[E]motion in the Nineteenth Century: A Culture of Fidgets

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> After a little while [Fanny Dorrit] turned on her sofa and exclaimed, 'Dear me, dear me, there never was such a long day as this!' After another little while, she got up slowly, walked about, and came back again.
>
> 'My dear,' said Mr Sparkler, flashing with an original conception, 'I think you must have got the fidgets.'
>
> 'Oh, Fidgets!' repeated Mrs Sparkler. 'Don't.'[1]

At the limit of daily exhaustion, physical and mental, we live suspended among squirm, fret, itch, and twitch. This is when our accidents seem on purpose, our intentions perverse. You helplessly give way to a fit of twitching, but you may also set to twitching for all you're irritatingly worth. We call it a 'wink' when it comes by design or cunning, but a 'blink' can be wilful or automatic and involuntary. 'Fidget' became the name for these small sharp stirrings of the body, and as Dickens's Fanny Dorrit reminds us, as annoying as the sensation could be the application of the word ('Fidgets! [...] Don't').

It is not that there were more fidgets or fidgeting in the nineteenth century than before or after — who could know? — but the steeply rising incidence of the word is compelling evidence of the disruptive force of the tic and the shiver.[2] Much of what was surely at stake was a new regime of attentiveness to bodily dispositions and the uneasy borderland between voluntary and involuntary action. The rising interest emanated from two distinct, though neighbouring, social practices: the regulation of domestic and private life (through manuals, journalism, and popular fiction),

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[1] Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. by Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 580.

[2] See the following graph, which charts the use of the word 'fidget' throughout the nineteenth century:
<https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=fidget&year_start=1700&year_end=1900&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cfidget%3B%2Cc0> [accessed 29 September 2014].

and the articulation of an anatomical psychology that looked to chart the circuits of apparently random movements of the human frame. Under this double gaze, the fidgeting body was bound to catch notice. Alongside Victorian respectability, and perhaps necessary to its rapid development, grew a culture of fidgets. Mary Douglas famously studied the notion of dirt as 'matter out of place'.[3] Fidgets, even when near, always are 'out of place'; it is their habitat.

As part of the micro-practice of the culture, the Victorian life of the fidget was at once widely visible and constantly remarked upon, and also strangely secret, in that its small scale and everyday character let it escape from systematic understanding. It was always there, but never understood. Indeed, failure of understanding ('Why do you crack your knuckles so?') becomes internal to the practice of fidgeting. It constantly elicits a demand for explanation that never expects to be satisfied. This article means to demonstrate the vitality of the practice and the energy of the discourse it generated. Its plan is to track the course of a behaviour that is also the history of a word: fidgeting having become conspicuous in large part because it occupied the point of intersection of many disciplines and vocabularies. It drew attention from those developing a new physiology, but also those articulating a new language of respectability. It raised questions of disease and cure, and, no less, questions of normality and social perversity. In what follows, I trace the evolving theories of the body and place the scientific proposals alongside journalistic declarations.[4] I then ask how the philosophical puzzle of fidgeting (the puzzle of intention or automatism) shifts towards the challenges of sexual desire and unrepentant pleasure. Dickens gives this article an epigraph, and also gives its point of focus. He not only promulgated the spectacle of cosy, cheerful Christmas, but also the spectacle of fussing beneath the tree, fussing and prodding and insinuating and trembling and teasing and taunting. But Dickens was in many respects the precipitate of the historical reflex, which he enlarged and illuminated, and I end with close focus

[3] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 41.

[4] A more general scientific overview can be found in Roger Smith, *Inhibitions: History and Meaning in the Sciences of Mind and Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). More recently, Tiffany Watt-Smith has written an excellent monograph studying the relation between stage drama and the act of flinching. See *On Flinching: Theatricality and Scientific Looking from Darwin to Shellshock* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

on his work, which raised the stakes of fidgeting and enlarged its imaginative reach, its social challenge, and its revelatory ethics.

Fidgets restless and odd

Like the things it has come to name, the word 'fidget' has always lived on the margins of seriousness. Much of its serviceableness to the Victorians lay in the profuse connotations that it acquired by the time it reached their ears. It had been, after all, a pie — a 'fidget pie', enjoyed in Shropshire over many centuries, that came 'fitched', or with five sides, and stuffed with pork, potatoes, onion, and apple. Add a little cider, sprinkle with cheddar and, presto, you have the dish that holds its name today. Then alongside the food came the canonical comic figure, William Wycherley's Lady Fidget in *The Country Wife* (1675), indecorous and excessive, offending against decorum, garrulous, desirous, unrepentant. A generation later, 'Mr Samuel Slack' writes to the *Spectator* (3 March 1712) imagining the gift of some wondrous transformations, including an end to 'the inclination Mrs Fidget has to motion'. Such is the figure as it assumed shape through the eighteenth century: fidget as person or proper name, designating movement above all, movement across rooms and behind doors, unsettled and unsettling, with loose morals and bad manners.

Fidget the person shares with fidget the pie an association with miscellany and mixture. One thing never being enough, pie and person keep accommodating more, even an ill-assorted more. This generative strain of meaning could even do service as a term of literary art. By the early nineteenth century it was flexible enough to stand as a book title, as in C. J. Besey's *The Muse in the Fidgets; or, What Next?*, which refuses any norms of genre, offering among other things, an acrostic, an epigraph, an inventory, an introduction to 'Tom', followed by an epitaph to the same, and succeeded by 'an Apology' in which 'the aforegoing epitaph [is] dissected' and ending with a history or biography recounting 'the Birth, Parentage, and Education of Tom'.[5] Indeed might the title enquire, 'What next?'. Two years later we meet the similarly entitled *A Fardel of Fancies; or, The Muse in a Fidget*. Here the resources of miscellany are richly indulged.

[5] C. J. Besey, *The Muse in the Fidgets; or, What Next?* (London: the author, 1822), pp. 59, 73.

The book unashamedly promises 'amatory and pastoral poetry, puns, epigrams, etc., etc.'; the list brazenly continues.[6]

For a long time, then, fidget remained a fidgety term, carrying suggestions of variety, restlessness, impropriety, and surprise, and settling on all manner of objects and behaviours. A clarifying text is Noah Webster's entry on 'The Fidgets' in *The Prompter* (1799), which begins by noting our dull use of the term to name a man 'fairly *hyp'd*' or a 'hystericky woman'. But these are merely 'domestic fidgets', holds Webster, minor members of a large and various tribe. Take the man 'who would not marry, for fear of the expense of a family, but will keep twenty ducks to feed and a dozen cats and dogs to play': such a man is called an old bachelor; in fact 'he has the *fidgets*', as does the 'lonely maiden of fifty' who keeps a bestiary. More striking still are the 'political fidgets', who begin with a 'universal itching' fast becoming a propensity 'to bite and snarl'. But the 'worst kind' are the 'purse fidgets', the lawyers, physicians, parsons, merchants, and beggars who primp and pose for the clink of some coin. Webster begins the whimsical essay with a working definition that might serve to consolidate a century's use of the term: 'When a man or woman is very restless, and has many oddities, he or she is said to fidget.'[7] The telling step is to combine a general state of mind (restlessness) with the habit of social awkwardness. The parameters of meaning are character and conduct, and while these connotations will persist into the nineteenth century, they soon undergo a specification that brings significant change and prepares for Dickens.

Fidgetal circuitry

The specification is the body, the body as an articulation of parts and as a physical circuit for the emotions. An anatomico-physiological discourse develops through the middle decades of the nineteenth century, and receives strong consolidation in Charles Darwin's *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). That 'curious state of the body called the *fidgets*' is Darwin's formulation, and to elaborate, he invokes Henry Holland's proposition: that there is 'an accumulation of some cause of irritation

[6] George Grantham, *A Fardel of Fancies; or, The Muse in a Fidget* (London: the author, 1824), title page.

[7] [Noah Webster], *The Prompter; or, A Commentary on Common Sayings and Subjects* ([n. p.]: [n. pub.], 1799), pp. 10–12.

which requires muscular action for its relief'.[8] Irritation relief is the emerging paradigm. Thus, 'when the cerebro-spinal system is highly excited and nerve-force is liberated in excess, it may be expended in intense sensations, active thought, violent movements, or increased activity of the glands' (p. 75). The account of the fidget often appears in quantitative terms. At bottom, the twitch and fret are merely products of what Alexander Bain characterized as a 'fixed quota of oxygen, carbon, and other materials'.[9] Nature, moreover, is illiberal with its quantities: our lives, our fidgets, can only rearrange themselves within unyielding limits; Darwin's is an image of the twitching body as part of a closed nervous system. Fidgeting borrows from the total stock of energies, and, in Bain's terms,

> persistent energy of a high order [...] costs a great deal to the human system. A large share of the total forces of the constitution go to support it; and the diversion of power often leaves great defects in other parts of the character, as for example, a low order of the sensibilities, and narrow range of sympathies. (*Practical Essays*, p. 27)

We are as far from the boundary-crossing, bed-jumping capers of Mrs Fidget as from Webster's political — and purse — fidgets. The fidget is just the last term in a physicalist sequence requiring no reference to whatever may be happening beyond the body circuit.

Here a subtle distinction in the science opens towards a broad and important contrast. At the advent of psychophysiology, Bain, even as he followed systematic lines similar to Darwin's, recognized a breach in the closure of cause and effect. For Bain, the guiding analogy comes from electricity: before all else, the body is a circuitry. But here he makes a telling qualification:

> The analogy that exists between nerve power and electricity does not amount to identity [...]. An influence arising from a centre may pass out into a muscle and be discharged there, without any return influence that can at present be traced [...]. There is no necessity for a *completed* circuit.[10]

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[8] Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, ed. by Francis Darwin, 2nd edn (London: Murray, 1890), p. 75, n. 13.

[9] Alexander Bain, *Practical Essays* (London: Longmans, Green, 1884), p. 4.

[10] Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect* (London: Parker, 1855), p. 58, emphasis added.

This is Bain's breach. The nervous body can generate a tremble or an itch, but these manifestations are not then assimilated back into the exchange of impulses. They materialize on the surface of the body as termini, now susceptible to a different circuit, the network of belief, emotion, and will. The nerves specify a pathway for the discharge of tension, but once a specification is discovered to satisfy the requirement, *then* the brain can begin to form intention (*Senses and the Intellect*, pp. 291–97). Involuntary reflexes come to accommodate voluntary meanings: the body clenches, the person *fidgets*.

These adjacent physiologies, Darwin's and Bain's, lead to different historical careers for the fidget. The closed neural system of the individual organism, pictured in *The Expression of the Emotions*, tends towards a statistical zoology that places fidgety behaviour within the normal life course of irritation and release. It is not only inevitable; it is in principle predictable. Indeed in a whimsy of 1885, published in *Nature*, Francis Galton suggests the future of twitchy statistics. In a hall with a large audience, sitting at a distance that allowed for wide viewing, Galton was 'able to estimate the frequency of fidget with much precision'. With his eye at an apex and with columns as boundaries, he counted 'the number of distinct movements' ('about 45 per minute'), duly noting the age of the audience (largely elderly) and the numerical difference between bored and attentive states:

> Circumstances now and then occurred that roused the audience to temporary attention, and the effect was twofold. First, the frequency of fidget diminished rather more than half; second, the amplitude and period of each movement were notably reduced. The swayings of head, trunk, and arms had before been wide and sluggish, and when rolling from side to side the individuals seemed to 'yaw'; that is to say, they lingered in extreme positions. Whenever they became intent this peculiarity disappeared, and they performed their fidgets smartly.[11]

The playful tone should not obscure the characteristic disposition in Galton: to find regularities within finite populations and to offer statistics as a resource for stabilizing anomalies. Within this vector of thought, fidget loses its charge, appearing as just the most visible sign of the nerves at their regular business.

[11] Francis Galton, 'The Measure of Fidget', *Nature*, 25 June 1885, p. 174.

In the other direction, though, as developed in Bain's reflections on the incomplete circuit of impulse and the parallelism of mind and body, the physiology of the fidget leads towards psychoanalysis and its new theory of the symptom as ideogenic. A bodily eruption is the sign of a thought, a memory, a desire, and a repression. The eruptive body is a map of meaning, or as Freud puts it in the case study known as *Dora*:

> When I set myself the task of bringing to light what human beings keep hidden within them, not by the compelling power of hypnosis, but by observing what they say and what they show, I thought the task was a harder one than it really is. He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore. And thus the task of making conscious the most hidden recesses of the mind is one which it is quite possible to accomplish.[12]

Precisely because the fidget occupies the nexus of intention and reflex, it stands as an invitation to significance; it is the site where inner meaning floods and overflows the self-possession of the body.

The personhood of fidget

I have been speaking of the 'specification' of fidget in the nineteenth century, when a figure of merriment and satire, a loose compendium of restlessness, gains definition through bodily emphasis and physiological enquiry. Fidget becomes something one can integrate into a circuit of nerves, something one can count. But there is a second specification, not physiological and individual, but social and moral. The command 'Stop fidgeting!' is among the most common form of reprimands. As a stock injunction, it places fretful behaviour within the domain of conduct and conduct books, but also, increasingly, in the realm of everyday characterology, which repeatedly returns to the scene of annoyance. It is notable, after all, how an action, even a reiterated action — fidgeting — becomes an indelible mark of character: 'A fidget'. The popular American author 'Shirley Dare' (Susan Dunning Power) writing in the 1890s, describes an entire class of women who are 'born fidgets, who must always

[12] Sigmund Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, ed. by Philip Rieff (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 69.

rock or blink, or open and shut their fingers apprehensively'.[13] She particularly abhors fidgets (either sex) who 'work with their tongues at a tooth, or play their jaws in that mysterious fashion which brings a crack at each movement' (p. 20). This is definition by constitution.

As Herbert Spencer's mother became increasingly difficult for his father to tend, son offered father the following advice: 'You must do what you can to prevent her from fidgeting herself, and make her feel that it is better to let things go a little wrong, rather than make herself worse by trying to keep them right.'[14] The son might have taken heed of his own counsel. Beatrice Webb, for example, who knew Spencer as well as anyone could or did, describes in detail just how difficult it was to be with him, especially at the last, largely because of the degree and intensity of his fidgets.[15] Within the ripening canons of propriety, fidgeting thus becomes at once a signature of personality and a prime barrier to sociality. Individual and interpersonal in equal measure, it marks the site where an inner necessity (to chafe and to churn) meets the basic terms of being with another. *The Weekly Tribune* found fit to publish this squib without introduction; the sentence stands alone, ominously, and portentously:

> A great deal of unhappiness is caused by a fussy and fidgety disposition, which makes mountains out of molehills, and keeps everyone in hot water about trifles.[16]

Size matters. Molehill to mountain marks an impressive passage, and it is a disproportion that attracts comment. If a man objects to the tepid tea his wife sets before him, grasps a hammer and bludgeons her, his behaviour would not be called fidgeting; but if the same man persisted in furiously tapping the table with his index finger, he will be said to have begun to fidget. The discrepancy between the precipitating cause and the emotion it rouses, along with the nature of the response itself (in this instance, tapping) belittles the person. One who fidgets is always small, whatever his or her size. It is no accident that even such morally con-

[13] Shirley Dare, *The Art of Beauty; or, Studies in Graces, Health, and Good Looks* (Baltimore: Woodward, 1896), pp. 18–19.
[14] David Duncan, *The Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer*, 2 vols (New York: Appleton, 1908), I, 176.
[15] *The Diary of Beatrice Webb*, ed. by Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie (London: Virago, 1982), pp. ii, 89–90, 262.
[16] *The Weekly Tribune*, 26 March 1904, p. 12.

trasting figures as Quilp and Miss Moucher, both little people, are two of Dickens's most conspicuous fidgets.

The persistent image, at once a source of fascination and repugnance, was of the small fidget creating an entire climate of irritation. In 1847, *The People's Periodical and Family Library* published 'The Dream of Life', (its author had previously written 'The Ordeal by Touch'), which includes this characteristic and revealing appraisal:

> Grace Menzies, who was naturally of a fidgety temperament, was popping and buzzing about, like a bushel of chestnuts on a fire, as the absence of the young people was prolonged beyond the usual time, and it was a great consolation to her, when her brother arrived, to communicate her anxiety to him, and, make him a sharer in them.[17]

The contagion of fidgety behaviour prompts ever sharper demands for its cessation, as if one infection might lead to a fidgeting epidemic. David Parisi explores the 'poorly defined borders of touch', of which we might include the transference of fidgets from one body to the next.[18] One need not touch a fidgeting body to be touched by it. The disease can transmit visually: a reflex is stimulated by the motor performance much in the way that one yawn precipitates another, and yet another. In Wilkie Collins's novel *Poor Miss Finch* (1872), the Reverend Finch's performance of Hamlet is toxic allergen to Madame Pratolungo, who immediately exhibits symptoms of 'the Hamlet-Fidgets', and passes them on to Lucilla, who 'catches the infection, and fidgets too'.[19]

Near to contagion lies aggression, the twitching body as instrument of assault. Quilp calculates his fidgets and employs them with cold ferocity, aiming to stupefy and petrify other characters. A character whose visage is as mobile as a pair of feet, whose body is in perpetual motion, and whose 'pursuits were diversified' as 'his occupations numerous', is described at one point as 'advancing with a sort of skip, which, what with

[17] 'The Dream of Life: A Romance', *The People's Periodical and Family Library,* 5 June 1847, pp. 545–47 (p. 545).

[18] David Parisi, *The Skin Ego*, trans. by Chris Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 12. See also his chapter, 'Tactile Modernity: On the Rationalization of Touch in the Nineteenth Century', in *Media, Technology, and Literature in the Nineteenth-Century: Image, Sound, Touch*, ed. by Colette Colligan and Margaret Linley (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 189–213.

[19] Wilkie Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, ed. by Catherine Peters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 133.

the crookedness of his legs, the ugliness of his face, and the mockery of his manner, was perfectly goblin like'.[20] The 'sort of skip' implies an eye-catching, repetitive, and insistent motion at once physical and figural. Such a fidget creates the grotesque, not as shocking tableau, but as ongoing, chronic, wilful irritability. It quivers with potentiality, which makes it a nervous form with an unstable structure. It is subject to fits and fancies, whims and desires. It has no teleology of its own and usually leads to nowhere more purposeful than its own exhaustion or extinction.[21]

The peculiar agency, uncannily balanced between focused intention and helpless automatism, not only discomposes those in the near circle; it also irritates critics, often journalistic critics, into compulsive attention. To follow the history within popular discourse is to see how often high-minded disapproval expresses another recognition: namely, that the perpetual motion of the quivering is an unmistakable sign of pleasure. A well-known song relates the story of a woman who returns from a visit to Scotland with an inexhaustible urge to dance to the Scotch fiddle. She 'fidgets so' when her body is not dancing, and her fidgets become themselves a kind of dance that is repeated in every refrain of the song:

> For it's scratch, scratch, rub, rub, scratch, scratch away
> For the d ____ l's a bit of comfort is there, all the blessed day.[22]

By the last verse everyone suffers from the fidgets; the entire household is afflicted, and though the singer declares he'll never return to Scotland, it seems as if return might be the antidote, since the only alternative is endless repetition of the refrain. The self-pleasuring refrain — with its masturbatory intimations in 'scratch, scratch, rub, rub', begins to seem endemic. The tale of 'The Old Marquis and his Blooming Wife' describes Mister December (at 78 and then 88 years), also known as 'Old Fidgets', because the young women he weds (Miss May) continually run away with

[20] Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. by Angus Easson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 73, 81.

[21] These characteristics separate fidget from other repetitive forms less porous, such as habit or ritual. Fidgeting may be or become habitual, but habits (or rituals) are not in themselves fidgets.

[22] 'The Scotch Fiddle', in *A Collection of Ballads*, 9 vols (London: [n. pub.], [n.d.]), I, 379. London, British Library (BL), Sabine Baring-Gould Collection.

young men (Mr June), and without a woman, 'When he goes to bed at night, | He's nobody to fumble.'[23]

That these quickenings are effects of desire is not enough to explain the untiring interest in fidgeting. It is surely also that the desire seems unquenchable. It abides, or it returns. In either case, it is always chronically there. The question then arises, and itself abides through the century: what's to be done with the fidgets?

The play 'A Cure For the Fidgets' (1867) featured a nervous Mr Finnikin Fussleton, whose maid describes him as 'such a werry excitable gent by natur', and so horful precise and partick'lar, that the doctors has ordered him no end o' cold baths just to take the "fidgets" out of him'.[24] The cold baths prescribed by the doctors suggest sexual causes, and indeed the word has etymological associations both to masturbation and 'fricking', or fucking, as Steven Connor has noted in his meditation on the subject.[25] But, copulation being out of the question (the play depends on the impossibility of satisfaction), the 'cure' mentioned in the play's title refers instead to a technique known in today's parlance as 'flooding'. Finnikin Fussleton pitches into 'one of his fidgety tantrums' like an epileptic seizure, and at the end of the play, when he revives, he realizes the value of immersion:

> After the 'dose' I have had this day I shall never have the 'fidgets' again, and should anybody present know anybody else suffering from the same infirmity, don't send him to a doctor, send him here — we'll ensure his recovery in a single visit, if he'll only drop in and try our notion of A CURE FOR THE FIDGETS. (Williams, p. 26)

Because fidgeting can appear an act of brazen licence, it invites such the discourse of improvement, often cast in terms of 'effort' or indeed 'self-help'. Cures were offered in the form of exchange — exercise, hobbies — that requires only a willingness to *try*. As Charles Rosenberg notes of many nervous diseases of the nineteenth century, 'control and

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[23] 'The Old Marquis and his Blooming Wife', in *A Collection of Ballads*, IX, 226. BL, Sabine Baring-Gould Collection.

[24] Thomas J. Williams, *A Cure For the Fidgets (A Farce)* (London: Hailes Lacy, 1867), p. 3

[25] Steven Connor, 'A Philosophy of Fidgets', Liverpool Biennial *Touched* Talks, 17 February 2010 <http://www.stevenconnor.com/fidgets/> [accessed 28 September 2014].

responsibility were central, if not always explicitly articulated, issues.'[26] They are central with our fidgets too. But no less central, as nearly all examples show, is the lure of a comic register. The word itself is funny, as is that disproportion between the micro-gestures of the extremities and the stern peremptory judgements. Then, too, the fidget is perhaps the consummate example of Henri Bergson's still persuasive proposition: 'The attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine.'[27]

Dickens and the art of fidgeting

Dickens has hovered over this article, his works fussing and fretting at the margins, as if claiming for themselves the provenance of fidgets. Who can resist? In *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction*, Barbara Hardy composes a medley of behaviours from which Dickens produces his fidgets: 'From *Pickwick Papers* to *Edwin Drood*', she writes,

> the behaviouristic rendering is central: the characters rant, rave, groan, sigh, weep, laugh fiendishly, heave bosoms, flourish sticks and umbrellas, toss heads, strike breasts, hit stones, cast themselves down, and writhe, as if only pantomimic violence could utter intensities of feeling.[28]

William Cohen observes the broader field of operation: 'Dickens frequently exploits the body as the site at which external world and internal self partake of each other.'[29] Between these two incontestable insights we locate the fidget. In Dickens, fidgeting accompanies the conscious mind and the deliberate body like a subversive understudy, and it rarely has an object of its own beyond the immediate discharge of its fret. But, without

[26] Charles E. Rosenberg, 'Body and Mind in Nineteenth-Century Medicine: Some Clinical Origins of the Neurosis Construct', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 63 (1989), 185–97 (p. 194).
[27] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911), p. 29.
[28] Barbara Hardy, *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 45.
[29] William A. Cohen, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 29. See also Athena Vrettos, 'Defining Habits: Dickens and the Psychology of Repetition', *Victorian Studies*, 42 (1999/2000), 399–426.

intention to communicate, or capacity to interest, fidgeting magnetically draws attention to itself. Dickens exploits not only the friction of repetition, but also the creation of spectacle on the small stage of the body. Here again is Quilp, the fiendish little person (Dickens calls him a 'dwarf') who makes the Old Curiosity Shop tremble: 'he rubbed his hand slowly round, and round, and round again — with something fantastic even in his manner of performing this slight action' (p. 69). The rubbing hands emanate a 'something fantastic' that breaks the norms of realist causality opening prospects for new eruption.[30] The agitated, impulsive quality of Dickens's fiction — as it appears in the texture of language, the lurching movement of bodies, and the accelerating rhythm of incidents — suggests a classic fidget. It also suggests a rereading of Dickens's construal of character and its relation to the social world. Here, from *The Pickwick Papers* is Mr Dowler, as he simmers:

> Clocks tick so loud [...] when you are sitting up alone, and you seem [...] as if you had an under-garment of cobwebs on. First, something tickles your right knee, and then the same sensation irritates your left. You have no sooner changed your position, than it comes again in the arms; when you have fidgeted your limbs into all sorts of queer shapes, you have a sudden relapse in the nose, which you rub as if to rub it off — as there is no doubt you would, if you could.[31]

[30] G. H. Lewes's famous 1872 critique of Dickens's characters — likening them to the frog that Bain discusses in *Senses and Intellect*, such that the frog's body will perform actions even after the spinal cord has been cut — mistakes Bain's 'reflex action' for Dickens's mental action ('Dickens in Relation to Criticism', *Fortnightly Review*, February 1872, pp. 141–54). Dickens does employ mechanism, but that is only one of many tropes and techniques that describe his techniques of characterization. In my book *Eros and Psyche* I challenged this disposal of Dickens's characters into the simplicity of caricature by arguing that Dickens creates 'a complex of simples', and that the surface *is* the centre (*Eros and Psyche: The Representation of Personality in Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 98). Many others have since added refinements and augmentations to this claim. See, for example, Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). John demonstrates the remapping of inner onto outer, and the concomitant elevation of surface and subordination of depth.

[31] Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. by James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 460.

Dowler is an exemplary case, who stands alongside another striking early example from *Barnaby Rudge*. This is late at night, when the Gordon riots have receded, but the Varden household remains awake and watchful. Its unsettlement is written into the flutter of the hair-triggered servant Miss Miggs. Gabriel Varden hopes for silence, by averting his attention from Miggs. But,

> if he looked another way it was worse to feel that she was rubbing her cheek, or twitching her ear, or winking her eye, or making all kinds of extraordinary shapes with her nose, than to see her do it. If she was for a moment free from any of these complaints, it was only because of her foot being asleep, or of her arm having got the fidgets, or of her leg being doubled up with the cramp, or of some other horrible disorder which racked her whole frame. If she did enjoy a moment's ease, then with her eyes shut and her mouth wide open, she would be seen to sit very stiff and upright in her chair; then to nod a little way forward, and stop with a jerk; then to nod a little farther forward again — lower — lower — lower — by very slow degrees, until, just as it seemed impossible that she could preserve her balance for another instant, and the locksmith was about to call out in an agony, to save her from dashing down upon her forehead and fracturing her skull, then all of a sudden and without the smallest notice, she would come upright and rigid again with her eyes open, and in her countenance an expression of defiance, sleepy but yet most obstinate, which plainly said, 'I've never once closed 'em since I looked at you last, and I'll take my oath of it!'[32]

A tick, a flick, an insult, a plea, a joke, a contortion, a wink, a tickle, a prod — such fidgetings lead an increasingly active life after these beginnings. The twittering of Miss Flite in *Bleak House*, Bradley Headstone's physical eruptions of rage in *Our Mutual Friend*, Mr F's Aunt's proleptic warnings and Flora Finching's galloping speech in *Little Dorrit*, the handiwork of Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield*, the insuppressible hyphenated speech of Jingle in *Pickwick Papers* — these are radiant instances. David Trotter identifies a central rhythm of Dickensian plot, which he describes as a cycle of circulation and stoppage.[33] I can bring Trotter's insight to

[32] Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, ed. by Gordon W. Spence (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), pp. 467–68.

[33] David Trotter, 'Circulation, Interchange, Stoppage: Dickens and Social Progress', in *The Changing World of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Robert Giddings (London:

bear on this analysis by noticing that fidget performs as a circulation that is also a stoppage. For Dickens what is psychologically inward is also visible, public — written on the surface of the body. What is most private is also most visible. Fidgeting rapidly circulates bodily energies, often circulating, because they are thwarted from outside. Events arrive at an impasse, and a body begins to tremble and shudder, bringing to the fore the vexing philosophic issue mentioned earlier, of a basic action — that is, the question of whether our most immediate bodily gestures are the outcome of intention or reflex, or simply part of the blind causality of the world. Is a fidget what someone does or merely something that happens to her, or in him? Is it the result of a purpose, or the effect of a cause? Earlier, we saw that such confusion generated both cultural fascination and stern judgement, and it is Dickens's pleasure, even his disruptive mission to pursue this confusion to its limit.

He does so, first of all, by deepening the uncertainty between action and motion, an uncertainty neatly caught in conventional linguistic practice to which I have alluded. We say that a person is a fidget, and we also say that someone has the fidgets, as a primitive gesture of human will and also as a sign of the unbidden forces that impinge on us. And this unstable juncture — between what is intended and what is endured, between sovereign agency and subjugated passivity — forces the uncertainty onto a wider scale, where individual agency contends with the impassive forces of modernity, urbanism, capitalism, the weather. The impasse in the world, which often takes the form of waiting, impatient waiting, generates this characteristic tableau — the body as crossed by fitful and uncontrollable impulses, running through the nerves and implicating the extremities. And so Eugene Wrayburn, as he waits with Lightwood for the return of Gaffer Hexam,

> took the fidgets in one leg, and then in the other leg, and then in one arm, and then in the other arm, and then in his chin, and then in his back, and then in his forehead, and then in his hair, and then in his nose; and then he stretched him-

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Vision Press, 1983), pp. 163–79. See also Trotter's *Circulation: Defoe, Dickens and the Economies of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1988).

> self recumbent on two chairs, and groaned; and then he started up.[34]

Dickensian fidgeting is far more than a single obtrusive gesture; it is a running rumination of the body — a chain of gestures, movements, twitches, self-irritating. We see here, clearly, how in its recurrent relentless aspect, fidget becomes a self-contagion in which a twitchy reflex in the ear sends tremors down and across the susceptible body. In Dickens the contagion to other bodies is less prominent, but only because the borders separating one personality from the next are themselves so permeable.

Notably, language belongs to this agitated body; a fidgety rhetoric accompanies the twitchy nerves — a rhetoric built on repetition and parallel phrases that extend without natural stopping point. Characters themselves become vehicles of fidget-speech. Flora Finching's disappointed longing unfolds in unpunctuated verbal fluttering, while Joey Bagstock stammers out his fading imperial glory:

> 'Would you, Ma'am, would you!' said the Major, straining with vindictiveness, and swelling every already swollen vein in his head. 'Would you give Joey B. the go-by Ma'am? Not yet, Ma'am, not yet! Damme, not yet, Sir. Joe is awake, Ma'am. Bagstock is alive, Sir. J. B. knows a move or two, Ma'am. Josh has his weather-eye open, Sir. You'll find him tough, Ma'am. Tough, Sir, tough is Joseph. Tough, and devil-ish sly!'

The mere recital of his name gains pace and force and volume until he 'rang such an infinite number of new changes on his own name that he quite astonished himself'.[35] Such fidget can surprise the agent/patient, and can thus generate, not only reproduction, but creation through iteration.

We can see the point more clearly by way of contrast. The Smallweeds constitute a society of fidgets all on their own, a closed system of flutter and disquiet, ever ready to boil over, as for instance when Grandfather Smallweed happens to mention '10 minutes', whereupon

[34] Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. by Adrian Poole (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 167.
[35] Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Alan Horsman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 106.

> Grandmother Smallweed, who has been mumbling and shaking her head at the trivets, hearing figures mentioned, connects them with money and screeches like a horrible old parrot without any plumage, 'Ten, ten-pound notes!'
>
> Grandfather Smallweed immediately throws the cushion at her.
>
> 'Drat you, be quiet!' says the good old man.
>
> The effect of this act of jaculation is twofold. It not only doubles up Mrs Smallweed's head against the side of her porter's chair and causes her to present, when extricated by her granddaughter, a highly unbecoming state of cap, but the necessary exertion recoils on Mr Smallweed himself, whom it throws back into his porter's chair like a broken puppet.[36]

The Smallweeds help us to see that the life history of fidgeting often follows a distinctive course. Its inward agitations, its self-contained theatre of energies, suddenly come to discharge and erupt, as if the private absorptions suddenly remember a world of others. Repeatedly, characters will withdraw from the social circuitry that binds individuals and engage with an inner and singular mechanism, unpredictable and non-normative. And then after the inner whirring of an apparatus that seems impervious to a world beyond, it expels a fragment of its fidgety planet, back into the social milieu. Such an erratic relation to shared community is a great provocation. The agitated body can exhibit unruly, disorderly behaviour, a style of primitive selfishness, unsuited to the ceremonies of exchange, the exchange of food and endearments in Dickens's fiction, upon which Dickensian sociality is based.

Just as notable as the provocation is its local character. Consummate fidgets such as Flora Finching, Mr Dowling, Miss Miggs, Fanny Sparkler, or Grandmother Smallweed belong to a micro-universe of disturbance. Trapped inside their own system of self-contagious cramp and twitching, they erupt outwards, even as their victims remain near and often small. They are gargoyles on the facade of Dickensian gothic, but they also represent the deeper structural rhythm of the plot, the rhythm in which forward movement through time and the logic of incident is continually interrupted through the diversions of the agitated body, the twitching tongue.

They conform, then, these fidgets, to one familiar paradigm of comedy earlier identified: the subject rendered as an object, rendered open to

[36] Charles Dickens, *Bleak House,* ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 309.

view, open to the embarrassment of undisciplined reflex, obsessive control, or compulsive ritual. The comic bent is paramount, but so too is its essentially metonymic narrative structure, because the fidget lives through adjacency, the nearby stimulus and the contiguous effect, one nervous action activating the next ('then in his chin, and then in his back, and then in his forehead, and then in his hair') — just as the fidgeting tongues react to their own movements, one sound generating similar sounds, one figure of grammar stirring a close repetition. This is what gives speed to the narrative passages, the quick slide along well-mapped routes, adjacent parts of the body (elbows leading to wrists) and also the speed of linguistic parallelism — simple sentences conjoined by commas or 'and'.

Their provocation and their impulsive energies make these cases productive narrative forces, ball bearings for the plot, radiant nodes of irritability that create kernel events of story, the local crux, the temporary impediment. The wider cast of the narrative, the large amplitude of its ambition, is built on the micro-device of the fidgets. Recurrently, even obsessively, the rhythms of plot depend on the local acceleration of the inward-tending, outward-erupting vortex. Arthur Clennam collides with Flora Finching, Eugene Wrayburn meets Mr Dolls, and Mr George greets the Smallweeds. The encounter between the fidget and the normative agent — one capable of performing basic actions, calibrating intention with desire, self with other, mind with body — produces narrative incident that regularly launches the movement of events into the broader arc of plot. The narrative danger of fidgeting is that it is in principle interminable, running without destination along the circuit of nerves. The central instances, I have suggested, are scenes of impasse — waiting beyond patience and then beyond bodily and verbal self-control. The risk is that narrative will be caught in the circle of anticipation without arrival, fret without purpose.

But for Dickens there remains another outcome for the squirming body. Its activity might turn to the light, introducing motions that can produce social warmth rather than selfish discharge. The peace of domesticity must be sustained by buzzing energy somewhere. Here is where fidget can provide as much as divide, and where it can perform an affirmative ethics. Esther Summerson is, after all, another fidget, fluttery and sometimes frantic in her gestures of self-chastening humility. Caddy Jellyby asks to learn domestic management by following the example of Esther, who responds:

> The idea of her learning housekeeping of a person of my vast experience was such a joke that I laughed, and coloured up,

> and fell into a comical confusion when she proposed it. However, I said, 'Caddy, I am sure you are very welcome to learn anything that you can learn of *me*, my dear,' and I showed her all my books and methods and all my fidgetty ways. (*Bleak House*, p. 439)

These sentences enact the peculiar valence of the condition — breathless slippage from one active verb to the next — 'laughed', 'coloured up', and 'fell into' and the acceleration of the conjoined unadorned nouns — 'my books and methods and all my fidgetty ways'.

Esther's role, you might say, as with Flora Finching in *Little Dorrit*, is to bring the quickening of those 'fidgetty ways' into the positive work of the novel. The task is to turn the energy of agitation away from the private cycle of the self-stimulating body (and the self-irrigating speaker) but also away from the rhythm of eruption and quiescence. Just as Esther's scars from smallpox are unnoticeable by the end of *Bleak House*, so we might say that her 'fidgetty ways' also have been incorporated fully into the household and affirmed by the social connectedness Esther ferments. Her bustle, stir, and fuss are affectionately regarded: eccentric, but also transferable. Caddy learns them; Jarndyce, in furnishing the second Bleak House, copies them. But it is not a bleaching of the 'disease' so much as absorption of Esther's generative energies into the social constitution. The power of her domestic mission (like the force of her coy chatter) is to serve as perpetual engine of benign agitation — the fidget assimilated to the soft emotions of a small community — a counter to the smell of death that haunts settled sentimental happiness.

Living fidgetal

It should be clear now that fidget, in its multiple forms, provides a radical unsettlement of dichotomous structures — voluntary and involuntary, mental and physical, normal and rebellious, individual and social. The fidget and the discourse created a generative node of capacities for infection, engagement, exhaustion, repetition, and mutation. As an aspect of nervousness, an agent of restlessness, or an ambassador of reconciliation, fidget accomplishes far more than it could ever mean to mean.

Through its steep rise to discursive prominence in the mid-nineteenth century, it retains the precariousness of physical (and metaphysical) unsettlement. It links inner with outer, expression with suppression, and reflex with will. Its attributes do not change, but the social vi-

sion has adjusted to the person whose fidget was a reaction to the world. A society in which fidget facilitates circulation allows eccentricity to flourish and offers the body a partnership with culture. George Gissing famously defends Dickensian caricature when he regrets the absence of eccentrics in the newly modern age. And John Stuart Mill, nearly forty years earlier, in his essay 'On Liberty', identifies eccentricity as a precious asset, at risk in a democracy. The Victorians carped at the fidgeting fingers, but complaint was a form of close possession, a gossip of the body that the critics never really wanted to do without. The Victorians lived in a 'fidgetal' age.