

The Anxiety of Effluence: Resituating Bodily Fluids in Nineteenth-Century Cultural History

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[FIGURE 1]

On the eve of the nineteenth century, William Blake wrote in his contradictory and provocative “Proverbs of Hell” that, while “the cistern contains, the fountain overflows” (199). This conjunction is manifested in few places as aptly as the human body. The body is both cistern and fountain: it holds back as much as it divulges; it is as watertight as it is porous; it admits, circulates, and emits by a series of reflexes that operate at varying degrees of autonomy and mental awareness. While blood, hormones, bile and its related digestive fluids are secretive – only emerging from containment in the event of sickness or injury – tears, sweat, mucus, effluvia, semen, and menses, by their nature, are secreted into the world as an anticipated part of normative life. But, while our skin contains and restrains the motions of the former set of fluids, there is also often a second intangible ‘skin’ of cultural and social practices and conventions that serve to hide the latter. While we may accept the biological fact that these fluids exist in our species, to explore their cultural and intellectual significance during any particular period is, by contrast, to try to prise open a secret history: it is to attempt to reconstruct, then analyse, the kind of mores that tend not to exist actively in the public arena, and which may even be articulated only euphemistically in private. At first glance, the supposedly squeamish culture of the nineteenth century seems to be more cistern than fountain – containing more than it let overflow, at least with regard to the seamier examples of such fluids. Alternatively, perhaps the discourse of a specific historical period simply vacillates between withholding and disclosing pertinent information in a manner that we have lost the power to process.

Commented [Author1]: Just checking- you want to break here from the lit studies convention of listing co-authors in the alphabetical order of their surnames? The break signals Daniel is primary author. Is that your intention?

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What follows is an exploration of the problem of exposing and rehabilitating historical conceptions of a largely unspoken topic: in this case, bodily fluids in the nineteenth century. Ironically, reanimating particular episodes from the course of intellectual history is a challenge that the nineteenth century itself laid down, a challenge which, in our terms at least, it failed to meet. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Friedrich Nietzsche writes with typical mordancy that

the *historical sense* (or the ability to guess quickly the hierarchy of value judgements by which a people, a society, or an individual has lived) [...], has come to us as a result of the enchanting, mad *semi-barbarity* into which Europe has been plunged by the democratic intermingling of classes and races – only the nineteenth century knows this sense. (114-115)

Yet, Nietzsche continues, this modern power to infer “every form and way of life” means we can “go our way enchanted and docile with our senses intact, no matter how much the sewers of the rabble’s quarter are in the air” (115). The fact that Nietzsche, the historical relativist *par excellence*, imagines that human effluvia is something against which the senses must be kept “intact,” rather than being themselves something to acknowledge or even investigate, illustrates the difficulty we have in overcoming our historical prejudices in resuscitating past minds; it therefore provides us with an introduction to the very nineteenth-century psyche we are trying to reproduce.

We are not conducting a history of material culture, nor are we questioning awareness of biological processes across history. We know from studying material culture that urination and defecation, for example, were, for most of history, not treated with the same avoidance seen today: human urine and faeces were quotidian necessities for the tanning, dyeing, and farming industries, and, before indoor plumbing, waste was collected in shared chamber pots

and buckets and often thrown in the streets in urban areas. It was only over the course of the eighteenth century, at least amongst the upper and middle classes, that defecation became a more personal and isolated process, and only through the development of new technologies that human waste became less frequently encountered in industry. We contend, however, that a knowledge of these practices fails to give us a full picture without a corresponding investigation into language and culture.

[FIGURE 2]

When we appraise our modern perceptions of the nineteenth century specifically, it is perhaps the theories of Norbert Elias that most closely link economic and industrial development to a culture of bodily shame: in his seminal work, *The Civilising Process* (1939), Elias argues that shame over bodily fluids and functions is crucial to the building of human societies; shame places necessary disciplinary parameters around behaviours and bodies to continue the trajectory of cultural development. And, indeed, a general biological imperative *may* provide some support to Elias's claim by insisting that "body fluids and body products [and] signs of decay or illness [...] will all reliably provoke revulsion" (Tallis 189). It is an easy leap to assume that shame and taboo derive from issues of health and the survival of the species. The nineteenth century seems particularly suited to reinforcing in miniature Elias's broader claims about human society and development: popular modern conceptions of the century characterise it by its tendencies toward incessant industry and severe decorum (often coded as hyper repression). However, even if this view of the nineteenth century were fully accurate, it is questionable whether we can claim that industry and decorum developed in tandem. Despite Elias's assertions and prevalent (mis)understandings of the nineteenth century, human progress and human shame may not even be corollaries, let alone causally related; we cannot simply, as Freud facetiously put it, make "soap the yardstick of civilisation" (282).

A directly correlative relationship between the fountain of progress and the cistern of taboo is belied by the manifestly uneven, sometimes seemingly retroactive, process of nineteenth-century modernisation itself – thus reasserting the counterintuitive nature of past minds and demonstrating just how potentially alien the everyday behaviour and attitudes of our forebears might be to us. The boom in populations and the coagulation of people in great cities during the Victorian era has since become a fable of social mismanagement and failure to accommodate change, and this is a history that can be told in bodily fluids. We know that by the middle of the century, as Dickens writes in *Little Dorrit* (1857) “through the heart of [London] a deadly sewer ebbed and flowed, in the place of a fine fresh river” (44), an environmental catastrophe checked only with the completion of Joseph Bazalgette’s sewer system in 1875. But it is hard for us to quite gauge why so many Victorian Londoners, at least until the famous “Great Stink” of 1858, seemed prepared to tolerate the Thames’ extreme degradation and its effect on public health in their everyday lives. Perhaps the pollution of the Thames was deemed an inevitable by-product of progress – or, alternatively, the passive terms in which Dickens couches his description might suggest that few Londoners were willing to recognise the extent of a public health crisis in whose creation they shared a portion of the blame. Indeed, the persistence of the “miasma” theory of contagion despite evidence to the contrary has since become a monument to such historical blind spots (one which helpfully overshadows the easy acuity of hindsight). Ignorance, desensitisation, or personal embarrassment notwithstanding, the late-nineteenth-century introduction of improved infrastructure serves largely to obscure these bodily processes even more and to further cement obliviousness. Introducing the sewers in *Les Misérables* (1862), Victor Hugo writes that “Paris casts twenty-five million [francs] yearly into the water. And this without metaphor. How, and in what manner? Day and night. With what object? With no object” (5:

83). Hugo reasserts a subject that is otherwise wilfully submerged and ignored by the populace despite the sheer scale of, and their highly personal participation in, its operation.

Hugo's "without metaphor" qualification notwithstanding, there is a seeming psychological reluctance to acknowledge many bodily fluids literally in nineteenth-century texts. These fluids' *figurative* significance persists, however, and they partake simultaneously in a number of overlapping historically and socially determined discourses that veer between the totemic and the taboo. The metaphorical cachet that blood held as the measure of social or racial distinction persisted into this period and beyond, but we also find that a more abstract conception of "circulation" – that of commodities, money, newspapers, information – was also becoming a gauge by which free-traders and free-thinkers alike might diagnose the potential ills of an ever-growing and coalescing figurative social body. The same principle also applies to seamier fluids: while mainstream nineteenth-century literature and culture may largely have been less *literally* scatological or salacious than that of the eighteenth or twentieth centuries (and special credit here goes to Gustave Doré for his pristine 1854 illustrations of Rabelais), this spirit of grotesquery is conveyed between the two centuries across the nineteenth century on the narrow viaduct of metaphor and allusion. With regard to sexual fluids, we have Charles Baudelaire, who, in a violent quasi-erotic encounter, transmits his splenetic venom "to one who is too cheerful" (Baudelaire 194) in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1853), an image that finds its cognate in the dubious matter emitted in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" (1862). The figuratively scatological, meanwhile, reaches its most transcendental with Thomas Carlyle's satirical German idealist, "Diogenes Teufelsdröckh" (God-born Devil-dung), in *Sartor Resartus* (1836) and its most trenchant with Honoré de Balzac's world-weary lawyer, Derville, who concludes *Le Colonel Chabert* (1832) by saying that the lot of his profession is to "see the same evil feelings recur without correction: our chambers are sewers that cannot be cleansed" (Balzac 104).

[FIGURE 3]

Far from the total bodily erasure one expects of the nineteenth century's supposed apogee of manners and inhibitions, therefore, we find instead a frequent reworking of these fluids into more elevated, systematic, and allegorical terms. Indeed, so recurrent was this tendency that it was ridiculed by Gustave Flaubert, whose titular petit bourgeois, Bouvard and Pécuchet, in the 1881 novel, learn that the secret to writing great literature is that "*to vomit* is to be employed only figuratively" (202). Nevertheless, however candid or discreet the discourse of a particular period may be, it will always necessarily be contained within the confines of the articulable; and frankness, in all its laconism, is therefore paradoxically more discursively circumscribed than the unending inventiveness of euphemism (even if euphemism can itself in turn become a kind of vulgarity). Bodily fluids, therefore, are not conspicuous by their absence in the nineteenth century because they were not absent. Although not literally discussed with the same frequency and indiscretion as in previous and subsequent eras, through their metaphorical potential these fluids maintained and diversified their discursive currency, serving as the basis for many cultural paradigms and material structures that coalesced and crystallised in that period.

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