



Lesley Thulin //

Jeremy Bentham, one of the founders of modern utilitarianism, has an old saw about pushpin. In *The Rationale of Reward* (1825), a treatise on the legislation of discipline, Bentham invokes the nineteenth-century tavern game to weigh the relative virtues of recreational activities and art. Framing the issue in the terms of his moral calculus, he writes, “Prejudice apart, the game of pushpin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry” (Bentham RR 206). If pushpin maximizes happiness for the greatest number of people—that is, if it provides more pleasure than either music or poetry—then, he reasons, it is more valuable than art.

Bentham’s game of pushpin is notable not only because John Stuart Mill would later famously misquote it, but because it produces an uneasy tension with Bentham’s material legacy. Asserting that pushpin is more accessible to the masses than art, Bentham issues a suspicion of the latter. He observes that the game is “always innocent,” whereas art treads in deceit—“false morals, [and] fictitious nature” (206). Although Frances Ferguson has recently complicated Bentham’s relationship to aesthetics, arguing that he deserves credit for his expansive account of taste’s relationship to sexual pleasure, a particular relic seems to stand in the way of the full reconciliation between utilitarianism and aesthetics.

In 1832, the year of his death, Bentham issued the final version of his will, which stipulated that his friend and disciple, Dr. Southwood Smith, should publicly dissect his body and preserve it as an “auto-icon,” or “self image” (Richardson and Hurwitz 195). In other words, Bentham directed Smith, who wrote an influential treatise on anatomical dissection titled “Use of the Dead to the Living” (1824), to dress his padded skeleton in his clothes and display his body in a case. According to his will, Bentham requested for his skeleton to “be seated in a chair usually occupied by me when living, in the attitude in which I am sitting when engaged in thought in the course of time employed by writing.” If friends or disciples desired to meet, he added, his body should be wheeled out to join them.

Although Bentham’s last wishes were controversial at the time—they preceded the passage of the Anatomy Act by two months and sought to destigmatize the practice of anatomical dissection—his rationale was philosophically grounded. As Ross Harrison succinctly puts it, “Utility, or happiness, depended upon health; health depended upon medical care; which depended upon medical knowledge; which depended upon dissection” (Harrison 6). In a letter to Home Secretary Robert Peel that lobbied for anatomical dissection, Bentham renders his corpse an instrument of utility and happiness, vowing, “I shall at least be not altogether useless after my death” (Bentham “To Robert Peel” 208). However, he does not elaborate on the supposed utility behind the preservation of the auto-icon.

While Ruth Richardson attributes the auto-icon to Bentham’s egocentricity, she speculates that its display might have helped normalize anatomical dissection in the nineteenth century. Although the poor would not have had the same privilege of preserving of their remains for the world to see, Bentham’s auto-icon would sever anatomical dissection’s association with the punitive consequences of the Murder Act of 1752 (Richardson 160). However, the rebranding of anatomical dissection would pose an aesthetic problem. What would happen, for instance, if the viewer’s horror at Bentham’s preserved body short-circuited its own utility?

Smith’s funeral oration-cum-lecture at the Webb School of Anatomy on June 9, 1832 begins to address this issue. After denouncing the public’s disgust toward anatomical dissection, Smith appeals to the beauty of Bentham’s countenance and asks: “Can you conceive that any thing bearing the remotest resemblance to degradation can attach to that body, devoted, by the mind that animated it, to the illustration, for the sake of human happiness, of the still more beautiful structure that lies concealed beneath the beautiful exterior?” (Smith 68). Through his injunction to find pleasure in the corpse’s countenance, which is to say to assume an aesthetic relationship to it, Smith helps justify the medical procedure—or at least make it more bearable to witness.

Ironically, however, Smith deemed Bentham’s head unfit for display, suggesting the shadow that aesthetics would cast over Bentham’s final utilitarian project. According to Richardson and Hurwitz, Bentham imagined the auto-icon as a substitute for statuary in his unpublished treatise *Auto-Icon; or, Farther Uses of the Dead to the Living* (Richardson and Hurwitz 196). Unfortunately, after fulfilling Bentham’s request to embalm his head in the fashion of the Maori, Smith disfigured

Bentham's head beyond recognition. Instead of defeating the purpose of the auto-icon, he commissioned an artist to create a wax head.

Two hundred years later, the auto-icon's various contemporary contexts suggest that the object exceeds a strictly utilitarian context. After appearing in the Metropolitan Museum's 2018 exhibit "Like Life: Sculpture, Color and the Body (1300—Now)," the auto-icon is back on display in University College, London's South Cloisters. At once a necrotourist attraction, a scientific specimen with a prosthetic head, a nineteenth-century mummy, and a monument to Bentham and utilitarianism, Bentham's corpse registers as more than a mere self image.

Featured Image: The auto-icon | UCL CULTURE – UCL – University College London

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