The Sanitary Arts

Cleere, Eileen

Published by The Ohio State University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/32602

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1204889
In 1860, Ruskin published the first few chapters of Unto this Last in the Cornhill Magazine, thus inaugurating his well-documented intellectual shift from aesthetics to economics and from paintings to people as the main focus of his lectures and writings. Indeed, there is no mistaking Ruskin’s generic transition to political economy: Unto this Last opens with an attack on J. S. Mill’s assessment of wealth as a stockpile of useful articles, and closes with the now-famous humanist revision of Mill: “there is no wealth but life.”

Yet it is not the case that Ruskin stopped thinking about art suddenly in 1860 (in fact, the final volume of Modern Painters was published in 1862), or that his lofty aesthetic interests simply collapsed beneath the weightier considerations of political economy and social reform. Instead, Ruskin’s burgeoning economic philosophy, his political and social theories of labor, wealth, and utility, were actually components of a more expansive aesthetic philosophy that linked the renewal of British art to the regeneration of the British people.

You cannot have a landscape by Turner, without a country for him to paint; you cannot have a portrait by Titian without a man to be portrayed. I need not prove to you, I suppose, in these short terms; but in the outcome I can get no soul to believe that the beginning of art is getting our country clean and our people beautiful. I have been ten years trying to get this very plain certainty—I do not say believed—but even thought of, as anything but a monstrous proposition. To get your country clean, and your people lovely;—I assure you, that is a necessary work of art to begin with.

—John Ruskin, “The Relation of Art to Use” (1870)
and their environment. I argued in my previous chapter that Ruskin's most profound contribution to the nineteenth-century cleanliness campaigns was his compelling causal relationship between environmental filth and aesthetic foulness; I will argue in this chapter that what I've termed Ruskin's sanitary aesthetic emerged as a powerful ideological convention of the British novel by mid-century. Perhaps Ruskin himself didn't read much popular fiction, and didn't realize that widely dispersed and self-organizing narratives of aesthetic transformation were collectively adapting traditional marriage plots, traditional reform plots, to his dream of a clean country with lovely people. But by the time Ruskin gave the above 1870 lecture at Oxford University where he bemoaned his perpetual inability to inspire true aesthetic reform, a significant shift in the cultural narrative about art was already emerging. In much mid-Victorian fiction, aesthetic transformation is a dominant mechanism of social reform. The highly educated and exalted taste of the connoisseur is often an inscription of aristocratic excess and cruelty, an aesthetic philosophy associated not only with the polluted tonalities and materials of highly prized paintings, but with filthy working-class people and their environments. Reform is only possible in such novels if the aesthetic indulgences of the property-owning classes are robustly repudiated, making newly sanitary models of beauty the favored modality of social change.

For example, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72) is set just before the passing of the 1832 Reform Bill, which also means that its action predates the publication of Chadwick's *Sanitary Report* and Ruskin's *Modern Painters*. This enables Eliot to make certain causal connections between the squalid conditions among working-class peasants on large rural estates in the 1830s and Romantic-era preferences for picturesque landscapes. Embodied by Dorothea's bumbling uncle and guardian, Mr. Brooke, the empty liberalism of the ruling class in *Middlemarch* is explicitly taken to task for locating aesthetic pleasure in communities of dilapidated cottages, starving children, and ragged laborers. Eliot famously writes,

It is true that an observer, under the softening influence of the fine arts which makes other people's hardships picturesque, might have been delighted with this homestead called Freeman's End: the old house had dormer windows in the dark-red roof, two of the chimneys were choked with ivy, the large porch was blocked off with bundles of sticks, and half the windows were closed with grey worm-eaten shutters about which the jasmine-boughs grew in wild luxuriance; the mouldering garden wall with hollyhocks peeping over it was a perfect study of highly mingled subdued colour, and there was an aged goat (kept doubtless on interesting super-
stitious grounds) lying against the open back-kitchen door. The mossy thatch of the cow-shed, the broken grey barn-doors, the pauper labourers in ragged breeches who had nearly finished unloading a wagon of corn into the barn ready for early threshing; the scanty dairy of cows being tethered for milking and leaving one half of the shed in brown emptiness . . . all these objects under the quiet light of a sky marbled with high clouds would have made a sort of picture which we have all paused over as ‘a charming bit,’ touching other sensibilities than those which are stirred by the agricultural interest, with the sad lack of farming capital, as seen constantly in the newspapers of that time. But these troublesome associations were just now strongly present to Mr. Brooke, and spoiled the scene for him.

Usually, the starving animals, the dirty laborers, and the neglected yard provide Mr. Brooke with a picturesque scene he can appreciate with high sensibility. Under the coming storm cloud of social and political discontent, however, the ominous “brown emptiness” of the cow shed is only a filthy forcing bed for calamities like the typhoid fever that strikes down young Fred Vincy as he bargains for a horse on the “unsanitary” Houndsley streets (225), and the cholera epidemic that threatens to swell the population of Lydgate’s forthcoming Fever Hospital. In *Middlemarch*, as in so many mid-nineteenth-century novels, the picturesque is cultural shorthand for filth and disease, and aesthetic transformation is coterminous with the approaching inevitability of sanitary reform.

Art is literally filth in the above passage from *Middlemarch*, filth that is tolerated and even allowed to flourish for the express purpose of aristocratic ease and enjoyment. While *Middlemarch* is not the only mid-Victorian novel to dramatize the repudiation of degraded aesthetic pleasure as a precursor to social reform, it is certainly the most famous; many of the novels I will discuss in this chapter grapple with the philosophical problem of dirty art at the fringes of what is normally referred to as “literary” fiction. Nevertheless, in a host of both literary and popular novels published during the mid-Victorian period, the revival of true art is imagined to be a process of civic purification that triumphs over the filthy and viciously private aesthetic pleasure of past connoisseurs, instituting artistic reform as a transformation of taste that privileges people over paintings, much in the way Ruskin described in 1870. While aesthetic objects, especially paintings, are important material signifiers in many of these texts, they are less central to the novels than the process of aesthetic objectification, demonstrated so vividly by Mr. Brooke, that purloins with impunity “charming bits” of social and economic tragedy for the gratification of elite, educated, and studied visual pleasure. Art objects are often
material icons that must be directly repudiated or exchanged as the price of reform, but the lost icon is displaced by a new aesthetic philosophy rather than by a new object. To be sure, the “healthful” values of Pre-Raphaelite art—bright colors, realist detail, meticulous finish—appear in many of these novels as idiosyncratically preferred aesthetic forms, often stridently opposed to the pestilential yellows and degenerate browns of the earlier Old Masters. But finally, the plots enacted in the novels I discuss in this chapter produce and reproduce a story of sanitation reform that promises more that the banishment of dirt, disease, and immorality from neighborhoods and communities, it promises that sanitary perfection, embodied in a clean country with lovely people, will eventually become, in itself, new cultural aesthetic.

I. Reforming the Picturesque: 
Middlemarch and North and South

The miasmatic theory of disease, which dominated scientific beliefs about the spread of illness until the advent of germ theories in the 1870s, has long been recognized as a standard shorthand of Victorian reform fiction; a convenient metaphoric chain that links filth, disease, and immorality in a providential plot. Decaying organic matter and the foul smells that emanate from viscous pockets and piles of filth are familiar features of the overpopulated urban environment in particular, providing novels like Dickens’s Bleak House (1853) and Our Mutual Friend (1865) with moral geographies of city life shaped by noxious slums, docks, dust heaps and brickyards. While the miasmatic and metaphoric features of the sanitary narrative are similar in novels with more pastoral settings, ground zero for filth diseases in the country, I would argue, is always the deceptively beautiful impoverished village, the moldering rural farm, or the picturesque cottage. In a variety of these novels published after 1850, the purification of the picturesque is inscribed upon more dominant narratives of character growth and transformation, and the pollution anxiety Mary Douglas theorizes becomes a driving mechanism of the plot. Some of these novels imagine an utopian future where artists will take on the social responsibility of cleanliness and sanitation; others, like Middlemarch, remember and reflect upon a dark age when aesthetic philosophy not only blunted moral understanding but promoted physical disease.

One of the many ways we know that reform is coming to Middlemarch is that the definition of beauty has at last become controversial: for example, our heroine and nineteenth-century St. Theresa, Dorothea Brooke, draws plans for model cottages and feverishly promotes her designs to the neighboring
gentry, hoping above all “to make the life of poverty beautiful” (29). Her desire to impose a new form of beauty upon working-class existence is in direct contrast with the beauty her uncle Brooke already finds in decayed housing, inadequate food and sickly tenants. Dorothea’s drawings, moreover, are not the kind of art most admired by her uncle; he prefers his own collection of Italian engravings and even the more amateurish pages of Will Ladislaw’s sketchbook. But such aesthetic pleasure seems poor compensation for social grievances to Dorothea, and as she glances for the first time at both Ladislaw and his sketchbook her words suggest that the coming marriage plot itself may require nothing less than a Ruskinian transformation of aesthetic values: “You know, uncle, I never see the beauty of those pictures which you say are so much praised. They are a language I do not understand” (73). Mr. Brooke good-humouredly blames Dorothea’s aesthetic limitations on the fact that she has had “a bad style of teaching” and has taken to reform rather than to fine art; he also regrets that she knows nothing of “morbidezza,” the Italian term for delicacy or softness in the representation of flesh (73). But the imported word only italicizes the dislocation of Brooke’s values from his environment: when the delicate flesh so idealized by Italian connoisseurs is substituted for the decaying flesh of British peasants, fine art emerges once again as a Romantic fascination with filth.

Conventional arguments about the picturesque have tended to assume that the concept became aesthetically insignificant by the early decades of the nineteenth century, and that the picturesque was largely anachronistic after Regency debates over the enclosure and cultivation of wild wasteland revealed picturesque pleasure to be a taste that England’s agricultural interests could no longer afford. But critics like Anne Janowitz and Malcolm Andrews have insisted that aesthetic and cultural preoccupation with the picturesque continued through the nineteenth century. Janowitz, for example, argues that marginalized groups like the Welsh Chartists quite actively appropriated the picturesque as a political tool in their poetry and writing about landscape. Andrews, on the other hand, actually finds the picturesque lurking in the more hegemonic discourse of the built urban environment, pointing out that mid- and late-Victorian architectural writers celebrated the picturesque development of irregular, idiosyncratic London as a sign of British individualism and laissez-faire politics. Of course, as Andrews points out, one inevitable effect of laissez-faire architecture and city planning is exactly the kind of social neglect demonstrated by Mr. Brooke in *Middlemarch*, and one of the reasons I argue that the long, slow shift in cultural values from the Romantic to the Victorian periods remains visible in fiction through a constant moral revaluation of picturesque pleasure.
Ruskin himself struggled with the word and its powerful implications throughout *Modern Painters*, finally bifurcating the definition in order to pacify his own conflicted conscience. Like “sublimity,” the “picturesque” has its high and low manifestations for Ruskin: on the one hand, we have Turner's “consciousness of the pathos in the confessed ruin, which may or may not be beautiful,” and on the other hand, we have the Old Masters' “entire denial of all human calamity and care.”

I want the reader to understand thoroughly the opposite element of the noble picturesque; its expression, namely, of suffering, of poverty, of decay, nobly endured by unpretending strength of heart . . . if outward sublimity be sought for by the painter, without any regard for the real nature of the thing, and without any comprehension of the pathos of character hidden beneath, it forms the low school of the surface picturesque. (5–6)

In Victorian writing, the picturesque aesthetic becomes a dangerous anesthetic; an experience of beauty so profound that it actually enfeebles human sympathy, numbs moral judgment, deadens social responsibility. Certainly, this cultural critique of the picturesque did not only appear in Victorian reform novels: Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1860 *The Marble Faun*, for example, suggests that whenever the term “picturesque” is applied to a landscape, its inhabitants are suffering slow and steady genocide: “There is reason to suspect that a people are waning to decay and ruin,” he mourns, “the moment that their life becomes fascinating either in the poet's imagination or the painter's eye.”

But English novels of reform like *Middlemarch* are already caught within the very dilemma exposed by the mid-Victorian problem with the picturesque: the aesthetic power or sheer beauty of the vehicle perpetually risks anaesthetizing the reader against the human calamity struggling for realist representation.

Eliot herself warned against the picturesque perversion of realism in her 1856 *The Natural History of German Life*, where both Dickens and Holman Hunt come under criticism for their prejudices about “the People,” as she calls them; the happy, healthy and innocent peasants and laborers that exist in the artistic imagination are sustained by feudal generalizations about the good old days and a form of aesthetic distancing that disguises harsh social relations within the effects of light, color, and tone. “Observe a company of haymakers,” Eliot instructs:

When you see them at a distance, tossing up the forkfuls of hay in the
goldenlight, while the wagon creeps slowly with its increasing burthen over the meadow, and the bright green space which tells of work done gets larger and larger, you pronounce the scene ‘smiling’ and you think these companions in labour must be as bright and cheerful as the picture to which they give animation. Approach nearer, and you will certainly find. . . . That delicious effervescence of the mind which we call fun, has no equivalent for the northern peasant, except tipsy revelry; the only realm of fancy and imagination for the English clown exists at the bottom of the third quart pot.

At a distance, a connoisseur like Mr. Brooke can access the disinterestedness and leisure of what Pierre Bourdieu has called the “pure gaze,” a claim to aristocratic ease and mastery that is normalized and naturalized as an aesthetic impulse. Under Bourdieu’s analysis, a preference for the picturesque would mark a form of aesthetic consumption that renders economic exploitation invisible because it disguises itself as a highly personal sensitivity to natural beauty. Indeed, as John Barrell has argued, the “picturesque eye” always masquerades as the natural gaze, offering the highly constructed viewing-position of an educated gentleman as a form of “pure, unmediated vision.” The cultural competence required to recognize and value the picturesque becomes, in turn, an extension and ratification of feudal exploitation: picturesque pleasure, for Eliot and Ruskin, for Bourdieu and Barrell, engenders no social involvement or moral outrage, anesthetizing against the dis-ease of social and economic inequity.

Like Eliot and Ruskin, Charles Dickens wanted to reform picturesque pleasure, to rescue the aesthetic beauty of the ruin while becoming mindful of the exploitation that such pleasure endorses and legitimates. After rhapsodizing about the intoxicating charms of Italian travel, he suddenly warns his 1846 readers of *Pictures from Italy* against the desensitizing effects of aesthetic tourism.

But, lovers and hunters of the picturesque, let us not keep too studiously out of view the miserable depravity, degradation, and wretchedness, with which this gay Neapolitan life is inseparably associated! It is not well to find Saint Giles’s so repulsive, and the Porta Capuana so attractive. A pair of naked legs and a ragged red scarf, do not make *all* the difference between what is interesting and what is coarse and odious? Painting and poetising for ever, if you will, the beauties of this most beautiful and lovely spot of earth, let us, as our duty, try to associate a new picturesque with some
faint recognition of man’s destiny and capabilities; more hopeful, I believe, among the ice and snow of the North Pole, than in the sun and bloom of Naples.¹⁰

Of course, Dickens’s literary attempts at imagining a “new picturesque” fell flat for Eliot, who resented Dickens’s “miserable fallacy that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance, and want; or that the working classes are in a condition to enter at once into a millennial state of altruism, wherein everyone is caring for everyone else, and no one for himself.”¹¹ The “natural taste” demonstrated by so many of Dickens’s uneducated and economically disenfranchised characters, most famously Oliver Twist, certainly informs Eliot’s accusation, and testifies to the lingering intellectual power of Shaftesbury and Burke into the nineteenth century. On the other hand, it is clear that the most reform-driven novelists of the mid-Victorian period were troubled by the intellectual dominance of the picturesque as an aesthetic protocol for working-class visibility. With varied and controversial success, Victorian reform writers struggled to represent some lived experience of the People, laboring to reverse the pollution discourse that reserves purity for disinterested and distanced gazes.

More to Eliot’s taste might have been Elizabeth Gaskell’s 1855 North and South, a reform novel most explicitly devoted to reforming the industrial mill owner, Thornton, into a sympathetic paternalist and an appropriate husband for the heroine Margaret Hale. Margaret’s own transformation is more subtle here, but just as important: Margaret’s marriage plot depends upon her ability to reform her aesthetic values, to realize that her reverence for the picturesque is just as damaging to the working class she wants to help as Thornton’s disrespectful and dehumanizing disregard. In the rural village of Helstone at the beginning of the novel, Margaret happily sketches the picturesque poverty of country cottages “before they tumbled down and were no more seen,” casually chatting up the almost deaf old man who lives alone under the dark, soggy thatch.¹⁵ But Margaret’s relocation to the ugly, filthy, industrialized Milton-Northern, and her inability to anaesthetize herself against the suffering she finds there, causes her to revisit the picturesque Helstone cottagers at the close of the novel with new eyes. Inquiring after Betty Barnes, a former favorite, she listens with horror to a story that the old woman has stolen a neighbor’s cat in order to burn it alive, in keeping with an ancient country superstition that the cries of a cat have the power to fulfill the wishes of the executioner (380). Margaret tries to “enlighten” the storyteller, but eventually gives up, and they “thridded their way through many a bosky dell, whose soft green influence could not charm away the shock and the pain in
Margaret’s heart caused by a recital of such cruelty; a recital too, the manner of which betrayed such utter want of imagination, and therefore of any sympathy with the suffering animal” (381). The narcotic effects of the pure gaze no longer protect Margaret: instead, she sees the destructive provincialism, the ignorance, and the scientific impoverishment of the rural landscape and People. While revisiting her wealthy country aunt and cousin, moreover, she resents the lofty conversation that once enthralled her, realizing that the dinner guests “talked about art in a merely sensuous way, dwelling on outside effects, instead of allowing themselves to learn what it has to teach” (397).

This Ruskinian realization about art in the novel is also accompanied by an interesting transformation of cleanliness and its moral meanings, as Margaret discovers when she visits the home of John’s mother and spends some time alone in the drawing room where a taste for ornament and color is preserved against all odds.

The walls were pink and gold: the pattern on the carpet represented bunches of flowers on a light ground, but it was carefully covered up in the center by a linen drugget, glazed and colorless. The window-curtains were lace; each chair and sofa had its own particular veil of netting or knitting. Great alabaster groups occupied every flat surface, safe from dust under their glass shades. . . . Everything reflected light, nothing absorbed it. The whole of the room had a painfully spotted, spangled, speckled look about it that impressed Margaret so unpleasantly that she was hardly conscious of the peculiar cleanliness required to keep everything so white and pure in such an atmosphere, or of the trouble that must be willingly expended to secure that effect of icy, snowy discomfort. Everywhere she looked there was evidence of care and labour, but not care and labour to procure ease, to help on habits of tranquil home employment; solely to ornament, and then to preserve ornament from dirt or destruction. (112)

In Thornton’s rarely visited drawing room, cleanliness is not only dedicated to enshrining the vulgar taste of the industrial class, it further severs the objects of industrial production from their human origins, rendering alabaster figures and lace curtains even colder and more lifeless than before. Ornamental objects beyond the scope of human use even seem to reintroduce dirt and disease at the heart of inanimate cleanliness: as the “painfully spotted” look of the drawing room unpleasantly indicates, this cleanliness has nothing to do with health or with beauty. At Margaret’s simple house, by contrast, the daily struggle for cleanliness is dedicated to keeping alive the frail human inhabitants, preserving, and sometimes failing to preserve, the warmth, health and
vitality of tenuous human existence. With this reassessment of cleanliness, dirt’s definition is too refined: the filthiness of the struggling industrial classes becomes progressive and productive in North and South, a sign of labor that is democratic and inherently valuable, while the filthiness of picturesque rural environments is regressive, superstitious, unproductive and finally illusory. Marjorie Garson has pointed out that exposure to Margaret awakens John Thornton’s higher aesthetic feeling, teaching him that good taste is a reflection of “emotional and intellectual receptivity, domestic comfort, and genuine hospitality.” But it is important to recognize that Margaret’s aesthetic values have also undergone significant transformation, and that the marriage of John Thornton and Margaret Hale becomes, in itself, the new aesthetic that replaces the diseased standards of both bourgeois vulgarity and aristocratic sensuality. In providing what Catherine Gallagher has famously termed a closing “tableau of reconciliation” between social classes, economic interests, and intellectual philosophies, their union consecrates a new and more harmonious society in the shape of Ruskin’s sanitary aesthetic.

II. Prevention and Progress: The Socialist Aesthetic

The social reconciliation provided by the marriage plot in North and South is one example of the kind of reform often promised by mid-Victorian sanitary fiction: a genre that gave narrative structure and reformist teleology to an aesthetic of social “perfectibility” that surfaced in the social sciences as early as the 1840s. From their earliest days, sanitary practitioners had imagined hygiene and health to be the primary engine of social harmony, unity and progress. For Edwin Chadwick and William Farr in the 1840s and 50s, this meant eliminating pockets of fever and filth in the aggregate social body; for Benjamin Ward Richardson and Alfred Carpenter in the 1870s and 1880s, it meant using environmental and domestic sanitation to eliminate the very possibility of disease in an individual human body, thus achieving a state of physical perfection that would render future medical interventions completely unnecessary. In 1879, for example, Dr. Richardson predicted that by the year 2050, humankind would finally achieve its natural lifespan of 100 years. In “Salutland,” his imagined utopian community, people will be “happy, powerful and beautiful” because everybody knows the basic sanitary laws and the modern principles of preventive medicine. In Salutland, Richardson rhapsodizes, there will be no center of government, no capitol, no gender inequality, no standing army, no legal system, and no medical profession: instead, “common health and common wealth—for health and wealth are one—will
make us a model and perfected people” (12). At the 1883 Glasgow Health Congress Dr. Alfred Carpenter was almost as optimistic when he declared that “everything is preventable,” not only smallpox, cholera, and diphtheria, but consumption, cancer and deformity too.18 Disregarding even entrenched Victorian assumptions about economic and biological determinism, and still resisting the rising tide of germ theory that would later turn sanitation into a physiological tool, Carpenter expressed a plain and positivist faith in the long-term effects of environmental cleanliness: “The sanitarian does not believe in the permanence of hereditary evils” (405).

By 1880, sanitarians had fully adopted as mission statement a phrase that now seems little more than homespun cliché: prevention is better than cure. Moreover, prevention itself was a concept that expanded the intellectual importance of sanitary reform into discourses and disciplines far removed from its original Chadwickian ethos. For philosopher and activist Edward Carpenter, in his 1889 Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure, the possibility of “prevention” could convert health into a positive attribute rather than a degraded concept, “a negative thing.”19 Currently, Carpenter explained, to be not gouty or not rheumatic was “the very limit of our impoverished understanding of health” (11). What needed to be recognized was that there a direct correlation between the social body and the individual body, and that in both models, health manifests itself as a simple unity of parts, while disease signified a loss of natural wholeness.

For as in the body disease arises from a loss of physical unity of parts, which constitutes health and so takes the form of warfare or discord between the various parts . . . so in our modern life we find the unity gone which constitutes a true society, and in its place warfare in classes and individuals, abnormal development of some to the detriment of other, and consumption of organisms by masses of social parasites. (2)

Of course, “civilization” itself is a negative stage of human society for Carpenter, a term that reflects not progress and enlightenment, but the current state of human discord, debilitation and disease. For society to cure itself, Carpenter argues, nature must again become the home of man, private property must disappear, and the “great, positive force of Health” must become, as it was for the ancient Greeks, an endemic aesthetic truth (20). The Greeks produced the greatest works of art because they valued health over all other human attributes and because they had no concept or consciousness of sin (10). “Which all means cleanness,” Carpenter explains, “The unity of our nature being restored, the instinct of bodily cleanness, both within and without, which is a
marked characteristic of the animals, will again characterize mankind—only now instead of a blind instinct it will be a conscious, joyous one; dirt being only disorder and obstruction” (38).

While the Hellenic inspiration of Carpenter’s vision would obviously dismay Ruskin’s fervent Christian medievalism, this last passage from Civilisation could be easily mistaken for an extract from Modern Painters. For English sanitarians and social reformers writing at the end of the century—from Carpenter to William Morris to Havelock Ellis—harmony, unity and proportion were the very definition of health physically and socially, and within this discourse of communion is the same aesthetic philosophy at work in Ruskin’s directive to “get your country clean and your people lovely.” “Socialism is an all-embracing theory of life,” explained William Morris in 1891, “it has an ethic and a religion of its own, so also it has an aesthetic . . . to the Socialist, anything made by a man is a work of art.”²⁰ In his aptly titled “The Socialist Ideal in Art,” Morris continues,

To the Commercialist, things are divided into art and not art. The Commercialist sees that in the great mass of civilized human labor there is no pretence to art, and thinks that this is natural, inevitable, and on the whole desirable. The Socialist, on the contrary, sees in this obvious lack of art a disease peculiar to modern civilization and hurtful to humanity; and furthermore believes it to be a disease which can be remedied . . . the great mass of effective art, that which pervades all life, must be the result of harmonious cooperation of neighbors. And a rich man has no neighbors—nothing but rivals and parasites. (63–67)

The “socialist ideal in art” for both Morris and Carpenter is socialism itself: a socialism imagined as wholeness, health, and cleanliness, a model of human existence that both produces and embodies Art. Commercialism, by contrast, is disease and dirt, fragmentation and filth, not just because it infects the environment, but because it degrades humanity. In this context, sanitation is material as well as political, a transformation of the socioeconomic order that will simultaneously purify man and the state. “The great positive force of Health, and the power which it has to expel disease from its neighborhood . . . will be realized when the more squalid elements of our present day civilization have passed away,” Carpenter insists.²¹

Obviously, the intellectual legacy I am trying to trace here from Ruskin to Morris to Richardson to Carpenter and beyond is often recognized as a relatively radical strain of social criticism; a school of protest that rises from a desire for change rather than stasis, for revolution rather than restraint. Com-
pared to the close of *North and South*, for example, socialist reform promises the eradication of the industrialist, like a stamping out of some pestilent disease, rather than his happy rehabilitation through marriage. But an interesting facet of the new socialist aesthetic that developed in the late nineteenth century is that it fits neatly inside a much larger, longer history of aesthetic philosophy that is anything but radical. As Terry Eagleton has described in his intellectual history of the aesthetic, traditional eighteenth-century philosophy, from Shaftesbury to Adam Smith, made the graceful and harmonious movements of a virtuous social order the very definition of art; for Edmund Burke, famously, beauty was a social quality that inspired us with necessary “sentiments of tenderness and affection” toward other persons, and a willingness to enter into personal relationships with them.  

Indeed, as Eagleton reveals, this strain of aesthetic philosophy shows art to be central to the work of political hegemony, and thus power, the class system, and the economic hierarchy. “The beautiful is just the social order lived out on the body, the way it strikes the eye and stirs the heart;” he writes. “The socially disruptive, by contrast, is as instantly offensive as a foul smell. . . . The maladroit or aesthetically disproportioned thus signals in its modest way, a certain crisis in political power” (38–42).

It seems appropriate that the opposite of beauty, harmony, and art, is for Eagleton, as it is for Ruskin, Gaskell, Carpenter and so many other Victorian writers, the foul odor of sanitary disaster. By averting such disaster, I argue, the fictional sanitarian also averts political crisis, reifying the aesthetic by remaking the known world at the close of each and every volume. Well into the twentieth-century, a familiar teleology surfaces in a variety of novels: dirty art produces disease, the dirty artist or connoisseur must be disciplined, and the fetishized art object or the filthy theory of the picturesque is subsequently exchanged for a sanitary philosophy derived as much from Ruskin as from more certified sanitarians. Importantly, the ideological work accomplished by the sanitary fictions I discuss throughout *The Sanitary Arts* often seems liberal, seems reformist, seems revolutionary. But the aesthetic objectives of sanitation reform also work against disruption and social upheaval, repeatedly offering hegemony as a form of harmony, and continuity as the essence of beauty. In most sanitary fiction of the period, the moneyed classes emerge well-lessoned, but relatively unscathed and, in fact, much more popular. The marriage plot usually provides both pedagogical apparatus and harmonious social reconciliation, as it does so smoothly in *North and South*, softening the rich industrialist in order to assimilate him into a happier, healthier social order. What is most radical, what is most revolutionary, about such novels is finally their ideological alchemy: they so
successfully transform the lowness and banality of sanitation reform (stinking sewers and pipes, filthy ditches and dung heaps) into a sophisticated aesthetic, effectively translating dirt into art for the sake of political power and social hegemony. Sanitary novels are efficient vehicles of the kind of culture most famously described by Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*, providing balance, regulation and harmony, instead of the vulgarity of social agitation and political opposition. “But there is of culture another view,” Arnold explains,

in which all the love of our neighbor, the impulses towards action, help, and beneficence, the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it—motives eminently such as are called social—come in as part of the grounds of culture, and the main and pre-eminent part. Culture . . . is a study of perfection.\(^{53}\)

Culture, for Arnold, is both a process and an institution, simultaneously the “removing,” “clearing” and “diminishing” work of re-form, and the harmonious aesthetic form of perfect social order.

**III. Sanitary Fictions and Fictional Sanitarians**

By arguing that the emergence of the sanitary aesthetic signals a conservative brand of power, I am not suggesting that the earnest socialism of, say, William Morris, was anything less than earnest or socialist, or that the realism of George Eliot didn’t strive to represent, in some irrefutable way, the lived experience of the People. But as we know, even progressive aesthetics are ambivalently and unreliably political, and as Eagleton points out, “lived experience, which can offer a powerful critique of Enlightenment rationality, can also be the very homeland of conservative ideology” (60). Sanitary narratives, I would argue, were ideologically powerful because they demonstrated public hygiene operating impersonally, impartially, collaborating with aesthetic philosophy to reconcile a hierarchical and divided society. I will be discussing the increasingly less progressive implications of public and even “social” hygiene in the final chapters of *The Sanitary Arts*, specifically in the context of some early-twentieth-century sanitary fictions. But in order to rehearse the broad connections between mid-Victorian sanitary reform and late-Victorian eugenic philosophy, it is useful here to remember how early in the nineteenth-century aesthetic preference for the picturesque began to be
linked to physiological and psychological degeneration. Ruskin, for example, in his 1860 *Elements of Drawing*, insisted that “colour power is a great sign of mental health in nations; when they are in a state of intellectual decline, their colouring always gets dull.” For this reason, individual artists must keep in good physical and mental health: as Ruskin warns fledgling painters, “your power of colouring will depend much on your state of health and balance of mind; when you are fatigued or ill, you will not see colours well” (235). While his logic is circular, Ruskin succinctly links bad health with bad art: illness and exhaustion causes diseased vision, and diseased vision, in turn, is a sign of immorality and even insanity. As we have seen, Ruskin’s doctrine of cleanliness and health sharply reverses the powerful eighteenth-century association between muted colors, soft tones and an evolved “natural” sensibility, and this reversal, in turn, was popularized through fictional reflections on color, taste, and the moral sentiments.

In Averil Beaumont’s intriguingly titled *Magdalen Wynard, or The Provocations of a Pre-Raphaelite* (1872), Ruskin’s aesthetic diagnosis is echoed when Bernard Longley, our painter-hero, asserts early in the novel that “an exclusive love of semi-tones in colour would betoken weakness, mental and physical, just as much as perpetual preference of the minor key on music; for depend upon it, the perfect man likes a full chord of colour, boldly struck.” Longley argues further that “bodily weakness” and ill health prevented both Keats and Shelley from having “perfect appreciation of colour” in their poetry (133). This self-proclaimed Pre-Raphaelite successfully “cultivate[s] literature, health, and art” for a good portion of the novel, devoting himself “to the study of Ruskin, and the question of the Old Style versus pre-Raphaelitism” (28). But while walking through Dorminster on his way to sketch the cathedral, Bernard begins to be distracted by “a dreadful place” just around the corner, a dirty by-street where ragged children play and filthy mothers gather on stoops, and he is soon driven to a hill outside the city for a more aesthetic and less aromatic view of the poisoned river and polluted streets.

The flitting to and fro of the sunshine, from the steaming pool, along the walls along the walls and rag-patched windows and indescribable meaness of the tottering, decrepit houses which formed the end of the water lane, was lovely to see, but would have required the spirit of self-sacrifice and endurance of a martyr to paint. On the high ground and from a distance all was perfect. The smoke of the city lay heavily along the course of the valley, warm in the afternoon light . . . the bridges were indistinct blurs upon the sheen of the river, while, over all, upon its platform of rock, rose the great shade of the cathedral, its massive towers refusing one sparkle of
Bernard is so fascinated by the scene that he is moved to begin a large, cumbersome painting, and hires a local man, “Cracky Charlie,” to cart his paints and painterly apparatus to and from the hillside so that he can be free to enjoy the distanced and “unencumbered” pleasure of watching the light change and the shadows shift (228). But eventually Cracky Charlie is stricken with cholera and dies, and Bernard realizes that his detached “pure gaze” is to blame. Overcome with regret for abandoning his healthy Pre-Raphaelite principles, his moral commitment to clear details rather than hazy effects, Bernard gives up painting entirely and dedicates himself to nursing the poor of his community through what proves to be a cholera epidemic.

One likely reason that the miasmatic theory of disease was so slow to disappear in the late nineteenth century is that this kind of association between sanitation and salvation, purification and perfection was too ideologically entrenched and attractive in Victorian culture. The germ theory of disease, on the other hand, as it was pursued by a variety of bacteriologists through the last decades of the nineteenth century, found no fundamental relationship between dirt, disease and immorality, and the microorganisms discovered in all human and animal life seemed disappointingly indifferent to schemes for sanitary perfectibility and moral improvement. Instead, throughout the end of the Victorian period, sanitary fictions like Provocations of a Pre-Raphaelite continued to pursue social transformation through the eradication of the fever nest, the poisoned village, the dilapidated cottage, the dirty peasant. Sanitary reform may have prescribed social behaviors and put in place intrusive and oppressive regulations ranging from the Poor Laws to the Contagious Diseases Acts, from slum clearances to home visitations. But it advanced these goals under the banner of aesthetic perfectibility, imagining progressive, utopian communities like the one found in B. W. Richardson’s 1876 Hygeia: A City of Health, where a healthful civilization is a beautiful civilization, and disease and social degradations unknown.

Richardson, an ardent anti-contagionist, here foresees the rebirth of Greek culture in England, as “artist civilisation” begins creating healthier, stronger,
more beautiful British bodies, foreshadowing as well the path that sanitary prevention would follow in the late nineteenth century as it moved from environmental to biological to even eugenic advocacy.

A similar story of sanitary transformation can be found in Florence Caddy’s 1878 *Artist and Amateur, or The Surface of Life*, a novel that explores the development of two female artists, Flora Potts and Elma Dean. Elma, an upper-class woman who runs away to London to pursue her art studies, has an eager but undisciplined appreciation of color that paralyzes her ability to paint well: there is so much color in the world, Elma explains, “I am literally borne down by quantity, and can do nothing.” Her old friend, Flora, gives her a home in London and some necessary guidance; Flora is the daughter of a master-craftsman, and has been trained in South Kensington art schools, most notably by a Morris-like sage Raymond Dalvey, whose domestic setting is characterized by its Venetian colors and medieval accoutrements. Elma realizes that Dalvey’s colours unfold “as Nature unfolds hers,” when she watches his wife bring “into the room a colouring of tea-rose in her face and dress that harmonized perfectly with the bluish-velvet pile carpet, on which was a waving, watery, reedy pattern, designed by Mr. Dalvey himself, in soft tints of pale grey and sea-green” (123). When Flora introduces Elma as an artist with “vaporous and vague” ideals who desires to go to Italy to study, Dalvey chides her by stating that “an artist’s home is his own country . . . look not to Italy, daughter, it is rather a grave . . . their history is over; reverence the holy shrines, but worship no dead relics” (123).

Both female artists do travel abroad, however, when Flora gains a Ruskinian commission to make drawings of ancient buildings in France and Italy “before they are restored beyond all recognition” (206). Passing through Milan, Flora explains to her companion why she must avert her gaze from a prominent Renaissance cathedral: “This is one of the buildings I am not to draw. I am told to shun the Renaissance like a pestilence and even pure northern Gothic is not part of my present contract” (157–158). Flora is eventually tempted to sketch outside her contract, and develops an appropriately infectious fever, however, upon recovery, she is able to explain the aesthetic lesson implicit in her experience: “I am sorry my illness came on when I was working at something outside my commission. I was told not to draw classic temples, and I was caught at play” (222). A similar fate is reserved for the more aesthetically wayward Elma: in France, Elma insists upon painting late into the damp, misty evening, “because it always needs a little mist to generalize details” (210). In response, Flora tries to warn Elma that her fortune is health rather than wealth: “If you go on expending health beyond the strength that is given you for daily use, it is like spending your capital . . . dear Elma, take care of your health, for health means your art, and you are rich in many
The two women separate after this incident, and Elma struggles to make her way to Florence in the early stages of an illness that necessitates her rescue by St. Bernard dogs in the Swiss Alps.

What must be clear about these sanitary narratives so far is that they display an ideological clarity that makes any potential marriage plot morally legible. If art is bad, health is good; if aesthetic knowledge is a symptom of selfishness, vanity, and degradation, sanitary knowledge is a sign of altruism, personal responsibility, and social progress. At the end of *Artist and Amateur*, Flora marries her art, but Elma marries a man little seen since the beginning of the novel, a man who manages to speak with Elma about both Ruskin’s “tenderness of colour” and the realities of rural poverty in the same conversation (52). The narrator tells us that Elma’s future husband, a wealthy and somewhat mysterious agent of international finance, is characterized by his “health, prolonged by temperance and active employment, bearing up against the enervating influence of hot climates,” and the way his “mental food” is “taken according to strict hygienic principles . . . assimilated and digested without effort, reviving the soul for its work in the service of its possessor” (98). As a character, Henry Wentworth is ill-developed and belated; as an ideological vehicle, however, he is delineated to perfection, demonstrating just enough sanitary commitment to permanently purify Elma’s diseased aesthetic proclivities, and to reconcile art and health for future generations of citizens.

A sanitary reconciliation enacted through the marriage plot may move the heroine from illness to health, as it does in *Artist and Amateur*, or it may force her to choose between men who represent radical sanitary alternatives and social philosophies. Gillian Lattimer, in Rhoda Broughton’s *Second Thoughts* (1880), is courted by painter and poet Francis Chaloner, an aesthete who favors sickness, dislocation and unwholesomeness as artistic objectives. When Gillian critiques the morbid nature of his art, he replies “gently but firmly, ‘there is nothing so beautiful as disease. The beauty of the pearl is greater than that of any other jewel, because it is the beauty of disease’” (189). After mistaking a female figure in his painting entitled “Amor Dolorosus” for a cholera victim, Gillian becomes more interested in rival suitor Dr. Burnet, and begins visiting sick children in Kings’ Hospital out of interest in his vocation; ironically, a particularly pathetic sickbed scene eventually allows the marriage plot to commence on more healthful grounds. While Broughton’s novel is less interested in environmental reform than the other texts I discuss above, the inadequate healthfulness of human forms in late-Victorian, especially late-Pre-Raphaelite, “aestheticism” was widely debated in sanitary circles as well: as Edward Cookworthy Robins declared to his audience at the
1886 meeting of the Sanitary Institute, in a paper called “The Artistic Side of Sanitary Science,”

There has lately sprung up a taste in Art that can only be postulated as a taste for disease—a leaning towards the outward expressions of decrepitude and decay. . . . In one school, at least, of the art movement, we find woebegone women, ill limp and unwholesome. They look thin, weak and weary; their complexions are not those of health, and their attitudes are of a long-enduring debility. . . . The unfitness of the association is condemnatory of its artistic character. It is as inartistic as it is insanitary.  

While I will be pursuing the sanitary status of human figures in art in a later chapter, it is worth noting here how thoroughly pollution anxiety had permeated aesthetic discourse at the end of the nineteenth century, and how, when it comes to a novel like Second Thoughts, it can provide sufficient ideological agency for a marriage plot. In Second Thoughts, Gillian Lattimer is merely asked to favor a suitor who is a doctor over a suitor who is a painter in order to protest the unwholesomeness of amor dolorosus, embracing cleanliness over filth and health over illness. But it is much more common in sanitary fictions for the female character to enforce hygiene and health through scientific knowledge or ethical principles by marrying and converting a dirty artist or connoisseur. Women were natural sanitarians, according to B. W. Richardson, because the domestic sphere is the best laboratory for healthy families and cleanly nations; moreover, sanitation is an art rather than a science, a standard aesthetic responsibility of middle-class housekeeping.

I would with all my strength suggest to women that to be practitioners of the preventive art of medicine; to hold in their hands the key to health; to stand at the thresholds of their homes and say to disease, “Into this place you shall not come, it is not fitted to receive you, it is free only to health, a barrier to disease.”

Certainly Florence Nightingale’s sanitary campaigns in Scutari during the 1850s make Richardson’s assertions in the 1880s less surprising. In Notes on Nursing, Nightingale insists that medicine and pathology are distinct disciplines, and that every mother and governess should learn enough about the prior (cleanliness, ventilation and diet) to significantly diminish the need for the latter (primarily surgery). By the mid-Victorian period, in fact, disease prevention was a domestic purview, and women were practitioners of a form of cleansing and revival that would extend ideologically from the domestic to
the national. As both Nancy Tomes and Alison Bashford have argued, moreover, while bacteriology increasingly interested doctors and surgeons in the 1870s and 80s, sanitation, hygiene, and cleanliness remained the primary discourse of nursing, and thus became an increasingly female program through the end of the century. In fiction, heroines forge new equivalences between the sanitary and the beautiful in a variety of ways, always using the marriage plot to impose final harmony on the supposedly competing claims of science and art. In Charlotte Mary Yonge’s *Astray: A Tale of a Country Town* (1886), for example, Frida Wood is an orphan, an heiress, and a painter, who dreams of traveling to Italy for art study until Burton King reorients her vocation. King has moved to Emery St. Lawrence with his family under a mysterious cloud of disgrace: it emerges that he endured seven years of penal servitude for the crime of forgery, a sentence that interrupted his medical training and derailed a promising career. It also happens that Emery St. Lawrence was once viewed as a second Bath, but a typhoid epidemic due to defective drainage gave it a bad reputation that frightened off potential visitors. King pretends he knows nothing of medicine while secretly doctoring residents for diphtheria and scarlatina (scarlet fever) in Gridiron Lane, a working-class slum, and lobbying simultaneously as a concerned citizen for a new convalescent hospital. The community practitioners, Dr. Blackstone and his son, are suspicious about King and hostile about plans for a new hospital; they dislike innovation, dismiss sanitary efforts, and fear the presence of “nursing sisters” in the community (176). Even when the water in six of the seven wells in Gridiron is found to be undrinkable, the Blackstones refuse to help King, as he begins to dig an Artesian well while finishing construction on a new mission room in the working-class neighborhood. Inevitably, summer brings unbearable heat and repulsive smells to Gridiron Lane; the children begin to sicken and eventually to die, and finally King comes out of hiding to treat them. His best helpmeet during the new typhoid epidemic is his beloved Frida, who designed and executed the large, delicate frescoes on the walls of the Mission Room just in time for it to receive patients. Here, she “nurses admirably” throughout the epidemic, while “her pale paintings make the sick feel better” (358). After the Blackstones leave town, and King becomes the chief practitioner of the new hospital, Frida marries King and continues to use her art as a form of nursing itself, a fundamental component of a holistic healing process.

In George Halse’s *Graham Aspen, Painter* (1889), our eponymous artist is described as “another [P]ygmalion” who devotes “abnormal” energy to the realization of an ideal study of a beautiful woman he has supposedly never met; eventually, however, we learn it is a picture of his dead mother.
might be expected, Graham’s obsession with this painting as well as other “sublime” images of death and decay renders his mind morbid, his body sickly, and his colors “false.” Dr. Eustace, himself an amateur artist, warns Graham that occupation with death “emasculates his mental facilities and his body pays for it. Hence, the inability at times to pursue the art you love” (57). Indeed, Graham begins to decline rapidly when his body demonstrates an intrinsic lack of harmony and vitality by failing to properly digest food (152). The heroine, Hester, is so moved by watching Graham faint in Dr. Eustace’s office that she becomes a nurse; however, the two don’t actually meet until some time later when she intrudes upon a picture he is painting of “dead trees in a wood,” and his assistant Starkey wisely suggests that Graham add her to it. Hester’s healthy, living image gradually displaces Graham’s dead mother’s ghostly presence, and the marriage plot ultimately coalesces around a project that formally recognizes the new healthfulness of Graham’s art when Graham inherits a famous health farm long-celebrated for excellent drainage system, fine air, and pure water. Aided by Dr. Eustace’s desire to employ some capital “in the interests of science and an equal portion in the advancement of British Art—the two fields of study which divide my attachment,” painter and nurse transform Flinders Farm into a famous art-school where enfeebled British painting will be cleansed and strengthened (283).

Flinders is the solution. It is a famous health resort. In conjunction with your friend Starkie, make it an equally famous art resort—and here my purse comes in. Reconstruct and adapt the place as an art-school in the truest sense. Let your aim be the highest; tolerate no mediocrity; allow no trifling with art; stamp out all meretriciousness; show that it should be pursued seriously, if at all. Let your motto be Nature, and your first and last canon, Truth . . . resolve that everything done under your sway shall be thorough, and you will render the art of your country a great service. (283)

A year later, a newspaper proudly reports that the creative arts have been reborn at the health farm: “Under these two guiding forces, Flinders in unique and destined to be famous as the Alma Mater of a great revival in British Art” (291).

Finally, in George Gissing’s 1890 The Emancipated, the aesthetic awakening of a formerly puritanical widow, Miriam Elgar, reaches its natural apogee in Italy, where she falls in love with and eventually marries a British artist named Mallard. We know these two are destined for the altar when they dramatically dislike each other at the outset: Mallard resents Miriam’s narrow asceticism, while Miriam deplores Mallard’s socially purposeless aestheticism.
The highest moral life for Miriam, as Mallard scornfully suggests, would be something like “the life of a hospital nurse, or a sister of mercy” (94), a vocation significantly at odds with his pursuit of personal pleasure through painting, and his disgust at Miriam’s prim suggestion that his art should be “useful” or should “serve mankind” (95). Mallard is likewise scornful of the repressive cultural force represented by Miriam’s religion, which he explains to his friend, Spence, is the bourgeois, domestic and especially “Philistine point of view”:

We become more and more prudish as what we call civilisation advances. It is a hateful fact that, from the domestic point of view there exists no difference between the noblest things in art and poetry, and the obscenities which are prosecuted. . . . If ever I marry, amico mio, my wife shall learn to make more than a theoretical distinction between what is art and what is grossness. If ever I have children, they shall be taught from the first a natural morality, and not the conventional. If I can afford good casts of noble statues, they shall stand freely about my house. . . . If a daughter of mine cannot describe to me the points of difference between the Venus of the Capitol and that of the Medici, she shall be bidden to use her eyes and her brains better. I’ll have no contemptible prudery in my house! (329)

As Arnold had infamously warned in Culture and Anarchy, most religion was incapable of “transforming vice and hideousness;” because Hebraic religions believe sin is perpetually thwarting man’s path to perfection, only Culture, that mechanism of “sweetness and light,” can help us achieve the harmonious expansion of human nature that Hellenic cultures nurtured through aesthetics. A shade of Arnold is here channeled by Gissing in order to isolate the ideological conflict between Miriam and Mallard as clash between the Hebraic and the Hellenic, and to forge a solution that represents an appropriate transformation of sin into sweetness, and religion into a socially conscious aesthetics. Prior to emancipation, Miriam had promised a large sum of money for the construction of a new Puritan chapel in her village; however, once Mallard gives her a new way of “looking at a thing” (322) Miriam is transformed by art and can no longer honor her pledge. Miriam and her soon-to-be husband together decide to reallocate that money from the propagation of religious oppression to the construction of public baths for the working poor. Hellenic culture meets sanitary culture in the reconciliation that concludes The Emancipated, and the closure negotiated by the marriage plot is consecrated by the aesthetic. The house in Roehampton that Miriam and Mallard share after their marriage is “sacred to love and art,” and their
first visitor is struck by how “the air seemed purer than that of any other house she entered; to breathe it made her heart beat more hopefully, gave her a keener relish of life” (446). Indeed, the work of aesthetic transformation in so many sanitary fictions gives narrative form to Arnold’s Hellenic model of perfectibility, offering through the marriage of art and science, through the marriage of working and upper classes, through the marriage plot itself, a “tableau of reconciliation” that can stand in for Culture. Importantly, the objectives of sanitary fiction also warded off the problem of laissez faire politics and the vulgarity of “doing as one likes”: such anarchy, as it was called by Arnold, would be as dangerous as revolution and as ugly as the reality of harsh social relations. Only art joined with social responsibility, only aesthetics joined with ascetics, could revive Culture at a time of so much environmental ugliness and social degradation.

I’ve been arguing throughout this chapter that sanitary fictions repeatedly sought to liberate Victorian aesthetics from the putrescence of the picturesque. Such liberation inevitably seems less triumphant when the work of sanitation gets defined as an effort to conserve power rather than disperse it, inspiring the rich landowners and selfish artists to discipline their wayward aesthetic inclinations and turn beauty into a political tool in the service of a more graceful and harmonious society. Sanitary fictions, in general, are not like to close on a note of interrogation; they re-form through rehabilitation, often nursing the diseased social hierarchy back to health and power. But the fact that I see sanitary fictions as formally coercive, demonstrative in the long view of socioeconomic power and class hegemony, makes me no less aware, in the still longer view, that these novels are also stridently oppositional, chafing against a tradition of aesthetic power and social oppression that had dominated intellectual discourse from the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment. Inconsistently and imperfectly ideological, the sanitary fictions I’ve written about in this chapter and will continue to write about in The Sanitary Arts, always expose the relentlessly political work of aesthetic discourse, even at the very moment of radical recapitulation to conservative ideology. As Caroline Levine points out, one helpful objective of “new” formalist methodologies might be “not to isolate forms, to bind them to intentions, or to choose between them, but to recognize their challenges to each other.” I would modify Levine’s point to the extent that though forms themselves are constantly changing, we can actually isolate intentions that are quite different from effects, and can attribute a certain degree of self-organization to the effects that emerge from collaborations between discourses. At the very least, Ruskin’s intentional articulation of a sanitary aesthetic became much more entrenched and controversial in Victorian culture than he gave himself
credit for in 1870; in a variety of aesthetic contexts, cleanliness and health came to embody the highest cultural values, and the future of the British people seemed to distill itself into a deceptively simple question asked most succinctly and earnestly by William Morris: “So, which shall we have, art or dirt?” Dorothea Brooke’s unrequited desire to make the life of poverty beautiful may be, in the final analysis, a troubling aesthetic goal, but its formal challenge to dominant discourse and social power could not have been articulated more clearly.