

Feeling Critically: A Report on 'The Victorian Tactile Imagination' Conference

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'By means of the power of touch, we pour in the light of information on the eyes of their understanding.'¹

Owing both to subject matter and circumstances, 'The Victorian Tactile Imagination' conference made its delegates intensely aware of somatics. Taking place during a prolonged heatwave, it was impossible to escape the feeling of one's own bodiliness, while frequent reference to Merleau-Ponty's formulation of the reciprocity of touch imbued every handshake with heightened significance. For me, one of the most interesting aspects was the way in which the conference themes impacted on the participants: Karen Chase's 'A Touch of the Fidgets' produced a marked rigidity of posture among her audience, whereas Nicola Bown's moving round-table discussion of 'Love Objects' evoked a strong emotional response. Here I want to focus on how a more 'feeling' direction for scholarship emerged at the conference, through the repeated questioning of what it means to be human, the connection between touching physically and feeling emotionally, and a revaluation of personal, subjective experience as part of research culture.

William Cohen began the conference by displacing the common preoccupation with plot and character in Victorian studies, to focus instead on the settings in Hardy's *The Woodlanders*. In a nuanced reading of the ways in which human and arboreal bodies shape one another, physically and metaphorically, Cohen challenged the stark distinction between human and non-human categorization. Emma Curry elaborated on this theme in relation to Dickens, the other nineteenth-century author whose work dominated the conference. Like Cohen, Curry disputed the boundaries between subjects and objects, to argue that touch extends beyond the limits of the body. Curry explored what it means to touch through objects

¹ From a caption at 'Touching the Book: Embossed Literature for Blind People in the Nineteenth Century' exhibition, Peltz Gallery, Birkbeck.

in *Great Expectations*, identifying canes, pokers, walking sticks, and table legs as prosthetics that can protect characters from directly touching other people, or their own raw emotions.

Death poses a different sort of challenge to subject–object positioning, as Jenny Pyke discussed in terms of Victorian taxidermy. The lifelike poses and soft fur of such specimens conjured a sense of tactile sensation for viewers, while the museum’s glass cases frustrated actual touch. Taxidermy creates the semblance of the dead object as living subject, yet crucially this illusion relies upon the absence of touch. Pyke reported that most modern taxidermists refuse to stuff pets as the owners are always disappointed by the way they feel; in the case of taxidermy, she argues, it is more effective to feel through seeing, unless the ‘objectness’ of the dead is clearly emphasized. Dickens again supplied the definitive example: the author chose to have the paw of his dead cat fashioned into a letter opener.

Using a dead pet to open one’s post may seem whimsically eccentric, but the functional use of human remains is charged with a very different valence, as Constance Classen’s plenary showed. Classen framed her discussion with reference to the role of touch in mourning the loss of a loved one: Queen Victoria’s handling of grief through objects such as a plaster cast of Prince Albert’s arm suggested a profound need to hold on to the deceased. This contrasted profoundly with responses to the ancient Egyptian mummies collected by the British Museum. On one hand, numerous fictions credited the mummy with continuing and often malevolent agency, but at the same time their humanity was undermined by staged spectacles of unwrapping and an overabundance of mummies in Egypt that resulted in bodies being dismembered and sold as souvenirs, medicines, and even fertilizer. Initially it seemed difficult to enter the Victorian mindset which positioned mummies as ‘exotic’ commercial objects, particularly in the decade after the Human Tissue Act (2004) which demands the respectful treatment of all human remains within museum collections. Yet as Classen reminded us with a final flourish of ‘mummy’ lip balm, bought from the British Museum gift shop, much common ground remains.

Within these debates about how the tactile might help us to understand or redefine what it means to be human, it was refreshing to see acknowledgement of our own humanity as scholars. It was exciting to find academics admit that they had been moved by their material instead of maintaining a supposedly objective distance, and privileging the power of feelings in the generation of their work, alongside much solid historical

and theoretical research. Lynda Nead's presentation on 'Dressing the Surface' demonstrated this approach: in a paper that explored the pleasures of dress, from the immediate tactile delights of the fabrics to the feelings they inspired, it seemed fitting that one of Nead's keenest observations sprang from a form of emotional intuition. Nead described how Empress Eugénie kept Franz Winterhalter's *Empress Eugénie Surrounded by her Ladies-in-Waiting* (1855) on prominent display in her home, long after the overthrow of the Second French Empire and the deaths of her husband and son. In picturing the elderly woman contemplating the near life-size image of her youthful, untroubled self, Nead felt the way in which we vividly recall moments of our past through clothes, and the sense of loss that underpins this painting because fashion is always already in the past. In a different mode, Lillian Nayder negotiates this combination of traditional research methodology and intuition for her novel-in-progress, *Harriet and Letitia*, reimagining Dickensian disability through fictional embellishment of the lives of Dickens's sister Letitia Austin and blind companion Harriet Dickens. It was Nicola Bown, however, who championed the role of subjective, critical feeling in a closing round table on 'Touching Nineteenth-Century Material Culture'. Each speaker was asked to bring an object, and Bown chose a *Book of Common Prayer* that had once belonged to her great-grandfather. Only the outside was worn, leading Bown to surmise that this was an object carried into Church to demonstrate piety, but rarely used practically. This led onto a rich meditation on holding, accompanied by a series of paintings that featured people in reverie while holding objects. These transitional objects, Bown suggested gently, may offer a way to commune with an absent other, possibly — although often overlooked by our secular research culture — a Divine other. In the past our work has sometimes sought credibility by focusing only on what we can prove; in contrast, this conference suggested the value of incorporating faith into our research frameworks, whether spiritual faith or a faith based upon addressing that which cannot be proven or measured. As the closing round table reiterated, there are always limits to the data that we have, and a point at which we might use a critically feeling intuition, drawn from our own subjective life experience.

I have found feeling critically to be particularly useful in my own research into the Victorian business of death, helping to prevent the practical, emotional, and financial complexities of dying from being reduced to a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence. When I first started working on this topic I approached death with neutrality, intending to bolster my critical position. Now, however, I am unembarrassed to say that I have

been very moved by many of the deaths that Dickens writes, even those ripe for parody, such as Little Nell's overwrought demise and the simultaneous departure of Dora and her pet dog Jip. Depictions of death and mourning are fundamentally about feelings: the feelings of the real or fictional subjects involved and the responsive feelings of the reader. Thus, paying attention to subjective emotional responses can enrich, instead of impoverish, textual interpretation. For example, in *Dombey and Son* Dickens offers a brilliant study of the emotional nuances of loss, which he fully intends the reader to participate in. Undoubtedly there was an element of commercial calculation in the author's decision to 'slaughter' Paul in the fifth number.² However, what the preface emphasizes about this death is the hope that if readers 'have felt a sorrow in one of the principal incidents', it is 'a sorrow of that sort which endears the sharers in it, one to another'.³ Dickens also states his position as a fellow sufferer — 'I may claim to have felt it, at least as much as anybody else' — creating a community of feeling (p. 3). In chapter 18 Dickens portrays the ripple of affect caused by Paul's premature death as it is transmitted from the immediate family to the wider community, and ultimately to the reader. The language is emotive and there are numerous references to weeping, sobbing, and crying; feelings are communicable, as shown in a scene where Florence and Mr Toots alternate between stifled amusement and tears. Another cue for the reader's emotional engagement is suggested by Florence watching from her window the happy family that live in the house opposite. Although Florence never meets them, she readily interprets the emotional dynamics of their domestic scenes from a distance through the glass. Equally, the family are moved by the spectacle of the funeral and Florence hides her tears and black mourning dress lest they look across and participate in her sorrow.

My paper at the conference extended these themes by exploring how an audience within or outside a text might be touched by scenes of touching. The striking preponderance of references to hands that surround deathbed scenes in *The Old Curiosity Shop* provided the central example. Symbolically, these hands, often disembodied by the description, are suggestive of manicules that point a spiritual lesson about the ac-

² Dickens to John Forster (6 December 1846), *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Madeline House, Graham Storey, and Kathleen Tillotson, Pilgrim edn, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–2002), IV: 1844–46, ed. by Kathleen Tillotson and Nina Burgis (1977), p. 676.

³ Charles Dickens, 'Preface', *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Andrew Sanders (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 3.

ceptance of God's will. At the same time, as human hands they heighten the pathos of Nell's demise and sympathetically acknowledge the difficulties of such acceptance, particularly in the scene where the grandfather clings to the girl's cold, dead hand in the futile hope of warming it. This spectacle of a touch that has recently become non-reciprocal deeply moves onlookers in the death chamber, and moved many of the novel's original readers, as well as this critic.

For me, feeling critically means respecting my own emotional response to a work, while also understanding that this response needs to be interrogated: examining the language that creates this effect, weighing it against the emotional responses of other original and contemporary readers, and exploring the factors that have helped to shape my feelings. As Bown herself acknowledged, such a methodology is fraught with problems, not least where to locate claims for interpretive authority, and whether our own feelings are a sound base from which to make observations about human nature in the past. Indeed, as Ji Won Chung showed in relation to the absent other as manifested at spiritualist seances, touch and feeling can be notoriously fallible, even when they appear to provide convincing empirical evidence. Nonetheless, scholarship that takes feeling seriously promises an exciting future.