## Charles Dickens and the Cat Paw Letter Opener

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Charles Dickens was fascinated by taxidermy. He had a few pieces, mostly in glass cases on shelves and on display with other artefacts. His beloved pet raven Grip, the inspiration for Poe's fictional bird, is stuffed and circulating museums in a glass case. But when Dickens's favourite cat died in 1862, the son of Williamina (named after Shakespeare until she had kittens), Dickens preserved only his paw and had it turned into a letter opener. Dickens's daughter writes:

> On account of our birds, cats were not allowed in the house [...] but Williamina's numerous offspring had a happy home at 'Gad's Hill' [...]. One of these kittens was kept, who, as he was quite deaf, was left unnamed, and became known by the servants as 'the master's cat', because of his devotion to my father. He was always with him, and used to follow him about the garden like a dog, and sit with him while he wrote. One evening [...] 'The master' was reading at a small table, on which a lighted candle was placed. Suddenly the candle went out. My father, who was much interested in his book, relighted the candle and stroked the cat, who was looking at him pathetically he noticed, and continued his reading. A few minutes later, as the light became dim, he looked up just in time to see puss deliberately put out the candle with his paw, and then look appealingly toward him [...]. Father was full of this anecdote when all met at breakfast the next morning.[1]

When this affection-seeking cat (who was said to be unnamed, but according to chronology and inscription seems to have been called 'Bob') died, Dickens chose to preserve only a part of him. In the object culture of Victorian England it was not unheard of to turn animals into functional objects. But the taxidermied cat paw stands out in its emotional and tactile softness, meant to be touched and held regularly.

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[1] Mamie Dickens, *My Father as I Recall Him* (New York: Dutton, [1896(?)]), pp. 80–81.

Teresa Mangum suggests Victorians learned and practised mourning and loss through excessive pet memorials, but those shrines also memorialize something else, what Mangum describes as 'simplicity': 'In the late century riot of urban expansion, imperial conquest, agitation by women and workers, technological transformation, and even confusion about the relationship among species, simplicity of any kind would have been in short supply.'[2] Victorian taxidermy often gets narrated as one story: the Victorians loved collecting, loved curiosities, wanted not only access to the exotic but ownership of it. But taxidermy holds a diverse set of stories: museum culture, home collectors, and pet-keeping have different expectations in the realm of sensation. That 'simplicity' in the midst of complexity is part of the story of Victorian desire for taxidermy, adding to the narrative of Victorian taxidermy as colonizing and possessing. Taxidermy not only offers wildness possessed, but wildness and utter silence and stillness in one space.

Why a need for wildness and stillness at once? In chapter 5 of his autobiography (1873), John Stuart Mill explains that it was Wordsworth's poetry that saved him from his own crisis of meaning. Specifically, Mill says Wordsworth taught him that tranquillity is acceptable:

> What made Wordsworth's poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty [...]. I needed to be made to feel that there was real, permanent happiness in tranquil contemplation. Wordsworth taught me this, not only without turning away from, but with a greatly increased interest in, the common feelings and common destiny of human beings.[3]

Here Mill demonstrates, in his own crisis of what is 'useful' and what is good, that Romantic tranquillity had to be reinterpreted for Victorians; he determines that moments of individual stillness need not detract from social good and progress.

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[2] Teresa Mangum, 'Victorians Memorialize their Pets', in *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin A. Danahay (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 15–34 (p. 31).

[3] *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. by J. M. Robson, 33 vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963–91), I: *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. by John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (1981), pp. 151, 153.

Mill's crisis and its remedy underscore the stakes of one's *actions*, even in terms of appropriate contemplation. Gillian Beer has suggested in her formulation of hyperaesthesia that, for Victorians, even daily perception and awareness became work, a kind of *duty*:

> The ethic of realism — paying respect to things as they are, accepting the objectivity of objects — combined with the ethic of sympathy descending from the Romantics, resulted in near intolerable pressure on the receptive or penetrating consciousness from the external world, the world of others.[4]

In part because of this constant acute involuntary exertion in an era of classification, Beer describes the mystery that is below the nomenclature of systems; she suggests that mystery can be found in latency: 'latency in its double aspect of concealment and futurity' (p. 90). This idea, that in an age obsessed with harnessing energy, latency holds *numinous*, perhaps unnameable potential, leads me to a new reading of the Victorian fascination with taxidermy. I suggest that in a moment in which work and laziness are polarized as the available moral, economic, and social categories, a desire for *stillness*, a space that is neither work nor laziness, exists in the encounter with taxidermied animals. The taxidermied animal allows energy and stillness to coexist.

Viewers were captivated by the first anthropomorphic displays of the Great Exhibition in 1851, where Hermann Ploucquet, the taxidermy artist who would influence Walter Potter, exhibited scenes of ermines at tea, cats mourning a death, multiple anthropomorphic tableaux. Ploucquet's expressive and anatomically detailed allegories made one of the most popular exhibits. A preface to the subsequent catalogue of images claimed 'everyone from Her Majesty the Queen down to the charity boys had hastened' to the exhibit.[5] Because taxidermy can exist in a space that is simultaneously art and actual skin, sensual recognition works in a way different from viewing other art. As Rachel Poliquin writes, this was 'all the stuff of traditional beast fables, except here the beasts belong to the material world. Allegory made corporeal' (p. 175). Fables told with skin. It is that corporeal space, the presentation of the actual animal, that

[4] Gillian Beer, 'Myth and the Single Consciousness: *Middlemarch* and "The Lifted Veil"', in *This Particular Web: Essays on Middlemarch*, ed. by Ian Adam (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), pp. 91–115 (p. 100).

[5] Quoted in Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), p. 176.

makes taxidermy something people often describe as 'an experience' or 'an encounter'.[6]

The space of encounter — visual encounter, sympathetic encounter, haptic encounter — is charged with energy. Eve Sedgwick suggests that 'even more immediately than other perceptual systems [...] the sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity; to touch is always already to reach out.'[7] Imagined touch around 'lifelike' taxidermied animals, in the museum or in the home, collapses false distinctions around action and inaction, the public and the private. Sedgwick's idea that touch is 'always already to reach out' collapses boundaries, but also suggests the energy that touch — and even the instinct to touch — holds. Taxidermied animals are experienced as touchable even when enclosed in glass in a museum or home display. Upon touch, the taxidermied animal — skin reconstructed over a plaster mannequin — feels surprisingly hard and cold. The cat paw letter opener, however, comes closer to fulfilling sensory expectation. The paw, which the animal would have used 'always already to reach out' with energy, is expected to be hard and functional.

Letter openers made of feet, paws, or hooves were available as trophies or collectibles. That Dickens's cat paw letter opener continues to fascinate viewers now, in its glass case in New York and in popular culture essays, is due to what Clare Pettitt has framed as the 'the active accrual of meaning over time that makes things cherished and luminous with meaning'.[8] While Pettitt is concerned primarily with objects within the Victorian novel, she also writes about the objects curated for inclusion in the Dickens House Museum, reading the collection as a constructed, and sometimes jarring, narrative of Charles Dickens's life. There is 'something faintly alarming', she reflects, about combining Dickens's lemon squeezer

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[6] Conor Creaney notes the significance of the 'frozen moments' in the scenes Potter chose: 'The stillness here [a marriage scene] might be read as not that of death, but rather as the stillness of an elongated, and particularly meaningful moment in a pair of lives.' See 'Paralytic Animation: The Anthropomorphic Taxidermy of Walter Potter', *Victorian Studies*, 53 (2010), 7–35 (p. 19). Here Creaney is looking particularly at enclosed tableaux.

[7] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 14.

[8] Clare Pettitt, 'Peggotty's Work-Box: Victorian Souvenirs and Material Memory', *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 53 (2009) <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ravon/2009/v/n53/029896ar.html> [accessed 9 October 2014] (para. 11 of 27).

with larger objects brought in from public locations because they inspired details in Dickens's novels:

> Dickens's lemon squeezer is exceptional because it was Dickens's — its very banality as an object paradoxically reinforces the exceptionality of its history, but these two advertisements are exceptional only because they fell into the trawling net of Dickens's imagination as he walked the London streets. Here is a difference between the affect stored in an object owned and used, and in objects seen, re-imagined and represented in literature.[9]

In regard to those objects represented in literature, Pettitt argues that not all objects in the Victorian novel hold equal subjecthood; some objects may hold meaning while others do not, and individual objects themselves can fluctuate in meaning within a novel.

Objects and 'things' in Dickens are so 'visible' to us, she says, because he presents them in uncustomary ways:

> The reason that objects are invested with such singularity and power in Dickens's novels is that he has put them to 'uncustomary use' [...] and thus he has really seen them (and so forces us to see them too) in ways he would never see his teacup or his hall clock. ('On Stuff', p. 11)

This navigation around 'uncustomary use' is precisely the mediation with the taxidermied animal. The strangeness of the still 'lifelike' animal in an unnatural context creates the experience of personal engagement, an energized encounter. Dickens was already interested in taxidermy, but after visiting a taxidermist shop with a friend, he was spellbound and wrote the shop and a taxidermist into *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65). Connected to this, energy is a primary concern of this novel, and the scenes within the taxidermist's shop are the site of renewed contemplation of those things most habitual to us, body parts, here set in 'uncustomary uses'.

Jessica Kuskey builds on previous important readings of filth and waste and reuse in *Our Mutual Friend*, with the lens of popular discourses

[9] Clare Pettitt, 'On Stuff', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 6 (2008) <http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/issue/view/69> [accessed 9 October 2014] (p. 3).

around thermodynamics in the nineteenth century.[10] The concern with recycling and against waste, in the novel and in mid-Victorian England, is not only a concern with 'filth', either the filth of money and capital or the actual filth of congested urban life and poverty. The concern also incorporates a new understanding of the way energy, once it has done its work, dissipates and becomes inaccessible. *Our Mutual Friend* seeks to reclaim the 'latent' from what *seems* to be waste.

Mr Venus, in *Our Mutual Friend*, has a shop full of *things*. The shop is full of materials that are loudly material and the text includes details of how things would *feel*. Not only are there bones and bones and bones, but specifically hands:

> At this moment the greasy door is violently pushed inward, and a boy follows it, who says, after having let it slam:
>
> 'Come for the stuffed canary.'
>
> 'It's three and ninepence,' returns Venus; 'have you got the money?'
>
> The boy produces four shillings. Mr Venus, always in exceedingly low spirits and making whimpering sounds, peers about for the stuffed canary. On his taking the candle to assist his search, Mr Wegg observes that he has a convenient little shelf near his knees, exclusively appropriated to skeleton hands, which have very much the appearance of wanting to lay hold of him. From these Mr Venus rescues the canary in a glass case, and shows it to the boy.
>
> 'There!' he whimpers. 'There's animation! On a twig, making up his mind to hop! Take care of him; he's a lovely specimen.'[11]

The hands in this scene are perceived in the contact they might make. Although the hands are merely bones like the other bones all over the shop, Wegg ascribes to them their recognized haptic function. The canary has to be rescued from these hands in the box. And the canary reads as a counterpoint of flesh and soft feathers and feather-light movement — even though we are told it is in glass, a substance hard and smooth like bone. But the animal reads in our instinctive tactile imagination in terms of how we would recognize it. It is the taxidermist in this novel who has

[10] Jessica Kuskey, 'Our Mutual Engine: The Economics of Victorian Thermodynamics', *Victorian Literature and Culture,* 41 (2013), 75–89.

[11] Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. by Michael Cotsell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 80–81.

the power to put things together and bring things back to life. In Venus's shop, stillness and contained energy coexist.

In abstractions of thermodynamics, energy and work become order, and their conceptual opposites, entropy and waste, become disorder. It is not clear where in this nationalist, economic, and moralizing polarization, emerging in part out of material anxieties around sustenance and endurance, the capacity for stillness exists. Stillness is not death, is not 'leisure'. It is not lack. Stillness is tranquillity, but Victorian tranquillity: tranquillity in a crowded city of others. In a cultural moment in which even perception is mediated work, a desire for stillness was being carved out, defined, imagined in different modes of cultural production — a desire for tranquillity in which energy would not be stolen from one. Stillness confounds the work/laziness and energy/lost energy polarization that came from an anxiety over wasted energy. And if stillness can be imagined as both confounding and necessary, the taxidermied animal objects hold exactly that paradox. Even in the complex object culture of the Victorian period, the encounter with the taxidermied animal allows these conflicted modes to coexist in a way other encounters with objects or nature cannot: stillness that is legible in a Victorian moment of contradictions.

Fascinated as he was by taxidermy, Dickens perhaps did not want to see or feel his favourite cat life*like*. And so he created a functional memory and a private sensation to buffer him from public correspondence. The cat who longed to be touched by him, snuffing out the candle of his constant work, becomes the paw that mediates the demand of that work. The preserved paw, cherished and luminous with meaning, offers tactile access to stillness in the midst of creative energy.