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Parts and Holes

In the last week of June 1824 Thomas Carlyle, on the cusp of a brilliant literary career, bounced up Highgate Hill to meet one of the country’s reigning men of letters. You might assume that the twenty-eight-year-old had lots to talk about with the veteran poet and critic, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge was Britain’s chief exponent of German Idealism, a tradition in which young Carlyle was himself fluent: his first book, published the following year, would be a biography of the philosopher Schiller. Yet far from a meeting of minds, this encounter between the literary generations might best be described as a repulsion of bodies. Carlyle was barely able to contain his shock at the ruin of the man who shuffled forward to greet him at 3, The Grove. Coleridge, he reported to his brother in an appalled post-mortem the next day, was a ‘fat flabby incurvated personage, at once short, rotund and relaxed, with a watery mouth, a snuffy nose, a pair of strange brown timid yet earnest looking eyes’.

It would be hard to imagine a greater contrast between this damp, spongy apparition and his spare, springy visitor. Carlyle appeared to have been whittled out of the birches of his native Dumfriesshire. His eyes were light and burning, his nose and mouth as decided as granite, and he had doubtless fizzed up North London’s steep incline in double-quick time, only to find this dollop of slop waiting for him at the top. Over the previous thirty years Coleridge had been
addicted to opium, which not only slackened the connective tissues of his brilliant mind but turned his body turgid. The sagginess that so offended Carlyle was partly due to the older man’s constipated and swollen gut, the humiliating legacy of his drug dependency. An ancillary snuff habit, meanwhile, had made rivers of his eyes, mouth and nose.

Sharp Oedipal elbows partly account for the savagery of Carlyle’s attack on Coleridge’s pitiable physique. Over the years the young Scot would frequently be mentioned as the natural successor to ‘the Sage of Highgate, and the comparison made him furious: he would be his own man, thank you very much – entirely original, self-hewn. And indeed, this sally turned out to be only the first of several extraordinary verbal attacks on Coleridge’s body by the young pretender. Just the following year Carlyle returned to the subject, refining the rhetoric of his disgust so that Coleridge now became ‘a mass of richest spices, putrefied into a dunghill, which he longed to “toss … in a blanket”.’ It was as if Carlyle hoped that by giving Coleridge a good shake he might redistribute his feculent stuffing into a more uniform shape. At the very least he would get him to sit up straight.

This disillusionment so early in his career did nothing to dent Carlyle’s conviction that bodies mattered as much as minds when it came to making sense of what had gone before. Thirteen years after that Highgate encounter he was exhorting his readers to remember that ‘the bygone ages of the world were actually filled by living men … Not abstractions were they, not diagrams and theorems, but men, in buff or other coats and breeches, with colour in their cheeks, with passions in their stomach, and the idioms, features and vitalities of very men.’ It was precisely these ‘vitalities’ that Carlyle worked so hard to bring to his own written accounts of the Past, a past which, according to his famous formulation, was best read by setting the biographies of Great Men end to end. Dante, Shakespeare, Oliver Cromwell and Frederick the Great all crashed through Carlyle’s books so vividly that it seemed as if at any moment they might bound out of the pages, take the reader by the hand and explain just what it felt like
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to write *Hamlet* or win the Battle of Naseby. ‘The figures of most historians seem like dolls stuffed with bran,’ wrote the Victorian critic James Russell Lowell, ‘but Carlyle’s are so real in comparison, that, if you prick them, they bleed.’

From the beginning of the nineteenth century British men and women had been piling into the cities from the countryside, exactly as Carlyle himself had done in 1809 when he left his native village of Ecclefechan to study at Edinburgh University. Strangers who would never previously have set eyes on one another increasingly found themselves in an involuntarily intimate embrace at the factory bench, the railway station, the lodging house, the beach or on the top deck of an omnibus. Other people’s sneezes, bums, elbows, smells, snores, farts and breathy whistles were, quite literally, in your face. Privacy, in the form of screens, locks, water closets, first-class carriages and single beds, was available only to a privileged few. For everyone else it was a question of raising thresholds of embarrassment and shame to protect against sensory overload. Of course, you could always turn to a physiognomy guide, or an etiquette book, or even the Bible, to tell you how to sort this untidy spill of corporeality into categories that made sense of it all – the clean and the dirty, the pure and the wicked, the rough and the genteel. But even here there were ambiguities, contradictions, collisions of meaning and sense.

So if our great-great-grandparents have a reputation for denying or concealing the body, it is only because they were obliged to live with it so intensely. And this reticence slipped naturally into the way that they wrote, or rather didn’t, about their physical selves. For while Carlyle made a point of describing Frederick the Great’s ‘negligent plenty’ of fine auburn hair and Mirabeau’s ‘seamed, carbuncled face’, most biographers of the time behaved as if their subjects had taken leave of the body, or had never possessed such a thing in the first place. If flesh and blood registered in Victorian life stories at all, it was in the broadest, airiest generalities – a manly stride here, the sweetest smile there. Mostly, though, there was a hole in the biographical text where arms, legs, breasts and bellies should have been.
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It was this jarring absence that Lytton Strachey seized upon in *Eminent Victorians* (1918), his iconoclastic takedown of three notable men and one woman of the nineteenth century. In scalpel prose the Bloomsbury Group stalwart revealed that his quartet of Victorian eminences were not only vain, petty and self-deceiving, they were physically faintly ridiculous too. Dr Thomas Arnold, the pious headmaster of Rugby, had legs that were too short for his body, while saintly Florence Nightingale had a ‘peevish’ mouth and descended into a fat, cushiony old age. The bulging forehead of Cardinal Henry Manning reminded cowed colleagues of a swooping eagle, while General Gordon’s ‘brick-red complexion’ was probably as much the result of brandy as it was of Khartoum’s relentless noonday sun. And that’s not forgetting *Eminent Victorians*’ cast of supporting characters, including Lord Panmure, whose ‘bulky mass’ reminded his friends of a bison, and Sidney Herbert, who was as sprightly as a stag.

Lytton Strachey’s insistence on exposing the moral and psychological frailties of his Victorian subjects has carried bracingly over into our own times. Indeed, we are all Stracheyites now, alert for humbug and self-deception in the stories that people in the past liked to tell about themselves. Yet when it comes to the attention that *Eminent Victorians* paid to physical form, little trace remains. In fact, in today’s biographies the body barely makes an appearance at all. It might be there, in its cradle, in Chapter 2 (Chapter 1 is for the forefathers and the Condition of England), at which point it gets a quick once-over and is assigned its father’s brown eyes or its mother’s long, loose limbs. From that point on we hear little about the biographical subject’s physical passage through the world until the penultimate chapter, at which point he or she develops a nasty cough, or a nigirling stomach pain, and someone calls the doctor. If the subject of the book is a woman there may be a bit of blood in the childbirth chapter, but there won’t be any mention of menstruation, hiccups, a headache or any of those fluxy realities that we all know about from our own bodily lives. Finally, in the closing pages, the subject takes to their bed, mutters a
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few last words and is committed to the grave, whereupon they duly crumble into dust.

As a result even the most attentive reader may finish a biography of a Victorian, eminent or otherwise, feeling that they’d be hard-pressed to pick them out in an identity parade. (Biographies typically contain visual likenesses, to be sure, but those quarter-page black-and-white images don’t show the body in motion, can’t give you much idea of its habitual off-duty slouch, let alone its sound or smell.) So while a Life of Charlotte Brontë might supply chapter and verse on the novelist’s rich childhood imagination, it won’t prepare you for the fact that when she opens her mouth a Northern Irish accent comes out (you were expecting genteel Yorkshire). Likewise, having devoured a joint biography of the poets Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett, you may feel that you have experienced all the exhilaration of their elopement to Italy, not to mention the intricacies of the lyric form. Yet, what a shock on encountering the happy couple in person to realise that both are partly African, with dark complexions, large mouths and, in the case of Barrett, a flat nose. What you’re seeing is the physical trace of their shared Jamaican heritage, a heritage that includes a moment two generations previously when a plantation-owner glanced at one of his female slaves and felt a tickle of entitlement.

The next stop is the Lake District, where you find yourself discreetly circling Coleridge’s erstwhile friend William Wordsworth, trying to work out why the shape of his body looks so different from the front than from the back. Is it some trick of the northern light? Finally, you bump into William Gladstone, the esteemed Liberal Prime Minister, and are taken aback to notice that his left forefinger is missing. He lost it in a shooting accident as a young man, but good manners mean that his contemporaries never mentioned it, portraitists ignored it, and even the caricaturists tactfully covered it up. You, however, can’t stop staring at that flaccid black finger-stall where the missing digit used to be.

‘You’, of course, means ‘me’. For I am the reader who feels chronically short-changed by the lack of physical detail in biography. What,
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I long to know, were people in the nineteenth century actually ‘like’ – a word that has a long and distinguished heritage in the English language, one that tells of deep presence and profound affinity. Tell me about these people’s books and their battles, their big love affairs and their little meannesses by all means – but how did it feel to catch sight of them across a crowded room, or to find yourself sitting next to them at dinner? Did they lean in close and whisper, or stand at a distance and shout? Did they smell (probably, most people did) – but of what exactly? Were they natty or slobbish, a lip-licker or a nose-picker?

Victorians Undone is an attempt to reverse the situation whereby biography, which parses as ‘the writing of a life’, has become indifferent to the vital signs of that life – to breath, movement, touch and taste. Dressed in its Sunday Best, the book might be described as participating in the ‘material turn’ in the Humanities, part of the new wave of interest amongst historians and literary scholars in objects that they can feel and hold, rather than simply chase through text after text towards an ever-receding horizon. In its more workaday incarnation Victorians Undone is an experiment to see what new stories emerge when you use biography – which, after all, is embodied history – to put mouths, bellies and beards back into the nineteenth century. I have been careful to avoid both Carlyle’s hectoring hagiography and Strachey’s sniggering snideness when writing about physical form. Nonetheless, I hope to introduce a certain lumpiness to canonical life narratives that have previously been rendered as smooth, symmetrical, and as strangely unconvincing as a death mask. For it is in lopsidedness and open-endedness, in bulges, dips, hollows, oozes and itches, that we come closest to a sense of what it feels like to live in the solitude of a single body, both then and now.

What follows are five corporeal conundrums that have emerged over twenty-five years of reading and writing about the Victorians, tangles of flesh and bone that have snagged in my mind long after the Life is supposed to be over. Why did the young Queen Victoria become obsessed with other women’s figures in the spring of 1839,
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and exactly what made Charles Darwin grow that iconic beard in 1862, a good five years after his contemporaries had all retired their razors? Why was the great philosophical novelist George Eliot so conscious that her right hand was larger than her left, and how did the poet-artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti manage to paint his mistress’s lips so beautifully while simultaneously treating them as a dirty joke? Finally, how did a working-class child called Fanny Adams dis-integrate into pieces in 1867 before being reassembled into a popular saying, one we still use today, but would stop, appalled, if we knew its origins?

I have chosen to use body parts as opposed to whole forms because they are biography’s precision tool. While an entire body may pull in several different directions at once – the right ear has this story to tell, the big toe quite another – a single part offers something both finer and more penetrating. We can follow a thickened index finger or a deep baritone voice into the realms of social history, medical discourse, aesthetic practice and religious observance. In the process, a whole nexus of cultural power is laid bare. And while this is a power predicated on those old faceless monoliths of class, race and gender, it expresses itself not in tables and charts or theoretical jargon, but in beauty, gracefulness, symmetry and vulgarity, roughness and dirt. Its language is one of admiring glances, cruel sniggers, an implacably turned back.

By locating these five body parts at the moment they created crises in individual lives, I hope to add something to our understanding of what it meant to be a human animal in the nineteenth century. What I can’t do is say anything systematising about the ‘Victorian body’. At best, these case histories are panes of glass through which to catch a partial glimpse of a huge, teeming landscape of thought and feeling that may, in fact, never become fully comprehensible to us. That’s because the body, no matter how we might like to imagine it as a safe haven from the messy contingency of history, is deeply implicated in it. Put simply, a broken wrist in 1866 does not mean, and may not even feel, the same as it would today. It’s not just a question of whether
the Victorians had codeine and splints to make things better, but the
far less easily settled matter of how they regarded their wrists – as part
of their essential core, or as a peripheral wing? And then what about
the middle-aged woman who in 1857 sends a letter congratulating her
niece on looking so ‘fat’? We gasp at Aunty’s insult, and it takes a while
to realise that what is being offered is actually a loving, relieved
compliment, a celebration of blooming good health in an age where
slenderness is death’s calling card. Only if we come prepared to check
our impulse to map our own bodily experiences directly on to the
nineteenth century will we begin to understand what is really going
on.

Yet although my starting point is the pastness of the past, a resist-
ance to reading the Victorians as if they were just like us, except
smaller and dressed in funny clothes, I can’t ignore the striking contin-
uities either. For although the Victorians inherited an Enlighten-
ment ideal of the human form as coherent and transcendent, their experi-
ence of their actual physical selves was remarkably similar to ours,
which is to say confused and mostly improvised. Cloning may not
have been possible in the nineteenth century, nor organ transplant
nor gender reassignment surgery, but there was still a blurring of the
boundaries designed to keep one body (and, by extension one class,
one sex and one race) distinct from another. The Great Exhibition of
1851 showcased technological advances in prosthetic legs and glass
eyes, while wearing someone else’s hair had become a universal salve
for anyone who was unhappy with what Nature had provided.
Meanwhile, industrial workers, from coalminers to glass-blowers,
found that the raw materials of their trades slipped under the skin to
lodge in their lungs and livers, so that they became effectively walking
alloys. Karl Marx warned that these men and women were already
well on their way to being replaced by the very machines they now
operated. The robots were on their way.

Meanwhile, far away from the centres of technological innovation,
even the most docile of Victorian bodies lived in a state of constant
perturbation. Behaviours that started as learned gestures – the correct
way to pour from a teapot or lift a seven-pound hammer – were repeated until they became part of a repertoire of automatic movements. Under the skin, yet-to-be-identified hormones and neurons fizzed away, producing moment-by-moment synaptic snaps that resulted, over time, in permanent changes to the body’s architecture. Much physical activity, indeed, took place beneath the level of consciousness altogether – defensively crossed arms, a blush, a stammer. In short, the Victorian body was porous, plural, always in the process of making itself, and far harder to pin down than those butterfly corpses that mild country clergymen spent their evenings crucifying on cork.

Those anonymous clergymen are not the subject of this book, and nor are their Brimstones and Painted Ladies. Instead I have followed Carlyle’s lead in writing about famous people. This is not because I agree with him that they matter more, but because they are the ones who tend to leave a paper trail of what historians call ‘ego documents’ – letters, diaries, memoirs – together with newspaper reports and, yes, biographies. It is hard to find sources for the sort of fleeting, fine-grained intimacies I’m after – a receding hairline, constipation, a poke in the eye, cold sores, menopausal flush, arms that refuse to squeeze themselves into new-fangled leg o’ mutton sleeves – and you really need to dig in the richest parts of the archive, where material has gathered in the deepest drifts.

And now, a final caveat. Strachey made up the bit about Arnold’s legs being too short for his body: when challenged, the Bloomsburyite drawled that ‘If they weren’t, they ought to have been.’ Meanwhile, Carlyle’s thundering instruction to remember that men in the past came with rosy cheeks and definite taste in trousers was actually part of an encomium to Sir Walter Scott, a writer of historical imagination rather than documentary fact. Scott’s men and women may indeed be three-dimensional, but what Carlyle fails to mention is that they are also made up. I, by contrast, have confined myself to the factual record: nothing that follows is imagined or guessed, faked or fudged. It is, rather, the result of a decade spent in archives (no amount of

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digitalisation has yet circumvented the need to haul one’s body around the world and sit in silence with boxes of unsorted paper). And as for the criticism that the exceptional people I deal with here can hardly be accounted typical, the answer must be this: genius has good-hair days like everyone else, while royalty also worries about its paunch.