The Sanitary Arts

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Given standard accounts of the sudden “rise” of germ theory in the 1870s, the ideological meaning of the picturesque should certainly be anachronistic by the early years of the twentieth century. The pollution anxiety conveyed so effectively by the dilapidated cottage, the dirty street, and the refuse heap should begin to disappear after germ theory shifts the origin of disease from the environmental to the biological, when the sanitation of a community can no longer promise healthy art or beautiful people. But several times over the course of The Sanitary Arts I’ve pointed to the slow rise and development of any single or singular germ theory of disease; with the help of Alison Bashford, Nancy Tomes, Margaret Pelling, and other historians of science, I’ve argued that the protracted and uneven assimilation of contagionist discourse in the nineteenth century owes as much to pervasive confusion about the unseen world of microorganisms as it does to an abiding cultural investment in sanitation reform as a moral narrative. In part, this book is an

Aesthetic Anachronisms

Mary Ward’s The Mating of Lydia and the Persistent Plot of Sanitary Fiction

The questions of social hygiene, as here understood, go to the heart of life. It is the task of this hygiene not only to remake sewers, but to re-make love, and to do both in the same spirit of human fellowship, to ensure finer individual development and a larger social organization. At one end social hygiene may be regarded as simply the extension of an elementary sanitary code; at the other end it seems to some to have in it the glorious freedom of a new religion. The majority of people, probably, will be content to admit that we have here a scheme of serious social reform which every man and woman will soon be called upon to take some share in.

—Havelock Ellis, The Task of Social Hygiene (1913)
attempt to shed some light on that long period of overlap between the miasmatic and the bacteriological theories of disease, with particular regard to the aesthetic promise of perfectibility that sanitation continued to provide in spite of declining scientific faith in fever nests and filth diseases. Instead of collapsing under the superior science of germ theory, disappearing as the misguided obsession of an unenlightened era, I would argue that sanitation reform actually increased its ideological reach in the era of germ theory. Sanitarians adapted to the new rhetoric of the germ, accommodated the discourse of the microorganism, and began to seek the fever nest in individual human bodies as natural extensions of communities, neighborhoods, and houses. Invested still in social perfectibility and prevention rather than surgical or pharmacological varieties of “cure,” sanitation reformers became interested in cellular pathology for what it could reveal about the very intimate environments of individual human subjects: “life history, heredity, family and domestic life, personal habits and customs” were increasingly scrutinized in the late nineteenth century for different kinds of dirt, dirt that could move from the individual body to the social body through the biological process of reproduction.

When we remember that Ruskinian aesthetic revival depended upon both a cleansed country and a stronger, healthier and more beautiful population, we should be less surprised to realize that the combination of Victorian sanitation reform and the “new” germ theory inspired, in the long, slow period of scientific hypotheses and ideological overlap, both the doctrine of social hygiene and the logic of race culture. Perhaps one of the reasons that germ theory has been celebrated by so many historians as a sudden paradigm shift in medical knowledge, such a lofty moment of scientific and intellectual enlightenment, is that the sudden rupture of a revolution can usefully repress the uncomfortable and even distasteful period of Western development when sanitarians and other social reformers began to seek the tools of human perfectibility in the ideas of the statistician and the geneticist. While defective drains and dust traps were less likely to be identified as sources of illness in the very late years of the nineteenth century, scientists like William Budd and John Tyndall denied the theory of spontaneous generation by insisting on a disease etiology that was even closer to home, “Disease,” Tyndall explained, “comes always from a parent stock”:

In cases of epidemic diseases, it is not on bad air and foul drains that the attention of the physician of the future will be primarily fixed, but upon disease germs, which no bad air or foul drains can create, but which may be pushed by foul air into virulent energy of reproduction.
For Tyndall, writing in 1881 as a physicist primarily interested in airborne microorganisms, the use of reproductive rhetoric was, in itself and as Budd had suggested before him, indicative of the inescapable truth of germ theory. Indeed, Budd had noticed that even opponents of germ theory found themselves, late in the century, using words like “propagation,” reproduction,” and “self-multiplication” to describe the spread of fevers through communities. While Margaret Pelling has usefully pointed out that over-emphasis on the biological associations of words like these by historians has obfuscated rather than clarified their complex historical associations, it seems important to recognize the linguistic contagion of reproductive discourse in late-century sanitary philosophy. The rhetorical accommodation of germ theory, noticed in the 1880s by Budd and Tyndall, marks a gradual shift in sanitary understanding; not the sudden disavowal of spontaneous generation, but the gradual acceptance of supplementary models of prevention that came to understand parenthood itself as a potential environmental crisis.

The Sanitary Arts is most directly concerned with germ theory as it relates to developments in sanitation, so this chapter will be less concerned with isolating and articulating the variety of ideas that were circulating about microorganisms from mid-century than it will be in demonstrating what effect that slow shift in scientific acculturation had upon the broader hygiene movement. The introduction of the germ did not simplify or clarify ideas about illness for Victorians; indeed, it complicated entrenched moral, religious, and even aesthetic assumptions about filth, often producing narratives of disease that may seem, to modern readers, etiologically bewildering, strangely anachronistic, and ethically contradictory. This chapter has two interrelated purposes: to explore the development of sanitation reform as it shifted from an environmental to a biological phase in cultural history, and to examine that shift through the persistence of the sanitary plot in British fiction written well after the discovery and general acceptance of microorganisms. Mrs. Humphry (Mary) Ward’s The Mating of Lydia is the text I discuss most thoroughly here as a very late sanitary fiction: published in 1913, Ward’s novel absorbs many of the most notable features of those mid-Victorian sanitary narratologies I discussed in the second chapter, and it eventually uses the marriage plot as a vehicle to banish environmental degradation, and to inspire a philosophical conversion to a sanitized, socialized aesthetic. But inscribed within the very title of Ward’s novel is an acknowledgment of the somewhat refined responsibility carried by that closing tableau of affective reconciliation; if mid-century sanitary fictions cleanse and renew the social order through a harmonious reconciliation of opposites in marriage, late-Victorian and early-twentieth-century novels often emphasize not only marriage, but the biological and
reproductive ritual of “mating” as a fundamental component of the new sanitary aesthetic.

I. Sanitary Fictions, Germ Theory, and the New Woman

The overlapping of miasmatic theories and germ theories of disease are particularly interesting when they appear in fiction, and often signal an unwillingness to relinquish the ideological power of the sanitary story to an ambivalent, morally meaningless microorganism. Grant Allen was especially cagey in his novels about the spread of disease, and still invested, as late as the 1890s, in reconciling germ theory with a seemingly anachronistic sanitary aesthetic. Allen’s *At Market Value* (1894), for example, is a rather strange story about Arnold Willoughby, the rising Lord Axminster, a young, apparently ugly painter who wants to understand his “market value” in the absence of the class privileges assigned to him at birth. Willoughby reads about an American doctor, Silas Quackenboos, who “undertook to make the plainest faces beautiful, not by mere skin-deep devices, but by the surgical treatment of the human countenance,” and hires Quackenboos to reconstruct his face. Newly anonymous and attractive, Willoughby heads off to Venice where he finds an interesting painting companion in Kathleen Hesselgrave, who loves to paint the inconvenient nooks and stagnant corners of Venice: “they’re so much more picturesque, after all, than the common things the world admires, and one sees everywhere” (Allen, *At Market Value* I, 67). Kathleen and Willoughby set up their canvases together all over Venice, but while Kathleen paints facing the untrodden streets, quaint old churches, and minor canals, Willoughby focuses his canvas and gaze towards the boats and waves on the open sea. During this long period of aesthetic courtship, Kathleen manages to figure out that Willoughby is the missing Lord Axminster, as does the visiting Canon Valentine, who keeps quiet because his own son will inherit if Willoughby stays lost. While Kathleen’s beloved picturesque has been critiqued throughout the novel for being both uncomfortable and insanitary, Canon Valentine is the first to detect disease in Venice’s charming dilapidation.

It is so delightful to see all these beautiful things in company with an artist. But the damp of the lagoons is really too much for my poor old throat... as I went along with Miss Hesselgrave to the Academy yesterday, I felt the cold air rise up from the Canal and catch hold and throttle me. . . . Change the air without delay, that’s the one safe remedy. And indeed to tell you the truth, Venice is so spoilt, so utterly spoilt since the Austrians left,
that I shan’t be sorry to get out of it. Most insanitary town, I call it—most insanitary in every way. (At Market Value I, 165)

Given that Canon Valentine dies of typhoid fever by the end of the second volume, one might guess that he was right about Venice and that he paid a standard Victorian price for his aesthetic tourism. But he leaves Italy perfectly healthy, and when, back in England, he complains to Kathleen again about the unsanitary smells of Venice, she rebuffs him with an alternative, more local narrative of the fever nest:

As to the typhoid, I have my doubts. The sea seems to purify it. Do you know, Canon Valentine, I’ve spent five winters on end in Venice, and I’ve never had a personal friend ill with fever; while in England I’ve had dozens. It isn’t always the places that look the dirtiest which turn out, in the long run, to be really most insanitary. And, if it comes to that, what could be worse than those slums we passed on our way out of the close, near the pointed archway, where you cross the river? (II, 10)

Canon Valentine, in turn, aggressively defends these English cottages; they are health and cleanliness epitomized, he asserts, “wholesomeness itself, the last word in sanitation. Nobody ever got ill there, nobody ever died; and he had never even heard of a case of typhoid” (II, 11). The reason the Canon is so offended is that the slums in question are the property of the Dean of Norchester, and currently the subject of a newspaper inquiry into their dubious sanitary status. Moreover, when a particularly intrepid sanitary inspector confronts him with a glass of suspicious water from Close Wynd, a particularly notorious slum by the river, the Canon drinks it without hesitation, and the fatal typhoid is upon him by bedtime. Here, the familiar sanitary narrative shifts to a new discourse of disease etiology: “For twenty-one days those insidious little microbes that he swallowed so carelessly lay maturing in their colony in the canon’s doomed body. At the end of that time, they swarmed and developed themselves; and even the canon knew in his own heart, unspoken, that it was the Close Wynd water that had given him the typhoid fever” (II, 13). During that period of microbial infestation, Canon Valentine manages to remake his will, leaving two hundred pounds for the sanitary construction of more perfect cottages than the ones “which had proved his destruction” (II, 13), but his hygienic awakening comes too late for himself, his wife, and even Kathleen’s mother, all dead of the typhoid within two weeks.

Such a story is perhaps a recuperation of picturesque environments, a geographical reshuffling of the fever nest that the germ theory of disease
makes possible by the last decades of the nineteenth century. After all, Kathleen’s picturesque Italian paintings sell quite well when she returns to England, and other than a temporary nervous breakdown she appears to suffer no penalty for her own aesthetic preferences. In fact, it is Willoughby who suffers some form of aesthetic retribution in the novel when a surprise shipwreck leaves his right hand crushed and destroys his painting career. While this is probably sanitary punishment for the elective surgical beautification he underwent in the first chapter, it is hardly a deathblow for Willoughby, who becomes a successful translator and is reinstated as Lord Axminster. Moreover, Kathleen and Willoughby marry and move back to the formerly foul city of Venice, where they apparently live happily ever after. This neutralization of the picturesque in the marriage plot gets reflected, of course, in the resolution of the social reform plot as well: microbes are revealed to be the cause of typhoid, not those environments that actually look the dirtiest or smell the most foul. Still, the moral to the story of Canon Valentine’s sad demise seems doubly determined by the environmental and the biological, and essentially unresolved by the recuperative money he leaves to the construction of sanitary cottages, but not actually to water purification, in Close Wynd. The Canon is doomed, finally, not only by his religious hypocrisy, but by his inability to give up the Chadwickian-era equation of picturesque environments with biological danger; indeed, his steadfast adherence to the sanitary story blinds him to the new menace of the microorganism. In this way, even after the advent of germ theory, the conventions of sanitary fiction remain visible, propping up the text’s moral imperative with a familiar set of aesthetic questions and quandaries.

The novel Allen published the following year, The Woman Who Did, eventually became his most infamous work. While this text isn’t usually read for what it can tell us about the slow rise of germ theory, its story of female sexual freedom is nevertheless shaped, at least initially, by the familiar narrative conventions of sanitary fiction. When Herminia Barton, a beautiful, healthy, Cambridge-educated “free woman,” becomes pregnant with Alan Merrick’s child, she refuses to marry him and they flee to Italy for her confinement. Here, Merrick, a barrister, fosters his true vocation, sketching, painting, and studying the early Umbrian painters, and the couple finally settles down in remote, rural Perugia, waiting for Herminia to give birth. Herminia hates Perugia, finds it dismal and disgusting, but Alan loves it: “A Celt in essence, thoroughly Italianate himself, and with a deep love for the picturesque, which often makes men insensible to dirt and discomfort, he expected to Italianise Herminia rapidly” (120). As for Herminia, “The picturesque did not suffice for her. Cleanliness and fresh air were far dearer to her soul than the quaint-
Dusty, dusty Perugia! O Baby, to be born for the freeing of woman, was it here, was it here you must draw your first breath, in air polluted by the vices of centuries” (121). Most interesting to me about this passage is that the pollution anxiety located in Perugia’s picturesque environment retains its moral meaning, but becomes metaphorical rather than physical: Herminia’s modern disgust seems to stem as much from Italy’s ancient vice and corruption, as it does from Perugia’s insanitary dirt and discomfort. Still, Alan’s punishment is predictable. After a few weeks in Perugia, Alan develops headaches, looks unwell, and is restless; Herminia asks him to stop painting, fearing the closeness of the streets and the filthiness of his cherished landscape. By the time Herminia calls in a doctor, however, his typhoid fever is pronounced, and he dies before marrying Herminia and conferring legitimacy on his daughter. A traditional Victorian sanitation story, would, as we know, make the moral to this tale aesthetically obvious: pleasure in the picturesque is dangerous, even deadly, and artists who pursue and replicate this selfish aesthetic endanger both the happy family and the harmonious social community. But *The Woman Who Did*, like *At Market Value*, demonstrates an ideological overlap and bifurcated causality common to the period of germ theory’s slow rise; as we see, moreover, this period of shifting germ etiology and disease discourse is mirrored in miniature by typhoid’s long incubation cycle. First, Alan’s doctor explains that his patient’s typhoid fever was actually contracted weeks earlier in Florence, where the disease is currently an epidemic. And finally, the narrator describes a chain of events that should sound familiar to readers who remember the relatively recent demise of Canon Valentine.

Alan had drunk a single glass of water from those polluted springs that supply in part the Tuscan metropolis. For twenty-one days, those victorious microbes had brooded in silence in his poisoned arteries. At the end of that time they swarmed and declared themselves. He was ill with an aggravated form of the deadly disease that still stalks unchecked through unsanitized Europe. (126)

Even for Grant Allen, writing at the dawn of the twentieth century, the picturesque continues to act as a delivery system for so-called filth disease, circulating the invading microbes freely in contaminated environments and unenlightened European capitals. Both of his mid-nineties novels represent the uneven transition between miasmatic and microbial theories of disease production, and the attempt to introduce an amoral and ambivalent agent...
of death to a narratology still invested in cleansing as a mechanism of social harmony.

It is true that the moral lesson of *The Woman Who Did* is more complicated than the one we see in *At Market Value*, committed as it is to lambasting a society that is still as unwilling to embrace the natural utopianism of gender equality as is it to embrace true cleanliness. Herminia resists the marriage plot repeatedly in her enlightened struggle for freedom and independence, eventually writing a novel with advanced social views that the *Spectator* judges to be genius, but also calls “poisoned”: “its very purity makes it dangerous,” the reviewer explains, succinctly exposing the contradictory forces of pollution anxiety at a moment of scientific and social upheaval (127). The abject source of both filth and cleanliness, Herminia kills herself when her daughter reenters the established social order, rejecting her mother’s hard-fought utopian values in favor of a traditional model of femininity and a life with her moralistic paternal grandfather. While *The Woman Who Did* is certainly a more ideologically strident novel than *At Market Value*, both Allen texts use so-called “New Woman” plots to tell the story of a new social threat, an unprecedented element of chaos and confusion that threatens the straightforward moral connections between sin and disease, immorality and filth. The New Woman, rising at the same moment that germ theory begins to circulate in public discourse, is a threat to any narrative that depends on a closing tableau of affective reconciliation and moral understanding, and given the new sexual and reproductive power demanded by such women, the social and even biological capacity for health and cleanliness was increasingly, and perhaps dangerously, in their hands.

As I’ve already discussed, the feminization of sanitation is one very interesting effect of germ theory that both Bashford and Tomes examine quite closely; in their view, the most important reason sanitation survived the advent of germ theory as a significant component of medical treatment is that sanitary work was largely relegated to women. Bashford explains that the “sanitarian discourse of health and disease was sustained in the field of nursing knowledge and practice well into the twentieth century. Moreover, the technologies of cleanliness produced by ideas of ‘asepsis’ allowed for, rather than obliterated, nurses’ sanitarian practices.” While the rituals of domestic and hospital cleanliness kept women central to the cultural work of hygiene through the early twentieth century, women’s role as mate, as mother, as breeder of a hopefully improved race of Britons made them just as important to the new sanitation as they had been to the old. The advent of the New Woman in fiction, a heroine who actively pursued one of the few
professions suddenly open to women (usually writing, nursing or painting), and who explicitly questioned her status as reproductive entity, pertinently underscores the way sanitation was reinvented as a specifically female form of labor.

While few novels detail the erratic debut of the microbe as dramatically as the two I discussed by Grant Allen, New Woman fiction, a loosely connected and ambivalently feminist selection of novels written primarily during the 1880s and 1890s, is a genre that consistently demonstrates the shift from sanitary to social forms of hygiene. As Beth Sutton-Ramspeck has persuasively demonstrated in *Raising the Dust: The Literary Housekeeping of Mary Ward, Sarah Grand, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, the hygienic aspects of housework, which middle-class women had increasing taken upon themselves in the late nineteenth century, function as a powerful metaphor in New Woman fiction, “sweeping way” old boundaries between public and private, artistic and practical, personal and political. Housekeeping is a subversively empowering image for Sutton-Ramspeck; broadly defined as social activists, literary housekeepers often clean up the public sphere by embracing eugenic marriage and purifying the human species through judicious breeding practices (63). While Sutton-Ramspeck doesn’t discuss in detail the broader connections between the mid-Victorian sanitation reform movement and late-Victorian eugenic philosophy, she does make this crucial aspect of New Woman fiction visible in a way that few critics, especially feminist critics, have done, usefully reminding us that the feminist story, like the sanitary story, is much longer and more complicated than historical narratives of enlightenment and liberal progress sometimes imply. The sanitary responsibility granted to (or seized by) New Woman heroines in the late-nineteenth-century novel is the power to remake the world by remaking the aesthetic; through art, through medicine, through eugenic mating, New Woman heroines are tasked (and task themselves) repeatedly with the Ruskinian imperative to get “the country clean and the people lovely.” Even when a eugenic program is not the first or final solution to hereditary disease and social ugliness, many New Woman heroines combine their “natural” aesthetic and sanitary talents by working to beautify the bodies of British citizens.

This is especially true in novels that feature sympathetic female doctors: medical professionals who naturally resist the filthy, reductionist labor of the surgeon, and instead view their vocation as sanitary prevention and perfection for the greater social good. While we’ve seen this kind of nursing professional well-represented in Grant Allen’s *Hilda Wade*, Charles Reade’s 1877 *A Woman-Hater* is a relatively early novel about a female doctor, Rhoda Gale, hired by a young, progressive country squire to tend to his community in
Barfordshire. It is beautiful, utopian country, Squire Vizard assures her when she first arrives, and his younger, half-sister Zoe generally agrees: she loves to bring her visitors to one village and one cottage in particular so they can glory in the picturesque. But Zoe has inherited an aesthetic sensibility from her Greek mother, and sees something amiss in the “pasty” faces of the children at Islip: “My sister is a great colorist, and pitches her expectations too high,” Vizard explains dismissively. “I daresay their faces are not more pasty than usual; but this is a show place, and looks like a garden, so Zoe wants the boys to be poppies and pansies and the girls roses and lilies.”9 Zoe’s friend Miss Dover proposes one facetious solution to the off-color faces of the village children: “Well, you have got a box of colours; we will come up some day and tint all the putty-faces,” but Dr. Gale makes it clear that all aesthetic alterations now fall under her medical purview. “Their faces are my business, I’ll soon fix them. She didn’t say putty-faced, she said pasty” (II, 161).

Dr. Gale’s initial inspection of the village reveals many sanitary dangers, from the deleterious green wallpaper in Vizard’s own home, to the malarial refuse heap that festers right outside the window of the most picturesque cottage in the village, to her suspicion that the poor children are eating cherry stones to assuage their hunger, thus causing their pallid hues (II, 168). Prevention requires, according to Dr. Gale, a patient and well-trained gaze, a gaze that is not insidiously “pure” as Bourdieu has defined it, not distracted by the aesthetic effects of colors, light and shadows. “You must have eyes, and use them” to investigate predisposing causes and to discover the true sources of illness and deformity that are often masquerading as beauty (II, 225). “The outside roses you admire so much are as delusive as flattery;” she insists to a dismayed Zoe Vizard; “their sweetness covers a foul, unwholesome den” (II, 238). But after Dr. Gale requests a microscope from the Squire, it becomes clear that her preventive gaze can be enhanced by scientific technology, and is just as willing to demonize the microbe as the dung heap. The water, Dr. Gale dramatically announces, is filled with “animalcula” that survive and breed in the stomachs of the children, and she produces a set a drawings that transform the picturesque aesthetic of the village into a form of art that “struck terror in gentle bosoms” (II, 230). At first, Vizard objects on the grounds that these hand-drawn creatures are “antediluvian monsters,” violations of evolution; Zoe is simply angry because she mistakenly believed her village was an aesthetic paradise (II, 231). Dr. Gale eventually persuades the landowner to dig a new freshwater well and to supply his villagers with healthy milk cows, but only after a lengthy explanation of the various long-term biological effects such microorganisms and others are having on his entire laboring population:
Now, for instance, if the boys at Hillstoke are putty-faced, the boys at Islip have no calves to their legs. That is a sure sign of a deteriorating species. The lower type of savage has next to no calf. The calf is a sign of civilization and due nourishment. This single phenomenon was my cue, and led me to others; and I have examined the mothers and the people of all ages, and I tell you it is a village of starvelings. . . . [T]he race has declined. Only five men over fifty are the appropriate weight and height. By purchasing five cows, you will get rid, in the next generation, of the half-grown, slouching men, the hollow-eyed, narrow-chested, round-backed women and the calfless boys one sees all over Islip, and restore the stalwart race that filled the villages under your sires, and have left proof of their wholesome food on the tombstones. (II, 242)

As Dr. Gale delineates the biological signs of civilization and savagery for the edification of the gentry, it becomes clear that the goals of sanitary prevention and social perfectibility have become more explicitly imperial and racial. While the picturesque aesthetic is still a problematic site of social disharmony and disease in A Woman-Hater, it signals slow physical decline and genetic deformity rather than the threat of any sudden and swift-moving epidemic. The task of the female sanitarian, however, retains its ideological meaning and urgency: sanitary knowledge must purify the community by remaking the aesthetic, teaching the perverse landowning class, in particular, to recognize and appreciate a form of beauty found in healthy environments and beautiful people rather than in the picturesque poison of the decayed village and the degenerated human body. This needful reorientation of the aesthetic gaze is also apparent in the novel’s primary love triangle: Zoe loves the beautiful Lord Severne but is beloved by the ugly Lord Uxmoor. Dr. Gale warns Zoe that while Lord Severne is certainly the most beautiful man she has ever seen, her knowledge of physiognomy assures her that he is both too feminine and a liar (III, 3). Indeed, Severne turns out to be a bigamist in the making, and Zoe finally marries Lord Uxmoor after a long depression and illness spent under the care of Dr. Gale. Zoe also sheds, at the end of the novel, her preference for the picturesque, and devotes herself to helping institute new sanitation reforms on her brother’s estate. In this way, the preventive gaze can redirect perverse aesthetic pleasure, ensuring the sanitary future of both the biological and social family. The novel ends with a plea for more women doctors, and a gendered understanding of the medical profession that clearly reflects an abiding distrust of male surgical and pharmacological science, and a celebration of female prevention: “The male physician relies on drugs. Medical women are wanted to moderate that delusion; to prevent
disease by domestic vigilance, and cure it by well-selected esculents and pure air” (II, 240). The unmarried Dr. Gale “is still all eyes, and notices everything” at the close of the novel (III, 390), but her medical practice is small; instead, she devotes herself primarily to breeding newer and healthier strains of cattle on a small farm on Squire Vizard’s estate. Esculents and fresh air are important, even necessary, but by the end of the nineteenth century, sanitarians were, like Dr. Gale, “all eyes,” looking for predisposing causes in breeding and bloodlines, rather than in fever nests and dust traps.

II. Biologizing Sanitation

At mid-century, the sanitary story was a popular narrative of social reconciliation and aesthetic harmony. Like the marriage plot itself, sanitation promised a resanctified image of England, free of unchecked epidemics and unattached lovers. By late century, the rise of an alternative and unpredictable model of disease might have threatened the comfortable closure of this realist drama, especially given the rising suspicion at the dawn of the twentieth century that Victorian sanitation reform was generally a failure. By the 1890s, as Teresa Mangum has written, people were generally disappointed that the social reforms of mid-century had so inadequately addressed crime, prostitution and other vices. An unintelligent and unteachable population had failed to respond as expected to the enthusiastic social outreach of the upper and middle classes, and in return liberal do-gooders had become, as Charles Masterman phrased it in 1907, “tired of the poor.” Masterman sympathetically summarized this problem in his discussion of Realities at Home: “Results seem so inadequate; the material is so stubborn and unpliant; it seems better after all to let things drift and trust piously in a Divine Providence, working all things for good” (5). One specific cultural event had forced these suspicions into more widespread public controversy at the turn of the century: Britain’s politically embarrassing performance during the military campaigns against the Boers. The fact that untrained farmers had successfully defended themselves against professional British soldiers for more than two years (1899–1902) prompted an investigation into the state and status of “national efficiency,” a phrase that primarily signified an inquiry into the physical and mental fitness of working-class Britons who fought the Empire’s battles. The specially formed “Committee on Physical Deterioration” convened in 1903 to review military statistics on the health of potential recruits, and the results “seemed to confirm the existence of a degenerate underclass of the population which formed a residual pool of infection,” reflecting studies of the
working class by nineteenth-century sociologists like Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree, reflecting, too, Charles Reade’s fictionalized description of a British race in significant physical decline. While these statistical studies eventually helped put in place nominally progressive policies like school lunch programs, athletic initiatives, and medical examinations for poor children, many who believed that the British underclass had been degenerating in health and intellect since the early nineteenth century believed also that the mid-Victorian reform movement had completely failed. Middle- and upper-class citizens weren’t just tired of the poor; they were dubious about the era of social perfectibility that reformers had promised would be the result of slum clearances, urban sewerage, and public baths.

If, on the one hand, many scientists, doctors, statisticians, and sociologists resented that environmental sanitation had simply failed to transform a degenerated race of working-class city dwellers back into the ruddy, hearty, innately moral peasants of the old agricultural times, many others believed that the mechanisms of mid-Victorian reform had actually created the current biological crisis by ameliorating the negative social conditions that so usefully preserved the health and strength of the human race. “In the reign of Victoria,” Arnold White complained in his 1901 book Efficiency and Empire, “hospital, sanitary and poor law machinery for treating avoidable disease, and thus tainting posterity, implies an indifference for our successors incompatible with humanity.” Even writers who were willing to admit that sanitary science had achieved much in the prevention of disease and death in the general population argued that its negative effects were actually much more serious: opined George Shee, in 1903 “the causes which are undermining the physique of the nation quite outweigh the results achieved by the progress of medical science.”

The groundbreaking text of sanitation reform had been, inarguably, Chadwick’s Sanitary Report, but for eugenic and proto-eugenic writers of the early twentieth century, the Sanitary Report also marked the beginning of the biological deterioration of England. By concerning itself with “only the conditions of life and not life itself,” Chadwick’s sanitation reform movement had wrongly concentrated its cleansing philosophy and apparatus on environments and not people. British sexologist and reformer Havelock Ellis admitted that in the days before Chadwick, people had certainly lived in “unspeakable filth and disease,” but sanitation measures and poor law reforms had allowed the weakest specimens of human existence to survive and breed, thus defeating natural selection and generating a “surplus” population of degenerates. The new era of social reform, in Ellis’s opinion, needed to focus on protecting the fit from the unfit, and taking responsibility for the
next generation by encouraging rather than ameliorating the necessary work of natural selection as it culled the degenerate, the inebriate, and the feeble from the British gene pool.

Bad conditions have this compensation that, though they produce an intolerable amount of sordid degradation and misery, they kill off their worst victims.

Natural selection, as we say, comes into operation and the more unfit are destroyed, the more fit survive . . . our social responsibility is becoming a sense of racial responsibility. It is that enlarged sense of responsibility which renders possible what we call the regeneration of the race. (39–40)

Certainly Chadwick was an active and opportunistic producer of sanitary discourse in the 1840s, but his power and his primacy as an agent of sanitation reform declined significantly after the protracted and idiosyncratic collaboration between sanitary philosophy and germ theory. Intent here is separate from outcome: environmental cleanliness might have been the original goal of the Sanitary Report, but biological filth was apparently its long-term, generational effect.

Still, even though Chadwick and the mid-Victorian reform initiatives he helped create were often vilified by late-century scientists, it is crucial to understand that writers like Ellis didn’t want to end the sanitation reform movement. They wanted to retrospectively recognize environmental sanitation as simply the first stage of what could now be more properly termed “social hygiene,” and extended to prenatal care, infant care, and puericulture.

Social hygiene, as it will be here understood, may be said to be a development, and even a transformation of what was formerly known as social reform. . . . In the first place, it is no longer merely an attempt to deal with the conditions under which life is lived, seeking to treat bad conditions as they occur, without going to their source, but aims at prevention."

Sanitation appears to have retained its ideological power as a moral vehicle well into the early twentieth century because it became a new, self-organizing force of prevention, one that could work in tandem with some aspects of a very fungible germ theory to promise biological perfectibility for the British race. Ellis may have been a relative newcomer to sanitary discourse when he wrote the above words, but it is important that his understanding of the new phase of social hygiene was widely shared and circulated at the end of the nineteenth century by many of the same sanitarians who pushed so strongly
for environmental improvements and domestic cleanliness in the old days of the fever nest and the dust trap. As early as the 1879 Croydon gathering of the Sanitary Institute, familiar advocates of Victorian hygiene were beginning to repudiate the growing suspicion that reform efforts had failed by conversely insisting that they simply hadn’t gone far enough. Dr. Alfred Carpenter, in his lecture “First Principles of Sanitary Work,” staunchly denied that “sanitary science was responsible for the propagation of a weakened race of beings, and was therefore tending to people the earth with a debilitated race.” Debilitation and physical decline are not the effect of sanitation reform, he asserted, “but a consequence of neglect of it”; if British “progeny” are taught to obey the laws of God and hygiene, “at the end of three or four generations, there will be a removal of gouty diathesis or the tubercular constitution” (44).

Mid-victorian sanitation hadn’t failed, in other words; the concept of environmental prevention was merely beginning to contemplate a new genetic frontier. At the same conference, we may remember, B. W. Richardson was also outlining his plans for the community of “Salutland,” an enlightened aesthetic and sanitary utopia where the surgeon has no cause to practice and the drug trade is unnecessary. However, “Salutland” is also a state dictated by certain strict genetic laws, and “intermarriages between people with hereditary taints—insanity, scrofula, cancer, and specific diseases—are forbidden.” By 1888, the Chairman of the Bolton meeting of the Sanitary Institute was Douglas Galton, cousin of the rising scientist, Francis, who had coined the term “eugenics” five years earlier. The paper Richardson delivered at this meeting, “Storage of Life as a Sanitary Study,” overtly demonstrated how the sanitary debate remained vital after the advent of germ theory; here, Richardson calls the failure to breed human beings in the same way we breed horses and sheep “bad sanitation,” adding that because “overpopulation is everywhere producing cripples, our job as sanitarians has now extended to this problem.”

Unless parentage be sound, it is clear, from what has already been said, that long storage of life in an offspring will certainly fail. . . . The question is a sanitary one in the strictest sense of the word, and no argument of a sentimental kind, indicating acknowledged difficulties, ought for a moment to stand in our way. (499)

The interest in proper “mating” as a cornerstone of the new sanitation is clearly inspired by both mid-Victorian utilitarianism and late-Victorian statistical science; by the end of the century, disciples of prevention were not so much interested in wholesale perfectibility, as they were in proportion,
averages, and the delicate balance of quality and quantity. Richardson’s ideas about the “storage of life,” for example, were based on a less than convincing statistical calculation he used to determine the average age of death within a family over several generations, the “life storage” number representing that average. Professor F. de Chaumont similarly used statistical discourse to express anxieties about Britain’s imperial power: “If a people’s average standard of vitality be lowered,” he reasoned at the 1886 York conference of the Sanitary Institute, “then people will assuredly be handicapped in the race of nations by as much as that standard has been lessened.” Such dubious statistical thinking may have asked British citizens to forgo sentimental reasons for marriage and to replace the affective model of human reproduction with a clinical method of breeding, but it also imposed a familiar moral narrative upon the newly chaotic science of disease, allowing participants to imagine they were eliminating illness, death, and deformity by controlling heredity itself. “Eugenic love” was also patriotic: “it was the politics of the state mapped onto bodies,” Angelique Richardson explains, “the replacement of romance with the rational selection of a reproductive partner in order to better serve the state through breeding.” The vagueness and multiplicity of developing germ theories in the late nineteenth century made its lessons rather easy to adapt and appropriate: the microbe simply extended its menacing authority from the dirty home to the degenerate body, often leaving intact the entrenched ideological location of disease within a working-class fever nest. After all, overpopulation and inauspicious breeding were largely blamed on the working classes, and while sterilization would “happily” occur in the natural course of many badly bred families, doctors like J. Russell Reynolds were committed to a concept of sanitation that would help nature function more efficiently.

There exists in man the power to modify the race to which he belongs; and acting up to his highest light, in all the paths of knowledge to use his art to diminish or destroy that which has within it, at its beginning, the seeds of its own inherent decay, being assured that if he does his work well, nature will internally perform the rest.

While many things are striking about Reynolds’s writing, the image of the seeds of decay stands out in particular. This organic, natural, familiar image of germination is common to explanations of germ theory that explain microorganisms as various “seeds” of disease ever-present in air and water, ready to invade and infect susceptible bodies and families. As Tomes explains, after the isolation of anthrax “seeds” in soil samples in the early 1880s the Victorian
association between dirt and disease germs actually intensified, allowing both environmental degradation and biological decay to assume responsibility, often simultaneously, for epidemics and physical deformities.

Even Richardson, an ardent opponent of germ theory, insisted that the next generation of sanitary scrutiny should focus on what he called “the seed time of health,” in an effort to purify the earliest life of the undeveloped human through the work of the new hygiene: “the new school of sanitarians will take up a new sanitation . . . it involves the problem of the fashioning of the child from the first moment it begins to feed on the universe, by its eyes, its ears, its touch, its taste, its smell.” This conscious adaptation to biological science in the discourse of old-fashioned sanitarians like Richardson clearly indicates that germ theory didn’t suddenly dethrone miasmatic theories of disease in the last decades of the nineteenth century; on the contrary, germ theory was appropriated by the new school of sanitarians who increasingly believed health and hygiene could penetrate and cleanse the earliest of human environments.

Before I leave Richardson’s problem of “fashioning the child” too far behind in this chapter, I want to recall Eagleton’s assertion that a sound political regime is one where “subjects conduct themselves gracefully,” and social harmony is everywhere shaped through the receptivity of our senses to conduct, to virtue, to beauty:

What matters is not in the first place art, but this process of refashioning the human subject from the inside, informing its subtlest affections and bodily responses with this law which is not law. It would thus ideally be inconceivable for the subject to violate the injunctions of power as it would be to find a putrid odor enchanting. The understanding knows well enough that we live in conformity to impersonal laws; but in the aesthetic it is as though we can forget about all that—as though it is we who freely fashion the laws to which we subject ourselves.

What is so important about Eagleton’s words to The Sanitary Arts is that they underscore the close relationship between an intellectual history of the aesthetic as a tool of cultural hegemony and the subtle exploitation of sense perception as the foundation for taste and, therefore, class. From the earliest identifications of fever nests in the urban environment to suspicions that certain bodies were degraded and diseased, sanitarians depended upon the ability of (primarily) the middle-classes to become “all eyes”: to recognize and be repulsed by mud on streets, in homes, and on bodies, to be sure, but also bad smells, disharmonious shapes, unbalanced limbs, undeveloped muscles.
As we know from Bourdieu, sensory reactions to ugliness seem natural and seem instinctive, but they are actually social and economic distinctions at the very moment of their successful incorporation and reproduction. This version of the aesthetic as cultural agent is especially powerful and persuasive because it allows us to ignore the reality of harsh social relations and economic injustice, providing us instead with an alternative moral narrative, one where the beautiful, harmonious society is more important than the grievances of individuals or even classes of individuals. Statistics organize quantities, qualities, probabilities, averages, but the aesthetic appeals to the conscience, to the senses, to the virtuous necessity for beauty in all aspects of human existence. We are all working toward the “realization of man” as John Simon explained in 1890, “and when sanitary reformers appeal to the conscience of modern civilisation against the mere quantitative waste of human life, their deeper protest is against the heedless extinction of those high and beautiful possibilities of being, against the wanton interception of such powers for good, against the cruel smothering of such capacities for happiness.”

“Health is more than mere existence,” agreed surgeon C. J. Bond in a collection of essays on the construction of “The Great State” edited by H. G. Wells; health signifies an ability to respond to beauty through all of the body’s senses and to shape for oneself a more enlightened, more self-aware existence. “This is no merely modern view,” Bond added:

The citizens of Athens in her best days conceived of the true, the healthy life, as a harmonious development of mental and bodily powers, and as a true adjustment of the man to his environment. Self-realisation meant to the Greek the union of a virtuous soul in a beautiful body, and this was the outcome of the ordered . . . natural faculties under the control of a well-balanced mind.

Like Matthew Arnold, Bond and many other late-Victorian socialists believed that the “sweetness and light” of the Hellenic period provided the best model for social perfectibility, and it was clear that the aesthetic harmony represented by perfect Culture had its roots in much older ideals; we all become artists, as Havelock Ellis argued, when we believe with Lord Shaftesbury that good behavior and social harmony constitute art.

In this context, it is crucial to remember that Richardson’s “Seed-Time of Health” was not only to be interpreted as the earliest stage of individual human life, it was also designed to reference that earliest and most perfect stage of human civilization to date— Hellenism. At the opening of that address, he asks his audience to imagine the ancient Greek people and their
society in order to conjure an image of utopia that was realized in the past and can therefore be created in the future:

If these people could be seen in their fair stature and build of body, draped in their loose garments, the eye, like the ear, would be vanquished. Such incomparable beauty! Should a sculptor want a model for a work he would leave for all time, he would find it in them; should a painter want a face for his perfected art, he would find it in them; should a physician want a text for a discourse on the types of health and sanity, he would find it in those types of beauty.30

While even the most sensitive human subject couldn’t see a microorganism, or depend on his sense of smell to detect the presence of germs, he could still react to disease by reacting to dysgenic types and still recognize health by responding to beauty. And just as sanitary physicians like Grant Allen’s Dr. Rhoda Gale were needed to provide concerned citizens with textual descriptions of pasty faces and undeveloped calves, artists must continue to train the “naturally” sensitive to recognize not only undegraded environments but uncompromised forms. Indeed, when social harmony relies so completely on taste as a constitutive mechanism, the role of not only the artist, but the connoisseur, the aesthete, the collector, and the curator become powerful pedagogical positions, common to texts that grapple, often triumphantly, with the problem of harsh social relations. As the textual representative of human sensitivity to beauty, to ugliness, to art and to dirt, the figure of the aesthetic practitioner in so much nineteenth-century literature continues to map the path to perfectibility, negotiating for the middle-class reader an artistic appreciation that kept the political order intact even after the chaos and confusion of germ theory.

III. From the Marriage Plot to The Mating of Lydia

Let me begin my discussion of Mrs. Humphry (Mary) Ward’s The Mating of Lydia with some sanitary boilerplate. As we enter the third volume of that novel, we are invited to contemplate the village of Mainstairs, a filthy, disease-ridden collection of slums on the estate of rich landowner, Mr. Edmund Melrose. Ward writes,

Over the village rose the low shoulder of a grassy fell, its patches of golden fern glistening under the October sunshine; great sycamores, with their
rounded masses of leaf, hung above the dilapidated roofs . . . and the blue smoke that rose out of the chimneys, together with the few flowers that gleamed in the gardens, the picturesque irregularity of the houses and the general setting of the wood and distant mountain, made of the poisoned village “a subject,” on which a wandering artist, who had set up his canvas at the corner of the road, was at that moment, indeed, hard at work. There might be death in those houses; but out of the beauty which sunshine strikes from a ruin, a man, honestly in search of a few pounds, was making what he could."

My larger argument about *The Mating of Lydia* necessarily begins with the ideological labor undertaken by this passage. The dilapidated village, the wandering artist, and the subjection of poverty and working-class desperation to picturesque pleasure are stock ingredients of what I have been identifying as the sanitary narrative: in summary, a series of tropes that mobilize a social revulsion against Romantic aesthetic values in order to plot a version of sanitation reform that could also purify British art. As we have seen, the perversities of the picturesque function as a kind of cultural shorthand for aristocratic detachment and social injustice, and we know that the unwholesome aesthetic pleasure derived from the poisoned village is a kind of sanitary convention that the perambulations of the plot will eventually justify, or even require. For one thing, in *The Mating of Lydia*, Melrose’s aesthetic pursuits are the direct cause of the Mainstairs tragedy: Melrose is an insatiable art collector and famous connoisseur, a character who explicitly uses every shred of his income to expand, often illegally, his collection of European art treasures at the expense of his diseased and starving tenants. In the first chapter, which is set “thirty years ago,” he imports, as well, a young Italian wife who is the daughter of his dealer in Italian antiquities, a wife who is forced to live in a kind of parallel poverty and isolation at the dilapidated Threlfall Tower estate, where beautiful art and artifacts are stored in all the rooms, but never cataloged, never even unboxed.

Eventually Netta Melrose rebels, stealing a valuable Hermes bronze from among her husband’s treasures, and escaping back to Italy with their daughter, Felicia. The remainder of the novel takes place twenty years later, when penniless Netta returns with her child to claim financial assistance from her even more prosperous, even more idiosyncratic estranged husband. The drama of their reappearance is played out against renewed epidemics of diphtheria and scarlet fever at Mainstairs, and Melrose’s appointment of fellow antiquarian and minor collector, young Claude Faversham, as his new estate agent and heir apparent. While the eponymous Lydia doesn’t enter the novel
for several chapters, when she does it is important that she is a landscape painter and a New Woman, and that her potential marriage or mating will be a choice between suitor Faversham, whose perverse aesthetic preferences promise to replicate Melrose’s, and Lord Tatham, a rival landowner without aesthetic understanding, who is nevertheless a model paternalist and sanitary overachiever.

Despite the convoluted narrative timeline that first sets us back a generation and then fast-forwards us to a historical moment right at the turn of the century, all of the standard features of mid-Victorian sanitary fiction are in place in *The Mating of Lydia*; indeed, this 1913 novel will eventually use the marriage plot as a vehicle to banish environmental degradation, and to inspire a philosophical conversion to a sanitized, socialized aesthetic. We could easily see this novel as an isolated throw-back to an earlier scientific moment; a sign of Mary Ward’s age and old-fashioned devotion to both the social reforms of the mid-Victorian period, and her Uncle Matthew Arnold’s formidable commitment to “sweetness and light.” But it seems to me that this view prematurely shoehorns *The Mating of Lydia* into an ahistorical sanitary narrative, ignoring Ward’s complex and even overdetermined interest in disease etiology and the aesthetic reconciliation marked here by mating rather than marriage, careful breeding rather than injudicious reproduction. The picturesque remains problematic in fiction well beyond its mid-Victorian moment because picturesque revulsion continues to mobilize the discourse of hygiene as an answer to the problem of working-class degradation and degeneration well into the twentieth century. Recognizing the continuity between mid-Victorian sanitary fiction and early-twentieth-century novels like *The Mating of Lydia* may reveal the persistence of certain plots and perversities in British fiction, but it may also expose the evolution of sanitary philosophy as it emerged from its environmental phase and entered upon a biological phase that was much more invested in the prevention of individual illnesses, heredity deformities, and intellectual weaknesses. The repudiation of the picturesque is a crucial ideological linchpin between sanitary and proto-eugenic thinking, I would argue, a trope that captures clearly an abiding effort to naturalize a set of specific social, political and economic problems as an aesthetic controversy.

As we know, by 1913, or at least by 1900, when *The Mating* is probably set, environmental reform had unevenly run its course as a vehicle of social perfectibility. Ward meshes many suspicions about the long-term efficacy of sanitation into the plot of *The Mating of Lydia*, casting the miserable village of Mainstairs as a throwback to unenlightened, insanitary times, and an embarrassment to neighboring landlords who instituted their own reforms in the previous century, and who now fear that Melrose’s scandalous treatment of
his tenants “brings disgrace on the whole show” (125). Asserting the rights of property, individualism, and the Englishman’s liberal prerogative to pursue his own pleasure without regard to social consequence, Melrose defies the Sanitary Inspectors when they attempt to pressure reforms on Mainstairs, decrying the destructive Socialism that constructs hospitals, free libraries, and model cottages for the undeserving Proletariat out of the wealth of the more privileged classes. In fact, personal power and property are the defining features of Melrose’s aesthetic identity: as he explains to an increasingly dubious Faversham, his collection of art is the pursuit of a radically private form of pleasure, an outgrowth, in fact, of the gaming habits of his youth. “In my view the object of everybody should be to live as acutely as possible—to get as many sensations, as many pleasant reactions as possible, out of the day” (276).

In this sense, the poisoned village is an ideological touchstone that points backward to mid-Victorian sanitation reform and simultaneously to its Modernist failure: the picturesque effects of decay and death in Mainstairs are an anachronistic byproduct of Melrose’s much more contemporary participation in the principles of aestheticism, an investment in “art for art’s sake” that ensures the purest of all possible gazes. Boxed up in a private house, Melrose’s treasures are radically decontextualized and dehistoricized; atomized and unseen, they are the essence of private property and individual pleasure. To unbox and catalog these art treasures, as Faversham would like to do, would represent the contamination of context, of public narrative, and of civic responsibility. Instead, Melrose woos Faversham with the tactile pleasures of private aesthetic experiences, coming to Faversham’s bedside while the beautiful boy recuperates from a bicycling accident, bringing him rare gems and antiquities to languidly stroke and turn over while the collector tells stories of his aesthetic exploits.

Indeed, in protracted defiance of its own title, the primary seduction in The Mating of Lydia seems to be the one undertaken by Melrose of Claude: each beautiful object revealed to the younger connoisseur tempts him to repress his lingering conscience and burgeoning love for Lydia and stay within the secluded sensations of Threlfall Tower. It also evinces a sterile form of taste that is deeply at odds with the aesthetic articulated by Shaftesbury and Kant; as Allison Pease has argued, traditional aesthetic enjoyment is deeply personal, but it also establishes a baseline theory of the beautiful that is communal, and socially constitutive.32 Purely personal gratification is merely the foundation of the “agreeable” in Kantian philosophy, and this private form of consumption, Pease explains, is pornographic rather than aesthetic (20). Claude is also perversely attracted to Melrose’s power and Nietzschean assertions of radical autonomy and liberty; when Lydia criticizes his fealty to
Melrose, Claude admits “his morality is abnormal, but his will and brain are superb” (406). Furthermore, Melrose pays Faversham an exorbitant amount of money—3000 pounds per year—to “manage” his estates, and Claude, at thirty, has determined not to marry until he has amassed enough capital to live easily, even well. Another complication to the traditional marriage plot presents itself when Lydia decides that she herself will never marry; in accordance with the New Woman spirit of equality and independence, Lydia wants above all things platonic friendships with men. Lydia also struggles, like Claude, with painterly pornographic pleasures that could finally eclipse her lingering social responsibility and civic consciousness: “she was, before everything, one of those persons who thrill under the appeal of beauty to such a degree that often threatens or suspends practical energy. Save for conscience in her, she could have lived from day to day just for the moments of delight, the changes in light and shade, in color and form, that this beautiful world continually presents to senses as keen as hers” (59).

Lydia’s keen enjoyment of her own highly developed sensations, her love of the effects of shifting lights on color and form, threatens to import all the past perversities of the picturesque under the new reign of Impressionism. In fact, Lydia is much influenced here by the contemporary painter Delorme, who periodically visits the Tatham homestead of Duddon Castle and proclaims himself “Whistler’s lawful and only successor. Pattern and harmony possessed him; finish was only made for fools, and the story-teller in art was an unclean thing” (246). This repudiation of Ruskinian realism temporarily reverses the pollution anxiety of aesthetic discourse: haziness, mistiness, and the blurred effects of distance repress the unclean story in favor of the pure gaze. Delorme does little actual painting in the novel, but he visits Duddon frequently enough to represent, along with Melrose, the unraveling of traditional aesthetic philosophy, especially the coupling of morality and beauty that once allowed the mechanism of social cleanliness to promise human perfectibility and artistic harmony. “‘There is no relation whatever between art and morality,’ Delorme smoked pugnaciously, ‘The greater the artist, generally speaking, the worse the man’” (247). Cleanliness, for the Impressionist, has other associations, and many of them demonstrate that the aesthetic perspective on social perfectibility is now a racial rather than a sanitary narrative. Contemplating a visiting Tatham cousin, Delorme “perceived in him the sure signs of a decadence which was rapidly drawing the English aristocratic class into the limbo of things that were,” and takes the opportunity to languidly suggest that a marriage between the beautiful, robust and healthy Lydia and the less impressive heir Lord Harry will be just the thing to energize the Tatham bloodline. Defensively, Cousin Tatham replies the family’s blood is
pure: “You’d find if you looked into it that we descended very straight. There’s been no carelessness.” To which Delorme responds, “Carelessness, as you call it, is the only hope for a family nowadays. A strong blood—that’s what you want—a blood that will stand this modern life—and you’ll never get it by mating in and in” (225).

It seems important that this dysgenic analysis is the special purview of the modern painter in The Mating of Lydia, important too that this avatar for Whistler is here given his own embodied version of Ruskin to fully flesh out the shift that has taken place in aesthetic philosophy. Cyril Boden is a fellow of All Souls, an advanced radical and art critic who is “quaintly Ruskinian in matters of art, believing that all art should appeal to ethical or poetical emotion” (246). Boden and Delorme nakedly generate all of the animus of Ruskin v. Whistler in their arguments about art, morality, and civic responsibility; as Delorme sneeringly summarizes his rival, “Boden admires a painter because he is a good man and pays his washing bills . . . his very colors are virtues and his pictures must be masterpieces because he subscribes to the Dogs’ Home or doesn’t beat his wife” (246). When Boden insists, moreover, that all great painters have felt emotional connections to the “multitude,” Delorme replies that the “multitude is a brute beast” (248). The stigmatizing and taxing of wealth by the Socialists is, for the great painter, another violation of natural selection because he believes with Melrose that democracy is also dysgenic: “Wealth is only materialized intelligence!” he thunders at the quaint Ruskinian, while the activist is busy ferreting out the Sanitary Authorities to make a complaint about the “horrible insanitary hole” he passed on his walk that morning.

As we might expect, Boden makes the most noise about Mainstairs in The Mating of Lydia, visiting the village repeatedly to learn the individual, unclean stories of the inhabitants, and what he learns does seem to confirm that there is something of a population crisis among the working classes, who are sorting out their own principles of natural selection without regard to the perceived racial needs of England. Like Middlemarch, The Mating of Lydia is set in the midst of an agricultural depression that has sent the strongest and ablest inhabitants of Mainstairs to “great Canadian spaces beyond the Western seas” (57). Left behind are the women, the sick, the young, the intemperate, and the feeble; while widespread “blood poisoning” after childbirth has killed off many women already “weakened by the long effects of filthy conditions,” at least thirty children have died in the past year, and a “paralysis” that sets in after diphtheria is widespread among the surviving children (325). The deeply entrenched ideology of the fever nest here appears intact well after the development of germ theory, but a new despair about physical degeneracy and
biological decline accompanies the sanitary narrative. While the novel keeps some distance between the reader and most of the individual working-class bodies, Boden frequently manages to bring one particular poor family under the reader’s gaze. John Brand inherited a small farm from his father, but his “dull brain” has no management sense; he drinks, he gambles, and he spends himself into a debt that exposes him to Melrose, who, because of a small legal dispute, surreptitiously pressures the bank to foreclose on the farmer. Brand has a similarly dim wife and two sons, but the elder, stronger, more intelligent sibling has left for Quebec, leaving only Will Brand to help support the declining fortunes of his parents. Will is a strangely clumsy boy who, at twenty, is generally regarded as “queer” and “feeble-witted,” best known in the neighborhood for putting on white sheets and frightening young lovers in the gloaming.

Only his parents know that Will is also capable of fits of rage, a pertinent aspect of his dysgenic profile when it comes to the resolution of Ward’s somewhat convoluted plot. Late in the novel, Melrose is murdered in his own art gallery, shot in the chest after a confrontation with Claude, who has finally broken off their arrangement for the sake of Lydia. Claude suspects there was somebody else in the gallery during their argument because he senses movement behind a new Nattier portrait from Paris, a portrait that is subsequently found face-down on the ground next to Melrose’s corpse. It is fitting that the affected and artificial work of Louis XV’s court painter provides a decorous disguise for the working-class degenerate with a gun; also fitting that the exposure of Will Brand as the murderer is only accomplished by Cyril Boden, who knows each family in Mainstairs personally, and who finds out that the boy hated Melrose and ran off after his death. The villagers warn Boden that Will may never be caught: the strange, intellectually stunted boy has unusually sharp survival skills, as if the decline in human characteristics in the feeble working classes has yielded compensatory animal instincts. Boden reports that Will knows to avoid the railroad and stick to the fells, and that the villagers “tell the most extraordinary tales of his knowledge of the mountains—especially in the snow and wild weather. They say that shepherds who have lost sheep constantly go to him for help” (468).

When Will finally appears to Boden after five winter months on his own in the mountains, he is a tottering and ghastly figure. Distress—mortal fatigue—breathed from the haggard emaciation of face and limbs. Round the shoulders was folded a sack, from which the dregs of some red dipping mixture it had once
contained had dripped over the youth’s chest and legs, his tattered clothes and broken boots, in streams of what, to Boden’s startled eyes, looked like blood. (480–81)

Hunted by human civilization and animalized by his brutal environment, Will speaks to Boden long enough to confess to the murder before jumping from a cliff into the foaming river below. Interestingly, however, when the jury inspects the obviously injured corpse at the inquest, what they see is a body “botched by Nature in the flesh” (484), confirming the novel’s repeated assumption that Melrose’s environmental crime against Mainstairs has been biologically altering and deforming its inhabitants. Mainstairs has always seemed “bloodstained” and a place of outright “murder” to Claude, but he likewise identifies Melrose’s crime as a generational unmaking of the human condition:

Had Melrose, out of his immense income, spent a couple of thousand pounds a year on the village at any time during the preceding years, a score of death would have been saved, and the physical degeneracy of a whole population would have been prevented. (327)

While the picturesque village in *The Mating of Lydia* may be an inscription of Ward’s scientific confusion or even an ideological red herring, it might also be the springboard for a new sanitary narrative that requires biological cleanliness to underwrite the next stage of social perfectibility. On the other hand, when it comes to the question of judicious mating in Ward’s novel, the answer is provided not by the modern Mr. Delorme, but by the anachronistic Mr. Boden. Boden has perpetually mourned the greedy modern preoccupation with wealth that prevents men like Claude Faversham from wanting to marry; indeed, both Claude and Lydia are segments of the British population that so-called “positive eugenicists” believed should be encouraged to mate and breed in racially invigorating numbers. Delorme’s favored aristocratic bachelor, Lord Tatham, is consigned, somewhat punitively it seems, to a marriage with Melrose’s dispossessed daughter, a girl of twenty-two who looks sixteen because her malnourished body is a symbolic inscription of her father’s paternalist failures, the deformity of an entire community legible in her small frame and unusually large head. Disenchanted with fortune and with Melrose’s deadly aesthetic, Claude reinstates Felicia’s rightful inheritance, asking only to retain residency at Threlfall Tower, and permission to enact a form of sanitation that will eradicate the perversities of the pornographic
gaze. His greatest pleasure since Melrose’s death has been the unboxing and
the cataloging of the art treasures, discovering in each hidden archive the
exquisite work of the living human mind reaching out “through the centuries”
to touch the lives of future generations (494). If dirt is matter out of place,
Claude’s catalog will be, in itself, cleansing; but his proposal to both Lydia
and the new Lord and Lady Tatham is to return the story to Melrose’s art, to
create a public record and context for aesthetic experience in the new century.

What would she think, he asked her, of a great Museum for the north—
a center for students—none of your brick and iron monstrosities, rising
amid slums, but a beautiful house showing its beautiful possessions to all
who came; and set amid the streams and hills? And in one wing of it, per-
haps curator’s rooms—where Lydia, the dear lover of nature and art, might
reign and work—fitly housed? (494).

Fortunately, Lydia has undergone her own aesthetic transformation by the
end of the novel. Disillusioned with Delorme, she finds that helping Boden
minister to the poor children in Mainstairs has deprived her of the pure gaze:
“she, who had plummed herself on the poised mind, the mastered senses,” can
no longer lose herself in beauty, and she abandons her maiden life with lit-
tle reluctance to marry Claude and help him curate and convert the myopic
pleasures of aestheticism back into a space of social harmony and economic
reconciliation, “a House Beautiful, indeed, for the whole north of England”
(504).

Finally, the sanitary narrative is on familiar ground: deviant aesthetic phi-
losophies are repudiated, and art is cleansed and revived within the public
space of the museum. This enlightenment fantasy of social progress through
cultural reform might be the most anachronistic aspect of The Mating of
Lydia, underscoring Ward’s fundamental conservatism and her unwilling-
ness, finally, to do anything more in her novel than consolidate vast wealth
in the hands of a liberal, through dubiously fertile, aristocratic couple. But
our Ruskinian hero, Mr. Boden, appears to reject the passive aesthetic pro-
gram of social improvement designed by Claude Faversham; in the closing
passage of the novel, Boden’s eyes “kindle” when he thinks of the power that
could be harnessed by Claude and Lydia in order to truly “turn the ground,”
“restore the waste places,” and “enrich” England’s garden. “Curator!—stuff!
If he won’t own that estate, make him govern it, and play the man! Disinter-
ested power!—with such a wife and such a friend? Could a man ask better of
the gods! Now is your moment. Rural England turns to you, its natural lead-
ers, to shape it afresh! Shirk—refuse—at your peril!” (512). The agricultural
metaphors and the discourse of returning fertility make of Claude and Lydia a new middle-class resource for political power, their aesthetic philosophy of public access and sympathy working to create a healthier and more harmonious society. The smooth, graceful functioning of a beautiful culture may no longer be a matter of blood, of class, and the accidental privileges of birth, but it is a matter of conscious, careful and “natural” breeding.