The Sanitary Arts

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Published by The Ohio State University Press


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Ellis’s words nicely capture the physiological meaning of beauty that became a dominant strand of sanitary discourse at the end of the nineteenth century. In its physiological phase, the Sanitary Idea worked as an aesthetic power to make the human body healthy through the enlightened sensory mechanism of taste. Taste is not represented by the exploitation of a single sense, moreover, but by a holistic sensory experience and awareness, an “art-instinct” that is inherently social because it can be satisfied only by the harmonizing perception of beauty in environments and in people. Ellis’s aesthetic concept looks back to Shaftsbury and Kant, but with a new awareness of the extent of dirt and degeneracy that art must repress in order to function as a harmonizing social philosophy. The eugenic movement in socialism at the end of the nineteenth century may have been an unintended development of mid-Victorian sanitary thinking, but when eugenic advocacy is reexamined as an aesthetic philosophy within a formidable intellectual tradition that also includes sanitary thinking it seems less like a moral misstep or a politi-
cal aberration than a collaborative and evolving cultural development. Self-organization is a morally neutral mechanism; as Paul Krugman somewhat ruefully explains, it is “something we observe, not necessarily something we want” (6).

Throughout The Sanitary Arts, Bourdieu and Eagleton have helped me to understand the power of the aesthetic to disguise ambivalent and repressive social programs as natural instincts for beauty. They have also helped me to interpret the resurrection of John Ruskin as the unwitting, unintentional father of eugenic advocacy as a chilling example of how that aesthetic functions to redefine sociological and statistical depravity as artistic taste. But when we find Ruskin operating as a eugenic bellweather, we must also realize that aesthetic history is robustly unstable and contingent, and that any causal narrative of cultural change must reflect the active, adaptive, and collaborative work of a variety of overlapping events, discourses, and people. The Ruskinian sanitary aesthetic is, on the one hand, a revolutionary overthrow of reigning artistic and political conventions; the cleanliness campaigns, after all, made *aesthesis* more social, more democratic, by leveling the senses. But sanitation reform is still a political philosophy imagined as an aesthetic philosophy, and it eventually recapitulates and reinvigorates some of the very artistic conventions most outrageous to mid-Victorian sanitarians. Even the ability to recognize and enjoy the picturesque, I argued in my last chapters, returns as a sign of individual health and vitality for neo-Kantian philosophers like Frederick Albert Lange, who celebrated the “synthetic thinking” and the “optimism” of powerful individuals who were able to ignore poverty and filth for the sake of aesthetic experience. Lange, who significantly influenced both Nietzsche and Havelock Ellis, returns the concepts of disinterest, detachment and generalization to high aesthetic regard, encouraging his post-Chadwickian readers to let the haziness and blurriness of distance once again elide all of the depressing things they now know about the reeking, revolting, and reckless poor.

In this way, my methodology has followed my story. Rather than developing or “tracing” a new genealogy of sanitation reform that emanates from John Ruskin instead of Edwin Chadwick, I have been arguing for the deliberately constructed and highly political work of genealogical thinking, trying to call into question the institutionalization of intellectual and scientific history around sharply delineated points of origin and persons of interest. Ruskin and Chadwick played central roles in the story of the cleanliness campaigns, to be sure, but so did Frederick Albert Lange and Havelock Ellis, Friedrich Nietzsche and Francis Galton. However, it is also the case that my story has followed my methodology. In trying to resist the genealogical power of certain
mutually exclusive narratives about sanitation and aesthetics, I have also attempted to resist the authoritative pull of those canonical Victorian voices who are most commonly associated with the genre of writing I privilege in *The Sanitary Arts*: the novel. While Dickens, Eliot, Gaskell and Collins have all made important appearances in these pages, they have been thrown into a broader, more collaborative conversation with their own less celebrated, less memorialized peers. It may be the case that the story I have been trying to tell about the sanitary aesthetic is more vividly available to me in noncanonical fiction because my interpretive strategy is less rigidly constrained by well-litigated authorial conventions, formal aesthetic qualities and entrenched critical protocols. It may also be true that noncanonical texts are noncanonical because they grapple, often quite unsuccessfully, with complex and even contradictory narratives about seemingly unrelated social and aesthetic problems. Sidestepping cause, I can still readily embrace effect: those less formidable voices—Charlotte Mary Yonge, Charles Reade, Sarah Grand, Grant Allen—have provided a much more robust and more complicated picture of my undisciplined topic over a longer nineteenth century, allowing me to identify significant cultural change represented by a set of discursive collisions, overlaps, and reconciliations that have not been conventional sites of interest for Victorian Studies.

Just as the distinction between high- and middle-brow fiction has prematurely limited the kinds of questions we have been able to ask about how the Victorian novel represents cultural change, the disciplinary separation of scientific discourse from aesthetic discourse has forced our answers to accommodate one semantic domain or the other. The production and circulation of the sanitary aesthetic within Victorian fiction, art criticism, home decoration guides, architectural handbooks, and eugenic propaganda can only be appreciated if we understand the idiosyncratically collaborative outcomes that emanate from unintentionally shared discoveries and objectives. More work needs to be conducted at the reclusive borders of seemingly unrelated disciplines and discourses; if my necessarily limited proddings at the interface between sanitation and aesthetics have been productive, I hope they have demonstrated that interactions among apparently uncongenial subjects and actors can be rich environments for some remarkable but forgotten causes of cultural change. Intent here needs to be separated from effect: as Levine explains, “there is a gap between ideology as a comprehensive group-based attempt to impose order and the kinds of successes and failures that particular ordering tactics actually achieve” (637). I would extend Levine’s argument to include the possibility that the “ordering tactics” that emanate from the chasm between intent and effect can become, in turn, the conditions for the
intentional work of other actors, other participants in the ongoing collaborative work of cultural change. My own conclusion is that aesthetic stances and scientific discoveries have political meanings that cannot finally be entirely repressive or revolutionary. They shift in their encounters and their confrontations with each other, and it is only the attempt to sort cultural events into the strict divisions of disciplinary discourse that imposes ideological coherence and temporal clarity on the much richer, longer, and more complex story of nineteenth-century culture.