

Reading the Body-Object: Nineteenth-Century Taxidermy Manuals and *Our Mutual Friend*

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Among the better-known pieces of nineteenth-century taxidermy are the whimsical works of Walter Potter, which feature anthropomorphized animals portraying the nursery rhyme of the same name, such as in *The Original Death and Burial of Cock Robin* (c. 1861). Potter's work evokes some of the tensions that cause eyebrows to be raised at the art of taxidermy, with this particular piece featuring the bodies of ninety-eight species of British birds reliving the stories of their death. These memorable Victorian tableaux highlight taxidermy as a technique at the intersections of art and science. On the more overtly 'scientific' side of the taxidermy spectrum, preserved specimens were crucial in constructing and disseminating anatomical, zoological, and taxonomic knowledge. Nineteenth-century natural history collections suggest the importance of taxidermy in the scientific landscape, with Carla Yanni arguing that museums presented 'knowledge in the form of specimens', 'objects of nature [that] were captured, stuffed, pinned down and categorized, sheltered beneath iron and glass canopies'.¹ Object-based epistemology allowed taxonomy to be 'made manifest in the museum', where the collection and display of taxidermy bodies was a key way of disseminating knowledge. But this was not the sole means of constructing scientific knowledge, which also 'had to be exhumed from its usual resting place: the book' (Yanni, pp. 3, 17). The literary inspiration in Potter's taxidermy, with its nursery rhyme source, characterization of animal bodies, and analogous representation of human life, is present also on the more 'scientific' side of the taxidermy spectrum. Material specimens were accompanied by another way to read and articulate the 'truths' of the body: anatomical literature such as the taxidermy manual had to construct taxidermy techniques and represent bodies through description and analogy. These texts created another layer to scientific epistemology, fulfilling the same function identified by attentive readers such as William Hazlitt does for poetry, 'unravelling the real web of associations, which have been round any subject by nature, and the unavoidable conditions of humanity'.²

¹ Carla Yanni, *Nature's Museums: Victorian Science and the Architecture of Display* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 13.

² William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets*, 3rd edn (London: Templeman, 1841), p. 394.

It is worth considering the aesthetic or cultural values inscribed in such volumes, and how these affect the truth value of their contents.

Object-based epistemology faced other problems by the mid-nineteenth century. As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have demonstrated, the scientific ideal was shifting from ‘truth-to-nature’ (in which scientists and artists might collaborate to create a typical image or representation that could stand for a whole class) towards an objectivity ‘that bears no trace of the knower — knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgment [...] seeing without interference, interpretation, or intelligence’.³ Instead of implicitly reinforcing object-based epistemology, the taxidermy manual reveals the subjectivity of these representations. Indeed, Daston and Galison assert that ‘in contrast to the *static tableaux* of paradigms and epistemes, [scientific objectivity] is a history of dynamic fields, in which *newly introduced bodies reconfigure and reshape those already present*’ (p. 19, emphases added). Such a statement draws on the language of taxidermy and museum display, and suggests that notions of objectivity are in tension with such practices. The two kinds of construction practised in these texts highlight the ambiguity of a move towards ‘scientific objectivity’ in concrete terms, particularly in fields like taxidermy, which took into account aesthetic concerns. The taxidermy specimen is no longer ‘just’ an object, but one that must be interpreted by the taxidermist, both through the material reconstruction performed in the practice of taxidermy, and by the object’s descriptive articulation in the taxidermy manual.

Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65) plays with these dual textual and somatic forms; nothing remains narratively stable, either in the description of objects or the representation of subjects.⁴ The problems of the dual articulations of body and narrative reverberate in the constant questioning of the essence of knowledge in *Our Mutual Friend*. While Conor Creaney has highlighted Dickens’s ‘late-career preoccupation with the inscrutability of value’, wherein the ‘boundary between the known and the speculative’ is rhetorically maintained, I argue that the tension between the boundaries of known/unknown, alive/dead, and object/subject in Dickens’s representation of ‘paralytically animated’ forms problematizes representing the body.⁵ Dickens’s own phrase, ‘paralytically animated’, itself denotes a refusal to impose completely opposing categories, simultaneously suggesting drunken stupor and an animation that stems from its exact opposite, a ‘paralysed’ or fixed body. The stability of bodies, and our understanding of them, is distorted through a combination of physical and narrative artic-

³ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p. 12.

⁴ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. by Adrian Poole (London: Penguin, 1997).

⁵ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 91; Conor Creaney, ‘Paralytic Animation: The Life of the Frozen Body in Dickens and Victorian Visual Culture’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, New York University, 2011), p. 16.

ulations embodied by characters such as the wooden-legged Silas Wegg, who misreads literature and situations alike. The reconstruction of a taxidermy specimen is reimagined in Mr Inspector's interrogation of 'the bird of prey' (Dickens, p. 14), Gaffer, which riffs on the questions surrounding object-based epistemology raised by the taxidermy manual. The ambiguous use of 'he' and 'it' pronouns allows characters to slide between object and subject status;⁶ they are miraculously reformed or revived through a combination of corporeal and textual articulation, persistently straining the categories of life and death, material and textual. The novel's insistence on rupturing any distinct separation between animate and inanimate forms allows the transgression of these boundaries. The treatment of the 'paralytically animated' figures of the novel presents the possibility that identities and bodies cannot be taxonomically certain, but subjective and subject to the same reconstructions of body and narrative. Juliet John's attention to post-structuralism and its descendant, the material turn, to examine the 'relationship between things and the signifiers used to represent them' is particularly pertinent in relation to textual representations of taxidermy: as with the taxidermy manual, 'things in Dickens's writings are not things but words representing things' (John, p. 117). Reading popular taxidermy manuals alongside *Our Mutual Friend* allows new light to be thrown on to the epistemological importance of reading and 'articulating' the body, both physically and narratively. Both taxidermy and novel gesture towards a means of reading and reconstructing the body through narrative techniques, undermining any ideal of objective knowledge as derived from the 'specimen'. Crucially, comparing the representation of taxidermy bodies in taxidermy manuals, and in fiction such as *Our Mutual Friend*, sheds light on the shared use of both scientific and literary techniques in representations of the body. This connection suggests that both taxidermy and literature permit a more ambiguous specimen in which 'truths' cannot be statically embodied. At best, specimens are authored, can tell stories, and necessitate interpretation.

The collected body and the taxidermy guide

The nineteenth-century preoccupation with bodies as sites of knowledge is present in a number of taxidermy guides which attempt to articulate anatomical 'truths' through a depiction of coherent physical structure. Zoologist and taxidermist Mrs R. Lee contends that 'the most difficult

⁶ As Juliet John has noted, the wealth of attention to the animate means that it has become 'a cliché of Dickens criticism that people and things, subjects and objects, are difficult to distinguish'. See Juliet John, 'Things, Words and the Meanings of Art', in *Dickens and Modernity*, ed. by Juliet John (Cambridge: Brewer, 2012), pp. 115–32 (p. 128).

part of the operation [...] is to reassemble all the bones, to reunite them, and to place them in their natural position', smaller parts assembled to create a greater whole.⁷ Lee's analysis of anatomical construction is one in which nature is interpreted to represent life, to 'form a sort of picture' with the body, fixing it 'equally with pins, at the parts of their articulations'; a body of static signs that conveys true and accurate information (p. 36). Taxidermy manuals, as a wider genre, denote a similar desire. *The Taxidermist's Guide*, for example, asserts the necessity 'to imitate, as nearly as possible [...] the carcase [*sic*]' and to 'COPY NATURE WHENEVER YOU HAVE IT IN YOUR POWER'.⁸ Similarly, Lee uses language that suggests the collected specimen can be a medium through which one can 'determine with certainty' the similarities and differences between species, accessing what fellow taxidermist, fellow of the Royal Zoological Society, and curator of the Leicester Museum Alexander Montagu Browne denotes as 'real truth'.⁹ Yet this reconstruction is, at best, an interpretation of an object-body for which materiality and biological death are but 'one narrative hinge of many'.¹⁰ While these bodies 'circulated understandings of the natural world', the text of the taxidermy manual begins to distort these systems of knowledge through subjective readings and articulations (Alberti, p. 4). The photographic plates of Montagu Browne present the stages of the taxidermy process as embodying another attempt to combine physical and rhetorical articulation, incorporating text and appending scientific terminology directly to the body (*Figs. 1, 2*). Browne's *Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy and Modelling* (1896) reveals an appending of text to the specimen, evoking the literary trope of reading stories through bodily signs. *Our Mutual Friend's* detective, Mr Inspector, interprets the 'bird of prey's' death by combining close physical examination with an alternative explanatory labelling, as he expresses what each part of the body can reveal about Gaffer's death.

These manuals also communicate the importance of the practical skill of taxidermy, with Mrs Lee questioning how the potential to construct scientific knowledge through taxidermy can be made use of if 'neither the English or the Dutch have in their language any work which treats of the

⁷ Mrs R. Lee, *Taxidermy; or, The Art of Collecting, Preparing and Mounting Objects of Natural History for the Use of Museums and Travellers* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, 1843), p. 23. For more on Mrs R. Lee's identity as Sarah Bowdich, see Mary Orr, 'The Stuff of Translation and Independent Female Scientific Authorship: The Case of *Taxidermy*...', anon (1820)', *Journal of Literature and Science*, 8 (2015), 27–47.

⁸ Anon., *The Taxidermist's Guide* (New York: [n. pub.], 1870), p. 13.

⁹ Lee, p. 120; Alexander Montagu Browne, *Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy and Modelling* (London: Black, 1896), p. 67.

¹⁰ Samuel J. M. M. Alberti, 'Introduction: The Dead Ark', in *The Afterlives of Animals: A Museum Menagerie*, ed. by Samuel J. M. M. Alberti (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), pp. 1–16 (p. 6).

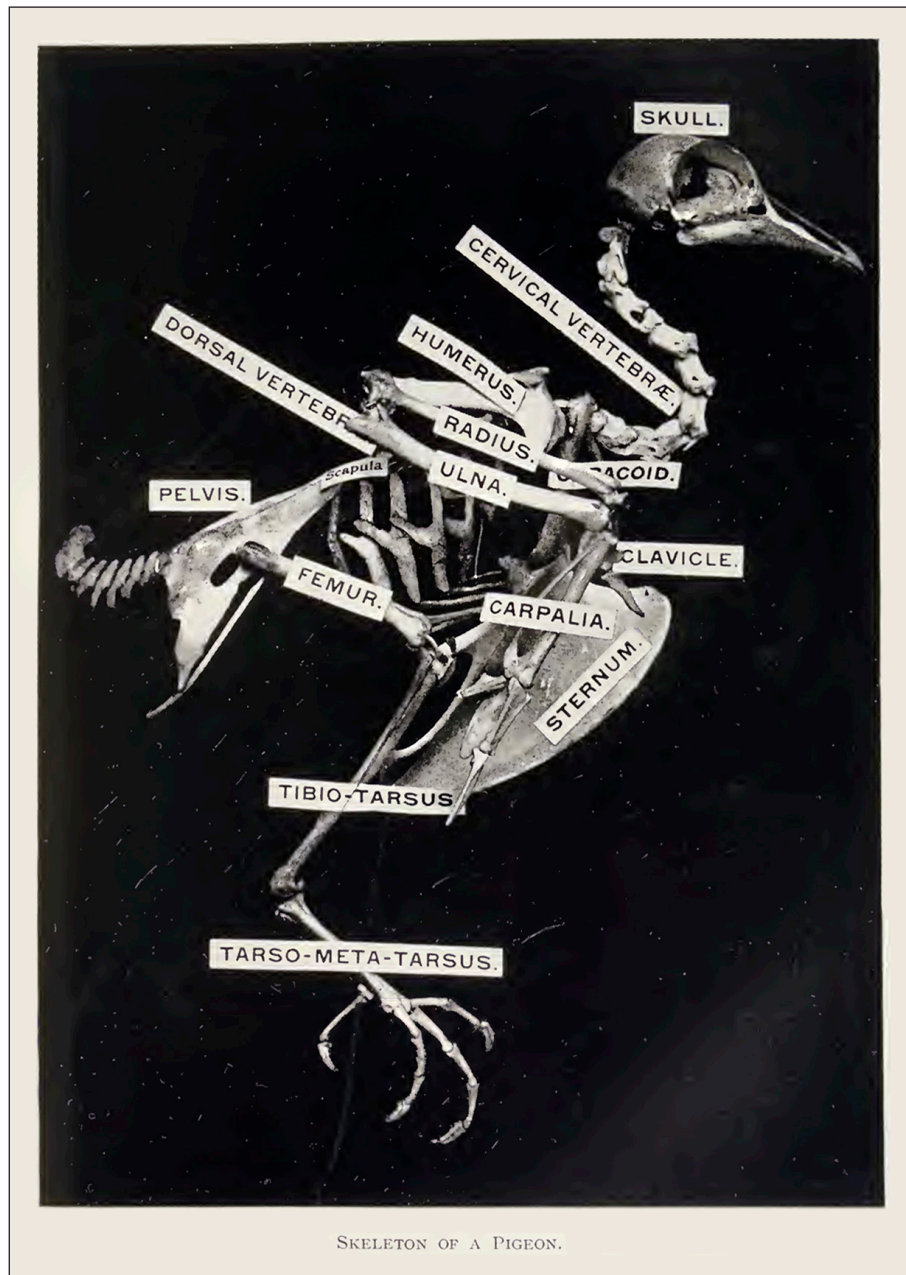


Fig. 1: Alexander Montagu Browne, Skeleton of a Pigeon, *Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy and Modelling* (London: Black, 1896), facing p. 172.

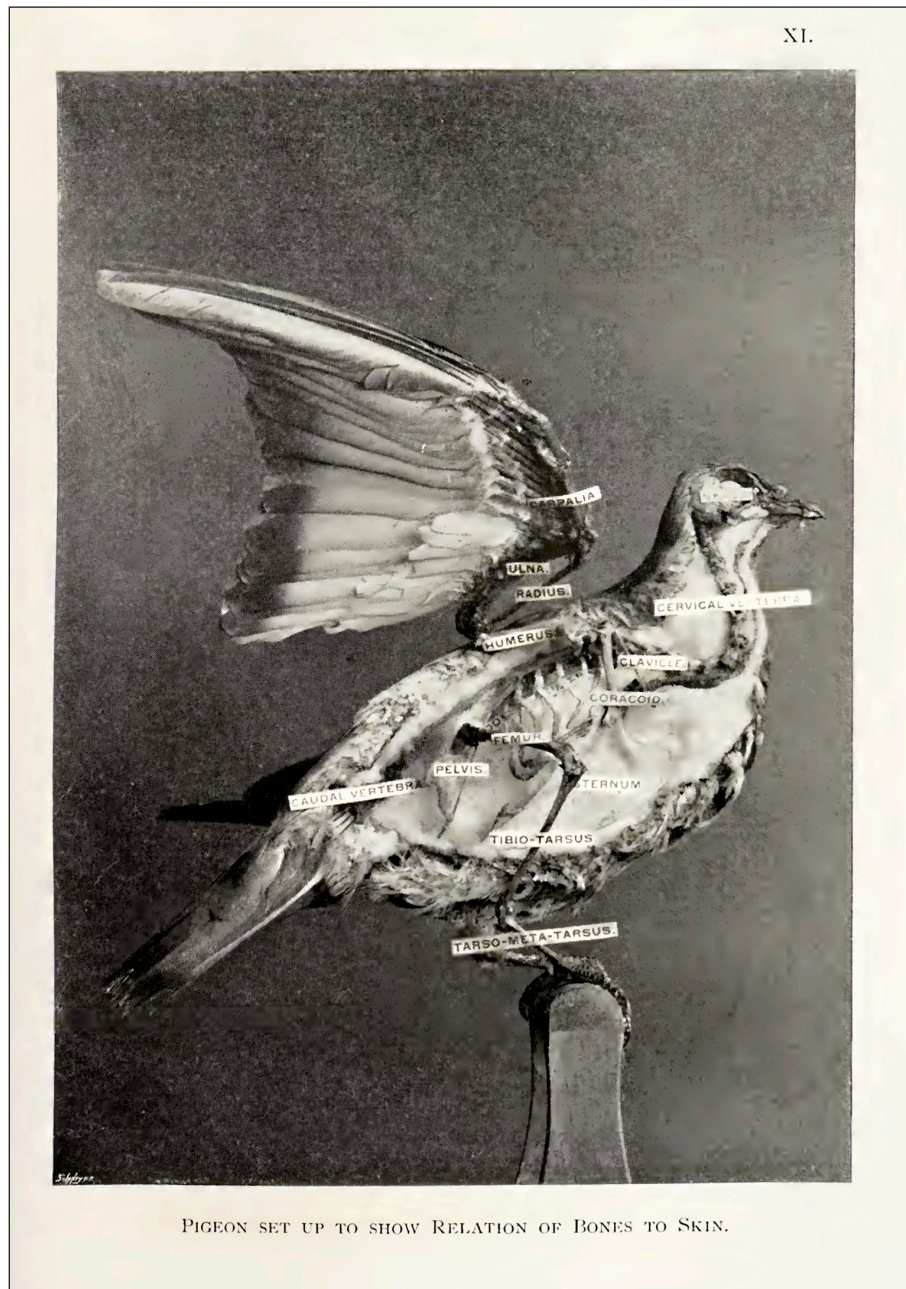


Fig. 2: Alexander Montagu Browne, Pigeon Set up to Show Relation of Bones to Skin, *Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy and Modelling*, facing p. 198.

method of mounting animals, according to system' (pp. 10–11). Browne's inclusion of a preface also positions him as an author as well as a taxidermist, explicitly suggesting that it is not just the taxidermy object but the 're-described' methodology that allows the reader to become a 'learner', 'easily led from the known to the unknown' through his studies (*Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy*, p. vii). Browne not only situates his own manual within a larger body of work, but analyses that larger body's smaller component parts, anatomizing the authorship and information formed in these texts. Applying an almost palaeontological process of reconstruction, Browne 'creat[es] an image of wholeness or completeness from the most incomplete of fragments', not just with the animal body but also the literary one, crediting 'the writings of educated naturalists' who 'produced a large mass of literature' relating to taxidermy.¹¹

Browne slides between textual and somatic sources of information, tracing the epistemological origins of taxidermy through the dissection of 'the name itself, derived from the Greek for order, arrangement or preparation and [...] for skin', which he uses to understand the 'intention' of this reconstruction (*Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy*, p. 1). Browne nonetheless worries over the fact that taxidermy terminology is rather literal — 'undeniably the most popular section of taxidermy is that vulgarly known as "bird stuffing", and, like some other vulgar terms, it is literally true' — as though he fears the banal language might undermine the value of the specimen (p. 166). Citing the 'surviving' bodies as 'testimonies of [...] work satisfactorily performed [...] [still] to be found in many museums', the taxidermist highlights the interconnection of authorial and bodily articulation (p. 2, emphasis added). Browne's conversational tone acknowledges his own subjectivity; he argues that although the taxidermist must show 'great fidelity to nature', he is constrained by 'human ability' and 'opinion', which he explicitly acknowledges as derived from a 'lifetime of [...] experience' (p. 8). Other forms of suspension or static representations of life are suspect in Browne's opinion, with photography capturing only

strained and inartistic attitudes [that] are, if natural, at least those resulting from fright, and not those which any one but a photographer, anxious to take a 'snap shot' at any risk, would perpetuate [...]. It may be asked: Would any taxidermist attempt to reproduce 'animals in rapid motion' as shown by instantaneous photography? Is it not yet fully understood that taxidermic representation of objects stands upon a level with pictorial art, and that to represent, by either method, attitudes, fixed by the lightning flash of the eye of the camera, which are invisible to the eye of man, is false in theory and in practice? (p. 11)

¹¹ Albert D. Hutter, 'Dismemberment and Articulation in *Our Mutual Friend*', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 11 (1983), 135–75 (p. 139); Browne, *Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy*, p. 4.

Browne's critique of the attempt to capture 'rapid movement' emphasizes the importance of the taxidermist's perspective, as one which undermines the 'eye of the camera' which is unable to bring the same experience as the knowing 'eye of man'. This rearguard action against the new technology of photography simultaneously reveals the fissure between taxidermy and the 'objectivity' which Daston and Galison have identified in numerous fields.¹² Much of Browne's interpretation of the body dwells on recreating life through a consideration of the animal's perspective. For example, Browne critiques the problems of inserting eyes 'so flat as some do, for nearly every animal has a full, liquid-looking eye', considering that the 'posterior angle of the eye is not brought forward enough to make the animal look to the front' (*Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy*, p. 193). Indeed, the problem with this 'looking eye', according to Browne, is that it cannot see 'in front of its nose or bill unless it protruded its eyes like a chameleon'; the realism of this gaze is disrupted by the amateur's incorrect interpretation of the animal's movement in life, and Browne's secondary interpretation of perspective in death (p. 194).

After the anthropomorphic displays of taxidermy at the Great Exhibition of 1851, taxidermists more overtly refer to their specimen as a character. It becomes popular to refer to the body of the specimen as 'Reynard the Fox' or 'Cock Robin' rather than with the scientific taxonomy of *Vulpes vulpes*, imposing a persona onto both anthropomorphized body-object and textual representation. The widespread enjoyment of anthropomorphic taxidermy, which manipulated 'animal bodies to make them seem to represent themselves as miniature humans [...] [in an] oppressively palimpsestic over-writing of their primary identities', can be read in one of the most popular examples, the centrepiece of Hermann Ploucquet's contribution to the Great Exhibition: a 'render[ing] of the illustrations from an edition of "Reynard the Fox", Goethe's poem based on the German folk-tale' (Creaney, pp. 23, 37). Taxidermist to the Royal Museum of Stuttgart, Ploucquet's famous tableau forms a physical narrative that embodies the illustrations by the painter William Kaulbach, and which was reworked in *Household Words* in 1851 (*Fig. 3*). Creaney notes that anthropomorphic taxidermy such as that by Ploucquet and Walter Potter are at once 'a kind of formal innovation (using animals as signifiers of something other than themselves) and at the same time an intensely literal-minded one (replacing

¹² Ronald R. Thomas's *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 26 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) also notes the issues of photography at play in Dickens's *Bleak House*, comparing the detective gaze of Inspector Bucket to the focused lens of a camera, connecting this technology with the resolution of the novel's central mystery (pp. 131, 134). While the issue of interpreting these static bodies persists in *Our Mutual Friend*, Mr Inspector's gaze instead draws on the novel's taxidermy imagery and the process of reconstruction also at work in taxidermy manuals to solve the mystery, as discussed below.



Fig. 3: William Kaulbach, Reynard Brings Forward the Hare to His Wife, in *The Story of Reynard the Fox* (New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1861), p. 21.

words and images with their real-world referents), again suggesting the conjoining of the two kinds of form (p. 72). Dickens's own reading and writing suggests that he 'was fascinated by taxidermy', including Ploucquet's.¹³ *Household Words*, for instance, published an article which praised 'certain cases from Germany which contain stuffed animals, and especially some exquisite groups illustrating the famous German fable, "Reineke Fuchs"', after which Goethe's 'long German poem' has been rearticulated into a 'short English tale'.¹⁴ On his death, Dickens had a variety of taxidermy in his possession, including 'a pair of hand-screens, formed of birds' feathers', 'a Stag's Head and Antlers', 'a Group of Stuffed Birds', and his pet raven Grip that was rearticulated as a character in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), recorded as 'Mr. Dickens's Favourite Raven — in a glazed case', as well as an 1845 edition of 'REYNARD THE FOX; a renowned Apologue of the Middle Age, reproduced in Rhyme, with extensive Introduction, by S. NAYLOR'.¹⁵ Dickens's well-documented enjoyment of melodrama and theatre, 'a phenomenon, in the nineteenth century, only nominally literary but overwhelmingly vocal, gestural, spectacular', also suggests a source of inspiration shared with the tableaux of more whimsical taxidermy.¹⁶

Taxidermy manuals show a similar concern regarding a superimposed, human personality, undermining the desired neutrality of a specimen by rendering it as a 'historical document'.¹⁷ Browne also worries that these inferior 'stuffers' (notably not taxonomized as taxidermists) conduct their work with a 'manner devoid of artistic feeling' and 'clumsy fingers guided by an unlearned or a clouded brain [...] invest[ing] it with their own sombre personality instead of with the bird's own *riante* elegance and perfection of form' (*Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy*, p. 166). The amateur taxidermist is represented as an unarticulated collection of haptic 'feeling' and 'clumsy fingers' (a contrast to the elegance of the bird), imposing their own morbidly 'sombre' personality, instead of preserving the natural '*riante*' essence of their specimen. Textual anthropomorphism also occurs in Browne's earlier guide, *Practical Taxidermy* (1878), which betrays a comic horror of the 'anathemas [heaped] upon the villain's head who is

¹³ Jenny Pyke, 'Charles Dickens and the Cat Paw Letter Opener', 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 19 (2014), p. 1 <<http://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.701>>.

¹⁴ Anon., 'The Story of Reineke the Fox', *Household Words*, 16 August 1851, pp. 484–91 (p. 484).

¹⁵ J. H. Stonehouse, *Catalogue of the Library of Charles Dickens from Gadshill* (London: Piccadilly Fountain Press, 1935), pp. 97, 128, 129, 130.

¹⁶ Deborah Vlock, *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 19 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 5.

¹⁷ Alberti, p. 1. Many of Alberti's taxidermy specimens 'refuse to be constrained by the zoological classification' for 'they are not only specimens, but also personalities; not only data but also historical documents' (p. 1).

suspected of “vulpicide”!). The ‘sacred fox’ is satirically transformed into the ‘late lamented’, and the fate of the killer of this animal must serve as ‘a warning to all who look with acquisitive eyes on the scented jacket of our “Reynard”’.¹⁸

The seeming irresistibility of anthropomorphizing an animal, both in writing and in death, also punctuates Browne’s later taxidermy manual:

Some time in November, 1885, a magnificent tiger, known as ‘Tippoo Sahib’, was killed by his companion in Messrs. Bostock and Wombwell’s menagerie at Norwich. So valuable was ‘Tippoo’ — who, by the way, was amiable enough, or so well trained, as to permit the redoubtable Captain Cardono to put his head into his mouth — that his market value was £400, as ‘a real, live, performing, double-striped Bengal Tiger.’ Unhappily, this paragon amongst tigers was, in an unguarded moment, seized by the throat by a more ferocious but less costly animal, who, jealous, no doubt, of the paragon’s surpassing merits, in less time than it takes to tell it, succeeded in killing him. A sudden spring, and four enormous canine teeth were planted through the carotid arteries and the windpipe, and in less than three minutes poor Tippoo lay dead. Mr. J. W. Bostock, having refused several tempting offers, generously allowed the Leicester Museum to acquire it for a nominal sum. By a strange fatality, Tippoo’s murderer, and, in fact, the whole den of tigers, have since then come under the hands of the museum operators; and now, in a large plate-glass case in the zoological room, ‘Tippoo’ is represented as fighting with another over the dead body of an elephant. (*Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy*, pp. 121–22)

Browne’s close attention to physical attributes such ‘carotid arteries’ and ‘enormous canine teeth’ is combined with the comic reanimation of Tippoo through the story of an ‘amiable [...] paragon amongst tigers’ who met his end at the teeth of his ‘companion’ and ‘murderer’. Unlike many of the other specimens in Browne’s manual, Tippoo retains his name and identity in death, but his physical reconstruction into a specimen displaces this through another, post-mortem, narration:

Directly it arrived, the jaws were opened and washed; the head was then placed upon a box, with a wedge opening the jaws to the extent required, and the muscles of the face, especially those over and under the eyes and at the corners of the mouth, having been worked up to give the necessary

¹⁸ Montagu Browne, *Practical Taxidermy: A Manual Instruction to the Amateur in Collecting, Preserving, and Setting up Natural History Specimens of All Kinds. To Which is Added a Chapter upon the Pictorial Arrangement of Museums*, 2nd edn (London: Upcott Gill, 1878), p. 162.

expression, a rapid colour-sketch of the head was made, showing the colours of the mucous membrane inside the mouth, of the great muscles leading from the inside of the lower lip nearly up to the formidable canines, of the tongue, nose, and eyes, with all other details required for ultimately reproducing the proper colours. This, however, did not give definite form nor arrangement of parts, therefore a model was made by taking a piece of well-kneaded 'pipe-' or modelling-clay, and, by the aid of the tools Nos. 27 and 29 to 36, accurately modelling by eye, assisted by measurements, the whole of the outside and inside (up to the teeth) of one half of the lower jaw. This, being done entirely by the knowledge and aptitude of the artist, is unteachable save by experience; a figure [...] is, however, given from a photograph. (*Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy*, p. 122)

Tippoo is reduced to a set of measurements and colours, re-membered from a subjective 'he' to an objective 'it', the identity he had in life rewritten by the taxidermist. While Tippoo is reinscribed with his name and story in the body of the text, the taxidermist physically removes Tippoo's internal organs and replaces them with a body of his own making (*Figs. 4, 5, 6*).

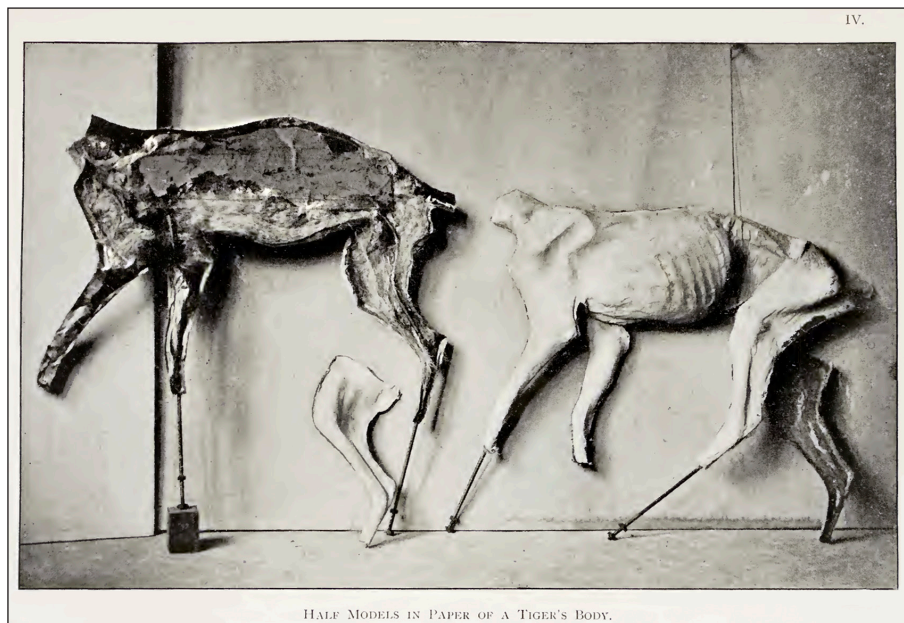
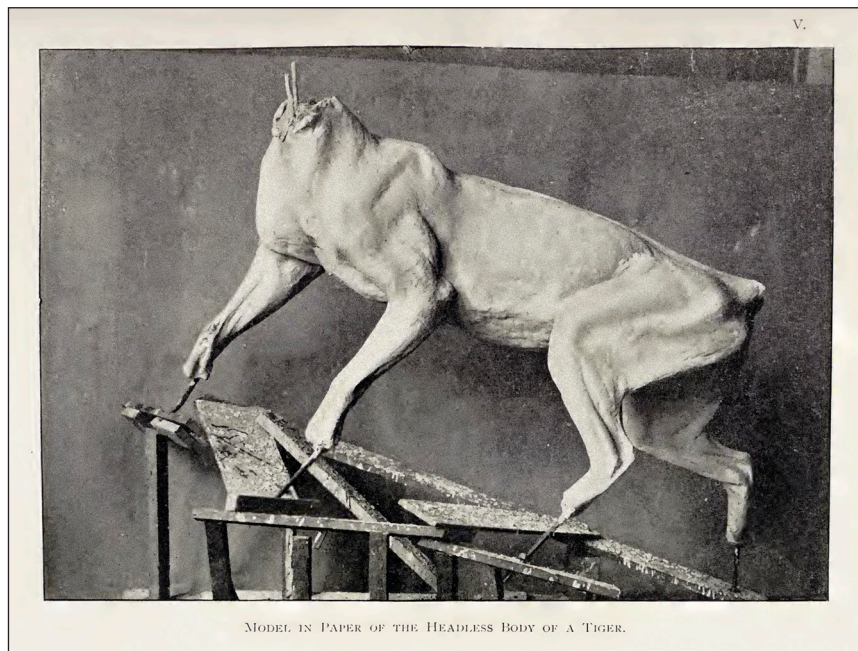


Fig. 4: Alexander Montagu Browne, Half Models in Paper of a Tiger's Body, *Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy*, facing p. 134.



*Fig. 5: Alexander Montagu Browne, Model in Paper of the Headless Body of a Tiger, *Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy*, facing p. 136.*



*Fig. 6: Alexander Montagu Browne, Group of Fighting Tigers with Elephant, Set up by Means of Paper Models, *Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy*, facing p. 140.*

The use of storytelling techniques in the taxidermy manual invests these devices with the power to reanimate, undermining the objectivity of the taxidermy specimen. Browne seems particularly invested in using storytelling to bring not just the process of taxidermy before the reader, but to reinvest the body with a multitude of legible possibilities. Of Tippoo's construction, he notes 'the place where the "knob" or head of the femur showed in the model [...] precisely *as if* it had been an operation in the flesh', combining close anatomical description which allows the model (referred to as a 'factitious body') to be inserted under the skin, with an evocative 'as if' that allows the 'flesh' of the tiger to appear as though alive (p. 122, emphasis added). Browne frequently uses 'as if' to allow the substitution of one body for another, creating tension between living and dead animal. The process of (re)creating Tippoo contains another strange substitution, for Browne's phrase 'when the paper model was quite finished, — the animal, which was intended for the tiger group, being shown lying prone, *as if* dead', uses an 'as if' that suggests an artificial body that has lived and then died rather than one that was never alive (p. 143, emphasis added). Each of Browne's twenty uses of 'as if' continue to tease the boundaries between subject and object, life and death, creating an uncanny tension between dead form and live animal. A 'lizard was laid upon its stomach as if walking', a larva is portrayed 'as if the creature were rapidly crawling', fish are represented 'as if swimming', and a 'moth itself may be suspended as if drying its wings, whilst another is in full flight'; while these animals are animated by the 'as if', the fact that the lizard is laid upon its stomach recalls the agency of the taxidermist (*Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy*, pp. 279, 292, 407, 409). Like the 'paralytically animated' bodies of *Our Mutual Friend*, the narrative's perspective enables the taxidermy mount to be both dead and alive at once.

Browne's approval of the 'varied expressions of hope, fear, love, and rage' as 'an immense step in advance of the old wooden school of taxidermy; [...] stiff, gaunt, erect and angular', continues these tensions between bodily life and death (*Practical Taxidermy*, p. 15). Like the strangely animate material of Mr Venus's shop, disrupting any single beady gaze on the anatomical body, Browne's descriptions evidence the interpretative nature of the specimen. Browne's language suggests the imposition of personality and emotion through the taxidermist's reconstruction, but also evokes the individual, subjective reading of these taxidermy bodies by the onlooker. As Daston and Galison have argued, 'the public personas of artist and scientist polarized' after the 1860s, with artists encouraged to express their subjectivity while 'scientists were admonished to restrain theirs' (p. 37). Taxidermy manuals like Browne's *Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy* problematize this division, particularly as artistically constructed taxidermy objects were used by scientists; such continued interrelationships are embodied in the manual's '*Artistic and Scientific*' title. The manifestation of authorial

intent in both taxidermy text and taxidermy object suggests the role of the taxidermist in mediating the information we can draw from the animal body, fracturing any single gaze on nature and framing our interpretation of physical and narrative form.

Charles Dickens and taxidermy

While Donna Haraway defines taxidermy as ‘about the single story, about nature’s unity, the unblemished type specimen [...] the art most suited to the epistemological and aesthetic stance of realism’, taxidermy manuals reveal the painstaking process of construction that fractures this clarity.¹⁹ *Our Mutual Friend* presents bodies and mysteries that similarly disrupt a clear-cut epistemology into multiple ‘single stories’ that require subjective interpretation. While the taxidermist’s art focuses on the interpretation of nature as to best represent life, Dickens problematizes this desire, addressing instead the subjective nature of these ‘sort of picture[s]’ and ‘articulations’, and how they can be read (Lee, p. 36). The imagery of taxidermy (and the figure of the taxidermist) also thickens the pages of Dickens’s last completed novel. From the echoes of the most popularly taxidermied animal, the bird, to anthropomorphic objects that reflect their viewer’s perspective, to the uncanny body ‘recalled to life’ through the interrogative power of the detective gaze (Lee, p. 1), ‘paralytically animated’ figures and misleading identities are rife.

These issues of epistemic ideals, identity, and form are revealed through Mr Venus’s discussion of the problems with Wegg’s amputated leg. ‘When I prepare a miscellaneous one’, Mr Venus says of a skeletal specimen, ‘I know beforehand that I can’t keep to nature [...]. I have just sent home a beauty — a perfect Beauty — to a school of art. One leg Belgian, one leg English, and the pickings of eight other people in it’ (Dickens, p. 85). Subverting the *Taxidermist’s Guide*’s instructions to ‘COPY NATURE’, and collapsing the categories of anatomist, craftsman, and scientist, Dickens’s taxidermist riffs on the impossibilities of keeping a reconstructed body epistemologically sound, disrupting the resolution of multiple body parts into one singular ‘it’. While the bodies of *Our Mutual Friend* are fragmented and actively interrogated, their reconstruction rarely provides the categorical truths desired of the scientific specimen. Even the detective, Mr Inspector, despairs to Eugene Wrayburn and Mortimer Lightwood that ‘you never got a sign out of bodies [...]. You got nothing out of bodies, if it was ever so’ (pp. 35–36). Dickens’s character portrayals also draw on the popular pseudoscience of physiognomy, in which the face could be read for clues

¹⁹ Donna Haraway, ‘Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936’, *Social Text*, 11 (1984–85), 20–64 (p. 34).

as to character, playing with the concept that the personal and subjective could be physically inscribed while simultaneously problematizing the usefulness of such signification. This worrying at the bodies of the novel figures not just a tugging at the threads of scientific objectivity emerging around the time *Our Mutual Friend* was written, but a deeper anxiety that emerges from Dickens's later novels of the possibility of knowing what Browne terms 'real truth' (*Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy*, p. 67); instead, all we have to work with are stories, perceptions, and readings. Readers are left with the 'embodied conundrum' of Eugene who 'bored [himself] to the last degree by trying to find out what [he] meant' (p. 283); and John Harmon (alias Handford, alias Rokesmith), who performs new identities after his supposed death. The value in taxonomically fixing names to bodies in *Our Mutual Friend* is distorted by multiple puzzling and unfixed identities. The successful detectives of the novel, Mr Venus, Mr Inspector, and Jenny Wren, are those whose vocations rest on constructing and telling stories through the body.

Our Mutual Friend's viewpoint on the world reflects that of natural history as a discipline, in which 'physical characteristics, origins, inter-relationships and distribution' are the material on which meaning rests (Yanni, p. 2). Dickens's familiarity with scientific and museum culture forms part of his imaginative landscape and is present in the objects and scenes in his novels: his representation of 'paralytically animated' matter disrupts static meaning, inviting instead a post-structuralist reading of these bodies.²⁰ Undermining a binary reading of order versus chaos, Dickens instead celebrates 'the energies of becoming over the fixities of being'.²¹ As Adrian Poole observes, 'most of the life [in *Our Mutual Friend*] [...] tends to a state of suspended animation. Nothing seems certainly dead nor entirely alive', evoking the language and texture of the taxidermy specimen that haunts the 'frontier between the living and the inanimate'.²² Yet this problematizing of boundaries stems from within scientific as well as literary culture, developing earlier ideas such as galvanism, evoked in the popular imagination through the paralytically animated body of Frankenstein's monster. As Catherine Gallagher suggests, this 'vastly multipl[ies] the entities that could be described as living or dead', and Dickens exploits these doubts to play with the uncertainty of form and knowledge.²³ While the majority

²⁰ Adelene Buckland, "'The Poetry of Science": Charles Dickens, Geology, and Visual and Material Culture in Victorian London', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 35 (2007), 679–94 (p. 679).

²¹ Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 18.

²² Adrian Poole, 'Introduction', in *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. by Poole, pp. ix–xxiv (p. ix); John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 174.

²³ Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 189.

of taxidermy guides discuss the necessity of entirely removing the interior of the animal, it is this loss of interiority, of subjective self and identity that Dickens's descriptions seem most concerned with. How can one perceive what lurks within through gazing upon the skin? While the taxidermist-detective cannot truly revivify either in life or in Dickens's novel, their physical and narrative rearticulation of the body may provide a useful bridge; the taxidermist figure in *Our Mutual Friend* attempts to access information about the self and identity through reading and reforming the body. Through creating an interpreted, manipulated body, the taxidermist utilizes storytelling to articulate the narrative framework upon which the skin of knowledge might be hung.

The figure of the taxidermist in *Our Mutual Friend*

The specimens of Mr Venus's shop parallel the corpses Gaffer recovers from the river, the material body in *Our Mutual Friend* positioned as knowledge for consumption. Samuel Alberti asserts that 'zoos and museums are engines of difference, classifying and presenting the entangled mess of the natural world in a comprehensible way' (p. 7), but Dickens's interpretation of Mr Venus's workshop presents an alternative to ordered nature:

'Oh dear me, dear me!' sighs Mr Venus heavily, snuffing the candle, 'the world that appeared so flowery has ceased to blow! You're casting your eye round the shop, Mr Wegg. Let me show you a light. My working bench. My young man's bench. A Wice. Tools. Bones, wariou. Skulls, wariou. Preserved Indian baby. African ditto. Bottled preparations, wariou. Everything within reach of your hand, in good preservation. The mouldy ones atop. What's in those hampers over them, again, I don't quite remember. Say, human wariou. Cats. Articulated English baby. Dogs. Ducks. Glass eyes, wariou. Mummied bird. Dried cuticle, wariou. Oh dear me! That's the general panoramic view.' Having so held and waved the candle as that all these heterogeneous objects seemed to come forward obediently and then retire again, Mr Venus despondently repeats, 'Oh dear me, dear me!' resumes his seat, and, with drooping despondency upon him, falls to pouring himself out more tea. (pp. 86–88)

The taxidermist's workshop figures an image of the traditional cabinet of curiosities or *Wunderkammer*: Marcus Stone's illustration is not dissimilar to the frontispiece from *Museum Wormianum* (1655), depicting Ole Worm's collection (Figs. 7, 8). This collection of curiosities was out of fashion by the time Dickens was writing *Our Mutual Friend*, with the dark and dusty environment of 'Mr Venus's museum' (p. 760) connotatively conjoined to the

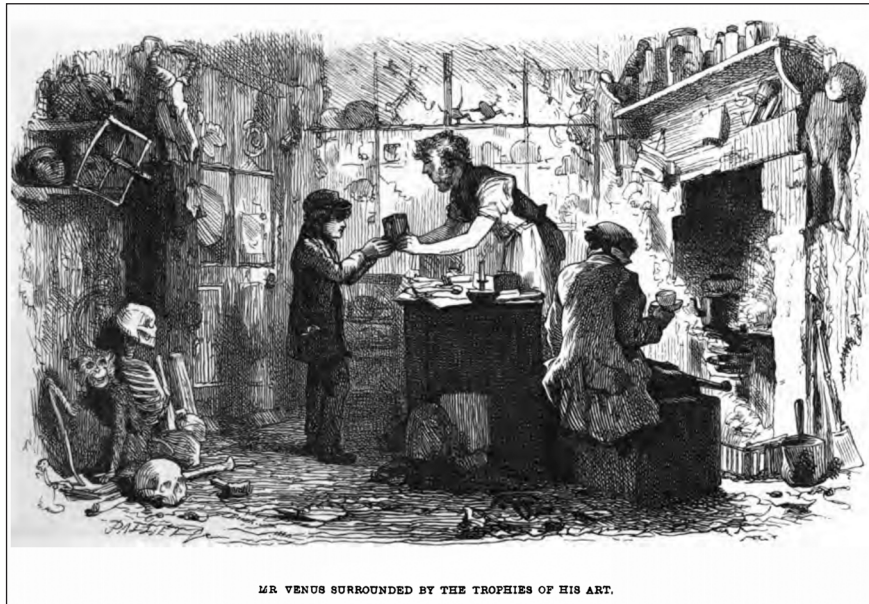


Fig. 7: Marcus Stone, Mr Venus Surrounded by the Trophies of His Art, in Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (London: Peterson, 1865), p. 112.



Fig. 8: Frontispiece, Olaus Wormius, *Museum Wormianum* (Leiden: Elsevir, 1655).
Wikimedia Commons.

'dry-as-dust' collections deplored by Montagu Browne (*Practical Taxidermy*, p. 312). Venus's listing collapses the categories of stocktaking and of cataloguing, mangling the different roles and processes of anatomist and taxidermist, curator and shopkeeper. The shop is analogous to a taxidermy specimen itself; the objects suspended and preserved through Venus's narrative articulation together make up a 'general panoramic view', animated through the flickering light Venus shines upon them. But it is Venus's articulation that brings each separate part to the focalized viewpoint of Wegg (and by extension, of the reader). The implementation of taxonomy, with the objects identified and animated 'obediently when they were named', suggests the importance of categorization in the overall structure both of anatomy and information, but, as with the taxidermy specimen, it cannot be conveyed without the taxidermist's interpretation.

Venus's taxidermy continues to evoke the physical methodology and narrative articulation of the taxidermy manual, imposing character onto the object-body:

Concurrently, Wegg perceives a pretty little dead bird lying on the counter, with its head drooping on one side of the rim of Mr Venus's saucer, and a long stiff wire piercing its breast. As if it were Cock Robin, the hero of the ballad and Mr Venus were the sparrow with his bow and arrow, and Mr Wegg were the fly with his little eye. Mr Venus dives and produces another muffin, yet untoasted; taking the arrow out of the breast of Cock Robin, he proceeds to toast it on the end of that cruel instrument. When it is brown, he dives again, and produces butter, with which he completes his work. (p. 84)

While Venus's performance conjures up the 'method of preserving the skin of birds' by 'introducing two ends of an iron wire into the body' (Lee, p. 3), another authorial 'as if' creates an identity for the robin derived from nursery rhyme rather than taxonomy. Instead of the desired impression of life, the 'long stiff wire' used by Venus pins the bird to its nursery rhyme fate, a death driven home in the uncertainty as to whether the wire represents the arrow that killed the character or the taxidermy arts that impose the performance of this character through the dead body.

Venus's specimens continue to recall the issues of subjectivity that arise in the taxidermy manual, when he 'rescues the canary in a glass case' to return to a customer, boasting 'There's animation! On a twig, making up his mind to hop! Take care of him; he's a lovely specimen' (p. 86). The perception of the canary's own subjectivity, 'making up his mind', is articulated both physically and narratively by the taxidermist, anticipating Browne's concern as to whether his articulated bird could 'really' use its glass eyes to see beyond its beak. The motif of the 'paralytically animated' body, anthropomorphized by perspective and the storytelling ability of the taxidermist,

undermines the solidity of knowledge drawn from bodies that adopt new identities or slide between life and death. The ‘as if’, as in the taxidermy guide, becomes the key articulation that allows this characterization and vivification:

The babies — the Hindu, African, and the British — the ‘human wariious’, the French gentleman, the green glass-eyed cats, the dogs, the ducks, and all the rest of the collection, show for an instant *as if* paralytically animated; while even poor little Cock Robin at Mr Venus’s elbow turns over on his innocent side. (p. 91, emphasis added)

Moving away from the ability to ‘determine with certainty’ and to embody ‘real truth’ declared in the taxidermy guides of Lee and Browne, Dickens’s taxidermist foregrounds the alternative sources of inspiration on which taxidermists also drew.²⁴ Folklore and nursery rhymes are balanced with the order of taxonomy and natural history museums: storytelling and science are symbiotic in *Our Mutual Friend*, and it is by using both that central characters reconstruct bodies and solve mysteries.

The death and reconstruction of the ‘bird of prey’

The threat of fragmentation and death in *Our Mutual Friend* is maintained through the text’s taxidermy imagery, the distorted form of Silas Wegg, the dead yet alive John Harmon, and the trembling decomposition of Mr Dolls. The anxieties these images raise proliferate throughout the novel, presenting no ultimate solution for such uncertainties. Instead of a heavy reliance on object-based epistemology, however, the novel gestures towards combining both kinds of form (anatomical and textual) as a means of resolving these collapsing categories into identifiable ones. While the resolution of mystery and identity in the novel does not advocate for ‘truth’ with the clarity put forward in the taxidermy manuals, stories and interpretations can be formed by piecing together and reading bodies using a similar methodology. Montagu Browne’s photographic

²⁴ The tension between representing the taxidermist as either a man of science or an artist, and of the veracity of the taxidermy object, are also present in Venus’s shop. On the one hand, Venus represents the untrustworthy taxidermist, who cobbles together ‘human wariious’ to create scientifically unsound specimens, embodying an anxiety present in accounts of nineteenth-century anatomy; Harriet Ritvo in *The Platypus and the Mermaid and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), notes that as far back as 1799, zoologist George Shaw expressed concerns that the newly discovered platypus might have had its beak stitched on by an unscrupulous taxidermist (p. 4). Conversely, Venus also embodies the moral integrity of the man of science, which, with his ability to collect and articulate the disconnected, brings the truth of Wegg’s villainy to light.

plates, for example, append a legible text by which the body can be read.²⁵ Mr Inspector, on the other hand, reads the body of Gaffer. In the case of ‘the man from Somewhere’ (p. 23),

this Proclamation [offering a reward for ‘the solution of the mystery’] rendered Mr Inspector additionally studious, and caused him to stand meditating on river-stairs and causeways, and to go lurking about in boats, putting this and that together. But, according to the success with which you put this and that together, you get a woman and a fish apart, or a Mermaid in combination. And Mr Inspector could get nothing better than a Mermaid, which no Judge and Jury would believe in. Thus, like the tides on which it had been borne to the knowledge of men, the Harmon Murder — as it came to be popularly called — went up and down, and ebbed and flowed [...] until at last, after a long interval of slack water, it got out to sea and drifted away.²⁶

Mr Inspector’s reconstructions are problematic, his putting of the non-specific ‘this and that together’ forming not knowledge but instead suggesting that this kind of reconstruction can create new, disconcertingly fictional readings. Meanwhile, the story of the ‘Harmon Murder’ is itself displaced in the narrative for the floating corpse of John Harmon, as the story ‘got out to sea and drifted away’ from popular consciousness.

These examples continue to emphasize that corporeal and textual forms should not be separated if we are to understand the body:

‘Take care’, said Riderhood. ‘You’ll disfigure. Or pull asunder perhaps.’ ‘I am not going to do either, not even to your Grandmother’, said Mr Inspector; ‘but I mean to have it. Come!’ he added, at once persuasively and with authority to the hidden object in the water, as he played the line again; ‘it’s no good this sort of game, you know. You *must* come up. I mean to have you.’ There was so much virtue in this distinctly and decidedly meaning to have it, that it yielded a little, even while the line was played. (p. 174, emphasis in original)

²⁵ Many of the taxidermy forms in Dickens’s pages meet their end in the same manner as Browne’s animals do: Mr Dolls dies by the ‘slow narcotisation’ of alcohol poisoning (Browne, *Artistic and Scientific Taxidermy*, p. 26), reversing the pickling process of preservation in the drunken sense of ‘paralytic’ and threatening to fall into decomposing fragments once more; while Gaffer’s ‘bird of prey’ is drowned in ‘fresh water’.

²⁶ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 40. The mermaid was another of the bodies that, in the nineteenth century, offered a taxonomic challenge to the distinction between human and animal, perhaps even between reality and mythology. As Ritvo notes of the platypus in *The Platypus and the Mermaid*, the mermaid was another animal in which the figures of the taxidermist and the fraud could be conflated. Showman P. T. Barnum, for example, sewed together a monkey and a fish to create his infamous ‘Fiji Mermaid’ (Ritvo, pp. 178–83).

Riderhood's fear that Mr Inspector will 'disfigure' the 'bird of prey' evokes the fears voiced by a multitude of taxidermy manuals, which encourage specific care so as not to mutilate a valuable body. Mr Inspector's respectful treatment of Gaffer's body and awareness of the 'bird of prey's' humanity distorts the *Taxidermist's Guide's* detached instructions on caring for a bird before it is treated:

Immediately after a Bird is killed, the throat and nostrils should be stuffed with tow, cotton, or fine rags, and a small quantity wound round the bill, to prevent the blood from staining the plumage [...]. In proceeding to skin the Bird, it should be laid on its back, and the feathers of the breast separated to the right and left, when a broad interval will be discovered, reaching from the top to the bottom of the breast-bone. (pp. 20–21)

The wiping of Gaffer's hair from his face by the Inspector's own handkerchief, the laying of the body on its back, and the separation of the feathers (evoked in the careful lifting and laying down of Gaffer's hand) bring to mind the use of cotton to prevent staining and to clean the body. When Lightwood asks, 'What is to be done with the remains?' (p. 177), Mr Inspector reinforces his own perception of Gaffer's body: "I'll find the nearest of our men to come and take charge of him; I still call it *him*, you see", said Mr Inspector, looking back as he went, with a philosophical smile upon the force of habit' (p. 177, emphasis in original). While, as Creaney notes, 'in both the novel and the tableau, the dead body stands as a malleable, rewriteable signifier that can be held in a state of suspended animation, but one that also carries a haunted trace of a previous life' (p. 73), Mr Inspector's interpretation is skilled enough not to overwrite identity, much as Browne fears the unskilled taxidermist's 'clumsy fingers' will do, and as Mr Venus does in the creation of a taxidermy Cock Robin.

Creating meaning by physically and descriptively articulating Gaffer's corpse, Mr Inspector is able to interpret what has happened to him:

Soon, the form of the bird of prey, dead some hours, lay stretched upon the shore, with a new blast storming at it, and clotting the wet hair with hailstones [...]. 'Now, see', said Mr Inspector after mature deliberation: kneeling one knee beside the body, when they had stood looking down on the drowned man, as he had many a time looked down on many another man: 'the way of it was this. Of course you gentlemen hardly failed to observe that he was towing by the neck and arms.' They had helped to release the rope, and of course not. 'And you will have observed before, and you will observe now, that this knot, which was drawn chock-tight around his neck by the strain of his own arms, is a slip-knot', holding it

up for demonstration. Plain enough. ‘Likewise you will have observed how he had run the other end of this rope to his boat.’ It had the curves and indentations in it still, where it had been twined and bound. (p. 175)

Mr Inspector performs a ‘reading’ of Gaffer’s body in which the repeated insistence that the onlookers ‘observe’ positions them as students of anatomy. The inferences drawn from the specimen are at their most powerful when physical and verbal interpretations are intertwined. Speaking like an anatomist giving a demonstration, borrowing the language of the taxidermist’s manual, Mr Inspector lays the body out as though constructing a diagram to instruct the observer (and the reader).

Indeed, Mr Inspector’s success in drawing information from the dead ‘bird of prey’ appears to lie in his ability to ‘read’ Gaffer’s story through his body. Mr Inspector’s analysis of Gaffer’s body is worth citing at length, as it reveals the careful attention to detail that evokes the subject who once inhabited it, exactly what the skill of the taxidermist often seeks to obscure:

‘Now, see’, said Mr Inspector, ‘see how it [a rope] works round upon him. It’s a wild, tempestuous evening when this man that was’, stooping to wipe some hailstones out of his hair with an end of his own drowned jacket — ‘this man that was, rows out upon the river on his usual lay. He carries with him this coil of rope. He always carries with him this coil of rope. It’s as well known to me as he was himself. Sometimes it lay in the bottom of his boat. Sometimes he hung it loose round his neck. He was a light dresser, was this man; you see?’ — lifting the loose neckerchief over his breast, and taking the opportunity of wiping the dead lips with it — ‘and when it was wet, or freezing, or blew cold, he would hang this coil of line round his neck. Last evening he does this. Worse for him! He dodges about in his boat, does this man, till he gets chilled. His hands’, taking up one of them, which dropped like a leaden weight, ‘get numbed. He sees some object, that’s in his way of business, floating. [...] Now, see! He can swim, can this man, and instantly he strikes out. But in such striking out he tangles his arms, pulls strong on the slip-knot, and it runs home. The object he had expected to take in tow floats by, and his own boat tows him dead, to where we found him, all entangled in his own line. You’ll ask me how I make out about the pockets? First, I’ll tell you more; there was silver in ’em. How do I make that out? Simple and satisfactory. Because he’s got it here.’ The lecturer held up the tightly-clenched right hand. (pp. 175–77)

Mr Inspector’s combination of facts with authorial techniques to build suspense, the ‘wild, tempestuous evening’ echoing the cliché of ‘a dark and stormy night’, begins a reconstruction that is explicitly a story. Constantly

referring back to the physical evidence, Mr Inspector solves the mystery of Gaffer's death by reading form, temporarily reanimating Gaffer through his use of the present tense. In the wire-like hyphenation of his speech between given explanation and physical object (such as when he breaks away from his discussion of Gaffer's rope to wipe Gaffer's lips), Mr Inspector's articulations perform the taxidermist's desire to 're-assemble [...] to reunite [...] and to place [body parts] in their natural position', working to reconstruct the 'man that was' (Lee, p. 23). Using techniques similar to those offered in the taxidermy guide, Mr Inspector's reading also presents the kind of information that can be drawn from the specimen: histories, stories, and interpretations, rather than data or facts. Gaffer's hands, particularly, are rearticulated here through close description, not to teach the names and positions of the bones, but to better understand the last time their living subject moved them. The troubling of boundaries between life and death by hands has been foreshadowed previously in the novel, with Gaffer calling attention to 'how dead [his hands] are' in the cold, while the skeleton hands of Venus's workshop 'have very much the appearance of wanting to lay hold' of Silas Wegg (pp. 69, 86). The 'now' used by the taxidermy manual to suggest the immediacy of the object is also used, but not the 'likes' and 'as ifs' that the manual uses to revivify its creatures. Dickens's text reserves this technique to animate objects (rather than bodies) in the novel, the solution to the mystery reached by the storytelling of Mr Inspector (the only usage of 'like' serves rather as a reminder of Gaffer's death and current lack of animation, his waterlogged body 'like a leaden weight'). Instead, Gaffer temporarily relives his last moments through Mr Inspector's description of them.

Contrary to an idealized specimen from which information can be drawn, Dickens's novel works towards interpretation, building knowledge through narrative and physical clues instead of assigning a genus or pinning the truth in place. *Our Mutual Friend's* incorporation of taxidermy presents not just problems of how we can interpret the body, but problems of this perspective changing bodies and identities. Both taxidermy manual and literary text combine similar representational strategies to move towards an understanding of the body, intertwining 'literary' techniques (characterization, analogy, and storytelling) with typically 'scientific' attributes (close observation and analysis of the body). Neither person nor object belongs properly to the category of 'thing' or 'being'; identities and selves change shape and evolve. The resolution of these identities often coincides with the resolution of shape and form, through the reading of the taxidermy object; an epistemological bridge through which confusion can become interpreted knowledge. Juxtaposing the bodies portrayed in popular taxidermy manuals and *Our Mutual Friend* reveals that despite the potential problems of interpretation, attention to material articulation can solve mysteries, while storytelling techniques can enhance the construction and dissemination of scientific knowledge.