THE MASSES ARE REVOLTING:
VICTORIAN CULTURE AND THE AESTHETICS OF DISGUST

by

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Abstract

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The Masses Are Revolting makes two overarching claims about the interrelation of disgust and aesthetics in Victorian culture and literature. First, I place the Victorian novel's focus on the newly repulsive conditions of British society in dialogue with the privileged position Enlightenment aesthetics afforded to the disgusting as the antithesis of the beautiful. An object which disgusts cannot be aesthetically pleasing, the story goes, since it is felt to be as repulsive in art as in nature. Traditional aesthetics thus prohibited the disgusting from artistic and literary composition, because it was thought to overflow the representational frame and preclude disinterested judgment. Through close readings of works by Charlotte Brontë, John Ruskin, Thomas Hardy, and George Gissing, I argue that Victorian literary texts, to the contrary, took this boundary confusion between disgusting representations and disgusting realities as a point of departure, and so broke much more sharply with the 18th and early 19th century discourse of taste and beauty than has conventionally been acknowledged. Second, while emphasizing this disconnect between Victorian literary practice and aesthetic theory, I also examine the unprecedented importance that Victorians afforded to disgust as a public and political passion, focusing in individual chapters on the complex roles that disgust played in Victorian medicine, physiology, obscenity law, and sanitation. In a chapter surveying the documentation of the 1858 Great Stink of London, for example, I argue that the Victorian rhetoric of social revulsion produced in the wake of the sewage crisis derived from the Enlightenment discourse of aesthetic judgment. Thus, while Victorian literature industriously flouted the aesthetic prohibition of the disgusting, industrial society absorbed it.

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Since beginning research some four years ago for what would become this dissertation, I have counted myself lucky to have the unabated support of a group of close friends and family, as well as the financial and institutional aid I have received from a Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellowship and two years of dissertation funding from the Graduate Center. I have been very grateful to several friends in particular who have endured my company as I subjected them to lengthy discourses on inevitably unsavory topics, like the evolutionary history of vomiting, Victorian London's river of sewage, and the invention of the stomach tube. Many thanks to Ariel Aberg-Riger, Sari Altschuler, Ben McKay, Michael C. Frank, Julia Jarcho, Zeke Reich, Christine Smallwood, Mark Sussman, and especially Gabe Boylan.

It is not easy to pinpoint when an interest in disgust and the disgusting first began to consume me, though all indications point to early childhood, and so my mother, Joanne Shulman, my father, Alan Samalin, and my sister, Danielle Samalin, are responsible for the development of this project in ways that are difficult to calculate. It is even harder to properly thank such a tolerant and supportive family, who all knew me before I had ever been disgusted. The more specific idea — that the scholarly analysis of Victorian literature could offer a unique perspective on a set of aesthetic and cultural problems historically understood in connection to disgust — *that* idea began as one of three lists for my oral exams, under the same title, "The Masses Are Revolting." I had begun reading for this list under the supervision of Professor Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in the months leading up to her death in April, 2009, and even under those circumstances her intelligence and wisdom left their distinctive marks on the way I understand my project. The vivacity and force of her writings on emotion, sexuality and Victorian culture remain my models for what intellectual work should aspire to do.

When Eve passed away, Professor Talia Schaffer stepped in to serve on my orals and dissertation committees; the first of her many generous contributions was to introduce me to George Gissing, an author whose work now seems so necessary to this project that I am amazed I was able to come up with the idea for it without him. Since then, Talia has remained an ardent supporter, a meticulous reader and interlocutor, and a source of inexhaustible knowledge regarding the 19th century. Professor Joshua Wilner, too, has provided some of the most focused and productive critical attention I have received; hopefully the following pages speak to the ways in which his thoughts on internalization have informed my own about expulsion. Since I met him at Johns Hopkins in 2003, Professor Jonathan Goldberg has been a friend and a mentor, and it is doubtful I would have applied to graduate school, let alone finished this dissertation, without his example and encouragement. Professor John Brenkman heard tell of this project when it was just a bad pun that had popped into my head one afternoon while teaching *Jane Eyre*, and it wouldn't have gone much further without his unparalleled energy and guidance as a supervisor, mentor, and friend. I owe my standards for intellectual clarity and conceptual scope to him.

Sonali Thakkar came into my life while I was wading knee deep into Darwin's vomit, and made what would have been 18 months of intellectual drudgery into a period of growth, excitement and curiosity that I never could have anticipated; I have not stopped being inspired by her brilliance and grateful for her companionship and love. Jonah Westerman has read every page I have written since 2004, and on the topic of disgust he has heard every word I have thought, and for those dubious privileges, and for a decade of friendship, he gets to be the ideal reader of this text.

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Realism & Repulsion

> Now from all parts the swelling kennels flow,
> And bear their trophies with them as they go:
> Filth of all Hues and Odours seem to tell
> What Street they sail'd from, by their Sight and Smell.
> They, as each Torrent drives with rapid force,
> From Smithfield, or St. Pulchre's shape their course,
> And in huge Confluent join at Snow-Hill Ridge,
> Fall from the Conduit prone to Holborn-Bridge.
> Sweepings from Butchers Stalls, Dung, Guts, and Blood,
> Drown'd Puppies, strinking Sprats, all drench'd in Mud,
> Dead Cats and Turnip-Tops come tumbling down the Flood.
> — Jonathan Swift, "Description of a City Shower"

> "It is surprising but undeniable that the inclusion of the fourth estate in serious realism was decisively advanced by those who, in their quest for new aesthetic impressions, discovered the attraction of the ugly and pathological."
> —Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*

Over the course of the Victorian period, disgust became a public and political passion — and it is not hard to see why. Compared with the dung, guts and blood drizzling down from above in Jonathan Swift's city shower, 19th century London was engulfed in a hurricane of filth: "Through the heart of the town a deadly sewer ebbed and flowed, in the place of a fine fresh river"[1]; "women from their doors tossed household slops of *every* description into the gutter; they ran into the next pool, which overflowed and stagnated"; "in dry weather, a long string of the most disgusting, blackish-green, slime pools are left standing on this bank, from the depths of which bubbles of miasmatic gas constantly arise and give forth a stench unendurable even on the bridge forty or fifty feet above the surface of the stream"[2]; "after the account I have given of the state of

the street, no one can be surprised that on going into the cellar...the smell was so foetid as almost to knock the two men down"[3]; "the law in its essence proclaims the poor criminals, the workhouses prisons, their inmates beyond the pale of the law, beyond the pale of humanity, objects of disgust and repulsion"; "the poor are dumped into the earth like infected cattle."[4] Pollution on an epic scale; squalor and misery of an industrial order of magnitude; an empire of baking, steaming trash on which the hot sun unfortunately never set. The record of it is impressive, if not overwhelming, even in small doses.

The following pages are an exploration of that record, an interrogation of the vast discourse of disgust which registered the unwanted effects and consequences of radical transformations in modern British society. To match the accumulation of filth, Victorians adapted available forms of language into a splanchnic discourse of rising bile, eye-watering gag reflexes, and churning gut reactions. It is a colorful and diverse discursive family, linked by a singular, involuted impulse to be rid of the very same foul objects out which it is made, while following a powerful ethical imperative to describe that which is felt to be unspeakable: "No existing terms of language known to me are enough to describe the forms of filth, and modes of ruin," which assailed modern Britain, Ruskin reported in 1880 — though he certainly tried. This self-abnegating purposiveness animated and enabled the critical languages belonging to numerous areas of social activity throughout the 19th century; the newly-minted proscriptions of sanitary reform, liberal social critique, obscenity law, and urban sociology would all have been unthinkable without the affective force garnered through appeals to moral repugnance and revolted sensibility. As the emotional basis for such a broad spectrum of critical practices, the expression of disgust merged the question of what needed to be excluded from society with the question of what needed to be excluded from language. "The disgusting brutality which

accompanied this work I cannot describe in further detail," Engels writes at the end of his extraordinarily detailed descriptions of the truly horrific brutalities he sought out and recorded, rhetorically dissolving the boundaries between what is bad, what is unwanted, what cannot be represented, and what ought not exist.

In the modern period, these questions of how and whether to represent that which revolts the senses or offends the taste were first posed within the aesthetic domain, which, from the Enlightenment onward, had granted disgust the exceptional role as the antithesis of the experience of the beautiful. Thus, the particular discourse of disgust which helped to organize so much moral, legal and even scientific argument in the 19th century had its roots in the development of theories of taste and judgment which at first blush seem quite far removed from such social and political contexts. But it is not possible to study the emergence of disgust in the 19th century as a prominent public emotion without running across and confronting the conceptions of disgust and judgment specific to British and German aesthetic thought throughout the previous century, which had been the only intellectual context to attach any theoretical interest to the emotion. The principle goal of this dissertation is to account for this interrelation of disgust and aesthetics in Victorian culture, looking to literary form in particular as the site of the richest and most explicit intersection of the two.

To this end, *The Masses Are Revolting* advances two overarching claims. The first is that the Victorian social novel broke radically with the core tenets of 18th century aesthetics, which held that if a work of art repulses, it cannot be aesthetically pleasing, since the visceral experience of revulsion was thought to induce a confusion between representation and reality. In Kant's meditations on the subject in the *Critique of Judgment*, rising bile overrides the disinterested palate, and a picture of a disgusting thing is felt to be indistinguishable from the disgusting thing itself. Traditional aesthetics thus prohibited the disgusting from artistic and literary composition, because it was thought to overflow the representational frame and preclude

disinterested judgment. Against a detailed analysis of this backdrop of Enlightenment dictates about proper judgment, I propose that in the realist novel both the disgusting and the expression of disgust emerged as integral elements of literary practice, and not its necessary, but necessarily excluded counterparts. Second, however, as I have already suggested, this dissertation argues that while the Victorian novel rejected Enlightenment strictures about the disgusting, various other areas of Victorian society internalized them. Taken together, these two complementary strands illuminate the wide range of values that Victorian culture ascribed to its disgust.

I. *Boundary Confusions*

The idea that one could study disgust as a discourse with specific conventions and recurrent rhetorical patterns, and that the Victorian novel was the most fruitful place to begin that study, originated in a classroom where the students utterly repulsed the teacher. I was teaching *Jane Eyre*, discussing Jane's own first day as a teacher in the little north country schoolhouse with my students. Unlike Yeats walking through his long schoolroom questioning, for Jane, being among schoolchildren yields an evocative articulation of disgust, as well as an explicit reflection on the nature of that feeling. Confronted with an "unmannered, rough, intractable, as well as ignorant" group of "twenty scholars," whose heavy regional accents alone preclude mutual comprehension, Jane responds to her class with a mix of lacerating contempt and aversive repulsion, followed by a sharp spike of self-derrogating shame:

> "Was I very gleeful, settled, content during the hours I passed in yonder bare, humble school-room this morning and afternoon? Not to deceive myself, I must reply — No. I felt desolate to a degree. I felt — yes, idiot that I am — I felt degraded. I doubted I had taken a step which sank instead of raising me in the scale of social existence. I was weakly dismayed at the ignorance, the poverty, the coarseness of all I heard and saw around me. But let me not hate and despise myself too much for these feelings: I know them to be wrong — that is a great step gained; I shall strive to overcome them. To-morrow, I trust, I shall get the better of them partially; and in a few weeks, perhaps, they will be quite subdued. In a few months, it is possible, the happiness of

> seeing progress and a change for the better in my scholars, may substitute gratification for disgust."[5]

Wavering between two strong negative judgments — first of her students, and then of herself — Jane's account of her first day on the job condenses into one knotty response much of the broad spectrum of sociopolitical, affective, and aesthetic concerns which this dissertation will pursue. From her awareness that feelings of disgust are at once inevitable and wrong, to her conviction that disgust and gratification sit in a substitutive relationship to each other, Jane's highly structured articulation of contempt and disgust for her students illuminates the range of socially significant meanings and purposes these emotions offered. Throughout the following chapters, I explore that range in a wide variety of contexts — literature, law, urban reform, public health and medicine, to name a few — but it was in trying to discuss the initial oppressive atmosphere of Jane's schoolroom that the complexities involved in claiming that the masses are revolting first crept into focus.

To begin with, there are two sides of Jane's account of her disgust that will remain close to the surface throughout this dissertation, and which throw into relief the richness and internal contradiction that disgust claims as an emotion. The first side is captured by Jane's belief that she "had taken a step which sank instead of raising me in the scale of social existence," her sense of having been "degraded," as she puts it, and not merely inconvenienced or frustrated, by her association with her uneducated and uncouth students. She feels that she will be lowered by coming into contact with the lowly. No matter, for now, that she "knows [her feelings] to be wrong," and never mind that she deems herself an "idiot" for having them; the point to grasp is the particular magical thinking that Jane's disgust produces, whereby simply coming into contact with a disgusting object threatens to transmit or transfer its vileness to the disgusted subject, as though the object were contagious. In Jane's very Victorian case, this sense of contagion is

transparently linked to class identity, as though the security of one's class position could be corrupted by physical association. Disgust provides an effective language for making hierarchical judgments, for imposing order on unruly objects and people and shoring up the boundaries they threaten to transgress — but for all its efficacy it is not a rational means of accomplishing these ends.

Repulsed and degraded by her students, Jane's account reproduces an essentialist logic of contamination which has been analyzed within aesthetics, psychoanalysis, philosophy and psychology for over two hundred years — *ad nauseum*, you might say — as one of the principal features of disgust. In recent years, the preeminent psychologist of disgust, Paul Rozin, has given this form of reasoning a Victorian pedigree, citing the two laws of sympathetic magic — similarity and contagion — James Frazer outlined in *The Golden Bough*, which Frazer himself considered "to be merely two different misapplications of the association of ideas."[6]According to the law of contagion, people believe that disgusting objects will contaminate everything they come into contact with; while, according to the law of similarity, anything resembling a disgusting object — including a representation of it — will also provoke disgust. Thus in the latter case, Rozin found that people are far less likely to choose to eat a piece of fudge shaped like excrement than a piece of fudge shaped like a muffin; whereas, in the former, subjects were far less likely to drink from a glass of water which had contained a "dead, sterilized cockroach" than from a glass "which contacted an innocuous object for the same period of time," or to don a sweater they were told formerly belonged to Hitler.[7] It is as though the object's contaminating essence persisted according to magical principles. "The disgusting object...is not regarded as belonging to a class of inorganic matter," an influential mid-20th century study of disgust reads, "But...as something 'almost living,' endowed with the capacity to sneak up on, and to penetrate,

the body in some unnatural way."[8] Like Jane's feelings of degradation and disgust, these aversive judgments persist irrationally — that is, regardless of whether the subject 'knows' the cockroach was sterilized — painting a portrait of disgust as a forcefully symbolic activity that sits in a very strained, even adversarial, relationship to objective knowledge.

The second feature of Jane's account that I want to highlight is its anticipatory structure. The passage articulates her revulsion towards her students, but it also offers a commentary on the social and moral value of that disgust which, in Jane's characteristic manner, anticipates the reader's condemnation and presumes that such disgust will be met with widespread social disapprobation. Jane knows her disgust is irrational, that the feelings themselves are unacceptable and loathsome and, above all, that they need to be overcome and excluded. Indeed, within the reformatory and very Protestant ethos of work, renunciation and self-discipline that Jane's *post hoc* reflections evince, it would seem that the expression of disgust is more unwanted, degrading and potentially harmful to a presumably egalitarian society than the objects which provoke the emotion in the first place. There is a slippery, recursive dynamic at work here, by which Jane rejects her own initial rejection of her students, in an exclusionary gesture that itself very closely resembles disgust. As epitomized by vomiting, expressions of disgust do double duty as objects of disgust themselves, which too can be rejected. In fact, we only have access to Jane's affective experience of disgust in the first place through her subsequent repudiation of the original experience; her revulsion for her students only exists within her disavowal of disgust as a dependable form of judgment. We get to know one rejection through another.

The bidirectional and self-implicating structure of Jane's reaction to her students exemplifies the central problematic of the broader Victorian discourse of disgust. On the one hand, there is a hierarchical emotional judgment, a negative reaction to unwanted and potentially

threatening social conditions, which takes shape as an irrational and urgent fear of contamination and defilement. And on the other hand, there is a reaction against disgust itself, understood as an irrational form of judgment that threatens to contaminate an emergent public sphere founded on the universalizable and increasingly democratized principles of disinterested reason and a liberal subjective freedom. The discourse of disgust is not only a composite of these two modes of negation, but is actually structured such that the latter, the disavowal of discursive irrationality, simultaneously contains and negates the former, the rejection of the objects in the social world which provoke one's revulsion. Disgust resides within disgust, revolting contents inside a revolted container. Far from an incidental structure, Jane's response to her uncouth students represents a fundamental conflict about the status of irrationality, emotion and exclusion in a culture whose self-definition was at the same historical moment being pegged to ideals of inclusivity and reason.

Responding to this conflict, Jane has a plan for her disgust. She will confront it, overcome it, and, in transforming her students from uncouth and illiterate peasants into industrious and relatively cultivated working-class Englishwomen, will thereby transform her disgust into pleasure. It is a simple plan, which, in addition to its logic of substitution, depends on Jane's condescendingly reminding herself that "these coarsely-clad little peasants are of flesh and blood as good as the scions of gentlest genealogy; and that the germs of native excellence, refinement, intelligence, kind feeling, are as likely to exist in their hearts as in those of the best-born."[9] Following Jane's logic, disgust can be overcome by the imposition of a patriotic but liberal egalitarianism, which functions at once as the guarantor of equally distributed cultural rights, and the motive for embracing individualism and difference:

> Some time elapsed before, with all my efforts, I could comprehend my scholars and their nature. Wholly untaught, with faculties quite torpid, they seemed to me hopelessly dull; and, at first sight, all dull alike: but I soon found I was mistaken.

> There was a difference amongst them as amongst the educated; and when I got to know them, and they me, this difference rapidly developed itself....[10]

By denouncing and overcoming her disgust, Jane's entire social perception changes. Differences emerge between individuals where before she had seen only the unwanted essential difference of one class from another; an inalienable humanity emerges from within her students that is antipathetic to the feelings of degradation and contempt by which she previously judged them. Indeed, such negative feelings have simply been abolished a chapter or two later, after Jane has inherited and divided her fortune, and has decided for the time being to take up her higher calling as a missionary in India: "I had long felt with pleasure that many of my rustic scholars liked me, and when we parted that consciousness was confirmed," she reports — but for how long? "Deep was my gratification to find I had really a place in their unsophisticated hearts" — but how deep could it be? At the end of a few months, Jane has substituted gratification for disgust with such success, that it is almost as though her initial judgment had never occurred.

Nevertheless, Jane's overcoming her disgust produces the same effect of stabilizing social categories by ordering them in a hierarchical structure that characterized her gut reaction to her students on the first day of class. It only widens the scope. On the last day, in fact, it seems as though whatever egalitarian lessons about individual difference she has learned have only served to shore up an irrational sense of nationalist identity, which mirrors her initial class prejudice on an international and imperialist stage, rather than a local, restricted socioeconomic one:

> I stood with the key in my hand, exchanging a few words of special farewell with some half-dozen of my best scholars: as decent, respectable, modest, and well-informed young women as could be found in the ranks of the British peasantry. And that is saying a great deal; for after all the British peasantry are the best taught, best mannered, most self-respecting of any in Europe: since those days I have seen paysannes and Bäuerinnen: and the best of them seemed to me ignorant, coarse, and besotted, compared with my Morton girls.[11]

While it has turned out that the British masses are not revolting, as Jane originally believed, the masses of everywhere else in Europe are, with the unconverted inhabitants of India representing

the outermost limit of the moving wall of her disgust. As Mary Douglas showed in her classic anthropological study of filth and defilement, maintaining such boundaries is fundamental to the maintenance of order in any social system. The conception of disgust that undergirds the whole of Jane's brief stint as a teacher is one that begins with the borders of her body, and with her proximity to other socially significant bodies, but which, following a pattern of externalization, ends in a far more abstract notion of the borders of the nation and the margins of imperial civilization.

Boundary confusion lies at the heart of any inquiry into disgust, but it also represents a fertile point of contact with the history and theory of the novel. If Jane's disgust towards her students reflects a primary confusion between self and other, a moment of confounding the social degradation one perceives in the world with one's own inner state or status, the episode also reflects a confusion between the different voices in which Jane processes that initial encounter. There is the voice that registers disgust as a subjective crisis, and the voice that undermines disgusted subjectivity as a social ill; the former yields an urgent critique rooted in an affective evaluation, while the latter adopts an ethical stance putatively grounded in knowledge of what is true and false. When Jane says of her feelings, "I know them to be wrong," then, she is transgressing a discursive boundary, in a way that gets at the heart of the conception of the novel as a report from the interior of the subject. This ability to speak in one voice that contains and conceals many voices, and to blend and to trample over the discursive boundaries of different forms of speech was, of course, theorized by Bakhtin as the defining feature of the novel — the English novel in particular — and exemplified there in his discussion of the "varied play with the boundaries of speech types, languages and belief systems" in Dickens' *Little Dorrit*.[12] Jane's revulsion lays bare the mechanics of a widely available Victorian discourse of disgust, but it also

suggests a much deeper familiarity between that discourse and the "heteroglossia" inherent to the discursive structure of the novel. Especially in its socially critical iterations, Victorian realism knows something about disgust that few other texts can tell us, and vice versa.

II. *Obtrusion*

The confrontation with the disgusting marks a major development in the history of the novel, a point at which the voices of bawdiness and moral outrage, the satirical and parodic energies, and other imaginative extremities of which there are no shortage in the English literary tradition, were repurposed and mobilized to confront the dynamism of new uglinesses produced by industrialization and imperialism, the consequent transformations in the grade of class positions, and prevalent fears of contagion, revolution, and pollution. Among other things, this meant that ahistorical and allegedly pure aesthetic questions became inextricable from more pressing matters concerning how to represent — and critique — the revolting conditions of an increasingly soiled Victorian society. Turbulent feelings of moral implication and political culpability merged with pragmatic issues about representational distance and literary value. As Auerbach put it in connection to Zola, "the inclusion of the fourth estate in serious realism was decisively advanced by those who, in their quest for new aesthetic impressions, discovered the attraction of the ugly and pathological."[13] But it was equally true that, in the Victorian quest for new objectifying forms of social criticism, the novel was never far from the front of the line. In one novel it may seem that the aesthetic has been sociologized, in another that the sociological has been aestheticized, but in fact the project of realism relied on a structural fusion of the two categories, if not on a preemptive denial that they are isolable. The fact that an entire natural landscape seemed ready to be swallowed up by a thick layer of filth and contamination, at once

taken to be a dehumanizing alien blight and the human issue of troubling new cultural processes, became both the principle object of the Victorian social novel's critical agenda and a productive source of literary innovation.

Even in the passage from *Jane Eyre* this duality in the novel's relationship to its own disgust is apparent, though the paradigmatic mid-19th century case for an aesthetics of disgust is beyond question Dickens. Thus in *Little Dorrit,* his most negative and lacerating critique of Victorian society, elicitors of disgust are also sites of fascination, and the transgression of boundaries which disgust reactions are always to some degree attempts to prevent become the objects of characters' desires as well. The Thames in the novel epitomizes this duality, emerging as the focus of Arthur Clennam and Amy Dorrit's depressive fantasies of drifting off and dissolving as a means of escaping the ordeal of professional, familial, societal and romantic obligations. Maybe rivers are *loci classici* of this kind of idle fantasying, but the novel was being written and serialized in the three years leading up to the Great Stink, when, as Dickens himself puts it in the novel, "through the heart of the town a deadly sewer ebbed and flowed, in the place of a fine fresh river" — a description not of the Thames during the 1820s, when the novel is set and when salmon still swam upstream, but of the 1850s, long after it had become the whole city's cesspool. Still, not only does Amy stare longingly off the Iron Bridge into the murky future, but a heartsick Arthur actually fantasizes about floating off downstream, which for readers in 1857 would have meant immersing oneself in the sometimes visible excrement of nearly three million Londoners:

> And he thought — who has not thought for a moment, sometimes — that it might be better to flow away monotonously, like the river, and to compound for its insensibility to happiness with its insensibility to pain.[14]

In the context of *Little Dorrit*'s larger critical program, this dissolution of the physical body into its own muck, and the attendant loss of identity, are, however negative, felt as potential

alternatives to a wrong society. But the emblem of wrong society is also the "deadly sewer" itself, and moreover, as has been well documented, Dickens' entire oeuvre relies on what amounts to an arsenal of disgust, stench and pollution in order to produce its social criticism: "the odor of circumlocution" and the "formation of a surface" by puckering one's lips, in *Little Dorrit*; the "tainting sort of weather" in *Bleak House*, a defiling fog enveloping London, but also "inborn, inbred, engendered in the corrupted humors of the vicious body itself"; "the spoiling influence of [Thames] water," in *Our Mutual Friend*, corroding dead bodies, money and garbage alike. Dickens' work embodies the conflicted point at which disgust becomes a vital source of literary expression and a socially necessary vocabulary of critical condemnation.

It is useful to situate this account of realism and repulsion in relation to other narratives about the development of the novel, in particular Michael McKeon's in *The Origins of the English Novel*. As is now well established, McKeon proposes that the early modern formation of the novel responded to tectonic shifts in two distinct "realms of human experience," an epistemological crisis which raised "questions of truth," and an ethical and social crisis which raised "questions of virtue." In the first case, McKeon argues that until the 17th century, "the reigning narrative epistemology involves a dependence on received authorities and a priori tradition," which was then critiqued and supplanted by an empiricist epistemology that now determined "how to tell truth in narrative"; this "naive empiricism" was itself checked by the development of an "extreme skepticism," which questioned the validity of empiricism as a basis for truth-telling. In the second case, McKeon relies on the same pattern, now turning to "socioethical" concerns with "how the external social order is related to the internal, moral state of its members." Thus, the received stratification of "aristocratic ideology" is replaced by a destabilizing "progressive ideology," which then "gives birth to its own critique" in the form of a

reactionary "conservative ideology." For McKeon, the relatively stable category of the 18th century novel was the yield of these shifts and counter-shifts in how truth and morality are represented in narrative form.[15]

McKeon's robust argument only approaches the topic of disgust obliquely, through a brief discussion on aesthetics towards the end of his long section on "Questions of Truth." There, he points out that the "modern belief in the autonomous realm of the aesthetic" owes a debt to empiricist epistemology, "most of all for its argument that several realms of knowledge are separable from each other." Yet this debt was left unsettled, McKeon argues, because

> the belief in the autonomous aesthetic could gain ascendancy only when the coarser and more material vestiges of empirical thought...had been ejected by the body of knowledge which in modern thought is designated as the last and lonely refuge of transcendent spirit, the sphere of artistic experience.[16]

McKeon describes the cordoning off of the aesthetic sphere as an ejection of an unassimilable empirical materiality from the imaginative realm of artistic production. It is a suggestive turn of phrase, since within aesthetic theory this ejection was by and large accomplished through the exclusion of the disgusting for being, in Kant's memorable formulation, the "one kind of ugliness which cannot be represented in accordance with nature, without destroying all aesthetical satisfaction and consequently artificial beauty."[17] One reason for this exclusion was that, by making such a strong negative appeal to sensation, disgust was felt to block reflection in the judging subject. But this alone would not have been grounds for singling out disgust as antithetical and not just inimical to aesthetic experience. Unlike other strong subjective feelings, disgust has seemed unique to aestheticians because the reactions it provokes take the form of objective judgments. In both moral and aesthetic registers, the language of disgust appeals to subjective, inner feelings, but is not prey to the "extreme skepticism" that McKeon posits as the response to empiricist sensationalism. To the contrary, disgust, Kant thought, forced itself upon

one — was inner, but not inward — demanding the public agreement that normally requires objective, empirically demonstrable criteria that can answer to "questions of truth." Disgust destabilizes the delicate equilibrium of the aesthetic sphere because it produces an ersatz objectivity, a subjectivity on parade as unshakeable knowledge.

If we think of the 19th century novel as zeroing in on the narrative potential offered by expressions of disgust, rather than excluding them *tout court*, then McKeon's barrier isolating the epistemological from the socioethical begins to crumble. Disgust sits right on the fault line of the fact/value distinction. This is in the first place what makes disgust at once so effective and so insidious when it is used as a justification for prejudice, dehumanization or violence. Following irrational laws of sympathetic magic, a disgusting image is real because bad; its existential reality is inseparable from its affective negativity; value regurgitates fact. For an aesthetics of disgust, then, the truth or falsity of a narrative is tethered to its moral value, not separated from it. This is related to Marcuse's formulation, in which the aesthetic experiences offered by cultural objects become "affirmative" alibis for the ugliness of the *status quo*. But in that formulation, an unwanted empirical reality sits in an inverse and apologetic relation to an aesthetic realm which is variously mental, ephemeral, and transcendental, whereas in the relation I am describing the obverse is true, and an unwanted inner experience threatens to throw itself into alignment with an unwanted reality. As far as cultural fantasies go, plunging into a river of excrement is not *exactly* an escape from the real into the ephemeral.

Dickens sits at the epicenter of the Victorian aesthetics of disgust; the whole of London was stuck to his shoe. But as the century wore on and the waste piled up, there was no shortage of authors who seized on the question of how to confront revolting ugliness as an opportunity for realizing through their works the aesthetic potential of the boundary confusion inherent to

disgust-reactions. Nevertheless, the novels of the Victorian period remain for many contemporary critics exemplars of the affirmative cultural object — a sanitized and sanitizing sponge, saturated with every kind of ideological fluid the 19th century had to offer. Despite a cottage industry of criticism on the "excremental" in Dickens ranging from Norman O. Brown to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and a budding interest in Victorian reactions to environmental pollution, the story persists of Victorian realism as a tightly-laced caesura between, say, Swift's scatological satire and the more graphic aesthetico-political experiments of Joyce and Lawrence. Nor have the twenty-five years since McKeon's origin story of the novel done much to counteract his assumption that the genre offered little resistance to — let alone broke sharply with — the injunction to exclude or eject disgust from the aesthetic realm.

In the following chapters, I aim to complicate this assumption, since what it fails to account for — what it excludes — is the prevalence of expressions of disgust in the Victorian novel. The literary record of the 19th century is crawling with disgust, whether in local moments as in *Jane Eyre*, or elevated to the level of an aesthetic program, as we will see with George Gissing and Thomas Hardy, and each of these articulations represents an obtrusive point of contact between values and facts, tastes and truths, smells and sights, subjective expression and objective judgment, epistemology and history. At the broadest level, these nodes of disgust seep through what can often seem the impermeable boundary separating the cultural from the social. The purportedly objective discursive practices of a whole host of social institutions — sanitary reform, obscenity law, gastroenterology, linguistics, sociology — derived in large part from the Enlightenment discourse of aesthetic judgment, and excluded disgust from the public sphere. In the entwinement of realism with repulsion, Victorian literature industriously flouted the aesthetic prohibition of the disgusting, while industrial society absorbed it.

III. *Organization and Literature Review*

The structure of *The Masses Are Revolting* is straightforward. Seeking to identify and analyze a pervasive Victorian discourse of disgust, each chapter pursues that end through a distinct sphere of sociocultural activity in which the emotion was afforded a signal importance, namely, sanitary reform; slum tourism and urban reform; gastric physiology and evolutionary biology; and obscenity law. In each case, the aesthetic prohibition of disgust serves as a proximal point of origin — not, that is, in any absolute sense, but as the nearest and most explicit theorization of disgust. Thus in each case, I emphasize a homology between the role of disgust in the given Victorian social discourse and the rules and conventions ascribed to disgust in aesthetic theory. At the same time, I seek to demonstrate how, in each case, a Victorian literary text offers an alternative way of understanding the emotion of disgust, one that countermands the aesthetic prohibition of the disgusting. The authors I have chosen — Gissing, Ruskin, Hardy and Darwin — are therefore those whose work most frustrates Enlightenment dictates about taste and judgment, leaving the task of epitomizing the latter to the historical documents I examine.

The Masses Are Revolting makes its primary intervention in the fields Victorian literary and cultural studies, though its scope is such that it will be of interest to scholars of British literature and culture of the modern period more generally, as well as to cultural and literary theorists. Within Victorian studies, an impressive body of recent scholarship on sanitary conditions in modern Britain enabled me to orient my research in a field that would otherwise have remained for me the giant mess which, of course, it is. This dissertation sees itself as contributing in particular to a conversation which includes William A. Cohen's edited volume of essays, *Filth: Dirt, Disgust and Modern Life*, as well as Michelle Allen's *Cleansing the City*.

More than other works, these two volumes depict the relation of filth to literature in Victorian society with remarkable historical detail, though they do so without acknowledgment of the ways in which the discourse of aesthetic disgust bears on the matter now, or informed it in the 19th century. This limitation prevents both Allen and Cohen's texts from making connections between sanitary reform and, for example, obscenity law, even though both *topoi* so clearly relate to the study of the general value Victorians ascribed to disgust. Consequently, these works are unable to connect their discussion of disgust or filth in Victorian literature or society to the larger issues in the history and theory of culture which this study addresses.

My dissertation also addresses a body of theoretical works, most of them written over the last twenty years, which take affect and emotion as their objects of study. With few exceptions, however, these works investigate emotions without reference to historical context, even when they take as their premise that emotional expression and affective life are culturally contingent. Not surprisingly, the two authors — Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Raymond Williams — whose work on the emotions has most influenced this work have both maintained a close grip on historical detail, and have therefore done the most to showcase the variety of scenarios in which particular affective responses may emerge, and to the variety of expression that an author may develop to give voice to those experiences.

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the subject matter, each chapter necessarily engages with a wide variety of primary and secondary materials that are only locally relevant. The medical texts from the second chapter, on Darwin, have little to say that is explicit to the obscenity proceedings in the fourth chapter, on Hardy. Rather, their continuity is routed through the literature on disgust which I have relied on heavily and, often, tacitly, in this introduction as well as throughout the dissertation. Another intervention my dissertation makes is in this subfield,

which includes a spate of scholarly works from the last decade or so, mostly from within philosophy and cultural theory, entirely devoted to the study of disgust, among them Martha Nussbaum's *Hiding from Humanity*, Winfried Menninghaus' *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Emotion*, and William Ian Miller's *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Alongside these works, however, the corpus of psychoanalytic theory as well as more recent psychological studies have served as a compendium of reflections on and investigations into the foundational role of disgust in human development, including Freud's work on "Negation"; Julia Kristeva's theorization of abjection; and Paul Rozin and Michael Haidt's experimental studies on disgust. Similarly, some more general works in critical theory have made specific statements about disgust that have proved incredibly useful, such as Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction*, most of Georges Bataille's writings, and especially Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*. Beyond the debates over taste and disgust in 18th century aesthetics, this body of literature represents the theoretical foundation for my own conception of disgust.

My first chapter, "The Odor of Things: The Great Stink and the Rhetoric of Victorian Disgust," argues that the rhetoric of Victorian sanitary reform relied heavily on a discourse of revolted judgment that was absorbed into the social sphere from 18th century aesthetic philosophy, which had been the only intellectual enterprise to afford the disgusting any attention prior to the 19th century. Such public discourse appealed to a presumptively shared threshold of disgust, a looming point past which civilization, it was feared, would succumb to its inherent animality. However irrational or imagined, anxieties about the internality of the disgusting, and the accompanying sense that the ever-expanding British empire might sour itself from the inside out, became a driving force in Victorian sociopolitical affairs. In order to analyze this structure of

feeling, “The Odor of Things” turns to the newspaper articles, medical reports, and political proceedings written in the wake of the Great Stink of 1858, when a June to July heat wave left the sewage-filled Thames moldering to such a degree that Parliament was closed, and a new sewer finally commissioned after more than a decade of legislative deadlock. Reading this discursive disgust enshrouding London — “an epidemic diarrhea of speeches, motions and notices of question,” as the *Lancet* medical journal described it at the time — alongside John Ruskin's lecture on “The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century” (1884), I argue in this chapter that the centrality of disgust to the foundation of the modern public sphere must be understood in light of theories of taste and aesthetic judgment.

Alongside the social revulsion endemic to the Great Stink, my second chapter, “Darwin’s Vomit: Disgust on the Primal Scene,” connects Charles Darwin’s late writings on the expression of disgust to emergent physiological conceptions of the stomach and Victorian medical theories of dyspepsia and indigestion. Here, I argue that Darwin’s theory of the evolutionary origins of vomiting was at odds with the dominant Victorian view of the stomach as the unwanted bearer of human animality. Understood as the most unknown and unknowable depths of the body, the desire to be free from the bilious, upset stomach motivated a diverse array of modern practices, ranging from the gruesome techno-rational reliance on vivisection in Victorian gastric medicine, to reactionary anti-imperialist calls for the return to a traditional English diet. As with the chapter on the Great Stink, here I put Victorian medical, scientific and dietetic concerns about indigestion into a productive conversation with longer-standing dualistic currents in the modern discourse of taste.

The third chapter, “The Gross, The Bad, and the Grubby: George Gissing and the Ideology of Revulsion,” explores the consequences of the confusion of aesthetic and

sociopolitical registers for innovations in the novel towards the close of the 19th century. Returning to the investigation of realism and repulsion with which I began, I argue that, as the century drew to a close, the urgency of such questions only intensified for naturalist authors. Reading George Gissing's *The Nether World* (1889), I detail how late 19th century socially critical novels registered a new shared sense of involvement and self-implication in the grotesque devastation of the world. This recursive dynamic signaled the emergence of a now explicitly articulated anti-aesthetic in the Victorian novel, which responded negatively to the perceived aestheticization of the British lower classes in late Victorian "slumming" practices and urban reform movements. Disgusted yet invigorated by the squalid conditions of the working class, the working class themselves, and the middle class to which he himself aspired, Gissing took the task of the novelist to be inherently bound up with the representation of "the dung heap" of modern society, without the elimination of the disgust it inspired.

The final chapter, "Rotten Atmospheres: *Jude the Obscure* and the Stench of Modern Obscenity," turns to the attempted censorship of Hardy's late novels, examining the intersections of the aesthetic prohibition of the disgusting with the development of modern obscenity law. Not only did Hardy anticipate the classification of his novels as obscene, but *Jude* represents a complex thematic meditation on the interconnections of censorship, obscenity law and iconoclasm, which takes shape through a persistent vocabulary of respiratory, gustatory and olfactory disgust. Considering the novel alongside the archive of Parliamentary debate and judicial opinion regarding the "traffic in obscenity," the chapter reads Hardy's late works as interrogations of the surreptitious absorption into social and legal affairs of the imaginative discourse of disgust which was endemic to Victorian culture. Obscenity law foregrounds the sociopolitical stakes of aesthetic and representational questions about disgust in a way that none

of the other chapters could, since obscenity trials are one of the few social arenas in which aesthetic judgments are already granted a concrete sociopolitical value. Ending on this note, the *Masses Are Revolting* thus provides a detailed cultural historical account of Victorian disgust, illuminating the ways in which squeamish repulsion, sneering moral outrage, and visceral revulsion were integral to the formation of the Victorian literary imagination and public sphere alike.

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[1] Dickens. *Little Dorrit*, 42.
[2] Engels, 75.
[3] Gaskell, 23.
[4] Engels, 48-53.
[5] Bronte, 305-7.
[6] Frazer, 12
[7] Rozin, 30.
[8] Angyal, A. "Disgust and Related Aversions." , 397.
[9] Brontë, 306.
[10]Brontë, 311-12.
[11]Brontë, 331.
[12]Bakhtin, 308.
[13] Auerbach, 446.
[14]Dickens. *Little Dorrit*. 169
[15] McKeon, 20-2.
[16]McKeon, 120.
[17]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 114.

Chapter I
The Odor of Things:
The Great Stink and the Rhetoric of Victorian Disgust

> "But what is smelling? It is an act of the mind, but is never imagined to be a quality of the mind….We say, this body smells sweet, that stinks; but we do not say, this mind smells sweet, that stinks."
> — Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, 1764

> "To put it crudely, the memory actually stinks, just as in the present the object stinks; and in the same manner as we turn away...the head and nose in disgust, the preconscious and the sense of consciousness turn away from the memory. This is *repression*."
> — Freud, Letter to Fliess, November 14, 1897

Most densely populated places will ripen on a hot day, but not every society makes a Great Stink; for that elevated designation, a culture has to afford a prominent social and political role to its disgust, as Victorian culture certainly did. In this chapter, I examine the complex discursive revulsion that hung over London during the Great Stink of 1858, when a June-to-July heat wave had the Thames sitting slightly lower than usual, and the stench of roughly three million Londoners' semi-solid excrement lurking just below the surface, washed up and downstream with the tide twice daily, threw most of London into an olfactory panic. Parliament was shut down; the press had a field day, as the stench of the polluted river came to stand for some of the more palpable problems of modern life; after only six weeks, a colossal system of intercepting sewers was commissioned — a project which had been stalled in bureaucratic limbo for a decade.

Just as significantly, the Great Stink also produced an explosion of language, both foul and florid — an "epidemic diarrhea of speeches, motions, notices of question," as the sober *Lancet* put it in the heat of the moment — which brings into focus the mechanics of a more general Victorian discursive disgust.[1] Examining this rhetorical revulsion in turn helps to explain the unprecedented importance Victorians afforded to disgust as a public and political passion. In what follows, I argue that the record of disgust's social preeminence reflects an absorption into sociopolitical affairs of Enlightenment aesthetic discourse concerning the disgusting and the beautiful.

The rhetoric of the Great Stink is certainly not the only place one can turn for evidence that disgust was central to Victorian public discourse. Appeals to a common, shared threshold of disgust, beyond which civilization would succumb to its own vile corporeality and barbaric animality, were common in many areas of Victorian culture, and reflected a new communal sense of revolted self-implication. Specific to Victorian anxieties surrounding the sewage question, the association of the working class with foul smells, and of foul smells with allegedly airborne illnesses like cholera, was endemic to the language of Victorian sanitary reform, which for decades promoted a miasma theory adhering to Edwin Chadwick's central thesis that "all smell is disease."[2] This sanitizing impulse itself permeated Victorian arts and cultural discourse, as Eileen Cleere has argued with regard to an 1840s push to clean the paintings in the British Museum, following Chadwick's pseudo-historical intuition (gleaned from Ruskin) that "the seats of ancient art were commonly centres of filth"; there was even a related call to make the museum inaccessible to the working class, whose breath some thought would blacken the paintings.[3] But even sympathetic accounts of the working class tended to rely on appeals to a common humanity defined negatively against a public disgust: "The very turmoil of the streets has something

repulsive," Engels wrote about London in 1844, "Something against which human nature rebels."[4] Tories and communists alike seemed to agree that the masses were in fact revolting.

This essay considers the rhetoric of disgust emanating from the Great Stink as an exemplar of the broader, more general office that revulsion held in Victorian England, situating it in the context of a brief intellectual history of the discourse of disgust. The first part of my discussion focuses on the ways in which the Great Stink exacerbated these various and often times irrational public proceedings, and argues that the outcry over the stink points to a specific structure of externalized self-implication and consequent self-erasure, a central gesture inherent to the discourse of Victorian disgust-reactions. This rhetorical gesture is a bidirectional blurring between outraged accusation and ostensive definition: a finger pointed outward which designates an object as repulsive by attempting to reject, repudiate or otherwise remove it, which is indistinct from a finger turned inward, perhaps even forced down the throat, in an act of self-designation likewise geared towards externalization, expulsion and denial.

In order to account for this structure, and to account for the advent of disgust as a sociopolitical passion in the first place, the second part of this essay then traces the Victorian discourse of social revulsion back to the arguments over the nature of aesthetic taste in Enlightenment aesthetic philosophy, the origin point of a long and ongoing tradition of theorizing the disgusting in relation to the beautiful. The third part of the discussion adduces a continuity between the social revulsion of the 19th century and the theorizations of aesthetic disgust in the 18th, suggesting that, since its structure was first articulated within an aesthetic situation, the primary way to understand the role disgust came to play in Victorian society is through its figurations and representations in literary or aesthetic texts. In order to cement this continuity between the social and aesthetic, I turn in conclusion to John Ruskin's lectures on *The Storm-*

Cloud of the Nineteenth Century, as prime examples of the Victorian discourse of aesthetic revulsion. In its confusion between the imaginary and the empirical, and between critical repudiation and disgusted self-implication, Ruskin's critical voice epitomizes the reviling animus so much in the air — and noses — of Victorian England.

I.

Bolstered by his calculation that 278,000 tons of sewage were discharged into the Thames each day, Henry Mayhew insisted in 1848 that "the removal of the refuse of a large town is, perhaps, one of the most important of social operations."[5] In the two decades leading up to the Great Stink, however, specific discussions of how sewage ought to be removed, where to take it, and what to do to with it once it got there, were characterized by an utter lack of consensus. Each step of the way in the cleansing of London, as Michelle Allen has demonstrated, had as many detractors as it did proponents, and both pro and con camps were themselves divided over every issue into various ideological substrata, each allied to a different agenda with wildly different goals.[6] In a hotly contested policy decision enacted throughout the 1840s, Chadwick himself had instigated the practice of emptying domestic waste into the Thames through London's outdated and insufficient old sewer tunnels, further strained by the spike in domestic water-consumption due to the popularization of the toilet bowl; prior to that, individual cesspools overflowed behind private houses, emitting the noxious local odors which miasma theorists believed were responsible for the transmission of cholera. Thus, Chadwick's answer to the stagnant residential cesspool helped make the Thames into a single "great cesspool instead of each person having one of his own," as the builder and architect Thomas Cubitt put it.[7] One of the earliest and most decisive acts in Victorian sanitary reform was therefore directly responsible for the

contamination of London's drinking water, and so for the spread of cholera in the outbreaks 1848 and 1854.

Not only were Chadwick's sanitary reforms critiqued for being ultimately unsanitary, but, as Allen has shown, "the substitution of a public drainage network for the the private cesspool was perceived by some as an attack on domestic autonomy."[8] A government regulated sewer system was seen by certain critics as part of an increasingly intrusive state; these critics included Herbert Spencer, who saw the sewer as the first step towards the "universal supervision of private conduct."[9] Yet while some resented government encroachment, others actually feared that sewer pipes would allow dangerous and volatile gases to enter into the home; still others saw the project as financially untenable — although Mayhew caustically claimed that the failure to reuse London's homegrown sewage as fertilizer (instead of importing South American guano) meant that "we are positively wasting £4,000,000 of money each year; or rather, *it costs us that amount to poison the waters about us*."[10] And as John Hollingshead observed in *Underground London* (1862), none of these concerns disappeared once construction of the new sewer was already underway:

> Some people cannot be brought to believe that any tunnels have been constructed anywhere, and they look upon the thick-ribbed shorecuttings, the houses on wheels, and the excavators' spades and lanterns, scattered about in different parts of London, as mere surface decoys, set up to satisfy a few inquisitive ratepayers. Others regard the tunnels as only too real and substantial; volcanoes of filth; gorged veins of putridity; ready to explode at any moment in a whirlwind of foul gas, and poison all those whom they fail to smother. Others take the financial ground that the scheme will exhaust three millions sterling, without doing three-pennyworth of good; forgetting that the tunnels will always be worth their money as wine-cellars, bowling-alleys, skittle-grounds, flower-beds of romance, and fancy subways. If sewage should prove as obstinate as certain sewer-doctors predict, the tunnels may even serve as condemned cells for all our unruly, colony-rejected thieves and convicts.[11]

Hollingshead's playful account reveals the extent to which the new sewer served as a lodestone for socially critical fears and anxieties, and so illuminates the length of its reach into the Victorian imagination. For Allen, the variety of resistance to the sewer presents a challenge to

progressive historical narratives about how modern public health standards are instituted. Such 'reformist' accounts, Allen rightly argues, reflect a "fundamental conviction about the universal desirability of modern sanitation and hygiene" only available from a backward-looking, "(Western) sanitary landscape happily provided with flush toilets and waterborne sewage."[12] Or as Freud would assert two decades into the 20th century, "a social factor is also unmistakeably present in the cultural trend towards cleanliness, which has received *ex post facto* justification in hygienic considerations, but which manifested itself before their discovery."[13]

The Great Stink exacerbated this maelstrom of dissenting ideologies, competing rationales, economic tabulations, and bureaucratic red-tape, but it also lent the matter a rhetorical urgency, previously lacking, which it derived from its sensory appeal to a shared threshold of disgust. Where over a decade of scientific and political argument had failed to make up anyone's mind, a month of revulsion brought the matter to a head and seemed likely to cut the Gordian knot the sewage question had become: "The stench of the Thames," one July 10, 1858 *Lancet* commentator remarked, "Has fairly taken the public by the nose, and compelled them to entertain most seriously questions of sanitary reform. The subject can no longer be burked, for it literally forces itself down our throats." The sentiment was not uncommon, and reflected a growing sense that Victorian noses, mouths and eyes were better judges of the river's malignancy than any of the inconclusive scientific studies of Thames water conducted daily throughout the stink.[14] As the Analytical Sanitary Commission reported,

> To such an extent has the river been polluted with sewage this year, that the water for miles...has become almost black, and has, in fact, presented the appearance of sewage itself, so that, without the least exaggeration, the river may be said to be transformed into one vast uncovered sewer, reeking with noxious and pestiferous abominations....Notwithstanding the horrid smells and stenches with which our nostrils are assailed, chemists and men of science come forward and declare that Thames water does not contain sulphuretted hydrogen, and that the sewage poured into the river is in no way injurious."[15]

The scientific community's failure to reach agreement over the toxicity of the water was felt by

many to signal the malleability of scientific discourse and the insufficiency of contemporary medical knowledge, when compared with the appeal to the sensory experience of olfactory revulsion "with which our nostrils are assailed." If this shared sense of assault did not exactly dissolve the ideological divisions of the day, it nevertheless was felt to insist on the need for action. As David S. Barnes has written, "Disgust — the powerful collective disgust of the Great Stinks [of London and later in Paris] — could galvanize or paralyze, but it could not be ignored."[16] Or as the *Times* editorialized in the wake of the stink,"The truth is, that this is a case where the fool's argument that 'something must be done' is applicable," adding, "Something *must* be done."

Parliament's decision to spend millions on the construction of the modern sewer system was rooted in panic, fear, frustration and, above all, disgust. It is all too easy to paper over this fact when regarding the response to the stink with the reformist hindsight which Allen criticizes, but the privileging of disgust was not a hidden truth of the affair. Rather, as the *Times* editorial exemplifies, panicked disgust and revolted outrage not only motivated the passage of the legislation, but were explicitly appealed to as sufficient grounds for it:

> Taken all together, the debate of Monday evening was a good expression of the actual conditions attending the great metropolitan drainage question. Most people can find objections to the measure proposed, nobody feels quite satisfied, in most quarters there are strong misgivings, and yet in the end the Bill is read a second time without so much as a division. The truth is, that this is a case where the fool's argument that 'something must be done' is applicable. Something *must* be done....That effluvium showed what the Thames had actually come to. That stink showed what might follow at any time from the filth of our own manufacture under the influence of a few days' sun. By and by, perhaps, the action of the sun may be hardly needed, and we may feel the nuisance every hour. The sewage of a mighty city lies in a broad stream under our very noses, churned up in its waters, putrefying on its banks, and steaming up from its surface....Everybody sees that "something must be done" — a very simple something, so far as its definition goes. The filth must be carried away, and our atmosphere relieved from pollution.
>
> Now, since it was first thought expedient to do "something," we have passed through exactly ten years without doing anything...It is a bad thing to go upon vicious principles in drainage as well as other matters; it is sad to sink money uselessly; and it will be lamentable if we find ourselves encumbered with a costly

> and insufficient system of sewerage after all our exertions; but it is, unhappily, beyond all question that if we wait for a concurrence of opinions on this subject, we shall never stick a spade in the ground or construct either a drain or a tunnel, or get, in fact, a single inch beyond the recent expedient of correcting Thames water with tons of lime....The stench of June was only the last ounce of our burden, or rather it was an accidental flash of light which brought a great fact before our eyes. That hot fortnight did for the sanitary administration of the Metropolis what the Bengal mutinies did for the administration of India....[17]

The article begins by justifying its claim exclusively through the appeal to the sensory experience of the nuisance itself. The threat of danger and infection, the sense of frustration at bureaucracy, the imperialist flourish — all take second place, rhetorically, to the odor of things, an olfactory experience which the article expects will supersede all possible reservations about the need for action. Part and parcel to this battle cry was an anxious articulation of self-implication — "the filth of our own manufacture" — reminding readers that the Great Stink hovering over London was nothing more than the excrescence of their own bodies, adducing a blurring of boundaries and a correspondence between visceral interior and noxious exterior; analysis published in the *Lancet* went as far as to detail the remnants of last night's dinner floating in the sewage-filled water (samples from beneath London Bridge apparently contained the most "potato, hairs, and husk of wheat").

This boundary confusion, however, performs a complex rhetorical shift between sensory and cultural registers, making it unclear whether the actual problem is to be found in the river or in the way of life which polluted it. The need for swift repudiation of filth is now a matter of civilization overcoming its own barbarism and animality, of disgust for a total social condition: "The sewage of a mighty city lies in a broad stream under our very noses, churned up in its waters, putrefying on its banks, and steaming up from its surface...." If this counts as raising the stakes, it is also a way of denying the initial sensory point of departure, as the stench is handily recast by the end of the editorial in distancing imperial terms: "That hot fortnight did for the sanitary administration of the Metropolis what the Bengal mutinies did for the administration of

India....” Bounding from the “drainage question” to the collapse of the Mughal Empire, the rhetoric of revulsion in fact sanitizes its own argument; no longer an olfactory crisis within “our very noses,” the stink has been taken out of the nose and metaphorically visualized, “an accidental flash of light which brought a great fact before our eyes.” Illuminating the need for deliberate action that is not merely a gut reaction, the article ends by targeting the very expressions of disgust with which it began.

The sense of disgust towards a total social condition formed part of a new structure of feeling that emerged over the course of the first half of the 19th century, in response to a heightened sense of moral and physical implication in the ever increasing pollution of the world. At the center of this structure of feeling lay the physical transgression of the boundaries of the body, primarily through the mouth and the nostrils, and an attendant respiratory repulsion towards suffocating smells felt to enshroud and contaminate from without, even while they emanated from within. This meant that rather than a disgust directed at specific objects which could be removed, the aspirations of Victorian social revulsion targeted a whole cultural atmosphere and climate; as the material instigators of revulsion increased by orders of magnitude, the particular shape that Victorian disgust took became, counter-intuitively, less corporeal and more ephemeral. This ephemerality highlights a central feature of the rhetoric of Victorian disgust, namely, that it proceeds by repudiating the articulation of physical revulsion that initially anchors it. This form of self-censorship reproduces on a discursive level the corporeal boundary confusion between inside and outside induced in the first place by foul smells; instead, *expressions* of disgust are treated as though they were disgusting *things* themselves which needed to be done away with — a recursive confusion between revolting objects and revolted subjects typical to Victorian articulations of disgust, but which had been analyzed *ad nauseum* in

18th century philosophical contexts as well.

II.

The response to the Great Stink emphasized how a sense of communal disgust could be used rhetorically to gesture towards a public threshold, a point past which modern society succumbed to what it felt to be its own repulsive, "semi-barbarous" tendencies, as the *Morning Chronicle* put it.[18] But where did this sense of a public standard come from? There is very little in the history of British political thought affording disgust the pivotal role in social formation that it began to play in the 19th century. Hobbes, for example, saw aversion as the natural counterpart to appetite, and so a primary engine of human interaction; and he saw contempt as an important passion, "being nothing else but an immobility, or contumacy of the Heart, in resisting the action of certain things" which were then felt to be "*Vile* and *Inconsiderable*." Perhaps Hobbes' concept of aversion can provide some perspective on visceral Victorian revulsion, but the discursive history of disgust emerges in large part out of a reaction against a vision of a *body* politic such as the Leviathan. Hume may have had much more to say on the emotions in general, though he was equally silent about disgust, and was less interested in the first place about how an individual's subjective passions translated into social activity in a political context. Prior to the 19th century, it seems, disgust was not considered an emotion of particular importance to social or political theory or practice.

Appeals to a unanimous public disgust upon which hinged the fate of the whole of society also marked a break with the gist of at least two centuries of British nuisance law and policy, which tended to determine where a nasty smell or sight was suitable by relegating it to the edge of town. According to *Hubbub*, Emily Cockayne's study of 17th and 18th century urban filth in

England, the problem was that the edges of an ever expanding town like London were perpetually finding themselves in the middle of things. Citing a 1757 lawsuit against a kennel whose vile emanations were thought to be toxic, Cockayne writes that "urban creep meant that a once rural and isolated business was perceived to be obnoxious to recently arrived citizens." "The town has come to the dog kennel," the defense protested, in a moment reminiscent of contemporary debates over the gentrification of formerly industrial neighborhoods.[19] Likewise, Cockayne notes a willingness to compromise in the early stages of industrialization and modernization of the British urban economy, referencing 17th and 18th century proverbs proclaiming that "Muck and money go together," and "We will bear with the Stink, if it bring but in Chink." Despite extremely squalid living conditions, Cockayne argues that early modern England saw its nuisances as intimately linked to its financial progress in a kind socioeconomic balancing act; Cockayne quotes Bernard Mandevile's *Fable of the Bees* (1720), which posited that "dirty streets are a necessary Evil inseparable from the Felicity of *London*."[20] This double emphasis on relativism and compromise with respect to urban nuisance differs greatly from the unanimity expected by Victorian articulations of disgust surrounding the Great Stink. A cesspool might overflow here or there (or here *and* there), Gin Alley might disgust the Hogarthian onlooker, but the problem of waste in 17th and 18th century England had not yet become a constitutive problem of the age, and disgust was considered to play little to no role in the political process.

One is very likely, however, to encounter tracts about the nature of the disgusting within debates over the nature of the beautiful all throughout 18th century aesthetic philosophy. This is especially true in the German tradition — a work like Lessing's *Laocoon* contains whole chapters devoted to differentiating the ugly and the horrible from the disgusting — which

culminated with Kant's dense meditations on the subject in the *Critique of Judgment.* In the British tradition, too, works like Shaftesbury's "Sensus Communis," Hume's "On the Standard of Taste," Thomas Reid's *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, and Edmund Burke's "Introduction on Taste," which opens his *Philosophical Enquiry*, among many others, were all parts of a long investigation into the shared grammar of aesthetic experience, each attempting to determine whether ordinary sensation could be separated from the allegedly more refined and cognitive procedures of aesthetic judgment. It remains a pertinent historical fact that the discourse of revulsion which was so ubiquitous in Victorian society derives in large part from these aesthetic contexts, which had been the only branch of intellectual production to pay the matter any sustained attention prior to the 19th century. Some of the first pages in the history of the discursive life of disgust are found at the onset of modern aesthetic criticism in the notion of aesthetic taste.

The central task of early aesthetic theory was to determine whether aesthetic judgments were rooted primarily in sensory pleasure, or if it were necessary to cultivate a more rarefied and intellectual form of appreciation in order to deem an object as beautiful, and not merely pleasant or charming. The need for this distinction was partly related to the increased availability of popular, entertaining cultural forms, such as aesthetic theory's more democratically accessible contemporary, the novel, which on the one hand threatened previously stable divisions between high and low, and on the other was felt to demand a more thorough delineation of a public standard for critical evaluation. Such a standard proved elusive for 18th century theorists, who feared that, without an objective sense grounding pronouncements of taste, critical judgment would be reduced simply to innumerable private and unsubstantiated moments of vulgar

enjoyment. Not arbitrarily, this endeavor hinged on the distinction between gustatory and aesthetic tastes.

Taste was not simply posited as the answer to the problem of judgment, but rather the entire vocabulary of Enlightenment aesthetics was suffused with a metaphorical vocabulary of appetite, orality and above all, consumption. As Denise Gigante argues, the gustatory rhetoric of the discourse of aesthetic taste was positioned as a blow against conceptions of human behavior as determined by appetite and the pursuit of pleasure, like Hobbes'; "as a social animal," Gigante observes, "man doesn't just eat: he dines."[21] Taste, as opposed to appetite, was supposed to be disinterested, and could in fact only be exercised properly once physical desires had been satisfied and put in check. In order to do so, Shaftesbury, for one, claimed the body must be rid of the impurities and imperfections which impeded its transcendence of the sensory; a negative vocabulary of purging, excretion and evacuation thus sprung up alongside the positive rhetoric of oral consumption. Consequently, the cardinal pursuit of pinning down and distinguishing aesthetic taste was a subtle and elusive affair, only growing more and more subject to frequent, if not ultimately permanent confusion with its sensory relatives of gustation and disgust. According to Hume, for example, in "Of the Standard of Taste," the goal was to "mingle some light of the understanding with the feelings of sentiment;" that is, to lend a cognitive dimension to an otherwise corporeal affair. The reason "why many feel not the proper sentiment of beauty," Hume goes on, "Is the want of that *delicacy* of imagination, which is requisite to convey a sensibility of those finer emotions."[22] His example, however, is a scene from the *Quixote* in which Sancho Panza relates a story about his family's "great judgment in wine," and so requires that the distance between aesthetic taste and the vulgar realm of gustation out of which it came be asserted once again.

In order to ground aesthetic judgments in an objective standard, and not just subjective pleasure and displeasure, aesthetic philosophers like Hume, Shaftesbury and Addison, attempted to theorize a shared, communicable and non-sensory faculty, otherwise known as the *sensus communis*. Kant's conception of the *sensus communis* is the most complex iteration of this philosophical construct in the period, and it is necessary to spend some time in the trenches with the third *Critique* in order to understand the specific ways in which disgust migrated from aesthetic to social and political discourse. That said, the notion of a *sensus communis* is a confirmation of the fact that the stakes of aesthetic discourse were from the start held to be fundamentally social (however elitist), and concerned with the commonality or distinction of experience between different strata of society, in ways that were not to be addressed by legal, logical or even moral judgment. This is perhaps most evident in the rhetoric of the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), in which the wayward ideas of philosophers lost in the stew of their own rationality are locked in a perpetual showdown with the "vulgar" and common "rest of mankind," Reid's preferred camp, whose commonsensical beliefs he took to be appropriate first principles for his philosophy. Reid's explicit divisiveness over what amount to intellectual and class lines foregrounds the social nucleus at the core of what only in hindsight would appear as purely aesthetic preoccupations.

Reid's conception of common sense argued that both the skepticism and the idealism of his intellectual forebears were indicative of larger philosophical tendencies which, "pitying the credulity of the vulgar...apply to philosophy to furnish them with reasons for the belief of those things which all mankind have believed, without being able to give any reason for it."[23]. Sensation was beyond the province of reason; judgments rooted in subjective sensory

experiences were self-evident; and attempting to doubt or circumvent them was simply philosophical hocus-pocus:

> The evidence of sense, the evidence of memory, and the evidence of the necessary relations of things, are all distinct and original kinds of evidence, equally grounded on our constitution....To reason against any of these kinds of evidence, is absurd; nay, to reason for them is absurd. They are first principles; and such fall not within the province of reason, but of common sense.[24]

Unlike Burke, whose early work on aesthetics saw man as governed by "a compound of various Passions," Reid tackles the issue of the reliability of the senses by claiming sensation as a foundational element of human experience, placing it outside the bounds of reasonable doubt. Taking the grammar of ordinary speech as accurately reflecting the structure of sensation, Reid's *Inquiry*, which begins with a fairly lengthy chapter on the priority of smell (considered essentially to subsume taste in this context), zeroes in on an epistemological problem concerning the confusion between the faculties of sensation and the qualities which pertain to the objects of sense:

> What is smell in the rose? It is a quality or virtue of the rose, or of something proceeding from it, which we perceive by the sense of smelling; and this is all we know of the matter. But what is smelling? It is an act of the mind, but is never imagined to be a quality of the mind...We say, this body smells sweet, that stinks; but we do not say, this mind smells sweet, that stinks. Therefore, smell in the rose, and the sensation which it causes, are not conceived, even by the vulgar, to be things of the same kind, even though they have the same name.[25]

Philosophy, Reid argues, has accused the vulgar of confusing smell (the sense) with smell (the quality); moreover the suggestion is even that vulgarity is defined, in such accusations, by the inability to distinguish between subjective sensation and objective quality. Reid is at pains to deny this accusation and to argue that the philosophers are the ones who have perpetuated this confusion. But what is most relevant to our discussion is Reid's own identification of a tendency in modern thought to locate boundary confusions between subject and object, and then to repudiate such confusions as vulgar and low — a discursive structure similar to the rhetorical structure of disgust-reactions. That Reid's discussion of this arises within the context of his

prioritization of smell and taste only drives home the extent to which the 18th century philosophical discourse of these senses, in and out of aesthetic contexts, was already bound up with many of the same questions and concerns inherent to the rhetoric of Victorian revulsion.

Though Kant is unlikely to have read Reid, he condemned the notion of common sense as "an appeal to the opinion of the multitude, of whose applause the philosopher is ashamed, while the popular charlatan glories and boasts in it."[26] Nevertheless, a variant conception of the *sensus communis* was absolutely necessary for Kant's understanding of the how aesthetic judgments could be universal. Kant focused, like Reid, on the singular grammar of aesthetic judgments, which demand to be accepted as objective truths even while they are rooted in subjective, sensory experiences:

> There can be no rule according to which anyone is to be forced to recognize anything as beautiful. We cannot press upon others by the aid of any reasons or fundamental propositions our judgment that a coat, a house, or a flower is beautiful. People wish to submit the Object to their own eyes, as if the satisfaction in it depended on sensation; and yet if we then call the object beautiful, we believe that we speak with a universal voice, and we claim the assent of everyone, although on the contrary all private sensation can only decided for the observer himself and his satisfaction.
>
> We may see now that in the judgment of taste nothing is postulated but such a *universal voice*...and thus the *possibility* of an aesthetical judgment that can...be regarded as valid for everyone.[27]

For Kant, one of the stakes of aesthetic judgment is the possibility of taking one's own sensory experience as an occasion for speaking for everyone. One person may feel hot and another cold; in purely subjective matters of sensation, agreement is not necessary; but, even though there is no rule that can settle matters of beauty beyond dispute, Kant goes on to claim that aesthetic judgments necessarily take the form of compulsory, normative propositions:

> In all judgments by which we describe anything as beautiful, we allow no one to be of another opinion; without however grounding our judgment on concepts but only on our feeling, which we therefore place at its basis not as a private, but as a common feeling.[28]

Kant's *sensus communis* is a precondition for normative agreement; it is what allows someone to

demand that everyone conform to his or her opinion, even if no one ever does: "It does not say that everyone *will* agree with my judgment, but that he *ought*."[29] Agreement is less important than the possibility and anticipation of agreement. As Stanley Cavell has observed, "If we say that the *hope* of agreement motivates our engaging in these various patterns of support, then we must also say, what I take Kant to have seen, that even were agreements in fact to emerge, our judgments, so far as aesthetic, would remain as essentially subjective, in his sense, as they ever were."[30]

Aesthetic judgments exist in a state of heightened tension, whereby they attempt to deny their subjective, sensory origins, instead demanding universal agreement as though their validity could be demonstrated by recourse to objective rules which do not exist. There is thus a perpetual confusion as to whether beauty is a property of specific objects, or a bodily pleasure experienced by particular subjects; we feel aesthetic pleasure, but the grammar of aesthetic propositions locates beauty in the object itself: "The pleasure that we feel is, in a judgment of taste, necessarily imputed by us to everyone else; as if, when we call a thing beautiful, it is to be regarded as a characteristic of the object which is determined in it according to concepts; though beauty, without a reference to the feeling of the subject, is nothing by itself."[31] Kant does not want everyone to have 'their own taste' for beauty; the world on that account would be fractured into innumerable instances of private judgments, each erroneously and frivolously attempting to pass off a sensory pleasure as a universal principle applicable to everyone's experience. By holding out the possibility of agreement, a commonality of taste, the *sensus communis* is what saves aesthetic judgment from its vulgar, merely 'pleasant' self.[32]

For Hannah Arendt, the *Critique of Judgment* represents the closest Kant came to producing a "political philosophy," and so the question of why a text so bent on finding a

common, public standard for judgment would attempt to derive that standard from the most inward of the five senses takes on a distinct social character. "The most surprising aspect of this business," Arendt commented about the third *Critique*, "Is that common sense, the faculty of judgment and discriminating between right and wrong, should be based on the sense of taste... [since] what I taste and smell cannot be expressed in words at all [and] seem to be private senses by definition."[33] Why would Kant attempt to found the public sphere in an unrepresentable and subjective sense, Arendt wonders. The first part of her answer is that aesthetic judgment, as Kant understood it, relies on the faculty of imagination, which "transforms an object into something I do not have to be directly confronted with but that I have in some sense internalized it"; the object's absence allows one to overcome the "it-pleases-or-displeases-me" which ordinarily "in matters of taste or smell...is immediate and overwhelming."[34]

Moreover, Arendt argues, Kant "was very early aware that there was something nonsubjective in what seems to be the most private and subjective sense." This something proves to be the other-oriented nature of taste, Arendt writes, catching Kant in an expansive mood claiming that "In matters of taste we must renounce ourselves in favor of others," and that "In Taste egoism is overcome."[35] In Arendt's reading of Kant, the peculiar grammar of aesthetic judgment belies the fundamental sociability ("publicity" is her term) of aesthetic relations:

> We must overcome our special subjective conditions for the sake of others. In other words, the nonsubjective element in the nonobjective senses is intersubjectivity. (You must be alone in order to think; you need company to enjoy a meal.)....The basic other-directedness of judgment and taste seems to stand in the greatest possible opposition to the very nature, the absolutely idiosyncratic nature, of the sense itself. Hence we may be tempted to conclude that the faculty of judgment is wrongly derived from this sense. Kant, being very aware of all the implications of this derivation, remains convinced it is a correct one. And the most plausible thing in his favor is his observation, entirely correct, that the true opposite of the beautiful is not the Ugly, but "that which excites disgust."[36]

Judgments of taste — their grammatical structure which attempts to overcome the privative, unreflective and unrepresentable nature of the gustatory by asserting an endlessly arguable

objectivity — are intrinsically public, interpersonal affairs, connected to our roles as members of a community. This positive valence which Arendt and Kant both place on connecting and identifying with others is most "plausibly" demonstrated, however, through the exclusion of the disgusting from the aesthetic realm.

The disgusting takes on a specialized role in Kant's aesthetic theory as an affective category blocking subjects from experiencing the beautiful, because the provocation of disgust makes it impossible to ignore the corporeality of one's judgment; rising bile overrides the refined palette. Since disgusting representations are a constant reminder of the subjective feelings that threaten Kant's conception of the beautiful, they preclude the possibility of a sense of taste capable of extending beyond individual preference. Unlike "the Furies, diseases the devastations of war, etc., [which] may be described as very beautiful, as they are represented in a picture," the disgusting

> is [the] only kind of ugliness which cannot be represented in accordance with nature, without destroying all aesthetical satisfaction and consequently artificial beauty....For in this singular sensation, which rests on mere imagination, the object is represented as it were obtruding itself for our enjoyment while we strive against it with all our might. And the artistic representation of the object is no longer distinguished from the nature of the object itself in our sensation, and thus it is impossible that it can be regarded as beautiful.[37]

Contrary to the transformative powers normally ascribed to artworks, Kant claims that a picture of a disgusting thing is functionally the same as a disgusting thing itself. Following Lessing's formulation in *Laocoon,* Kant's picture of the disgusting overflows the representational frame that allows other ugly forms to be transformed into objects of aesthetic pleasure, and, in so doing, confounds the object and its representation.[38] The logic was familiar in 18th century German aesthetics: the brutality of war might be made to appear heroic or tragically redemptive in a painting or poem, and so excite admiration or pity, however horrible and terrifying the actual experience of that brutality would be; whereas an object that disgusts (examples tend to be

restricted to vomited or rotten food, corpses, a few bugs, and the ever-popular feces — the *loci classici* of disgust for some three centuries of western philosophy, the way that ideal chairs and tables are the mascots for metaphysics) will disgust as much in the putrid flesh as it will splattered in paint on a canvas or cave wall. Nature and art are felt to be indistinguishably repulsive.

One's disgust also, Kant suggests in a rather opaque way, confuses subject for object, and pleasure for displeasure. First, Kant ascribes an uncertain degree of agency to the disgusting object being represented, which "obtrudes," "insists," "presses" or "imposes" on us, depending on the translation; in a sense, the object is more active in this relation than the subject, troubling Kant's dictum that artworks should be purposive without having a particular purpose. On the contrary, Kant writes about disgusting artworks as though they had a very singular, albeit complex purpose: the object apparently insists upon being *enjoyed*, even while the pleasure it claims to offer is unwanted — "we strive against it with all our might," or, in another translation, "violently resist" it. One's disgust is thus characterized here by the confusion of revulsion for a pleasure which is thrust upon one by a work of art, itself in the first place confounded for the disgusting object that it represents too vividly to make beautiful.

This triple blurring — picture and thing, subject and object, pleasure and displeasure — is further compounded by the double connotation of 'Genuss' in German of both 'enjoyment' and 'consumption.' As Winfried Menninghaus has observed, Kant surpasses previous aestheticians by implying that the perception of the disgusting entails an unwanted taking in — inhaling, eating, or otherwise internalizing — either by, or as though by, smelling or tasting.[39] The intentionality of the disgusting, the way it *obtrudes* or *insists*, suggests that it has already entered inside the viewer, a sort of aesthetic effluvia. The disgusting thing is inside the mind, the

way the particles of the disgusting stench are inside the nose; there is no opportunity for cool, measured reflection. The confusion between subject and object is further ramified by the porous nature of the human body, its openings and closings, which is precisely what disgusting substances — oozing, viscous things — and noxious bad odors call to mind. This emphasis on an internalization (preceding expulsion) produces a strongly felt self-implication which precludes the disinterestedness Kant thought was necessary to produce an actually reflective aesthetic judgment. The purely sensory strength of one's revulsion produces these confusions, which Kant considers antithetical to the production of aesthetic pleasure in the first place, prompting his designation of disgust as the one emotion prohibited *tout court* in the spectrum of aesthetic experience.

Implicit to Kant's idea that revolted judgments are objectively true is the notion that, somewhere out there, there is an immense Public Nostril, bearing to the disgusting and to disgust the same relationship that the *sensus communis* bears to the beautiful and to taste; an entity that can ensure possible agreement over objects of distaste like there is hoped to be over objects of aesthetic taste. In judging something either beautiful or disgusting, a particular subjective feeling is referred to the object provoking the sensation, as though the feeling were a quality pertaining to the object. In the case of judging something as beautiful, simply articulating one's pleasure is felt to be insufficient, not exhaustively or fully communicative of one's feeling; this lack generates the grammar of aesthetic taste, which, positing a *sensus communis*, allows for the possibility of agreement over the object. Designating something as disgusting, however, is a through-the-looking-glass version of aesthetic judgment. The subjective feeling of disgust is felt to be more than sufficient, obtrusive to the point of being incontrovertible; repulsion is held to be so strong that there is no apparent problem attributing it to the object as though it were an

objective quality perceptible to all. One expects unanimous agreement in both cases, but whereas in judging something beautiful one denies the universality of sensation for the objectivity of aesthetic taste, in judging something disgusting one irrationally succumbs to sensation and denies it at the same time. Where the positing of the *sensus communis* is required in order to provide for our demands for universal consent, this hypothetical Public Nostril instead legitimates our repudiations; where the *sensus communis* grants "exemplary validity" to our aesthetic determinations, and so allows our faculty of taste to shed its sensuousness, the Public Nostril allows us to override our customary inhibition to attribute universality to our innermost sensations, and lends our disgust an objectivity derived exclusively from its sensuousness. The Public Nostril is what allows us to claim, with all the force of a logically demonstrable truth that a thing, a category of things, even a whole people or culture, is vile, without value and repulsive, but to point only to our nauseous reflexes as evidence. The proof is in the puking. And yet — and this is the whole point of the role of disgust in the third *Critique* — if matters of distaste are held to be beyond dispute, it is only so that matters of aesthetic taste can continue to be endlessly disputable; even while the Public Nostril authorizes our critical rejections and the *sensus communis* our expectations of assent, this only means that, at the end of the day, we tend to agree about the disgusting in the same way that we never really do over the beautiful.

III.

Surveying the epic accumulation of human waste and industrial slag; the increasing degradation of the working class and the outbursts of sexual and gendered disgust; the leaky, seeping plague years, the perceived threats of foreign contaminants, and the brutalities of imperial ambition; as well as the attendant accumulation of written records documenting in the language of disgust what Ruskin called the "forms of filth, and modes of ruin" of a culture gone sour — surveying

all this today, the Victorian century looks a lot less like an attempted realization of Kantian disinterestedness than a hundred year gag reflex; a century ruled by a fully-flared Public Nostril, not a *sensus communis*, overseeing the absorption of the discourse of aesthetic disgust into the affairs of public life. Not only does this interplay between Victorian sanitary reform and Enlightenment aesthetics demand that we enlarge our understanding of the social dimension of the aesthetic domain, from the moment of its inception, but, moreover, consideration of the actual historical record of social formation reflects a long, uneven process, sometimes rational but at least as often fueled by sensory revulsion, and so completely at odds with Enlightenment dictates about proper judgment. If certain developments in modern western society can claim some form of disinterested decision making as the actual impetus for large scale public and governmental action, the Great Stink showcases the extent to which some of the most significant of such interventions were, quite to the contrary, motivated by a rhetoric of recursive, reviling, and self-implicated disgust.

More to the point, the Great Stink gives another turn of the screw to ongoing debates about the role of reason in the public sphere, by providing a glimpse of a process by which *ex post facto* rationalizations about social norms can emerge out of prior assertions concerning the objectivity of sensation. While the origins of what seems rational, even necessary, in today's world need not have been entirely subject to the dictates of reason in the past, conceptions of rational judgment tend to define themselves through the prohibition of disgust, understood as a form of sensory irrationality. Even though disgust has clearly played an integral role in the formation of certain aspects of the modern public sphere, the discourse of reason still understands itself as pitted against the experience of revulsion. There is an element of denial, a little logical leap, in this opposition between reason and revulsion, which sees the expression of

disgust as prohibitively harmful to the possibility of rational discourse; from Kant's day to the present, this sense of harm has animated calls for the invalidation and exclusion of expressions of disgust from the realm of rational discourse. Naively progressive historical narratives about the development of modern sanitary norms are in fact extreme cases of this discursive confusion between the exclusion of the disgusting and the exclusion of the expression of disgust, like Steven Johnson's account of the 1854 London cholera outbreak and its aftermath:

> The scourge of cholera then seemed intractable, too, and superstition seemed destined to rule the day. But in the end...the forces of reason won out. The pump handle was removed; the map was drawn; the miasma theory was put to rest; the sewers were built; the water ran clean.[40]

Such revisionist accounts are remarkable, since they actually recast bygone sensory rationales — and perhaps irrationalities — as self-evident truths, grounded in the light of a reason asserted to be exempt from the experience of the sensation. History is conceived as an overriding causal chain of events free from corporeality, superstition and illogicality, even while it is the act of revision itself which is illogical and, perhaps, affectively determined. This is not to say, along with reductive accounts of the deep-seated "wisdom of the body," that disgust is a reliable guide for making judgments, but rather to point out the strand of negation which persists in modern conceptions of rationality.

Today, Martha Nussbaum's argument that disgust "cannot stand the scrutiny of public reason," and is therefore an inadequate basis for legal and moral judgment, exemplifies the problems inherent in excluding disgust from rational discourse.[41] Positioning herself against conservative theorists who have tended to understand disgust-reactions as accurately demarcating the thresholds of human decency, especially with regard to sexuality, Nussbaum observes that revolted judgments are "usually based on magical thinking rather than on ordinary causal thinking...and ordinary evaluation."[42] Despite its strong claims to voice the wisdom or

truth of the body, disgust is more often than not an affective response to an object whose negative value may be purely, or partly, symbolic, and, as Nussbaum repeatedly observes, rarely a response to actual threats of physical contamination or harm.[43] Since disgust is an imaginative, symbolic gesture, it is highly unreliable, in Nussbaum's view, for anything beyond articulating a vestigial desire to "police the borders of human animality...bounding off a group against its neighbors and promoting clannish solidarity."[44] Indeed, for Nussbaum, this is grounds enough for disgust's invalidation and exclusion not only from jurisprudence, but from rational and moral discourse more generally. Yet while it does seem eminently reasonable to disregard disgust in legal contexts, where the consequences of erring in judgment are fairly explicit, it is not at all clear what sort of consequences one forestalls by actively excluding disgust from the wider, nebulous realms of moral judgment or "public reason."

There is in fact something brittle about the liberal notion that if irrationality, as typified by disgust, were excluded from the public sphere, then all else might be included. To begin with, this line of reasoning certainly cannot be applied to the record of the Great Stink without reversing, as Johnson has done, the causality between disgust and the scientific and public health advances which followed from the construction of the sewer. Furthermore, questions of harm related strictly to the expression of disgust largely evaporate outside the realm of punitive legal judgment, unless, as I take Nussbaum to argue, merely relying on disgust as a legitimate form of judgment is taken to imperil the standards of rationality in an Enlightened society. But this sense of harm can only at best swap the exclusion of what is deemed disgusting for the exclusion of that which expresses disgust, reenacting in a meta-discursive register the same form of rejection that such an exclusion targets on the level of discourse — quite often as we have seen at the expense of important historical distinctions. Neither the limits nor the mechanics of what we call

rational judgment are clear enough to draw with any precision the line between irrationally holding a class of people or practices to be disgusting and contaminating, and holding irrationality itself to to be comparably base and threatening. It is difficult to see how these two manners of protecting the presumably tenuous attainments of civilization differ in structure in any substantial way.

Attempts to invalidate revolted judgments for responding to imaginative or symbolic, and not actual threats of harm, produce a discourse that cleans up after itself, similar to the way that one might express disgust first by vomiting, and then by mopping it up. And at bottom, this discursive sanitation is an expression of disgust in its own right. We have no criteria for measuring the imaginative and symbolic harms disgust allegedly inflicts on its equally symbolic victims — rational discourse, culture and civilization — only a Public Nostril. Nussbaum's desire to exclude disgust from the fuzzy realm of public reason on the grounds of its capacity for symbolization, understood as subrational “magical thinking,” is just as much a departure from her psychological ideal of “ordinary causal thinking.” What is more, by invalidating this imaginative quality of disgust, the variously legal, moral, psychological and even neuroscientific conversations around disgust today also elide their historical indebtedness to the relatively unspecified domain of aesthetic judgment, the modern origin of writing about disgust, and in many ways the branch of critical and philosophical endeavor most committed to grappling with the functioning of human imagination. The history of writing about disgust contains a strain of critical discourse perpetually sanitizing itself, with less and less acknowledgment of its aesthetic roots, as it turns further and further away from consideration of the obtrusive objects of revulsion and towards an internalized, naturalized and occasionally positivist psychology of disgust. Far from an arbitrary phenomenon, this self-sanitation reflects the extent to which attempts to

illuminate the workings of disgust yield a torn discourse, doubly motivated by an ordinary exploratory mode interested in sensory and affective experience, and a negative epistemic mood, always sweeping up its own tracks and denying sensation by transforming it into knowledge.

In the late 19th century, this discursive, symbolic dimension of disgust was theorized within psychoanalytic theory. Contrary to Thomas Reid's assertion that one would never say of the mind itself that it stinks, by the close of the Victorian period, Freud thought of his early theory of repression as a kind of purely internal disgust reaction, and ultimately came to see the civilizing process as rooted in a large-scale social experience of olfactory revulsion. Referring to his "suspicion that something organic plays a part in repression," Freud wrote to Wilhelm Fliess in 1897 that "the notion was linked to the changed part played by sensations of smell: upright walking, nose raised from the ground, at the same time a number of formerly interesting sensations attached to the earth becoming repulsive — by a process still unknown to me."[45] The timeline of Freud's account of human development is notoriously hazy, but his explication of the mechanisms of repression betoken a major step in the conception of disgust as something internal to the subject and not a reaction to qualities inherent to certain objects:

> To put it crudely, the memory actually stinks, just as in the present the object stinks; and in the same manner as we turn away our sense organ (the head and nose) in disgust, the preconscious and the sense of consciousness turn away from the memory. This is *repression*.

Describing the mind and its internal objects in a figurative language of internal stench and repulsion, Freud's analogy, along with Darwin and Nietzsche ("My genius is in my nostrils"), marks one of the first explicit theorizations of disgust after Kant, now from within psychology and the social sciences.[46] Regardless of the actual validity of the Freudian repressive hypothesis, the emphasis on a completely internalized, imaginative disgust, rendered only metaphorically, stands as a complex and historically specific response to a growing communal sense of self-

implication in the contamination of the world.

Rather than presenting a pseudo-scientific insight into human prehistory, we might have an easier time reading Freud's description of “a number of formerly interesting sensations attached to the earth becoming repulsive” as referring all but explicitly to the hygienic and sanitary fits and starts of the 19th century. Contrary to a contemporary thinker like Nussbaum, Freud saw modern society in some of its most characteristic endeavors as constituted by a sense of total disgust, even a repulsion for the earth itself experienced as an immense revolting totality. Just as importantly, though, this total disgust was matched by an equally inward movement, reflecting a shift towards thinking of disgust as something internal to the subject and not a reaction to qualities inherent to certain objects. Yet even while this internalization allowed Freud to explore the imaginative nature of disgust, it also stripped the emotion of its visceral qualities, paving the way for the discursive naturalization of symbolic processes as scientific knowledge which typify the intellectual history of disgust. Accounts such as Freud’s would, of course, have been unimaginable as the force behind the application of nuisance laws in 17th century England, which functioned by pushing external boundaries further away from community centers — a kind of public gesture of simple repulsing. By 1858, however, as disgust pulled the Parliamentary purse strings towards unprecedented civic expenditures in the name of a cleanlier and more civilized society, new gestures were needed to articulate this growing sense of the internality of revulsion; except by using metaphorical language such as Freud’s, one cannot exactly push away or recoil from something that is inside oneself. Consequently, the most complex articulations of this new structure of feeling are to be found in contexts which preserved the inherent gestures of critical repudiation, but which also had grown aware of the potential of the imaginative and internal dimensions of modern disgust, and so recognized the aesthetic

situation out of which it emerged. The documents of the Great Stink, while providing a snapshot of the conundrums of Victorian social revulsion, can only take one so far, since they do not thematize the conflict between knowledge and imagination that animated Victorian sanitary reform; the most fertile place to examine Victorian disgust is in the slippery language of indignation and the emblems of outrage within Victorian cultural criticism and the socially critical novel.

IV.

If Victorian industrial society had absorbed the aesthetic prohibition of the disgusting, the filth-filled pages of 19th century realism industriously flouted it. Even while the tradition epitomized by Kant's third *Critique* persisted in Victorian aesthetic concepts such as disinterestedness, by the late 1840s the socially critical texts, the novel in particular, had begun to confront the social grotesquerie of the day specifically as problems relating to the ethics and politics of representation. For the emerging documentary function of literature and art, the prohibition of the disgusting from the aesthetic polis due to its unwanted boundary-confusions raised urgent questions of aesthetic responsibility: Was a picture of a disgusting object necessarily a disgusting picture? Wasn't it immoral *not* to show — that is, to *conceal* — just how repulsive the world had become for a growing number of its inhabitants? Is it even possible to *show* an *odor*? Would opening the floodgates to a revolting art simply add to the growing heap of nasty things produced in a world already overrun by encroaching philistinism, unavoidable foul odors, and the general denigration of beauty? Unsurprisingly, these questions defied (and continue to defy) consensus, cutting boldly across ideological positions about the relationship between imaginative and critical production and the efficacy of social and political action. With its high premium on both realistic exposure and revolted indignation, Victorian socially critical literature understood itself to be situated directly at the same hazy border crossings which typified the aesthetic discourse of

disgust in the previous century.

In this final section, I turn to John Ruskin's famous lectures on *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (1884), as well a piece of literary criticism, *Fiction – Fair and Foul* (1880), as exemplary articulations of Victorian social revulsion within explicitly critical literary contexts, in order to situate the problematics of Victorian representation as well as sanitary reform under the overarching aegis of an aesthetic discourse of disgust.[47] Ruskin's late writings focus their critical attention specifically on what he saw as the simultaneous contamination of his culture and the social and physical world which housed it, often with a ferocity which conflates his art and literary criticism with his more environmental and social concerns. Thus in *Fiction – Fair and Foul* (1880), something of a screed against modern letters, Ruskin posed the problem of accounting for the uglinesses of his day explicitly as the problem of how the tension between the beautiful and the repulsive bear on literary representation. Returning to the scene of his youth, Ruskin reflects on how much more difficult it is for him to write about the trash heap he sees before him than the bucolic beauty he recalls from his childhood:

> Often, both in those days, and since, I have put myself hard to it, vainly, to find words wherewith to tell of beautiful things; but beauty has been in the world since the world was made, and human language can make a shift, somehow, to give an account of it, whereas the peculiar forces of devastation induced by modern city life have only entered the world lately; and no existing terms of language known to me are enough to describe the forms of filth, and modes of ruin, that varied themselves along the course of Croxsted Lane.

The beautiful, Ruskin suggests, can be approximated, whereas the disgusting is too much for language, is unrepresentable. However, Ruskin proceeds immediately to call into question the insufficiency of language to conjure the disgusting in a long passage descriptive of the very "forms of filth" he has just placed outside the range of words:

> ...bordered on each side by heaps of — Hades only knows what! — mixed dust of every unclean thing that can crumble in drought, and mildew of every unclean thing thing that can rot or rust in damp: ashes and rags, beer-bottles and old shoes, battered pans, smashed crockery, shreds of nameless clothes, door-sweepings, floor-sweeping,

> kitchen garbage, back-garden sewage, old iron, rotten timber jagged with out-torn nails, cigar-ends, pipe-bowls, cinders, bones, and ordure, indescribable; and, variously kneaded into, sticking to, or fluttering foully here and there over all these, — remnants broadcast, of every manner of newspaper, advertisement or big-lettered bill, festering and flaunting out their last publicity in the pits of stinking dust and mortal slime.[48]

Indescribable ordure, indeed; if anything, Ruskin's list reflects the difficulties he and other Victorian authors experienced when they endeavored to distinguish the beautiful from the revolting, and yet found there were plenty of "terms of language" in the already extant aesthetic vocabulary — words, tropes, cadences, effects and so on — at hand for the nasty task of rendering the disgusting. Despite the sharp unwanted experience of the modernity of the trash heap that has replaced Ruskin's memory of his boyhood, and the attendant feeling that new unwanted words must be required to describe it, Ruskin not only manages to enumerate Croxsted Lane, but to evoke it with some of the poetic verve (iambic, even) for gruesome detail that he then goes on to condemn in modern literature a page or two later.

Situating itself "at the very edge of semantic availability," as Raymond Williams defined structures of feeling, Ruskin's complex response — his aesthetic disgust — is a record not only of the forceful critical contempt and revulsion felt towards new material changes in the lived world, but of the ways those changes were felt to be debilitating for expression. And yet, for us, Ruskin's articulation of the difficulty of expression is also one of our best records of the ways in which this negative experience managed to find expression quite generally through an exhilarated, poetic language, geared, formally at least, towards the production of an enjoyment antithetical to its expressly critical goals and intentions. The confusion between pleasure and disgust throughout the 19th century is itself the theme of Ruskin's diatribe against modern literature and the rotten world it chronicles, which he fears will corrupt future generations of readers so much so that revulsion will come to be the only form of pleasure they know:

> [F]or the children of the day, accustomed from the instant they are out of their cradles,

> to the sight of this infinite nastiness, prevailing as a fixed condition of the universe, over the face of nature, and accompanying all the operations of industrious man, what is to be the scholastic issue? Unless, indeed, the thrill of scientific vanity in the primary analysis of some unheard-of process of corruption — or the reward of microscopic research in the sight of worms with more legs, and acari of more curious generation than ever vivified the more simply smelling plasma of antiquity.
>
> One result of such elementary education is, however, already certain; namely, that the pleasure which we may conceive by the children of the coming time, in the analysis of physical corruption, guides, into fields more dangerous and desolate, the expatiation of imaginative literature; and that the reactions of moral disease upon itself, and the conditions of languidly monstrous character developed in an atmosphere of low vitality, have become the most valued material of modern fiction....[49]

With a stumbling, disruptive cadence, Ruskin anxiously predicts a world so cut off from the beauty of its natural history that a complete inversion of values has occurred — where foul is fair, and pleasure is derived from "the analysis of physical corruption." The culture of this dystopia will consequently be enlarged, not erased, by the widespread interest in the

> hot fermentation and unwholesome secrecy of the population crowded into large cities, each mote in the misery lighter, as an individual soul, than a dead leaf, but becoming oppressive and infectious each to his neighbor, in the smoking mass of decay.

The pleasure Ruskin references here is a pleasure of analysis, an enjoyment taken in the very description and enumeration of the forms of filth he initially declared himself incapable of describing, but for which he soon found words. In this sense, Ruskin's imagination of the "children of the coming time" not only registers his distaste for the present and a reactionary fear about the unrecognizable future already recognizable on the horizon, but also undertakes in the service of cultural criticism more or less the same type, or perhaps a prototype, of the analytical project he believes will one day be a vehicle for aesthetic pleasure: "The resulting modes of mental ruin and distress are continually new," Ruskin writes of the impending death of the imagination, "And in a certain sense, worth study in their monstrosity" (156).

In finding further words to rouse him from his wordless disgust, Ruskin's analysis also shifts away from the heaping imagery of trash piled up along Croxsted Lane, and instead moves

toward the more ephemeral vocabulary of “an atmosphere of low vitality,” “the hot fermentation [of] the smoking mass of decay,” and finally of a more general “pollution.” The result is a respiratory figure which, by blurring the boundaries of the body, leads to the confounding of pleasure and repulsion, of which the temporal confusion between the rotten future, an already-soured past and the fetid present is the epiphenomenon:

> The incapacity of their own minds to refuse the pollution, and of their own wills to oppose the weight, of the staggering mass that chokes and crushes them into perdition, brings every law of healthy existence into question with them, and every alleged method of help and hope into doubt. Indignation, without any calming faith in justice, and self-contempt, without any curative self-reproach, dull the intelligence, and degrade the conscience, into sullen incredulity of all sunshine outside the dunghill, or breeze beyond the wafting of its impurity; and at last a philosophy develops itself, partly satire, partly consolatory, concerned only with the regenerative vigor of manure, and the necessary obscurities of fimetic Providence; showing how everybody’s fault is somebody else’s, how infection has no law, digestion no will, and profitable dirt no dishonor.[50]

Unlike the enumeration of the “forms of filth” with which he began his lecture, this passage describes a much more complex process of transformation which very closely resembles the Kantian description of the obtrusive power of the disgusting, and which relies on now thoroughly confused conceptions of moral and physical degradation. In fact, the first step in this process, detailing “the incapacity of their minds to refuse the pollution,” is a reversal of agency and a transgression of the boundary between subject and object analogous to Kant’s disgusting object “obtruding itself for our enjoyment while we strive against it with all our might.” Consequently, this ineluctable pollution is not to be perceived visually as a heap of static objects, but rather presses upon one’s body and is inhaled into the mind through the nose and mouth (“the staggering mass which chokes and crushes them”); like the anxieties expressed during the Great Stink that “by and by, perhaps, the action of the sun may be hardly needed,” Ruskin too fears that this process of respiratory abasement will lead to a “sullen incredulity of all sunshine outside the dunghill, or breeze beyond the wafting of its impurity” — perhaps the greatest and most

overdetermined preoccupation of Victorian culture, the failure of vision by the man-willed extinction of the sun.

As a piece of literary criticism, the primary interest in *Fiction – Fair and Foul* lies in the proleptic inauguration of a new recursive discourse of aesthetic disgust: "at last, a philosophy develops itself, partly satiric, partly consolatory, concerned only with the regenerative vigour of manure, and the necessary obscurities of fimetic Providence." But even the tense in which this prediction is written is difficult to pin down, since its anticipation of the future seems as intended to presage the coming of a new discourse, as to refer retroactively to the problems with Dickensian realism to which the remaining pages are devoted. (As I discuss in a later chapter, less than a decade after Ruskin's *Fiction*, George Gissing's *The Nether World* would take as its epigrammatic slogan and conceptual starting point an explicit interest in reorienting the novel entirely towards the 'dung-heaps' of modern slum society.) Of course, Ruskin's forecasting the birth of such a "partly satiric" philosophy is itself at least partly ironic, and the figure of a world ruled by "fimetic Providence," with its "necessary obscurities," is above all self-referential. *Fiction – Fair and Foul* is therefore a text which takes as the object of its critical condemnation the ways in which a revolting world will produce a revolted discourse, but it is also a text which aspires to be such a discourse. As a piece of criticism which consequently can imagine itself as both a revolted subject and a revolting object, Ruskin's writing is conscious of the relationship between disgust and boundary confusion in a way that neither strictly philosophical discourse nor editorializing gut reactions can ever be; taking Ruskin's aesthetic disgust to be a close relation of immanent critique, *Fiction – Fair and Foul* performs on the level of structure the fundamental boundary confusions between subject and object, thing and representation, world and text — and above all, between the aesthetic and the social — which in the first place

constitute the role that disgust came to play in the Victorian public sphere.

Ruskin's lecture on *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (1884) is the natural terminus of the increasingly respiratory and atmospheric rhetoric of disgust in *Fiction – Fair and Foul*. Bringing Ruskin's lifelong scrutiny of clouds — pictured and real — into contact with the heightened urgency of his late critique of the ugliness of modern industrial society, the lectures sit at the overdetermined point where political and cultural fantasy converges with representational anxiety, in order to yield a discourse of revulsion — a pivot point between aesthetic and social concerns animating much of the critical ferocity in Ruskin's late work. It is in this oscillation between aesthetic, imaginative, or literary registers, on the one hand, and social, political, or environmental, on the other, that Ruskin's criticism both participates in and exceeds the prevalent Victorian rhetoric of disgust which we have already examined. Conflating in a single rhetorical gesture what he saw as the simultaneous contamination of his culture and the natural world which housed it, Ruskin's storm-cloud gives shape to the concomitant Victorian desires to acknowledge, and yet also to deny, the ways in which an enlightened mankind was thoroughly implicated in the blighting of the world.

As putatively observable visual phenomena first perceived by Ruskin's eye "in the early spring of 1871," the "storm-cloud" and its accompanying "plague-wind" have flummoxed over a century of readers for their indeterminate status as a literal condensation of the empirical and the imaginary, the natural and the cultural, the aesthetic and the moral, into a single critical figure. This has meant that while some have focused on the lecture as an early instance of environmental criticism directed primarily outwards towards the natural world, others have chosen to view the new cloud formation as metaphorical, Ruskin's elaborate externalizing diagnosis of an

essentially inner state of Victorian moral decay; others have attempted to reconcile this critical bi-directionality, most recently through "ecological" interpretations of Ruskin's conception of the natural and the human; and still others have emphasized Ruskin's own mental instability in accounting for the lecture's discursive chaos.[51] But the key point that emerges out of this mixed reception, is that Ruskin's storm-cloud is a figure for the actual, felt boundary collapse between aesthetic, affective, rational, moral and scientific motivations in the Victorian public sphere, a collapse which I have been arguing can be glimpsed today principally through the discursive history of disgust.

The cloud itself is rhetorically volatile and difficult to pin down, and the language which Ruskin uses to conjure it will slip in and out of various descriptive registers over the course of a single passage. Underlying this apparent incoherence, however, is a tension between the visual and the four other sensory modes of apprehending the storm-cloud. The first introduction to the cloud in the lecture — a reflexive diary entry which Ruskin claims to have written in the months after he first glimpsed it in 1871— describes the cloud blackening the sunlight almost to the point of making writing impossible:

> "I sit down to write by the dismallest light that ever yet I wrote by....For the sky is covered with grey cloud; — not rain-cloud, but a dry black veil, which no ray of sunshine can pierce; partly diffused in mist, feeble mist, enough to make distant objects unintelligible, yet without any substance, or wreathing, or colour of its own. And everywhere the leaves of the trees are shaking fitfully, as they do before a thunderstorm; only not violently, but enough to show the passing to and fro of a strange, bitter and blighting wind. (32)

As Ruskin continues detailing his early encounter with the plague-wind in the journal entry, however, there is both a spike in the general anxiety level of the writing, and a faltering in the visual framework initially introduced to analyze the cloud:

> And the scientific men are busy as ants, examining the sun, and the moon, and the seven stars, and can tell me all about *them*, I believe, by this time; and how they move, and what they are made of....And I do not care, for my part, two copper spangles how they move, nor what they are made of....But I would care very much

> and give much, if I could be told where this bitter wind comes from, and what *it* is made of....
>
> It looks partly as if it were made of poisonous smoke; very possibly it may be: there are at least two hundred furnace chimneys in a square of two miles on every side of me. But mere smoke would not blow to and fro in that wild way. It looks more to me as if it were made of dead men's souls — such of them as are not gone yet where they have to go, and may be flitting hither and thither, doubting, themselves, of the fittest place for them." (33)

This slight shift away from the visual perception of the cloud as a static object obscuring the source of light, and towards a mass of noxious fumes suggesting inhalation, toxicity, as well as its own human agency, continues as Ruskin attempts (now back in the 1884 'present') to anatomize the salient features of the cloud. While the first of these is that it is "a wind of darkness," and the fourth is that it is "intermittent," "the light being never for two seconds the same," the remaining attributes move away from the primacy of sight, shifting now into other sensory and moral registers: "it is a malignant *quality* of wind"; "it always blows *tremulously*...is panic-struck, and feverish; and its sound is a hiss instead of a wail"; "it degrades, while it intensifies, ordinary storm"; "*filthiness* of lurid...smoke-cloud...I never saw such a dirty, weak, foul storm":

> Saturday, 17th August 1879. Raining in foul drizzle, slow and steady; sky pitch-dark and I just get a little light by sitting in the bow-window; diabolic clouds over everything: and looking over my kitchen garden yesterday, I found it one miserable mass of weeds gone to seed, the roses in the higher garden putrefied into brown sponges, feeling like dead snails; and the half-ripe strawberries all rotten at the stalks. (40)

Over the course of the two-part lecture, the storm-cloud is characterized in terms of its appearance, its sound, and the effect of its touch; described as consisting of poison smoke, of the souls of the wandering dead, and as an acid rain rotting the earth; and not only likened to the "vapor over the pool of anger in the *Inferno*, the clogging stench which rises from Caina, and the fog of the circle of Anger in the *Purgatorio*," but also referred back to passages in *Modern Painters*. As many have argued, there is certainly a thread running throughout the whole piece prioritizing vision as the sense which is most endangered by the arrival of the plague-wind; but

what is most noteworthy about the figure is its synaesthetic over-determination.

Ruskin makes a point of singling out the sixth and "most important sign of the plague-wind and the plague-cloud: that in bringing on their peculiar darkness, they *blanch* the sun instead of reddening it" (41). This final, menacing flourish signals Ruskin's attempt to re-solidify his prioritization of sight as the primary sense with which to perceive, and also afflicted by the plague-wind: "And here I must note briefly to you the uselessness of observation by instruments, or machines, instead of eyes" (41). The first part of the lecture ends on this note, with its famous prophetic warning — "Blanched sun, — blighted grass, — blinded man" — a three-part structure establishing the natural connection between sun, eye and world threatened to be dissolved by the obscuring storm-cloud (43). Yet, while Ruskin provides his audience with a sketch of "a sunset in entirely pure weather, above London smoke," he was unable to "blot down for you a bit of plague-cloud to put beside [it]; but Heaven knows, you can see enough of it nowadays without any trouble of mine" (43). Despite its availability to the naked eye, Ruskin's plague-wind escapes visual representation; except as a rhetorical or verbal obscurer, the storm-cloud is, for Ruskin's audience and readers, itself obscured.

This curious omission is further compounded by Ruskin's declaration that visual attributes of the plague-wind are experienced in the first place as choking, respiratory problems, an assertion which immediately follows his identification of the sixth and most important feature of the storm-cloud:

> And yet observe: that thin, scraggy, filthy, mangy, miserable cloud, for all the depth of it, can't turn the sun red, as a good, business-like fog does with a hundred feet or so of itself. By the plague-wind every breath of air you draw is polluted, half round the world; in a London fog the air itself is pure, though you choose to mix up dirt with it, and choke yourself with your own nastiness." (42)

In describing the effect of the storm-cloud on the sun, Ruskin refers us to the effect of the storm-cloud on the lungs. Inhalation and consumption supplant apperception, and the primary form of

knowledge of the storm-cloud, which is knowledge of its capacity to threaten the source of all knowledge (the sun), turns out to be grounded in the very sensations historically considered to be beyond the purview of knowledge in the first place. From this perspective, the figure of the storm-cloud is not so much one of threatening obscurity, but rather of the making visible of smell, in particular of olfactory revulsion and the threat of suffocation; the storm-cloud points to the stink-cloud, and the concealing image of a cloud serves counter-intuitively as a figure of demystification, an attempt to transform the olfactory into a primarily visual and cognitive experience exempt from the affective sense of self-implication, physical as well as symbolic, the former carries with it.

Ruskin's storm-cloud is a mixed figure, on the one hand evoking a visceral disgust towards the obscuring pollutants of the century, while on the other disavowing the very sensory revulsion it articulates. The storm-cloud thus condenses the central problematic of the aesthetics of disgust into a single figure, now elevated to the status of a negative or unwanted totality, at once emanating on a decidedly individual level from the "insolence of your own lips, and the troubling of your own passions," but also engulfing the entire 19th century and extinguishing the sun (44). As an argument, Ruskin's text is caught up in the same process of self-censorship that we saw in the *Times* editorial regarding the response to the Great Stink, which derives from the aesthetic tradition's expulsion of the disgusting from artistic composition because of its obtrusive reality effects. The ever-increasing ephemerality of the rhetoric of Victorian disgust stems from exactly this confusion between articulations of disgust and actually disgusting objects; it sanitizes the repulsive object rhetorically, that is, within the text, confusing the verbal repudiation of an object only at the moment of utterance with an actual form of physical rejection of an object transgressing the openings of one's body. As a figure, however, the storm-cloud itself

represents this confusion between figurative and physical modes of expulsion, and serves as an emblem of precisely the forms of rhetorical self-blindness it expresses in its critical capacity. *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* is a complex figurative record of the historical process of involution and effacement by which a structure of disgust-reaction emerged out of 18th century aesthetic contexts, and began to play, with increasing importance, a critical role in the the formation of the Victorian public sphere.

This chapter has argued that the rhetoric surrounding the Great Stink reflects not merely the elevation of disgust to an eminent public position in Victorian society, but also the absorption into Victorian social affairs of an aesthetic discourse of disgust originating in Enlightenment debates over taste and judgment. Unlike many other accounts of Victorian culture which highlight the ways in which political or ideological discourses arise in and ultimately determine aesthetic and literary contexts such as the Victorian novel, situating the Great Stink in relation to the aesthetic philosophy of the previous century allows for a re-prioritization of the aesthetic; not as an autonomous domain asserting a *de facto* independence from ideology or politics, but as the realm in which certain forms of judgment were first formulated; forms of judgment which then began to claim a larger and larger stake in public and political life at more or less precisely the same historical moment that the aesthetic was theorized. This re-prioritization is not meant to suggest Enlightenment aesthetics could serve as a fixed origin point for modern critical practice, nor do I suggest that the emergence of aesthetic theory itself was not a historically and sociopolitically contingent development. On the contrary, the goal of my discussion of the social inflection of Enlightenment aesthetics is to suggest something more like a Russian-doll structure, a historically recursive confusion between what conventional critiques of the ideological infusion

of aesthetic products and artifacts often separate as the cultural and the political or social. And this unwanted confusion, or perhaps this desire to straighten out and individuate the spheres of public life, is itself related to the historical development of a rhetoric of disgust which does find a major theoretical origin point in the intellectual milieu of Kant's third *Critique*.

Putting the historical record of the Great Stink and the intellectual history of aesthetic disgust into further conversation with a critical figure like Ruskin's *Storm-Cloud* sharpens our focus on the ways Victorian disgust blended irrational and imaginative forms of rejection into political and ideological discourse. Again and again, in all forms of socially inflected Victorian literature, one runs across a persistent rhetorical pattern, a mechanics of revulsion whereby a negative judgment grounded in a self-implicating sensory experience is projected outward onto the world, and is cut off from its sensory origin, while still preserving its affective force. Hence the more aspirated the Victorian rhetoric of disgust grew, the stronger the initial sense of self-implication in the process of revolted judgment was felt to be. But by severing the tie to sensory revulsion, and by ridding even the articulation of disgust of its corporeal connotations, Victorian revolted judgment could only rely on an imaginary entity to ground its claims; to study Victorian disgust thus throws into relief the evolution, the inhalations and exhalations, of the Victorian Public Nostril overseeing the boundary between civilization and animality, and permitting the disavowal of self-implicating corporeality. It is to the Public Nostril that the revolted *Times* editorial directed its renewed assertion that "something *must* be done," and it is also, covertly, the Public Nostril which underwrites Ruskin's insistence on "the uselessness of observation by instruments, or machines, instead of eyes"; and it is also the Public Nostril which would warrant a cultural shift, such as Freud identified when he imagined "a number of formerly interesting sensations attached to the earth becoming repulsive"; and which would motivate the anxious

fantasy Victorians had that they would blot out the sun, that they were becoming the bad breath of the world, and so would fuel an outraged revolt against the grotesque issue of their own culture, and its accompanying vision of a future in which the punishment would fit the grime, like the cloud of smoke choking Dante's wrathful:

> "...meager skies, / as overcast by clouds as sky can be, / had never served to veil my eyes so thickly / nor covered them with such rough-textured stuff / as smoke that wrapped us there in Purgatory."[52]

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[1]"The Thames," *The Lancet*, July 10, 1858, 41.
[2] Metropolitan Sewage Committee proceedings. Parliamentary Papers. 1846. p. 10. :651.
[3] Cleere, "Dirty Pictures," 127 – 8.
[4] Engels, 36-7.
[5] Mayhew, 159.
[6] Allen, "From Cesspool to Sewer," 383 – 402; and more generally, Allen, *Cleansing the City*.
[7] Halliday, 46.
[8]Allen, "From Cesspool to Sewer," 383.
[9]Quoted in Allen, "From Cesspool to Sewer," 388.
[10]Mayhew, 161.
[11] Hollingshead, 99.
[12]Allen, *Cleansing the City*, 17.
[13] Freud, *Civilization*, 54.
[14]See for example, Carlisle. *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High Victorian Fiction*.
[15]"The Analytical Sanitary Commission Report Upon the Present Condition of the Thames," *The Lancet*, July 10 1858, 43.
[16]David S. Barnes, "Confronting Sensory Crisis in the Great Stinks of London and Paris," 125.
[17]*The Times*, 21 July 1858, 9.
[18]Quoted in Barnes, 113 (mis-cited as *Morning News*)
[19]Cockayne, 248.
For contemporary examples of similar urban phenomena, see:
"Residents and Chicken Slaughterhouse Clash." New York *Times*, February 13, 2009.
"A slaughterhouse in Brooklyn, and Misery Next Door." *New York Times*, June 10, 2011.
[20]Cockayne, 244-5.
[21]Gigante, 5.
[22] Hume, *Essays*, 234.
[23] Reid, *Inquiry*, 5.
[24]Reid, xxvii.
[25]Reid, 28.
[26]Reid, xxv.
[27]Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 14.
[28]Kant, 36.
[29]Kant, 37.
[30]Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," 94.
[31]Kant, 17.
Compare to Reid (492): "No reason can be given why all mankind should express themselves thus, but that they believe what they say. It is therefore contrary to the universal sense of mankind, expressed by their language, that beauty is not really in the object, but is merely a feeling in the person who is said to perceive it. Philosophers should be very cautious in opposing the common sense of mankind; for, when they do, they rarely miss going wrong."

[32]See: Salim Kemal on the multiple valences of the *sensus communis* in *Kant's Aesthetic Theory*.
[33]Arendt, 64.
[34]Arendt, 65-6.
[35]Arendt, 67.
[36]Arendt, 68.
[37]Kant, 107.
[38]Compare with Lessing: "Quite different is the case with disgust and its kindred sensations. Here the mind is conscious of no perceptible admixture of pleasure....A feeling of uneasiness gains the mastery, and under no imaginable conditions in nature or art would the mind fail to recoil with aversion from representations of this nature." In Lessing, *Laocoon*, 158-9.

Or with Moses Mendelssohn: "But whether or not we believe the object to be real, the disagreeable sensation of disgust results, by virtue of the law of our imagination, from the mere mental image....Feelings of disgust are therefore always real and never imitations."
Quoted in Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust.*
[39]Mennighaus, 105.
[40] Johnson, 255.
[41]Nussbaum, *Hiding From Humanity*, 102.
[42]Nussbaum, 102.
[43] Today, this process of disgust's transcending the purely physical continues in contemporary brain science, which as a consequence of demonstrating the neurological relativism of disgust-reactions and the irrationality of contamination-avoidance, has dubbed disgust "the body-and-soul-emotion." See for example: Rozin et al, "Disgust: The Body and Soul Emotion."
[44]Nussbaum, 102.
[45]Masson, J.M., ed. *The complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess*, 278 – 282.
[46]Nietzsche, 88.
[47]All subsequent parenthetical citations are to: Ruskin, *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*.
[48] Ruskin, *Fiction*, 154.
[49] Ruskin, *Fiction*, 155-6.
[50] Ruskin, *Fiction*, 158.
[51]For two recent examples see:
David Carroll, "Pollution, Defilement, and the Art of Decomposition." In *Ruskin and Environment: The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, 58 – 75.
Brian J. Day, "The Moral Intuition of Ruskin's 'Storm-Cloud,'" 917 – 933.
[52]Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 188.

Chapter II
Darwin's Vomit:
Disgust on the Primal Scene

> I was at first as other Beasts that graze
> The trodden Herb, of abject thoughts and low,
> As was my food, nor aught but food discern'd
> Or Sex, and apprehended nothing high:
> Till on a day roaving the field, I chanc'd
> A goodly Tree farr distant to behold
> Loaden with fruit of fairest colours mixt...
>
> — *Paradise Lost*

> "Why do you doubt your senses?"
>
> Because," said Scrooge, "a little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!"
>
> — *A Christmas Carol*

"I find the noodle and the stomach are antagonistic powers," Darwin wrote his sister Caroline in May 1838, after completing his Beagle journal, "And that it is a great deal more easy to think too much in a day than to think too little. What thought has to do with digesting roast beef, I cannot say," the passage concludes, "But they are brother faculties."[1] The relation of brain to belly was of particular salience to Darwin, whose life, as is well-documented, was plagued by bouts of severe indigestion, incessant flatulence thought to cause equally eruptive boils, and painful, weeks-long cycles of vomiting that rendered him incapable of working or socializing.[2] In particular, the meticulous record of his gastric well-being now referred to as his "Diary of

Health," and which he furnished with entries twice daily from the late 1840s well into the mid-1850s, stands as a testament to just how interwoven for Darwin the capacities for rational thought and empirical observation were with the twists and turns of the digestive process. Reading through the seemingly endless catalog of entries like "weak and languid," "restful wakeful poorish," "acid sickness" "from indigestion" — physical states more often than not accompanied by "2 or 3 slight fits" of "excessive flatulence," or "1 baddish fit" and "acid vomiting" — one begins to feel justified in speculating about the urgency and pathos involved in realigning human and animal bodies during the gastrointestinally turbulent decades leading up to the publication of *The Origin of Species*.[3]

The body of Darwin's work also displays an abiding interest in the ways in which physiological processes, especially gastric ones, could bear on consciousness, most explicitly in the brief chapter on disgust in his late book, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1870), which will be the principle focus of this chapter. Darwin's observations there on the core features of disgust-reactions have contributed to a long-standing tradition in modern thought — reaching back to the Enlightenment and forward to the present — which understands disgust as condensing the putative conflict between the corporeal and the cognitive into one emotional state. Within this philosophical context, being disgusted involves passing a strong judgment about some object, but without a clear sense of whether that judgment has originated, so to speak, in the noodle or the stomach; due to disgust's capacity to make moral, aesthetic and purely sensory appeals all with one and the same vocabulary, the study of disgust has demanded close scrutiny of the relationship between the "brother faculties" of rational judgments, on the one hand, and gut reactions, gag reflexes and rising bile, on the other. "By being so much in the gut, the idiom of disgust has certain virtues for voicing moral assertions," William Ian Miller has argued,

observing that “the day-to-day nitty-gritty of moral decision...is more likely to involve reference to the disgusting than to the Good and the Right.”[4] Does disgust, as many have argued, give voice to a deep-seated, supra-rational wisdom of the body — is it, in the words of the conservative bioethicist Leon Kass,“the only voice left that speaks up to defend the central core of our humanity” in an era “in which our bodies are regarded as mere instruments of our autonomous rational wills”?[5] Or, to the contrary, do expressions of disgust rely on precisely those unthinking and automatic animal impulses that human reason ought to quell in the interest of the larger social good?[6] Low subject matter, but very high stakes, to say the least: Seen from this overly schematic dualistic perspective, simply to be disgusted is to live out and to embody some of the most foundational conceptual problems of human agency. Or, to shift back into a more familiarly Darwinian register, such speculative theories about disgust necessarily presuppose some theory of instinct.

Darwin’s chapter on disgust not only adjoins these philosophical conversations about agency and instinct, but it is also the only theoretical statement specifically on the subject of disgust by a major Victorian thinker. Along with rapid changes in Victorian sanitary standards, the emerging modern discourses of sexuality and repression, and the strong link between moral disgust and realist aesthetics — to name a few major examples — Darwin’s chapter forms a significant piece of the larger structure of feeling comprising what we can know about Victorian disgust. Like most theories, Darwin’s theory of disgust — which, however brief, is what his five page speculative comment constitutes — can show us quite a bit about what certain currents and tendencies in Victorian culture wanted disgust to mean, while also revealing links between the Victorian discourse of the emotions and other discursive formations, especially those having to do with human physiology and psychology. And yet, because of the nature of advances in

scientific knowledge, Darwin's disgust threatens at every step of the way to backslide into the obscurantism which we today customarily ascribe to the unfulfilled scientific assertions of previous épistemes; while some aspects of Darwin's theory of disgust do inform contemporary evolutionary and psychological thought, too many of its crucial pieces are now considered scientifically unsound or benighted: much is taken, but little abides.

To do justice to Darwin's theory of disgust therefore entails responding to a double challenge: first, the challenge of confronting the theory within its cultural historical context, and of finding the value in its apparent obsolescence; and second, the challenge of attending to the ways in which the theory itself participates in an ongoing philosophical tradition which has long understood the questions raised by the study of disgust in relation to a slew of reputedly transhistorical binarisms, such as instinct and reason, thought and feeling, nature and culture. In both framing and responding to these two challenges, the present study has incurred a deep debt to the conceptual infrastructure Bruno Latour developed in his self-described anthropological analysis of modern "nature-culture," *We Have Never Been Modern*.[7] There, Latour proposes that we understand the project of modernity as engaged in two contradictory processes: the process of purification, by which social and natural categories are first isolated, then polarized and finally elaborated and reintegrated; and what Latour calls the work of mediation, or the simultaneous means by which these absolutely distinct categories are perpetually brought into contact, despite their alleged incommensurability, yielding a constant proliferation of natural-social hybrids. This framework recommends itself to the study of disgust, which, in a wide variety of theoretical contexts, and over the span of at least three centuries, has functioned as a powerful hinge mechanism, serving to distinguish not only brain from belly, but also the innate from the learned, and ultimately the natural from the man-made. These terms certainly populate the landscape of

Darwin's disgust, but in ways that more often than not run counter to the polarizing, purifying roles disgust is conventionally afforded; and, significantly, these mixed and blurring aspects of Darwin's disgust are more often than not precisely those elements which set his theory askew of the main currents in the intellectual history of the emotion, and render it obsolete or benighted.

The aim of this chapter is to synthesize the two sides of Darwin's disgust: to describe a point of contact between the obsolete historical features of Darwin's particular theory and the transhistorical claims of the more general theory with which it was in tension. In order to do so, I focus on a five-sentence paragraph proposing an evolutionary genealogy of the human capacity to vomit, which sits at the core of his conception of disgust:

> [1] It is remarkable how readily and instantly retching or actual vomiting is induced in some persons by the mere idea of having partaken of any unusual food, as of an animal which is not commonly eaten; although there is nothing in such food to cause the stomach to reject it. [2] When vomiting results, as a reflex action, from some real cause – as from too rich food, or tainted meat, or from an emetic – it does not ensue immediately, but generally after a considerable interval of time. [3] Therefore, to account for retching or vomiting being so quickly and easily excited by a mere idea, the suspicion arises that our progenitors must formerly have had the power (like that possessed by ruminants and some other animals) of voluntarily rejecting food which disagreed with them, or which they thought would disagree with them; and now, though this power has been lost, as far as the will is concerned, it is called into involuntary action, through the force of a formerly well-established habit, whenever the mind revolts at the idea of having partaken of any kind of food, or at anything disgusting. [4] This suspicion receives support from the fact, of which I am assured by Mr. Sutton, that the monkeys in the Zoological Gardens often vomit whilst in perfect health, which looks as if the act were voluntary. [5] We can see that as a man is able to communicate by language to his children and others, the knowledge of the kinds of food to be avoided, he would have little occasion to use the faculty of voluntary rejection; so that this power would tend to be lost through disuse.[8]

After a preliminary section on Darwin's general ideas about expression, each section of what follows is devoted to decompressing the different positions Darwin takes in this remarkably dense paragraph, showing how in each case the obsolescence of Darwin's stance gives his theory a historical and theoretical purchase lacking in other modern theories of disgust. Thus, the second section of this chapter shows how Darwin's assumptions ([1] and [2]) about the relation between vomiting, the stomach and the imagination, drew heavily on Victorian theories of

dyspepsia which were in the process of being replaced by sweeping new developments in gastric physiology throughout the 19th century. In the third section, the discussion pursues Darwin's idiosyncratic notion of a lost capacity for voluntary vomiting ([3] and [4]), sketching the persistence in Darwin's late work of an outmoded conception of instinct, rooted in the very theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics which Darwin's own theory of natural selection had debunked. And, in the final section, I examine Darwin's assertion that the development of critical language would have gradually replaced the ability to vomit at will ([5]) in light of the Victorian theories on the origins of language Darwin adduces to make his case, none of which survived into the 20th century. Thus, Darwin's positions on each of the three discourses subtending his theory of disgust — physiological, linguistic, and, ironically, evolutionary — have been subsequently discarded, or were in the process of being jettisoned in his day. And yet, these obsolete turns in Darwin's work take on a renewed salience when brought into contact with the far reaching polarizing currents in modern thought which underwrite the philosophical discourse of disgust.

The larger goal of this chapter is to contribute to a greater understanding of what sorts of things disgust might have meant in the past, and to speculate about some reasons why it may no longer mean them. In its specificity as well as in its connection to the grand theories and discourses which have surpassed it, Darwin's vomit affords a glimpse of the intense pressures which help to shape the values a culture ascribes to its emotional expressions. Far from seeing the emotions ahistorically, Darwin was among the first serious thinkers to observe just how much they evolve. However intuitive this point may seem, this chapter nevertheless shares as one of its own central assumptions Foucault's position that our prevailing conceptions of the affective dimension depend on the guarantee of an unchanging, transhistorical stratum of human

experience:

> We believe that the feelings are immutable, but every sentiment, particularly the noblest and most disinterested, has a history. We believe in the dull constancy of instinctual life and imagine that it continues to exert its force indiscriminately in the present as it did in the past. But a knowledge of history easily disintegrates this unity, depicts its wavering course, locates its moments of strength and weakness, and defines its oscillating reign.[9]

I. *Disgust Without Objects*

Darwin's disgust has no objects. Lacking nearly all the familiar elicitors of revulsion, it sits apart from the majority of pages devoted to the subject over the last 250 years: there are no oozing, slimy, chunky or rotting things; no bugs, or wounds — no bugs crawling in wounds; no reeking sex organs, menstrual blood or fecal matter; and relatively little mention of the dark crevices and orifices of our bodies, where who knows what might come in or go out. Instead, there is a schmear of soup in an unkempt beard, and a "naked savage" touching a piece of beef jerky, which we will turn to shortly. And there is, of course, the vomit — but there is nothing in it. In an area of study which far too often confuses its subject for its objects, Darwin's chapter stands out for actually being about disgust, and not the disgusting.

This is in part a methodological consequence, with roots in the tradition of British Empiricism. It makes sense that a book focused on expression in general would have less to do with the objects which provoke our emotional reactions than with the external responses which characterize them. In order to bolster its strong case for a species-wide biological basis to the emotions, *Expression* emphasized the outward constants of disgust — facial expressions, sounds, gestures — rather than the variables, the targets of our disgust, which Darwin knew were both culturally specific and contextually determined. As a result of privileging affective display,

Darwin makes relatively few claims either about the objects we deem disgusting, or the inward experience of the emotion:

> I never saw disgust more plainly expressed than on the face of one of my infants at the age of five months, when, for the first time, some cold water, and again a month afterwards, when a piece of ripe cherry was put into his mouth. This was shown by the lips and the whole mouth assuming a shape which allowed the content to run or fall quickly out; the tongue being likewise protruded. These movements were accompanied by a little shudder. It was all the more comical, as I doubt whether the child felt real disgust – the eyes and forehead expressing much surprise and consideration. (239)

Such description is highly precise, and Darwin is still credited with having first identified what contemporary psychologists refer to as the 'gape face,' the reflexive expression of disgust "by the mouth being widely opened, as if to let an offensive morsel drop out" (236). Situating disgust alongside contempt, scorn and disdain, Darwin placed the gaping mouth at the core of this complex of negative emotions, which grow increasingly oral as they intensify: "The term 'disgust,' in its simplest sense, means something offensive to the taste." While there is plenty of disagreement today over Darwin's definition, it remains by and large the prototypical account of disgust. Yet considered in light of the passage above, it is a very unusual prototype: the cherry itself is not meant to be understood as disgusting in the ordinary sense — we are certainly not meant to infer anything about the cherry, or about cherries in general — nor does the infant even experience "real disgust." The shudder and the shape of the mouth alone are of interest. It was in pursuit of these interests, for example, that Darwin was drawn to Guillaume Duchenne's electric shock-induced portraits of an "old, toothless man," made famous in *Mécanisme de la physionomie humaine* (1862); as well as to dramatically costumed set-shots commissioned from the pioneering Victorian photographer Oscar Rejlander. The images of *Expression* reveal Darwin's complex relationship to both technology and authenticity, but they do not reveal any grotesque objects. In the terms of Darwin's project, writing about disgust need not involve the disgusting at all; for that matter, it may not even involve "real disgust."

By avoiding specific consideration of the disgusting, Darwin's study resists the phenomenological impulse which underwrites almost every theoretical account of disgust one can find. It is easy to see why disgust — more so than other emotions, perhaps — would appeal so strongly to phenomenological description, since it is in many obvious ways structured by its orientation towards objects. "The intention of disgust is much more markedly oriented outwards [than fear]," the Hungarian philosopher Aurel Kolnai wrote in his study *Der Ekel*, published in Husserl's *Jahrbuch* in 1929, adding elsewhere in the essay that "in the foreground of the phenomenon of disgust there remains the object with its specific features."[10] This insight squares with one of the basic grammatical functions of disgust, which would seem to pass a judgment, to tell you something about an object or person, or even a class of objects or people. To call something disgusting is a common form of appraisal, and, as cultural theorist Sianne Ngai has recently asserted, a forceful one, "for disgust is never ambivalent about its object."[11]

There is thus an immense conceptual pressure to engage with disgust critically through the experience and description of its culturally coded objects. To talk about how a certain food disgusts, doesn't one have to talk about the food itself? Discussion of the disgusting therefore commingles frequently and indiscriminately with discussion of disgust, a slippage which can often involve a surreptitious shift from an ordinary critical discourse about the emotion into a phenomenological description of the object.[12] Such a shift relies on an uninterrogated claim to immanence, to a presumptively universal ability to speak about repulsive objects from *within* an experience of disgust, while also examining the emotion as an object of study in its own right — a boundary-confusion which has characterized theorizations of disgust since Kant's third *Critique*. Moreover, because the experience of disgust is largely understood as an innate, reflexive behavior, the confusion between disgust and the disgusting often leads to a further

confusion between the biological and the interpretive aspects of the emotion. That is, in the most sophistic cases, disgust's allegedly instinctual 'hard-wiring' is used as purportedly biological evidence in support of a qualitative judgment of an object. Darwin was clearly aware of this dynamic, since he describes expressions of scorn, disdain, contempt and disgust as all sharing a set of related "actions representing the rejection or exclusion of some real object which we dislike or abhor" (239).Yet Darwin's discussion attempts to avoid this problematic confusion of disgust with its objects by remaining focused instead on the surface biology of expression.

Culture and biology therefore sit in a tense relationship in the book. On the one hand, in his discussions of individual emotions, Darwin sought to bring to the fore the questions "about the proper application of the terms, will, consciousness, and intention" which lie at the heart of *Expression*'s interest in human instinct, without embroiling these questions of hard-wiring with the variable and culturally specific objects which elicit emotional response (326). But on the other, the very fabric of *Expression* is indisputably and explicitly cultural: posed photographs, and allusions to art and literature; personal observations and memories dating back to childhood and to the early *Beagle* voyages; and anecdotal evidence collected from "Queries About Expression," a questionnaire Darwin sent abroad in 1867, asking colleagues scattered in outposts of the British Empire and beyond to provide "a *definite description of the countenance* under any emotion or frame of mind, with a statement of the circumstances under which it occurred." "Observations on natives who have had little communication with Europeans," the survey noted, "Would be of course most valuable."

> (10.) Is disgust shewn by the lower lip being turned down, the upper lip slightly raised, with a sudden expiration, something like incipient vomiting, or like something spat out the mouth?
> (11.) Is extreme fear expressed in the same general manner as with Europeans?

Saturated by Victorian racial and cultural stereotypes which both upheld and reflected

little more than British imperialist ideology, the descriptions Darwin received were far from neutral, let alone scientific. A response from Ceylon reports that in "native faces...really there is very little expression at all, even when they are talking together, but there is sometimes slyness and sometimes vindictiveness very evidently indicated"; while an account of disgust in Calcutta refers to a servant's "eructation of wind and spasmodic backward with short rapid horizontal shaking," in response to the castor-oil he was repeatedly forced to consume against his will.[13] While Darwin did cherry-pick observations tending to confirm his views, it is not yet clear to what extent this imperialist frame of reference has colored his book, especially not considering how much more skeptical Darwin remained than many scientists today about "whether we have any instinctive power of recognising" particular emotional expressions in the first place (326). What is clear, however, is that Darwin had no qualms about turning to, producing and even doctoring cultural and aesthetic artifacts in order to make his case about biology of emotions. As Phillip Prodger has written about Darwin's relationship to his prized photographer, for example, "Rejlander's willingness to compromise between the actual and the illusory is precisely what would have commended him to Darwin."[14] The whole conception of the biological basis of emotional expression is constituted through the interpretation of cultural material; but the cultural interpretations comprised by emotional expressions are not symmetrically rooted in a biological authority.

An often-cited episode from the chapter on disgust can illustrate Darwin's nuanced position on these matters of cultural interpretation, and lead the way into his complex discussion of vomiting. Recollecting his time in Patagonia almost forty years earlier, Darwin describes a scene of mutual revulsion in his tent in order to discuss the tension between the involuntary and the conscious which inheres to disgust-reactions:

> In Tierra del Fuego a native touched with his finger some cold preserved meat which I was eating at our bivouac, and plainly showed utter disgust at its softness; whilst I felt utter disgust at my food being touched by a naked savage, though his hands did not appear dirty. A smear of soup on a man's beard looks disgusting, though there is of course nothing disgusting in the soup itself. I presume that this follows from the strong association in our minds between the sight of food, however circumstanced, and the idea of eating it. (236)

Recent readers have zoomed in on this reported memory in order to evidence the essentialist logic of contamination and defilement of disgust-reactions, what psychologist Paul Rozin has referred to as the laws of sympathetic magic according to which "disgust is elicited by objects that have contacted [or resemble] a disgusting item."[15] For example, William Ian Miller begins *The Anatomy of Disgust* with a reading of the scene, claiming that "Darwin fears ingesting some essence of savagery that has been magically imparted to his food by the finger of the naked savage."[16] Likewise, Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* uses the scene to open its chapter on "The Performativity of Disgust," which opens by insisting that the native "is already seen as dirt," rather than dirty in any specific sense. Avoiding engagement with Darwin's explicit point about the cultural relativism inherent to the elicitors of disgust, Ahmed and Miller both propose Darwin's mystification about the rules of intercultural defilement and disgust. To do so, Ahmed draws heavily on Sartre's phenomenological reflections on stickiness ("slime is the agony of water," for example[17]), arguing that being disgusted exemplifies how "objects [can] seem to have us 'in their grip,' and to be moving towards us in how they impress upon us, an impression that requires us to pull away, with an urgency that can be undoing." For Darwin's account, though, the objects quite significantly do not have us in their grip: "There is of course nothing disgusting in the soup itself."

Ahmed's argument misses the mark in a telling way, since it uses Darwin's scene to produce an account of disgust's phenomenological intentionality towards objects — at precisely the moment when Darwin is suggesting that the objects of disgust do not bear on his interest in

the automaticity of emotional expression. Throughout his discussion, Darwin pursues the way in which disgust is articulated in a seemingly universal and reflexive manner, "even in opposition to the will" (326); but he thought this about all emotional expression, which he believed was instinctive, and did not share Ahmed's phenomenological impulse to isolate disgust in terms of its peculiar intentionality. At the same time, the interpretive cultural material of Darwin's biology falls out of the picture in Ahmed's cultural politics, even though this is surely what makes the theory unique: the fact that a memory of an experience decades in the past can be revisited and reinterpreted in order to provide evidence ought to signal from the start that Darwin conceived of evolutionary biology at least partly as a hermeneutic and cultural enterprise. This willingness to develop scientific argument out of what may seem a hodge-podge of personal and cultural interpretation is part of what makes *Expression* seem outdated, but, as Daniel M. Gross has recently argued, "Darwin's rhetoric is essential to his nonreductive scientific project because emotions are themselves fundamentally rhetorical, which is to say Darwin's methodology accounts for the emotion's medium, occasion, and social situation."[18] To draw on Raymond Williams' older vocabulary in the cultural theory of the emotions, Darwin gives us emotions as "social experiences in solution," inseparable as objects from the cultural contexts of their subjective expression.[19] As Gross continues, "the very experience of an emotion, according to Darwin, depends upon the social and not the biological situation"; in Darwin's rhetoric of the emotions, biological experience has an unreciprocated dependence on the social.

Darwin's first reflection on vomiting reinforces the connection between culture and biology, interpretation and reflex — between noodle and stomach — while maintaining his non-phenomenological account of disgust with no objects: "It is remarkable how readily and instantly retching or actual vomiting is induced in some persons by the mere idea of having partaken of

any unusual food, as of an animal which is not commonly eaten; although there is nothing in such food to cause the stomach to reject it" (237). Darwin is quick to further complicate his mind-stomach dualism by distinguishing his interest in imaginatively induced disgust-vomiting from "when vomiting results, as a reflex action, from some real cause — as from too rich food, or tainted meat, or an emetic — [when] it does not ensue immediately, but generally after a considerable interval of time." Vomiting induced by disgust does not have a specific physiological purpose, though it is nevertheless performed as an involuntary behavior — as an instinct — the motions of which Darwin did not believe needed to be learned. Thus it has neither the mechanistic necessity of instinct customarily ascribed to the unthinking body, nor the intentionality and freedom ascribed to rational thought. Darwin gestures instead towards his conceptions of habit and association to explain his understanding of disgust-reactions, though his annotations and notes on Daniel Tuke's *Illustrations of the Influence of the Mind on the Body*, published the same year as *Expression*, suggest a lingering reluctance even to consign spontaneous vomiting exclusively to the domain of habit.[20] As I will discuss below in the section on Darwin's outmoded conception of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, some more nuanced way of understanding this middle range of affective agency is necessary to grapple with the easily excited stomach.

Moreover, if disgust can be triggered by a "mere idea," there will be nothing to vomit up. There is no need for tangible objects of disgust or a structure of intention, since ideas and imaginations have a material weight capable of producing palpable physiological consequences with external, social ramifications. Contrary to Ngai's claim that disgust is never ambivalent about its objects, Darwin suggests that disgust is characterized by a built-in uncertainty about the location and even ontological status of its objects. Disgust is a form of enacted confusion, an

innate performance revolving a perception of “some real object” which may be nothing more than a “mere idea.” The missing objects of disgust are made all the more ambivalent by Darwin’s repeated emphasis on the double gesture “representing...rejection or exclusion,” suggesting that Darwin understood disgust to signify at once the fending off of unwanted objects from without, and the expulsion of undesirable objects already within the body. Like most, if not all, accounts of disgust, Darwin’s identifies the confusion of the physical boundaries of the human body as a structural feature of the emotion.

Similarly, working at the cusp of philosophy and evolutionary theory, Daniel Kelly has posited that disgust is the product of the “entanglement,” at some unspecified moment in human history, of “two integrated but originally distinct mechanisms,” one “monitoring food consumption and preventing the ingestion of poisons and toxins,” the other specializing in “parasite avoidance.”[21] Yet while Darwin seems in part to have anticipated Kelly, he does not ascribe to disgust the same kind of instinctive intuition about external objects that Kelly’s “entanglement thesis” does. Even if we reject or exclude “some real object which we dislike or abhor,” it does not imply something intrinsically harmful about the object. This is because, as I will discuss below, Darwin held the strange and difficult belief that mankind’s objectless articulations of disgust derived from a prehistoric capacity for voluntary, not involuntary, vomiting. In lieu of parasites and toxins, Darwin suggests that the materiality of the thoughts in our minds can itself account for the confusion over the body’s beginnings and ends which accompanies disgust-reactions.

A disgust with no objects does not resemble disgust, at least not as it is typically described. The objects are so embedded in the dualistic lexicon of disgust that to remove them from critical discussion has a transformative effect, enough so to make some critical readers wonder if

Darwin's account has not simply missed what is distinctive about the emotion. But few theories of disgust really believe there is anything to the objects themselves. Most tend to rely instead on an understanding of common disgust elicitors, like rotting flesh and human feces, as having become in some sense the physical tokens of human animality — projections of the body's openness and vulnerability, often further specified as its sexuality or mortality. The revolting objects are necessary, but only as extensions of the revolted subject, sick to her or his stomach. But then are they really necessary? As Latour puts it,

> It is not clear why society needs to be projected on to arbitrary objects if those objects count for nothing. Is society so weak that it needs continuous resuscitation? So terrible that, like Medusa's face, it should be seen only in mirror?[22]

In light of Latour's questioning, it becomes difficult to support the standard philosophical account of disgust as the expression of revolt against the aspects of our existence which our rational selves cannot bear to confront, and which we then project onto objects, only to find that the expression of disgust also opens the body and makes it vulnerable. The expression of disgust can also serve as such an emblem of animality and irrationality; our vomit can be disgusting in and of itself, the sounds we make while doing it, the smell of it, the way it looks — a perspective from which agent and object become indistinguishable.

Darwin implicitly upends this recursive story of disgust as the mind's negative judgment of the experience of the porosity of the body. If disgust is without objects, then it is without the animus which makes it recursive. It is no longer a story of repressed desire or unwanted pleasure or excluded sensation, the Kantian story of disgust which Pierre Bourdieu summarized as "the paradoxical experience of enjoyment extorted by violence, an enjoyment which arouses horror."[23] Darwin's disgust is a heightened experience of the body's porosity, but not its convoluted and contorted rejection. Deprived of its vehemence and its objects, but still welling up from the bilious stomach, Darwin's disgust more closely resembles anxiety.

II. *Dialectic of the Illuminated Stomach*

Darwin's theoretical discussion of vomiting — without vomiting anything up — adjoins a prolific 19th century literature on the topic of dyspepsia. While the chapter in *Expression* may be the only statement on vomiting in the context of Victorian studies of the emotions, bilious disturbances and gastrointestinal disruptions were common currency in discussions of the disordered stomach, as Darwin knew well from his own painful experience of gastric illness: "I seldom throw up food, only acid and morbid secretion," he reported to Hooker in 1864, "Otherwise I should have been dead, for during more than a month I vomited after every meal."[24] The specific causes of Darwin's illness have eluded doctors and puzzled medical historians and biographers since the 19th century, but dyspepsia, understood as a catch-all for various digestive disorders, became such a widespread epidemiological problem in Victorian England that it was said to "knock at the door of every gradation of society, from the monarch...down to the squalid inhabitant of St. Giles," as one physician put it in 1827.[25] The strong connection between imagination and stomach which Darwin adduced in the statement on vomiting finds a compelling analogue in the tossing and turning of the disordered gut, where disgust and anxiety converge.

The gut itself had sat for centuries at the center of holistic conceptions of the human, where it commanded an almost magical significance as the body's innermost sanctum and most powerful yet mysterious agent.[26] For example, conjuring archaic principles of nervous sympathy to connect the brain intimately to the belly, Robert Burton asserted in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* that "perturbations of the mind [can]... alter matter... [in] this *omnivorantia et homicida gula*, this all-devouring and murdering gut."[27] Both influencing and influenced by consciousness, the stomach had its own laws of causality, which did not square with easy divisions between internal and external, corporeal and cognitive, physiological and social, or

natural and cultural. Despite mounting skepticism from modern physiology to explain the body's internal mechanics empirically, time-tested medical and conventional wisdom allowing that the perception of social reality could effect changes in the physical makeup of the body, and that the stomach could alter the perception of reality, persisted throughout the 19th century into the present day, as with Scrooge's incredulous response to the the first ghost in *A Christmas Carol*, who asks, "What evidence could you have of me beyond that of your senses?....Why do you doubt your senses?"

> "Because," said Scrooge, "A little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!"[28]

For Scrooge, as for many Victorians, disruptions down below were thought to disrupt the mind, rendering useless the basic tools and assumptions of empirical data collection; human behavior, on this account, is subject to unknowable principles of causation, whose source lies somewhere deep within the equally unknowable recesses of the body. Even with the increasing priority granted to modern physiology, such older holistic conceptions continued to inform Victorian conceptions of the stomach and its cryptic agency, which underwrote Darwin's understanding of disgust. As he advised Hooker, "Do be careful of your stomach, within which, as I know full well, lie intellect, conscience, temper and the affections."[29]

Nevertheless, by the middle of the 19th century, rapid advances in physiological knowledge of the stomach were avidly chipping away at the darkness — physical and conceptual — which enshrouded the stomach, in an effort to dispel the obscurantism felt to authorize older views of physiological causation. As Ian Miller has written at length in *A Modern History of the Stomach*, with the rise of dyspeptic disorders to their prominent station as the "national disease of Britain," the stomach became a major battleground for empirical medicine, which sought for

the better part of the 19th century sought to lay eyes on and explain the human interior and human interiority alike.[30] Central to the rapid expansion of knowledge of the digestive process was the conclusive discovery, published in 1833 by the American army surgeon William Beaumont, that digestion was chemical, and not the purely mechanical process which had long been described by 17th and 18th century physiologists, chief among them Descartes.[31] Beaumont had reached his conclusion after experimenting at length on Alexis St. Martin, a Canadian *voyageur* for the American Fur Company whose insides had been blasted open by an accidental musket shot to the gut, and whose stomach remained artificially propped agape and under analysis for the many subsequent years during which Beaumont employed St. Martin as a laboratory assistant. Extracting stomach juices from St. Martin's wound, Beaumont was able to determine that the stomach's acidity, and not its purported crushing movements, was chiefly responsible for digesting food. This realization ushered in a new era in laboratory medicine focused on opening up the stomach and subjecting it to new forms of scrutiny, which not only forever changed medical conceptions of the digestive process and led to the diagnosis of gastric ulcer, but also gave another turn of the screw to the long story of mechanistic physiology. Yet the exposure of the stomach's chemical makeup could not dissolve the increasingly outmoded medical opinions, pseudo-scientific convictions and outright superstitions which had heretofore held sway; to the contrary, those who clung to more traditional beliefs about the stomach began to indict the new physiology for its participation in the very social processes of modernity which were deemed to exacerbate an already disorderly digestive process.[32]

The stomach now found itself in the midst of a complex discursive tug-of-war. On the one hand, modern physiology struggled to separate the purely biological from the psychological and socially determined forces at play in normal and abnormal digestion alike. On the other hand,

this forcible separation was itself understood from the holistic perspective as being a part of a larger nebula of problematic social causes, of which the apparent rise of mass dyspepsia was a single, but significant, effect. From the latter perspective, according to which the world and the stomach were mutually constitutive, the rise of modern stomach illness was inseparable from the larger condition of an overly-rational modernity; the precepts of nervous sympathy merely needed to be recalibrated to fit the new and enlarged magnitudes of modern life, where novel cultural and social factors, and not the inherent acidity of human biochemistry, were sufficient causal explanations. Under pressure from the new physiology, the old holism backslid into a reactionary caricature, which designated the emissions of the upset stomach as markers for the more general loss of traditional values: new, which is to say *foreign* foods, like coffee, tea, and spices, were expanding traditional palates, while irritating traditional British bowels; new, potentially *toxic* forms of pollution were occluding traditional circulation; and grueling new work schedules, followed by unprecedented physical exhaustion and unwarranted intemperance, were ushering in a new era, with millions of dyspeptics all piled one on top of the other in the fetid corners and splanchnic alleyways of newly crowded metropolises, where they would breed in "maggot numbers."[33] No longer a matter of individual constitutions, all of society was eroding, besieged by the melancholy, long withdrawing roar of an epochal wave of gastritis. Even at the dawn of the century, a prescient Wordsworth had described the tumult of the capital in grotesquely emetic terms, "as if the whole were one vast mill...vomiting, receiving, on all sides, / Men, women, three-years' children, babes in arms"[34]; while a hundred years later, George Gissing would complete the picture by describing the entire British Empire as "a ghastly whirlpool which roars over the bottomless pit" of London, a vast toilet sucking things down from the furthest reaches of the colonial bowl.[35] Something was being lost in the transition to

modernity, to which the uprising of the national stomach — an anxious, mass disgust with no fixed object — could bear witness.

Specific advances in scientific knowledge of the stomach made in the laboratory did little to allay these pervasive anxieties — both reactionary and legitimate — about the interconnection of modern life and modern dyspepsia. To the contrary, as Miller has explored in detail, strong opposition to non-clinical medical experimentation galvanized around the increasing objectification of the gut, widely understood to be the innermost penetralium of the human body.[36] Overlapping with the European scramble for Africa, the full illumination of the stomach towards the close of the 19th century and into the first decades of the 20th was felt to signal the crossing of a final frontier in the untrammeled progress of a perverted modern rationality, which insisted on turning everything it could see into a form of fully mapped out and disembodied knowledge. In the case of the stomach, the desire to shed light on, to comprehend, and even to wash the body's innards gave rise to a wide array of new practices and apparatuses for mastering the stomach: the auto-lavage, whereby a tube would be inserted to fill the stomach with no less than two liters cleaning fluid; the gastrodiaphane, a small light-bulb hung off the end of a rubber tube, swallowed by the patient in order to render visible the stomach's contents; and various other techniques for pumping the stomach full of gases (often the physician's breath) and for applying electric currents to the stomach to allegedly therapeutic ends, as well as for data collection.[37] As Miller argues, the ethics of actually utilizing such new technologies on human or animal subjects were hotly contested by British physicians and by British society more generally, often explicitly on the grounds that medical science no longer had anything relevant to contribute to clinical practice.

The perception that modern medicine had fully departed from its roots in traditional

practices was only further reinforced through increasing reliance on vivisection from the 1870s onward, which took the mechanistic principles of Cartesian physiology to gruesome new heights. This departure was exemplified by the experiments of eminent University College London physiologist, Ernest Henry Starling, whose early determination that the nervous system controlled the movement of food through the intestine led to his eventual discovery of hormones in the body and, late in life, his formulation of the "law of the heart" while conducting research on poison gas inhalation for the military.[38] Integral to Starling's scientific exploration of the peristaltic process was the vivisection of laboratory dogs, which entailed boring holes not only into the stomach in order to collect gastric juices, but also into the esophagus in order to feed the animals by pouring liquids into the artificial fistula. However, Starling soon realized that the stomach would only yield the high levels of acid needed for analysis if the dog were actually to grow hungry, see food, start salivating, and ingest food through the mouth — leading to the development of a process which came to be known as "sham feeding," and which resulted in the macabre spectacle of famished dogs tearing into morsels of food which immediately proceeded to fall out of the esophageal holes onto the floor. As Miller reports, "If the laboratory dog was provided with food when in a state of extreme hunger, it might avidly attempt to eat in this futile manner for hours, without ever realizing that food would never reach its stomach."[39]

Utilized as well by Starling's famed Russian contemporary Ivan Pavlov in his experiments on conditional response and reflex systems, the surgically-induced pseudo-vomiting of sham-feeding marked a milestone in the afterlife of Descartes' suspicion that living animals could not be distinguished from "machines having the organs and shape of...some other animal that lacked reason."[40] 70 years after Beaumont's discovery, it turned out that the stomach's chemical processes were as mechanistic as ever — only slimier. In this connection, we might

take Starling's experiments as a 19th century update on the 18th century theme of Jacques de Vaucanson's *Canard Digérateur*, the consuming and defecating mechanical duck which likewise allowed rapt Enlightenment audiences to ponder the viscera by simulating the entire digestive process.[41] Yet while the likes of Voltaire and Diderot had praised Vaucanson's automata as the works of "Prometheus's rival,"[42] Starling's dogs instead invited the condemnation of already potent antivivisectionist and animal rights movements, which questioned both the medical value of such experimentation, and the capricious techno-rationalistic impulses and appetites behind it: "How brain secretes dog's soul," Robert Browning seethed, "We'll see!"[43]

Strong opposition to the experimental use of laboratory animals from prominent individuals such as Browning, Darwin, Leslie Stephens, and Thomas and Emma Hardy, as well as from groups like the International Society for the Total Suppression of Vivisection and the RSPCA, merged with larger anxieties about the moral future of modern society, centered around the opening up of the stomach.[44] "The practice which is justifiable because implying laudable motives," Leslie Stephens weighed in, "Graduates imperceptibly into the practice which is execrable because implying sheer brutality."[45] The need for conceptual mastery over the body was alleged to have regressed into full-blown barbarism, as medical experimentation appeared more closely associated with causing than alleviating pain. Even seemingly neutral technological advances like the stomach tube, science's emissary to the unknown depths of the body, reinforced the perception that modernization was the process of society becoming ever more rationalizing, objectifying, instrumentalizing, and, ultimately, luridly dehumanizing. The fact that one of the most newsworthy early uses of the stomach tube was the widespread force-feeding of imprisoned suffragettes on hunger strike in 1909 was for many a telling reminder that a medical science which was marked from the onset by its brutality would have even more invasive and

dominative political applications when taken out of the laboratory.[46] Events such as these confirmed mounting late Victorian and Edwardian anxieties that the scientific and technological objectification of the human body would only further serve to disempower and silence already disempowered groups by physically controlling when they open and shut their mouths.[47]

These concerns were both legitimate and necessary, but the critique of the barbaric flights of modern medical science also served to intensify the reactionary protestations which would lump all new social and cultural phenomena together in one negative category. At once resentful of and indebted to Britain's imperial ambitions, a volatile and incoherent atavism originating within the hazy realm of dietetics began to call for a return to simpler times, before modernity had soured the body politic, and before modern physiology had ruined medicine. Traditionalist physicians as well as outright quacks claimed that the total condition of modernity was the sickness, and mass dyspepsia was merely its symptom; or, in a bizarre inversion, that dyspepsia was the root cause of which the woes of modern times were the effect. Modernity on this account resembled a gastric feedback loop, a self-perpetuating process whereby the noxious products of contemporary culture were at once the agents and results of indigestion: "If Carlyle had not ruined his digestion by excessive indulgence in tobacco, his influence on the world would have been happier," one homeopathic physician opined, adding:

> If Darwin's stomach had recovered from the effects of seasickness, he would doubtless have been a happier man, and his view of humanity might possibly have been a more generous and exalted one. I have no manner of doubt that the writings of some pessimistic philosophers, which modern would-be thinkers waste their energies in trying to understand, are the pure products of disordered digestion.[48]

There was no telling what manner of problem dyspepsia could not cause, or be caused by, especially as concerns regarding the stomach in turn entered into the gravitational pull of Victorian temperance movements, holding that excessive alcohol consumption was responsible for the rise of all nervous illness.[49]

Animating such reaction was the phylogenetic fantasy of restoring the spoiled stomachs of society to a pre-modern, pre-industrial and even prelapsarian state of gastric innocence, before the advent of anxiety-inducing dietary choices — or rather, before the advent of choice itself. "Savages, that have none of our stimulants," the Reverend Benjamin Parsons brazenly declared in his polemic, *Anti-Bacchus*, "Have scarcely more than one disease among them, and that disease is death — not sudden, or from apoplexy — but from the shaft of the warrior, or the gradual decay of nature."[50] The stomach could offer a species of primitive wisdom, a form of judgment which alone could put contemporary Britain back on its proper moral and digestive path. For the physician Thomas Lauder Brunton, this meant going back even before the "oldest diet table in the world... — 'Of every tree in the garden thou mayest freely eat, but' — and here follows the one exception, of which Adam might not eat without injury," Brunton reminded his readers, an *et en Arcadia ego* for the dyspeptic 1880s.[51] The sense that people had lost their way in a society which offered too many options for consumption pervaded 19th century dietetics; in order to regain its equilibrium, society's progress needed to be halted, and, in a kind of gastric exhumation, the stomachs of the past would be disinterred, interpreted and reclaimed: "We know that prehistoric man was fond of strawberries," Brunton goes on, "Because the seeds of some, which a man, ages and ages ago, had eaten and voided unchanged, still remain to inform us of the fact."[52] Like anxiety and disgust, science and myth also commingled freely in Victorian gastrointestinal tracts.

The reactionary mythologizing of the savage stomach was not merely a sharp rejoinder to the experimental brutalities of modern physiology, but its dialectical complement in a matrix of questions and concerns about the scope of human agency. Whether indigestion was the sickness for which modern medicine alone possessed the cure, or whether it was modernity which was the

condition and indigestion the pervasive, preeminent symptom, both responses serve the same function of attributing to the body an unfailing, unthinking and unchanging instinctivity. Unless we have first isolated the stomach as an object distinct from the capacity for rational or subjective agency, we can neither reclaim past stomachs nor illuminate present ones; the stomach is forcibly separated from the noodle, and then forcibly reunited on new terms: "Split the Lark and you'll find the Music."[53] Answering less to the desire to be free from bodily suffering, the modern scientific drive to master the stomach seemed to express instead an anxious desire to be free from the alleged automaticity of the body itself — that is, a desire for the freedom to choose, or for freedom *per se*, the disinterested fantasy of autonomy which may lie at the core of the project of modernity, even if it has always been perceived quickly to devolve into barbarism.[54] The reaction against modern physiology exhibited the very same fantasy of mastering the body, only it directed it against the onerous anxieties of modern freedom, and not the fear of having no agency at all. Yet it is doubtful that even the most outspoken critics, railing at the nexus of modernity and the body, and exalting the savage stomach for being free from the burden of choice, ever wished to surrender their rational agency to the promise of healthy digestion. The two fantasies collapse into each other: freedom from the mechanistic, dyspeptic body, which is to say freedom as choice, was no more than a recipe for anxiety; but anxiety was notorious for manifesting itself in the stomach, as if by magic, in the form of dyspepsia. Neither the flights of techno-rational fancy nor the regressions into primitivist escapism could evade Burton's all-devouring and murdering gut, which existed in the Victorian cultural imagination as an uneasy synthesis of these two modes of thought.

Darwin's statements on vomiting ought to be read against the cultural backdrop of Victorian

gastric thinking in which larger epochal questions about human agency and the future of society descended *en masse* on historically specific scientific advances pertaining to the human body itself. Considering Darwin's personal familiarity with nearly every form of medical practice related to the treatment of dyspepsia, it is not surprising that his vomit shared many of its constitutive elements with the dominant cultural conceptions of the disordered stomach. Wrenching the stomach at once towards a hyper-rational future and a mythologized past, Darwin attempted a slurry of holistic and dietary remedies alongside countless technological innovations, including: the application of hydroelectric cords, known as Pulvermacher's Chains, to the waist and neck,"[55] despite the failure, years earlier, "of what sounds a piece of quackery, viz twice a day passing a galvanic stream through my insides from a small plate battery."[56] Taking, at different moments, opium, "bluepill," tartar emetic, "Condy's Ozonised Water," while sometimes being told to avoid heavily spiced or acidic foods, and other times being directed, to the contrary, to drink "muriatic acid with cayenne and ginger," or to eat lemons ("½ lemon thrice" — "Whole Lemon Twice a Day" — "Left off lemon"), or to drink India Ales, or bitters, or "Cordial Aloes," and so on — the Victorian precursors to today's H_2-antagonists, proton-pump inhibitors, and *Helicobacter pylori* eradication protocols, any of which might one day appear as mythical and misguided as Darwin's various ineffectual medical regimens. And at any rate, as anyone who has ever gone to the doctor with stomach trouble will know, stress remains one of the most notorious causes of modern indigestion.

The most trusted and enduring of Darwin's attempted treatments was Dr. James Manby Gully's hydropathy, the water treatment purported to have cured Dickens, Carlyle, Tennyson and Wilkie Collins, among other Victorian luminaries, of their various kinds of stomach trouble.[57] The cure, which involved pouring cold water on the patient from a considerable height, as well

as scrubbing the body vigorously "with a rough towel in cold water" and inducing intense perspiration with spirit lamps, was said to function by shifting blood away from the stomach, where it caused indigestion, to the skin, where it resulted in harmless irritations. But Darwin also recognized that aspects of Gully's treatment verged on charlatanism, complaining to his sister Susan that "I grieve to say that Dr. Gully gives me homeopathic medicines three times a day, which I take obediently without an atom of faith."[58] Faith was evidently not the issue, however, and Darwin continued to entrust his health to Gully's complex regimen for years, even when Gully sent his incredulous patient to a well-reputed clairvoyant. Long after he ceased utilizing hydropathy, its precepts continued to inform Darwin's longstanding conviction that the appearance of eruptive boils and disfiguring facial eczema in fact signaled the end of his long bouts of vomiting and flatulence: "How I wish I could beg, borrow or steal your eczema, intensified a dozen fold," he wrote Hooker in 1865, "For this alone would do me good."[59] As it did for many Victorians, the causal principles affecting Darwin's stomach remained obscure.

Darwin's disgust certainly drew on his own experiences with Victorian medicine, but it diverged sharply from the dualism underlying the Victorian conception of stomach. The intuition that "mere ideas" could incite vomiting very clearly drew on the principles of nervous sympathy which informed holistic treatments of dyspepsia, like Gully's, but this did not lead Darwin, as it did for many of his contemporaries, to envision a prelapsarian past in which the stomach had rule of the roost, and anxiety-provoking choices had yet to present themselves to the mind. Indeed, the evolution of vomiting that Darwin offers as a tentative answer to the questions of agency which for centuries have defined inquiry into the stomach bears little resemblance either to the standard-issue atavistic fantasies with which he was undoubtedly familiar, or to the mechanistic reductions which his own theory of natural selection would fuel. And this is in large part because

Darwin's genealogy runs backwards, towards a distant point in the past before certain intentional behaviors, like vomiting, had been reduced to instincts, like emotional expression, and not the other way around: "The suspicion arises that our progenitors must formerly have had the power (like that possessed by ruminants and some other animals) of voluntarily rejecting food which disagreed with them, or which they thought would disagree with them" (237). Against the story of the stomach's immutable automaticity, Darwin's ideas about the origins of vomiting and disgust offer a far more uneven and unstable narrative concerning the relation of instinct and agency in human behavior.

III. *Allegories of Instinct*

Darwin believed that spontaneous vomiting out of disgust, like most other forms of emotional expression, was an innate behavior which gestured back towards a lost capacity of the will, in this case the ability to vomit up food voluntarily. This relatively minor speculative detail has far reaching consequences, since, in the first place, Darwin here quietly gives voice to the idea that the history of the human species has not been a progressive and developmental acquisition of the higher cognitive powers, such as free will, complex reasoning and judgment. Looking back at the evolution of the human, Darwin perceived instead a far more uneven and unpredictable process, which, in the case of our progenitors' now lost capacity for "voluntarily rejecting food which disagreed with them, or which they thought would disagree with them," entailed the loss of a form of measured judgment, and its subsequent evolution into an instinctive behavior. However, in order to account for this hypothesis, we need also to understand an underlying, foundational tenet of Darwin's speculations about the evolution of nearly all forms of emotion expression, which is that certain "actions, which were at first voluntary, soon become habitual, and at last

hereditary, and may then be performed in opposition to the will" (326). Underwriting Darwin's position on voluntary vomiting, this view — that learned behaviors might in some cases ultimately become instinctive in future generations — is remarkably close to Lamarck's theory of the heritability of acquired characteristics, generally considered to have been rendered obsolete by Darwin's theory of natural selection. So in his chapter on disgust, Darwin not only espouses a decentering and asymmetrical view of human evolution in which mankind has become in some respects more, rather than less ruled by instinct, but appears also to ground that view in a debunked theory of inheritance which he himself had been largely responsible for debunking — all of which props up a very brief speculation on the voluntary origins of vomiting. Clearly the stakes of this paragraph need to be made clear, as do the shifts in what Darwin understood by instinct over the course of his career, in order to understand Darwin's disgust with any specificity.

And yet, while the comments on mutual revulsion in the Patagonian bivouac continue to draw notice, nobody has attempted to write about Darwin's voluntary vomiters, save a casual dismissal by the philosopher Winfried Menninghaus in his tome on the intellectual history of disgust in the German and French traditions. Menninghaus's principle objection, which paves the way for a lengthy discussion of Freud, is that Darwin has failed to provide a basis on which our ancestors could ground their decisions to vomit up the food they believed to disagree with them: "How such classifications of certain foods...might have emerged, and what function they might have served, Darwin has left entirely unanswered."[60] The allegation is true: Darwin's story of disgust does not designate an origin point for the capacity to judge — a primordial standard of taste, so to speak — only an early instance of its voluntary use. What instincts or sensations preceded those early measured decisions to regurgitate one's semi-digested foods? — Darwin

does not venture to guess, remaining content instead to ascribe to such judgments of taste an extremely primal start date; it is worth noting, too, that Menninghaus's insistence that Darwin provide a "function" for food classification is itself an accusation that Darwin's theory is not sufficiently Darwinian, and appears to lack conceptual economy. "Not surprisingly, therefore," Menninghaus concludes with bravado, "[Darwin's] narrative of disgust's evolution has not found any followers to date; indeed, in psychology, it has been deemed hardly worth the effort of a commentary." Freud, by contrast, saw disgust as playing a significant role not only in the birth of civilization, but in the foundational becoming upright of the species, through the repression of sexual instincts[61]; ontogenetically or phylogenetically, disgust has long been deemed a trace of our pre-rational, our unthinking pasts, and it is to this compelling narrative of disgust's involvement in the overcoming of instinct and the birth of reason that Menninghaus devotes his attention — not just in Freud's account, but also in its roots in Nietzsche and Kant, as well as related ramifications Menninghaus finds in Batailles, Sartre and Kristeva. Throughout the history of ideas, the expression of disgust has been bound to instinct — and a very rigid conception of instinct, at that. Darwin's willed disgust is the outlier: touting an outmoded view of inheritance in turn enabling a reversed chronology of instinct and reasoning, the voluntary vomiters find themselves on the wrong side of the philosophical, as well as the scientific tracks.

Yet Darwin's reluctance to imagine disgust as the vestigial emblem of our nearly-lost animal nature is of a piece with what, in the larger scheme of things, gave his thought its critical force; there is no instinctive animal nature to lose, or purely human nature to gain — only nature, which is to be understood with ever more finely-tuned gradations. Averring that "instincts are not always perfect and are liable to mistakes," even Darwin's principle statement on the topic in *Origin* defies the pervasive dualist impulse to set the artificiality of human reason over and

against the automaticity of primitive animal nature. From the earliest notebooks to the late publication of *Expression*, Darwin remained defiantly resistant to easy classifications of instinct as unerring or automatic.[62] Consequently, there is a wide gulf between Darwin's proposal that instincts are liable to lapse into error, on the one hand, and on the other the long intellectual tradition holding that to err is human — which is to say, it is not animal, not instinctive, not corporeal — because errors in judgment are the product of rational thought gone astray, and in the first place are only errors from a rational standpoint. Darwinian instincts are fundamentally at odds with this deeply entrenched and still prevalent perspective, which takes the body to be infallible, because sub- or non-rational. The explosive hypothesis that man had evolved by natural selection from some bygone primate may have upended the timeline of human creation, but the other side of that coin, that animals are also complex reasoning creatures, irreducible to bleeding, breathing machinery, was no less damaging to the view of the human as "the roof and crown of things."

Darwin insisted that the animal-human divide could not be maintained through an appeal to the outright isolation of reason from instinct, though of course he did not discard the distinction formally. Instead, the opening passage outlining the subject in the chapter on "Instinct" in *Origin* is marked by its ambivalence, at once expressing deep uncertainty that instinct could be entirely isolated, while acknowledging the impossibility of explaining animal behavior without doing so:

> I will not attempt any definition of instinct. It would be easy to show that several distinct mental actions are commonly embraced by this term; but everyone understands what is meant, when it is said that instinct impels the cuckoo to migrate and to lay her eggs in other birds' nests. An action, which we ourselves should require experience to enable us to perform, when performed by an animal, more especially by a very young one, without any experience, and when performed by many individuals in the same way, without their knowing for what purpose it is performed, is usually said to be instinctive. But I could show that none of these characters of instinct are universal. A little dose, as Pierre Huber expresses it, of

> judgment or reason, often comes into play, even in animals very low in the scale of nature.[63]

With the publication of *Origin*, it grew more and more difficult to say where reason ended and instinct began. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to demonstrating this last insight, that instinctive behaviors mingle with other forms of judgment, and are in general an inherently murky business. As with his treatment of disgust, Darwin's broader theory of instinct severely problematizes mechanistic accounts of behavior, and the fundamental dualism such accounts imply.

While Darwin's view of the entwinement of reason and instinct certainly met with strong opposition, the notion that animals were endowed with the same kind of rational faculties as man nevertheless had a notable lineage in British Empiricism. Unlike the rationalist tradition, empiricists held that sense data determined all experience, therefore providing a common material foundation for instinct and rational thought in man and other animals. Responding to the strong mechanistic case made by Descartes, for example, Locke granted that "if they [*Beasts*] have any *Ideas* at all, and are not bare Machins (as some would have them) we cannot deny them to have some Reason." In fact, "the Species of *Brutes* are discriminated from Man" primarily, if not solely, by their inability "to express their universal *Ideas* by signs." Even though Locke believed this deficiency to be of divine origin and so insurmountable, such a higher order distinction nevertheless afforded animals ideas in the first place, suggesting that the difference between animals and humans was in degree, and not kind: "This, I think, I may be positive in, That the power of *Abstracting* is not at all in them; and that the having of general *Ideas,* is that which puts a perfect distinction betwixt Man and Brutes."[64] In Locke's hands, the unbridgeable gap between man and animal shrank to the uppermost tip of the cognitive faculties, such as abstraction and the use of symbols, which comprised the essential difference of humanity.

Empiricist discourse continued to blur the line separating instinct from reason throughout the Enlightenment and well into Darwin's day. Half a century after Locke's *Essay*, Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739) put the case forcefully in the section *Of the reason of animals*: "Next to the ridicule of denying an evident truth, is that of taking much pains to defend it; and no truth appears to me more evident, than that beasts are endow'd with thought and reason as well as men. The arguments are in this case so obvious that they never escape the most stupid and ignorant."[65] Arguing fervidly that animals possess both reason and instinct, Hume's polemic also came with an added flourish at the end, positing that far from being opposing faculties, reason itself "is nothing but a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls, which carries us along a certain train of ideas, and endows them with particular qualities":

> This instinct, 'tis true, arises from past observation and experience; but can any one give the ultimate reason why past experience and observation produces such an effect, any more than why nature alone shou'd produce it? Nature may certainly produce whatever can arise from habit: Nay, habit is nothing but one of the principles of nature, and derives all its force from that origin.[66]

By the end of the 18th century and into the early years of the 19th, Hume's position on the "brother faculties" of instinct and rationality had gained wider circulation among naturalists and philosophers of varying stripes, among them Darwin's grandfather Erasmus, as well as Lamarck.[67] Under the pressure of an increasingly materialist and naturalizing tradition of thought, the irreducible margin dividing man from animal continued to cede ground — even within the context of Victorian religious thought. In fact, as Robert J. Richards has shown, Darwin's early ideas about instinct in the late 1830s were heavily indebted to those of contemporary natural theologians, such as the Reverend Algernon Wells, Henry Lord Brougham and Reverend William Kirby, each of whom managed to reconcile an attested devotion to God as the *primum movens* of all life with the empirical conviction that animals could reason.[68] "Though instinct is the chief guide of insects," Kirby wrote in his religiously inflected, four-volume *Introduction to*

Entomology (1815 - 1826), “They are also endowed with no inconsiderable portion of knowledge.”[69] Stemming from Hume’s “instinct in our souls,” and passing through the natural theology of the early 19th century, Darwin’s eventual view that “a little dose...of reason or judgment often comes into play” in instinctive behavior emerged out of a well-established British intellectual tradition of anti-mechanistic thinking.

The empiricist tradition was also a fertile source of inspiration for early 19th century conceptions of heredity, like Lamarck’s, since it provided ample groundwork for the transmutation of innate structures through habituation. If “habit is nothing but one of the principles of nature,” as Hume claimed it was, then the automaticity of instinct could be derived from the gradual accumulation of learned behaviors become habitual and passed down over time. Prior to Darwin’s theory of natural selection, this view represented the foremost conception of how species could change and adapt their instincts through descent. Darwin himself forged his early position on instinct principally through the idea of the heritability of acquired characteristics such as habits, though he failed to acknowledge his debt to Lamarck, to whom he erroneously attributed the idea that species could adapt and even create parts of the body through the pseudo-magical application of the will.[70] Scornful of unscientific reasoning, Darwin believed that instincts which were developed out of hereditary habits must operate on the substance of the brain independently of intention or will, constituting a form of “unconscious” or “involuntary memory” passed down through generations.[71] Yet Darwin never elucidated this process, which, perhaps more than any other feature of his work, today bears the stamp of obscurantism; as Richards writes, “for the Newtonian scientist (an ideal toward which Darwin aspired), the occult connections between matter and its powers did not need explanation, only description.”[72] However, Darwin never fully abandoned this Lamarckian model.[73] Even while championing

natural selection in the *Origin of Species*, Darwin continued to maintain that "if we suppose any habitual action to become inherited — and I think it can be shown this does sometimes happen — then the resemblance between what originally was a habit and an instinct becomes so close as not to be distinguished."[74] Far from being superseded by the more robust mechanism of natural selection — as it has been in the history of evolutionary thought — the theory of habit-instinct adaptation came to play a significant role in Darwin's late work on the human, in particular as a constitutive part of his explanation of how emotional expressions had developed in humans.

Not only did Darwin believe that voluntary behaviors could become habitual and ultimately inherited as instincts, but he considered instincts acquired in this manner, including emotional expressions, "to be degraded in character, for they are no longer performed through reason or from experience."[75] Not bound by the principles of natural selection, and cut off from their original purposes, Darwin deemed the expression of emotions through facial movements and other gestures to be a kind of defunctioned behavior. While clearly still valuable, since "such movements may be voluntarily and consciously employed as a means of communication," Darwin nevertheless did not believe this would yield any necessary evolutionary advantage (325).[76] In fact, he was certain that "there are no grounds, as far as I can discover, for believing that any muscle has been developed or even modified exclusively for the sake of expression":

> Nor can I discover grounds for believing that any inherited movement, which now serves as a means of expression, was at first voluntarily and consciously performed for this special purpose....On the contrary, every true or inherited movement of expression seems to have had some natural and independent origin. (325)
>
> Although they [such instinctive actions] often reveal the state of the mind, this result was not at first either intended or expected. Even such words as that 'certain movements serve as a means of expression' are apt to mislead, as they imply that this was their primary purpose or object" (326)

Automatic and instinctual, and yet, from a physiological perspective, never ends in themselves, Darwin's emotional expressions are difficult to comprehend, especially because — thanks in

large part to Darwin — we have become used to thinking of the evolution of instincts and behaviors in the more pragmatic, mechanistic terms of natural selection. Modern psychology has gone to great lengths over the last several decades to demonstrate that such a major swath of human behavior as the emotions must have a functionalist explanation; since Darwin himself eschewed this view, this has meant, occasionally, selectively drawing on or even outright misreading *Expression*, in order to salvage Darwin from his own historical moment while simultaneously claiming his historical imprimatur.[77] There has been strong resistance to Darwin's putatively benighted views on the the emotions, even while he is credited with having originated the field of inquiry in the first place. In fact, to complicate Menninghaus's assertion that no self-respecting psychologist has followed up on this aspect of Darwin's thought, in *Expression*'s scholarly afterlife it turns out *only* Freud was explicitly to follow up on the speculation that expressions have been cut off from their original purpose, finding in Darwin's "unconscious memories" and "degraded" inheritances an early model for the hysterical symptom.[78]

In lieu of primordial instinct, primal intention; animal rationality rather than the rational animal; a cryptic Lamarckian Darwin in lieu of a modern Darwinian one; lost agency and evolutionarily purposeless behaviors, instead of enlightened mastery and evolved fitness; the descent of man rather than the rise of civilization: Darwin's voluntary vomiters fly in the face of received wisdom in the natural as well as the human sciences. Where the combined weight of the modern intellectual disciplines have posited a disgust determined by its evolved functionality, the voluntary vomiters would see only the eventual misuse of a simple application of the will, devolved into a bizarre tic; as though we were to see some future humans bathing compulsively — and then instinctively — whenever something filthy crossed their minds. Moreover, the

voluntary vomiters would be confused by our conviction that this unintentional tic had a necessary and fixed meaning, even though it was neither reasoned nor learned. Perhaps above all else, they would find it strange that we had contrived stories about them — stories in which it was they who were ruled fully by unthinking instincts, and we who had leapt past them in a single moment with our abilities to reason and intend; as though the voluntary vomiters had simply been crawling around sniffing each other, stuck in some unchanging instinctual rut, so that we could leap ahead to become the upright walkers, complex thinkers, and smooth talkers we are today: "*Natura non facit saltum*," they'd chide us, while vomiting up some poorly seasoned cut of meat or unripe fruit. "You can make your disgust mean whatever you like," they'd say, "Only, leave us out of it."

If we survey the stories modern thought has told about the meaning of disgust, though, it quickly becomes clear that we can't leave them out if it. Disgust always turns up on the primal scene, a pseudo-biological shorthand for instinct. And, as long as disgust remains available to the philosophical imagination as a referent for our supposedly unchanging primal instinctivity, its interpretation will continue to take shape as an origin story; in many ways, the imaginative production of such stories has been the point of the study of disgust in the first place. Ongoing debate about whether or not disgust produces sound judgments — about whether we should 'listen' to or trust our disgust — only persists in obscuring the far more widely relevant fact that the interpretation of disgust serves the generative function of producing the past of the human species in a surreptitious narrative form: the animal before the man, the feeling before the thought, the taste before the judgment, the abject before the object — even the stomach before the advent of modernity. By refusing the conceptual allure of a purely instinctual past, Darwin's claim that intentional food rejection was the predecessor to disgust also reverses the compelling

narrative priority by which the primitive and the pre-rational are necessarily folded into the past, a priority which Kant had helped to establish almost a century earlier. Thus, in an imaginative close reading of the *Book of Genesis* entitled "Speculative Beginning of Human History" (1786), Kant insisted that "Instinct — that *voice of God* that all animals obey — must alone have first guided the beginner...to use several things for nourishment, but forbade others."[79] Ruled entirely by animal instincts, not only had Kant already made the voluntary vomiters star in the original origin story as Adam and Eve — but, in his telling, the interpretation of their instinctual disgust would mark the onset of history itself.

Kant posited that in a world at least partially naturalized by the power of reason, the Fall itself would have to be reinterpreted as an allegory in which the experience of disgust marked the painful and irreversible transition from the automated innocence of instinct to the anxiety of knowledge and free will. Ruled by "the sense of smell and its connection with the organ of taste, [and] the latter's acknowledged sympathy with the organs of digestion," Kant's primal couple follow their noses and stomachs through a mythically pre-rational Eden, as yet unsullied by the burden of choice. Against this backdrop of mechanistic bliss, the overcoming of instinct through the use of reason constitutes the first transgression:

> But reason soon began to stir and sought, by means of comparing foods with what some sense other than those to which the instinct was tied — the sense of sight, perhaps — presented to it as similar to those foods, so as to extend his knowledge...beyond the limits of instinct. If only this attempt had not contradicted nature it could, with luck, have turned out well enough, even though instinct did not advise it. However, it is characteristic of reason that it will with the aid of imagination cook up desires for things for which there is not only no natural urge, but even an urge to avoid...

Glimpsing a fruit that looks like one they have already eaten, Adam and Eve choose to taste it, even though it turns out to be "detrimental to man's nature, so that [their] natural instinct consequently resisted it." Visual comparison, in conjunction with analogical thinking, supplants the innate guidance of smell, and as a result Adam and Eve grow sick to their stomachs. The first

articulation of disgust, here understood as the instinctual outcome of the first denial of instinct, becomes the symbol of the naturalized Fall, a solitary point of contact between the conscious human history that comes after, and the sensory prehistory which came before.

The Fall ushers in a state of perpetual anxiety, distinguished as the cognitive counterpart to the the fleeting moment of purely corporeal revulsion which precedes and produces it. At once encumbered and liberated by his newly-minted autonomy, Kant writes, "man now proceeded with his eyes open (Gen. 3:7)," as the first bout of dyspepsia in the garden "must have been followed immediately by anxiety and unease as to how he should proceed":

> He stood as if at the edge of the abyss; for besides the particular objects of desire in which instinct had until now made him dependent, there opened up to him an infinitude of them, among which he could not choose, for he had no knowledge whatsoever to base choice on; and it was now equally impossible for him to turn back from his once tasted state of freedom to his former servitude (to the rule of instincts).

Where to go, what to eat, how to choose. The first couple quickly begins to long for their prelapsarian menu — a menu with no choices — but, despite their anxious yearning, there is no returning to the unthinking wisdom of instinct, which has in a single fell swoop been rendered vestigial by the initial erroneous application of reason. The first choice inaugurates the permanent impossibility of not choosing, even if the anxieties of autonomous life make regression to the "former servitude (to the rule of instincts)" seem desirable. In fact, Kant's conception of original sin depends on "man's completely credit[ing] to himself the guilt for all evil that arose from the first misuse of reason, for he is probably conscious that he would behave in precisely the same way were he in those same circumstances, and his first use of reason (even in the face of nature's advice) would have been to misuse it." To err becomes the defining feature of humanity, set against the receding horizon of an instinctual prehistory.

At every step of the way, where Darwin's voluntary vomiters depend on making explicit

the points of contact between stomach and mind, disgust and anxiety, instinct and reason, Kant's account of the beginning of human history enacts a forcible isolation between the very same terms. Smells had better cede ground to sights. Anxiety must succeed disgust. Reason, judgment and error, must be kept completely separate from unfailing instinct, and the past entirely isolated from the present — not merely because the past is obscure or unknown, but because it is unknowable, obscurity *per se*; to imagine the pre-rational past, Kant says, we would have to exceed the structural limits of our own minds. Even our inheritance of Adamic guilt must be entirely reducible to our own agency, since history only begins at the moment of the first transgressive choice, and, Kant reminds us, against Lamarck and Luther alike, "freely willed actions contain nothing hereditary." Above all else, nature must be entirely detached from culture, following "the transition from the raw state of a merely animal creature to humanity, from the harness of the instincts to the guidance of reason — in a word, from the guardianship of nature to the state of freedom." These separations in turn enable what Latour has called "modern temporality": "The asymmetry between nature and culture then becomes an asymmetry between past and future. The past was the confusion of things and men; the future is what will no longer confuse them."[80] The conception of time as a succession of irrevocable events, each obliterating the past — such as Kant's first case of disgust, which obliterates the rule of instinct — springs out of the underlying attempt to keep separate the natural and the man-made, the unthinking and the freely chosen.

It is not at all clear, however, that the affective and conceptual substrata Kant isolates can in fact stay separate. In Darwin's account, these registers are simply given as mixed — but even in Kant's densely allegorical Eden, where everything seems to refer neatly to something else, it proves difficult to keep the past from impinging on the present, anxiety from bleeding into

disgust, or instinct commingling with reason. For example, the instincts from which we are today cut off are, in the first place, simply the senses of smell and taste, which Kant claims were identical in their prelapsarian and modern forms: “However, it is not necessary to assume a special, but now lost, instinct for this purpose....One need not even assume that this sense [of smell] was more acute in the first pair than it is now....” On the one hand, Kant tells us that the instinctual past is foreclosed, unimaginable, relegated to an inaccessible prehistory. And on the other hand, he not only goes ahead and imagines it, but insists he is justified in doing so by projecting the present onto it in an entirely unaltered form. In order to reconnect with the past, Kant imagines that we are cut off from it; in order to cut us off from it, he imagines we are the same now as we were then. Envisioning an immense evolution, Kant declares that our senses, our emotions and our instincts do not evolve.

Yet not only do emotions evolve, but, unless one insists on imagining them in advance as fixed and unchanging throughout time, they are also quite difficult to categorize. Especially after considering Darwin’s very different story of disgust — and especially in light of its connection to the Victorian stomach — one wonders just how much water Kant’s isolation of anxiety as the affective term in the transition from instinct to reason can hold. All throughout the essay, anxiety is described in cognitive terms, while disgust is physiological. Anxiety responds negatively to unknown, diffuse possibilities — like the fate of mankind — while the sole disgust-reaction in the essay, by contrast, refers back to a concrete act with a concrete object — the consumption of the apple. Disgust is for the past, anxiety for the future; disgust is visceral and automatic, anxiety concerns choice. And yet, these two putatively distinct affective states overlap significantly: in nausea, in vomiting, in their generally avoidant behaviors.[81] The dual vision which allows Kant to see disgust as instinct itself, while simultaneously alleging it to be the consequence of

instinct's overcoming begins to grow blurry. Isn't Kant's anxiety simply a slightly brainy disgust? And doesn't the initial distaste give way far too quickly to anxiety to say where the one stops and the other begins? There are of course major qualitative differences between the two emotions, as well as between their somatic effects — anxiety elevates the heart rate, for example, whereas it is thought that disgust lowers it — but nevertheless it seems self-evident that anxiety and disgust share a powerful capacity to connect the brain and the belly in noteworthy ways that other emotional states do not. At precisely the moment he wants to quarantine judgment and agency from the unthinking body, Kant returns those faculties to the upset stomach.

Everywhere that Kant posits a separation of terms and concepts, Darwin blurs them. Disgust and anxiety, reason and instinct, noodle and stomach, learned and innate — each of these dyads collapses in Darwin's conception of disgust, to such an extent that his voluntary vomiters become incommensurable with Kant's allegory. Kant's speculation that "instinct...must alone have first guided the beginner" grates against Darwin's observation that "a little dose...of judgment or reason, often comes into play" in instinctive behavior; as does Kant's conception of error as a condition of rationality alongside Darwin's conviction that "instincts are not always perfect and are liable to mistakes." Of course, Darwin's conception of instinct is more robust and far more compelling than Kant's, and at any rate there is no shortage of reasons why it is unfair to pit Kant against Darwin on the subject of instinct or human biology, let alone evolution. Yet, even if Darwin's contribution to these fields can hardly be measured, it remains the case that his ideas about the inheritance of acquired characteristics have very little currency in a scientific tradition where his own theory of natural selection holds sway, and that his theory of the emotions is consequently subject to accusations of obscurantism. At the same time, as Menninghaus has made clear, it also remains true that in the history of writing about disgust, no thinker has exerted a more defining influence than Kant — not primarily in the short "Speculative Beginning of Human History," but in the comments

on aesthetic disgust in the *Critique of Judgment* which followed it by a few years, which have had a lasting afterlife in the German philosophical tradition, as well as its adjuncts in psychoanalytic thought. Darwin's disgust falls short of modern thought's natural scientific and cultural standards, but only because it consciously resists explanation by either pole in the nature/culture dialectic taken on its own, devoting most of its energies instead to demonstrating how fully synthesized the two are in spontaneous human expressions of disgust, and how futile it is to attempt to isolate the natural from the cultural, the visceral from the cognitive, and the reasoned from the instinctual in the evolution of our capacity to vomit.

IV. Everybody's a Critic

Darwin's most radical assertion about the origins of disgust is that the advent of human language as a primary form of social communication would gradually have rendered obsolete the ability to vomit at will: "We can see that as a man is able to communicate by language to his children and others, the knowledge of the kinds of food to be avoided, he would have little occasion to use the faculty of voluntary rejection; so that this power would tend to be lost through disuse" (237). Now specifying an interpersonal, social function in his conception of early disgust, Darwin implies a period of continuity between certain intentional physical behaviors, like vomiting, and certain forms of language — which in this case would best be described as a rather complex form of judgment along the lines of, "I wouldn't eat that if I were you." Proposing such an evolutionary overlap between man's physical, even visceral faculties and his presumedly higher linguistic powers was in keeping with Darwin's remarks on the development of human language elsewhere, *The Descent of Man* in particular. There, Darwin describes language in terms of its capacity to problematize heavy-handed distinctions between the innate and the acquired, since

while “it certainly is not a true instinct, as every language has to be learnt....it differs, however, from all ordinary arts, for man has an instinctive tendency to speak, as we see in the babble of our children.”[82] Language use, for Darwin, along with emotional expression and his definition of instinct, occupied a liminal, mediating position with regard to the nature-culture dialectic; like the intentionally rejected food they supplanted, words would not fit neatly on either side of the divide.

Between the views he made explicit in *The Descent of Man* and those implied throughout *Expression* a few years later, Darwin’s position on the development of language can be divided into a few closely related strands: first, that some features of language must have developed out of and supplanted certain forms of emotional expression, such as grunts and screams; second, that other features were derived from primitive forms of gestural and ostensive communication; third, that the vocal chords of early humans had been shaped and strengthened through the innate tendency to imitate sounds made by other animals and in nature; and fourth, driven by sexual selection, that “some early progenitor of man, probably used his voice largely, as does one of the gibbon-apes at the present day, in producing true musical cadences, that is in singing.”[83] Language, in Darwin’s schema, was a fully embodied and evolutionarily ancient form of communication — though it did not share in the Romantic conception of the primal and originary power of words, since the differences between speech and the forms of communication it supplanted could be represented as a slow and even gradation.

The intellectual milieu into which such unsettling statements on language entered was far from settled. As Foucault has shown at great length in *The Order of Things*, along with Cuvier’s comparative anatomy and Ricardo’s labor theory of value, the first half of the 19th century saw the emergence of modern philology and, with it, a tumultuous shift towards conceiving of

language as a fully objectified system of linguistic laws, rather than in terms of its representational capacity:

> If the word is able to figure in a discourse in which it means something, it will no longer be by virtue of some immediate discursivity that it is thought to possess in itself, and by right of birth, but because, in its very form, in the sounds that compose it, in the changes it undergoes in accordance with the grammatical function it is performing, and finally in the modifications to which it finds itself subject in the course of time, it obeys a certain number of strict laws which regulate, in a similar, way, all the other elements of the same language.[84]

Keeping pace with the leaps and bounds of European imperialism which had enabled its foundational comparison of the Indian and European language families, the new linguistic science had by and large taken hold in mid-19th century Europe as the dominant method for the the scholarly study of language.[85] Theories of the origins of language grounded in emotional expression or representational power, such as Rousseau's, gave way to a *Sprachwissenschaft*, epitomized by the work of Franz Bopp and the brothers Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, and concerned primarily with the historical analysis of roots and particles within the Indo-European language system, as well as the typological standardization of phonetics. Detached from its expressive or emotive function, language at once became more concrete, as a formal object of study, and yet also more ephemeral, cut off from its unsystematic, merely incidental occasions of actual use. As Foucault writes, it is due to these tectonic shifts in early and mid-19th century philological scholarship that "etymology will therefore cease to be an endless regress towards a primitive language entirely stocked with primal, natural cries; it becomes a definite, limited method of analysis."[86]

Darwin's remarks on linguistic origins clearly tacked hard towards the very same expressive theories which Foucault describes as on the wane. In particular, Darwin relied frequently on the writings of his cousin and brother-in-law, Hensleigh Wedgwood, an etymologist whose essay on "The Origin of Language" (1866) argued that the complexities of

human speech developed from more rudimentary forms of communication such as gesture, imitation and, above all, onomatopoeic exclamations and interjections.[87] Along with Wedgwood, Darwin supported his own views in *The Descent of Man* with references to the Reverend F.W. Farrar and, significantly, August Schleicher, a German philologist who had argued in his influential *Darwinism Tested by the Science of Language* (1863 – trans. 1869) that languages evolve like species. Invoking these three contemporaries, Darwin wrote in *Descent* that "I cannot doubt that language owes its origin to the imitation and modification, aided by signs and gestures, of various natural sounds, the voices of other animals, and man's own instinctive cries."[88] At precisely the intellectual historical moment Foucault designates as when "there is no longer any attempt to refer [language] back to the cries from which it originated," Darwin allied himself with those theories which, perhaps about to be eclipsed, nevertheless sought a naturalized origin to language in the sounds, gestures and expressions of the animal world.

The chief proponent in England of the new linguistic science was Max Müller, a German-born Sanskritist who became the first University Professor of Comparative Philology at Oxford, and whose work Darwin explicitly targeted in *Descent*, making sure to place the "the celebrated lectures of Prof. Max Müller on the other side" of the increasingly central language question. In the immensely popular *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1861), delivered almost a decade before *Descent*, Müller had already spoken out against what "I shall call the *Bow-wow theory* and the *Pooh-pooh theory*" — snide names for the imitative and interjectional linguistic theories subtending Darwin's own.[89] An especially complex figure, Müller has on the one hand been credited with introducing the new philology into England, while, on the other, he made use of its scientific rigor only in order to demonstrate the time-tested thesis that "the one great barrier between the brute and man is *Language*":

> Man speaks, and no brute has ever uttered a word. Language is our Rubicon, and no brute will dare to cross it. This is our matter of fact answer to those who speak of development, who think they discover the rudiments at least of all human faculties in apes, and who would fain keep open the possibility that man is only a more favored beast, the triumphant conqueror in the primeval struggle for life. Language is something more palpable than a fold of the brain, or an angle of the skull. It admits of no cavilling, and no process of natural selection will ever distill significant words out of the notes of birds or the cries of beasts.[90]

Thus, while Müller's scientific apparatus was quite modern, his underlying motivations harkened back at least two centuries; in fact, he goes on to quote from Locke's assertion in the *Essay* that the "perfect distinction betwixt Man and Brutes" lay in the specifically human capacity "to express their universal *Ideas* by signs" (a move which might have been partly motivated by the German-born Müller's desire to appease his audience by grounding the rather Teutonic pedigree of the *Sprachwissenschaft* in a reassuringly British tradition[91]). In Müller's hands, the very same passage in Locke which had opened the door to the further erosion of animal-human difference in Hume and, subsequently, Darwin, became a means of demonstrating their insurmountable distinction. Only now, Müller had specified Locke's universal ideas using the well-defined rules of the new philology, and its immutable linguistic particles: "These roots stand like barriers between the chaos and the kosmos of human speech."[92]

Language persisted as a significant battleground in Victorian debates over the definition of the human, and Darwin's take on linguistic matters reflected all the idiosyncratic force which characterized his larger views about human evolution. This meant that while Darwin explicitly opposed Müller's reputedly scientific linguistic exceptionalism and its religious implications, he also felt the need to distinguish his position from that of some of his allies, such as Schleicher, who argued that language had developed polygenetically, after racial and geographical dispersion, and so held that allegedly less sophisticated races could be identified by their apparently less sophisticated languages. As Stephen G. Alter has argued, despite the undeniable influence that polygenist thinkers such as Schleicher and Ernst Haeckel had on Darwin's late work, he could

not reconcile their timeline with his own conviction that language must have arisen long before racial characteristics had differentiated and distinct social groups had begun to settle in different parts of the world.[93] Such an early start was necessary to his fundamental belief that the capacity for language and higher brain functioning had coevolved, since "the mental powers in some progenitor of man must have been more highly developed than in any existing ape, before even the most imperfect form of speech could have could have come into use."[94] In philology as in other disciplines, Darwin envisioned the history of human behavior as having begun far earlier than most of his contemporaries were prepared to entertain. The easy opposition to Müller's essentialist claims was therefore matched by a subtler distancing from polygenetic racialist accounts, the latter of which saw in the histories of particular languages proof of European cultural ascendancy. To satisfy his underlying thesis that language and mind were coeval and extremely primitive, Darwin had to conceive of language as a necessary and constitutive feature of all human behavior, yet without thereby designating it as the essential and originary element of the human *per* se, detached from all other kinds of activity.[95]

Weaving gesture, sound, and imitative learning into his speculations on vomiting, Darwin's notion that voluntary food rejection was rendered obsolete by verbal communication is in keeping with his more general remarks on the origins of language. In a limited sense, then, Darwin designates the prototypical expression of disgust as one of many origins of verbal communication. Although no one has taken Darwin up on his theory of voluntary vomiting, his emphasis on gesture as a primitive form of intentional communication has resurfaced in research into the evolutionary origins of human communicative behavior, where the complex and intentional gestures of the Great Apes are thought to present the most compelling precursor to human intentional speech. Yet this turn in linguistic psychology and evolutionary biology has

taken time to develop, at least in part because of the pervasive intellectual and cultural pressure over the last century and a half to account for the innateness of the human aptitude for language within a framework, like the one Foucault describes, which has prioritized internal structures and syntax, and not the acquisition of behavioral capacities, like intentionality. At the forefront of this recent research into primate intentional communication, Michael Tomasello has observed the extent to which his own research has had to "turn the Chomskian proposal on its head, as the most fundamental aspects of human communication are seen as biological adaptations for cooperation and social interaction in general, whereas the more purely linguistic, including grammatical, dimensions of language are culturally constructed and passed along by individual linguistic communities."[96] In significant ways, Darwin's views on the early intersections of gesture, intentional behaviors, expression and language are the forbears to research like Tomasello's. Early speech may have arisen out of primitive cries, but those cries were not the expressions of authentic primeval instincts — on the contrary, the intentionality we ascribe to language is coeval in this case with the intentionality of primitive vomiting and other non-reflexive prototypical forms of expression.

At the nexus between the linguistic and the emetic, Darwin once again refers us to the body's inherent porosity, and the unavoidable experience of its transgression. Whatever exits the mouth, whether it is regurgitated food or words, is recognized as social communication. This model of communication, moreover, requires that we reorient the fundamental rhetorical situation implied by disgust-reactions so that it accounts for the fact that the value to be found in our disgust will not be located in the dyadic relation between subject and object, but in a more diffuse range of communal sociality. Especially if we entertain Darwin's thesis of the early intentionality of food rejection, the rhetorical situation of disgust necessarily implies at least

three parties: an eliciting disgust object, a gagging subject, and a person or group to whom this reaction is significant. If this seems an obvious feature of most emotional expressions, it has nevertheless not been widely accepted; indeed, the most recent philosophical literature on disgust recognizes it at most as presupposing an unwieldy dyadic relationship, which tends, almost invariably, to dissolve into convoluted, even solipsistic subject-only accounts: "So the intention of disgust is reflexive in a way," the philosopher Colin McGinn has recently argued: "In disgust, consciousness seeks to avoid a state of itself — namely, perception of the eliciting stimulus."[97] Unlike Darwin's disgust without objects, this would be a disgust without a world. Such involutions evaporate, however, when a study takes, as its initial premise, the idea that, like language, the disgust a person articulates about a particular object is indissoluble from its actual relations between persons and things.

Darwin thus places a strong value on the socially communicative function that the transgression of the body's boundaries can play, initially though voluntary food rejection, and then through speech. And this function is best understood as a form of critical judgment, by which one person can intentionally transmit information about an object to a larger community of people: for Darwin, the origins of critical judgment pass through the mouth, as vomit. To support this hypothesis, Darwin refers his readers in a footnote to Wedgwood, the only of the philologists mentioned in *Descent* to be cited in *Expression* as well. This is not too surprising, though, since Wedgwood's essay on the onomatopoeic roots of language, not dissimilar to *Expression* in some respects, consists of sections devoted to particular affective states and the interjections which constitute their expression, including a lengthy one specifically treating disgust and enjoyment. There, in a subsection entitled "Pooh!," Wedgwood precedes Darwin in arguing that "the attitude of dislike and rejection is typified by signs of spitting out an unsavoury

morsel," the foremost of which is, across a wide variety of cultures, the bilabial stop: "The sound of spitting is represented indifferently with an initial *p,* as in Maori *puhwa*, to spit out; Lat. Spuere, to spit; *respuere* (to spit back), to reject with disdain; *despuere*, to reject with disgust or disdain...."[98] According to Wedgwood's onomatopoeic theory, then, the language of dislike — which is to say, the language of negative judgments — arose from the sounds associated with the imitation of spitting — with the letter *p*. It is easy to see why Darwin would have been attracted to this line of thinking. On the one hand, it grounds an important language of evaluation in the actual contours of the human body, which thereby becomes a means of communication itself; and on the other hand, it avoids the fallacious attribution of a necessary meaning to a behavior simply because it is rooted in the body. Indeed, in the case of Darwin's disgust, the openings, closings and transgression of the body at its most vulnerable points become socially significant as the sources of intentional judgments, and not gut reactions.

This chapter has explored Darwin's brief but dense remarks on the subject of disgust in light of their specific relationship to various pockets of Victorian intellectual and cultural history, as well as in their connection to larger-scale epochal currents in modern thought captured by the theoretical *topos* of disgust. In each of the four sections, Darwin's work exhibits a tendency to veer away from dualistic conceptions of the human, and towards an increasingly integrated, synthetic alternative to the nature-culture dialectic which has animated so much of theoretical, scientific and even aesthetic practice in the modern period, and certainly in Darwin's own time. Tellingly, each of the local ways in which Darwin sought to avoid participating in the theoretical isolation of the natural from the man-made or the animal from the human, appears as a token of just how obsolete Darwin's thought is, when viewed from the broader perspective of modern

intellectual history. Yet careful examination of Darwin's work in context consistently reveals its currency, and its unsettling critical force persists even today. In the first section, then, Darwin's methodological exclusion of the objects of disgust from his inquiry led to two distinct ends: on the more local level, the absence of any particular objects led to Darwin's emphasis on thought-things as the elicitors of disgust, and of his designation of the ambivalent experience of the body's openness as the characteristic quality of the emotion. On the larger level, however, the removal of the phenomenological paradigm which dominates studies of disgust has led recent critics to question the accuracy of Darwin's account, consigning it to a reductive 'Victorian' moment when so-called science was saturated with imperial cultural presumption.

The same double-vision, in which innovation from one angle appears as obsolescence from another, characterizes the second section, on the Victorian stomach, and the third, on instinct. The former shows how the holistic conception of the stomach's relationship to the mind underwriting Darwin's theory differed substantially from the fantasies of instinctivity and agency which motivated reactionary Victorian gastric quackery and the new techno-rational Victorian physiology alike; while the latter focuses on Darwin's supposition of voluntary vomiting, understood as a lost primordial will which could serve as a rejoinder to the oppositional logic of the instinct-reason deadlock. Unlike nearly any other expression of disgust, Darwin's vomit is irreducible to pure instinctivity — it refuses to serve as the hinge between disembodied minds and unthinking bodies, and so poses an immense conceptual threat to nearly all modern stories of human origins and their distinctions between man and animal — including, to a degree, the legacy of Darwin's own story of natural selection. The final section on language represents the reach of Darwin's disgust into the domain of modern linguistic science where, similar to Darwin's challenge to modern physiology, his qualified allegiance to an already outmoded

etymological theory provided a powerful critical relevance as well as the stamp of the irretrievable past.

By providing a detailed account of the intellectual and cultural history, theoretical implications, and even biographical salience of Darwin's statements on vomiting, this chapter has implied a larger and more diffuse picture of Victorian culture, as refracted through its only substantive theory of disgust. Latour once again provides a useful theoretical framework for dealing with the specific changes in Victorian physiology, biology and linguistics touched upon here, through his designation of modernity as comprised by two distinct phases: first, when "the obscurity of the olden days, which illegitimately blended together social needs and natural reality...gave way to a luminous dawn that cleanly separated material causality from human fantasy"; and second, when, in the 19th century, "precise knowledge of society made it possible to criticize not only the biases of ordinary obscurantism but also the new biases of the natural sciences":

> Sorting out the kernels of science from the chaff of ideology became the task for generations of well-meaning modernizers. In the hybrids of the first Enlightenment thinkers, the second group too often saw an unacceptable blend that needed to be purified by carefully separating the part that belonged to things themselves and the part that could be attributed to the functioning of the economy, the unconscious, language, or symbols. All the ideas of yesteryear — including those of certain pseudo-sciences — became inept or approximate.[99]

One need look no further than the Victorian stomach in order to realize Latour's vision of the 19th century as the long moment of modernity's nearly perfected separation of the natural from the social or cultural. Of course, Latour's ultimate thesis is that such a separation is functionally impossible, and that the work of purification is never more than one particular method for increasing the contacts between allegedly isolated categories; the larger the wedge 19th century culture drove between nature and culture, Latour argues, the more it connected them in convoluted hybrid forms, like Starlings dogs, in whose natural physiological processes it was

easy to see the violent marks of scientific culture; or like Müller's *Sprachwissenschaft*, which despite its objectivist tendencies, was declared even in his own obituary "to have regarded words as endowed with some mysterious potency"[100]; or the fall from Kant's queasy Eden, where reason and instinct met in the anxious stomach. These reunions of the markedly social with the allegedly natural are brought about by virtue of their initial purification.

We need to give an additional turn of the screw to Latour's thesis that we have never been modern, since it is clear that a well-defined and purposive hybridism animates Darwin's theory of disgust. With each of the discourses it engages, Darwin's vomit positions itself as a blow to the work of purification. It can neither be explained through affiliation with either pole in the nature-culture dialectic, nor explained away through accusations of obscurantism: we are left with a disgust neither mystified nor techno-rational, neither instinctive nor willed, neither natural nor cultural; finally, we are left with a language of disgust which is neither disembodied nor originary, but still primeval and corporeal, and an anxious nausea that defies easy resolution into either noodle or stomach. If the afterlife of the actual statement on disgust has been a series of misreadings and misapprehensions — that is, if Darwin's disgust has today come to look "inept or approximate" due to the polarizing processes which have guided each of its discursive bases into the 20th and 21st centuries — then that only underscores the need for closer examination of the critical strains in 19th century culture which enabled Darwin's study, along with other mixed forms in the period, to resist the lures of purification at the time. Over and over again, conceptions of disgust, from Kant to the present day, have played a significant role in the very conceptual processes of isolation which have left Darwin's vomit disfigured and partially unrecognizable from our vantage point. In pursuit of a prelapsarian past free of choice, and a rational future free from error, the hermeneutics of disgust keeps making the same mistakes, so

that the history of the emotion can appear static — as though disgust, and not history, were unalterable: "As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly."[101]

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[1]Darwin Correspondence Database, http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-411 accessed on Thu May 03 2012.
[2]Ralph Colp. *Darwin's Illness*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008.
[3]Reprinted in Colp, 187 – 257.
[4]William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 180.
[5] Kass, "The Wisdom of Repugnance," 20.
[6]Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 102.
[7]Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 7.
[8]Charles Darwin. *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. New York: Penguin, 2009: 236-7.
I have added the enumeration for the purposes of clarity. References to this work are parenthetical in this chapter.
[9] Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 153.
[10]Kolnai, *On Disgust*, 38, 78. Only recently translated into English by philosophers Carolyn Korsmeyer (*Savoring Disgust*, 2011) and Barry Smith, Kolnai's essay was the first philosophical text devoted explicitly and exclusively to the study of disgust in the 20th century.
[11]Ngai, 335.
[12]Take for a paradigmatic example William Ian Miller's bold declaration that "I need not spell out just how contaminating, how disgusting, the anus is. It is the essence of lowness, of untouchability, and so it must be hemmed in with prohibitions." To be sure, Miller writes from an avowedly demystified vantage point: he cites Freud, Bourdieu and Bersani, and clearly does not actually believe that the anus deserves this kind of treatment because of any inherent qualities. We might in this connection turn to Beckett's *Molloy* for a counterexample to this kind of immanence: "We underestimate this little hole, it seems to me, we call it the arsehole and affect to despite it. But is it not rather the true portal of our being and the celebrated mouth no more than the kitchen-door." It is never clear which end is up.
[13]http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/darwins-queries-on-expression
[14]Prodger, 171.
[15] Rozin, "A Perspective on Disgust," 23 – 41.
[16]William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 3.
[17]Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 774.
[18] Gross, "Defending the Humanities With Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*," 34 – 59.
[19]Raymond Williams. *Marxism and Literature*, 133-4.
[20]See editor's footnote to Darwin, *Expression*, 237.
[21] Kelly, *Yuck!*, 48. While Kelly's thesis has informed my reading of Darwin, he remains vague about the extent to which he attributes something akin to his entanglement thesis to Darwin's position, which seems clearly to anticipate it.
[22]Latour, 54.
[23] Bourdieu, 488.
[24] Letter to Hooker, 20 February 1864. Darwin Correspondence Database.
[25]Ian Miller, *A Modern History of the Stomach*: *Gastric Illness, Medicine and British Society, 1800-1950*.
[26]Miller, *Stomach*, 22.
[27]Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 225.
[28]Dickens. *A Christmas Carol*, 21.
[29] Letter to Hooker, 29 May 1854. Darwin Correspondence Database,
[30]Miller, *Stomach*, 20.
[31]See: Beaumont, *Experiments and Observations on the Gastric Juice the Physiology of Digestion.*
[32]Miller, *Stomach*, 8.
[33]Dickens, *Bleak House*, 256.
[34] Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 290.
[35]Gissing, *The Whirlpool*.
[36]Miller, *Stomach*, 57-79. See also: Miller. "Necessary Torture," 333-372.
[37]Miller, 60-1.

[38]See for example: *British Medical Journal* 330, 25 June 2005: 1466.
[39]Miller, 64.
[40]Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 31.
[41]See: Daniel Cottom. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Digestion," in *Cannibals and Philosophers.* Jessica Riskin. "The Defecating Duck, or, The Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life."
[42]Riskin, 601.
[43]Robert Browning, "Tray."
[44]Mayer, 399 – 417.
[45]Leslie Stephen. "Thoughts of an Outsider: The Ethics of Vivisection." *Cornhill Magazine* 33 (1876): 468–78. Quoted in Mayer, 404-5.
[46]Miller, *Stomach*, 67.
[47]Geddes, "Culpable Complicity," 79 – 94.
[48]Quote in Miller, 25.
[49]Miller, 36-7.
[50]Parsons, *Anti-Bacchus*, 29.
[51] Brunton, *On Disorders of Digestion*, 62-4.
[52]See as well: "Prehuman Species Preferred Forest Foods, Fossil Teeth Suggest." *New York Times*, June 27 2012.
[53]Emily Dickinson. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*.
[54]See: Adorno, "Juliette, or Enlightenment and Morality," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 70-1.
[55]Colp, 53.
[56]Letter to Hooker, 5 or 12 November 1845. Darwin Correspondence Database, http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-924 accessed on Fri Jun 01 2012
[57] Colp, 41-61.
[58]Letter to Susan Darwin, 19 March 1849. Darwin Correspondence Database, http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-924 accessed on Fri Jun 01 2012
[59]Letter to Hooker, 9 February 1865. Darwin Correspondence Database, http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-924 accessed on Fri Jun 01 2012
[60] Mennighaus, 184-5.
[61]Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*.
[62]See: *Notebook N*: "Instincts are unerring: no." Printed in: Paul Barrett, ed. *Metaphysics, Materialism and the Evolution of Mind: Early Writings of Charles Darwin*, 85.
[63]Darwin, *Origin*, 155.
[64] Locke, 94 – 95. (Book II, Section XI)
[65]Hume, *Treatise*, 176.
[66]Hume, 179.
[67]See: Richards, *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind*, 105 – 110.
[68]Richards. "Instinct and Intelligence in British Natural Theology," 209.
[69]Quoted in Richards, "Instinct," 216.
[70]Richards, *Darwin and the Emergence*, 93.
[71]Barret, *M Notebook*, 14.
[72]Richards, *Darwin and the Emergence*, 95.
[73]For Richards's full treatment of the subject see especially the second chapter on "Behavior and Mind in Evolution: Charles Darwin's Early Theories of Instinct, Reason, and Morality": 71 – 126.
[74]Darwin, *Origin*, 156.
[75]Darwin, *Descent*, 38.
[76]Richards, *Darwin and the Emergence*, 231.
[77]For an exchange on this topic see:
Azim F. Shariff and Jessica L. Tracy. "What Are Emotion Expressions For?" *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20 (6), 2011: 395 – 299.
Lisa Feldman Barrett. "Was Darwin Wrong About Emotional Expressions?" *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20 (6), 2011: 400 – 406.
Azim F. Shariff and Jessica L. Tracy. "Emotion Expressions: On Signals, Symbols, and Spandrels—A Response to Barrett (2011)" *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20 (6), 2011: 407-408.
[78]Freud, "Fräulein Elisabieth von R." In *Studies on Hysteria*, 181: "What could be more probable than that the figure

of speech ‘swallowing something’, which we use in talking of an insult to which no rejoinder has been made, did in fact originate from the innervatory sensations which arise in the pharynx when we refrain from speaking and prevent ourselves from reacting to the insult? All these sensations and innervations belong to the field of ‘The Expression of the Emotions’, which, as Darwin [1872] has taught us, consists of actions which originally had a meaning and served a purpose. These may ow for the most part have become so much weakened that the expression of them in words seems to us only to be a figurative picture of them, whereas in all probability the description was once meant literally; and hysteria is right in restoring the original meaning of the words in depicting its unusually strong innervations.”

For a longer discussion of the connection between Darwin’s *Expression* and the Freudian symptom, see: Rowlinson, “Foreign Bodies,” 535-559.

[79]Kant, “Speculative Beginning of Human History,” In *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, 49-60.

[80]Latour, 71.

[81]For recent studies on the overlap and distinction between anxiety and disgust, see:
“Anxiety and Disgust: Evidence for a Unidirectional Relationship.” *Cognition and Emotion* 19(5), 2005: 729-50.
“Cardiovascular Indicators of Disgust.” *International Journal of Psychophysiology* 68(3), 2008: 201-8.

[82]Darwin, *Descent*, 55.

[83]Darwin, *Descent*, 56.

[84]Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 280.

[85]Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 25.

[86]Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 288.

[87]Hensleigh Wedgwood. “On the Origin of Language.” In *A Dictionary of English Etymology*.

[88]Darwin, *Descent*, 56

[89]Max Müller. *Lectures on the Science of Language*, 358.

[90]Müller, 354.

[91]Linda Dowling, “Victorian Oxford and the Science of Language.”

[92]Max Müller. “Lectures on Mr. Darwin’s Philosophy of Language,” 659 – 678.

[93]See: Stephen G. Alter. “Darwin and the Linguists,” 573 – 584.
To complicate Alter’s view, see: Richards, “The Linguistic Creation of Man,” 22-48.

[94]Darwin, *Descent*, 57.

[95]See Raymond Williams’s distinction in the section on “Language” in *Marxism and Literature*: “It is precisely the sense of language as an *indissoluble* element of human self-creation that gives any acceptable meaning to its description as ‘constitutive.’ To make it *precede* all other connected activities is to claim something quite different.” (29)

[96]Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, 10-12.

[97] McGinn, 11.

[98]Wedgwood, xlv.

[99]Latour, 35-6.

[100]From E.W. Hopkins, “Max Muller.” *Nation*, 1 November 1900: 343-4. Quoted in Dowling, 175.

[101]Proverbs 26.11. *King James Bible.*

Chapter III
The Gross, the Bad and the Grubby:
George Gissing and the Ideology of Revulsion

> "Even if a tree is cut down or blown down, a worse one, if any, is planted in its stead, and, in short, our civilization is passing like a blight, daily growing heavier and more poisonous, over the whole face of the country, so that every change is sure to be a change for the worse in its outward aspect. So then it comes to this, that not only are the minds of great artists narrowed and their sympathies frozen by their isolation...but the very food on which both the greater and the lesser art subsists is being destroyed; the well of art is poisoned at its spring."
>
> —William Morris, "Art Under Plutocracy"

> "For the way to perfection is through a series of disgusts."
>
> —Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*

For a study of disgust, George Gissing is a major author; a point which is not unrelated to his status, in the wider world of literary history, as a relatively minor one. Gissing himself lived a certain kind of double life among high highs and low lows. He aced all his exams, read fluently in Greek and Latin, and, like his contemporary Wilde, was more than well versed in the classics; at the same time, one senses in this man of lofty tastes' recipe for literary production an anguished familiarity with less noble realities: "I get tinned meat, and mess it up with potatoes which I cannot trouble to peel. The flavour is rather fishy, but it satisfies the appetite, and a dinner of this kind only costs a little more than sixpence."[1] Beyond his own appetites, Gissing had a visceral interest in the repulsive conditions of the London poor which was unsurpassed in

19th century British literature — and they were conditions which he knew well, both from his own experiences of poverty, months of imprisonment, venereal disease and hunger, not to mention two untenable marriages (the first to Nell Harrison, who was an alcoholic and a prostitute), expulsion from college, exile to America, and at least one suicide attempt; as well as from a distanced intellectual perspective, formed in his early twenties while reading Schopenhauer, Nietzsche ("long before he was popularly known," he wrote) and Auguste Comte, across the reading room from Marx at the British Library.[2] At the same time, however, his own articulation of disgust for those conditions, and for the people who live among them, is equally singular, and the resultant form this pronounced tension took in his work marks an important development in the aesthetics of the social or political novel.

Picking up on what had been a submerged problematic in authors like Dickens, Brontë, and Gaskell, Gissing was the first British novelist to write books *about* the fact that the middle-class desire for social upheaval is very often adjacent to, if not concurrent with a strong repulsion for the social body; in Gissing's claustrophilic vision, these two poles may have been concurrent to a hyperbolic, even a monomaniacal degree. Irving Howe called him the "poet of fatigue," since his characters are constantly running on fumes (as opposed to the normative desire that the novel as a form apparently demands of them), but the phrase hardly does justice to what one notes as an exhilaration in Gissing's writing that arises directly from his headlong confrontation with the bearing of disgust and social criticism on literary representation.[3] Indeed, his novels are fueled by a contemptuous revulsion directed in equal measures towards the very characters he has invented, and the oppressive worlds he has invented for them to inhabit (however much they might remind us of our own).

Gissing's novels are fully saturated with this revulsion — the term itself is one of the

most common in Gissing's descriptive vocabulary, and can usually be found no more than three or four pages into a given book — but, in order to begin to make sense of his work, the different registers on which it transpires need to be distinguished. First, on the most basic level, Gissing saw disgust as a dramatic device, a motive force for interactions between characters that could tease out differences in social standing; a measure according to which differing individual thresholds for disgust are taken to be an index of objective class differences: what happens, for example, when a man content live in a grimy household marries a woman content only to live at worst in a greasy one? Yet while questions such as these are common enough in the realist and the naturalist novel (very often along just these gendered lines), Gissing's novels up the ante by subjecting the dramatic register to a critical revulsion on a metanarrative level; that is, Gissing's narrators articulate an unabashed revulsion for the worlds that they are narrating — a socially critical feature of his texts which Gissing himself saw as a conscious development of and break with Dickensian sympathy and satire alike, and which produces an unrestrained, different order of boundary confusion from what we have seen in previous chapters.[4] Moving upwards from the diegesis to a third, aesthetic register, Gissing saw his work as actively engaging with the dialectic in contemporary and received theory between the beautiful and the disgusting; as presenting, in addition to a complex socially critical internal vision of late Victorian London, a blow against the conventional demands for beautiful art, which he saw as inextricably bound up with the society his novels took it upon themselves to represent, even as they entered into it as literary commodities. And finally, on a metacritical level — in the novels' receptions and afterlives — one notes the particular ways acts of revolted valuation on the part of the critics have contributed to Gissing's almost total disappearance in the 20th century, despite a critical heritage that in volume, despite no small accumulation of dust, is nothing to sneeze at.

The aim of this chapter is to make sense of these various registers in which Gissing engages with disgust, and to establish "the revolting" not merely as a descriptive trope common to his work, but rather as the keystone in a coherent, or at least identifiable, aesthetic project that unfolds and matures over the course of his career. My argument will chart the ways in which Gissing's explicit designation of revulsion as a source of political, psychological and aesthetic interest winds up producing the most detailed portrait in the literature of the period of how the typical slippage between an image-of-the-disgusting and a disgusting-image takes place. Reading Gissing, then, has a double significance for this project. First, in their own right, Gissing's novels represent an incredibly sustained and unique meditation on the relationships between political and aesthetic disgust, between disgust and beauty, and between desire and taste, as represented and contained *within* a work of literature. While the other authors I discuss in this dissertation may present strategies for mitigating or displacing the disgusting, Gissing alone can be said to confront it head on, or to be drawn ineluctably towards it, and in any case to crash into it in terms that are extraordinarily similar to the ones with which I am working. Second of all, and stemming from the first point of interest, the fate of the novels, as works, as books — only three out of over two dozen of which remain in print today — helps to illuminate, in a rather dazzlingly Bourdieu-ian way, the actual material consequences which critical judgments of taste and distaste have on the reception and interpretation of literature.

I.

The Nether World presents the clearest and most explicit vantage point from which to examine the narrative role revulsion plays throughout Gissing's work. Throughout the novel, which plots the course of a failed philanthropic project in the slums of Clerkenwell, the terms "revolt," "revulsion," and a ubiquitously diagnosed "impulse to revolt" serve as the hinge between

individually and socioeconomically determined manners of representing a handful of characters, as they endure often excessively brutal hardships.[5] Far more than anything else, various iterations of this "impulse to revolt" are the most prevalent affective motivations available to the characters of the novel — and prevalent hardly does it justice; it is as though a grotesque pandemic of sneering revolt threatened to erupt over all of Gissing's Britain. The worst case, Clara Hewett "suffers" from it as though her revulsion itself were a sort of social disease, "cries of frenzied revolt, wordless curses" wrung from her in situations when ordinary "tears were trivial," when "she felt herself an outcast even among these wretched toilers whose swarming aroused her disgust," "with every drop of her heart's blood crying its source from that red fountain of revolt whereon never yet did the upper daylight gleam" (274-5)[6]; and it turns out to be hereditary, too, as John Hewett suffers from the same condition: "He was Clara's father, and the same impulse of furious revolt which had driven the girl to recklessness now inflamed him with the rage of despair" (119). And even though we are told not to "imagine that any impulse of that nature actuated his son," Bob, (since "Clara alone had inherited her father's instinct of revolt"), the company he keeps is so repugnant their conversation is pointedly and uncharacteristically excluded from the text for being "merely revolting" (218). However, this is not just a Hewett family affliction, and even the seemingly unflinching Sidney Kirkwood — who does, to be fair, marry into the Hewett clan — befriends John based on their mutual "pleasure in joining the side of revolt for revolt's sake" (54), and manages by the end of the novel to write Jane Snowdon a letter rescinding his affections, which "proved how profoundly his instincts were revolted by the difficulties and the ambiguity of his position" and which leads him "to seem to himself to be in a degree contaminated" by how "far he had got in his revolt against circumstances" (255-6). Minor characters, too, are afflicted, like the scheming Scawthorne, "who

formerly [had] revolted because he could not indulge his senses to their full," though he shows promise of recovery (270); and if we were content to quarantine those possessed with the specific "impulse to revolt" alongside those suffering from related conditions, we would have to include the "four in every six [Londoners who] have visages so deformed by ill-health that they excite disgust" among one another, not to mention the author whose bile rises it seems at the thought of each and any of his creations. At the end of the day, only Jane Snowdon, "incapable of revolting against the tyranny of circumstances," appears to be off the hook, and it is unclear how long she can hold out (312).

The double sense of revolt at work in each of these excerpted passages reveals a much fuller and more complex instability than at first appears. "Revolt" acts as the fulcrum between objective and subjective modes of understanding the individual. One's disgust makes it unclear whether one is determined from within or without, and in this sense, disgust takes on an ideological character in *The Nether World*, not dissimilar to Marx's early formulation of ideology as the "phantoms formed in the human brain."[7] It is just this fluctuation between, as Marx put it, "individuals...as they may appear in their own or other people's imaginations" and "people as they *actually* are, i.e., as they act, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will," which Gissing is intent on representing. From the former, subjective perspective, Gissing details a particular negative affective response — "cries of frenzied revolt, wordless curses," in excess of ordinary frustration, revolt as revulsion. At the same time, the affective revolt is invariably a repudiation of an objective socioeconomic condition beyond individual control — a "revolt against circumstances," or revolt as a negative political response, an uprising. Taking both senses together, the "impulse to revolt" describes an individual affective reaction to a deterministic class situation, and so

dramatizes a tension intrinsic to a conception of human behavior which constantly oscillates between subjective and objective perspectives. Gissing's characters are neither wholly individuals nor entirely objectively determined, and one can feel just how much of his energies were devoted to developing a literary strategy for depicting this indeterminacy on an almost myopic scale, as his language often toggles back and forth between these two registers in a single passage, sentence, or even a single word.

Clara Hewett embodies the full range of revulsion in the novel, in the swing between a negative interior space ("that red fountain of revolt whereon never yet did the upper daylight gleam") and a rejected external emblem of objective circumstances ("she felt herself an outcast even among the wretched toilers whose swarming aroused her disgust"; "like a creature that is beset by unrelenting forces"; "something independent of her will seemed to direct her in speech and act" (86-7). Trapped in a family situation that, due to the intensity of her emotions, her ambition, and the quickness of her intellect, she feels to be beneath her station, Clara sees the only viable outlet for her ambitions in the potential fame promised by the theater. She runs off and gives it a shot and, just as she is poised to achieve a modicum of success, a jealous colleague splashes vitriol on her face, ruining her chances; then she returns home and marries Sidney Kirkwood, whom years earlier she had spurned, but whom she manages to convince to accept her in spite of, or perhaps due to her disfigurement. Clara's trajectory, one gets the sense, is not particularly original. Frederic Jameson detects in Clara's character an echo of Eugène Sue's *Mystères de Paris*, but the stronger allusion is surely to the episode in *Mary Barton* when a labor organizer splashes vitriol on a scab worker's face.[8] The differences, however, merit a closer look. In Gaskell's novel, the violence is apparently motivated by a generalized class resentment — one man's refusal to get on board with the general strike is felt to threaten the opportunities for an

entire class to advance, and the novel tracks that anxious communal "state of feeling" (a phrase of Gaskell's which Gissing recycles at least twice in *The Nether World*); whereas in Clara's case, the violent class conflict is played out in a smaller-scale drama of individual resentment and envy, the narrative then pursuing Clara as she nurses her sense of personal injury. Raymond Williams, however, has suggested that the uncommon historical precedent for the episode in *Mary Barton* belies, more than anything else, Gaskell's own "*fear of violence* which was widespread among the upper and middle classes at the time"; vitriol being more regular in Victorian bourgeois invective than in working class warfare.[9] In Gissing, forty years down the line, that middle-class fear of uprising has dissipated, leaving behind only a residue of contemptuous finger-pointing, mingled with a disillusioned conviction that class violence will more frequently be intra-class violence.

Clara's problem, then, as Gissing describes it, is not so much one of denied opportunities for social advancement and personal expression, but rather that she has been condemned to a perpetual recognition of her own thwarted situation. The suggestion is that it would have been less miserable, less intolerable for Clara to have been born without the ambition and drive that leads her to lock antlers so violently with her class-consciousness. Not that one ought to stay in one's own class, as Frederic Jameson has argued about the moral imperatives of Gissing's work, but simply that Clara's emotional state would be quite different if she wanted to do so.[10] The imperatives to stay put in or to rise out of one's class in Gissing are almost always undercut by the relatively static intensity of individual misery — the whole point is that they are fire and frying pan alternatives; the later works confirm Gissing's equally potent distaste for the lower middle class to which Clara aspires. And the intensity of Gissing's own negative interest in this kind of suffering leaves little room for the depiction of human variety, let alone utopian or

revolutionary speculation; indeed, in the years leading up to *The Nether World*, Gissing had abandoned the circle of Positivists in London (who had helped launch his career) for being, essentially, too positive about the future — a break he defended in his unpublished "The Hope of Pessimism," an essay we shall turn to later on in this chapter.[11]

It is a very bleak scenario. One is revolted by one's inability to revolt, and the consequences generally entail further revolt, self-reviling. Poverty, the novels incessantly suggest, is a degradation that causes people to degrade one another; it has a chicken-and-egg structure. And the possibilities for social change even on the individual level, for revolt, are suffocated by a disgust which prohibits one from fully grasping the terms of one's agency. But, perhaps counter-intuitively, this signals more than anything else Gissing's reluctance to abandon individual affective response as the site of literary representation. In fact, there is no site of greater interest — even if it is an increasingly negative and pejorative interest. Even as Gissing's novels go on to absorb new strains of unsettling objective knowledge (evolution in *Born in Exile*, the certainties of advertizing in *In the Year of Jubilee*, the automatic needs of the literary marketplace in *New Grub Street*), again and again, the emphasis in his work falls on characters' inward emotional states, like Clara's thwarted impulse to revolt — a fact which requires us to examine the critical relationship between Gissing's narrators and the narrated worlds they despise.

II.

Sometimes we are unsure whether Gissing's narrators are critical of the people who live in the nether world, or critical of objective forces which have produced it; but at any rate we are sure the narration is critical, and contemptuously so. We ought, however, to distinguish this strain in Gissing's narrations from the socially critical narrators that preceded them. In general, moments of critique in a novel, satirical or sociological, are moments when a novel's contents seem most

clearly to refer outwards to the world the novel inhabits as an object — if only to reject that world. The stronger the tonal outrage, the more we may be convinced of a kind of direct correspondence between the world of the novel and the world around it; convinced, even, that the whole of our world is somehow contained within the caustic passage we are reading; miniaturization being one of the great privileges of criticism. Thus we get short, scathing chapters in Dickens such as "Concerning the Whole Science of Government," expounding on the Circumlocution Office; or, a bit later in *Little Dorrit*, "Mr. Merdle's Complaint," in which the word "Society," always capitalized, is deployed like a hand grenade some thirty times in just a few pages. In each of these chapters, the outside world, all of it, in its most abstract, attenuated form — that of a totality — is shrunken down and laid into the grain of the prose, only to be disparaged and, with any luck, expelled. The text is swapped or pawned off for the world, on the strength of an attachment proclaimed only by the text itself, by referring — the more furiously, the better — to its own constituent parts, parts which it then attempts to excise (which is an excise in futility). One consequence of the strength of this putative correspondence has been a relative failure to account for the full heterogeneity of narrative texture in the 19th century social novel; another subsidiary consequence has been to neglect the pervasive reliance on synecdoche as the trope par excellence for the production of social criticism within a literary form or without, as a further specification of the ordinary attention devoted to metonymic association in the novel.

In Gissing, this formal process is subject to a crucial inversion. The general movement over the course of his career is away from satirical or critical narration, and towards the development of characters who can each present differing critical perspectives on their own. This is what Virginia Woolf meant when she classed Gissing as one of the "extremely rare novelists who...makes his people think," who allowed his characters ideas.[12] More often than not, their

thoughts are of a critically objective nature; they see their own actions and the actions of others determined by grand, impersonal laws and dehumanizing market forces which they despise. But while the tropes of totality — the tonal indignation, the defamiliarizing ostinato repetition, the galloping cadence of accusation, the synecdochal shrink-ray — are essentially unchanged from *Bleak House* to *The Nether World* (and passing on through to "The Waste Land"), in Gissing this apparently whole, but apparently cracked world is continually being shrunken down even further — almost to the size of a sucking stone that would fit in one's pockets — until it becomes an affective property of given characters. Part is exchanged for whole, only to be reduced to part again, and arraigned in a lineup alongside other part-whole composites.[13] This is one of the major achievements of *New Grub Street*, which marks the onset of the tendency of Gissing's novels to restrain themselves from granting a totalizing critical perspective to the narration itself; instead of Clara's wordless frenzy, we get Jasper Milvain, who can critique his own commercial profligacy as a writer better than anyone, even while he continues to sell more and more "tidbits" of himself to the market; and his is just one critique among many in the novel. What had been the object of an attempted vehement rejection in Dickens, becomes in Gissing an object of contemplation and powerful dramatic irony.

Even in *The Nether World*, where the narration is often pointedly satirical and seemingly disparaging of the "multitude," one sees an ideological indeterminacy similar to that which we saw on the character level with Clara Hewett's revulsion. Rather than a revolted tirade that attempts to hold itself together through an act of repudiation, the narration in *The Nether World* now focuses on the indeterminate tension, the oscillation between its critical and descriptive components, as in the following account of "Shooter's Gardens," an especially dilapidated corner of Clerkenwell:

> Needless to burden description with further detail; the slum was like any other slum; filth, rottenness, evil odours possessed these dens of superfluous mankind and made them gruesome to the peering imagination. The inhabitants of course felt nothing of the sort; a room in Shooter's Gardens was the only kind of home that most of them knew or desired. The majority preferred it, on all grounds, to that offered them in a block of model lodgings not very far away; here was independence, that is to say, the liberty to be as vile as they pleased. How they came to love vileness, well, that is quite another matter, and shall not for the present concern us. (74)

One is hard pressed to determine the narrator's position here — neither "peering imagination" nor seething critic seems quite right — but the passage makes it clear we are dealing with questions of individual and group agency, even if it is only "the liberty to be as vile as they pleased." The passage actually comes to rest on that point — not to affirm it, but to suggest again that individual determination remains the stuff of literary representation, even if the confrontation with the individual is a revolting experience to the narrator.

The real repudiation in this passage, in fact, is in the last line — "How they came to love vileness, well, that is quite another matter, and shall not for the present concern us" — which, however flippant, enacts a more emphatic pushing away (a repulsion) from the space that is just coming to be occupied by systematic forms of sociological, economic, psychological, or even social Darwinian explanation. Even while acknowledging the possibilities of that kind of explanation, Gissing suggests the novel is not the proper context for it. Raymond Williams saw this as a "negative identification" in Gissing, a partial, and partially erroneous recognition between a self-designated outcast intellectual and an outcast class, that must break down at the moment of realization that "their cause will not be precisely his cause; the oppressed will have intentions and attachments and faults of their own." What Williams only begins to stress, however, is the extent to which Gissing's negative identification, and the full saturation of his novels with revulsion, captures a very new sense of resistance to different strains of objective critique; sometimes this paints Gissing up as a radical, sometimes as a reactionary. The fact of

the matter is he is much slipperier than either of those. But Williams goes on to claim, without much specification, that Gissing's work "is less a discovery of reality than a document of a particular category of feeling," and it is in this sense — in the shifting of critical literary focus *away* from "reality," even as Gissing seems to present the apotheosis of 'realist' fiction — that Gissing's novels represent a significant shift in the socially critical function of the Victorian novel.[14] Instead of rejecting a shrunken down emblem of the outer world the book inhabits, Gissing gives us a rejection of the blurry relationship itself between that world and the world within the book.

It needs to be established that this is in fact a tendency in Gissing's work, and not an isolated moment, or even a misreading, since it runs against the grain of most criticism, and since this is precisely what I mean by Gissing's headlong confrontation with his revulsion. The critical heritage tends to see Gissing either as putting all his eggs in a deterministic basket or just the opposite — often in one and the same muddled argument. Take for (a paradigmatic) example *The Nether World* narrator's fail-safe plan for fixing the nation's social problems, hatched out of contempt for the "reeking multitude" enjoying itself at the Crystal Palace, followed by one recent critic's reading of the passage:

> Well, as every man needs must have his panacea for the ills of society, let me inform you of mine. To humanise the multitude two things are necessary — two things of the simplest kind conceivable. In the first place, you must effect an entire change of the economic conditions: a preliminary step of which every tyro will recognize the easiness; then you must bring to bear on the new order of things the constant influence of music. Does not the prescription recommend itself? It is jesting in earnest. (109)

While, along with Martin Ryle, "we note the aggressive-defensive tone, the irony which makes issues more complex without fully clarifying the narrator's position, and indeed some uncertainty as to whether the narrator can be held finally to any position," trouble is right around the corner in Ryle's argument:

> The reader's agreement is not assumed; it is enforced, argumentatively. The argument is not straightforwardly either conservative or progressive. The plebeian holidaymakers are described at times with contempt, but the chapter places ultimate responsibility for their condition on large social forces: economic subordination ('slaves of industrialism'), and also the cultural manipulation to which Gissing was always very sensitive.[15]

Given the extent to which questions of agency and indeterminacy present themselves in the novel, what needs to be questioned in Ryle's analysis is how exactly he squares the narrator's inability to be "held finally to any position" with his bolder declaration that "the chapter places ultimate responsibility for their condition on large social forces." Which is it? Aren't "finally" and "ultimately" synonyms? — And how does one make sense of the narrator's contempt for those plebes on their day off, a contempt which Ryle identifies without interrogating, if the narrator does not grant the individuals that constitute the "reeking multitude" any "ultimate responsibility"?

Looking a few pages ahead to the end of this chapter (which in a fairly emotional register is called "Io Saturnalia!"), the reader is confronted not with an emphasis on large and impersonal social forces, but rather with Bob Hewett and his new bride Pennyloaf Candy lying in bed on their wedding night, after both newlyweds have been beaten badly in a violent brawl with some neighborhood acquaintances (Pennyloaf's wedding dress torn, Bob too drunk to feel all that much). Their honeymoon day at the Crystal Palace coming to a close, and Pennyloaf, unable to sleep while listening to her parents drunkenly beat each other across the courtyard, the chapter ends with a vision of brutal anxiety:

> Bob was already asleep, breathing stertorously. As for Pennyloaf, she was so overwhelmed that hours passed before oblivion fell upon her aching eyelids. She was thinking all the time that on the morrow it would be necessary to pawn her wedding ring. (113)

The final emphasis of the chapter is patently personal, portrait-scaled. If there are ironclad laws at work here, they are the laws that cause critics to impute things to texts that are not apparently

there; perhaps, even, Ryle has made a kind of under the table substitution of his own, preemptively taking Pennyloaf's as yet un-pawned ring as an index of something larger and more institutional than her finger. That is Ryle's prerogative, but in any event, Gissing's emphasis is local. That this episode comes immediately after the acute focus on the throng of Bank Holiday visitors to the Crystal Palace, where the fireworks go off and "all the reeking multitude utters a huge 'Oh' of idiot admiration," only highlights Gissing's explicit interest in the relationship between objectively critical and subjectively representational modes of writing. But the particularity of this interest is smothered if one cannot get past using terms like "progressive" and "conservative" to describe the status of Gissing's work, neither of which captures the uneasy mixture of objective knowledge, contemptuous critique, and continual disgust which characterize this passage and many others like it.

Even if, with Ryle, we take the narrator's panacea on its own — that is, out of its most immediate context in the novel — we are still pressed with the need for a critical apparatus that can account, first, for the recursive nature of disgust-reactions in general, and, second, for the difference that Gissing's propensity to rile up his own bile makes, compared to his predecessors. In the first instance, the intimacy between the tropological structure of criticism within the novel and the nature of disgust as Kant outlined it in the *Critique of Judgment* and as it is systemically reiterated today needs to be stressed; more specifically, the stress needs to fall on the resemblance between the synecdochal blurring between whole and part upon which criticism relies, and the Kantian confusion between disgusting representations and disgusting objects; as well as the resemblance between the negativity of criticism (its propensity for dramatic rejection which must also rely on some figure of speech) and Kant's prohibition of disgust in the production of aesthetic beauty, which girds the whole system of taste. In short, we will not be

able even to confront or regard Gissing's double negativity — in the passage at hand, ironic disdain for the reformer and revulsion for the hoard — unless we first swallow the fact that the gestures of pushing away inherent to criticism, and perhaps even to the tropic turnings-away of language, more often than not coincide, affectively as well as structurally, with the gestures of repulsion; that is, unless we swallow the fact that criticism in its most prevalent form, even after deconstruction, still relies all too often on a confusion between the objectivity of its own assertions of taste and the forms of objectivity contained within a novel or other artwork.

And in Gissing's case, this is a particularly sensitive issue, since if we miss out on the relationship between disgust and criticism more generally, we then miss out even more on the fact that his novels diverge pointedly from an affective-critical lodestone which in a relatively short period had become a normal feature of the English novel: the frustrating Frankenstein-worker of *Mary Barton*, the disgusting illiterate pupils of *Jane Eyre*, the dull black pit at the end of *Hard Times* — each a site of reviling impulses to be excised, overcome, or redeemed, but never left alone to be regarded *as* disgusting for more than a fleeting moment of anxiety felt as representational instability. Gissing's novels, on the contrary, are structured as attempts to regard these disgust-reactions, to look at them as repulsions, and not merely to produce them, certainly not just to provoke them; they are are structured to maintain examination of the externalized, shrunk-down pellets that Kant claimed were by nature aesthetically indigestible and unexaminable and therefore to be discarded. And this structure, the *dégueule-en-abyme* of Gissing's work, must make some difference in the way that we read the novels, since by all accounts it began for Gissing with a social and aesthetic impulse that diverged just as strongly from the demands for literature to produce either beauty or entertainment as it did from the demands to critique and repair society.

III.

"If readers can put faith in the desperate sincerity of the author," Gissing wrote his brother Algernon about *Workers in the Dawn*, "They will not be disgusted with the book; otherwise, it is far better they should not read it. I fear it is the fate of many men to incur odium by their opinions, but the odium is only cast by those who cannot realize the sincerity of minds differently constituted from their own."[16] As an author whose economic foothold in the literary profession was less sturdy than his reputation, the risk of offending his readership was a major stumbling block for Gissing. Similar to Hardy's experience of the 1880s and 90s, the prudishness of a still very 'Victorian' censor at work within the publishing industry towards the turn of the century produced a peculiar form of exasperation in Gissing; not so much outrage at being constrained, as a strong sense of having his intentions misunderstood. Granted this impulse to manage the reception of one's work practically inheres to the act of publishing one's writing, but the play between intention and misunderstanding surrounding the particular question of whether or not a work is disgusting should not be reduced to *just* a question of authorial control in a biographical register. No matter how much of a control freak Gissing was (and compared to Hardy or Dickens, he hardly was at all), the fact remains that something he was trying to interrogate critically was repeatedly being mistaken for something he was at best involuntarily promoting and at worst scandalously producing; something inadmissibly detrimental to culture and society, to boot. Much like Hardy's assurance to his publisher that "*Jude* would be a tale that could not offend the most fastidious maiden," Gissing was *desperately sincere* about the appropriateness of his material for an aesthetic environment, and not just shooting for the provocative sensationalism or watered down entertainments he lambasted in *New Grub Street*.[17] If he could only communicate his intended sincerity, then his readers would not find his novels

revolting; and if his readers would not find his novels revolting, they could have instead an experience of difference, of a "mind differently constituted from their own"; the implication being that this latter experience is one of the ends of 'real' or 'high' literature, however far from the ends of Victorian aesthetic discourse and popular criticism it might be.

Gissing's exasperation must be taken seriously if we are to understand his novels, the history of their reception, or the nuance of his aesthetic position, and yet, to do so requires that we grant an unusually high degree of authority to Gissing's misunderstood intentions, a move which runs counter to the "purposive purposelessness" Kant saw in works of art, and the strictures of the intentional fallacy which grew out of the Kantian aesthetic relation. Perhaps this would not be worth noting, if Gissing's insistence that his works need not be deemed disgusting did not further complicate the already fraught relationship between aesthetic judgment and authorial intention, since disgust, by virtue of its overly-intentional obtrusion, is the particular emotion which breaches the critical distance required for aesthetic judgment. Gissing therefore situates his work right on one of aesthetic theory's major fault lines: he insists his work is not disgusting, but rather merits serious attention, even while traditional aesthetics holds, to the contrary, that the disgusting is what *insists* in a work of art, and therefore precludes serious and detached appraisal.

While there is undeniably a deliberate and intentional quality in Gissing's novels — felt at times as an overly desultory cadence in the prose, or an overly negative turn in the plot — it is not clear however that his intentions "obtrude" in the same way that those of Kant's disgusting representations do. As Bourdieu has put it, "disgust is the paradoxical experience of enjoyment extorted by violence, an enjoyment which arouses horror," and it remains extremely difficult to say just where in Gissing the enjoyment lies:

> This horror, unknown to those who surrender to sensation, results fundamentally from removal of the distance, in which freedom is asserted, between the representation and the thing represented, in short, from *alienation*, the loss of the subject in the object, immediate submission to the immediate present under the enslaving violence of the 'agreeable.'[18]

For Bourdieu, the detachment on which aesthetic appraisal relies is an index of socioeconomic privilege, and the disgust that a refined sensibility expresses for a supposedly crude enjoyment consists of a mix of pleasure and the fear of surrendering to pleasure. The extravagance of Bourdieu's own position, which appears at least to recognize, if not to grant the *un*-distinguished unmediated access to 'pure' pleasure (as well as to assume that all forms of alienation are necessarily the same), must be noted and distinguished from Gissing's aesthetic. While Bourdieu's interests — a social analysis of the aesthetics of revulsion and enjoyment, and of intention and alienation — run very close to Gissing's, my aim here is less to emphasize their particular similarities than to stress once again just how firmly situated Gissing's work is in the grid of terms that comprise the core of the aesthetic tradition. The fact that Gissing appears to revile enjoyment as much as he reviles any of its alternatives — the fact that pleasure in his novels is not merely displaced or repressed, but, perhaps, wholly absent or utterly transformed — troubles Bourdieu's too neat formulation of the "enslaving violence of the agreeable," even while it aspires for a "loss of the subject in the object" in the form of grasping "the sincerity of minds differently constituted from [one's] own."

We run into even more trouble when Gissing's avowal that he is not trying to disgust his readers butts heads with what often appear to be manifesto-ish proclamations of the need for literature to confront it's relationship to disgust, perhaps the most significant of which is the epigram to *The Nether World*. A snippet from a public lecture by the French historian and philosopher Ernest Renan, the quotation announces the extent to which Gissing saw the

disgusting as more than just a generic obligation to naturalistic detail, but rather as a historically pertinent aesthetic problem involving the interrelation of formal composition and descriptive content :

> La peinture d'un fumier peut être justifiée pourvu qu'il y pousse une belle fleur; sans cela, le fumier n'est que repoussant. [19] (xxxi)

At once less complex and more gung-ho than the third critique, nevertheless our feet are still firmly planted on Kantian ground. In order to produce a generalized and normative statement about aesthetic value, Renan pits the beautiful against the repulsive, going so far as to claim that beauty is necessary in the first place to justify an artwork that would otherwise be irrevocably disgusting (and the strength of the "justifiée," here, strikes me as being both stronger and dumber than Kant's infamous "Sollen," because it is more practical and immediate, and seems to refer to some actual painting, even conjures up a highly plausible scene with some panting, apoplectic painting professor, pushed to the brink of despair, while consigning dozens of student paintings of dung heaps, each with little insufficient rosebuds poking out of the too-adequately rendered steaming brown piles, to the growing dross heap of repulsive canvases in the corner of the classroom).

In *The Nether World*, Gissing seems to have taken Renan's quip less as the rules of the game, and more as a challenge for his own method of literary production: he will scrap the beautiful flower, and make a beeline for the dung-heap. The novel takes exception to the claim that the sole purpose of an artwork is to produce beauty, but what is most striking about this polemical stance is the rapidity with which such aesthetic concerns become sociopolitical matters in the novel. As Frederic Jameson has argued, the dung-heap and the flower (or the lack thereof) refer, respectively, to the Clerkenwell slum, and to the possibility of a homegrown philanthropic project that would literally sprout up within the eponymous nether world. When Snowdon's plan

for Jane to educate the brute multitude around her goes up in smoke, the flower withers, and we are left with what may or may not be a "merely repulsive" piece of literature. The rejection of the beautiful is thus indistinct from the rejection of philanthropic enterprise — both as a narrative trope to provide closure to the novel, and as a statement of a socially critical attitude towards "slumming," as it occurs within the novel.

Jameson has written extensively about Gissing's handling of the philanthropic plot as a major "ideologeme" in the naturalist repertoire, and it is worth taking a detailed look at some of his argument, since my own is not only heavily indebted to his, but in some sense splits a hair that he had already plucked thirty years ago. Indeed, my thinking about this aspect of *The Nether World* derives from Jameson's claim that "the philanthropic motif is autoreferential to the degree to which old Snowdon's sudden revelation of his purpose in life is *the same* as Gissing's discovery of a way to organize his narrative (and to solve the crisis of narrative totality)."[20] For Jameson, however, Gissing's philanthropic plots' repeated failure to solve the social problems posed by the early novels (*Thyrza, Demos* and *The Nether World* in particular) signals as well "a grim diagnosis and commentary on the unconscious meaning of...philanthropic altruism, a virtually Nietzschean unmasking of the gesture of hostility concealed within the charitable impulse"; Jameson goes on to designate both this drive to unmask and the unmasked hostility as Nietzschean "*ressentiment*" and elevates it from an affective tendency to the level of an ideologeme, the central ideologeme in Gissing, in fact.[21] Within this analysis, however, Jameson finds it necessary to account for what I have called Gissing's double negativity, and so discovers in various "secondary adaptations" of Nietzschean *ressentiment* that this particular negative emotion cuts both ways: sometimes articulated "in a kind of exoteric and vulgar sense, the ideologeme of *ressentiment* can seem to account in a 'psychological' and nonmaterialistic sense

for the destructive envy the have-nots feel for the haves"; but "meanwhile, in a secondary and more esoteric, 'overdetermined' use

> *ressentiment* can also explain the conduct of those who incited an otherwise essentially satisfied popular mass to such "unnatural" disorders: the ideologeme thus designates Nietzsche's "ascetic priests," the intellectuals par excellence — the unsuccessful writers and poets, bad philosophers, bilious journalists, and failures of all kinds — whose private dissatisfactions lead them to their vocations as political and revolutionary militants. This diagnostic double standard, which will furnish the inner dynamic for a whole tradition of counterrevolutionary propaganda from Dostoyevsky and Conrad to Orwell....[22]

Ressentiment is thus a constituent passion in class conflict as well as intellectual, critical and aesthetic production, which, moreover, has an "unavoidably autoreferential structure": "It may therefore be concluded that the theory of ressentiment, wherever it appears, will always itself be the expression and the production of ressentiment." Jameson sees in *ressentiment* the "very motive force of Gissing's narratives," which, as we have seen, are similarly both critical and recursive in nature. Finally, since *ressentiment* assails the guilty "bourgeois reader" as much as the enviously resentful working class — since it "is intolerable for the bourgeois reader to dwell for any length of time" within Gissing novels — "*ressentiment* ceases to generate sheerly ideological images and becomes the guarantor of a divisiveness beyond ideological commitment."

The proximity of Jameson's argument to my own should be clear, but two major points need further specification: first, we need to determine the stakes in affording either "revulsion" or "*ressentiment*" a central role in Gissing's literary output; and second, we need to put some pressure on Jameson's claim that "there is no need to rehearse at length the ideological content of philanthropy" (i.e. because philanthropy is *tout court* fueled by *ressentiment*) in light of recent research on the history of Victorian slumming as a pervasive cultural phenomenon and on Gissing's rather specific relationship to those practices. In the former case, what may at first appear an essentially terminological difference rather quickly becomes a methodological one that

revolves around the central question of whether or not the task of a politically conscious and ideologically invested literary criticism is itself one of unmasking. This is an especially pressing question since, following Jameson's own analysis, his designation of the philanthropic plot as in fact masking the core ideologeme of *ressentiment* in Gissing would, at least on the level of gesture, resemble an act of *ressentiment* as well. If this is the case, then we are in need of some qualitative criterion that could distinguish between acts of accusatory revelation which are and are not resentful, that is, which are and are not repeating the condemned gesture.

At certain moments in Jameson's essay, this criterion appears to be inching towards a definition of Gissing's intentions: "In Gissing's maturity the novel comes to be considered as something like a laboratory space, where given characters can be submitted to experiments in a controlled environment in which the modification of variables is systematically tested"; "Again, the abrupt termination of the narrative experiment has something so arbitrary about it as to suggest a deliberate affective logic"; not to mention a few suggestively incomplete references to Gissing's "own personal wound" (that is, his arrest and expulsion from college for stealing money from classmates to give to Nell); and so on. Of course, this residual sense of deliberateness is entirely at odds with Jameson's overarching thesis of the political unconscious, not to mention with the general sense one has reading Jameson that he is illuminating something that had been kept in the dark — it makes for a real anticlimax to pull back the curtain and announce, 'Aha! Just as I expected — you wrote books like this *on purpose*!" Consequently, Jameson does not follow through on his identification with a version of Gissing's intention, which, it turns out, even here must be kept at least at arm's length.

Instead, what we find is that Jameson's "secondary" *ressentiment* relies on a system of aesthetic judgment that has been left entirely unquestioned in the context of the essay. This is not

a hidden truth about Jameson's argument, which, on the contrary, here wears its unsupported critical acumen lightly and on the surface: I am referring to those "intellectuals par excellence — the unsuccessful writers and poets, bad philosophers, bilious journalists, and failures of all kinds — whose private dissatisfactions lead them to their vocations as political and revolutionary militants." One certainly has a sense of the cast of characters Jameson is conjuring here, and, in a local way, it even seems right. But the tonal shift in this particular passage from the confidently theoretical, assertively objective, to the more or less anecdotal, ought to raise a few eyebrows, since this is presumably what will guarantee the recursive structure of Gissing's *ressentiment*. Since success cannot be Jameson's measure of literary quality, it is hard to see how the blurring between "unsuccessful" writers and "bad" theorists can be a solid enough foundation for the extension of *ressentiment* to a "universal principle" "generalized into a global refusal of commodity desire itself." The recourse to an evaluative vocabulary of bad and good in order to distinguish between resentful and unresentful critical writing speaks less to the particularities of Gissing's work than it does to the aesthetic roots of certain strains in Marxist theory.

Despite its theoretical sophistication and radical inclinations, the terms of Jameson's essay are still dictated by the very Kantian (and even New Critical) prohibitions against granting authorial intention any serious legitimacy. As a consequence, Jameson's argument relies on the requisite distance between reader and text (which Bourdieu suggests itself is a species of alienation) which will allow him to distinguish the ideological surface material of Gissing's novels from their ideological interiors: ideology is thus what takes the text out of an author's hands, what makes one's pen shake. Jameson presents this critical distance as a given form of objectivity, but, as we have seen, those certainties are guaranteed only by an aesthetic discourse the critique of which itself should be a precondition of critical judgment — which, I am arguing,

is a major feature of *Gissing's* critical program. It is as though, in order to produce a historical, putatively objective criticism, Jameson has merely punted the most fundamental questions about the ahistorical rhetoric of the purely aesthetic situation down the road. The essay complicates but also recapitulates Ryle's simplistic demand that Gissing be either "progressive or conservative." The result is an accordingly denser and more dazzling form of projection which nevertheless still relies on a hazy indistinctness between the text and the critical judgments it produces.

One of the main advantages of affording revulsion an animating centrality to Gissing's work, as opposed to *ressentiment*, is that we have the luxury of letting Gissing speak for himself, since the word and its affective cognates belong to his repertoire in such a pronounced way. I am certainly not arguing for the primacy of disgust over *ressentiment*; it is not that one comes before the other, or that one could provide a more stable foundation for critical argument than the other, or anything of the sort. Rather, with Gissing more so than most other authors, revulsion is already granted a complex privileged position, as a concept, an emotion, an aesthetic drive, and as a material word. The desire to find a critical position that is not bound up in the dynamics of revelatory *ressentiment* Jameson's essay identifies and reinforces would thus be reason enough for engaging this extremely charged knot in Gissing on its own terms. The fact that Gissing's lexicon is already so bound up with the very terms of traditional aesthetic discourse, and in ways as suggestive of new alternatives for criticism as illuminating of the consequences of old ones, however, makes one think moreover that Jameson's kind of reading (there is only one passage quoted from Gissing in the whole essay) has done more to obscure than to situate Gissing's text. It is certainly worth wondering how we would have to reevaluate the history of art and literature if we were to afford *ressentiment* the central role in cultural production Jameson suggests it has; but revulsion already occupies a commanding position in those histories, however relatively

neglected it has remained as a focus of attention.

It should be evident, too, that Nietzschean *ressentiment* as Jameson understands it closely resembles the Freudian conception of disgust as the "watchman" for our repudiated desires. The mixture of contempt, envy and displaced personal dissatisfaction that Jameson claims are the fuel for the "the gesture of hostility concealed within the charitable impulse" would, on this model, be interpreted primarily in terms of sexuality and aggression. Gissing's "impulse to revolt," then, could be situated somewhere between the involutions of a thwarted "Wille zur Macht" and suppressed libidinal drives — a compelling picture which certainly appears to square with Gissing's late novels, where the vocabulary of political revolt and the nether world gives way to a misogynist vocabulary surrounding the "woman question" and the demi-monde of the salon, and in which all the ideological-representational interest in the multitude is compressed into the snug dyad of the lower middle class heterosexual marriage. The sexually inflected *ressentiment* of the reformer for the multitude thus appears interchangeable with, or reducible to, for example, the much more sexually explicit aggression and disappointment that Harvey Rolfe feels for his too ambitious wife Alma in *The Whirlpool* — a process of narrowing down that at the very least confirms the close relations between sexual and political desires in Gissing's imagination.

Yet neither Gissing nor Nietzsche were exceptional in the 19th century for their indictment of altruism; rather, the attitude went hand in hand with whole business of philanthropic enterprise. Seth Koven's evocative book, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*, turns the question of "unmasking" the sexually aggressive core of altruism on its head, not by refuting the relationship between the sexual and the altruistic, but by showing instead how this allegedly hidden relationship was very much on the surface of Victorian public discourse. Seen as the onset of a new attitude toward the urban lower classes which "insisted that firsthand experience

among the metropolitan poor was essential for all who claimed to speak authoritatively about social problems," slumming "bore the obloquy of sensationalism, sexual transgression, and self-seeking gratification, not sober inquiry and self-denying service to others."[23] Moreover, as a "widespread phenomenon" consisting of a diverse array of social practices (including cross-dressing, dressing down, and just plain undressing, as well as other forms of performative imposture), Koven writes that "slumming, the word and the activities associated with it, was distinguished historically by a persistent patter of disavowal," which thus "confounded clear-cut distinctions between true and false charity"; that is, the drive to unmask the hypocritical core of philanthropic altruism was itself a pervasive, and perhaps constitutive characteristic of the discursive practices of slumming in general. Jameson's conclusion that in Gissing "the phenomenon of *ressentiment*... may be said to have a certain authenticity" is thus entirely in keeping with the Victorian attitude towards urban philanthropy, which was likewise dominated by anxieties about authenticity, involvement, and socioeconomic distance.

Koven argues that the desires which prompted so many upper and middle class Londoners to cross the socioeconomic chasm that divided the metropolis were nebulously erotic, and his research certainly confirms this thesis. Koven's prime example, James Greenwood's 1866 series of articles, "A Night in a Workhouse," consist of equal parts social indignation and sexual insinuation; the stripping down, bathing in murky water, and piling up of the naked bodies of dozens of impoverished men was for Greenwood at once a cause for moral outrage and the focus of erotic curiosity, and Koven cites this exposé as the beginning of a long tradition of homoerotically charged, class-crossing, authenticity-seeking reportage (one that culminates, he suggests, with Orwell): "The reporter writing about vagrancy; the reporter posing as a vagrant; the vagrant as homosexual; the reporter as homosexual: these sets of closely-associated terms

generated by ‘A Night’ and its many nineteenth- and twentieth-century legacies seem to proliferate, each opening up new lines of inquiry.”[24] By the same token, these relations between male writers and reporters and the lower class men who were the objects of their more and less professional desires also produce a defensive form of misogyny.

Koven emphasizes that criticism of ‘false charity’ was very often leveled by men at women, and “depended on an unstated set of assumptions about gender and [an] unacknowledged investment in making philanthropy appealing to men at a time when women were coming to dominate it.”[25] Even with the establishment of more and more female run philanthropic institutions, there remained a strong sense in public discourse that women could only interfere with a project that was understood properly only by men; even more defensive yet was the implication that women who crossed class lines did so for illicit sexual purposes that were of course unheard of in truly gentlemanly circles. For Koven, who discerns in the contours of these social phenomena an essentially Foucauldian dynamic, the frantic search for class authenticity relies on and continually exudes a diffuse, gendered, and primarily discursive sexual desire, one which appears not to have any real goal beyond reproducing itself according to the suggestively syllogistic unfolding of a kind of erotic, textual and sociological Jacob’s Ladder.

Gissing’s novels reflect an ongoing preoccupation with the same aspects of Victorian slumming Koven emphasizes. For one, the quest for authenticity Koven details is certainly at work, in *The Nether World*, in Snowdon’s obsessive plan

> to raise up for the poor and the untaught a friend out of their own midst, someone who had gone through all that *they* suffer, who was accustomed to earn her own living by the work of her hands as *they* do, who had never thought herself their better, who saw the world as they see it and knew all their wants. A lady may do good, we know that; but she can’t be the friend of the poor as I understand; there’s too great a distance between her world and theirs. (178)

Snowdon's whole plan, in fact, revolves around his desire to overcome the distance between some unspecified "lady" and the urban poor; philanthropic work, for Snowdon, will not work unless it grows up 'naturally' from within the slum itself. From the start, however, Gissing handles this attitude as delusory, and by the end of the novel it is clear that Gissing neither wants to promote this kind of philanthropy nor to align his work with the type of authenticity that Snowdon and many urban slummers sought, which he very emphatically repudiates. Instead, over the course of Gissing's career, as the novels focus more intently on the aspirations of the lower middle class, the philanthropic motif loses what little constitutive stake it had in *The Nether World*, and goes on shedding its narrative potency until it is hardly more than a minor detail subject to the critical irony and blasé disdain of a handful of characters. Hence we get, in *The Whirlpool* (1897), the following sarcastic description of Lady Isobel Barker, whom we never meet throughout the course of the novel, and who has just fallen into the clutches of the arch-manipulator, social climbing and allegedly adulterous Mrs. Hugh Carnaby:

> 'Why, she's a daughter of the Earl of Bournemouth, and she married a fellow on the Stock Exchange. There are all sorts of amusing stories about her. I don't mean anything shady—just the opposite. She did a good deal of slumming at the time when it was fashionable, and started a home for women of a certain kind—all that sort of thing. Barker is by way of being a millionaire, and they live in great style; have Royalties down at Boscombe, and so on. Well, Mrs. Carnaby has got hold of her. I don't know how she managed it. Just after that affair it looked as if she would have a bad time. People cut her—you know all about that?'[26]

This sarcasm takes on an even more caustic edge at the end of the novel, when Mrs. Carnaby herself winds up joining forces with Lady Isobel in a "project for the benefit of working-class women in the West End," as announced in the newspaper in the novel's last pages:

> 'Unfortunately, Lady Isobel herself was unable to take part in the proceedings, owing to sudden indisposition; but her views were most suggestively set forth by Mrs. Hugh Carnaby, who dwelt on the monotony of the lives of decent working-class women, and showed how much they would be benefited by being brought into touch with the intellectual movements of the day. Practical details of the scheme will shortly be made public.'

> Morton chuckled quietly.
>
> 'Splendid idea,' said Rolfe. 'Anyone who knows anything of the West End working-class woman will be sure to give it warm support.' [27]

What in *The Nether World* was, however derided and deemed impossible, a structural component of the novel upon which the fates of the characters hinged, winds in *The Whirlpool* up as the butt of a joke about a more or less peripheral character, told by another character whose interest in the amelioration of poverty is on its most engaged level still only theoretical. For Koven, then, even as they developed from the early 1880s to the late 1890s, Gissing's novels would still participate in the historically specific pathos and misogyny surrounding the desire for authentic inter-class relations, in which Snowdon's "lady" is never capable of an authentic altruism.

Gissing himself claimed that "the philanthropic movements of the day are nothing to me save artistic material," adding that his "books can never be practically useful."[28] Even though Gissing's position here was subject to change, as Diana Maltz has shown, and even though the position itself may rely upon an indefensible, forced division between artistic work and social practice, Gissing's point sheds light on the extent to which a complex set of aesthetic assumptions already underwrote the performative and literary practices of slumming. Maltz has written about Gissing's views in and out of his novels in relationship to the writings of actual philanthropic workers, arguing that "this relationship between caseworkers and novelists was indeed a two-way street," with both rhetoric and ideas passing back and forth between the two.[29] Like Koven, then, Maltz is interested in the facts of slumming as a form of discursive practice, and yet, neither of them pursues the next step of interrogating the structures of the critical and aesthetic texts and performances that they both identify.

This is perhaps most striking in Koven's book, where he tracks the discourse of authenticity to some of its most absurd limits: in particular, a play called "The Casual Ward"

which was adapted from the raw material of Greenwood's "A Night" and ran for over three months before an audience of thousands.[30] Koven tells us that the "play itself is entirely undistinguished," and that, as a piece of "hack writing" "following the conventions of working-class popular melodrama," it really only merits our attention in light of the author's "decision to erase all traces of sexual 'abominations' between males." Running counter to the anti-authentic current in this censorship, and complicating the representational politics of the play, however, was the director's decision to cast an actual "workhouse pauper named Budge," also known as "Daddy," as himself. Daddy had become famous after Greenwood depicted him in "A Night," and so his presence on the stage lent a degree of reality-TV style authenticity to the show which would hopefully drive up ticket sales, even as it made for a particularly incoherent aesthetic policy, which "on the one hand...made Greenwood's experiences authentic by allowing the audience to meet for themselves someone Greenwood had encountered in the workhouse," and on the other "confounded those who aspired to clear-cut distinction between fictions and facts, artifice and social reality."[31]

The introduction of 'real' workhouse paupers into the literary and theatrical discourse of slumming, and the critical backlash it produced, corresponds on the level of broader critical dialogue to the structure of substitution and repudiation that we saw at work within Gissing's novels and within the socially critical novel more generally. The principle difference is, in this register, that the aesthetic consequences of disgust are now primarily visible *between* texts, rather than within them. The matter of how to write about something an author holds to be revolting now reverberates off the page of the literary text and into the echo chamber of public critical discourse. In this sense, the historical questions writers like Maltz and Koven raise about the representational politics of slumming become available to us as elements of the same aesthetic

problematic specifically confronted by Gissing's novels, with the added dimension that now all critical judgment will fall under the aegis of a *sensus communis*, the underlying principle of taste; and of course we we can never exactly put our finger on the Public Nostril which must adjudicate and even dictate the terms of our aesthetic judgments. What this means is that the projection of disgust is no longer leveled specifically at given objects in the world (like a dung heap). Rather, disgust is now located in between revolted critics and specific revolting works, the latter of which are seen to *contain* vile objects 'too real' for representation, but are also seen as objects in themselves, which are taken to be the product of an intentionality that overrides the long sought after purposeless purposiveness of an artwork.

Criticism of *The Casual Ward*, much like criticism of Gissing's novels, even as it repudiated the contents as well as the contours of the play, often wound up reproducing the very elements it found to be so loathsome. This is so true of the following *Punch* satire, which captures and condenses so much of the animus surrounding the decision to cast 'Daddy' as himself, that it is worth quoting in full:

> With exquisite good taste a highly enterprising Manager engaged "a few of the survivors" who were rescued from the *London*, and has been paying them to appear every evening at his theatre, as a prelude to the gambols of Pantaloon and Clown. With a similar high notion of the duties of men catering to entertain the public, another enterprising Manager has hired "kind old DADDY," late of Lambeth Workhouse, to exhibit himself nightly in a new sensation drama, called *The Casual Ward*. "Sweet are the uses of adversity," when it is utilized in this way for dramatic exhibition; and flourishing indeed is the condition of the drama, when such magnets are deemed requisite to make a play attractive, and to draw a decent house.
>
> In putting plays upon the stage, some of our Managers of late have greatly studied the realities, introducing real gas-lamps to illumine a street scene, and cascades of real water in lieu of simple paint. This mania for realities appears to be extending, and real persons are exhibited as well as real things. A murderer's "real gig" was once announced as an attraction, and perhaps we soon may see a real murderer on the stage, and be told he has been respited in order to appear there for a few more extra nights...
>
> If the horrors of the causal ward be thought a fitting subject for dramatic exhibition, perhaps we soon may see a drama called *The Union Infirmary*, with a score of real paupers all lying really ill. Or a sensational scene of surgery perhaps might prove attractive, and a real leg or arm be amputated nightly, before a crowded house. The

> exquisite good taste which led a Manager to hire some rescued sailors for his stage, and turn the terrors of a shipwreck to theatrical account, perhaps may set the fashion for founding a new drama on any terrible disaster that the newspapers record. Playgoers will thus become familiarized with horrors, which they read of with dismay; and to some minds a calamity may fail to cause regret, on the ground of its affording a good subject for the stage. No doubt but the Cattle Plague may somehow soon be turned to some theatrical account. To please the Cockney playgoer, real cows might be exhibited, and real cow-doctors employed to wrangle and dispute. The audience in this way might be readily prepared for a strong sensation scene, wherein a real pole-axe might make a real hit. The band might then strike up the tune the old cow died of (whatever that may be); and, as a touching climax, "a few of the survivors" might slowly stalk across the stage.[32]

The terms of this criticism are all over the map. One is unsure whether the satirical contempt here is directed more towards the "enterprising managers" eager to capitalize on the new "mania for realities," or towards the "Cockney playgoer" for encouraging them, but the piece itself displays a rather energetic capacity to generate new examples that would surely please both, and are intended to do so. Neither are the stakes of the matter clear. Sometimes the problem appears merely to be a question of "exquisite good taste" and "the condition of the drama," and yet the end of the review, which, however comical, introduces an element of violence as the final link in a chain of progressively more gruesome potential abuses of this reality principle, at the very least implies an ethical dimension to the representational decisions under attack, an offensive transgression of the principles of taste.

The *Punch* review and Greenwood's "A Night" reflect very clearly the general problematic of the aesthetics of disgust at a specific historical moment in which social injustices nobody wanted to look at were beginning to feel at once like the only thing anybody wanted to look at *as well as* the thing-itself which was impossible for anyone actually to see. Real problems of systemic social neglect which had become emblematically frozen in articles like Greenwood's or Mayhew's, or even in Dickens or Gaskell, were thus warped and distorted so that they were decried publicly for being inadequate forms of aesthetic manipulation; legitimate social indignation was intermingled with unsupported aesthetic disapproval; and the response normally

entailed an attempt at further separating the social and the aesthetic in pursuit of some more authentic aesthetic ideal. Evidently nobody could (and still cannot) ever really put their foot down as to whether the right questions to ask were inherently social or purely aesthetic, a false distinction to begin with, but one which had certainly held its ground over the course of the century and had secured some real territory in Aestheticism by the time Gissing was active. Moreover, the category of the aesthetic was from the start, as Raymond Williams has argued, a mixed bag. On the one hand an "affirmation...of certain human meanings and values which a dominant social system reduced and even tried to exclude," the aesthetic has on the other always relied on a denial of the continuities between social activities, and a desire, in response to real threats, to isolate and quarantine certain kinds of social production.[33] The articulation of critical disapproval in the form of demands for more (and less) authentic representation, grounded in referrals to "exquisite good taste," thus regularly wound up being drawn towards reproducing, as in the *Punch* satire, more and more grotesque imagery without ever bothering or, perhaps, being able to specify the difference between critical and aesthetic contexts and intentions, which was in fact a more pressing need than reinforcing the false distinction between the social and the aesthetic.

If we can manage to think of this *Punch* review, as well as Koven's whole analysis of the erotic dimension inherent to the "mania for realities" the review expresses, as capturing a decent sized slice of the critical free-for-all surrounding the problem of presenting the revolting masses in mid-century Victorian England, then we can begin to see the backdrop against which Gissing explicitly positioned his novels and his ideas about aesthetic value a few decades later. For starters, we had better ditch the idea, intact from contemporary reviewers down to Jameson, that Gissing's novels are especially worried about authenticity. The whole real/false, on/off,

inside/outside model (of class, of the nether world) needs to be severely reoriented in order to account for Gissing's biography alone, which, like everyone's life, is slightly more complex than a light switch. Jameson's formulation of Gissing's "dependence on the privileged yet placeless observer who complacently yet dispassionately collects this narrative raw material," which I take to be a formulation of the generic problem of the narrator especially within the ascribed conventions of naturalism, is only a particularly absurd exaggeration of this matter, which fails to grapple with the fact that Gissing was at once fully situated in the world he wrote about and fully passionate about his raw material. Even if it was a primarily negative passion, and even if Gissing's negativity alienated him from his immediate community, the fact remains that his novels are not motivated by a desire to produce authentic records of slum life, at least not in the coarse sense in which 'authentic' simply designates an unmeasurable, unattainable degree of mimetic fidelity to a world of hovels that is defined in advance as fully other to the author's own world of townhouses.

It ought not come as a surprise that Gissing's thoughts on the matter of how his work should be read and on how some of the most pressing social questions of his day should be addressed involves a privileging of negativity as a potential source of clarity. One of Gissing's finest articulations of this position is his early essay, "The Hope of Pessimism," an attack on Comtean Positivism which he wrote in or around 1882 but did not attempt to publish because of his dependence on the circle of London Positivists surrounding Frederic Harrison for financial support and a foothold in intellectual society. "The Hope of Pessimism" is a polemic (at times a real screed) against the "philosophical optimism" of Gissing's day, which, in the wake of the new agnosticism, still maintained a faith in the importance of the individual that Gissing found to be menacingly "egotistic" and ill-fated.[34]

The essay's force rests on Gissing's refutation of the assumption "that it is possible to eradicate from the human mind that instinct which Schopenhauer calls *das metaphysische Bedürfnis*,—

> that standing revolt of the intellect against it circumscribed conditions, which has given birth to every form of supernatural religion, and has been hitherto the prime motive of philosophical enquiry.[35]

Far from dissipating in the wake of post-Darwinian agnosticism, Gissing clung not only to the unfashionable belief that "the metaphysical instinct can never acquiesce in subordination to realistic philosophy," but moreover held

> that so far from deriving such subordination, we should do our utmost to cherish and strengthen the metaphysical tendencies of the human mind, seeing that in such tendencies alone, inevitably leading to the universal acceptance of a pessimistic philosophy, is at present discernible a hope of the better order of the common life of men.

What Gissing here refers to as the "metaphysical instinct" and the "standing revolt of the intellect" is compressed half a decade or so later into his repeated insistence in *The Nether World* on the centrality of the "impulse" or "instinct" of revolt; for Gissing, this nasty little tendency to turn away from or to desire to outstrip the actual conditions of one's life is an essential and unchanging facet of human nature; or, put another way which seems equally appropriate, it is inherent in the structure of human thought to overcome itself, on both individual and, roughly, epochal levels:

> But philosophical views are not hereditary: were it so the mind would be fixed for ever in one construction of the universe....with all our present knowledge, we should still be adherents of fetishism or some such primitive philosophy.[36]

Along these lines, Gissing questions the audacity of contemporary critical thought to imagine that, even under radically ameliorated social conditions ("a world in which the average man has quite mastered the "Kritik den Reinen Vernunft"), enlightened agnosticism could actually answer all the salient epistemological questions of the day, and that the subsequent positivistic

privileging of the individual would naturally lead to a world in which altruistic impulses held sway.

On the contrary, Gissing argues that our altruistic impulses are nothing more than an expression of a historically situated egotism. This is not, to be clear, the Nietzschean indictment of altruism as masking aggression that Jameson refers to; nowhere in the essay does Gissing indict aggression per se, not even the sniveling passive aggression of Nietzsche's slave morality. Instead, Gissing's main point of contention is that altruism is incompatible with the anti-metaphysical tendencies of agnostic optimism, in its denial of a higher moral authority to ground acts of goodwill between individuals. The combination of the two, which supplants "the individual life with that larger life of the race which the altruist is to always have in view," is logically untenable." And in any case:

> In very deed, it is not Humanity which the new religion makes the object of its worship, but an ideal embodiment of man's noblest faculties and attainments, a terrene divinity such as will never find its avatar in human flesh. Better to abandon the figure, and acknowledge that our only guide is in our good instincts. And how ineffectual such guidance proves is sufficiently attested by the union of the highest degree of civilization yet attained with the most flagrant social misery the world has ever seen... "How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!" Yes, and for all that but "the paragon of animals."

This is a strong claim, which ought to resonate with Benjamin's observation a few decades later that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," and even perhaps with Adorno's that "myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology."[37] Gissing saw the progress of civilization as in lockstep with the concurrent progress of brutality, superstition and egotism, and his prognosis is accordingly grim (and chillingly apt):

> Imagine the intensifying through another generation or two of the social strife which every day grows more bitter; imagine wealth accumulated in the hands of yet fewer capitalists, and the immense majority toiling desperately for mere subsistence; then

> conceive the utter annihilation of all hopes of a future world, of all believe in a rewarding and avenging God, with the prevailing religion one which makes Man its supreme being, the earth its scene of final blessedness, and appeals to the unselfish instincts as the sole guarantee of morality. Do we not already recognize on every hand the one great and obvious result of such tendencies, in the strengthening of the natural forces of egotism?
>
> The social results which directly issue from such a conviction in the individual are only too plain before our eyes. Hence this scheme of commercial competition tempered by the police-code, to which were are pleased to give the name of a social order. [38]

Since the starting point of any philosophical account of society for Gissing was so much bleaker than anyone wanted to admit — "Lay to our souls what flattering unction we may, we shall not escape from the eternal truth that the world is synonymous with evil" — the development of arguments in favor of altruistic intervention was at best completely futile, and at worst an exacerbation, like picking scabs off self-inflicted wounds (HP, 88). It might help this or that person, but it was a part of the larger problem that was only attempting to pass itself off as a solution.

One feels that this vision of the world is so feverishly grim that one can either take it or leave it; that the proper response to Gissing's polemic might be to remind him that everyday experience does not entirely confirm his assessment of human behavior. We saw this in Jameson's identification in Gissing's "narrative experiments" of "something so arbitrary about it as to suggest a deliberate affective logic"; in Williams' characterization of the novels "less [as] a discovery of reality than [as] a document of a particular category of feeling"; and we also see it all throughout Gissing's early reception, as in the following review of *The Nether World*'s bleakness: "Perhaps the best result of this realism is the question left now and then in a reader's mind, Is there really any nether world?"[39] What is interesting about the seeming arbitrariness of Gissing's negativity, however, is precisely just how little it takes to get him frothing at the mouth.

For Hamlet, nobility of reason, infinite faculties, angelic action and godlike apprehension are continuous with man's status as the "paragon of animals"; Hamlet's problem was rather the "quintessence of dust" that lurked around the corner and was already visible in everything alive. Man delights *him* not for existential reasons, because death saps life of its meaning, whereas, for Gissing, the world is already intolerable from recognition of the preliminary fact that human savagery and barbarity are inseparable from human achievement.

Death, in fact, becomes the eponymous hope of "The Hope of Pessimism." Despite the fact that "each generation builds upon the grave of that which went before," and that the "the whole earth is but the cenotaph of vanished hopes," it is "in the pity of it that we must find our salvation." This is the weakest point in the essay, in which Gissing's characteristic bleakness gives way to a bizarrely florid vision of humanity braving the void together as compassionate friends (and not as "a strong warrior competent against the odds"): "Let us move on to the real gulfs hand clasped in hand, not each one's raised in enmity against his fellow"; "So will the agony of the last drowning moment be lightened by the thought that we have not lived in vain"; "Let us see into the dark places of our brother's soul, and strive to solace him with sweetest sympathy." These lines seem so out of sync with the polemical cadence and utter negativity of the twenty preceding pages that one wonders if Gissing himself even wrote them. But while the point they express is neither totally insignificant nor exactly earth-shattering — something like a vision of community in which the social fabric is held together principally by the commonality of death — Gissing maintains his unique ability as a writer not to turn away from the abstract negativity he has produced, which reaches its peak in the final paragraph:

> Death, too, persistently regarded as a consummation devoutly to be wished, will lose a portion of its terrors; —
>
> "Nec mihi mors gravis est posituro morte dolores."
>
> The grave will become a symbol of joy; those who have departed will be spoken of

> as the happy ones, and the tears of the mourner will be checked by his bitter reason. Pity is alone for the living.— Unless by the eyes of faith we may look onward to that day when compassion will extend itself to generations yet unborn. To create a being predestined to misery will come to be deemed a crime, even as the passion concerned is recognized as a sin. And so, perchance, where the condemnation of reason could not overcome, the dictates of emotion will be strong to chasten; a childless race will dedicate its breath to eternal silence, and Mercy will have redeemed the world. [40]

The essay comes to rest on this more specific description of a potential world to come — as close as Gissing gets to utopian speculation — and regains some of its earlier intensity. And so, too, the essay again leaves us with a sense of the histrionics and arbitrariness of Gissing's utter desolation ("only with the final cessation of conscious life can evil disappear from the earth"), which seems to exceed what we normally find in calls for humanity to contemplate its ineluctable lot. Death does not deny life its meaning, but rather is the shared experience which confers value on all social life, which is striving towards "eternal silence."

While the strength of that final sentence, with its desire for a childless race, is considerable in its own right as a statement of critical protest against the demands of a dominant social order whose "great problem is, how to make the food for two keep three alive" (tinned meat?), Gissing's vision of a future with no future ought to be read as a dissent against the status quo of literary as well as human production and reproduction. The essay was, after all, destined for Gissing's desk drawer, a calculated decision which weighed Gissing's already dreary financial future against whatever possible future could await such an earnest defamation of the societal norms that had already begun to assail Gissing's novelistic output. More to the point, what Gissing's argument lacks in practicability it more than makes up for in affective force (at 25, he is trying to out-Hamlet Hamlet). This is a rare species of invective that is at once logically sound (enough) and yet at the same time is obviously entirely incapable of persuading any one of its agenda, namely, the importance of ending the propagation of the human race; regardless of whether one thinks of future generations as necessary (and obviously in our day and Gissing's

necessity does not bear on the matter), there is still a notable discrepancy between his style of conceptual argumentation and the affective urgency with which he communicates his revulsion for one of the more basic facts of human civilization. It makes no difference whether we think the future ought to be finally childless and then eternally silent or whether we delude ourselves into believing in a future of complete satiety; what we are actually witnessing is the appearance of an intensely applied rationality in the process of producing an affective negativity normally not attached to these particular objects, which ordinarily carry a positive valence. The closest parallel that comes to mind is the mixture of extreme rationality and contemptuous despondency in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which, as anyone who has read it must admit, seems at times designed to make one feel as guilty about going to the movies or listening to jazz as about Hiroshima or the Holocaust. In Gissing's case, at least, the objective validity of his argument takes second place to the highly restricted affective range and emphasis on the subjective ferocity of his whole socially critical orientation: "Man becomes conscious that to represent himself as tempted by evil is a reversal of the truth; evil is the essence of his being; of good he is cognizant, but can only approach it....The foremost religions of the world, Buddhism and Christianity, alike recognize this, vouched for as a truth by that inner persuasion, that subjective proof, which is our only revelation."

What emerges in situations like these, where negative affects (here, contempt and revulsion) are so clearly in excess of and friction with the rational language which attempts to house them, is an aesthetic relation. The intentionality customarily ascribed to rational, critical discourse breaks down at the moment we realize that philosophical logic has not only failed to deliver that click of conceptual identification that makes reading philosophy so satisfying, but has instead presented us with a world so affectively overdetermined in this particular unpleasant

direction that it is emotionally unrecognizable; it is as though all the colors in Gissing's dystopia were wrong. We say, he *can't* mean *that*. Then we either voice our own revolted outrage; or we entertain the idea of living out our own ascetic fantasy in accordance with our own reading of Gissing or Adorno; or we refocus our attention on what Gissing has already expressed for us as "the sincerity of minds differently constituted from [our] own," which is to say, we find in Gissing's early critical text something like the seeds for a negative aesthetic that can help us account for the discrepancy between Gissing's stated intention and his reception, between his own revulsion and the critical revulsion he provoked.

In this sense Gissing's rather corny imagination of a meek humanity facing together "the real gulfs hand clasped in hand" resembles a picture of reading, a negative aesthetic relation whose constituent elements run directly against the current of the discourse of taste in all its various registers and yields instead an aesthetic of disgust. Against the critical distance required for the aesthetic contemplation of an artwork, which, Bourdieu argues, is a form of alienation shielding the reader from "the loss of the subject in the object," Gissing focuses instead on representing the "despair...in the discovery that subject and object presuppose each other"; if one wants to "view this mutual relationship from without [one] must first transcend the conditions of [one's] intelligence."[41] The removal of this distance, which in the Kantian tradition would remove the requirement that art produce beauty, and so open the floodgates for a wave of aesthetic revulsion, also opens the door to the experience of authorial intention in a way that traditional aesthetic theory considers inimical to the ends of high art and is ordinarily ascribed to the domain of crude pleasure and entertainment. But to read Gissing's novels as objects designed for pure entertainment is an essentially impossible endeavor: they are not fun; they do not make you laugh; they have almost no sex; do not even get much mileage, as these things go, out of

displaced sexual energy; they consciously eschew the cadences and alliterations of the English language so much of which, for example, Joyce so clearly picked out of Dickens' pocket; they seem to despise everything within themselves; and their endings are at best not tragic and at worst disappointing. From the level of the individual word, up through both dramatic and metanarrative levels and into the domain of critical discourse, Gissing's novels represent instead a profound attempt at maintaining their focus on their own critical disgust, without mitigation, and without repurposing that disgust in the service of pleasure.

"If readers can put faith in the desperate sincerity of the author, they will not be disgusted with the book; otherwise, it is far better they should not read it." Without a claim on Gissing's intention, the books will revolt; and yet, revulsion itself is defined as that intention "represented as it were obtruding itself for our enjoyment while we strive against it with all our might." Gissing's novels are literally mired in the most central problematic of the aesthetic tradition.

IV.

What *happens* to books that lay claim to the aesthetic relation I have just outlined? What does that relation *do,* once it becomes an actual, and not a theoretical relation? These two questions are far more valuable than any attempt at dissolving the tension between Gissing's aesthetic and our Kantian inheritance. Rather than putting our foot down and deciding once and for all about the nature of disgust, we can discern some of the force of Gissing's work by examining the footprint they have left in their critical legacy — a legacy notable, as I suggested earlier, for Gissing's rapid plunge into obscurity. What we see is that from the beginning of Gissing's career, when reviewers were not finding in Gissing's more properly social novels a confirmation of their own altruistic agendas, is that even the strongest praise of his novels' literary merits has always been tempered by the identification of his writing's repulsiveness in terms of both style and

content. Early reviews of *The Nether World* read like an abecedary of the various ways that a reader might confront a work of literature that provokes disgust, ranging from condemnation of Gissing's purposeless, but intentional interest in revolting representation, to applause for his "brutal accuracy":

> ...We rise from a perusal of his book with a load at our hearts and a feeling of hopelessness, such as Hercules must have felt when called upon to cleanse the Augean stables. And as far as we can see at present there is no Hercules living, albeit writers of Mr Gissing's stamp resemble him somewhat. (Unsigned, *Whitehall Review*, 4 May 1889, 19)

> It is possible, indeed, that Mr Gissing might not find the amusements of the upper classes a subject for unmitigated admiration; but at any rate this description of the people has in it more of cynical contempt than of sympathy and insight. (Unsigned, *Guardian*, 29 May 1889)

> What is the object...of painting such scenes — such conditions of society, and of human life reduced to its barest and blankest elements of spiritual death, of moral atrophy, of physical degradation?
>
> If the object only were to provide amusement for a passing hour...it would be worthy of the severest reprobation.
>
> If, again, it were the purpose of those who describe this triumph of the fraud and malice of the devil and man, to foster in our minds the deadening pessimism which makes men acquiesce in the dogma that this is the worst of all possible worlds — it would be an unhealthy and misdirected object.
>
> Nor should we protest less distinctly against any notion that such realistic pictures are excusable only on the plea of Art for Art's sake. That 'such things are' is not, in itself, an adequate excuse for dragging them into publicity. That a dunghill exists, or that a beggar's foot is dirty, is no sufficient reason for painting them. Nature herself protests within us against the revelation of her horrors, the laying bare of her sores.
>
> ...The author of [*The Nether World*] has little or nothing to impress upon as to the nature of the remedy... (F.W. Farrar, *Contemporary Review*, September 1889)[42]

Even when Gissing turned his attention away from the more obviously gruesome conditions of the working class, the stamp of the revolting stuck with him; like Hardy in this respect, the more Gissing attempted to write *about* something, the more he was accused of just doing it. Significantly, the turn away from the semantic focus on the "laying bare of [nature's] sores"

exposed Gissing to criticism for stylistic shortcomings. Thus we get the "obvious blemishes" a *Daily Chronicle* (26 May 1892) reviewer points out in *Born in Exile*, words like "'nigritude,' 'sussurration,' 'improval,' 'intemerate,' [which] strike us as vile phrases"; as well as the critique of Gissing's propensity for quotation and allusion, which one *Saturday Review* critic found unreadable:

> It is all very well to quote, as does the author of *Born in Exile*. 'Oui, répondit Pococurante, il est beau d'écrire ce qu'on pense; c'est le privilège de l'homme,' but he should remember that what is 'beau' to the writer may be anything but 'beau' to the reader, and that if it be the privilege of one man to write, it may be, at least, equally within the rights of others to skip.[43]

But Gissing had already agreed: ""If readers can put faith in the desperate sincerity of the author, they will not be disgusted with the book; otherwise, it is far better they should not read it."

The emphasis on stylistic repulsion continues on into the 20th century, too. Take, for instance, Orwell, actually one of Gissing's biggest champions in the twentieth century (the story goes that the transformation from Eric Blair to George Orwell owes its 'George' to Gissing):

> Certainly there is not much of what is usually called beauty, not much lyricism, in the situations and characters [Gissing] chooses to imagine, and still less in the texture of his writing. His prose, indeed, is often disgusting.[44]

The reaction is typical. The entire critical heritage is marked by similar proclamations of interest, balanced by austere pronouncements of taste which are not easy to read neutrally, and which often rely on just those terms which appear most frequently throughout Gissing's work. It is hard to imagine using the word "disgusting" to describe a similarly stilted prose description of a bunny rabbit or a rainbow. And Orwell is especially telling, since he re-stages the familiar problematic of the disgusting and the beautiful as something to be discerned in Gissing by the critic, and not part of Gissing's own critical aesthetic statement.

Maybe what the fate of Gissing's novels reveals is the need for a new literary category,

something between pulp and literature, what we might call 'pulped literature,' a form of writing which engages so directly and contentiously with the symptomatic dictates of critical judgment that no amount of interest of any kind can actually save it from the dung heap where, in any case, it already aspires to go. Gissing's novels and their critical afterlives offer us a glimpse of the immense burden that such a literature would endure under the weight of a century of protracted pronouncements of taste. One imputes "vileness" to his prose, as though it were intrinsic to it; or as though, because it felt too intentional, one had to consider this or that turn of phrase as accidental flaws standing in the way of a higher form of enjoyment, and not an element of a conscious aesthetic project. It is perhaps not surprising that an author whose work plunges headlong into the boundary confusions inherent to disgust reactions would encounter those confusions again and again in his critical afterlife. But the upshot of this is that the degree to which Gissing's novels have been misread into oblivion (which is not the case with every author whose work falls out of print) is also the degree to which the contours of the Public Nostril, as it has barely evolved in the century since Gissing's time, come into sharper focus; we can almost see its pores, as with Gulliver's reflection

> upon the fair skin of our English ladies, who appear so beautiful to us only because they are of our own size, and their defects not to be seen but through a magnifying glass, where we find by experiment that the smoothest and whitest skins look rough and course and ill-coloured.[45]

The centrality of revulsion to Gissing's work serves as a magnifying glass held over the dominant strain in our inherited system of taste, which struggles even to regard his prose for too long due to the categorical exclusion of disgust from the public spaces of aesthetic judgment; as though at the end of the day there were no difference between a picture of a disgusting thing, a disgusting picture, and the disgusting thing itself. Thus we begin to see the books as books, as physical objects at once full of language, but also subject in obviously material ways to the

consequences of language; and we see the continuity of preoccupation over intention, authenticity, and taste as an actual indicator of the continuity, not the separation, between the social and the aesthetic from Gissing's day to our own; and finally we see the compound effect of this kind of revolted critical reception — because really, where can an author go if he or she consistently provokes such a response; where does Gissing go in the 20th century? He goes out of print.

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[1] Delany, 89.
[2]Delany, 35- 8.
[3]Irving Howe, "George Gissing: Poet of Fatigue," 119 – 125.
[4]See: George Gissing. *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*.
[5]Gissing, *The Nether World*. Citations hereafter are indicated within the text.
[6]The latter quote was removed after the original three volume edition.
[7]Marx, *The German Ideology*, 41.
[8]Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*.
[9]Williams, *Culture and Society*, 90.
[10]Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 189 – 191.
[11]Delany, 67.
[12]Woolf, 223.
[13]Compare with Paul de Man: "The exchange from part to whole generates wholes that turn out to be only parts." "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," 79.
[14]*Culture and Society*, 175-6.
[15]Ryle, 121-2.
[16]Delany, 45.
[17]Quoted in Eagleton, "Thomas Hardy and *Jude the Obscure*," *The Eagleton Reader*, 36.
[18]Bourdieu, 488. Of particular interest to this dissertation is the final chapter, "Postcript: Towards a 'Vulgar' Critique of 'Pure' Critiques."
[19] "A picture of a dung-heap could be justified provided a beautiful flower grew out of it; without the flower, the dung-heap is merely repulsive."
[20] Jameson, 192.
[21] Jameson, 199.
[22] Jameson, 201-2.
[23]Seth Koven. *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 8.
[24] Koven, 87
[25] Koven, 8.
[26] Gissing, *The Whirlpool*, 406.
[27] Gissing, *The Whirlpool*, 423.
[28]Quoted in Maltz, 17.
[29] Maltz, "Blatherwicks and Busybodies: Gissing on the Culture of Philanthropic Slumming." In Ryle, ed., 16.
[30] Koven, 52.
[31] Koven, 64.
[32]"Another Drop for the Drama." *Punch* March 17, 1866: 117.
[33]Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 151.
[34] Gissing, "The Hope of Pessimism." In *George Gissing: Essays and Fiction*, edited by Pierre Coustillas.
[35] Gissing, "The Hope of Pessimism," 82.
[36] Gissing, "The Hope of Pessimism," 84.

[37]Benjamin. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” *Illuminations*, 254.
Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xviii.
[38] Gissing, “The Hope of Pessimism,” 88.
[39]Unsigned review from *The Nation* (20 February 1890), 160. Reprinted in: Coustillas and Partridge, eds., *George Gissing: The Critical Heritage*, 147.
[40]Gissing, “The Hope of Pessimism,” 92-7. The Latin is from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (“Narcissus”): “Death is not grievous to me, for by death I shall lay aside my pains.”
[41] Gissing, “The Hope of Pessimism,” 93.
[42]Coustillas and Partridge, eds., *The Critical Heritage*, 138 – 146.
[43]*Critical Heritage*, 291-2.
[44]George Orwell, “George Gissing.” In *Collected Articles on George Gissing*, edited by Pierre Coustillas, 55.
[45]Robert A. Greenberg and William B. Piper, eds., *The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift*, 71.

Rotten Atmospheres: Jude the Obscure *and the Stench of Modern Obscenity*

> "The frightening unknown on the other side of the line is that which in man we call the unconscious, that is to say, the memory of those things he forgets. And the things he forgets — you can see in which way — are those things in connection with which everything is arranged so that he doesn't think about them, i.e, stench and corruption that always yawn like an abyss. For life after all is rottenness."
>
> — Jacques Lacan, "The Function of the Beautiful"

> "Behold, they are all vanity; their works are nothing; their molten images are wind and confusion."
>
> — *Isaiah 41:29*

"Inflamed by strong liquors" one day in June, 1663, Sir Charles Sedley and some companions climbed to the balcony of the Cock's tavern in London, and "putting down their breeches excrementiz'd in the street: which being done, Sedley stripped himself naked, and with eloquence preached blasphemy to the people." [1] One account has Sedley then "throwing down bottles (pist in) among the people in Covent Garden," almost sparking a riot. "And that being done," Samuel Pepys observed in his diary, "He took a glass of wine and washed his prick in it and then drank it off."[2] For producing this bombastic mix of profane speech, bodily emission, and disorderly conduct thought to "corrupt the public morals," Sedley was fined, held without bail for a week, and bound to his good behavior for a year — a punishment to which Sedley, a poet well known for his wit, "made answer that he thought he was the first man that paid for shitting."[3] He was not so far off the mark, either: as one of the earliest noteworthy indictments

for the common law offense of obscene libel, Sedley's case would provide a precedent for the next three hundred years of obscenity law. It was not until the Victorian period, however, that this unwholesome concoction of speech and conduct would be enshrined in statutory law, when Lord Campbell's Obscene Publications Act of 1857 allowed for the prohibition, seizure and destruction of the diverse and unspecified range of texts and images — from pornographic postcards to Zola's *La Terre* — which comprised the "abominable traffic in obscenity."[4]

Victorian obscenities did not have to rain down on your head from a chamberpot dumped off a balcony or be accompanied by actual human waste in order to be actionable, and yet the language of the law never loosened its grip on the potent vocabulary of pollution and disgust — of bodily filth, sewage and stench — which Sedley's explosive tirade so neatly illustrated and invited. Thus when Victorian legislators spoke of "the mass of impure publications which was poured forth on London," and hoped that "the public might be relieved from these contaminations,"[5] or when revolted book reviewers warned of "those dark corners where the amateurs of filth find garbage to their taste,"[6] they were speaking words that were less than literal, but something more than metaphorical. Intimations of an inescapable overlap between verbal and excremental forms of bodily emission and between emetic, erotic and emotive expression — as well as intimate but unwanted connections between consumption and expulsion, between each of the body's openings' various uses — helped to sculpt the accusatory language of Victorian obscenity law.[7] Far from incidental, this splanchnic rhetoric actually structured the way obscene works were identified and understood to operate within the developing field of the law, which freely entangled aesthetic, moral, and bodily or affective registers, with little to no distinction, in the evocative idiom of disgust. From Sedley to Lord Campbell and continuing into the present, to make a claim about how obscenities function, one must already have some notion

of the workings of disgust.

This chapter will argue that the emergence of obscenity law in the Victorian era represents an absorption into legal affairs of the specific aesthetic discourse of disgust which I have examined throughout this dissertation. To demonstrate this, I will turn to parliamentary and judicial debates over obscenity in the legal archive, as well as to Thomas Hardy's meditations on the subject in *Jude the Obscure* and his essay "Candour in English Fiction." But to begin with, there is already a general way in which obscenity law depends on the aesthetic domain, since it is one of relatively few arenas in which judicial and legislative institutions concern themselves explicitly with cultural or artistic production, especially on the level of content. Presupposing a relationship between cultural consumption, aesthetic response and the rule of law, obscenities reside at an elusive point of contact where the imaginary insides of a book and its social environment are felt to collide. Even before the American trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the late 1950s, when for the first time literary 'experts' were hauled out of the classroom and into the courthouse to testify to a given work's aesthetic value, obscenity proceedings were unique in granting aesthetic judgments a concrete role in a purportedly rational and objective judicial process. Despite laying claim to such wildly divergent conceptions of evidence and proof, and despite the historically fraught relationship between objectivity and the aesthetic domain, legal and aesthetic judgments converge in the obscene.[8] Seen through the wide-angle lens of cultural history, the very emergence of obscenity in the modern period reflects the deep tectonic ambivalence between the shared but necessarily subjective experiences we tend to designate as cultural, and the reliance on rational, objectifying practices which have structured our social institutions. Why else would we feel we need the law to protect us from works of art and literature?

In what follows, I treat the disgusting as the aesthetic category most relevant to a discussion of Victorian obscenity, focusing in particular on the two interrelated features attributed to disgust in both aesthetic and psychological accounts which I identified in the opening discussion of *Jane Eyre*. The first of these is obtrusiveness. Recall that Kant described the disgusting artwork as "obtruding itself for our enjoyment though we strive against it with all our might." In this relation, disgusting art objects are understood to possess an intentional power in excess of our capacity for resistance; they force their unwanted consumption upon us as though they had wills of their own, an agency whose very existence threatened our autonomy as subjects. In contemporary discussions of obscenity, this conception is often further specified as the capacity of the obscene to "overflow" the aesthetic frame, which relates to the etymological sense the word conveys of bringing onstage that which is customarily kept out of sight.[9] Such unruly objects have obtruded into psychological accounts of disgust, which often confirm Kant's focus on the object's intention by elaborating a kind of animistic thinking: "The disgusting object...is not regarded as belonging to a class of inorganic matter, but...as something 'almost living,' endowed with the capacity to sneak up on, and to penetrate, the body in some unnatural way."[10] To recall, this animism connects to the laws of sympathetic magic — contagion and similarity — with which disgust has been associated. Not just the object, but images that resemble it or things which have come into contact with it adopt its powers to sneak up on and to penetrate the self. And these contaminating powers of the disgusting object and its semblant effigies are experienced as properties of an unwanted agency.

The second feature of disgust relevant to obscenity is its negativity. The contaminating work's pollutant powers and unacceptable agency only become manifest negatively, in their rejection, just as growing aware of the obtrusiveness of the disgusting artwork is inseparable

from our "striving against it with all our might." For Kant, this unwanted experience was grounds enough for excluding objects that provoke disgust from the aesthetic sphere, in order to clear a space for proper judgments that do not follow subrational rules and superstitious laws of magic. As Frazer insisted, the laws of "spurious science" are fundamentally at odds with and threatening to the rationalization of modern society. The exclusion of disgust therefore has a role to play in the disenchantment of the world; but, as I have argued throughout, that negative gesture of exclusion also bears a family resemblance to disgust in its own right. Unlike the animistic reaction, which seeks to destroy or expel the disgusting object, the exclusionary reaction to the disgusting abolishes the bare existential possibility of its obtrusive powers. The animistic rejection of the object is complemented by the equally negative disavowal of animism as something real, so that, when one judges an artwork aesthetically — that is, as good or bad or ugly or beautiful — it is as though it never could sneak up on one or act of its own accord.

These two features of disgust were central to the Victorian conception of obscenity as a form of pollution, at once unwanted and obtrusive. A close reading of the archive of legislative debate surrounding Lord Campbell's Act reveals a consensus among many Victorian lawmakers that obscene and pornographic works were to be treated as elements of an inescapable noxious atmosphere which pressed itself upon unwitting victims through the mouth and nose, obtruding itself for enjoyment though Victorians strove against it with all their might. The boundary between nuisance and obscenity blurred in the legal discourse of the last years of the 1850s, as the need to be rid of ostensibly licentious pamphlets laid claim to the same revolted urgency as the need to purify the Thames in the years leading up to the Great Stink. Yet rather than engaging this pollution model on its own irrational ground, critiques of censorship have by and large attempted to frame the issue of obscenity as a dialogue about individual liberties, focused on

guaranteeing subjects a relatively unrestricted freedom of expression, and not on protecting the public sphere from assaults by animistic objects. Even in the 1850s, critics of obscenity laws therefore rarely bothered to deny allegations of a particular work's obtrusive agency, because this quality is already excluded or disavowed in practice by the rational constitution of texts and images as expressive objects. The two sides talk past each other.

Hardy was among the Victorian authors most invested in exploring the obscene, especially as it related to his abiding interest in animism, as well as his extensive literary experiments with different varieties of negation. Though he is only occasionally brought up in this context, from the close of the 1880s onwards Hardy's writing reveals an increasingly complex investment in the very questions of negativity and obtrusiveness which not only defined the obscenity debates in his day, but also characterized the moral revulsion his last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, elicited from the literary press. Caustically dubbed "Jude the Obscene" by one reviewer, the book was both a lightning rod for allegations of pollutant obscenity, and a sustained examination of the internal mechanics of such allegations; a liminal case study (the book was never actually banned), and, along with "Candour in English Fiction," an important chapter in the modern critique of literary censorship. Hardy is unique among such critiques, however, in that he shared with proponents of obscenity regulation an animistic vision of culture as an airborne pollution, inhaled through the nose and mouth against one's will — what he describes in *Jude* as the "rotten atmosphere" of cultural institutions which have turned or gone stale. By sharing with his own detractors the focus on the obtrusiveness of the disgusting which has been so central to the development of the modern category of the obscene, Hardy preserved a negative vision of cultural objects as imbued with a dim and elusive agency, which for most critics of censorship simply did not exist. Thus within Hardy's Wessex and without, cultural objects lay

claim to an animistic power often in excess of the expressive authorial agency which is normally the basis for attacking censorship: “Makers of things,” he observed in his poetical matter notebook, “e.g. painters, writers, builders, furniture makers, are present as ghosts before their works.”[11]

Reading *Jude* in the broader context of the disgusting and the obscene foregrounds the contribution that a critically invested novelistic discourse can make to this unique entwinement of aesthetic and legal affairs. Indeed, from the 1890s until the 1960s, major Anglo-American obscenity trials were concerned almost exclusively with novels — from *La Terre* to *Ulysses*, *The Well of Loneliness*, and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* — and this informed the way that particular aesthetic problems, such as the distinction between part and whole, played out within the law. *Jude*, however, underscores a side of obscenity that is rarely the focus of critical attention, and which is not reducible to the questions of sexual explicitness raised by most of the literary works which sit at the core of 20th century Anglo-American obscenity law. The myopic focus on representations of sex has lent obscenity law the form of an intractable problem, mostly serving to obfuscate the ways in which irrational concerns about agency, animism and pollution helped to shape the matters of speech, conduct and expression which comprise the heart of obscenity law. Hardy’s novel can shift our focus towards the more historically significant and fundamental contours of the obscene, towards the emergence of a publicly and politically recognized discourse of disgust in the Victorian period, an imaginative discourse with roots in the aesthetic, and stakes in the emergence of the modern public sphere.

I. *Aspirations*

Jude is a meditation on obscenity — on its negativity, on its singular mix of expression and

conduct, on the looseness of the category, and on the inconsistency and hypocrisy with which it is applied. The novel's language is to begin with overwhelmingly pejorative: its pages overflow with words that are understood to be vandalizing, defamatory, lewd and blasphemous; texts in the novel are scratched out, erased, effaced and burned; the most straightforward written document is a child's murder-suicide note, which is trailed only distantly by a college rejection letter; speech is rumorous, slandering and full of aspersions. In a similar vein, graven images in the book are destroyed and idols are smashed and destroyed, and photographs are carried like talismans and adored like pornography, guiltily stroked and kissed when no one is thought to be watching. Compared to such relationships to texts and other cultural objects, the graphic scenes in which Jude slaughters the pig, or in which Arabella first courts him by whacking him in the face with a dismembered pig's penis, seem tame. Pigs are kid stuff; words and pictures are dangerous. One wonders if Hardy's contemporaries would have felt those particular scenes to be so provocative if not for the far more global negativity the novel reserves for culture and modernity writ large: "You called me a creature of civilization, or something," Sue chides Jude: "It is provokingly wrong...I am a sort of negation of it" (180).

From iconoclasm to censorship, immolation to defacement — the novel transpires entirely within the ambit of the obscene.[12] Yet as a consequence of this thematic engagement, "Jude the Obscene" was received by many as though the book itself threatened to negate civilization. The most infamous reaction belonged to the Bishop of Wakefield, who reported being "so disgusted with its insolence and indecency that I threw it into the fire." Burned but not banned, the charge against the book was led by Margaret Oliphant, who averred that "nothing so coarsely indecent as the whole history of Jude in his relations with his wife Arabella has ever been put in English print....There may be books more disgusting...in those dark corners where the

amateurs of filth find garbage to their taste; but not...from any Master's hand."[13] Despite her ferocity, Oliphant's criticism actually registers a complex instability in the accounts of just what made Jude so obscene: some reviewers joined her in skewering the novel's "coarsely indecent" treatment of sex and marriage, while others turned to the pig-sticking scene as an illustration of the novel's gratuitousness carnality; still others saw the "titanically bad" book's mechanistic conception of destiny as a "repellant" transgression against aesthetic disinterestedness.[14] Thus, for some, the existence of immoral or sexual material within the novel was sufficient grounds for decrying its obscenity; while for others it was the overly didactic, purposive nature of Hardy's moral or critical agenda which precluded its full reception as literature, in the way that an excessive intentionality is often used to distinguish pornography or propaganda from purportedly literary texts.

Jude's revolted reception therefore points to a more general pattern of response enabling a book about obscenity to be treated as though it were an obscenity in its own right. According to the most common reasoning, the bare presence of obscene material within a work renders the whole work obscene, regardless of context — though the status of intention, either the author's or the text's, clearly bears on the matter. As with the aesthetic discourse of disgust, obscene contents are treated as an obscene container. (This troubled relationship between part and whole was not addressed within the law until the 1933 trial of *Ulysses*, when it was finally ruled that works needed to be regarded in their entirety, and that a single obscene paragraph or phrase could not legally capsize a behemoth of a novel.) In his 1890 essay on "Candour in English Fiction," Hardy characterized this same problem by arguing that, in judging a text obscene, "a question which should be wholly a question of treatment is confusedly regarded as a question of subject."[15] What ought to be a matter of judging *how* certain material is represented is, on

Hardy's account, taken instead as problem *that* certain subjects are represented in the first place. To claim that a work is obscene is to engage in a confused mode of judgment which conflates existential criteria about whether or not something is present, with evaluative criteria about whether or not something is good. Hardy's take on obscenity sits on the same epistemological and socioethical fault line identified at the beginning of this dissertation in connection to the role of disgust within the history of the novel. The breakdown of distinctions between fact and value inherent to disgust reactions maps directly onto Hardy's identification of a confusion between questions of subject and questions of treatment inherent to Victorian censorship. As with the disgusting work, the obscenity is deemed real because bad; inversely, its suppression makes it good because gone.

From the novels of the late 1880s onward, Hardy explored this immensely productive confusion of the existential for the evaluative with a consistency and variation suggesting deliberate experimentation. In what Marjorie Levinson has called Hardy's "strangely suicidal imagination," the insatiable impulse to make the unreal coincide with the unwanted functions as a dramatic *agon,* fueling narrative action and propelling characters through their fictive worlds.[16] There is always somebody or other who can't go on, but goes on, lamenting along with Tess that "I cannot bear my fate as write, / I'd have my life unbe,"[17] or joining in Michael Henchard's desire in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* to escape his failures by wishing himself out of the world:

> The whole land ahead of him was darkness itself; there was nothing to come, nothing to wait for. Yet in the natural course of life, he might possible have to linger on earth another thirty or forty years — scoffed at; pitied at best. The thought of it was unendurable.[18]

Henchard's grim reflections very neatly demonstrate the ways in which Hardy will oscillate between existential and evaluative registers, the latter understood here in terms of desire, so that the wish for non-existence can be a conscious desire in the face of thwarted material ambitions,

even while the self's existential aspirations to go on living seem to transpire in a register wholly independent of the will.

On a generic level, too, the intermingling of these registers informs what Aaron Matz has recently called *Jude*'s "terminal satire," describing it as a work whose "destructive energy" and "radically ironic and misanthropic, perverse humor," after lacerating the social world, "must in the end turn inward, on itself."[19] Matz's generic claim implicitly rests on a tendency in Hardy's work to blend a socially critical agenda with more properly existential concerns. From one perspective the gratification or frustration of desires and the truth or falsity of ideological narratives are the novel's measures of value; yet from another vantage point, Hardy seems to peg a negative value to the basic fact of being alive, of existing: "*The amusement of the dead,*" a notebook entry marked "X-mas Day 1890" reads: "At our errors, or at our wanting to live on."[20]

Despite the ubiquity of this thematic in Hardy's oeuvre, it is only in *Jude* that Hardy engages with the conflation of existential and evaluative modes of judgment as a matter explicitly related to the ways in which individuals relate to texts and other cultural objects, as well as to cultural consumption more generally. The most notable of these relationships is clearly Jude's childhood fantasy of intellectual cultivation, by which his desire for institutionalized cultural authority becomes tragically enmeshed in his existential well-being. But before examining this central axis of the novel, I want to turn to a pair of peripheral scenes which capture something essential to Hardy's understanding of the mechanics of aesthetic relations. In the first, Phillotson gazes at a photograph of Sue. Snooping around in Sue's desk drawer at the schoolhouse where she formerly worked, he removes the portrait of Sue "as a young woman, her dark eyes and hair making a very distinct and attractive picture of her":

> It was a duplicate of the one she had given Jude, and would have given to any man. Phillotson brought it half-way to his lips, but withdrew it in doubt at her perplexing phrases: ultimately kissing the dead pasteboard with all the passionateness, and more

> than all the devotion, of a young man of eighteen. (195)

An older man lasciviously coveting an image of his young female employee while in the workplace, there is something both pathetic and sordid about Phillotson's adoration of Sue through her picture. Yet observe the specificity with which Hardy's describes Phillotson's motivation: preparing to kiss the image, he balks when he thinks of the ambivalence of Sue's "perplexing phrases," as though by deriving sexual pleasure from the picture he would be vulnerable to retaliation. Counterintuitively, it is only by divesting the image of this animistic connection to Sue — by renouncing it as "dead pasteboard," as a mere copy or thing — that Phillotson is able to fully embroil it in his sexual fantasy, reinvesting it with a passionateness that is ironized not only by the image's reproducibility, but by Sue's physical aversion to his touch.

The instance provides a provocative counterexample to received ideas about how obscenity and pornography function. Rather than exceeding the aesthetic frame, Phillotson here tamps down the image as it thrusts itself upon him, forcing it back into its two-dimensional existence as inert representational matter. It as though all representations exceeded the frame, but through denying this existential status and power they become harmless objects of desire that can be handled sexually. Hardy's relative skepticism for the demystified, deauthorizing attitude towards representations shines through. In the collision the novel stages between modern ideas and religious beliefs about the power of cultural objects, Hardy's position often seems bizarrely more amenable to the latter than the former. This residual acknowledgment of the animistic in representation distinguishes him from other vocal critics of Victorian prudishness, who viewed pornography as the consequence of a prevalent repressive social attitude towards sexuality, and defended sexually explicit works of 'real' literature as the protected expressions of creatively virile authors. Thus for D.H. Lawrence, an essay about pornography was necessarily a polemic against the sexual repressiveness of "the grey elderly ones belong[ing] to the last century, the

eunuch century, the century of the mealy-mouthed lie, the century that has tried to destroy humanity, the nineteenth century,"[21] as well as a spirited defense of the "fresh and wholesome" depictions of sex in authors like Boccaccio. For Hardy, the problem would seem to lie instead in a conception of aesthetic response in which desire and value can only be supplied when representations that have been stripped of their existential agency.

A second peripheral scene helps to clarify Hardy's unwillingness to reduce our enthrallment to cultural objects entirely to fetishism and mystification. When we first meet Sue she is, in the words of Jude's evangelical aunt, "an artist or designer in some sort of ecclesiastical warehouse, which was a perfect seed-bed of idolatry" (122). Yet despite the religious nature of her employment, and before her ultimate conversion, Sue nonetheless claims the most thoroughly demystified and demystifying attitude in the novel, going so far as to condemn Christminster as "a place full of fetichists and ghost-seers!" (185). Following this impulse, in one of Sue's first scenes in the novel we see her buying two pagan figurines — one of Venus, one of Apollo — from a peddler walking through the hills selling "I-i-i-images." Only partly because she knows that her churchgoing landlady will not approve of the purchase, the image-figurines immediately make her extremely anxious:

> She clasped them as treasures....[But] when they were paid for...she began to be concerned as to what she should do with them. They seemed so very large now that they were in her possession, and so very naked. Being of a nervous temperament she trembled at her enterprise....After carrying them along a little way openly an idea came to her, and, pulling some huge burdock leaves...from the hedge, she wrapped up her burden...But she was still in a trembling state, and she seemed almost to wish she had not bought the figures. (129-30)

After telling her prying landlady that they represent St. Peter and St. Mary Magdalene, her lie is exposed a dozen pages later and she is forced to move out: "She broke some statuary of mine," Sue reports to Jude. "She found it in my room, and though it was my property she threw it on the floor and stamped on it, because it was not according to her taste, and ground the arms and the

head of one of the figures all to bits with her heel—a horrid thing!" (139). From Sue's defiantly agnostic, modern perspective, the existential matters of belief inherent to her landlady's iconoclasm have become subordinated to evaluative aesthetic questions of "taste." Yet by highlighting Sue's physical trembling anxiety over her purchase, Hardy suggests that aesthetic relations cannot fully demystify artworks of the powers which destructive iconoclastic gestures acknowledge.[22] In both relatively tangential scenes, an obscure aura suggesting a transgressive agency beyond the control of the subject clings to a representation, an agency which is registered negatively either through disavowal, rejection or destruction.

This same aura is present in the far more central narrative thread of Jude's desire for Christminster, taken as the emblem of his more general ambitions for cultural acquisition, consumption and authority, and figured throughout the novel as a totality in terms of breath and atmosphere. Serving as a narrative and generic pivot point as the novel lurches forward from its opening as a seemingly desire-fueled *Bildungsroman* into the more satirical and ultimately tragic modes which define its main phase, Christminster is at once the object of Jude's conscious aspirations and the source of a pervasive respiratory motif in the novel that describes those aspirations in terms of breath, suffocation, and contagion. Indeed, *Jude* is quite literally a novel of aspirations, a text in which fantasies and desires are inhaled, and in which the world exudes noxious and fetid atmospheres that get inside people and sour them from within, against their wishes. Culture in *Jude* is an airborne pollution.

Relying from start to finish on a vocabulary of inhalation and ingestion, the novel tells the story of Jude's limited rise and precipitous fall as the story of his breath, of the rise and fall of his chest. Beginning early on in the novel when he first sets his sights on the "bluer, moister atmosphere" of Christminster from afar, and "drew in the wind as if it were a sweet liquor,"

Jude's fantasy of educating himself and moving to the university town takes hold once he believes he has inhaled it:

> He had heard that breezes traveled at the rate of ten miles an hour, and the fact now came into his mind. He parted his lips as he faced the north-east, and drew in the wind as if it were a sweet-liquor.
>
> "You," he said, addressing the breeze caressingly, "were in Christminster city between one and two hours ago, floating along the streets, pulling round the weather-cocks, touching Mr. Phillotson's face, being breathed by him, and now you be here, breathed by me – you, the very same."
>
> Suddenly there came along this wind something towards him — a message from the place — from some soul residing there, it seemed....calling to him, "We are happy here!"....He had become entirely lost to his bodily situation during this mental leap....(59)

Notably, the internalization of fantasy involves actually breathing in air thought to be exhaled by the cultural center; desire and existential drive here become entangled, as interior self and exterior environment merge in Jude's lungs. This emphasis on the physical incorporation of culture lends Jude's revery a real materiality, however ephemeral, that carries over into the next phase of the novel, when the damp "rottenness" of the Christminster stones still "seemed to breathe his atmosphere" even while they suffocate his ambitions (118-9); as well as later, with Sue, encumbered by "the oppressive atmosphere which encircled their souls" (328); and all the way through to the end, to the "dreary, strange, flat scene, where boughs dripped, and coughs and consumption lurked," when Jude "is confined to his room by inflammation of the lungs, a fellow who only had two wishes left in the world, to see a particular woman, and then to die" (419). While Jude claims to have indirectly committed suicide by gratifying his desire to see Sue one last time, he is simultaneously presented as having been the symbolic victim of the "rottenness of [the] historical documents" which he ingested as a youth — dead, more figuratively than many Victorians, of consumption; and yet Hardy also appears to have conceived Jude as suffering from an occupational hazard known at the time as 'stonemason's lung' or 'stone-cutter's disease,' the material particulate of the dank university and church stones out of which he made his livelihood

literally lodged in his respiratory tract. The libidinal desires for cultural acquisition and love, the ideological fantasy of socioeconomic advancement, and the existentially negative groping towards death — Jude's inspiration, aspiration and expiration, respectively, we might say — all commingle in his overworked, overdetermined lungs.

Jude's critique of sociocultural institutions — church, marriage, university — derives much of its force from this respiratory motif, by which cultural objects and their ideological promises are imbibed from the air. Terry Eagleton has suggested we understand Jude's internalization of the Christminster fantasy as Hardy's critique of false consciousness, arguing that Jude's "mental leap" springs wholly out of the deprivations of his socioeconomic situation in Marygreen at the onset of the novel: "The more starved and barren actual life is, the more the ideals it generates will be twisted into bodiless illusions."[23] But the structure of this deleterious cultural atmosphere has far more in common with archaic models of moral and cosmological pollution than it does with modern attempts to explain the ill effects of cultural consumption in terms of ideology critique; as we have seen, Hardy remained very skeptical that the fantasied relationships between individual and artworks and other cultural artifacts could be explained away as false consciousness, and that facts could trump values. Indeed, the respiratory theme in *Jude* suggests that Hardy wrote from an intense conviction that, regardless of its truth or falsity, fantasy life was not only real in some sense, but could be transmitted between people as an object or atmosphere: "The biography of an emotion, idea, aspiration, (as of a person)," a suggestive 1896 entry in the *Poetical Matter* notebook reads: "Passed on from one to another as a coin."[24]

The notion that disgusting cultural objects are imbibed through the air as an unavoidable atmospheric pollution was at the anti-modern heart of Victorian obscenity law. Obscenities are

what emit a rotten atmosphere; they follow primal laws of contamination; confound enjoyment for disgust; and merge the subject with its environment in a revolted boundary confusion, so that breathing them in aligns revolted containers with their revolting contents. Hardy inverts this arrangement, so that it is not filth or smut or pornography which functions as pollution, but rather the products and institutions of the dominant culture which are felt to be obscene, even as they operate on Jude's desires.

II. *The Age of Obscenity*

Modern obscenity law was shaped by two conflicting ways of conceiving of the threat that certain texts and images could pose to a nascent public sphere. On the one hand, the development of the law has long been fueled by a conception of obscenity as a form of pollution, a contaminant that forced itself upon, whether or not you sought it out and paid for it, and therefore needed no further definition. Beginning with the Lord Campbell's often cited declaration in 1857 that "he had learned with horror and alarm that a sale of poison more deadly than prussic acid, strychnine, or arsenic — the sale of obscene publications and indecent books — was openly going on," there is a long and colorful record of legislative and judicial text treating obscenity as a problem related to the ineluctable and unwanted effects of physical ingestion, consumption, and contamination.[25] On the other hand, detractors of censorship and obscenity regulations have always sought to frame the matter as a problem of judgment. As soon as legislation was introduced into Parliament to make obscene libel a statutory offense, critics pounced on the law with a litany of questions regarding the inherent ambiguity of aesthetic judgments: Who is fit to judge, and by what standard? Such evaluative questions, however, are

largely irrelevant from a perspective which purports to understand obscenities as an existential problem of in incontestable pollutant agency. Thus from the start, the law has been marked by the non-coincidence of the two sides of the debate. What was for many the principle objection to obscenity law — that there was no definition of obscenity — was for others the basic premise.

The passage of Lord Campbell's Obscene Publications Act of 1857, which remained essentially unchanged until its replacement by the Obscene Publications Act of 1959, empowered the courts and police with the ability to confiscate and destroy published materials which were deemed to be obscene, targeting in particular, as the inflamed Lord Campbell averred, "people who designedly and industriously manufactured books and prints with the intention of corrupting the public morals."[26] Significantly, however, Lord Campbell's Act supplied no definition of obscenity, an omission which met with considerable criticism in both houses of Parliament, and which was by no means a casual oversight. It was very consciously a law which criminalized the circulation of a certain class of objects, but made no provision for the systematic description of that class as a whole, or the objective identification of those objects individually. From the moment he introduced the bill, Lord Campell had maintained that "there was no definition of obscenity," and that "he was ready to make what was indictable under the present law a test of obscenity," that "the question of whether the pictures or books impugned were obscene or not was left to the jury to decide."[27] In other words, the Obscene Publication Act did not aim to provide an evaluative standard of obscenity; in fact, its author was certain there could be none, and that none was needed. From its inception, obscenity law has rarely given a better description of the class of objects it was designed to categorically forbid than "I know it when I see it," though it has always arrogated to itself the legitimacy of a self-evident universality.

It took over a decade for the first obscenity test to arrive. In the 1868 trial of Regina v.

Hicklin, Chief Justice Lord Alexander Cockburn established what has come to be known in international law as the Hicklin Test, an enduring set of explicit legal criteria for judging a text or image to be obscene. Forming only a few sentences in Cockburn's fairly lengthy verdict, the test, which with some alteration remained actively in use as a legal standard in both British and American obscenity law into the late 20th century, read as follows:

> ...And I think the test of obscenity is this, whether the tendency of the matter charged as obscenity is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall.[28]

While the Hicklin Test did provide a precedent for future cases, it is nonetheless notoriously vague and riddled with circular reasoning. Essentially, it transferred the burden of defining obscenity as a quality of certain objects onto the equally hazy task of demonstrating a causal link between certain works and an even more ill-defined kind of moral harm or corruption already implicit in most allegations of obscenity. Indeed, when the philosopher Bernard Williams was tasked in the 1970s with leading a Commission on Obscenity and Film Censorship, it was "this famous test—the deprave and corrupt test, as we shall call it," that the Commission argued "has...brought a certain confusion in the interpretation of the law."[29] Due to the Hicklin Test, Williams added more succinctly, "The law, in short, is a mess."[30] Yet despite this built-in obscurantism, from the 1888 prosecution of Henry Vizetelly for his translations of Zola to the defenses of *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* decades later, international obscenity law has been anchored in the basic assumption — tacit or otherwise — that "the tendency...to deprave and corrupt" is available as a legitimate measure of a work's obscenity.

Prior to the Obscene Publications Act and its elaboration through the ruling in Regina v. Hicklin, the banning of texts and images took place under the auspices of a broad spectrum of legal prohibitions, which combined in unpredictable ways in order to produce what we think of today as the ostensibly unitary category of obscenity. Among these were relatively well-defined

offenses such as seditious and blasphemous libel, which treated certain forms of language as antagonistic conduct either against one's country or against the sacred, as well as more nebulous transgressions including outraging public decency, the conspiracy to corrupt public morals, and keeping a disorderly house.[31] Regarding the former class of offense, as Lynn Hunt and others have shown, most 17th century British texts that might today be classed as obscene or pornographic were markedly political in nature, and often couched the task of political and religious critique alike in sexually explicit poetry, prose and illustration.[32] Thus the focus on words and images as actionable conduct in the development of obscenity law derived most apparently from the laws against seditious and blasphemous speech. Yet the moral vocabulary of depravity and corruption found in the Obscene Publications Act and the Hicklin Test stemmed from the latter type of offense, which, while not normally applied to speech-acts, published texts or images, were types of behavior understood to comprise assaults against less-circumscribed entities such as "public morals" and "public decency." "Obscene libel" was in this sense a new way of understanding certain uses of words and images as a kind of conduct against a newly emergent and yet ever ephemeral public sphere, as opposed to the stabler institutional spheres of Church and State.[33]

The cultural-historical pressures which brought about this convergence of previously distinct offenses were also intertwined with the development of three major interrelated cultural formations over the course of the Enlightenment: the novel, pornography, and aesthetic theory. As Allison Pease observes at the opening of her study of modernist literature and obscenity, "As aesthetic philosophy emerged and created the modern notion of the art object in the eighteenth century, so pornography as we understand it today came into prominence in the Age of Reason."[34] More than a mere historical coincidence, each member of this tripartite emergence

presupposes the other two: only through the formalization of a vocabulary of aesthetic taste could a critic appear who could distinguish what was potentially art by declaring an obscene non-art, and not merely poorly executed bad art, to lurk on the other side of the line. The critic-consumer thus adjudicated between the novelist-artist and the pervert-pornographer, and in this sense all three worked together to demarcate and identify which representations were admissible in the modern public sphere and which were not. "Since the eighteenth century," Pease continues, "What is aesthetic and what is pornographic have repeatedly been defined as mutually exclusive, pornography often marking a boundary or frame within which 'true' aesthetic texts operate." Along with the popularization of photography in the mid-19th century and after it film in the twentieth, both the attempted framing of the aesthetic through the exclusion of the obscene, and the rapid proliferation and commercialization of sexually explicit literature, have long taken place principally under the auspices of the novel form; from Fanny Hill to Constance Chatterley the already messy history of the novel has been marked by a persistent and an occasionally flagrant lack of distinction between what is felt by some to be pornographic and what is defended by others as literary.[35] The very terms of aesthetic theory, as well as the contours of the novel form, have historically been shaped by the fundamental question concerning the distinction of art from obscenity: Where to draw the line, and who to draw it?

This precise evaluative problem was adopted by one side of the Victorian obscenity debate. Lord Campbell's urgent proposal to regulate the "detestable traffic" in obscene publications was met by equally anxious protestations that the new law would expose the fruits of high culture to a self-interested and uneducated relativism of individual tastes. "My noble and learned Friend's aim is to put down the sale of obscene books and prints," Lord Lyndhurst objected, "But what is the interpretation which is to be put on the word 'obscene'? I can easily

conceive that two men will come to entirely different conclusions as to its meaning."[36] While Lord Campbell's law purported to target only a certain class of pornographic literature, it was feared the failure to provide a fixed definition of obscenity would result in the confiscation and destruction of confirmed works of high art and literature by the prudish and uncultivated. To illustrate his point, Lyndhurst famously narrated a hypothetical situation in which a policeman enters into a print shop after receiving a tip that it was trafficking in pornography, and, lo and behold, immediately lays his eyes on an obscene "picture of a woman stark naked, lying down, and a satyr standing by her with an expression on his face which shows most distinctly what his feelings are and what is his object":

> The informer tells the man he is going to seize the print, and to take him before a magistrate. "Under what authority?" he asks; and he is told— "Under the authority of Lord Campbell's Act." "But," says the man, "don't you know that it is a copy from a picture of one of the most celebrated masters in Europe." That does not matter; the informer seizes it as an obscene print.....

Lord Lyndhurst foresaw a world in which Correggio and Goya, Dryden and Ovid, "may be committed to the bonfire with as little mercy as Don Quixote's chivalry books were," undifferentiated from the mass of smutty photographs and filthy writing Lord Campbell claimed to be after. Nor was he alone in his vision of the coming cultural dystopia; though the bill passed through both houses of Parliament without the addition of the desired criteria, it had no shortage of detractors.[37] "The extensive powers sought to be conferred upon the police by the Bill required grave consideration, and the definition of what was obscene was very uncertain," Lord Wensleydale weighed in. "There was not a library in which books could not be found containing passages which a strict-dealing magistrate might consider to bring them within the operation of this Bill. The classic authors might be held to be obscene, and the possession of Lucian, Lucullus, or Juvenal, might expose the owners to the penalties which the Bill prescribed."

This concern for the steamier side of European cultural patrimony was echoed even more

forcefully in the House of Commons, where opponents of the bill were similarly quick to point out that "even the works of Pope, elegant and beautiful though they were, contained passages which no decent woman could say she had read."[38] More significantly, debate in the lower house gave voice to mounting anxieties that the law granted the police dangerous, undue powers to seize and destroy private property, acting solely on accusations anyone could make. Liberal MP Richard Monckton Milnes, a poet and literary scholar himself who would later defend the scandalous Swinburne, declared that "the Bill was a clumsy method of meeting the evil, one totally alien to the habits of this country, and certain, in the end, to be disgustful to the English people."[39] Milnes's critique epitomized a particular line of argumentation which sought to frame the obscenity debates around potential infringements of individual liberty stemming from the initial lack of a definition of the obscene, rather than the questions of moral harm and greater social good which concerned the law's proponents. To Milnes, government assaults on the autonomy of the subject were cause for disgust, not bawdy poems and sexually explicit photos. "In a laudable zeal for a good object," James White likewise warned, "[the Committee] should be careful not to over-step the limits of a wise discretion and inflict a signal wrong on innocent individuals," adding that "to pass the Bill in its present shape it would be imperatively necessary to insert an interpretation clause, or pass a special law to first define what was obscene."[40] Otherwise, it seemed increasingly clear the law would lead the nation down a slippery slope: "Where were they to stop? They could lay down no rule."[41]

Such concerns were not unfounded, and countless trials which ensued in the wake of the Act's passage and Regina v. Hicklin would dramatically recapitulate the same questions about the legitimacy of judgment and the fuzziness of the obscene. As had been feared, the law did indeed make it such that obscenity charges could be brought on at the urging of civilian groups

such as the Society for the Suppression of Vice and later the National Vigilance Association, whose extreme standards and vigilantist agendas hardly bore any resemblance to general public opinion. The more notorious indictments, such as Henry Vizetelly's for his already expurgated translation of Zola's *La Terre*, capture some of the actual relativism and incoherence which stemmed from empowering the police to confiscate first and determine obscenity later. Something of a crowning achievement for the NVA, the Vizetelly trial appears especially egregious with the added clarity of hindsight, considering Zola's acknowledged acclaim in Britain and abroad at the time and in the coming decade. Yet as Vizetelly's son would recall later in his book on Zola, the trial itself frequently verged on farce, and Vizetelly's own lawyer was reprimanded by the prosecution for referring to Zola as "a great French writer":

> "Oh, no, a voluminous French writer, if you like," said Sir Edward Clarke. "A popular French writer," the Recorder suggested. "A writer who certainly stands high among the literary men of France," Mr. Williams retorted; whereupon Sir Edward Clarke exclaimed in a pompous way, "Do not malign the literature of France!"[42]

La Terre — which the prosecution declared a book without any artistic merit and simply "filthy from beginning to end" — was found to be so obscene that the jurors evidently begged the prosecutor to stop reading passages aloud. "I hope you will understand that it is at least as unpleasant to me to read them as it is to you to listen to them," the prosecution responded, adding: "If you think...that these passages are obscene, I will stop reading them at once."[43] Such proceedings were in effect realizations of the precise set of aesthetic and moral concerns about the relativism of the obscene that opponents of Lord Campbell's Act had pronounced thirty years earlier.

The problems arising from the question of who was fit to judge a given work's obscenity were by no means isolated to works which today appear confirmed in their aesthetic value. On the contrary, as Lisa Z. Sigel has shown in her study of Victorian pornography, the massive fin-

de-siècle trade in photographic postcards depicting sexually explicit scenes from around the globe was fraught by the same problem of differing tastes. In this connection, Sigel reproduces an exchange from the trial of a man indicted for selling pornographic postcards, who maintained his innocence on the grounds that "the cards were sold by millions all over the world":

> The Magistrate: That is not the point. The question is whether they are indecent.
> The Defendant: Who is to decide what is decent?
> The Magistrate: I have to decide in the first place.[44]

This last point — "I have to decide in the first place" — with its frustrating mix of anti-empirical egoism and moralizing universalism, could indeed be the slogan for all justifications of obscenity, from the moment it was enshrined as a legal category through the present day. The incoherence of obscenity law is in this sense the result of ever so many instances of somebody having to decide in the first place, as though the individual case would finally establish the rule — an unwanted universal derived from a loathsome particular — when in fact it could only ever further muddy the waters.

For Lord Campbell as well as for the authors of the opinions in Regina v. Hicklin, obscene works patently did not demand evaluative judgments. There was no need to search around *inside* a picture for the qualities or features that would distinguish it as obscene; that an obscenity existed was felt to be self-evident and therefore to be a just cause for action. Far from an arbitrary rhetorical flourish, Lord Campbell had in fact decried his "poison more deadly than prussic acid," and introduced the matter of "pestilential" publications, in the context of a discussion of the difficulties in regulating the sale by pharmacists of physically poisonous chemical compounds. Indeed, the problems in the latter case seemed to anticipate the problems that would arise as regards the former: "However extensive might be the enumeration of poisons, the ingenuity of

chemists would speedily introduce others. Then the line which separated poisons from medicines was extremely difficult to define."[45] Accounts of Lord Campbell's comparison have tended to treat it primarily as a convenient rhetorical maneuver, making use of a telling overlap in our moral and physiological vocabularies to capitalize on the urgency of an already extant legislation. But there is every indication that, for Lord Campbell as for many, obscenity was felt to function as a poison in ways that were more homologous than metaphorical, and that it therefore joined other pollutant substances in the elaboration of a Victorian *pharmakon*.

The text of Regina v. Hicklin, too, shares its vocabulary of toxicity and ingestion with Lord Campbell's initial proclamation. To recall, the trial is principally, if not exclusively, remembered today because it introduced the first legal test for judging a work's obscenity: "I think the test of obscenity is this, whether the tendency of the matter charged as obscenity it to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall." The whole significant afterlife of the trial revolves around this one evaluative touchstone, though the trial was relatively unconcerned with evaluating obscenity, and focused almost exclusively on the question of intention: Henry Scott, had been prosecuted for selling copies of an anti-Catholic pamphlet, *The Confessional Unmasked*, as part of his membership in the Protestant Electoral Union, a group aiming "to protest against those teachings and practices which are un-English, immoral, and blasphemous." The local magistrate for the borough of Wolverhampton, Benjamin Hicklin, had found that, while the pamphlet may have contained "grossly obscene" descriptions, Scott's intentions in selling the pamphlet exonerated him; on appeal, the higher court, led by Lord Cockburn, overturned Hicklin's ruling, decreeing that the pamphlet's obscenity would override Scott's intention, and so "he must be taken to have intended the natural consequences of his act."[46] The pamphlet's

obscenity was never in question, and while the justices found it necessary to provide the criteria for obscenity which subsequently became the Hicklin test, this strand of the trial was secondary to the larger principle question about the intentionality of obscenity.

Regina v. Hicklin established the overriding intentionality of *The Confessional Unmasked* through a frequent recourse to a vocabulary of poison and ingestion, contamination and pollution. As with Lord Campbell's poisons, the reliance on this vocabulary can hardly be constrained to a metaphorical register, since the ruling was in fact laying out how obscenities were to be understood to function by the law. The ruling would have been impossible in its actual form had it not been able to adduce a working correspondence between the question of how obscene literature pollutes the public sphere, regardless of the intentions of its distributors, and what was felt to be a related case which decided "whether or not an indictment would lie against a man who unlawfully and wrongfully gave to children unwholesome bread, but without the intent to do them harm":

> The defendant was a contractor to supply bread to a military asylum, and he supplied the children with bread which was unwholesome and deleterious, and although it was not shewn or suggested that he intended to make the children suffer, yet Lord Ellenborough held that it was quite sufficient that he had done an unlawful act in giving them bread which was deleterious, and that an indictment could be sustained, as he must be taken to intend the natural consequences of his act.

Obscenity on this account functions like contaminated or spoiled food, acting on those who have consumed it regardless of their wills or the intentions of the people who have prepared it. Even with a lawful intention, distributing an obscene pamphlet for consumption by the general public was held in this light to constitute a kind of criminal negligence regarding the reflexively contaminant qualities of obscenity; in fact, Scott's intention, which the court repeatedly describes as "an inference of the law resulting from doing the act," was understood as having been subsumed by that of *The Confessional Unmasked*. It is the perceived or imagined autonomy —

and automaticity — of the obscene which enabled this correspondence to ingesting a poison to exceed mere metaphorization, and even to absorb aspects of the law normally reserved for nuisances and public health risks:

> So in the case in which a person carried a child which was suffering from a contagious disease, along the public road to the danger of the health of all those who had happened to be in that road, it was held to be a misdemeanor,without its being alleged that the defendant intended that anybody should catch the disease.[47]

If the previous comparison established the ineluctable effects of an obscenity once it has already been ingested, the respiratory function in this case establishes obscenity as something that one ingests regardless of one's will, something capable of forcing its consumption upon people. Like a contagious disease or a noxious miasma, a piece of rancid meat or a poisonous chemical, obscenities were declared to have independent intentions of their own, rendering insignificant the wills of the subjects with whom they interact and overflowing the contexts into which they are introduced.

The conception of obscenity as a form of pollution which emerges from this closer examination of the Obscene Publications Act and the ruling in Regina v. Hicklin cannot be fully accounted for by debates about where to draw the line between art or literature and obscenity or pornography, though, with few notable exceptions — such as Catharine MacKinnon's important work[48] — such debates have largely dominated the discussion since 1857. Instead, the whole matter of obscenity has been characterized since its inception by the non-coincidence of these two seemingly irreconcilable points of view, the one concerned with the existence of pollutant obscenities, the other with the aesthetic difficulties in judging an object as obscene. There is an immense fracture in the psychosocial dynamics of the obscenity debate, and, depending on which side of this unbridgeable gulf one stands, obscenity becomes a wildly different problem:

what appears as animistic pollution from one cliff looks like protected speech from the other. From the liberal-aesthetic side, censorship represents a potential abrogation of individual liberties, whereas from the existential side the object represents a potential assault on and corruption of the individual.

To understand the significance of obscenity in modern Anglo-American culture, both sides of the long intractable debate have to be taken together and grasped as irrational. It is easy to see why the notion that certain artworks have magical corrupting powers and surreptitious intentions is irrational. But the response within the law has never confronted its superstitious and irrational origins — has rarely even recognized persistence of archaic ideas about intentionality and sympathetic magic into the putatively rational domain of 20th century law. The law has been driven by an unacknowledged avoidance of this confrontation; objects and artworks are not supposed to be so autonomous that they overpower our own liberty as subjects. What has resembled the progressive weakening of repressive and prudish attitudes towards sex and the enlightened defense of free expression and individual liberty has also culminated in the total abolition of obscene agency and pornographic intentionality from the representational frame, if not the public sphere. In protecting authors, the law has deauthorized the text; in defending the artist, the work is defanged and neutralized. The price of being able to say what one likes and consume as one pleases — of being a subject — has been the death of the object.

III. *Le Délire de Negation*

Hardy's experiments with negativity offer a unique way of reconceiving the problem of obscenity, so as to avoid the impasse which has characterized the last century and a half of legal and

aesthetic argument. The sense of the animistic which inheres in Hardy's depictions of aesthetic relations, as well as the development in *Jude* of a respiratory discourse of pollution and disgust, are structurally very similar to the conception of the obscene found on one side of the Victorian legal debate; but in many cases Hardy's own opinions resemble the evaluative and liberal arguments made on the other side. Thus while Hardy's account of cultural pollution may have much in common with Lord Campbell's, he nevertheless remained skeptical that statutory laws were necessary and harshly critical of censorship, and was above all a staunch proponent of what he saw as the need for "candour" in literary production. Often responding to what he felt were *ad hominem* attacks made my reviewers who "go behind the book & review the man," his sense of the stultifying effects of Grundyism was articulate and deeply personal: "If I print them, I know exactly what will be said about them," Hardy wrote of his own poems in 1900: "'You hold opinions which we don't hold: therefore shut up.'"[49] The complexity in Hardy's position on the obscene comes from his remaining deeply invested in the critique of an increasingly moralistic Victorian culture, while at the same time preserving a negative attitude towards aesthetic relations which tended to be affiliated with the advocates of obscenity legislation.

Written on invitation as a contribution to a *New Review* symposium on censorship and literary sensibility, "Candour in English Fiction" was published in January 1890, just as the serialization of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was beginning to produce its own first shock waves, and well after Hardy had fleshed out the basic contours of the story that would become *Jude*. Recapitulating many of the complaints discussed in the previous section, the main thrust of the piece is that the modern novelist is fundamentally at odds with the restrictions imposed on literature by an increasingly middle-brow cultural establishment — "no longer Peers with taste — acting under the censorship of prudery."[50] Not only did this prudishness stifle the future of

literary production and “doom high expression to dumbness,” but it was felt to threaten the whole history of culture. Along with many of his contemporaries, Hardy saw in the dominant sensibility of his day a cresting wave of philistinism, on track to crash headlong into a centuries-old accumulation of bawdy, blasphemous and otherwise ‘unsuitable’ cultural artifacts, a tradition to which the novel was the modern heir. “It is, indeed, curious to consider which great works of the past the notions of the present day would aim to exclude from circulation, if not from publication, if they were issued as new fiction,” Hardy muses in the essay, speculating that, along with Milton, Goethe, Sophocles and Aeschylus, “a brazen young Shakespeare of our time” would have no luck getting novelistic versions of his tragedies past the censor at Mudie’s.

The conflict this represented, he elaborated, was that the production of “true literature” required engaging with the sexual and moral content precluded by uptight contemporary mores: “The crash of broken commandments is as necessary an accompaniment to the catastrophe of a tragedy as the noise of a drum...to a triumphal march. But the crash of broken commandments shall not be heard; or, if at all, but gently, like the roaring of Bottom — gently as any sucking dove, or as ’twere any nightingale, lest we should fright the ladies out of their wits.”[51] Clearly bearing the increasingly tragic tendency of his own work in mind, Hardy argued that a literature “which reflects and reveals life” would require the representation of the dramatic and impassioned transgression of deep-seated moral codes: “In representations of the world, the passions ought to be proportioned as in the world itself.” Against the “charlatanry pervading so much of English fiction,” he maintained that the novel’s connection to social reality depended on its capacity to depict representations of that which society deemed impermissible. Or, in other words, the world within a novel should contain just as much obscenity as the world without.

Part of Hardy’s criticism rested on a familiar assumption about authorial intention that in

fact got his argument nowhere. “Were the objections of the scrupulous limited to a prurient treatment of the relations of the sexes,” he writes, “Or to any view of vice calculated to undermine the essential principles of social order, all honest lovers of literature would be in accord with them.” Anticipating the specific language of “prurient interests” which would come to define obscenity law after the mid-20th century, Hardy here attempts to distinguish literary from pornographic or otherwise immoral intentions. As we saw in the previous section, this attempted distinction has been a problematic, albeit constitutive feature of obscenity law since its beginnings, one with roots in the equally intractable self-definitional problem for the aesthetic domain of describing its own boundaries. There can be no telling in advance which texts will invite critical condemnation for their author’s alleged prurient intentions — a lesson Hardy would learn firsthand in the coming years amid the general lack of critical consensus about what made *Jude* so obscene.

The critical point about authorial intention may have been a dead-end, but Hardy also pursues a more fruitful and open-ended investigation of the different forms of judgment which are called into play in deeming a work indecent or obscene. What appeared at root to motivate the restrictions on “candour” in Victorian fiction, the essay goes on, was the beguiling fact that any representation of transgression would be inevitably taken for a transgression itself. Sidelining the questions of intention, Hardy’s insight into this problem was to identify the confusion between existential and evaluative modes of critical judgment inherent mentioned earlier:

> But the writer may print the *not* of his broken commandments in capitals of flame; it makes no difference. A question which should be wholly a question of treatment is confusedly regarded as a question of subject.[52]

In the confusion of treatment for subject, Hardy suggests, what disappears is the author’s “not,” the contextual marker which shows that the author (or text) does not endorse or promote the

transgression it is nevertheless representing. This slippage actually involves the entanglement of three levels of negation: a character's breaking a rule, then the author's emblazoned "not," and the critic's condemnation, which depends on ignoring that not. Significantly, though, it is only the middle negation, the author's intention to open up a space for evaluating the treatment of the broken rule, which drops out of the picture. The frame which ought to annul the transgression depicted and enable moral and aesthetic evaluation, is instead itself annulled, and the text becomes a transgressive act or object in its own right.

It is worth dwelling a moment longer on the differences between Hardy's two objections to the negative cultural attitudes towards literature of his day. On the one hand, he takes recourse to authorial intention as a means of protesting what are felt as restrictions on expression. But on the other hand, he locates the source of these restrictions in a form of critical blindness that transpires entirely between critic and text, essentially leaving the author out of the picture. In the passage from the authorial complaint about censorship to the identification of a confusion between treatment and subject, the location of intention has been shifted, from the author to the work itself. The obscene work insists on being obscene in spite of its author's intention, as with the disgusting artwork of aesthetic theory. In identifying a culturally endemic confusion between questions of treatment and questions of subject, between evaluative and existential judgments, Hardy begins to acknowledge how these two perspectives on the problem of obscenity talk past each other, staging a conflict of interpretations in which nothing said on one side can ever be made to stick for the other. What appear as opposing positions regarding the expressive agency of authors are actually opposing attitudes towards the agency of artworks.

Jude represents Hardy's richest and most searching exploration of this shifting distribution of agency. Indeed, the very same broken commandments with their ignored 'nots'

make their way into the novel, not only extending his critical discussion of censorship and obscenity, but also suggesting that the subject was of interest for literary representation in its own right. Roughly two thirds of the way through the novel, while living in Aldbrickham, Jude is offered employment as a stone-cutter touching up the lettering of the Ten Commandments in a nearby church, an episode which carefully reproduces the confusions attending the example in "Candour in English Fiction." Accepting the job and reflecting that "we shall have all the church to ourselves," Jude invites Sue to come help him with the work, despite the disapproval their unconventional romance has drawn in town. Before long, several people, including the vicar and the churchwarden, enter the church and begin to question the appropriateness of a probably unwed and potentially adulterous couple for the task at hand: "A strange pair to be painting the Two Tables! I wonder Biles and Willis could think of such a thing as hiring those!" (331). Still at work, Jude and Sue endure the group's protracted disapprobation, as the churchwarden now relates "an anecdote, in a voice that everybody in the church could hear, though obviously suggested by the present situation":

> Well, now, it is a curious thing, but my grandfather told me a strange tale of a most immoral case that happened at the painting of the Commandments in a church out by Gaymead....In them days Commandments were mostly done in gilt letters on a black ground...and they had to get men from Aldbrickham to do 'em. Now they wished to get the job finished by a particular Sunday, so the men had to work late Saturday night, against their will, for over-time was not paid then as 'tis now. There was no true religion in the country then...and to keep the men up to their work the vicar had to let 'em have plenty of drink during the afternoon....It got later and later, and they got more and more fuddled, till at last they went a putting their rum-bottle and rummers upon the Communion table...and poured out again right hearty bumpers. No sooner had they tossed off their glasses than, so the story goes, they fell down senseless, one and all....when they came to themselves there was a terrible thunderstorm a-raging, and they seemed to see in the gloom a dark figure with very thin legs and a curious voot, a-standing on the ladder, and finishing their work. When it got daylight they could see that the work was really finished, and couldn't at all mind finishing it themselves. They went home, and the next thing they heard was that a great scandal had been caused in the church that Sunday morning, for when the people came and the service began, all saw that the Ten Commandments wez painted with the 'Nots' left out. Decent people wouldn't attend service there for a long time, and the Bishop had to be sent for to reconsecrate the Church....You must take it for what it is wo'th, but this case to-day has reminded me o't, as I say. (332)

The irony of this situation is not lost on the couple, Sue remarking: “It is droll, after all...that we two, of all people, with our queer history, should happen to be here doing this! You a reprobate, and I – in my condition....O dear!” Only hours after Jude and Sue overhear the story, however, the contractor comes by the church and fires Jude, having “had a complaint.” The implication is, of course, that Jude and Sue will profane or otherwise corrupt the church, just like the satanic figure in the old man’s story. “A cloud...has gathered over us,” Jude tells his son, Little Father Time, soon after, “Though ‘we have wronged no man, corrupted no man, defrauded no man!’ Though perhaps we have ‘done that which was right in our own eyes’” (338).

The episode recasts in narrative form the critical point Hardy makes in “Candour in English Fiction” that prudish ignorance creates a cultural environment which is stultifying to the individual’s flourishing. The local tragedy of Jude figures metonymically for the complaint about restrictions of free expression; what happens to Jude in the scene foreshadows what would happen to *Jude*, the novel, in its reception — or, Hardy implies, to any text containing representations of transgressive or potentially obscene subject matter. Within this frame of reference, Jude and Sue occupy the position of the writer printing “the *not* of his broken commandments in capitals of flame,” while the churchwarden and company take the position of a censorious public who, in order to condemn the text in question, must omit or overwrite those negations. Jude and Sue’s good intentions dissolve under the preemptive disapproval of their critics, just as Hardy claims in the essay that the novelist depicting a transgression supposedly under the protective aegis of a moral prohibition is likewise stripped of his or her authorial agency. Blending personal tragedy with social criticism, *Jude* thematizes the far-reaching social and cultural problems identified in “Candour” as a drama of individual deauthorization.

Yet if this scene in the Aldbrickham church extends and deepens Hardy’s critique of

prudishness, it also embarks on a less critical exploration of the psychodynamics of condemning judgments and the creative potential of negativity. For it is the churchwarden, and not Jude or Sue, who crosses out the 'nots' in this scene, reproducing in an apparently acceptable manner the absent but threatening text which the couple are nevertheless accused of generating. According to the *dramatis personae* of his own recollected story, the churchwarden himself ought to be cast in the role of the devil with the "curious voot" who profanes the church, though of course it is Jude and Sue who are given that part to play. What is diabolical, Hardy seems to say, is the peculiar power possessed by the critic to alter prohibitions written by others, so that they read as transgressive imperatives, and then, always, to condemn the others for it. But beyond this criticism there is a superfluity of double, triple and quadruple negatives, which seems to be less obviously connected to Hardy's cultural critique of censorship than it is to his sense of the productive and reproductive potential of negation in the first place.

A brief foray into a problem in psychoanalytic theory can help to clarify this. In his well-known essay "Negation," Freud develops the insight that the presence of the "symbol of negation" can allow repressed material to enter into consciousness: the patient who says he isn't talking about his mother is most certainly talking about his mother; "I never thought of that" becomes the "strong[est] evidence that we have been successful in uncovering the unconscious"; "'Now you'll think I mean to say something insulting, but really I've no such intention,'" is a "repudiation, by means of projection, of an association which has just emerged."[53] Thoughts which would otherwise be condemned and relegated to the unconscious are permitted to emerge, granted they are prefaced by a 'No,' which Freud calls the "hall-mark of repression, a certificate of origin, as it were, like 'Made in Germany.'" Moreover, this quality of negation derives from the primitive capacity for expulsion, when, at an early stage, to spit something out functions as a

form of judgment according to a now familiar distinction between existential and evaluative (or, as Freud says, attributive) criteria: “The function of judgment is concerned ultimately with two sorts of decision. It may assert or deny that a thing has a particular property; or it may affirm of dispute than a particular image exists in reality.” The way Freud describes the process of negation, it is as though the attribution of an undesirable quality to an idea or image is converted into an existential negative — bad becomes unreal — which in turn suspends the repression, allowing the idea to enter the consciousness.

Freudian negation offers an appealing way of understanding the poetic and aesthetic processes that inform the history of obscenity law, as I have outlined them in connection to the aesthetics of disgust. With its superstitious implications and passive aggressive overtones, it is not hard to style the churchwarden’s story as a projection; in this case, an *ad hominem* condemnation of others for a disavowed transgression presumably originating in the churchwarden’s own imagination. He projects obscenity outwards, onto their text, telling the story under the permission, so to speak, of a negation. Read this way, Hardy’s scene anticipates a great many Anglo-American critiques of obscenity law in the 20th century that would rely on a largely Freudian vocabulary of sexual repression and cultural neurosis in order to condemn the censoring impulse, often while ascribing to sexually explicit novels such as *Lady Chatterley* and *Tropic of Cancer* a liberatory aesthetic potential. Thus, for example, Malcolm Cowley’s expert witness testimony during the first American trial of Grove Press for publishing *Lady Chatterley* went so far as to claim that Lawrence’s book actually did the same work as psychoanalysis: “In substance, it [*Lady Chatterley*’s message] is what marriage counselors are telling the counselees five days a week as a result of various forces, including Freudian psychology and great worries about repressions and perversions.”[54]

Hardy actively distinguishes his account of the negativity of obscenity from accounts of censorship as a form of repression. For one, Hardy and Freud both acknowledge the extent to which acts of condemnation or of judging something as obscene are themselves as much productive as destructive activities, which are in many ways difficult to distinguish from other creative acts. As Paul Ricoeur commented on Freud's essay, "It is not surprising that negation is derived from the death instinct....On the contrary, what is surprising is that the death instinct is represented by such an important function which has nothing to do with destructiveness, but rather with the symbolization of play, with esthetic creation, and with reality testing itself."[55] Negation is both critical and creative. This connection of symbolic and especially aesthetic activity with negation is everywhere in Hardy's oeuvre. Even the churchwarden, after all, absents one text by narrating a story about another which is not there. Hardy is at least as interested in working out the details of this process, by which a recollected story about an imaginary text takes forceful priority over one that is literally being written in stone, as he seems critical of the "oppressive atmosphere" which afflicts Jude and Sue (328).

Moreover, Hardy's account of creativity is already structured similarly to Freudian negation, since it is the author's "not," printed in capital letters, which constitutes the aesthetic frame, and enables the representation of the transgression; once again, something bad becomes unreal and therefore acceptable. Censorship becomes in this sense the negation of a negation — it fails to see the "not," and in so doing abolishes aesthetic frame, so that the object itself becomes unacceptable. Without the frame, the object comes back to life in all its obtrusive agency. Indeed, in the Victorian discourse of obscenity, it is as though the aesthetic frame never existed, and not that the frame had been repressed, since if the latter were true, we would presumably find signs and traces of it everywhere in the annals of Victorian law. But those traces

are not to be found in the discourse of obscenity. One side insists that is there, plain as day; the other side hallucinates its absence — or vice versa.

By putting Hardy into conversation with disgust in the context of obscenity law, I have attempted to inject a new set of concerns into what has remained an intractable problem. Hardy's unabated investment in negativity and in the obtrusiveness of aesthetic objects separates him from most detractors of censorship and prudishness. Yet as I have shown in the first section, in *Jude* Hardy inverts the terms of the dominant Victorian conception obscenity, so that sociocultural institutions and the very promises of cultivation and personal development offered culture by itself are shown to function like a cloud of pollution, inhaled through the nose and mouth. Contrasted with the historical record of the legal debates over obscenity in the second section, Hardy's idiosyncratic notion begins to come into focus. Culture, not obscenity, is what emits a rotten atmosphere. Taking a cue from the wild-eyed, gagging proponents of the Obscene Publications Act, Hardy's thoughts on aesthetic relations and obscenity refuse to reduce the agency of the artwork to its status as a mediated authorial expression. Something in Hardy's conception of the artwork resists, something material and negative; something which, in this final section, I have linked to Hardy's own literary experiments with negation and to his thoughts about the productive potential of negativity in general.

Hardy demands a far wider and more responsive critical vocabulary for dealing with negativity than most authors. Forgetting, death, decay, nausea, alienation, and any number of other negative moods, states, attitudes and operations are all merged in his writing, as though what joined all things together in the world was their rejection — like Jude's belief that a "magic

thread of fellow-feeling united his own life with" the crows he is employed to scare away from farmer Troutham's crops — a sense of unity rooted in the recognition that the birds "seemed, like himself, to be living in a world which did not want them" (51). *Jude* is beyond question Hardy's most negative novel, and throughout the book Hardy remains deeply invested in this contradictory notion that what connects individuals to each other is their feeling constitutionally and even cosmically expelled by available forms of life, and not merely socially or politically marginalized. And if the experience of being in the world is one of constant negation, of being constituted as an individual through a process of perpetual expulsion, then the state that puts one's insides in step with the outside world is not pleasure but disgust, or at least the queasy *taedium vitae* which pervades Hardy's Wessex: "Jude went out, and, feeling more than ever his existence to be an undemanded one, he lay down upon his back in a heap of litter near the pig-sty....As you got older, and felt yourself to be at the centre of your time, and not at a point in its circumference, as you had felt when you were little, you were seized with a sort of shuddering, he perceived" (54-5).

This chapter began with Charles Sedley throwing open bottles of hot urine off a public house balcony, and ended with Freud's speculations on the developmental significance of spitting things out and Jude's uneasy shuddering. My intent has not been to attenuate or water down the visceral side of the disgusting, but rather to show how the irrational, the bodily and the downright revolting are actively connected to our capacities for critical judgment and symbolic representation. Negation is a fitting place for a study of disgust to come to close, an umbrella big enough for the splatter of Ruskin's fimetic storm-cloud, Darwin's primal vomiting, Gissing's ceaseless revolt, and Hardy's variations on the theme:

It wears me out to think of it,
To think of it;
I cannot bear my fate as writ,

I'd have my life unbe;
Would turn my memory to a blot
Make every relic of me rot,
My doings be as they were not,
And gone all trace of me!

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[1]Quoted in Robertson, *Obscenity*, 21.
[2]*The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, July 1 1663.
[3]Craig, 24.
[4]Hansard Parliamentary Debates, 3 July 1857.
[5]Hansard, 3 July 1857.
[6]Cox, ed., *Critical Heritage*, 257.
[7]See: Jonathan Goldberg, "The Anus in *Coriolanus*," 177-180.
[8] Hannah Arendt's observation comes to mind, that in making aesthetic judgments one does not argue one's case to the other — rather, one "woos" him. Could this romancing be the basis for a whole branch of criminal law? Arendt, 72.
[9]See for a few examples:
Allison Pease. *Modernism, Mass Culture and the Aesthetics of Obscenity*.
Carolyn Korsmeyer. *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*.
Diana Heath. *Purifying Empire*.
[10]Angyal, "Disgust and Related Aversions," 397.
[11]Hardy, *Poetical Matter*, 15.
[12]Joss Marsh has made a compelling case for reading *Jude* in the context of Victorian blasphemy proceedings. My argument builds on Marsh's, but finds the novel's negativity cannot be restricted to a religious context — though of course the the longer history of the aesthetic domain and its relations derives in many ways from areas of experience that were formerly religious.
See: Joss Marsh. *Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture and Literature in Nineteenth-Century England*.
[13]Cox, ed., *Critical Heritage*, 270.
[14]Cox, ed., *Critical Heritage*, 261.
[15]Hardy, "Candour in English Fiction." In Orel, ed., 131.
[16]Marjorie Levinson, "Object-Loss and Object-Bondage in Hardy's Poetry," 552.
[17]"Tess's Lament," in *The Complete Poetry.*
[18]Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.
[19]Aaron Matz. "Terminal Satire and *Jude the Obscure*," 519 – 547.
[20]Hardy, *Poetical Matter*, 17.
[21]Lawrence, 75.
[22]See: Latour. "A Few Steps Towards an Anthropology of the Iconoclastic Gesture," 63-83.
Adler, "The First Amendment and the Second Commandment," 41- 58.
W.J.T. Mitchell. *What Do Pictures Want?*
[23]Eagleton, 39.
[24]Hardy, *Poetical Matter*, 21.
[25]Hansard, 11 May 1857.
[26]Hansard, 3 July 1857.
[27]Hansard, 25 June 1857.
[28]Regina v Hicklin, 8.
[29]Bernard Williams, *Report*, 9.
[30]Bernard Williams, *Report*, 20.
[31]Robertson, *Obscenity.*
[32]Lynn Hunt, ed. *The Invention of Pornography*.
[33]Other statutory laws which regulated the sale of indecent prints and literature included the catch-all Vagrancy Acts of 1824 and 1838, which had passed through Parliament following the Napoleonic Wars; the Town Police Clauses Act of 1847; the Customs Consolidation Act of 1876; and the Indecent Advertisements Act of 1889.
[34]Pease, 1.

[35]See: Hunt and Pease.
[36]Hansard, 25 June 1857.
[37]M.J.D. Roberts, “Morals, Art, and the Law: The Passing of the Obscene Publications Act, 1857,” 610-629.
[38]Hansard, 12 August 1857.
[39]Hansard, 12 August 1857.
[40]Hansard, 19 August 1857.
[41]Hansard, 12 August 1857.
[42]Vizetelly, *Emile Zola, Novelist and Reformer*, 280.
[43]*Pernicious Literature*, 17.
[44]Sigel, 150.
[45]Hansard, 11 May 1857.
[46]Regina v. Hicklin, 1.
[47]Regina v. Hicklin, 10
[48]Catharine MacKinnon, *Only Words*.
[49]Quoted in Millgate, 372.
[50]Hardy, “Candour,” 128-9
[51]Hardy, “Candour,” 129.
[52]Hardy, “Candour,” 131.
[53] Freud, “Negation,” 181-5.
[54]Quoted in Rembar, 83.
[55]Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 317.

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