

Transporting Things: The Spiritual Life of Victorian Objects

Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move. John Plotz. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008. 288 pp.

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<1> Any reader of *Great Expectations* (1860-61) will, no doubt, recall a scene in the novel's twenty-fourth chapter, wherein the law clerk Wemmick cheerily reveals to Pip his life's motto: "As to myself, my guiding star always is, Get hold of portable property."⁽¹⁾ Showing off the macabre mementoes that are the apparently valuable legacies of recently executed criminals, Wemmick at first seems a ridiculous figure, the sort of man who, in his unfeeling practicality, has become a vulture of sorts, metaphorically feeding on carrion, or at least the material property of the dead, if not their actual bodies. But as Pip — and the reader — come to learn, Wemmick's appetite for portable property is the necessary byproduct of the demands of maintaining an ever-tenuous grasp on social status, holding up the foundation of Wemmick's own "great expectations," which are rendered visible in the castle-like home where he resides with his Aged Parent and in his betrothal to Miss Skiffins. Far from being absurd, Wemmick is astute, his personal maxim an insightful bit of commentary on the economic realities of middle-class Victorian lives.

<2> What is more, as John Plotz observes in the Preface to *Portable Property* — a work whose title is of course indebted to Wemmick's signature pronouncement — the obsession with material goods comments on values beyond the purely monetary. Wemmick's relics, as he himself repeatedly reminds Pip, tell a story, becoming "portable reliquaries of departed clients" (Plotz xv); they are biographical containers, markers of lost lives, monuments to memory. And, as such, they should be understood as continuous with Wemmick's miniature castle, the home he understands as a safe haven from the stresses of work, which demand the suppression of feeling. Wemmick's many mourning rings⁽²⁾ are, in Plotz's view, "a form of domestic retreat" (xv). If anything, the possessions Wemmick carries on his body are, in at least one significant way, superior to Wemmick's domicile; as objects capable of accompanying Wemmick to work, "they let him recollect, at a touch, the perversely comforting narratives that somehow sustain him" (xv). Wemmick's portable property bridges his public and private selves, bringing comfort to the workday by reminding him of the domestic life it enables, reminding him all the while that domestic life is itself made possible by the work.

<3> Trinkets and ornaments — like those Wemmick extols, or else those methodically, lovingly catalogued by Victorian writers, both at home and abroad⁽³⁾ — serve as the starting points of Plotz's inquiry into the role played by portable property in the period between 1830 and 1870. Indeed, the extent to which such “trinkets and ornaments became the metonymic placeholders for geographically disaggregated social networks” (xiii) during the Victorian era, when increasing mobility — predicated, in some fundamental way, on the possession of property or its acquisition — made portability increasingly meaningful,⁽⁴⁾ furnishes Plotz's initial aim of exploring “why and how certain objects, artworks, and cultural practices came to serve as metonymic extensions of the home and family Victorians on the move,” including those in the far-flung reaches of empire, “had left behind” (xiii).

<4> In the tremendous Victorian attraction to portable property,⁽⁵⁾ Plotz locates a nexus of intertwined ideas and emotions, an occasion for interrogating the sometimes contradictory, sometimes complementary relationship between emotion and commerce embodied in objects with the potential to become sentimentally priceless that could be had at a price. Plotz links the “heightened commitment to durable but moveable repositories of nonfiscal value” to “the nineteenth century's turn toward fully globalized capitalism” (xiv). Still, the question remains: what mechanisms enabled the transformation of particular objects into possessions of exceptional status? How did certain objects (but not others) come to be regarded as simultaneously having a known value and being invaluable?

<5> It is the novel, Plotz argues, that lies “at the crux point where dual conceptions of value collided in the Victorian era” (xv). At once commodity and spiritual artifact, the novel is the very sort of unstable but essential object whose worth is dependent on its ability to evade commercial law in the minds of consumers. No less significant is the novel's ability to imbue certain objects with an affective resonance; as “sentimentalized items, endowed with a fiscal and a transcendent value” (1), literary works have the singular power to confer their own liminal status on other objects, to create things that could be marketed and sold by the virtue of indelible — and priceless — association. That this power is moveable,⁽⁶⁾ infinitely transportable, easily removed from one context and relocated to another makes books the ideal vehicle of synchronized capitalist commodification, aesthetic refinement, and ethical sophistication; that is, Victorian texts occupy themselves with comprehending meaningful but potentially profitable objects. Thus, Plotz suggests, Victorian novels must be grappled with as “a series of works *about* portable property that were also meditations on their own status *as* pieces of portable property” (xv).

<6> Portable property — the novel not least among its iterations — acquires still further significance when considered in context of rapidly expanding empire. Offering a solution to the problem of “staying English” while abroad, as well as instrumental to spreading British influence and contributing to British wealth, portable property is ultimately instrumental to the imperial project.⁽⁷⁾ Plotz considers the particular role of property within the making of “Greater Britain” in the finely sketched second chapter, “The First Strawberries in India: Cultural Portability Abroad,” noting the typical insistence on “remaining English” while abroad and the attendant necessities of turning to objects, those infallible signposts of Englishness. In one especially vivid example, Plotz observes the “markedly English dress among Anglo-Indians,” as well as the otherwise inexplicable surge in advertisements for canned (English) foods targeted at the Anglo-

Indians (49). Both dress and food, of course, exemplify the paradoxical duality at the heart of “portable property,” functioning at once as metaphorical domestic haven and goods for sale.

<7> Plotz focuses on the period between 1830 and 1870, the high point of “obsession with objects represented as problematically endowed with sentimental and fiscal value simultaneously” (7) in the English novel. (The apotheosis of the “provincial novel” in England — discussed in Chapter 4, “Locating *Lorna Doone*: R. D. Blackmore, F. H. Burnett, and the Limits of English Regionalism” — is, in Plotz’s convincing reading, linked to this object-obsession.) It is during this time too that the words *portable* and *portability* come to be used in an increasingly abstract way.(8) The Bible — a text that increasingly comes to be seen as “suspended between material and spiritual form” (3) — is critical to this transformation, which places portable property as physically manifest and yet somehow beyond material shape, its teachings applicable beyond those literally included in the book; but it is the novel that is most fundamentally involved in and defined by “the lengthy and involved meditations on portability’s dual aspect” (4).

<8> Like the Bible, whose lessons are absorbed — and transported — by its readers’ hearts, the novel is designed to travel widely, “across historical, authorial, national, and generic boundaries” (4). Its ideas and its characters, carried in the readers’ heads, position the novel as a piece of portable property. So too does its quotability, with its opportunity for detaching and moving portions — whether words, descriptions, or motifs. The realist novel, for example, is capable of being both locodescriptive and separable from any given place, as local mementoes can be inserted into global circulation without necessarily being detached from the original locale (5).

<9> Beginning with his Introduction, “The Global, the Local, and the Portable,” Plotz discusses a number of works. George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) presents Mrs. Tulliver’s inability to properly understand the doubleness of the physical property she is to lose following her husband’s bankruptcy as a downfall and figures the failure to appraise and evaluate the property’s affective portability as a failure to be sufficiently bourgeois. This failure is amended in Trollope’s *The Eustace Diamonds* (1871), discussed in the first chapter, “Discreet Jewels: Victorian Diamond Narratives and the Problem of Sentimental Value.” In Chapter 3, “Someone Else’s Knowledge: Race and Portable Culture in *Daniel Deronda*,” Plotz returns to Eliot and focuses on the shame that is the result of treating personal property as potential liquidity. Plotz also addresses Hardy’s Wessex novels (in Chapter 5, “Going Local: Characters and Environments in Thomas Hardy’s Wessex”) and the work of William Morris (in Chapter 6, “Nowhere and Everywhere: The End of Portability in William Morris’s Romances,” in which Plotz contends that Morris indicts the novel as a genre inadequate to the discussion of the universal [144]). Throughout, Plotz pays particular attention to the sway of portable property over social structure, the subtle but indelible ways in which the affective ties the Victorians formed to their things reveal matters of class and hierarchy.

<10> Plotz reserves his conclusion — “Is Portability Portable?” — for a consideration of what it ultimately means for cultural properties to be made portable. In examining the aspects of a given culture that become doubly valuable — purchased at a price but given real worth through affect — we will, Plotz insists, be able to see cultural transmission, generalization, and replication more

clearly, a vision that portends a better understanding of culture — its construction, its significance — in the age of mobility. Having demonstrated throughout the political implications of what at first seems a mere Victorian quirk, Plotz extends his model of “portable property” well beyond the Victorian novel. The book’s carefully wrought readings of well-known Victorian works — interpretations arrived at through the lens of theoretical concern, which consistently illuminates without ever blinding — are, without a doubt, impressive, but Plotz’s real accomplishment may be said to reside in the “portability” of his argument. One is tempted to transport Plotz’s methodologically creative thinking to still more works, both Victorian and otherwise.

Endnotes

(1)Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Janice Carlisle (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1996) 195. Wemmick has occasion to repeat this advice when Pip consults him about Magwitch: “Avail yourself of this evening to lay hold of his portable property,” Wemmick solemnly urges. “You don’t know what may happen to him. Don’t let anything happen to the portable property” (342).(^)

(2)On the subject of Victorian mourning jewelry, Plotz cites the work of Marcia Pointon, who has discussed “the value inherent in memorial rings, which are at once personalized (given, usually in a will, so that a friend will mourn for one) and fully commodified (produced by job lot at values ranging from five shillings to ten pound)” (Plotz 184).(^)

(3)Plotz begins the book by noting Emily Eden’s observation that people would be happier if, instead of children, they could birth “a set of Walter Scott’s novels, or some fine china” (xiii). (Eden’s original sentiments can be found in her October 1834 letter to Charlotte Greville. See *Miss Eden’s Letters*, ed. Violet Dickinson [London: Macmillan, 1919].)(^)

(4)One may well imagine Pip, having left England to take a job with Clarriker and Co. in the East towards the conclusion of *Great Expectations*, learns to appreciate portable reminders of Joe and Biddy, things that must substitute for otherwise unavailable contact.(^)

(5)Plotz cites the “universally acknowledged truth about the Victorians,” which is “that they loved their things” (1), noting, too, that the genealogy of Victorian object obsession dates as far back as Dorothy Van Ghent’s 1953 study, *The English Novel, Form and Function* (New York: Rinehart, 1953).(^)

(6)Plotz dutifully observes the connection between reading and railways, noting that the novel profited from its association with newly popularizing forms of rapid transit, following Richard Daniel Altick’s contention that the rise of rail travel, in combination with the emergence of W. H. Smith’s stalls, which sold books, helped book sales reach unprecedented levels in the 1850s. (For more on this connection, see *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957].)(^)

(7)Plotz astutely notes that the cultivation of “*asymmetry* in portability” is necessary “so that the flow of culture-bearing objects from core to periphery is not counterbalanced or interrupted by a flow in the opposite direction The capacity of an imperium to sustain that kind of asymmetry is a crucial component of its power” (2).(^)

(8)The first metaphorical usage of *portable*, Plotz informs us, seems to occur in Joseph Gurney’s *Hints on the Portable Evidence of Christianity*, an 1833 tome focusing on the Bible as a “portable book.” Gurney takes his title from Thomas Chalmers’ belief that, in reading the Bible, man “is furnished with practical proof of the divine origin of our religion I call [this evidence] the PORTABLE evidence of Christianity.” Gurney understands the physical portability of the material Bible as linked to “the ease with which the Bible’s lessons can be applied to the natural world, to moments of moral doubt,” or, to put this another way, the “metaphorical ‘portability’ of the Scripture” (Plotz 3).(^)