

**Absorbing Fare:
Food, Bodies, and Social Attention in Modern Britain**

by

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ABSTRACT

Absorbing Fare examines the imaginative functions of food and ingestion within the discourses of difference that emerged in modern Britain. Using four historical instances of cultural fixation, I argue that these seemingly anomalous moments illuminate a conceptualization of identity as constituted, for individuals as well as communities, by acts of exclusion as well as incorporation.

The first half of my dissertation focuses on two disparate types of foods whose distinctive properties activated questions about the ethics of eating and the ways in which the object of ingestion could act upon the consuming body. Chapter 1 (“Man is but a Crab: Crustacean Kinship and Its Perils”) pries into the crustacean’s place in Victorian marine biology and evolutionary theory, situating it in the context of a long tradition of literature that uses ingestion to visualize the origins and ends of human life. Chapter 2 (“Pills for Our Ills: Diagnosing Self and Society”) listens in on the clamorous conflict between purveyors and critics of patent medicines, showing how both sides claimed likeness between habits of alimentary, auditory, and cultural consumption in articulating competing visions for the future of the human race.

The second half of the dissertation turns from foods to foodways, and from philosophical questions about the malleability and vulnerability of the human body to socio-political questions about how these bodies could be ordered and placed to optimize the good of the British nation. Chapter 3 (“Weariness and Watercress: Temporalities of Gender, Temporalities of Class”) follows the withered figure of the watercress girl to consider how the preservation of food, the salvation of souls, and the reification of national identity converged in the disproportionate

visibility of labor across the watercress industry within sociological and philanthropic accounts.

Chapter 4 (“Between World’s Fairs and Warfare: Ordering Food at the British Empire Exhibition”) pays a visit to the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, arguing that food’s recalcitrance to coherent narrativization was causally linked to the exhibition’s failed aims to circumscribe the visitor’s movements simultaneously within the contained space of the exhibition and in the wider Empire, depicted as ripe for harvest.

Together, the case studies in these four chapters articulate the centrality of food in the period’s engagements with the limitations and possibilities of self, society, and species.

INTRODUCTION

Setting the Table

“One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.”
–Virginia Woolf, “A Room of One’s Own,” 1929¹

In her 1929 essay “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf commented that novelists describing meals frequently focus on conversation and action but “seldom spare a word for what was eaten.”² E.M. Forster had made similar observations two years prior in *Aspects of the Novel*. “Food in fiction is mainly social,” he wrote. “It draws characters together, but they seldom require it physiologically, seldom enjoy it...They hunger for each other, as we do in life, but our equally constant longing for breakfast and lunch does not get reflected.”³ In the two pieces, Woolf and Forster each comment on the way meals provide an occasion and a backdrop in novels without coming into focus. Both writers happen to use the same word—“seldom”—in describing the infrequency with which meals receive direct attention, drawing a contrast with the recurrent and continued place of food in the lives of real people who eat and think about eating throughout each day.

Indeed, many memorable moments of nineteenth-century literature portray food in its dearth rather than plenty, as uneaten or inedible symbol rather than sustenance consumed. In

¹ Virginia Woolf, “A Room of One’s Own,” in *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Anna Snaith (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), 14.

² Woolf, “A Room of One’s Own,” 8.

³ E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (San Diego; New York; London: Harcourt, Inc., 1955), 53.

Dickens' work we have the measly portions of gruel that cause the title character in *Oliver Twist* (1838) to unsuccessfully entreat Mr. Bumble for more and, in *Great Expectations* (1861), Miss Havisham's spectacularly uneaten wedding cake "so heavily overhung with cobwebs that its form was quite undistinguishable."⁴ *Vanity Fair* (1848) humorously shows Becky Sharp turning desperately to water after a bite of Joseph Sedley's beloved chili pepper and curry, while Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) heartbreakingly depicts a young boy killing his siblings and himself "because we are too menny" for his poor parents to house and feed.⁵ Turning from fiction to fact, the Irish Potato Famine in the middle of the century and the widely debated Corn Laws between 1815 and 1846 were just two of countless instances in which food served as a topic of intense interest, but mainly in light of its scarcity.

However, these examples do not extrapolate into a representative view of the culture as a whole. The nineteenth and early twentieth-century produced a rich array of engagements with eating in all its physical and metaphysical dimensions, testifying to its cultural centrality. Domesticity and "homecraft" served as popular topics for research and writing during the long nineteenth century,⁶ corresponding to the flourishing of the cookery book as a genre during this period.⁷ In attempting to recover the sensory experiences and ingrained mental habits of Victorian life during a long-term reenactment, historian Ruth Goodman found a vast range of domestic texts as well as countless others about farming, cooking, and eating, testifying to the

⁴ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson, 1841); Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1868), Vol 1., 115.

⁵ William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1917); Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 424.

⁶ See Monica F. Cohen's *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel: Women, Work and Home* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7. Cohen also discusses the origins and influence Coventry Patmore's "Angel in the House" trope.

⁷ See Stephen Mennell, "Of Gastronomes and Guides," *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, 2nd edition (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 266-290.

foundational place these topics held in Victorian England.⁸ “The attention now paid to our food is not a mere fashion,” J. Milner Fothergill wrote in 1884, suggesting that the subject matter deserves its outsized place it holds in the minds of himself and his contemporaries.⁹ The author of a volume on preparing *Food for the Invalid; the Convalescent; The Dyspeptic; and the Gouty*, Fothergill reveled in the ample quantities of published information that he was able to refer to in his treatise on distinct diets for ailing bodies of various stripes. As Suzanne Daly and Ross G. Forman argued in the introduction to a special food-themed issue of *Victorian Studies*, “the way to Victorian studies’ heart is through its stomach.”¹⁰

In fact, though Woolf and Forster disparage the “mainly social” appearance of food in texts, scholars increasingly turn specifically to this aspect in their defense of food studies. “The connection between eating and community is ancient and formative,” Shakespearean scholar David B. Goldstein claims: “biological, evolutionary, archaeological, and anthropological research shows that the act of eating together provides a fundamental architecture for human sociality.”¹¹ Similarly, in her study of Virginia Woolf and other twentieth-century women writers, Diane E. McGee comments, “Meals and the customs surrounding food are important texts of a culture, with many inherent levels of significance and signification.”¹² For Goldstein and McGee, meaning is produced precisely in the social architecture of each alimentary moment, including but going far beyond the material substance of the meal. As Pierre Bourdieu writes,

⁸ Ruth Goodman, *How to be a Victorian: A Dawn-to-Dusk Guide to Victorian Life* (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013).

⁹ J. Milner Fothergill, *Food for the Invalid; the Convalescent; The Dyspeptic; and the Gouty* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1884), 1.

¹⁰ Suzanne Daly and Ross Forman, “Cooking Culture: Situating Food and Drink in the Nineteenth Century,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 36:2 (2008): 363.

¹¹ David B. Goldstein, *Eating and Ethics in Shakespeare’s England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 4.

¹² Diane E. McGee, *Writing the Meal: Dinner in the Fiction of Early Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 10.

“Eating habits, especially when represented solely by the produce consumed, cannot of course be considered independently of the whole lifestyle.”¹³ Fictional characters may not be actively hungering or partaking in a painstakingly detailed menu, but as “A Room of One’s Own” itself argues, food tells, even—or especially—when taken for granted. Thus, whether consciously or not, in implicitly differentiating themselves from other practitioners of novel-writing in the two works quoted above, Woolf and Forster participate in the embedded cultural practice of using food to demarcate the bounding lines of community and self.

Absorbing Fare examines the imaginative functions of food and ingestion within the discourses of difference that emerged in Britain during roughly a hundred-year span that begins with the start of the Victorian era and ends with the onset of World War II. During this period, categorical concepts such as nation, race, class, gender, and family took on their modern meanings, alongside the modern understanding of the individual.¹⁴ Despite the strong association of this era with the birth of consumer culture, scholars have often overlooked the extent to which the literal consumption of food itself functioned as a site in which individuals increasingly exercised their wherewithal to choose, and through this, to negotiate expressions of selfhood. By exploring the intersection of the sociological and the culinary, I argue that the period’s growing attention to the production, preparation, and ingestion of food created a vocabulary for imagining identity as constituted, for individuals as well as communities, by acts of both exclusion and incorporation.

From a historical perspective, the second half of the nineteenth century and the first

¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984) 185.

¹⁴ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006).

decades of the twentieth saw rapid developments related to the preservation, distribution, and consumption of food. For many individuals, these changes led to increased dietary access and choice. For instance, though the restaurant in its modern form had been introduced during the eighteenth century, it was not until the early Victorian era that such places were widely accessible to middle class patrons, either socially or financially.¹⁵ With the invention of refrigeration technology in the early 1840s, preceded by blocks of ice transported in ships or trains, an even wider variety of edible and perishable goods could be sent across and between continents.¹⁶ “Our increasing wealth permits of organisms being reared to maturity which must have perished under earlier and more trying conditions,” wrote Fothergill, the author of the cookbook for invalids, arguing that British citizens now had the economic wherewithal to optimize their consumption in accordance to their individual bodily needs.¹⁷

These technological and social transformations drastically expanded the previously localized borders circumscribing what and how the average person ate, producing changes to foodways across the nation and around the world. For example, while tea and coffee drinking had begun working its community-building effects on more privileged segments of society since the eighteenth century,¹⁸ it took another hundred years or so before these beverages became readily accessible to all classes, with the average British citizen consuming approximately two pounds of coffee and two and a half pounds of tea per year by 1850.¹⁹ The widespread taste for the latter would become a major factor in Britain’s colonization of India and establishment of

¹⁵ Elliot Shore, “Dining Out: The Development of the Restaurant,” in *Food: The History of Taste*, ed. Paul H. Freedman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 301-332.

¹⁶ Bill Bryson, “The Kitchen,” *At Home: A Short History of Private Life* (New York: Random House, 2010) 79-102.

¹⁷ Fothergill, *Food for the Invalid*, 1.

¹⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “On the Genesis of the Bourgeois Public Sphere,” *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991) 14-26.

¹⁹ Andrea Broomfield, *Food and Cooking in Victorian England: A History* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 2007) xv, xvi.

treaty ports throughout China, as well as the resulting conflicts in these regions. The globalization of food followed these foreign imports of drink: Thomas Prasch notes that by the 1860s cookbooks were “increasingly infiltrated by foreign recipes,” reflecting the influence of Britain’s colonial outposts as well as the growth of ethnic enclaves in London itself.²⁰

At the same time, these technological and social transformations increased the distance between producers and consumers, introducing gaps in each individual’s ability to understand in full the operations and lifecycles of the things he or she consumed. Events such as the cholera epidemics of 1832 and 1852, which in the latter case was eventually tied to a water well, fanned fears about encountering invisible vectors of disease through consumption. Similarly, the frequent rumors about toxic additives in food—especially prior to the passage of the Adulteration of Food, Drink, and Drugs Act in 1872—reflected the anxieties rooted in the growing alienation from the production process.²¹ Wider horizons exacted their toll in making the individual’s sphere of influence and comprehension correspondingly small.

Accordingly, my chapters forego single- or double-author studies in favor of a chorus of voices taken together to illuminate wider trends. This approach aligns with reconsiderations of the agency of the individual in recent decades. Catherine Gallagher, for instance, has remarked on “the subtle ways in which poets, playwrights, and novelists, despite their overt proclamations, wrote within the dominant ideologies of their times.”²² Similarly, Amanda Anderson comments on scholarship’s tendency to aggrandize the agency of historical actors and argues for modeling

²⁰ Thomas Prasch, “Eating the World: London in 1851.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 36, no. 2 (2008): 596. For more information about the Chinese population in the Limehouse district of London, for instance, see Robert Bickers, “China in Britain, and in the British Imagination,” *Britain in China*. (Manchester University Press, 1999), 22-66.

²¹ For example, Victorian writers expressed fears that alum was used to whiten bread or copper salts to color pickles. See Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 125.

²² Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death and Sensation in Political Economy and The Victorian Novel* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 1.

historical change through the operation of more “diffusive, potent agency,” a lineage she traces through Foucault and Bourdieu.²³ More recently, Lauren Goodlad has described her methodology as one that tracks “engagements with global situations that are at once lived and beyond the scope of individual experience,” an approach that “endows literature and art with a crucial capacity to articulate structures that elude ordinary cognition.”²⁴ Though these approaches seem to diminish the individual, they also ultimately make room for recognize the “tactics” of self-expression—to use Michel de Certeau’s term—that are possible within larger social and institutional structures.²⁵

Interdisciplinarity is central to both the subjects and methods of my project, which traces the politics of ingestion through primary sources that range from exhibitions and ephemera to mezzotints and musical scores. The emergent field of critical food studies, which frames my dissertation, sits naturally across disciplinary boundaries. Accordingly, my interpretations of primary sources draw from traditional formalist analysis as well as more recent critical developments in fields such as material culture, thing theory, animal studies, and museum studies. Most fruitfully, these new theoretical models have generated methods of reconsidering historical and cultural phenomena through the lens of non-human agents and actors. By stepping back from seeing individuals—and particularly those in positions of privilege—as the primary

²³ Amanda Anderson. "The Temptations of Aggrandized Agency: Feminist Histories and the Horizon of Modernity." *Victorian Studies* 43, no. 1 (2000): 54. Anderson observes in particular that, in good faith acts of recuperating the voices of previously marginalized voices, scholars often overcompensate in the amount of influence and power they attribute to their subjects.

²⁴ Lauren Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 272.

²⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley; California: University of California Press, 1988). Sidney Mintz has similarly argued that “Individuals are...presented with a series of situations within which they may begin to make meaningful constructions for themselves, as long as such constructions do not violate the outer situational boundaries that have been established for them.” See Sidney Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 21.

authors of historical change, these methods open up possibilities for rewriting traditional narratives of power, allowing for more inclusive histories. Moreover, in uncovering the thematic ley lines that connect different representational forms, I seek to interpret the period and its historical objects in ways that are attuned to the disciplinary capaciousness of nineteenth-century critical and creative labors. Thus, while my dissertation offers new readings of canonical authors such as H.G. Wells, T.S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf, it also establishes stakes that extend beyond literary interpretation and into the wider ramifications of identity construction in Modern Britain.

The question that Catherine Dickens poses in the title of her 1852 cookery book—*What Shall We Have for Dinner?*—is not one I am very interested in here.²⁶ Recent movements in historical and literary studies have illuminated the value of studying the everyday, and scholars such as Annette Cozzi, Helena Michie and Robyn Warhol, Sarah Freeman, Andrea Broomfield have fruitfully covered topics related to writing about cooking, eating, and domesticity in England during this period.²⁷ However, the forging of individual and communal senses of self through eating and ingestion invariably involves a projective aspect. As Stephen Greenblatt has influentially observed, “the fashioning of human identity [is] a manipulable, artful process.”²⁸ Thus, in examining works that run the gamut between scientific treatises and speculative fiction in their intended relationship to reality, I seek to capture the variety of texts that engage with food in formulating the imaginative potentialities and limitations of being human.

²⁶ Catherine Thomson Dickens [as Lady Maria Clutterbuck], *What Shall We Have for Dinner?: Satisfactorily Answered by Numerous Bills of Fare for from Two to Eighteen Persons* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1852).

²⁷ See Annette Cozzi, *The Discourses of Food in the Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 2010.); Helena Michie, “Permeable Protections: The Working Life of Victorian Skin,” in *A New Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Herbert F. Tucker (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2014); Helena Michie and Robyn Warhol, “Adventures in the Archives: Two Literary Critics in Pursuit of a Victorian Subject.” *Victorian Studies* 52:3 (Spring, 2010): 413-439; Sarah Freeman, *Mutton and Oysters: The Victorians and Their Food* (London: Gollancz, 1989); Broomfield, *Food and Cooking in Victorian England*.

²⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980; 2005), 2.

Rather than offering a historical account of staple meals and representative practices, then, this dissertation looks to instances where a food, product, figure, trend, or event received disproportionate emphasis in the cultural production of the period, a phenomenon that I term amplified attention. Jonathan Crary has written of the last decades of the nineteenth century as a period that underwent a crisis of attention in response to the overload of sensory stimuli and consumer options that capitalist modernity introduced into everyday life.²⁹ My approach investigates instances of amplified attention within a culture of inattention in order to identify the aspects of Modern British food culture in which food takes on the greatest subjunctive meaning in the minds of consumers—that is to say, the instances in which a choice about consumption was perceived as having the highest stakes. These four case studies—of crustaceans, patent pills, watercress girls, and the Wembley exhibition—have marginal status in most accounts of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century food culture, in part because their influence was so internalized. Thus, my own project here is also a form of amplification, as it seeks to recover a historical sense of the magnitude surrounding these topics at the time.

The first half of my dissertation focuses on two disparate types of foods whose distinctive properties activated questions about the ethics of eating and the ways in which the object of ingestion could act upon the consuming body. My first chapter, “Man is but a Crab: Crustacean Kinship and its Perils,” takes the nineteenth-century fixation on lobsters and crabs as a manifestation of the period’s ambivalence about biological taxonomy. While evidence from cookery books suggest that crustaceans had a relatively familiar place in kitchens, literary and scientific representations focused on the creature’s indiscriminate eating habits and physical strangeness compared to the human form. Writers frequently leveraged the immensities of this

²⁹ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

difference to dramatic effect, but did so almost invariably by hypothesizing its collapse. Children's literature of mid-Victorian England posed the possibility that lobsters could be friends as well as food: they behave like humans for parodic purposes in Lewis Carroll's novels and to didactic ends in Charles Kingsley's stories. Biologists such as Thomas Henry Huxley and writers such as H.G. Wells and T.S. Eliot would posit the other extreme, imagining the human body as potential fodder for crustacean feasts. Through analyzing these radical visualizations of human-crustacean parity, I argue that the image of the scavenging, anthropophagic crustacean becomes the late Victorian and Modernist answer to early modern poetry's corpse-eating glow worm in focalizing contemporary anxieties about the potentially permeable boundaries—both material and theoretical—between the human and animal world.

Next, in "Pills for Our Ills: Diagnosing Self and Society," I continue to explore the period's fixation on the limits of the human by examining the fictions of restoration featured in patent medication advertisements within the context of wider cultural dialogues about self- and societal improvement. Patent formulations flourished at the close of the nineteenth century and into the early decades of the twentieth, during a period when consumer goods and printed materials alike inundated the marketplace with competing assertions of authority. While patent medicines pitched themselves as clear-cut antidotes to the overwhelming volume of information, critics from Thomas Carlyle to H.G. Wells characterized them in aural terms as part of the disorienting noise of modern life. This chapter draws on post-human theorizations of the agency of objects to move beyond questions of medical efficacy, showing how patent formulations came to be associated in literature with the rhetorical formation of individual and communal identities. I argue that, in transposing pills and tonics from fringe treatments to establishment practices in their texts, authors sought to amplify the risks of giving oneself over, either as an auditory or

alimentary subject. I close by returning to the themes of the previous chapter, placing P.G. Wodehouse's Mulliner tales alongside Walter Besant's *The Inner House* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* in order to reveal their unexpectedly shared vision of worlds in which humans harness the power of medicine and technology, only to become less rather than more like themselves.

The second half of the dissertation turns from foods to foodways, and from philosophical questions about the malleability and vulnerability of the human body to socio-political questions about how these bodies could be ordered and placed to optimize the good of the British nation. My third chapter, "Weariness and Watercress: Temporalities of Gender, Temporalities of Class," explores representations of the watercress seller within religious and philanthropic visions of social order and productivity. Starting in the nineteenth century, watercresses and other types of produce were made available to Londoners in new ways as a result of the railway system that shuttled people and freight from one side of the country to another, knitting the nation together through both the access to common goods and the adoption of standardized time. However, this new infrastructure also made more visible the alternative and abject experiential temporalities of the poor. This chapter juxtaposes documentary texts like Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and London Poor* and the archival records of John Groom's Watercress and Flower Girls' Christian Mission with a variety of other paintings, plays, and poems in which the prematurely sage and aged watercress girl plays a central role. In doing so, I trace how the figure and her fragile wares came to be imagined not only as a counterpart for the normalized rhythms of the privileged classes but also as a contrast to the disrupted, truncated temporalities represented by other stereotypes of indigence—including the other type of female streetwalker, similarly compelled to work against and around the clock.

Moving from domestic to global networks of food production, the fourth chapter (“From World’s Fairs to Warfare: Ordering Food at the British Empire Exhibition”) examines the geopolitics of cultural exchange during the long nineteenth century by reading the culinary spectacles staged in exhibitions, expositions, and world’s fairs in the context of the concerns about food security raised by escalating international tensions during that period. My chapter focuses on an exposition explicitly organized as a symbol of international friendship following the Great War, the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924 and 1925. From recreated Hong Kong street stalls to elaborate displays of prized exports, Wembley offered itself up as an encyclopedic site in which all the foods of the globe fit together as part of a seamless worldwide system of social and material exchange. At the same time, it sought to mobilize visitors to participate in securing Britain’s future by equalizing the distribution of population and food resources across the Empire. I argue that food’s resistance to coherent narrativization throughout the exhibition made manifest wider tensions between forms of visual and political representation in Interwar Britain. Accordingly, I reposition critical exhibition visitors such as Virginia Woolf, G.K. Chesterton and E.M. Forster as participating in a wider articulation of imperial discontent rather than as solitary voices of prescience.

Taken together, these four case studies explore how the socio-cultural, scientific, and technological changes of the long nineteenth century transformed the dietary landscape, and how these changes in turn intersected with new ways of imaginatively situating the consuming body in relation to other bodies: bodies animal and human; discerning and undiscerning; British, colonial, and non-British; bodies gendered; bodies classed; and bodies present, future, and past. Furthermore, the project illuminates the intersectional, multi-dimensional nature of the discourses of consumption that emerged in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain,

within which literary production, identity formation, and eating were imagined as similarly metabolic acts. Rather than being the sole province of literature or history, this cultural study demonstrates the necessity of thinking beyond periodization and genre in order to account for the role of ingestion in the imaginative formations of social and individual identities, both during the long nineteenth century and into the present day.

PART I
Consumers Consumed

CHAPTER ONE

Man is but a Crab: Crustacean Kinship and its Perils

"Oh, Dan, are you gonna die someday? Does the quality of your life not matter then? Since you're gonna eventually die? Get dropped in your own pot? At the end of the day, the quality of life is all we have, and it's just as important to that lobster, the quality of life that it lives — even if it's not as long — as the quality of your life."

—John Mackey, CEO of Whole Foods, in an interview with Dan Rather, 2006¹

These His Good Creatures

After a full and productive day in June of 1666, Samuel Pepys bought two lobsters and made his way home “with mighty content.” But the seafood dinner was not to be. As he relates in his diary later that evening, upon his arrival home,

I find my wife and father had dined, and were going out to Hales’s to sit there, so Balty and I alone to dinner, and in the middle of my grace, praying for a blessing upon (these his good creatures), my mind fell upon my lobsters: upon which I cried, Cuds zooks! and Balty looked upon me like a man at a losse what I meant, thinking at first that I meant only that I had said the grace after meat instead of that before meat. But then I cried, what is become of my lobsters? Whereupon he run out of doors to overtake the coach, but could not, so came back again, and mighty merry at dinner to thinke of my surprize....²

Biographers have made much of this lively anecdote. Claire Tomalin mentions it twice in her biography of Pepys, as Hermione Lee notes in an essay on the craft of biography—an essay that

¹ Daniel Schorn, “John Mackey: Not Your Average Grocer,” CBS News, 31 May 2006 (Accessed 30 June 2017). <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/john-mackey-not-your-average-grocer/>

² Samuel Pepys, “13 June 1666,” *The Shorter Pepys*, ed. Robert Lathan (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 631.

itself partly derives its title from the incident.³ In their tellings, the discovery of the lobsters' absence reveals their subject's vivid presence, a sense of immediacy and kinetic energy that the scholar or biographer strives to capture in her own writing.

In focusing on the physical and verbal activity in the scene, however, these readers of Pepys overlook a more remarkable set of movements within the text: the mental ones that happen inside the parentheses and lead to the anecdote-making epiphany. As Pepys asks a blessing for "these his good creatures," presumably himself and Balty,⁴ it is as if hearing the phrase aloud brings to mind a set of parallel constructions that carry his thoughts down along the chain of being:

his	good creatures
[my	good creatures]
my	lobsters

The multivalency of the word "creatures" subtends the parallelism: since its first introduction to the English language, the word has been capable of referring specifically to humans (as Pepys first uses it), referring solely to *non*-human animals (e.g., "deep sea creatures"), and encompassing the full spectrum of animate life (e.g., "All God's creatures big and small").⁵ Thus, as Pepys says his belated grace for the meal, the first meaning of "creatures" (creatures as humans) tangles with the third (creatures as all animal life), then untangles into the second (creatures as non-human animals) to produce his realization.

The linguistic slippage that helps Pepys recover from his slip of memory does not depend on the fact that he bought lobsters and not something else, only that his purchase was alive. But the detail does, for us, give the story its force: "But then I cried, what is become of my fish?"

³ Hermione Lee, "Shelley's Heart and Pepys' Lobster," *Virginia Woolf's Nose* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 35-6; Claire Tomalin, *Samuel Pepys: The Unequalled Self* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2007) 183, 255.

⁴ Balty is Pepys' nickname for his brother-in-law, Balthasar St Michel.

⁵ "creature, n.," *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2015, Web, 29 February 2016.

does not bring the scene into relief in the same way. What is the “lobster effect,” and why does it heighten the human drama of the scene?

This chapter tracks a fascination with crustaceans that emerges across multiple genres of British writing with particular force in the nineteenth century, a trend that culminates in the early decades of the twentieth century but continues to inform the associations we have with these animals in the present day. Over the course of this period, lobsters—as well as crabs, crayfish, and to a lesser extent, shrimp—come to be seen as intrinsically comic and grotesque. Where Pepys’ account takes for granted the mental turning point at which “creature” encompasses both the diarist and his forgotten lobsters, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts discussed in this chapter linger in this space of taxonomical permeability between the human and animal world. In these writings, which span the scientific, culinary, and literary, crustaceans function rhetorically as the consummately creaturely creature, the limit case in thought experiments that probe and challenge what it means to be human.

I begin by identifying an antecedent for this form of animal analogy in Early Modern tropes that use worm imagery to remind readers of their eventual death (*memento mori*) and to urge them to make the most of their lives (*carpe diem*). The individual confrontations with mortality provided by this pervasive image in Early Modern religious discourse of the body being eaten by worms sets the scene for its social and secularized counterpart in the Victorian period, as crabs and lobsters emerge in marine biology as an unexpected testing ground for ideas about evolution and human exceptionalism. By reading a series of fictional and nonfictional nineteenth-century texts featuring crustacean-like humans and humanoid crustaceans, I track how writers during the period used these hybrid or boundary-crossing figures to make room for a spectrum of behavioral and genetic possibility that troubled previously rigid conceptions of

natural hierarchy by introducing the disruptive presence of a body I term the familiar other.⁶ In particular, I examine the way writers fixated on the crustacean's unusual position, as a scavenger, as both the potential predator and prey of humans. While the Victorian frequently treated this imagined turning of the tables as a whimsical thought experiment, two turn-of-the-century works by H.G. Wells and T.S. Eliot take seriously the crustacean threat to the human body, following the hypothetical situation of reciprocal consumption to its furthest extreme. Their staging of physical confrontations between man and animal, though extremely different, each bring to the fore the ethical and aesthetic stakes of the comparative act that earlier Victorian writings often sublimated into comedy. Finally, the last section of this chapter turns from body to mind, exploring the continued resonance of the crustacean in twentieth and twenty-first century debates about animal sentience in relation to human cognition, particularly as it features in the politics of food.

The Inaugural Worm

As will be discussed later in the chapter, the crustacean discourse of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exerted significant pressure on the scavenging habits of lobsters and crabs—in particular, the fact that they have been known, in specific circumstances, to eat human flesh. While the development of these associations is rooted in particular features of Victorian scientific and cultural history, the ways in which texts framed this unsavory information about the predatory crustacean diet share several structural features with a recurrent poetic trope contemporaneous with Pepys' time period, the image of a maggot or glow worm consuming a

⁶ Tim Youngs argues that the transformations of the social body and scientific understanding at the turn of the century produced anxieties that reveal themselves in the tales of beasts and blurred human-animal boundaries. Building on his argument, I claim here that crustaceans, in their specific physical qualities and their place on the food chain, marked a particular intersection between the everyday and the monstrous for the Victorians. See Tim Youngs, *Beastly Journeys: Travel and Translation at the Fin de Siècle* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

corpse.⁷ Here, I explore the vermicular trope of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature in order to highlight the ways in which it abstracts scientific fact into a philosophical perspective and leverages disgust for didactic ends, techniques that will again emerge—though frequently in oblique form—in Victorian and Modern writing about lobsters.

For the Early Moderns, worms served as part of a repertoire of images that were frequently deployed as warnings against overinvestment in the transitory material world. As Alanna Skuse notes, “Literary and biblical sources...continually positioned worms as a *memento mori* [a reminder of death, literally “remember that you must die” in Latin] associated in various ways with man’s sinfulness and bodily frailty.”⁸ She adds, “The presence of worms in the body after death was therefore an example of the transience and corruptibility of the flesh, a theme on occasion expanded to include viewing oneself as a lowly worm.”⁹ Shakespeare’s sonnets offer two instances of this imagery, in Sonnet 71 (“I am fled from this vile world, with vilest worms to dwell”) and Sonnet 146 (“Shall worms.../Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body’s end?”).¹⁰ Similarly, in “To His Coy Mistress” (c. 1649-1660), Andrew Marvell’s speaker famously and ominously warns the object of his affections that even if she does not give in to his entreaties, “The worms shall try/Thy long-preserved virginity” (ll. 26-7).¹¹ The dead remain embodied in Shakespeare and Marvell’s poetic invocations, experiencing decay not as a natural chemical progression but an active, invasive process of desecration by a foreign body.

⁷ Janelle A. Schwartz’s *Worm Work* traces the trend later, arguing that the Romantic period marked “a specific historical moment when worm studies enjoyed a particular emphasis and exponential growth,” with the creatures being “recognized as much for their literal ability to break down and cast up organic structures as for their figurative utility in the disruption of man-made systems like the classification of organisms and conventional aesthetic judgments” (xv). See Janelle Schwartz, *Worm Work: Recasting Romanticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

⁸ Alanna Skuse, “Wombs, Worms and Wolves: Constructing Cancer in Early Modern England” *The Social History of Medicine* (June 16, 2014), 13. <http://shm.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2014/06/14/shm.hku039.long>

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹¹ Andrew Marvell, *The Poems of Andrew Marvell* (London: Routledge, 2006).

While Shakespeare and Marvell's poems remain frequently cited, the most extended Early Modern consideration of worms and their moral symbolism comes in the writing of John Donne. They appear in the 1612 poem "Of the Progress of the Soul: The Second Anniversary" ("The world is but a carcass; thou art fed/ By it, but as a worm, that carcass bred"),¹² as well as in a sermon Donne gave in 1620 on lines from the Book of Job: "And though, after my skin, worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God."¹³ However, the figuration gains its fullest force in a 1632 sermon, "Death's Duell":

We must all past this posthume death, nay, this death after burial, this dissolution after dissolution, this death of corruption and putrefaction, of vermiculation and incineration, of dissolution and dispersion in and from the grave, when these bodies that have been the children of royal parents, and the parents of royal children, must say with Job, Corruption, thou art my father, and to the worms, Thou art my mother and my sister. Miserable riddle, when the same worm must be my mother, and my sister, and myself! Miserable incest, when I must be married to my mother and my sister, and be both father and mother to my own mother and sister, begat and bear that worm which is all that miserable penury; when my mouth shall be filled with dust, and the worm shall feed, and feed sweetly upon me.¹⁴

"Death's Duell" was Donne's final sermon, preached just days before his own death. In this passage, he focuses not on the afterlife of the soul but of the bodies of the deceased. Beginning with a message that runs along the lines of "a king and a pauper are equal in death,"¹⁵ Donne goes on to imply that this parity extends to human and animal life as well. He literalizes the idea of hierarchical leveling by pointing out that the same worm can process several human bodies

¹² John Donne, *The Works of John Donne, D. D., Dean of Saint Paul's 1621-1631 with a Memoir of His Life*, Vol. 4, Ed. Henry Alford (London: John W. Parker, 1839) 233.

¹³ John Donne, "Job 19.26. And though, after my skin, wormes destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God," *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George A. Potter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 3: 91-114.

¹⁴ John Donne, "Death's Duell," *Devotions, by John Donne; with two sermons: I. On the decease of Lady Danvers, mother of George Herbert; II. Deaths duell--his own funeral sermon; to which is prefixed his life, by Izaak Walton* (London: W. Pickering, 1840) 214.

¹⁵ Or as Donne puts it in the 1620 sermon mentioned above, "Thus far then to the destroying of skin and body by worms, all men are equal...." See *Ibid.*

simultaneously within its digestive tract, thereby using them indistinguishably to nourish and constitute itself. From here, the worm becomes not only a symbol of sexual violation—much as in Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress”—but also gender inversion, as Donne imagines the worm’s circulation through the burial plot forcing him into a monstrous form of incestuous maggot pregnancy. These two long, sinuous sentences themselves function like the unstoppable forces of decomposition, with the relentless pace slowing down only after he reaches the final reversal: the image of the worm feasting on the poet’s body, while the poet can only eat dirt.

To make its point about the futility of human vanity, “Death’s Duell” produces scenes of extreme revulsion, scenes that use the intrusive behavior of worms to depict a violation of the natural order. Through this process, the sermon and its Early Modern counterparts cast the model for the way the carnivorous habits of crabs and lobsters will similarly be used by later generations of writers to evoke horror in order to question human exceptionalism and depict the leveling force of death.¹⁶ This move from worms to crustaceans is not as improbable a leap as it may seem: as Dan Brayton comments, crabs are “invasive organisms” operating under a “salvage ontology,” a description that also applies to worms.¹⁷ In fact, there is also etymological justification for understanding crustaceans as the vermin (Latin *verminum*, worm) of the sea. The word “lobster” derives from an Old English corruption of the Latin word *locusta*, meaning locust.¹⁸ Moreover, worms become associated later in the Early Modern period with the debilitating effects of cancer (as in “the canker in the rose”),¹⁹ a word that was sometimes used to

¹⁶ In *The Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva defines horror as being made abject—as opposed to being an object. Abjection, she argues, operates through “what disturbs system, identity, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” See *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 4.

¹⁷ Dan Brayton, “Consider the Crab,” *Shakespeare’s Oceans: An Ecocritical Exploration* (University of Virginia Press, 2012) 61.

¹⁸ “lobster, n.1.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2015, Web, 29 February 2016.

¹⁹ Skuse, “Wombs, Worms and Wolves,” 8-9.

refer to crabs in the Early Modern period as a result of its shared Classical roots (Latin *cancer/cancrum* and Greek *karkinoj/karkinwma*).²⁰ While Early Modern writers paid little attention to crustaceans, this network of parasitic connotations would remain latent within the English language, to be activated centuries later in service of new types of debates about humanity's place in the world.²¹

Clawing up through the Ranks

The heightened interest in crustaceans during the nineteenth century coincided with a period in which shellfish, once cheap and abundant, suddenly became prized luxury foodstuffs within a short period of time. Archaeological excavations of open-air theaters in Southwark reveal that crabs were “a popular snack” for Renaissance theatergoers, the historical equivalent of popcorn at the movies or sunflower seeds at a baseball game.²² Similarly, William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647* clearly identifies lobsters as abundant but undesirable sustenance. In the text, the governor of the Plymouth Colony narrates how the first pilgrims were so close to starvation that when a new ship arrived, the “best dish they could present their friends with was a lobster or a piece of fish without bread or anything else but a cup of fair spring water.”²³ For both British and American consumers during the Early Modern period, crustaceans

²⁰ "cancer, n. and adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2015, Web, 29 February 2016.

²¹ This is not to say that the Victorians lost interest in worms; however, it was earthworms rather than maggots and glow worms that received the most attention. Darwin's *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms, with Observations on their Habits* (London: John Murray, 1881) was a forty-plus year project on the work of earthworms in transforming soil. For readings of Darwin's study, see Janelle Schwartz, *Worm Work*; Adam Phillips, *Darwin's Worms: On Life Stories and Death Stories* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2000); Jonathan Smith, “Darwin's Worms,” *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 245-285; Jane Bennett, “Political Ecologies,” *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2010), 95-109.

²² Oysters were another popular theater-going treat, to judge from the shells discovered in the sites. See Brayton, 60.

²³ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 1952), 130.

were clearly what today would be called a cheap eat.

They continued to be in plentiful supply into the first few decades of the Victorian period. As late as 1867, William Barry Lord reveled in the vision of “Steam in clouds float[ing] above the vast loads of newly-boiled crustaceans and molluscs” in the morning at a London marketplace.²⁴ This was most likely Billingsgate Market, where the majority of the city’s seafood was bought and sold.²⁵ Writing in 1859, P.L. Simmonds claimed that a fishmonger by the name of J.E. Saunders often “often sells 15,000 lobsters before breakfast of a morning; and in the height of the season, the sale not unfrequently amounts to 30,000.”²⁶ George Dodd cited similarly large figures in *The Food of London* (1856), reporting that importers had taken advantage of the recent invention of screw steamers “to bring twenty-thousand lobsters in one cargo, without any deaths” and, to accommodate these hauls, had built a space in Southampton where up to 70,000 lobsters could be kept at a time.²⁷ The abundance of crustaceans in marketplaces found an answering plenitude in cookery books. Though not especially prominent in any of Charles Dickens’ novels,²⁸ lobster and crab feature at several points in his wife Catherine Dickens’ *What Shall We Have for Dinner?* (1852).²⁹ Isabella Beeton’s *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management* (1861) likewise provides a combination of specific recipes and

²⁴ William Barry Lord, *Crab, Shrimp, and Lobster Lore: Gathered Amongst the Rocks At the Sea-shore, by the Riverside, And In the Forest* (London: G. Routledge and Sons, 1867), 96.

²⁵ Billingsgate Market features in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, which I will discuss at more length later in the chapter: “And a clatter and a chatter from within/Where the fishmen lounge at noon...” (ll. 262-3). See T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ed. Michael North (New York; London: W. W. Norton, 2001).

²⁶ P.L. Simmonds, *The Curiosities of Food: Or, The Dainties And Delicacies of Different Nations Obtained From the Animal Kingdom* (London: R. Bentley, 1859), 325

²⁷ George Dodd, *The Food of London: a Sketch of the Chief Varieties, Sources of Supply, Probable Quantities, Modes of Arrival, Processes of Manufacture, Suspected Adulteration, And Machinery of Distribution, of the Food for a Community of Two Millions And a Half*. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1856), 353-4.

²⁸ Not prominent, that is, except when used to indicate another kind of prominence, in a few characters unfortunately endowed with “lobster eyes”; the descriptor is also used by Thackeray. I return to these usages later in the chapter.

²⁹ Catherine Thomson Dickens [as Lady Maria Clutterbuck], *What Shall We Have for Dinner?: Satisfactorily Answered by Numerous Bills of Fare for from Two to Eighteen Persons* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1852).

general techniques for preparing both lobster and crab.³⁰

By 1877, however, overzealous demand had definitively led to the decline in supplies that cemented the crustacean's place in the realm of luxury.³¹ That year, Parliament passed the passage of the Crab and Lobster Act, which dictated that fishermen could only keep crabs that were over 4.5 inches across and lobsters that were 8 or more inches long.³² George Eliot composed her novels in this newly-barren world: as Gillian Beer points out that in *Middlemarch* (1871-2), Will Ladislaw's immaturity "is signaled by his extremes with food: alternately starving himself and eating lobster."³³ Where Plymouth governor William Bradford had aligned starvation with lobster consumption, here Eliot presents them as opposites.³⁴ In *Daniel Deronda* (1876), she similarly indicates Thomas Cranmer Lush's superficial personality through two sentences that move swiftly from the character's consideration of Gwendolen Harleth's "graceful back" and troublesome inheritance situation to his intentions to have lobster salad at the club for lunch.³⁵

³⁰ See Isabella Beeton, *The Book of Household Management* (London: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1861). Hannah Glasse's *The Art of Cookery* (1784) has a similar number of recipes to these later cookery books. See Glasse, *The Complete Art of Cookery: Exhibited In a Plain And Easy Manner, With Directions for Marketing, the Season of the Year for Butchers' Meat, Poultry, Fish, &c.: Embellished With Engravings, Shewing the Art of Trussing, Carving, Etc. Etc. Etc.* (London: H. Quelch, 1828).

³¹ Andrea Broomfield places the date earlier, noting that the cost of oysters, lobsters, and other shellfish took a sharp upswing in the 1850s and 1860s as a result of overfishing and pollution. See Broomfield, *Food and Cooking in Victorian England: A History* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 2007), 84, 86-7.

³² "Crabs and Lobsters," *Encyclopedia of the Laws of England with Forms and Precedents by the Most Eminent Legal Authorities*, A. Wood Renton and Max A. Robertson, Ed. 2nd edition. Vol. 4 (Edinburgh, William Green & Sons: 1907), 185.

³³ Gillian Beer, "What's Not in Middlemarch?" *Middlemarch in the Twenty-First Century*, Ed. Karen Chase (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 32.

³⁴ One notable exception to this general timeline is Lord Byron's dictate in his letter of September 25, 1812 to Lady Melbourne that "a woman should never be seen eating or drinking, unless it be *lobster salad* or *champagne*, the only truly feminine and becoming viands" (emphasis his). However, as rise in demand generally precedes diminishing supply, it seems reasonable that lobster could have been increasingly considered a delicacy even prior to (or in a trend that led to) the decimation of the ocean populations. See Byron, *Lord Byron's Correspondence Chiefly With Lady Melbourne, Mr. Hobhouse, the Hon, Douglas Kinnaird, And P. B. Shelley* (London: J. Murray, 1922), 84.

³⁵ The passage in full: "[Gwendolyn Harleth said,] 'Tell Mr. Grandcourt that his arrangements are just what I desired,'—passing on without haste, and leaving Lush time to mingle some admiration of her graceful back with that half-amused sense of her spirit and impertinence, which he expressed by raising his eyebrows and just thrusting his tongue between his teeth. He really did not want to see her worse punished, and he was glad to

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Edmund Gosse would be warning readers of *Father and Son* (1907) against false hopes of visiting British beaches expecting to observe the plenitude of marine life he describes discovering a child with his father, the biologist Philip Henry Gosse: “There is nothing, now, where in our days there was so much.”³⁶ Once found littering theater grounds and filling the public market, crustaceans became increasingly associated with rarified, self-indulgent worlds following the mid-Victorian period.

Crustacean Science

While Pepys’ lobsters may have taken on outsized importance in their absence, the increased interest in crustaceans during the nineteenth century can only be partially attributed to their rapid elevation from plebian goods into hard-to-find commodities. The mania for marine biology—abetted by the rise in nineteenth century leisure travel as well as the increased volume and accessibility of print—had taken hold before the major drop in crustacean populations. The “noble sea-side passion” proved infectious among amateur collectors, including George Henry Lewes, who rummaged eagerly through tidal pools and mail-order catalogs in search of live specimens for their aquariums.³⁷ While this popularity could have been a contributing factor to declining populations, crabs and lobsters had secured their place in the attentions of marine enthusiasts even before they became a rarity.

In spite of the prominence of crustaceans in the guidebooks and aquaria of nineteenth-century collectors, history has not been kind to their place in Victorian science. Darwin himself

think that it was time to go and lunch at the club, where he meant to have a lobster salad.” See George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, Vol. 3 (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1876), 369.

³⁶ Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son: a Study of Two Temperaments* (London: W. Heinemann, 1907), 155.

³⁷ George Henry Lewes, *Sea-Side Studies at Ilfracome, Tenby, the Scilly Isles, and Jersey*, Second Edition (Edinburgh; London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1860), 188.

never wrote about them, which may be part of the reason why they have receded in prominence within our understanding of the period and its scientific interests. Notably, however, he did amass a collection of 230 specimens during his HMS Beagle voyage of 1831 to 1832.³⁸ These specimens circulated between multiple zoologists before entering Oxford University's zoological holdings. While Darwin may have never published on this collection, his specimens did eventually find their way into print, becoming the major source for Thomas Bell's comprehensive study of 1853, *History of the British Stalk-Eyed Crustacea*.³⁹

Crustaceans would make other subtle but critical contributions to scientific and mathematical practice. M. Eileen Magnello has argued that statistical variation as a discipline emerged from the work of Darwinian biometricians such as Francis Galton, W.F.R. Weldon, and Karl Pearson, who addressed limitations in the way "vital statisticians emphasized averages and regarded variation as a source of error [...]." ⁴⁰ In undertaking this work, Weldon in particular relied heavily on studies of variations in shrimp and crab populations, including data derived from two 1892 expeditions in which in which he and his wife "collected twenty-three measurements from a thousand adult female shore crabs in the Bay of Naples" as well as from another thousand specimens at Plymouth Sound.⁴¹ The biologist Karl Pearson would later declare that "Weldon's intense, laborious, and careful measurements on the organs of shrimp and crab was [*sic*] the first step in the right direction" in developing a statistical methodology for

³⁸ A. A. DiMauro, "Rediscovery of Professor Thomas Bell's type Crustacea (Brachyura) in the dry crustacean collection of the Zoological Collections, University Museum, Oxford." *Zoological Journal of the Linnean Society*, 76 (1982): 155–182. doi: 10.1111/j.1096-3642.1982.tb01499.x

³⁹ Pete Wilton, "Darwin's crabs," University of Oxford. 12 Feb 2008. Accessed 12 October 2014. http://www.ox.ac.uk/media/science_blog/080212.html

⁴⁰ M. Eileen Magnello, "Darwinian variation and the creation of mathematical statistics," in *Mathematics in Victorian Britain*, ed. Raymond Flood et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 283.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 288-9

measuring evolution through quantifying minute biological differences.⁴²

Thus, Victorian crustaceans skitter just beyond the boundaries of our awareness. As inhabitants of the shoreline and part of the expatriate community of the collector's aquarium, they offered professional and amateur scientists overtly alien forms of life that nevertheless tantalized with their quasi-human variations in behavior and appearance. For scientists, the disparities observed between one shrimp or crab and another galvanized the categorization and ordering of individual species. As the next section will show, however, the scientific association of animals in general and crustaceans in particular with unique, often anthropomorphic behaviors would deeply shape the way in which Victorian literature populated its pages, with both animals behaving like humans and humans resembling animals. Where previous studies of Victorian anthropomorphism have focused on the charismatic and cuddly, here I examine the implications of the position of what I call the familiar other that is regularly given to the talking lobster and lobster-like individual throughout nineteenth-century texts. As I will argue, the liminal yet centrally defining place occupied by crustaceans in these fictional and non-fictional texts serves as the broader manifestation of a smaller, more radical trend found throughout late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts in which writers use these clawed creatures and their ability to "get back at us," digestively speaking, in order to theorize the limits of human exceptionality.

Being Crabby

While literary-minded Victorians cared less than their scientific counterparts about the precise length of various crustacean appendages, the anthropomorphic uses of lobsters and crabs followed a similar logic of inclusion: rather than writing off odd individuals, reaching for these

⁴² Karl Pearson, cited in *Ibid.*, 290.

figurative comparisons allowed writers to find a place for them within the remit of natural human variation. And lobsters and crabs were definitely seen as odd: Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby* (1862), the narrator remarks that "for all the ingenious men, and all the scientific men, and all the fanciful men, in the world, with all the old German bogy-painters into the bargain, could never invent, if all their wits were boiled into one, anything so curious, and so ridiculous, as a lobster."⁴³ George Henry Lewes shared the sentiment, commenting in 1860 that while a fish "has a sense of the proprieties," a crab has "a feeling for the Grotesque"—a trait that Lewes optimistically associates with the possession of wit.⁴⁴ Though Kingsley's lobster confounds the wits while Lewes' crab surpasses others in it, both writers suggest that crustaceans introduce the exceptional into the everyday.

Given the popularity of phrenology and facial analysis during the period, this coupling of physical appearance with personality is unsurprising; in fact, it extended to ascribing personality to crustaceans—and other animals—based on their characteristic behavior. For instance, writers frequently marveled at the way crabs, lobsters, and shrimp moved sideways and backwards. As Guillaume Apollinaire writes on the crawfish in *The Bestiary* (1909), "*Comme s'en vont les écrevisses, / A reculons, à reculons.*" (In X.J. Kennedy's charming translation, "Do as does the craw/And withdraw and withdraw.")⁴⁵ Alongside their tendency to hide in dark and undisturbed waters, this trajectory of retreat caused them to be portrayed as neurotic, self-absorbed, and even fearful.

For instance, in *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management*, the "Natural History of

⁴³ Charles Kingsley, *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby* (Boston: T.O.H.P. Burhham; New York: O.S. Felt, 1864), 131. Subsequent references will be made in the text.

⁴⁴ Lewes, *Sea-Side Studies*, 54.

⁴⁵ Guillaume Apollinaire, "L'écrevisse/Crawfish," *The Bestiary, or Procession of Orpheus*, trans. X.J. Kennedy. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011). Originally published 1909.

Fishes” includes some unattributed lines of poetry about the lobster’s “local attachment”:

Nought like their home the constant lobsters prize,
And foreign shores and seas unknown despise.
Though cruel hands the banish’d wretch expel,
And force the captive from his native cell,
He will, if freed, return with anxious care,
Find the known rock, and to his home repair;
No novel customs learns in different seas,
But wonted food and home-taught manners please.⁴⁶

These lines happen to come from an eighteenth-century English translation of a second-century Greek text.⁴⁷ While its appearance here suggests that lobster literature and lobster anthropomorphism have a long history, this extract does not become widely cited until the nineteenth century, at which point it starts to appear frequently in books about fish and animal species, always in order to illustrate the same point—that the anxiety-ridden lobster likes to stay in comfortable waters.⁴⁸ Before readers become familiarized with the lobster as it is prepared in Beeton’s kitchen, then, they are introduced to it as a character, with a distinctive set of personality traits and preferences that seem to undermine it as a dietary option for a Victorian considering dinner.

This friction between crustaceans as subjects and objects, and especially ones that could potentially be consumed, spilled beyond the pages of cookery books. In particular, children’s literature of the period similar made a place for the lobster to be a friend as well as food—while at the same time reinforcing the creature’s alterity in comparison to both protagonist and reader.

⁴⁶ Isabella Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, 139.

⁴⁷ The lines come from *Halieuticks*, an English translation of second-century Greek writer Oppian’s *Halieutica*. See William Diaper, *Oppian’s Halieuticks of the Nature of Fishes And Fishing of the Ancients* (Oxford: Printed at the Theater, 1722).

⁴⁸ While the lobster may not learn anything new while away, at least it avoids the fate of the young men in Pope’s *Dunciad*, who “sauntered Europe round/And gathered every vice on Christian ground” (IV.311-12.) See Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope: The Dunciad (1728) & The Dunciad Variorum (1729)*, ed. Valerie Rumbold (London: Routledge, 2007).

For instance, in Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*, little Tom comes across a lobster that he thinks is a "conceited fellow" and, despite being funny, "the most curious, odd, ridiculous creature he had ever seen" (133). However, this lobster becomes his playmate, and the two eventually save each other after getting caught in a trap—though the lobster loses its claw and nearly dies after stubbornly refusing to let go, a trait that the narrator attributes to its being Irish (130, 160-165). In this exchange, then, the lobster is concurrently set up as a companion for Tom and, unquestionably, an outsider.

This pattern of simultaneous bonding and estrangement recurs throughout the literature of the period. Within the logic of the children's stories, crustaceans may be like humans, but not one you aspire to be. In the "Lobster Quadrille" chapter of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), for example, Alice talks to a Gryphon and Mock Turtle about various topics related to schooling. The Gryphon reveals at one point that his Classical master "was an old crab, he was," literalizing the metaphor.⁴⁹ Later, Alice mis-remembers an eighteenth-century schoolyard rhyme about a lazy wastrel by Isaac Watts called "The Sluggard," turning it instead into a parody featuring a lobster:

'Tis the voice of the Lobster: I heard him declare
You have baked me too brown, I must sugar my hair.
As a duck with its eyelids, so he with his nose
Trims his belt and his buttons, and turns out his toes.
When the sands are all dry, he is gay as a lark,
And will talk in contemptuous tones of the shark;
But, when the tide rises and sharks are around,
His voice has a timid and tremulous sound. (80)

A dandy with a long list of rituals, Carroll's lobster expends its energy on looking different,

⁴⁹ Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, ed. Donald J. Gray (New York; London: W. W. Norton & company, 2013), 75. Subsequent references will be made directly in the text. The use of a "crab" for a grouchy person may have originated from the creature's use of its pincers.

making it stand out even within the novel's catalog of characters with unusual appearances.⁵⁰

While a little more intrepid than Isabella Beeton's lobster and more vulnerable than Kingsley's, it shares with them traits that are recognizable but undesirable—notably, in this case, retreating from action when it counts. Like the unmotivated sluggard of the original poem, Alice's lobster possesses several character flaws that make him ripe for literary ridicule.

Even as these crustaceans became the butt of the joke or object of a moral lesson, however, these texts did something revolutionary in giving them histories and personalities. “We know the history of fabulation and how it remains an anthropomorphic taming,” writes Jacques Derrida, “a moralizing subjection, a domestication. Always a discourse of man, on man, indeed on the animality of man, but for and as man.”⁵¹ The examples here, however, seem to subvert his claims by opening up rather than foreclosing the possibility of animal agency for its own sake. By imagining the lobster as an exile, for instance, *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Cookery* seemingly undercuts its main purpose by depicting the lobster being victimized by “cruel hands,” which in this case might well be the same ones flipping through the pages to figure out how to make lobster cutlets or lobster curry. Similarly, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* repeatedly averts the potential disaster of discovering that one's food has agency—a coming-to-life embodied in the reverse-engineered character of the Mock Turtle. Notably, the lobster of her poem ostensibly speaks in spite of having been “baked too brown.” Earlier, when the Gryphon and Mock Turtle asks if she has seen a lobster before, she replies “I've often seen them at Dinn—” before hastily stopping herself (78). However, the lobster manages to live beyond his

⁵⁰ In an 1866 article on “Spider-Crabs and Their Parasites,” W. Alfred Lloyd describes the spider-crab as a “prodigious coxcomb, and very careful of its own precious person” because it decorates itself with seaweed, “always preferring the most gaudy colours.” See W. Alford Lloyd, “Spider-Crabs and Their Parasites,” *Science-gossip*, Vols 1-3 (August 1, 1866), 178.

⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I am (More to Follow),” *Critical Inquiry* 28: 2 (Winter 2002): 405.

ordeal in the oven, while the Mock Turtle and Gryphon take “Dinn” to be the name of a foreign land, attenuating the implied violence of the human diet. Similarly, in *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), the final dinner party seems poised to erupt into mayhem when the foods on the table get angry after Alice tries to eat them after being introduced, leading to a revolt in which they try to turn the tables and consume the guests.⁵² As the last major episode in the book, however, it takes place just before Alice wakes from her dream, thus conveniently neutralizing the threat. Repeatedly, then, these texts acknowledge the tension of talking to one’s food but expediently diffuses it, opening up a potential set of relationships that would otherwise be forestalled without fully addressing the outcome of following these hypothetical situations to their less socially harmonious ends.⁵³

The place generally found for the nineteenth-century crustacean, then, is as the familiar other—not quite a part of the inner circle, and yet undoubtedly part of the fold. Thus, the references in Dickens and Thackeray to characters unfortunately graced with “lobster eyes,”⁵⁴ and the potentially apocryphal stories about the poet Gerard de Nerval’s pet lobster Thibault, whom he would supposedly walk around the park on a blue ribbon on the grounds that this was

⁵² See Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass: And What Alice Found There; With Fifty Illustrations by John Tenniel* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1872).

⁵³ This is actually not the case in an American poem called “The Lobster” that is cited in Simmonds, *The Curiosities of Food*, 327-8. While the poem similarly depicts an exchange between several humans and an intractable lobster, this one does not have a happy ending, but rather uses it as an object lesson:

Now hence be warned, ye bustling men and in your projects pause—
Beware into your neighbour’s pot, how you thrust in your claws.
Ye busy wights! reflect ye how this luckless Lobster got,
But injudicious meddling, from cold water into hot....

⁵⁴ In Dickens, the Major in *Dombey and Son* is repeatedly described as having lobster eyes. Additionally a toy called the “Tumbler” in the story “A Christmas Tree” shares the same affliction. See Charles Dickens, *Dombey And Son* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1859) and *The Holly Tree Inn, And A Christmas Tree: As Written In the Christmas Stories by Charles Dickens* (New York: The Baker & Taylor Company, 1907). In *Vanity Fair*, Mrs. Captain Kirk “must turn up her lobster eyes forsooth at the idea of an honest round game.” See William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair: a Novel Without a Hero* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1848), 130.

no more strange than keeping “a dog, a cat, a gazelle, a lion or any other beast” as a pet.⁵⁵ The lobster-eyed characters of the serial novelists and Nerval’s blue-ribboned Thibault are just a little bit unusual, but still naturalized within the known world.

This seemed to hold true as well for a woman referred to as Madame Babault, widely known as the Lobster-Clawed Lady, who “delighted audiences by knitting and crocheting with her crustaceoid hands.”⁵⁶ According to advertisements (Figure 1), Madame Babault did “knitting, sewing, crocheting, and...all kinds of pretty embroidery work...with the same freedom and accuracy as any other lady might.”⁵⁷ Treated as firmly human (“the same...as any other lady” rather than “the same...as a lady”), she is shown demonstrating her abilities rather than her disability (most likely a condition called ectrodactyly) and featured as a genteel, productive member of society. While it would be a stretch to argue that the scientific breakthroughs discussed earlier that normalized variation within species made the Victorians more tolerant as a social group, this work did introduce the idea that outlying data itself possessed interest and value. These depictions of crustacean-like humans and human-like crustaceans similarly encourage a wider gaze, even in some cases showing what it might be like to imagine the experience of life from the perspective of the ingested.

⁵⁵ Scott Horton, “Nerval: A Man and His Lobster.” *Harper’s Bazaar* (12 October 2008), <<http://harpers.org/blog/2008/10/nerval-a-man-and-his-lobster/>>. Richard Holmes also discusses Thibault in his chapter on Nerval in *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (New York: Vintage, 1996).

⁵⁶ Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians: What We Think We Know About Them and Why We’re Wrong* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 142.

⁵⁷ “The Real Lobster-Clawed Lady,” [Advert for an appearance of Madame Babault, the lobster-clawed lady, 1898], Jackson Collection, Bridgeman Images. Accessed 30 June 2017. The text reads, in full,

Although it seems impossible to the idea of the public, the lady has neither feet nor hands; in place of Hands she has Two Lobster Claws, measuring fully 10-inches in length, and in place of Feet she has Two Crab Claws, and what is most surprising to the doctor, as well as the public, is when this most wonderful lady is knitting, sewing, crocheting, and doing all kinds of pretty embroidering work, she does so with the same freedom and accuracy as any other lady might with their hands and fingers.

Easter Week 1898
 For the First Time in this City!
 For Two Weeks only at
12, LONDON ROAD.
 The Marvel of Marvels.
A Most Extraordinary Freak of Nature
TO BE SEEN ALIVE!
 THE REAL

**Lobster-Clawed
 LADY**

We don't want to bring people by exaggeration and
 not give them satisfaction.
All this is very True!

The Greatest Novelty



of the Day!

MADAME BABAULT
 The Pretty French Lady,
 is one of the most curious Freaks of Nature ever
 known in the world. Although it seems impossible
 to the idea of the public, the lady has neither feet
 nor hands: in place of **Hands** she has
Two Lobster Claws, measuring
 fully **10-inches** in length, and in place of
Feet she has **Two Crab Claws**,
 and what is most surprising to the audience, as well
 as the public, is when this most wonderful lady is
 knitting, sewing, crocheting, and doing all kinds of
 pretty and useful work, she does so with the same
 freedom and accuracy as any other lady might with
 their hands and fingers.

Madame Babault offers **£200** to any person
 who has seen her and can prove that she was not
 born with Two Lobster Claws in place of hands, and
 Two Crab Claws in place of feet, and that it is not
 really natural.

Manager—J. H. Dixon.

Figure 1. Advertisement for Madame Babault, the lobster-clawed lady, (c.1898). Print, Engraving on Paper. Credit: Look and Learn, Peter Jackson Collection/Bridgeman Images.

Cannibal Monkeys of the Sea

At the same time, it is important not to overstate the empathetic connection. Crabs and lobsters were frequently described in ways that suggested a resemblance to human behavior, or vice versa, in spite of their easily identifiable shape and their obvious differences from mammalian life. However, this was rarely a moment of personal introspection. In other words, writers were usually not seeing themselves in these crustaceans, but others (and Others), distinguishing their work from some of the more powerful attempts in Early Modern poetry to grapple with selfhood and embodiment. This reticence becomes more apparent in writings that make cross-species analogies, but in specific and limited ways, comparing crustaceans either solely to non-human mammals or, when a human comparison is being made, to so-called savages.

A passage from an 1859 book called *The Curiosities of Food* illustrates the type of ambivalent response that writers sometimes faced when confronted with crustaceans. In the excerpt, P.L. Simmonds describes an artificial pond in Southampton where incoming shipments of lobster could be kept:

Even here, their cannibal-like propensities are not extinguished; for the powerful make war upon, and incorporate into their own natures, the weak. ... These shell-fish are enormous creatures, the body with the claws being as long as a man's arm. As the lobsters and cray-fish climb nimbly up the sides of the watery caravan, they look like a collection of purple-coloured monkeys or stunted baboons; and there is something frightful in the appearance and noiselessness of these chatterless simiae, climbing about their liquid den, and approaching the surface to look at the spectator."⁵⁸

In this scene, Simmonds describes a form of domestication—putting the lobsters in an enclosed pond—that aggravates rather than civilizing them. The description emphasizes their brute natures, and Simmonds' language of incorporation highlights the dominance of the stronger lobsters. Partway through the passage, however, the language turns to entertain the thought of a

⁵⁸ Simmonds, *The Curiosities of Food*, 326.

closer relation between the visitor and the objects of his gaze. Simmonds' description of the lobsters as being "like a collection of purple-coloured monkeys or stunted baboons," unexpected though it is, has a corollary in *The Water-Babies*. Describing the early days of the boy protagonist's friendship with a lobster, the narrator of Charles Kingsley's novel writes, "Tom delighted in watching him hold on to the seaweed with his knobbed claw, while he cut up salads with his jagged one, and then put them into his mouth, after smelling at them, like a monkey."⁵⁹ Kingsley's vegetarian lobster, however, earns its simian comparison from smelling its food, and poses little threat to Tom. Those in Simmonds' text, on the other hand, seem to be compared to monkeys as a result of their deft climbing skills. His description highlights the uncanniness of familiar yet disturbingly silent creatures, clambering under the water instead of in trees.

The research of scholars such as Masahiro Mori has highlighted the "uncanny valley" of the nearly-but-not-quite human, of zombies and robots that repel not because they are utterly different from humans but because they are a little too similar.⁶⁰ Here, the opposite seems to be at work: innately different creatures that close the distance "nimble" and with ease. Whereas in the first part of the passage, Simmonds evokes the draining of the pond, in the second half he insistently maintains the water level, using phrases such as "watery caravan" and "liquid den" to refer to the lobsters' habitat. In the final moment of confrontation, moreover, he focuses on the "surface" that separates the two sets of lookers, as if water tension can constitute a substantive boundary between the humans looking down and the lobsters looking up.

Beyond the external similarities that Simmonds finds fundamentally repulsive, however,

⁵⁹ Kingsley, *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby* (Boston: T.O.H.P. Burhham; New York: O.S. Felt, 1864) 132.

⁶⁰ See also Ernst Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906)," trans. Roy Sellars, The Boundary Language Project, accessed 30 June 2017, <http://www.art3idea.psu.edu/>; Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (Das Unheimliche)," *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. Strachey, Freud et. al. Vol. 17. (Toronto: The Hogarth Press, 1955).

it was the unpalatable crustacean diet that more commonly alienated those who considered crustacean behavior. Isabella Beeton notes distastefully that lobsters are “baited with garbage” as well as “rather indigestible, and, as a food, not so nutritive as they are generally supposed to be.”⁶¹ Writing a few years after Beeton, William Barry Lord would similarly note that the British freshwater crayfish’s natural diet “consists of animal substances, the spawn of fish, vegetable matter, the larvae of water insects, &c.,” adding that offal, “waste fish,” or “small bits of frog” were commonly used as bait for these and other crustaceans.⁶² In a culture where “you are what you eat” first emerged as a motto that clearly defined the stakes of consumption,⁶³ the crustacean diet proved especially hard to swallow.

This modulation between metaphors of proximity and distance becomes more apparent when crustacean feeding habits are depicted explicitly in relation to human habits. In *The Aquarium* (1856), for example, Philip Henry Gosse observes, “like the wolves and hyaenas of the land, [crabs] devour indiscriminately dead and living prey.”⁶⁴ To back up his claim, he tells a story about a Fiddler crab he once introduced into his aquarium:

As the Giants Grim of old spared not ordinary-sized men for any sympathy of race, so our giant Crab had no respect for lesser Crabs, except a taste for their

⁶¹ Isabella Beeton, *Mrs Beeton’s Book of Household Management*, Ed. Nicola Humble, Abridged Edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 109. Simmonds’s *The Curiosities of Food* appears to be her source here. Simmonds uses the same phrase about garbage when describing lobster-trapping and writes elsewhere in his text that “the flesh of all crustaceous animals, although in great request, is rather difficult of digestion” despite being “greatly esteemed as a very rich and nourishing aliment.” See Simmonds, *The Curiosities of Food*, 323, 316, 322.

⁶² Lord, *Crab, Shrimp, and Lobster Lore*, 106, 24, 108.

⁶³ In 1826, Anton Brillat-Savarin first made the claim, “*Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es.*” [Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are]. Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach voiced a similar notion in German in the 1860s when he wrote, “*Der Mensch ist, was er ißt.*” [Man is what he eats.]. See Anton Brillat-Savarin, *Physiologie du Gout, ou Meditations de Gastronomie Transcendante (1826)*, cited in Sandra Kumari de Sachy, “We are What We Eat: Sri Swami Satchidananda on Vegetarianism,” *Food for the Soul* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011) 64 and Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach, *Concerning Spiritualism and Materialism (1863/4)*, cited in de Sachy, 64.

⁶⁴ Philip Henry Gosse, *The Aquarium: An Unveiling of the Wonders of the Deep Sea* (London: J Van Voorst, 1856) 191.

flesh. I had two or three full-grown Soldier Crabs (*Pagurus bernhardus*); themselves warriors of no mean prowess; two, at least, of these fell a prey to the fierce Fiddler. His manner of proceeding was regular and methodical. Grasping the unthinking Soldier by the thorax, and crushing it so as to paralyse the creature, he dragged the body out of the protecting shell. The soft, plump abdomen was the *bonne bouche*; this was torn off and eaten with gusto, while the rest of the animal was wrenched limb from limb with savage wantonness, and the fragments scattered in front of his cave.⁶⁵

From wolves and hyenas of the natural world, Gosse transitions in this passage to the giants of folklore. The opposing forces of human and animal simile produce a tension that runs through the passage: “regular and methodical” gets set against “wrenched...with savage wantonness,” while “torn off and eaten with gusto” is paired with its incongruous object, the elegantly French “*bonne bouche*.” The Fiddler crab is a contradiction in terms, alternately over-civilized and shockingly crude. Like a maritime Hannibal Lector, its transgressions are heightened by its seeming adherence to other recognizable social norms.

Once the idea of crab cannibalism has been introduced in the text, the mental leap to anthropophagy happens swiftly. Indeed, by using man-eating giants as a point of reference for his analogy, Gosse has already set up the transition from *they'll even eat each other* to *they'll even eat us* as a kind of counterpoint to Samuel Pepys' slip from *God's creatures* to *my lobsters*, discussed at the opening of the chapter. As mentioned earlier, the scavenging habits of crustaceans were widely known by this time, with writers such as Isabella Beeton and P.L. Simmonds commenting obliquely on their subsequent unsuitability as meat. Gosse draws a more visceral image of the possibilities in his text. There is “no doubt,” he writes, “that many an enormous Crab, whose sapidty elicits praise at the epicure's table, has rioted on the decaying body of some unfortunate mariner.”⁶⁶ Unlike Beeton and Simmonds, however, he exhibits less

⁶⁵ Gosse, *The Aquarium*, 190.

⁶⁶ Gosse, *The Aquarium*, 191.

apparent horror:

But what of that? Let us imitate the philosophy of the negro mentioned by Captain Crow. On the Guinea Coast people are buried beneath their own huts, and the Land-crabs are seen crawling in and out of holes in the floor with revolting familiarity: notwithstanding which, they are caught and eaten with avidity. A negro, with whom the worthy Captain remonstrated on the subject, seemed to think this but a reasonable and just retaliation, a sort of payment in kind; replying with a grin and chuckle of triumph:—"Crab eat black man; black man eat he!"⁶⁷

Gosse's attempt to put this in perspective opens up the epistemological dilemma posed by crustaceans, in their disruption of the animal kingdom's accepted hierarchies and unidirectional food chains. Though Gosse seems flippant in his advocacy for a philosophical approach, the way he relates the anecdote suggests that he cannot quite decide whether to present it as exemplar or ethnic joke.

Part of the inconsistency of tone derives from Gosse's attempt to reframe source material for his own purposes. The incident comes from a part of *Memoirs, of the Late Captain Hugh Crow, of Liverpool* (1830) in which Crow discusses ritual ceremonies in Guinea. After discussing the burial practices that Gosse mentions above, Crow comments, "it is revolting to see the land-crabs creeping up and down from holes into the floor over the graves. Although there is no doubt these ugly creatures consume the bodies, the inhabitants eat them with a great deal of relish."⁶⁸

Far from intending to build intercultural sympathies, Crow's text directs itself to exposing differences; the lengthy subtitle of the book ends by noting that the memoir has been supplemented with "Anecdotes and Observations, Illustrative of the Negro Character." The

⁶⁷ Gosse refers here to Hugh Crow, who whose *Memoirs, of the Late Captain Hugh Crow, of Liverpool* was published in 1830. See Gosse, *The Aquarium*, 191.

⁶⁸ Hugh Crow, *Memoirs, of the Late Captain Hugh Crow, of Liverpool: Comprising a Narrative of His Life Together with Descriptive Sketches of the Western Coast of Africa; Particularly of Bonny; the Manners and Customs of the Inhabitants, the Productions of the Soil, and the Trade of the Country. To Which are Added, Anecdotes and Observations, Illustrative of the Negro Character* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green; and Liverpool: G. and J. Robinson, 1830) 241.

prejudices of the author are made even clearer within the context in which he presents the anecdote that Gosse will later adopt as his source. The next page of the *Memoirs* discusses a feast in which an elephant's carcass left in the street until "quite putrid" was "when cooked...considered by the natives as a treat."⁶⁹ In pop parlance, Crow leans here on the traveler's lazy recourse to describing "foreign queasine."⁷⁰ As the tone of these excerpts suggest, the captain does not acknowledge any possibility that he might learn from the indigenous population on his travels.

The practice of sniffing at another culture's strange culinary customs, deeply entrenched in the genre of travel narrative, closely aligns with the condescension with which writers observed the scavenging diet of the crustaceans. For instance, George Vasey, in an 1847 book about diets around the world, commented on the "unfastidious palates" of the Hottentots and noted that several Southeast Asian groups—ironically, all lumped together by Vasey—"eat, without distinction, rats, mice, serpents, putrefied fish, and all sorts of garbage."⁷¹ Vasey's language clearly echoes the vocabulary used by Isabella Beeton, William Barry Lord, and Philip Henry Gosse when they describe crustaceans as partaking in an "indiscriminate" diet full of "garbage" and "waste." By associating an all-inclusive attitude toward food with a lack of refinement, these food writers and travel writers alike articulate the distance between themselves and their supposedly less developed animal or human subjects, and Captain Crow's narrative merges the two separate trends into one.

In contrast with the source material he derives from Crow, Gosse introduces the same

⁶⁹ Crow, *Memoirs*, 242.

⁷⁰ "Foreign Queasine," TV Tropes, n.d. <<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ForeignQueasine>> Accessed 12 October 2015.

⁷¹ George Vasey, *Illustrations of Eating: Displaying the Omnivorous Character of Man, And Exhibiting the Natives of Various Countries At Feeding Time* (London: J. R. Smith, 1847) 50, 39.

story at least ostensibly to counsel broad-mindedness. In moving Captain Crow's Guinean conversationalist from the footnote where he is relegated in Crow's *Memoirs*, Gosse at least takes him out of the margins. At the same time, where Hugh Crow's text only remarks that the Guinean man "replied," Gosse has added that this is done "with a grin and chuckle of triumph." Additionally, Gosse has changed "he thought the custom reasonable and just" in Crow's *Memoirs* to "[he] seemed to think this but a reasonable and just retaliation."⁷² Rather than merely reporting speech, these slight alterations in wording suggest the presence of an external observer who finds the speaker surprising and perhaps amusing because he "seems to think" in alien ways. Despite Gosse's lip service to tolerance, he intensifies rather than moderates the cultural divides presented in the original material. The source text continues to control the tone of Gosse's retelling of the anecdote. Notwithstanding his initial call to imitate the Other, at the end of the day the Guinean's words about eating the one who eats you become a punch line in Gosse's book rather than a philosophy to emulate.

Other texts invoking the possibility of crustaceans consuming humans tend to perform a similar act of pushing away, of identifying substitute bodies that might be eaten. P.L. Simmonds writes in his description of Janeiro, for instance, "Strangers are often told as a joke, that [the immense prawns called *Camaroës*], are kept in pits, and fed with the dead bodies of slaves thrown at them from time to time, and many people will in consequence not touch them."⁷³ Similarly, William Barry Lord notes that the pincers of some Japanese crabs are "large enough to embrace the thigh of man easily"—so easily, in fact, that "bugbear of apple-stealing rustics, the village man-trap, would be a matter of perfect simplicity, and a mere practical joke, to getting out

⁷² Crow, *Memoirs*, 241.

⁷³ Simmonds, *The Curiosities of Food*, 332.

of the grip of one of the gigantic crustaceans of the antipodes.”⁷⁴ While Lord’s description evokes a less visceral reaction than Gosse’s or Simmonds’, he places his description at the antipodes and in the countryside—at a distance from the metropolis, where his main readers most likely reside. While Simmonds’ “strangers” and Lord’s thieving “rustics” clearly consider the situation no joke, the tone is harder to read from the author’s perspective: as seems to be the case with Philip Gosse’s story of the man-eating land crabs, comedy is tragedy that happens to someone else.

Of the Victorian writers, scientist and Darwin supporter Thomas Henry Huxley came closest to genuinely entertaining the idea of reciprocal consumption. Lobsters and other crustaceans recur throughout his writings and lectures. In “The Study of Zoology,” a lecture delivered in 1861 at the South Kensington Museum, he selected the lobster as his key to all zoology in order to show “that that all living animals, and all those dead creations which geology reveals, are bound together by an all-pervading unity of organization,”⁷⁵ concluding at the end of the talk that “[the lobster’s] anatomy and physiology have illustrated for us some of the greatest truths of biology.”⁷⁶ In 1879, he published *The Crayfish: An Introduction to the Study of Zoology*. The Preface recalls his earlier lecture: “I have desired, in fact, to show how the careful study of one of the commonest and most insignificant of animals, leads us, step by step, from every-day knowledge to the widest generalizations and the most difficult problems of zoology; and, indeed, of biological science in general.”⁷⁷ His views captured the attention of *Illustrated London News* science writer Andrew Wilson, who referred to “a certain great naturalist” who showed that

⁷⁴ Lord, *Crab, Shrimp, and Lobster Lore*, 62.

⁷⁵ Thomas Henry Huxley, “A Lobster; Or, the Study of Zoology,” *The Major Prose of Thomas Henry Huxley*, Ed. Alan P. Barr (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 8.

⁷⁶ Huxley, “A Lobster: Or, The Study of Zoology,” 12.

⁷⁷ Huxley, *The Crayfish*, vi.

lobsters were a “text...for teaching a great lesson” in an 1888 “Science Jottings” column in the newspaper.⁷⁸ Both writers rely for their effect on showing that a common animal has a great deal *in common* with the audience.

This word “common” again plays a role in a lecture Huxley gave in Edinburgh titled “On the Physical Basis of Life.” In the talk, given in Edinburgh in 1868 and published a year later in the *Fortnightly Review*, Huxley used lobsters as one of his central examples in introducing his theory of protoplasm, glossed by Alan P. Barr as “a recognizably consistent unit of all living matter, plants and animals alike...”⁷⁹ He might consume and digest them, Huxley observes at one point, but they could just as easily “return the compliment, and demonstrate our common nature by turning my protoplasm into living lobster.”⁸⁰ The difference in his text is the fully immersive way he approaches the act of suggesting a radical parity between species. In this, the lecture recalls the Early Modern emphasis on the worm’s eventual ascendancy in relation to the human body, which here too is highlighted as a lowly and temporary form. In contrast with the retribution described by Crow and Gosse, Huxley’s figuration of eating as returning a compliment imagines an act that builds social bonds between eater and eaten rather than breaking them down. Similarly, by introducing demonstration as a euphemism for the act of consumption, Huxley presents the lobster as detachedly validating a universal scientific principle rather than actively victimizing its human meal. Thus, rather than associating crabs and lobsters with savage behavior, Huxley gives their habits credence as a form of polite, enlightened intercourse.

⁷⁸ Andrew Wilson, “Science Jottings,” *Illustrated London News* [London, England] 15 Dec. 1888: 718. Web. 16 Aug. 2014.

⁷⁹ Alan P. Barr, in *The Major Prose of Thomas Henry Huxley*, Barr, Ed. (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 174.

⁸⁰ Thomas Huxley, “On the Physical Basis of Life,” *The Major Prose of Thomas Henry Huxley*, Ed. Alan P. Barr (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 184.

Most significantly, in Thomas Henry Huxley's phrase, "my protoplasm," the first person appears for one of the only times in Victorian writing in conjunction with the carnivorous crustacean diet. As the examples above have demonstrated, lobsters and crabs are repeatedly described in familiarizing terms, through language that brings them into closer biological relationship with human beings. In children's literature and poetry, in particular, these crustaceans figure as oddball but anthropomorphic characters. At the same time, the majority of these characterizations carry with them undercurrents of discomfort and even disgust, though P.L. Simmonds is one of the few who explicitly acknowledges this when he calls the pond-climbing lobsters "frightful." Thus, lobster and crabs continually inhabit a shadowy space for the Victorians, a source of fascination and sometimes of laughter, their behavior and appearance made risible even as these acts of denigration often find their true targets in human rather than animal bodies.

While Thomas Henry Huxley's work is unusual among texts of the period in its willingness to entertain the idea of reciprocal consumption that directly threatened the first-person body, he too uses humor as a way of distancing the lobster anthropophagy he considers, rendering it in disembodied terms. In the next section, I discuss a major example of a text that introduces human-eating crustaceans as palpable physical threat directed at the self, recasting Huxley's delighted treading of common ground into a darker exploration of overlapping lineages that disrupts narratives of human superiority.

The Future behind Us

H.G. Wells, who was actually a biology student of Thomas Henry Huxley's,⁸¹ would introduce

⁸¹ W.M.S. Russell, "H.G. Wells and Ecology," *H.G. Wells Under Revision: Proceedings of the International H.G. Wells Symposium, London, July 1896* (London; Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1990) 145.

crustaceans during a seminal moment in *The Time Machine* (1895), a scene in which the unacknowledged unease described in midcentury Victorian texts would emerge with unmitigated force. In one of the last chapters of the novella, the Time Traveller describes being sent into a barren landscape in the distant future in his attempts to escape the grasping hands of the Morlocks in a slightly-less-distant future:

Looking round me, I saw that, quite near, what I had taken to be a reddish mass of rock was moving slowly towards me. Then I saw the thing was really a monstrous crab-like creature. Can you imagine a crab as large as yonder table, with its many legs moving slowly and uncertainly, its big claws swaying, its long antennae, like carters' whips, waving and feeling, and its stalked eyes gleaming at you on either side of its metallic front? Its back was corrugated and ornamented with ungainly bosses, and a greenish incrustation blotched it here and there. I could see the many palps of its complicated mouth flickering and feeling as it moved.⁸²

In this passage, the Time Traveller's descriptive language moves from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the inert and innocuous to the nightmarishly sentient. The crab-like creature initially appears to be inanimate, "a reddish mass of rock." He then compares the crabs twice to domestic objects—"yonder table," "carter's whips"—before moving swiftly away from the everyday in his description of a creature whose "metallic front" and "corrugated back" are covered with slime. This amalgamation of mechanical and primordial imagery further obscures the status of the crustacean by mixing the futuristic with the prehistoric.

Before the expected confrontation, however, a second creature short-circuits his thoughts:

As I stared at this sinister apparition crawling towards me, I felt a tickling on my cheek as though a fly had lighted there. I tried to brush it away with my hand, but in a moment it returned, and almost immediately came another by my ear. I struck at this, and caught something threadlike. It was drawn swiftly out of my hand. With a frightful qualm, I turned, and I saw that I had grasped the antenna of another monster crab that stood just behind me. Its evil eyes were wriggling on their stalks, its mouth was all alive with appetite, and its vast

⁸² Herbert George Wells, *The Time Machine: An Invention* (New York: Henry Holt, 1895) 196-7. Subsequent references will be made directly in the text.

ungainly claws, smeared with an algal slime, were descending upon me. (197)

Even as the Time Traveler processes the first crab approaching his exposed position within the Time Machine, he undergoes a second series of disorientations after realizing that the tickles on his face are not from an innocuous little fly but a set of massive antennae. He is the small one, it turns out. The belatedness of his discovery is built into the acceleration that takes place in this paragraph. The first creature moved deliberately (“moving slowly and uncertainly,” “swaying,” “waving and feeling,” “crawling”). In contrast, the movements of this second creature are characterized by speed (“in a moment,” “almost immediately,” “drawn swiftly”) even though it stands still. Moreover, this paragraph shifts from the present participles of the earlier passage into the past progressive tense (“were wriggling,” “were descending”) in this one, as if he is already too late. Grammar and physical positioning alike highlight the terrifying irony: the crab behind him is one step ahead.

The inversions of timing and scale that render the Time Traveler vulnerable here recall his earlier reversal of understanding, when he realizes that the seemingly underdeveloped Morlocks actually control and enable the lifestyle of the refined Eloi, rather than merely offering a brute contrast to them. Though the Time Traveler initially enters this barren landscape to escape from earlier dangers, Wells establishes several similarities between the two predatorial species. Both the Morlocks and the crabs are clumsy, touch-oriented creatures: his description of the crabs as “foul, slow-stirring monsters” evokes the earlier description of the Morlocks as a “strange incredible company of blind things groping to and fro” (198, 181). Though the gleaming eyes of the crabs seem to be at odds with the Morlocks’ extreme sensitivity to light, the haptic rather than the visual organs remain the true menace: the antennae, the claws, and the “flickering and feeling” mouth of the crustaceans here operate in much the same way as the “clinging fingers” of

the Morlocks, which the Time Traveler earlier describes “creeping over my coat and back, touching even my neck” (173). Within the context of these shared traits, the Time Traveler’s earlier discovery that the overworld Eloi and underworld Morlocks share common human ancestry opens the possibility that the crabs here are too close for comfort not only physically but genetically.

Ezra Pound commented in 1922 that “In his growing subservience to, and adoration of, and entanglement in machines, in utility, man rounds the circle almost into insect life.”⁸³ In Wells’ novel, the Time Traveler’s encounter with the giant crabs of the distant future carries with it a strong sense of the frustrated progress that Pound articulates: his technology carries him to places where brawn outranks brains, where humans have become “nauseatingly inhuman” not only in their physical appearance but in their cannibalistic habits” (132). Moreover, the juxtaposition of the prehistorical algae and the mechanical shell of the monstrous crustaceans here trace a similarly recursive form of evolution, in which development no longer happens in a linear trajectory of improvement.⁸⁴ In the traveler’s words, the “species that had resulted from the evolution of man were sliding down...” (196). On all fronts, the Time Traveler finds himself able to escape but not to effect change. The future, in Wells’ telling, constitutes a space of confusion and inversion, where confrontations with seemingly alien creatures end up as a form of confrontation with the self.

Written just five years before the turn of the century, *The Time Machine* serves as a transitional text. In the cookbooks, fairy tales, children’s stories, and natural histories of

⁸³ Ezra Pound, “Translator’s Postscript,” in Remy de Gourmont, *The Natural Philosophy of Love*, 209, cited in Jessica Burstein, “Waspish Segments: Lewis, Prosthesis, Fascism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 4.2 (1997): 139-164, 158.

⁸⁴ Other critics have written on the rise of theories of degeneration in the late nineteenth century. For an example of a discussion of H.G. Wells’ work, see Michael Parrish Lee’s reading of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* in “Reading Meat in H.G. Wells,” *Studies in the Novel* 42.3 (Fall 2010): 249-268.

Victorian England, crabs and lobsters figured as frequent but largely unthreatening presences. They are variously characterized as grouchy, antisocial, fretful, snappy, vicious, vain, and unwise—but their behavior is usually not beyond the pale. These anthropomorphic traits mark their closeness to their human counterparts, even when they are marked as others within that remit. Described as “sinister” and “evil,” Wells’ monstrous crabs also possess a certain amount of human-like subjectivity, though his true debt to the Victorians is in the concept of incremental yet accumulative change within the scientific discourse that allows him to suggest a world in which crustaceans represent the future line of the human race.

Making It Modern

In many ways, H.G. Wells’ hypothetical crustacean apocalypse hearkens back to work like John Donne’s, which chastens human vanity by offering vivid portrayals of worms inheriting the earth. At the same time, Wells’ presentation of crustaceans as terrifying predatorial creatures brings out a subtext running beneath the Victorian writing in which discussions of lobsters and crabs eating people are frequently played for laughs. While Early Modern metaphysical poetry and Victorian animal literature seem to inhabit disparate spheres, an examination of crustacean cameos in T.S. Eliot’s work shows that H.G. Wells’ apocalyptic fiction is not the only place where the two traditions converge.

Famously, of course, T.S. Eliot would align himself most overtly with the Early Modern poets rather than writers in the recent past. Reading his crustacean references as a translation of their worm tropes into a modern maritime setting illuminates highly contested moments in his poetry while fitting in with how Eliot wanted himself to be understood—as an avid advocate for and frequent alluder to Early Modern poetry, a poet whose criticism brought the long-forgotten

work of Marvell and Donne back to public attention.⁸⁵ Notably, he is the only writer in this chapter to show what it might actually look like for a lobster to work over a corpse, a scene that routinely featured when worms appeared in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writing, as it did in Donne's "Death's Duell" sermon.

At the same time, pairing Eliot's work with its Early Modern models brings a few misalignments into focus. In particular, the crustacean references in his poems share with the Victorian period a tendency to skew the angle of reflection, such that the target is not the writer but an external person or group. These moments highlight ways in which the self-styled Modernist break from the immediate past brought with it certain modes of forgetting, in which thematic borrowings from the much earlier writers could be explicitly acknowledged but more recent debts were rendered invisible. Ironically, for Eliot this takes place even as the very Victorian period under erasure offers the body of lobster knowledge that seems to serve as the template for his alternative poetics.

Crustaceans appear three times in Eliot's poetry, two very briefly and one in a more extended scene. The earliest are the cryptic lines from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1920) where the titular narrator comments, "I should have been a pair of ragged claws/Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (ll. 73-4).⁸⁶ Peter Lowe interprets the line as escapism, citing Prufrock's "fear of rejection" and "inability to risk failure."⁸⁷ Similarly, Bonnie Kime Scott reads the lines as looking backward instead of forward, tracing in them the "natural elements Eliot

⁸⁵ Eliot published essays on both the metaphysical poets and on Andrew Marvell in 1921, and his poetry often alludes to these earlier poems. For instance, he echoes lines from Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" in *The Waste Land*: "Would it have been worth while,/ To have bitten off the matter with a smile,/ To have squeezed the universe into a ball/ To roll it toward some overwhelming question...." (ll. 90-93).

⁸⁶ T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1934), 6.

⁸⁷ Peter Lowe, "Prufrock in St. Petersburg: The Presence of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* in T.S. Eliot's 'The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 28.3 (2005): 13.

experienced, particularly in the summers at Cape Ann,” which she suggests are used in the poem to “evok[e] lost possibilities.”⁸⁸ The crab, she writes, represents “a bodily fragment...and a means of escape.”⁸⁹ Whether posited as a better option (better to have been) or worse (I may as well have been), the scuttling claws represent an alternative form of existence, one that is mindless, partial, even trivial. Though these bodiless claws do not act on anything other than the seafloor, they are like the worms of the Renaissance and Restoration poets in representing a marginally sentient life form whose purposeless industry is intended to spur self-reflection.

A similar juxtaposition of human and animal life occurs in the second reference, which is part of a list of items in the *Four Quartets* (1943).⁹⁰ In the first part of “The Dry Salvages,” the narrator describes

the beaches where it [the sea] tosses
Its hints of earlier and other creation:
The starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale's backbone;
...
It tosses up our losses, the torn seine,
The shattered lobsterpot, the broken oar
And the gear of foreign dead men. (“The Dry Salvages,” I.17-19, 22-24)

Though there seems to be little ambiguity here, the stranded sea creatures are notably described as “earlier and other creation.” *Earlier* and *other* are comparative adjectives, potentially marking the alterity of these shells and bones in relation to the human body. The second list, which explicitly includes the detritus of human activity, supports this reading. In particular, *earlier* can be read as a word indicating *longue durée*, not *before I got to the beach today* but *before our time*. If so, an analogous moment to Eliot’s sea tossing up its “hints of earlier...creation” on the beach would be in Charlotte Smith’s “Beachy Head” (1807), when the narrator encounters “the

⁸⁸ Bonnie Kime Scott, *In the Hollow of the Wave; Virginia Woolf and the Modernist Uses of Nature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 19.

⁸⁹ Scott, *In the Hollow of the Wave*, 19.

⁹⁰ T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1943).

strange and foreign forms/ Of sea-shells” within the cliffs and wonders “What time these fossil shells,/Buoy’d on their native element, were thrown/ Among the imbedding calx...” (ll. 373-74, 384-86).⁹¹ The difference, in Eliot’s poem, is that there are man-made artifacts along with the marine ones ending up on the shoreline. Placed side by side on the beach as well as in the poetry, the two types of creation—a word that again recalls Pepys’ multivalent “creatures”—stand out against each other while simultaneously being pulled into a shared articulation of loss.

However, these lines from the *Four Quartets* introduce one other odd moment of othering, one in tension with the human and first-person “we” that Eliot seems to introduce; this anomaly provides the transition between the relatively innocuous spurs to reflection offered by the sea creatures in these two examples and a much more aggressive, Donne-like use of the imagery in a draft of *The Waste Land* that I will discuss next. In the second list from the “The Dry Salvages” excerpt cited above (“the torn seine,/ The shattered lobsterpot, the broken oar/ And the gear of foreign dead men”), Eliot specifies that the dead men who have lost their gear are foreign, while the shattered lobsterpot and broken oar ostensibly come from local fishermen who could potentially still be alive and well. In the latter case, the objects have taken the beating, and in the former, loss is located in human bodies—but those of strangers. Why this small but definite act of distancing from the readerly and writerly self?

The question weighs even more heavily in T.S. Eliot’s last crustacean reference, a short poem called “Dirge” that was excised from *The Waste Land* on Ezra Pound’s suggestion and published posthumously as part of the manuscript.⁹² In the poem, Eliot riffs on Ariel’s song from Shakespeare’s *Tempest*:

Shakespeare:

⁹¹ Charlotte Smith, “Beachy Head” in *Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. Stuart Curran (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 213-250.

⁹² *Ibid.*

called the Venus Flower Basket, “Of cornucopiae form, and of the finest Brussels lace texture,” to the work of the crabs sometimes found inside, though it was later discovered to be a naturally occurring phenomenon (Figure 2).⁹⁵



Figure 2. Photograph of a Golden Crab by Venus Flower Baskets. Credit: NOAA Okeanos Explorer Program, Gulf of Mexico 2012 Expedition.

Though scientifically unsound as an origin story, the explanation provided for the fragile and porous Venus Flower Basket speaks to the imagined forces of the nibbling crabs and scratching lobsters in “Dirge,” which Eliot offensively but likewise fantasizes as a transmutation of something unexceptional (a nose) into an aesthetic object (lace). Partway through, Eliot uses the final *sea-change/strange* couplet of the original *ababcc* rhyme scheme to transition into the emotional immediacy of *aabbcc* rhymes, but the pattern lurches: we have *nose/toes, tide/side,*

⁹⁵Lord, *Crab, Shrimp, And Lobster Lore*, 37, 38-9.

unfold/gold, but also the unrhymed *surprise* and the final off rhyme of *watch/scratch*. Hyam Maccoby has described this passage as a “savage paean of victory.”⁹⁶ If so, it is one undermined by the overflow of its own virulence.

Ultimately, this move aligns with Eliot’s own description of his poetics. “And I should say that the mind of any poet would be magnetized in its own way,” claimed Eliot in a lecture given in 1932 as part of a series on “The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism,”

to select automatically, in his reading (from picture papers and cheap novels, indeed, as well as serious books, and least likely from works of an abstract nature, though even these are aliment for some poetic minds), the material—an image, a phrase, a word—which may be of use to him later. And this selection probably runs through the whole of his sensitive life. There might be the experience of a child of ten, a small boy peering through sea-water in a rock-pool, and finding a sea-anemone for the first time: the simple experience (not so simple, for an exceptional child, as it looks) might lie dormant in his mind for twenty years, and re-appear transformed in some verse-context charged with great imaginative pressure.⁹⁷

Aside from this seaside moment that critics frequently read as biographical,⁹⁸ Eliot tellingly describes writing poetry as a process of selective ingestion, of picking out promising bits “an image, a phrase, a word” at a time from both highbrow and lowbrow texts before digesting them into something new. As explained in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1921), moreover, by

⁹⁶ Maccoby, 115.

⁹⁷ T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1986), 70. These lines are frequently cited to gloss the lines from the *Four Quartets* that were analyzed earlier (“Dry Salvages,” Part I, ll. 16ff):

The sea is the land's edge also, the granite
Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses
Its hints of earlier and other creation:
The starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale's backbone;
The pools where it offers to our curiosity
The more delicate algae and the sea anemone.
It tosses up our losses, the torn seine,
The shattered lobsterpot, the broken oar...

⁹⁸ The *Four Quartets* includes the lines, “The pools where it offers to our curiosity / The more delicate algae and the sea anemone” (“The Dry Salvages,” I. ll. 20-21). For instance, see Lyndall Gordan, *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 13.

new he does not mean something better than previous art, but verse that “digest[s] and transmute[s]” multiple influences while avoiding the other extreme, taking “the past as...an indiscriminate bolus [masticated lump of food].”⁹⁹ Basically, his poetics of alimentary fragmentation and recombination is the “salvage ontology” of crustaceans that Dan Brayton describes, the renewal of dead bodies into living protoplasm that T.H. Huxley imagined so cheerfully. While Prufrock seems to back away from being a pair of ragged claws, Eliot puts multiple sets to work on another person’s corpse in this poem. He, in essence, becomes the crustacean, for the emotional distance between Bleistein and the narrator means that the latter becomes more closely associated with the crab and the lobster, scavenging low.

“Dirge” shares Early Modern poetry’s technique of literally fleshing out death, making visible both the predatorial agents and objects of decomposition. In contrast to the relative abstraction of “ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” these images are fully embodied. At the same time, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century worm references have nothing quite like this poem’s gleeful internalization of predation and externalization of death. While Donne initially calls his reader a worm bred on the “carcass” of the world in “The Progress of the Soul: The Second Anniversary,” he goes on to include himself among the “fellow-worms” who share the same unhappy fate.¹⁰⁰ Thus, “The Progress of the Soul” eventually turns inward, just as “Death’s Duell” does in its references to the worm feeding sweetly *upon me*. Eliot, on the other hand, insists on Bleistein’s alienness, signaling it as early as the first line when he substitutes the familiar second person of “thy father” in the Shakespearean original with the jeering quality of “your Bleistein” in “Dirge.” Both the narrators of “Dirge” and of *The Time Machine* imply that they recognize themselves in

⁹⁹ T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *T.S. Eliot: Poetry, Plays, and Prose* (New Dehli: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2000), 224-229.

¹⁰⁰ John Donne, *The Works of John Donne, D. D., Dean of Saint Paul’s 1621-1631 with a Memoir of His Life*, Vol. 4, Ed. Henry Alford (London: John W. Parker, 1839), 233.

the alien. In the novella, the Time Traveler escapes by pressing a button on his machine. In “Dirge,” however, Eliot unflinchingly and surprisingly embraces the animal role, refusing to identify with the human body within the scene.

As this interpretation demonstrates, the juxtaposition of Eliot’s poetry alongside that of Early Modern writers—as his imitation of Shakespeare begs readers to do—offers several insights into his adaptation of a fully-fledged set of symbolic tropes that speak to the futility of human vanity. However, it provides no inroads into understanding his racialization and alienation of the dead, nor to his relocation of these scenes from the land to the sea, from the worm to the crustacean, rather than taking the Early Modern imagery as it is. Critics frequently explain away these issues by focusing on Eliot’s own life—attributing the latter to his prejudices and the former to his tendency to “return again and again to the Cape Ann shore and sea [of his childhood] for scenes of crisis and revelation in his poetry.”¹⁰¹ The answers to these lie instead in the Victorian period that he routinely disparaged. There, in the recent but unacknowledged past, writers from across genres produced a rich literature of the ocean in which lobsters and crabs in particular emerged as a potential extension of or alter-ego for the human. In their investigation of the ethically loaded relationship between humans and crustaceans, moreover, these Victorian writers frequently attempt to normalize reciprocity and equality between the species—even if it meant accepting that lobsters and crabs have been known, in foreign countries, to eat human flesh. Eliot’s poetry, then, emerges from these Victorian scientific and literary contexts while serving as a form of misreading, ramping up the hysteria that these earlier writers attempted to neutralize through humor or otherwise tone down. However, in its excesses, Eliot’s work also draws out the latent anxieties and discomfort of the Victorian texts by making explicit the

¹⁰¹ Lyndall Gordon, *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 13.

maneuvers of diversion and scapegoating found in the nineteenth-century work. Thinking of lobsters may have gotten Eliot and both his immediate and distant predecessors to reflect on the fragility of the human body, but this realization could stimulate callousness just as easily as empathy.

Shells and Selves

Socrates, in Plato's *Symposium*, used shellfish as the ultimate opposite of humans, describing the oyster as representative of the category, an insensate being with "no true opinion" and "no power of calculation."¹⁰² Even the most crustacean-averse writers discussed above would disagree with these characterizations. Recall, for instance, P.K. Simmonds' simian lobsters or H.G. Wells' nightmarish depiction of his "sinister" and strategic monster crabs. Victorian and early twentieth-century invocations of these animals invariably recognize commonality, even if the remaining differences are leveraged as a bulwark against the potential threat against the self.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, lobsters, shellfish, and their neural makeups continue to play a role in the ways we think about our place as humans in the natural world. Much as in H.G. Wells' work, contemporary science fiction frequently depicts alien threats as hard-shelled, crustaceoid creatures: the imperialist Fatu-Krey of *Galaxy Quest* (1999) and the Poleepkwa—derogatorily referred to as "Prawns"—in *District 9* (2009) are only two cinematic examples among many in various mediums. Owen Barfield has written of a "fascination for culture's carapaces, for things with 'the works on the outside': French locomotives, insects,

¹⁰² Plato, "Philebus," *The Dialogues of Plato*, Vol 4. Trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892), 587. Aristotle, along the same lines, called the octopus "a stupid creature." See Amia Srinivasan, "The Sucker, the Sucker!" *Review of Other Minds: The Octopus and the Evolution of Intelligent Life*, by Peter Godfrey-Smith and *The Soul of an Octopus: A Surprising Exploration into the Wonder of Consciousness*, by Sy Montgomery. *London Review of Books* 39 no. 17 (2017): 23-25, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n17/amia-srinivasan/the-sucker-the-sucker>.

soldiers” that emerges at the same time as increased militarization in early twentieth-century Britain.¹⁰³ Their continued longevity as models for imagined confrontations between the human and the Other, however, suggest that crustaceans exert a pull that goes beyond their quintessentially foreign outer shell.

Within the domestic sphere, they often take center stage today in animal rights and vegetarianism debates. Samuel Beckett’s 1934 short story, “Dante and the Lobster,” was one of the first to imagine the cruelty of cooking a lobster. The main character Belacqua spends the majority of the pages going about procuring one. As his aunt prepares to boil it, Belacqua comforts himself with the thought that “it’s a quick death, God helps us all,” only to have the narrator remark, “It is not.”¹⁰⁴ In “Consider the Lobster” (2004), an essay originally published by Ruth Reichl in *Gourmet* magazine, David Foster Wallace similarly echoes the moves of earlier writers, emphasizing distance while at the same time closing the gap. “The point is that lobsters are basically giant sea-insects,” he says by way of setting up his description of the Maine Lobster Festival for the culinary magazine. From there, however, he goes on to compare the cerebral cortices of humans and lobsters, making readers uncomfortable while implying these pangs of conscience are deserved because crustaceans might too be capable of experiencing pain. Like the Victorian writers, he oscillates back and forth between proximity and distance in his treatment of the crustaceans, navigating the disorienting ground between familiarity and foreignness.

The “Being Boiled” PETA campaign that David Foster Wallace cites partway through his piece takes things even further. Text on the campaign website attempts to build rapport early on,

¹⁰³ Cited in Jessica Burstein, “Waspish Segments: Lewis, Prosthesis, Fascism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 4.2 (1997) 139-164, 158. [The quotation comes a letter written by Owen Barfield to C. S. Lewis.]

¹⁰⁴ Samuel Beckett, “Dante and the Lobster,” *Poems, Short Fiction, and Criticism*, ed. Paul Auster (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 77-88.

noting that, “Like humans, lobsters have a long childhood and an awkward adolescence.”¹⁰⁵

Going further, the page notes that “Scientists also have found that crabs live by the saying, ‘Love thy neighbor.’”¹⁰⁶ Not only do crustaceans develop physically and emotionally as humans do, the campaign literature suggests, but they exemplify our own aspirations for virtuous behavior.

Whether these affective claims hold water or not, lobsters do continue to be a source of information about the human body for present-day scientists, as they did for Victorian natural historians and statisticians. Neuroscientist Eve Marder’s pioneering work on the stomatogastric-ganglion (STG) system of lobsters, for instance, identified “the same kind of rhythmic neural circuit that controls breathing and chewing in humans.”¹⁰⁷ As a result of her work, she no longer eats lobsters: “I just feel bad for them.”¹⁰⁸ Marder’s burgeoning sympathy for the lobster emerges in her recognition that they are “the same as us” in signal ways. Consciously or not, her conversion story follows PETA’s implicit beat sheet in driving toward a realization of shared biological wiring.

To return one last time to the Early Modern period, this move from an acknowledgment of biological kinship to a feeling of social kinship recalls a famous speech from Shakespeare’s

The Merchant of Venice:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs,
dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with
The same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject
To the same diseases, healed by the same means,
Warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as
A Christian is? (Act III.i.54-59)

¹⁰⁵ “Lobsters and Crabs Used as Food,” People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, accessed 2 March 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Ironically, PETA backs their claim about the loving Christian behavior of crustaceans using research about Fiddler crabs, the same giant crab that in Philip Gosse’s aquarium ripped another crab from “limb to limb with savage wantonness.

¹⁰⁷ Ishani Gaguli, “Neuroscience: A gut feeling,” *Nature*, 31 October 2007, doi:10.1038/450021a Accessed 25 February 2015.

¹⁰⁸ Gaguli, “Neuroscience.”

Here, Shylock cites the similarities between Jewish and Christian bodies, their perceptions, and their capacity to suffer, much as those abstaining from lobster do in comparing them to humans. And yet, despite the speech, Shylock remains defeated at the end of the play, his earlier rapaciousness for his “pound of flesh” rendering him unforgivable in the eyes of the court. Despite verbalizing his claims to affinity, his presence continues to threaten harm to Shakespeare’s protagonists.

In this play as in the texts analyzed above, the act of imagining kinship functions as a powerful rhetorical move that can be mined for dramatic effect. However, the rhetoric begins to fray when the hypothetical takes on physical form, requiring the confrontation of actual bodies in a zero sum game. Where for the most part, Early Moderns eagerly drew on the energy produced by the fear and revulsion of envisioning the total loss of the material self, the Victorians and Edwardians developed a variety of strategies for holding on: abstracting the problem, as T.H. Huxley does when he refers to his body as “protoplasm”; triangulating the parties involved in order to create a scapegoat, as in T.S. Eliot’s “Dirge”; using humor to dull the edge, as Charles Kingsley does in *The Water-Babies*; and violating the laws of space and time, as H.G. Wells finds himself doing in *The Time Machine*. The graphic and occasionally unruly material vocabulary provided by the crustaceans in these texts offer moments of friction that, however fleetingly, intensify for these writers the stakes of defining the self and its place in the world.

CHAPTER TWO

Pills for Our Ills: Diagnosing Self and Society

“We live, Augustus, in an age eminently favorable to the growth of all roguery which is careful enough to keep up appearances. In this enlightened nineteenth century, I look upon the doctor as one of our rising men.”

—Letter from Mr. Pedgift, Senior to his son in Wilkie Collins, *Armadale*, 1866¹

Negative Space

Readers of the July 6 edition of *Harper's Weekly* in 1867 would have encountered prose from a familiar genre, even if they had not read these particular words before (Figure 3). “Many, many people suffer from they know not what,” the text begins dramatically. “They are not sick—they are not well.” With two brisk sentences, these opening lines delineate a vague but supposedly widespread malady. As the negations in the sentences accumulate, the words construct a double crisis of epistemology and identity—they know not, they are not. There is certainty only in the shadow cast by the amorphous shape of potential unfulfilled.

The piece appearing in *Harper's Weekly* on July 5, 1867 was an advertisement for a patent medicine called Hostetter's Bitters, as the text soon reveals. Having asserted a state of uncertainty upon readers with its opening lines about untold numbers suffering from vague ailments of body and soul, the narration performs a complete about-turn in tone, offering a confident answer to its constructed malaise.

¹ Wilkie Collins, *Armadale: A Novel* (New York : P. F. Collier, [1866?]), 565.

Machine can operate it at once."—*Demorest's Magazine*.
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NO NAME.

Many, many people suffer from they know not what. They are not sick—they are not well. There is no name for it. It is simply weakness—a breaking down of the vital forces. Whatever its causes (and they are innumerable), its symptoms are in the main the same. Among the most prominent are extreme lassitude, loss of appetite, loss of flesh, and great mental depression. Indigestion and a Stomach Cough are also frequently concomitants of this distressing state of body and of mind. The common remark in relation to persons in such a condition is, that they are consumptive. Now, what these unfortunates really want is vigor, vital strength; and, as certainly as dawn succeeds darkness, they can recuperate their systems and regain perfect health by resorting to HOSTETTER'S CELEBRATED STOMACH BITTERS. It is as clear that a life-reviving tonic is required in such cases, as that the dying flame of an active lamp requires to be revived with a new supply of oil. Perfectly pure and innocuous, containing nothing but the most genial vegetable extracts, and combining the three grand elements of a stercorific, an alterative, and a genial invigorant. HOSTETTER'S BITTERS are suitable to all constitutions, and are as applicable to the diseases and disabilities of the feeblar sex as to those of men.

QUAKER COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE CEREMONY.—How it is done. Over the River; Origin of Vegetable Life; a Pocket Kingdom; The Turkish Bath; Memory, as effected by Tobacco; The Spirit of the Age; Studies in Physiognomy; Mrs. Wyllys on "Extravagance;" What is Eloquence? Oratory explained, in July pictorial double No. PNEUMOLOGICAL JOURNAL, 30c. : 25 a year.

Free Gerra Vines and other Plants.

Figure 3: Hostetter's Bitters Advertisement in an 1867 issue of *Harper's Weekly*.²

² "No Name" [Advertisement for Hostetter's Bitters], *Harper's Weekly* (July 6, 1867): 430.

It is clear that a life-reviving tonic is required in such cases, as that the dying flame of an active lamp requires to be revived with a new supply of oil. Perfectly pure and innocuous, containing nothing but the most genial vegetable extracts, and combining the three grand elements of a stomachic, an alterative, and a genial invigorant, HOSTETTER'S BITTERS are suitable to all constitutions....³

The sentences lengthen, the tone modulates from grim to effulgent, and the text reveals its hand. True to genre, the advertisement presents the usual abundance of rhetorical devices: parallelism (“They are not sick—they are not well”; “dying flame of an active lamp”); consonance and assonance (“innocuous, containing nothing”; “dying...revived...supply”); and a rhyme at the beginning of the two final sentences that pairs both aurally and semantically (“It is clear”/“Perfectly pure”).

The formulation here is short on active medicinal ingredients and long on filler material, rhetorical and otherwise. Hostetter’s Bitters, according to the ad, is *innocuous*, it contains almost *nothing* but some vegetable juice masquerading as “extract.” These negative constructions echo the earlier negations (know not, not sick, not well), making the title of the piece (“No Name”) particularly fitting. Like the conditions plaguing potential customers, these supposedly medicinal contents avoid the diminution of specificity. Instead, the “three grand elements” listed as ingredients (stomachic, alterative, invigorant) are obfuscating words, suggesting curative functions without being definitively identifiable.⁴ This opacity of content stands at odds with the company’s deep investment in producing a recognizable brand, written in all caps twice in the body of the text. While the advertisement may purport to offer a clear solution, the product’s composition is far from transparent.

³ “No Name” [Advertisement for Hostetter’s Bitters], *Harper’s Weekly* (July 6, 1867): 430.

⁴ In a scene of *David Copperfield*, he is given cowslip wine and describes it as a stomachic. See Dickens, Charles, *David Copperfield* (Cambridge: printed at the Riverside Press, 1868), Vol. 1, 139.

This chapter moves from the eminently recognizable “whole foods” represented by crustaceans to indeterminately composed yet strongly branded patent medicines, articulating both a continuity and a trajectory in narrative. The previous chapter tracked the crustacean’s place in scientific debates about the differences between humans and animals, exploring the ways in which rigid identity categories were rendered permeable by the disruptive scavenging of crustaceans. This chapter begins where that one ends, exploring the ramifications for understanding selfhood as pliable, forged through an individual’s habits of literal and figurative consumption.

Hostetter’s Bitters existed as part of a vast constellation of patent pills, tonics, and other proprietary formulations that saturated the marketplace during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Britain and abroad. Though they originated in Pennsylvania, Hostetter’s Bitters are representative of an active Anglo-American and even global trade in similar products during the time. In his travels through England in the early 1840s, for instance, Friedrich Engels noted the ubiquity of “Morrison’s Pills, Parr’s Life Pills, Dr. Mainwaring’s Pills, and a thousand other pills, essences, and balsams, all of which have the property of curing all the ills that flesh is heir to.”⁵ Technological advances in printing and in mass manufacture made it easier to produce both the patent medications and the packaging and advertisements accompanying them, enabling widespread dissemination to the global markets pried open through Britain’s imperial forays.

While their heavy advertising presence certainly played a role, the success of these patent medicines can also be attributed in large part to the way in which they blurred the hard line that licensed medical practitioners sought to draw between quackery and legitimate practice.⁶ By

⁵ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844; With Preface Written in 1892*, trans. Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 104.

⁶ See Sylvia A. Pamboukian, *Doctoring the Novel: Medicine and Quackery from Shelley to Doyle* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012) for an extended account of the blurred lines between healing practices.

frequently feeding off of contemporary developments in the understanding of nutrition and disease, such products contributed to wider awareness of health-related concepts and terms, even as they were forcefully denounced by the establishment in the shift toward medical professionalization in the mid-nineteenth century.⁷ The response to these pills and tonics was in many ways disproportionate to the threat; nostrums were more likely to do nothing than be actively harmful. As suggested by the descriptive liberties that Engels himself takes in decrying the “*thousand* other pills, essences, and balsams” (emphasis added) that inundate the unwary consumer, marketers did not have a monopoly on hyperbole. The amplified language circulating around these pharmaceutical products reflect, for both proponents and detractors, stakes that went beyond whether or not a particular brand of medicine could effectively treat a specific complaint.

The patent medicine as *thing* has dominated scholarship on its history. Its visual assertiveness and material heft dictate the questions that are asked: what were these medicines made up of, exactly?⁸ How were they packaged and sold?⁹ What canny use of new technologies allowed proprietors to spin ever more widely the web of commercial promises as well as the

⁷ The Medical Act of 1858 and the 1869 publication of the *Nomenclature of Diseases* were two important milestones in this process. For more on the professionalization of medicine and law in relation to the publishing industry, see Mariaconcetta Costantini, *Sensation and Professionalism in the Victorian Novel* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2015).

⁸ In the case of Hostetter’s Bitters, this was apparently mostly alcohol. Different sources identify the formulation as 47% alcohol, 40.5% alcohol, and 25% alcohol by volume, giving the text’s repeated insistence on the “genial” nature of the bitters a decidedly different cast. See “Hostetter’s Bitters,” Midwest Archaeology Center, National Park Service. U.S. Department of the Interior. http://www.nps.gov/mwac/bottle_glass/hostetter.html Accessed 1 December 2015.; R.C. Kedzie, [Letter to H.O. Hitchcock, M.D., President of State Board of Health, Feb 4, 1875], *The Entailments of Alcohol; Being the Annual Address of the President, H.O. Hitchcok, M.D., of Kalamazoo, Michigan* (Lansing: W.S. Goerge & Co., State Printers and Binders, 1874) 27; “The Propaganda for Reform,” *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 74.2 (May 29, 1920): 1534.

⁹ See W.F. Bynum and Roy Porter, eds. *Medical Fringe and Medical Orthodoxy, 1750-1850* (London: Croom Helm, 1987); Lori A. Loeb, “British Patent Medicines: ‘Injurious Rubbish’?” *Nineteenth-Century Studies*, 13 (1999): 1-21.

networks of domestic and international circulation?¹⁰ We have much of this information. The exact byways of their textual infiltration into newspapers and novels, onto trade cards and buildings. The precise proportions of their composition: arsenic, alcohol, opiates, oats, mercury, exotic and mundane plant extracts, and other proprietary ingredients ranging from innocuous bulking agents to—more rarely—toxins that would gradually accumulate in the body and could eventually kill. The legislation that eventually limited the advertisers’ ability to sell dubious substances using scientifically unfounded claims.¹¹

In declaring Hostetter’s Bitters an “alterative,” advertisers offered a future-oriented verb masquerading as a noun, leaving the thing itself conveniently unspecified. I take this grammatical feature of the advertisement as paradigmatic of patent medicines as a whole. Accordingly, in this chapter I focus less on the material *stuff* of these pills and tonics in favor of exploring the many ways they are defined by and associated with an immateriality and opacity of heightened possibilities. As hinted at in the pileup of negations in the advertisement above, the essential nothingness of these “alteratives” paradoxically takes up a great deal of room. To borrow a term used by Susan J. Wolfson in a different context, it is an “expectant vacancy.”¹² Though all objects are inherently multivalent in meaning, as Ivan Gaskell has observed, the impenetrable compositions of these formulations means that they were even more symbolically malleable than most.¹³

¹⁰ For instance, see Raymond Williams, “Advertising: the magic system” is one such history of the rise of advertising. *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 2005) 170-196.

¹¹ Williams, “Advertising,” 181.

¹² Susan J. Wolfson, “Sketching Verbal Form: Blake,” *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 39.

¹³ Ivan Gaskell, “From Sacred to Profane and Back Again,” in Andrew McClellan, *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium* (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 149-162.

While the lobsters and crabs at the heart of Chapter 1 possessed distinctive physical features, the powders, pills, and fluids at the center of this chapter are visually indeterminate to the consumer. Instead, they rely on an ambient network of information—the wrapper, the box, the advertisement, the printed testimonial, the salesman’s pitch, the word-of-mouth account of inner transformation or visible outward change—to translate their contents, accurately or not. While materiality certainly comes into play, it is mainly through these enveloping secondary sources as they seek to establish a dominant interpretation for the primary physical matter of the patent formulations themselves. Moreover, notwithstanding the fast-acting properties claimed by both devotees and alarmists, either positive or negative effects of ingesting these pills and tonics were cumulative at best.

The theorist Jane Bennett has emphasized the agency of food, by which she refers to the way “Thoreau, Nietzsche, and recent studies of omega-3 and hydrogenated fats” have illuminated the capacity of “edible matter to coarsen or refine the imagination or render a disposition more or less liable to resentment, depression, hyperactivity, dull-wittedness or violence.”¹⁴ In the case of these patent formulations, however, the immediate moment of ingestion usually contains merely the imagined or expected possibility of future transformation. Thus, my approach in this chapter differs from Bennett’s model of organic agency in seeing matter as ancillary rather than central, as Bennet does. Despite the fact that these patent medicines possess physical form and contain material ingredients, they also functioned figuratively as blank slates, the inscrutable substance of their compositions being molded into competing narratives about the pliability of human identity and biology on various temporal scales.

¹⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 48-49.

Thus, this chapter will explore what I call the ambient and subjunctive spaces of the patent medicine. By ambient space, I refer to the immediate sensory environment in which these pills and tonics were encountered as well as the cultural discourse surrounding their circulation. Specifically, I point to a pattern in treating patent medicines as a sonic phenomenon in order to go beyond rhetorical affect in accounting for their rational elusiveness and outsized emotional sway. While advertisements suggested that consumers could exercise agency by proactively feeding patent remedies and supplements to themselves and their families, other cultural commentators feared that patent medicines in fact threatened the utter loss of volitional action, infiltrating consumer bodies like unwanted sounds entering the ear. The opposing view of consumer agency set forth in these critical writings treats aural and oral consumption as parallel practices requiring similar vigilance and discrimination, outlining a construction of the self that relies on actively regulating both cultural and dietary intake.¹⁵

Accordingly, the second half of the chapter examines the patent medicine as a locus for imagining the possibilities of individual and corporate transformation, or what I call the subjunctive space attached to these pills and tonics. By focusing on a deferred moment of projected impact rather than on the dubious items themselves, the subjunctive space opens up a way of understanding how the ubiquitous patent pills and tonics of the long nineteenth century could do important cultural work, even when none of them worked as advertised. Whatever the medicinal value of these formulations, they produced a vision of the individual not just a body with physical complaints, but also a social and self-creating being. As a genre driven by speculation about what could be, science fiction serves an important touchstone here, by serving

¹⁵ James Whorton's *Inner Hygiene in the Nineteenth Century*, which discusses the importance of intestinal health in connection with moral and physical wellness, makes a more limited version of this argument. See *Inner Hygiene: Constipation and the Pursuit of Health in Modern Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

as a structural parallel to the future-oriented structures that underlie the promises made by patent medicines. Together, the ambient and subjunctive spaces show that, rather than being antiquated products antithetical to modernity, these patent formulations played a central role in articulating late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century visions of what humanity's future might look like and where it could go wrong. And, as we saw in Chapter 1, these projections forward often bear a striking resemblance to the past.

Doctoring

Peripheral medical practices have long been associated with rhetorical performances, such as the chanting of healers or canting of street-sellers. In the Victorian period, this identification would frequently be compressed into direct equivalence, with not only the sellers but their concoctions being cast as forms of sound. By placing patent medicines into the larger aural landscape that an individual would encounter, writers posited an alternative form of consumer agency rooted in properly navigating the white noise of modern life, often making their arguments through strategies of rhetorical finessing similar to those employed by the products being criticized.

Etymologically, the English term quack comes from the Dutch word *kwakzalver*. Later Anglicized to *quacksalver* in Medieval and Renaissance England, the word was used to refer to charlatans and purveyors of home remedies.¹⁶ Though the meaning is not entirely certain, *kwak* may have been derived from the loud and incessant sounds produced by these salesmen. "The chatter of the quack, in most cases more like torrents of words, would have been familiar to both town and rural populations," William H. Helfand writes in his study of the material history of

¹⁶ "quacksalver, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2015. Web. 23 November 2015.

quackery.¹⁷ Historically, the quack's facile linguistic performance seems to have outweighed the dubious medical practices themselves in raising the ire of the public.

The word circulated actively in Victorian and Edwardian England: “Quacking seems to be the most *telling* game at present,” wrote the author of *The Hawkers and Street Dealers of the North of England Manufacturing Districts* in 1858, “especially with those who have a talent for ‘pattering’” (emphasis original).¹⁸ In this exposé of quackery and con games, Felix Folio—ironically, the pseudonymous identity of a man named John Page—primarily identifies his subjects through their verbal dexterity. By using the gerundive form *quacking* at the beginning of his declaration, Page explicitly associates the disingenuous sales pitches of the hawkers with the meaningless sounds made by a duck. Just as “quacking” belittles his subjects’ free-flowing speech, Page’s emphasis on *telling* similarly suggests that they are betrayed by their own inventive effusions. By describing the hawkers’ game as “the most *telling* game at present,” he emphasizes the verbal thrust of their sales work while also suggesting that he sees through it all.

In reality, however, curative options rarely sorted themselves into obvious categories, with the products of solid scientific grounding clearly standing distinct from those cobbled together by disreputable moneygrubbers. Though the Royal College of Physicians in London had been founded in 1518, medical practice in the nineteenth century was a loose and poorly-regulated system. Modern understandings of hygiene and infection were still in the developing stages, as was research on the essential nutrients required by the human body (vitamins, for

¹⁷ William H. Helfand, *Quack, Quack, Quack: The Sellers of Nostrums in Prints, Posters, Ephemera & Books* (New York: The Grolier Club, 2002).

¹⁸ Felix Folio [John Page of Manchester], *The hawkers and street dealers of the north of England manufacturing districts : including quack doctors.--cheap johns.--booksellers by hand ... / being some account of their dealings, dodgings, and doings by Felix Folio* (Manchester: Abel Heywood, 1858), 23.

instance, would not be named until the 1910s).¹⁹ Moreover, as Friedrich Engels pointed out, proper care was often financially out of reach for poor and working class families.²⁰ Certainly, there were legitimate concerns about the clearly unethical practices of some patent medicine sellers, including infant mortality resulting from babies being overdosed with narcotics such as opium to get them to sleep.²¹ Still, in many cases, the line between orthodox and alternative practices could be difficult to identify.

For one, purveyors of patent medicines frequently affiliated themselves with the scientific establishment. As P.S. Brown has noted, “A systematic sample of advertisements for 100 medicines in seven Bristol newspapers published in 1851 and 1861...showed clearly that many advertisers wished to be identified with regular medicine.”²² Brands occasionally invoked connections with eminent authorities who, in reality, had nothing to do with the product. For instance, Locock’s Pulmonary Wafers tried to build brand credibility by borrowing the name of Sir Charles Locock, a London obstetrician who counted Queen Victoria among his patients. Kevin Morrison writes, “The suggestion that so eminent a physician had conceived of the wafers, though he did not, was enough to guarantee the product’s success for several decades.”²³

¹⁹ Frances Rachel Frankenberg, *Vitamin Discoveries and Disasters: History Science, and Controversies* (Santa Barbara; Denver; Oxford: Praeger, 2009).

²⁰ Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class*, 104.

²¹ “Medical officers were convinced that one of the major causes of infant mortality was the widespread practice of giving children narcotics, especially opium, to quieten them,” Anthony Wohl writes in *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 34.

²² P.S. Brown, “Social Context and Medical Theory in the Demarcation of Nineteenth-Century Boundaries,” in Bynum and Porter, *Medical Fringe and Medical Orthodoxy*, 217. Brown also outlines one notable exception, the Thomsonian system of herbalism founded by Samuel Thomson, who “entered the field with a blatant social challenge to the medical profession” by encouraging individuals to organize into self-diagnosing communities rather than rely on orthodox medical practitioners (219).

²³ Kevin A. Morrison, “Dr. Locock and His Quack: Professionalizing Medicine, Textualizing Identity in the 1840s,” *Victorian Medicine and Popular Culture*. Ed. Tabitha Sparks and Louise Penner (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2015): 9-25. 10. Interestingly, when *The Lancet* took issue in this instance it was not merely the purveyor of Locock’s Pulmonary Wafers who came under fire but also Sir Charles Locock himself, who was seen as not going far enough in repudiating those who had misappropriated his name and thus sullied the legitimacy of his profession.

Furthermore, regulations required all patent medicines to register with the government and include a royal stamp on the product packaging certifying payment of the duty (12 percent of the retail price). However, as Lori Loeb has shown, the public frequently confused this stamp as a sign that the government had inspected and approved the formulation for public use, a fact that savvy marketers took advantage of when attempting to convince consumers of the legitimacy of their product.²⁴

The lines were not blurred solely through disingenuous action. For instance, not all the doctors named in patent medicines brands were fakes. Recognizing the financial possibilities, some licensed physicians created and sold proprietary formulations as well—though this was not necessarily a guarantee that their products worked. As modern medicine was still in a nascent state, patent formulations did not necessarily differ much from those prescribed by doctors. “Studies of the patent medicines most often advertised in eighteenth-century newspapers have suggested that their composition closely resembled that of the official preparations used by the regular practitioners,” the historian P.S. Brown writes: “Regular and proprietary medicines seem therefore to have differed more in the context of their supply than in their composition.”²⁵ For instance, calomel was frequently prescribed by regular physicians as a laxative or digestive aid, despite the fact that it was later found to put users at risk for mercury poisoning.²⁶ Beyond the entwined issues of avarice and deception, there was often a lack of consensus, even among the medical establishment, about what remedies worked and which ones did not.

Thus, as Sylvia A. Pamboukian argues,

During the nineteenth century, British medicine was a vast and complicated marketplace that included devices such as the stethoscope, pharmaceuticals such as ether, and practices such as antisepsis that would become recognized as breakthroughs. At the same

²⁴ Lori A. Loeb, "British Patent Medicines," 8.

²⁵ Brown, "Social Context and Medical Theory," 217

²⁶ Whorton, *Inner Hygiene*, 48.

time, other practices such as hydropathy (water cures) and teetotaling and products such as patent medicines and arsenic were widespread and popular, prescribed by trained and untrained, licensed and unlicensed practitioners alike. It is tempting to celebrate the breakthroughs and deride the rest as quackery, but without the benefit of hindsight or the now-familiar procedures of training and licensure, defining quackery is a tricky task.²⁷

This excerpt cautions fellow historians of the dangers of oversimplifying nineteenth-century cures by classifying them simply as right or wrong, and judging the practitioners along similar grounds. Additionally, by laying out the critic's task as one of defining, Pamboukian's commentary also opens up the possibility of understanding the process as one of staking boundaries rhetorically rather than taking a set of given practices and sorting them into recognized slots. The lack of definitive answers only raised the stakes of policing a constructed line. For practitioners as well as external critics of the period, navigating these claims to medical authority had major implications for their own social identities.

In her 1856 novel *Daisy Chain*, for instance, Charlotte Yonge explicitly sets an informed doctor against an ignorant and self-medicating nanny, creating a stark opposition between the two healing practices.²⁸ *Daisy Chain* tells the story of how Flora and George Rivers' baby daughter dies from an opium addiction after the nurse repeatedly doses her with Godfrey's Cordial in secret.²⁹ The baby's ailment is eventually diagnosed by her grandfather, a physician, who correctly ascertains the reasons for the waxen complexion and feeble movements of the "poor little sufferer."³⁰ By juxtaposing a licensed physician with a self-diagnosticsian who has taken matter into her own hands, *Daisy Chain* crystallizes the period's anxiety about class and

²⁷ Pamboukian, *Doctoring the Novel*, ix.

²⁸ Charlotte Yonge, *The Daisy Chain: Or, Aspirations: a Family Chronicle* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1856).

²⁹ For more about the history of Godfrey's Cordial, as well as a brief discussion of Yonge's novel, see T.E.C., Jr., M.D. "What were Godfrey's Cordial and Dalby's Carminative?" *Pediatrics* 45.6 (June 1970): 1011. 23 November 2015.

³⁰ Yonge, *The Daisy Chain*, vol. 2, 217.

education by suggesting that the toxic consequences of ignorance are pervasive, rather than being containable within certain social groups.

Indeed, quacks were othered, in more ways than one. Starting in the 1830s, the British journal *The Lancet* dedicated itself to skewering quack doctors and patent medicine purveyors. A piece titled “Obscenity and Quackery” published on in 1858 describes the industry as one that convinced the public to sink “thousands and thousands annually into a slough, which should have gone to the proper earnings of the medical practitioner,” referring to the quack doctors themselves as “performers” whose “mendacious audacity is a disgrace to our social economy and moral pretensions.”³¹ In its depiction of patent formulations funneling off funds rightly destined for “real” doctors, *The Lancet* portrayed practitioners and performers as utterly distinct categories of persons, the latter leeching insalubriously from the welfare of the former. Though the article briefly references moral wrongdoing, the true offense against the legitimate doctors in this extract seems to be pecuniary, lending some irony to the accusations of mendacity.

Writing on the history of *The Lancet* and its editor Thomas Wakley, Kevin A. Morrison has discussed how Wakley used the journal as a way “to build camaraderie among doctors by defining their common values and professional culture.”³² These efforts did eventually bear fruit with the passage of the Food, Drinks and Drugs Act of 1872.³³ However, the methods of Wakley and other writers for *The Lancet* also employed a discourse of othering that “fully utilized racial and religious tropes in order to construct a notion of the professional, self-disciplined and disinterested humanitarian doctor contrasted with the greedy, deceitful and irrational quack,” as

³¹ “Obscenity and Quackery,” *The Lancet* [London] (31 July 1858): 121.

³² Morrison, “Dr. Locock and His Quack,” 14.

³³ Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, 54.

seen in the article from *The Lancet* cited above.³⁴ These authors, moreover, frequently insinuated Catholic or Jewish backgrounds for the quacks being attacked.³⁵

By mapping medical proficiency onto religious faith and cultural background, writers such as Thomas Wakley suggested that the traits defining a good doctor from a bad one were not difficult to parse, but rather a matter of recognizing a person's place and stature in society. Authority, in his view, was ascribed rather than attained. As Pamboukian has pointed out, the word "doctoring" itself has a dual meaning, referring both to the work of restoring someone to health and to the questionable practices of manipulating information and ingredients.³⁶ This double connotation captures the ambiguity of nineteenth- and even early twentieth-century medical practice, in which new techniques and imported ingredients were showing up on the market, alongside new maladies real and manufactured. Much rode on successfully defining oneself as a practitioner of the right kind, though as this section has shown, this task only corresponded in part to one's medical expertise.

In looking at this contested history, then, separating the medical wheat from the chaff presents a less interesting undertaking than mapping the ways in which patent medicines presented an opportunity for vying accounts of knowledge production and consumer agency. With assurances of authority and efficacy coming strongly from all quarters, in the end consumers were left with the choice of taking someone's word for it, or not. Michael Schoenfeldt has written in other contexts that "Digestion is not... simply a function of some lower bodily stratum, to borrow a phrase from Bakhtin, but a central process of psychological and

³⁴ Morrison, "Dr. Locock and His Quack," 14.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Pamboukian, *Doctoring the Novel*, x.

physiological self-fashioning.”³⁷ As this chapter demonstrates, for the nineteenth and early twentieth-century consumer, the process itself—of encountering these patent medicines and navigating competing claims in deciding whether or not to ingest them—subtends the fashioning of the bodily and cognitive self. In making this argument, I push back against the frequent troping of patent medicine consumers as witless dupes and the products they took as irredeemable waste. Instead, I argue for a recuperative reading of individual and object-oriented agency in the muddled history of patent pills and tonics by suggesting that they catalyzed important dialogues about of the capacity of the human body and human mind to be changed.

Naming and Unnaming

As previously discussed, the entrenched association of patent medicines with the sounds of their purveyors features prominently throughout their literary treatments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These instances of metonymic elision between the material and oral/aural presence of these patent formulations illustrate their constructive potential and illuminate wider stakes that range from the operative capacities of marketing to the way fiction works.

This chapter opened with an 1867 *Harper's Weekly* advertisement for Hostetter's Bitters that was headlined “No Name,” coyly positing illness as a loss of being while giving voice to an ambiguous malaise supposedly widely felt but beyond the diagnostic powers of orthodox medical methods. Following the same cues, the body of the advertisement subsequently likened the assertiveness of its branding to a confident sense of self, a linguistic turn that renders the

³⁷ In the quotation, Schoenfeldt is specifically describing a pre-Cartesian approach to selfhood in Edmund Spenser's poetry, but his point applies more broadly. See Michael Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 60.

actual contents of the bottle extraneous. Curiously, similar themes of commerce and identity appeared in another work featured in *Harper's Weekly* five years earlier. At the time, the publication had been one of the two journals—the other being Dickens' *All the Year Round*—to serialize Wilkie Collins' novel, also called *No Name*.

In the 1862 novel, two sisters named Magdalen and Norah Vanstone are left destitute after discovering, following their parents' deaths, that they are illegitimate and cannot inherit.³⁸ As a result, they must seek out alternative means by which to recover the place in society now denied to them by the revelation, which has had dire consequences despite altering their situation only in name. Under a series of assumed identities, Magdalen attempts to wrangle back the family fortunes. This she does with occasional help from a distant relative named Captain Wragge, a con man who has developed a product he only refers to as "The Pill." Read primarily by critics through the lenses of sensation fiction and the marriage plot, *No Name* can also be understood as a commentary on the utility of fiction, in the way that language makes possible alternate modes of being.

Wilkie Collins initially describes the slippery Captain Wragge as being characterized by "the copious flow of language pouring smoothly from his lips," a phrasing that suggests his words have taken on tangible material form (584). In their own way, his lengthy orations present a consumable good that—as with his pills—his auditors must decide whether or not to buy into. The character appears in the novel with his wife in tow, an ungainly woman unable to follow even simple directions, whether given orally or presented in cookbooks.

Collins initially depicts the Wragges as a classic odd couple: the wily Captain Wragge with his smooth ways and fluid speeches contrasting with the dense and awkward Mrs. Wragge.

³⁸ Wilkie Collins, *No Name* (London: Penguin, 2004). Subsequent references will be made directly in the text.

Toward the end of the novel, however, Captain Wragge tells main character Magdalen about the Pill that he has invented, featuring his wife as “the celebrated woman whom I have cured of indescribable agonies from every complaint under the sun” (586). In doing so, the work of his marketing strategy is to normalize Mrs. Wragge’s large and clumsy body, rewriting it as desirable rather than grotesque.

This approach inverts the usual advertising strategy of reconceiving the norm as inadequate, seen in the history by which products as varied as diamonds and deodorant became constructed as socially necessary. Even Mrs. Wragge’s clumsiness gets redefined as useful behavior after her husband loads her with flyers, for “She is sure to drop herself perpetually wherever she goes, and the most gratifying results, in an advertising point of view, must inevitably follow” (590). In so doing, Collins suggests that the function of the Pill is in the way it highlights the malleability of identity from a descriptive standpoint. Just as Magdalen and Norah can lose their identity through a formality that has nothing to do with their essential beings even as it radically reframes who they are to others, so too can Mrs. Wragge’s size be redefined as strapping good health, her awkwardness recuperated as a productive promotional stratagem. The Pill’s powers, by this account, are wholly unrelated to its efficacy as a drug.

Captain Wragge’s reciprocal identification of himself with the Pill (“They can’t get rid of me and my Pill—they must take us”) facilitates a reading of his function at a critical moment toward the end of the novel (585-6). After Magdalen falls ill, Captain Wragge comes to Magdalen and is allowed to see her after Doctor Merrick determines that letting him in is the “least serious risk of the two” potential courses of action, suggesting the Captain’s status as a form of treatment with uncertain outcomes (588). Wragge plies Magdalen with explanations by way of “administ[ering doses] of truth,” and eventually accelerates the resolution of the novel

with Magdalen's marriage to Captain Kirke (589). Though Collins undoubtedly means for the audience to recognize that "The Pill" does not work, the convenient cure-all thus takes on an importance equivalent to that of the convenient plot development in sensational fiction, by which the transparent phoniness of Captain Wragge can nevertheless serve to grease the wheels of the plot.

This interpretation of *No Name* fully acknowledges—as Captain Wragge himself does—the patent pill's excoriated and lowly place in society while at the same time elucidating the work that it does in resolving the plot by facilitating a solution to Magdalen and Norah's sufferings as a result of having their surname and thus their identity stripped from them. With Captain Wragge's help, Magdalen slips into various identities over the course of the novel, from characters in a stage-show to disguises designed to get her in position to regain her inheritance. By semiotically equating Captain Wragge with his Pill and later figuring him explicitly as part of Magdalen's course of treatment in her quest to restore her identity, Collins elides the difference between her physical welfare and social standing. In doing so, Wilkie Collins' novel illuminates how the textual and visual apparatus that accompanies pills and tonics always produces "side effects" on a social level. These capacious social effects, extending beyond the limits of the individual body, far supersede the main medicinal functions of these patent formulations.

Daniel Hack has written on the ways in which Wilkie Collins allies his authorial persona with the inventive figure of Captain Wragge. Just as Wragge calls attention to his own imaginative fecundity, the author "promotes an awareness of [his own] literary labor and narrative mastery" through laying bare the machinations of his fiction for readers.³⁹ This reading frames Captain Wragge as the embodiment of Collins' novelistic dexterity. However, Wragge

³⁹ Daniel Hack, *The Material Interests of the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2005), 144.

can also be read as a character who represents, through the intermediary of his Pill, the power of language more broadly. His Pill functions as a form of speech act, creating a competing construction of the real. In doing so, it exposes naming as an arbitrary and yet powerful practice, capable of fundamentally shifting the social place of both Mrs. Wragge and the Vanstone sisters.

In both Wilkie Collins' *No Name* and the Hostetter's Bitters tonic advertisement with the same title, language opens up ambient spaces of imaginative potentiality. Both texts posit the making and unmaking of identity as externally constructed and ratified processes. Rather than a rose by any other name smelling as sweet, "No Name" and *No Name* produce a joint vision of a world in which a flower's olfactory effects could be fundamentally transformed by changes to its linguistic frame. Within these texts, the bodies and bottles that serve as material referents do not have immanent meaning but rather latent possibilities, offering a powerful metaphor during this period that will be used in other texts to articulate social ills and their proposed recourses.

Bottled Nonsense

Captain Wragge's honeyed tongue and the ear-pleasing patterns of patent medicine advertising suggest a connection to the voice that other works make explicit. H.G. Wells' *Tono-Bungay* offers an extended consideration of the sonic in relation to the title product. The 1909 novel simultaneously tropes this imbrication with the aural as a symbol of the resonant power and obvious superficiality of patent medicine's operative tactics, showing how their effects can permeate the body even before a potential consumer makes the choice to take a dose.

In a critical moment in the first section of the novel, the main character George Ponderevo runs into his uncle Edward Ponderevo, who shares the news about a new invention in the following way:

‘Listen!’ he said.
 I listened.
 ‘Tono-Bungay,’ said my uncle, very slowly and distinctly.
 I thought he was asking me to hear some remote, strange noise. ‘I don’t
 hear anything,’ I said reluctantly to his expectant face.
 He smiled undefeated. ‘Try again,’ he said, and repeated, ‘Tono-Bungay.’
 ‘Oh, that!’ I said.
 ‘Eh?’ said he.
 ‘But what is it?’
 ‘Ah!’ said my uncle, rejoicing and expanding. “What is it?” That’s what
 you got to ask? What won’t it be?” He dug me violently in what he supposed to be
 my ribs. ‘George,’ he cried—‘George, watch this place! There’s more to follow.’
 And that was all I could get from him.
 That, I believe, was the very first time that the words Tono-Bungay were
 heard on earth—unless my uncle indulged in monologues in his chamber—a
 highly improbable thing.⁴⁰

Tono-Bungay turns out to be the name of the patent medicine that Uncle Edward has invented,
 and which George Ponderevo himself will later market and sell. However, the main character
 and reader alike first encounter not Tono-Bungay not as object but as sound. At first, George
 literally cannot place the word, assuming it is a “remote, strange noise” inaudible to him. His
 inability to locate it spatially corresponds to his difficulty mapping his uncle’s utterance onto his
 own knowledge and perception of the world. He hears nothing because for him, the word Tono-
 Bungay has no correspondence to a recognizable thing, even in the grammatically placeholding
 sense that Lewis Carroll’s “slithy toves,” “borogoves,” and other nonsensical words take on in
 the poem “Jabberwocky.”⁴¹

Though the deictics multiply as the conversation continues, these so-called pointing
 words (that, it, this) only serve to emphasize the circular nature of the dialogue, which rounds
 back on itself rather than producing useful details. In his second attempt to understand his uncle,

⁴⁰ H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay* (London: Penguin, 2005), 92-3. Subsequent citations will be made directly in the text.

⁴¹ Lewis Carroll, “Jabberwocky,” *Through the Looking Glass: And What Alice Found There* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1872), 21-24.

George Ponderevo realizes that the word “Tono-Bungay” is non-referential, a thing in and of itself—““Oh, that!” Despite his use of a definite pronoun, however, Ponderevo remains in the dark about what “that” is. His uncle’s response—“What won’t it be?”—proves slippery not only in its negative construction but also in its use of future rather than present tense. Edward instructs his nephew to “watch this place,” but then accompanies this locational direction with only a poke into an indeterminate area in his nephew’s side, giving the body evidential value without explicating the terms by which this evidence might be read. The misalignment between speech and action produces physical comedy that further underscores the referential elusiveness at work.

Tono-Bungay does not return to center stage in the narrative again for several chapters, so readers are forced to inhabit the timeline of George Ponderevo’s own ignorance as he parts ways with his uncle here. Ponderevo uses the past tense, suggesting that he is narrating retrospectively. In spite of this, he delays the grand reveal, building suspense rather than cluing readers in right away to the true identity of Tono-Bungay. In fact, Ponderevo even contributes to his uncle’s dramatization of the invention by dramatically declaring it “the very first time that the words Tono-Bungay were heard on earth.” Though he bookends his inflationary statement with qualifications (“I believe”; “unless my uncle indulged in monologues”), they function as counterarguments that are immediately dismissed as “highly improbable.”

As a result, the scene ends with no other information about Tono-Bungay except the sonic charge of the word itself, allusive yet vague. *Tono* recalls tonic, though this dimension of the product does not revealed until later in the book. The second part of the word, however, has less clear origins, despite sounding loosely exotic and exclamatory. Contemporary readers might think of the energetic interjection, “Cowabunga!” However, this word did not enter English

usage until 1954—and even then mainly in American colloquial usage.⁴² “Bungie” or “bungy” were slang terms adopted to describe India-rubber or those associated with the material in the early twentieth century, though the Oxford English Dictionary’s first recorded use is in 1915, postdating the 1909 publication of *Tono-Bungay* by six years.⁴³ “Bungy” is also an obsolete Early Modern word used to describe something that was “puffed out, protuberant”—a fitting though most likely unintentional connotation for the name of the useless patent medicine at the center of Wells’ novel.⁴⁴ Whether or not Wells meant for the name of Tono-Bungay to have these particular resonances, the linguistically bewildering scene in which it is introduced prefigures Ponderevo’s later revelation that shipments of the product consist of “case after case of bottled nonsense” (149).

Even after this early scene, the novel continues to emphasize Tono-Bungay as an aural phenomenon. Walking around London, George Ponderevo happens to come across his uncle’s shop, which has a sign hanging in front:

THE SECRET OF VIGOUR
TONO-BUNGAY

Seeing this, he reflects, “It was simple and yet in some way arresting. I found myself repeating the word after I had passed, it roused one’s attention like the sound of distant guns. ‘Tono’—what’s that? And deep, rich, unhurrying;—‘Bun-gay! (127). Ponderevo here encounters a silent, written text. However, rather than seeking to find meaning in the name, he emphasizes the sonic qualities of the word, the timbre of various syllables sounding themselves over and over in his mind. His Aunt Susan will later describe her husband’s invention by recalling, “It came on quite

⁴² “cowabunga, int.”. OED Online. December 2015. Oxford University Press. Accessed January 20, 2016.

⁴³ “bungie | bungy, n.”. OED Online. December 2015. Oxford University Press. Accessed January 20, 2016.

⁴⁴ “† 'bungy, adj.”. OED Online. December 2015. Oxford University Press. Accessed January 20, 2016.

suddenly. Brooding he was and writing letters and sizzling something awful—like a chestnut going to pop. Then he came home one day saying Tono-Bungay till I thought he was clean off his onion...” (144). Filled with onomatopoeic words, Susan Ponderevo’s memory frames the moment of her husband’s invention as the imminent emergence of a sound (“pop”), and its earlier gestation as a constant, building noise (“sizzling”). As in the scene analyzed above, the name itself precedes the content as the product of her husband’s labors: the “it” she refers to seems not to be the appearance of the product but the conception of the name. In Edward’s next interaction with his nephew George, the elder Ponderevo repeats the word continuously much as his wife reports him doing after he first conceived of the tonic: “Here we are, George! What did I tell you? Needn’t whisper it now, my boy. Shout it—*loud!* Spread it about! Tell everyone! Tono—TONO, — TONO-BUNGAY!” (128, emphasis original). Edward Ponderevo’s outpouring of words takes on an unexpectedly song-like quality, its rhythms and vocabulary reminiscent of the Hokey Pokey’s hortatory lyrics.⁴⁵ The crescendo and buildup toward the full name of his invention at the end of his declaration mimics his call to auditory and spatial maximalism. By measuring the progress of his work by the volume and coverage of his signature product’s name, Edward Ponderevo once again substitutes the word—specifically, in its spoken form—for the object itself, whose physical circulation seems to be of lesser concern.

The aural continues to take precedence over the material, as Edward Ponderevo makes a pitch to his nephew to come join his company. “There you are!” Edward Ponderevo says, “That’s what I’m after. You! Nobody else believes you’re more than a boy. Come right in with me and be a man. Eh, George? Think of the fun of it—a thing on the go—a Real Live Thing!

⁴⁵ Though the definitive origins of the Hokey Pokey are contested, a similar song appeared in Robert Chambers’ *Popular Rhymes of Scotland* (1826), where the titular lyrics appear as “Hinkumbooby, round about;/ Right hands in, and left hands out...” See Robert Ford, *Children’s Rhymes, Children’s Games, Children’s Songs, Children’s Stories: A Book for Bairns and Big Folk* ([London]: Alexander Gardner, 1904), 85-87.

Wooshing it up! Making it buzz and spin! Whoo-oo-oo” (133). In this scene, Uncle Edward’s manic energy translates into a choppy series of semi-detached statements that devolve into a sequence of sound effects. As when he first introduces Tono-Bungay to his nephew, “thing” has an ambiguous cast here. Additionally, the vision of the “Real Live Thing” with which he attempts to draw his nephew into his scheme never makes clear what exactly “it” is, leaving the pronoun without a specified antecedent.

As far as job descriptions go, these lines make more of an emotional appeal than a rational or even grammatically coherent one. “Come right in and be a man” offers little beyond a banality, suggesting immediate transformation merely by virtue of his uncle’s “belief” in him. The next time Edward Ponderevo’s words offer any hint of George’s future job duties (“Wooshing it up! Making it buzz and spin!”), they are less commonplace turns of phrase but nonetheless comparably empty ones. These phrases seem to refer to promotional and marketing work, with “wooshing it up” potentially functioning as synonymously to “talking it up” in order to create buzz around the product.⁴⁶ At the same time, these activities have negative connotations, with “spin” in particular suggesting linguistic slyness. In his interpretation of the novel, Thomas Richards describes *Tono-Bungay* as portraying “the economic process as consisting of a continuous transformation of low entropy into high entropy, into irrevocable waste,” emphasizing the conversion of raw materials into processed and ultimately overprocessed and disposable goods.⁴⁷ While applicable to capitalist models more generally, Richards’ interpretation assumes that the production line starts with physical resources, raw

⁴⁶ The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the first use of “buzz word” in U.S. usage in 1946, but notes usages dating as far back as the 1627 for the use of the word “buzz” to refer to “a condition of busy activity” or the “mingled sound made by a number of people talking or busily occupied.” See buzz, sb.1, 2a., 5. Accessed May 3, 2017

⁴⁷ Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London; New York: Verso, 1993), 92.

material that can be transformed. These scenes from *Tono-Bungay* illuminate a different, immaterial form of circulation and value creation, rooted in verbalization rather than physical construction. In his uncle's telling, George Ponderevo's words would be the true catalyzing agent, activating the product from its otherwise inert state into a "thing on the go" and a "Real Live Thing" through his acts of speech; the physical materiality of the nostrum itself remains immutable and thus secondary. While his uncle is the product's inventor, the younger Ponderevo would be the true maker, undertaking the *poiesis* of creation with his words.

Thus, the effects of *Tono-Bungay* are mainly measured psychologically rather than physiologically. While acknowledging some of the limitations of his drug, Uncle Edward remains convinced of its worth: "After all, there's no harm in the stuff—and it may do good. It might do a lot of good—giving people confidence, f'rinstance, against an epidemic" (135). Later, he remarks, "We mint faith, George...and by Jove we got to keep minting!" (258). While consumers would most likely prefer defense against an epidemic rather than potentially misplaced confidence and faith against it, Edward Ponderevo astutely identifies the placebo effect as a real one—which, as studies have shown, it is.⁴⁸ Bottled nonsense may not cure ailments directly, but people will be transformed nonetheless.

This reading of *Tono-Bungay* makes clear that patent medicines must be interpreted as a total system comprising not only the pills or liquid within the glass vessel but also the vessel itself; the label on it; the utterances related to it, both written and spoken; and the individuals who produce, circulate, and consume them. Noxious though they could be, these patent formulations did not dictate the material and abstract resources mobilized in service of their circulation. Rather, as in *Tono-Bungay*, they were subordinated to the linguistic and intellectual

⁴⁸ See, for instance, Ted J. Kaptchuk, and Franklin G. Miller, "Placebo Effects in Medicine," *New England Journal of Medicine* 373 (2 July 2015): 8-9. Accessed 8 February 2016. DOI: 10.1056/NEJMp1504023.

play that surrounded them and used as vessels for other ideas. Seeing the contents of the pills and tonics as part of the background rather than foreground makes it possible to move beyond medical history and into a consideration of the social ramifications of patent medicine ingestion.

The Stakes of Mishearing

The meaning of partaking varied a great deal depending on the perspective of the observer, and in many accounts taking a patent pill was framed as the equivalent of being taken in by one. Friedrich Engels, in *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844*, lamented the reliance of the working classes on “cheap charlatans, and...quack remedies, which do more harm than good.”⁴⁹ Engels acknowledges in his text that the popularity of patent medicines among the working classes can be attributed to the high cost of medical care. For the majority of British citizens, who had no reliable or affordable access to doctors, these patent medicines represented one of the few methods for addressing sickness that lay within their means. Still, after naming several specific examples of questionable patent formulas, Engels observes that most people “swallow them wholesale whether wanted or not.”⁵⁰ With the phrase “swallow them wholesale” (rendered from the German *große Quantitäten verschlucken* by Florence Kelley Wischnewetzki, translator of the 1892 edition), he introduces the connotation that gullibility is mapped onto consumption, with the act of swallowing referring both to ideological and physical acts of unearned credulity. Additionally, in using the word “wanted,” Engels’ text plays on the word’s double meanings of desire and need, suggesting the necessity for differentiating between the two.

⁴⁹ Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class*, 104.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 103-105.

Unusually for a period in which visuality became increasingly dominant,⁵¹ discernment was structured here as an act of critical listening. Those who failed as auditors became the subjects of literary derision. During the nineteenth-century, the *Dictionary of National Biography* and a series of articles in *Notes and Queries* made mention of a one-act farce by James Wilkie titled *Yalla Gaiters, Or A Rare Discovery on the Banks of the Moy* (1840) that featured Morison's Pills, a real product invented by James Morison (whose name was frequently misspelled with the addition of a second 'r').⁵² Though the play is no longer extant, a contributor to *Notes and Queries* describes the plot in detail.⁵³ Near the beginning of the play, an Irishman named Mr. Wealthy goes out to visit farms surrounding the River Moy and encounters a man who sings an eight-stanza song called "Morrison's Pills" [*sic*] lauding the famous vegetable-based patent pills. His lengthy song begins with grand claims:

Of all the wonders we have read since first the world began,
The greatest lately has appeared, and Morrison's the man.
No longer death we need to fear, or labour under ills,
For all disease now are cured by Vegetable Pills.
He says, 'They're sure to do it,
They're very sure to do it,
They're safe and sure to do it
Are the Vegetable Pills'⁵⁴

Rather than a vocal interlude in between more important events, this song turns out to be a catalyzing moment in the plot. Utterly entranced by the song, Mr. Wealthy unknowingly drops

⁵¹ See Christopher Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁵² G.G. [Gordon Goodwin], "Morison, James (1770-1840)," *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. 39, ed. Leslie Stephen (London: Macmillan, 1894), 56-57; J.M., "The Ladythorne Dramas," *Notes and Queries* (25 Aug 1866) s3-X (243): 141-142. doi: 10.1093/nq/s3-X.243.141; and J. M., "The Ladythorne Dramas," *Notes and Queries* (15 Dec. 1866) s3-X (259): 477-478 doi:10.1093/nq/s3-X.259.477-c. The *Notes and Queries* contributor states the year of the play's debut as 1840.

⁵³ J.M., "The Ladythorne Dramas," *NQ* (25 Aug 1866), 141-142.

⁵⁴ J.M., "The Ladythorne Dramas," *NQ* (15 Dec 1866), 477.

the titular pair of yellow gaiters that he had been holding, having removed them earlier to preserve them from getting dirtied during his bucolic excursion. Afterwards, he continues on his way without realizing the loss. The remainder of the plot consists of his frantic attempts to recover his beloved gaiters, culminating in a scene where he comes across a traveling showman working the crowd into a frenzy to see the “pair of halli-gators” he has specially procured from afar. Mishearing him, Mr. Wealthy angrily storms the stage, calling the showman a thief and demanding the return of his precious “yalla gaiters,” only to be set right by a friend who has more accurately heard everything that has transpired.

In addition to illustrating the pervasiveness of Morison’s Pills, James Wilkie’s play serves as a warning against the dangers of a poorly-tuned ear. While the *Dictionary of National Biography* describes the song as a “clever ballad,”⁵⁵ the lyrics are decidedly clunky. Syntax suffers in service of form, as suggested in knotty lines like “No longer death we need to fear, or labour under ills.” In a moment reminiscent of the elision between Captain Wragge and the Pill he plies, it’s unclear whether the inventor or his Vegetable Pills are the referent for being “the greatest wonder of the world.”

The incessant repetition of “sure to do it” in the chorus goes does not quite offer the satisfactions of rhyme. Instead, it hammers the thought home, repeating rather than reinventing itself. Quoting Morison directly, the last lines of the stanza emphasize the importance of verbal reiteration in patent pill advertising. In its repetitiveness and lack of variation, the lyrics lay bare the way pills—with their gesturing toward testimony and borrowed authority—fundamentally work by repeating their message until familiarity breeds a sense of truth. Beyond the audacity of declaring Morison’s Pills the newest and greatest wonder of the world, the song ends with the

⁵⁵ Goodwin, “Morison, James (1770-1840),” 57.

miraculous claims that “the blind may gain their sight, the dumb may find a tongue,/ The lame may quickly run a race, the old again be young...”⁵⁶ By laying claim to the realm of the supernatural, the ditty seems to mime the folkloric promises of a magical potion. Ostensibly, the audience of the play is meant to recognize these purported healing functions as being beyond the pale of possibility, and thus get in on the joke. And yet, Mr. Wealthy falls prey to the siren song, literally losing control of his faculties as he drops his gaiters without noticing.

His ill-fated confrontation with the alligator-displaying showman only serves as one more instance of mishearing, his own rustic accent and that of the salesman converging to produce the near-homonyms that lead him astray. Significantly, though Morison’s Pills feature prominently in James Wilkie’s play, their presence was an authorial elaboration on the original source. *Yalla Gaiters* appears to be based on an apocryphal incident related several years before the play’s performance in 1840. An 1833 newspaper piece titled “RARE DISCOVERY ON THE BANKS OF THE RIVER MOY” was printed as “a fact” in *The Dublin Penny Journal*, featuring the same “yalla gaiters”/“halli-gators” punch line but without any mention of the song about Morison’s Pills.⁵⁷ By inserting this song and presenting it as the source of Mr. Wealthy’s woes, James Wilkie turns a generic anecdote—one that the newspaper claims happened nearly a hundred years ago—into a contemporary moral tale.

Sounding True

The addition of the Morison’s Pills interlude to *Yalla Gaiters* reinforces its construction of its viewers as critical listeners in contrast to the unwitting Mr. Worthy. The joke works because the

⁵⁶ J. M., “The Ladythorne Dramas,” *NQ* (15 Dec. 1866), 478.

⁵⁷ Anonymous, “RARE DISCOVERY ON THE BANKS OF THE RIVER MOY, COUNTY OF MAYO,” *The Dublin Penny Journal* 1.31 (January 26, 1833): 242. According to the publication, it happened “not one hundred years ago.”

audience does not join him in falling under the spell. However, critics almost unanimously affirmed the real psychological allure built into the rhetorical and musical sounding of patent medicine advertisements. The infiltrative qualities of sound amplified the threat, since it allowed the *ethos* and *pathos* of Classical persuasion to shout down the deficiency of the *logos*.⁵⁸

Thus, case studies from the period also present examples of more self-aware listeners being led astray by their ears. In 1883, the orchestral composer John Knowles Paine debuted a comic male vocal quartet titled “Radway’s Ready Relief” that set fictional advertising text for a real and widely circulated patent medicine to music. In the lyrics, a man named William Sydney Myers, Esquire, a correspondent for the *London Times*, testifies to the swift cure that Radway’s Ready Relief provided for his chronic insomnia.

Mock heroic in its scope, Paine’s score sampled from many musical genres. False solemnity was signaled through “a solo bass recitative recalling the best oratorio style” and a conclusion that quoted from Beethoven’s *Egmont* overture.⁵⁹ At the same time, flourishes such as the transliteration of “Esquire” as “Esquiah” and swift oscillations between tempo markings such as *Adagio e doloroso* (slowly and sadly) and *Vivace e con fuoco* (lively, fiery) produce dramatic extremes that signal the joke. One of the early signals of the song’s comic intentions appears during the narrator’s extended self-introduction, when the final syllable of his location of residence—“Havana, Cuba”—receives prolonged and accented repetition, finally culminating in melodic runs and trills (Figure 4).

⁵⁸ Randal Marlin, “History of Propaganda,” *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion* (Peterborough; New York: Broadview Press, 2013), 35-90.

⁵⁹ John C. Schmidt, *John Knowles Paine: Vocal Chamber Music* (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, for the American Musicological Society, 1999), xii.

Spanning nearly a full page of the score, these repetitions of “ba” transform the original word into sound, into melodic and rhythmic babble. Like the *ad nauseum* repetition of “they’re sure to do it” at the end of the Morison’s Pills song in *Yalla Gaiters*, the repeated iterations of the syllable set to increasingly florid melodies seems to mock the strategies of insistence that characterize patent medicine marketing.

However, this quartet also reveals the limits of satirical intent when wedded to overly compelling form. Though Paine would refer to this composition in his later years as “a youthful jest,”⁶¹ not all listeners caught on to the mocking tone. One reviewer of a performance by the Mendelssohn Glee Club, though fairly confident that the song could only be meant as a joke, found it unconscionable that a serious composer and a serious singing group could have “given its attention to such trash.”⁶² The reviewer took issue with Paine’s elevation of a known patent medicine by referencing high orchestral styles and producing “an emotion of profound melancholy” in the musical setting.⁶³ Aldous Huxley, whose engagement with the allurements of drugs in *Brave New World* I will discuss later in the chapter, described the phenomenon more broadly but in similar terms. “To most people music is intrinsically attractive,” he writes:

Moreover, melodies tend to ingrain themselves in the listener’s mind. A tune will haunt the memory during the whole of a lifetime. Here, for example, is a quite uninteresting statement or value judgment. As it stands nobody will pay attention to it. But now set the words to a catchy and easily remembered tune. Immediately they become words of power.⁶⁴

⁶¹ John Knowles Paine, quoted in John C. Schmidt, *John Knowles Paine: Vocal Chamber Music* (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, for the American Musicological Society, 1999) xii.

⁶² The review comes from an undated and anonymous clipping found inside a copy of the score. Cited in John C. Schmidt, xiii.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Aldous Huxley, “The Arts of Selling,” *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 67.

Here, Huxley emphasizes the non-volitional receptivity of mind and memory in the face of melodies that ingrain and tunes that haunt. The reviewer of the “Radway’s Ready Relief” performance likewise responds angrily to the confusion produced by the pull of the music against what the he or she knows to be the worthlessness of the information conveyed therein. Though a word like “Cuba” might be dull from a factual perspective in William Sydney Myers’ glowing testimony, for instance, the setting of the four voices in concert produced charisma on its behalf. Such were the draws of the melodies and harmonies that the reviewer describes being able to rely only on sustained rationalization: “Since the position of the Mendelssohn Glee Club makes it impossible to believe that its programmes would be used for the purpose of advertising a patent medicine, one is *forced* to the conclusion that the words of this song are intended to be facetious” (emphasis added).⁶⁵ By distinguishing the intentions of “Radway’s Ready Relief” with its perceived effect, the anonymous reviewer identifies the aural as a force independent of, and in this case short-circuiting, the intellectual.

Social Maladies

This association of patent medicines with sonic overload crystallizes a wider cultural concern about being mentally and neurologically taxed. Paine’s perturbed reviewer and *Yalla Gaiter*’s Mr. Wealthy, with the former struggling to disentangle jest from sincerity and the latter unable to hold on to his gaiters while listening to a song, become representative of the plight of the citizen of the nineteenth century in the face of overwhelming quantities of knowledge to parse. Leah Price writes that the Victorian period was experienced as an era of “too much information and too much paper,” a period when reading material was in such overabundant, uninvited supply

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

that it became a physical as well as emotional burden.⁶⁶ Similarly, Elizabeth Carolyn Miller notes the effects of the explosion in print culture on book reviewers and readers, who could no longer keep up with everything published.⁶⁷ This content overload extended beyond the written. Noting the intersection between unwelcome crowds and unwelcome sounds, Leigh Eric Schmidt comments on “Victorian middle-class stereotypes about the loudness of new immigrants and the threatening cacophony of the cities.”⁶⁸ Similarly, John M. Picker observes the emergence during the mid-Victorian period of a belief, based on theories by Florence Nightingale and others about the negative effects of noise on the health, that the “growing urban cacophony” represented “threatening pollutants with noxious effects.”⁶⁹ Under this understanding of the body’s susceptibility to bad noises and false information, patent medicines concretized the latent threats to the embodied self even when the dangers were ephemeral, invisible, or otherwise difficult to grasp.

Thomas Carlyle, who went to great lengths to build himself a soundproof study later in life,⁷⁰ made extensive use of these intersecting symbolic vectors in *Past and Present* (1843). Significantly, “Morrison’s Pills” [*sic*] show up as a target in his depiction of contemporary times as inferior to the premodern age. In an extended section within the Proem for *Past and Present*, Carlyle writes,

It seems to be taken for granted, by these interrogative philosophers, that there is some 'thing,' or handful of 'things,' which could be done; some Act of Parliament, 'remedial measure' or the like, which could be passed, whereby the social malady were fairly fronted, conquered, put an end to; so that, with your remedial measure in your pocket, you could then go on triumphant, and be troubled no farther. ‘You

⁶⁶ Leah Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 139.

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, “Constained Criticism: Victorian Book Reviews.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association, Vancouver, Canada, 8-11 January 2015.

⁶⁸ Leigh Eric Schmidt, “Sound Christians and Religious Hearing in Enlightenment America,” *Hearing History: A Reader*, Ed. Mark Michael Smith (Athens; London: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 236.

⁶⁹ John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 66.

⁷⁰ Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, 43-44.

tell us the evil' cry such persons, as if justly aggrieved, 'and do not tell us how it is to be cured!' How it is to be cured? Brothers, I am sorry I have got no Morrison's Pill for curing the maladies of Society. It were infinitely handier if we had a Morrison's Pill, Act of Parliament, or remedial measure, which men could swallow, one good time, and then go on in their old courses, cleared from all miseries and mischiefs! Unluckily we have none such; unluckily the Heavens themselves, in their rich pharmacopoeia, contain none such.⁷¹

Addressing the widespread problems of the time, Carlyle simultaneously rejects the idea of the easy fix as well as any who suggest that one is possible. Placing Acts of Parliament and Morrison's Pills in parallel, he sets up the individual body as a metaphor for the social body, with both doomed to continual suffering. Further extending the comparison between politics and pills, he introduces the persona of the "'sham-hero'—whose name is Quack" (32). Carlyle's sham-hero, like other quack doctors populating nineteenth-century texts, is a figure defined by his profuse speech, heavy with "Falsity and Fatuity" (32).

For Carlyle, there is only one salvation from the dissonant noise of politician's longwinded falsehoods and public cries for easy cures:

The silence of here and there such a man, how eloquent in answer to such jargon! Such jargon, frightened at its own gaunt echo, will unspeakably abate; nay, for a while, may almost in a manner disappear,—the wise answering it in silence, and even the simple taking cue from them to hoot it down wherever heard....Wholly a blessed time: when jargon might abate, and here and there some genuine speech begin. (32)

Against the noisiness of these social toxins, silence in turn presents itself as the antidote. Carlyle here imagines blessed silence, one that not only provides an answer to the excessive speech it combats but actually acts upon it, making what he considers figuratively unspeakable into the literally unspoken. Here, as elsewhere in this chapter, the sounds of speech have corporeal weight and even human personality. Not only do silence and jargon enter into conversation in

⁷¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (London: J.M. Dent and Co., 1902), 30-31. Subsequent references will be made directly in the text.

Carlyle's imaginative confrontation, but the latter possesses a shadow capable of wielding influence on the body it represents.

He later switches from generalization into apostrophe. "Thou there," he writes in direct address to the reader, "the thing for thee to do is, if possible, to Cease to be a hollow sounding-shell of hearsays, egoisms, purblind dilettantisms; and become, were it on the infinitely small scale, a faithful discerning soul" (34). Here, Carlyle contrasts two modes of being, suggesting that readers reject sounding-out empty words in favor of the quieter act of discerning, and in so doing going from being shells to souls. Rather than effusing enthusiastically about the boundless possibilities of the silent soul, he keeps his expectations measured. He adds the qualifier "if possible" and points out that his proposed route would produce change on an "infinitely small scale," that of the individual person, faithfully filtering out the clamorous untruths permeating society.

Carlyle's recommended incursions against political and pharmaceutical puffery were harder to achieve in practice than theory. *Past and Present* itself talks back rather than embracing silence. Additionally, the second option he provides for those who find total silence too difficult is likewise problematic: "hooting" to drown out the sound of the offender and provide the opportunity for "some genuine speech." While Carlyle and others could rail against the infiltration of noise into every quarter of urban life, they provided less help with distinguishing between, on the one hand, words and sounds of power, and, on the other, something that should rightly be filtered out. The reception to John Knowles Paine's sendup of "Radway's Ready Relief" suggested how one form of utterance could blur into the other. Despite the repeated *ba ba* in a central section of the piece converting persuasive testimony to incomprehensible babble, the irate and aurally overwrought reviewer could not be completely sure where the

composer stood. The crusader could inadvertently become, like the quack, a contributor to the noise.

Carlyle's focus on the single person goes against the very tenets of diffusiveness under which patent medicines operated, as part of a system of broad dissemination and nearly endless replicability made possible by the new technologies of the period. At the same time, in locating the capacity for silent discernment within the self, he replicated the message of individual capability often contained with the patent pill advertisements as well. Though coming from vastly different directions, both patent medicine purveyors and their critics suggested that their prescriptions lay within the individual consumer or citizen's means.

Alterative Futures

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century consumers may have feared the potentially toxic consequences of ingesting poorly-formulated patent medicines. However, authors also suggested that the more disturbing effects of such substances extended beyond those of the individual and physical body. Writing in the 1840s, Friedrich Engels and Thomas Carlyle had both aligned mass patent medicine ingestion with widespread gullibility and a desire for easy answers. In the decades surrounding the turn of the century, a new type of speculative fiction emerged, one that refracted the discourse on legitimacy in medical practice. In these texts, writers imagined the social ramifications if pills and tonics worked only too well—altering behavior, extending life, conferring bliss. Most of these narratives diverge from earlier accounts in presenting the champions of these drugs as members of the medical establishment or ruling authorities and not self-promoting individuals grifting on the social fringe. These texts answer the longing for

human perfectibility and expose the outcome as undesirable, expunging rather than refining the differences between individuals.

In Walter Besant's *The Inner House* (1890), for instance, an immortality-producing Vital Force erases the need for social distinctions and hierarchies of all types. The work, which opens at the end of the nineteenth century, begins with a doctor introducing the Vital Force, a "potent liquid which arrests decay and prolongs life, apparently without any bound or limit," at a scientific meeting.⁷² Initially intended to release the full potential of humans that take it by freeing them from the hard limit of death, the Vital Force causes society to cease recognizing gender and social distinctions, private property laws, familial ties and generational hierarchies—structures that no longer make sense when all citizens live forever (44). This new society in Canterbury consists of communities of androgynous and drably-dressed individuals who feel no violent emotions and seek no aesthetic pleasure. The novel's main antagonist ["The Suffragan"] describes at one point his vision of the perfect world in which man can shed the distractions of labor and social intercourse, and just "eat, drink, and sleep again, while the years roll by: he will lie heedless of all: he will be heedless of the seasons, heedless of the centuries" (166). In the Suffragan's vision, eternal life's highest potential consists of endless, continual oblivion.

The turning point of *The Inner House* comes after a young girl named Christine is allowed to be born to replace a member of the community who died in an accident.⁷³ Her interest in excavating the past and reintroducing lost social practices inspires a group to rebel against the stagnant life created by the Vital Force. Dr. Linister, the Arch Physician and keeper of the secret formulation, ends up joining the dissidents after reconnecting with Mildred, the woman he had

⁷² Walter Besant, "The Inner House" in *The Holy Rose, Etc.* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1890) 160. Subsequent references will be made directly in the text.

⁷³ Death by accident is the only possible way to go in this new regime.

been courting and had abandoned to lead the new society after the scientific meeting at Canterbury. He says at his moment of recognition that things have gone wrong, “...we should have had the due succession of father and son, mother and daughter: always age and manhood and childhood; and always the world advancing by the efforts of those who have time to work for an appreciable period. Instead, we have—” (172). While text indicates a gesture here (“he waved his hand”) that accompanies the abrupt end to Dr. Linister’s words, the dash also creates a fitting visual blank, a negation of all the rightful properties of human experience that he previously described. At the beginning of this chapter, an advertisement for Hostetter’s Bitters illustrated the signifying potential of negative space, which derived power from its lack of specificity. Here, the same formal structure signals evacuation rather than possibility. The Vital Force, Besant suggests, creates a life without any. Specifically, the rebel leader Mildred observes that those living in this new society have been “reduced to the condition of sheep” (146). Despite working well, the tonic at the center of the text still reveals itself as a fallacy, making the individuals who take it more animalistic in their behavior and thought-processes.

Similarly, in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1931), the pill called soma is among an array of other products that mark the future as dehumanized. In the novel, citizens of the World State receive regular rations of the drug, which produces feelings of contentment that keep the population happily under the governing reach of the World Controllers. Unlike with Besant’s Vital Force, soma initially performs a separating function, reinforcing the stratification of society into classes of Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, and Epsilon individuals. This imposition of synthetic structure upon human life recalls the confident exposition of patent medicine advertisements, with their postures of clarity in the face of the complex ailments and symptoms experienced by potential consumers.

At the same time, in *Brave New World* the distinct structure of the government belies the erosion of other social structures, much as in *The Inner House*. In the main plot line, a character named Lenina Crowne meets and becomes fixated with a character named John the Savage, whose Shakespeare-heavy upbringing outside the boundaries of the state leads him to reject the polyamorous romantic entanglements that Lenina and others around her understand as normative. Early on in their acquaintance, before their conflicts come to a head, Lenina breaks out into the following song as she reflects on her building chemistry with John: "Hug me till you drug me, honey;/ Kiss me till I'm in a coma;/ Hug me, honey, snugly bunny;/ Love's as good as soma."⁷⁴ On a superficial level, the song shares similarities with the commonplace, "love is a drug." Both formulations compare the physiological effects of love and those derived from a drugged state, a comparison that medical research has substantiated, albeit in a limited way. However, while the aphorism makes the metaphor explicit, Lenina's song establishes a more unexpected relationship: "Love's *as good as soma*" (emphasis added). The affective experience of soma has taken over that of love as the baseline against which other feelings are measured.

As in *The Inner House*, moreover, *Brave New World* upends familial relationships, particularly all spousal and parent-child ties. Lenina Crowne works as a nurse at the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Center, where new babies are raised and inculcated *en masse* rather than conceived and brought up by parents. A major scandal occurs when The Savage addresses The Director of the Hatcheries as "my father," while a character named Linda, whose affair with the Director resulted in her departure from the World State, refers to herself The Savage's mother (180, 179). The direct reference to pregnancy and birth appears so ridiculous and regressive that it causes all three characters to become laughingstocks. As the narrator

⁷⁴ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 198. Subsequent references will be made directly in the text.

observes of Linda's *faux pas*, "To say one was a mother—that was past a joke: it was an obscenity" (182). Much like in *The Inner House*, this erosion of familial ties is linked to a shift in the experience of the individual's life cycle. Although inhabitants of the World State do experience death, their aging process is also arrested. Coming out of exile, Linda thus appears to the World State citizens as a "terrifying monster of middle-agedness," wrinkled and flabby in ways they have never encountered (178). Just as the inhabitants of the World State have lost the parental and spousal relationships that shape the course of a life, they have ceased to mark time in embodied ways.

Instead, soma functions as a form of alternative narrative, one that privileges social isolation and locks into the present moment. Physiologically, the pill directly alters one's sense of time and place. From their own perspective, those who take it enter "the warm, richly coloured, the infinitely friendly world of soma-holiday" (91). However, it appears substantially different to external observers, to whom a person under the influence appears to be in a haze, or under heavy dosages, to be in a protracted stupor. As the narrator writes, the pill "raise[s] quite an impenetrable wall between the actual universe and their [the user's] minds" (92). In an attempt to stave off criticism of soma's side effects, a character named Dr. Shaw argues at one point, "Soma may make you lose a few years in time, . . . But think of the enormous, immeasurable durations it can give you out of time. Every soma-holiday is a bit of what our ancestors used to call eternity" (184). While Dr. Shaw presents soma as temporal and geographical liberty in a pill, the text ultimately portrays the darker side of such pleasant oblivion. Toward the end of the novel, Huxley describes how the humiliated Linda chooses to spend the rest of her life

in her little room on the thirty-seventh floor of Bernard's apartment house, in bed, with the radio and television always on, and the patchouli tap just dripping, and the soma tablets within reach of her hand—there she remained; and yet wasn't there at

all, was all the time away, infinitely far away, on holiday; on holiday in some other world. (184-185)

In this scene, Huxley gives Linda's room a great amount of sensory and factual detail—the height of her room in the building, the continual sounds of the radio and television and dripping tap, the fact that the tap contains patchouli. However, he goes on to note that she is aware of none of it. Soma, while a driving force for the continued functioning of society, also becomes a deeply enervating influence that eventually causes several characters to lose their lives.

Though published over forty years apart, *The Inner House* and *Brave New World* similarly put a twist on the predominant nonfictional responses to pills and tonics, making them effective formulations that fundamentally transform those who consume them. Unlike Hostetter's Bitters, they reach their full potential as alteratives, but in doing so they attenuate both selves and societies. This chapter opened with an examination on the emphasis in texts on individual responsibility to figure out what was good and bad, to cut through the mountains of nonsense and misinformation that assaulted the senses on a regular basis, as represented most quintessentially by the visual and aural advertising apparatus—the ambient and subjunctive spaces—surrounding patent medicines. In deciding what to ingest, then, the individual consumer was staking a position and not just attempting a remedy. The culture surrounding such pills and tonics thus intersected with a culture of anxiety about unwanted sounds, unwanted ideas, and unwanted additives permeating and affecting the body.

The second half of the chapter discussed the literary response to the challenges of such navigation, given the lack of clear distinction between the valid and fake, the orthodox and the unorthodox. What if, these texts imagined, there *were* universal pills and elixirs of life—and they were in the hands of power rather than those of the marginalized? In such a situation, extreme potency rather than impotency is the fear, not because of the direct physiological effects of the

drugs but as a result of their wider ramifications in flattening social, biological, locational, and even temporal differences. Heather Urbanski has written of speculative fiction that “it shows us our nightmares and therefore contributes to our efforts to avoid them.”⁷⁵ In these two texts, however, Besant and Huxley articulate the short-sightedness of our dreams.

Strangely, then, the many threads of this chapter end up leading to the similar places. The messy marketplace of pills and tonics in the long nineteenth century flourished as a result of the access and agency it promised to the individual, who was empowered to buck the rigid hierarchies of knowledge production and resource distribution represented by the medical establishment. At the same time, cultural critics virulently rejected these patent remedies in favor of a vision of the discerning self as a strategic non-consumer, defined by rejection rather than intake. Finally, in the speculative fictions examined above, writers depicted countercultural individuals who expose the breakdown of society’s operative distinctions between categories such as gender, generation, and class. In all three cases, these works promulgate an anti-establishment ideal of selfhood and behavior, though each defines authority differently. Together, they testify to patent medicines as a powerful cultural object during the long nineteenth century, as well as a potent and contested metaphor that linked understandings of body, self, society, culture, and sensory environment.

Of Codfishes and Curates

To conclude this chapter, I turn to one last fictional treatment of patent medicines from an unexpected genre, in order to illustrate the cultural saturation of patent drugs. In a series of

⁷⁵ Heather Urbanski, *Plagues, Apocalypses and Bug-Eyed Monsters: How Speculative Fiction Shows Us Our Nightmares* (Jefferson; North Carolina; London: McFarland & Co., 2007), 1.

stories written between 1927 and 1933, P.G. Wodehouse used a tonic called Mr. Mulliner's Buck-U-Uppo as a major driver in his plotlines. The patent formulation features in two stories from the 1927 collection *Meet Mr. Mulliner*—"Mulliner's Buck-U-Uppo" and "The Bishop's Move," —as well as a third story, "Gala Night," from a sequel, *Mulliner Nights* (1933). The powerful tonic that gives the first story its name circulates among the Mulliner family and their acquaintances, with individuals either unknowingly imbibing or accidentally misdosing themselves, to comic effect.

In the critical consensus, Wodehouse depicts fictional worlds defined by their "timelessness," untouched by real-world events and concerns.⁷⁶ This trait has been variously interpreted as the source of the stories' escapist pleasures and the reason for their blinkeredness as texts.⁷⁷ The Mulliner stories each begin with frame narratives set in a pub called The Angler's Rest, with Mr. Mulliner telling yet another story of his brother Wilfred's tonic as it circulates informally among friends and family who hear of its powers. The first story, "Mulliner's Buck-U-Uppo," relates the adventures of a curate named Augustine Mulliner—the nephew of the Mr. Mulliner telling the tale—who "had flaxen hair, weak blue eyes, and the general demeanour of a saintly but timid codfish."⁷⁸ He has fallen in love with the daughter of the Reverend Stanley Brandon, "a huge and sinewy man of violent temper" (55). Though Augustine hopes to impress the man, the Reverend is disgusted with the timidity of his prospective son-in-law.

Everything changes when Augustine receives a parcel from his aunt containing a bottle of her husband's new invention, Mr. Mulliner's Buck-U-Uppo, and immediately takes a dose. He

⁷⁶ David A. Jasen, *P.G. Wodehouse: A Portrait of a Master* (New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 2002), xiii.

⁷⁷ Edward L. Galligan takes a middle ground of sorts when he states that "The very limitations of his narrative method enable Wodehouse to achieve grander results." See Galligan, "P. G. Wodehouse Master of Farce," *The Sewanee Review* 93.4 (1985): 610.

⁷⁸ P.G. Wodehouse, "Mr. Mulliner's Buck-U-Uppo," *Mulliner Omnibus* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1935), 54. Subsequent references will be made in the text.

subsequently saves a Bishop (who turns out to be the Reverend's good friend) from a vicious dog, prevents the two older men from coming to blows over ceremonial vestments, and finally earns the respect of his would-be father-in-law, only to discover upon returning home that his uncle Wilfred has written to warn him that his aunt sent along the stronger version of the tonic, originally invented to facilitate the sport of tiger-hunting while riding elephants by helping "the most timid elephant to trumpet loudly and charge the fiercest tiger without a qualm" (75). Moreover, the correct daily dosage for a large elephant is not the tablespoonful Augustine has been taking, but only a teaspoonful. As the punch line of the story, Augustine responds by asking for three more cases of the same formulation. In the next two tales, having moved up in the world thanks to his daily doses, Augustine dispenses the tonic to those around him in need, enabling young lovers to wed, stuffed shirts to let loose, and the steely eye of the law to be redirected when pranks get pulled and punches thrown.

On the surface, these cheerful stories seem to belie the grim trajectories set out in the science fictions analyzed above. Set in countryside cottages and all boys' schools, they project an image of England as reliable and unchanging. The generic and constant nature of the framing narrative that takes place in the pub only highlights the constancy of the world Wodehouse depicts. Though each story hinges on warnings about the need to exercise caution in light of the tonic's extreme potency, its actual effects mainly bolster the status quo, fostering harmonious relationships as surely as a nightly draught at the Angler's Rest. The foreshadowed calamities of aberrant behavior invariably de-escalate into harmless comedy, supporting upward mobility through promotions and nuptials without disrupting the entrenched system of power.

As in the stark visions of the future depicted in *The Inner House* and *Brave New World*, however, Mr. Mulliner's Buck-U-Uppo's acts like the Vital Force and soma in collapsing

differences rather than enhancing individuality. Warnings aside, the formulation for elephants works just as nicely for humans. Moreover, the Mulliner tales depict a world in which those in positions of authority—bishops, curates, vicars, headmasters, Lords—are compelled by the tonic to act contrary to their stations, turning hand-springs, climbing up water pipes, and pretending that they are cats. It is an equalizing vision, one that brings people together socially by erasing the pecking orders and behavioral strictures that keep them apart.

While certainly more colorful and open to emotional excess than the drab, sheep-like existence of the new Canterburians of *The Inner House* or the highly controlled World State inhabitants in *Brave New World*, life for those in Walsingford-below-Chiveney-on-Thames and the other settings of the Mulliner stories still moves toward a state of hierarchical leveling. Elephants behave like tigers, stodgy adults like party-loving youngsters, shy young men like their aggressive superiors. Taking Mulliner's Buck-U-Uppo for the first time, the preternaturally weak Augustine Mulliner suddenly feels "most amazingly fit" (60). Darwinian theories of survival and evolution fall to the wayside when everyone has access to advantage in a bottle. In creating a self-contained universe that shifts but never changes, P.G. Wodehouse establishes the only conditions under which the subjunctive promises of patent medicines can come to be.

PART II

Producers and Production

CHAPTER THREE

Weariness and Watercress: Temporalities of Gender, Temporalities of Class

“The use and application of power frequently enter into changes in a society’s food consumption habits. Where this power originates; how it is applied and to what ends; and in what manner people undertake to deal with it, are all part of what happens when food habits change.”

—Sidney Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom*¹

Going to Market

“The first coster-cry heard of a morning in the London streets,” wrote the Victorian journalist Henry Mayhew, “is that of ‘Fresh wo-orter-creases.’”² Mayhew’s sentence here opens a section on “Green Stuff” in his monumental *London Labour and the London Poor*, serialized through the 1840s before being printed in three volumes in 1851. After a general overview of the working conditions and average pay of these street sellers, the section culminates in an interview with an eight-year-old female watercress seller.

Moving from the object-oriented perspectives of the first two chapters to a structurally-focused approach that will characterize the second half of the dissertation, this chapter continues to investigate the implications of consumption from a communal standpoint. Again, I take a familiar feature of the nineteenth-century social landscape as my starting point, but this time instead of leading into the troubled boundary between human and animal, the buying and selling of watercress will raise questions about how changes in Britain’s domestic foodways impacted cultural delineations of gender and class.

¹ Sidney Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 17-18.

² Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: a cyclopaedia of the condition and earnings of those that will work, those that cannot work, and those that will not work* (London: [G. Woodfall and Son], 1851), Vol. 1, 145.

Though the watercress girl has receded behind chimney sweeps and matchstick girls in our vision of the Victorian world, she was a recurrent subject in nineteenth-century poems, prose, music, and art. Mayhew's account provides one of the most sustained nineteenth-century looks at the figure, and it has been influential both in his time and ours. A few depictions precede his, including an eighteenth-century work by Johan Zoffany that will be discussed in greater detail. However, many more representations cluster in the second half of the nineteenth-century, and these multimodal depictions of watercress sellers largely follow in the footsteps of Mayhew's little watercress girl. In more recent times, the historian Carolyn Steedman has written several books and articles featuring the watercress seller from Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, describing her frequent returns to the figure as the product of a "stickily sentimental and 20-year obsession."³ Other scholars, in turn, have responded to Mayhew and to her in their work.⁴

This chapter explores the prominence of watercress girls in nineteenth-century cultural production, both as a conspicuous feature of working class London and as the result of cultural amplification. That is to say, the efflorescence of watercress girls in the nineteenth-century imaginary can be attributed to demonstrable historical changes, including newly developed technologies that enabled the growth of a metropolitan trade in watercress, but these girls also received a disproportionate amount of attention compared to others engaged in street trades. I am

³ Carolyn Steedman, "Intimacy in Research: Accounting for it," *History of the Human Sciences* 21.4 (2008): 21.

⁴ For responses to Steedman, see Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 68-69; Claudia Nelson, *Precocious Children and Childish Adults: Age Inversion in Victorian Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012). Other discussions of the watercress girl appear in Daniel Williams, "The Clouds and the Poor: Ruskin, Mayhew, and Ecology" *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 38.5 (2016): 319-31; Hugh Cunningham, "Saving the Children," *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (Harlow; New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), 137-170.

interested in the structures of this attention as well as in the watercress girls themselves.

The line from *London Labour and the London Poor* with which chapter began illuminates some of these relational dynamics. Grammatically, the most prominent feature of the sentence is its proleptic structure. *The first coster-cry heard of a morning in the London streets is that of 'Fresh wo-orter-creases*. We initially encounter the figure only through Mayhew's sensory experience of hearing the hawker's cry. Implicit in the quotation and the dramatically transliterated pronunciation of "wo-orter-creases" is a sense of clear social distance between those who speak like the writer and those who speak like the subject.⁵ This distance is authorially mediated, a fact further highlighted by the phenomenological reversal of stating the cry as heard before the cry itself is sounded in the text. This sentence is about the watercress seller, but it is also about a middle-class journalist encountering her. Additionally, the watercress seller herself is simultaneously placed within and foregrounded against the larger category of costermongers to which she belongs. Her voice is one of many, but it comes first.

At this moment in Mayhew's narrative, the cry of the watercress seller is still disembodied and genderless, a singular cry standing in for a plurality of instances. The scholar Carolyn Steedman writes that after two decades spent attempting to identify the specific individual featured in Mayhew's interview, her fixation abruptly loosens its hold when she discovers that the girl is likely a composite figure based on several interviews rather than a specific, locatable person.⁶ In this chapter, it is precisely this conflation that interests me. The friction between the individual and the group, the exceptional and the representative, is a defining feature in depictions of the watercress girls. They are almost always named—Susan,

⁵ For an analysis of Mayhew's positioning of self and subject through speech, see Daniel Hack, *The Material Interests of the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2005), 101-103.

⁶ Carolyn Steedman, "Intimacy in Research," 21.

Phoebe, Nelly, Rose, Jenny, Dot—and described in detail. At the same time, the line between the particular and the universal components of their narratives are frequently blurred when their speeches and actions get filtered, as they invariably do, through another person’s eyes and ears.

Though it predates the period that I focus on in this chapter, a painting of the watercress girl by the neoclassical painter Johan Zoffany illustrates many of the ambivalences of later representations (Figure 5).⁷ After first being displayed at the Royal Academy in 1780, Zoffany’s painting has been owned privately ever since the artist gifted it to a friend, and it is more well-known through a mezzotint version by John Raphael Smith, which still exists in several copies.

This watercress girl, like almost all those who follow her, stands alone. On one side, the soft folds of her cloak have been pushed back on one side to make room for the basket of cresses hanging on her bare arm. Though she looks directly at the viewer, the top of her face is thrown into shadow by the bonnet that she wears, bringing her mouth into relief. Unusually for this type of painting, her lips are parted, perhaps in the act of calling out for prospective buyers. The soft light that shines on her casts a shadow on what looks like a wall behind her, but the texture of the background remains indeterminate.

The art historian Martin Postle has written of this piece as a combination of two influences with different ways of seeing the world. On the one hand, the painting is in the genre of a fancy picture, which usually featured romanticized images of “serving maids, street vendors, old beggars and ragged urchins”.⁸ On the other, the fancy picture craze originally grew out of

⁷ Though born in Germany, Zoffany (born in 1733) traveled widely during his early years before settling in London in 1760 and spending most of his time there until his death in 1810. He did take a few major trips during those fifty years, such as a journey to India in the 1780s. See Ian Chilvers, "Zoffany, Johann," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists*, Oxford University Press, DOI: 10.1093/acref/9780191782763.001.0001.

⁸ Martin Postle, “John Raphael Smith after Johann Zoffany, *The Watercress Girl*,” in *Johan Zoffany RA: Society Observed*, ed. Postle (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 228.



Figure 5: Johan Zoffany, “The Watercress Girl” (1780). Oil on Canvas. Private Collection. Credit: Bonhams / Bridgeman Images.

“cries of London,” a type of book offering a textual and visual assemblage of the types of people that a reader might encounter in the city. Thus, the painting’s lineage comes from the intersection of one genre that admits to romanticization in its very title and another that purports to life-likeness in its representations.

These tensions are reinforced by the image’s anomalies. The girl has crescents of dirt under each fingernail, and she wears plain clothing in multiple layers, as one would expect for someone working long hours in inclement weather. Closer inspection, however, suggests that the girl may not be as impoverished as one might expect. She wears an immaculate red cloak with delicate edging details. In fact, it is a cardinal, “the most desirable cloak for women in England and Wales at working class levels.”⁹ Moreover, the clothing underneath also appears to be of high quality, well-fitted, and with little wear. “Poor and working-class children did not generally have clothes that were bought or made for them,” Sally Mitchell writes: “Their garments were hand-me-downs or secondhand; they might be cut down from adult cast-offs.”¹⁰ In essence, the girl wears the right type of clothing for her station, but it all looks a little bit too nice.

These incongruities make more sense in light of the uncertainty about her identity. Indeed, the main consensus is that she was probably not a watercress seller at all. Though the subject was unidentified when Zoffany’s painting was first displayed at the Royal Academy, the British Museum’s copy of J.R. Smith’s engraving has a handwritten inscription identifying her as “Jane Wallis.”¹¹ Scholars have alternately proposed that she could have been a relative of Albany

⁹ Diana de Marly, *Working Class Dress: A History of Occupational Clothing* (Holmes and Meier: New York, 1986) 84. The cardinal was “a winter wear hooded cloak usually made of scarlet cloth or duffel; other materials and colours were occasionally used.” See C. Willett Cunnington and Phillis Cunnington, *Handbook of English Costume in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Faber, 1972), 339.

¹⁰ Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England* (Westwood, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996) 137.

¹¹ Martin Postle, “The Watercress Girl,” *Angels and Urchins: The Fancy Picture in 18th Century British Art* (London: The Djanogly Art Gallery in Association with Lund Humphries Publishers, 1998), 80.

Wallis, David Garrick's lawyer, or the actress Tryphosa Jane Wallis in her early years, before she gained fame in London.¹² The likelihood that this painting depicts not a watercress seller but a girl dressed up as one further contributes to the distorted history of this image, one that emphasizes its viewership over its subject matter and its symbolic function over its documentary usefulness.

Consequently, even though this watercress girl looks straight at us, we have very little access to who she is or what she represents. As observed earlier, the rich decorative detail present in the girl's clothing belies the absence of revealing information about her setting and background. Though her shadow gives the backdrop a sense of material reality, it seems just as possible that she is captured in a studio rather than on the city streets. She stands before us as a fleshed-out figure, yet outside of her native time and place. The textual and visual representations of the watercress seller that proliferate after the 1850s share the same mix of specificity and archetypal universality, despite coming at least seven decades after this early representation by Zoffany.

I shall argue that the way these watercress girls come in and out of focus as individuals reflects an important feature of both fictional and non-fictional accounts of encounters with these girls by nineteenth-century social observers: the manifold and occasionally incompatible measures of lived time that their lives and bodies represent. In works such as Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), Thomas Miller's "The Water-Cress Seller" (1850), and Mary Sewell's "Our Father's Care" (1864), writers articulated the ways in which the sellers inhabited alternate temporalities at odds with the regular rhythms of middle-class existence, rhythms that technologies such as the railway had standardized and stabilized. The prematurely

¹² Postle, *Johan Zoffany RA: Society Observed*, 228.

wized watercress girl thus comes to represent a classed and gendered experience of time that echoes the frailty of the watercress plant that she sells, revealing an understanding of poverty not as a cycle but as a simultaneous compression and overreaching of time.

Additionally, the asynchronicity of the watercress girl made her particularly portable as a representative figure: in being depicted as outside of regular measures of time, she became available as a decontextualized and universalized subject of philanthropical efforts. Thus, the end of the chapter turns to John Groom's *Watercress and Flower Girls' Christian Mission*, reading the their work as an effort to reconcile different temporalities, both between the watercress sellers and their benefactors as well as between the temporal and eternal worlds subtending nineteenth-century religious understandings of charity. By repeatedly using chronology-resistant illustrative forms such as the anecdote and woodblock print in service of their practical and spiritual ends, John Groom's *Christian Mission* exemplified the way nineteenth-century depictions of the watercress girl illuminate the stakes of narrating others' lives, even and especially in advocacy.

Green Stuff, Good Stuff

The story of the watercress girl happens within the context of the story of watercress, which was a relatively new addition to the diet for Victorian city-dwellers. Wild watercress had been eaten for centuries, foraged from where it grew naturally "in wet ditches and slow running streams."¹³ However, it was not commercially grown or widely available until the nineteenth century. Large-scale cultivation of watercress first began in central Germany in the 1750, with England and

¹³ John Claudius Loudon, *An Encyclopaedia of Gardening: Comprising the Theory and Practice of Horticulture, Floriculture, Arboriculture, and Landscape-gardening, Including All the Latest Improvements; a General History of Gardening in All Countries; and a Statistical View of Its Present State, with Suggestions for Its Future Progress, in the British Isles* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1829), 662.

France gradually following suit in the first two decades of the 1800s, mainly to serve London and Paris.¹⁴ These developments aligned with technological improvements that allowed these markets to thrive.

During the nineteenth century, the introduction of new shipping and transportation methods transformed the lives and diets of those living in England as well as abroad. With the development of transnational and transcontinental networks, previously inaccessible places and objects entered the realm of everyday potentiality, fostering the illusion of vast spaces rendered small. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch has shown, the incremental moves toward standardized time that began with individual railways in the 1840s and culminated with the national adoption of Greenwich Mean Time in 1880 subtended this sense of the nation as unified by shared time, space, and goods.¹⁵

Among these newly widespread products were foodstuffs once limited by localized production or inability to survive long journeys. As the opening chapter described, screw steamers allowed mid-century food importers to bring tens of thousands of lobsters at a time to Southampton, where they were kept in massive ponds before being shipped over land to London and other towns. Alongside these live lobsters, rail cars full of chilled meats, cheese, vegetables, and other goods similarly criss-crossed the nation, making their way to new places and new customers.

An aquatic plant with small tender leaves, watercress was one of the beneficiaries of this improved infrastructure. Growing the plant required access to open spaces close to sources of clean water for the plant beds, which was only possible away from the metropolis. Moreover, the

¹⁴ Derek B. Munro and Ernest Small, *Vegetables of Canada*, (Ottawa: NRC Research Press, 1997), 286.

¹⁵ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 43-44.

matured plant wilts quickly once picked, unlike hardier produce such as potatoes or cabbages. “In selecting a locality for the formation of beds,” the naturalist J.C. Newsham advised would-be cress farmers, “it is necessarily to consider carefully the distance from a rail-way station and the facilities offered for quick transit at moderate rates.”¹⁶ Speed was not the only consideration. The watercress bunches had to be packed with careful attention to environmental conditions. While a two-bushel hamper was “capable of holding from 30-36 dozen bunches in cold weather,” this was reduced to “about 24 dozen when the weather is warm,” though spoilage could be prevented by “hollow-packing” the cresses and placing a block of ice in the center of the basket to keep the produce cool and promote circulation.¹⁷ These limitations meant that watercress was rarely found in cities until shipping and transportation systems made it possible to keep the picked produce chilled while getting it swiftly and reliably to its destination.

The so-called Watercress Line—which began operations in 1865 under the auspices of the Alton, Alresford, and Winchester Railway Company—was one of the main avenues of transport. “Watercress did not travel well,” Matt Allen writes, “and so the railway enabled distant London markets to be reached, with crops taken daily by horse and cart to Alresford Station.”¹⁸ Beyond the link between Hampshire and London provided by the Watercress Line, references to watercress cultivation and shipment from other railway lines show that distribution took place on a much greater scale. Stopping in St. Albans during a journey on the Midland Railway in 1876, for instance, Frederick S. Williams learned from a station master that the city sent “perhaps two tons or more” of watercress to London and Manchester on a nightly basis when the plant was in

¹⁶ J.C. Newsham, “The Cultivation of Watercress,” *Journal of the Ministry of Agriculture*, 15 (Feb 1909): 826.

¹⁷ Newsham, “The Cultivation of Watercress,” 831.

¹⁸ Matt Allen, *The Mid Hants Railway: The Watercress Line* (Wellington : Halsgrove, 2007), 3.

season, “packed in hampers containing half a hundredweight each” [i.e., in 56-pound loads].¹⁹ Traveling 25 miles to London and 175 miles to Manchester, these giant hampers of watercress had to reach the metropolis in time for the pre-dawn opening of the daily markets at Farringdon Market in Islington, where nearly 90 percent of the daily wholesale transactions took place; as well as Covent Garden in Westminster; Borough Market in Southwark, Spitalfields Market in East London, and Portman Market in Marylebone.²⁰

The documents used in British railway stations also speak to the scale of watercress shipping. In 1889, the Cleveland-based *Railway Agent and Station Agent* magazine published an article by overseas correspondent E.M. Needham on “Train Workings upon an English Railway” for the benefit of its American readers. In it, Needham reproduces a “Miscellaneous Way Bill” used to track various types of food being transported in large cargo loads (Figure 6):²¹

This WAY-BILL must be used for Fish, Game, Dead Rabbits, Poultry (Live or Dead), Pigeons, Meat, Tripe Butter, Cheese, Vegetables, Watercress, Eggs, Fruit and Ice, in quantities of two cwt and upwards, also for Milk, etc.

A-I MISCELLANEOUS WAY BILL. *Midland Railway.* Guard's Signature.

From.....to.....

Route via.....

Departure.....o'clock Train.....day of.....188

Description. No. Gals.	Consignee.	Destination.	Weight. Cwt qr. lbs.	Rate.	Paid on. s. d.	To Pay. £ s. d.	Paid. £ s. d.	Thro.	Under Charg'd	Over Ch'gd	Sender.

Figure 6: Way Bill for the Midland Railway, in E.M. Needham, “Train Workings upon an English Railway” (1889)²²

¹⁹ Frederick S. Williams, *The Midland Railway: Its Rise and Progress. A Narrative of Modern Enterprise* (London: Strahan & Co., 1876) 364.

²⁰ Mayhew, 152.

²¹ E.M. Needham, “Train Workings upon an English Railway,” *The Railway Agent and Station Agent: A Monthly Magazine Devoted to the Interests of Ticket and Freight Agents and the Traffic Departments of the Railway Service*, Vols. 1-2 (Cleveland, Ohio, 1889), 119.

²² “Miscellaneous Way-Bill,” in Needham, “Train Workings upon an English Railway,” 119.

Along the top of the document, the text specifies that

This WAY-BILL must be used for Fish, Game, Dead Rabbits, Poultry (Live or Dead), Pigeons, Meat, Tripe Butter [*sic*], Cheese, Vegetables, Watercress, Eggs, Fruit and ice, in quantities of two cwt and upwards, and also for Milk, etc.²³

The irregular categories on this way bill suggest disproportionate representation, certain types of cargo being shipped in quantities that require additional levels of descriptive precision (e.g., “Dead Rabbits, Poultry (Dead or Live)”). Notably, watercress is the only produce item on the form that receives special mention in the list, all others presumably getting lumped under the umbrella categories of “Vegetables” and “Fruit.”²⁴ The unit measure “cwt” used on the form refers to a hundredweight, equal to 112 pounds in the imperial measurement system, so the minimum weight for cargo shipped using this way bill would be 224 pounds. When the station master in St. Albans told Frederick S. Williams in 1876 that his city shipped two tons or more a night, then, he was talking about loads over ten times the minimum size. In 1905, official documents suggested that Londoners consumed approximately 75 percent of the output of farms within a 50 miles radius, estimated conservatively at 1,500 tons of watercress a year.²⁵ Though watercress comprised only one component within a much wider infrastructure of food production and consumption, it held a distinct place within the larger system.

These city-bound shipments of watercresses helped feed a high demand that cut across

²³ Needham, “Train Workings upon an English Railway,” 119.

²⁴ In fact, the railroads may have even spurred watercress production rather than merely meeting latent demand for it. In an 1868 piece, a correspondent for *The Railway News* commented favorably on the German practice of dealing with “the gravel pits and other unsightly holes from which the soil has been dug out for various railway purposes” by leasing the land to nearby inhabitants for planting willow trees, farming fish, and cultivating watercress, and recommended that the English adopt similar practices. See Anonymous “Local Correspondent”, “Railways in Germany,” *The Railway News and Joint-Stock Journal*, Vol. 10, 31 Oct 1868 (London: Published at the Office of the “Railway News,” 1868), 456.

²⁵ Shirley F. Murphy, “Watercress: Report by the Medical Officer, to which are appended reports by Dr. Frank Clowes, the Council Chemist, and by Dr. AC. Houston, on Watercress and Watercress Beds in the neighborhood of London,” *Annual Report* (London: London County Public Health Committee, 7 February 1905), Appendix II, n.p.

class lines. Once it was readily available in London, watercress quickly became a “cheap staple in the working class diet, where it took place alongside other inexpensive produce such as onions, carrots, turnips, and leeks.²⁶ A halfpenny would buy four bunches, affordable even for all but the poorest of the poor, and a long growing season that lasted from April through February meant that watercresses were available except for a couple months in the winter.²⁷

In addition to the attractive price point, proponents frequently highlighted the sanguine mix of good flavor and dense nutrition that the leaves provided. “It is a popular favorite in spring in most places;” claimed an 1829 gardening encyclopedia, “and is eaten fasting, or with bread and butter, by those who have faith in its antiscorbutic virtues. The juice is decocted with that of scurvy-grass and Seville oranges, and forms the popular remedy called spring juices.”²⁸ Another writer declared,

Under cultivation it cannot be equaled as a salad, and, apart from its appetizing and refreshing flavour, it possesses important medicinal and health-giving properties, which deserve to be better-known and appreciated among all classes of society. The plant contains Sulphur in various forms, and is rich in mineral matter. Like mustard, it contains an aromatic oil to which it owes its pungent taste, and to some extent its medicinal value.²⁹

²⁶ Paul Clayton and Judith Rowbotham, “How the Mid-Victorians Worked, Ate and Died,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 6.3 (2009): 1235–1253. PMC. doi: 10.3390/ijerph6031235. 16 May 2017.

²⁷ Clayton and Rowbotham, “How the Mid-Victorians Worked, Ate and Died.” Technically, watercress came in two types, one with brown leaves (“winter cress”) and another with green (“summer cress”), with the brown leaves being more popular; however, the watercress types are rarely specified during the period except in horticultural texts.

²⁸ Loudon, *An Encyclopaedia of Gardening*, 662. Though watercress rarely appears in a juicing recipe any more, modern-day sources are no less enthusiastic about the plant’s nutritional value. In the *Encyclopedia of Herbal Medicine*, for instance, Andrew Chevallier writes,

Watercress contains isothiocyanates and is rich in vitamins A, B1, B2, C, and E, and minerals (especially iodine, iron, and phosphorous). Allyl isothiocyanate has broad-spectrum antibiotic activity. Research in the 1960s suggested that watercress might have antitumor activity. [...] Its high mineral and vitamin C content makes it particularly suited for chronic ill health and convalescence. It is thought to stimulate appetite, ease indigestion, and counter mucus.

See Andrew Chevallier, “Nasturtium officinale (Cruciferae), Watercress,” *Encyclopedia of Herbal Medicine* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 239.

²⁹ Newsham, “The Cultivation of Watercress,” 827.

For those less concerned about health, watercress lent itself to less spartan preparations as well. Isabella Beeton recommended it as a standard garnish for roast fowls or sweetbreads and as one of the ingredients that “should always form part of a cheese course.”³⁰ Juiced, dressed, sandwiched between bread, or eaten plain, watercress found favor with nineteenth-century consumers as a vegetable for all budgets and tastes.

Showing the Work

While the new accessibility of the watercress in the nineteenth century exemplifies the way railroads enabled social and economic connections to be forged between distant towns and cities, this picture of interconnectedness excludes the lived experience of the working poor whose livelihoods were contingent on the railways and their cargo. After all, the substantial trade in watercress required an equally considerable labor force to support it.

The work began with the plants themselves, far away from the metropolis. According to the naturalist J.C. Newsham, three men were needed to tend to each acre of watercress beds during the cutting season, with additional women employed to wash and tie the watercress bunches after harvest.³¹ In the city, watercress sellers comprised individuals of all ages and genders. “[E]veryone almost—especially the Irish—is selling them,” frets the watercress girl in Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*.³² An 1875 issue of *The Argosy* claimed that during the spring season, “the number of cress sellers in London alone exceeds *one thousand*”

³⁰ Isabella Mary Beeton, *The book of household management; comprising information for the mistress ... Also, sanitary, medical, & legal memoranda; with a history of the origin, properties, and uses of all things connected with home life and comfort* (London: S.O. Beeton, 1861) 358, 472, 474, 478, 498, 531, 817.

³¹ Newsham, “The Cultivation of Watercress,” 830.

³² Mayhew, *London Labour And the London Poor*, 151.

(emphasis original).³³ According to Mayhew, these armies of roaming street sellers sold approximately 7 of the 15 million bunches of watercresses that were shipped to London a year by midcentury.³⁴

However, this labor is disproportionately represented in the cultural production of the period. There are almost no extant images of professional watercress cultivation operations. As I have suggested earlier, representations of people engaged in the watercress trade primarily show images of solitary young girls in a bleak urban environment. The discrepancy is even more pronounced when focusing on fictional work. A brief overview of exceptions that prove the rule will help to frame the cultural history of the watercress girl by drawing attention to the erasures and selective attention that produced the specificity of the archetype.

While watercress cultivation happened on a large scale far away from the city centers, depictions of these highly coordinated operations appear only occasionally in textual accounts, and even more rarely in visual images. Instead, depictions of watercress harvesters in rural scenes tend to be of people gathering wild cress from the riverside, such as in these two images (Figures 7 and 8):

³³ Ellen Barlee, "Our London Water-cress Sellers," *The Argosy*, Vol. 20 (London: R. Bentley and Son, 1875), 106.

³⁴ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, Vol. 1, 152.



Figure 7: Joseph Mallord William Turner, “The Watercress Gatherers” (1819). Etching and mezzotint on paper, 188 x 265 mm. Credit: Tate Britain.



Figure 8: Detail from James Ward, “The Watercress Girl” (1830). Watercolor on paper, 16.25” x 12.25”. Credit: Victoria and Albert Museum.

Though these two images differ greatly in composition, they both emphasize the full scene rather than the individuals who are at work.

In J.M.W. Turner's mezzotint, part of a 71-print project titled *Liber Studiorum* (1807-1819), the watercress gatherers blend into the landscape. Though beams of light pierce the clouds, it does not illuminate their shadowed faces. Crucially, Turner was most famous as a painter of light-dappled landscapes rather than of human figures. Although the title of "The Watercress Gatherers" alludes to the people within the scene, they are depersonalized elements of the landscape, and the image is more striking for its depiction of the dramatic sky than of the dimly-lit figures in the foreground. In fact, only one of the six figures seems actively engaged in watercress gathering, with three other adults tending to children or gear.

Similarly, James Ward's watercolor painting, dated just over a decade after Turner's, depicts a girl sitting by a stream whose full basket serves as the main evidence for the title. As she gazes at a mangy dog lapping at the water, she seems more remarkable for what she is thinking than what she does. Just as in Turner's mezzotint, Ward has emphasized the picturesque over the professional. John Ruskin may have praised Turner's piece as "a resolute portraiture of whatever is commonplace and matter-of-fact in life,"³⁵ but the way of life that Turner's work and Ward's portrayed was by that time already out of line with how the majority of watercress was being grown, picked, and sold.

In contrast to these pastoral depictions, representations of watercress sellers in the city tend to offer a grittier portrayal of labor, though they similarly focus on scattered individuals doing their best for themselves. Amidst the large-scale infrastructural system that brings watercress to the masses, these sellers are the decentralized extremities. Male sellers do appear

³⁵ John Ruskin, *Notes by John Ruskin On His Drawings by J.M.W. Turner, R.A.: Exhibited At the Fine Art Society's Galleries, 1878 & 1900* (London: The Fine Art Society, 1900), 33.

among these depictions. For instance, T.L Busby's *Costume of the Lower Orders of London* (1820) features an unnamed man to represent participants engaged in the "sorry trade" of selling watercress (Figure 9):



Figure 9: Artist Unknown, Printed Illustration of a Watercress Seller from T.L. Busby's *Costumes of the Lower Orders of London* (1820). Credit: New York Public Library.³⁶

³⁶ Thomas Lord Busby, "Water cresses," *Costume of the lower orders of London* (London: Baldwin and Co., 1820). The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Art & Architecture Collection, The New York Public Library. *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*.

As the man's patched and ragged clothing already conveys, the accompanying text describes the long hours and pitiful pay that the work entails. Similarly, the 1866 novel *Ernest Graham: A Doctor's Story* assumes a male seller—at least in the abstract—when the title character urges charity by saying,

If you pass a rubbish-gatherer, or a water-cress or groundsel-seller, you may give him a stray sixpence, and confer a blessing: they are the poorest of the poor, and try to earn an honest living; they won't beg of you, but will be grateful for assistance.³⁷

This depiction of the watercress seller as desperately poor but resolutely honest was the norm for most Victorian representations—of men, women, and boys, as well as their young female counterparts who will be discussed in more detail. One notable exception is of a man who appears in an 1844 police blotter and who provides one of the most detailed descriptions we have of an actual watercress seller. Twenty-three-year-old William Singleton, according to the description, stood at “5 feet 7 inches high, [possesses a] thin, dark complexion and hair, no whiskers, long thin face, awkward gait, and has an impediment in his speech; dressed in a blue jacket and trousers, and blue cap; is a costermonger, and sells water-cresses”; he appears in the blotter after receiving felony charges “Violating the Person of Sarah Harrison, a girl 8 years of age.”³⁸ As suggested by the side-by-side examples of the felonious William Singleton and the abstractly virtuous watercress seller alluded to in *Ernest Graham: A Doctor's Story*, the distance can be great between widespread opinions about a group of people and the actual lives of the individuals within it. The horrific example of the real-life Singleton brings into relief the flattened quality of many of the other depictions of watercress sellers as paragons of absolute virtue.

³⁷ Anon (Graham Ernest?), *Ernest Graham: A Doctor's Story* (London: William Tweedie, 1866), 318.

³⁸ "Felonies." *Police Gazette; or, Hue and Cry*, 24 June 1844: 3278. *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*. Web. 7 Dec. 2016.

This tendency toward romanticizing and typification explains, in part, the prominence of the watercress *girl* as the focus of the greatest amount of attention. Though the physical conditions of watercress selling in the city would have been similar for everyone, the plight of the young girls engaged in the trade appeared particularly heartrending. More so than in the case of boys, men, or older women, they were seen as victims of circumstance. Thus, most of the fictional and non-fictional narratives about watercress sellers in this period—and certainly all of the most prominent ones—feature girls. Occasionally, this happens as a surprise development in the narrative. For instance, in Thomas Archer’s story, “Some little ones of the street,” the narrator encounters a “gruff boy” named Bob calling out for watercress customers, only to discover that the boy yells out “war-ter-cree-ses!” up and down the street not only for himself but for his sister as well, as the little girl’s voice is too weak to get her any customers.³⁹ While Betsy and Bob serve as dual protagonists, the narrator repeatedly depicts Betsy as the more pitiable and hapless figure.

Young female watercress sellers clearly took up greater space in the Victorian imagination than did their older and male counterparts, stirring sympathies with perceptions of their heightened vulnerability in the face of the abject conditions that all the street sellers experienced. The consciousness of this selective attention is made explicit in the archives of John Groom’s Watercress and Flower Girls’ Christian Mission, an organization whose objectives and history will be discussed in greater detail toward the end of the chapter. During a committee meeting for the mission that took place in 1888, members discussed a recent suggestion from a supporter of “an alteration in the name of the mission, substituting the word Sellers for that of Girls, it being alleged that the name misled people thinking that the mission encouraged the

³⁹ Thomas Archer, “Some little ones of the street” *Little Folks: A Magazine for the Young* (London; Paris & New York: Cassell, Petter, Galpin & Co., 1883 Jan-June), 290-291.

young girls into the street trade, while the exact reverse was its real object.”⁴⁰ After discussion, however, the members decide to keep the old name, reasoning that changing the wording to “sellers” would suggest that the mission also targeted men, older women, and boys, while the charity wanted to serve only girls. In justifying the circumscribed nature of its work, the committee noted “the great dangers besetting young girls so engaged in the streets,” acknowledging that while the high demand meant that doing away with the trade completely was unfeasible, any female sellers “should be women of mature years and experience, to whom the temptations and experiences of such a calling are not so terrible.”⁴¹

That the same circumstances could be seen as “not so terrible” for some but untenable for others highlights the extent to which certain types of suffering had greater visibility and value in Victorian society. In dividing its subjects into three categories that each corresponded with a separate volume, the subtitle of Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* reinforces the idea that not all poverty is equal:

A
CYCLOPEDIA OF THE CONDITIONS AND EARNINGS
OF
THOSE THAT *WILL* WORK,
THOSE THAT *CANNOT* WORK, AND
THOSE THAT *WILL NOT* WORK

Here, Mayhew’s list suggests a descending hierarchy of social value among the subjects of his study. In other places, the distinction was drawn more simply between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor, a difference that made its way into social discourse and public policy

⁴⁰ “Minute Book 1888-1896,” London Metropolitan Archives LMA/4305/001/003, 296.

⁴¹ “The Watercress and Flower Girls’ Christian Mission was Founded in 1866,” London Metropolitan Archives, LMA/4305/6/17.

alike.⁴² Thomas R.C. Gibson-Brydon writes, “A frequent site of social exclusion was in poor-but-respectable people’s approach to charity,” noting that “to accuse one of receiving undeserved charity” was a common slight.⁴³ Mayhew’s watercress girl appears, unsurprisingly, in Volume 1 of his book as one of “those that *will* work.” Similarly, social observers considered them among the most deserving of London’s poor. Like the watercress they sold, these girls were part of a larger system and yet seen as particularly tender, fragile, and at risk of being despoiled by the influences of their environment.

This theme of mediation will recur throughout the chapter, framing nearly all encounters with the nineteenth-century watercress girl. For instance, though multiple Victorian ballads and folksongs featuring watercress girls exist, they almost invariably present matters from a male perspective. The most widely known of these watercress girl songs, No. 92 in Roy Palmer’s collection of ballads and extant in several recorded versions in the British Library,⁴⁴ is sung by an unidentified male narrator who spots a “maiden from the dell.” The second stanza ends with the girl introducing herself, and the third begins with the narrator announcing that they are getting married—or, in the language of the song, “Martha will be mine.”

Another song, “Come Buy My Water Cresses,” written by Messieurs Upton and Hook, possesses a title that suggests that it is sung by the watercress seller herself.⁴⁵ However, the full title for the song reveals that it is “A Favorite Song, Sung by Master Phelps at Vauxhall.” The

⁴² For more on Victorian attitudes toward the poor, see Geoffrey A. C. Ginn, *Culture, Philanthropy and the Poor in Late-Victorian London* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2017) and Robert F. Haggard, *The Persistence of Victorian Liberalism: The Politics of Social Reform in Britain, 1870-1900* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001).

⁴³ Thomas R.C. Gibson-Brydon, “The Hard Lines of the Working-Class Hierarchy,” *The Moral Mapping of Victorian and Edwardian London: Charles Booth, Christian Charity, and the Poor-but-Respectable* (Montreal; Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016), 121.

⁴⁴ Anonymous, “Watercress Girl,” in Roy Palmer, *Everyman’s Book of British Ballads* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1980), 189-190. Variations of this song in the British Library’s sound recording collections include songs C1034, C1047, C1033, and C102.

⁴⁵ [James] Hook, “Come Buy My Water Cresses” (London: A. Bland & Weller, [1794]). British Library BL H.1651.c.(29.).

singer describes the diligence of his “sweet Girl” Nan, who “is seen to Cry from town to town,/ Come, Buy my Water Cresses.”⁴⁶ The passive voice of the formulation “is seen to Cry from town to town” renders her action secondary to that of her unnumbered and unidentified watchers, much as the cry of Mayhew’s watercress seller is “heard of a morning in the London streets.”

Thus far, I have only come across one instance of a song in which the watercress girl herself does the singing, in a song that comes at the end of Shirley Hibberd’s home watercress cultivation manual of 1878. The lyrics leave something to be desired, as the second stanza illustrates:

My mother is old,
And my father is dead;
My feet are so cold,
And my hands are so red,—
I must sink in the snow, for my anguish increases,
I can’t sell a bunch of my nice water-creeses.
Water-creeses, nice water-creeses.⁴⁷

However, the subjectivity at work here is also a ventriloquized one: Hibberd concludes his book with this song because he fears that home cultivation of watercresses will prove so successful “that the ‘pretty watercress girl’ may soon find her occupation gone,” and takes it upon himself to “a song *which she will doubtless sing* with taste and power in the intervals of business” (emphasis added).⁴⁸ Rather than giving her a voice, Hibberd puts words in the watercress girl’s mouth.

Seen but rarely directly heard, the watercress girl is repeatedly made the subject of the narrative visions of others. By following the Victorians in their focus on this young female figure, I abjure any extended attempt to recover the watercress trade “as it was” in London and

⁴⁶ Hook, “Come Buy My Water Cresses,” stanza 3, p. 4.

⁴⁷ Shirley Hibberd, *Water-cresses without Sewage. Home culture of the water-cress: a practical guide to the cultivation of the water-cress, etc.* (London: E.W. Allen, 1878), 49.

⁴⁸ Hibberd, *Water-cresses without Sewage*, 48.

other English metropolises during the nineteenth century. Instead, the chapter attends to both parties in these encounters, the external and mostly male observers as well as the watercress girls whom they speak to and watch. In doing so, I read these narratives not as documents of historical fact about a subset of Victorian Londoners but rather as records of a specific type of social transaction that recurred throughout the period, one that reflects a relational, temporalized understanding of gender and class.

Past Eight

Thus far, most of the texts, songs, and images discussed have all been largely forgotten, even if the work or the artist were widely known at the time, as in the case of the watercress girl ballad or of Johan Zoffany. Henry Mayhew's interview with the watercress seller, which served to open the chapter, was and is the one major exception. Thus, it makes sense to return to this influential account in order to break down the archetype of the young female watercress seller.

Mayhew describes the girl as one who, "although only eight years of age, had entirely lost all childish ways, and was, indeed, in thoughts and manner, a woman."⁴⁹ This depiction of the watercress girl as preternaturally mature recurs frequently in other texts. In nineteenth century moral tales it takes the form of the watercress seller girl's possession of wisdom beyond her years, her carriage communicating the "grown-up" behavior that the parents wish to instill in their own children. For instance, an anonymously written children's book published in 1845 tells the story of the poor but virtuous Susan, who sells watercresses to care for her ailing grandmother and teaches Mary Meadows, a spoiled girl "without half of Susan's merits," that

⁴⁹ Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 151.

“the only way to be happy is to be good.”⁵⁰ At other times, the maturity seems like it might be externally imposed rather than an expression of internal development: in the ballad of Martha the watercress girl, discussed earlier, she is described by the narrator as having hair that “hung down in tresses,” even though this would be unusual for a female of marriageable age.⁵¹

In the case of Mayhew’s watercress girl, she makes a long list of world-weary comments such as the following:

I aint [*sic*] a child, and I shan’t be a woman till I’m twenty, but I’m past eight, I am.

I used to go to school, too; but I wasn’t there long. I’ve forgot all about it now, it’s such a long time ago[.]

We children never play down there, ’cos we’re thinking of our living.

Me and Carry H— carries the little ’uns.

No; I never see any children crying—it’s no use.

Besides it’s like a child to care for sugar-sticks, and not like one who’s got a living and vittals [*sic*] to earn. (151-52)

In these utterances, childhood is sometimes a category with which she identifies herself, and sometimes one that she finds estranging. “We children” on the one hand, and “It’s like a child to care for sugar-sticks” on the other. If she seems to have lived too many lifetimes in her short number of years, this may be because the interview was in fact a composite account rather than a conversation with a single individual, as Carolyn Steedman has pointed out. However, whether or not she was a single individual does not change the way in which the watercress girl

⁵⁰ Anon., “The Water-Cress Girl” in *The Two Cousins; and the Water-Cress Girl* (Providence: Geo. P. Daniels, 1845), 15, 20. Published in Providence and set near Boston, this American volume testifies to the wide reach of the virtuous watercress seller trope.

⁵¹ “Victorian girls,” writes Victoria Sherrow, “wore their hair down as children, then began to pin it up to show their new maturity as young women.” See Victoria Sherrow, “Coming of Age,” *Encyclopedia of Hair: A Cultural History* (Westport; London: Greenwood Press, 2006), 95. Mayhew’s watercress girl tells of “another [girl], as must be around fourteen, ’cos she does her back hair up.” See Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 151.

articulates a separate, geographically and temporally distant sphere of “there” in which concrete emotional, pedagogical, and pleasurable practices take place—schooling, weeping, playing, eating sweets—in contrast to the utilitarian world that she inhabits day in and day out. As grown-up as she behaves, however, she is an alien within the adult world as well. The strangeness of an eight-year-old saying that her education happened “such a long time ago” or she and her friend “carries the little ’uns” emphasizes the acceleration of her temporal experience. Though by her own count she will not be a woman for another dozen years, she is already mothering and reminiscing about times past.

Scholars who have identified this liminality primarily focus on the fuzzy social delineation between girl and woman. Mayhew, Carolyn Steedman writes, is “quite uncertain about [the watercress girl’s] status on a developmental map” and “[unable] to see her as an eight-year-old.”⁵² Building on Steedman’s argument, Claudia Nelson identifies the “idea of the aged child” as a recurrent theme in the many post-Mayhew treatments of the watercress girl and ultimately claims that characters like the watercress girl “are adultlike without threatening the adult system” and used “to shore up the authority of their lawful guardians rather than to challenge it.”⁵³ Since Nelson reads the development of the middle-class sensibility in Victorian England as being akin to the period’s understanding of growth from child- to adulthood, for her the circumscribed interactions between the sellers and their potential customers also represent a reaffirmation of the class system.⁵⁴ In both Steedman and Nelson’s readings, these “economically precocious child-women” (in Nelson’s terms) are moving targets, troubling social

⁵² Carolyn Steedman, “The Watercress Seller,” in *Reading the Past*, ed. Tamsin Spargo, (Basingstoke, Hants: Palgrave, 2000), 22.

⁵³ Claudia Nelson, *Precocious Children and Childish Adults: Age Inversion in Victorian Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012), 110.

⁵⁴ Nelson, *Precocious Children and Childish Adults*, 106-9, 112-13.

mores even as they are simultaneously neutralized by their unsophisticated traits, such as an inability to calculate sums.⁵⁵

I want to approach these figures from a slightly different angle. Rather than understanding these watercress girls by charting their mental or moral development, I want to pursue a more embodied understanding of their experience. By examining the traces of description about their physical bodies, it becomes clear that these watercress sellers should be understood as not merely straddling a position on the spectrum between girlhood and adulthood but inhabiting the paradoxical position of being infant-like and elderly. The deck is stacked less in favor of their transgressive bodies acting out than of their fragile bodies giving out.

This interpretation maps onto the work of cultural anthropologists such as Johannes Fabian, whose *Time and the Other* suggests that the culture in power repeatedly denies “coevalness” to the cultures it considers foreign and other, such that it treats outsiders as needing to catch up from its backwardness.⁵⁶ As in the reading of *The Time Machine* in the previous chapter, this one poses the possibility that this chronological progression (one is young before one is old, one learns the behaviors that allow entry into the middle class) might be short-circuited and ruptured. H.G. Wells’ novella imagines a technology that brings creatures from different points of the same evolutionary thread into confrontation with one another—the human and the Morlocks, and more tentatively, the human and the monstrous crab. In doing so, Wells posits a set of potential future selves for the narrator and the human race he represents, each time suggesting the road forward leads to regression rather than progress. The watercress girls of this chapter are similarly brought face-to-face with another—a male narrator-observer or interlocutor whose experiences serve to throw into relief the contradictory temporal cues inhabited in the

⁵⁵ Nelson, *Precocious Children and Childish Adults*, 9.

⁵⁶ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other* (Columbia University Press, 1983).

daily routine and even physical body of the watercress seller.

A more elaborate juxtaposition of the separate temporal experiences of the watercress girl and her narrative foil happens in Thomas Miller's 1850 poem, "The Water-Cress Seller":

Now all aloud the wind and rain
Beat sharp upon the window pane,
 And though 'tis hardly light
I hear that little girl go by,
Who does "fine watercresses" cry,
 Morning and noon and night.

I saw her pass by yesterday,
The snow upon the pavement lay,
 Her hair was white with sleet;
She shook with cold, as she did cry,
"Fine watercresses, come and buy,"
 And naked were her feet.

And with one hand, so red and cold,
She did her tattered bonnet hold,
 The other held her shawl,
Which was too thin to keep her warm,
But naked left each little arm,
 It was so very small.

Her watercresses froze together,
Yet she, through the cold, bitter weather,
 Went on from street to street:
And thus she goes out every day,
For she can earn no other way
 The bread which she doth eat.⁵⁷

For the narrator of the poem, the passage of time brings variety and change: for the girl, time has collapsed into unwavering repetition. In the first stanza, the narrator describes hearing the girl calling for customers—perhaps he is busy with other things, or perhaps he is still lying in bed. The sound of her voice causes him to remember seeing her through the window yesterday (ll. 7-

⁵⁷ Thomas Miller, "The Water-Cress Seller," *Original Poems for My Children* (London: D. Bogue, 1850), n.p. Further citations of this poem will be made directly in-text using line numbers.

21) and imagine her passing every day in the same way (ll. 22-24). While the speaker encounters her in different contexts, her side of the equation remains the same.

Miller's poem emphasizes the lack of differentiation in the girl's day through its syntax and rhyme. "Light" and "night" are usually paired in poems to draw a contrast—for instance, Charles Bowen's lines, "Come, sweet night. Day, take thy flight:/ My love will make the darkness light" in his 1877 poem "Good-night, Good-morning."⁵⁸ Here, however, the use of "*hardly* light" (emphasis mine) means that the emphasis is instead on similitude, through the darkness shared by these supposedly polar moments at the beginning and end of the day.⁵⁹ Moreover, alongside the triptych of present, past, and future that this poem introduces structurally through the narrator's auditory triggering of memory and imaginative projection into the future is another smaller temporal triptych, the more restricted daily one of "morning noon and night" (l. 6). The unpunctuated list captures, on one hand, what the narrator experiences as the shifting time frame of the poem while it suggests, on the other, that for the watercress girl the days blur. The Victorian writer Ellen Barlee lamented that the watercress girls faced "seven days' toil, the Sabbath being an unknown rest, and their greatest day of success."⁶⁰ Accordingly, the cries of Thomas Miller's watercress seller girl are in the present indicative, regardless of the time of day. *I hear that little girl go by,/ Who does "fine watercresses" cry,/ Morning and noon and night.* As the grammatical tense suggests, she has neither future nor past.

This misalignment between the temporal experiences of the narrator and the watercress seller play out further in the descriptions of the girl's body. The narrator in Miller's poem refers

⁵⁸ Charles Bowen, "Good night, Good-morning" in *An Anthology of Victorian Poetry*, ed. Mountstuart Elphinstone Grant Duff (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1902), 395.

⁵⁹ Mayhew's watercress girl has to be at the market between 4 and 5 to buy her produce, though other texts claim that this needs to take place as early as 1 or 2 in the morning.

⁶⁰ Barlee, "Our London Water-cress Sellers," 107.

to his subject three times as little or small (ll. 4, 17, 18). At the same time, she exhibits characteristics associated with the elderly: white hair and a tremor (ll.9-10), though in her case these signals of premature age are the effect of the cold, brutal environment in which she works.



Figure 10: Detail from M. Vizetelly, illustration from first edition of Thomas Miller’s “The Water-Cress Seller” (1850). Print, woodcut on paper, 18 cm.⁶¹

⁶¹ Thomas Miller, *Original Poems for My Children* (London: D. Bogue, 1850), n.p.



THE WATER-CRESS SELLER.

Figure 11: Artist Unknown, Illustration from an 1863 version of Thomas Miller's "The Water-Cress Seller." Print, woodcut on paper, 13 cm.⁶²

⁶² Artist Unknown, "The Water-Cress Seller" [woodcut print], in Thomas Miller, "The Water-Cress Seller," *Home Songs for Little Darlings* (Boston: T.O.H.P. Burnham, 1863), 203.

Carolyn Steedman has suggested that beneath Henry Mayhew's interview with the watercress seller "hovers the idea of a more common reason for gentlemen stopping little girls on crowded pavements than investigation into their work and home circumstances."⁶³ Taking into account this potential subtext of prostitution, the line "she can earn no other way" (l. 23) seems to connect the girl to the other type of streetwalker, even as it implicitly forecloses that possibility by stating that it is not an available option. Simultaneously, the repeated references to her nakedness seem insistently innocent as it describes her cold feet and her arms "so very small." The effect conveys more of the material paucity in *naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return* than scandalous dishabille, an interpretation reflected in two illustrations of the poem from different versions of the work (Figures 10 and 11). In both images, the figure is hunched into the wind and snow, with bare feet and arms. Though the ground lacks detailed texture, we know it is snow from the footprints they have left. The first image, in particular, depicts a girl with one hand at her neckline and another on her hat, but there are no intimations of unsavoriness in the risk of unclenching. Rather than being perched perilously and threateningly between childhood and womanhood, as other critics have suggested, Miller's seller traverses a greater extreme: her body is at once far too young and too old for what it needs to do. To borrow Henry Mayhew's language, the watercress girl is an "infant," but one "wrinkled where the dimples ought to have been."⁶⁴

Writing in the context of modern international development, Sara Berry notes that

People who live in or close to poverty, without access to land, capital, infrastructure and/or marketable skills, are almost entirely dependent on their own time and effort and, for that reason, are also highly vulnerable to both natural and

⁶³ Carolyn Steedman, "Children of the Street," *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 118.

⁶⁴ Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 151.

man-made temporalities—rhythms and contingencies, from weather to market fluctuations and bureaucratic delays—that they can neither escape nor control.⁶⁵

Miller's watercress seller, like Mayhew's, experiences many of the vulnerabilities identified by Berry here, from the punishingly early hours dictated by the watercress trade to the daily demand for watercress ten out of twelve months of the year. They go beyond the effects that Berry identifies, however, in portraying the girls' physical embodiment of the multiple, incompatible rhythms under which they live.

Mary Sewell's "My Father's Care," a ballad published in 1864, develops additional forms of periodicity. In integrating secular and religious modes alongside those described earlier, "My Father's Care" paves the way for moving from these isolated, one-on-one encounters to a broader understanding of the watercress girl's importance on a societal level. The popular poem, which sold 750,000 copies at the time,⁶⁶ begins with a framing stanza that sets the scene:

'Tis five by the clock on a wintry morn,
And dark in the east lies the lingering dawn;
The populous city is slumbering still,—
And the silent whirl and the tramp of the mill;
The shuddering, wrestling, struggle of life,
The pitiless crush, and the perilous strife,
Have paused for a moment—with daylight, the strain
Of London's great city, will go on again.⁶⁷

The narration establishes itself as an omniscient voice who looks down from above at the city and into its historical and recurrent aspects. It also goes further, assembling a series of references to alternative forms of temporality: clocked time ("five by the clock"), seasonal and daily time

⁶⁵ Sara Berry, "Poverty Counts: Living with Poverty and Poverty Measure," *The Many Dimensions of Poverty*, ed. Nanak Kakwani and Jacques Silber (Houndmills; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 38.

⁶⁶ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780–1850* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), 146-7.

⁶⁷ [Mary] Sewell, *Our Father's Care: A Ballad* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1864) 3. Subsequent references to page numbers will be made directly within the text.

(“wintry morn”), phenomenal or natural time (“dark in the east”; “lingering dawn”), and human circadian time (“slumbering still”). This gaze recalls the London poems of the Romantic poets, and with it the genre’s emphasis on establishing a piercing look at the stagnations and injustices of urban life at the time of writing.⁶⁸ However, the poem also establishes an interest in elaborating multiple modes of measuring time that will come to play a central role in establishing the social precariousness of the ballad’s central character, a young watercress seller, in particular through the introduction of physical and spiritual hunger as forms of anticipation that happen on different temporal scales.

The poem opens with a convolution, lavishing several lines on a visualization of seemingly perpetual movement before marking it all as motion that is temporarily arrested. The parts of speech that Sewell has chosen contribute to the sense of flattened action: *whirl*, *tramp*, *struggle*, *crush*, and *strife* are all nouns rather than verbs. The contrast between movement and stillness happens syntactically as well, with a lengthy periodic sentence describing action that drives toward its verb, only to have that verb be “paused” (l. 7). This verb itself receives mimetic support from a mid-line break and an enjambment, taking place in the last two lines of the extract here:

The shuddering, wresting, struggle of life,
The pitiless crush, and the perilous strife,
Have paused for a moment—with daylight, the strain
Of London’s great city, will go on again. (ll. 5-8)

Together, the line break and enjambment disrupt the rolling rhythm of short phrases set off by commas that predominate in the stanza, creating momentary inertia.

In effect, the opening conflates present and habitual realities. While depicting a moment

⁶⁸ See William Blake’s “London” (1794) or William Wordsworth’s “London, 1802” as examples of this genre.

of silence, it insists on visualizing labor that does not rest even when it stops. By doing so, the poem requires the reader to view the scene at hand and simultaneously picture an equally real, albeit currently invisible scene of the endless toil of the laboring classes, in a kind of evocation of Keatsian negative capability. By doing so, the poem prefigures the introduction of its main character, Nelly, an eight-year-old watercress seller, whose existence continually resists the rhythms and timings of those around her—including, implicitly, those of the implied reader. On a broader level, moreover, the poem's opening exercise of imagining movement within a moment of stillness also translates into its larger project of vivifying the life of its central character, who remains perpetually busy without being able to change her station in life.

From the beginning of the poem, Nelly, the watercress seller, is depicted as isolated despite being an inhabitant of a “populous city”:

The old parish clock had just finished its stroke,
When suddenly starting, poor Nelly awoke...
Poor child! Nestle down there, and slumber again.
But no—she is rising—there wants nothing more,
To rouse her from that humble bed on the floor: (3)

The many types of human and natural time alluded to in the first stanza all mark the opening of the poem as a moment of dormancy—pre-dawn, at five o'clock on a winter day, with the machinery of the city silent and its people asleep. In the character of Nelly, however, the narrator has introduced an individual who inhabits a temporality that runs against the grain compared to everyone else.

Over the next several stanzas, Sewell enhances the contrast between Nelly and those around her by placing their behavior in juxtaposition, and by doing so highlights the temporal rupturing produced by the state of constant need that Nelly inhabits:

She takes the cress-basket under her arm,
No lodger awakens, or feels an alarm;
Or if they should notice a step on the stair,
Or cold creeping in from the chill morning air,
'Tis but the poor water-cress girl, they will say,
Who goes to the market before break of day;
And turn round to sleep with a sigh of regret,
Not selfish or careless, but glad to forget. (5)

This stanza presents Nelly's actions as unremarkable to her neighbors, even as it is clearly remarkable in comparison to their own habits, as they turn both their backs and their thoughts away from her in sleep. As Nelly makes her way to Farringdon Market, the narrative continually emphasizes her solitude, her difference. She is described as being "[w]ithout a companion, a light, or a guide,/. . .running along in the desolate street" and as having gotten "used to the echo, used to the shade" (5). A few stanzas later, the narrator adds that "[n]one to speak to poor Nelly, and she speaks to none" (6). While this line does not make it clear whether there are no people around at all, or if her lack of dialogue happens in spite of potential opportunities to speak with others, the narrator subsequently clarifies. Encountering a patrolman, Nelly registers in his awareness only as "fluttering garments and hurrying feet," her intensity and speed leaving only the barest impression of movement on his "half-dreamy eye" (6). The patrolman, like the sleeping lodgers, is presented as living a wholly different life with a wholly different set of timings and tempos, even as he physically occupies the same space as the young girl.

As in the Thomas Miller's watercress girl poem, "Our Father's Care" includes someone who watches the seller and hears her hawk her wares. However, whereas in Miller's poem this figure is a disembodied "I," here a full interaction takes place in an extended passage of the poem, bringing the conflicting temporalities of the two characters into full relief:

A gentleman sat in his low window seat,

And often looked out in the dim, foggy street,
And then looked within at his bright blazing fire,
And round on his room, and its costly attire;
At well-cushioned sofa, and soft easy chair,
At beautiful pictures, and ornaments fair;
And then his eye fell on his plentiful board,
With many a luxury carefully stored;...(9)

After multiple pages depicting loneliness and lack, Mary Sewell introduces an inventory of upper-class plenitude as she introduces Nelly's foil in the character of the gentleman. He carefully itemizes his possessions by sight, contrasting them to the glum and empty scene outdoors. While Nelly barely has the clothing she needs, even the gentleman's room is described as well-attired. The use of polysyndeton ("And round on his room, and its costly attire;/ At well-cushioned sofa, and soft easy chair, At beautiful pictures, and ornaments fair...") emphasizes the abundance. Through the proliferation of *ands*, Sewell creates a sentence structure that seems to be endlessly replicable, in which there will always be another object that can be plucked out to finish the rhyme.

All this sets up the eventual intersection between Nelly's world and the gentleman's:

He walked once again to the low window seat,
And earnestly gazed in the dull, foggy street;
When sweetly and clearly there fell on his ear,
The cry of a water-cress girl, drawing near.
"Fresh water-cress-e-s! sweet water-cress-e-s!
Four bunches a penny, sweet water-cress-e-s!"
How often he'd carelessly noticed that cry
Draw near to his dwelling and then pass it by!
But now, as he listened, the words seemed to bear
A message for him as they rose on the air! (10)



Figure 12: Detail from William Dicks, “*Water-cress-e-s!*” (c. 1869). Print, chromolithograph on paper, 16 cm.⁶⁹

Andrew H. Miller has written about how the glass construction of the massive Crystal Palace produced a space for the Great Exhibition of 1851 that enabled visitors to experience a “reduction of space and time” by containing products from near and far within a single, massive building.⁷⁰ However, glass can contain as well as exclude, much like the railway might help the more affluent classes “sit nearer to one another by two-thirds of the time which... alienates them” while simultaneously making more apparent the divide between the have- and have-nots.⁷¹ Thus,

⁶⁹ William Dicks, *Household Pictures for Home and School* (London: Jarrold & Sons, [1869?])

⁷⁰ Andrew Miller, *Novels behind Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 56.

⁷¹ *Quarterly Review* 63 (1839): 22, cited in Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, 34n.

the windowpane in the gentleman's house here—and in the similar tableau depicted in Thomas Miller's poem earlier—initially serves a divisive purpose, keeping the two characters separate in their respective worlds.⁷² A chromolithograph by William Dickes, which may be an illustration of this poem, uses several techniques to amplify this distance between the two watercress girl and her male observer (Figure 12).⁷³ Though physically proximate, the man looks at out the girl from behind the glass as well as a sturdy iron fence; he is depicted in muted brown tones behind the windowpane, while the girl stands out in full color with her red cloak and green cresses. Moreover, Dickes has depicted the weather in a way that suggests it falls only on the girl, with the whitest flakes concentrated right over her head, while the space in front of the man's window remains largely unobscured.

The glass panes of the Great Exhibition and the gentleman's windows do overlap in one critical function, however. Miller notes in his study that the design of the Crystal Palace “reminded viewers that they too were on show,” contributing to the exhibition's spectacle of magnitude and variety.⁷⁴ In this poem, the window—with its permeability both as a visual and aural barrier—allows the gentleman and Nelly to make contact across the different spaces they inhabit. Her call travels to his ear, he sees her through the glass and invites her in, then pledges to help her in any way he can.

Writing about this scene, Carolyn Steedman has commented that “Children, moving at a

⁷² For more on glass as a potential barrier, see Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination, 1830–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For instance, Armstrong describes glass as a substance that “makes evident its materiality as a brittle film” (p. 115).

⁷³ The print is part of a collection of twelve plates that originally appeared as frontispieces in the *A Book for the Household* series by William Dickes for Jarrold & Sons; however, the book containing the image of the watercress girl does no longer seems to be extant. See “Notes,” <http://www.worldcat.org/title/household-pictures-for-home-school/oclc/003652606>. Accessed 31 May 2017. Dickes, incidentally, also contributed illustrations for marine biology texts by Philip Henry Gosse and Charles Kingsley, both featured in the previous chapter.

⁷⁴ Miller, *Novels Behind Glass*, 57.

different pace from adults, drawing the eye down from the line of sight established by the adults moving there....”⁷⁵ While her analysis insightfully differentiates between the two characters’ contrasting speeds of movement, her characterization of the scene as an encounter between an adult and a child seems to simplify drastically an exchange that also crosses identity lines of gender and, most prominently, class. In fact, Sewell explicitly blurs the line between adult and child in the character of Nelly: when the girl hears the man knock on the window to catch her attention, Sewell depicts this thought running through her mind: “‘All right,’ thought the child, as she nodded her head,/ ‘Sure I am the woman that earns mother’s bread’” (10). Like Mayhew and Miller, Sewell refutes the idea that these watercress sellers are young, in spite of their age.

More crucially, however, Steedman’s analysis of the poem describes Nelly’s salvation by this man in the window. However, this is merely the midpoint of the text, which does not end on such firm redemptive ground. While this encounter seemingly ends with the man promising to aid Nelly, the poem continues with a second part in which the man is referred to but never reappears. By and large, the rhythms of her life continue unchanged:

The rain beat on Nelly, she rose ere the light,
Her limbs were oft weary, her small face was white;
...
And so they had poverty, hardship and pain,
Not two or three times, but again and again. (13)

What drives the plot is not a permanent change in station that this man’s largesse enables, but rather Nelly’s movements between the beds of her sick and dying parents, as she continues to remind them of God’s provisions for the hungry and needy. As her father nears death—and eventually succumbs to it—Nelly sends him off with a glorious picture of the heavenly home

⁷⁵ Steedman, *Strange Dislocations*, 126.

that awaits them in which they will partake in “a heavenly feast,/ Prepared for all people, the greatest and least” (21). In this section, Nelly comforts her parents with words such as “always” and “sure” (17), using God’s eternal promises as a salve for the erratic and uncertain nature of their impoverished lives in London. Hunger, one of the basic recurrent needs of the human body, becomes one of the poem’s main distinctions between earthly and heavenly life. As she demonstrates her faith in the face of difficulty *again and again*, Nelly is portrayed as preparing for an afterlife that replaces the fixity of her impoverishment with a positive form of permanence.

The poem finally ends with Nelly’s final return to her mother’s bedside and her recounting of her father’s last moments:

"For now I am an orphan,
And you're a widow too;
And don't you think it's certain,
We'll find that promise true?"
"Yes, Nelly—yes, my blessing,
And we must trust it now;
And trust that God will help us,
Although we see not how. (24)

Though trite, this ending is remarkable for the things it leaves unresolved. In fact, several editions of the poem end with the words of Nelly’s mother, but no closing quotation marks.⁷⁶

This is a printing error, perhaps, but a suggestive one, for while the closing words are an expression of faith, they could also be paraphrased as “We don’t see (yet) how God will help us.”

A shift in meter underscores the sense of irresolution: the last section of the poem changes from tetrameter into trimeter, creating a feeling of constriction rather than fulfilled abundance.

The ending of “My Father’s Care” qualifies as a happy one only in a moral rather than

⁷⁶ The copies at Duke University Press and the Huntington Library are among these.

material sense, introducing a gentleman of means and motive in Part I only to have him fade into a background figure rather than taking on the role of someone with definitive influence on the lives of Nelly and her family. At the same time, Sewell's refusal to employ the wealthy gentleman as a *deus ex machina* to give the poem a tidy resolution essentially leaves open the question of who will step in to help.

Preservation

While the gentleman in Mary Sewell's poem may or may not come back save Nelly and her mother, other wealthy patrons did step in to help real-life watercress girls. In 1866, the Earl of Shaftesbury founded the Watercress and Flower Girls' Christian Mission and gave responsibility for daily operations to the mission's secretary John Groom, whose name was later added to the title of the institution. The charity aimed "by constant visiting at the Markets, Streets, Theatres, Music Halls, &c., to reach with the Gospel these Women whose are exposed to all the ills and evils of Street Life,...and by various means to benefit them temporally and spiritually," as declared in a document from the 1870s elucidating the organization's scope and purpose.⁷⁷ By 1904, the organization had established "an Industrial Training Branch for Crippled Girls, a Servants' Training Home, an Orphanage and Home for Waif Girls, and a Cottage Hospital and Convalescent Home" to help over 10,000 women a year.⁷⁸

Intended to help watercress and flower girls who were girls no longer transition out of their backbreaking work on the streets, the Mission trained many of its constituents in the art of

⁷⁷ [Printed Objectives of the Mission], London Metropolitan Archives, LMA/4305/04/001.

⁷⁸ Boothroyd, *E. Low's Handbook to the Charities of London, Giving the Objects, Date of Formation, Office, Income, Expenditure, Invested Funds, Bankers, Treasurers and Secretaries of ... Charitable Institutions* Sampson Low, Marston, and Company. Ltd., [1903-1904], 230.

making artificial flowers that could be sold abroad so that they were “no longer useless.”⁷⁹ This trade was intended to shift the girls from their intermittent, time-sensitive work and allow them to extend their working lives once their bodies had begun to fail them. “What had the future to offer her and others in like case?” posed D.L. Woolmer in a 1905 article in *The Quiver* discussing the tough lives of lower class workers.⁸⁰ One appeal from the charity, pictured below, explicitly associated the girls with the fragile watercresses and flowers they sold on the streets (Figure 13). Inside the pamphlet, the organization provides a response to Woolmer’s query: “Unanswered they drift, droop, and die; Answered they become bright, useful, wage earners.”⁸¹

In the image on the front of the appeal, the girl on a crutch even vaguely resembles the handful of cresses she holds as she “drifts and droops,” much like the pamphlet’s text asserts. The drab, raggedy layers of the tatters she wears give her an organic, leafy appearance. In depicting their work as extending the useful lives of the girls, John Groom’s Mission sought to combat the accelerated senescence of these girls and their bodies. Throughout the petitions and pamphlets issued by the charity, the appeals continually pose the problem being solved as one of exchanging one kind of timeline for another: the girls’ long hours and truncated careers on the street could be remedied by replacing perishable flowers and vegetables with artificial floral arrangements that could be made, sold, and circulated without fear of expiration. “Such an enterprise,” promised an 1889 booklet celebrating the mission’s 23rd year, “would teach and encourage the girls to help themselves with a little or no assistance (beyond that of the start) from the outside public.”⁸² Unlike live watercress, with its demanding harvest schedule and brief

⁷⁹ D.L. Woolmer, “Class Missions: Leverage to Higher Levels,” *The Quiver* (London, Paris, NY, Melbourne: Cassell and Company, 1905), 1130.

⁸⁰ D.L. Woolmer, “Class Missions,” 1129.

⁸¹ “What is done for the Crippled Girls” (c. 1903), London Metropolitan Archives, John Groom’s Association for Disabled People Collection, LMA/4305/6/18

⁸² [Account of the Mission’s 23rd year of service (1889)], London Metropolitan Archives, John Groom’s Association

lifecycle, artificial flowers would serve as a gentler master, allowing the girls to participate in a self-regenerating enterprise that “was light, interesting and fairly remunerative” rather than requiring pre-dawn work hours at a pittance.⁸³



Figure 13: “What is done for the Crippled Girls” Appeal pamphlet circulated by the Watercress and Flower Girls’ Christian Mission (c. 1903). Credit: London Metropolitan Archives⁸⁴

The charity had another major aim, this one on a longer timeline. Scholars such as Frank Prochaska have written about the indelible ties between nineteenth-century British religious faith

for Disabled People Collection, LMA/4305/3/26, n.p.

⁸³ “What is Done for the Crippled Girls, [1903], 6. London Metropolitan Archives, John Groom’s Association for Disabled People Collection, LMA/4305/6/18.

⁸⁴ “What is Done for the Crippled Girls,” cover.

and philanthropy.⁸⁵ For John Groom's Christian Mission, this vision of a self-sustaining community capable of generating output with minimal input was one that mapped onto the transition between the everyday and the eternal. As one pamphlet emphatically put it, "SHALL THESE GIRLS BE RESCUED FOR CHRIST AND USEFULNESS IN THE WORLD, OR SHALL THEY BE LEFT TO FALL VICTIMS TO THEIR EVIL SURROUNDINGS?"⁸⁶ In this formulation, "Christ" and "usefulness in the world" fall under the same designation, jointly placed in contrast with the bleak alternative. Either way, however, the girls seem to possess little agency. Like the singer Master Phelps' sweet girl Nan, who "is seen to Cry from town to town," here the watercress sellers are imagined as passively waiting to "be rescued" or "be left to fall victims [*sic*] to" their environment. Their heightened mortality and moral vulnerability in the eyes of Victorian reformers made them particularly fitting subjects for the salvational aims of the charity.

One of the existing photographs of the mission illustrates this power differential between the agent of succor and the recipient of charitable goodwill (Figure 14). In the photograph, John Groom, the secretary for whom the charity was later named, stands over several young women sitting at a long table busily sorting artificial flowers. The woman to his left has a slight grimace on her face as she looks directly at the camera; John Groom's back seems to press into her right arm. He has his hand on the shoulder of another woman, who looks blankly into the distance, avoiding both John Groom's gaze and the camera's. Mounted on a green board and captioned, the photograph has clearly seen heavy use in the operational history of the society, though the precise nature of its display are unknown. Subordinated to the man who towers above them, the

⁸⁵ See Frank Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: The Disinherited Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁸⁶ "Maggie and Birdie," 24, LMA/4305/6/16.

former watercress and flower girls depicted in this photograph have been subsumed into a larger narrative of industrious redemption. The similarity of their white ruffled dresses and pompadour hairstyles further suggests the erasure of their individual narratives of suffering.



**Figure 14: Detail from Photograph of “John Groom with Girls Making Flowers” (c.1900s).
Credit: London Metropolitan Archives.⁸⁷**

⁸⁷“John Groom with Girls Making Flowers” [Photograph], London Metropolitan Archives, John Groom’s Association for Disabled People Collection, LMA 4305/7/152.

This sense of interchangeability between the stories of specific watercress and flower girls becomes embedded even in the form of the appeal. Though they often feature narratives about individual girls who are named and tracked through lives of woe, one sob story blurs into another as the beats of the plot remain the same. Their practices of illustration similarly elided differences between one girl and another. Woodblock prints frequently appear in multiple pamphlets containing different stories, despite details that do not always perfectly align with the text. For example, Figure 15 appears in at least two series of appeal pamphlets published by John Groom's Christian Mission.

In *Rose*, a pamphlet in circulation between 1896 and 1918, this image accompanies a description of the title character preparing to meet her mother, an alcoholic, abusive woman about to be released from jail. In *The Watercress and Flower Girls' Christian Mission: Aim and Work*, c. 1896-1919, the same image, captioned "Covent Garden," faces text that describes the types of hardships faced by the young girls "whose lives were running waste and whose danger of moral ruin was imminent."⁸⁸ Neither pamphlet mentions the boy depicted in the figure with whom the girl interacts, suggesting that the block may in fact have been carved for a third text. These two appeals, one particular and one general in its approach to the subject, were each published over a span of more than two decades, long after *Rose* and her costermongering colleagues—if they were in fact real individuals—had left girlhood behind.

⁸⁸ *Rose* and *The Watercress and Flower Girls' Christian Mission: Aim and Work*, London Metropolitan Archives, John Groom's Association for Disabled People Collection, LMA/4305/6/18.



Figure 15: Woodblock print reused in multiple appeal pamphlets (c. 1896-1919). Credit: London Metropolitan Archive.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Artist Unknown, Woodblock print used in multiple appeal pamphlets, including *Rose and The Watercress and Flower Girls' Christian Mission: Aim and Work*, London Metropolitan Archives, John Groom's Association for Disabled People Collection, LMA/4305/6/18.

This practice of re-appropriating illustrations was fairly common during the period. Paul Goldman notes the “cavalier re-use of blocks” by Victorian publishers, who frequently sought to cut down on costs by using existing printing plates and blocks “where they seemed appropriate and even, on numerous occasions, where they made no sense with the later text whatsoever.”⁹⁰ As a reviewer, Thackeray frequently railed against the practice, once describing a particularly offensive work as “a sea-pie, made up of scraps that have been served at many tables before.”⁹¹ However, this practice of reuse was most frequently associated with publishers of fiction or, in the case of the target of Thackeray’s wrath, of gift books and literary annuals.

Whatever the ethical calculus for John Groom’s *Christian Mission*, their replication of the same image in multiple contexts over extended lengths of time suggests that the narrative work of these appeals aspired to a sense of timeless and unremitting urgency. The years pass, but an endless number of needy subjects—tens of thousands, according to the *Aim and Work* pamphlet—continue to confront the charity-minded with their foreshortened and accelerated lives. In the unchanging nature of the watercress girl’s plight (“morning noon and night”; “Not two or three times, but again and again”), they offered themselves as particularly fungible subjects for the charity’s reiterations of their moral point. Thus, rather than faithful representation of a specific individual at a particular place and time, the function of these images is to stir the imagination of a reader for whom vivid detail is more important than documentary accuracy.

Time and the body were of central concern to the philanthropists behind the *Watercress*

⁹⁰ Paul Goldman, “Defining Illustration Studies: Towards a New Academic Discipline,” In *Reading Victorian Illustration, 1855-1875: Spoils of the Lumber Room*, ed. Paul Goldman and Simon Cooke (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2012). Accessed June 30, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁹¹ Cited in Vanessa Warne, “Thackeray Among the Annuals: Morality, Cultural Authority and the Literary Annual Genre,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 39.2 (2006): 168.

and Flower Girls' Christian Mission, much as they were to their counterparts engaged in the work of depicting watercress sellers in prose, poetry, and art. In formulating the plight of the Victorian watercress girl, the language of the narrative repeatedly frames the issue as one of conflicting measures of time that, at least in some texts, have the potential to be brought back in sync through the intervention from the outside. Invariably solitary, the watercress girl is nevertheless treated as one who can be read in substitution for an indefinite number of others, her neediness and vulnerability rendering her exceptional from a societal standpoint while remaining commonplace on the level of narrative development.⁹² This understanding of poverty as a disrupted experience of routine and standardized time, both on a daily and a human scale, depends on the sometimes implied but nevertheless omnipresent observer as the norming force. Charity, as suggested by these texts, enables the broken temporalities of the watercress sellers to be made whole, the rhythms and trajectories of their lives realigned through the rightful extension of their social utility and the proper orientation of their spiritual lives.

A Nosegay for the Nation

Throughout this chapter, we have seen the watercress girl through the lens of multiple observers and interlocutors, who often depict their subjects with a proprietary eye. From the possessive gaze of the ballad-singers ("My sweet girl Nan"; "Martha will be mine") to the explicit moral mapping of Mary Sewell and John Groom's *Watercress and Flower Girls' Christian Mission*, these intermediaries used these girls to articulate experiential differences in class and gender while reifying an individual and communal sense of self.

⁹² [Account of the Mission's 23rd year of service (1889)], London Metropolitan Archives, John Groom's Association for Disabled People Collection, LMA/4305/3/26, n.p.

The operations of this identity formation are on exhibit in the way John Groom's Christian Mission focused on usefulness as the central measure of the watercress and flower girls' redemptions, a criterion that highlights the reciprocal side of charity work. Philanthropy, Robert Humphreys writes, "provided esoteric benefits to the donor as well as material relief to the recipient."⁹³ In doing good for the less fortunate, the charitable sought to better their own world as well. Particularly after the 1870s, Humphreys notes, there was "an acceptance that the well-being of the individual and of the nation depended on a greater fulfilment of the ideal whereby all citizens would benefit from reduction in the scourges of ill-health, ignorance, and poverty."⁹⁴ Indeed, benefits could occasionally take concrete form. For instance, while being honored with a gift at the 17th meeting of the Watercress and Flower Girls' Mission for his longtime role as the mission's main benefactor, the Earl of Shaftesbury gave a thank you speech in which he declared,

My house is rich in such presents. The other day I was presented with an inkstand and pencil case by the young girls of the Young Women's Christian Association. I have now got this clock.... On my bed in the country there is a large counterpane worked by ragged school-children....I have got on at this moment one of six pairs of stockings given to me a year ago by the poor little girls of Prince Edward's School....I am clothed and warmed by the ragged children, and I am adorned and made comfortable and handsome in my house by the capacities of the flower girls.⁹⁵

The list of possessions here recalls the inventory made by the gentleman in Mary Sewell's poem as he looks around his well-appointed home. In that scene, the list motivated the gentleman to an act of charity; here, the Earl of Shaftesbury's catalogue of plenitude is the result. Though his

⁹³ Robert Humphreys, *Sin, Organized Charity and the Poor Law in Victorian England* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, London: Macmillan Press, 1995), 50.

⁹⁴ Humphreys, *Sin, Organized Charity and the Poor Law in Victorian England*, 50.

⁹⁵ "Addresses delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Watercress and Flower Girls' Mission, Held at The Foresters' Hall, Tuesday, June 26th, 1883," London Metropolitan Archives, John Groom's Association for Disabled People Collection, LMA 4305/3/101.

intentions were surely to offer gracious thanks for his gift, the statement highlights how his act of generosity provides him with both social and economic capital in return. The phrase “I am clothed and warmed by the ragged children” has the effect of making the children sound like a form of raw material, capable of transformation into useful finished goods. Moreover, in declaring that “I am adorned and made comfortable and handsome in my house,” he refers not only to living in physical ease and luxury but also to looking good in the eyes of others—providing good optics, in contemporary parlance.

The Earl of Shaftesbury’s words here show how philanthropical work was not solely oriented toward the beneficiaries but also served to reaffirm the giver’s position in society. The chapter began with the idea that nineteenth-century changes in shipping and transportation technologies created a sense of nationhood bound by shared time and shared goods while at the same time visibly excluding many of the working poor whose lives were contingent on these systems without benefiting from them. Watercress girls exemplified this exclusion, their protracted workdays and prematurely wizened bodies at dramatic odds with the rhythms of life experienced by their patrons in more privileged classes. Like the highly perishable watercresses that they sold, these girls functioned like consumables in a society with unceasing demand for what they offered.

In retraining watercress and flower girls to make artificial flowers to extend their usefulness, John Groom’s Christian Mission inadvertently created a new space for these street sellers in the national narrative of collectivity through goods. Specifically, the charity saw itself as ensuring a self-reliant future for Britain by supporting a domestic artificial flower trade. As a promotional card published in 1916 exhorts, purchasing fake flowers created by the girls would help break Britain’s reliance on foreign flower imports and creating a new, self-sufficient nation

that can enjoy domestically-produced (if not domestically-grown) flowers at will (Figure 16).

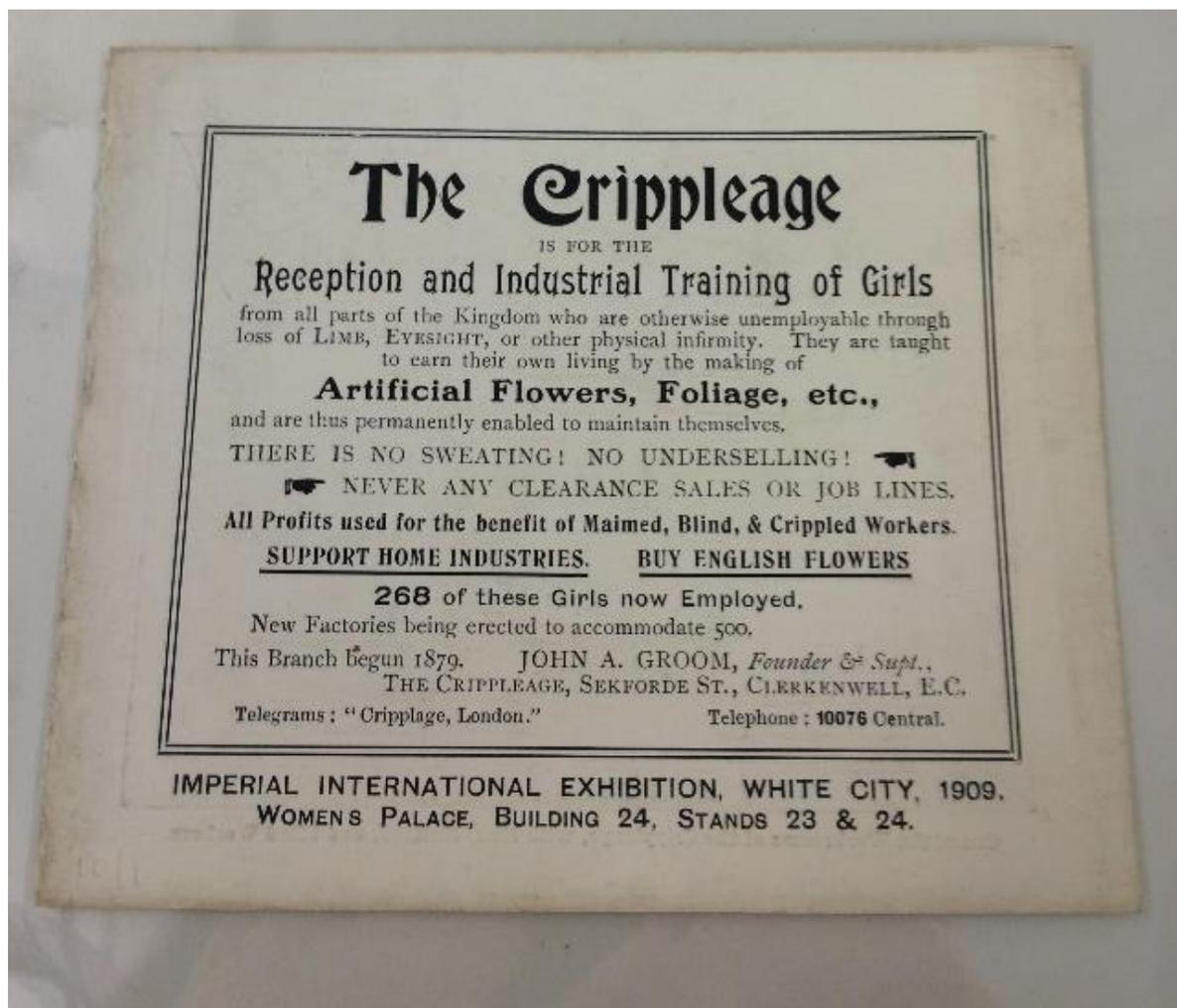


Figure 16: Promotional Card for John Groom’s Charity (later renamed John Groom’s Crippleage) at the 1909 Imperial International Exhibition⁹⁶

The card emphatically asks its readers to “SUPPORT HOME INDUSTRIES. BUY ENGLISH FLOWERS,” claiming that the charity will soon be expanding its facilities to raise employment capacity from 268 girls to 500. Another document, composed to celebrate the charity’s Golden Jubilee in 1916, asserted that “The making of Artificial Flowers by these girls has become an

⁹⁶[Promotional Card for John Groom’s Watercress and Flower Girls Christian Mission, c. 1909], London Metropolitan Archives, John Groom’s Association for Disabled People Collection, LMA/4305/3/80.

important branch of British Industry...From this Mission the market is largely supplied with artificial flowers formerly imported from Germany.”⁹⁷ This statement is odd: France had been seen as the industry powerhouse since the mid-eighteenth century, and sources estimate that Paris flower makers still outnumbered their counterparts in Britain by nearly five to one in the mid-nineteenth century.⁹⁸ In the early 1900s, L’Industrie Florale estimated that 28,000 people in and around the Paris worked in the industry.⁹⁹ Moreover, C.E. Herring, a Berlin Commercial Attaché, reported in 1922 that the German “cottage industry” of flower-making in Saxony did not even register as a threat to France until 1905.¹⁰⁰ Thus, the identification of Germany as the nation’s sole competition for artificial flowers seems motivated by post-war political relations rather than hard numbers. Similarly, the idea that the charity could fulfill all British demand for artificial flowers seems overly optimistic, given that Paris’s 28,000 fake flower makers constituted a number 56 times greater than the number of flower-makers John Groom’s Christian Mission wanted to employ after expanding their factories.

However, the vision of redemption and self-sufficiency was a compelling impetus for action. Andrea Geddes Poole has written about way charitable work became constructed as a patriotic duty and not just a religious one over the course of the nineteenth century.¹⁰¹ Though

⁹⁷ “The Golden Jubilee of a great Charitable Institution,” c. 1916, London Metropolitan Archives, John Groom’s Association for Disabled People Collection, LMA/4305/3/103, n.p.

⁹⁸ Alison Matthews David notes “an estimated 15,000 flower makers in Paris in 1858, [compared to] 3,510 in Britain, mostly concentrated in London in 1851.” See Alison Matthews David, *Fashion Victims: The Dangers of Dress Past and Present* (London: Bloomsbury), 90. Incidentally, Charles Wentworth Dilke’s catalogue for the Great Exhibition of 1851 notes lists 74 total exhibitors of artificial flowers and fruit; of these, 15 are French, 34 are from the United Kingdom (and a further 11 from British Colonies), and only three from Germanic territories (Hamburg, Hesse, and Wurtemberg). Though the number of domestic exhibitors seems high, representation was likely skewed in favor of the exhibition’s location in London. See Charles Wentworth Dilke, *Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, 1851: Catalogue of a Collection of Works On, Or Having Reference To, the Exhibition of 1851* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1852), 644.

⁹⁹ Mary Van Kleeck, *Artificial Flower Makers* (New York, Survey Associates, Inc., 1913), 150.

¹⁰⁰ C.E. Herring, “German Artificial-Flower Industry,” *Commerce Reports* Vol 3., Nos. 27-39, US Department of Commerce (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1922), 205.

¹⁰¹ Poole focuses specifically on women philanthropists and their advocacy for increasing political voice, but her

she focuses on female philanthropists advocating for a growing political voice, Poole's observation also ties in to the way philanthropy became imbricated in the larger project of defining the nation through shows of economic prowess and self-sufficiency. For John Groom's Christian Mission, one outlet for patriotic expression came in the form of participating in the displays of national industry at exhibitions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These displays of artificial flowers created by the girls aimed to increase support for the charity but also framed their work—and the patronage of potential customers—in overtly patriotic terms. The card touting home industries analyzed above, for instance, was printed for the Imperial International Exhibition in White City in 1910, where the charity had two display stands in the Women's Palace. A photo of the Japan-British Exhibition of 1910, also held in White City, shows a lavishly decorated stall (Figure 17).

The stall appears to show an assortment of floral varieties, some in labeled containers and others arranged in trellises and bouquets. There are no human figures in the scene, leaving the enduring robustness of the fake flowers to stand in for the broken bodies of the girls who created them. Once again, they do not speak for themselves but through an intermediary. Where the hyper-visible physical suffering of the watercress girls was reflected in the fragility of the cresses they sold, these everlasting floral displays created a narrative of redemption that asserted longevity via substitution, mirroring the depersonalizing forms of representation that we saw earlier in the chapter.

this thesis also applies more broadly. See Andrea Geddes Poole, *Philanthropy and the Construction of Victorian Women's Citizenship: Lady Frederick Cavendish and Miss Emma Cons* (University of Toronto Press, 2014).



**Figure 17: Photograph of Artificial Flowers Display at the White City Exhibition, c. 1910.
Credit: London Metropolitan Archives¹⁰²**

¹⁰² London Metropolitan Archives, John Groom's Association for Disabled People Collection, LMA/4305/7/150

Bloom and Bust

Watercress sellers, once a fixture of London streets, receded from view in the first decades of the twentieth century. Though contamination of the watercress beds had long been a concern,¹⁰³ outbreaks of enteric (typhoid) fever and other diseases around 1905 led to an investigation by the London County Council into diseases potentially transmitted by sewage-polluted watercress. Though the scientists concluded that the majority of harmful bacteria could be removed by careful washing, it found evidence that over half of the beds contained “unsatisfactory, in some cases highly unsatisfactory” water samples, with up to ten million times more harmful bacteria than in the best-kept beds.¹⁰⁴ Fears of contagion dampened enthusiasm for buying cresses, especially from street sellers, whose itinerancy emphasized the lack of connection to where the watercresses came from and how they were grown. Simultaneously, the landscape of retail had undergone a significant shift over the course of the nineteenth century. Shopping arcades and department stores changed practices of consumption by centralizing spaces for trade and redefining the consumers’ relationship to the goods they bought. Accordingly, rather than being hawked in the streets, produce was increasingly bought and sold in grocery stores and later, supermarkets. All these changes contributed to lowered demand for itinerant watercress sellers, who gradually disappeared from the cityscape.

As their target demographics shifted, John Groom’s Watercress and Flower Girls’ Christian Mission was renamed John Groom’s Crippleage and Flower Girl’s Mission in 1907, dropping the

¹⁰³ For instance, Shirley Hibberd mentions it as a motivation for home cultivation in his manual, discussed earlier. See Hibberd, *Water-cresses without Sewage*, 4-6.

¹⁰⁴ Murphy, “Watercress,” 11. This report was discussed in several places, including “Thirteenth Annual Report (For 1904) of the Medical Officer of Health of the Administrative County of London,” *The Lancet* Vol. 1. (March 10, 1906): 687; as Samuel Rideal, *Sewage and the bacterial purification of sewage*, 3rd Ed. (London: The Sanitary Publishing Co.; New York: John Wiley, 1906), 322-324.

reference to watercress girls. It would later be shortened to John Groom's Crippleage, then changed to John Groom's Association for the Disabled and finally John Groom's Association for Disabled People, the name under which it continues to operate today.¹⁰⁵

The efflorescence of the watercress girl in cultural production of the nineteenth century resulted from the intersection of economic and social factors. On one hand, the rise in food transportation by rail and the concomitant growth of large-scale watercress farming created the circumstances that allowed individuals in London to find work selling watercress. On the other hand, the industry counted among its midst sellers of all ages, genders, and levels of moral and physical fortitude. Thus, the dominant representation of the watercress seller—as a young, frail, virtuous, and impoverished girl whose exigency is poignantly symbolized in the ephemerality of the leafy greens she sells—reveals a deeply inflected view of social reality. In consolidating this watercress girl archetype, Victorian social observers and philanthropists could make visible the social violence that was a byproduct of nationalizing infrastructure and food production while simultaneously defusing it by offering multiple levels of redemption for a group cast as both particularly vulnerable and especially deserving.

Within the scope of the vision adumbrated in works like “My Father's Care” and elucidated more fully in the efforts of John Groom's Christian Mission, the socio-temporal ruptures of the watercress girl's life could be twice restored: firstly, by extending her working life through freeing her labor from the demanding hours of street-selling and, secondly, by leading her to a religious salvation that answered continual hunger with eternal satiation. In articulating the need to save these girls, printed appeals made heavy use of the retold anecdote and the reused printing plate, subordinating the individual to the narrative. Notably, these

¹⁰⁵ “John Groom's Association for Disabled People” [Finding Aid], The National Archives, accessed 6/3/17.

charitable measures neither addressed the root cause of a structural problem nor accorded the watercress girl with social mobility to accompany her newfound work stability. Instead, by training these girls to make artificial flowers, the charity framed the unsettling sight of a young, decrepit street seller as a problem of market inefficiency rather than shared ethical failure. In essence, the patriotic narrative of establishing a domestic artificial flower industry powered by girls who would otherwise “droop and wilt” painted these rehabilitated sellers as a reclaimed commodity in the process of building nationhood, ensuring comfort and adornment not only for the Earl of Shaftesbury but for Britain as a whole.

CHAPTER FOUR

Between World's Fairs and Warfare: Ordering Food at the British Empire Exhibition

“...the Empire is there. Awaiting development. It can grow anything.”
—Austin Harris, c. 1922¹

Going Big and Scaling Down

“[M]an has made things almost too great for his own imagination to measure,” announced G.K. Chesterton upon the opening of the British Empire Exhibition in 1924.² Set in Wembley, 10 miles northwest of central London, the exhibition spread out over 216 acres and ran from the spring through the fall of 1924 and again in 1925. Britain’s most celebrated were called upon for assistance: Rudyard Kipling helped to name the streets.³ Agatha Christie set off on a yearlong, worldwide “Great Empire Expedition” in 1922 to promote it.⁴ Edward Elgar was commissioned to perform the “Empire March” for the opening festivities.⁵

At the time, the British Empire Exhibition represented the largest exhibition to date. During these two years, over 27 million visitors came through the gates,⁶ approximately 60

¹ Austin Harris, “The British Empire Exhibition, 1924,” [Reprinted from the *English Review*, November 1922?], n.p. Brent Archives, British Empire Exhibition Collection, WHS/0/1/10/2.

² G. K. Chesterton, “Our Note Book,” *Illustrated London News* [London, England] 19 July 1924: n.p.

³ Kurt Koenigsberger, “Monsters on the Verandah of Realism: Virginia Woolf’s Empire Exhibition.” *The Novel and the Menagerie: Totality, Englishness, and Empire* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), 186.

⁴ Agatha Christie and Matthew Prichard. *The Grand Tour: Letters and Photographs from the British Empire Expedition 1922* (London: HarperCollins, 2012).

⁵ David Lacey, “England Take to their Wings.” *The Guardian* Nov 20 1974: 27.

⁶ Donald R. Knight and Alan D. Sabey, *The Lion Roars at Wembley: British Empire Exhibition, 60th anniversary 1924-1925* (London: Barnard & Westwood, 1984), 5.

percent of the United Kingdom's population at the time.⁷ In contrast, the Franco-British ("White City") Exhibition of 1908 had seen 8 million attendees,⁸ while the wildly popular 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition (the "Great Exhibition") had drawn 6 million.⁹ For various reasons, however, these exhibitions have received an exponentially greater amount of scholarly attention in comparison to Wembley.¹⁰

The grounds of the British Empire Exhibition included three palaces dedicated respectively to industry, engineering, and art; pavilions representing all but two of the British colonies; an Empire Stadium capable of containing 125,000 people; several dedicated Tube stations; and an amusement park with sideshows, a menagerie, and over twenty rides.¹¹

"Wembley has become a little world in itself," a rapturous article in the *Illustrated London News* proclaimed, "and probably never before has such a cosmopolitan assemblage been gathered within a single area of the same dimensions."¹² E.M. Forster would remark that almost anything one would ever need could be found within the turnstiles, "with the exception of a cemetery."¹³

⁷ The total population of the United Kingdom was between 44.8 and 45.0 million between 1924 and 1925. See "UK Population Estimates 1851 to 2014," *Office for National Statistics*. July 2015. Accessed 24 June 2017.

⁸ David Bradshaw, Notes to Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays*, ed. Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 239n.

⁹ This was a third of the British population at the time. See "The Great Exhibition," Learning Victorians, British Library, n.d., Web, 16 Dec 2012.

¹⁰ These exhibitions broke new ground in various ways, as detailed in works such as Andrew Miller, *Novels Behind Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Paul Young, *Globalization and the Great Exhibition: The Victorian New World Order* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and Thomas Prasch, "Eating the World: London in 1851." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 36, no. 2. 2008): 587-602. As this chapter will discuss, the British Empire Exhibition was not a fully triumphal imperial exercise, despite being historically and critically significant.

¹¹ Knight and Sabey, *The Lion Roars at Wembley*, 93-94. The amusement park offered entertainments such as The Shoe in which the Old Lady Lived, a spinning car ride called The Whirl of the World, a water voyage through The Enchanted Caves, and a Palace of Beauty with women posed as famous beauties through the ages. See *The Marlborough Pocket Guide to the Empire Exhibition At Wembley, 1924* (London: Marlborough Printing Co., [1924]), 28-29. British Library BL X419/2700.

¹² "Subject of the King from Many Climes at Wembley: Picturesque Types at the British Empire Exhibition," *Illustrated London News* (24 May 1924): 934-5.

¹³ E.M. Forster, "The Birth of an Empire," *Abinger Harvest* (New York: Harcourt, 1964), 46. Forster's essay first appeared in 1924.

Food was a central component of this comprehensive experience. At this exhibition, displays such as giant butter sculptures of Prince Edward and a “native bazaar” representing colonies in East Africa impressed upon visitors the scope of the natural and human resources under Britain’s command.¹⁴ Visitors could eat at any number of restaurants inside exhibition areas and throughout the grounds, including special dining areas serving the foods of a specific country or region. *The Times of India* reported in 1922 that insofar as it was possible, Empire products would be used exclusively in restaurants and elsewhere—except for a few necessary exceptions, “as in the case of French wines and Havana cigars.”¹⁵ Vendors throughout the grounds sold an “Empire fruit cake” made wholly from ingredients sourced within the British Empire, allowing visitors to relive the taste of imperial self-sufficiency even after they returned home.¹⁶

This chapter uses food to examine the interplay between simultaneous levels of representation (and misrepresentation) at the British Empire Exhibition and to take a deeper look into the national and global systems of production and trade that the philanthropists of John Groom’s Christian Mission sought to capitalize upon at the end of Chapter 3. In the *Illustrated London News* article cited above that declared Wembley “a little world,” the author referred to assemblage and scalar miniaturization in a single sentence. Here, I will also examine forms such as replication, tokenization, reenactment, and metonymy in relation to the Exhibition’s promotion of another kind of representational project, that of ensuring food security through the redistribution of food resources and population advantageously across the empire.

In interpreting primary sources including guidebooks, official publications,

¹⁴ G.C. Lawrence, ed. *Official Guide to the British Empire Exhibition, 1925*, (London: Fleetway Press, 1925), 82 British Library b.62.7961.

¹⁵ "British Empire Exhibition," *The Times of India*. Oct 20 1922: 7.

¹⁶ Lawrence, ed., *Official Guide to the British Empire Exhibition*, 116.

advertisements, news reports, and postcards, this chapter will address the British Empire Exhibition from multiple perspectives. From the institutional side, I examine the plans and intentions of the Exhibition's organizers and promoters. Additionally, materials from contemporary news reports, essays, and archival documents, including those by canonical authors, illuminate what would now be considered "visitor experience"—a concept currently at the foreground of Museum Studies, but one more difficult to reconstitute within a historical context. By considering how visitors were guided into inhabiting multiple points of view, the chapter shows how ephemeral acts of consumption in this exhibitionary "fleeting city" were imagined as having agency in producing lasting, monumental changes in Britain's food and foreign policy.¹⁷

The texts I looked at in the first three chapters of this dissertation were largely circumscribed by the borders of England, with the exception of a few gestures toward the exotic from the writers seeking to titillate audiences with references to anthropophagic crustaceans. The end of the previous chapter saw John Groom's *Watercress and Flower Girls' Christian Mission* framing its contributions to Britain's formations of national identity by redirecting the livelihoods of rescued street sellers toward building domestic industry and participating in international exhibitions. A sense of self can only exist within the context of a sense of the other, whether the particular self in question is an aristocratic philanthropist, Great Britain, or the human race as a whole. Thus, I use the 216 acres of the Wembley Exhibition here as an entry point into understanding social and imperial interrogations of identity in early twentieth-century Britain.

¹⁷ The term "fleeting cities" is Alexander Geppert's. See Alexander C. Geppert, *Fleeting Cities: imperial expositions in fin-de-siècle Europe* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

The View from Above

Scholars of the British Empire Exhibition frequently cite Virginia Woolf as the purveyor of exclusive insight in her commentary on the exhibition's representational inconsistencies in the critical essay "Thunder at Wembley," published in 1924. For instance, Scott Cohen writes that Woolf's piece "confronts the spectacle of empire, revealing specific problems of representation that become of increasing concern to metropolitan modernist authors."¹⁸ In particular, he sees Woolf as establishing a critical geography that explores "the flexibility of the subject position of the writer as observer" in response to the exhibition's act of totalization in its "attempts to create a narrative of empire...that positions its crowds as both characters and readers."¹⁹ Kurt Koenigsberger similarly reads "Thunder at Wembley" as expressing Woolf's "critique of the Exhibition's economy of realism." This economy, argues Koenigsberger, "posits the world as a sociospatial totality that can be observed by a disengaged spectator without entailing a loss of meaning or entangling the subject with the world as object."²⁰ Though they differ in some specifics, both critics see Woolf as pressing against the fallacy of total representation embodied by the exhibition in her search of a new form of literary expression.

Her essay in question begins with the idea that nature resists transformation at the British Empire Exhibition. Whereas even moths and leaves had become magical for Woolf in the lighting and close quarters of the Earl's Court and White City exhibitions, she finds that the trees and thrushes remain too much themselves in the massive space of Wembley. While initially this

¹⁸ Scott Cohen, "The Empire from the Street: Virginia Woolf, Wembley, and Imperial Monuments," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 50, no. 1 (2004): 87.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

²⁰ Kurt Koenigsberger, "Virginia Woolf and the Empire Exhibition of 1924: Modernism, Excess, and the Verandahs of Realism," in *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place*, ed. Anna Snaith and Michael H. Whitworth (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 100.

seems like a criticism of the “mediocrity” of nature in comparison to the staged spectacle of the exhibition, her sudden shift of attention to the visitors causes a corresponding shift in opinion:

They pass quietly, silently, in coveys, in groups, sometimes alone. They mount the enormous staircases; they stand in queues to have their spectacles rectified gratis; to have their foundation-pens filled gratis; they gaze respectfully into sacks of grain; glance reverently at mowing machines from Canada; now and again stoop to remove some paper bag or banana skin and place it in the receptacles provided for that purpose at frequent intervals along the avenues (170).

In this passage, Woolf’s list purposefully fails to differentiate between different types of engagement with the exhibition: whether they are seeing sacks of grain or not seeing as they await adjustments to spectacles, the visitors’ actions accumulate without order or narrative. Despite the wide array of active verbs used in the excerpt, the people seem to operate automatically as they pass, mount, stand, gaze, and glance their way through the Exhibition.

This sense of detachment builds as the passage continues:

Can it be that one is seeing human beings for the first time? In streets they hurry; in houses they talk; they are bankers in banks; sell shoes in shops. Here against the enormous background of ferro-concrete Britain, of rosy Burma, at large, unoccupied, they reveal themselves simply as human beings, creatures of leisure, civilisation, and dignity; a little languid perhaps, a little attenuated, but a product to be proud of. (TW 170)

Immediately, however, Woolf recasts this perspective by noting that “this cynical reflection, at once so chill and superior, was made, of course, by the thrush” (TW 170). Suddenly, the previous observations have been pitched, literally, into the realm of a bird’s-eye-view. Once introduced, this secondary perspective, of the uninvited visitor with the unwelcome observations, continues to color the account. The point-of-view creates a form of double vision that opens the narrator’s eyes at ground level to the “ordinary grass, scattered with petals, harbouring insects” and while airborne on a ride to a woman who “comes out and wrings a dish-cloth in her backyard” outside the grounds (TW 170). When a storm breaks out and with it chaos, Woolf depicts a sodden, windswept empire, cracking apart in the lightning and “perishing” in the rain, “For that is what

comes of letting in the sky” (TW 171). “The natural world trumps the constructed colonial world,” as Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina puts it.²¹ Within the linguistic space Woolf has constructed, nature’s refusal to be subordinated to the exhibition’s contained imperial representation exposes the frailty of Empire itself.

Fellow visitors come off poorly in Woolf’s account. She uses language resembling that of a children’s book (“In streets they hurry; in houses they talk; they are bankers in banks; sell shoes in shops”), rendering them faceless and slotted into place. Attributing the critical eye of judgment and observation to the thrush, Woolf diminishes the exhibition’s patrons into objects in motion being observed. Scholars give different interpretations of Woolf’s critique. While Cohen claims that the exhibition presses visitors into being “both character and reader,” Koenigsberger suggests that the problem lies in the displays forcing visitors into the role of “disengaged spectator,” overlooking the fundamental reality of their engagement with the material world. In both cases, however, the critics see Woolf as exposing the representational contradictions of Wembley by virtue of exercising an omniscient authorial gaze.

Within the context of the cultural production surrounding the British Empire Exhibition, both official and not, Woolf’s thematization of fracture in “Thunder at Wembley” stands out less as a penetrating critique than a symptomatic response. As I will show, this exposition casually combined multiple forms of representation and encouraged visitors to navigate seamlessly between them. Though not without its problems, this continuity between different perspectives reframes the modulation between human and avian points of view that Woolf’s essay privileges. Rather than the sole purview of the Modernist revolutionary, this capacity to mark and negotiate dissonance characterized many responses to the exhibition at Wembley.

²¹ Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, “Virginia Woolf, Performing Race,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, ed. Maggie Humm (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 85.

In reconsidering Woolf's status as an exceptional critic of Wembley and Empire, this reading of the British Empire Exhibition reevaluates the role of exhibition culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For instance, in assessing the "exhibition mania" of the nineteenth century, Peter Hoffenberg assigns agency to exhibition patrons but argues that their participation offered "a new strategy of socialization" that reinforced the social order by serving as a gentler complement to military and economic violence.²² Much like Woolf, Hoffenberg suggests in his "soft diplomacy" account of exhibitions that visitors were themselves on display but that they essentially conformed to the overarching vision.

In contrast, Timothy Mitchell sees a "clear distinction between visitor and exhibit" but argues that world's fairs reframed the outside world which the exhibits referenced by smoothing over "a contradiction...between the need to separate oneself from the world and render it up as an object of representation, and the desire to lose oneself within this object-world and experience it directly."²³ While he differs from Woolf in maintaining a separation between the viewer and the viewed, he too seems to negate the possibility of simultaneous immersion and reflection. Mitchell suggests that world's fairs operated on principle of absolute "discernibility, between a representation and the original object or idea to which it refers,"²⁴ echoing Woolf's implication in "Thunder at Wembley" that moths and leaves must be either magical or mundane.

Both Hoffenberg and Mitchell present exhibition visitors with an evacuated form of agency. For Hoffenberg, visitors interact of their own volition with each other and with their environment but in so doing merely cement national and colonial ideologies. Mitchell similarly questions what he considers the naturalized clarity of expositions, which forces exhibition

²² Peter H. Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display : English, Indian and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) xiii, 28. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 1 June 2017.

²³ Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 27.

²⁴ Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 172.

visitors to interpret within defined limits, though he aligns with Kurt Koenigsberger in strictly establishing the visitor as viewer. Interpreted in this light, exhibitions promoted ways of thinking about the world so powerful and pervasive that few ever stepped out of the prescribed line.

By pushing back against a reading of the exhibition as totalizing monolith, my methodology draws inspiration from the work of scholars such as Antoinette Burton. In her recent book, *The Trouble with Empire*, Burton resists the traditional “rise and fall” history of the British Empire by arguing that it was continuously troubled by imperial dissent, even during the purported heights of its power.²⁵ Such an approach seeks to give more credit to the average individual, leveling out the tendency in historical accounts to assign the capacity for critical distance and subversive action to only a select few. Moreover, it leaves room for inconsistency within the narrative space of empire that the exhibition represents, allowing visitors various entry points into considering the limits of their subscription into the imperial project.

Food Uncontained

Though “Thunder at Wembley” suggests a flattened experience of the grounds, visitors to the British Empire Exhibition moved constantly in and out of spaces that operated under different rules of referentiality. Food serves as a fitting frame for exploring these representations because it spilled across categorical and physical boundaries throughout the exposition, becoming incorporated into the experiences and stomachs of visitors in myriad ways. Attending to the array of physical matter and visual material that patrons digested during their trips thus reveals the manifold ways in which the exposition sought to create corporeally imbricated subjects of the

²⁵ Antoinette Burton, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

British Empire while also suggesting the ways in which the system of representation undercut itself.

A book classifying the exhibits, published a year before the opening of Wembley, gives early indication of the exhibition's heterogeneous strategy of coverage. Outlining the exhibition plan, organizers divided the exhibits into ten sections covering food; manufacturing; raw materials; communications and transport; machinery; manufacture; city planning, interior decoration, and landscaping; science, art, and education; the military; and colonization. The section on "Food of the Empire" split the exhibit into five categories, which were then subdivided further:

Group I. Agriculture:

- Production
- Vegetable Food
- Animal Food
- Wild Crops

Group II. Horticulture

- Kitchen Garden Plants
- Fruit Trees and Fruit
- Greenhouse Plants
- Horticultural and Nursery Seeds and Stock
- Bees and Their Products

Group III. Wine-Growing

- Cultivation of the Vine

Group IV. Fisheries

- Fish Food

Group V. Food Products and Beverages

- Farinaceous Products and Their Derivatives
- Bread and Pastry
- Preserved Meat, Fish, Vegetables, Fruit and Milk
- Sugar and Confectionary; Condiments and Relishes
- Wines and Wine Brandies
- Syrups and Liqueurs; Spirits
- Miscellaneous Beverages.²⁶

Some of these divisions make sense: splitting fisheries from land-based agriculture, for instance.

²⁶ *The British Empire Exhibition (1924), Incorporated. Wembley Park, London: April to October, 1924* [Classification of Exhibits] (London, 1924?), 8-10. Brent Archives, British Empire Exhibition Collection, WHS/0/1/5/54.

However, many of the categories overlap: “Vegetable Food” might well fit under “Horticulture” just as easily as “Agriculture,” which is the main section for unprocessed food. Similarly, “Wines and Wine Brandies” remains oddly separate from the highly specific demarcation of Group III, “Wine-Growing.” Some sections have five or seven sub-categories; others have just one.

Moreover, this typology of foods does not map directly onto the actual exhibit spaces found inside the exhibition. Rather, food displays were split up into two main types. On a centralized level, the Palace of Industry contained one large section—80 stalls—wholly dedicated to food.²⁷ Declared the most interesting part of the Palace by the *Official Guide to the Exhibition*,²⁸ the “Food, Beverages, and Tobacco” displays covered 43,000 feet.²⁹ Among its attractions included “a mechanical baking-plant at work, and a host of machines busily manufacturing chocolates, confectionery, and biscuits.”³⁰

Food was also integrated into other areas of exhibition dispersed throughout the grounds, particularly the Pavilions and buildings featuring specific geographical regions. The Zanzibar Court featured displays about the clove, of which “Zanzibar produces ninety per cent. of the world’s supply,”³¹ as well as dozens of varieties of rice.³² The Newfoundland Pavilion demonstrated the cod liver oil manufacturing process³³ and the Cypriot Pavilion delighted visitors with “honey and native cheese, liqueurs and spirits, including the famous Cyprus brandy and certain liqueurs made from exotic fruits,”³⁴ while the Ceylon display celebrated the region’s

²⁷ *The British Empire Exhibition, 1924, etc.* [Official Catalogue] (London: Fleetway Press, 1924) 82-86. British Library 7960.df.14.

²⁸ Lawrence, ed., *Official Guide to the British Empire Exhibition*, 39.

²⁹ *The Marlborough Pocket Guide to the Empire Exhibition at Wembley*, 9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

³¹ Lawrence, ed., *Official Guide to the British Empire Exhibition*, 83.

³² *Ibid.*, 84.

³³ *The Marlborough Pocket Guide to the Empire Exhibition at Wembley*, 14.

³⁴ Lawrence, ed., *Official Guide to the British Empire Exhibition*, 92.

production of rubber and tea.³⁵

Frequently, the lengthier descriptions of these regional displays further highlight the porosity of boundaries and representational levels. For instance, the *Official Guide to the Exhibition*, gives this description of the Uganda section in the East Africa Pavilion:

Cotton is, of course, the chief exhibit in the Uganda section, though agriculture, forestry and native crafts play their important part. The Department of Agriculture issues cotton seed free of charge to the natives for the better development of this industry, and it is interesting to note among such agricultural products as haricot, maize, millet, groundnut and rice, the simsim from which oil is produced, and the soya bean, which is in itself a complete food. Tribal relics include head and arm ornaments.³⁶

The three-sentence paragraph slips from one topic to another. Though it leads off with cotton and the government's work in promoting the industry, the subject switches partway through the second sentence with the help of a misleading "and" that suggests continuity. It only becomes clear belatedly that the writer does not intend to return to cotton, but has shifted into edible agriculture. A catalog embedded within a subordinate clause ("it is interesting to note among such agricultural products as haricot, maize, millet, groundnut and rice...") disguises the abrupt move to simsim [sesame seeds] and soya beans. A final comment on tribal relics sits disjointedly at the end of the paragraph, with even less relation to the sentences preceding it.

The writing here shifts in and out of different representational modes, at times talking about the displays and at other times about Uganda itself. In this passage, the oscillation between modes manifests most clearly in the treatment of cotton, which zooms in from detached observations about the focus of the display ("Cotton is, of course, the chief exhibit...") to direct, reportage-style information about the availability of governmental assistance ("The Department of Agriculture issues cotton seed free of charge..."), as if the narrator falls through a portal into

³⁵ Ibid., 98.

³⁶ Lawrence, ed., *Official Guide to the British Empire Exhibition*, 83.

the geographical subject of the exhibit partway through the explanation. Guidebooks frequently reinforced this slipperiness by laying out the different regions represented in the British Empire Exhibit as if visitors were traveling to these locations abroad—for instance, by listing details about the area and population of the region at the top of each section.³⁷

Reading through the text of these guides, the viewer moves through several personas as the implied audience continuously changes. This representational mobility contravenes the absolute discernibility that Timothy Mitchell asserts as a central feature of exhibitionary spaces, suggesting that visitor engagement operated under more complex principles.

Commerce and Consumption

The visitor's point of view in relation to the Wembley displays was further complicated when eating entered the equation. As Jane Bennett has observed, eating functions “as a series of mutual transformations in which the border between inside and outside becomes blurry.”³⁸ A boundary-dissolving process by nature, the act of ingestion undertaken at the exhibition further dissolved the differences between tourists, consumers, and citizens.

Food was a central feature in the day of any visitor who had made, at minimum, the ten-mile trek from London to see the grounds. In 1924, the Exhibition's first year, concessions were run by the Lyons Company and included two spaces capable of seating a thousand each, as well as several restaurants cafes, “varying from 350 to 750 in capacity, serv[ing] light luncheons and

³⁷ Ibid.,83.

³⁸ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2010), 49.

dinners.”³⁹ Promotional materials claimed that 25,000 guests could be fed at a time.⁴⁰ In 1925, food service was further expanded and decentralized, with over twenty catering companies being engaged (Figure 18). Added options included several “Quick Lunch Buffets” in the Palaces of Industry and of Housing and Transport, a special catering hall for large groups, a fancy Stadium restaurant overlooking the exhibition, and distinctive dining venues organized by ten of the Dominions and Colonies “to emphasise the special products of their respective countries.”⁴¹

Guidebooks extolled these dining facilities as a way in which savvy visitors could increase their access to the exhibition. For instance, though the grounds normally did not open until 10 a.m. from Monday through Saturday, “A special dispensation...was granted to Breakfast parties of excursionists where arrangements had been made with the caterers in advance.”⁴² Even regular patrons could make the most of their visit by taking advantage of the dining options to facilitate an uninterrupted trip: “Another convenient feature of the restaurants,” wrote the *Daily News Souvenir Guide*,

is that they are attached in many cases to the various palaces and pavilions...Both the Palace of Industry and the Palace of Engineering have their own restaurants and cafes, so that, after a morning spent in sight-seeing in either of these places, there is no long tramp for something to eat.⁴³

Rather than visitors needing to go out of their way to seek out food, the guidebooks assured them that options would be available wherever they turned, allowing them to focus on taking everything in.

³⁹ *Daily News Souvenir Guide to the British Empire Exhibition. Concise “Where is it” index and complete train, tram and bus guide* (London: Daily News, 1924), 30. Brent Archives, British Empire Exhibition Collection, WHS/0/1/5/41.

⁴⁰ *British Empire Exhibition, 1924: Wembley, London, April-October: Handbook of General Information*, [London?: [s.n., 1924], 40. British Library YD.2007.a.9700.

⁴¹ Lawrence, ed., *Official Guide to the British Empire Exhibition*, 115.

⁴² “The British Empire Exhibition (1924), Incorporated,” 16. Brent Archives, British Empire Exhibition Collection, WHS/0/1/7/17.

⁴³ *Daily News Souvenir Guide*, 30.

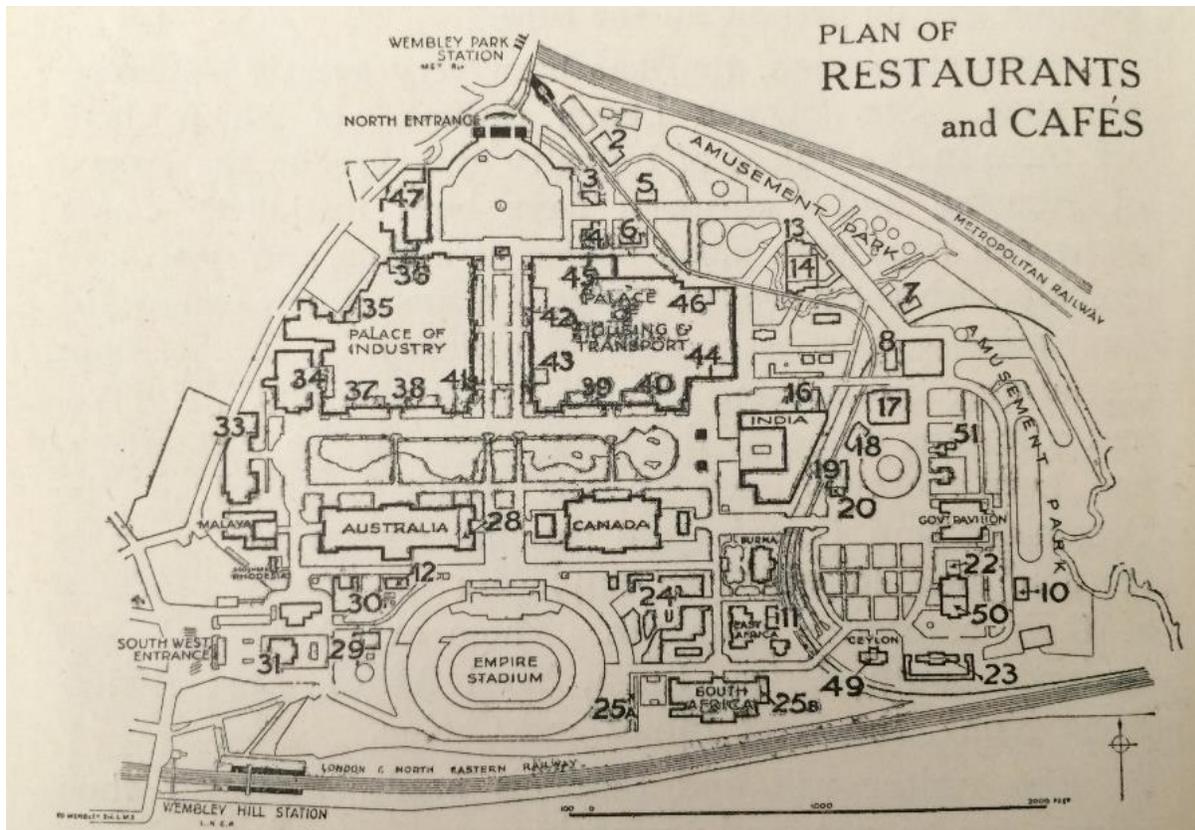


Figure 18: “Plan of Restaurants and Cafés” in *The Official Guide to the British Empire Exhibition* (1925).⁴⁴

However, dining was also made continuous with touring not just in terms of maximally efficient pathways but also thematically. While food had its own place in the exhibition plan, its presence also spilled beyond these confined areas into many other formal and informal components of the exhibition. The Australian Pavilion, for instance, exhibit areas blended in and out of concessionary spaces:

In a gallery at one end will be an Australian restaurant, where practically the whole of the foodstuffs used will be of Australian production—bread, fruit, butter and meat—and where only Australian wines will be served...A great cold storage will be shown along with Australian refrigerated products, such as butter, meat, eggs and poultry.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ “Plan of Restaurants and Cafés,” Lawrence, ed., *Official Guide to the British Empire Exhibition*, 116.

⁴⁵ *British Empire Exhibition, Wembley, London April-Oct 1924* (London: British Empire Exhibition, 1924), n.p. British

Among the features of this refrigerated display case was a diorama featuring the cricketer Jack Hobbs carved in butter—competing, as it were, with the two butter carvings (both of the Prince of Wales) in the Canadian Pavilion.⁴⁶

At the bakery, visitors could watch Australian goods being made and procure them as well. As the *Daily News* guide to the exhibition noted, “Women should not miss the Australian bakery, where every step in bread and cake making can be followed.”⁴⁷ One specific feature was being able to watch as Australian apples, “second to none in the world,” being “baked on the spot” and offered for sale “as they come from the oven.”⁴⁸ Such setups abounded: Cyprus sponsored a kiosk selling citrus fruits, for example, while Trinidad and Tobago’s section of the exhibition contained a chocolate lounge where visitors could not only enjoy refreshment but procure drinking or eating chocolate, “attractively presented for custom,” as gifts guaranteed to “make fresh friends.”⁴⁹

The presence of several region-specific restaurants offered still more immersive options for dining. The Chinese restaurant inside the replica of a Hong Kong street, for instance, was one of the most popular features of the 1924 Exhibition, leading to expansions in 1925. In addition to enlarging the entrance, “Entirely new furniture has been imported, and the new cooks from Hong Kong have brought additional recipes with them to add to those that found favour in 1924.”⁵⁰ Over 150 British Chinese workers lived on the grounds through the entire Exhibition of 1925, and “in order to make Hong Kong still more Chinese than it was last year, instructions have been

Library BL W65/8396.

⁴⁶ “Souvenir Pictures, 1925,” Item 2, n.p. [Miscellaneous Illustrated Exhibition Catalogs], British Library X.802/3535.

⁴⁷ *Daily News Souvenir Guide*, 44.

⁴⁸ Lawrence, ed., *Official Guide to the British Empire Exhibition*, 61-2.

⁴⁹ Lawrence, ed., *Official Guide to the British Empire Exhibition*, 89.

⁵⁰ *The Marlborough Pocket Guide to the Empire Exhibition at Wembley*, 100.

issued that native dress is to be retained.”⁵¹

The West Indies Pavilion similarly tried to make its service staff a draw, and also did so problematically: “Blue Mountain Coffee and much appetising fare identified with Jamaica is served by an attendant in native costume, while a negro mixer of cocktails is to be found in the North Porch.”⁵² The Indian Pavilion took things one step further, touting not only the “true Indian style” in which the restaurant had been designed,⁵³ but emphasizing the presence of “an entrance into the restaurant from the Chandni Chauk bazaar street, so that no touch of the West need intervene between the visitor who has been exploring the bazaar and the restaurant in which he takes his ease.”⁵⁴ Similar assertions accompany the descriptions of other areas of the Exhibition, assuring patrons that the restaurant environments would represent the height of authenticity.

As a medium for as well as a subject of exposition, food illustrated the difficulty of

⁵¹ *Ibid.* This was a response to the disappointment in 1924 that the shops were staffed by “bland Chinamen, not in the pigtail and flowing robes of the so-called heathen Chinese, but in irreproachable lounge suits, speaking creditable English.” (See *Daily News Souvenir Guide*, 55.) The next year, the *Illustrated London News* featured a photo essay on the “distant and dusky” imperial subjects to be seen at the Exhibition, including a picture of a Chinese man fitting the “pigtail and flowing robes” description, with the following caption below him: “From Hong-Kong: A Typical Young Chinaman in National Dress at Wembley, Cigarette at Hand.” (See “Subject of the King from Many Climes at Wembley: Picturesque Types at the British Empire Exhibition,” 935.) The article seems oblivious to the irony of the man’s not-so-Chinese prop or the fact that the queue had been abolished in China ever since the Revolution that brought down the Qing Dynasty in 1911. (See Bickers, *Britain in China*, 51.)

⁵² Lawrence, ed., *Official Guide to the British Empire Exhibition*, 89.

⁵³ Though all the restaurants and cafes were centrally organized in 1924, in 1925 many regions coordinated their own catering. The food at the Indian Pavilion was provided by E.P. Veeraswamy (sometimes spelled Veerasawmy), who later became proprietor of one of the first Indian restaurants in the United Kingdom. Veeraswamy was the alter ego of an Anglo-Indian man named Edward Palmer. Palmer wrote and worked under the fictive persona of Veeraswamy, supposedly as an Indian man who traveled to England as a medical student but eventually abandoned his studies to pursue his love of food. While the Indian food at the British Empire Exhibition was widely touted as being highly authentic, the story behind Edward Palmer’s fictionalized persona raises fascinating questions about what it means to represent a culture authentically and who has the authority to do so. See E. P. Veerasawmy, *Indian cookery for use in all countries, by E.P. Veerasawmy, gold medalist: Indian Catering Advisor to the Indian Government, British Empire Exhibition, Wembley, 1924-5. Founder of Veerasawmy & Co., Indian Food Specialists, 1896, and of Veerasawmy's India Restaurant, 1926-30* (London: Arco Publishers, 1955). Huntington Library 640291.

⁵⁴ Lawrence, ed., *Official Guide to the British Empire Exhibition*, 75.

breaking down the components of empire into clean and distinct categories, shading the line between the didactic and the commercial. Visitors were presented with a panoply of things to see but also enjoined to perform variegated acts in response—learning Australian cake-making techniques, sitting on a veranda to sip Ceylon tea and Turkish coffee, and loading up on Trinidadian chocolate bars to carry home. Rather than calling for passive gawking, the exhibition encouraged its patrons to participate as eating, drinking, active consumers of empire capable of negotiating a suitable path through the exhibition’s myriad forms of representation.

Placing

To help orient visitors to their multiple positionalities in relation to the literal and figurative spaces—near and far, concrete and abstract—simultaneously set in play at Wembley, a wide range of maps were produced for and incorporated into the exposition. On the broadest level, of course, the British Empire Exhibition was itself a map of the world, one that offered an immersive and interactive experience to its “readers.” As the earlier sections have shown, however, smaller maps also existed within this larger representation, covering their slice of empire with vying perspectives, scopes, and scales.

Those who wanted to take in the whole at a glance could make their way to the Government Pavilion, where a map of the world measuring 20 by 40 feet was spread out on the floor before visitors. A relief map illuminated in several colors, it contained “little steamers...hurrying along the seaways of Empire.”⁵⁵ For children and pedagogical enthusiasts, the Board of Education also put together “a small, but significant exhibit showing how the school formed a link of the Empire, how the Empire history and geography were taught, how children

⁵⁵ Knight and Sabey, *The Lion Roars at Wembley*, 18.

corresponded with other parts of the British Empire, and how Empire Day was celebrated,” accompanied by “a working illustration of the sun trying in vain to set on the British Empire.”⁵⁶

These imperial visualizations appeared even in the Amusement Park, where exhibition-goers could see The Globe, measuring 50 feet across and featuring “illuminated trade routes of the world, lighthouses, reefs and islands.”⁵⁷ In the Palace of Housing and Transport, exhibits reproduced Britain’s system of ports and waterways as prime evidence of the importance held by London, Liverpool, and other British metropolises in worldwide tourism and trade.⁵⁸ A model of the Bristol port, for instance, displayed “65 acres of docks...and storage space for a quarter of a million tons of goods,” including bananas and grain.⁵⁹ Smaller local maps were also on display within specific colonial pavilions. For example, the Hong Kong pavilion had several model maps of various parts of the colony, including a 20 foot by 15 foot relief model of the island and several models of the British dockyards in Kowloon and Quarry Bay.⁶⁰ Finally, a plethora of official and non-official paper maps were produced of various sizes. These included a promotional poster map designed by Thomas Derrick and Edmund Bawden for London Transport and various guidebook inserts—such as the “Plan of Restaurants and Cafes” from the *Official Guide* that was discussed earlier (Figure 18).

However, the folding map that Kenneth S. North designed for visitors to the Exhibition best encapsulates Wembley’s compression of multiple forms of representation into a single space (Figure 19). Many visitors to the British Empire Exhibition would have received or encountered

⁵⁶ Ibid., 21

⁵⁷ Ibid., 92.

⁵⁸ Lawrence, ed., *Official Guide to the British Empire Exhibition*, 49.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 49.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 56.

the official folding map, a color lithograph designed by North in 1923.⁶¹ In the map, the Exhibition grounds and exhibition spaces are rendered primarily in an ichnographic projection, in which the viewer looks straight down from up high. However, the carousel and a few umbrella-topped stands appear in oblique perspective, emerging from the flat floor plan in three dimensions.

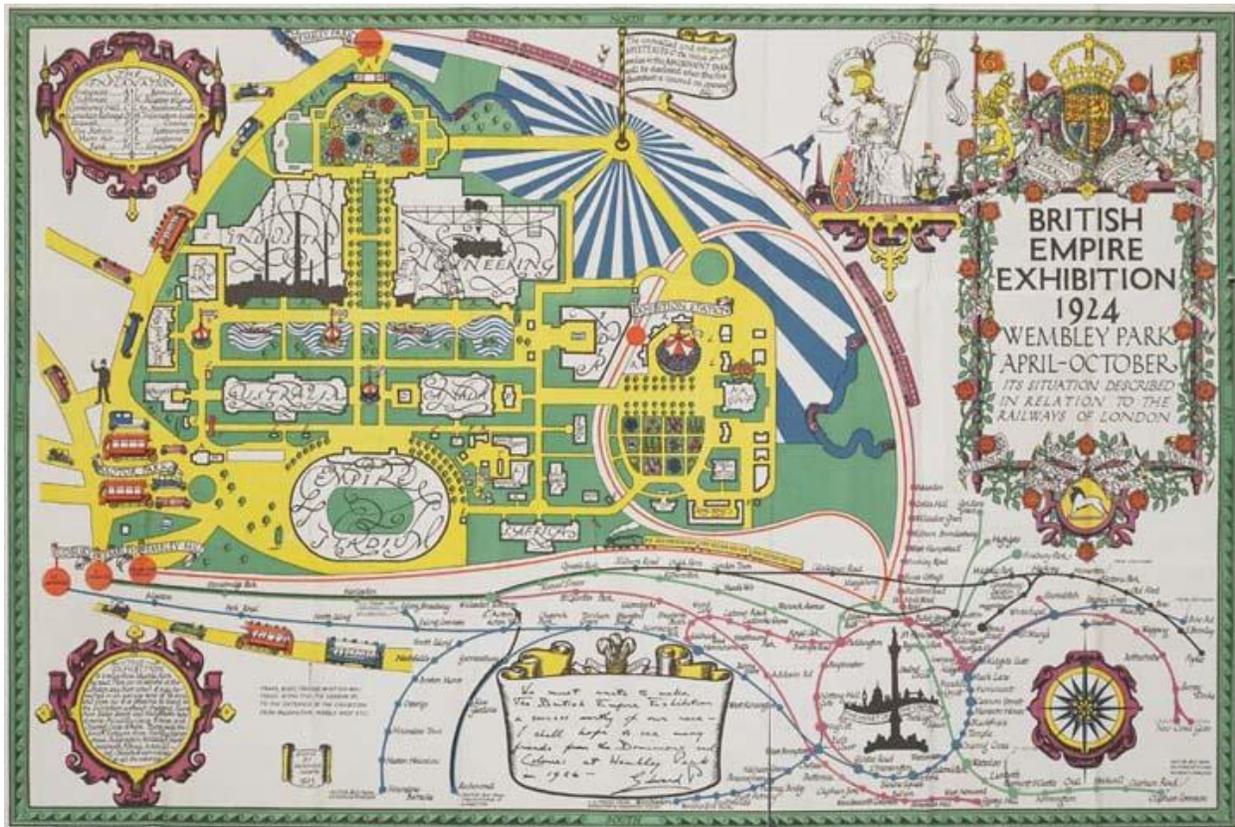


Figure 19: Kenneth S. North, Official Map for the British Empire Exhibition (1923). Color Lithograph, 29.5 x 19.5 inches. Credit: Museum of London, 83.819/4.

Meanwhile, trains, open-top buses, and cars zoom in profile. In one instance, traffic is

⁶¹ Bill Tonkin, "1924 British Empire Exhibition Maps," Exhibition Study Group, 2003, Web, 9 Dec 2012. The original is held by the Victoria and Albert Museum, museum number E.386-1924.

directed by an outsized policeman towering over the vehicles arrayed at the west entrance. Britannia looks down at the exposition from a perch welded to the rail line, facing the viewer but at a 120° angle from the railroad tracks that run in profile view. Meanwhile, the triangular space of Wembley itself is drawn into the embrace of several colored lines from the London Underground that emanate, octopus-like, from an iconic silhouette of the city featuring Nelson's Column in Trafalgar's Square in the bottom right corner of the map. Red dots, significantly larger than those on the rest of the compressed tube map, identify the five stops available to visitors arriving by rail: Wembley, Wembley Park, Wembley Hill, Sudbury, and the purpose-built Exhibition Station. Prefiguring Harry Beck's 1931 diagrammatic London Tube map that is the precursor to the one used today,⁶² this minimalist representation of London's transportational infrastructure in the bottom right of North's map stands in contrast to both the saturated geometry in the bird's-eye view of the exhibition grounds as well as traditional cartographical elements like the compass rose and ornate cartouches nestled among the tentacles of railway lines.

Kenneth North's map would have been the main guide used by most visitors in their journey through the space of the British Empire Exhibition, and its chaotic fusion of different perspectives, scales, and artistic styles—from the heraldic to the modern—encapsulates the ways in which visitors were optimistically enjoined to participate in juggling several simultaneous forms of representation. The twenty-four sections of the map as a whole folded down into a pocket-sized 6.75 by 3.75 inches, allowing visitors to grasp, at least in the physical sense, the amalgamated offerings of the British Empire all at once.

⁶² Claire Dobbin, *London Underground Maps; art, design and cartography* (Farnham; Burlington: Lund Humphries in association with London Transport Museum, 2012), 66-68.

Eating for Empire

Like the official map by Kenneth S. North, the British Empire Exhibition offered multiple ways for visitors to orient themselves within the space of Wembley, which was both a simulacrum of different facets of empire and a physical space in and of itself. As they moved through the palaces and pavilions, visitors were continuously re-situated within and in relation to the British Empire.

This positioning also served as a form of iterative practice, moving the bodies of visitors through acts and spaces in anticipation of future activity. As the *Marlborough Pocket Guide* to the exhibition observed,

In formulating their plans for this great display of Empire resources, the promoters have had in view three main objects, which may be summarized as follows:

To find, in the development and utilisation of the raw materials of the Empire, new sources of wealth.

To foster inter-imperial trade, and open fresh world markets for Dominion and Home products.

To bring the different races of the British Empire into closer and more intimate association, and to demonstrate to the people of Great Britain the almost illimitable possibilities of the Dominions, Colonies, and Dependencies overseas.⁶³

The majority of these objectives spill beyond the temporal endpoint of the Exhibition. From fostering trade and opening markets to demonstrating “illimitable possibilities,” Wembley also sought to nudge visitors into place within a vision of the future operation of the British Empire.

As one foray toward these ends, the Empire Marketing Board published a booklet entitled “A Calendar of The Fruits and Vegetables of Empire” that encouraged homemakers to support the work of the empire by buying produce shipped in from overseas.⁶⁴ “There is not a day in the

⁶³ *The Marlborough Pocket Guide to the Empire Exhibition at Wembley*, 1-2.

⁶⁴ The Empire Marketing Board, *A Calendar of the Fruits and Vegetables of Empire* (London: Waterlow & Sons, [c. 1924]), Brent Archives, British Empire Exhibition Collection, WHS/0/1/12/56. Subsequent references to page

year when fruit from some part of the overseas Empire is not on sale in the home shops,” the booklet declared in the introduction (iv). In addition to informing the consumer of the produce in season for every month of the year, the calendar included suggested recipes for those bewildered by the choices, further prescribing activity. Purchasing these fruits and vegetables was presented as an act of patriotism as well as self-cultivation:

So every housewife who sets herself actively to seek out Empire produce in the shops and, if its price and quality are satisfactory, to buy it, is not merely doing well by her own family, she is also doing well by her own country and by the Empire of which it is part...Be guided by it in your shopping, and you will find that a new interest has been added to the art of housekeeping (iv).

Paralleling the perspectival shifts that recur throughout Wembley’s exhibition spaces, the passage moves partway through from the third person “her” to the second person “you.” The author nests concentric spheres of ownership and influence available to the reader: the self, the family, the country, the empire. In presenting a model of mutual benefit—the housewife gaining a new level of engagement with her work through the calendrical variety of offerings now available to her while the British Empire forges closer ties through a deepened trading relationship—the booklet suggests a happily tightening loop of imperial intimacy.

While “A Calendar of the Fruits and Vegetables Empire” suggests that bringing the right produce home could be an effective act of imperial piety, the emphasis on foreign foodstuffs also had a second component emphasizing the redistribution of bodies in relation to sources of food. This particular booklet only refers to the topic elliptically. After mentioning that “The men and women who have grown [your patriotic produce] and packed it and brought it to you over the water are British citizens,” the author remarks, “The countries in which they live...are the great

numbers will occur directly within the text.

world markets of the future” (iv). This shift from present wants to future needs was addressed more directly in the Oversea Settlement Gallery, designed to convince citizens of Great Britain that fairer pastures awaited in the far-flung colonies. The book published to accompany the display elaborated at length on the disparity between the respective sizes of the agricultural industries and the populations in the United Kingdom and its Dominions. “Great Britain has become mainly a country of secondary production,” the opening intones ominously, “based upon its large primary output of coal and iron, and certain other minerals. The primary production of food, however, supplies less than half of the requirements of the population.”⁶⁵ Illustrations highlighted Great Britain’s reliance on outside sources for everything from meat to sugar, dried fruit, and canned goods by using scaled representations of the foodstuff in question to demonstrate the insufficiency of internal production (Figure 20).

While the Exhibition ostensibly celebrated citizens from across the British Empire, the Oversea Settlement Gallery in the British Government Pavilion addressed itself to a more limited audience. The walls of the gallery were covered with a frieze showing “the inequality of distribution of the white population, the sources of the food supplies of the United Kingdom, and the direction of the disposal of the produce and manufactures of the United Kingdom.”⁶⁶ In the pamphlet published to accompany the exhibit, the author called on these citizens to bring the system back into supposed balance: “In the vast natural resources of the Dominions overseas are contained enough Real Things to serve the needs of many times the present population of the British Empire. The land is there, the wealth is there, but the people are not there.”⁶⁷ A page later,

⁶⁵ *The British Empire Exhibition Oversea Settlement Gallery*, Wembley 1924, [c. 1924], 10. Brent Archives, British Empire Exhibition Collection, WHS/0/1/5/22.

⁶⁶ British Government Pavilion, *Empire Settlement, Past, Present and Future. Including the Guide to the Oversea Settlement Gallery* [London, 1925], 6. British Library BL 7960.d.f.26.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

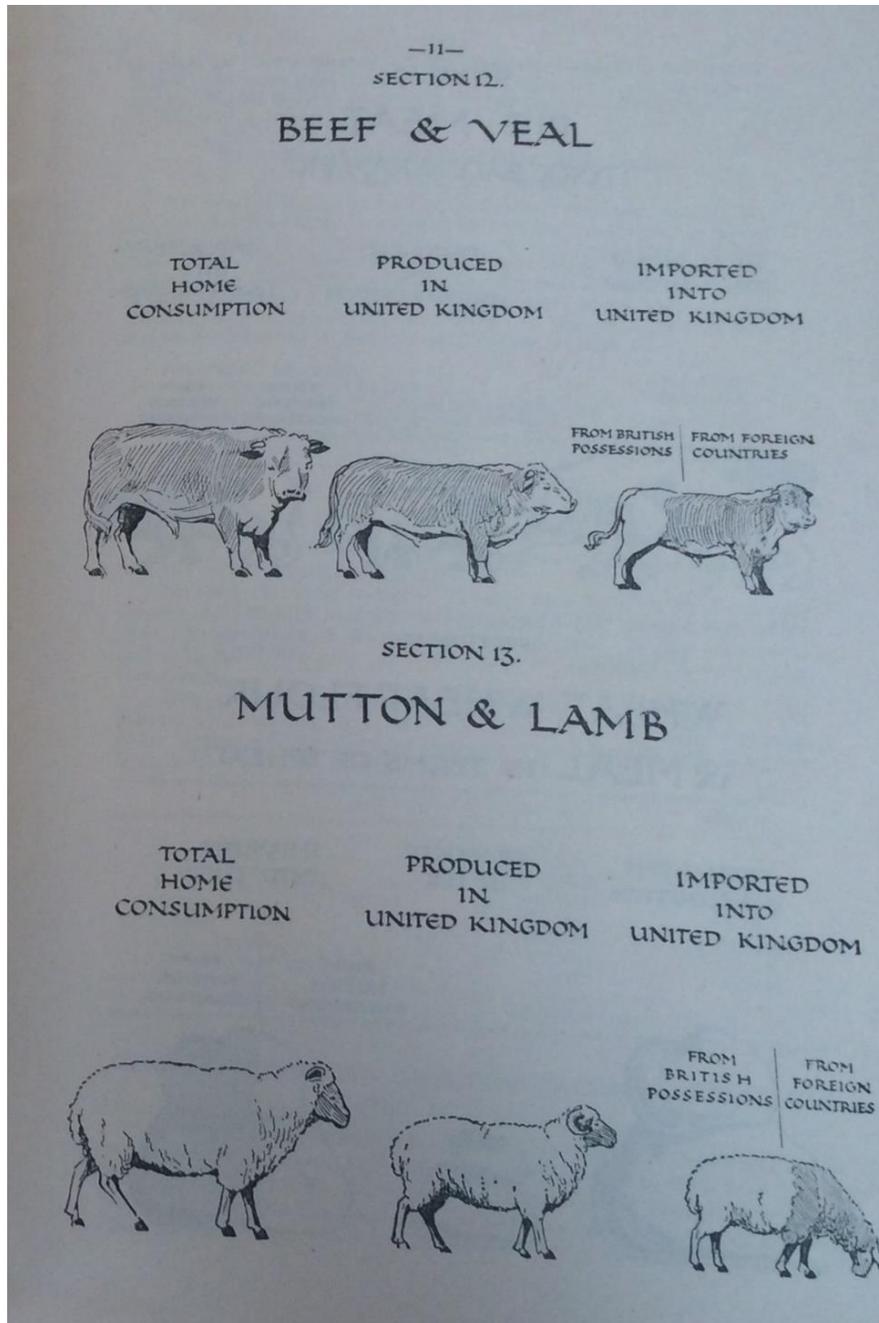


Figure 20: Illustrations of Meat Consumption, Production, and Import from a Guide to the Oversea Settlement Gallery (c.1924). Credit: Brent Archives.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ *The British Empire Exhibition Oversea Settlement Gallery, Wembley, 1924* [Exhibit Guide]. Brent Archives, British Empire Exhibition Collection, WHS/0/1/5/22.

the writer adds, “The area which remains for cultivation by white labour is immense.”⁶⁹ The indicative slippage between “the people” and “the white population” happens throughout the pamphlet,⁷⁰ as the writer outlines the effect on the war on normal immigration to the Dominions and Colonies, and, as a result, on populations and food supply.

Writing two years before the exhibition opened, British writer Austin Harris had penned an essay on the exhibition making a similar argument, though without the benefit of visuals. When contemplating the shortfall of agricultural production within Great Britain, Harris wrote, “our thoughts almost instinctively turn to that vast exploitable field known as the Empire, which still remains largely untapped, almost ludicrously unpopulated, the natural nursery and reservoir of all our wants.”⁷¹ According to Harris, the exhibition must “prove that the Empire can grow everything and that, as such, it should be a completely self-contained and self-supporting unit, as independent of the European market as is America, and as flourishing.”⁷² Much as in the mapping projects that the exhibition inspired and aspired to, the model that Harris invokes is that of a fully independent and completely functional system, one that does not need the rest of the non-British world. Troping the empire as a “field,” “nursery,” and “reservoir,” Harris conflates natural resources with what he presents as a natural course of action. As with the Oversea Settlement Gallery pamphlet circulated during the exposition, only certain British subjects are visible to Harris. To modern ears, his choice of the word “exploitable” feels disturbingly apropos.

Explaining the century-long course of events that necessitated these strategies, the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁷⁰ Though not phrased as explicitly in racial terms, the organizers of the Australian Pavilion articulated a similar sentiment: “What Australia needs beyond all things is British settlers....Those responsible for the display wish to attract both the right types of British migrant and the right types of British inventor.” See Lawrence, ed., *Official Guide to the British Empire Exhibition*, 62.

⁷¹ Harris, “The British Empire Exhibition, 1924,” n.p.

⁷² Ibid.

historian Niek Koning writes that in the early nineteenth century,

Britain was the only Western country that postponed protection [for domestic agriculture] although it no longer possessed a comparative advantage in farming. Agricultural free trade resulted in half a century of stagnation in farm output and productivity. By World War I, approximately half of the British food supply was imported. Britain could afford to sacrifice its agriculture because it was the world's hegemonic power. Its industrial outlets did not rely on domestic farm incomes, and its empire and navy secured food imports. After 1900, Britain's hegemony began to erode.⁷³

This historical context reframes Wembley's double aspiration of bringing food to British bodies and bringing British bodies to food. Rather than consolidating strength, these projects of redistributing resources were required to prevent further deterioration.

Despite being centrally stated aims of the exhibition, overseas settlement and colonial food importation did not actually dictate British food policy following 1925. Studies of migration between Britain and its colonies in the early twentieth century primarily focus on the influx of bodies into England rather than the other way around.⁷⁴ Even in cases such as Australia, which saw "large-scale immigration from Britain and Ireland, from 1909 to 1913 and 1921 to 1925," the operative years took place prior to or concurrently with the exhibition's two-year run.⁷⁵ The disruption of trade routes during World War II led to a reduction in imports and the necessity of rationing. Accordingly, attention shifted to agriculture on a significantly more localized scale, in the "victory gardens" that citizens were encouraged to grow.⁷⁶ Agriculture Acts in the two and a

⁷³ Niek Koning, "Food security and food crises: Evolving realities, evolving debates," *New Challenges to Food Security: From Climate Change to Fragile States*, in Ian Christoplos and Adam Pain, ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2015) 19.

⁷⁴ For instance, see Robert Johnson, "What were the motives and effects of colonization and migration?" *British Imperialism* (British Imperialism. Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 58-76.

⁷⁵ John Ashley Soames Grenville, *A History of the World from the 20th to the 21st Century* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 664.

⁷⁶ Scholarship on victory gardens has more frequently emphasized an American perspective. For example, see Cecilia Gowdy-Wygart, *Cultivating Victory: The Women's Land Army and the Victory Garden Movement*

half decades following World War II enacted the protections on domestic agriculture that Britain had earlier eschewed.⁷⁷ The “Calendar of the Fruits and Vegetables of Empire,” the Oversea Settlement Gallery, and their linked blueprints for repositioning the people and products of empire turned out to be oriented in the wrong direction, temporally as well as geographically.

Forwards but Backwards

Indeed, in many ways the whole project of the British Empire Exhibition was inherently belated, despite its attempts to push visitors toward the imperial future. Originally proposed in 1913, the Wembley Exhibition was put on hold when the Great War began in 1914.⁷⁸ Plans were then set in 1919 for a projected opening date of April 1923, but this was later deferred another twelve months to the 23rd of April, 1924.⁷⁹ What Lord Strathcona had initially envisioned as a British showcase logically building on the successful Franco-British Exposition at White City in 1908 was then recast as part of a national project to forge “out of the ashes of war...a new Commonwealth of Nations with a new faith in the future.”⁸⁰ Officials sought to recast the endeavor as forward-looking and ahead of its time rather than situated in relation to the past.

In accordance with these goals, Wembley became the site of many firsts and many descriptive superlatives. The Exhibition provided the occasion for the first commemorative stamps ever issued by the British government, featuring “a lion in an imposing stance.”⁸¹ At the

(Pittsburgh PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013); Amy Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity* (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

⁷⁷ See Richard James Hammond, *Food and Agriculture in Britain, 1939-45; Aspects of Wartime Control* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954).

⁷⁸ Knight and Sabey, 2.

⁷⁹ “British Empire Exhibition Deferred,” *New York Times* Mar 22 1922: 9.

⁸⁰ Knight and Sabey, 2.

⁸¹ “British Empire Exhibition,” The British Postal Museum & Archive, n.d., Web, 9 Dec. 2012.

Opening Ceremony, the king gave his first radio broadcast and sent a telegram announcement that took 80 seconds to make a twenty-stop circle around the globe and back to the Stadium, making time the invisible spectacle.⁸² In order “to show the advanced state of British concrete technology,” the Exhibition’s architects produced some of the largest buildings that had been made to date, using state-of-the-art reinforced ferro-concrete.⁸³ Contemporary news reports made much of the fact that the Palace of Engineering, which enclosed a space measuring half a million square feet, was large enough to “contain Trafalgar Square Square 6 ½ times.”⁸⁴

“It was ‘contemporary’ at a bad time,” wrote Alfred Byrne in his reminiscences about the exhibition. Declaring the reinforced concrete buildings “heavy and squat,” Byrne added that “the rows of ‘palaces’ looked like rows of mud-pies.”⁸⁵ A double temporal regression happens here, in the shrinkages that take place from architectural marvel to child’s play and from concrete to mud. To Byrne, being “contemporary at a bad time,” with the first word in scare quotes, apparently means following a fad that is backwards at heart, both late and lame. A similar doubleness characterizes G.K. Chesterton’s thoughts on the Exhibition, though he ultimately lands on the side of praise rather than censure. “When I first heard of Wembley, I feared it might be a pre-war Exhibition,” he writes in an *Illustrated London News* column of 1924, but then goes on to remark,

But...I think Wembley is a post-war product, after all. There is something intelligent and disinterested in the study of strange peoples, something larger and more enlightened about the plan and the architecture; something that shows that the younger generation may not be merely looking into a large mirror, but are, like

⁸² Alan Sabey, “The British Empire Exhibition, Wembley: A Diary of Royal Visits and Other Notable Events in 1924,” Exhibition Study Group, 2001, Web, 6 Dec 2012.

⁸³ “British Empire Exhibition Site,” Engineering Timelines, n.d., Web, 12 Dec 2012.

⁸⁴ *The Business Features of Wembley: An Investor’s Tour of the Empire*. Investors’ Chronicle (London: Fleetway Press, 1924). Cited in David Bradshaw, notes to Virginia Woolf, “Thunder at Wembley,” *Selected Essays* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 239-240n.

⁸⁵ Alfred Byrne, “On Exhibitions,” *The Irish Times* Nov 18 1961: 10.

the first sailors and travelers, looking at a larger world.⁸⁶

Chesterton contrasts the pre-war and post-war mentality, the first limited and narcissistic, the second is more widely engaged. Yet, at the same time, his terminology frames this “post-war” mindset as one of the distant past, shared with “the first sailors and travelers,” whom he leaves unspecified.

Given the many examples of the exhibition’s belatedness, Chesterton may have been onto more than he knew in making this comparison between the experiences of visitors in his present and explorers in the past.⁸⁷ For instance, the two butter dioramas featuring Edward, the Prince of Wales, in the Canadian Pavilion showcased dated and rigid images of culture rather than representing England at the forefront of technological prowess and technical reach (Figures 21 and 22).⁸⁸

⁸⁶ G. K. Chesterton, “Our Note Book,” *Illustrated London News* [London, England] 24 May 1924: n.p.

⁸⁷ In fact, one of his later columns about Wembley included a large inset photograph, presumably inserted by an editor, of an ostrich-like bird with the following caption: “Extinct; But on view in the New Zealand Pavilion at Wembley: The Moa Bird—A Reconstruction.” Ironically, the photo credits below are given to the “Realistic Travels” studio. See Chesterton, “Our Note Book,” 19 July 1924, n.p.

⁸⁸ The first refrigerated display case featured life-sized butter models of “H.R.H. the Prince of Wales and his horse with a Canadian homestead as a background” (Knight and Sabey, *The Lion Roars at Wembley*, 49). In the second case, he was depicted as Chief Morning Star of the Stoney Indians. This sculpture was based on a visit The Prince of Wales had paid to Canada in 1919, when he was “initiated as chief by three different Indian tribes”: in addition to the title given to him by the Stoney Indians, “the Bloods named him Chief Big Mountain, and he is hailed by the six tribes of the Iroquois as Chief Dawn of the Morning.” See “Burnham now ‘Big Chief,’” *The Fourth Estate* [New York] 11 September 1920: 8.



**Figure 21: Campbell Grey, “H.R.H. The Prince of Wales in Butter,” (c. 1924-5).
Photographic postcard. Credit: Brent Archives.⁸⁹**

⁸⁹ Campbell Grey, “H.R.H. The Prince of Wales in Butter (The Canadian Pavilion)” [Postcard, c. 1924-5]. Brent Archives, British Empire Exhibition Collection, WHS/0/1/11/16 ACC 657/105.

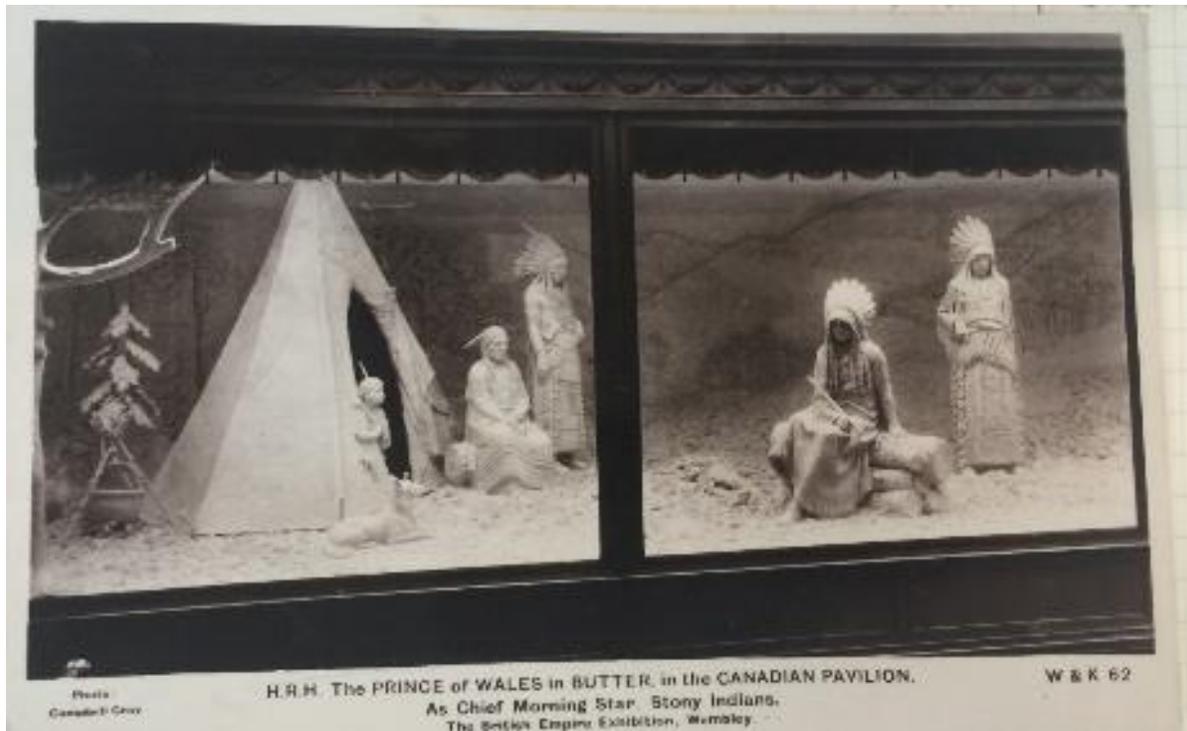


Figure 22: Campbell Grey, “H.R.H. The Prince of Wales in Butter...As Chief Morning Star. Stoney Indians” (c. 1924-25). Photographic postcard. Credit: Brent Archives.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Campbell Grey, “HRH The Prince of Wales in Butter, in the Canadian Pavilion. As Chief Morning Star. Stoney Indians” [Postcard, c. 1924-5]. Brent Archives, British Empire Exhibition Collection, WHS/0/1/11/16 ACC 505/145.

In fact, butter sculptures had long been a mainstay of North American exhibitions. The 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia—the first official World’s Fair to take place in the United States—featured “A Study in Butter: the Dreaming Iolanthe,” by the sculptor Caroline Shawk Brooks, who would give demonstrations of her art at the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893.⁹¹ The St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904 featured a butter bust of Theodore Roosevelt as well as a second sculpture of him as a Rough Rider.⁹² The malleable medium in which these sculptures were executed represented a well-worn form and not the groundbreaking display that exhibit planners seemed to think.

Along the same lines, the West African Village stirred considerable contemporary controversy for its representational decisions. The section closed down part way through the 1924 season following protests, organized by the Union of Students of African Descent in London, that it was “the West Africa of many years ago that we see at Wembley.”⁹³ However, it reopened the next year over their objections, following dubious declarations by exhibition-goers and civil servants that the village “reproduced the *exact* conditions under which the West African people lived” (emphasis added), as a later work would assert.⁹⁴ “A raced and gendered imperial culture advertised at Wembley represented a paradoxical modernity,” writes Daniel Mark Stephen, “in which a supposedly unsullied landscape of ‘the primitive’ would alleviate a sense of

⁹¹ Pamela H. Simpson, *Corn Palaces and Butter Queens: A History of Crop Art and Dairy Sculpture* (Minneapolis, US: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), xviii.

⁹² Francine Kirsch, “Eat Me at the Fair: America’s Love Affair with Food Installations.” *Gastronomica* 11.3 (Fall 2011): 82. Also see Pamela Simpson’s discussion of the corn palaces and butter sculptures of nineteenth and early-twentieth century American exhibits as “icons of abundance” that became prevalent not only at fairs but also trade meetings in *Corn Palaces and Butter Queens*, xvi.

⁹³ Cited in Geppert, *Fleeting Cities*, 168. The incendiary event was a newspaper article published after a reporter accosted a Ghanaian princess with questions about “sexual practices and native marriage rituals,” though there were wider problems of representation at stake.

⁹⁴ Knight and Sabey, *The Lion Roars at Wembley*, 60.

crisis regarding the direction of modern society in Britain.”⁹⁵ While scholars have often focused on the hegemonic aspects of the exhibition, such conflicts suggest the variety of vantage points from which people viewed the empire and its representations at Wembley, including ones that called into question the structure of the exhibition’s own embrace of perspectival fusion.

Leftovers

The British Empire Exhibition closed on October 31, 1925. The *Washington Post* reported that despite the huge turnout, “it has not proved a financial success.”⁹⁶ Other outlets struck a similarly melancholy note. “One of the saddest features of the great demolition was the disestablishment of animals and birds which had found the exhibition a happy home,” wrote the *New York Times*. “Sparrows by the thousands were looking for crumbs which had been their daily food all summer, and hundreds of cats were being chased from stalls they had considered their own.”⁹⁷ In the essay by Virginia Woolf quoted at the beginning this chapter, she had imagined the animal observers of the British Empire Exhibition in a position of heightened perception, empowered by their ability to strip the symbolic fluff from the fundamentally banal physical structures and objects of the exhibition. The *New York Times* article on the displacement of Wembley’s most loyal visitors instead reveals the limits of being unable to surmount the material plane.

Museum scholars have written extensively on exhibitions as spaces for “free choice learning,” in contrast to the formal environments provided in schools.⁹⁸ John Howard Falk and

⁹⁵ Daniel Mark Stephen, “‘The White Man’s Grave’: British West Africa and the British Empire Exhibition of 1924-1925,” *Journal of British Studies* 48.1 (Jan., 2009) 103.

⁹⁶ “British Empire Exhibition Closes.” *The Washington Post* Nov 01 1925: 13.

⁹⁷ “‘Treasure Island’ to be Brought here Intact from British Empire Exhibition Near London,” *New York Times* 3 Nov 1925: 10. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009)*.

⁹⁸ John Howard Falk, Lynn Diane Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000) 13.

Lynn Diane Dierking describe visitor pathways as “nonlinear” and “personally motivated,” involving “considerable choice on the part of the learner.”⁹⁹ In practice, this means that visitors frequently deviate from the curatorial script, calling to mind Michael Warner’s description of his students’ propensity for reading “in all the ways they aren’t supposed to.”¹⁰⁰ Though titled “Uncritical Reading,” Warner’s essay also opens up space for audiences whose recalcitrance we find more appealing.

The plentiful yet divergent appearances of food at Wembley highlighted its absolute centrality in structuring visitor experience and constructing imperially-oriented selves. At the same time, its tendency to spill out of its physical and ideological enclosures also provided ample opportunities for patrons, like the sparrows, to make a meal from the unwanted crumbs. Though commissioned to orchestrate the opening ceremonies, Edward Elgar reportedly walked out “because he objected to the hackneyed way in which the band churned out Land of Hope and Glory.”¹⁰¹ Similarly, when confronted with chaotic last-minute preparations on his visit to the British Empire Exhibition a few days before the grounds officially opened, E.M. Forster reflected that there was no reason why it would not open on schedule, as “It is even open now.”¹⁰² By taking the exhibition to be most emblematic of empire in aspects where it was supposedly non-representational, such critics followed the rules of engagement for navigating between the exhibit’s diverse strategies for modeling empire but then flipped the script. In the end, Wembley’s meaning-making visitors proved as difficult to keep in order as the foods they saw and ate within the grounds.

⁹⁹ Falk and Dierking, *Learning from Museums*, 13.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Warner, “Uncritical Reading,” *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.

¹⁰¹ David Lacey, “England Take to their Wings,” *The Guardian* Nov 20 1974: 27.

¹⁰² Forster, 44.

CONCLUSION

Ruminations

“Food, as a self-altering, dissipative materiality, is also a player. It enters into what we become.”
—Jane Bennett¹

P.L. Simmonds, visiting the Southampton pond where lobsters were kept before being sent to market, came face to face with unexpectedly simian crustaceans that clambered toward the surface of the water to get a look at him even as he looked down at them. Edward Ponderevo stood puzzled before a sign advertising his uncle’s mysterious invention of Tono-bungay and intuitively tested out the weight of the word on his tongue. The unnamed gentleman in “Our Father’s Care” saw the determined watercress girl as his eyes scanned outward from his beautiful sitting room to the chilly London street beyond the window panes and felt moved to respond to her call. Visitors to the fairgrounds at Wembley peered at exhibits celebrating the agricultural bounty of the colonies, seeing themselves woven into the narrative of empire.

Scenes of viewing like those above have recurred throughout these four chapters, drawing attention to the fact that this dissertation has been about perception as much as it has been about food and its production, circulation, and consumption. In each case, the moment of looking evolves into a moment of engagement, as the subject of attention compels the viewer to take stock of his or her place in relation to the people, animals, and objects of the wider world. Though it is not the sole material vehicle for brokering these negotiations, food takes on a

¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2010), 51.

privileged role by virtue of its capability to visibly enter and change the body—in the parlance of pill advertising in Chapter 2, to be an alterative. Food’s symbolic power relies on but also magnifies its transformative properties, according to it the potential not only to vitalize the physical body through nourishment but also to constitute the ethical, social, and philosophical dimensions of the self.

This dissertation has been selective in its focus, examining anomalous objects of cultural fixation rather than the staples of British diet—cabbages, for instance, or bread. In doing so, my goal has been to show that these moments of disproportionate attention are central to the ethos of the period, during which consumer choice not only emerged as an option for ever-expanding segments of the population but also, increasingly, as an imperative. Food’s imaginative status exists independently of its actual presence or absence in a particular moment, and by following the winds and whims of cultural attention in this historical context rather than presenting a representative view of the period, I seek to account for a history of thought rather than a history of culinary practice or human nutrition.

In tracing the ebbs and flows of these ideas, these chapters repeatedly explored models of time that resist linearity, revealing wrinkled or even cyclical chronologies instead. We are in another moment of return, as many of the issues surrounding ingestion and identity have become timely again. In both the scholarly and public realms, food has commanded growing place in discourse over the past few decades. Trends in “craft” and “artisanal” food making have renewed traditional practices, many of them rooted in nineteenth century recipes and techniques.² This emphasis on local, small-scale production has its counterpart in the increased scrutiny of the hidden violence of industrial food production, including issues such as enslaved laborers being

² Patric Kuh, *Finding the Flavors We Lost: From Bread to Bourbon, How Artisans Reclaimed American Food* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).

used for shrimp aquaculture in Thailand and male chicks being ground alive for fertilizer on egg farms.³ By exposing the human and non-human victims of the economies of scale, such revelations have troubled entrenched hierarchies and practices surrounding food. Recent scientific studies have drawn attention to other aporias, once again calling human exceptionality into question by listening in on the “screams” of yeast using sonocytology to amplify cellular vibrations, for instance, or investigating animal consciousness and intelligence by way of the octopus.⁴

Compared to twenty or thirty years ago, even kitchen basics such as cheese, mushrooms, cooking oil, salad greens, and vinegar now appear in regular grocery stores in inconceivable variety. Chicken eggs at the supermarket don’t just come in different sizes, colors, and grades, but also cage-free, hormone-free, free range, farm-fresh, organic, pasteurized, pasture-raised, grain-fed, Food Alliance Certified, Omega-3 enriched, fertilized, and Animal Welfare Approved. As this partial list suggests, our alimentary options and habits feed into a wide range of positions on subjects such as health, ethics, politics, and the environment.

While the multifarious implications of our food choices have resulted in a proliferation of communities whose shared diets reflect shared commitments, they have also illuminated the human capacity to be divided almost indefinitely into ever smaller and more exclusionary collectivities. For example, though the Paleo diet and “locavorism” both valorize a return to past eating practices (real and assumed), they delineate very different values and worldviews. Even

³ Doris Lin, “Ag-gag Laws and Farming Crimes against Animals,” *Routledge International Handbook of the Crimes of the Powerful*, ed. Gregg Barak (London; New York: Routledge, 2015), 467.

⁴ Sophia Roosth, “Screaming Yeast: Sonocytology, Cytoplasmic Milieus, and Cellular Subjectivities.” *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009): 332-50. doi:10.1086/596646; Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Other Minds: The Octopus, the Sea, and the Deep Origins of Consciousness* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016); Sy Montgomery, *The Soul of an Octopus: A Surprising Exploration into the Wonder of Consciousness* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2015).

seemingly objective arenas, like determining daily nutritional recommendations, can be ideologically fraught. The 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee’s advocacy of a plant-based diet to improve health and lessen environmental impact turned into a major controversy after severe backlash from the meat industry; the sustainability factor was expunged from the Dietary Guidelines later published by the USDA that determine domestic food policy.⁵ Not eating likewise constitutes taking a stance: from the graduate students at Yale who went on a hunger strike in the spring of 2017 in advance of collective bargaining to the recent rise of the meal replacement drink Soylent for those who want to “Get rid of hunger and get on with [their] day,” these practices of renunciation replace one type of sociality with another.⁶

In George Eliot’s 1860 novel, *The Mill on the Floss*, young Maggie Tulliver runs away to the gypsies to escape an unhappy home life only to realize the enormity of her mistake upon discovering that her imagined redeemers take bacon instead of butter or treacle on their bread and intend to feed her an unfamiliar meat-and-potato stew.⁷ Maggie’s expedition stages a recurrent scene in which food, even when uneaten, occasions a conscious staking of selfhood. My dissertation has detailed the disparate ways in which thinking about ingestion during the long nineteenth century intersected with the period’s central vectors for defining individual and corporate identities. Thinking about food, then and now, means positing alternate possibilities for forging connections as well as foreclosing ties. Though the act of eating is ephemeral, it

⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Executive Summary,” *2015 – 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. 8th Edition. December 2015. Available at <https://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015-scientific-report/02-executive-summary.asp>; Almond growers were also outspoken against considerations of sustainability in the dietary guidelines, due to the high amounts of water required for irrigation of almond trees. See Allison Aubrey, “New Dietary Guidelines Will Not Include Sustainability Goal,” NPR. 6 October 2015. <http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/10/06/446369955/new-dietary-guidelines-will-not-include-sustainability-goal>

⁶ Soylent. Accessed 25 June 2017. <https://www.soylent.com/>

⁷ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. A. S. Byatt (London: Penguin, 2003), 107-111.

unceasingly compels us to project forward, reframe the past, and situate ourselves in relation to others with every real and imagined bite.

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