



'By a Comparison of Incidents and Dialogue': Richard Owen, Comparative Anatomy and Victorian Serial Fiction

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Darwin's extensive reading of literature was a crucial starting point for Gillian Beer's insights into the interchange between science and culture which have shaped scholarship in the field for the last three decades. However, while the impact of Darwin's reading on the imaginative development of his theories has continued to be an extremely productive area of study, there has been hardly any consideration of the broader context of nineteenth-century scientists' reading practices in relation to literature, giving the impression that Darwin's thought was especially, perhaps uniquely, amenable to the impact of his immersion in fiction and poetry. This paper examines the extensive but relatively little-known literary reading of the comparative anatomist Richard Owen, suggesting that important aspects of other, and even explicitly non-Darwinian, areas of Victorian science were just as likely to be influenced by their practitioners' enthusiasm for fiction and poetry. That Darwin and Owen frequently read the same literary works, and often in the same or similar locations (whether in metropolitan clubs or out in the field), also permits direct comparisons of their reading practices, which, intriguingly, suggest that, far from being uniquely amenable to it, Darwin's scientific thought might in fact have been shaped much less by his literary reading than that of contemporaneous naturalists like Owen. In particular, the paper focuses on Owen's reading of serial fiction, and considers the close parallels between his practices of reading serial novels and his use of comparative anatomy in his renowned reconstructions of the skeletons of prehistoric creatures.

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