on the materiality rendered by this blend is particularly interesting, since I deal precisely with one of those ‘materials’ that document Darwin’s life and times and explore how it enables an encounter if not exactly between Darwin and us, then certainly between his (domestic) life and ours. This essay discusses *Mrs. Charles Darwin’s Recipe Book: Revived and Illustrated* (2008) in the light of recent notions of the trace and analyses the cookbook’s potential in terms of neo-Victorianism, proposing a reading of it as a successful attempt, out of the many recent endeavours, to render the Victorian past more material.¹

Notwithstanding the recent increase in contributions that move beyond the neo-Victorian ‘text’, considering neo-Victorian impulses and “cultural memory work” in a broader sense (Bowser and Croxall 2010: 1), the notion of active engagement with the (Victorian) past is, still, most often discussed in terms of writing/reading processes. This article investigates the potential of the multisensory experience (that involves touching, smelling and tasting as much as or more than seeing) as a way to actively engage with the past, suggesting that *Mrs. Charles Darwin’s Recipe Book* provides

one of the ingredients for a neo-Victorian encounter with nineteenth-century cooking – and dining – at the Darwins'. Published during the worldwide celebration of her husband, the commercial dimension of Emma Darwin's recipe collection is hard to ignore. However, although its evident commercial strategies, such as the rather incongruous play at a nostalgia for the wonderful Victorian times and ways, may complicate the idea of the book as neo-Victorian *in its whole*, the revival of Emma Darwin's home cooking, as I aim to prove, enables a different, yet valid, kind of (re-) enactment that returns the Victorian past to us in a very tangible form. And, despite its opportunistic first impression, *Mrs. Charles Darwin's Recipe Book* neither encourages its readers to become twenty-first-century Darwin doubles nor promises to provide us with any missing links or unveil any great discoveries – unlike many of the Darwinian commemorative products and events that I briefly look into below.

1. To 'Cook up' Darwin or to Cook *with* Darwin

One of the most outstanding commemorative celebrations of Darwin's twofold anniversary was the Dutch multi-media project which included the TV-series entitled 'Beagle: On the Future of Species' broadcast on Dutch TV during 2009 and 2010.² In 35 episodes, as well as on an interactive web site, viewers could follow a team of scientists, producers and Darwin's own descendents in their aim to 're-experience' Darwin's long journey (this time, however, in eight months instead of five years, and on an old-world-looking but sophisticatedly equipped vessel), with the aim of demonstrating "how his theories are still tested and confirmed 200 years later" (Petit 2010: n.p.).

Along the same lines, towards the end of 2008, the Beagle Trust announced its plans to build a 5-million-pounds replica of the H.M.S. Beagle for a voyage of discovery which, like Darwin's, "changed our view of the world" (Prigg 2008: n.p.). As one of the scientists involved in the project explains in a podcast interview for *The Guardian's* Science Weekly section, while the new vessel will *look like* the original Beagle, the project "is not about recreating the actual ship as a replica" but rather "about rebuilding the Beagle [...] so that we can do science aboard, communicate [...] through on-line videos, tweets and blogs [...] do everything that I guess Darwin would have wanted to do, or would have done, had he done this today" (Boase and Duckworth 2010: n.p.). The initial deadlines for the

project have not been met and the replica is still under construction at the present time. Joint founder and trustee of the project, Peter McGrath, recently proposed 2013 as a possible date for the new H.M.S. Beagle's virgin voyage (McGrath 2012: n.p.). In any case, this project is undoubtedly one of the longest lasting Darwinian events.

A more exclusive way to follow the path of Darwin's expedition was launched by Stanford's Travel/Study Agency for those interested in 'revisiting' the highlights of his Beagle voyage by private jet during the month of January 2009. Promising the travelers an extraordinary experience – both intellectually and in terms of comfort – the trip, beginning at Stanford's campus in California and ending in London, would not only take them from destination to destination aboard a private Boeing 757 but would also include an extensive educational programme on Darwin's life, discoveries and legacy delivered by experts such as Bill Durham, David Abernethy and Janet Browne, who all were to accompany the (wealthy!) Darwin fans.³

Another of the many remarkable tributes to Darwin in 2009, was the revelation of *Darwinius Masillae* to the public worldwide: a unique 47-million-year-old primate fossil which was originally discovered in 1983 in Germany and called *Ida* (after project leader Jørn Hurum's daughter). Though receiving its formal name (and thus obtaining worldwide fame) in honour of Darwin's anniversary, *Darwinius Masillae* was not (re)named after Darwin on a whim, if we are to believe the international team of scientists. In their first 2009 press release, they presented the fossil as the missing link of world heritage that "rewrites our understanding of the early evolution of primates" (Jörg Habersetzer qtd. in Natural History Museum, University of Oslo 2009: 3). And, in a similar vein, on *Darwinius Masillae*'s personal website, www.revealingthelink.com, they promise visitors that it provides "at last, 150 years after the publication of *On The Origin of Species*, the link that connects us directly with the rest of the animal kingdom".⁴ 2009 was undoubtedly the perfect moment for making the fossil 're-appear', given that, as the team openly admit, they hoped not only to make *Darwinius Masillae* a talking point for everyone interested in palaeontology, but also to renew the interest in evolution (and by extension Darwin) on a broader scale.

All of the abovementioned Darwin celebrations, and many more, figure on the web site Darwin Online (<http://darwin-online.org.uk/>), which

claims to offer ‘probably the largest list of worldwide Darwin events in 2009’.⁵ The site does indeed provide an impressive number of commemoration announcements ranging from scholarly conferences and works, to museum exhibitions, theatre performances, TV series and merchandise, some of which (not to say many) certainly seem intended to ‘cook up’ and serve Darwin to his present-day fans as a delectable consumable. Notwithstanding the simultaneous occurrence of both the broader, sometimes highly commercial, cultural celebrations of the Darwinian year and the more specialised or academic commemorations of the man and his work, the list gives a useful overview, loosely arranged into subgroups. For example, reflecting the expected boom in publications on Darwin (Browne 2010; Smith 2009), Darwin Online includes more than 200 titles of books, chapters, journals and articles published in connection with the eminent Victorian’s anniversary. Yet, this substantial corpus of scholarly as well as non-academic texts also embraces works that are, strictly speaking, neither on Charles Darwin nor on his scientific achievements. Hence, amongst the first entries (given the alphabetical order) of ‘Publications’, in the subsection of ‘Books etc.’, we find Dusha Bateson and Weslie Janeway’s *Mrs. Charles Darwin’s Recipe Book*, a collection of Emma Darwin’s recipes and notes on home economics. Myself being the happy owner of one of the copies, the title naturally sprang into my eyes running over the many entries the first time that I visited the site. Though not surprised to see the book there (considering the great coverage of the Darwin Online list), to a certain extent I did regard the text as misplaced.

At first sight the cookbook may seem a rather opportunistic (commercial) publication: released only a number of weeks before the Darwinian red-letter day, promising that “[c]ookery, history, Victoriana, and botany buffs alike will be sure to devour this rich culinary exploration that has the diversity and excitement of one of Charles Darwin’s botanical adventures” (Bateson and Janeway 2008: blurb). However, although *Mrs. Charles Darwin’s Recipe Book* appears to be little more than a mere side dish to go with the abundant, Darwinian anniversary feast, it in fact belongs on the table of innovative, neo-Victorian appetisers. In what follows, I explore recent theoretical conceptualisations of the trace and its relevance for neo-Victorianism, focusing on how notions of the trace combined with the phenomenological perception of embodied experience provide a fruitful framework for considering contemporary sensory engagement with the

Victorian past in a broader sense and, specifically, for understanding the (re-)enactment of Emma Darwin's home cooking as a neo-Victorian encounter.

2. Neo-Victorianism and the Trace

The last decade's elaborations on providing an appropriate delineation of the neo-Victorian novel have been both various and varied. Critics have described it as "a kind of third space [...] a fascinating area of tension between the Victorian and the contemporary, a hybrid space of mimicry, camouflage and assertions of difference" (Voigts-Virchow 2009: 112), as well as "an intellectual and cultural mode" (Llewellyn 2009: 28). Constantly crossing and pushing at the boundaries of definition, the neo-Victorian novel has, however, kept pace with the attempts at delineating it, and the genre remains, in this sense, problematic. Certainly, the neo-Victorian novel is far too complex a genre/mode/site/space to (even attempt to) define properly in a short essay. Moreover, neo-Victorianism as a phenomenon extends to much more than (literary) texts. As Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn have suggested: "[n]eo-Victorianism represents a wide range of experimentations" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 32). In itself forming part of neo-Victorian experimentation, this article deals neither with a work of neo-Victorian fiction nor, strictly speaking, with a neo-Victorian text but, rather, with the neo-Victorian encounter – or moment – that emerges through active, sensorial contact with the Victorian past in the present. In other words, it seeks to analyse the process of actively employing our senses while engaging with the trace, here in the form of Emma Darwin's recipe collection. Although relying decidedly on today's products and kitchen implements, the re-enactment of Darwinian home cooking, in this case, also entails sensory contact with (the trace of) the past, namely Mrs. Darwin's instructions. In essence, cooking, baking and preserving according to these allows for plenty and fruitful, sensorial interaction with the (Victorian) past, which, in turn, results in a dynamics that connects past, present and future – an idea which comes to resonate with Theodore R. Schatzki's notion that "activity [is] the meeting point of times" (Schatzki 2005: 199).

On several occasions, Schatzki has advocated for a different demarcation of history: as "the realm and course of human action inherently tak[ing] place within bundles of practices and material arrangements"

(Schatzki 2005: 208).⁶ In his essay ‘Where Times Meet’ (2005), he furthers the theories of Martin Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur, aiming to prove that history is actually where “the time of objective reality” meets with “the time of human experience” (Schatzki 2005: 191) – a hypothesis originally formulated by Ricoeur in his seminal 1988 work, *Time and Narrative*. However, disagreeing with Ricoeur’s original notion which, according to Schatzki, largely ignored “the nexus of past human actions and events” by focusing merely on “history *writing*”, he proposes that the two types of time meet “in human activity” (Schatzki 2005: 191-192, added emphasis). This argument fits well with Emma Darwin’s recipe book, where the writing (the historical recipes), on the one hand, grows out of and is indelibly defined by the writer’s prior activities and experiments in the kitchen; and, on the other, where past human actions and events (the cooking as well as the writing) meet present human activity and vice versa. Significantly reframing Ricoeur’s original notion of “historical time”, Schatzki’s thesis not only lessens the value of history writing, but convincingly argues that it is precisely because of the intermingling of “phenomenological and cosmic times” that historical practices have the potential to “refigure time” (Schatzki 2005: 198). Although refuting the term ‘third time’ as employed by Ricoeur to describe the so-called meeting point, Schatzki’s conception that the intermingling of times can produce a refiguration of history/time goes hand-in-glove with the perception of neo-Victorianism as a “third space” (Voigts-Virchow 2009: 112): as an in-between dimension or fusion of two times – or two worlds – with the potential to refigure both. An interesting parallel can also be drawn between neo-Victorianism and Schatzki’s central argument that different times “inherently meet in human activity, not because activity institutes a third time, but instead because it instantiates *each* time” (Schatzki 2005: 192, added emphasis). Replicating Emma Darwin’s recipes in our own kitchens is similarly an activity which not only embraces (or instantiates as Schatzki terms it) the Victorian past as well as the present, but also combines the so-called times of objective reality and human experience. Moreover, that it is precisely in this combination that a refiguration of time becomes possible, as Schatzki theorises, arguably explains the great potential of the neo-Victorian sensory encounter to stimulate and/or complicate our understanding of past and present, and, in this sense, to refigure both times.

Schatzki's essay proves, in many ways, an attractive theoretical framework for discussing neo-Victorianism in a larger critical and philosophical context. Yet, for the purpose of this paper, two aspects of Schatzki's reflections upon 'where times meet' are particularly interesting. First of these is his claim that human action provides the site for different times to meet. Coinciding with Ricoeur, Schatzki sees activity, rather than a material entity or even an idea, as the vehicle whereby objective reality and human experience are "intercalated" (Schatzki 2005: 198). Second, he understands action as always constituting part of a practice which, in turn, is always "performed at and amid arrangements of material entities (people, artifacts, organisms, and things of nature)" (Schatzki 2005: 208). In viewing practices, rather than material entities, as the vehicle that brings together times, Schatzki arguably adds another layer to the perception of the trace, understood as the materials "attend[ed] to in constructing [...] accounts of the past: documents chiefly, but also other remnants such as tools, human remains, films, and ruins" (Schatzki 2005:197). Put differently, the trace is not merely embodied by the material object, but just as crucially by the subject engaged in the trace's perception via a particular action/activity – for the purposes of my further argument, the activity of cooking. Ricoeur considered such materials as institutive of a third space in which different times could "overlap" (Ricoeur qtd. in Schatzki 2005: 198). However, although Schatzki acknowledges the importance of such "artifacts [...] vestiges, left-overs from the past" (Schatzki 2005: 197), he maintains that it is in the *use* of and especially *interaction* with these traces that the overlapping of existential temporality and objective reality is brought about, not in the traces themselves. The reenactment of Victorian culinary activities involves precisely such an overlapping of different times, given that, by preparing and enjoying a Darwinian dinner, we necessarily use and interact with the trace: Emma Darwin's instructions.

Along similar lines, Rosario Arias has put forward the idea that it is in the act of tracing and in the *active*, sensorial appreciation of the trace that the power of the trace resides. In her forthcoming chapter, 'Traces and Vestiges of the Victorian Past in Contemporary Fiction', Arias (re-) considers Ricoeur's original notion of the trace through the lens of cultural phenomenology, providing illuminating insights into "the ways in which the trace is linked with our being-affected in a bodily sense" (Arias 2014:16). Offering a useful overview of how, in the twenty-first century, we continue

to be affected (as well as effected) by the Victorians, Arias investigates the relevance of the sensorial dimension in neo-Victorian re-imaginings of the past, and shows that by “privileg[ing] the tracing of the Victorian traces in the contemporary present”, the neo-Victorian mode establishes novel kinds of (inter)connections between past and present by way of phenomenological rather than just epistemological activity (Arias 2014: 5).

While Arias effectively reveals the critical-analytical potential that lies in combining phenomenology with notions of the trace, she also underlines that we have merely glimpsed the tip of the iceberg. As Arias points out, despite the extent to which the “growing concern with sensory experience in critical studies on the Victorian age parallels the expansion of neo-Victorianism in the last ten years, in which sensory apperception plays a fundamental role” (Arias 2014: 10), critical engagement with sensorial perception in neo-Victorianism remains a comparatively recent trend. A few, but highly valuable, contributions have appeared, such as Silvana Colella’s pioneering discussion of the sense of smell in Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (see Colella 2010), which I shall return to later. Others have similarly drawn attention to the sensorial qualities of Faber’s novel, most recently, Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss in their joint introduction to a 2011 special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, in which *The Crimson Petal and the White* served the guest-editors as a “paradigmatic literary example” for the volume’s “focus on visual and material culture” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2011: 3). By bringing together a range of works that all share an interest in the “immersion into texture, smells and sounds of the Victorian” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2011: 19), the special issue entitled ‘Spectacles and Things: Visual and Material Culture and/in Neo-Victorianism’ draws attention to, and partially compensates for, a rarely explored approach to neo-Victorianism. However, while the contributions therein do lend credibility to the editors’ claim that “[t]he intertwining of the visual and the material seems definite of neo-Victorianism” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2011: 15), they also testify to the fact that, although the interest in the meaning(s) of sensory experience in neo-Victorianism is growing, critical studies tend to focus on vision. Indeed, of all the senses, sight (in all its complexities) has so far played the most prominent role in the discussions on the sensorial universe of neo-Victorianism.

This essay seeks not to argue against the privileging of the visual and of vision, which is described by phenomenologists as “the dominant human sense, the one most richly evoked in language, and the highest in the classical hierarchy of senses” (Cohen 2009: 17). Instead, it advocates for the possibility of a multisensory (neo-Victorian) encounter with the past, providing a concrete, practical example thereof. Drawing on the recent critical perspectives of the trace outlined above, in combination with the phenomenological perception of embodied experience, I read *Mrs. Charles Darwin’s Recipe Book* as an alternative way of sensing the Victorian past, or, rather, of sensing the *presentness* of the Victorian in our contemporary daily life through the elaboration and ingestion of food. First, however, I want to briefly return to Colella’s essay on ‘Olfactory Ghosts: Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White*’, in which she convincingly argues that “[a]ccess to the past – however illusory – depends on perception rather than recognition”, given that “[t]he senses define a liminal area between past and present where connections become possible” (Colella 2010: 88). Although the context for Colella’s formulation is a discussion of sensorial experiences in the neo-Victorian novel, it provides an appropriate point of departure for my own analysis of *Mrs. Charles Darwin’s Recipe Book* in terms of a liminal site of neo-Victorian experience and encounter.

Relying on phenomenological tenets, Colella “brings together the trope of haunting and olfactory experience” (Arias and Pulham 2010b: xxiii) in her illuminating analysis of Faber’s novel, which she perceives as far more sensorial than textual. Readers’ access to the Victorian past in the text, she holds, significantly “involves [...] an active engagement with the least intellectualized and most stubbornly material of our senses”: smell (Colella 2010: 87). To make sense of the past, Colella notes, readers must necessarily sense it, and it is particularly through the novel’s varied range of odours that a more material apprehension of reality is achieved (Colella 2010: 87). The same might be said of Emma Darwin’s recipe book, since the activity of cooking primarily involves the sense of smell, though evidently touch and taste, via the texture of ingredients and of the object produced and its subsequent consumption, also feature in the (re-)experience of ‘Victorian’ food. Discussing the power of smells, Colella notes that these can

hardly [...] help readers remember a collective past they have never known or experienced. But they may function as gatekeepers of the historical ‘real’: the more smells are depicted or simply referenced [...] the more directly apprehensible the Victorian ‘real’ is made to appear – ‘a whiff and we know’. This is of course paradoxical, since there are no smells on the page, just as there are no sounds. However, given that we know of olfactory perceptions, it is undeniable that olfactory representations on the written page carry with them a distinctive aroma of referentiality, more so than visual descriptions. (Colella 2010: 91)

However, the dualistic nature of smells, being at once material and immaterial, also complicates our sensing of the past presented in novels or other kinds of writing, such as recipe books. Not only is it “hardly possible to describe the precise smell of a substance to someone who has not smelled it before”, it is also virtually “impossible to re-smell a smell in the absence of the odour-emitting substance” (Colella 2010: 90, 101). Yet a recipe book can function differently from a novel, by circumventing both these difficulties: facilitating the actual smelling of the smell in the reenacted activity of ‘Victorian’ cooking and thus substituting the smell’s absence with *presence*. In contrast, while Faber makes the Victorian past “almost tangible” through descriptions of “Victorian lives [...] powerfully evoked through the olfactory medium”, he simultaneously evokes those same scents’ intangibility “as mute signs” of an already lost and irrecoverable “object world” (Colella 2010: 86). In this sense, smells in *The Crimson Petal and the White* ultimately have no ‘real’ referential value as literal “traces” but only as “signs” of traces (Colella 2010: 95).

Nonetheless in concluding that it is the (albeit only imagined) “*act of smelling itself* that connects the present and the past” (Colella 2010: 104; added emphasis), Colella reveals a fundamentally phenomenological standpoint that resonates with the idea of the trace and, more importantly, with the conceptualisation of *tracing* as discussed throughout this section.

3. Sensing the Past: (Neo-)Victorian Home Cooking

Unlike *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Mrs. Charles Darwin’s *Recipe Book* offers an encounter which is not a construction or simulacrum

but an actual operation of mediation between the Victorian past and the present. In other words, while Faber's novel affords readers only the illusion of smell, the (re-)elaboration of Emma Darwin's dishes is driven by a different desire – not for the 'real' historical referent but, rather, for making presence-based connections with the past through an actual sensory interaction with one of its traces in the process of cooking.⁷

You buy a book; you download recipes from the Internet; you eat something delicious in a restaurant or at a friend's house. Before long, your books bulge with postcards, old envelopes, and yellow newspaper cuttings. Likewise is it not surprising that Emma Darwin, wife of the great nineteenth-century biologist, had a note of recipes. She was in the great tradition of women who ran what were, by almost any standard, large and complex households, and she was organized enough to write things down. (Bateson and Janeway 2008: 17)

The editors of *Mrs. Charles Darwin's Recipe Book* thus begin their 'Introduction' by establishing a parallel between those interested in cooking today and Emma Darwin. Their presentation undeniably reflects a nostalgia for "great tradition[s]" of bygone eras, for times in which households were run by people (women) who were "organized enough to write things down", in contrast to present-day householders' disorganised assemblies of loose cuttings, printouts and notes, a nostalgia also captured on the back cover, which promises that every reader will be transported "to one of history's most admired eras" (Bateson and Janeway 2008: back cover). Yet in its project of reviving Emma Darwin's recipes – which it, significantly, encourages others to participate in – the book proves to be more than a product of nostalgic and/or opportunistic adaptation.

Drawing on the two main ideas discussed throughout this essay, namely that sensory experience can operate as a mediator between past and present and that tracing – understood as the active (sensorial) engagement with the trace – can provide the means for such sensory experience, I would like to suggest that *Mrs. Charles Darwin's Recipe Book* offers a vast buffet of sensorial ventures as it invites us to experience and experiment with the "left-overs" (in Schatzki's terms) of nineteenth-century home cooking and thus to actively partake in the mediation process. In this respect, *Mrs.*

Charles Darwin's Recipe Book offers us a way of “reaching back”, as Dana Shiller proposed (Shiller 1997: 551), into the Victorian past with all our senses combined. There are, of course, “no smells on the pages” (to repeat Colella’s words), but as Nach Waxman observes in his foreword to the collection, “[f]ood, surely, seems to provide one doorway, or at least a peephole into [...] realms about which we may speculate but which we can never inhabit” (Waxman 2008: 13). By cooking and eating the dishes presented in this cookbook, we no longer have to merely imagine but are allowed to see, touch, smell and get a taste of Victorian gastronomy. Whereas, for all our sniffing, the smelly universe of *The Crimson Petal and the White* ultimately speaks more of an absence than a presence, the act of preparing/ingesting Emma Darwin’s meals constitutes an actual embodied, presence-based re-enactment of nineteenth-century home cooking.

Mrs. Charles Darwin's Recipe Book offers 55 recipes ranging from simple and short ones on how to make a curry, buttered eggs or chicken and macaroni to longer and more challenging ones, such as the recipes for French ragout of mutton or the so-called ‘Rice Patties’. The book includes, moreover, a facsimile reproduction of the majority of them, taken from Emma Darwin’s original manuscript: a small, half-leather notebook which is now “much darkened with age and rubbed with use” but, nevertheless, looks like the sort of book “a young lady would carry with her on some expedition” (Bateson and Janeway 2008: 30). The editors have not only made the manuscript accessible but have also set the recipes in context, as Janet Browne writes in the preface to the book, so “[n]ow guests will simultaneously be able to enjoy real food and the quirky pleasures of dining with history” (Browne 2008: 11). As their description of the manuscript illustrates, Bateson and Janeway’s contextualisation, at times, draws on a somewhat opportunistic word choice, as if seeking to establish certain parallels between Emma’s kitchen ‘ventures’ and her husband’s work and expeditions. Also, in the same (opportunistic) vein, the editors have chosen the six lines on how to boil rice, written, they assure us, by *Mr Darwin* himself, as the first ‘original’ recipe to cite in their ‘Introduction’. However, although Bateson and Janeway sometimes appear to confound commercialisation and contextualisation, they do offer, as Browne observes, a “remarkable access to the inner recesses of a prosperous Victorian home” (Browne 2008: 11). In what follows I discuss this ‘access’ provided by *Mrs. Charles Darwin's Recipe Book* according to neo-Victorian principles.

Despite being quite experienced in the kitchen environment, I must admit that to reproduce a Darwinian dinner is not a piece of cake. Similarly, Bateson and Janeway repeatedly underline the difficulties they encountered in working through the original recipes: “[w]hat appeared obvious and straightforward at first often proved puzzling when we assembled the ingredients and started cooking” (Bateson and Janeway 2008: 40-41). The surprising quantities and puzzling practices, for instance in the instructions for making lemon pickle which involve “an unusual stage where the salted fruit is completely dried out before the spiced vinegar is added” (Bateson and Janeway 2008: 38), are not the only things that complicate the preparation of the Darwinian dishes. Part of the difficulty in Emma Darwin’s recipes stems from the fact that some of the instructions appear to be unfinished. This is the case with the veal cake recipe which, as the editors observe, “calls for some initiative on the part of the interpreter” (Bateson and Janeway 2008: 81). In the original instructions the cake is made of alternating layers of cooked meat, hardboiled eggs and thin slices of lean ham. It gives, however, no indications as to how to bind the layers together, which is what ultimately makes the veal cake a *cake*. It similarly remains a mystery how the original ingredients could have produced the jelly around the cake, which, as Emma wrote, one should be careful not to “hurt” (Bateson and Janeway 2008: vi). As Bateson and Janeway conclude, apart from the ones given in the original recipe, further preliminaries are necessary. In short, if we want a veal cake coated with jelly, something juicy and fatty needs to be added.

As the veal cake mystery shows, the final results (the dishes) depend very much on our approach to the instructions – on readers’ expectations, willingness to compromise and also ability to fill in the gaps. I mean, what veal cake jelly actually is made of, for instance, is hardly common knowledge. Their working through the original recipes, the editors admit, has indeed involved a lot of speculation and adjustment, also illustrated by the many additional and speculative comments appearing alongside the recipes. However, as they acknowledge in their joint introduction – in an essentially neo-Victorian vein – “[Emma Darwin’s] manuscript is also interesting for what is *not* there” (Bateson and Janeway 2008: 34, added emphasis). Many questions are asked, though not necessarily answered, for example in the recipe for Cheese Soufflé, “which breaks off, crucially, before dealing with the egg whites” (Bateson and Janeway 2008: 32). The

editors speculate as to why the final instructions are missing. Is it the result of Emma's making a fair copy (of an Eliza Acton recipe perhaps)? Did she know enough about soufflés not to need them? Only one thing is certain, without the egg whites, "this soufflé would not have risen!" (Bateson and Janeway 2008: 32).

The editors' comments on speculation, interpretation, adjustment and gaps take me back to my discussion of *Mrs. Charles Darwin's Recipe Book* in terms of neo-Victorianism. Besides the reproduction of the original recipes, the editors have also *re-produced* them. In other words, apart from being a collection of Emma Darwin's notes on cookery, the cookbook is also a collection of Dusha Bateson and Weslie Janeway's *adapted* versions of the dishes once served in the Darwins' home. However, the editors' comments and reflections upon the adaptation process become a particular strength of *Mrs. Charles Darwin's Recipe Book*. Despite its occasional commercial undertones, the context provided for the recipes largely consists in a good deal of speculation, personal reflections and open questions, repeatedly inviting us to *partake* in the mediation processes and draw our own parallels and conclusions. Literally speaking, we are given the ingredients but must cook the dinner and serve it ourselves. What is perhaps most "remarkable" about this means of "access" into the Victorian everyday sphere, as Browne describes it in the preface, is the way we are involved ourselves, actively and physically, in the processes of adaptation, medi(t)ation and tracing as we experiment with Darwinian home cooking.

Sometimes based on (pure) imagination, at other times on investigation, Bateson and Janeway do fill in some of the gaps of the original recipe book. In the case of Emma Darwin's Burnt Cream recipe which ends with "put brown sugar on the top and salamander it" (Bateson and Janeway 2008: xi), their explanatory note on the Victorian implement known as The Salamander provides the missing link that enables us to perform the present-day version of 'salamandering' (or caramelising the top-layer of sugar on the cream). However, the cookbook aims not so much to compensate for elisions as to encourage its readers to speculate and experiment for themselves; or, as Dana Shiller might put it, to explore the ground between cooking as though there are no persisting truths and cooking as though there is indeed a recoverable past.⁸ So although *Mrs. Charles Darwin's Recipe Book* is, obviously, the result of the editors' own expedition into the kitchen of the Darwins, it may function, at the same

time, as a tool for others to become active participants in this sensorial, historical journey. “We trust the reader will be able to do the same”, as Bateson and Janeway put it, stressing the importance of “eating the results” to complete the sensory experience (Bateson and Janeway 2008: 40). And, as they advert, if we do “not stray too far into what would be considered best practice today”, imposing a presentist attitude on the exercise, and instead approach the recipes “without fixed ideas of what the results ought to be, the outcome is often surprisingly good” (Bateson and Janeway 2008: 41, 124). We are thus invited perhaps not to dine *with* the Darwins but to reach back and get a sense of what cooking and dining *at* the Darwins’ was like. In this respect, *Mrs. Charles Darwin’s Recipe Book* arguably proves a successful attempt, out of the many recent neo-Victorian projects, to render the Victorian past more material, offering us the ingredients for a sensory encounter with nineteenth-century kitchen- and eating habits.

4. Beyond the Fetishised Object: The (Neo-)Victorian ‘Real’

Returning to cultural phenomenology, I would like to briefly consider William A. Cohen’s recent work on the embodied experience in Victorian literature. In *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses*, Cohen persuasively describes how the sensory encounter translates into bodily experience, and argues that bodily experience is of primordial significance for our understanding of the world (or worlds). Coinciding with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Cohen explains that “the subject mingles with the world through processes of sensory apprehension, entering into and being entered by it reciprocally” (Cohen 2009: 17). In this sense, the embodied experience not merely models but, rather, as Cohen maintains, “perform[s] the flow of matter and information between subject and world” (Cohen 2009: xii). In effect, whereas previous phenomenological theories have concentrated on vision and assigned tactile qualities to visual perception in order to analyse sight as a kind of touching, for Cohen ‘to embody’ involves a more literal, even material, sense of mingling: our knowledge of external objects, as he notes, relies largely on our *incorporation* of them “through the organs of perception” (Cohen 2009: 16-17). From such phenomenological perspective, our physical/sensorial engagement with Emma Darwin’s recipes can be considered an act of ‘mingling with the world’ or, even, with multiple worlds – both the Victorians’ and ours and, by extension, the different exotic ‘worlds’ of India, China and other sites of (imperial)

interchange reflected in the Victorian recipes. The activity of (sensorial) tracing, in this case, works as more than a link to the past. As it involves preparing, cooking, eating and, even, digesting the Darwinian dishes it comes to constitute ‘the embodied experience’ in the most phenomenological sense: an experience which involves the “fluid exchange between surface and depth, inside and outside [through ...] the organs of ingestion, excretion, and sensation” (Cohen 2009: xii).

In relation to the notion of understanding the world and, specifically, its composition in the past, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has recently pointed out that, although texts and concepts arguably remain the most appropriate medium for an interpretative approach to the past, cultural phenomenology calls attention to “the limitations of historiography as a textual medium in the business of making the past present” (Gumbrecht 2004: 123-124). In *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Gumbrecht advocates “against the uncontested centrality of interpretation” which tends to overshadow presence-based relations to the past, and argues instead for an approach “that could oscillate between presence effects and meaning effects” (Gumbrecht 2004: xv). Emma Darwin’s re-produced recipe book arguably achieves such an effect of oscillation between the “presence effects” of touching, smelling and tasting and the “meaning effects” of the editors’ and readers’ own interpretations of the recipes. Although Gumbrecht maintains that the means for presentifying the past rely fundamentally on “presence effects” which, in turn, “exclusively appeal to the senses” (Gumbrecht 2004: xv), the neo-Victorian “presence effects” of *Mrs. Charles Darwin’s Recipe Book* seem rather to derive from the oscillation itself produced through the activity of cooking.

Cohen’s and Gumbrecht’s phenomenological conceptualisations of, respectively, the embodied experience and presentification of the past provide a fruitful framework for (re)considering “the possibility of an authentic neo-Victorianism beyond the fetishized object or fantasized subject” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 224). Throughout this essay I have aimed to prove that the (re-)elaboration of Emma Darwin’s meals constitutes an active, sensory and material encounter with Victorian home cooking; that by emphasising the dimension of active, sensorial engagement with the Victorian (object), we may read *Mrs. Charles Darwin’s Recipe Book* in terms of presentifying the past. In other words, a phenomenological approach to the cookbook helps illustrate why it avoids falling into the

category of those adaptations or products that merely result from a contemporary “theme-park-cum-freak-show mentality [...] accompanied by a material notion of nostalgia as things, possessions and objects either from the past or fabricated to imitate items from the past” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 244). That is, if the book in itself does not wholly avoid this category, then its project of presentifying nineteenth-century cookery through the senses most certainly does – a project in which it enables us to actively participate. Therefore, what *Mrs. Charles Darwin’s Recipe Book* offers is not a piece of the past to be owned (in the form of Emma Darwin’s recipes), so much as the chance to recapture “the authenticities of the historical experience” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 222).

We may not be able to “accurately reproduce the past”, Dana Shiller observed (Shiller 1997: 551) in her original discussion of ‘The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel’. Yet she added that there was also much “to be gained by trying, and a great deal to be learned and enjoyed from the traces we can decipher” (Shiller 1997: 551). This is also what I deduced from my own *practical* experience with Emma Darwin’s recipes. When I threw myself and my five-year-old daughter into the (re-)making of one of the Darwin puddings, it was very much with a focus on the process rather than on the result and, of course, with an awareness of the fact that no matter what, we would never be able to make/recreate the ‘original’ Emma Darwin Burnt Cream. Involving a lot of chitchatting about ‘old times’ (when mummy was a girl) and ‘very old times’ (when Emma Darwin lived), as well as some frustration over the difficulty in boiling flour, the process did turn out both very enjoyable and memorable – and so did our dessert. As to authenticity, the activity as well as the pudding seemed (and tasted) real enough to us. Anyway, if there ever was an original Emma Darwin Burnt Cream, which one was it? The first one she made? The tenth? Or the best?

Challenging the present-day focus on the unique and originary artwork – a result of our essentially individualised culture – in her introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairytales*, Angela Carter urged readers to approach the stories from a domestic-arts perspective to appreciate them more fully. “Is there a definitive recipe for potato soup?”, Carter rhetorically asked and suggested that we rather “[t]hink in terms of the domestic arts [...] This is how I make potato soup” (Carter 1990: x, original emphasis).⁹ In a similar sense, I hold that (neo-Victorian) home cooking is a form of adapting the nineteenth-century past more widely, precisely because it

involves a holistic activity that displaces the notion of any definitive material trace into the tracing process itself.

To conclude, times meet in activity, as Schatzki theorises, and cooking is an example of this. Indeed, times meet when several generations get together to prepare Christmas dinner; when a mother teaches her daughter the way she was taught by her own mother to make apple marmalade. Times also meet when we cook, bake and preserve according to (secret) recipes which have been passed down through the family, as well as when we make a Burnt Cream following Emma Darwin's instructions. Shiller argued that the re-imagining of the Victorians via fiction can work as a way of knowing, as a way learning. My aim with this essay has been to explore a somewhat different neo-Victorian path, considering the activity of cooking as a process that, often, involves a simultaneous reaching back and forth, and I hope to have shown that food preparation (and ingestion) can work, similarly, as a way of both knowing and learning – as a way into bygone eras through the kitchen door. As to what *precisely* one can gain or learn from (neo-)Victorian home cooking is a question left open with reference to Gumbrecht's preference for a fluid and unconstrained engagement with the past:

A good reason [...] for letting the conjuring up of the past just happen, is that any possible answer to the question of practical benefits will limit the range of modalities through which we can indulge in the past – and simply enjoy our contact with it. (Gumbrecht 2004:125)

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Notes

1. This essay builds on the paper that was written specifically for and presented at the ‘New Critical Perspectives on the Trace Conference’, held at the University of Malaga, Spain, 20-22 October 2011.
2. See the Dutch Beagle Project website, <http://www.beagle.vpro.nl/#/talen/item/12/>.
3. See ‘Voyage of the Beagle by Private Jet’, <http://darwin-online.org.uk/2009.html>.
4. See ‘Who is Ida?’, <http://www.revealingthelink.com/who-is-ida/>.
5. See ‘Darwin 2009 Commemorations’, <http://darwin-online.org.uk/2009.html>.
6. See also Theodore Schatzki’s 2003 essay ‘Nature and Technology in History’.
7. I adopt the term “presence-based” from Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht who has recently called attention to the tendency in contemporary culture and academia to “abandon and even forget the possibility of a presence-based relationship to the world” due to a “systematic bracketing of presence” as well as “the uncontested centrality of interpretation” (Gumbrecht 2004: xiv-xv). Gumbrecht distinguishes meaning-based from presence-based relationships, as well as techniques of “presentifying the past” from “techniques of learning from the past”, and argues for an approach that could oscillate between both (Gumbrecht 2004: xv, 123).
8. In her influential 1997 essay, Shiller persuasively argued “that neo-Victorian fiction explores the ground between writing as though there are no persisting truths, a way of thinking that gives the author tremendous latitude in reconstructing the past, and writing as though there is indeed a recoverable past, however attenuated” (Shiller 1997: 541). I have here adapted Shiller’s splendid formulation to my argument that neo-Victorian home cooking, equally, is a way of exploring and reconstructing the past.
9. Thanks to Marie-Luise Kohlke for drawing my attention to Angela Carter’s interesting potato soup analogy.

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