ARTICULATING VICTORIAN BODY PARTS: THE CONFERENCE

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> "Mr Wegg, if you was brought here loose in a bag to be articulated, I'd name your smallest bones blindfold equally with your largest, as fast as I could pick 'em out, and I'd sort 'em all, and sort your wertebrae, in a manner that would equally surprise and charm you."[1]

Dickens's final completed novel is a treasure trove of curious bodily bits, from Bella Wilfer's 'favourite ankle' to Bradley Headstone's bursting nose to Sloppy's 'giant's' mouth to Jenny Wren's 'queer legs'.[2] The most extensive musing on the curiously assembled nature of the body, however, comes from Mr. Venus, the novel's eccentric taxidermist and 'articulator of human bones'. Mr. Venus's shop contains hundreds of ghoulish specimens, described matter-of-factly as 'human warious', and Venus takes great pride in his aptitude for sorting and categorizing these fragments, performing the demands of his job with a dexterity and rapidity that he labels 'charming'. Whilst Silas Wegg is unnerved by the casual manner in which Venus points out the 'dried cuticle' or 'articulated English baby' that litter the shelves around him, Venus's unemotional response to his 'human warious' is symptomatic of a wider cultural turn during this period of the nineteenth century towards understanding the particularities of the human body. Many critics have pointed out the echoes of Darwin's *Origin of Species* within Dickens's novel, and, as Howard Fulweiler has recently suggested, Venus himself may well be a portrait of Richard Owen, a prominent anatomist of the period who was instrumental in establishing the Natural History Museum.[3]

It was thus fitting that, at one of the first events for PhD students at Birkbeck that we attended, we were introduced to one another rather ghoulishly as 'the "bits" girls', a title Mr. Venus would no doubt have been proud of. Beatrice works on the wrist, the neck, and the waist in mid-Victorian culture, whilst Emma works on heads, hands, and feet within the work of Charles Dickens. Needless to say, it came as a surprise to both of us that two such similar projects should have coincided in the same department, but, both being familiar with Mr. Venus and his shop of curiosities, it was no surprise at all to find that this theme was a recurrent one throughout Victorian studies. This fortuitous meeting led to a lot of discussion as to what was happening in the critical field to provoke our projects, and it seemed imperative that we hold a conference to find out who else was working on the fractured,

[1] Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* [1865] (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 89.
[2] *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 50; p. 625; p. 787; p. 222.
[3] Howard Fulweiler, '"A Dismal Swamp": Darwin, Design and Evolution in *Our Mutual Friend*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 49 (1994), pp. 50–74 (p. 63).

dismembered, and discontinuous body in the Victorian era, and to uncover the variety of approaches to such an unruly and fragmented subject.

Our own interest in the topic is certainly in one way part of the general critical turn in recent years towards materiality, and in researching our projects the work on material culture of scholars such as Bill Brown, Marcia Pointon, Catherine Waters, and Isobel Armstrong has proved invaluable.[4] We wanted to build upon a sense within nineteenth-century studies that the tools of this criticism could be used to analyse the physical, commodified body in the same way that they have helped to analyse the materiality of the objects which passed between these bodies. Other conferences of the academic year supported this notion, particularly Birkbeck's 'Victorian Tactile Imagination' event, and the Victorian Popular Fiction Association conference which took 'Bodies' as its theme, both of which were held in July 2013. In the light of these major conferences, we wanted our conference to particularly address PhD and early career research, and we were incredibly lucky to secure keynote speakers whose work perfectly encapsulates the various exciting directions in which this field could take nineteenth-century studies.

'Victorian Body Parts' is one of those happy topics which almost everyone to whom you mention it will respond with a coo of "that's interesting!" And, true to form, the conference covered an immense amount of ground, while ostensibly about little fragments of the human organism in the long nineteenth century. We were very pleased to secure Bart's Pathology Museum as our venue: it made the perfect location for such an event, since it is the "embodiment" of the ways in which, even separated from their physical, personal, and historical context, pieces of the body still hold immense power. A Victorian organ at the core of a modern hospital, its rows of specimens housed in glass bottles, it is still used as a teaching resource for the medical students. For this reason the museum is not open to the public, and there are no photographs of the event: the Human Tissue Authority still regulates the reproduction of all such material as part of its ethical contract with the donors.

Our submissions fell naturally into thematic groups, even those which we regrettably had to leave off the programme, and only proved the ways in which this conference theme, deliberately all-encompassing, could prove relevant to multiple fields of research. We had submissions from researchers on the particularised body in medicine, film, art history, archaeology, disability studies, cultural studies, history, and literature, almost all of which could be described as in some way interdisciplinary.

[4] See, for example, Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2001), pp. 1–22; Marcia Pointon, 'Materialising Memory', in C. Breward & M. Kwint, eds., *Material Memories* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), pp. 39–59; Catherine Waters, *Commodity Culture in Dickens's 'Household Words': The Social Life of Goods* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

The conference began with Dr. Katharina Boehm (Regensburg) on the body of the child, particularly in the writing of Charles Dickens, as a tool within Victorian medico-psychical discourses, and Dr. Kate Hill (Lincoln) on the skull's potency within the developing fields of archaeology and anthropology in nineteenth-century museum culture, both of which got the day off to a fantastically thought-provoking start. Boehm uncovered the ways in which children's bodies became "boundary objects" upon which competing medical, social, political, philanthropical, and literary discourses on childhood centred, and suggested that in unravelling these multiple meanings, we might come to understand the ways in which literary and scientific cultures influenced and built upon one another during this period. Hill described the circulation of skulls from remote historical or geographical sources, and the cultural and political ends to which these artefacts were put within broader discussions of science and race. As she demonstrated, in the fairly novel disciplines of archaeology and anthropology, many of the interpretations of these skulls came from a cultural standpoint rather than a biological one. Her paper threw important light on the negative potential of the period's urge to classify, and gave us all as researchers significant pause for thought on the need to be sensitive to the ethical repercussions of our own work on nineteenth-century specimens.

Dr. Ellery Foutch (Courtauld) then opened the 'Severed Parts' session with a paper on the cultural afterlife of bodybuilder George Sandow in casts of his legendary body. Foutch described the ways in which Sandow capitalised upon emerging photographic technologies to circulate images of his muscular arm, and encouraged devoted followers to both isolate and compare their own limbs to his. This fascinating paper was followed in kind by Dr. Graeme Pedlingham (Sussex), who discussed how hysteria discourses apply themselves to the titular disembodied limb in 'Lady Wishaw's Hand', a neglected gem of the *fin-de-siècle* gothic by Richard Marsh. Catherine Oakley (York) concluded the panel with her work on comic dismemberment in early film and the concomitant malleability of cinema as a medium. Her clips of early filmmaker Georges Méliès' work provoked much laughter, and were a beautiful way to conclude the panel.

Panel two centred on 'Prosthetic Parts', and was begun by Clare Stainthorp (Birmingham), who analysed the work of a pioneer of a prosthesis in relation to the nuances of gender, class, and contemporary disability studies. Ryan Sweet (Exeter) exposed the surprisingly frequent appearances of the prosthesis-as-weapon in the fiction of authors such as Conan Doyle and Thomas Hood, with its attendant complexities for contemporary scholars. Emma Curry (Birkbeck) leapt from fragment to fringe in her analysis of the appearance of hair in Dickens' creative work and correspondence, and the ways in which this peculiarly separable, insensate part troubles boundaries of substance, space, and time.

Lisa Coar (Leicester) opened the final panel on 'Gendered Parts' with her

exploration of the 'discorporation' of tight-laced men in nineteenth-century culture through both surgical and sartorial means, synthesising historic and medical criticism of the issue in examining Victorian culture's 'fierce anorexic logic'. Dr Ally Crockford (Edinburgh) scrutinised interpretations of diphallicism – look it up – in medical literature on congenital birth defects, and provided a neat counterpoint to the day's analysis of the artificial shapings of the body. Finally, Beatrice Bazell (Birkbeck) analysed the cultural interplay of focus and corsetry in shaping representations of the mid-Victorian female body through the photographs of Lady Clementina Hawarden.

Tiffany Watt-Smith (QMUL) concluded the day with her work on the mutual fascination of the theatre and science in analysing Victorian ideas about imitation and mimicry. Watt-Smith uncovered the fascinating turn in psychological research at the end of the century towards investigating what she termed "compulsive copying": our bodily urges to mirror others' smiles, yawns, and gestures, and highlighted the ways in which psychologists were drawn to the theatre as a means of making sense of these bodily enactors of emotion. Her work was a wonderfully stimulating end to the day's proceedings and has since been featured on Australian radio programme *The Body Sphere*.

The conference drew to a close with a swift decamp to the nearest restaurant for the necessary fortification of our participants' component "parts", and a continuation of the brilliant discussions that the papers had served to foster. Overall, the day provided us with a fascinating exploration of the depth and diversity of current scholarship on this topic, and, we hope, served to forge new relationships and collaborations between scholars. We are so grateful to BAVS for their generous sponsorship of this event, to Bart's Pathology Museum for hosting us in such a fantastic setting, to all of our speakers who provided us with such stimulating material, and to all of our attendees who contributed their expertise to promote some fascinating and fruitful discussions. We look forward to reading the work of the next generation of Mr. Venuses!

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