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Review of The Dog in the Dickensian Imagination

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Beryl Gray, *The Dog in the Dickensian Imagination* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, The Nineteenth Century Series, 2014), pp. xiv + 259. ISBN 978 1 4724 3529 3. £65.

The nineteenth century saw great changes in the way the English thought about animals. This wasn't only because of Darwinian revelations; it was also the result of increased urbanization and industrialization. Less frequently confined to the farmyard or the hunting kennels the dog, in particular, entered the daily life of humans as never before. It became a domestic pet, a fellow worker, the object of scientific enquiry; in today's accepted phrase, it became a member of 'a companion species', deserving understanding and concern. Dorothea Brooke, we might recall, was 'always attentive to the feelings of dogs, and very polite if she had to decline their advances.'

At the same time the very appearance of the species was increasingly regularized and aestheticized with the implementation of breed specifications, dog shows and institutions such as the Kennel Club. These shifts brought with them fresh opportunities for anthropomorphism, that ancient trope always at the heart of how we think about living in the world with animals. As Beryl Gray shows in this devotedly researched book, for Charles Dickens in particular the dog was an omnipresent fact of social life exerting a continual pull upon his emotions and providing a means of conveying feelings of domestic alienation along with more consoling thoughts of an inclusive animate community. At no point are canine characteristics simply metaphorical; the Dickens dog is always a character, though of a different non-human kind. The writer observes the animal closely – and thinks about what it might be thinking about.

Gray opens with detailed biographical notes on the real-life dogs that Dickens owned, but she continues with a mythic creature: 'The Dog of Montargis', with whose story Dickens was very familiar, evoking it on several occasions. This is one of those dog anecdotes that have always been with us in one form or another but it was revived in the early nineteenth century in a staged melodrama. The hero is a bloodhound who revenges the assassination of his master by tracking down the killer and publicly holding him down until he confesses. Here are the mixed qualities of intelligence, loyalty, instinct and sheer physical strength that Dickens respected in his own pets and projected in complex and sometimes hesitant ways onto the imaginary dogs that feature in his writing.

Gray's book supplies an exhaustive but discriminating range of examples, frequently following up her reading of a text with an acute analysis of an accompanying visual illustration. A brilliant treatment of Bill Sikes's Bull's-eye in *Oliver Twist* shows how, on the one hand, Dickens cannot bear to confront too much canine reality but, on the other, knows he must acknowledge its potential. When Oliver is taken to Fagin's den Nancy warns that the dog might turn violent and assault the boy, yet, as Gray points out, Bull's-eye remains quiet all through the immediately subsequent events. 'It is as though Dickens has no heart for the idea that Bull's-eye really has it in him to tear anybody to pieces'. A little later Bull's-eye is allowed a 'wistful look' at Sikes his master yet this is 'potentially no more than a passing, conventionally pathetic image, [...] effective because it is not fixed, but transitory and recurring; alive. It is part of a closely watched but economically described cycle of alert canine responsiveness.' In other words, sometimes Dickens looks closely, and sometimes he looks away. It's this complex moral susceptibility that governs his particular brand of anthropomorphism. Indeed, one might even say that he seems at times to display symptoms of 'anthropodenial', a refusal to permit

anthropomorphic thoughts. We should, in any case, always allow for the provisional or merely speculative element in his representation of canine behaviour.

Like many Victorians, Dickens was fascinated by performing animals, although by today's best standards he remained relatively uncritical of what went into their training. 'Merrylegs' in *Hard Times* is the obvious example, but Gray also discusses a lesser known instance: the pink-nosed poodle in an *Uncommercial Traveller* essay of 1863 entitled 'In the French-Flemish Country', who has been taught to stand on his hind-legs and 'present arms' at a passing train laden with military recruits. 'So admirable was his discipline', writes Dickens, 'that when the train moved, and he was greeted with the parting cheers of the recruits, and also with a shower of centimes [...] he remained staunch on his post until the train was gone'. The subtlety of this touching scene lies not only in what Gray calls 'the riveted detail' of the dog's little act, but the fact that the recruits fail to see how both like and unlike that of the pink poodle their own futures will be. Like the dog they, too, will be made to perform; unlike him they're in for the long haul. 'It struck me', remarks Dickens, noticing the speed with which the dog brings his show to a close, 'that there was more waggery than this in the poodle, and that he knew that the recruits would neither get through their exercises, nor get rid of their uniforms, as easily as he'. There are distinctly anthropomorphic possibilities in the thought that the dog may understand more than the recruits, yet it's also clear that Dickens knows that he is indulging in unwarranted speculation. The self-conscious pun of 'waggery' mixes the involuntary with the witty, and the passage as a whole falls wisely short of simple analogy.

Anthropomorphism, as Dickens demonstrates, is essentially a mode of interpretation. There's a typically subtle example of this in *David Copperfield* when Miss Murdstone describes the theft by Jip the spaniel of a bundle of love letters between David and Dora and reports that 'he kept it between his teeth so pertinaciously as to suffer himself to be held suspended in the air by means of the document.' This is comic, physically accurate and, once again, an avoidance of anthropomorphism since it is clear that the dog is playing with a pretend prey and can have no inkling of what the papers might otherwise represent. As Gray insists throughout, by prioritizing the physical behaviour which he so enjoys, Dickens's description avoids sentimentality. It's his characters who anthropomorphize – though admittedly sometimes in ways that the novelist finds useful. And it's her own shared note of caution that makes Beryl Gray such a discriminating close reader.

These days even the most scientific of ethnologists allow that it is by comparing their lives with our own, allowing for distance as well as affinity, that we can best appreciate the otherness of animals. Dickens wrote about dogs from a similarly double perspective. His observation of their physical appearance and behaviour is always precise and yet he is nervous about assuming absolute knowledge of their intentions. Beryl Gray matches him in that, bringing critical rigour to a subject that could easily have been indulged. You don't even have to like dogs to respect her appreciation of their behaviour, the ways in which they guide us in recognizing our own equally strange habits – though it probably helps.

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