

Gowan Dawson, “Literary Megatheriums and Loose Baggy Monsters: Paleontology and the Victorian Novel.” *Victorian Studies* 53. 2 (2011): 203-230.

Henry James’s characterisation of Victorian serialised novels as “large loose baggy monsters” has become an accepted term of reference in literary criticism, whether critics deemed the serialised novel an apt response to a sprawling, multifarious Victorian world, or whether, like James, they took the New Critical view that equated serialisation with sloppy structure and formal incoherence. Despite the recurrence of James’s epigram in twentieth-century criticism, there has been little scholarly attention paid to the sources of his analogy. Gowan Dawson’s article addresses this, and in doing so demonstrates how James’s remark grew out of much older critical discourses based on complex, well-established analogies between novelistic design and Cuvierian methods of comparative anatomy.

Contemporary reviewers of the serial novel grappled with the problem of how the whole might be judged from its parts and saw a lack of design and coherence in serialisation that precluded it from consideration as high art. Dawson shows how book reviewers in the 1840s and 1850s began to depict “serial novels in similar terms to those used to portray lumbering, ungainly prehistoric creatures” (205). At the same time, Cuvier’s “paleontological method of functional correlation” (205), which had been adopted with stunning effect in Britain by Richard Owen, provided a powerfully persuasive model for recognising design in the most unlikely assemblage of parts. The consummate example of awkward monstrosity in palaeontology was found in the Megatherium. Owen’s remarkable reconstruction of this creature revealed it to be bizarre and ill-proportioned; however, it also demonstrated that the Megatherium, despite its apparent absurdity, was wholly adapted to its environment. This rationalisation of seemingly discordant parts, Dawson argues, offered writers an affirming critical context whereby what “had seemed merely incongruous, ungainly, and awkward” could be regarded instead as exhibiting “harmonious and perfectly integrated design” (208).

The Megatherium appears regularly in William Makepeace Thackeray’s writings and Dawson demonstrates how over the course of Thackeray’s personal associations with Owen and Louis Agassiz such references became increasingly sophisticated, from Thackeray’s “sardonic play with the ‘Megatheria of history’” (211) in the 1840s, to *The Newcomes* (1853-55) and Arthur Pendennis’s comparison of narrative construction with Owen’s articulation of fossil fragments. While Pendennis’s ruminations have been read as deriding comparative anatomy’s claim to inductive reasoning, Dawson demonstrates how Thackeray’s careful composition of serial instalments can be read as evidence of his recognition that “authorial practice bore an uncanny resemblance to [. . .] paleontological procedures” (215). Thus, through Pendennis’s speculations on “Owen’s functionalist elaboration of the Megatherium’s perfectly integrated anatomy,” Thackeray offered a “means of appreciating novelistic design and structure that [. . .] vindicated the aesthetic credentials of serialised fiction on precisely the grounds on which it had been most vociferously condemned” (217).

Disparaging criticism of serialised novels as ill-shaped monstrosities intensified, Dawson asserts, “especially among a coterie of prominent American

commentators on literary taste who grew increasingly antagonistic to the stylistic conventions of the mid-Victorian novel” (219), and the second half of the article traces the use of the analogy by the American poet James Russell Lowell. While Lowell found in comparative anatomy an “appropriate parallel for the Romantic conception of the suggestive power of the fragmentary,” he failed to see the “perfectly integrated Megatheroid structure” of Thackeray’s *The Newcomes*. Rather for Lowell, such “literary Megatheriums” indicated a “vulnerability to extinction” (221). Personal connections between Lowell and Henry James lead Dawson to an examination of James’s own use of “images of prehistoric megafauna” (222) to indicate aesthetic monstrosity, and to the conclusion that mid-Victorian writers, readers and critics familiar with contemporary discourses in comparative anatomy were much more inclined to perceive coherent design in the disparate parts of the serialised novel than later critics less accustomed to paleontological methods.

Dawson’s article is not only a fine piece of research, it also challenges recent critical readings of the serial novel as corresponding to Darwinian models of the unfolding of species through evolutionary process, positing alternatively a persuasive argument for the primacy of comparative anatomy in the shaping of the serialised form and critical responses to it. The article offers a timely reminder that there is still much to be recovered in the exchanges between literature and science in the years before 1859, and that those exchanges were not nullified by the event of Darwinism, but continued asserting powerful influences far beyond 1859. It reminds scholars that the shadow of Darwinism has been retrospectively cast over the Victorian world by modern critics whose valuable research has, nevertheless, tended to obscure other highly pertinent literary/scientific exchanges. Dawson pieces back together and re-articulates a rich and intricate critical discourse, one that will have an important part to play in scholarly research into both Victorian and early twentieth-century critical understanding of the relationship between novelistic design and scientific method.

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