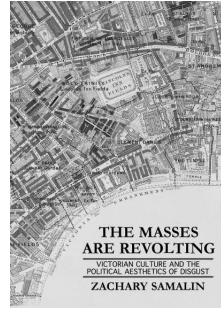


Zachary Samalin, *The Masses are Revolting: Victorian Culture and the Political Aesthetics of Disgust*

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One Wednesday a few years ago, I spent the morning having a wisdom tooth extracted in Leeds. Having time to spare that afternoon, I decided to visit the Thackeray Medical Museum at St James's Hospital. Besides housing a gruesome array of brutal surgical and dental equipment, the display included a reconstruction of a Victorian slum – complete with all the health hazards of the day – presented in painstaking and nauseating detail, down to the odour of the latrine. Looking at these grim exhibits with a mouth full of blood, while still reeling from the anaesthetic was, I can honestly say, a thoroughly fascinating experience. It was like seeing a corner of Victorian England in 3D – the whole dizzying, sickly, dirty mess of it. The experience was enlightening because it taught me one thing; that, despite being repelled by revolting things, we are also compulsively fascinated by them. To confirm this fact, you simply need to type any random disgusting topic into the YouTube search box. I discovered that one video, entitled 'Botfly Maggot Removal', had attracted twenty million viewers.<sup>1</sup>

It is for this reason that, when given a choice of books to select to review for this journal, I chose Zachary Samalin's *The Masses are Revolting*, which takes us on a guided tour of the multitudinous sources of disgust to be found in the Victorian world through the writings of those compelled to coexist with them. The first chapter deals with the 'Great Stink' of 1858. That summer, the combination of heat and increased sewage output into the Thames (thanks to the vogue for flushing toilets) made the river's odour so

nauseous that Parliament became unbearable to work in. The situation was severe enough to force MPs to urgently address the question of sewage treatment, hitherto a source of endless unproductive official wrangling. The result was Joseph Bazalgette's new sewage system, which pumped effluent to the mouth of the Thames. Samalin, presenting an impressive array of sources, traces political and journalistic responses to The Stink, discussing arguments on issues such as whether sewage should be discharged into the river or used as fertilizer, and investigating some eye-opening commentaries on the issue. He also cites contemporary observations which will resonate with anyone living in present-day Britain, where parliamentarians are often viewed as a disconnected elite insulated by wealth against the travails of the masses. The *Times*, for example, rejoiced in the fact that Parliamentarians were finally suffering from the effects of pollution in a way that normal Londoners had been for decades, proclaiming: 'It is right that our legislators should be made to feel in health and comfort the consequences of their own disregard for the public welfare'. The *British Medical Journal*, meanwhile, hoped that a case of 'mild diarrhoea' might visit the Lord Chancellor and stir him into action.<sup>2</sup>

Among his sources, Samalin also draws attention to important but little-known documents such as John Snow's 'Drainage and water supply in connexion with the public health' (1858),<sup>3</sup> which demonstrated that disease was spread through the consumption of sewage-contaminated river or ditch water rather than through airborne 'miasma'. Snow's article itself is worth seeking out, because it presents some compellingly modern arguments for basing sewage disposal on composting toilets rather than flush toilets, which waste fresh water and produce large volumes of effluent. Samalin focuses on one passage from Snow's final paragraph. Here, Snow mocks adherents of the miasma theory of disease by making a sardonic statement about the mid-century obsession with deodorizing the Thames. He remarks that the river's odour is an aesthetic concern rather than a threat to public health, because the stench itself actually deters people from drinking the contaminated water. Samalin argues that Snow's remark 'can point us toward the historically

concrete ways that aesthetic theory offered a discursive framework within which affective and sensory experience could be given a legitimate status within the world of public action and debate'.<sup>4</sup> However, I did wonder whether Snow, Edwin Chadwick or the other participants in sanitary debates would actually have been familiar with or influenced by the German aesthetic theories that Samalin uses to interpret their arguments. I would have liked to see more discussion of the sanitary debate grounded in material culture; for example, through an exploration of the interior design culture, hygiene beliefs and commercial pressures which favoured flush toilets. Indeed, a debate on Victorian beliefs about disgust, dirt and the home might provide a valuable insight into a public health problem which persists to this day. Environmental groups are still concerned about the threat to public health from effluent discharge and have coined the term 'Thames Tummy' to describe the gastrointestinal complaints suffered by water users due to high concentrations of *E Coli* and *Cryptosporidium*.<sup>5</sup> Our own 'local' waterway, Lake Windermere, contains so much effluent from septic tanks that its eco system is under threat.<sup>6</sup> The influence of Victorian ideas of disgust and propriety on plumbing and sewage systems, together with commercial interests, have left us with a problematic legacy, and a critique of these ideas would provide a useful insight into a still-relevant dilemma.

Chapter Two deals with episodes of disgust in Dickens's *Little Dorrit* and Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, as well as with the aesthetic disgust expressed by critics such as William Morris and John Ruskin towards realist fiction. This trend in literature, they felt, had hardened the modern public to the 'infinite nastiness'<sup>7</sup> of industrial society and given it a 'prurient appetite for the rotten and the grotesque'.<sup>8</sup> Throughout his analysis of these and other works, Samalin shows how disgust was a paradoxical emotion for the Victorians. On the one hand, it was an 'unwanted feeling' based on primitive, animalistic urges which the rational citizen was obliged to conquer. On the other hand, disgust played the role of uniting specific groups in their social abjection of supposedly inferior groups. It was also an 'agent of social change'<sup>9</sup> which

could be mobilized in the pursuit of social improvements such as sanitary reform. I would add that there is another dimension to disgust, which I have gestured towards already – that it is sometimes, paradoxically, entertaining and perversely compelling, particularly in the work of Dickens. As Annette Federico observes, neither aesthetic nor anthropological readings of disgust explain the use of the disgust in Dickens's work, where it is often a source of great enjoyment to the writer and evidently, if audience figures account for anything, to readers also. 'Although disgusting', remarks Federico, the 'fluid or perishable bodies' of Dickens's vilest characters 'are not objects of existential terror, and they are often terrifically funny'.<sup>10</sup> She argues that Dickens's work provides a kind of relief-valve for a society which over-valued 'self-containment and purity, Christian duty, and the virtue of stoical endurance', undermining its obsessive quest for order and for 'classification ...hard lines and clear taxonomies'.<sup>11</sup> Investigating the tension between disgust as an 'unwanted feeling' and as a sought-after sensation which offers psychological relief in a society fixated on physical perfection would, again, be a valuable avenue for future work, and might give an insight into our contemporary appetite for consuming media which provokes social disgust.

Samalin's discussion of *Jane Eyre* focuses on the episode where St. John Rivers finds Jane a teaching post at a rural school. When Jane first encounters her students, she finds that some (though not all) are 'unmannered, rough, intractable, as well as ignorant', and feels a sense of degradation at having fallen so far socially from her life at Thornfield Manor. Ashamed at this feeling, Jane vows to improve her students so that she can feel 'gratification' rather than 'disgust' in her work.<sup>12</sup> Citing Martha Nussbaum, Samalin explains that Jane's irrational disgust has more to do with status anxiety than an actual sanitary risk posed by the students. He also argues that her desire to overcome it is evidence of a white middle-class 'civilizing mission',<sup>13</sup> and part of a general trend towards reforming the working classes and colonized peoples out of their 'disgusting' primitive habits. However, Jane's disgust is arguably directed at herself as much as at

her students. Immediately after the passage Samalin cites, Jane imagines the life she could be living as Rochester's mistress, 'in a fool's paradise at Marseilles – fevered with delusive bliss one hour – suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next'. Despite its luxury, the role of mistress seems, if anything, to be more disgusting than the role of schoolteacher, which suggests another paradoxical idea about disgust – that it can coexist with powerful physical attraction. Jane's language here echoes Rochester's remark that his relationships with previous mistresses were tainted by the 'rooted disgust' he felt for Bertha Mason, a fate which Jane implicitly fears for herself. Indeed, Rochester uses the word 'disgust' more than anyone else in the novel, mostly while discussing Bertha and his mistresses. St. John Rivers, devastatingly attracted to Rosamond Oliver, also sees disgust and sexual attraction as intertwined. When he envisages giving up his missionary plans and living at her father's house, he imagines 'human love rising like a freshly opened fountain in my mind and overflowing with sweet inundation all the field I have so...assiduously sown with the seeds of good intentions'. Those plans, he remarks, would have been 'deluged with a nectarous flood', causing the 'the young germs' of his good intentions' to be 'swamped [by a] delicious poison cankering them'.<sup>14</sup> Paradoxically, for Jane, the self-denial of missionary life also provokes disgust, especially when she contemplates marrying St. John, going to India and having loveless marital relations with him, which would be 'monstrous'.<sup>15</sup> As a Victorian woman, she is faced with the decision between disgusting adulterous luxury with Rochester or disgusting marital righteousness with St John. Ultimately, Brontë fudges the issue by killing Bertha and maiming Rochester so that Jane can have a sanitized, non-disgusting relationship with a legitimate husband who is no longer physically prepossessing enough to be dangerous. A further examination of Brontë's representation of disgust in terms of gender, marriage, morality and sexuality would be fascinating.

Samalin's third and most engaging chapter is about Charles Darwin's work on the evolution of disgust which was, evidently, prompted by his own

struggles with gastric illnesses. Samalin traces Darwin's attempts to understand the complex and irrational relationship between the brain and the digestive system. For example, Darwin was surprised by the disgust he felt when he saw food being 'touched by a naked savage, though his hands did not appear dirty',<sup>16</sup> and reflected on how his brain had manufactured disgust when the food posed no danger to him. Samalin also demonstrates how the Victorians were intrigued by the way in which the stomach seemed to have 'a mind of its own',<sup>17</sup> not only performing its normal functions without any conscious effort from the individual, but also, when disordered, impacting on the emotions. He describes how this counterintuitive brain/stomach dynamic undermined Darwin's idea of the body and mind as a rational machine. For example, he explains how Darwin envisaged language – supposedly a vehicle of reason – as emerging from more visceral acts of communication such as vomiting and the emanations of physical disgust which our ancestors may have used to demonstrate that food was unfit to eat. He also explores an array of Victorian anatomical investigations into the digestive system, which included some horrifyingly cruel animal experiments.

The book then proceeds to discuss the role of disgust in the evolution of social theory, beginning with Engels's descriptions of repulsive urban conditions in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), and tracing the ways in which descriptions of the disgusting city were used to convey the idea of social alienation. Samalin describes how these ideas emerged into the concepts of *anomie* and urban estrangement employed by writers such as Durkheim and Simmel, and ultimately into Sartre's 'existentialist nausea'.<sup>18</sup> I wondered whether a further discussion on Victorian ideas of money as 'filthy lucre' (again an object of disgust and well as desire) might have helped to give a sense here of how ambivalent Victorian attitudes to capitalism were. This could have included some discussion of the ways in which writers associated exploitative moneymaking with contagion; for example, Charles Kingsley in *Alton Locke* (1850), where contaminated clothes spread disease from the sweatshop into the outside world.

Chapter Five takes the idea of disgust out of the physical realm and into the moral realm by considering the Obscene Publications Act of 1857, which promoted the idea that moral corruption could spread through society in the same fashion as disease. In this discussion, Samalin considers the moral outrage provoked by Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. He focuses on Sue's purchase of a pair of Greek statues which provokes a confrontation with her landlady over their alleged obscenity, and ultimately the destruction of the statues and the eviction of Sue as the landlady attempts to purge the house of their moral 'pollution'. I did wish, however, that he had looked further into Margaret Oliphant's claim, which he cites on p.235, that Jude's relationship to Arabella was the most 'coarsely indecent' thing ever to be put into English print. In Jude's marriage – as well as Sue's relationship to Phillotson – Hardy explores the role of physical disgust as a motivation for divorce. It would have been interesting to see how the Obscene Publications Act actually functioned to silence those who were trapped in relationships which physically disgusted them, and how, paradoxically, the authorities shut down discussions on divorce by arguing that these debates in themselves would somehow disgust or corrupt the public. But perhaps this is a discussion for another day. The final chapter functions as a conclusion and briefly discusses the Indian Rebellion of 1857.

Samalin's work has many admirable qualities, not least the extensive body of primary texts which it presents, the introduction of lesser-known debates by prominent individuals such as Darwin, and in the humour he provides, particularly during the chapter on the Great Stink. I personally feel, though, that this book, like many more recent academic works, sometimes tends to focus more on theoretical discussion than on primary texts. I think the theoretical debates would have benefited from being condensed and simplified. I also felt that the discussion sometimes veered too far from Victorian thought when twentieth-century thinkers (such as Foucault) were included, and that this was sometimes disorienting. Above all, I would also say that as academic writers it is incumbent on us all (including me) to make

ease of reading *much* more of a priority when we edit our texts. Academic books should be accessible to a wide range of people, including undergraduates, non-specialists, and readers whose first language is not English, both for the sake of the audience and for the sake of achieving as wide a readership as possible. Sentences need to be kept short – three or four lines at maximum – jargon should be kept to a minimum, and definitions should be used for terms which are not in general use. Arguably, scholars of Victorian literature already have enough obscure vocabulary to grapple with in primary texts without having to run to the dictionary to search for words such as ‘picayune’ (used by one critic whom Samalin cites).<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding, I think that *The Masses are Revolting* provides plenty of ideas which could be explored further in many different directions, some of which I have noted above. Indeed, it might be said that the book provides a lot of food for thought; even though much of that food is thoroughly, and quite appropriately, utterly nauseating.

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- 1 Guy Sterne. ‘Botfly Maggot Removal’. *YouTube*. 22 November 2017. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Iyink5ZOFE>. Accessed 29 July 2022.
- 2 Samalin, Zachary. *The Masses are Revolting: Victorian Culture and the Political Aesthetics of Disgust*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021. p. 52.
- 3 Snow, John. *Med. Times and Gazette*, n. s. vol. 16, Feb. 13, 1858 (Part 1), pp. 161-162, Feb. 20, 1858, pp. 188-191 (Part 2), cited in Samalin pp. 58-9.
- 4 Samalin, p. 60.
- 5 Vidal, John. ‘Thames tummy: David Walliams has got off lightly so far’. *The Guardian*. 9 Sep 2011. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/blog/2011/sep/09/david-walliams-thames-pollution>. Accessed 29 July 2022. Wilson, Sarah. ‘England’s polluted rivers are breeding drug-resistant diseases’. *The Big Issue*. 13 Jan 2022. Available at: <https://www.bigissue.com/news/environment/polluted-rivers-breeding-drug-resistant-diseases/>. Accessed 29 July 2022.
- 6 Horton, Helena. ‘Lake District sewage could leave Windermere “ecologically dead”’. *The Guardian*. 8 Oct 2021. Available at:



- <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/oct/08/sewage-could-leave-windermere-lake-ecologically-dead>. Accessed 29 July 2022.
- 7 Samalin p. 102.
  - 8 *Ibid.* p. 15.
  - 9 *Ibid.* p. 12.
  - 10 Federico, Annette R. 'Dickens and Disgust.' *Dickens Studies Annual*, vol. 29, 2000, p. 154.
  - 11 *Ibid.* p. 155.
  - 12 Samalin, pp. 89-90.
  - 13 *Ibid.*, p. 92.
  - 14 Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Ed. Richard Nemesvari. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2021. Available at [https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Jane\\_Eyre\\_Second\\_Edition/OCdJEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Jane_Eyre_Second_Edition/OCdJEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1) Accessed 3 August 2022. pp. 433, 387, 446.
  - 15 *Ibid.* p. 477.
  - 16 Samalin, p. 127.
  - 17 *Ibid.* p. 138.
  - 18 *Ibid.* p. 184.
  - 19 *Ibid.* p. 248.